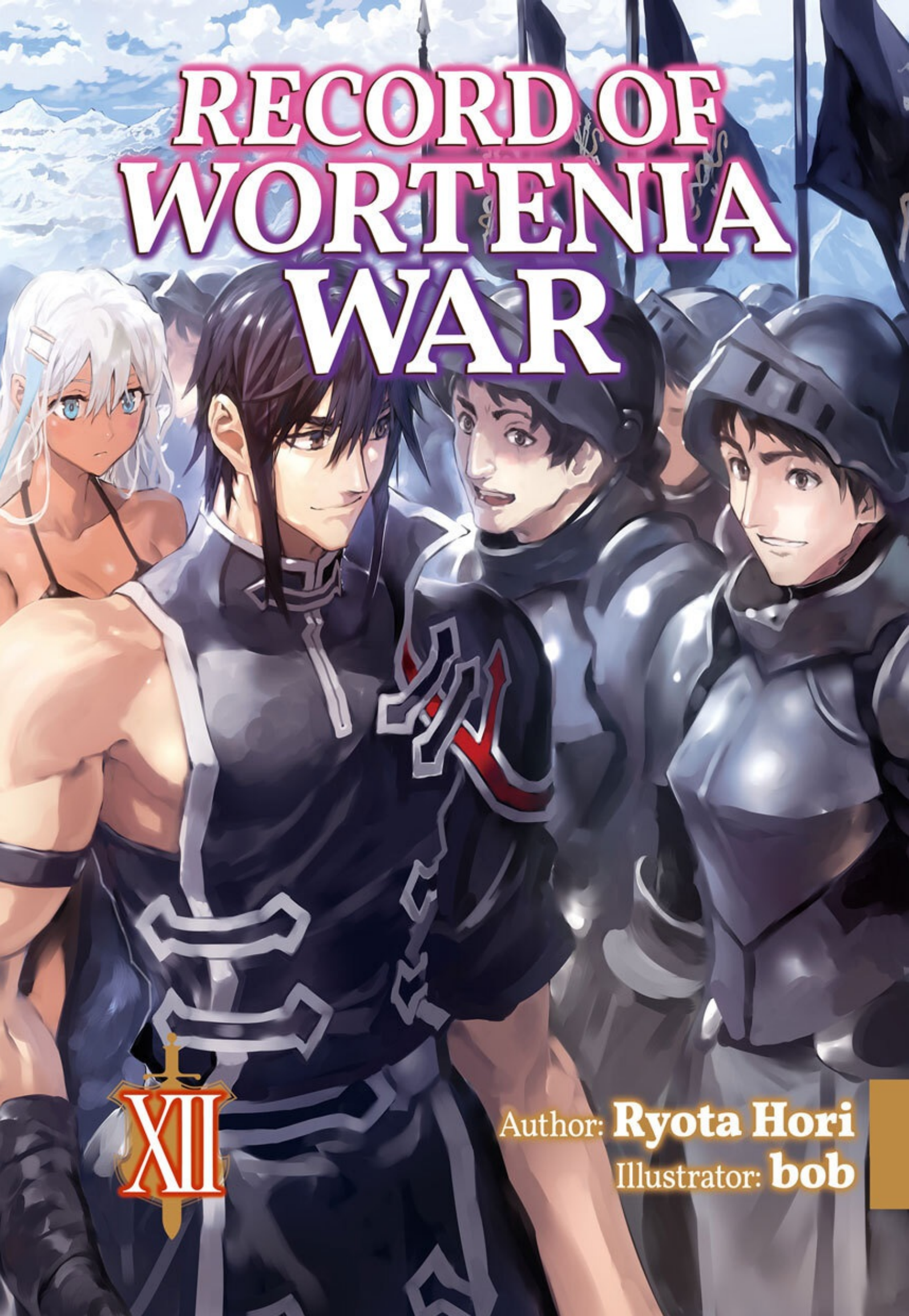
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



XII

Author: Ryota Hori
Illustrator: bob


“How many attackers are there?”
“Over here, Lady Laura.”
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR


“So we’ve
finally made it.”


"How are the preparations I requested going?"
"We're ready to begin whenever you give the word."

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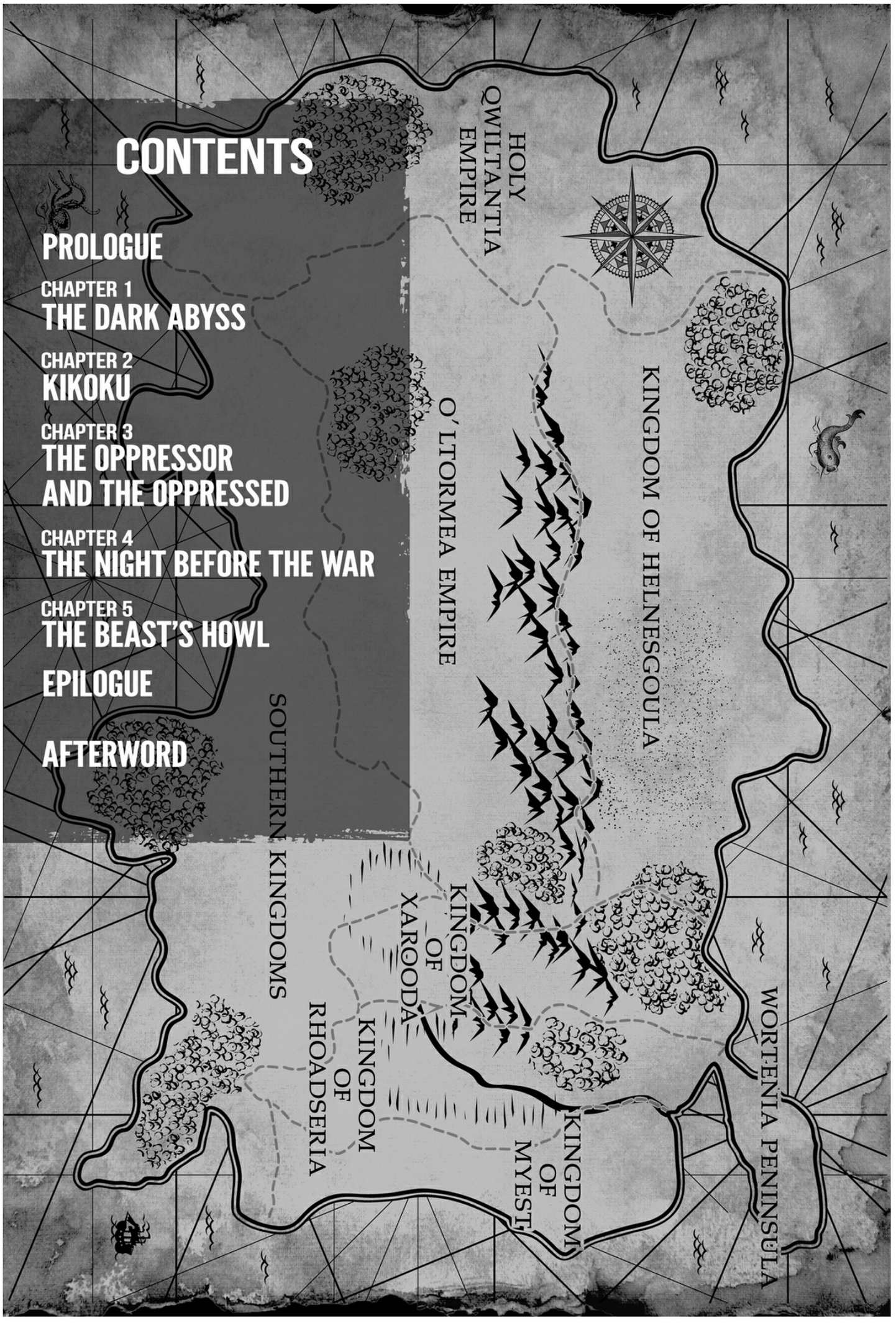
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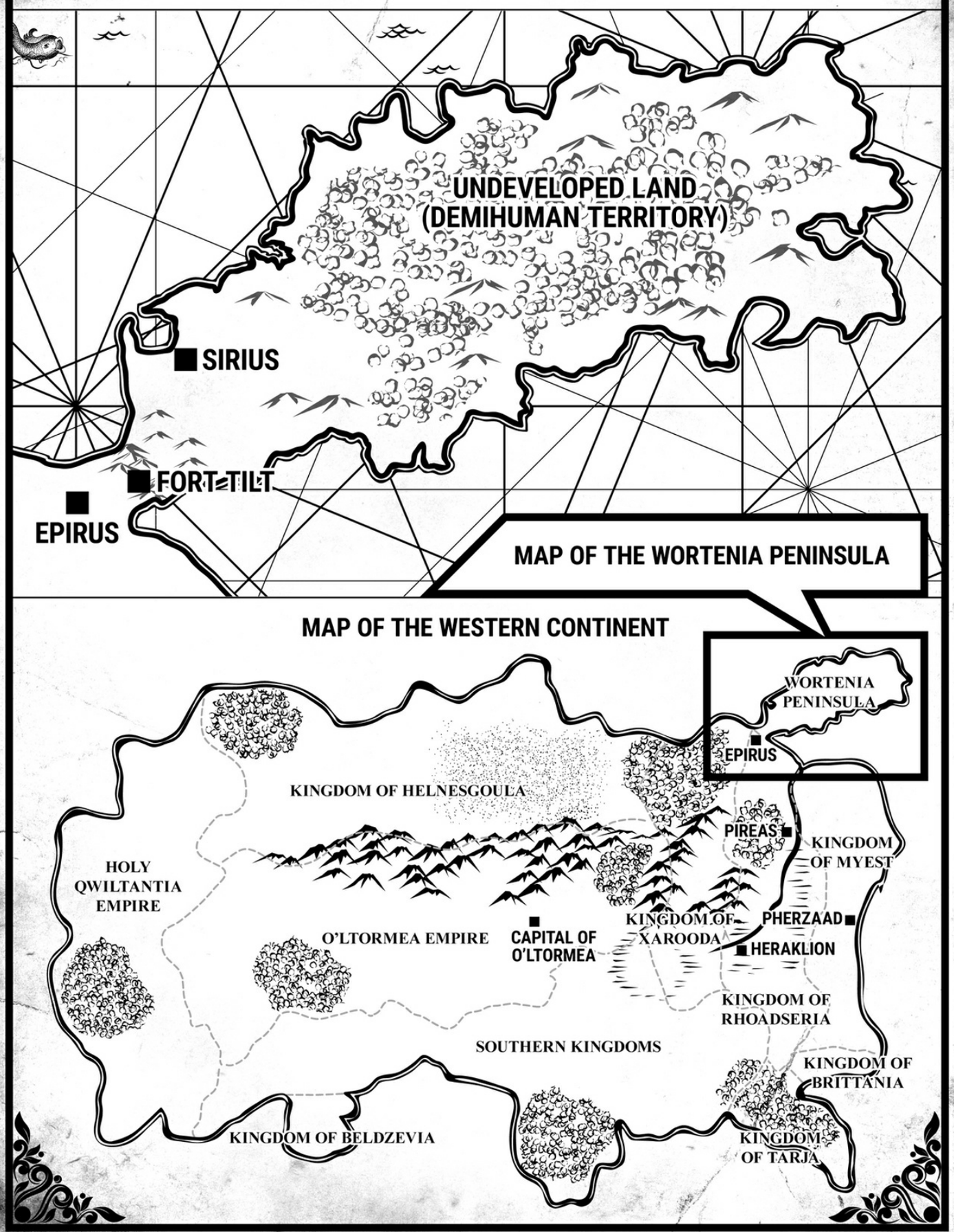
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WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



Prologue

Sitting in his office, Count Bergstone looked up at the ceiling, his expression bitter. He'd been in this state, unstirring, since he'd returned home from the royal castle. Ten minutes passed by. Twenty minutes. Thirty. An hour. His sense of time had long since faded.

Count Bergstone was one of the men at the helm of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria in these dark times. His heart was heavy with conflict, regret, and sorrow. Never before had he felt so exhausted and hollow.

Where did we go wrong? I thought we had more time...

Count Bergstone had prepared a hand that could save them from this bleak situation. Though it had been unpleasant, he had spent the last few months' worth of palace meetings in complete silence, waiting to unveil that hand.

In order to overcome a greater evil, I actively condoned and helped raise a lesser one. Queen Lupis must come to a decision if she wants to save this country. But she refuses to make the necessary sacrifices. She had to be forced to see that this country was starting to come apart at the seams. She needed to panic in order to move forward. It wasn't a mistake to open her eyes to what's happening, but...

The count had been doing all in his power to save this country. But given time, evil could mature and ripen. He had intentionally left such an evil unattended, allowing the commoners to suffer poverty and pain. The consequences were undeniable, but he'd acted so that Rhoadseria would avoid the flames of rebellion and civil war.

Nothing could be more ideal than exorcising both a greater and a lesser evil. Sometimes, however, one had to choose between them. Count Bergstone had chosen, and his choice wasn't wrong. Nevertheless, despite his intentions, everything had gone down the drain.

Now I'm back to square one. No, even that's too optimistic.

Today, a messenger riding a fast horse came to the palace to deliver news of a

magistrate's death. Normally, a message like that would contain nothing more than a brief notice about a greedy, corrupt man's demise.

It wasn't clear yet what kind of family this magistrate was from. The details were still being gathered, but since he worked as a magistrate collecting taxes from a village, his station wasn't very high. He was probably from some noble house's branch family. He was either a knight, or at best, a baron. He was indeed a noble, but he was only a step above a commoner. It was rude to state such a thing publicly, but the fact of the matter was that there were countless low-ranking nobles across the kingdom, and his death was somewhat inconsequential. He was merely a cog in the machine.

Normally, his passing would have concluded with his funeral. The only real problem that would arise from his loss would be the question of his house's succession. And unless there were unusual circumstances, the capital's House of Lords would generally accept whoever his heir was to be. After all, bloodlines decided one's noble status in Rhoadseria.

This was how things usually progressed when a noble like a magistrate died. This time, however, the story wasn't that simple. This magistrate had died at the hands of commoners.

As low and insignificant as he was, he was still an aristocrat. And aristocrats would never forgive a commoner killing one of their own. The commoners know this too. So the escorting knights must have realized that even if they tried to discuss things, or hinted at the possibility of a pardon, the crowd wouldn't have listened. They'd had no choice but to suppress them.

Count Bergstone bit his lip—hard. The fact that commoners had killed a noble complicated things to no end. The commoners' discontent was understandable, and the circumstances leading up to the rebellion were undeniable—the blame lay with the dead magistrate.

Due to the national crises, the kingdom had enacted several special war-related taxes, but nearly half of those taxes ended up in the pockets of the nobles collecting them—for assorted trumped-up reasons. A few nobles went as far as keeping up to ninety percent of the revenue.

No one recognized this situation for what it was more than the commoners.

All their hard-earned money was going to taxes, so their anger and indignation was understandable.

That didn't mean the kingdom could overlook commoners rising up in revolt, though. No matter what, the sovereign and the nobles ruled Rhoadseria. The kingdom itself was based around a rigid class system. No matter the events that led to an uprising, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria could not tolerate the commoners conspiring to slay a member of the ruling class.

This problem jeopardized the survival of the state, which meant there could be no negotiating with the leaders of the rebellion. Commoners were better off than slaves, but their lives were nowhere equal to a noble's. The ringleaders would be executed, as would any surviving parents or remaining children. That was the law, and the commoners were aware of it.

But that's not to say all doors are closed. The easiest solution would be if Queen Lupis gave them a pardon. She could bend the law and resolve everything. However...

In a monarchy, the sovereign's words trumped all others. That was only the official stance, though. Not even the sovereign could overturn each and every situation. Still, Queen Lupis's decision could greatly change things. It would wrap things up neatly if the queen were to pardon them.

But asking her to make a decision now would be a bit too awful.

This would be the best course of action for Rhoadseria, but it would also place Queen Lupis in quite the precarious position. A sovereign had the power to bend the rules, but that didn't mean nothing would break. And since Queen Lupis's coercive power had grown so weak, it was questionable whether she could truly withstand the nobles' backlash.

Either choice would be a gamble. Maybe we got the timing wrong. Or maybe there really isn't any way to save this country anymore...

In his younger days, Marquis Ernest, Count Bergstone's father-in-law and sponsor, had lost a power struggle with Duke Gelhart and had been forced to live in seclusion in his territory. At the time, Bergstone had been crushed by sorrow. What he felt now made that pain pale in comparison.

Perhaps that's what growing older means.

A sense of helplessness and loss, the likes of which he'd never felt during his youth, hung over Count Bergstone like a stone.

Just then, someone knocked on his office door.

"My apologies, sir," said the aged butler, "but Count Zeleph is here to see you. Shall I let him through?"

The knock pulled Count Bergstone back into reality. "Oh, yes, of course. Let him in." He was torn between wanting to see his brother-in-law and greatly dreading it. His gaze settled on the bundle of papers resting on the table. It was all evidence he'd gathered to denounce the nobles and placate the commoners.

What would Elnan say?

Up until a few hours ago, these papers were a trump card that could turn things around for Rhoadseria. But now, they were nothing but kindling. How many sacrifices had he made to prepare this mountain of useless trash? It wasn't simply a question of money. He'd spent time, connections—not just his own, but Elnan's as well. The thought that it had all been for nothing made him ashamed to look his brother-in-law in the eye, especially since Elnan trusted him so much. He knew Elnan wouldn't blame him for it, but...

The door opened and Count Zeleph entered the room. Seeing the look on Count Bergstone's face, he immediately furrowed his brow.

"Why the long face, dear brother-in-law?" Zeleph asked as his corpulent form sank into the sofa opposite Bergstone.

"Well, given the situation, I'd be hard pressed to react any other way," Bergstone replied with a sigh.

"I happened to hear something about Her Majesty collapsing during the daily meeting? Something to do with some bad news?" Zeleph prodded.

Surprised, Count Bergstone stared hard at his brother-in-law's face. Only the people at the meeting should have known that.

I don't know how he knows about that, but as always, he doesn't miss a beat.

In front of Count Bergstone sat a pudgy middle-aged man. His amicable smile

was charming, but that was his only notable trait. In terms of appearances, he was greatly below Count Bergstone, who was refined and handsome, yet unrestrained and daring.

Within the Rhoadserian aristocracy, Elnan Zeleph was merely an extra attached to Count Bergstone, the unwanted side dish next to the succulent entrée. He was necessary—perhaps—and his absence would impact the picture as a whole, but he wasn't worthy of attention.

Marquis Ernest, who had been Duke Gelhart's rival for many years, had impressed most of Rhoadseria's nobles with his wisdom and good looks. But when he informed them that one of his daughters was to wed the young Elnan Zeleph, it came as a shock to the numerous aristocrats who had hoped to marry her themselves. Even now, it was a topic of discussion among Rhoadseria's nobles.



But while rumors insisted that his brother-in-law was mediocre and unremarkable, Count Bergstone had never looked down upon Elnan Zeleph. He knew very well just how deceptively menacing Zeleph could be.

“Yes,” Bergstone said, confirming Zeleph’s question. “She fainted after she heard news of a rebellion. She’s resting in her room for the day. I’m sure it was quite heartbreaking in its own way for her.” Bergstone then glared at his brother-in-law. “I’m surprised you know that, though. I was under the impression that the palace issued a gag order on the whole matter...”

Count Zeleph shrugged. Ordering people to keep quiet was easy enough, but assuring that they remained silent was difficult. It was a self-evident truth, as far as Count Zeleph was concerned. He couldn’t very well brag about it, but he had eyes and ears all around the palace.

“A gag order doesn’t mean much,” Zeleph said. “Even the gods would struggle to completely silence people, especially at a time like this, when everyone’s anxious about Rhoadseria’s fate.”

People had a natural proclivity for gossip. News had a tendency to expand from mouth to ear like a ripple, picking up fragments of truth and falsehood along the way. Because of that, forcibly suppressing human instinct was arduous. No matter how much one thought they could keep things in check, it would always fall apart on some level.

“I suppose that’s inevitable,” said Bergstone.

Zeleph nodded. “Indeed, it is.”

For one long moment, they gazed at each other.

In all honesty, Queen Lupis’s physical condition was the last thing on Bergstone’s mind. “This means that all the things I had you gather for me were for nothing,” he said, breaking the silence. “I’m sorry it ended up like this after I asked you to do the dirty work. I’m really sorry, Elnan.”

Count Bergstone bowed his head to Count Zeleph, apologizing from the depths of his heart. Count Zeleph’s expression, however, remained unchanged.

After a moment, Zeleph cracked a smile and said, “Don’t let it trouble you,

Alan.”

Bergstone raised his head. “But—”

“Neither of us could do anything about this,” Zeleph stated, shaking his head. “It was a poor gamble to begin with.” There was no sign of anger or indignation in his expression. He truly believed this outcome was unavoidable.

Count Bergstone moved his gaze to the stack of papers on the table.

How can he be so calm? Or am I just too naive?

The papers were full of information about the taxation in Rhoadseria. It detailed who collected how much from which village, and what method they used to do so. They also noted how much had gone into the collector’s pocket. The information on these papers was thorough and precise. And Count Bergstone had intended to use this information to purge the nobles’ faction from the regime.

Many of the problems plaguing Rhoadseria could be attributed to the nobles’ faction, which was once again gathering under Viscount Gelhart. They provoked discontent toward Queen Lupis, interfered with national defense, and pressured the bureaucrats to slow their work. Nothing they did proved fatal to the country, but on the whole, they couldn’t be ignored.

