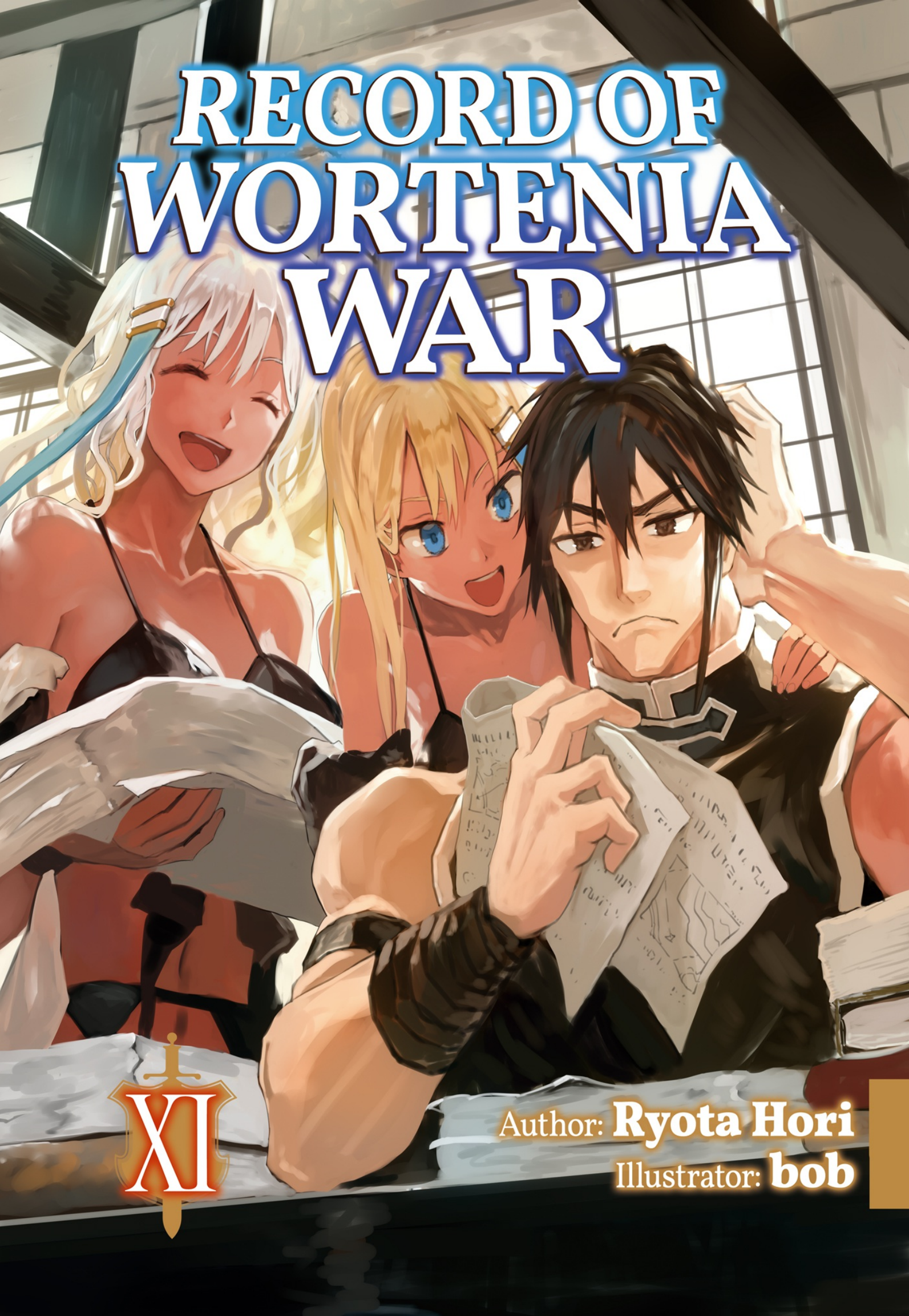
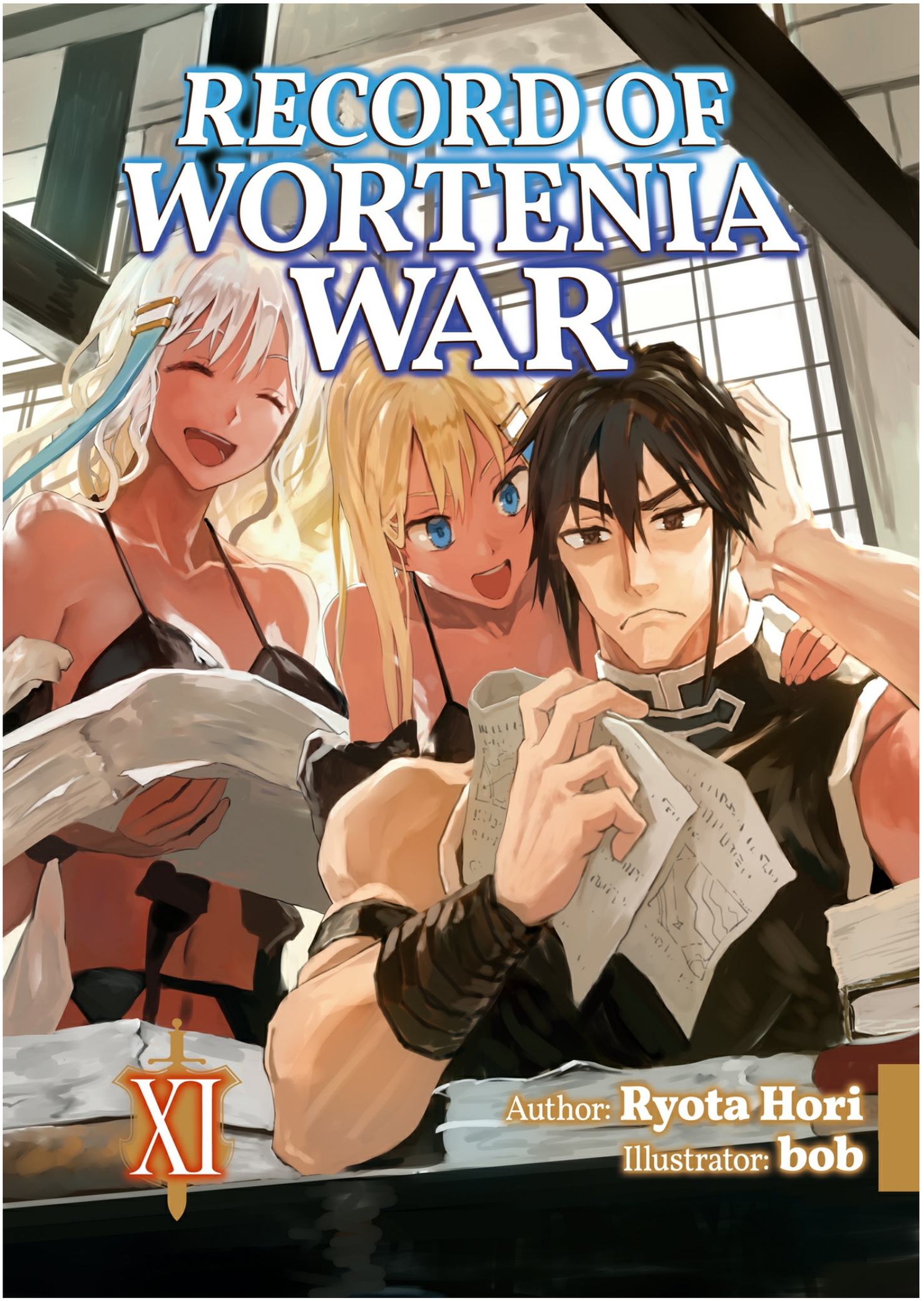

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR
XI
Author: Ryota Hori
Illustrator: bob


RECORD OF
WORTENIA
WAR
XI
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RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR
“Welcome back from your dispatch to Xarooda, Lord Mikoshiba. I’m relieved to find you safe and sound.”


“Then we crush the ten houses of the north!”
And at that moment, Kevin could hear the sound of history’s gears grinding as they were set in motion.
“Before I give you your next orders, I need to confirm something.”


“Mikoshiba? As in, Baron Mikoshiba?”



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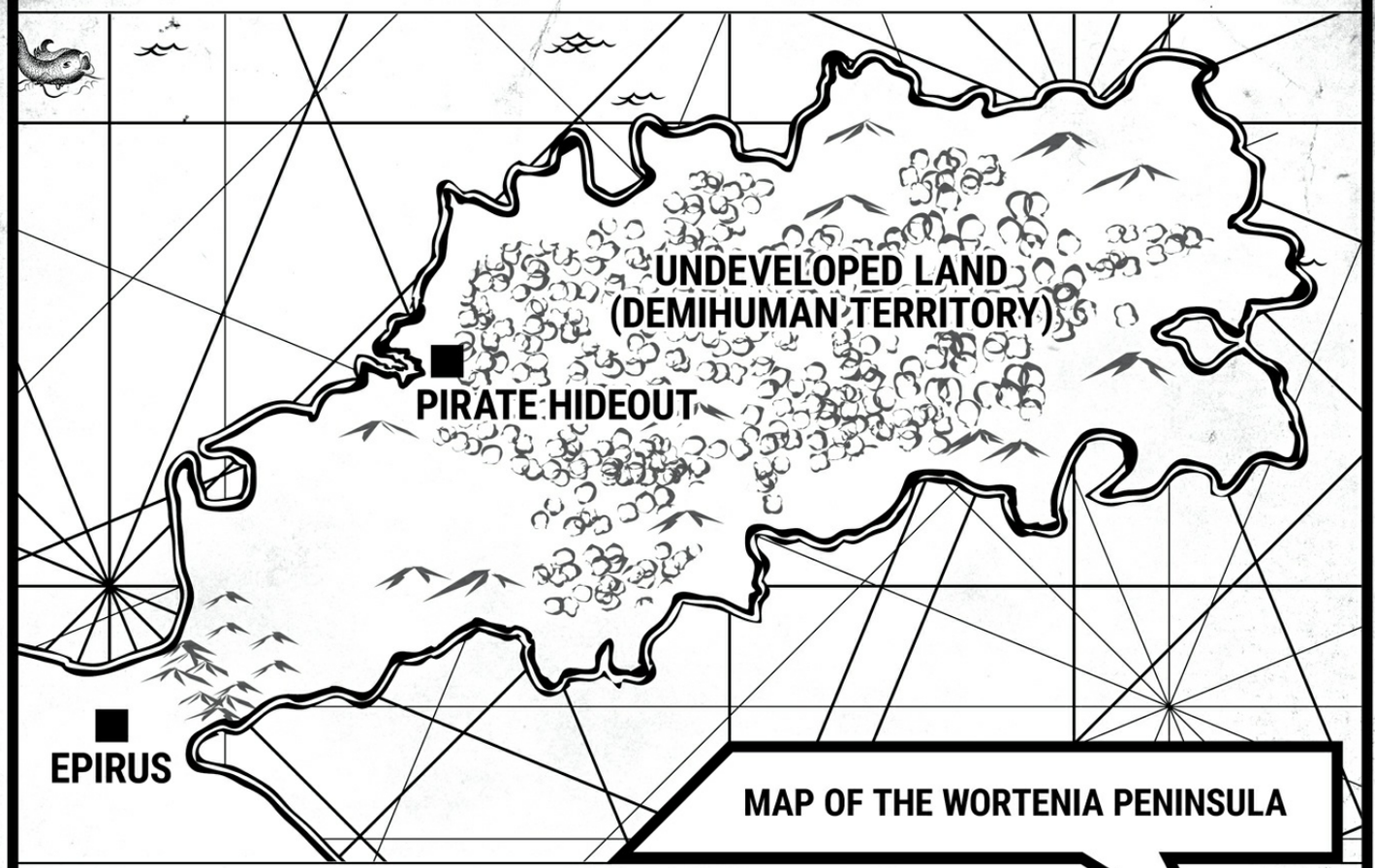
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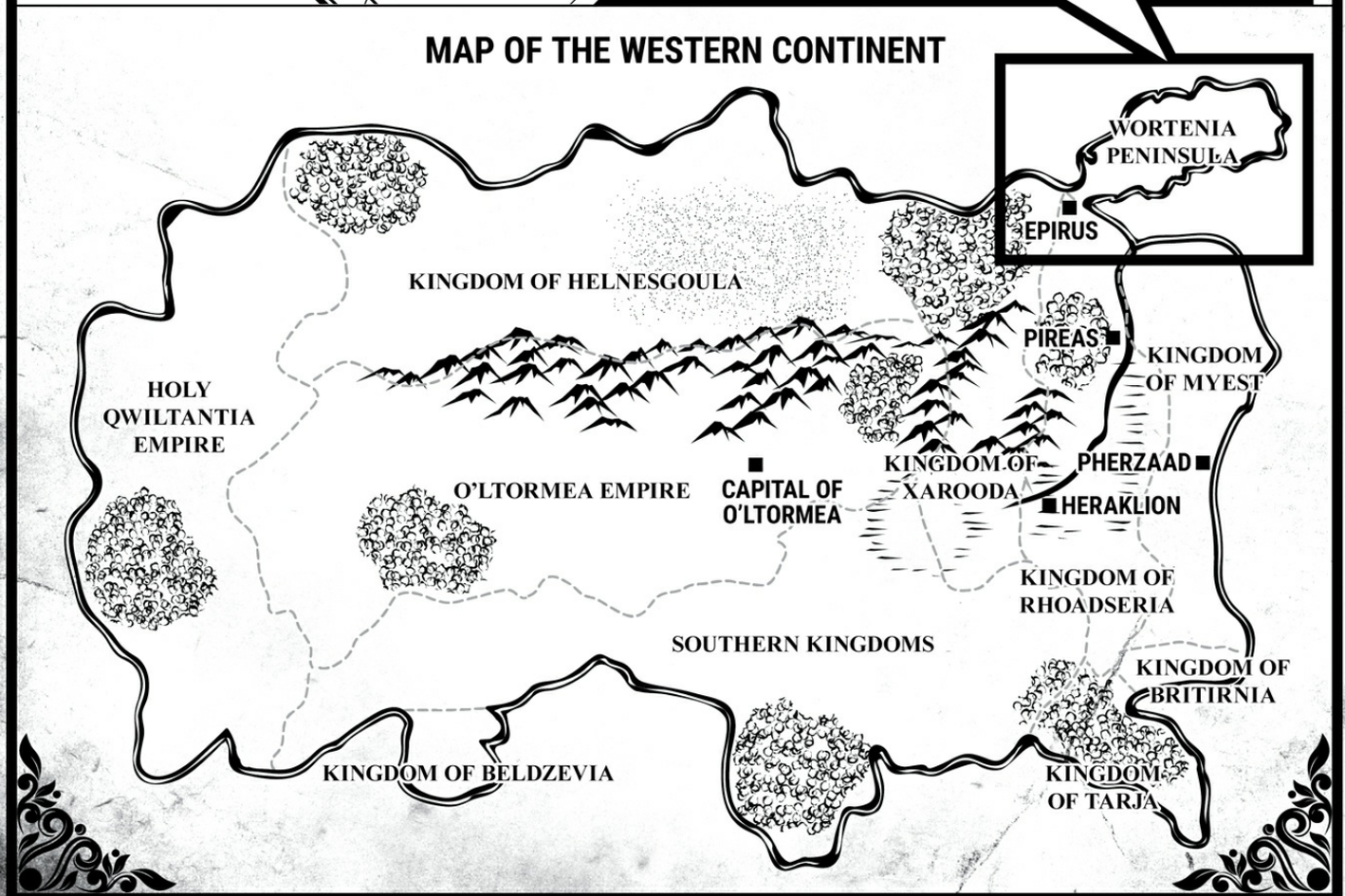
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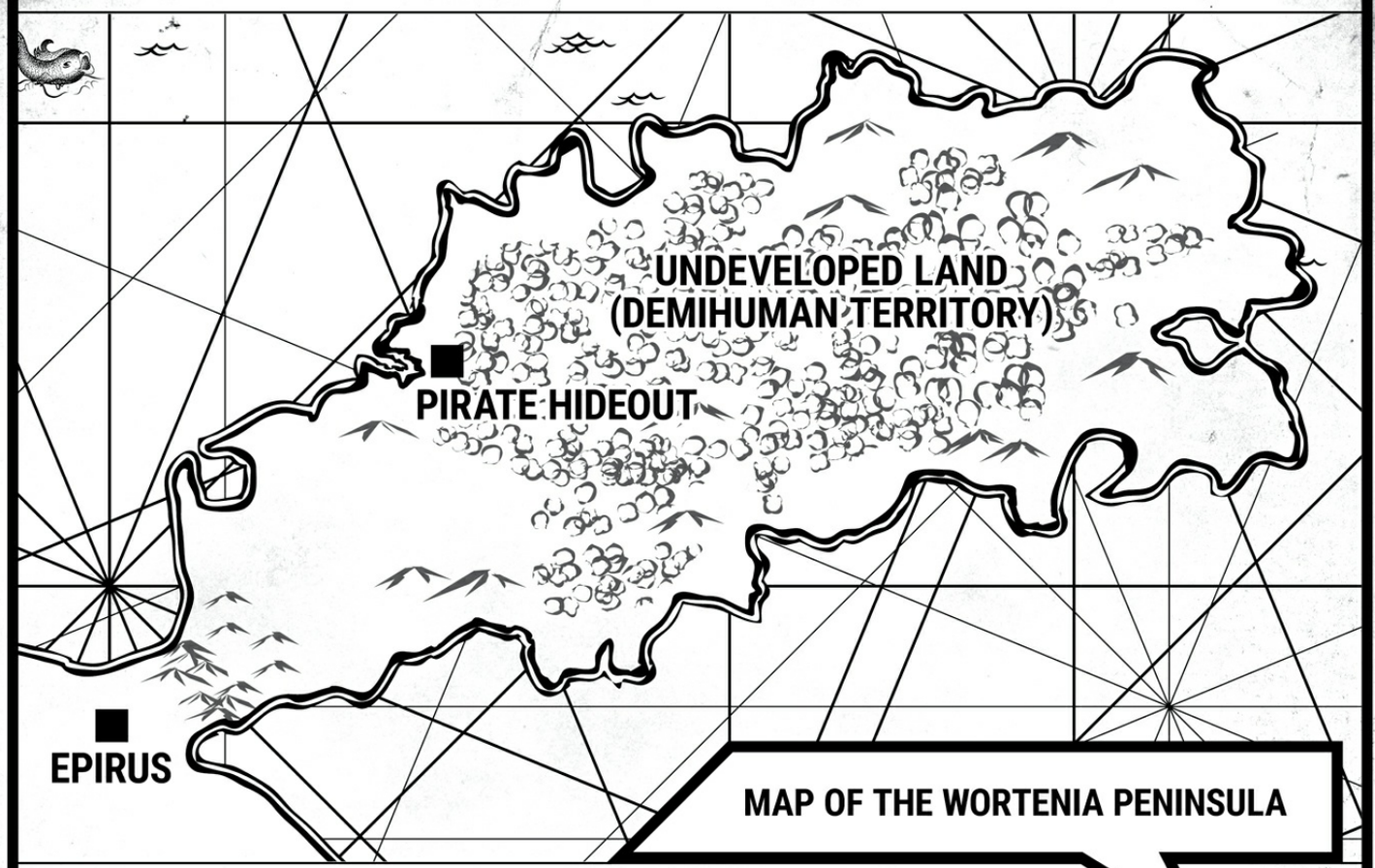
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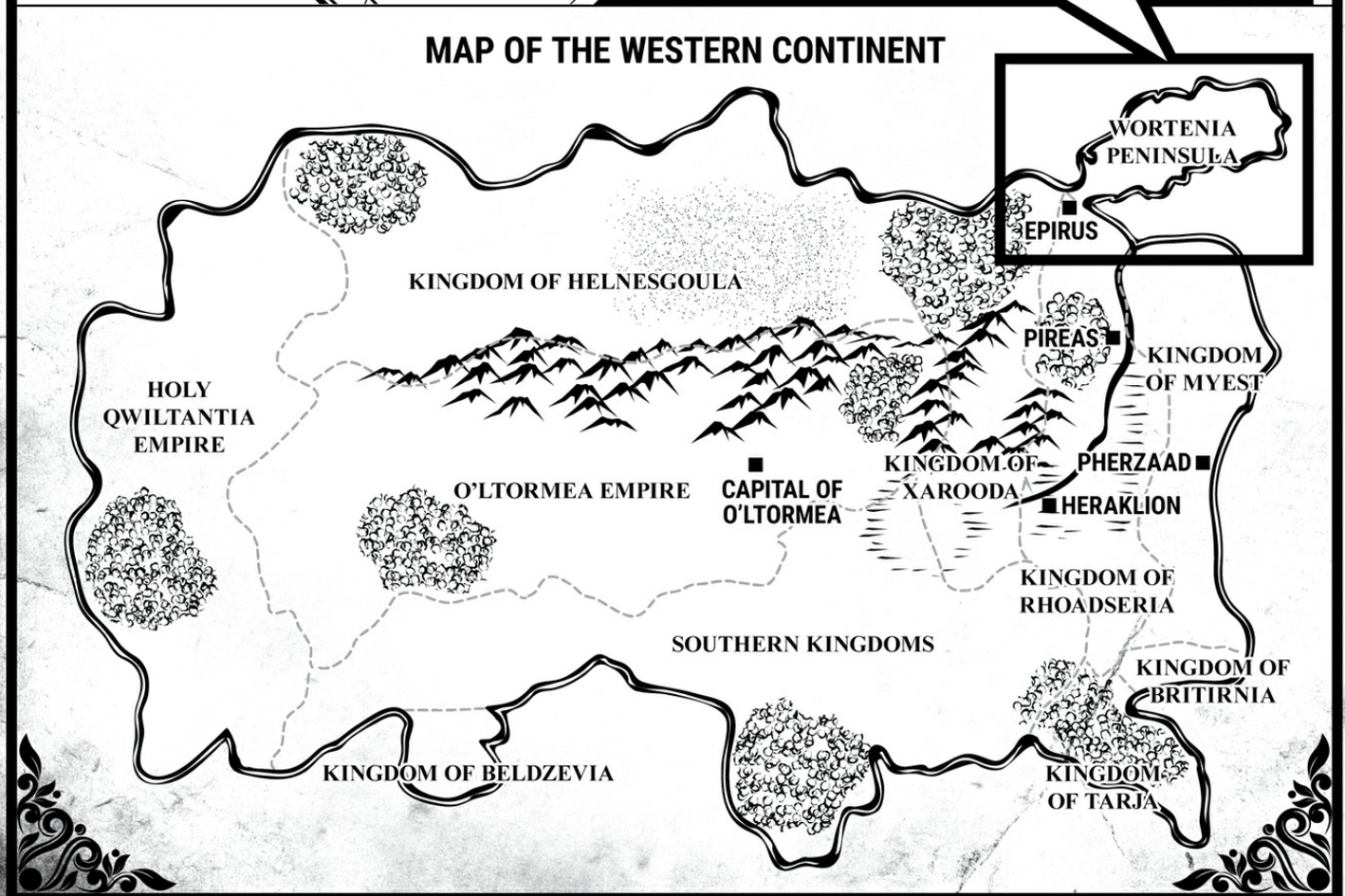
WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》





WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》





Prologue

The sun was just starting to rise in the east, casting a shadow over the earth. This was a hidden village, deep within the woods in the eastern regions of the Wortenia Peninsula. Despite the early hour, ten carriages were lined up in front of Nelcius, ready to depart. A large number of figures were moving around them busily.

Gathering the stock we agreed on was a bit harder than expected, but we should still make the delivery on time. He shouldn't complain, then.

They were steadily loading wooden crates onto the carriage. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Nelcius looked over his tribesmen as they went about their work. Crossing his arms, he nodded in satisfaction.

The image of a man with a tanned face entered Nelcius's mind. The man always smelled like the salty breeze. He had been dispatched to the city of Sirius by the Christof Company—the only firm Baron Mikoshiba allowed inside the Wortenia Peninsula.

His name was Alejandro Rosso. He was the village's point of contact for trade. Since his last name was Rosso, he was probably some kind of noble or knight, or perhaps he had been born to an influential merchant family.

Alejandro was currently putting his considerable skills to use in Sirius, under Baron Mikoshiba's rule. He wasn't officially a retainer of the Mikoshiba barony, but he was as trusted as its oldest members, Boltz and Gennou, who were often left to manage the domain in the baron's absence.

Nelcius, however, was quite cautious of Alejandro. The demi-humans, Nelcius among them, saw humans as their enemies. In the past, mankind had persecuted them, driving them to live in hiding in this cursed land.

Four hundred years ago, the Church of Meneos decreed that humans were the superior species and should govern this world. Their teachings spread throughout the continent and resulted in a holy war. Being on the opposite end

of the western continent compared to the Church of Meneos, very few people in Rhoadseria truly clung to those religious beliefs. However, it significantly affected places near the holy city of Menestia, like the southern kingdoms and the Holy Qwiltantia Empire.

The fact that Dilphina had been captured by pirates in the past demonstrated that elves in particular were seen as valuable commodities in human society. Thankfully, Ryoma Mikoshiba had freed Dilphina from captivity, but normally, Nelcius would have never seen his daughter again.

But even though Ryoma, the man who'd saved his daughter, had instructed him to work with Alejandro, Nelcius couldn't easily trust him. Indeed, during their first meeting, their exchange had been awkward, though Nelcius hadn't been hostile toward him.

Well, while I can't believe in him, I can trust him to do his job—so long as we honor our agreement and keep bringing profit to the Mikoshiba barony.

Nelcius heaved a deep sigh. Alejandro wasn't the kind of person to show any ill will toward the demi-humans, and Nelcius had learned to trust him based on their interactions thus far. He couldn't call Alejandro a friend, but he could see him as an acquaintance or an important business partner.

That wasn't to say that Alejandro ever compromised when it came to business, though. He was a seasoned sailor and a skilled merchant and was extremely critical when it came to deals and promises. He would penalize even Nelcius, one of the demi-humans' leaders, for breach of contract if they were late on a deadline or didn't secure enough merchandise.