And by now, it wasn’t just the nobles’ faction. The aristocrats of the neutral faction, who had entered Queen Lupis’s service alongside Count Bergstone, were beginning to prioritize their own greed. They were much worse than the nobles who actively opposed the queen and obstructed her reforms; they were much harder to deal with. Or rather, they would be difficult to deal with given Queen Lupis’s position and disposition.

And so, Count Bergstone had turned to the simplest, most effective solution. He had checked which of the uncooperative noble houses had the weakest political power and terminated their entire families. He didn’t even give them time to object. He completely crushed and purged them from the aristocracy.

Nobles saw themselves as special and essential to society, so no punishment was more terrifying to them. This fear could bind the hearts of even the most rebellious nobles, making them more cautious to act. After that, the regime

would need to formally and relentlessly tame them until they were completely docile.

They wouldn't need to look too hard to find a reason to purge them either. The information Count Zeleph had collected was incriminating enough to justify eliminating their families altogether. Besides, all noble houses had their shady dealings. And if not, they could use the sovereign's authority to fabricate a crime.

So long as Queen Lupis was willing to tarnish herself like that, she could have used her absolute authority as sovereign to crush any and all nobles who opposed her. Engaging in politics naturally meant she couldn't avoid dirtying her hands sometimes. But her gentle and calm disposition, coupled with her lack of achievements since becoming queen, made it difficult for her to invoke the power to forcibly purge the nobles' faction. She was terrified of tarnishing her reputation like that.

That was why Count Bergstone—knowing all the while that Queen Lupis held a grudge against him—had adopted a wait-and-see approach. He'd sat on this evidence despite the fact that it could cripple the nobles' faction. After all, he had been on friendly terms with Ryoma Mikoshiba when they both worked together in the previous civil war. Plus, he was disillusioned with the queen for sending Ryoma on the expedition to Xarooda. He also couldn't tolerate Mikhail Vanash, who remained safe only by the grace and trust of Queen Lupis.

Even so, that didn't mean I would give up on this country and cast my homeland to the dogs.

Count Bergstone hadn't acted, but only because he was biding his time. He knew that Queen Lupis was so indecisive that any suggestion he made would fall on deaf ears—unless she was completely and utterly backed into a corner. And as he held his tongue, he had his brother-in-law act in secret, gathering evidence of the nobles' corruption. He'd waited until the nobles would be at their most careless, lying low until the day he would expose their true ugly nature for all to see.

I gambled everything on this ploy, but...

Count Zeleph seemed to have a different opinion, though.

“I realize it might be too late to say this now, but honestly, I thought it would take a great deal of luck for your plan to work. Just setting it all up was too complicated to begin with.” He paused for a moment, exhaled, and then continued, his tone heavy. “Do not misunderstand what I’m about to say. I, too, am a noble servant of Rhoadseria. I am loyal to Her Majesty. That’s why, when you approached me with your plan, I lent you what little strength I had and helped you weave this plot. But anything more than this is wasted effort.”

“Elnan...you...” Bergstone swallowed, realizing the meaning behind Zeleph’s words. Those were the very words he never wanted to hear.

“Listen, Alan. You’re a wise and skilled governor. Your subjects hold you in high regard, and you are talented with militaristic endeavors. Surely you’ve realized it by now.”

The gentle smile was gone from Count Zeleph’s lips, and his eyes glinted with a dangerous light. His words were like the herald of the grim reaper’s approach. But as much as Count Bergstone didn’t want to hear what he was about to say, it wouldn’t change the reality of it all.

“Stop it, Elnan. You...a retainer of the Rhoadserian throne, aren’t allowed to say that...”

What Count Zeleph was saying was all too evident already. The words he would speak next were exactly what Count Bergstone was trying to avoid. Hearing it would crush him...but he already knew. Hearing it from his brother-in-law, a man he trusted so deeply, was going to hurt worse. The moment those words were out, he would have to choose between following his brother-in-law or parting ways with him. And if they were to part, they would not meet again.

Of course, Count Zeleph didn’t approach this with half-hearted emotions. He knew how Bergstone felt. Despite that, he continued speaking, his tone grave.

“Alan, it’s time we look reality in the eye. We’ve been loyal to this country long enough. Now we have to consider which path to take—which way will help us survive this.”

The Kingdom of Rhoadseria was a ship on the brink of capsizing. It hadn’t quite begun to sink, but any stopgap measures that could have saved it had all but failed. The impending submersion could no longer be stopped.

This left them with only two options: either remain on this sinking ship and share its fate, or—

“But that would mean...”

—or abandon Queen Lupis.

Bergstone’s eyes were full of questions and doubt, but Zeleph wouldn’t back down now. Giving in to emotion and letting sentimentality sway his choice would only bring ruin upon his household. And so, if it came down to it, he would even abandon his brother-in-law. He had come here resolved to do what needed to be done.

Zeleph continued, “Either way, Queen Lupis has no chance of winning at this point. If she doesn’t suppress this rebellion... Well, the commoners carry too much of a grudge against her. She won’t be spared. Even if she does suppress the rebellion...”

“Viscount Gelhart will use Princess Radine as a banner to crush her,” Bergstone finished. “He’d claim that an incompetent ruler has no place on the throne.”

Count Zeleph nodded slowly. Nothing was a greater indicator of one’s capacity than their ability to take advantage of a just cause. Legitimacy could be the most powerful weapon in one scenario, but a crippling poison in another.

During the previous civil war, Queen Lupis’s greatest weapon was her just cause. By asserting that she was the legitimate heir to the throne, many nobles who’d waited for the right time to eventually unite had come under her banner and helped her. Things were different this time. The power and responsibility that came with being the legitimate sovereign only served to push Queen Lupis back against the wall.

“Isn’t negotiating with the commoners a possibility?” Bergstone asked. He had written it off as impossible before, but he had to mention it now. He couldn’t think of a better alternative.

“It’s pointless, Alan. The commoners won’t believe anything a noble says anymore, and the other nobles would never agree to compromise with the lower classes. The only possible way out of this is if Queen Lupis forcibly

suppresses the nobles and pardons the ringleaders of the rebellion. But if she does that, she would be beholden to the nobles, and their power would only grow. It would buy the kingdom a bit of time, but... In the end, there'll be yet another, greater rebellion, or one of the surrounding countries will take advantage of the unrest and invade."

That was the same conclusion Count Bergstone had come to. They both had similar outlooks, so them reaching similar conclusions wasn't much of a surprise.

Count Bergstone feebly turned his face away from Count Zeleph.

So that's really all there is to it.

The secret to keeping a country stable was maintaining fear, be it by military strength, financial advantage, political authority, or lawful power. People didn't obey the country because they believed it was absolutely just and right. They obeyed because they feared its power and, at the same time, trusted that it was strong enough to protect them.

For better or worse, peace was built on the power to keep internal threats in check and deter external ones. As she was now, Queen Lupis lacked that power. Without power, she couldn't foster trust. And without trust, her words had no potency. When all was said and done, the problem lay in one fact: Lupis Rhoadserians was weak.

"But even if they had no regard for her cause, too many people doubt the queen's capacity to rule," Zeleph continued. "The current rebellion is a crippling blow to whatever respect people still had for her. All of the nobles will likely gather under Viscount Gelhart and Princess Radine."

"Even if we try to persuade them?" Bergstone asked, as if clinging to a final strand of hope.

Count Bergstone was a confident man. Perhaps too confident, since it had bought him the ire of the late King Pharst II, but he was by no means unpopular. He was known for having a backbone, for not bending to the nobles' faction even at its strongest. That was why so many of the neutral nobles had answered his call when he'd asked them to gather under Queen Lupis. But there was no guarantee that the same thing would work this time.

“It won’t work,” Zeleph said. “Viscount Gelhart’s influence extends to over forty percent of the nobles. Even after being reduced to a viscount, he still retains most of his authority. With things being what they are... Unless you’re dealing with someone who has a major grudge against the viscount, you won’t be able to convince any of the nobles’ faction to help the queen. Not even the neutral nobles will listen.”

Being the legitimate queen did give Lupis a great advantage. But even if they tried to convince other nobles to join her, Viscount Gelhart’s scheming to depose the foolish ruler would completely overshadow that. And since he could place Princess Radine on the throne instead, he would also have legitimacy on his side.

The only silver lining was that the leader of the knights’ faction, the former General Albrecht, had perished in the last civil war. Because of his demise, the royal guard and the knights affiliated with the kingdom were all under the control of the royal house.

No, even that depends on Lady Helena.

The face of the Ivory Goddess of War flashed in Count Bergstone’s mind. Normally, she was Queen Lupis’s ace in the hole, but she was currently in Tritron, a region near the Xaroodian border.

The general who oversaw all military affairs couldn’t be absent from the capital for too long, though. Rumor had it that the relationship between Queen Lupis and Helena had soured due to the expedition to Xarooda, which was a possible explanation for this situation. Still, even though the O’ltormea Empire had been forced into an armistice, they could launch an invasion on Xarooda again, so the army had to remain stationed by the border. That wasn’t a wrong decision by any stretch of the imagination.

Who’s to say what Helena Steiner’s feelings are about this rebellion. I doubt she would join the nobles’ faction, but what is her take on this situation?

Helena had become the highest ranking knight in the kingdom, but she was originally a commoner. On the other hand, the royal family and the nobles did help her rise to that position, so she couldn’t regard them too harshly. Given those circumstances, how would she view this rebellion?

At worst, she might give up on Queen Lupis...

That would truly be the worst possible conclusion. But Count Bergstone couldn't see any way of avoiding it.

"So there's nothing we can do," Bergstone muttered. He let out a deep, despondent sigh.

Zeleph slowly shook his head. "I understand how you feel, Alan. But the situation is simply too bleak. If only we could do something about Princess Radine and Viscount Gelhart, we might still be able to do something, but..."

If Princess Radine were gone, Viscount Gelhart wouldn't be able to dethrone Queen Lupis, no matter what cause he had on his side. He would look like a usurper. And the nobles wouldn't want to associate with a usurper. At least some of them would take Queen Lupis's side and would be willing to listen to Count Bergstone.

But now that Princess Radine had been recognized as an official princess of Rhoadseria, that wasn't possible. The same could be said of Viscount Gelhart himself. His oath of fealty during the civil war should never have been recognized, and he certainly should have been disposed of alongside General Albrecht.

"It's too late..." Bergstone lamented, sounding hopeless. "Saying this now might be pointless, but accepting his allegiance in exchange for Mikhail Vanash's life was a fatal move."

Mikhail Vanash. If only he wasn't so starved for merit.

Regretting the past would achieve nothing, but Count Bergstone couldn't help but look back bitterly. There was certainly a moment, back at the end of that war, where a brilliant future could have dawned for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

But now it's too late for that. That glorious future slipped through our fingers. This rebellion will completely end Her Majesty's reign. In which case...

He had to choose between perishing with Lupis Rhoadserians or seeking a way to survive. His duties as retainer to his queen clashed with his responsibilities as governor to the population of his territory and his vassals. Both of those things were precious to him. Normally, he wouldn't have to pick

one over the other. But now he had to.

A long silence settled over the office. Eventually, Bergstone nodded and said, “Understood, Elnan. Tell me your idea. How can I save my county’s people?”

“There’s something I need to check first. Can I take this to mean you’ve decided?” Zeleph asked, making doubly sure. Given their intimacy, it was unlikely that he would misunderstand Bergstone’s intentions. But the matter in question was quite dangerous, so he needed to hear Bergstone say it directly.

“I have no choice,” Bergstone said, forcing the words out from the bottom of his heart. “I won’t denounce all of her decisions, and her love for this country is true. But...at this point, I can’t do anything else.”

It felt like his very soul was howling in pain. Queen Lupis’s choices were by no means all mistakes, at least not on an individual, personal level. Even as a person in charge of national politics, her decisions weren’t inherently erroneous. But that was all the praise he could give her. She wasn’t wrong...but she wasn’t right either. And in politics, whether a choice was good or bad was decided purely by the outcome. If the outcome was poor, right or wrong didn’t matter.

Queen Lupis had failed to bring about desirable outcomes. For that, she was deemed guilty and seen as an evil upon her kingdom.

Forgive me, Your Majesty.

In the depths of his heart, Count Bergstone wept. He held no hatred for Lupis Rhoadserians as a human being. She might have made a few foolish, even childish decisions, but she wasn’t a vile woman at heart. She was a sovereign worth serving. If nothing else, during the civil war, he had served her because he truly and honestly believed in her.

But now he couldn’t be picky about his measures. There were lives riding on his shoulders—a family he’d shared the good and the bad with for years and the subjects living in his county.

“You’ve made a wise decision, Alan,” Zeleph said gravely.

Bergstone bit his lip and nodded.

Chapter 1: The Dark Abyss

Count Zeleph gazed out the carriage window onto the dark highway.

“The blue moon is so clear that it’s almost frightening. It’s like an eye that can see through everything.”

The beautiful glow of the moon shone between the surrounding trees. It drew a perfect, unblemished circle in the sky. Perhaps it was the artfully displayed purity of that moon that made Count Zeleph feel disgusted with himself—at his own baseness, at how utterly defiled and filthy his heart was.

“We got through our first obstacle with this, but the next problem is how Lady Helena views it. Well, and...”

During his talk with Count Bergstone the day prior, the two of them had ironed out most of the details. They’d concluded that the deciding factor would be Helena, who was currently commanding the western garrison. Between the free Rhoadserian knights and the mercenaries serving under her, she currently commanded three knight orders—a total of roughly eight thousand troops. Except for the royal guards, who were stationed in the capital Pireas, Helena’s army was the strongest force in Rhoadseria in both numbers and quality. Having those units under her thumb meant that whatever choices she made going forward would greatly influence the outlook of the coming conflict.

Indeed, Helena had many options before her. As a knight herself, it made sense that she would swear fealty to Queen Lupis. But she could choose to betray her foolish sovereign and join with Duke Gelhart. She could also remain silent and watch how this situation developed.

But there was one person who worried Count Zeleph more than Helena did.

Ideally, she’ll agree to cooperate with us. But Lady Helena isn’t so much the issue here. We just need to ask for her opinion. The problem is...

He hadn’t told Count Bergstone this, but Count Zeleph had been about eighty percent confident that their initial plan would succeed. Making it work was by no means easy, so the possibility of failure always loomed over them. After all,

they did intentionally leave the situation unattended until the commoners were on the verge of rebellion. This was a dangerous yet necessary attempt at resuscitation, meant to force Queen Lupis into making a decision—a true gamble that toyed with the very life of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. But despite this, Count Zeleph hadn't stopped Count Bergstone from executing his plan...for a reason.

The information my men found should've been accurate.

This had weighed on Count Zeleph ever since he got the news that a rebellion had broken out. Count Zeleph's household had served the kingdom since its founding, but despite its long tenure, it wasn't often discussed within aristocratic society. Such a household was unusual within the nobility. House Zeleph could be traced back to the kingdom's early days, when it had held an important position. Despite that, few people actually knew of the family's accomplishments.

The first Count Zeleph had climbed to the title of count, so he must have done *something* to earn this promotion. But no one knew why or even when he had been given the title. It was something of a mystery among the nobles.

Since the kingdom's founding, there had been twenty heirs to the headship of House Zeleph, and none of them were particularly remarkable. This was one reason House Zeleph didn't draw much attention among the nobles.

Within this world's noble society, what one's ancestors had achieved and how they had contributed to the country was a major status symbol. Boasting about it was a crucial part of maintaining one's position and authority. Within this social construct, House Zeleph was quite the anomaly.

There was no such thing as a noble who didn't boast of their house's contributions, be it the achievements of their ancestors or merit won through their own personal efforts. In fact, most nobles spent their days pursuing any chance to make more achievements, to contribute and stand out further. And many nobles would usurp the accomplishments of others and claim them as their own without a second thought.

But even when he attended dinner parties, the current Count Zeleph spent the night standing in the corner, smiling amicably and engaging in harmless

small talk. He would listen to others boast, but he never regaled them with stories of his forefathers' grand exploits. If his brother-in-law, Alan Bergstone, happened to attend the party, Count Zeleph would simply cling to him like a shadow.

Still, even though Count Zeleph didn't boast like the other nobles, he ruled over his land adeptly. He was a mild-mannered and pleasant man, and even when he was invited to parties where his wife couldn't join him, he remained gentlemanly in both speech and conduct. He'd politely accept any invitations to dance, so long as the women weren't too obnoxious or physically unfit to dance with a man of his stature and build.

Count Zeleph was quite the devoted husband. He didn't have a concubine, and any such dances never escalated into forbidden relationships. Had the women disliked him, they could have coldly turned him down and publicly humiliated him. The fact that this didn't happen was proof that he was well-liked within noble society.

He wasn't shunned by those around him, nor was he mocked. That wasn't to say he had never experienced any kind of harassment before, but those instances were because his brother-in-law was an ambitious man who drew the envy and antagonism of others. Count Zeleph would occasionally get caught in the crossfire. He wasn't happy about it, but he concluded that fussing over every little affair would be a waste of time.

In short, Count Zeleph was a reliable and reasonable man, yet he was plain and forgettable. But that was only how he presented himself. What made Count Zeleph truly frightening was the intelligence network he'd created, which extended into the deepest reaches of the castle. He knew everything about Rhoadseria's internal affairs. He was aware of all the dirty dealings the Rhoadserian nobles had committed. Every time someone manipulated the tariffs to line their pockets, he knew about it. He was privy to the number of lovers and bastard children each noble had. From the trivial to the crucial, he grasped everything about the royals and the nobles.

This was how he knew Queen Lupis had fainted after she'd heard the news of the rebellion. The gag order his brother-in-law was under was meaningless in the face of his intelligence network. This was the secret House Zeleph had kept

since the kingdom's founding.

My family's network is operating properly. But despite this, a rebellion broke out. Did I miscalculate the situation? Or perhaps...

Count Zeleph was also under the impression that someone had intentionally caused the unrest hanging over Rhoadseria. Most of Rhoadseria's nobles thought themselves superior and treated the other nobles as tools to further their extravagant lifestyles. Their subjects were like magic wands that produced money when brandished. Even so, they realized these magic wands had limits. They knew not to cross that line. As odd as it might sound, even the greediest of nobles had some semblance of self-restraint. They kept the extortion at a level where their social standing and military power could offset any disgruntlement.

Because of this, Rhoadseria's peasants hadn't revolted in centuries. The nobles had maintained a delicate balance of pressuring their people, but not smothering them entirely. Recently, however, that had changed.

Someone must be pulling the strings from behind.

Someone was presumably manipulating the nobles' faction for the explicit purpose of agitating the commoners. At first, Count Zeleph had suspected that it was Viscount Furio Gelhart working behind the scenes to orchestrate his return to power. But after Count Zeleph looked into the matter, he found that things weren't quite so simple.

From the looks of it, most of the nobles' faction is involved. Meaning Viscount Gelhart is also involved. But he doesn't seem to be the ringleader this time.

The fact that many of the nobles' faction's members were involved did point to Viscount Gelhart, but Count Zeleph's analysis of the situation suggested the contrary. The chances of Gelhart being the one behind it were close to nil.

Being the king...would be tempting. But I doubt he would choose to do that.

Anyone could see that Furio Gelhart was a greedy man. Until he failed in the civil war, he'd used his position for his own benefit, giving him authority that in ways even overshadowed the king's. For better or worse, Gelhart was power-hungry and selfish, but he was also obsessed with fame and reputation. House Gelhart had served Rhoadseria for generations. Furio Gelhart would avoid

tarnishing its good name by being branded a usurper. If he truly had eyes for the throne, he'd had plenty of chances to claim it in the past.

Is someone ordering him to do this, then?

If Count Zeleph were to assume that Viscount Gelhart wasn't trying to steal the throne, the next most likely culprit would be the O'ltormea Empire. The empire sought to conquer the western continent, and their biggest obstacles were the Holy Qwiltantia Empire, which reigned over the continent's west, and the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, which ruled the continent's north. Both of these powerful countries rivaled O'ltormea's military might. No matter how strong the empire was, it couldn't easily topple these two rivals. This meant they could only expand to the south and the east.

The continent's south was a war-torn contested zone. The countries that occupied it were small, but they were locked in a state of incessant warfare. Because of this, their troops were seasoned and powerful. On top of that, whenever a larger country tried to invade, the southern kingdoms would set aside their differences and unite to repel the threat.

The holy capital of Menestia was also in the south. Menestia was the center of the greatest religious force on the continent, the Church of Meneos. While they claimed they didn't interfere with worldly affairs, the pope governing the church was powerful enough that even a king would be hard pressed to oppose him. The Church of Meneos also had many knight orders serving under it, the most powerful being the Temple Knights. Their territory was small—roughly the size of a baron or viscount's territory—and confined to Menestia and its surroundings only, but their military power could match the three great powers of the continent. Not even O'ltormea, as ambitious and hell-bent as it was, would recklessly pick a fight with them.

So with the continent's north, west, and south out of the question, the empire could only expand east. Attacking the east wasn't a simple task, but it was *relatively* easier to do so. Myest controlled the eastern coasts, and through trade with other continents, they'd become quite wealthy. This allowed them to hire powerful knights. Rhoadseria was an agricultural country graced with fertile lands, and it had the greatest population in the east. Xarooda was surrounded by steep mountains. Since most of its land was unlivable, it had the

smallest population. But the mountains contained many mines, and their people were skilled smiths.

On their own, none of these countries were a match for O'ltormea, but as a united region, the east formed one of the most wealthy and fortified areas in the western continent. As a matter of fact, the empire had repeatedly tried to conquer them and failed.