It's unlikely he'll cease trading with us, since that would hurt Ryoma Mikoshiba as much as it would hurt us. Given everything that's happened so far, I doubt he'll do what the rest of the filthy humans infesting this land would do and demand we hand over young elven girls.

Excepting that, however, no demand was off the table.

They could demand we increase the amount we export, or tilt the exchange rate unfavorably for us. That wouldn't be that bad...but I doubt that's all they'd do.

Nelcius scowled, imagining that undesirable outcome. Increasing the size and scope of their exports wasn't a bad thing, and Nelcius was interested in doing that. But he wanted to wait until the village held the initiative when it came to trading. After all, increasing the quantity of exports was easier said than done. Their merchandise wasn't that easy to produce.

Firstly, the elves produced high-quality medicine. Because of its quality and rarity, it was valued in human society as a nostrum. In order for it to retain its efficacy, it required techniques known only to the elves. Many of them used herbs and the entrails of monsters native to Wortenia, which had to be dried and condensed as soon as they were collected.

For the time being, though, the village was able to meet its trade quotas with its stores of existing materials and freshly farmed ingredients. Still, their stocks had dwindled to the point where they had to be cautious with their next few deliveries.

In addition to medicine, elven thaumaturgists could apply powerful endowed thaumaturgy on a level a human practitioner could never hope to achieve. They used this to produce tools that made their everyday lives easier. They could possibly sell those items alongside their medicine, but they took a long time to create. The entire process, from the fashioning of the tools to the application of endowed thaumaturgy, took several weeks and required highly advanced techniques to apply a truly powerful enchantment.

Of course, they could compromise and produce it on the same level as a human practitioner, which would greatly shorten the amount of time needed to do it. But that would defeat the purpose of trading with the elves. It was because their products were well above the quality of anything a human could produce that Ryoma Mikoshiba saw them as useful.

At present, Nelcius was able to convince the other chiefs to cooperate with Ryoma despite their misgivings about mankind. As a result, their elven craftsmen were all fully mobilized to produce new goods for trade. The sad reality was, however, that they could at most produce two hundred suits of armor a month. Compared to the powerful enchantments needed to produce armor, the tools used for everyday life were far easier to make. They weren't made for war, so the thaumaturgical seals weren't as complicated.

Yet the sum Ryoma requested of them through Alejandro was simply too large.

At least a thousand a month, and more if possible... I suppose he would need that much to achieve the future he's envisioned. I can't very well fault him for the demand.

Right now, Ryoma's domain only contained the limited lands of the Wortenia Peninsula, but given time he would surely march his army on the northern regions of Rhoadseria. During Ryoma's absence, Boltz had been left in charge of the peninsula. As Count Salzberg and the ten noble houses of the north attempted to gain information on the goings-on in Wortenia, Boltz had acted to prevent their infiltration.

Thankfully, the Igasaki clan had set up a defensive perimeter around the fortress at the peninsula's base. Thanks to that, no information had leaked. Still, this wasn't a favorable position. Since Ryoma had returned from Xarooda, he would eventually go on the offensive. And Nelcius knew that day was fast approaching.

And if that happens, Sirius will prosper. Its population will grow, and it will consume more resources.

Even Nelcius, who was praised and feared among the elves as the Mad Demon for his combat prowess, could see that Ryoma was a talented, transcendent warrior. His political skills were impressive as well, and he didn't fear stooping to any means to achieve his ends.

The Mikoshiba barony would eventually rule Rhoadseria's north—Nelcius knew this for a fact. And when that came to pass, Ryoma's demands from the elves would only grow larger.

We need just a little more time. Somehow...

If they were to continue trading with Ryoma, they would have to increase their production rate. Nelcius was aware of this and had begun taking measures to ensure this would happen. Specifically, he was training more apothecaries and thaumaturgists skilled with endowed thaumaturgy. Since all industries in this world were done by hand, the only way of increasing the production rate was by training more craftsmen.

But his efforts were still only halfway done. Given a few more years, things would be fine, but if their next orders were to suddenly increase, it would cause a considerable strain on the clans. They would have to work ceaselessly, even forgoing sleep. If they were penalized now with a change in the bartering rate, it would make things even worse.

But the most frightening prospect is if they were to ask us to divulge our secret techniques.

That was the one thing Nelcius couldn't tolerate. Giving away their guarded secrets would leave them with one less reason for Ryoma to treat the elves preferentially. The elves had considered sharing their secrets with the Mikoshiba barony at some point in the future, but that was a long way off.

For now, we need to make sure these carriages make it to Sirius safely.

Nelcius's current task was to ensure their trading with Sirius continued smoothly. This wasn't just for his own tribe's profit; he wanted to see to it that all the elves on Wortenia could live peacefully. If trade were to cease for some unforeseen reason, Nelcius would be greatly criticized during the next clan chief meeting. It could even lead to bloodshed among the elves.

Did he anticipate this?

Before Ryoma left on the expedition to Xarooda, he and Nelcius had struck a deal. It wasn't an official business transaction—no documents were signed—but it was a verbal agreement, a trade meant to bridge the antagonistic gap between mankind and the elves.

In the beginning, their trade was simple, just various sundries. It was so small in scale that it was presumptuous to call it "trading." But a year and several months had since passed, and the scope of their exchanges was growing. They would carry wares to Sirius and return with merchandise for their village.

By now, those imports had become an indispensable part of the elves' daily lives. Even the chiefs, who at first criticized Nelcius's actions and called them shameful, were now demanding more goods from the human city. Some clans were even stepping up to trade on their own, despite the fact that Nelcius's warrior tribe was the only one currently allowed to trade with Sirius. This was a natural development. Life in Wortenia was severe and taxing; their home was a

peninsula infested with dangerous monsters. The food and luxury items brought in from Sirius had become necessities.

The elves' diet consisted of the flesh of monsters living in the vicinity of their village. Their meat was by no means appetizing, however. Most monsters were carnivorous by nature, and their flesh was hard and sinewy. Worst of all, it had the thick stench unique to a carnivore's flesh.

Seasoning and spices could make it more palatable, but those luxuries were hard to come by in the forests of Wortenia. One example was salt—the most basic of seasonings. It was essential to one's health, and that applied to demi-humans as well. But there were very few salt veins in the peninsula, and most of them were deep in towering mountains surrounded by thick forests. Traveling across Wortenia, unexplored and undeveloped as it was, was already a dangerous feat, and those veins were in the most secluded regions of the peninsula. Worst of all, those regions were essentially ruled over by dangerous monsters who'd made these sprawling, hidden places their territories.

Ryoma had told Nelcius about how Count Salzberg was illegally mining salt from a vein on the peninsula. But that vein was on the foot of the mountains near the base of the peninsula, and the distance between it and Epirus was short. Monster attacks were also less likely in that region. By comparison, the elves' territory was positioned deep within the peninsula, so obtaining salt was a much greater ordeal.

Mining a salt vein wasn't simple work either. Moving in a large group would provoke the monsters, so only small groups could travel through the undeveloped regions. Assuming they made it to a salt vein, they couldn't excavate the rocks using verbal thaumaturgy since that would aggravate the monsters. In addition, before they began trading with Sirius, the elves didn't have any horses, so they had to carry the salt back by hand.

Because of these factors, the elves could only gather a limited amount of salt. In some places in Ryoma's world, like Africa, salt was once used as a form of currency. Similarly, for the elves of Wortenia, salt was a treasure worth more than gold. As such, the amount they used for their daily meals was greatly limited.

Pepper and other spices didn't grow in the peninsula at all, so the only way to obtain them was through trade with other cities. Since the elves didn't have any contact with humans, they couldn't import them. Their only options were to sprinkle a little salt on their meat or simply boil or fry it, but neither of those made the food very palatable. For comparison, Pireas had to import salt, so it was used sparingly and their cuisine was minimally seasoned, but the elves of Wortenia made do with even less.

It was said that ingredients were what brought out the taste, but when the only thing one had to work with was thick, smelly meat, cooking seemed impossible. Personally, Nelcius didn't care much for flavor. So long as it filled his stomach, any food would do. But that wasn't to say he had no sense of taste at all. He didn't eat this kind of food by choice.

Meat wasn't even the elves' preferred diet to begin with. Before the holy war that took place four hundred years ago, the elves ate fruit foraged from the forests and vegetables they raised in the fields. They mostly hunted animals to gather materials for medicine and tools.

But they'd lost the holy war and had been driven out of their land. And the only thing at the end of their long, bitter journey was this cursed, infertile land of Wortenia. The guild often sent experienced, elite adventurers to gather resources from the peninsula, but even they dreaded entering the regions the elves lived in.

The elves had chosen to live here, so as to cut off all contact with humans, but it had made their lives that much harder. Agriculture wasn't as simple as just planting seeds or saplings. The land had to be plowed, and the crops had to be watered and fertilized. This required time and dedication. Trees had to be cleared to make room for the fields, and barriers would have to be set up to protect their harvests from monsters.

After their defeat in the holy war, the elves had been too beaten and tired to establish their new villages properly. As a result, they were forced to live by hunting monsters for their flesh. Luxury items like alcohol or cigarettes were entirely out of the question.

But things had changed. While they didn't have an abundance of such

luxuries, Nelcius was able to barter for enough alcohol and cigarettes so all of the elves could at least have access to them. Vegetables, which were once rare and reserved only for celebrations, now became a common part of their diet. And most importantly, salt and spices greatly improved the quality of their lives.

In just a year and a few months, trading with Sirius had revolutionized the elven lifestyle, which had remained unchanged since their defeat in the holy war.

Yes. He offered to trade with us knowingly. He knew that once our standard of life went up, it would be hard to lower it again.

Even Nelcius would sternly refuse to return to the days when the only things that sated his hunger were bland soup and smelly, dry meat. Not only that, he desired to experience the finer commodities. The delicious food and drink he'd had during the banquets in Sirius left a lasting impression on him. The tender, oily texture of birds and beef bred for consumption was irresistible. They also served fish from the sea to the north, seasoning it with salt. That kind of cuisine was entirely new to Nelcius.

At the end of that banquet, confections had been brought out for dessert. Their taste had rendered him speechless. Anyone forced to lead their life without so much as the taste of fruit would react this way in the face of sugary treats. Nelcius, once dreaded by the human generals of the holy war as the Mad Demon, was no exception. He had specifically ordered as many tea leaves and dry, preserved confections as possible from Alejandro. Officially speaking, he ordered them as a way to reward his subordinates and for his meetings with Ryoma. Needless to say, his true intentions were rather obvious.



Even without those special foods, going back to our old lives is unthinkable now.

As the chief of an influential warrior tribe, Nelcius had a responsibility to defend all of elvenkind. The other chiefs, however, had a far more shallow outlook, adhering to their people's demands and pressuring Nelcius to import more from the humans.

I can understand why they'd feel that way. Our lives have become much richer, if only for a time. But...what about the future?

The other chiefs viewed the trade with Ryoma Mikoshiba too lightly. They only saw their own profits and didn't consider the future risks.

As Nelcius pondered over these details, a dark elf ran up to him, bowing his head.

"Preparations are complete," he said. "We can set forth as soon as you say the word."

Nelcius nodded. "Hm. The road to Sirius is protected by barrier pillars, but never forget that we're on the Wortenia Peninsula. A monster powerful enough to tear through the barrier could attack." He turned his gaze to the carriages. "Stay on your guard. We're carrying quite the valuable load this time around, and the barriers are not as effective on the larger monsters."

"We will," responded the young elf. His expression was strained—perhaps from the pressure. He understood the gravity of his responsibility. "We'll guard these goods with our lives."

Half the carriages were full of herbs only found in Wortenia, as well as the entrails and furs of monsters. The other half was full of rare nostrums, armors, and weapons made by elven craftsmen. Any of those would be worth their weight in gold so long as they were brought to the right hands. More importantly, this freight carried something much more meaningful than any of their former trades had. That was why Nelcius himself, the chief of a warrior clan, was escorting the caravan this time.

He mentioned wanting to talk to me directly, but in all likelihood...

Nelcius looked ahead, past the flagstones of the road. His warrior's intuition, the same intuition that had earned him the title of Mad Demon, could feel it—the omens of a new war, swirling like clouds on the horizon.

Chapter 1: A New War Beckons

It was afternoon and the sun was beginning to dip into the west. Having successfully delivered the caravan to its destination, Nelcius went to Baron Mikoshiba's estate, at the heart of Sirius.

A summons from the baron himself. It must be what he mentioned before.

When Alejandro had delivered the supplies two days ago, he'd updated Nelcius on Ryoma's overall business as of late. Ryoma had probably called Nelcius to get a final confirmation on the matter.

Not that I can very well refuse, but...

Nelcius didn't see this as a favorable proposal, but it wasn't an absurd demand he could easily refuse. He did understand Ryoma's intentions, and he knew this was the best possible option to achieve them.

But this isn't a decision I can make on my own. I'll need at least another month.

There were a total of seven elven tribes in Wortenia. Nelcius was seen as a hero of elvenkind, and he was the leader of a warrior tribe, so he had a significant say when it came to collective decision making. But he wasn't a dictator. If it was just his own clan, he might have been able to make those kinds of decisions, but he couldn't do that when the outcome would affect all the elves on the peninsula.

As Nelcius entered the room, his expression understandably hardened thinking of the negotiations ahead of him. In contrast, Ryoma sat on the sofa opposite him with a serene, friendly expression. His casual attitude was perhaps thanks to the confidence his superior position granted him. Either way, Ryoma was the one to begin speaking.

"I appreciate you coming all the way here. Laura, pour Nelcius some tea, would you?"

"As you wish, Master Ryoma." Laura curtsied and reached for the porcelain

pot sitting on a nearby cart. The tea had already brewed, and she poured it with practiced motions. She then set the steaming porcelain cup on the table, as well as a silver platter carrying some tea cookies.



Nelcius nodded his thanks and brought the cup to his lips. He suddenly narrowed his eyes. It wasn't that the tea was bad; the aroma was impeccable. Nelcius had ordered a tea set from Alejandro and had made his own attempts at brewing tea. Through trial and error, he'd learned how to do it quite well, but as it turned out, he was no match for Laura. But this tea was more sour, more refined, and more distinctive than anything he'd had before. It definitely needed something else to go with it. It didn't taste bad per say, but not everyone would appreciate it. It wasn't the kind of tea one would usually serve to guests.

Based on past experience, Nelcius believed Ryoma served him this particular blend for a reason.

Meaning... Nelcius's gaze fell to the platter of cookies sitting next to his cup. He took one and brought it to his lips. *Oh, these have dried fruit kneaded into them. This is delectable.*

A moderate, restrained sweetness spread in his mouth. He'd been called to tea a few times before, but he'd never had something with dried fruit like these cookies.

"It's good," Nelcius said honestly, his stiff expression softening.

It wasn't just sweet. Every crunchy bite was accompanied by the soft texture of the fruit, resulting in a satisfying contrast. Nelcius then took another sip of his tea.

I see, yes. So that's why they chose this blend.

Ryoma had served this bitter tea alongside these cookies in a calculated decision to surprise Nelcius. It was something of a little prank.

Simply serving a new blend wouldn't be refreshing enough. He's as well-prepared as ever, I see.

People could grow used to anything, for better or for worse. The same held true for demi-humans like Nelcius. Even the most exciting experience grew dull on the second and third reiteration. With this in mind, Ryoma had prepared a more unique blend to pique Nelcius's interest.

Realizing his intention, Nelcius gave a satisfied nod as he turned to look at Laura. Her master had provided him with a conversation topic. As the guest, he had an obligation to go along with it.

“The aroma is wonderful, thanks to your skillful brewing. It’s very refreshing. And the bitterness spreads on the tongue and helps wash down the cookie’s sweetness. I’m ignorant when it comes to tea, but is this some kind of famous blend?”

“You’re too kind, Sir Nelcius,” Laura said, bowing her head. “This is a blend called Bandark, native to the Holy Qwiltantia Empire.”

“Bandark, you say... It’s distinctive but pleasurable. I’d love it if you could spare a bit for me to take back to the village.”

Apparently, Nelcius enjoyed the flavor very much. His demeanor wasn’t normally very pleasant, but he was acting quite frivolously right now.

“Of course,” Ryoma said with a satisfied smile. “If you like it, you can have a crate or two to take home with you. We can’t thank you and your village enough. Your elven products have made Simone’s business flourish quite a bit.”

A smile played over Nelcius’s lips. The Christof Company’s business dealings, which were spearheaded by the Mikoshiba barony, were very much relevant and pertinent information for Nelcius.

“That’s good to hear. I suppose I’ll take you up on that offer and take those crates with me.”

“Yes, help yourself. Oh, and we purchased some cacao from the southern continent the other day and used it to make chocolate. We have some put aside for you to take home as a gift for your village, so you can take that with you too.”

Nelcius’s eyes positively lit up. Chocolate, much like other confections that used sugar, was so rare in the western continent that even royalty didn’t eat them often. In this world, sweets were a rarity, and things like chocolate sold for even higher than spices and sugar. Its raw material, cacao beans, were quite hard to come by. Cacao trees required ground with good drainage and routine rainfall to grow, as well as an appropriate level of humidity. The only lands that

fulfilled all of those conditions were located in the central continent and the northern reaches of the southern continent.

What's more, cacao beans on their own couldn't be refined into chocolate. To make chocolate, one needed to gather hard cacao pods from the tree and collect the seeds and pulp extract from within them. Those were then roasted to produce cacao powder, which was mixed with milk and sugar to create chocolate.

The process was taxing, especially by hand. Nelcius wasn't privy to those details, but he did realize members of the royalty were just about the only ones on this continent who could enjoy chocolate. Receiving such a luxury item for free was very indicative of the financial success the Mikoshiba barony was experiencing.

"Oh! Chocolate, you say? But I hear that's a very expensive product. Are you sure I can have it?" Nelcius asked.

Needless to say, Nelcius was very excited to receive this gift. He'd had it during past tea parties. But the rich, distinctive taste made from real cacao beans had captivated not just Nelcius. Elves that had visited Sirius were always shaken up by it. Refusing to bring some back when given the choice to do so would result in unwanted problems. The elves coveted chocolate about as much as cigarettes and fine alcohol.

However, the quantity Ryoma offered for free didn't sit well with Nelcius. His elven honor was a factor, but he also worried that jumping on such opportunities would make it seem like elves were easy to take advantage of. That could make future transactions harder for them.

Ryoma understood his concerns, though. "Don't worry about it. Dilphina helped us a great deal during the last war. Given all you've done for us, this doesn't even begin to repay the favor."

The casual mention of his daughter's name served to stroke Nelcius's ego and allowed him to save face. Ryoma did have a way with words, and Nelcius had no choice but to accept the present.

"I suppose I must oblige, then," Nelcius said, bowing his head to Ryoma in gratitude.

“Like I’ve said, you’ve been a great help to us. Besides, if it’ll dispel some of the aversion your people have for us humans, then I couldn’t wish for anything else.” Ryoma smiled, reaching for his own teacup.

“Yes...” Nelcius said with a sigh. “I’ll admit that when you offered peace between us and the humans, I doubted it was possible. But now I see that we both profit from your idea.”

In the end, Nelcius believed he was right to accept Ryoma’s offer. Had they continued to stubbornly refuse mingling with the humans, the elves of Wortenia might not have had a future.

Ryoma nodded and said, “Given everything you went through before, who can blame you?”

The elves’ history was one of suffering. Their defeat in the holy war centuries ago drove Nelcius and his people from their homeland. No one but them could even imagine the predicament they’d had to live through. And while the elves struggled to bear children, they lived longer than other races. Many of the elven warriors still remembered their battles against the humans, much like Nelcius. Such senior warriors were given important positions, like serving as the chiefs for clans or leading hunting parties. Their enmity toward mankind was understandable.

“Yes. As you say, many of my people were quite fixated on the past. Things are changing, however. Because of trade with your city and the new goods it brings, we are changing our ways.”

Splendid, Ryoma thought, grinning. *Alejandro told me the same thing, but the elves really are softening up. That’s exactly what I need.*

Ryoma had no desire in particular to exploit the elves. He wasn’t going to buy their merchandise for cheap and sell his wares to them for ridiculous rates, nor did he intend to force unreasonable sums on them. Even without such lowly tactics, trading with the elves brought Ryoma great profit.

He hadn’t been lying earlier when he’d said that Simone’s business was flourishing thanks to the elves. However, he hadn’t been entirely truthful about it either. It wasn’t *just* flourishing, and “quite a bit” didn’t begin to describe the degree of its success. Her business was outright booming.

By now, Simone had over twenty trade cogs in her possession, each ship costing several tens of thousands of gold coins. To Ryoma's surprise, Simone had said she still didn't have enough ships and was planning on purchasing more. At first, she only had two cogs, but that number had increased tenfold. Only a few companies in Myest's city of Pherzaad, a great trading port, had that many ships sailing the seas. True, Ryoma's scheme to profit off the O'ltormean-Xaroodian war by selling provisions at inflated prices had been disrupted by unforeseen interference. That did make a considerable dent in their profits. But overall, the Christof Company was doing extremely well.

The only real problem had been the elves' aversion to humans. Hearing that their view of mankind was improving was exceptionally good news as far as Ryoma was concerned.

"Really? That's good to hear," Ryoma said. "That kind of mutual benefit contributes to good relations in the long run."

"Quite right, Lord Mikoshiba."

The two looked at each other and laughed.

Nelcius then bowed his head. "Incidentally, this may be overdue, but welcome back from your dispatch to Xarooda, Lord Mikoshiba. I'm relieved to find you safe and sound."

Ryoma nodded. "Thank you. I fulfilled Her Majesty's orders and stopped O'ltormea's invasion."

This was an exemplary, almost prescribed sort of reply. Nelcius understood this perfectly well, but the problem was what came next.

"Yes. My daughter told me of what happened. However..." Nelcius directed a probing glance at Ryoma. If possible, he'd have preferred to let the topic rest here, but he knew that wouldn't happen. His only choice was to accept what was to come. Ryoma wasn't dense enough to mistake the intention of Nelcius's gaze either.

Ryoma shrugged and heaved a tired sigh. "Well, there's still unfinished business."

There was no need to ask what he meant. Had Nelcius not known it ahead of

time, he wouldn't have asked Ryoma to begin with.

"Yes. I do believe you've done the most you could given your position, but the outcome was still far from satisfactory."

Having spent centuries isolated from the outside world, Nelcius was somewhat detached from the mindset and customs of human society. But demi-humans were quite similar to humans when it came to emotions. And when it came to war, conflicts that spanned nations were essentially the same as feuds between villages.

When Dilphina had given her detailed report on the events of the war, Nelcius had realized just how precariously Xarooda was teetering on the cusp of destruction.

I don't intend to recklessly interfere, but...

If he could avoid getting involved in this matter, he would very much prefer to do so. But Nelcius realized that based on what Ryoma decided, he might have to prepare for the worst. In a manner of speaking, Nelcius had already decided, but this was still a question he had to ask.

"Lord Mikoshiba, do you intend to conquer the ten houses of Rhoadseria's northern territories?"

Ryoma's lips curled upwards. "Yeah. From the looks of things, they're not keen on playing nice with me."

"I see. I've heard as much from Master Boltz and Master Igasaki. While you were away in Xarooda, the ten houses sent adventurers and spies time and again to gain information on the peninsula, right?"

"That's right," Ryoma said, shrugging. "You know, this whole affair taught me a lesson. Nobles can be sneaky bastards in their own right. Not that I can't understand why they're doing it."

"Which is to say?" Nelcius asked.

"The way they see it, I was a mercenary of unknown origins. I wasn't even a citizen of Rhoadseria. But one way or another, I ended up helping Queen Lupis Rhoadserians at the right time, and it changed everyone's fates. The nobles

aren’t happy Lupis won the war, and they want to kill me for enabling her to do so. Even if I didn’t really do it by choice...”

Ryoma sighed. He hadn’t helped Queen Lupis because he wanted to. He’d gone from a normal high school student in Japan to being summoned to O’ltormea by Gaius Valkland. He’d killed Gaius and earned his freedom, but he was still under pursuit from one of the continent’s three greatest countries. In most cases, his only options would have been to settle down and live in hiding in the middle of nowhere or to cross over to another continent. But at the time, Ryoma had been occupied with finding a way back home. It was then that certain schemes unfortunately forced him to take a compulsory request in the port city of Pherzaad, which had derailed all of his plans.

The request had ended in an attack led by Mikhail, Queen Lupis’s attendant, who’d thought he was going after the late King Pharst II’s illegitimate child, Radine Rhoadserians. Learning he’d been forcibly embroiled in Rhoadseria’s succession war, Ryoma had realized he needed to place Lupis on the throne if he was to defend himself and the Malfist sisters.

“Yes, you were an unfortunate victim, caught up in the whole affair. Queen Lupis should bear responsibility for everything. But the nobles who pulled the short straw can’t help but begrudge you.”

Ryoma nodded. The civil war had overturned the power balance among the nobles of Rhoadseria. Those who’d been treated poorly before were now receiving preferential treatment, while those who had been favored were subjected to misfortune.

This world operated by the law of the jungle. The nobles now at the bottom had to watch as the ones they’d once trampled on exacted revenge on them. But even if that was an undeniable truth, people couldn’t forgive those who hurt their profits.

That was especially true for nobles who’d been close to the former Duke Gelhart’s faction. Members of the neutral faction were now seeking revenge. Those who were simply driven out of their posts were lucky. Some lost all their assets, and some lost their entire household over trumped-up charges.

Over a decade had passed since the former Duke Gelhart had purged Duke

Ernst's household, during which the neutral faction had been spurned by the nobles' faction. The pain and humiliation was still fresh in the neutral nobles' memories, and now that their positions were reversed, they took their chance to exact revenge.

Queen Lupis's inaptitude as a ruler only made the problems more pronounced. The fact that she did nothing to stop the neutral faction from lashing out made the nobles' faction resent her all the more.

But for all her faults, Lupis Rhoadserians was still Rhoadseria's rightful sovereign. It might have been different before she officially inherited the throne, but publicly slandering the rightful queen's name required a great deal of courage. And Ryoma Mikoshiba's actions were what had jump-started this whole state of affairs. With a convenient scapegoat in the form of a newly appointed baron dangling right in front of them, it was only natural those disgruntled nobles would take their frustration out on him.

"Plus, I had the Igasaki clan investigate, and they discovered quite a few disturbing things."