If O'ltormea was trying to attack the east again, one approach would be to isolate and cripple Rhoadseria. This made them a prime suspect in Rhoadseria's unrest. However, that would mean Viscount Gelhart was in cahoots with the empire. And if he was, he would demand his old territory in Heraklion as his reward.

The citadel city of Heraklion and its surrounding territories were arable regions that were especially bountiful, even when compared to the rest of Rhoadseria's rich lands. Viscount Gelhart's ancestors had tended to the land and developed it for generations. For Viscount Gelhart, regaining this land and his title were the most important things. This would give him a reason to cooperate with O'ltormea.

But if that were the case, he'd have no need to develop the land he was currently charged with. If he was hell-bent on returning to his old territory, he wouldn't waste his time and effort on the smaller land he was inhabiting at present. In fact, it wouldn't be surprising if he were to sell all the women in his domain into slavery in order to cover the war expenses, and conscript every man, young and old, into his army.

But my spies tell me Viscount Gelhart is working on stabilizing the villages in his new domain in the frontier lands. If nothing else, he's not neglecting his duties.

Even though Rhoadseria was in such a state, Viscount Gelhart was still trying to stabilize a territory he'd only had for a couple of years. That implied he was solely focused on managing his own affairs.

Besides, being called a traitor isn't much better than being branded a usurper of the throne. Which makes me think he's not involved with O'ltormea...

Another possibility came to mind.

No... That man might not be a fool, but he is arrogant and careless. Someone might have threatened him and gradually coerced him into cooperating.

From Count Zeleph's perspective, Furio Gelhart wasn't very smart. When it came to managing his territory, he was quite skilled, but his talents stopped there. True, he did lead the nobles' faction, but that was due to his territory's wealth and House Gelhart's name.

This was why when Gelhart swore fealty to Queen Lupis at the end of the civil war, Lupis had demoted him to a viscount and transferred his territory from his ancestral home in Heraklion to the frontier lands. Doing so would greatly cripple his influence and strength. The problem was that Viscount Gelhart still maintained his influence over the nobles' faction, despite his demotion—even though there were higher-ranking dukes and counts in the faction.

Count Zeleph suspected that someone smarter might have been supporting Viscount Gelhart even before this, and that someone might very well be the mastermind behind all of this.

This is all just conjecture though.

For a moment, fear gripped Count Zeleph. He felt like he was peering into a fathomless darkness.

There's a limit to what I can do alone. I wish there was someone I could turn to for help.

As talented as he was, Count Zeleph couldn't grasp everything that went on in the world, nor could he resolve every problem that popped up. That wasn't an issue of skill; it was simply impossible to be everywhere and do everything at once. The obvious solution was to find companions that could work alongside him.

Of course, his brother-in-law was the first to come to mind. But as soon as he thought of Count Bergstone, Count Zeleph shook his head.

Alan is too frank. He functions well in the public eye, but not when it comes to dirty work. That's why we divided our roles the way we did.

Count Bergstone was trustworthy. He was intelligent and, without question, skilled at internal affairs. He was even quite talented with military affairs. But

he wasn't fit for this role. He was wise and amicable, but he wasn't good at scheming and handling secret information. And though he was talented, he was too confident and proud.

Count Zeleph had held his tongue for years out of respect for his brother-in-law, but the misfortune that had befallen their territories for the last ten years was, honestly speaking, the result of Count Bergstone's problematic attitude.

Their father-in-law Marquis Ernest had lost a political power struggle against Duke Gelhart. And the nobles' faction was hostile with him because of his prideful demeanor. That didn't mean that relations between the two counts and the other nobles were completely irreparable, though. If nothing else, Duke Gelhart hadn't tried to crush their households. Considering Marquis Ernest and his entire clan had had to choose between execution and exile, this was a bit of a miracle.

This was only speculation on Count Zeleph's part, but he believed that Duke Gelhart held Count Bergstone in high enough regard that he didn't want to lose such an asset to Rhoadseria. The truth of the matter was that most of Rhoadseria's nobles were useless good-for-nothings. So even if they were political rivals, Duke Gelhart wanted to put Count Bergstone's skills to use.

Assuming that this hypothesis was correct, there was still the possibility of smoothing things over. Had Count Bergstone apologized to Duke Gelhart when time came to decide government positions, his standing might have improved. He wouldn't have had to spend a decade living in seclusion within his territory, and the mayhem that reigned over Rhoadseria now might not have been quite as severe.

At the time, Count Zeleph had proposed that he and Count Bergstone negotiate with the nobles' faction. But Count Bergstone had adamantly refused, choosing to remain loyal to the late Marquis Ernest.

I can understand his sense of duty to the marquis. And that loyalty is part of what makes him a good man, but...

Count Bergstone was better than the other foolish nobles, for sure. But he was too stubborn and obstinate—not at all the kind of man who'd plot behind the scenes.

It was then that another noble came to mind—the man who'd raised Lupis Rhoadserians from her inferior position and handed her Rhoadseria's crown. He was a commoner, an adventurer of unknown origins, but through his exceptional achievements, he had risen to a noble rank in Rhoadseria.

Ryoma Mikoshiba... How would he act in this situation?

As a man adept at intelligence and scheming, Count Zeleph recognized that this hulking young man had a talent for subterfuge. He was as talented as Count Zeleph himself was.

I'd like to know what he's up to. But no matter. I'll find out sooner or later—

The moment that thought crossed his mind, a jolt pulled Count Zeleph from his thoughts. The carriage suddenly stopped, causing the count to lurch forward. He bumped his head against the opposite seat, and for a second his thoughts were muddled.

"What's going on here?" he moaned painfully. "Hey, what happened?! Answer me!"

The fact that the coachman said nothing made Count Zeleph suspicious. Holding his aching forehead with his hand, he exited the carriage. Perhaps he'd cut his forehead during the impact, because dots of crimson stained his shirt. He felt something warm and moist drip down into his eyes.



Taking out a silk handkerchief from his pocket, Count Zeleph pressed it against the wound.

“Hey, what happened—”

As the mist slowly lifted from his clouded mind, he gasped at the sight before his eyes. What he saw left him speechless. Two men lay collapsed on the coachman’s seat, arrows lodged into their chests.

“This can’t be... How did this happen?!”

The coachman was a trusted employee who had served under him for many years. He was both a proficient member of his intelligence unit and an experienced warrior. The other man wasn’t as skilled as the coachman, but he was still a fine warrior. If they were up against mere bandits, the two of them could easily fend off ten to twenty of them.

Yet his capable guards had been dispatched before they could even resist, and that stunned Count Zeleph.

“Dammit! What’s going on here?!” he unintentionally cursed under his breath.

Having too many guards meant it was harder to act, and it made one conspicuous. This was why he only took two guards with him. That proved to be a fatal mistake, however. The guards weren’t heavily armed, but they did wear chainmail under their clothes. Anyone capable of slaying them that easily had to be quite skilled.

This isn’t a random bandit attack. Someone’s out for my life. But who?

Another flurry of arrows whizzed through the darkness, stabbing into the coachman’s seat. Count Zeleph quickly used his guards’ bodies as shields, but a few arrows pierced through their dead flesh. Thankfully, they only lightly grazed the count’s arms and legs.

It’s just bows and arrows. At least there aren’t any thaumaturgists here.

If the enemy’s sole weapon was a bow, he could remain behind cover and stay alive. An arrow fired from a tightly drawn bow could pierce a corpse, but its impact would still be greatly reduced. On top of that, a ranged attack from a

great distance would be less accurate. Their number of arrows was limited as well. If given the chance, he could weather the storm and possibly launch a counterattack.

But if he were up against a thaumaturgist, that wouldn't be an option. No matter what element of thaumaturgy they wielded, they would have the power to blow the carriage itself away, and their attack range and area of effect would be larger than any barrage of arrows.

Still, the fact that they chose to attack with arrows first means they probably don't have any thaumaturgists with them.

Maybe this wasn't quite the worst-case scenario, but it wasn't far from it.

Unlike Alan, I'm not all that good with a sword. But I have no choice. I can't just roll over and let them kill me.

Drawing the sword from his dead guard's waist, Count Zeleph bided his time until a barrage of arrows ended. He used this pause to take cover behind the passenger car. He was on a highway, surrounded by thick woods, and it was late at night. No one was around. The chances of someone coming to help him were close to zero.

Even if he were lucky enough to run into adventurers or mercenaries passing through here, his outlook might still be grim depending on his attackers' strength. Both of Count Zeleph's guards were ranked Level 4 by the guild—not the most skilled warriors around, but certainly good enough to serve as vanguards in a knight order.

Even though the guards had been taken by surprise, the fact that they'd been immediately killed meant that the bows used to kill them were composite bows made of steel—the kind used to dispatch giant monsters.

If it were just one person with a bow, my guards would have been able to evade or cut down the arrow, which means...

These were heavy bows that a normal person would struggle to hold aloft, to say nothing of pulling the string. In all likelihood, there were multiple shooters. Count Zeleph's chances of survival were slim.

Count Zeleph wasn't a warrior. He had learned thaumaturgy as part of his

noble's education, and he'd learned how to wield a spear and a sword. But his skills as a warrior were subpar. He was, at best, slightly better than a novice knight. And even then, a novice knight could likely beat him due to the age difference.

But Count Zeleph's true problem lay not in his physical condition, but in his heart. He knew the techniques needed for fighting, but his heart cowered at the thought of using them.

Count Zeleph directed his eyes to his sword, which clattered loudly in his shaking hands. *This is pathetic. If Alan were to see me like this...*

His brother-in-law always placed importance on a noble's pride and self-discipline. What would he think of Count Zeleph if he saw him now?

Would you scold me for this or tell me I'm always a handful with that smile of yours? Heh, if I want to know the answer to that, I'll have to survive here and find out.

Another arrow flew through the darkness. Seeing it stab into the passenger car's door, which was reinforced with steel, confirmed Zeleph's suspicions about the type of bow they were using.

If I had known this would happen, I'd have put more care into practicing thaumaturgy.

There was no use crying over spilt milk, but Count Zeleph had only one way of escaping this—slaying his assassins, though it was unlikely that he'd succeed.

But as he bravely prepared for the worst, Count Zeleph's fate changed.

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Let us turn back the hands of time to several minutes before Count Zeleph steeled himself. Five shadows darted through the dark forest, striding faster than a steed could ever gallop. Their bodies were reinforced by martial thaumaturgy.

Two other figures emerged from the trees, regrouping with the first five.

"Over here, Lady Laura," one of the Igasaki ninjas called out to the twins.

"How many attackers are there?" Laura asked.

“As far as we’ve seen, there are more than ten of them,” the ninja replied. “But they could have a few men hiding in the woods as a rear guard.”

Laura clicked her tongue.

No good. And Master Ryoma did warn us not to let Count Zeleph out of our sights.

This had all started a few months ago. One of the Igasaki clan’s men had discovered that Count Bergstone seemed to be preparing for some kind of large-scale gambit. Hearing this, Ryoma had immediately ordered that the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph were to be guarded from the shadows at all times.

The details of what Count Bergstone was planning were unclear, but given Rhoadseria’s current political climate, whatever he was doing couldn’t have been good. And after the meeting that had taken place in the palace a few days ago, there was a suspicious air around the two counts. Ryoma unflinchingly sent his two most trusted aides, the Malfist sisters, as reinforcements.

The two counts were indispensable pawns in Ryoma’s efforts to form a future country. Losing them now, just when he was on the verge of making his move, would be terrible. Of course, he didn’t know for sure that something was going to happen. It was just one of countless possibilities he’d considered and accounted for.

And, as a matter of fact, his judgment proved correct.

The twins were ordered to guard both counts, but Laura had decided to prioritize Count Bergstone. It wasn’t that she’d underestimated Count Zeleph’s worth; Count Bergstone had just seemed the more plausible assassination target between the two.

Because of this, they had failed to notice Count Zeleph secretly departing the capital under cover of night—a fatal mistake. Fortunately, they had ordered a few Igasaki ninjas to keep an eye on Count Zeleph. Thanks to that, they arrived on the scene before he was successfully assassinated.

“Laura, over there!” Sara said, pointing ahead.

Laura glanced in that direction, her gaze settling on a toppled carriage. Count

Zeleph stood next to it, using the carriage's door as a shield.

"He's fine!" Laura said. "He's using the door to defend himself!"

In truth, he wasn't fine. He was only barely holding death at bay. But the result was decided at this point.

"Have the Igasaki ninjas spread out and keep watch over the area. The attackers are probably keeping Count Zeleph fixed in place so that their rear guard can creep up on him from behind and attack him when he's defenseless."

The Malfist sisters quickly issued orders, and the ninjas wordlessly nodded and disappeared silently into the woods.

"Are preparations complete?" Laura asked, to which Sara nodded gently.

They wordlessly drew the scimitars sheathed at their waists. They'd first encountered these curved swords when Ryoma had fought off the bandits attacking them. He stopped at the town of Alue to gather new gear, but he hadn't forgotten about this weapon. When he returned from Xarooda, he had asked Nelcius to make them weapons they could wield either with one hand or two, and scimitars fit the bill.

The blades were even darker than the black night. These swords were blessed with endowed thaumaturgy—the secret art of the elves passed down uninterrupted for centuries. Their grips were inlaid with blood-red jewels that drew the attention of anyone who saw them. Any connoisseurs who laid eyes on their scimitars would likely drop a small fortune to buy them.

But as bewitching as the Malfist sisters' scimitars were, they were still cold weapons meant for severing the thread of life. And these twins were about to put them on full display.

"Let's begin, then! We hold nothing back," Laura whispered as she drew her blade.

Prana circulated through the sisters' bodies as they bid the Vishuddha chakra in their throats to operate. Their bodies became as light as the wind, granting them the explosive speed of a loosed arrow. In the blink of an eye, they had the assailants in their sights.



They split up into two groups after all.

There were ten attackers firing incessantly at the carriage. If the Igasaki clan's report was to be believed, there were more than ten.

If they have a rear guard moving in to attack Count Zeleph from behind, there should be about five moving separately.

There were five Igasaki ninjas under the twins' command—meaning they either matched the enemy's detached force in number or they had only slightly fewer. Still, these were particularly experienced members of the Igasaki clan, and the assailants had their guard down, since they were confident their surprise attack was successful. They were prepared for the possibility that Count Zeleph might try to escape or counterattack, but a strike from a third party would catch them unaware. The worst thing the sisters could do was give away their presence.

Laura silently sprinted ahead. Holding the sword low with a horizontal grip, she slashed the man standing in front of her up across the flank.

It's so sharp!

She'd realized the value of this blade the moment Ryoma gave it to her. It was light and supple and, at the same time, exceedingly hard and sharp. The blade maintained it's edge by absorbing the wielder's prana, and it naturally repaired any light nicks and scratches. But even though she knew of its powers, experiencing them firsthand made her realize the true worth of this scimitar.

At first, the man Laura had slashed didn't seem to react in any way to the attack. But his body soon lurched forward, and he collapsed to the ground as blood spurted from his flank.

Without confirming that he'd fallen, Laura quickly set her eyes on another target—all in the name of completing the orders her beloved master had given her.

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Before long, the barrage of arrows that rained nonstop on the carriage died down.

“Did they run out of arrows?” Count Zeleph whispered to himself.

His heart beating, he slowly peeked out from his cover behind the door. The noise around him seemed to have died down, and silence now hung in the air. He could hear an owl hooting in the distance.

Is this a trap? But either way, if I just stay here, it won’t end well for me.

After checking two more times, Count Zeleph stepped out from the cover of the carriage. He knew this could very well be a trap meant to lull him into a false sense of security, but at the same time, the door couldn’t protect him forever. He’d have to make a gamble at some point to get out of this.

It was then that he heard the sound of rustling grass and cracking branches coming from the woods.

“Who’s there?!” he called out into the darkness, awkwardly directing his sword toward the noise. The blade shook in his hands. His throat burned, having gone dry from fear, and his heart thumped heavily.

The figure approaching him from the woods spoke to him with a calm, gentle voice.

“Please put your sword away, Count Zeleph. We’ve disposed of the assassins.”

Those words came out of nowhere. Truth be told, he wished he could openly believe this fortunate turn of events. But he didn’t know who he was speaking to, and he wasn’t nearly careless or stupid enough to blindly believe a complete stranger’s words.

“Do you take me for a fool?!” Count Zeleph shouted, his sweaty fingers clenched hard around his sword’s grip. “Who are you?!”

Though he was being cautious, something tugged at the back of his mind.

Where have I heard this voice before?

Perhaps because of his nerves, his thoughts weren’t as clear and sharp as usual. But this beautiful, chime-like voice was one Count Zeleph definitely knew.

“Have you forgotten who we are?” another familiar voice asked.

The owners of those voices approached him, the moonlight shining on their silvery and golden locks.

Finally recognizing the twins, Count Zeleph raised his voice in shock. “Aren’t you...? I see, you were with Lord Mikoshiba!” he exclaimed.

All the strength drained from his body, and he fell to the ground. This wasn’t how a man of his age and status would act in public, but he couldn’t help it. For years he’d presented himself as a mediocre fool to evade unwanted attention. This was the first time he’d ever faced the threat of assassination. On top of that, his martial prowess was lacking. This whole situation had made him feel extremely threatened.

Every person had things they were good at and things they weren’t suited for. A schemer couldn’t be as daring and brave as a warrior. The fact he hadn’t wet himself despite having just escaped the jaws of death was praiseworthy enough. The Malfist sisters knew this, and they didn’t mock or blame him for this shameful display.

“Lady Laura, Lady Sara, we’re done as well.”

A black-clad shadow suddenly appeared from within the forest and kneeled in front of the twins. Apparently, everyone was accounted for, which implied they’d done their job without any problems or complications.

Laura gave a satisfied nod and turned to look at Count Zeleph.

“Now, Count Zeleph, what do you intend to do next?”

After being attacked like this, the natural course of action would be to flee home. But as a man Ryoma Mikoshiba had seen as a person of value, Count Zeleph chose otherwise.

He parted his lips without a hint of hesitation.

Chapter 2: Kikoku

“Good, you made it,” Ryoma said, heaving a sigh of relief. He placed the pen he’d been gripping back on the table. “Glad to know Count Zeleph is still safe.”

After Laura had returned from escorting Count Zeleph to Helena’s garrison in the city of Tritron, she’d reported to Ryoma.

Laura nodded. “Yes, Master. It’s thanks to the Igasaki ninjas’ timely report. Count Zeleph’s escorts were slain in the initial attack, so the situation was urgent. But we were able to finish off the attackers. After that, we took him to Lady Helena. Their conversation went about as you predicted too. Both agreed to abandon Queen Lupis. Also, Lady Helena entrusted a message to us, saying she would very much like to discuss the country’s future with you.”

Laura handed the letter over to Ryoma. After quickly skimming through it, Ryoma’s lips curled into a satisfied grin. Then he held the letter up to the candle’s flame. It would be devastating if this information leaked to a third party.

If we just leave Rhoadseria alone, the country will fall apart on its own before long. And if that were to happen, this land would turn into hell on earth. Being a former commoner, Helena has no other choice.

Helena was a skilled military leader, but she had little aptitude for politics. She could perhaps govern a town, but she knew herself well enough to know that she had no business being a sovereign. On the surface, she had asked for a discussion, but really she had implicitly declared her intention to enter Ryoma’s camp.

As the scent of burning paper filled the room, Ryoma leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the ceiling with a pleased expression.

“Count Zeleph made the exact move I thought he would. Well, it’s not like he has many reasons to leave the capital and go talk to Helena. I’d like to talk to Count Zeleph personally later, but for now let’s let him take a breather and have a look around Sirius.”

Count Zeleph had gone to see Helena soon after the attack on his life, then traveled all the way to the Wortenia Peninsula immediately afterward. And since they had been traveling incognito, it had been a tiring journey. Count Zeleph was probably exhausted. It'd be best to give him a few days to rest.

Not that it's entirely out of the goodness of my own heart...

If Count Zeleph visited Sirius and saw the city's progress, his impressions of it would influence the power balance to come.

"Yes, I've already told Count Zeleph that he's free to look around the city," Laura said, sighing. Reluctantly, she continued, "But I didn't expect things to really go exactly as you planned."

Ryoma laughed out loud. "You look surprised," he quipped with a smile.

"Well, yes. He convinced Count Bergstone to give up on Queen Lupis and even decided to join forces with Helena. I didn't think Count Zeleph would be that decisive."

Laura's gaze fell on the letter. It was clear from her expression that she was still apprehensive about this turn of events.

I've met and spoken to Count Zeleph many times already, but not once have I thought him to be this frightening.

Count Zeleph was an amicable middle-aged man, and his pleasant demeanor extended to the Malfist sisters, even though they were servants. He came across as mild-mannered, and he had a friendly disposition and a penchant for jokes. His open personality was unique among Rhoadseria's nobles, who often stressed their status and station.

But that was only how Count Zeleph *seemed*. He was a noble just the same. Laura and Sara only saw him as a plain, plump man who hid behind his brother-in-law's shadow. That wasn't to say they looked down on him, but it was exactly why this development came as such a shock to them.

"Is it really that surprising?" Ryoma asked.

"Yes. I still find it hard to believe," Laura answered, nodding. Her beautiful features were marred with doubt.

Laura believed that she didn't judge people solely on appearance. She was mistaken, however. She did unconsciously make assumptions about Count Zeleph based on how he looked. When Ryoma ordered her to prevent Count Zeleph's assassination, she'd also learned of the count's shady dealings. But even after seeing him with her own eyes, Laura struggled to believe Elnan Zeleph had been masking his fangs.

"That's his trick, see?" Ryoma said, laughing. "Part of his MO is influencing people's impressions of him."

Laura blinked. "His...em oh?"

"Yeah, it means, hm, his usual methods."