Nelcius eyed Ryoma curiously. "Such as?"

"I don't know if it was intentional or just a coincidence, but there are signs that indicate that people from Lupis's side are purposefully agitating the nobles."

"To get them to lash out at you?"

Ryoma nodded heavily. A long silence settled between the two of them, which only broke when Nelcius groaned and shook his head.

"It stands to reason. You stick out, so they try to beat you down. I've heard human nobles abhor those who move up in the world. But to Queen Lupis, you're the distinguished vassal who installed her on the throne. You even saved Xarooda from its plight. I cannot understand why she would hand you over like a sacrifice..."

"Well, you know what they say. Once you win the war, you can kill off your victorious soldiers. From where Lupis is standing, she probably thinks she repaid me in full by making me a baron and giving me the peninsula. She might have a

bit of a guilty conscience, but that's about it."

"So you think this isn't the queen's will?"

"In all likelihood, it's not..."

Ryoma didn't think Queen Lupis was vile or vicious—quite the contrary. Lupis Rhoadserians was good-natured to a fault. She was intelligent too. If nothing else, she had been wise enough to see the civil war coming and knew to place herself under Ryoma's command.

Most nobles or royals would have never accepted Ryoma's plan. Some might have even ordered his execution for the sheer nerve of making such an absurd proposal. And while she did break her promise to Ryoma, giving him a title was her way of making up for it. She wasn't ungrateful by nature.

Ryoma certainly harbored a grudge and some ill will toward Queen Lupis, but he wasn't going to claim she was completely lacking in good qualities. However, he would hesitate to say she was a suitable ruler. A sovereign stood at the top of the country and was charged with making its decisions. Had Ryoma been in her position, he wouldn't have treated someone like himself as indecisively as she had. He'd have either executed that person, despite how ungrateful it might have made him seem, or elevated them to an even higher position, the nobles' resistance be damned. Of course, his decision would have depended on that person's nature and the circumstances of the situation. Perhaps he'd have even chosen a third path. Either way, one couldn't rule a country if they feared ill repute.

A part of politics is making things seem clean and proper.

In that regard, Lupis was by far the worst possible person to serve as ruler. She had neither the pluck to cover up her mistakes nor the resolve to discard those close to her when need be. This bought her the undying loyalty of knights like Meltina and Mikhail, but in the end, those traits only ended up backfiring on her.

"Who did it, then?" Nelcius asked. "Viscount Gelhart?"

"That's a possibility, but..." Ryoma shook his head.

"I see..." Nelcius said, nodding.

Viscount Gelhart was indeed the type of person to stealthily agitate his rivals to make them tear each other apart. Among the nobles of Rhoadseria, Gelhart was especially obsessed with noble status and loathed those who moved up the social ladder. Since Ryoma was the direct cause of his fall from grace, he'd certainly hate him enough to want to see him dead. But while he might have sent assassins to dispose of Ryoma, he wouldn't need to turn the nobles' faction's ire from Queen Lupis to Ryoma.

In exchange for his title and the arable southern lands of Heraklion, Furio Gelhart's death sentence had been pardoned. But still, he was the ringleader of the civil war, and Queen Lupis and her court regarded him as an enemy. Currently, the O'ltormean-Xaroodian war was all that occupied the minds of Rhoadseria and the surrounding countries. The country's new regime hadn't been properly reorganized yet. It would come as little surprise if Gelhart were stripped of his noble title or if his entire clan were executed for his past transgressions.

In other words, Queen Lupis and Viscount Gelhart were still very much in a state of hostile antagonism. And Gelhart knew this perfectly well. In fact, the viscount was trying to once again consolidate the nobles' faction and rally his political power. He would have little incentive to incite the nobles' faction against Ryoma in particular. Allowing things to run their course was far more preferable; going out of his way would only risk drawing suspicion to himself.

That reasoning narrowed down the list of possible suspects.

Out of Queen Lupis's aides, I can only see one of them doing this.

Ryoma was politically affiliated with Queen Lupis's clique, at least as far as the palace's political map was concerned. In truth, he was more of an independent faction of his own. He was a noble of Rhoadseria, but he wasn't under the queen's control.

Among the court, there were two people who particularly disliked him: Meltina Lecter and Mikhail Vanash. Both had served Queen Lupis since her infancy, and she regarded them as her most trusted subordinates. But while their skill as knights was considerable, they were lacking in foresight, and Ryoma had trouble believing either of them could come up with a plan that

relied so heavily on the manipulation of others. Despite this, Ryoma was convinced it was them for some reason.

They went through that much shame and agony. They'd have to learn their lesson sooner or later...

Meltina and Mikhail had both tried to stampede through the civil war by relying on their martial prowess and sense of duty, but they were only humiliated time and again. Apparently, that repeated shame taught them that not all problems could be solved with brute strength.

Ryoma didn't know which of them came up with this plot, but he had no doubt either Meltina or Mikhail was behind it.

Well, I guess I can't dismiss the possibility that it's that mysterious faction old Julianus warned me about. Either way, if I don't do something, things are only going to go downhill for me.

The Wortenia Peninsula was a natural fortress, and sealing off the base would bar most attempts at entry. Entering by ship was possible, but of the three countries of the east, only Myest had a strong navy. The sovereign of the north, the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, had a navy as well, but it was occupied with fighting the O'ltormean Empire and the Holy Qwiltantian Empire. It was too distracted to go to the trouble of invading Wortenia.

With that in mind, holing up inside the peninsula wasn't a bad idea. But Ryoma would earn nothing by merely withdrawing and hardening his defenses. Sooner or later, someone would inevitably force their way into Wortenia.

And that's why I have to usurp control of Rhoadseria's north.

Thankfully, his preparations were complete to some extent. All that remained was this final negotiation with Nelcius.

"And that's why I called you here, Nelcius."

Nelcius heaved a deep sigh. A moment later, he solemnly parted his lips. "To discuss my people's position in your future domain. Am I right, Lord Mikoshiba?"

Ryoma gave a slow, earnest nod.

†

That evening, Ryoma beckoned five visitors into his office.

“Thanks for coming over,” he said once they’d entered.

All five bowed their heads at once. Kevin stood at the front of the group, with Melissa and Leon to his left, and Rina and Annette to his right.

“We’re honored to see you, milord,” Kevin said on behalf of the group. “We were told the call was urgent, but...”

His words were careful and stiff, but they didn’t sound unnatural. Considering they’d started off as slaves, they had become quite disciplined. Still, Ryoma thought that Kevin’s speech was a bit exaggerated, almost anachronistic. This world had set rules and etiquette for speaking to nobility, but seeing Kevin’s downcast gaze as he acted accordingly brought a cynical smile to Ryoma’s lips. He ordered the five to stand.

I’d like to find a way to simplify all these formalities, but... Some other time, I suppose.

Etiquette changed with time and the shifting of society. Even if Ryoma felt it was outdated, they still had to abide by those rules. He could have ordered Kevin to do away with the formalities, but any other noble would have taken offense, even demanding that such a disrespectful servant be beheaded for it. Ryoma knew this, so he had ordered Laura and the others to teach the child soldiers etiquette once they were freed of their slave status. It still grated on Ryoma’s personal sensibilities, though. The habits he’d fostered in the decade and a half he’d spent in his home world were hard to break.

There were more important things to prioritize right now, though.

“Before I give you your next orders, I need to confirm something. I heard the injuries you sustained in Xarooda have healed already, but is everything all right?”

All five bowed their heads again.

“Yes. I injured my left hand during the battle for Fort Notis, but I’ve fully recovered thanks to the elven nostrums,” Kevin replied. “The other four had

different injuries of varying degrees, but they've all recovered as well."

Ryoma gave a satisfied nod.

I see. Given enough time, the nostrums can even heal severe injuries that were potentially beyond recovery. Even if it must be applied quickly, along with a few other limitations, that elven medicine is amazing. I'd heard medicine in this world was pretty primitive, but stuff like this is legitimately impressive.

Ryoma had been informed of their injuries ahead of time. During the battle for Fort Notis, an O'ltormean soldier cut through Kevin's arm, nearly severing it altogether. But a mere few months later, it had healed almost entirely. That was a miracle that Japan's medicine could never hope to imitate.

In Ryoma's world, there were cases of automobile accidents that resulted in severed limbs. Hospitals did attempt to reattach them, but that assumed the injuries only extended to broken bones or torn muscles. If a tendon or a nerve were severed, a patient would be lucky if they didn't need an amputation. Connecting a nerve was possible, restoring sensation in the limb, but in most cases it was rejected by the body and became much less responsive.

There were methods to prevent rejection, but those depended on the skill of the surgeon and other factors—how much time had passed since the injury occurred, whether it was cooled with ice, *etc.* But in cases of an accident, it took a great deal of luck for any of those conditions to turn out favorably for the victim. Even if the operation were successful, it would require extensive rehabilitation that would often see some mobility restored, but not on the same level as before the accident.

Things were a little different in this world, but not in terms of actual medical treatment. Without thaumaturgy, the medicine in this world was on par with medieval remedies, or at best, early modern times. Doctors who'd been summoned from Rearth led to the discovery of bacteria, but some physicians still didn't sterilize tools by boiling. Standards here were understandably low.

But with thaumaturgy in the picture, things are pretty different.

Boltz had been the first to tell Ryoma of this. During Rhoadseria's civil war, Ryoma and Lione, who had only recently met, held a banquet to deepen their friendship. As Ryoma and Boltz drank, Boltz told Ryoma of his past and how he

came to join Lione's Crimson Lion group. Boltz also mentioned elven medicine—nostrums, as they were called.

Elven nostrums were said to be highly effective, capable of not just closing fatal wounds, but also of regenerating lost limbs if applied correctly. Perhaps some of it was exaggeration, but Ryoma thought that if even half of these claims were true, it would still be incredibly useful.

The only problem was that this magical elf medicine was as good as conjecture if one couldn't obtain it. Due to the holy war between mankind and elvenkind, the elves had been driven to near extinction. Rumor had it that those who'd survived took refuge in hidden enclaves on faraway undeveloped lands.

Even if Ryoma were to find elves, it was highly unlikely they'd share their medicine with a human. One would have to venture into an elf enclave, defeat a skilled elven warrior who *might* be carrying such a nostrum, and snatch it from their dead fingers. Needless to say, such a method was risky and unsustainable. One could try to purchase elven medicine with money, but the price would make a dent in even a wealthy king's treasury.

But of all the royals and nobles who held authority in the western continent, there was only one man with a steady supply of elven nostrums—Ryoma Mikoshiba. He was the governor of the Wortenia Peninsula and a friend to Nelcius, the chief of an elven warrior tribe.

Still, it's not like it can heal absolutely any wound.

From what Nelcius had told him, elven nostrums had their limitations. Firstly, it took a great deal of time, effort, and rare ingredients to produce them. In addition, they had no effects on diseases, only wounds. In cases like Kevin's, where the arm was still attached, it would only take weeks to heal. But if a limb were fully severed, it would take over a year's worth of treatment to restore full mobility.

Nelcius could have been withholding information, of course, but Ryoma suspected this was roughly accurate. Besides, if the elves had truly had large supplies of medicine that could heal any wound or malady, they would have had an overwhelming advantage when fighting humans. Any injury that didn't result in instant death could be healed at once. As numerically inferior as the

demi-humans were, they still would have been able to fight mankind equally with that kind of edge.

Despite this, the demi-humans had lost the war and were forced to relinquish their homes to the humans. Their defeat meant either the nostrum's effects were too diminutive to make a difference, or there was too little of it to give the demi-humans an advantage. Considering that, Ryoma felt that Nelcius's claims that the elves couldn't produce large quantities of the nostrum were true and that the rumors of its effectiveness had been exaggerated.

That's a shame. I'd imagined the kind of magic elixir you see in video games, the kind that heals all injuries at once. Ryoma smiled bitterly at his own shallowness. *Still, when you couple that with the elves' thaumaturgically endowed weapons and armor, this should give us a major advantage.*

Though the elven medicine had its limitations, none of the surrounding nations had any medical techniques that could match the nostrum's healing powers. Having access to it gave Ryoma an overwhelming edge.

"That's good," Ryoma replied. "Speaking of, what about the others who returned from Xarooda? Do they have any problems?"

"What do you mean, sir?" Kevin asked, furrowing his brows. It seemed he didn't quite understand what Ryoma was getting at.

"I mean, we just went to Xarooda as reinforcements. Since we weren't allowed to pillage, you didn't get much reward. I was hoping I could repay you for your efforts somehow, so I was wondering how you felt about that...especially since I want to ask you to do some pretty annoying work."

Kevin seemed to have realized Ryoma's meaning and shook his head sadly. "Are you doubting our loyalty, milord? Do you think we're displeased with you?" He gazed into Ryoma's eyes, his expression stiff. "You freed us from slavery and gave us new lives, and we swore unending fealty to you, milord. If...if you suspect us of even the slightest disloyalty, order me to end my life here and now. I will gladly do it if it will prove my allegiance to you."

Kevin drew the sword at his waist and held it against his neck. In Ryoma's world, Kevin's words and actions would have been far too anachronistic. While one might throw a tantrum and threaten to cut their stomach open, no one

would expect them to actually go through with it. But as Kevin stood stoically in place, his blade pressed against his neck, his eyes showed he was intent on proving his loyalty.

Everyone else realized this too. Though he had drawn a sword, the twins, who were standing behind Ryoma, didn't so much as stir. Melissa and the other soldiers standing by his side remained still as well.

He's serious, huh?

Ryoma hadn't expected this turn of events, and he hurriedly snatched the sword out of Kevin's hands.

"No, no, that's not what I meant! It's just, you all worked so hard, putting your lives on the line, and you weren't rewarded for it. It just didn't feel right to me."

Ryoma honestly meant what he'd said. But at the same time, he couldn't deny Kevin's comments had held some truth to them.

"I apologize for this shameful display," Kevin said. Ryoma tapped his shoulder and shook his head slowly.

With the situation resolved, Ryoma heaved a sigh of relief.

Phew... That was scary. When I talked to Lione about this, she said I was worrying too much, but I was right.

Ryoma's anxiety had been justified. In a sense, Kevin had been right when he'd said Ryoma didn't trust in their loyalty to him. But it wasn't so much that he suspected them to be disloyal; it was more that some small part of him was burdened with guilt.

Ryoma carried a great amount of guilt over his treatment of Kevin and the other child soldiers. He wasn't worried about something as petty as restricting the amount of food they were given or deciding whether they were allowed to see doctors whenever they were injured or sick, though. In those regards, Ryoma treated his soldiers quite well.

No other noble on the western continent did as much for their soldiers as Ryoma did. For example, soldiers like Kevin, who'd joined the expedition to

Xarooda, had been honored with a banquet to celebrate their achievements. They had also received a monetary reward for their service. Those funds would inevitably circulate back to Sirius's economy, but Ryoma had honestly wanted to reward those who'd survived the harsh battles in Xarooda.

The sick and wounded soldiers had been treated with the nostrums they'd got from Nelcius, the best they could offer. Those who couldn't make a full recovery had been given sizable pensions and assured of new employment should they choose to remain in Sirius. The city was still only halfway developed, after all, and there was no shortage of work.

This was unbelievably kind treatment in this world. The concepts of labor standards or welfare programs didn't exist here, both legally and generally speaking. Even if such laws had existed, they would have been meaningless.

No matter how hard one looked, they wouldn't find a noble who treated his soldiers this favorably. This wasn't a matter of belief or creed, though. Ryoma was able to act this way because of the financial freedom afforded to him by the Christof Company's vast profits. That was what enabled him to repay the services of his subordinates so generously.

Even though Ryoma treated his soldiers impeccably, he worried if he was doing enough in other ways. Unlike mercenaries, soldiers fought for more than profit. That wasn't to say that monetary gain wasn't a factor, but they prioritized the safety of their families and loyalty to their country.

Aside from the former mercenaries in his army, most of Ryoma's soldiers had been bought from slavers. Most of them didn't have families. Sometimes they had been sold off with their siblings, but that was a rare exception. In general, they didn't have families to prioritize.

On top of that, Simone had gathered slaves from across the continent under the condition that they were all in their early teens. As a result, they all came from different countries. Some of them were even originally from the central or southern continents. Naturally, these slaves weren't loyal to any one nation. For this reason, Ryoma had freed them from slavery and given them thorough educations in order to ensure their loyalty to him. They were taught to lay down their lives for their liberator. This was the path they'd chosen for

themselves, out of true belief and conviction. One could say their education had produced its intended result.

However, Ryoma himself was still just short of twenty years old, and he couldn't help worrying about the hearts and feelings of the people he knew personally. As old as his face looked and as daring as his attitude might be, he lacked crucial life experience. His anxiety was understandable.

But it seemed that Ryoma's concerns were in vain.

Lione had told me about this, so I wasn't worried per se, but they really are loyal.

He'd asked them what he did in order to confirm their loyalties, but looking at the faces of Kevin, Melissa, and the others, he realized that he'd been careless to doubt it.

But this is where the problematic part begins.

Ryoma had already constructed a plan for whittling down the ten houses of the northern territories. But in order to do that, he needed people who could mobilize for a long period of time—people who didn't shirk away from dirty work. Many of the Igasaki clan's ninjas were already occupied with securing the peninsula's defenses, so Ryoma had considered who would make trustworthy spies. Kevin, along with his four companions, were the names that he'd eventually come up with.

"Then I'll explain your next task. I need you to...prepare the groundwork for our takeover of northern Rhoadseria."

All five bowed their heads.

"First, let me give you a rundown of the situation," Ryoma said, beckoning them to the sofa by the window. Sara handed him a map, and he spread it out in front of Kevin. "This is a map of Rhoadseria. The area north of this point is called the northern regions." Ryoma moved his finger around the top side of the map in a circle. "These northern regions are ruled by a group of nobles called the ten houses of the north. They're led by House Salzberg, which governs over the Salzberg countship and the citadel city of Epirus."

The five child soldiers nodded. This was common knowledge, even among the

ordinary townsfolk. Still, Ryoma wanted to be thorough, so as to minimize unpredictable mistakes.

"Based on our position," Kevin started, "if you want to take over the north, you'll have to take Epirus no matter what. But that's going to be a challenge."

"Because toppling the city is going to be difficult?" Melissa asked. "We do have fewer soldiers, so it will be hard to take down the citadel by brute force. But resorting to starvation tactics isn't wise, either..."

"That's part of the issue," Ryoma said, "but that's not the entire problem."

"Meaning..." Melissa trailed off.

Ryoma nodded. The points that Melissa had brought up were valid. The rule of thumb was that when attacking a fortress, one needed a force three times the garrison's size. This theory had been called into question following research conducted by German soldiers after the First World War, but the idea behind it was quite clear.

Since fortresses relied on the surrounding terrain for defense and were equipped to intercept the enemy, they often had the advantage. Because of this, it had been established that to successfully besiege a fortress, the attacker needed a force three times that of the garrison. But the question of whether three times was the right amount was subject to debate.

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* claimed that one needed ten times the enemy's number to surround them and five times their number to launch an attack. If one only had the same number of troops or less, they were to retreat. Of course, the society and environment of Sun Tzu's time were wildly different from post-WW1 Germany, and Sun Tzu's advice applied more to field warfare. Either way, it was fairly evident that the side hiding inside the fortress had the advantage, even if it wasn't guaranteed they'd win the war.

With that in mind, Ryoma had to consider the size of his forces compared to Count Salzberg's. At present, Ryoma had three thousand soldiers within the city of Sirius. This number was thanks to Simone's acquisition of more slaves during Ryoma's absence and Boltz's training. In addition to their number, Ryoma's forces were all trained warriors who could use martial thaumaturgy. This placed him on equal footing with the former Duke Gelhart. Count Salzberg had Epirus,

the largest citadel city in northern Rhoadseria, under his command, but he couldn't possibly possess more troops than Duke Gelhart had in his prime. That alone didn't mean Ryoma could beat Count Salzberg's forces, though.

"The first issue is that if we attack Epirus, Count Salzberg will call the other ten houses of the north for reinforcements."

A baron in Rhoadseria typically only controlled a single village. Depending on the size of their domain, they would have somewhere between one hundred and one hundred and fifty knights in their service. In case of a war, they could conscript the commoners to form an army of roughly six hundred men. Viscounts controlled multiple villages and a larger number of knights compared to a baron. They had two hundred to three hundred knights under their employ, and with their conscripts, they could raise an army of one thousand men.

This time, however, Ryoma was going up against a count, who had five hundred knights in his service. If Count Salzberg were to gather conscripts from all the villages in his domain, he could amass an army of several thousand men. But the real problem was that he was also the leader of the ten houses of the north and had six barons and three viscounts under his banner.

Compared to each individual noble, Ryoma had the largest armed force in the area. He also had more knights. But if the ten houses of the north were to all gather inside Epirus's walls, his army wouldn't have the power to beat them down. And if Ryoma were to surround Epirus and try to starve them out, then other nobles outside of the ten houses might become a problem. House Salzberg was a warrior house that had supported the Rhoadserian royal family since the country's founding, so it wasn't without allies.

At present, House Salzberg was estranged from the royal family, but they did have a long history of guarding Rhoadseria's north. They also had a number of connections within the aristocracy. So while it was unlikely that the nobles in the south would send troops, because of the distance, nobles from the east and west could very well dispatch their armies to help Count Salzberg.

"And there are other concerns at play," Laura added.

She took out a book from one of the shelves behind her and opened it next to

the map. It was a thick leather tome made of paper—an expensive material. The book was quite bulky too. Laura, however, leafed through the pages with practiced motions and quickly found the passage she was looking for. She then slid the book over to Kevin and the rest, so they could see it more easily.



“This book lists Rhoadseria’s laws,” Laura explained. “And if you look at this article...”

“A prohibition on waging private wars...” Kevin groaned, looking at the line Laura was pointing to. “I see. So that’s what you mean.”

When factions that weren’t considered countries engaged in warfare for personal reasons, it was considered a private war. In Japan, Hideyoshi Toyotomi had prohibited battles between warlords. Nobunaga Oda planned to bring an end to Japan’s Warring States period. His protégé Toyotomi helped pave the way for that. He was succeeded by Ieyasu Tokugawa, who finally succeeded in unifying Japan. The initial cause of that period was the Onin War, a power struggle between two warlords by the names of Katsumoto Hosokawa and Sozen Yamana over the succession of the title of Shogun of the Muromachi shogunate. This time in Japanese history demonstrated why private wars were forbidden—a country can’t function when those in power squabble over territory.

In this world, all proper countries strictly forbade their nobles from conducting private wars. This wasn’t just a recommendation; it was binding, punishable law. If one were to break that law in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, the kingdom would bring all its power to bear and exact justice on the culprit. Both noble houses would be stripped of their power, and their entire clans and their vassals would be executed. Breaking this law was the same as refusing to obey Rhoadseria’s laws.

“Yeah, we have to do something about this or we’ll be publicly branded as traitors who oppose Rhoadseria,” Ryoma said.

A heavy chill settled over the office. Everyone regarded that single sentence as a major obstacle standing in the way of the Mikoshiba barony’s future.

Annette, however, seemed to regard it differently. “But, milord, you’re not just going to go along with what the law says, are you?”

“What makes you say that?” Ryoma asked with a smile.

Annette grinned brightly. “You wouldn’t have called us here if you’d given up on fighting.”

Ryoma burst into a rolling laughter that filled the office.

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense,” he said, still chuckling as Kevin and the other three regarded him curiously. “You’re right, that law isn’t going to stop me from going to war. After all, we’re talking about fighting the people who took advantage of the fact I was in Xarooda to pester us.”

The smile on Ryoma’s lips turned vicious. The ten houses of the north hadn’t really caused any harm by sending in spies. Ryoma had predicted that Count Salzberg might do just that and had taken measures to prevent him from succeeding. And the spies did serve as good practice dummies for the children training to become ninjas. But that didn’t mean Ryoma was happy that spies had been trying to sneak into his domain and snoop into his affairs during his absence.

“But...what are you going to do then, milord?” Kevin asked.

Sara, who was standing behind Ryoma, said, “First, we’re going to take advantage of Rhoadseria’s poor public order and cause an uprising within the kingdom.”

The child soldiers swallowed nervously. From the moment they had been called here in secret, they’d known they would be taking on a questionable task. But this was more dangerous than they’d expected. If this matter were to be exposed, the Mikoshiba barony would be crushed.

Out of the five of them, only one remained unsurprised.

Rina, the girl who had so far listened wordlessly, asked, “You mean you want to spur the commoners to rise up in rebellion?” Her expression was completely blank.

“That’s right,” Ryoma answered. “At present, Queen Lupis’s regime is in a state of chaos. The nobles are keeping a careful eye on the situation and building up their armies to prepare for whatever may come. That includes the ten houses of the north.”

Ryoma continued explaining, filling in for Sara.

“So we use it to our advantage. First, we incite a rebellion to break out when it’s best for us. Then, we raise our army under the banner of restoring public

order. Once we do, we reveal that they sent spies multiple times into the Wortenia Peninsula and built up their armies to rebel against the royal house. Then we can crush the ten houses under those pretenses."

The plan wasn't without reproach. It was definitely an evil plot. But the reality was that sometimes false pretenses could be seen as justice. One thing was certainly clear, however. If Ryoma was to protect the subordinates who trusted him, he had to eliminate Count Salzberg.

So, as if to spur himself on, Ryoma made his declaration.

"We have to chip away at Count Salzberg's strength, so we'll be aiming for three people. The first one is Lady Yulia Salzberg's father, Zack Mistel. The other two are known as House Salzberg's Twin Blades, Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria!"

As Ryoma's declaration filled the room, Kevin felt something like a heat wave emanate from Ryoma's body and pass through his own. It was resolve, the iron will of a man who had faced countless enemies and always stood his ground. And at that moment, Kevin could hear the sound of history's gears grinding as they were set in motion.

Chapter 2: The Ten Houses of the North

Beyond the highway leading south from Sirius, the citadel city of Epirus towered over the land. It was the crux of northern Rhoadseria's defenses and the castle of a powerful man leading the ten houses ruling over the region. Deep moats and ramparts standing a dozen meters tall protected it from intruders. It was an impregnable fortress. Generals praised as heroes had led large armies against it, shutting the city off and laying siege with starvation tactics, but since the founding of House Salzberg, the fortress had never been breached. Not once did it permit their enemies to invade the north. Fathers and sons had perished on this battlefield, laying down their lives to protect Rhoadseria.