As far as Ryoma had observed, Elnan Zeleph was considerably skilled in politics. He wasn't as good as Count Bergstone, but compared to the other Rhoadserian nobles, he was an asset. Despite this, public opinion of him was surprisingly low.

I mean, it makes sense. He's always compared to Bergstone, a comparison that will never work in his favor, especially when he intentionally plays the part of a fool.

Count Bergstone was a tall, handsome, refined dandy in the prime of his life. Count Zeleph, on the other hand, was short, pudgy, and plain-looking. It was clear who drew the most attention. Count Zeleph would always come across as Count Bergstone's foil or henchman. Be that as it may, Count Zeleph decided to use it to his advantage so he could act in the shadows.

"He knows he's plain-looking and inconspicuous," Ryoma explained. "He always keeps a step or two removed from the public eye by hiding in Count Bergstone's shadow."

"So you're saying he does that to *not* draw attention to himself?" Laura asked.

Ryoma nodded. "In a manner of speaking. The difference between him and Count Bergstone is like the difference between an actor and a backstage hand."

The actor shone on the stage and received all the applause, but the one who directed the spotlight onto him from behind the scenes was just as crucial. It was dull, thankless work, but without it the curtain couldn't even rise.

Count Bergstone performed impressive feats that drew attention, and Count Zeleph supported him from the shadows and did his dirty work. The two of them were effectively one and the same—they shared a common fate.

“Either way, that gives me three more valuable pawns,” Ryoma concluded.

“Lady Helena and the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph?”

“Yep. All three are pretty powerful pawns, but Count Zeleph is exceptionally useful.”

“Count Zeleph? Really?” Laura asked in surprise.

She agreed that all three were valuable. But if asked who the most valuable was, she would answer that it was Helena, or maybe Count Bergstone. Count Zeleph was a surprisingly good manipulator, but Helena was known across multiple countries for her military exploits, and Count Bergstone had proved his political aptitude under Queen Lupis’s regime.

Ryoma shook his head, as if to chide Laura for her disbelief. “His intelligence network allows him to acquire information from both the aristocracy and the palace—places the Igasaki clan can’t reach easily.”

The Igasaki ninjas were crucial to Ryoma’s plans because they provided him with intelligence and information, but not even they could handle the entirety of that role. The Igasaki clan consisted of two hundred members, including women and children. They’d also trained the liberated slave children in the ninja arts, but at this time, only a hundred or so of them were actually good enough to be in the field. The size and scale of the clan would certainly grow in the future, but if Ryoma were to seize more territory now, there wouldn’t be enough of them to go around. Besides, having someone versed in noble society and capable of gathering intelligence on that front would be indispensable.

After all, the Igasaki ninjas would have a hard time blending in at the palace with their black hair and tan skin. That didn’t mean they were terribly discriminated against, since people with such features were usually traders from other continents, but the western continent was predominantly occupied by people akin to Caucasians. The ninjas would certainly stand out. And noble society was an insular space, which made it extremely difficult to gather information.

Not that I intend to leave too many nobles around...

Ryoma had a vision of his ideal country. He wanted to make a place run entirely by merit. He disliked nobles, mainly those who retained their roles while doing nothing to deserve it—parasites that only extorted their people to live in luxury.

Ryoma wasn't naive enough to allow these parasites to infest his country—his proverbial garden. But despite his ideals, he knew that completely eliminating the nobility and running all of Rhoadseria by himself would be too troublesome. That left him with just one choice: to take his time, sift through all the nobles, and divide the jewels from the pebbles—those who were skilled and beneficial from those who leeched off of others. To do that, he needed Count Zeleph, a man familiar with the inner workings of Rhoadseria.

The day Count Zeleph would prove his worth was still far away, though. Ryoma was still just a minor governor of a frontier land, so planning out what he'd do once he ruled everything would be presumptuous and absurd.

For now, let's take things one step at a time.

True to Ryoma's original plan, a rebellion broke out in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, and the government officials were spread too thin to effectively control the situation. With the country in this state, one could force just about anything to happen.

The attack on Count Zeleph was a prime example of this. Under normal circumstances, such a blatant attack on a noble's life would never happen in the open. There were more discreet ways of dealing with him, be it poison or extortion. But they chose to attack his carriage on the highway, where anyone could see them. True, maybe they were in a hurry to eliminate him as fast as possible. But if that were the case, they would have planned more meticulously. The natural conclusion was that his assassination would have served as a warning to any noble who opposed Queen Lupis.

Ryoma could only think of two people who would go that far for Queen Lupis during such uncertain times.

Mikhail is the most likely candidate, but Meltina's becoming more vocal now that she's serving as Queen Lupis's aide. I guess those two still haven't learned

how to read a room.

Mikhail and Meltina both being thoughtless and impulsive was nothing new. One couldn't find two people more loyal to Queen Lupis if they searched Rhoadseria up and down, but everything they did seemed to backfire. They were particularly bad when it came to politics. Their loyalty was important, to be sure, but they lacked the basic understanding that not all ideals could become reality. Whenever a bureaucrat or official failed to complete the queen's orders, Mikhail and Meltina would mock them for it.

Many of Queen Lupis's problems could be traced back to the nobles' faction. Their interference definitely inhibited the bureaucrats' work and Queen Lupis's reforms. But that wasn't the core reason the queen's regime was failing.

The attack on Count Zeleph was either because they realized he helped Count Bergstone gather the documents Bergstone had brought to that meeting, or because they were protecting Queen Lupis's honor. Either way, they planned this revenge at their own discretion.

Before the Malfist twins escorted Count Zeleph to Tritron, they collected one of the arrows as proof of the attack. They'd shown it to Helena, who immediately recognized it as the type used by the Rhoadserian knights to slay large monsters.

Of course, some third party could be framing Mikhail and Meltina by using the knights' arrows. But Laura had sent a runner from the Igasaki clan to inspect all of the Rhoadserian knights. The runner had discovered that seventeen knights among the royal guard had died from illness. All of these reports came within a few days of the attack on Count Zeleph. What's more, a company commander within the royal guard had managed everything relating to their deaths, from the reports to the funeral arrangements. The knights saw each other as family, so when one of them died, his colleagues would pitch in and help the bereaved family. But if this company commander was close to Meltina or Mikhail, the story became much more suspect.

Another suspicious detail was that during the funerals, neither the family nor the attending knights could see the body. It was like they were trying to hide something and were in a hurry to bury the corpse and be done with it. This was

highly unusual for military funerals in this world.

Once one considered that Count Zeleph had been attacked by seventeen people, the answer became quite clear.

Based on what Laura said, the fighting was pretty savage. I can't imagine they'd show the bodies in that state.

In cases of accidental death or murder, where the body was particularly damaged, they would cover it so as to spare the families and guests further anguish. This world lacked the knowledge to embalm a body. But these knights were reported to have died from illness. They couldn't very well say that and then show corpses scarred and maimed from battle.

Still, using their own subordinates for an assassination... Whoever's behind this made a pretty dangerous gamble by sending knights instead of hiring assassins. Though I guess that's something I can only say thanks to hindsight. If I hadn't sent Laura and her team, Count Zeleph would be dead now. So I can see why they'd feel more confident in knights they knew rather than outsiders. They're definitely getting impatient. It's pretty ironic that their attack on Count Zeleph is what ended up exposing them.

Either way, this timing was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for Ryoma. It was clear to him that putting off the war any further might allow the forces operating in the shadows of the western continent to interfere.

"I think now's the time," Ryoma said. "Tell Simone and Gennou I need to see them urgently."

Laura immediately understood the implications of his order. "So it's time, then, Master Ryoma?"

"Yes," Ryoma confirmed, nodding. "We're taking over Epirus."

Laura left the room to call Gennou and Simone. Now alone, Ryoma leaned against the sofa as he waited for them to arrive. It was then that he heard what sounded like the wind moaning—a demon wailing in the night.

"Such a melancholic voice," a man said from behind the door to Ryoma's room.

“Gennou.” Ryoma recognized the harsh voice and sat up.

“I heed your call, milord,” Gennou stated, his voice muffled by the door.

“Yeah, come in.”

The door silently opened, and an old man stepped inside. He had white hair and a long mustache, and he was clad in his usual black garb, as was customary in the Igasaki clan. He bowed respectfully to Ryoma.

“Sorry for calling you out of nowhere like that,” Ryoma said, bowing his head back.

Gennou shook his head. “We are ninjas, milord. We are always in your service. Whenever you require our help, we will be there to answer your call.”

“Yeah? That’s good to hear.” Ryoma motioned for Gennou to take a seat at a table in the corner of the room. “Based on how sloppy the assassination attempt on Count Zeleph was, it looks like the capital’s in a state of chaos. Everything looks ready. How are the preparations I requested going?”

“We’ve already pinned down most of the enemy’s main players, starting with Yulia Salzberg. We’re ready to begin whenever you give the word.”

“Right. Everything’s going well, then,” Ryoma muttered.

Gennou then hesitantly said, “While this may come across as impolite, milord, I must ask. How do you like the katana we gave you?”

“You mean Kikoku?” Ryoma asked. When Gennou nodded, Ryoma continued, “Hm, well...” He scratched the back of his head and dropped his gaze to Kikoku, which was sitting atop a shelf. He paused for a moment, carefully picking his words. “Well, it’s convenient. It doesn’t require any maintenance, and even if it breaks, it fixes itself after a night in its sheath. That saves time on whetting and fixing it. But...I can’t say it really lives up to your story, Gennou.”

Ryoma had heard Gennou’s story a little before he left for the expedition to Xarooda. One night, Ryoma was called to a covert meeting with the Igasaki clan’s elders, where he was given this katana.

Kikoku—The Wailing Demon. It was a demonic sword forged by the founder of the Igasaki clan, Douman Igasaki. It was said that he had forged it by mixing

the flesh of his own wife and child into the blade. The blade had been passed down for five hundred years, but the only one who ever truly wielded it to its full power was Douman.

Following Douman's death, the sword was sealed in a sheath of plain wood with multiple seals on it. This was done in accordance with Douman's will. Apparently, the Igasaki clan had spent the last five hundred years as vagabonds so that they could complete Douman's last wish.

I mean, I don't want to speak out of line here. Gennou devoted his life to this. But from what he's told me, this will Douman Igasaki left behind doesn't really add up.

Douman had left his clan with two orders: seek a true master who could lead the clan and have this new master inherit his will. Ryoma didn't scoff at inheriting an elder's will; he thought it was a lofty pursuit. It was much easier said than done, though, especially when Kikoku picked its new master.

Also, this cursed blade absorbed the prana of surrounding humans and lifeforms—except for its master. This was why it had to be sealed and carefully cared for and why the elders' council treated it as a divine weapon.

The Igasaki ninjas had then walked across the land. Whenever a promising master appeared, they'd ask them to grip Kikoku. If Ryoma were to be frank, it all seemed terribly haphazard. The most disturbing part, though, was that if Kikoku found the master unworthy, it would drain them of their prana until they died.

I mean, I can't exactly say they duped anyone. They do confirm the person's ability and mettle, and check if they're Japanese. And then they explain the situation and gain the person's approval.

Thankfully, when Gennou informed the other elders that he'd found a potential master, Kikoku had started wailing on its own for some reason. This had convinced them to serve Ryoma. Had that not happened, they probably wouldn't have considered working under a man they were once ordered to assassinate. But by the time Ryoma prepared to leave for Xarooda, the elders seemed to acknowledge Ryoma as Kikoku's true master.

Unfortunately, though Ryoma became the clan's master, Kikoku proved to be

a rather ordinary katana, unworthy of its storied history. It was certainly an improvement on the katanas they had previously given him, and it was capable of repairing itself and required no maintenance. It was a strong blade that was unlikely to ever snap. But that was all it was.

Gennou claimed that once it truly awakened, Kikoku could cut through anything and everything with a single slash. But for now, it was nothing more than a nice katana that took care of itself. Ryoma wouldn't go so far as to call the story fake, but he felt it was only half-true.

Either way, Ryoma's katana had yet to show its true value.

"I see," Gennou said pensively. "But the fact you can hold it without it draining your prana means that you are its rightful owner."

"Well, I guess, but..." Ryoma's expression was unreadable as he looked up to the ceiling.

Their exchange continued until Simone knocked on the door.

†

The meeting with Gennou and Simone had ended, and Ryoma was alone in his room. His gaze turned to the katana sitting on the shelf next to his work desk. As if feeling Ryoma's eyes on it, Kikoku's blade let out a morose wail.



Kikoku, huh?

It had been passed down as proof of the Igasaki clan's heir and had spent centuries awaiting a proper wielder. As moonlight shone into the room, Ryoma's lips curled into a smile. Had anyone else been there, they would have seen the face of a blood-drenched demon.

"Either way, I'll be counting on you from now on, Partner."

Kikoku didn't show the power Gennou spoke of, but that didn't mean Ryoma had any intention of discarding it. When he attacked Fort Notis to cut off O'ltormea's supply line, he had used it to slay Greg Moore. Since that battle, Kikoku had become an indispensable ally and tool.

You're the only one I can trust with my life.

Ryoma gently removed the sword from its sheath and whispered to the blunt blade. The moment he did, Ryoma thought he could hear a screeching in the wind, like the demented wailing of a demon.

I see. So you...

This was Ryoma's first true conversation with Kikoku.

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The town of Sirius was built within a forested area deep inside the Wortenia Peninsula. The flagstone roads stretching between the stonework buildings were truly an astounding sight.

"So this is his town. No, it's not just a town..."

Count Zeleph sighed in admiration as he looked out the window of his room at the inn. He'd walked through its streets just this afternoon, accompanied by a lookout.

Sirius was nowhere near the size of capitals like O'ltormea or Pireas. Its population wasn't impressive either. If those capitals had half a million people each, Sirius didn't even make up a tenth of that. Still, for a baron's territory, it had quite a large population.

Rhoadseria had over a hundred barons, and their territories were mostly

villages with a few hundred commoners. Only a handful of barons had towns developed enough to have a population in the thousands. And once the population reached five figures, it wasn't a village or a town anymore. It was a city. Many of the cities in Rhoadseria were more populated than Sirius—like the capital or Heraklion, the largest citadel city in Rhoadseria's south. There was also Count Salzberg's stronghold, Epirus.

There are cities larger than Sirius out there, but considering what's in this city...

The Wortenia Peninsula was originally a strip of land without any real population. It was a land infested and overrun with dangerous monsters, and the only people who ventured there were exiled criminals and their families. The Rhoadserian royal house held it under their direct control, but they had neglected it and left it undeveloped since the country's founding. That a city like Sirius existed in the peninsula was unusual in and of itself.

Just who is he? What is he thinking?

Several weeks had passed since the attempt on Count Zeleph's life, and every day since then he grappled with his doubts about Ryoma. The meeting they had the other day had only reinforced those doubts.

It was good for a noble to build up their territory—developing villages into towns, and towns into cities. It also made the people's lives safer and more affluent. That was how it should be. It was a noble's duty to oversee the growth of their land, much like a parent watching their child mature. In that regard, Sirius was typical. If nothing else, it was a testament to Ryoma Mikoshiba's political prowess. Nobody would hold that against him.

However, it had only been a couple of years since Ryoma was put in charge of the peninsula. And during this past year, he had to leave his territory for roughly a year because of the war in Xarooda. Not even Count Bergstone, who was praised for his skill in internal affairs, would have been able to develop the Wortenia Peninsula to such an extent in such a short period of time. In addition to that, Ryoma was considered equal to Helena, Rhoadseria's fabled Ivory Goddess of War, in military affairs.

He really is a monster.

Count Zeleph didn't dislike Ryoma. During the previous civil war, Ryoma had guided Count Bergstone back to the forefront of the political world, which had helped Count Zeleph improve his own position as well. He was thankful for that. Ryoma was a commoner and wasn't familiar with palace etiquette, which was an issue, but Count Zeleph preferred his frank attitude to the nobles who insisted on decorum. Their attitude was nothing more than a facade.

But though Count Zeleph liked Ryoma, he couldn't help but fear this city. And after learning of the plot behind the current commoner rebellion, not even a sly fox like Zeleph could maintain his composure.

I can't believe it was his men who shot that foolish noble dead. Who would have guessed that it was all Lord Ryoma's doing?

The timing with which the rebellion broke out was something that had puzzled Count Zeleph. But once he learned of the trick behind it, it all seemed simple. A third party had triggered the rebellion, but another mastermind had planned it. A single uncertain factor was added to the equation, and it had changed the outcome entirely.

One could easily say Ryoma Mikoshiba set off the rebellion.

Ryoma's plan included Count Zeleph gathering evidence of the other nobles' corruption and Count Bergstone turning his back on Queen Lupis. But another unknown group had organized and set up the rebellion. Ryoma was just the match to light the powder keg they'd set up.

If everything Lord Ryoma says is true, then I can't very well fault him.

Count Zeleph was displeased at having been played, but one had to seize the initiative to survive in this world. Considering this, Ryoma's actions weren't wrong.

But that begs the question...is there really a group manipulating the continent from the shadows, like Ryoma says?

Ryoma had spoken of a group that influenced the entire continent. If such a group really existed, it would answer quite a few questions. But admitting that meant acknowledging the existence of a network that exceeded the scope of multiple nations.

Ryoma said he'd heard of it from Julianus I, King of Xarooda.

Xarooda's mediocre king claimed that a mysterious organization manipulated the entire continent from behind the scenes. It honestly sounded far-fetched. But Zeleph was familiar with pretending to be mediocre and hiding his true strength from the world. He couldn't deny that Julianus I might be doing the same.

It doesn't matter. Given the situation we're in right now, there's nothing else to do.

There was no undoing the fact that a commoner rebellion had broken out, and Count Bergstone's decision could no longer be overturned.

"Let's see what he can do for now," Count Zeleph whispered to himself as he pulled a bottle of alcohol from a shelf on the wall. He poured the amber-colored liquid into a glass and took a swig.

†

That day, a man appeared in the fortress on the border between the territories of Baron Mikoshiba and Count Salzberg.

"So we've finally made it."

Looking down at the black-clad soldiers lined up beneath him, Ryoma nodded in satisfaction. A few years had passed since the goddess of fate brought him, an ordinary high schooler, to this world. Reaching this moment had required a great deal of blood and effort.

There was strength in numbers. This was true in both Ryoma's home world and this one. And now, Ryoma would exhibit his strength for the world to see. It was a force he'd kept secret for years now.

Even so, Ryoma couldn't help but feel a little anxious.

Once I start this, there'll be no turning back. So no matter what, I have to win this.

Ryoma knew that others had shunned him. To the nobles, he was nothing more than a commoner who had stumbled into success. The knights envied him for his military achievements and noble title. Very few people could look past all

that and treat Ryoma as an ally. Most of Rhoadseria viewed him as a heretic. And society hated and expelled heretics, no matter what world it might be.

The reason none of this had managed to stop Ryoma was because he knew to hide his power and remain as inconspicuous as he could.

It'll be fine. I already talked things out with Helena. And we're still talking to that woman, but based on how things are going with her father, it's just a matter of time until she breaks. Everything's going according to plan, so all that's left is...

He'd built up this army himself, and he was certainly confident in its power. But with the exception of the small group he'd taken with him to Xarooda, most of them lacked real combat experience. They had continually hunted the monsters that infested Wortenia. They could match medium-ranked knights from any of the surrounding countries, if not surpass them. They were skilled in their own right. But fighting monsters wasn't the same as fighting another person.

The stronger person wasn't guaranteed to win. Bloodlust could grip people, and a yearning to live could drive people to do amazing feats. And a battle where such emotions mingled and clashed had its own unique conditions.

"It will be fine," Laura assured him as she gripped Ryoma's shaking fingers with her hand. "We will succeed."

Ryoma had nerves of steel, but his future depended on this battle. It was difficult to remain composed at a time like this. It wasn't just Ryoma's future at risk here.

A voice from behind Ryoma suddenly said, "You're finally taking your first step to make your ambitions a reality, Sir Mikoshiba."

Ryoma was surprised to hear this person in a place like this. He turned around and smiled awkwardly.

"Don't startle me like that, Nelcius."

The silver-haired elf smirked and shrugged. "My apologies. Our lifestyle involves hunting, and we've developed a bad habit of masking our presences, you see." Several hooded figures stood behind him as guards.

“Thank you for coming to see us off today,” Ryoma said.

Nelcius’s position within Ryoma’s regime was still somewhat unclear. He often visited Ryoma’s estate in Sirius, and he frequently attended major meetings. But he wasn’t a vassal of the Mikoshiba barony yet. He was at best a casual ally.

“Oh, come off it. You’re an important trade partner to us, Sir Mikoshiba. There isn’t much we can do to help you, but we will offer what little assistance we can.”

Nelcius reached into his pocket and took out a cigarette. He rolled it up with his fingers and placed it between his lips.

“My apologies,” he muttered as he lit it with thaumaturgy. “Recently I can’t relax without one.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying our merchandise,” Ryoma replied with a smile.

The demi-humans living in the peninsula, namely the elves, maintained a certain standard of living by using their unique physical abilities. They’d spent many years adapting to life in this inhospitable land. However, their lives were by no means affluent. They had to live off the meat of monsters and the mushrooms and fruit growing in the forests around them. While those were sustainable food sources, they were utterly unappetizing. In addition, they had no way of getting assorted sundries or little luxuries. The best thing they had was wine distilled from local fruit, but the amount they could produce was limited.

Their lives had been quite strained, and all their efforts went into staying alive. Such was life within the Wortenia Peninsula. They could produce powerful thaumaturgical weapons, but it cost their quality of life. This was why Ryoma had shrewdly given them those luxury items. He taught them once again how to enjoy life.

“Seeing so many soldiers lined up here is quite the sight,” Nelcius remarked. “It looks like the heroic legions of legend.”

Ryoma felt there was something slightly off with Nelcius’s compliment. Nelcius had called this army the stuff of legends in a rather casual way, knowing

full well that the man who'd built that army was listening. It wasn't unpleasant to hear, but it did come across as desperate flattery.

I can't blame him, given his position. They can't go back to being cut off from the outside world now.

Once one's quality of life increased, it took a great deal of effort and mental diligence to do with less.

"Well, we're only as well-equipped as we are because of you and your clan, Nelcius. We're very grateful to you. It's rare for humans to have this many endowed thaumaturgical weapons, and your knowledge on thaumaturgy is much more advanced than what humans possess."

Nelcius nodded. If any soldiers from another country were to see the equipment Ryoma's soldiers were wearing, they'd be beside themselves with shock. Masters of endowed thaumaturgy were even more rare than verbal thaumaturgists, and merchants from all over monopolized many of them.

Weapons and armor that had endowed thaumaturgy applied to them were precious commodities. The only countries on the continent that could afford to equip their knights with endowed gear were the three great powers. Even then, only select units, like the royal guard, received that treatment. It was unthinkable that a provincial governor like Ryoma could obtain such gear in such quantities. It was only possible because of the demi-humans inhabiting the Wortenia Peninsula.

"We're glad to hear you say that," Nelcius replied. "I hope our business relations continue in the future. And so..." Nelcius ordered the soldiers kneeling behind him to stand up. "I've come here to further deepen our relationship."

"Meaning?" Ryoma asked.

"Remove your hoods," Nelcius commanded. He smiled as his soldiers revealed their faces—living jewels—to Ryoma.



“This is...” Ryoma uttered.

“I’ve picked the fairest and most skilled of our warriors. Use them however you see fit, Sir Mikoshiba. As both guards and thaumaturgists, their skill is guaranteed. Even produce offspring with them, if you wish. They’ve already agreed to it.”

Nelcius’s laughter was loud and whimsical, but Ryoma was very much taken aback.

Well, uh, I’m stumped. So that’s his angle. Ryoma’s mind worked quickly, grasping the meaning behind this surprise attack. *He probably assumed Dilphina wasn’t enough by herself. Rejecting his good will wouldn’t go over well. I don’t know about sleeping with them, but I guess they’ll make for good guards.*

The items Ryoma gave to the elves, be it alcohol and cigarettes or more essential sundries like medicine and vegetables, were all things produced outside the Wortenia Peninsula. These trade relations were their sole connection to the outside world. And the only person who traded with them was Ryoma Mikoshiba—no one else. Nelcius probably couldn’t find another business partner if he tried.

While the Church of Meneos’s influence differed from country to country, their doctrine of human supremacy and rejection of demi-humans was generally accepted throughout the western continent. This was why the demi-humans had been forced to build their enclave in a dangerous region like Wortenia. No other governor on the continent would allow a demi-human population to live within their territory. And even if there were a governor like that, it wasn’t likely that Nelcius would ever meet such a man.

Because of this, Nelcius viewed Ryoma as an indispensable ally. So long as Ryoma didn’t make any absurd demands, Nelcius wouldn’t risk betraying him.

That must be why he’s so anxious. Maybe I should increase the rate we’re trading with them a bit.

As far as Ryoma could see, Nelcius had already proven himself a worthy ally. But Nelcius was the leader of an exiled people. It made sense he’d be desperate to strengthen his bond with the one ally he had.

“Then, as thanks, I’ll increase the amount of cigarettes and alcohol we’ve been trading with you,” Ryoma said after a moment.

“Oooh, that would be greatly appreciated.” Nelcius nodded in satisfaction, happy that Ryoma had correctly guessed his intention. “Everyone’s quite enthralled with both.”

Nelcius had only offered his support because he expected to be rewarded for it. But speaking his desire outright at a time like this could be a fairly risky threat. If he were to demand gratitude, it could lower Ryoma’s opinion of him. However, it would be problematic in its own way if he didn’t make his demands known. This meant he had to maintain a delicate balance and keep his expectations implied but also clear.

“Well, it’s time,” Ryoma whispered into Laura’s ear. Then he turned to Nelcius. “That’ll do for today, I’m afraid. If you run into any problems in my absence, ask Simone for help.”

“Very well,” Nelcius said, bowing his head. He watched Ryoma turn around with a flourish of his cloak and walk over to speak to his troops. “May your fights bring you glory and victory.” His words were a vassal’s gesture of honor and dignity toward his lord.

That day, a double-headed serpent with a golden head and a silvery one flashed its fangs in a bid to consume the continent. Of course, few people knew of this—not even the first victim of its venomous bite.

Chapter 3: The Oppressor and the Oppressed

A reserved knock echoed through the corridors of Count Salzberg's estate in the citadel city of Epirus.

"Beloved?" Yulia Salzberg called, even as she heard a woman moan on the other side of the door. "My apologies for interrupting while you're occupied, but could you spare a moment of your time?"

Apparently the people in the room heard her, because the woman stopped gasping and the bed stopped creaking.

"What is it, Yulia?!" a masculine voice barked from inside the room. "If it isn't urgent, tell me later!"

He spoke with a confident, overbearing tone, like a master chiding a servant. He'd pulled a young, nubile maid into his room that morning and had been bedding her ever since. But even as his legal wife called out to him, Count Thomas Salzberg felt neither regret nor guilt.

Most people would be shocked by his attitude. After all, it seemed as though Lady Yulia had all the power in the relationship. But even within the nobility, this behavior was unusual.

Nobles did have concubines and lovers. Preserving one's bloodline was necessary for the longevity of a noble house, so it wasn't seen as immoral. Yet that didn't mean one could haphazardly sleep around. Proper order had to be maintained.

A concubine was inferior to a legal wife. They weren't regarded as poorly as random lovers, but they were still kept out of the public eye. And since they competed for the affections of the same man, wives saw them as an opponent, albeit an inferior one. For example, at a tea party, the concubine couldn't sit at the same table without the wife's explicit permission.

Still, being a concubine was better than being a lover. Lovers held a much weaker position, and they weren't even permitted to set foot in their master's estate. Even if they lived on the same grounds, they had to live in detached residential wings away from the main household, and they weren't allowed to

visit without explicit permission. And should the master of the household die, a wife would retain her position, as would a concubine. A lover would not. If their relationship with the wife was poor, then they wouldn't even be allowed to attend the master's funeral. They would be laid off with a small monetary consolation.

The legal wife held the strongest position, but Lady Yulia was quite an anomaly within the nobility. It was clear that Count Salzberg didn't see her as his spouse. In modern times, the way he treated her would be considered emotional abuse. Any sensible person undergoing this kind of treatment might demand a divorce, or at least choose to live separately. Sadly, Lady Yulia didn't have that choice. In noble society, the wife wasn't allowed to ask for a divorce. More than that, the power balance between them was skewed entirely in Count Salzberg's direction.

I only work for this man like a slave. I can't separate from him, nor can I live away from him. I can't hope to expect any of those things. But...

Lady Yulia didn't see herself as a fastidious wife. If her husband desired a concubine, she was patient enough to abide by his wishes even if she disliked the idea. She'd even be willing to step down as the legal wife. She wasn't a noble, just the daughter of an influential merchant in Epirus.

For a commoner, she was born into the more affluent caste of society. She didn't have to spend her days laboring away in the fields. That was how most people in Epirus lived, struggling for a living. But even if a merchant was more financially secure than a peasant, they weren't exempt from the class system. They were still commoners, same as the dirty, exhausted peasants.

True, some merchants traveled across different countries and could influence the market trends. One historical example of this was during the Edo period, when a class of merchants were in charge of handling and selling the rice stipend the shogunate sent to its retainers and vassals. Those merchants looked down upon the samurai, who were higher than them within the social hierarchy but far less affluent.

In this world, stipends weren't paid through actual goods, so such roles didn't exist. However, some merchants did in fact lend money to the nobility. Even if

they were commoners, nobles and even kings could end up owing them. But only a handful of merchants had that kind of relationship with the nobility.

It was said that having no money could spell the end of one's life, and indeed, debts could relate directly to one's death. But when all was said and done, it was only a figure of speech. In modern Japan, the law generally applied equally to all, be they politicians or police officers, but that wasn't the case in this world. Invoking a noble's ire could lead to one's head flying. So while some merchants overcame the class system through contracts and funds, most were physically segregated from noble society.

In other words, there was an insurmountable wall between commoners and nobles. The fact that Lady Yulia was originally a commoner didn't change, even after she married into House Salzberg and assumed that family's name.

I might carry the name of House Salzberg now, but to him, I'm just a commoner.

The situation she faced now was a stark, painful reminder of that. She was as much a resident of this world as anyone else, so the absurd power the nobility had was nothing new, and certainly not something to be bitter about at this point. All of that would have been acceptable so long as Count Salzberg acknowledged her as his wife.

Their marriage was a loveless political marriage, and given the class difference between them, it wasn't a desirable union to begin with. Still, even political marriages could blossom into true affection and love, and Yulia was a devoted spouse who supported her husband's endeavors. Nonetheless, it didn't take more than a glance to see just how Count Salzberg regarded her. She was officially his legal wife, but in truth, she was nothing more than a servant to this household.

I know better than to expect his love, but...is asking to be treated like his wife so wrong?

She was aware that their marriage was turning cold. Nobles kept concubines and lovers to preserve the bloodline, and she understood that. And she knew Count Salzberg well enough to know his sexual appetite leaned toward younger women.

In this world, women could marry in their mid to late teens. Once a woman reached twenty, she was considered an old maid—not so much among commoners, but certainly within the nobility.

Yulia married Count Salzberg in her teens, but fifteen years had since passed. She took care of her looks daily, so she retained much of her youthful appearance. But for all her efforts and natural beauty, Lady Yulia was still a woman in her thirties. She had the ripe charm of a mature woman, but her skin certainly wasn't as soft and clear as it had been in her teens.

On top of that, the typical marriage tended to edge into ennui after a decade. Between that and his natural frivolousness, Count Salzberg didn't even view Lady Yulia as a woman anymore. It was understandable, then, that their hearts would turn away from each other.

Though Lady Yulia could understand the logic, she wasn't indifferent. Each time her husband treated her cruelly or talked down to her, her heart cried. And little by little, irritation and hatred began building up in the bottom of her heart, like sludge gradually accumulating in a septic tank.

She didn't let it show, of course. If she were to show any sign of disgruntlement, Count Salzberg would ruthlessly expel her. His wrath would also bring ruin to the Mistel Company. Knowing this, Lady Yulia had only one choice. It was a thorny path, but even so...

"A letter came for you from Baron Mikoshiba of the Wortenia Peninsula," Yulia said softly, suppressing the desire to scream at the horrible way her husband treated her.

She heard him click his tongue loudly through the door. He was in the middle of his fun, but he still had enough good judgment to understand the situation.

"Fine. Give me a minute. I'll get dressed."

Lady Yulia sighed. Count Salzberg's debauchery was nothing new. After having to lead a frugal lifestyle throughout his adolescence, he now insisted on living in extravagance and with reckless abandon. He had overthrown his own father and seized headship of House Salzberg, and ever since, he'd let his suppressed lust and greed run rampant. He only tended to Epirus because he saw it as a garden to be groomed. Once he no longer needed it, he would find someone

else to take care of it for him. Yulia knew this better than anyone.

I'm just a tool to him.

People tended to view Lady Yulia as a strong femme fatale, a woman who overcame the class system and manipulated Count Salzberg behind the scenes. Nothing could be further from the truth, however.

"Thank you for waiting, Lady Yulia," the maid said as she opened the door.

The moment she did, an obscene stench washed over Lady Yulia. She turned her face, trying to avoid the scent, but the room's owner didn't care one bit about her feelings.

As Lady Yulia stood in the entrance to the room, Count Salzberg jerked his chin, signaling for her to enter. "What are you doing? You said you have business with me. Hurry up." His voice was cold and harsh, laced with anger and annoyance.

Something shattered within Lady Yulia's heart. It was the last bit of piety and duty she'd held toward Count Salzberg as a spouse.

It wasn't that Count Salzberg was doing anything exceedingly unusual. He was arrogant and disdainful, but it wasn't any different from how he'd acted over the last fifteen years. But for some reason, this time seemed different to Lady Yulia. Or perhaps *she* was different than usual.

Either way, her patience suddenly snapped in a manner she hadn't anticipated. All the anger and hatred that had built in her for years sizzled up, like magma on the verge of erupting.

Enough.

Emotion filled her heart like a droplet of ink polluting a glass of water. It made her recall the secret meeting she'd had the other day with her father, Zack Mistel, and gave her the final push she needed to go along with the new plan.

Truth be told, up until a moment ago, Lady Yulia still had her misgivings about her father's plan. Anyone in her position would be doubtful. As much as her husband had oppressed her, she'd spent fifteen years living with him. And since she personally managed Epirus's internal affairs, she knew full well how great

House Salzberg's military power was. There was a reason it had been charged with protecting northern Rhoadseria for generations.

Epirus flourished as the center of the north's economic activity, granting it a powerful market. It also stood as the heart of the ten houses of the north, with over ten thousand men at its beck and call.

The army's commanders were also remarkable individuals, including Signus Galveria and Robert Bertrand—House Salzberg's Twin Blades. Neither of them was the eldest son of their family, so they weren't in line to inherit their respective house's headships. Normally, they couldn't serve as commanders because of that. At best, they could serve as captain in a baron's personal army. But their fearsome skill and talent granted them their reputation and titles, and the names of the Twin Blades were praised even in neighboring countries. This was a glory mere knights would never achieve.

Count Salzberg hoped to make them his direct personal vassals and possibly form a house for them, but both of their families refused to relinquish them. That alone stood as proof of their immense abilities.

Who in Rhoadseria can hope to match those two?

Rumors in the streets suggested Mikhail Vanash. He'd won a martial tournament held by the late king, marking him as the strongest knight in Rhoadseria in terms of swordsmanship. Queen Lupis's attendant, Meltina Lecter, was another option. Though she was a woman, she was elegant and intense with a blade. Some wondered if she could be the successor to Helena Steiner, Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War.

Lady Yulia doubted either of them was a match for Signus and Robert. She didn't deny that they could give the Twin Blades a run for their money in a tournament match. Maybe they'd even eke out a win.

But things would be different in a battle to the death.

Signus and Robert both entered a battlefield for the first time over two decades ago, when they were in their mid teens. They'd spent their days on the frontlines ever since.

A match wasn't a real battlefield. There were sometimes duels to the death,

but one didn't have to be wary of enemies coming from any direction in a match.

They really are strong. But what's really scary about them is...

A chilling fear froze Lady Yulia's mind. Her husband was a corrupt failure of a noble who had steeped himself in debauchery. He cared little for the internal affairs of his territory and insisted on living in luxury, beckoning beautiful young women so he could rape them. He'd done more corrupt things than one could possibly count. There were very few decent nobles in Rhoadseria to begin with, but Thomas Salzberg was far and away among the most corrupt.

He was a terrible human being, but Count Salzberg was still a fearsome man. Including the times he'd fought under his father, the former Count Salzberg, he'd fought off their neighboring countries roughly ten times. He'd also quelled many bandit and monster attacks. That reputation had faded a bit in recent years, but as the eldest son of his house, there had been a time when Thomas Salzberg was feared as a demon of war.

Lady Yulia wasn't keen on giving him any credit, but she was aware that had he not been heir to his house, he might have been nominated to be Helena's successor. He wasn't quite as skilled in strategy and tactics as the Ivory Goddess of War, but his martial prowess did exceed hers. And in this world, a general's individual ability was just as important as their capacity for commanding an army. A single knight could swing the balance of a battle, after all.

Making an enemy out of such a monstrously powerful man would be suicidal. But even knowing this, Lady Yulia remained firm in her decision.

Even so, I...

She'd kept this emotion locked away in her heart for many years. It was a dream she hadn't even been allowed to fantasize about. But once she let that dream fill her mind for just a moment, she couldn't bring herself to discard it anymore—even if the probability of it happening was terribly slim.

All of that hinged on hiding it from Count Salzberg.

"You are not needed here," Lady Yulia said to the maid hurrying out of the room. "But do not let anyone approach until we call for you."

Lady Yulia desperately tried to quell her emotions and feign composure as she slowly walked into the room. Count Salzberg glanced at her for a moment before reaching for a bottle of alcohol sitting on the table. He brought the mouth of the bottle to his lips and sloppily gulped it. He then roughly wiped his lips with the sleeve of his silk blouse.

“That whelp sent me a letter? What does he want?” Count Salzberg said, eyeing Lady Yulia suspiciously before thrusting his arm forward. Lady Yulia deposited the letter in his outstretched hand. “Well, would you look at that,” he continued, snorting. “It’s actually properly sealed. The whelp’s learned to act pretentious.”

The wax seal was a double-headed snake coiled around a sword, identifying it as a letter from Baron Mikoshiba. Count Salzberg had exchanged letters with Ryoma before, but this was the first time he’d seen such an emphasis placed on decorum. Usually he’d just paste the envelope shut with glue.

Count Salzberg examined the letter and picked up a small knife from the room’s corner table to break the seal.

“Now, let’s see what that whelp has to say.”

His eyes scanned the paper, and when he finished reading, he folded it up. A heavy silence hung over the room until he interrupted it with his high-pitched laughter.

“Heh heh. Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Hilarious! This is absolutely hilarious!”

Covering his face with his hand, he threw his head back and laughed loudly. He was clearly mocking Ryoma.

“What does it say?” Lady Yulia asked in the most natural manner she could manage, keeping her emotions hidden.

Count Salzberg thrust the letter in her direction. Her father had informed her about the contents of the letter ahead of time, but she had to play coy here. She silently accepted the letter and skimmed it.

“What do you think?” Count Salzberg peered into Lady Yulia’s face, finally suppressing his laughter. He was sneering, but his eyes were full of anger and wrath—outrage at the weak for having the gall to oppose those stronger than

them. His gaze, as cold as the glint of a blade, gouged into Lady Yulia.

“It’s...a declaration of war.”

Her impression was correct. The text in this letter couldn’t be described as anything else.

Count Salzberg snorted with disdain. “Stupid woman. That’s obvious. I don’t need you to spell it out for me. What I want to know is why does that whelp think he can openly and publicly oppose me?”

The contents of the letter could be summarized into two points. The first demanded an apology and compensation for House Salzberg and the ten houses of the north’s attempts to send spies into the Wortenia Peninsula and engage in sabotage over the past year. The second insisted that House Salzberg and the ten houses of the north transfer full authority over all their armies to the Mikoshiba barony, for the purpose of restoring the public order and resolving the corruption currently crippling the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

Each demand was fair. No noble would like their neighbors sending spies into their land. Count Salzberg didn’t recall ever ordering his spies to commit sabotage, but he couldn’t deny that they might have resorted to it depending on the situation.

The request to hand over command wasn’t all that unusual either. Ryoma Mikoshiba was the hero who had quelled the previous civil war and gave Queen Lupis the crown. While relations between him and the queen had soured, maybe even to the point of antagonism, on the surface they were amicable.

By contrast, Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north hadn’t made any moves during the civil war. When the kingdom had splintered into the nobles’ faction and the princess’s faction, they had remained disinterested and refused to pick a side.

Certainly, Count Salzberg hadn’t been the only noble to spectate during the war. Plus, he was also charged with defending the northern borders. Furthermore, the fighting was centered quite far from him, in the kingdom’s south, near Heraklion. But despite all that, the public regarded House Salzberg unfavorably for its noninvolvement. A national hero asking for rights over his army at a time like this wasn’t all that outrageous.

But that was only one side of the story. Count Salzberg was well aware that the reasons behind this letter were only pretense. Though he had sent spies into the Wortenia Peninsula during Ryoma's absence, it was worth noting that this wasn't at all unusual for his position. He was looking into every governor in the area, and other nobles had sent spies into his domain. Nobles naturally wanted to keep an eye on their colleagues and rivals.

Count Salzberg did send spies more persistently in this case, but that was because Queen Lupis had pressured him to do so. He couldn't be faulted for acting in accordance with the sovereign's orders. The same could be said for the allegations of sabotage. Defending one's territory depended solely on the governor's skill, and Ryoma Mikoshiba knew this.

At first glance, the letter seemed like a request for an apology and compensation, but it was probably sent knowing that the request would be ignored. This meant it was a declaration of war. And citing "restoring the public order" as his reason for demanding command over Count Salzberg's armies was rather outrageous. What governor in their right mind would ever hand over their army to someone else, especially after Ryoma claimed that Count Salzberg had sent spies into his land for the purposes of sabotage?

Would Count Salzberg ever hand over his defensive army to someone who was clearly antagonizing him? Of course not; the very idea was laughable. Count Salzberg was confident that no sane noble would ever yield command under these conditions, no matter how justified Ryoma's case might have been.

This meant Ryoma had sent the letter for one of two plausible reasons. The first reason was that he was so utterly ignorant about nobility that he wrote this letter unaware of the consequences. The other reason was that he intentionally sent it knowing perfectly well that his demands would not be respected. And neither Lady Yulia nor Count Salzberg were foolish enough to assume Ryoma was an imbecile who stumbled into success.

"He probably sees the commoner uprisings as a chance to expand his sphere of influence," Lady Yulia said.

Count Salzberg's lips curled into a dark smile. The Kingdom of Rhoadseria was currently in a terrible state of affairs. The commoners had risen up in revolt

because they were disgruntled with the nobles, while the governors had sent their armies to quell those rebellions. This made the towns and highways quite unstable. Bandits were even cropping up in areas near the capital, which would normally be unthinkable.