The counts of House Salzberg were called demons of national defense, and their reputation was well-earned. That applied to the current Count Salzberg as well. He had taken to the battlefield for the first time during his teens and had fought through multiple wars alongside his father, the former Count Salzberg. His combat experience matched and possibly exceeded that of all other counts in House Salzberg's history. But this was precisely why no one noticed the madness brooding within Count Salzberg.

That day, several days after Ryoma had given Kevin's group their covert mission, the Countess Yulia Salzberg approached her husband's study to deliver a letter. The sounds of a woman's coquettish moans reverberated against the corridor walls and reached her ears—a disturbing but common occurrence.

In the middle of the day? Why does he have to be so...

Lady Yulia let out a sigh. The woman her husband toyed with right now wasn't a prostitute. Count Salzberg had an obnoxious taste for bedding inexperienced women. It had caused Yulia trouble more times than she cared to count. He'd only recently taken to sleeping with women so conspicuously, though. It was as if something had loosened his restraint.

Well, I suppose it's too late to mention it at this point.

Truth be told, she didn't approve of this situation in the slightest. But no matter what, Yulia couldn't openly oppose Count Salzberg.

More importantly, I have to deliver this letter.

Lady Yulia hurried through the corridor. She didn't particularly care for this task; she had to visit her husband while he was having his way with another woman. Under most circumstances, she would have had someone else deliver the letter. But this letter she'd just received couldn't be entrusted to one of the servants.

She'd already guessed at what the contents might be once the messenger had said the sender's name. It was from Meltina Lecter, one of Queen Lupis's most trusted aides—standing shoulder to shoulder with Mikhail Vanash, the strongest swordsman of Rhoadseria.

It was no wonder she could guess so easily at the contents of the letter. Meltina had sent the same letter countless times already. But Meltina was Queen Lupis's right hand woman, so they couldn't very well disregard it. The contents *could* be different this time, and if they were to discard the letter without reading it, it would lead to very unfortunate developments.

As Lady Yulia advanced through the hallways, she could hear the woman's moans growing louder. Submerged in her thoughts, she found herself at the door to her room before she knew it. But she simply stood there for a few moments.

I swear, no matter how much time passes, hearing another woman moaning like that is so unpleasant. I just hope he won't get angry that I got in the way of his merrymaking...

A wife calling upon her husband while he was sleeping with another woman would indeed douse a man's interest. She would very much be walking in on an act of adultery. Few things could be as unpleasant. Yulia knew this and wasn't keen on interrupting his tryst because of that. Still, she came here because this was urgent business. She couldn't put it off any longer.

Yulia took a deep breath. "Beloved, may I come in?" she asked, knocking gently on the study's door.

The moment she did, the lewd moans from inside the room grew louder. They were followed by the sound of labored breathing and the creaking wood. She couldn't tell just how long she'd been standing there, but after hearing what felt like the shrillest screech yet, the cacophony finally died down. The merrymaking, it seemed, had reached its end.

She heard the shuffling of fabric and then her husband—Thomas Salzberg—answered her from behind the door.

"Yulia... Yes, it's fine. Come in."

The room would reek with the distinctive scent of the act, and she might see something she'd rather not have to witness, but Yulia didn't have the right to refuse. Readying herself, she turned the doorknob.

"What is it, Yulia? Did something happen?"

As soon as she opened the door, Yulia was assaulted by the particular stench of body odor mingled with aphrodisiac. The bed in the corner of the room was occupied by a naked woman, still gasping for air on the jumbled sheets. It seemed they had gotten rather wild. The woman was breathing heavily, a pink blush on her skin. This was clearly the aftermath of an intense affair.

Count Salzberg stood in the center of the room and directed his gaze at Yulia as he composedly adjusted his shirt cuffs.

Yulia stood still, remaining silent. "Beloved..." she finally managed to breathe out. She'd expected this, but seeing the vivid reality of it still came as a shock.

What am I to you...? That doubt shook Yulia's heart.

Yulia had entered House Salzberg through a political marriage. She wasn't from a noble family, but a merchant one. Someone of her station normally wouldn't have been allowed to marry a noble. Despite that, Yulia had married into House Salzberg as the count's legal wife. Though rumors and whispers called her a vile woman, Yulia ignored it all. Instead, she improved Epirus's economy with her shrewd business skills.

Even though Yulia was a devoted wife, Count Salzberg didn't show a hint of remorse as he invited her into his room immediately after lying with another woman. Of course, Yulia couldn't say she loved Count Salzberg from the bottom

of her heart either. Besides, they hadn't married for love; they'd married because both House Salzberg and the Mistel Company stood to profit from their union. It was simply a marriage of calculated interest.

Even matrimony borne of such calculation could blossom into affection and understanding, but there was no such sweet idealism between the two of them. On the surface, Count Salzberg played the part of a loving husband who favored his wife, and Yulia appeared to be a devoted woman who supported her husband's endeavors. But the reality of their relationship couldn't have been more different. In their hearts, they didn't see each other as spouses. They didn't even regard one another as friends. Some couples were said to be shallow, only ever going through the motions of marriage. Yulia and Count Salzberg were even less than that. If anything, their relationship was that of master and servant.

"Hey, how long are you going to sleep there? Go on, out!" Count Salzberg barked, tearing the sheets off the woman on his bed. He forced the girl to her feet and shouted at her to leave, as if to say he was done with her. This was a daily occurrence in this estate, though. The woman knew to hurriedly pick up the fallen sheets, cover her body, and vacate the room.

Fixedly glaring at the woman as she left, Count Salzberg once again spoke to Yulia, who stood rooted in place. Apparently he'd driven the girl out of the room for Yulia's sake, since she hadn't stated her business.

"Well, what is it? Why are you so quiet? You came here for a reason, right?" There was a hint of irritation in his tone.

Seeing his attitude take a turn for the worse, Yulia hurriedly handed over the letter. "I'm sorry, beloved. A messenger came from the capital."

"Oh? The capital, you say?" Count Salzberg's eyes narrowed as he looked down at the letter. "I see. Yes, this is the royal seal."

The count then clicked his tongue and broke the seal. He opened the letter and quickly skimmed through the contents...and then started chuckling.

"Heh heh heh! Ah ha ha ha! I'm surprised they never get tired of this!"

Yulia realized her guess as to the contents of the letter had been right from

her husband's response.

"Go on, read it yourself!" He handed her the letter.

Yulia accepted it and read through it quickly. As she confirmed its contents, her brows furrowed. It said exactly what she thought it would. After receiving the same letter repeatedly for over a year, one couldn't help but feel exasperated.

Ugh... That woman really is persistent. Is she really that wary of Ryoma Mikoshiba?

Normally, Yulia would feel inclined to ignore the letters. But for all Meltina's faults, she was still Queen Lupis's closest aide. Even if they were to refuse, they'd have to do so carefully.

"So, what should we do?" Count Salzberg asked. He spoke in his usual pleasant voice, but Yulia could feel the sneering behind it, as if he were mocking a fool.

"Yes, well, I'll admit that I have no desire to do this. But we should answer Lady Meltina's request, superficially at least."

"Hm, yes." Count Salzberg nodded, fiddling with his beard. "That would be wise."



The count knew that Queen Lupis and her aide regarded Ryoma Mikoshiba with an exaggerated degree of caution. Soon after she'd granted Ryoma the Wortenia Peninsula, she had sent Count Salzberg a letter asking him to keep a watchful eye over him. Unfortunately, none of the spies he'd sent into Wortenia had returned, so he was effectively blind as to what was going on in the peninsula. And truthfully, Count Salzberg would have preferred to avoid any more losses over this matter.

Still, this letter was sent in the name of the country's ruler, so as pointless as it might be, he had to at least give the appearance that he was looking into the matter, even if the attempt yielded no information whatsoever.

"But that man truly is unfortunate. Don't you think so, Yulia?"

Yulia nodded. Ryoma was indeed an unlucky man. He'd put his life on the line to install Queen Lupis on the throne, but she was a fool unworthy of the title. Her aides, Meltina and Mikhail, were meatheads that blindly adhered to her whims. In the end, the only thing he'd gotten for his troubles was the Wortenia Peninsula—an undeveloped no-man's-land. And when the O'ltormea Empire invaded Xarooda, she'd sent him on the expedition with Helena.

Queen Lupis used him repeatedly, yet she remained wary of him at the same time. Had Yulia been in Ryoma's position, she didn't know if she'd be able to bear it.

"Then like last time, I'll contact the ten houses," Yulia said. "Regardless of whether we gain any information, it should make them leave us alone."

"Yes, do that," Count Salzberg said. "I'll leave it to you." Then he reached for a bell on the table to call the girl he'd just kicked out back into the room.

That same day, Yulia received permission from her husband, Count Salzberg, to visit her family home at the Mistel Company. She'd arrived earlier that afternoon, but it was already past eight in the evening now. She'd been waiting for five hours to see her father.

This is quite the wait. Did something happen? Yulia pondered, glancing at the clock on her father's office wall as it ticked away. *The shop's staff said he took*

off without saying anything, but...

Once or twice a month, Yulia would pay her father a courtesy call, like this visit. Normally, a woman visiting her family this often was unusual. After all, when a woman married into a noble family, it placed all sorts of limitations on her as a wife. She couldn't return to her maiden family often. But since Yulia's mother had passed away when she was young, her father, Zack Mistel, remained her sole relative. He was also the owner of the Mistel Company and the leader of the trade union that controlled business within Epirus. Given all that, Count Salzberg had had no choice but to grant Yulia's request.

Yulia wasn't just visiting her family home, though. She also wanted to discuss Epirus's developing economy with her father, so she hadn't made this request on a whim.

But even though Yulia had received permission to visit her father, the hour was late and staying the night would be inappropriate. Of course, since Count Salzberg and Yulia's relationship was as terrible as it was, the count could very well ignore the fact that she'd spent the night away. But Yulia did have a reputation to maintain. Even so, Yulia had a reason to visit her father that night. If she were to return without discussing things with him, she would have to wait until her next courtesy call. Since she handled much of Epirus's internal affairs in her husband's stead, she was a busy person. Missing this chance to discuss the matter with him now meant pushing it off for two weeks, if not longer.

And this can't wait...

Because of Meltina's letter, Count Salzberg had ordered the ten houses of the north to resume their investigations into the Wortenia Peninsula. Yulia also felt that another civil war was on the horizon, due to the tumultuous atmosphere that hung over Rhoadseria as of late. It was very likely that the citadel city of Epirus would get caught up in the fighting.

No, not caught up, but rather...

Yulia suspected that Rhoadseria's current state of unrest had been caused intentionally. But that was only her own personal speculation; she didn't have any proof to back it up. However, that was the impression she got from Epirus's current economic state and Rhoadseria's public order as a whole.

Lupis Rhoadserians is a foolish sovereign. There's no doubting that, but...

It seemed only logical that Queen Lupis's reforms would go poorly, but every single one of her plans had failed. It was easy to assume that some political faction was trying to disrupt her efforts.

Viscount Gelhart is the most obvious candidate, along with his nobles' faction. Furio Gelhart dropped in noble status by three ranks, and his domain was moved from the farm lands of Heraklion to a frontier region. He would definitely hold a grudge against the queen. But could he really cause something like this?

Even during their golden age, the nobles' faction had struggled to have such far-reaching influence over the entirety of Rhoadseria. And now that their power had been greatly diminished, Yulia couldn't see how they could manage this.

Which leaves...a foreign country?

The O'ltormea Empire, the ruler at the center of the western continent, would be the most suspect. When O'ltormea launched an invasion on Xarooda, Rhoadseria's expedition, led by Helena Steiner and Ryoma Mikoshiba, had crushed their ambitions. Because of this, O'ltormea might be trying to strike back at Rhoadseria.

But I can't imagine the empire would directly manipulate Rhoadseria like this.

Based on their prior tactics against Xarooda, O'ltormea's fundamental strategy revolved around creating spies within the enemy country and manipulating them. They would bribe people native to the land and gather information on internal affairs. But since O'ltormea was surrounded by enemies in every direction, they needed spies in every region. This made it harder for them to deploy their own agents in large numbers. With that in mind, it was hard to believe O'ltormea would directly try to bribe people within Rhoadseria.

Which leaves... Yes, him.

Yulia thought of the young man who looked much older than his actual age. That scoundrel had quickly discovered that they had been mining a salt vein within Wortenia and had shamelessly forced them to negotiate over it. Since Queen Lupis had forced the Wortenia Peninsula on him, he most certainly had

an ax to grind with her.

Count Salzberg and the others had sent upwards of a hundred men to scout out the Wortenia Peninsula, but none of them had returned. That implied he had very skilled adventurers and spies on his side. In addition, despite having no residents in his domain, he had bought countless slaves and trained them to be his soldiers.

He was creative, plucky, and decisive. He had proven to be a dangerous man. Still, it was hard to believe he was the source of all the political unrest in Rhoadseria.

He seems to be greatly profiting with Simone's help, but I'm not sure he could influence all *of Rhoadseria like this.*

As Yulia continued to think, the clock rang out nine times, marking that another hour had passed.

It's already so late. Should I just leave? It had become late enough that she had to consider returning home. Yulia was perplexed. *I suppose I'll have to come another time.*

But just as she got up to leave, she heard a sudden knock on the door.

"Come in, the door is open," she said.

The door swung open, and her father peered into the room. "Oh, you're still here. Good, good," Zack said, swiftly slipping into the room. He closed the door behind him and locked it. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and sank into the sofa.

Yulia directed a questioning glance at him, noticing his nervous attitude. "Father, the shopkeeper said you left without saying anything. Where were you?"

One would naturally suspect that he'd been to see a woman, but thankfully, unlike her husband, Yulia's father was quite indifferent to women. That implied he had been out on business, but if that was the case, why wouldn't he tell the store's staff about it?

Zack Mistel, however, wasn't willing to answer her question. "No, you go first.

The shopkeeper told me that I've kept you waiting for quite a while. Did something bad happen?"

Yulia shook her head. "I wouldn't call it bad. There's just something I thought I should inform you of."

Yulia went on to tell him about the letter Meltina had sent them.

"So we've decided to order the ten houses of the north to dispatch more spies, like before."

Zack nodded, crossing his arms. He then fell into a short silence. Whatever was on his mind, it was probably quite the difficult matter. But just when Yulia began to think that his silence had been dragging on for too long, he finally seemed to steel himself to speak.

"I see. So that's what happened. There's something I should probably tell you, then. You see, a messenger from the Mikoshiba barony came to see me today!"

Yulia gasped, looking at her father questioningly.

That entire night, the light in Zack Mistel's room remained lit.

Chapter 3: The Azure Sky Nimbus

Vast grasslands spanned as far as the eye could see. In the midst of this grand scenery, a massive flat black thing moved across the land, shaking the ground with every step.

Yeah, it's a big one. Specimens this large are rare outside of Wortenia. I can see why they call it a glutton. The guild describes it as a dangerous giant monster. Doesn't take more than a glance to see why.

As he hid behind a large rock, Kevin peered ahead. Some three hundred meters away, a massive centipede skittered across the earth, its many legs and feelers writhing as it did. Its appearance was disgusting, and it had the repulsive nature typical of arthropods. A more timid person would be too terrified to approach it.

Kevin thought back to the description the guild had given him the other day.

Thirty meters long. No, almost thirty-one. Normally, the best way to kill a centipede would be to crush it, but this thing is definitely too large for that.

Kevin couldn't help but smile at the thought of trying to stomp on a creature that large. While it was certainly long, it wasn't very tall; climbing on top of it and stomping on it wasn't impossible. But the creature was slithering across the plains with the speed of a horse, so actually getting on would have been easier said than done. And even if he could have done so, the thing was huge. Kevin might have been relatively bulkier than most boys his age, but his weight was average. Even if he were to double his weight, it wouldn't have mattered much. He couldn't so much as slow the thing down.

Established theory says to lure it into a melee fight and cut off one of its legs to break its balance, right? Either way, we have to do something to slow this bugger down. It's too quick.

The centipede skittered about with surprising agility. They were also known for being extremely belligerent creatures. Coupled with their size and strength,

their aggressive nature made them a considerable threat. If Kevin and his brigade were to attack it, the centipede would simply perceive them as prey and lunge at them. And then it would chomp down on them. Their upper halves would go flying. Even if they somehow remained whole, the venom from its glands would end their lives in minutes.

They would have to slow the centipede down somehow. When fighting humans, the rule of thumb was that if your opponent was larger, you aimed to incapacitate their limbs. The same logic applied to monsters like this.

If this were mountainous terrain, we could have dropped rocks on it to pin it down and then took our time finishing it off. But that won't work here.

Kevin scanned the surrounding rock formations. They were large enough to serve as hiding spots, but they weren't nearly tall enough to drop rocks from. This was a vast meadow, and one could easily see far ahead to the horizon. There were groups of trees here and there, which offered some cover, but there were no rocky mountains.

That leaves either attacking it from the front using martial thaumaturgy or attacking its weak spot using verbal thaumaturgy. Either way, fighting that thing head-on would be unwise. Let's see, though...

Kevin glanced behind him and smirked. Martial thaumaturgy did give the user superhuman strength, but they still remained fundamentally human while using it. Transcendants and Ascendants might have been able to slay this creature with nothing more than augmented strength, but Kevin's grasp of thaumaturgy was still meager. Challenging the centipede in melee combat would be reckless.

Rick, the leader of the adventurer troupe Kevin was now affiliated with—the Azure Sky Nimbus—would likely come to the same conclusion too. Rick was a powerful warrior, much more experienced than Kevin was. But to the monster in front of them, their differences were hardly worth mentioning. If they were to win, they'd have to rely on more than just brute strength.

I could cast some verbal thaumaturgy to stall it while the others sever its legs, or we could lay a trap and lure it in and kill it that way. What would Rick do?

Relying on someone you hadn't developed any trust with in a life-and-death situation was a gamble. Kevin didn't know the strength of each individual team

member, and the troupe's coordination was a point of concern. At worst, they might use Kevin as bait, or they might attack him from behind when the job was finished so they wouldn't have to pay him for his help. Kevin realized the chances of this were slim, but he didn't trust this troupe enough to completely discount it. After all, this was the largest-scale hunting request he'd undertaken since joining the Azure Sky Nimbus.

The Azure Sky Nimbus is probably the most skilled and highly regarded adventurer troupe operating in Rhoadseria.

Rick was the same rank as Lione, and the guild had given the troupe as a whole the lofty Rank A. This was higher than the Crimson Lions, the mercenary group that had trained Kevin. There was a difference between mercenaries and adventurers, though. The former fought in wars; the latter slew monsters. However, guild ranks didn't necessarily correlate with each individual's strength. But fundamentally speaking, those who reached Rank A presumably had the strength to back up that claim.

The only question is, do they have what it takes to match that reputation?

It had been roughly three months since Kevin had joined the Azure Sky Nimbus troupe, and as far as he could see, they were certainly strong enough to match their name. However, Kevin wasn't seeking simple strength or successful people. Kevin's honored lord had ordered him to seek out people who met certain requirements. And he couldn't properly gauge their worth unless he spent a certain amount of time with them.

I'll need a bit more time to confirm that. Either way, it's nice to have a target worth killing for once.

A mix of elation and anxiety ran through Kevin's body. That centipede was a predator, on a much higher rung of the food chain than a human like himself. But so long as he handled the situation properly, he could subdue and slay this creature.

This world was teeming with powerful monsters. But mankind still ruled, despite being a relatively weak and vulnerable species. Their rule wasn't by way of luck or coincidence either.

Even if Kevin looked like an inexperienced boy in his late teens, his combat

experience was the real deal. He had been among the first slaves that Ryoma Mikoshiba had bought in Epirus, and he had survived more battles than a child his age should ever have experienced. He had started his career as a warrior fighting the monsters infesting Wortenia, and he had gone on to join the expedition to Xarooda. He had also participated in the Battle of Fort Notis under Ryoma's command.

Sirius was protected by barrier pillars, but the area outside the city was swarming with monsters. And since Kevin often trained against these monsters, he'd grown used to fighting this kind of creature. He'd seen plenty of monsters that had matched this centipede in size. In fact, Kevin was one of the most skilled soldiers under the Mikoshiba barony, after Lione and the Crimson Lion mercenaries. With that much training and experience, he was naturally overcome with excitement to fight such a monster.

It's been four months since I left the Wortenia Peninsula, and all I've fought is low-ranking fodder.

That emotion burned in Kevin's heart. Of course, even low-ranking monsters posed a threat. They weren't to be taken lightly. However, after months of fighting them, they had become tedious. Because of that, Kevin couldn't help but smile at such powerful prey. He would have felt that way even if he hadn't been hiding his true strength these past three months.

Kevin suddenly heard a hoarse voice behind him, and he felt a hand pat his shoulder.

"What do you think, Kevin? The guild calls this dangerous monster a glutton. It's our prey for today."

Kevin's hand jumped to the shortsword at his waist. It was a reflexive reaction that anyone with sufficient training would have developed. But as soon as he saw the familiar figure of the black-haired man, with his usual daring smile, Kevin forced himself to relax.

Oh, no good...

Kevin changed his indomitable smirk into a sheepish smile, one mixed with abject anxiety. It was the expression of the weak, which had been beaten into his very soul. His current cover story was that he was the illegitimate son of a

knight who had fallen from grace and lost his title.

Suppressing his giddiness to fight, Kevin slowly turned around.

“Oh, sorry. But don’t surprise me like that, sir,” Kevin said, looking at Rick in a wide-eyed, exaggerated manner. “What are you doing here? Did you decide on a plan?”

Rick shrugged unapologetically. “Hey now, this is a battlefield, you know? If I were a monster, some part of you would be decomposing in my stomach right about now.” Despite his words, his eyes and tone implied that he hadn’t been scolding him.

Rick then grinned and tapped Kevin’s chest affectionately. A light shock ran through Kevin’s solar plexus, knocking all the air from his lungs.

Right, he was worried about me because I’m a rookie. I suppose he’s at least caring.

Apparently, Rick had been concerned about the new rookie facing his first large monster, so even though he was the captain of the troupe, he’d personally come to check on him.

In that case...

Keven immediately caught on to Rick’s intentions. He kept his tone anxious and fearful, saying, “I didn’t think it’d be that big. Are we really supposed to fight that thing, Captain Rick?”

Kevin looked just like a novice soldier heading into battle for the first time. It was a truly difficult act that required painstaking balance. He couldn’t seem too afraid, or he’d come across as cowardly and incompetent, which would impair his future credibility. And since he was supposed to be a knight’s son, he had said that he’d been trained in combat and had learned martial thaumaturgy. This story was why he was allowed to join the Azure Sky Nimbus in the first place. He was supposed to be a beginner adventurer, but one that already knew how to fight.

The Azure Sky Nimbus was one of the highest-ranked adventurer troupes in Rhoadseria, and they wouldn’t normally accept a total novice who’d only just registered with the guild. Instructing a rookie was difficult in any profession,

and there weren't any schools in this world. As such, the troupe preferred people with some existing aptitude. He'd had to tell them he could fight in order to get in.

Still, given the sheer size of the monster in front of him, Kevin had to appear at least a little fearful. Otherwise, he would look suspicious. Kevin had seen monsters on the same scale as the glutton thanks to his experience in Wortenia, but outside the peninsula, creatures of this size were rare. They were like a natural disaster that could destroy an entire city, depending on the circumstances.

A young woman butted into their exchange, answering Kevin's question. "Of course we're gonna fight it. That's our job."

The woman stepped out from behind Rick. She had shoulder-length blonde hair, and she wore black-rimmed glasses, which made her look sharp and capable.

"Vice-captain," Kevin said, greeting her.

The woman, who was around thirty years old, nodded lightly.

"You came here too, Anastasia?" Rick asked as he turned around to face her. He sounded exasperated. "Are preparations complete?"

"Would I be here if they weren't?" Anastasia said, cocking her eyebrow. "We covered up the trap hole; it's all ready. Besides, I can't leave protecting the rookie to a bumbling ape like you."

Apparently, Anastasia had already completed the preparations needed to slay the centipede and had come to check on Kevin as well. She, too, was quite the caring, helpful person. The only problem was that she'd sounded quite prickly with the captain.

Rick flared up at her. "A bumbling what?! Watch your tone, woman!"

"What, are you saying you're not?!"

Anastasia was dignified and beautiful, but she wasn't one to mince words. She wasn't vulgar, per se, but she didn't care for the pretentious airs that nobles typically exuded. A bespectacled woman and an adventurer—she was quite the

strange noble by this world's standards.

While Rick and Anastasia continued arguing, Kevin snuck a peek at Anastasia, thinking back to what he'd learned of her.

I heard she's the daughter of a noble who lost his title. Her last name is unknown. Though she's the vice-captain, she's the brains of the group and takes command of the Azure Sky Nimbus whenever the captain is on the frontlines.

Kevin had heard this from some of the troupe's veterans, though this could have been false information. Following her family's loss of status, Anastasia had turned to adventuring as a means of making a living. After many twists and turns, she'd ended up joining Rick's troupe, the Azure Sky Nimbus.

Judging by how they argue, it looks like they're fairly close.

Though their argument seemed fierce, the two got along very well. It was often said that people needed to be close to repeatedly argue, but in their case, their arguing felt more like a married couple's bickering. And from what the other members of the group had told him, these arguments were quite frequent.



She doesn't really feel like a noble, but I guess that's all in the past.

It had been a lifetime ago, as one might say. Anastasia still looked refined and beautiful, but by now she had fully acclimated to life as an adventurer.

Kevin silently watched them bicker, and after a few minutes, their argument died down.

"So, you think we can really defeat that thing?" Kevin asked.

Rick scratched his hair awkwardly. "Huh? Oh, yeah, that depends on Anastasia. She's our outfit's brains, after all. You just stay on the ready and take advantage of her plan."

Anastasia sighed, shaking her head at Rick. Then she directed a gentle smile at Kevin. "I can't fault you for being anxious. You've been working with us for a few months, but you've never fought anything that big. That thing's a monster, for sure. It's huge, a menace to society."

"That's right," Rick said, nodding sagely. "And it's not just big. Its skin is as thick as armor, and it's an insect monster, at that. Bugs are crazy robust. It might have been just a centipede at first, but once it's that big, it's a major threat. It's not smart enough to use any verbal thaumaturgy, but its brute strength and hard shell make it a menace. I don't know if it's true, but based on the guild's records, the biggest centipede monsters out there were equal to low-ranking phantasmal beasts or a dragon. And they start out as itty-bitty centipedes. Can you believe it?"

"Equal to a dragon?" Kevin parroted, surprised.

Dragons existed in this world. They ranged from low-ranking drakes to high-ranking dragon lords. However, even the weakest drake was far stronger than any human. Fortunately, they were few in number and rarely left their territories, so most adventurers and mercenaries had never even seen one.

Once a dragon went on a rampage, the damages and losses were great. They had reduced entire villages and cities to dust, and whole countries had had to mobilize in order to wipe them out. Dragons had even destroyed kingdoms as retribution for encroaching on their territories. The destruction left in their wake was colloquially called a "maelstrom," and it was treated the same as a

natural disaster like an earthquake or a typhoon.

Though Kevin was familiar with the no-man's-land that was Wortenia, he'd never faced a dragon. Same as how no man alive had the power to push back or prevent a natural disaster, no one in their right mind would challenge a creature equal to such a force of nature. Even in the myths passed down in this world, the number of people who had faced a dragon and lived to tell the tale was less than a hundred. Kevin was indeed a gifted warrior for his age, but he didn't consider himself to be as strong as those mythical heroes.

Kevin forgot his act and swallowed nervously out of real fear. Rick laughed. His expression soon hardened, though.

"Well, that was a joke. Those records were fairly old, so who's to say how accurate they are. But if we don't do something about this thing, one day that joke might end up becoming real."

Rick then paused for a moment and directed a questioning glance at Kevin before continuing. "Big monsters like the glutton don't appear out in the open like this very often, but every now and then they skulk out of their dens. Why do you think they do that?"

"Hm, because they've developed a taste for human flesh?" Kevin suggested.

Humans weren't the only creatures that increased their strength by feeding on the lives of others. In fact, it seemed animals and insects were more receptive to the boon of their prey's life force than humans were. It was the law of the jungle; eat or be eaten. The strong emerged victorious and grew all the stronger for it.

Normally, overcoming those odds wasn't easy. People might have been capable of beating dragons in this world, but it was quite the rare occurrence. The possibility was one in a million, or even one in a billion—a veritable miracle.

Statistically, it was impossible. Yet even such impossibilities sometimes became reality. And humans weren't the only species to capitalize on such luck. The goddess of fate was a fickle mistress, and she would sometimes grant even the smallest of lifeforms terrifying power. Sometimes it was enough power to overturn and shatter the food chain.

“That’s right,” Rick said, satisfied with Kevin’s answer. “You’re pretty smart for a rookie. Like you said, they probably devoured some adventurer or mercenary in the woods and developed a liking for their flesh. And that’s why they crawl out of their usual habitat and closer to ours. To a glutton, adventurers that have absorbed enough prana to raise their level are probably plump, delicious prey.”

Maybe it was a matter of flavor, or the prana they yielded. Or perhaps it was something else entirely. Either way, monsters that had reached a certain level of power and growth developed an appetite for human flesh. That wasn’t to say that people simply allowed themselves to be devoured, though. They would fight to survive.

“And as a matter of fact,” Anastasia added, “five men have died just to confirm its position. And a few adventurer groups never returned from the forest it used to inhabit, which brings the grand total of casualties to twenty.” She spoke eloquently and with a gentle smile, but it was clear that she was trying to scare Kevin into understanding the gravity of the situation. “Thanks to that monster, traffic through this route has essentially stopped, which is a blow for the trade caravans. That’s why the guild came to us, asking that we dispatch this creature as soon as possible.”

Kevin’s face screwed up anxiously. “And we’re facing the glutton with these numbers? Shouldn’t we have more people on our side?”

Their group consisted of a total of twenty people or so. Adventures mostly formed parties of five, meaning they currently had four parties’ worth of fighters here. That wasn’t a small number by any means, but it wasn’t a large group either. They were visibly skilled warriors, but by Kevin’s estimate, they were still nowhere strong enough to face the glutton head on.

We’ll need at least twice these numbers to slay a monster of that size.

Kevin looked at Anastasia, his gaze fearful and anxious. Some part of him was still acting, but some part was honestly concerned. He wasn’t afraid of that giant centipede, but he wasn’t going to underestimate it either.

Kevin did have experience hunting down monsters of that size and class alongside his friends in the Wortenia Peninsula, but they were true comrades,

bonded by a trust thicker than blood. They had trained and lived together, and they'd won their battles thanks to meticulous preparation. By contrast, Kevin had only been in the Azure Sky Nimbus for three months. He'd heard of their reputation, and through spending time with them, he had gained an understanding of their skill. But he didn't know them that well yet. And that lack of coordination could lead to fatal mistakes.

Do we really have a chance here? If things turn bad, I'll have to run. Captain Rick is a promising candidate, but I can't afford to die without completing the task my lord entrusted me with.

If you're not confident you can win, don't take fights you can't back out of. That was a lesson Kevin knew by heart. So even though he burned with desire to hunt such strong prey, his mind advocated caution.

To Rick and Anastasia, however, he just looked like a rookie with cold feet.

"What, you scared?" Rick asked. He patted Kevin on the back and laughed heartily, as if to dispel his fear. "Don't worry. Like I said, follow Anastasia's plan and you'll be fine. I understand how you feel, kid, so stop frowning like that. It's bad luck."

"Don't you worry, just focus on doing your part," Anastasia added with a gentle smile.

The two of them then turned around. It seemed the time for idle chatter was at an end.

"Guess that's all they'll tell me. Oh, well," Kevin muttered to himself.

Perhaps they didn't think there was any point explaining the subtleties of their plan to a rookie, or maybe they had some other reason. Kevin couldn't tell. He wished he'd gotten a proper briefing, but pestering them any further would arouse suspicion.

Let's see if they have the skill my lord seeks.

Watching them walk off, Kevin's lips curled into a smirk—not the smile of an inexperienced novice—as he recalled the order his one and only master had entrusted him with.

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As the sun began dipping into the western sky and the hearty shouts of drunkards filled Epirus's streets, one man sat in his study, detached from the celebrations. He was occupied by a large mountain of paperwork, his face lit up by his lamp's faint glow.

He could hear the members of his troupe cheering from downstairs, celebrating the success of the first big job they'd taken from the guild in a while. The giant centipede had truly been a satisfying kill, and they did it with minimal injuries on their part. The adventurers were understandably elated and merry.

I see they're enjoying themselves down there. Good for them.

Rick cracked a smile, though it was tinged with envy. The Azure Sky Nimbus had rented out the tavern, and the dining hall was now lined with appetizing meat and flowing ale. And once their bellies were full and their minds sufficiently intoxicated, they'd likely go out into the night streets to seek more fun. The men, who had walked the tightrope of life and death today, would seek comfort in a woman's warm bosom and more sweet mead—the most basic of instinctual desires.

When Rick was younger, whenever he would finish a job and his pockets were heavy with coin, he and his friends would go celebrate in the brothel. He could no longer afford to follow his desires freely like a rookie, though. He was captain, and that meant he had the important—and somewhat bothersome—duty of handling the paperwork.

Working through the sizable stack of merchant invoices, Rick let out a sigh as he reached for the last one. "That should do it..."

Rick had repeated this work many times since becoming captain, but he never could get used to it. A fatigue unlike anything he'd felt after fighting monsters washed over him. He was a warrior at heart, the type to fight on the front lines, covered in plate armor. He was more at ease bathing in the blood of his foes and dancing with the reaper. With nothing but his skill and a bit of luck, he'd blazed a path through this career. So for a seasoned warrior like him, paperwork was a greater challenge than most battles.

Never imagined I'd see the day when I'd be doing work like this. I shouldn't

have agreed so easily when Pops retired and told me to take over the troupe for him.

It was too late to complain now, but Rick often looked back on that decision with a hint of ironic disgruntlement.

It had all started twenty years ago. One unfortunate boy had been caught up in a war taking place in Rhoadseria's south. In a single night, he'd lost both his parents and the village he lived in. That boy was Rick.

There were as many children with the same background on the western continent as there were stars in the night sky. And most of those children had no one to protect them. They either starved to death or were captured and forced into slavery. That was how Rick's life was supposed to have ended too. But after days of crouching in the ruins of his burnt-down house, with hunger as his only companion, a man found Rick and took care of him. That man was the founder and leader of the Azure Sky Nimbus adventurer troupe, Donovan.

Even now, Rick didn't know why Donovan had decided to take him in. Maybe he'd needed a lackey to handle the chores and Rick happened to be in the right place at the right time. Or perhaps Donovan had seen something in the young boy's eyes. It could have even been nothing more than a whim. But for whatever reason, Donovan had taken Rick from the burnt village and given him food, lodging, and a warrior's training.

Donovan had raised Rick. At times he had been kind, and at others he had been stern. In a way, their bond was stronger than a father and son connected by blood. As far as Rick was concerned, Donovan wasn't his foster father; he was his true father. And five years ago, his father had decided to retire from the adventuring business.

All the members of the troupe had looked up to Donovan as a father, affectionately calling him "Pops." He had been over sixty years old at the time, and his body could no longer move as swiftly as it had in his youth. But aged as he was, Donovan was still a skilled warrior praised by the guild. He had led a life fighting monsters, forcing him to remain in peak physical condition. In addition, mastering thaumaturgy and absorbing a great deal of prana slowed aging. Old age wasn't necessarily a reason to retire. If he wanted, he still could have

remained in active duty.

Of course, adventuring was a difficult profession. One had to crawl through the foliage and bogs of uninhabited lands to hunt down monsters and collect materials. It wasn't easy work. But it wasn't the only career a swordsman could pursue. If Donovan had been willing to become an officer, he could have become a knight and even possibly earned a noble title. The troupe's other members could have become army officers as well, if they'd so wished.

But Donovan didn't choose to remain an active adventurer or to seek a career as a soldier. Instead, he elected to return to his village. Even now, Rick could never bring himself to ask Donovan for the reasons behind his retirement. But after becoming captain himself, Rick believed he might have understood why.

I can see how he'd get burned out by this life.

After so long, the job stopped being about cultivating one's personal prowess and growing stronger. Leading an adventurer troupe meant handling finances and balancing income and expenses—profit and loss. No leader could escape money matters.

An adventurer or a mercenary handling jobs on their own could get away with sloppy accounting. So long as nothing major happened, even if they'd gotten their calculations wrong, the worst they'd have to worry about was paying their tab in the pub or refraining from the brothel. But Rick had subordinates to look after. He had to maintain the Azure Sky Nimbus as a whole, and he couldn't be noncommittal about their finances. Weapons were the tools of their trade, and using them resulted in damage and wear. And since they lacked a base of operations to call their own, they had to either pay lodging fees or camp outside.

When a member of the troupe was injured, Rick also had to pay for their treatment. And if they couldn't return to the business, he would pay them a large sum based on their accomplishments and the number of years they'd served the troupe.

Incidentally, none of this was required by law. This world had no set concept of human rights, and ideas like workers' rights or work-related injuries didn't exist. But just because the words for them hadn't been invented yet didn't

mean people couldn't carry out the concepts. Even in different worlds, people still led their lives in much the same manner. The things required to do so didn't change either. The only question was whether those needs were acknowledged.

Since such treatment wasn't law, no one had to abide by these ideas. But Donovan saw the importance of treating his subordinates well. One could say that he had been graced with a foresight most commoners in this world lacked. But at the same time, he had also realized that he wasn't cut out for this kind of work.

That's why Donovan rejected the offers of all those officers and pushed the troupe into my hands, choosing to retire.

Being an officer meant even more paperwork. From what Rick had heard, all the offers Donovan had received from the military were for positions of battalion commander or higher, which meant he would have been commanding a force several times the size of the Azure Sky Nimbus. He wouldn't have been expected to command that many people single-handedly, but it would have still meant a great amount of paperwork. Choosing to pass on his position to the next generation and earn an easy retirement wasn't a mistake by any means.

Rick smirked derisively at himself, sneaking a glance at the pile of papers on his desk. *But it's not like I'm any more suited to it than you were, Pops.*

Any amateur had trouble bartering with a sly merchant. Eventually, someone would take advantage of them and swindle them into a bad deal. But not everyone got duped to the same degree. One could swallow a bad offer whole, or they could break off the deal after realizing the situation. Either way, the amateur would take some losses, but in the latter case, the losses would be less.

Since Rick was a captain, those kinds of negotiations fell to him. He hated them more than anything. But right now, his headache was due to something even more troublesome.

Now that we've pulled off a big job, we've got money to spare. That gives us the option to leave Rhoadseria, or...

The guild had paid the Azure Sky Nimbus a large fee for slaying the giant

centipede. It was enough to live off of for a good while. In fact, it was their biggest haul in recent memory. Even if Rick were to pay the members generously for their service, they'd still have enough to maintain the entire troupe for a while without needing to take up extra work.

There's been too much suspicious business going on here recently.

Neither adventurers nor mercenaries could escape the influence of those in power. Obligations had a way of catching up to those who raised their rank and reputation.

If a flock of monsters were to suddenly attack a town, adventurers weren't the only ones sent to exterminate them. Mercenaries, who made their living fighting other people, would also be called upon to help. The opposite also held true. If their own town were embroiled in the fires of war, no adventurer would remain indifferent to it. That was all the more true when an influential noble personally demanded work from them.

Because their successes attracted the attention of nobles, both mercenaries and adventurers had to devote themselves to gathering information and intelligence. Being aware of recent events could mean the difference between life and death.

Princess— No, it's Queen Lupis now...

Rick had only been to Pireas, the capital, once in his life. He'd happened to see Queen Lupis during that visit. Thinking back on her visage, Rick smiled bitterly. Queen Lupis cherished her subjects and abided by justice. In return, her citizens loved and respected her. Rhoadseria had probably never had another sovereign that loved the commoners as much as Queen Lupis did. When she drove Duke Gelhart away and took center stage in politics, many of the commoners had welcomed her reign with open arms and cheering.

I get why they expected so much out of her.

Throughout Rhoadseria's existence, nobles had repeatedly asserted their tyranny. This was to be expected, since nobles were always the privileged class. But the years during which Duke Gelhart held de facto power over the country were especially dark. And then came the change of regime. For the oppressed masses, Queen Lupis was a beacon of hope. They simply rejoiced and hoped for

a brighter future, unaware that it was all a grand illusion.

An adventurer like Rick lacked both the knowledge and the will to analyze Queen Lupis's mistakes. The only thing he knew was that at present, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria was in an even more precarious position than it had been during the civil war. The guild was full of requests for bodyguards and bandit elimination. Many villages had organized their own local militias to defend themselves against pillaging. All of that was due to Queen Lupis's leadership...or lack thereof.

The nobles levied heavy taxes on their subjects to increase their profits, building up funds to protect their domains. Everyone was feeling the advent of a new war and was preparing accordingly. This left the commoners with only two options: either pay the taxes and starve to death or risk their lives opposing the bandits.

At present, one person in the troupe stuck out to Rick. He was still young and a rookie, but he had been blessed with surprising skill and grit. He still had a ways to go as an adventurer, but his combat prowess already matched that of a medium-class adventurer. Based on how he'd behaved when they hunted the glutton the other day, his personality was fine too.

He looked a bit uneasy, but he was up against his first giant monster. Any novice would react like that.

It hadn't been any ordinary monster either. It had been a giant variant—a truly horrifying monstrosity. The fact that he didn't run from the sheer size of the creature was praiseworthy on its own.

In the three months since Rick had permitted him to join the troupe, Rick had seen the promising prospects the guild's staff had mentioned. Still, something about him felt off.

A skilled rookie joining us at a time like this. Normally, I'd rejoice, but I'm not sure whether this was a coincidence. And...

If Kevin had joined the Azure Sky Nimbus to polish his skills as an adventurer or mercenary, then there was nothing to criticize. But Rick couldn't discount the possibility that he'd had ulterior motives.

Maybe I'm overthinking this. At least, I hope so.

The boy had cleared his test before joining, fair and square. And the fact that he knew how to read and write and do arithmetic made him quite the catch. Most of the troupe only knew how to write their names, at best. They knew even less about math. Many didn't even know how to add or subtract, despite their usefulness in everyday life. This was how merchants often swindled adventurers and mercenaries. The only two who wouldn't be duped so easily were Anastasia, who'd had a noble's education, and Rick, who'd been taught how to barter by his adoptive father.

Because of Kevin's education, his addition to the troupe meant they could relegate a bit of that load to him. All of this was assuming Kevin really wanted to become an adventurer, though. No one wanted to hand responsibility to a traitor in their midst, after all.

It might be time to discuss this with Anastasia.

Rick didn't pretend to be a smart man. His outlook had expanded over the years as he gained experience as the troupe's leader, but he was still a warrior at heart. His true worth was on the frontlines. Reading through contracts and negotiating with clients wasn't his field of expertise. As such, his vice-captain was an indispensable part of his work—the brains to match his brawn. Having been born a noble, Anastasia was far wiser and more prudent than a commoner like Rick.

"Hey, Lloyd. You got a minute?" Rick called out.

The door opened and a middle-aged man peeked inside the room. "You called, Cap? Finally done with work?" he asked, his eyes glowing. He looked like he was expecting a very specific answer. His whole body was alive with excitement, like a child raring to go outside.

Though Rick recognized this, he still had to ruthlessly walk all over Lloyd's hope. "Not even close, you numbskull."

"Right..." Lloyd said, hanging his head.

Unfortunately for Lloyd, it was his turn to be the captain's direct attendant, assisting him with his duties and functioning as his guard. So long as Rick was

still working, Lloyd couldn't go out drinking with the rest of his friends. He had to patiently wait for Rick to finish.

"You're not gonna be drinking today, Lloyd; give it up. Call Anastasia over, would you? She should be in her room."

"Understood, Cap. Man, having to be assistant today, of all times?" Lloyd shrugged, exasperated. "Fine, I'll give up on my booze and women. Make sure to get me something nice to eat later though!"

"Fine, fine. Dinner's on me. And you can have one mug of ale. So hurry up and call Anastasia."

"Just one mug? You trying to kill me here, Cap?!"

"Get going!"

Lloyd left, still visibly dissatisfied and mumbling to himself.

Rick leaned against his backrest, looking up at the ceiling. *Not that I don't get how you feel, Lloyd.*

Rick didn't like this assistant system either, but Anastasia had suggested it. And it had indeed saved his neck a few times, so there was no good reason to call it off. Besides, being the head of such an influential troupe meant he couldn't remain indifferent to politics.

But tonight was a time of celebration. They'd completed a major job. Even Rick understood how Lloyd felt, with painful clarity. If it wasn't for his position, he'd be out and about in town instead of slogging through this mind-numbing work.

"Being captain's a pretty rotten job."

Rick sighed and reached for his cigarette case on his desk. He took out a roll and a dagger to make a filter. Before long, smoke filled his office.

As he took a puff, Rick cocked his head. "She's late... What's Anastasia doing?"

According to Lloyd, she had been occupied. He'd knocked on her door, and she'd replied she'd be to Rick's office soon. But an hour had passed, and there had been no sign of her. Anastasia was always methodical and punctual. She

wouldn't normally leave him waiting like this.

Just as Rick thought to beckon Lloyd and ask him to call her again, he heard three knocks on the door.

"I apologize for the wait, Captain. May I come in?"

Anastasia's voice was as lovely as ever, but Rick could hear a hint of stress in it. They were comrades who'd fought together in battle; he could easily sense the minute changes to her tone.

Did someone threaten her or something? No, that's not it. It's more like she's trying to keep her emotions in check.

"Oh, Anastasia. Sure, come in," Rick said, still somewhat puzzled.

"Excuse me," she murmured, gently opening the door.

"I...see. So that's what happened." Rick had planned to ask about her tardiness, but he'd changed his words when he saw the young man standing behind her. "Anastasia, can you explain why you brought him to my room in the middle of the night? Is this...what I think it is?"

Anastasia nodded briefly.

Rick heaved a deep sigh. "Right. So, who sent him?" He'd known the promising new rookie held some kind of secret, but honestly, he didn't want to pursue that line of questioning too deeply.

"He says he's from the Mikoshiba barony," Anastasia replied shortly.

Rick furrowed his brows. "Mikoshiba? As in, Baron Mikoshiba?"

Talk about unexpected.

Rick's surprise was only natural. Baron Mikoshiba was publicly seen as a sham noble, an aristocrat in name only. At best, he was seen as an upstart. Between having to govern the backwater land of the Wortenia Peninsula, which had no citizens, and then having to go on the expedition to Xarooda, he'd been drawing one terrible hand after another.

At first, Rick had even felt a hint of admiration and envy toward him. He was a mercenary of humble background who'd received a noble title, even if it was

the lowest rank possible. But with every rumor Rick heard of him, that admiration turned to derisiveness.

Ryoma Mikoshiba was a hero who had been banished to a frontier region with only an infertile land as his prize. Any fool could see that Queen Lupis had wanted to push Ryoma Mikoshiba as far away as possible. Even so, Ryoma had gone to Xarooda and repelled the O'ltormean invasion.

Rick readily acknowledged Ryoma Mikoshiba's skill. But the fact that he'd simply kowtowed to the demands of a mistress who had scorned him made Ryoma seem like a coward, bound by the fetters of his social position.

But it seemed Rick's take on the baron had been off the mark. He stood frozen in place, surprised by this news.

Kevin took this opportunity to step forward. "My apologies for intruding at this late hour, Captain," he said, bowing his head. "I think you've realized by now, but allow me to introduce myself again. My name is Kevin, servant to the noble house of Mikoshiba."

His bow had been perfect. Even Anastasia, with her noble background, could affirm that. It was clear that Kevin had been through rigorous training. But the way his head didn't completely lower proved that his martial skills were significantly higher than Rick had initially assumed. Perhaps he wasn't as good as Rick, but he was certainly as skilled as the average troupe member...if not stronger.

The way he's moving... Yeah, he was playing coy with us, the little bastard.

Something had felt off about this boy since the day he'd joined. Now Rick knew what it was.

Dammit. I thought he was a promising rookie, but it was all a hoax.

Rick sighed again. Whatever job Kevin was supposed to relay to them was surely one they couldn't refuse.

Their talk continued deep into the night. Only the three of them knew what their discussion was about. But after that day, the Azure Sky Nimbus troupe began pursuing work within Rhoadseria more frequently than before. That was until one day, several weeks later, the gears of history creaked into life and

began to revolve once again as they fed on the blood and tears of many.

Chapter 4: The Twin Blades

“Sure is stupid of them, don’t you think?” a knight in red armor said from atop his black horse. He was speaking to an old knight following him. “They could have kept hiding under their rock, but instead they decided to come out and meet me just so I can kill them. The poor saps, really.”

The knight who’d spoken was a massive man with short blond hair and a beard. He was easily taller than two meters, and his arms were as thick as tree logs and his chest stout. He was the very image of a seasoned, virile hero. But in contrast to his burly appearance, his tone and mannerisms seemed frivolous, almost childlike. This dichotomy gave him a certain inexplicable charm.

Far ahead of him stood a group of bandits—the largest group in Rhoadseria’s northern border regions. There were roughly three hundred of them. They had originally been a mercenary group operating on the border of Rhoadseria and Myest, but when a governor had blamed them for losing a war, citing their inadequacy, they’d decided that rebelling was a fine alternative to the death sentence. They’d turned coat and become bandits instead.

The original group had only numbered a few dozen men. Normally, a governor would purge a bandit group before it could grow any larger, but Rhoadseria was currently in a state of political unrest and ever-worsening public order. Due to the heavy taxation, refugees had fled the surrounding villages and ended up joining the group. Because of this, it had eventually grown into the largest bandit group in northern Rhoadseria.

But unlike an ordinary army, which followed the lead of battalion and company commanders, this group had no clear chain of command. They were merely a mob of unorganized vagabonds. Still, they couldn’t be ignored. Three hundred men was a large enough threat, especially considering this knight’s army was a mere fifty men—albeit ones trained by his family. The enemy had six times their numbers. They were at a staggering disadvantage.

There was also a concerning rumor that the leader of the original mercenary

group was a knight that had once served some country. The surrounding governors had tried to gather troops and crush this bandit group, but the bandits had beaten back their forces time and again. The fact that a disorderly mob could do this implied that, even if he wasn't a former knight, their leader was at least very skilled.

But despite the potentially dangerous foe before him, the armored knight didn't betray any signs of doubt or anxiety. He must have been quite confident. In fact, given that he was about to fight to the death, his attitude seemed *too* calm—as if he were heading out for a leisurely picnic and not a battle. And to him, there wasn't much of a difference between the two.

His name was Robert Bertrand. He was the second son of the Bertrand barony and a warrior praised throughout northern Rhoadseria as one of House Salzberg's Twin Blades.

The old knight shrugged at Robert's comment. "I'm sure they think that with their numerical advantage, they'll easily beat us back and scatter our forces. But you purposefully brought so few knights just to lure them into that misguided confidence, didn't you, Lord Robert?"

He spoke to his master with a familiarity that would normally have been considered rude, but the two of them shared a trust that transcended decorum and formality. After all, he had served as Robert's guardian and attendant for the thirty years Robert had walked upon the earth.

Robert was a legitimate child of House Bertrand, but he wasn't the eldest son. As such, he wasn't the heir to his father, the family head. He was, at best, a potential successor should anything happen to his elder brother. That wasn't to say his father hadn't cared for him though. He'd given Robert the proper education for a child of the Bertrand barony and kept him safe. Robert had lived a life free of danger, unlike his sworn friend, Signus Galveria.

Robert's father had also shown him some degree of love. However, in aristocratic society, the eldest son was always favored. His father had compared him to his older brother at every turn. After hearing time and again that he ought to know his station as the second son, Robert had realized that a wall existed between him and his father. Because of that divide, Robert had

developed a deep paternal bond with the knight who served as his constant guardian and attendant. He saw him as more of a father figure than his real father.