"I think I understand," Count Salzberg uttered. "In this situation, he can mobilize his troops, and the capital would be too occupied to interfere."

Lady Yulia nodded.

Ryoma Mikoshiba's position within Rhoadseria was a peculiar one. He'd been given the Wortenia Peninsula, an undeveloped no-man's-land that couldn't even yield any tax revenue, to say nothing of producing anything of value. But the trade agreement that had been made between the three kingdoms of the east and the Kingdom of Helnesgoula had ended up making his land quite affluent.

Now, his territory was an indispensable relay point for any trade cogs sailing the northern sea routes. Most skilled merchants had their eye on the peninsula. In addition, the monsters infesting Wortenia provided ingredients and resources that could be sold for high costs. Before, adventurers would only venture into the peninsula to hunt monsters. But Ryoma had built a fortress at the base of the peninsula, on the foot of the Tilt Mountains. It served as a checkpoint, and its presence greatly changed things.

It was hard to discern how much Ryoma was earning, but based on the size of the army he took with him to Xarooda, he was certainly earning more than a baron reasonably should. Somehow, this upstart had gotten his hands on a great deal of wealth. That wasn't something the ten houses of the north could ignore. Count Salzberg wasn't as deeply occupied with it, but that was only because Ryoma had handed him the rights to the salt vein. Had it not been for that, Count Salzberg would have demanded his own share of those riches and investigated the peninsula more aggressively.

Queen Lupis feared his abilities, and from her perspective, this situation was incredibly grim. Her displeasure with Ryoma meant conflict would eventually spark between them either way. The ten houses of the north would seek to split his territory between themselves, each squabbling for their share of the pie.

And Queen Lupis would seek to reclaim the peninsula for the crown.

Ryoma was bound to understand just how precarious his position really was. This letter was one of his countermeasures.

“The capital’s House of Lords would usually arbitrate a territory dispute between nobles,” Lady Yulia said. “But since he has no connections within the nobility, it’s unlikely he’ll get a fair mediation.”

“Of course he wouldn’t. He’s a nobody,” Count Salzberg spat out dismissively.

The nobles would regard an upstart like Ryoma as a heretic, and nobody would want to help the Mikoshiba barony. Perhaps the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph would take his side, as would Helena Steiner, but it was hard to tell what their support could amount to.

Both of the counts came from families that had existed since Rhoadseria’s founding. Count Bergstone was regarded as a man of principle for not yielding to the nobles’ faction, but his skills made him arrogant, and many of the nobles disliked him for this. Count Zeleph, by contrast, was seen as Bergstone’s henchman and lackey. Their backing would do little to influence the ruling. Even if the Mikoshiba barony was justified in its claim, the result wouldn’t reflect the truth. Justice was decided by majority rule.

Lady Yulia continued, “The more time goes by, the worse his situation will become. Baron Mikoshiba probably decided to expand south before that happened.”

Armed territory disputes between nobles were outlawed. The capital would simply send its forces to quell the attempt, and they would end that noble’s bloodline. But now, when the country was rocked by internal strife, things were different. Even if Ryoma were to steal land with his army, the royal house would be too occupied to criticize him for it.

“Hm... That about sums up his plan, yes,” Count Salzberg said, nodding. Then he folded his arms and fell silent.

It looks like a reckless decision at first, but I don’t think he has any other choice, given his position. The question is whether he’s leaving this to chance, or if he actually has something to boost his chances of winning.

A long silence settled over the room as Count Salzberg considered the possibilities.

“So what are you going to do, beloved?” Lady Yulia asked, breaking the silence.

“I don’t like doing this without knowing what’s going on inside the peninsula, but I’ll have to contact the ten houses and gather soldiers,” he replied gravely.

Despite the many spies Count Salzberg had sent to Wortenia, he still didn’t know what Ryoma was up to. He didn’t think it was likely, but there was the possibility that Ryoma had an army that exceeded even his own. He’d mocked Ryoma, calling him an upstart, but Count Salzberg was a seasoned warrior, and his judgment was appropriately sharp.

“So you’ll gather soldiers to crush him on the field at once,” Lady Yulia surmised. “It’s not exactly refined, but we can’t take any risks. I’ll go prepare the letters, then.”

Lady Yulia bowed elegantly and hurried out of the room. Her attitude was no different from usual, but Count Salzberg noticed something was slightly off. He silently watched her leave, as if trying to gaze into her heart.

†

That night, Lady Yulia entered the grounds of her family home at the Mistel Company. It was already past ten.

I might have been visiting too often recently.

It hadn’t been long since the last time she’d asked Count Salzberg for permission to visit her father. Normally, a married woman would only return to her family’s home for special occasions, maybe once every few years. The frequency with which she visited her family seemed quite strange, even if they both lived in Epirus. It was especially noteworthy since Lady Yulia wasn’t scheduled to visit the Mistel Company that day, and she wouldn’t stay the night even if it meant going back home late. But since her husband had given her permission, she wasn’t doing anything wrong.

Lady Yulia handled internal affairs for Count Salzberg, so she had to meet with the Mistel Company, which controlled the economy in Epirus. With that as her

reason, she could even get away with spending the night here if need be. She didn't resort to that, but she did visit her family home once or twice a month. While unusual, it wasn't worthy of much attention.

A person's heart can be interesting. I used to hesitate so much before, but now...

Yulia couldn't shake her fear of Count Salzberg, and she had hesitated to betray him, but now she had made her decision. She felt liberated, like she'd been freed from a curse that had shackled her heart for years.

Filled with that sense of freedom, Lady Yulia reclined against the sofa. A moment later, she heard a knock on the door, which soon opened to reveal her father, Zack Mistel.

"My apologies, Yulia, for holding you up so long," he said and sat opposite of her.

Lady Yulia shook her head. "It's fine. I'm sorry for coming without informing you ahead of time."

From a noble's standpoint, Lady Yulia's sudden arrival was quite problematic. One would need to prepare to host a noble lady. It was very impolite not to inform anyone that she would be arriving that same evening.

Be that as it may, Zack laughed her apology off. He could tell, as her father, that something had changed in her. He picked up a bottle sitting on the table between them, poured some amber-colored fluid into a glass, and pushed it in Yulia's direction.

"What are you saying, my dear? No father would turn down a visit from his daughter. However..." He trailed off and silently gazed at Yulia's face before filling his own glass. "I see it in your eyes. You've decided."

Zack picked up the glass and took a swig. What he meant by that went without saying. The two of them remained speechless for one long moment, during which Lady Yulia thought back on the days she'd spent married to Count Salzberg. She then parted her lips, as if she'd made peace with her choice.

"Yes. I was torn over it for quite a while, but..."

That one sentence was enough for Zack Mistel to see into her emotions.

I see. Finally...

Since the day he had yielded to Count Salzberg and given Yulia's hand in marriage, Zack had always carried that regret with him—the guilt of warping his daughter's life for his own ends. But now, the whimsy of fate guided him to a chance to redo that choice.

Zack silently got to his feet and walked over to his work desk by the window. He opened a hidden drawer, took out a single letter, and handed it over to Lady Yulia.

Chapter 4: The Night before the War

A week had passed since Count Salzberg received Ryoma's letter. It was a declaration of war, and Salzberg had resolved to fight him directly. As such, he was gathering armies to Epirus.

A thick layer of leaden clouds blotted out the afternoon sky. A force of cavaliers clad in metal armor rode down the western highway, kicking up dust in their wake. Unfortunately for them, rain began pelting down in big fat drops. The large-built man leading the group sat atop a black horse and glared up at the gray sky. He clicked his tongue in annoyance.

The highway they were on led from the Bertrand barony to the citadel city of Epirus. The man yanked on the reins, prompting the horse to stop, and looked around. All he saw were pastures. There wasn't anything that could offer them shelter from the rain, except for a few trees standing pathetically at the roadside. He was leading a group of over a hundred men; those few trees wouldn't cover even half of them. Whoever had to stand outside of them would be drenched.

"Tch, it looks like the rain's only going to get heavier," he grumbled, spitting at the ground bitterly. "It's annoying enough that old Salzberg pretty much twisted our arm into helping him with this war. Now the weather's trying to ruin our day too."

He then turned around and shouted at the rest of his men. "All forces, halt! No point catching cold before a major battle! It's a bit early, but we set up camp here for the day."

The man's name was Robert Bertrand, the second son of the Bertrand barony. He was in his late twenties or early thirties, but his menacing aura made him seem ten years older. He gave the impression that he was a virile, dangerous man, and the scar carved into his right cheek was exceptionally eye-catching.



His limbs were toned and thick, and he was twice as large as any of the knights riding behind him. From his appearance, most people would assume he was some kind of brigand or mercenary. Appearances were deceiving, though. Robert was the natural enemy to all manner of bandits and thieves.

“Hey! Someone get me some booze!” Robert barked at his subordinates, who were beginning to set up camp.

Alcohol was customary in war, so the logistics carriage had bottles of liquor set aside. But the soldiers currently working on the campsite wouldn’t have any alcohol on them. Robert knew this and wouldn’t usually make this demand of them. He must have been quite moody and felt he couldn’t keep going without a drink.

As if reading Robert’s mind, a white-bearded knight approached him. He always had a bottle of ale attached to his horse’s saddle, just in case. Robert would complain that he wanted a drink every time he left the barony, so the old knight knew how to placate him.

“Here you are,” the old knight said as he offered Robert the bottle.

For a moment, Robert looked displeased. He’d made an unreasonable demand, but seeing someone actually respond to it annoyed him. He wordlessly took the bottle, uncorked it, and took a swig.

Robert did act like some kind of bandit. His behavior wasn’t befitting of a knight. But despite this, the old knight knew better than to say anything needless. Doing so now would only annoy and anger Robert. At worst, Robert would leave his army behind altogether and look for the closest brothel. That would destroy the Bertrand barony.

I swear. Sir Robert can be a handful sometimes.

Robert Bertrand had something of a troublesome personality. Once he’d decided to do something, he would do it no matter what. Perhaps he just had a one-track mind, but he lacked the personality necessary for a noble. That was a definite flaw, though an intentional one.

Robert was a very irritable person. Despite that, he was aware of the circumstances around him and knew to remain focused on the main goal. That

was why he was so conflicted at times like these. It made him difficult to deal with. He knew how to read the room, but for some reason he didn't. His unruly behavior couldn't be ignored, of course, but his biggest flaw was his timing.

I should admonish him for this, but it can wait until we get to Epirus. For now, I should handle this delicately.

The old knight had to at least prevent Robert from saying something that might offend Count Salzberg. There were no outsiders here, so even if Robert were to let his frustrations show, only the grass growing at his feet would know. But if he were to say anything like that in Epirus, the core of the Salzberg barony, it would be terrible. It was better that Robert let out steam here, on this empty highway, than there.

There was one man present, however, who ignored the old knight's attempts at consideration. Baron Bertrand had personally assigned Cidney O'Donnell to oversee Robert in this dispatch. As soon as he saw Robert drinking on the job, he began rudely admonishing him.

"Sir Robert, believe me, I understand how you feel. Count Salzberg may have ordered us to do this, but we're still only to assist him. And given that the enemy is some upstart baron, the outcome of this war is already quite clear. But while I do understand your frustrations, I must ask you to exercise patience here. All ten houses of the north are dispatching their soldiers. If House Bertrand were to directly refuse to help Count Salzberg, it would place us all at risk."

Anger streaked across Robert's features.

Cidney wasn't wrong—assuming that Robert wanted to maintain his family's standing. Rhoadseria's northern territories were governed by ten nobles—the ten houses of the north. Of those ten houses, House Salzberg was the only one to have the rank of count. It also controlled the citadel city of Epirus, a large army, and vast wealth. Because of this, House Salzberg had functioned as northern Rhoadseria's leader since the country's founding. The heads of House Salzberg had served as the crux of Rhoadseria's northern defense throughout history.

The royal family had even granted it special jurisdiction out of consideration

for its position. In the event that a foreign army marched on the country, House Salzberg had the authority to call on the ten houses of the north for reinforcements, as well as command knights dispatched from the capital. In other words, when it came to military affairs, House Salzberg was as good as the sovereign. Even during the nobles' faction's heyday, Duke Gelhart knew better than to try and make a move on House Salzberg.

Therein lay the reason that, despite being part of the Bertrand barony, Robert was known as one of Count Salzberg's Twin Blades. A mere baron couldn't refuse someone as powerful as Count Salzberg. Doing so would be suicide. Robert knew this perfectly well.

"Well, it was his shitty attitude, how he expects people to just bow down and comply with his every shitty order, that made Baron Mikoshiba rebel, wasn't it?!" Robert hollered at Cidney. "Butting heads with another noble when the country's falling apart... That's why I'm against this! But my father and brother have to gang up on me, prattling on about how it's the barony's duty, a noble's pride and so on... In the end, we just pissed someone off and encouraged him to start a war with us!"

For an angry outburst, Robert was being quite reasonable. But to Cidney, a sneering overseer, logical arguments held no meaning.

"It may be disrespectful of me to say this, but Baron Mikoshiba is nothing more than a status seeker who stumbled into success. As they say, the nail that sticks out gets hammered. Besides, we don't know that we're just a supportive army this time around. The Wortenia Peninsula has proved more lucrative than we thought, so we may be rewarded quite handsomely for our assistance."

Cidney's statement dripped with greed, unfit for a soldier, yet the other knights were secretly craving that outcome too.

Robert scoffed at Cidney and then grinned. "I guess that's what a dignified knight of House Bertrand amounts to. Real classy," he said, his voice thick with irony.

Cidney didn't seem the slightest bit annoyed, though. "Such is the way of the world. A knight's honor doesn't put food on the table. And regardless of how things came to be, Count Salzberg didn't start this war. I ask that you keep this

in mind.”

“So you’re saying that if someone falls for a taunt, it’s all their fault, huh?” Robert asked with a sneer.

Cidney said nothing. He simply bowed and turned to leave. Apparently, he had already said his piece.

What a buzzkill.

Watching him leave, Robert tossed the bottle behind him.

Ryoma’s demands weren’t unreasonable. For those in power, spies and secret operatives were essentially thieves that stole valuable information and intelligence. They could also function as assassins or saboteurs. They were nothing but insects that ravaged the garden. Sending them into another’s territory did look rather damning. True, this was a war-torn world, so it was normal for nobles to send spies to look into other nobles. But that didn’t mean that discovering spies within your territory was any less unpleasant.

Mikoshiba has the moral high ground, but...

Robert thought Ryoma’s demands were sensible. The problem was that this battle was between a baron and a count. They were both nobles and members of the ruling class, but there were ranks within the aristocracy. Unless something very unusual happened, the higher rank would usually win in a disagreement.

In the end, the real facts didn’t matter. What mattered was how many people one could gather to back their claims. Between a mere baron and the leader of the ten houses of the north, it went without saying who would win.

That’s why my father and brother obey Count Salzberg, like Cidney said. Especially now that the Wortenia Peninsula turned out to be a mountain of treasure.

For better or worse, nobles sought to expand their territory and wealth. They had to retain the honor of their family names at all costs. So whenever they found the right prey, they would swarm over it like hyenas. They would threaten, coax, and bribe to get their way. And a weak baron was the easiest, most appetizing prey they could find. No one would sympathize with or spare

Ryoma.

But, wait... I see. There's a chance they intentionally provoked Ryoma to declare war. I wouldn't put it past those vultures.

By constantly sending spies into Ryoma's territory, they increased his anger. And once he lashed out in retribution, they would crush him with military strength. All that would remain would be the Wortenia Peninsula, with its commercial port that had suddenly become much more valuable. Rights to it would be split among the surrounding nobles.

Robert didn't have any proof to back up his hypothesis, but he felt as if the outlines of this conflict were becoming more clear.

Ryoma was loathed by most of Rhoadseria's nobles. He was a vagabond who came out of nowhere, he had been lucky enough to win the civil war somehow, and he had been elevated to noble status without regard for the class system. Still, the other nobles would have overlooked him if he'd lived modestly in his domain. However, Ryoma had developed the Wortenia Peninsula, an otherwise useless lot, into an economic power. The nobles, fixated on their superiority, couldn't sit quietly by and leave him be.

But who planned this, then?

As far as Robert knew, his father and brother weren't crafty enough to come up with a plan on that scale. At best, they'd just wag their tails at Count Salzberg and beg for leftovers. They were greedy; the only things they cared for were extorting their people and living luxuriously. They had no experience on the battlefield.

What about old Salzberg? No, this doesn't feel like something he'd plan. Was it that evil woman, Yulia?

As soon as that thought came to mind, Robert denied it at once.

No. Lady Yulia is skilled with finances, but I've never heard of her scheming like this. She could be more capable than she lets on, but still... Was it someone from the ten houses of the north, then?

Robert thought back to the heads of the ten houses of the north and their close aides. He thought any one of them could be behind the whole affair.

Robert was, in fact, mistaken about that, but he knew how corrupt the nobles could be. His suspicion wasn't all that surprising.

I can look for the culprit some other time. But whoever came up with this pulled one nasty trick. I guess they really can't tolerate Ryoma's success.

With that in mind, Robert entered his tent, seeking refuge from the intensifying rain.

†

A few days later, two armies met where the roads extending from the southeast and southwest of Epirus connected.

"Sir Robert, please look over there," the old knight said after receiving a report from the scouts.

Robert looked in the direction the old knight pointed. There was an army marching down the opposite highway, heading their way. At first the army was only a dot in the distance, but it gradually grew big enough for their banner to be visible.

"A golden eagle spreading its wings against a red background... That's the Galveria barony," Robert said, a smile spreading across his lips.

That was the banner of the man who had fought at Robert's side countless times already. He wouldn't mistake that flag.

"All forces, halt!" Robert ordered.

Since the highways were built for armies to march along them, they were fairly wide, but they weren't wide enough for two armies at once. They would need to coordinate which army would march ahead first.

"We wait for a while," he told the old knight riding at his side before prompting his horse to march forward.

Normally, a commander like Robert wouldn't need to negotiate this personally, but he knew what he was doing. The other army's commander realized Robert's intentions and rode ahead.

"I figured it'd be you leading this army," Robert said. "It's been a while, Signus."

Signus met him with a toothy grin. He got off his horse and raised his hands.

“Same here, Robert Bertrand. It’s good to see your ugly mug.”

“Shut up, you reject. They still feeding you scraps back in your barony?”

“I could ask you the same thing!”

Though they were hurling insults, they threw their arms around each other.

“I think it’s been what, two... Has it been three years since we last saw each other face-to-face?” Signus asked.

“Yeah, I think it was when they sent us to resolve that border skirmish with Helnesgoula,” Robert said with a sigh. He then tapped his fist against Signus’s chest, an ironic smile on his lips. “Well, can’t do much about that. We’re both excess baggage for our baronies, right?”

“From the way you’re talking, I’m guessing nothing’s changed on your end, eh?” Signus asked.

“Nope, my brother’s been putting me through the wringer. What about you?”

“Same as ever. My stepmother hates me; my father ignores me. It feels like they want to hide the fact I exist. They wouldn’t have even sent me out this time if Count Salzberg hadn’t insisted I come along.”

Unlike firstborn sons, who were the heirs to their houses, second and third sons were only valuable as backups in case something happened to their older brother. So long as nothing happened, their families had no use for them. This meant that the first born was treated much better than the second and third sons. As a sixth son and a bastard child, Signus was that much worse off. His position naturally meant he would be treated horribly—not that he was the only one being treated badly.

Robert’s brother, Rosen, already had a wife, a son, and a daughter. Robert was even less valuable as his spare. He was rarely called to any social events with other nobles. When he was, it was only to fill out the dinner table. Had it not been for his extraordinary martial feats, Robert would have been demoted to a subject of House Bertrand. Either that, or he would have left his family and sought his fortune on his own.

“Doesn’t look like much changed in your family either, Robert,” Signus said.

“But you’re not faring much better, are you?”

Signus nodded, looking resigned. Robert and he were in similar positions. They had been born to families that were by no means affluent. Neither of them was the firstborn, so they were shunned as outsiders within their own households. In addition, their talent for combat kept them from breaking free of their families. The similarity between them was uncanny.

“It’s not like we can do anything about it.”

“I suppose...”

Neither of them liked that their families took advantage of them. Still, the only real way out would be to slay their families and usurp control over their households. They could do it too. Both Robert and Signus looked like men made of flesh and blood, but their martial prowess bordered on superhuman. But for as coldly as their families treated them, they couldn’t say they felt no attachment to their relatives, to say nothing of killing them.

“Oh, well. We can’t keep chatting here forever,” Signus said, turning around to return to his horse. “Let’s handle this for now.” He then threw a glance at Robert over his shoulder. “Let’s have a drink when we get to Epirus, eh? We’ve got catching up to do.”

“Yeah, got it,” Robert said, nodding. “But you’re paying for it.”

Signus smiled and nodded back at him. “Fine. You get one mug on me.”

Both got on their horses.

“See you in Epirus, then!”

“In Epirus!”

After he saw his old friend off, Robert turned around.

†

On the second floor of an inn, not far from the gates of Epirus, a man gazed out the window, glaring at the streets below as he reported the situation to his superior. Said superior was reclining in his chair.

“Another army crossed the gates, Lord Jinnai. They bear the banner of a golden eagle over a red background.”

“Hm, an eagle... The Galveria barony. How many men did they bring?” Jinnai asked calmly, puffing on a silver pipe said to have been passed down from the Igasaki clan’s ancestors when they were first summoned centuries ago.

Jinnai Igasaki had a round face that suited a merchant more than a ninja. But there was a dangerous glint to his narrow eyes that revealed how lethal he was.