Robert took no offense to his knight's attitude and instead smirked. "If I can see a simple way of handling things, I go for it. And besides, you're not getting any younger, old man. You went with my plan because you figured attacking their fortress head-on was unwise, right?"

The old knight nodded. If all three hundred of them were to shut themselves up in their fortress, they would become even more of a threat. Robert would need three times the bandits' numbers—an army of a thousand—to topple their fortress. The old knight had realized that gathering that kind of army was unrealistic.

"You are right," the old knight said as he turned his eyes to the rocky mountains standing behind the bandits. "The scouts report that their hideout is in those mountains. They have a fence and a moat, albeit very simple, impromptu ones. If they were to hide in there, we'd have to be ready to take considerable losses."

"That's what I thought," Robert replied. "The report says the mountain's slope is pretty steep and the road is narrow. They have a strong environmental advantage."

"Yes, and the fact that we don't have that advantage on our side makes things difficult." The old knight paused for a moment before adding, "Maybe we should ask Viscount Telshini to send us some troops?"

"Don't be stupid. He'd never do something that admirable. If the viscount actually cared about this, he wouldn't have sent me to take care of it."

Robert spat bitterly at the ground, a stark contrast to his earlier flippant blitheness. It was because he was in the presence of the old knight, a trusted confidant, that he could lay his emotions bare.

The Bertrand barony held territory in Rhoadseria's north, but Robert was currently in the neighboring territory of Viscount Telshini. Normally, the responsibility of handling these bandits would have fallen to the viscount and his men, but despite that, the knights of the Bertrand barony were here instead.

Since they were neighbors, it wasn't strange for the Bertrand barony to extend a helping hand with such matters. However, they were only supposed to be sending reinforcements; they weren't supposed to function as the primary force.

"Are you dissatisfied, Lord Robert?" the old knight asked.

Robert directed a dark glance at him. "Of course I am! How could I not be?!" he shouted, anger and hatred seething in his heart. "Day in, day out, old Salzberg orders me to fight for him! And when I do, all the credit goes to my father and brother! This is inane, and I feel even dumber for having to play along with this crap. To hell with all of them!"

Robert was indeed livid at the way he was being treated, but he knew better than to express it outwardly most of the time. He never would have said this if someone other than his closest of aides was nearby. He would have kept his anger pent up. Still, he felt if he didn't unleash it somewhere, he'd go mad.

"Old Salzberg pushed this job onto my brother, not me, yet I'm the one doing it. I swear, this is stupid. I wanna get this over with and drink myself to sleep in the tavern, shit." Robert's expression suddenly changed, as if he'd remembered something. "Oh, that reminds me. My brother gave me a little gift before I left, right?" he whispered. Then he extended his hand toward the old knight, like a child pestering a parent for pocket money.

The old knight shook his head with a sigh. True, there were former mercenaries mingled in with the enemy, but the majority were unorganized refugees who'd hardly had any training. Even if Robert were slightly intoxicated, he likely wouldn't be caught off guard. In fact, the odds of that were probably close to nil. Robert was, when all was said and done, one of the two strongest warriors that Count Salzberg, the leader of the ten houses of the north, possessed.

Even so, this loyal old knight adhered to the ideals of chivalry; he couldn't let his master fight inebriated. Besides, anything could happen on the battlefield. He couldn't make an exception, even if it were to lift Robert's spirits and ease the disgruntlement he felt.

"I know they're just mere brigands, but do you really intend to drink before a

battle?" the old knight asked. He'd admonished Robert like this countless times already, and he didn't expect Robert to listen this time either. But he still had to say it.

Robert remained silent and thrust his hand forward again, as if urging the old knight to hand it over already.

The old knight sighed again. Shaking his head, he grabbed a leather sack hanging from his horse's saddle and handed it over to his master.

"I swear, old man, your sermons last too long," Robert said with a smile. He took a swig from the sack and drank the wine inside it. He then took two more gulps and roughly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He spat in irritation, his saliva mixed with the reddish liquid. "Ugh, this is shitty stuff."

The wine did quench his thirst, but it didn't taste good by any stretch of the imagination. The quality itself wasn't bad, but it was a third-rate drink—the kind of cheap booze you might find in a local tavern. It wasn't something a noble like Robert would usually drink. On top of that, perhaps owing to the haphazard way it had been preserved, it was rather bitter. It wasn't acidic, but it was certainly unpleasant.

Damn bastard. You gave me this kind of shitty booze on purpose, didn't you?

His brother had probably bought cheap wine, the kind that was sold at low prices for the sake of clearing storage space. Robert had asked for the drink to invigorate himself, but it only quashed his enthusiasm further.

"Nice of my brother to be this considerate, eh? Giving me this cheap booze."

The face of his brother, with slender features much different from his own, surfaced in Robert's mind. He knew for a fact that they'd both come from the same womb, but while Robert had gotten his father's virile features, his brother had gotten their mother's fair, oval face. His brother was also more artistically inclined, a black sheep among a long line of warriors.

But Robert's brother was skilled at governance, and his reputation among the commoners was rising. Among the many nobles in Rhoadseria who governed over their lands while not even regarding their subjects as human beings, his brother was a rare exception.

Robert, however, only saw his brother's supposedly competent management as an inevitability. Slaying monsters and subjugating bandits fell squarely on his shoulders instead of his brother's. That meant his brother's burden was that much lighter, so the fact he could govern was much less impressive in light of such favorable conditions. Certainly, Robert didn't think that managing a domain's internal affairs was easy. But Robert had more to do than his brother ever did, and he was known as one of Count Salzberg's Twin Blades and had solved numerous problems across all of the northern territories. Despite that, his brother was the one receiving praise for his government skills.

"If everyone's so keen to push work onto me, the least they could do is give me some good booze to help me get through it!" Robert grumbled.

But even if Robert were to complain to his brother about his stinginess, he probably wouldn't even get an apology. For all his brother was concerned, Robert was a convenient tool for the barony. This wasn't in spite of their blood relation, but because of it. If there had been no blood between them, Robert could have easily become independent or gone to work with another noble. His brother would have been more inclined to keep him placated in that case.

But they were family, and thus things were different. It was no different from how a family member would help with the family business even though they weren't officially employed or paid for their services. From his brother's perspective, this wine was more than enough payment. If Robert were to complain that his brother was skimping out on his reward, or to mention a noble's pride and duty, his brother would simply say that he had no understanding of what it meant to be a noble.

That asshole always does this.

His brother was downright miserly. He placed great importance on taxes and took any chance he could to cut expenses. He was a typical cheapskate, as it were. Robert didn't think frugality was a bad idea in and of itself. A noble that squandered their money blindly and carelessly was nothing more than a fool that drove themselves into bankruptcy. His brother's understanding of the importance of money made him a hundred times better than those kinds of idiots. But Robert couldn't deny feeling displeased and angry at his brother's methods. This was what one might call the gap between realism and idealism.

His father, the current head of the family, and his brother led lavish lifestyles within their domain, to maintain the dignity and prestige expected of a noble. The nobles were the ruling class, and a shabby lifestyle would tarnish their honor and authority. Commoners wouldn't follow someone dressed in the same rags they wore. In that regard, there was a certain rationale to living luxuriously. Robert realized this and wasn't going to criticize his father and brother for leading affluent lives. It also stood to reason that their lifestyles meant that Robert, as the second son, couldn't spend as much as they did.

But Robert felt that was too bothersome to deal with. Besides, their domain was by no means large. Their primary industries were stock farming and agriculture, and compared to other nobles who had mineral reserves in their territories, their tax revenue was comparatively small. On top of that, the family's prestige came from its history as a warrior family, not it's expenditures.

All in all, their pride came across as petty. But petty though it might be, they had to hold on to it. They had to maintain a certain standard, or they'd draw the scorn of the other noble families. Also, their status as a warrior family meant they had to invest in military matters. Between that and the finances needed for internal affairs, the tax revenue was by no means enough.

Considering all this, one could easily understand why Robert's brother would want to cut down on meaningless expenses wherever possible. But when those cuts were used as an excuse for Robert to pull the short straw at every turn, Robert would eventually grow upset with it. His brother had even taken the reward money Count Salzberg had paid him for his services, saying Robert was just lending it to him.

"I understand your frustrations, Lord Robert, but please, keep your voice down," the old knight rebuked him. He'd listened to Robert quietly out of sympathy, but it seemed he'd decided now was the time to interject. Allowing Robert to bottle up this anger would do him no good, but Robert couldn't lash out either. If Robert's father or brother were to somehow learn of what he'd just said, the fissure running through their relationship would only grow deeper. That wouldn't be good for any of them. Besides, the bandits could launch a preemptive attack on them at any moment.

Robert's expression soured and he clicked his tongue. But he nodded and

said, “Right. For now, let’s just finish this job.” He lifted the long-handled battle ax in his right hand and held it aloft. “My name is Robert Bertrand! By order of Count Salzberg, lord and unifier of Rhoadseria’s north, I shall hereby execute you!”

Robert kicked against his horse’s flanks and swung his ax in the direction of the bandits. An animalistic roar and an intense gale blew across the mountainous region. He rode ahead, like a typhoon or a whirlwind—a natural catastrophe in the form of a man. His first swing took the lives of many bandits with the ease of blowing out a candle. Some of the bandits were wearing knight armor, which they’d gained from somewhere, but that mattered little against Robert’s onslaught.

One bandit, his face streaked with sweat, blood, and dirt, tried to encourage the rest. “Don’t fall back! Stand firm! There’s only one of him! Surround him and we’ll finish him off!” But the next moment, that bandit’s head went flying.

“Shit!” another bandit breathed out as he tried to block Robert with his sword. His attempt was futile, though.

Robert’s weapon was closer in shape to a bardiche. The blade’s edge was thick, and its grip was sturdy. But while an ordinary bardiche weighed around six kilograms, Robert’s battle ax was far weightier. It was several times heavier than a regular ax too, but Robert swung it around like a twig. This stood as proof that he was a warrior of superhuman strength.



“Swinging a weapon that big like it’s nothing... I’d heard the rumors, but I didn’t believe one of Count Salzberg’s Twin Blades was such a monster!” a bandit called out as he watched his comrades perish one after another.

A bardiche was built so that the majority of its weight fell on the tip of the blade. This increased its centrifugal force, which translated to more destructive power. However, this unbalanced design was much harder to spin around.

In this case, the weapon chose its wielder, so to speak. Most people wouldn’t even be able to pick up this kind of ax. Rotating it would be out of the question, to say nothing of wielding it effectively in battle. But Robert wielded it as if it weighed nothing. And even with martial thaumaturgy augmenting his physical abilities, the fact that he could swing it like this meant his muscle strength was already absurd to begin with.

Robert had been naturally endowed with supernatural strength, and he used this god-given gift to rush across battlefields. Each time he swung his ax, the weapon screeched, and screams filled the battlefield. Droplets of blood sprayed into the air like petals fluttering in the wind.

The sight of this hulking man rushing forward atop his black horse had an otherworldly, almost illusory sort of beauty to it. Be that as it may, anyone who laid eyes upon it was bound to reach the same end.

The blood splattered across Robert’s face congealed, turning black.

I love this! I can’t get enough!

The wind unique to battle filled Robert’s heart with elation. He was in a state of bloodlust. The sheer hostility rolling off of him struck paralyzing fear into the hearts of the surrounding bandits. They were small creatures transfixed in place by a predator’s lethal glare.

Robert laughed loudly, swinging his ax as he ended the lives of one bandit after another. He was a one-man army. He strode across the battlefield, a stunning display of might by a masterful user of martial thaumaturgy.

Following behind Robert was the gray-haired, mustached old knight. He vigilantly watched his master’s back, following him like a shadow.

“You mustn’t go alone, Lord Robert!”

His shout echoed in Robert’s ears, loud enough to be heard over the fighting. But Robert sped up his horse, willfully ignoring the admonition, as if to say his time on the field of battle was his sole refuge from the melancholy gripping his heart.

“Lord Robert!”

Hearing the old knight rebuke him again, Robert swung his ax toward the man who looked to be the bandits’ leader. As if to meet his challenge, the leader kicked his own horse into a gallop. He was armed with a spear. The two horses darted toward each other like intersecting arrows.

“Raaaaaah! Eat this!” Robert howled as he swung with all his strength. It was a simple blow, but that simplicity lent it an unmatched lethality.

The ax screeched as it cut through the wind and plummeted toward the man’s head. But the bandit leader was no weakling. Spurring his horse straight ahead, he held his spear aloft, aiming to skewer Robert.

Their figures intersected for one brief moment, and then the two horses sprinted past each other, evading a frontal collision.

“Oh. Not only did you dodge that hit, you even landed one on me. Not bad.”

Feeling a lukewarm fluid streak down his cheek, Robert’s lips contorted into a grin. He wasn’t a masochist, but the presence of a foe worth fighting, for the first time in what felt like a long while, filled him with exhilaration.

The bandit leader turned his horse around to face Robert again and shouted, “You’re massive and your ax is absurd. Are you one of Count Salzberg’s Twin Blades, the famed Robert Bertrand?!”

Stating one’s name on the battlefield was seen as an overly confident gesture, as if one had the leisure to do so. But the bandit leader had asked this with the tip of his spear pointed upwards, implying he was familiar with battlefield etiquette. It seemed he wanted to settle this one-on-one. In which case, Robert had an obligation to respond.

Robert didn’t necessarily need to duel to win this battle. He could ignore the

bandit leader and simply swing his ax, bringing this skirmish to an end just the same. Or he could order the knight behind him to have his troops surround the bandit leader. But all of that would have only mattered if Robert were an ordinary general. Unfortunately, in the twenty years Robert had been fighting, he'd never once refused a duel.

It wasn't because Robert was pretentious or prideful, or because of any such personal reason. The human body operated by physical rules, but it was equally influenced by mental aspects. Refusing a duel at a time like this could lower the morale of his comrades and turn the situation unfavorably against his side.

In this case, if Robert, who was known for his martial prowess, were to refuse, it could impact the opinions of those around him. Robert's personal stance on duels wasn't at all relevant here. Even if he were to reject the match for some tactical reason, everyone else would think he was running away, and it would lower his soldiers' morale. In melee combat, these kinds of mental fulcrums were necessary.

"That's me, all right! Let's hear your name, then!" Robert shouted back.

"The name's Deck!" the leader howled. "Deck Monister! Robert Bertrand, I challenge you to a duel!" Deck lowered his spear from its upright position and aimed it directly at Robert. This was a typical gesture by knights on the western continent to signal a duel.

Monister, huh? Apparently he really is from a line of knights, but...

Regardless of whether his opponent was a descendant of knights, Robert's task remained the same. Even if Deck had pretended to be a mere bandit, Robert would have accepted the duel just the same.

"Very well, I accept!"

Robert circulated the prana in his body, activating the Vishuddha chakra in his throat. Since this was one-on-one duel, he wasn't going to show any mercy or restraint, nor did he expect to receive any either. Holding his ax under his torso, he kicked his horse into a gallop.

Deck raised his voice in a battle cry and charged toward Robert with his spear held aloft. He was gambling everything on a single blow too.

Good. No tricks!

Deck's figure gradually grew closer. He thrust his spear forward toward Robert. Meeting his challenge, Robert swung his ax up, the blade howling.

"It's over!"

Robert had swung up diagonally from the right, snapping the handle of Deck's spear down the middle. He then held the ax over his head, bringing it down in a sideways slash across Deck's torso. Deck just stood there, dumbstruck at how easily his opponent had disarmed and hit him.

Silence settled over the field of battle. A few moments later, blood spurted from Deck's chest, dripping down his saddle. He slid off his horse's back and fell to the ground.

Robert silently thrust his battle ax into the air. A victorious howl left his lungs.

†

The day of Robert's battle with the bandits had turned to night. A letter had arrived at the Bertrand estate, located near the Xaroodian border.

"A messenger from Count Salzberg?" Baron Bertrand asked, picking up the letter from his desk. After confirming the wax seal on it, he turned his gaze to his elder son, Rosen, who stood nearby.

"Yes, Father," Rosen answered. "The messenger said it was addressed to you, so I didn't check the letter's contents."

The baron nodded. "Hm, very well. Let's see what it says." He slowly opened the letter, and after reading it over twice, he handed it to Rosen.

"May I?" Rosen asked.

"Go ahead. I want your opinion on this."

Rosen was apprehensive. They were father and son, but this letter was from the head of the ten houses of the north and was addressed to the baron. Whatever it said, it must have been confidential.

And he still wants my opinion on this?

Despite Rosen's doubts, the head of House Bertrand had given his approval.

As the eldest son, he had a duty to oblige—even if he still didn't officially hold the title of baron himself.

As soon as he started reading the letter, Rosen grimaced. "I...see. So that's what this is about," he muttered.

Baron Bertrand sighed. "Even after all those losses, he asks us to investigate the peninsula again. Just what is Count Salzberg thinking?"

Rosen nodded, a bitter expression on his face. Honestly, House Bertrand wanted nothing more to do with the Wortenia Peninsula. The number of lives they'd lost the last time Count Salzberg had ordered them to investigate was still fresh in their memories. Or rather, all the adventurers and spies they'd sent never came back, so it wasn't that they'd explicitly died. They'd simply gone missing. But it was all the same for the Bertrand family; the whole endeavor struck a painful blow to their coffers.

Many adventurers didn't have families, but Baron Bertrand's spies did. With their fathers and breadwinners missing, the families had come to their employer, the baron, with questions. In addition, Baron Bertrand had ordered that in case a spy was found dead or went missing during an investigation, the barony would provide financial aid to the family and guarantee their livelihood. Naturally, the families had come to claim their dues. And Baron Bertrand hadn't neglected his promise to look after the families of the people lost in the midst of fulfilling his orders. After all, reliable spies were hard to come by.

Honestly speaking, a spy's value lay less in their skill and more in their humanity and trustworthiness. Because of that, nobility picked spies from families of vassals and retainers that had served them for generations. In addition, they guaranteed the families' safety in order to prevent double-crossing.

Refusing to take responsibility for the family as an employer would only buy the barony the hatred of those families. And the other spies in their employ would see this mistreatment. It would lead to criticism and possibly betrayal.

One needed money to buy things, including loyalty—whether it was true or fake. For that reason, Baron Bertrand always had money put aside for their families in case a spy went missing or died on a dangerous job. That said, spies

didn’t actually die or go missing that often—until now. Unless there was a war going on with another country, it only happened once or twice a year. That was why Baron Bertrand only set aside, at most, three nobles’ worth of monthly income.

But things were different this time. At first, they’d lost contact with the adventures from Epirus’s guild. This wasn’t all that surprising or incriminating; the Wortenia Peninsula was known for being dangerous. Baron Bertrand had remained optimistic.

But then an entire group had gone missing. Then another, and another. By the time the fifth group had disappeared, no adventurer was willing to enter the peninsula. And so Baron Bertrand had ordered his most trusted spies to handle it. None of them had returned either.

The eighth and final spy Baron Bertrand sent had been his ace, his spymaster who had served him for many years. He also hadn’t returned. He had been set to return within two weeks, but two months had passed.

Baron Bertrand was in a state of panic. He’d lost eight trusted spies. He had less than twenty spies total in his employ, and he’d lost nearly half of them in the space of one year.

So far, he’d entertained Count Salzberg’s requests to investigate the Wortenia Peninsula, cutting into his own manpower and military might in the process. But now, things weren’t so simple, and Baron Bertrand was forced to make a grave decision. Should he decline the order to investigate the peninsula? He felt he had to. He absolutely didn’t have nine people’s worth of bereavement funds set aside. And adventurers had to be paid in advance. His income would be in dire straits. They’d already had to forcibly “borrow” the funds Robert had earned.

Ever since this whole affair had started, the subject of the Wortenia Peninsula became taboo in the halls of the Bertrand estate. For all their efforts, they’d only just managed to maintain their family’s honor.

“Are we going to have to go through this nightmare again?” Rosen asked.

Baron Bertrand shook his head wearily. It would be reckless to even try it. They’d have to ask for financial aid from House Salzberg to do it, and the baron didn’t want to resort to that. Begging for money went against his aristocratic

pride. But at the same time, they couldn't work when they didn't have the money to do so.

"We'll need to consult the count about this. We have no other choice," the Baron said, heaving a sigh and looking up at the ceiling.

†

The Kingdom of Rhoadseria's northern regions were home to two warriors of extraordinary skill and talent. One of them was Robert Bertrand, the second son of the Bertrand barony. The other was Signus Galveria, the sixth son of the Galveria barony, which was located near the border with Myest.

Together, the two of them were considered to be the strongest knights in Rhoadseria. Since their youth, they'd crossed countless battlefields, becoming two of the country's most celebrated heroes. As a pair, they were called the Twin Blades of House Salzberg. Count Salzberg, the head of the ten houses of the north's alliance, had personally given them that name, but rumors of their valor had traveled as far as the neighboring countries.

Their most famous achievement was the Battle of the Lantia Plains, which had taken place in Myest five years ago. The Kingdom of Myest had transgressed on Rhoadseria's border, resulting in hostilities between the nobles positioned along the borderline. The conflict had turned into a stalemate, leading to that battle. In a fierce clash that was remarkable even within Rhoadseria's rather war-torn history, Robert and Signus had led a mere thousand troops against an army of five thousand. They tore through the enemy lines, broke the deadlock, and ended the war in Rhoadseria's favor.

They had each taken the heads of no less than a hundred enemy combatants during that battle—a striking achievement worthy of the title of war hero. Had the two of them become royal knights, they could have well become candidates for the rank of general in the future. But the goddess of fate had cursed Signus with a heavy burden.

Signus Galveria was currently in his room at his family's estate, reclining on the sofa. His almost two-meter body barely fit. He was gazing up at the ceiling, his eyes melancholic.

"What should I do? Leave the house, after all?" Signus pondered aloud, a

deep sigh escaping his lips.



It had been over a month since he'd been confined in this house. He'd spent his days doing nothing but eating and sleeping, which, to a trained warrior like Signus, was very much a sort of torture.

The cause for his confinement was quite clear—his discord with his father, the current head of the Galveria barony, Joseph Galveria. Said discord had led to antagonism between Signus and his stepmother, as well as his step-siblings. Everyone around him eyed him with hostility, believing he had conspired to inherit the title of Baron Galveria. Signus himself didn't have the slightest desire to inherit the family headship. But at this rate, the situation would turn into the worst-case scenario—a family feud.

At present, Signus was desperately seeking a way to solve this situation diplomatically. And yet, in many ways, the outcome had already been decided. The way things currently were, the safest way to resolve things with the least possible damage was for Signus to cut ties with his family.

Yet Signus couldn't go through with that. Physically leaving the house wasn't the problem. Since he was locked inside the estate, powerful knights remained stationed outside. Normally, escaping such a sound defensive perimeter would be difficult. But that was assuming any normal knight was the one trying to escape. Signus was one of the two strongest knights in northern Rhoadseria. If one of House Salzberg's Twin Blades were to bring his full strength to bear, no one could stop him. He'd once single-handedly broken through an army of one thousand men in the past. A monster among monsters like Signus could easily break out of the estate if he put his mind to it. But doing so would separate him from the person he held dearest to his heart.

I don't want to lose you, Elmeda.

The image of one old woman crossed his mind. Signus's father loathed him and his mother had discarded him. This old woman, though, was the only person he didn't want to lose.

Some part of Signus felt like this childish attachment was laughable. But if Elmeda were to see his current state, she would lay down her own life to break his fetters. She would insist that she didn't want to be a burden upon him. And giving her life up would, in a way, break the chains that bound Signus and buy

him his freedom. Signus knew this, but he didn't want things to end that way.

A normal child would have gotten the unconditional love they needed from their parents. But Signus was no normal child, and his parents had denied him the affection he desperately wanted. Instead, old Elmeda had been the only one to truly care for him.

When all was said and done, Signus's mind and heart led him to the same conclusion. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

How did a hero of Signus's caliber find himself in such a predicament? The reasons lay in the complicated circumstances of his birth and upbringing. This might invoke certain connotations, but Signus wasn't a legitimate child of the Galveria family. His father was Joseph Galveria, the current Baron Galveria, and there was no doubting that. His mother's name was known but greatly irrelevant. She had been a commoner's daughter living in one of the villages in Galveria's domain.

Why was I ever born? It only made everyone miserable.

That question had crossed his mind time and again during his thirty years of life, but he never did find an answer.

Signus was the sixth son of House Galveria, but he wasn't a child of the count's legal wife. He wasn't the son of a concubine either. He had been born from the womb of a woman Joseph Galveria had spent a single night with, before he'd inherited the headship of the barony. Such were the circumstances behind Signus's birth.

Why did Joseph have to sleep with that woman? There was no clear answer to that question. But from what little Signus had heard at the time, there hadn't been a great deal of affection between them. As inappropriate as it might have been, Joseph had been either wasting time or following a whim. At least, this was Signus's take on it.

But after the deed had been done, Joseph had never returned to that woman's embrace. That much was clear. While Signus had no intention of slighting the woman who'd brought him into this world, he did admit that she wasn't the most attractive woman out there. Her fellow villagers had said her features had a charm to them, but there had been a certain rural uncouthness

to her.

Joseph could have had any number of beautiful women at his beck and call with his noble background and wealth. What spurred him to sleep with her, all of people, was a mystery that would likely remain forever unsolved. Maybe he had been drunk, or perhaps he'd grown tired of beautiful women and had the urge to try a more plain-looking girl. Only Joseph knew the truth. But the reality was that even he had no real reason to give. The only certain thing was that any union between Joseph and that commoner girl had been limited to that one night.

Things of this sort weren't uncommon in this world, which lacked the concept of contraceptives. A child from a single night's tryst wasn't at all unheard of, and there were quite a few bastard children with noble blood running through their veins. But when the girl had informed Joseph that she was with child, he had ordered her to abort the baby.

Joseph had rejected Signus's birth for a few reasons. First, House Galveria was a barony. The title of baron was the lowest possible noble rank, but it was still a noble title. There was a vast difference in class between an heir of that house and a common farmer's daughter. Rhoadseria's rigid class system would have impeded their union, had there been one.

But if class had been the only issue, there were ways around it. If Joseph had wanted, he could have had the baby adopted by a third party. But Joseph feared the very concept of Signus's birth for one simple reason. Joseph himself hadn't been born into House Galveria; he'd married into it.

Joseph was the third son of a certain knight family. His family was in very high standing, and Joseph's own martial accomplishments had elevated him enough to allow him to marry into the noble family of Galveria. By the time Signus had been conceived, Joseph had already had five other children with his legal wife.

Nobles bore many children to ensure that there was always an heir. Second or third sons were seen as spares in case something happened to the firstborn. But a sixth son had little value in that regard. If his mother had been an influential merchant or a landowner's daughter, things would have been different, but a mere farmer's daughter couldn't offer any help to House Galveria.

And more than anything, there was the matter of Joseph's legal wife—Anne Galveria. She was a terribly jealous woman, and her jealousy had made the situation that much worse.

With all that in mind, Joseph had ordered Signus's mother to abort the child, so as to avoid needlessly rocking the boat. And his decision had been correct, for a noble. The mother hadn't been keen on birthing the baby either. She was a commoner, and given the class difference, she couldn't be accepted as a concubine. Even if Joseph had wished for that, the social pressure from those around him would have made it unadvisable, to say the least. His legal wife would behold her with hatred and would dread the possibility of her children being deprived of the title of baron. At worst, Anne's wrath could get the mother killed. Realizing this, his mother decided to comply with Joseph's orders. Resisting would have been pointless anyway.

And so neither of Signus's parents had wanted him. A child like him would normally never grow to maturity. But the final word of the former Baron Galveria, who was renowned for his wisdom, had overturned baby Signus's fate. As a result, Signus had been accepted into House Galveria. In the presence of the previous baron, he had been acknowledged as the sixth child of the family.

It was unclear if the previous head had done it out of mercy or if he'd sensed something fateful in the child's conception. Signus had no way of finding that out anymore. If nothing else, Signus knew that his life had been pardoned by his grandfather, and he refused to let it go to waste. He devoted his life to training and martial growth, as would befit a member of the Galveria family, which had served the Kingdom of Rhoadseria since its founding days. He did all this to repay his debts to the stepmother that hated him to this day and the father who remained estranged to him even now.

Through his efforts, Signus matured into one of Rhoadseria's most prominent knights. Most people were unaware of his tragic origins.

I did everything because I wanted to belong. But that only made me a latent enemy of House Galveria.

A man in a weak position carving out a place for himself with sheer effort—one only heard of that in stories. But the real world wasn't so merciful. Signus's

ardent efforts to earn himself a place in his family had only turned him into a thorn in House Galveria's side. He'd become a threat they had to fear.

And of course they would fear him. They dreaded the possibility that he would one day use his newfound status and authority to take revenge on them for a lifetime of discrimination and persecution. The stronger Signus became and the more fame he gained as a knight, the more dangerous he looked to those who'd realized that the way they'd acted was by no means commendable.

Yet they couldn't kill or expel Signus. His abilities and fame, cultivated from a youth spent on the battlefield, greatly augmented House Galveria's military potential. Still, they couldn't shake their fear of the man who'd grown to be called one of Count Salzberg's Twin Blades. And so they'd looked desperately for a weakness, a chink in Signus's armor. They looked and looked, until at long last, they found it—his greatest weakness.

"I...I just want to live freely," Signus moaned, coughing up the words as if they were his very lifeblood.

As he was now, Signus was a caged bird. He couldn't go anywhere or decide anything for himself. In this state, there wasn't a tinge of daring heroism to him. He would simply remain in this room until he wasted away—a pitiful warrior, not even permitted to stand on the battlefield.

But fate would once again beckon Signus to battle.

The door to his room suddenly swung open, and a single man walked inside, not even bothering to knock.

Signus's eyes widened in shock.

Chapter 5: Spontaneous Discharge

It was a hot day. The sun's rays shone brilliantly over the land. White clouds drifted in the blue sky, and sheep walked the green pastures, waiting to be sheared. Time passed by peacefully.

While bandits and monsters were always a menace in this world, villages and settlements kept them at bay using moats and barrier pillars. This place in particular was off the highways and had little military significance. Fields like this one only got attacked roughly once every few years. It was one of many agricultural communities that dotted Rhoadseria's territory, which belonged directly to the royal house.

Even in this war torn world, there were still times of peace. But such peace could easily be disrupted by the slightest bit of malice.

A small community positioned so far from any military strongholds wasn't bothered so much by external threats. Most of its problems came from governors or officials dispatched by the state, people who should have been on their side. And one such problem was occurring at this moment, as a loud, angry shout disturbed the peaceful, picturesque scenery of this small hamlet.

The villagers stood around the village's plaza, expressions of anxiety and fear on their faces. Their gazes were fixed on a group standing in the center of the circle—or rather, on the man standing in front of the group.

"Please forgive us. We can't spare any more..." one man desperately pleaded with them. "Take any more from us, and we won't have enough to live off—"

A thick metallic thud cut off the man's words. A knight bashed his large, gauntleted fist into the man's face, knocking him back and easily crushing his teeth.

The rusted taste of blood filled the man's mouth; his teeth had likely been broken to bits. He squatted down, drooling out saliva and blood. It pooled on the ground under him, forming a dark red stain.

“Father...”

A pair of frightened eyes looked at the man sprawled on the ground. A village girl shook off her mother’s arms and darted out toward her father, tears in her eyes. She was much too young for a sight like this. Yet even she knew that interfering would achieve absolutely nothing. After all, the man who had beaten her father was a fully armed knight. With her slender arms, even if she were to punch him, it wouldn’t so much as tickle him. But she couldn’t ignore her father’s pained figure.

Wishing to calm his beloved daughter, the man gently held her shoulders down with his bloodstained hands. He wished she didn’t have to see this, especially when she was so young.

Why... Why does this have to happen?

All sorts of thoughts surfaced and disappeared like bubbles in the man’s mind. When Lupis Rhoadserians had assumed the throne, everyone had expected the winds of reform. Ever since she’d served as a knight captain, Lupis had been regarded as a fair person who cared for the people. The rumors of her kindness had reached as far as this village. The man could remember clearly—perhaps all too vividly—how he’d cheered with his friends in the tavern, rejoicing about how their lives would be easier now. But reality turned out to be different. There was indeed a change, but not one in this man’s favor.

Standing with his back to the knight, the magistrate leading the armed warriors regarded the man scrambling on the ground with a cold, obscene smile.

“Then let me ask you one more time. How long are you going to hold back on the taxes you owe?”

The magistrate was absolutely confident in his superiority and didn’t hesitate in the slightest to trample over his fellow man. From his perspective, the only value this man held was as a source of taxes. He didn’t feel any more empathy for this man than a hunter would feel for his prey.

“If we had anything more, we’d gladly pay,” the man protested. “But we really, honestly have nothing more—”

It was pointless. Once again, the knight from earlier cut the man off with a sharp, heavy thud. The punch bashed into his diaphragm, knocking all of the air out of his lungs. The man gasped.

"Really, you commoners never cease to amaze me," the magistrate said as the man clutched his stomach. "Having to deal with you time after time gives me such a headache. I'm asking you a simple question; when will you pay your taxes? I don't care how easy or hard it is for you."

You damn bastard. Running your mouth like that!

Crimson flames of anger and bloodlust rose up in the man's heart. Images of the countless ways he would beat this vile magistrate to death if only given the chance flashed through his mind. If he'd had the power to do so, he'd have lunged at him and punched and torn the life out of his body. The only reason he restrained himself now was because he was weaker than the violence this magistrate could enact on him.

Are you saying the fact that you're stronger means you're allowed to walk all over us?!

The man's hands shook with anger. They couldn't even hope to pay the sum of taxes the magistrate asked for—not even this man, who was a rather affluent farmer in this village.

It's not that I won't pay! I can't *pay!*

The end result might have been the same, but there was a difference of heaven and earth in the details, especially given that the man had already paid this year's share of taxes. Had it not been for those special war-related taxes, he could have even lived in comfort.

The man didn't reject the idea of paying taxes altogether. The kingdom needed an army to protect the land. It needed to build roads to develop its economy. Those things required money. And the wealthier the country became, the more that wealth benefited people like him. Of course, to people living in a village like this, the boons of this wealth were diminutive compared to those living in the big cities, but that wasn't a reason to evade paying taxes. Plus, considering the recent war between O'ltormea and Xarooda, the special war taxes were understandable. Everything had its limits, though.

“Where’s your answer?! The magistrate asked you a question, peasant!” the knight snarled as he landed another blow on the man’s skull.

Even as his consciousness wavered, the man couldn’t help but feel indignant.

I never thought it would be like this. Wasn’t Queen Lupis’s reign supposed to put an end to the nobles’ tyranny?!

Over the last few years, this man had led the village instead of the aged village headman. Had he been born to this village, he probably would have long since been made headman himself. He was originally a peddler, and despite being a commoner, he knew how to read and do arithmetic. Thanks to those skills, he’d been able to manage the vegetables and wool this village produced and sell them to other nearby communities. Still, the cash income of this village was very small. They lived on self-sufficiency, bartering with other villages for what they lacked.

The only ones who handled actual coin in this area were peddlers, who sold their stock to passing adventurers and mercenaries. That only happened a few times a year, though. Money wasn’t all that necessary for life in this remote village; it was only needed for paying taxes once every year, during the spring. Or so it was, until this magistrate, with his nasty, obscene smile, appeared in this village.

He took all of our stock and still demands more.

At first, the magistrate had claimed it was for rebuilding the country. The man had believed that and cooperated, out of expectation for Queen Lupis’s reform and love for his own country. Having been a traveling peddler, he’d seen the world and could imagine the crisis to Rhoadseria’s existence the queen had spoken of.

But those demands didn’t end. The magistrate demanded tax a second time, a third time, and a fourth—there was no end in sight. In the beginning, it had been small sums that didn’t affect the village’s livelihood that much. But the demands had escalated. It was an adhesive sort of pressure that was deceptively light but soon turned into a powerful noose around their necks.

How much are they going to try and extort from us?!

Anger surged up from the man's heart and ran through his body. True, he could pay once or twice more. But after that, he'd be left with absolutely nothing to his name. His only remaining options would be to either commit family suicide, sell one of his family members to slavery, or leave the village and become a vagrant. What little produce he had left now was, for all intents and purposes, his last stock.

"Well, if you absolutely can't pay with money, we could have you settle your debt by...other means," the magistrate said suggestively.

A shiver ran down the man's spine. This was the one thing he wouldn't consider—a terrible future he intentionally tried not to think about. But seeing the magistrate's vulgar gaze settle on his wife and daughter, who sat huddled together, it was clear what he'd been implying.

If only I could somehow earn more money. Am I going to lose everything again?!

Regret and terror overcame him. He had never been a very skilled merchant. He lacked the greed to stop at nothing to make a profit. Thanks to that, his wallet held only copper coins—silvers, at best. He was never at a loss, but he never made large profits. However, he was honest and amicable. He would give money to the beggars in the alleyways, and he always gave cordial advice to his business partners. Because of that, he had many connections and was well-liked by his friends.

He was a good man. Had he been born to a developed country in modern society, he would have probably had the respect and praise of his peers. But his human kindness, a virtue in any other setting, was nothing short of weakness in this world.

Once upon a time, an acquaintance and fellow merchant came to him for help. He'd urgently asked that he lend him some funds, even if for just a few days. It was around that time that the man had planned to quit working as a peddler and buy his own store in a city. He'd saved up a great deal of money just for that purpose. It could have determined his future. But his acquaintance had begged for the loan, and the man had eventually obliged, believing in their verbal promise that he'd return the sum by a certain date.

When the man went to his acquaintance's house to collect, he found a staggering number of creditors standing at the doorstep. His acquaintance's trade cog had been caught in a storm and had sunk along with its freight. The acquaintance had taken all that he'd borrowed and disappeared. He'd discarded all his friendships and debts he'd built up so far.

As a result, the man had lost everything. The deal that would have secured his future passed him by. And since the man had been forced to cancel the transaction so suddenly, his trust as a merchant was compromised.

The truth was that a trusted acquaintance had duped him. He was the victim, but instead of garnering him sympathy, this incident cast doubt on his skill as a merchant. He was seen as a man who lacked the ability to judge people.

The fact that their deal had been a verbal promise also worked against him. He complained to the governor, but the governor didn't listen. He just shooed him away. Even if he had listened, though, the governor of a countryside region couldn't do much against a person who'd up and disappeared.

In a world like Ryoma's, where information technology was advanced, law enforcement could use that to chase down criminals. But in this world, the most guards could do was stop an ongoing crime as it happened. Even then, they couldn't stop every single crime. That was just how the justice system worked in a world where the strong fed upon the weak. Governors didn't have enough men or influence to dispatch people to other regions and investigate a criminal.

And so the man was left with no one to turn to. He'd lost everything, and it was all because of his good will. No one was virtuous enough to extend him a helping hand at a time like this—not even any of the merchants he'd been so cordial and helpful toward.

The man sank to the very bottom of disillusionment and sorrow. He cast aside the city he'd worked in and became a vagrant. He walked around with torn clothes and a sullen expression—the very image of a shambling corpse. What money he still had on him soon ran out. All that remained was for him to plummet down the rungs of life, as those who'd exhausted all their luck often did. He would spend the rest of his days rummaging through the trash heaps and begging passersby for coin.

But all of that changed one day, when he met a girl in one of the villages he passed by. It wasn't clear what had spurred her to call out to him, but whatever it was, love blossomed between them. That love stoked the flames of life in this man, whose heart had died even as his body lingered.

Their union brought a new life into this world; they had a daughter. The man had finally managed to latch onto a small bit of joy. His plights were over. His family and this village were all that he lived for.

But now, something threatened to sever the path of this man's life a second time.

No. I have to keep those two safe.

The magistrate's disgusting gaze wasn't fixed on the man, crouched and cowering on the ground, but on the daughter clinging to her father's back and shivering with fear. And once he'd taken the daughter, he would come for the wife next.

Compared to the other villagers, his wife and daughter were relatively clean. His wife couldn't be considered beautiful, but she looked good enough to draw a man's attention. The daughter took after her, and her bright disposition only made her more attractive. A decent man who truly sought a stable relationship would perhaps find their cute appearances preferable to a more conventionally beautiful woman.

And sadly, unlike a man, those two had more uses. They could be sold off to a brothel or used as sex slaves. Some of the money made by their sale could be used for taxes, while the rest would go into the magistrate's pocket as a "handling fee." No...in *this* magistrate's case, he'd rather "sample" the women before selling them off.

Even though the man knew this, he could do nothing to stop it.

Wasn't Her Majesty supposed to improve our lives?!

The man spit out more blood and then wobbled to his feet. He clenched his fists. Flames of anger burned in his eyes.

"Staying silent doesn't answer my question, peasant," the magistrate said, walking up to the man with a slimy grin on his face. "Queen Lupis made it quite

clear that this tax order is very important and must be completed. This is to rebuild the country and to ensure our safety as citizens. Understood?”

The two men faced each other and glared, standing close enough to feel each other’s breath. The magistrate’s breath reeked of cheap cigarettes.

“Her Majesty the queen requires this tax to develop and defend our country,” the magistrate said. “Refusing to pay that tax means you’re opposing not me but your queen. You’re opposing the Kingdom of Rhoadseria itself if you don’t pay. And that means treason. That would make you...a traitor.”

“Traitor...” A jolt of electricity ran down the man’s spine.

Seeing the effect his words had had, the magistrate continued his verbal assault. “That’s right. And if that happens, you and your family will not be spared the proper punishment. You can resist all you want and try to do whatever you like, but it will all end the same way.”

The magistrate laughed loudly. Those branded as traitors weren’t only sentenced to death. Their families were also sold off to slavery. Whether the man chose to pay his taxes or not, the result would be the same.

The man was the first to look away. The raging anger that had spurred him on until now had been snuffed out by that single word—traitor. It wasn’t patriotism that had extinguished his wrath, though. It was terror. He was terrified of the power a country could bring to bear on an individual.

Overwhelmed by the magistrate’s ruthless words, the man simply gazed at the ground. A mere commoner living in a small village couldn’t so much as begin to imagine opposing a country’s ruler. As much as the commoners might complain and grumble in their daily lives, they didn’t consider really opposing the throne.

What should I do? How do I protect my family...and the village?

The man desperately searched for some kind of solution. He had never been so conflicted in his life. He racked his brains, trying to find a way that would save his village, for his family and for his own personal happiness.

Silence reigned over the village square for one long, agonizing moment. Everyone held their breath as they watched this tragedy unfold. Only one

person watched and saw a different kind of scene unfold.

Anger, impatience, resignation, and despair... All of those emotions are jumbled together. Just look at the expression on his face.

The knights stood in the midst of the overbearing atmosphere, hiding their emotions inside their helmets. But one man among them was desperately holding back laughter.

His name was Elliot Chamberlain. He had fair skin and reddish-brown hair. He was a slender, well-toned man who stood 167 centimeters tall. Judging by how he moved freely despite the heavy metal armor he was wearing, he was quite well-trained. His appearance was rather typical within Rhoadseria, and if one were to look around the capital or some of the larger cities, one could find plenty of men with similar physiques or features. But his true value didn't lie in his appearance.

He was a British man who had moved to America, making the city of New York his home. Having been born and raised in a world that sang the praises of freedom and equality, he had the cultivated intellect of an educated modern man. If he were to apply and teach that knowledge in this world, it would no doubt become slightly less of a hell.

But right now, he watched something that was the stark opposite of freedom and equality. And he was relishing the sight of it.

Oh, crap. Don't laugh. Hold it in!

Chamberlain painfully withstood the rolling laughter rising up from his chest. Letting it out now would completely ruin all that he'd plotted so far. But as firm as his will was, he couldn't stop himself from shaking.

Each time he held back his laughter, Chamberlain's metal armor clinked and clattered. One of his fellow knights noticed this and shot Chamberlain a quizzical glance. Of all the knights standing behind the magistrate, he alone had suddenly started shaking.

Chamberlain glanced back at the knight and nodded shortly. Since the knight couldn't see Chamberlain's expression through his helmet, he assumed that Chamberlain was shaking with suppressed indignation. He shook his head, as if

telling him to restrain himself, then turned his gaze forward.



Chamberlain sneered under his helmet.

Pfft. Moron.

Of course, no sensible man would derive pleasure from a sight this tragic. Not even a knight, a member of the ruling class, would enjoy this—especially since some of the knights serving the magistrate were originally commoners. Many of the knights present were wavering between their sense of duty and justice. However, none of them moved to stop him. They'd all been strictly ordered to see this mission through to the end.

Chamberlain didn't waver, though. To him, the people of this world were mere toys with no wills of their own. He watched from afar as they thrashed and struggled, like a child gleefully tearing the wings off a butterfly. He couldn't hide his true nature, even with his fellow knights watching him suspiciously.

The magistrate was forcing the commoner to submit through violence. Malice burned in both their hearts. Sensing the boundless hatred running between them, Chamberlain felt his crotch harden.

Things are sizzling over just the right way. It won't be long until Sudou's plan bears fruit.

The Organization had ordered Chamberlain and his comrades to manipulate matters within Rhoadseria, and Chamberlain could vividly feel the results of their efforts paying off.

As a result of the civil war, Gelhart had been officially demoted to the rank of viscount. One's noble rank was important. This demotion was quite a great loss for Gelhart, to be sure, and it had certainly tarnished his honor. Immediately following the civil war, many of the nobles had kept their distance from him. Nonetheless, many of the nobles' faction's members still treated him like a duke. They did this despite the fact he'd been relieved of his lands and sent to the backwater territories of the south, which had struck a painful blow to his economic prowess.

Looking back at it now, it all seemed like a bad joke. The scum of the earth, just like this terrible temporary magistrate, were drawn to the viscount's side by the allure of personal gain. And Elliot Chamberlain had enabled this course of

events.

Sudou always gives out the most fun jobs. That's what they call mixing business with pleasure. If only Sudou were here to enjoy this with me.

Chamberlain was most grateful to Sudou, who was now far off in O'ltormea's capital city. Chamberlain's sole regret was that he couldn't show his respected superior this comical sight.

But with all the mess going on in O'ltormea, he has to be there. I'm sure I'll get to work with him again though. I'll just have to enjoy today for the both of us.

The sight of this world's people hating and killing each other was Chamberlain's greatest source of enjoyment.

Kill. Tear into each other. Suffer and grieve and hate one another. Die, perish, rot, wither away...the lot of you!

His was a delusional hatred, the kind born from a loss so cruel it broke a man.

Seven years ago, Chamberlain was living in New York, carefully and anxiously watching the stock prices on Wall Street. But a twist of fate summoned him to this world, alongside his beloved lover Vanessa.

Before his summoning, Chamberlain had been a successful businessman with a beautiful woman by his side. He'd toned his physique at the gym, and he'd gotten his MBA from Harvard. He was talented and successful. His victory in the game of life was all but guaranteed. He had a picture-perfect life—like the protagonist of a book.

Had things gone like they did in stories, his summoning to another world alongside his beloved girlfriend would have been a heroic tale. Gorgeous women would have tried, to no avail, to come between him and his beautiful lover. It would have been a perfect story played out by the perfect protagonist, albeit a little trite.

But the real world didn't follow such hackneyed conventions. Chamberlain hadn't been summoned into this world to dispatch some kind of great evil. His only use was as a pawn of war. This wasn't a hero's story, and he definitely wasn't the protagonist.

Vanessa had worked as a model and had the looks to match. Due to her good looks and peculiar hair color, she was relegated to being the nobles' plaything. Worst yet, those nobles had warped sensibilities; they relished in hearing the agonizing screams of others.

The fact that Vanessa was a liberalist who had actively participated in human rights movements only made things that much worse. To those sadistic nobles, she was just prey that struggled deliciously. However, Vanessa was educated and refined, and the more the nobles abused her, the more she insisted on her human rights. Unfortunately, that only spurred them to try and break her. They wanted to make her scream and cry that much harder, which only delighted them all the more. Prey that resisted was that much easier to hunt than an obedient plaything.

Vanessa had spent her days being punched, kicked, and violated. The nobles had continued their unending cruelty, and Vanessa's heart had eventually shattered. The light of will had faded from her eyes. She'd been reduced to a drooling, unresponsive doll. It was only then, when she'd become a broken toy, that the nobles had discarded her and returned her to Chamberlain, as if to say they were done with her. They'd done it without so much as a hint of hesitance or regret. To them, they were just casting aside raw garbage.

Performing an otherworld summoning required a great deal of resources, and rich nobles like them didn't *have* to use otherworlders. If they wanted to treat people like objects, they could have taken any person they wanted. Still, they had chosen her. But even an expensive toy was worthless after it had broken. That was how they had discarded her so easily.

As soon as Chamberlain had been summoned, they had placed an enslavement seal on him. He'd had no choice but to obey their orders. He had been forced to watch that terrible sight unfold. And the nobles had delighted in watching him suffer, forcing him to watch his beloved break beyond the point of return.

His lover had screamed and begged for help, and he could only watch. It wouldn't take much to imagine how he must have felt. Any man, no matter how kind and upstanding he might have been, would have snapped under the weight of madness.

After he'd wrung his own beloved's neck, so as to spare her from any more suffering, this once affluent businessman had crumbled away. From his husk hatched a hateful, sadistic demon who cursed anyone and everything in this world.

Someday, he would slay those nobles and murder their families. That was Chamberlain's sole reason for being. And with this raison d'etre, he'd survived through countless hellish battles. He'd honed his body, mastered thaumaturgy, and sought greater power. But the seal of slavery deprived him of that dream. At least, it had until the day the Organization saved him.

Yes. More. More! Trample over each other! Get angry, hate, let those grudges grow and ferment until their very weight crushes you!

Up until now, the commoners had put up with the nobles' terrible taxation. The nobles had thaumaturgy on their side and could exercise their violence. But even that had its limits. Just like how building materials had a limit to their durability, anything could break if enough pressure was applied to it.

If you really wanted to reform the country, you should have completely cut off the nobles' faction as soon as you settled the civil war, Your Most Exalted Majesty.

Chamberlain sneered. To him, Lupis Rhoadserians was nothing more than an idealistic, ignorant girl. She'd received the highest education this world had to offer, and she burned with idealism and loved the people. Her reign should have produced the finest regime in this world. But her lack of resolve and naivete ruined everything she could have built up.

When Queen Lupis chose not to purge Viscount Gelhart and instead let him walk away with only a fine and a relocation of territory, it gave the nobles the impression that even if they rebelled, they would not be killed. Because of that, they scoffed at the policies she tried to promote, which would have improved the commoners' lives all the more.

The nobles that clung to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria like a tumor believed that Lupis Rhoadserians was a naive, weak woman. That wasn't to say that inciting terror was the best way to reign over a country. Terror only sowed seeds of doubt and rebellion. But being feared was preferable to being slighted. A ruler

must have a moderated attitude and the decisiveness to shed blood when needed. To gain something, one must make sacrifices. This was where Queen Lupis had failed, and the result was on full display now.

Queen Lupis. Your indecisive, half-baked responses made it that much easier to provoke the nobles.

Most nobles were fixated on their ideas of elitism. For many years, the former Duke Gelhart had held the country under his thumb, and the idea of loyalty to the royal family was growing obsolete. In modern terms, it was as if a company's acting director, who'd had de facto run of the company so far, lost all his management power to the old president's young, inexperienced child. In that situation, no matter how much Queen Lupis tried to do the right thing, the nobles would never follow her orders.

There were real reasons to use this kind of brutality, but very few people would actually enforce this much violence on their own territory. A county's government relied directly on its tax revenue; a well-governed county produced a steady stream of income. True, one could apply pressure on the commoners to temporarily extort them for more taxes. But one could only do it once, twice, or maybe thrice. Eventually, their earnings would progressively decrease with each taxation. And then public order would worsen, and the hearts of their people would decay.

This left only two outcomes. Either the kingdom of Rhoadseria would have to crush those nobles, or the commoners would rebel and overthrow the kingdom. Most nobles knew this, but the grand majority of them looked down on the commoners, believing that they could maintain their territories by gently balancing the quality of commoners' lives. They wouldn't let them live properly, but they also wouldn't allow them to die.

But what if one were to mix in the nobles' disdain for Queen Lupis and her attempts to reform the country? That disdain and their own elitism would mix in the nobles' hearts like a poison, preventing them from properly judging the situation.