“Roughly a hundred cavaliers,” the other man answered unflinchingly.

As part of the Igasaki clan, this man had mastered the arts of assassination, sabotage, and a host of others skills. But of all the tasks required of a shinobi, this man was most skilled at gathering intelligence in anticipation of battle. He would infiltrate the enemy’s ranks and inform his masters of the size of enemy forces. He had inevitably learned how to estimate the enemy’s numbers just by looking at them.

“Cavaliers... So it’s just knights?”

“Yes. They’re all knights in full armor.”

As he tipped his pipe to knock away the ashes, Jinnai smiled. “I see. So Baron Galveria sent the smallest forces he could without relying on conscripted peasants.”

“They’re probably wary of the uprising,” the man said.

“I’d imagine they are.” Jinnai nodded, satisfied. He then took out some fresh tobacco from his pocket. “They’re not stupid enough to conscript their peasants with revolts breaking out in every corner of the kingdom.”

Seven of the ten houses sent their forces to Epirus, which comes up to over a thousand knights.

With the exception of the governor of Epirus, Count Salzberg, that left just two more houses. Typically, nobles had their own private armies. On the surface, nobles were under the absolute authority of the crown. But since they were granted the right to autonomously govern their lands, they needed some sort of military power to enact their authority.

After all, the areas outside of their fences and trenches weren't under any control. Monsters could threaten people at any time there, and criminals or bandits driven out of town could prey on the weak. Survival of the fittest ruled the areas outside the city boundaries. Not even a city surrounded by firm walls, like Epirus, was perfectly safe. Dragons, or monsters of similar rank, could easily descend upon it if they felt so inclined.

Though their defenses were imperfect, cities that were safe and affluent influenced the economy. People gathered in safe places, and where people went, goods would follow. Security encouraged people to engage in commerce. Anyone would prefer to live in a safe city where they didn't need to lock their doors than a place where they feared being mugged every day.

The problem was that commoners typically weren't allowed to freely migrate between cities. Except for special circumstances, like marriage, a considerable tax was required to move between cities.

But even if it meant paying a tax, people wanted to live under a governor who took care to maintain the public order. The influential merchants particularly felt that way. Poor public order impacted business negatively, which meant merchants naturally gravitated to more secure cities. Unlike farmers, who were bound to their lands, merchants could move fairly easily to safer cities, so long as they had the money to pay the tax.

In order to counter the threats looming outside the cities and stimulate the finances in their territories, governors worked on reinforcing their military strength, particularly by hiring knights. But that didn't mean they blindly appointed people to the rank of knight.

Nobles possessing vast military strength weren't a good thing for the royal family. That made them latent threats that could one day oppose the throne. The royal family couldn't afford to ignore a potential enemy. However, the sovereign didn't deny the nobles the right to an army altogether. If a neighboring country were to invade the kingdom, and the army was united under the sovereign, the kingdom could take considerable losses before the royal army even reached the battlefield. With that in mind, it was necessary for the nobles to have their own armies.

It was a delicate balance. The nobles needed an appropriately large military force, but not so large as to draw unwanted attention from the sovereign. This was why the nobles limited their standing army to only knights and officers and filled in the blanks with conscripted commoners when needed. That made things easier to control. It was like how a large corporation might rely on temporary employees or outsourcing.

The average baron in Rhoadseria typically had 50 to 100 knights and could conscript around 500 more troops. A viscount had 150 to 200 knights and 1,000 conscripts. A count had 300 knights and between 2,000 to 3,000 conscripts. This was only a rough estimate, though. It all depended on the size and condition of the territory. Since the ten houses were charged with protecting the northern borders, they had larger military forces. House Salzberg alone had over 500 knights.

Whatever the actual number was, Jinnai and the other man now had a rough idea of what the ten houses of the north were planning.

The fact that they only dispatched their knights means each house is feeling unsure of their domain's public order. If they didn't have any problems, they'd conscript every soldier they could.

For all the ten houses were concerned, they were up against a single upstart baron. If all ten houses consolidated their armies, they'd have over ten thousand conscripted commoners. Their victory would be assured. But despite this, they only sent their knights to Epirus. Their intentions were clear.

Like ants flocking to honey...

For years, the Wortenia Peninsula was known as an undesirable, unprofitable frontier. But once Ryoma Mikoshiba took over as governor, things changed, especially once he established trade relations with Helnesgoula and the other countries. It had become a profitable strip of land.

Any of the ten houses who sent troops to Count Salzberg were guaranteed a place at the bargaining table once they'd won the war. The question was how the land would be divided. Since it would be split among all ten houses, each share would be small. It was similar to a horse race where everyone bet on a winning horse. The more gamblers at the table, the smaller the winnings. If one

wanted to profit knowing the winnings would be slim, they'd need to up the stakes.

Everything is going as my lord planned. I can see why Gennou is so taken with him.

Given the class system, it wasn't out of sympathy that the nobles didn't conscript the commoners—not when they stood to profit so much from winning. If they wanted to get the most out of this war, they should have conscripted as many soldiers as they could and thrown everything they had at Ryoma. But they didn't. The unrest in Rhoadseria wouldn't allow it, and they were fearful of the consequences.

My lord has foreseen everything so far. When Gennou said he found someone who might inherit the founder's will, I suspected he'd gone completely mad, but...

Jinnai lit the pipe again and took a deep puff, but his moment of bliss was soon disturbed. The eyes of the man looking out the window settled on a knight leading the forces.

"Sir! I think that man is Signus Galveria."

Jinnai's eyes narrowed sharply, like a serpent that had spotted its prey.

"Galveria of the east... When we investigated House Galveria, I thought the chances of him coming this time were about fifty-fifty. But I suppose it makes sense that Count Salzberg would gather his strongest knights."

On Ryoma's order, the Igasaki clan had investigated the internal affairs of each of the ten houses.

"House Bertrand of the west will have surely sent Robert."

Each of the ten houses was a prime source of strength for Count Salzberg, but among all of them, Houses Bertrand and Galveria were exceptionally powerful. They were his rooks on this proverbial chess board. Both houses had unremarkable territories, but one thing set them apart from the other houses.

"Count Salzberg's Twin Blades... Good. Let's see how they fare. I'm curious if the rumors have any truth to them," Jinnai whispered with an indomitable

smile.

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That night, Count Salzberg held a grand feast at his estate. His cooks used rare, fragrant ingredients for the food, and his sommeliers uncorked bottles of expensive wine, the likes of which were hard to come by even for a noble.

As the leader of the northern alliance, and the one who beckoned them to this war, Count Salzberg was a gracious host to his guests. The only drawback was that there were hardly any women around. War loomed ahead, so this wasn't an ordinary evening party; the participants' wives and daughters couldn't attend.

Well, even if there were any young noble ladies here, they wouldn't want my company.

Cursing his lot in life, Robert Bertrand brought a piece of pheasant to his lips. If he were the first son and to inherit his family's headship, the nobles present would be much more interested in deepening their friendship with him. But he wasn't, and none of the other families cared about him.

Robert himself had no aspirations to take over his house, but those around him didn't see it that way. His older brother was more of a scholar, lacking in martial abilities, and he regarded Robert's position with bitter suspicion. House Bertrand valued martial might, so this caused some friction between the two. Rosen Bertrand wasn't going to let his younger brother inherit the house instead of him.

This was the hand life dealt Robert as Rosen's younger brother, but Robert couldn't stand that he was suffering for it. He especially disliked that it was only at times like these that he was called upon and forced to serve a family that treated him awfully.

"And he's pouring all the money he can into these parties, like always. Shit, this is all stuff I'd never eat at home. Hey, can you fill me up?"

Having gulped down the wine in his glass, Robert asked a nearby maid for a refill. All he cared for here was the food and drink, but what else was he supposed to focus on?

She’s got a good butt, at least. I’d like to see what she’s like in bed, Robert thought to himself as he watched the maid walk off after filling his glass. Of course, he didn’t have the nerve to follow through with that thought. All the maids waiting on them were pretty girls, but rumor had it that Count Salzberg had had his way with each and every one of them. Because of that, no noble was brazen enough to make a pass at them.

As Robert downed the wine like cheap booze, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“I see your drinking habits haven’t changed.”

Robert knew immediately who it was, and he hurriedly turned around and bowed his head politely.

“Count Salzberg. It’s been a long while, milord.”



Robert greeted Count Salzberg with the etiquette expected of a noble. When Count Salzberg wasn't around to hear it, Robert would call him "Old Salzberg" or even "shitty old man" whenever he was in a foul mood. Yet those same lips addressed the count respectfully now. Anyone who knew what Robert was usually like would probably be stunned. Even a brusque contrarian like him knew to behave himself when the situation called for it. His standards for what those situations were just happened to be a bit different than everyone else's.

"Yes, I see you're enjoying yourself. That's good," Count Salzberg said, eyeing Robert's plate loaded with food. There was something disapproving in his expression and tone of voice, as if he were criticizing Robert's lack of dignity.

"Yes, it's all things I could never have at home," Robert said, picking up a piece of ham and munching on it with his wine. "I plan to enjoy it while I can."

He wasn't lying about that. The Bertrand barony wasn't so bad off that they lived in squalor, but they were fundamentally poor nobles. And since he was the second son and not the heir, he was even worse off.

"You do seem to be in good health," Count Salzberg said with an ironic smile. "Well, if you fight well in this war, I'll see to it you're fed as well as you'd like. Put everything you have into this."

There were undertones of shock, disdain, and exasperation in Count Salzberg's words, but the fact that he went out of his way to speak to Robert showed that the count didn't take Robert's strength for granted. In fact, he and Signus were Count Salzberg's most powerful pawns in this war.

Count Salzberg was a warrior, and he believed himself the strongest warrior in Rhoadseria, but even he acknowledged Robert and Signus could one day match him. One could even go so far as to claim Robert and Signus were stronger than the rest of Houses Galveria and Bertrand's soldiers put together.

"Did you really need to mobilize all ten houses for this, though?" Robert asked. "I've heard the rumors about Baron Mikoshiba, and apparently he really is doing something in the peninsula, but..."

Since Count Salzberg had approached him, Robert saw this as a chance to make his doubts known. They were up against just one baron, and his territory

was the barren Wortenia Peninsula. Meanwhile, the ten houses of the north all had above-average armies considering their titles. It felt like this war would be over before it even started. Actually, even House Salzberg on its own should have been able to defeat the Mikoshiba barony. At least, that was the conclusion Robert came to based on the information he had.

"Who's to say?" Count Salzberg lightly shrugged. "Honestly, even I think I might be overreacting here. But that man is hard to predict; that much is fact. I can understand why my wife errs on the side of caution. But I suppose we'll have our answers in a few days' time."

With that said, Count Salzberg glanced out the window, as if gazing at the land to the north hidden behind the leaden curtain of night.

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Several days later, an army clad in black armor appeared to the north of Epirus.

Standing in a watchtower built along the ramparts of the citadel city, Signus narrowed his eyes as the intense wind whipped at his hair. His gaze was fixed on the rows of black helmets approaching the city. They were clearly visible under the light of day, but they blended in perfectly at night.

As the enemy army lined up several kilometers away, they gathered under a banner with an image of a double-headed serpent coiled around a sword, one of its heads golden and the other argent. Its red eyes glared at its surroundings menacingly. It wasn't a design Signus had seen before.

I see, so he has about a thousand or so men. Their equipment is uniform... Baron Mikoshiba probably bought it in bulk and supplied it to his troops. Looks like he has no shortage of funds.

Count Salzberg's army had two thousand knights, provided by the ten houses of the north. Having received word of the enemy's approach, the commanders of the count's army gathered on the walls. They used martial thaumaturgy to enhance their vision, which allowed them to observe the enemy army and its soldiers.

Signus gazed ahead with his arms crossed.

“How’s it look, Signus?” Robert called out to him from behind.

We have the advantage in terms of numbers, but we were foolish to think Lord Mikoshiba was just a baron. During the conference yesterday, we said we’d just beat him down with brute force, but looking at this...

Signus was only looking from a distance, so he couldn’t make any real assumptions, but the enemy’s ranks looked well-organized. They were likely elites, and their numbers were considerably greater than what they’d expected. Considering a normal baron could only support an army of a hundred or so knights, the size of Ryoma Mikoshiba’s force was exceptional.

“This war might be more trouble than we thought,” Signus whispered, his eyes fixed on the distance. He kept his voice low because he knew that this wasn’t something to say before going to war. After all, Count Salzberg had twice the numbers.

Though Baron Mikoshiba’s army was larger than they’d expected, Count Salzberg’s army still had the numerical advantage. He could also mobilize it from Epirus, a renowned citadel. Having a city as their base of operations meant that not only did they have a source of supplies, but they could also conscript the citizens and hire mercenaries if need be. Count Salzberg’s army clearly held all the cards. If Signus were to be pessimistic now, everyone would just brand him a coward.

Despite this, Signus couldn’t help but put his anxiety into words. All skilled soldiers claimed that war had a certain scent. Those who’d experienced battle and survived had developed a sixth sense for it. And the moment Signus laid eyes on the other side’s army, his intuition had cried out in alarm.

“Hmm. Well, if you think so, I guess you must be right,” Robert replied with his usual composed expression.

Signus smiled wryly. “You never change, friend.”

Out of everyone in Count Salzberg’s army, Signus and Robert boasted unrivaled strength and combat experience. It had been decided that the two of them would serve as vanguards. In this world, vanguards were commanders who would charge at and cut their way through the enemy forces. Their performance would increase the soldiers’ morale, and the second and third

waves would wash over the enemy and turn the tides of battle. Their role was critical and would decide which way the war's outcome swung. For men of the battlefield, no role could be more honorable. However, it also meant braving a great deal of danger.

Though he was charged with such an important duty, Robert remained calm even after hearing Signus's ominous words. He didn't affirm or deny them. In fact, he almost seemed indifferent to it all.

"Don't worry," Robert said. "Either way, our job's the same. We just kill any enemy soldier we see. Old Salzberg and his bootlicking lackeys are just gonna have to pick up our slack." After he finished, he looked around with a cold gaze that succinctly expressed his feelings.

Not far from where they were standing, Viscount Telshini was looking out at Ryoma's army too. He had a nasty expression on his face, and he was laughing vulgarly. He was seeing the same thing as Signus, but his impression was the complete opposite.

"So those are Baron Mikoshiba's soldiers. Quite the gaudy costumes he had them wear."

The men around Viscount Telshini raised their voices in agreement, parroting him.

"Indeed..." one of them said.

"But looking at their gear, it seems like the Wortenia Peninsula is more affluent than we thought," said another.

"And given the numbers he gathered, I can only assume the rumors about him buying slaves in bulk are true."

"His numbers are impressive, but individual strength is what decides the outcome. The upstart did work hard, I will grant him that, but how many of those soldiers are actually useful?"

"From what the count told me, the three hundred soldiers he took to Xarooda could all use thaumaturgy."

"That's an obvious bluff. He probably hired a few skilled users and mingled

them in with his troops, fooling everyone into thinking his entire army was on that level."

"Well, that's what I think too, but..."

Signus and Robert could hear the nobles' exchange, full of ridicule and exasperation. These were the firstborn sons set to inherit the headships of the ten houses of the north. A few of them spoke sensibly, but any fair point was buried under obstinate opinions and contrary objections. The few reasonable men present weren't confident enough in their words to argue back.

"Don't overthink this. We just need to do what we can given our position," Robert said. His derisive smile vanished, and he gazed fixedly at Signus.

The intensity of Robert's words made Signus avert his gaze. Just like Robert, he wasn't keen on this war. He wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. Still, he was going to put his best effort into winning—an approach Robert seemed to disagree with.

"But where is this war going to go from here?" Signus asked. "Count Salzberg was originally a skilled warrior. If I try to talk some sense into him—"

Signus was displeased with both the way he was being treated in general and with this war in particular. As a commander, a man who held people's lives in his hands, he'd always thought he had to do the best job he could. And being cautious and taking well-considered measures were the best ways to stop disasters from happening. Remaining inside the confines of Epirus's wall and collecting information could change everything.

While Robert understood Signus's feelings, he still shook his head. "Don't bother. It doesn't matter what advice we give; no one's gonna listen. They'll just say we don't know our place and brush us off, or they'll think we're trying to curry favor with the count to take over our households. And if your family catches wind of that, they'll off you even if we do win this war, you know?"

Signus and Robert were only allowed to live because their families thought they had no interest in seizing the headship for themselves. That along with their martial prowess was why their eldest brothers—who had no talent for battle—had given them control over their armies. They viewed Robert and Signus as convenient substitutes for themselves. But if something were to even

slightly shake their confidence, the Twin Blades' lives would be forfeit. Victory on the battlefield didn't necessarily make one a winner. As strong as Signus might be, poison in his food or a knife through his ribs while he slept would still kill him.

"Listen, Signus, overthinking things is a bad habit of yours. Just take it easy and do what you want. Focus on killing the enemies right in front of you. If there's a trap, we'll break through it."

Those words bordered on callous, but Robert's suggestion was the safest, most efficient method.

"But if we do that..." Signus started.

"I told you, didn't I? Worry about your own damn hide," Robert said, giving him a friendly tap on the

shoulder before turning around."Are you..." Signus whispered at Robert's back. "Are you really okay with this?"

His old friend didn't answer.

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"Milord, a report just came in from Lord Jinnai. The ten houses of the north have already entered Epirus's walls." One of the guards standing outside Ryoma's tent had walked inside and whispered that.

A command post had been set up inside the tent. A long table sat in the center, with a large map spread out over it. It was a highly detailed topographical map of not just Epirus, but the entirety of Rhoadseria's northern regions.

"Also, here is the thing you ordered us to bring." The guard handed over a securely sealed letter.

Ryoma accepted it and placed it in his breast pocket, without so much as opening it.

"Understood," Ryoma said. "Good work. Have the runner who brought the report take a rest before he heads back to Jinnai."

"Understood." The soldier bowed and ran out of the tent. Thanks to his

arduous training, he knew better than to say anything more.

Lione and her people really ran them ragged, Ryoma thought.

They had used Spartan training, meant to beat them into shape and mold them into skilled, disciplined soldiers in the shortest time possible. In modern society, this would undoubtedly be seen as abuse. But Ryoma and his subordinates had had no choice but to do things that way.

I guess I'll just have to ask them to forgive me. This did give them a chance to survive...

Ryoma didn't presume himself to be omnipotent or capable of saving everyone under his wing. He had his hands full just protecting his own well-being. But the methods he used could mean that instead of a hundred dying, only ninety-nine would die. It would only save one person, but would it be right to do nothing just because he couldn't save all one hundred people? No one could answer that question. If God existed, maybe he could.

Either way, I can only do what's within my means.

As that thought filled his mind, Ryoma heard someone approach him from behind.

"What's wrong, boy? Hidin' something again?"

A vulgar woman with shoulder-length crimson hair approached him with a teasing smile. It was Lione. Her red hair and combative personality had earned her the moniker "The Crimson Lioness."



Lione was one of his longest-running companions, second only to the Malfist sisters, and among his most trusted lieutenants. The only problem was that she still treated Ryoma like a younger brother and teasingly called him “boy.”

“Yeah, I am hiding something, actually,” Ryoma replied with a straight face. “I’ll explain it in a bit, though.”

“Hmm. Right then,” Lione replied, seemingly bored. “Yer no fun, boy. Can’t tease ya without ya goin’ all serious. You’ve been gettin’ cheeky on me.”

“I think you know my methods by now?” Ryoma replied with a smile.

“Sure I do,” Lione said, meeting his smile with a sarcastic one of her own. “Ya were a schemer since the day I met ya. At first, I didn’t get how a kid yer age could be like that, but after years, I’m used to it. Same as you, right, Boltz?” She directed the conversation over to her lieutenant, the one-armed Boltz.

“Can’t say it surprises me anymore. The lad got here by making dangerous gambles, after all. Seeing him act cautious almost makes me worry.” Boltz directed a meaningful glance at Ryoma.

“I guess I must be pretty decent, then, since you and Lione still back me up,” Ryoma said with a grin.

“Hmph. Guess ya got us there,” Lione muttered, her cheeks flushing. She then scoffed at him and looked away.

Everyone present could tell Lione was just hiding her embarrassment.

Lione had spent years living as the leader of a mercenary group, and it was the leader’s job to decide if the people hiring them were trustworthy, even if their request was backed by the guild. Mercenaries put their lives on the line, so discerning the decency of their employer could mean life or death. Because of this, Lione had developed a keen eye for people. How she and Boltz got involved with Ryoma in the first place was nothing more than a sequence of tangled coincidences. Ryoma might have had moral fiber, but if Lione and Boltz hadn’t thought that he was a man worth serving, they’d have taken their mercenary group and left for another country. In other words, Lione’s very presence here was proof of the deep trust between her and Ryoma. Still, by her very nature, Lione was a bit bashful to admit that she trusted him to his face.

A calm, silent air hung over the tent. It didn't last long, though.

"All right, banter ends here. We've got a war to fight. Still, I already explained the plans earlier, so I don't think you need to hear it again."

Ryoma's low, collected voice filled the tent. All the lieutenants around the table, starting with Lione and Boltz, grew more tense and serious.

"For now, just like we predicted, the armies of all ten houses have gathered in Epirus. They have roughly two thousand knights."

Ryoma picked up two figurines of cavaliers and placed them over Epirus on the map.

"Are they all knights?" Boltz asked.

"Yeah, they are."

"Hmm. I see your plan worked, lad."

"As weak as conscripts might be," Ryoma continued, "numbers are an important factor in open field combat."

Everyone else nodded.