On top of that, this territory is under the royal house's jurisdiction. And the noble they picked to be their magistrate might be good at his job, but he's a

terrible human being. Thanks to that, everything went swimmingly. It's a good thing I told Gelhart to use this man for the job.

Chamberlain sneered under his helmet as he gazed at the magistrate. This low-ranking noble was a cowardly bastard who only cared for his own self-preservation. Using the conversation skills he'd developed on Rearth, Chamberlain had curried favor with him. And once Chamberlain had gotten on the magistrate's good side, he continually dripped poison into the magistrate's mind.

At this rate, it'll only take a few more months. I'll have to make a few adjustments before that, though. Now, let's finish things for today. Though I'd like to watch this a little longer...

Chamberlain glanced at the villager crawling pathetically on the ground, then walked up to the magistrate and whispered into his ear.

The Organization had decided to sow discontent in Rhoadseria's people to induce a rebellion, but that required multiple preparations. One couldn't recklessly whip up a rebellion. The Organization needed the right timing to reap the utmost profit. And Chamberlain hadn't been given the final orders to execute the plan yet. He couldn't afford to push the villagers too far and have the rebellion start now.

"My lord, I think these people are already quite afraid of you. Let's leave it at that for today and withdraw."

The magistrate looked at Chamberlain quizzically, his eyes intoxicated with violence and greed. "Why? If we threaten them a little longer, they'll cough up the coin." For all he was concerned, the first order of business was figuring out how much of that coin he'd be able to pocket for himself.

"I understand, my lord, that if you constrict him a little harder, he would likely pay. And if he won't, you'll be able to sell his family to the slavers. But take this too far, and it could incite a rebellion. Plus, it would impact your career negatively. You should relent now. Make them grateful for it. It would benefit you later down the line, my lord."

The magistrate's heart wavered between greed and self-preservation. His greed craved more money, but he didn't want to drag his own name through

the mud to do it. Chamberlain knew this, and therefore he could easily control the magistrate.

After silently weighing his options for a few moments, the magistrate nodded bitterly. “Hm... Well, if you insist. Very well. Showing the commoners mercy from time to time isn’t a bad idea. We will retreat for today.”

Idiot, Chamberlain thought, scoffing at him. *As if they’d feel thankful to you after you oppressed them this long.*

That kind of facade would only work once. He’d already repeatedly extorted from them, so even if he retreated now, it was clear it wouldn’t be long until he came to torment them again. This was especially true since the magistrate had just stressed that they would be branded traitors. Letting up a little at this point wouldn’t change the end conclusion. Quit the opposite, in fact; the man would either take his family and flee the village or begin preparations for a rebellion.

And I don’t care which way this falls.

If the man were to flee, the magistrate would simply levy the tax from the other villagers. If they decided to revolt, that would be fine in its own way.

“Thank you kindly, my lord,” Chamberlain said, bowing his head to the magistrate while mocking him in his heart. “I’m sure your mercy will—”

Just then, something happened. The sound of something whizzing through the wind reached Chamberlain’s ears. The next moment, two arrows pierced the magistrate’s brain.

“My lord! My lord!”

“Protect the lord!”

As the magistrate toppled to the ground, the knights hurried over to him.

“Form a circular formation! Hurry! This is a revolt! A rebellion!”

Out of all of them, Chamberlain alone remained collected. He no longer had a shred of human emotion left in him anyway. The most he could do was pretend, if the need called for it.

He didn’t have the leisure to pretend now, though. He pressed a hand to the magistrate’s neck, feeling for his pulse, and then clicked his tongue bitterly.

Dammit! It killed him on the spot.



This magistrate was an expendable pawn, but Chamberlain needed him to die in the right place at the right time. His dying now meant that the Organization would need to greatly revise its plan.

The problem is, who killed him, and why?

He pulled one of the arrows out of the magistrate's forehead. It was a standard mass-produced arrow, the kind one could buy anywhere. But there was a black, viscous liquid on the arrowhead. Chamberlain smeared a bit of it on his fingertip and brought it to his lips. He licked it gently with his tongue, and tasting acid, spat it out at once.

Poison. This is an issue.

He couldn't recognize what kind of poison it was, but based on how it had stimulated his tongue, it was definitely some kind of herbal toxin—and a powerful one at that.

Whoever concocted this poison couldn't have been a commoner. Who was it, then?

The arrows had definitely whizzed in from the other side of the wall formed by the villagers. Based on the angle with which the arrows had hit the magistrate's head, the direction they'd come from was certain. That just left the question of who did it.

Normally, one might assume a villager shot the magistrate because of disgruntlement or a grudge. He did torment them to no end, so someone could have lost patience and decided to kill him. But the fact that the arrows had been coated with poison meant it was unlikely a villager had done it.

The scene erupted into chaos. The knights formed a wall, holding up their shields as they surrounded the magistrate. Chamberlain tried to grasp the situation from behind their cover, but something suddenly disrupted his thoughts.

One of his fellow knights had grabbed him by the shoulder. "Hey, Chamberlain, what do we do?! Something's happening!" the knight cried, his fingers shivering with fear.

“What’s gotten into you? Quiet down...” Chamberlain said, looking up.

But then he saw it. The villagers were in a frenzy. Men, women, children, and the elderly all regarded the knights with murderous intent. They had probably already resolved to rebel. At some point, they’d all picked up spades and hoes.

“I see. I don’t know who’s behind this, but this was their plan,” Chamberlain whispered to himself, sighing.

The magistrate had died from an arrow, and that arrow had been shot in this village. As stupid as the villagers might be, they knew no one would believe they weren’t involved with his murder. The dead magistrate’s subordinates would conclude the villagers were at fault. It wouldn’t matter who specifically did it; the entire village would be seen as responsible. Their de facto leader, the former peddler, would be put to death, and his family would be sold into slavery under the pretense of paying settlements to the victim’s family. Even if the villagers were dissatisfied with this, their complaints to the kingdom wouldn’t be heard.

After all, if they were to appeal to court in the capital, the judge would be a noble. Aristocratic society was governed by connections. A noble judge wouldn’t pay any attention to commoners’ complaints. If they were to press charges, the result would be set in stone before the trial even took place.

The villagers knew they had no out. They would be driven into a corner with no escape. Yet their hatred for the magistrate still burned hot. Right now, the villagers lacked any semblance of composure. They were beset by madness and fervor.

The knights formed a circular formation as the villagers closed in on them, little by little. The villagers were out for blood—including Chamberlain’s.

“There’s six of us, including me. And there’s over a hundred villagers. We can’t hold them back...” Chamberlain muttered to himself.

Knights who’d mastered martial thaumaturgy were said to match ten normal soldiers. But that assumed that the knights were in prime physical and mental condition. These knights were a far cry from that. Their own countrymen eyed them with bloodlust.

Worse yet, some of these knights were originally commoners. They'd done as they were ordered, and had put up with the atrocities the magistrate wrought, but in their hearts they pitied and sympathized with the villagers. They couldn't regard them as enemies in the same sense they usually would.

To top it all off, the villagers were like cornered rats. They knew they'd die either way, so they had chosen to at least take the knights down with them. They were, in many ways, the most feared type of opponents.

I have to find some way to get out of here.

For the Organization, whether the rebellion started when they wished it or during an unexpected event made all the difference. Chamberlain lacked the authority to decide that now was the right time. He had to report this to the Organization and defer to their judgment.

"We've got no choice," Chamberlain whispered to the other knights. "We have to break out of here, even if it means making some sacrifices along the way. If you want to survive, follow me."

"Are you serious?!" one of the other knights asked.

Chamberlain replied by drawing the sword at his waist. They may have been knights capable of thaumaturgy, but there were only six of them. The commoners could easily flank six isolated knights; they'd tear the knights apart like a swarm of angry ants. Six people would be enough to guard one man, but this time those numbers weren't in their favor.

This isn't a coincidence. Someone picked this timing to ignite this powder keg and start a rebellion. And what happened here will spread to the other villages in no time. This is bad!

Rhoadseria was already festering with discontent and animosity toward the nobles. Once the flame of revolt was ignited, there would be no way of putting it out.

There's no way we can suppress the rebellion now. It'll start before we need it to. Far be it from me to say how this'll influence the Organization's plans...but I've got no choice. I have to contact the Organization and think of our next step.

Chamberlain was resolved. He had decided his course of action. He activated

his chakras in an attempt to break out of this deadlock...

†

That day, a group of villagers rose up in rebellion in one small corner of Rhoadseria. That small rebellion was nipped in the bud, but the fires of revolt quickly spread across the country, feeding on the anxiety and discontent that festered in the land.

This was the start of the second Rhoadserian civil war—an event that the history books would later call the trigger that led to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s downfall.

Epilogue

The history of the western continent had reached a major turning point. An incident that would go down in infamy began on one unassuming morning.

“Figuring that out is your job! Why do you think you were appointed? I’m not asking you whether you can do it, I’m telling you to get your people to work!”

In a room of the white castle that stood at the heart of Pireas, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s capital city, a woman’s shrill shout echoed through the room. The two sentinels stationed outside the door could hear her, the room’s owner, through the thick oak door. They exchanged glances and sighed deeply, as if to say, “Not again.”

It wasn’t that they disliked her. She’d gained the ruler’s trust in their youth, and her care and devotion for Rhoadseria’s people were known to many. But after hearing her shout almost every day, anyone would sigh heavily, even if those shouts weren’t directed at them.

She’s in a bad mood today...again, thought one of the guards as a bitter smile played on his lips. He struggled to recall a day when she’d been in a good mood. She’d accepted this job with a smile, but in the months that had passed since, she’d spent nearly every day shouting in that room.

“B-But Lady Lecter, y-you must understand. It’s not that we just s-stand around and do nothing...” a tall, thin man said to Meltina, sounding almost neurotic. He was obviously flustered. His forehead glistened with a nervous sweat.

Beside him stood a corpulent middle-aged man. His hefty gut hung over the waistline of his pants, and his greasy face and hair reflected the light in the room. He must have been quite stressed as well, because thick beads of sweat stained his silk shirt.

“He’s quite right, milady. As a matter of fact, there’s nothing we can do right

now. Of course, should Her Majesty make a decision, it will solve all these issues. But the chances of that are slim. So for now, we should be careful, take our time, and make the allies we need little by little."

The men grimaced, uttering reasons and excuses for their lack of results. They were not at all pleased that a younger person, and a woman at that, was shouting at them and bossing them around. Their appearances aside, they had served as low-ranking bureaucrats for many years and had taken part in countless matters. They had experience and the track record to match it. From their perspective, it was painfully evident that the results Meltina demanded from them were unrealistic.

How dare you holler at us, you whelp! You don't know the first thing about politics! Who do you think you are?! You're just one of the queen's sycophantic lackeys!

What a relief it would be to shout those words at her. But they suppressed the urge to ruthlessly lash out. They weren't haughty, but they did have their dignity. They couldn't help but feel outraged, especially since they honestly believed they weren't at fault. Be that as it may, it didn't mean they could take it out on Meltina. Whether they were right or wrong, it wasn't a reason to break etiquette. Doing so would only negatively affect their future work.

But this is bad. How do we convince her? the younger man pondered.

In truth, they weren't at fault for this. Queen Lupis's reforms weren't progressing as they should, and the fundamental reason for that was clear. Early on, these bureaucrats had proposed a countermeasure to both Meltina and her predecessor, a way to overcome resistance to the queen's reforms. They'd both done everything they could within the scope of their role. If things didn't turn out favorably even after that, no one could say they were at fault.

But whether Meltina Lecter would accept this reasoning was another matter altogether. And given her personality, the answer to that was already set in stone. She was the type to stubbornly cling to her idea of justice and turn a deaf ear to anything else. Worse yet, she could very well grow to hate anyone who questioned her ideals, seeing them as opponents trying to get in her way.

The two men exchanged a look, silently communicating those emotions to

one another, and chose to remain quiet.

Meltina furrowed her shapely brows and rhythmically tapped her fingers on the desk. She must have been quite annoyed.

Take our time? That's stupid. Do they seriously think we have that kind of time?

These two had been promoted *after* Queen Lupis's rise to the throne. In terms of pedigree, they were just low-ranking nobles. They were known to be quite skilled among the younger core officials, but they wouldn't normally hold such high positions. That changed after Lupis became queen.

Their appointments as high-ranking bureaucrats was entirely Queen Lupis's will. And since Meltina was the queen's closest aide, she believed that these two didn't have the right to refuse any of her demands. Of course, whether they had the right was up for debate. Perhaps they didn't. And if they wanted to keep their positions, they would need to do everything in their power to hold on to them. But Meltina forgot one fundamental thing. Regardless of whether they could refuse, it didn't change the fact that they couldn't do as she asked.

Meltina once again lashed out at them, saying, "Take our time? Don't be foolish. How long are you going to keep saying that and squander away what little time we do have?!"

Quite some time had passed since Lupis Rhoadserians became queen and began her reforms. And it had already been several months since Meltina had been promoted to oversee those reforms.

But nothing has changed. Nothing at all.

Naturally, there *had been* changes. Everything had become comparatively worse. Even an amateur politician like Meltina could see that much.

In the months since she'd taken this post, Meltina had frantically gone about her duty. She knew what the problems were, and she even knew how to address them. But her position didn't allow her that authority, and she feared that everything would crumble to dust if she admitted that.

And so Meltina had pushed work that couldn't possibly be achieved onto these two and then shouted at them when they failed to deliver. Their lives

would be so much easier if they could just admit that this task was beyond them.

"Enough. Leave." Meltina shooed them away with her hand. "Seeing your faces makes me sick to my stomach. Go back to your rooms and do your job. I expect a more satisfying report tomorrow."

After they left, Meltina sank into the sofa. A deep sigh escaped her lips. Lying face-up, she covered her eyes with the back of her hand. She felt warm, wet tears slipping down her temples.

"Why? Why won't anyone cooperate with Her Majesty? Why do they only care about their own profit? Doesn't anyone love this country?"

To Meltina, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria stood above all else. It was as dear to her as her own mother. She devoted her life to this country, shed her very blood for it. She felt it was her duty. That was why she couldn't tolerate this situation.

Before Queen Lupis rose to the throne, Duke Gelhart had controlled national policy. Most of the commoners had feared for their futures under his authority. Only the high-ranking nobles and the wealthy merchants working under them profited; everyone else lived in squalor.

Meltina sought to change that reality. And since Queen Lupis was the legitimate heir to the royal bloodline, Meltina put all her efforts into serving her. It didn't matter to her what everyone else thought of her efforts, whether they thought them sufficient and appropriate. What did matter was that she earnestly believed she'd done her utmost in the name of these endeavors. She worked hard, and those around her noticed it.

But for all her efforts, reality didn't change one bit. The nobles continued to hide behind their privilege, increasing their fame and power, while the merchants used their wealth and connections to further their relationship with the aristocrats. And though the commoners dreaded what the nobles and aristocrats might do to them, they still continued to complain—loudly.

Everyone criticized and looked down on Queen Lupis.

At this rate, this country will... But what are we to do?

Meltina realized just how problematic the situation was, but she didn't know how to deal with it. If nothing else, she couldn't stand the fact that people were criticizing her beloved queen. Even so, Meltina wasn't any closer to solving these problems. She felt like she was trying to conquer a mountain no one had ever scaled before. The distant peak was in sight, but she lacked a map, and there was no paved road to follow.

"Ugh, enough. Enough! This weighs on Queen Lupis much more than it does me. I have to be responsible and support her!"

Letting out a small sigh, Meltina rose from the sofa. She then stood in front of a mirror in the room's corner. Her beautiful hair was as well-kempt as it always was, and her attire was as classy as ever. But her face was visibly tired, and her eyelids looked a bit swollen.

"I look awful," Meltina said, running a hand over her cheeks. "And I have a meeting coming up too."

Meltina reached for her box of cosmetics nearby. She wasn't very good at applying makeup, but she couldn't very well attend a meeting looking so haggard.

†

The setting sun cast a red glow over the round table. Queen Lupis looked at the members seated there and said, "That concludes our agenda for the day. Does anyone have anything else to add?"

These meetings took place every day at two in the afternoon, and honestly speaking, Queen Lupis hated them. The same people would sit in the same conference room, arguing over the same issues in exactly the same way. It was an utterly vapid, futile waste of time. There was never any progress, no forward movement. Hosting these meetings did nothing but strain her nerves and patience.

Another meeting that achieved nothing. We didn't decide on or improve anything. All they do is mock everyone and shove their responsibilities onto each other.

Queen Lupis had personally chosen all the people here. She'd invited those who weren't part of the nobles' faction and who had done nothing but rule over their territories. She'd thought this would shape the country into an upright, impartial, and just kingdom—a paradise.

Queen Lupis resisted the urge to sigh. They didn't acknowledge her abilities as a ruler to begin with, so she couldn't come across as apathetic on top of that. She did try, in her own way, to fulfill the role of Rhoadseria's ruler.

Doesn't someone have something? Anyone? What am I supposed to do with this country?

Queen Lupis understood the country's predicament perfectly. Indeed, everyone present in this meeting was devoted to solving these issues. Despite this, she couldn't come up with any solutions. All she could do was pray that someone would suggest a viable plan.

Queen Lupis looked around desperately, her eyes practically begging the others for help. But they all averted their gaze, even her closest aides, Mikhail and Meltina.

"Nothing, then. In that case..."

Resigned, Queen Lupis was about to conclude the meeting when someone silently raised their hand.

"If I may, Your Majesty?"

It was Count Bergstone, who sat to her left. All the eyes in the room fixed on him at once.

What is he going to say? Is he going to criticize me? Or is he...

Queen Lupis's pulse boomed in her ears like an alarm bell. Both anxiety and hope shook her heart. Count Bergstone and his brother-in-law were two of the most adept politicians in the room. They were undoubtedly the most appropriate people to manage and handle the changes she wanted to enact in the country.

When she first took the throne, Count Bergstone had masterfully handled the early stages of the reform. At the time, everyone had been optimistic, but the

honeymoon phase hadn't lasted long. As the country's issues stagnated, Count Bergstone suggested that they firmly exercise the power of the state to overcome the resistance. Queen Lupis had rejected that proposal. That dispute drove a fissure between the two of them.

Because of that break in their relationship, Queen Lupis had opposed Count Bergstone's stance about the expedition to Xarooda. She had tried to defend Mikhail, who had been unrepentant, from the sound criticism of the others. This had just soured her relationship with Count Bergstone even more.

In the end, Queen Lupis had decreed that Ryoma Mikoshiba and Helena were to go to Xarooda. She'd had no other choice. Count Bergstone still attended the meetings after that, but he didn't proactively suggest any policy changes. His brother-in-law, Count Zeleph, had left the capital altogether.

The end result was political turmoil. Those that were left were either loyal but lacking in political skill, or they were capable but disloyal. Neither of those groups were helpful to her. Queen Lupis was stuck in a game of chess where all she had were pawns—no queen, knights, rooks, or bishops.

In chess, a pawn could be promoted to a queen. It held the potential to be the strongest piece in the game. Much in the same manner, people could show a great deal of worth and utility if used correctly.

But unlike Count Bergstone, I don't have the skill or the experience in utilizing people.

Any game of chess depended on the skill of the player, after all.

Honestly, the easiest way out of this would be to apologize to Count Bergstone and seek his counsel. But I can't do that.

Queen Lupis regretted her decisions. She knew she'd had no other options at the time, but she couldn't escape her guilt. Yet she wasn't in a position to admit that she'd been in the wrong. The sovereign was the highest authority in the country; regardless of how much de facto power they had, they were still regarded as nominally absolute rulers. If such a ruler were to apologize, it would call their authority into question. Queen Lupis had no firm achievements to speak of as it was, and lowering herself like that would enable those who doubted her power as a stateswoman to be more vocal.

More than anything, though, Queen Lupis feared that admitting to her faults would once again direct the blame at Mikhail Vanash. He was one of her closest and most trusted aides, as close to her as Meltina. She revered him as an older brother.

As for what was best for the kingdom, she knew she needed to cut Mikhail out of her government. But not even a benign sovereign could completely cast aside her own personal desires and greed. She could only hope that the passage of time would solve the problems that plagued Mikhail.

But then Count Bergstone had suddenly asked for permission to speak. Queen Lupis was naturally on guard, but she couldn't afford to let it show in such a public setting.

"Yes, go ahead," Queen Lupis said, her voice a bit shrill. "You have my permission to speak, Count Bergstone."

"Thank you kindly, Your Majesty." Count Bergstone rose from his chair. He bowed deeply at Queen Lupis and looked around the table before taking a deep breath. "I'm sure all of you realize, Her Majesty most acutely of all, that our country is currently suffering under the weight of several large problems."

Count Bergstone's words echoed through the room. His voice was by no means coercive. His tone was calm, and each word was perfectly enunciated and pleasing to the ear. His words were backed by overwhelming confidence and conviction.

"Ideally, each of these problems should have been solved early on, but the top priority is the possibility of another O'ltormean invasion on Xarooda."

Everyone around the table nodded in agreement. They all worked desperately to rebuild the country in preparation for that possibility.

"Last year's war concluded with an alliance between the three kingdoms of the east and Helnesgoula. For now, things are calm. But many believe that didn't mark the end of the war. Xarooda is continuing its negotiations with O'ltormea, but I find it unlikely they will settle the matter. At some point, O'ltormea will find one reason or another to launch another war with Xarooda."

A few people raised their voices in agreement.

“And when they do, O’ltormea will definitely try to break the alliance between the three kingdoms of the east. But how will they attempt to do that? What would cut into our national power even more than sending reinforcements to Xarooda?”



Count Bergstone's question hung in the air until someone finally uttered, "The southern kingdoms..."

The air in the room froze over. Anyone with even a vague understanding of the situation would know that a militaristic hegemony like the O'ltormea Empire—the ruler of the continent's center—wouldn't retreat so easily. If O'ltormea, which took other countries by force, were to lose to Xarooda in a war, hostilities within the empire would increase. This meant O'ltormea couldn't afford to lose another war against Xarooda, no matter what. They'd use every secret tactic they could. In which case, they'd probably bait one or more of the southern kingdoms into opening hostilities against Rhoadseria and Myest.

The O'ltormea Empire had been forced to negotiate a cease-fire because Ryoma Mikoshiba had taken Fort Notis, a supply base essential for their war effort. In addition, three kingdoms of the east and Helnesgoula, the ruler of the continent's north, had formed a common front against them. Not even a powerful empire could force their way through four countries at once. O'ltormea's most natural course of action would be to break the alliance between those four countries. And the easiest way to go about that would be to increase their own allies and divide the enemy.

O'ltormea's most likely allies were the war-torn, warmongering southern kingdoms. Their territories were small, and their national power was by no means large, but they were known for having individually skilled and powerful soldiers. Rhoadseria had locked blades with them in the past, and the losses they'd taken were considerable. A war with the southern kingdoms wouldn't ruin Rhoadseria, but it would diminish its resources and national power enough so they couldn't spare any reinforcements to Xarooda.

That's assuming that internal affairs are stable and organized under the queen, Count Bergstone thought. *Given the internal turmoil we're in right now, we would struggle to hold back the southern kingdoms anyway. In that regard, we would have been better off if we'd let General Albrecht rule the country with Queen Lupis as a puppet ruler, or if we'd let Duke Gelhart become the prime minister.*

Count Bergstone scoffed at his own ironic thought. The late Hodram Albrecht and the former Duke Gelhart were highly problematic individuals. Count Bergstone regarded them as the scum of the earth. They were both vain and self-serving, and they stopped at nothing to elevate their own glory and status. They both had aspired to make the sovereign their puppet as they ruled over Rhoadseria. That was why a war had broken out—to eject them from the regime and remove their authority over the royal house. That had been accomplished, but now Rhoadseria was like a flock of sheep without a proper shepherd to lead them.

Still, we have to do something. This could change everything.

The room settled into silence. Everyone waited with bated breath to hear what Count Bergstone would say next.

With everyone's gazes fixed on him, Count Bergstone took out the trump cards he'd prepared from the bag at his feet. He'd held his silence for months just for this moment.

"For that reason—"

But the goddess of fate once again ignored Count Bergstone's desires. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, there was a loud knock on the door.

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.

As of the time I write this afterword, it's already the latter half of October. The months pass by quickly, and 2018 approaches its end. There were many typhoons and earthquakes this year, and I had to be hospitalized for the first time in my life. I was faced with the pressing question of how I'd live my life going forward... It was, in many ways, an unforgettable year.

But still, one way or another, I've kept up my schedule of publishing three volumes per year. That's thanks to my editors, who waited patiently until the very limits of the deadline, and bob the illustrator. Allow me to take this chance to thank you profoundly for all your help.

Now then, let's put aside the author's navel-gazing and get down to our usual business. This volume's outline is actually quite simple. Volume 11 is a close-up on Count Salzberg, ruler of Rhoadseria's northern regions, and his two confidants Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria. These two will have a great influence on Ryoma. Albeit, both carry their own problems and complications, so he'll have to take special care when handling these two... Volume 11 ends on a question mark, but look forward to seeing how the story develops around those two in the future.

Also, dark clouds are brewing over Rhoadseria's skies, and Queen Lupis is in quite the predicament... With only a couple of years having passed since the civil war's conclusion, it's surprising how much trouble seems to come her way! Such is the hand life tends to deal to a well-intentioned fool. No matter what she does or tries to achieve, it all turns out negatively.

And most of it...well, at least half of it is due to our unruly protagonist's intervention. With Ryoma being the protagonist he is, and this story being what

it is, some part of me marvels that we've gotten as far as 11 volumes in. Had this been a more orthodox fantasy story, the protagonist would have saved the unfortunate queen by now, wouldn't he?

Of course, it's because it's so orthodox and hackneyed that I can't bring myself to write something like that... A bit perverse of me, I'll admit. But it's thanks to you readers that a perverse author like me can keep writing.

I'll try to make it a point to submit my manuscripts faster next time. If all goes as planned, volume 12 should be out by March 2019. I hope you will continue to support *Record of Wortenia War* in the future.

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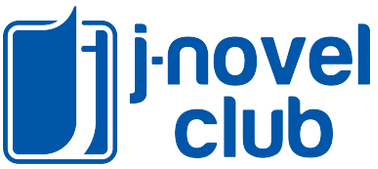
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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 11

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal Edited by Suzanne Seals

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