If this war were a chess game, Count Salzberg would naturally be the king, while Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria, his two strongest soldiers, would be his rooks. The conscripts, by contrast, would all be pawns. Certainly, some of the conscripts might have individual strength, but the deciding factor on the battlefield was whether one was able to use thaumaturgy or not. Even so, that didn't mean pawns were useless. Though a true chess master could perhaps win a match using just rooks, bishops, and knights, it was extremely difficult.

"For now, everythin' went according to yer plan, boy. The first fight should decide how the rest goes. What's yer strategy after that?" Lione asked, a dangerous smile on her lips. She was a skilled commander, but she was also a savage warrior. Her instincts sensed the bloodshed about to unfold.

"We'll be clashing against their army. Conventional battle," Ryoma answered.

At those words, all the warriors in the tent raised their voices in a battle cry.

Chapter 5: The Beast's Howl

The walls of Epirus loomed ahead of them. Countless flags flapped in the wind in front of those walls, bearing the emblems of the ten houses of the north.

Ryoma smiled ferociously at the army lining up before him. "Well then, looks like the enemy's ready to go at it too."

Count Salzberg's army was twice the size of Ryoma's. If Ryoma were up against an amateur, it would be one thing, but the enemy had defensive facilities and was experienced enough to use them to their advantage. But despite their resources, Count Salzberg's army chose to meet Ryoma's army head-on, on an open field. Realizing they had the numerical advantage, they wanted to finish this war as quickly as possible.

Both options—staying inside the walls or going outside them—had their pros and cons. Count Salzberg and the other nobles chose the latter. After all, he did have the ten houses on his side, and he was up against a single upstart baron. His victory seemed assured. If he let it show that they were struggling against Ryoma's forces, even a little, it would besmirch their families' names. They would be the laughingstock of not just all of Rhoadseria, but the entire western continent. Others would then view them as nobles in name only, no better than commoners.

Good. This proves that they don't have any more soldiers left in their domains.

There were only two options for fighting an enemy without prior information. The first option was to go on the defensive and minimize losses while gathering intelligence. The other was to use the greatest offensive power you had to defeat the enemy. Both methods had their merits.

Count Salzberg chose to crush Ryoma with greater force. Deep down, though, he and the ten houses feared Ryoma. And that fear was what convinced the nobles to meet Ryoma in battle. Ryoma had blocked their attempts to send spies into Wortenia, so uncertainty and anxiety had grown in their hearts.

They're moving just as I planned. Proud people are very predictable.

The commoner revolts that had erupted all around Rhoadseria further

restricted the nobles' options. All the effort Ryoma had put into making sure the rebellions happened proved to be worth it. All that was left now was to fight and slay the enemy. He didn't even have to make a speech to inspire his soldiers.

One of the soldiers at Ryoma's side blew a horn, and the two armies lined up opposite each other.



The enemy army stood in single and double lines, forming an orthodox rectangular formation—a traditional formation used throughout history in Ryoma's world. It took little time to organize, which was helpful, but other than that, it offered no particular advantages. At best, it widened the surface area of the army and minimized losses for the vanguard when the fighting became savage.

Ryoma split his army into two groups of five hundred troops each. One group was for the vanguard and the other was for the rear guard. Since Count Salzberg had more men, he split his army into a vanguard of eight hundred, a mid-guard of five hundred, and a rear guard of another five hundred. The remaining soldiers guarded Epirus. Even though winning this war would be easy, Count Salzberg couldn't risk his stronghold falling to the enemy.

That choice would eventually cause Count Salzberg a great deal of misfortune.

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The ground shook as the black army began to march. Count Salzberg's army charged forward to meet them.

"They're pretty quick, given that they're on foot!" said one of the commanding officers in Count Salzberg's army.

His name was Cidney O'Donnell, the man Count Bertrand had sent to watch over Robert. But right now, he was on the frontlines, leading the charge.

Why?! This isn't what I signed up for!

Cidney's heart burned with indignation. However, the situation cared little for Cidney's feelings.

The enemy soldiers moved swiftly, much faster than warriors in metal armor could ever run. In fact, even if they had been wearing just leather armor, they were still moving too fast. That left just one conclusion: martial thaumaturgy.

"So the rumors are true?! Dammit, what are the archers doing?! Close the gap! Ready the front spearmen!"

Under Cidney's command, Count Salzberg's soldiers prepared to intercept the enemy.

Bows weren't commonly used in this world. They were ineffective in such frantic fighting. Bows were used for their ability to fire rapidly and attack from long distances. In other words, so long as archers remained a safe distance away, they could attack without fear of counterattack.

But this world also had thaumaturgy. With martial thaumaturgy, the human body could move at speeds that not only matched horses, but even arrows in flight. They could wear armor so thick that an ordinary soldier wouldn't be able to penetrate it. Soldiers could smoothly close in on their enemies. And during their advance, they could use different weapons at different ranges more effectively. A sword had a longer range than a dagger, and a spear could reach farther than both.

Cidney had lived through countless battles, and there was no doubt in his voice. As the black wave approached his forces, with the banner of the double-headed snake fluttering above them, his heart was steady.

"Get ready!"

The soldiers around him responded with a battle cry. They concentrated, bidding their chakras to operate. However, most of the knights present could only operate three of their chakras.

In this world, those who mastered the Manipura chakra, located under the navel, were regarded as true warriors. By repeatedly activating it countless times, warriors could operate it with ease, even during stressful combat situations.

The chakras in the knights' bodies began operating, augmenting their physical abilities. Three steps, two, one... The enemy soldiers had entered the range of their spears.

"Die!"

They thrust their spears downward, clashing with the enemy's weapons. Red sparks sprayed between opponents. They thrust their spears a second time, and a third. They thrust so hard their hands became numb from the impact.

One knight felt his spear slip from the force, and he desperately tightened his grip.

He's matching me tit for tat. He might be a commander.

Many talented knights took to the front lines even though they had subordinates to command. A single skilled knight could do the work of several ordinary knights. And in this world, survival of the fittest was law. Killing another life-form meant absorbing their prana, so the strong actively pursued mighty opponents.

This was why the knight believed he was up against a skilled, experienced soldier the same age as him. But what he heard next made him doubt his hearing.

"Doyle, cover me from the back and take care of the enemies on my sides. I'll handle this one. Go!"

There was nothing unusual about his words. The problem lay with the voice that had spoken them. It was a young man's voice. Based on the pitch, he seemed to be in his mid-teens, or at the very least, no older than twenty.

This can't be... I'm fighting a child that's as young as my son?!

This boy who was matching him in combat was the same age as his successor. And because the knight had helped his son train and knew how skilled he was, the realization that this young boy was fighting him equally was that much more shocking.

Who are these soldiers? This can't be... It's absurd!

The boy was dodging, blocking, and returning the continuous thrusts the man had spent years perfecting. This was the worst nightmare a knight could face.

How is he dodging my attacks?! How in the blazes is he countering me?!

One doubt followed another, and soon the knight's mind was overcome with confusion. His attacks gradually grew weaker, and his thrusts became predictable. It wasn't because of physical exhaustion, though. The knight's stamina and endurance was much better than ordinary people's. But even a knight graced with superhuman strength could succumb to mental exhaustion and desperation.

This can't be. It can't, it can't! This isn't supposed to happen!

In most cases, the first attack decided who would win. But they'd exchanged blows dozens of times now, and there still was no clear winner. In all of this knight's long career, he had never experienced something so frustratingly difficult. He'd always thought that he was stronger, but his confidence and strong will were crumbling to pieces.

"Die already, you stupid brat!" the knight yelled before using the most powerful thrust in his arsenal.

That was a fatal mistake. The knight had forgotten that he wasn't dueling one-on-one. He was fighting on a battlefield where lives were on the line. A sudden intense blow struck him from behind. The knight's arms, which had been aloft, fell limply to his sides.

Warm, sticky fluid rose from the pit of his stomach, filling up his throat. A rusty taste filled his mouth. His hands weakly fumbled over his back, but all he could feel was a warm, wet substance. What had happened went without saying.

The knight glanced over his shoulder, glaring at the enemy standing behind him.

"You damn demons... I hope you burn...in hell..."

Other hateful epithets leaked from the dying knight's lips, but he knew his words were utterly meaningless. At first, his army had formed a rectangle. But while he and the young boy were exchanging blows, the formation had shifted. Little by little, the black wave of soldiers was penetrating the white formation.

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"Oh, now this is interesting. They're facing our knights head-on and matching them."

Sitting atop his horse, Robert narrowed his eyes as he watched the ensuing battle. Ecstasy and bloodlust oozed from his facial expressions.

Signus shook his head. "This isn't a show, Robert. They're pushing us back."

Signus was surprised by Robert's nonchalant attitude, yet his own smile carried a hint of sarcasm. The current situation was proof that Signus's hunch

about the outcome had been right.

Robert glanced at Signus and then rubbed his chin and laughed. “Right back at you, Signus. This only happened because you said you wanted to see what the enemy would do.”

Just then, cheers and roars erupted from the frontlines. Before long, a messenger on horseback approached them with a report.

“Oh...” Robert’s lips curled into a smirk as he read the report. “They actually killed Cidney.”

Robert’s smile was truly vile. He cared nothing for the death of his fellow man. For all Robert was concerned, Cidney O’Donnell was nothing more than a thorn in his side, a dog his father had sent to bark at him whenever he acted out of line.

“So your chaperone got killed,” Signus said.

“Aye. He was a real pain. Kept hiding behind my father’s orders at every turn,” Robert replied, looking displeased. But then he realized he’d have to prepare some kind of excuse to keep up appearances or Cidney’s death might come back to bite him. “Don’t get me wrong, though. It’s not like I killed him or anything. He just kept talking a big game, so I gave him a chance to prove himself. He ought to thank me for that.”

Robert had craftily engaged Cidney’s sense of self-preservation and hunger for glory, which had prompted Cidney to take command on the frontlines. By sacrificing his most troublesome subordinate, Robert was able to ascertain the enemy’s strength.

“You always were a bloody idiot, Robert, but you do have a good eye for people’s true nature.”

“Hmph. See, unlike you, I don’t like wasting my energy by thinking over the little things. You don’t need to look too hard at someone to tell what they’re about. And if you can’t do that, I’d say the rest of the world doesn’t know how to judge people properly.”

Signus eyed Robert and saw that he was sulking.

Signus and Robert had known each other for a long time. They had fought their first battles together and dealt with many of the same problems. They'd become kindred spirits and had been close ever since. They truly were bosom friends, but their natures couldn't have been any more different. Signus acted on careful analysis, while Robert was more of a savage beast, a natural-born hunter who strode through the wilderness with nothing but his intuition. And though both were powerful commanders leading the vanguard into battle, those around them appraised them differently.

But what makes Robert so nasty, Signus thought, *isn't just his martial prowess. It's his skill as a schemer*.

Since others usually saw Robert as a brave but tactless warrior, he was judged to be both a competent general and something of a berserker. Robert took full advantage of that perception too. He was a genius at manipulating those around him by relying not on logic, but on his optimized intuition.

"Well, either way, I have my information, so let's get down to business, Signus."

"Right. Struggling too much in the first fight wouldn't bode well, would it?"

With that said, the two of them began operating their first chakra, the Kundalini chakra. Their breathing synchronized, and their bodies surged with prana. The lump of hot energy building up in their perineum began climbing upwards.

The highest chakra that Robert and Signus could operate was the fifth one, the Vishuddha chakra. There were seven chakras in the human body, so being able to activate the fifth one, which was located in the throat, was truly proficient. It took talent and severe training, and on top of that, one had to survive countless battles.

"Let's go, Signus! You take the left flank!"

"Got it, you can count on me!"

The two spurred their horses into a gallop and charged into the black wave of enemy soldiers.

☥

Doyle was thrusting his spear on the frontlines, so he felt the moment the atmosphere of the battlefield shifted. Until then, it had felt like their side was winning. But suddenly, everything was overturned.

What is this? It feels like the first time I saw a giant monster...

It was an uncomfortable sensation, like an insect was creeping down his spine. There was a word for that feeling—terror. Of course, Doyle didn't deny the fear filling his heart. Fear wasn't a sign of weakness.

Doyle had once been a slave, but he'd found a new future for himself on the Wortenia Peninsula. His teachers, the members of the Crimson Lions, had made sure to instill that lesson into his heart. Fear wasn't weakness; it was an important sensor mankind had been graced with. It was like a car's brakes. Without fear, one would never truly become a powerful warrior. Fear urged one to defend themself and deal with dangers aptly.

Oh no... This is bad.

The words his master had told him before the battle surfaced in his mind. The enemy soldiers before him had him parted, clearing the way for a single knight on horseback. He was wielding a battle-ax, swinging it around to slay Doyle's comrades. It was like watching a knight gallop through an empty field. Count Salzberg's soldiers followed a short distance behind him, also afraid of that ax.

"He's good! Everyone, surround him!" Doyle called out, his survival instincts kicking in at the sight of this man.

This must be one of the two men my lord warned us about. Robert Bertrand or Signus Galveria. Let's see which one is scarier—him or the peninsula's giant monsters!

Faced with one of the most feared commanders in this war, Doyle's heart filled with an elation that drowned out his fear. His comrades felt the same.

As if he meant to mock them, Robert imposingly introduced himself. "My name is Robert Bertrand! Come at me if you've got a death wish!"

Robert was a storm. He roared like an animal and swung his battle-ax. He had a body of steel, overwhelming prana to reinforce that body, and a strong will to perfectly control those elements. When all that combined, he became a force of

violence.

The sound of metal striking metal echoed loudly through the battlefield. Doyle used all the force he could muster to resist the pressure of Robert's attack.

It's so heavy! What a powerful strike.

Doyle had the disadvantage of being on foot, while Robert delivered his blow from horseback. Still, Robert's attack was too strong.

Doyle tried to block Robert's ax with his spear, but the spear's grip bent under the pressure, and the blow went through. Doyle fell to his knees. His head was protected by a helmet, which kept the blow from being fatal, but the impact still muddled his brain.

"Oh. Well, color me surprised," Robert said in a voice so composed it was inappropriate for battle. "You actually blocked one of my attacks. Then how about this?!"

Robert swung his battle-ax from the opposite direction. It hit Doyle and knocked him upwards.

The sound of the metal clashing resembled an animal's howl. For as loud as the battlefield could be from all the fighting, the sound of Robert's swings reached the soldiers' ears all too clearly. He swung his battle-ax with blinding speed, and each blow knocked Doyle's body up into the air like a feather.

Each blow felt like a boulder had bashed into him. Doyle survived thanks to the martial thaumaturgy augmenting his body, but a normal person would have died instantly. But though Doyle had avoided death, the blows crushed his bones, making it impossible for him to move on his own. And an injured person on the battlefield was as good as dead. If Doyle were some brave general or a warrior known across countries it would be one thing, but he was one ordinary knight among many.

Normally, Robert would have moved on from Doyle's limp body and gone in search of new prey. But Robert ignored the rules of battle. Laughing like a demon, he spurred his horse forward, his ax aloft. Robert was strong, and since Doyle had given him trouble, he decided that he'd have to eliminate him right

then and there.

But as Robert readied to swing, a black-armored soldier rushed between him and Doyle.

“Hey, someone get Captain Doyle out of here and have him treated!” the soldier yelled like a wounded animal. “And call for reinforcements. We can’t let this guy live!”

Though he was shivering, the soldier desperately blocked Robert’s blow.

Robert couldn’t believe it. “Hey, what in the blasted hell is going on here?” he uttered in confusion. “Now there’s another soldier who can block my attacks? And this time he actually completely blocked it!”

Robert wanted to believe this was some kind of daydream. But much to his surprise, this was very real, and it nicked at Robert’s confidence.

Am I holding back on them without realizing it? No... But how are they blocking my attacks? Martial thaumaturgy can’t explain this.

Be it the masses who couldn’t use martial thaumaturgy at all or even experienced knights and mercenaries, Robert could count the number of opponents who had successfully blocked his ax on one hand. None of those exceptions had survived his second blow. Robert had spent his entire life building up his martial prowess; he prided himself on his overwhelming inhuman power.

In that moment, what made Robert Bertrand who he was cracked slightly, producing an opening he normally would have never made. His body suddenly sank, and in the next instant, he found himself uncontrollably pitching forward.

Shit! I was careless!

The enemy soldier had keenly noticed Robert’s momentary doubt, and seeing it as an opening, he had swung his spear at the black horse’s front feet.

As his horse bucked, Robert rolled forward. Immediately grasping his situation, he thrust his ax’s handle into the ground, using it as a makeshift staff to quickly regain his balance and land on his feet.

Robert glared around cautiously, holding up his battle-ax.

Well, crap. This is bad.

He was surrounded by enemy soldiers. He should have made his own soldiers follow close behind him, but at some point he'd gotten separated from them.

Their thrusts are accurate and sharp, and they're aiming for the gaps in my armor. These soldiers would make for top-notch knights in our army.

Swiftly dodging the spears coming at him from all directions, Robert swept his ax horizontally. Metal struck metal as his ax met a soldier's spear, sending a flurry of sparks into the air. But his sweep failed to cut down the enemy he'd aimed at.

He jumped back to absorb the impact of the blow. Goddammit. They're all skilled.

Abiding by his animalistic instincts, Robert stepped back in retreat. A cold sweat ran down his back. Five soldiers had him surrounded, all of them fairly skilled. Still, they were individually much weaker than he was. It wasn't so much a difference in talent, but more of a gap in their experience.

Either way, since Robert could use the Vishuddha chakra, he would probably still emerge victorious. But that was assuming he was facing them one-on-one or had his own soldiers nearby to help. As strong as he was, Robert would still be in trouble against five skilled soldiers at once, especially when they surrounded him like this. Even if he were to slay them, he'd still need to break out of the enemy's formation. Otherwise, he'd definitely die.

I might have underestimated them. Guess I have to take this seriously.

Robert always charged into battle and tore a hole in the enemy's ranks. It wasn't a very refined strategy, and exposing himself to danger like that was risky for a general. This was partly why others saw him as a berserker. Yet no other tactic utilized his impressive fighting abilities as well as this one did. He'd never been defeated in war before, so Robert was sure that this time things would play out the same way. That ended up working against him, however. He'd known that they would be difficult opponents, but he hadn't thought that each and every knight would be so strong.

Breaking through this encirclement on foot would be hard. I can turn this

around if I regroup with Signus somehow, but...

The enemy slowly closed the circle around him. Robert dodged their thrusts and swipes as he waited for a chance to escape. He'd lost track of how long he'd been doing this. Had it been only just a couple of minutes, or had he been doing this for over ten minutes already? His breathing turned ragged, and sweat spilled from his pores. His armor and battle-ax were coated in clotted blood.

"Robert, are you all right?!"

One corner of the encirclement crumbled away. Signus had appeared on horseback and knocked away enemy soldiers. It seemed he was having trouble too, because the iron club in his hands was filthy with human flesh, and his helmet was missing.

"Over here, Signus!" Robert shouted as loud as he could, making his position known.

"You're still okay, but you won't get out of here on foot. Let's bust out of here!"

"All right. Don't worry about me!"

Instantly realizing Robert's situation, Signus charged into the enemy. He knew that if he were to stop his horse for even one second, the enemy would knock him down and flank him too.

Just then, out of sheer coincidence, Robert spotted a man standing two hundred meters away—a large man riding on a black horse. At his side were two twin girls, one with silver hair and the other blonde. This man exactly matched a description that Robert had heard of before.

It's him!

There wasn't a rational reason for it. Robert knew he should help Signus break the blockade around them. But the moment he realized the supreme commander of the enemy army was facing him, Robert's animalistic instincts exploded. Every muscle in his body strained, twisting him like a bowstring.

The next moment, Robert hurled his beloved battle-ax at Ryoma. The power behind it was phenomenal. The ax, which was already heavier than standard,

flew through the air faster than an arrow launched from a special alloy composite bow meant for hunting large monsters. If it were to hit Ryoma directly, it would cleave his body in two. However, Ryoma cut down Robert's lethal attack with a single swipe of his katana.

Both Ryoma and Robert stood in place, two hundred meters between them. Oddly enough, Robert felt as if he had locked eyes with Ryoma.

I see! So you're Ryoma Mikoshiba!

Robert picked up a spear some unknown knight had dropped and turned back to exploit the opening Signus had created.

All right! Come at me with all you've got! This was the moment Robert truly acknowledged Ryoma as a worthy opponent.

Before long, Robert and Signus shook off the black wave chasing them, and both camps blew the horn for their soldiers to retreat.

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Stars twinkled in the night sky, spread unevenly around the pale moon hanging at the center of the celestial sphere. It was a breathtaking scene, the very picture of the cosmos' endless possibilities. This mystical sight was said to bring peace to the hearts of men. Yet no one had the leisure to appreciate it—not Ryoma Mikoshiba, who had just concluded a battle this afternoon, nor Count Salzberg.

"My apologies, Master Ryoma. I come bearing a report," Laura said from outside Ryoma's tent.

Ryoma looked up from the papers in his hands. All the documents he'd received that day were high priority and required his immediate attention, but right now, nothing was more important than Laura's report.

"Laura? Come in," Ryoma said.

The tent's entrance gently fluttered open. A young woman, as fair as a goddess, entered the tent with a smile, her golden hair trailing after her. That smile calmed Ryoma's nerves ever so slightly. He'd been on edge, dealing with this war.

“From the look on your face,” Ryoma started, “I’m guessing our losses are about what I thought.”

“Yes,” Laura answered. “We’ve only had thirteen dead so far. As for the injured, we have twenty-two heavily wounded soldiers. But thanks to the nostrums and the healing verbal thaumaturgy, they’re not in danger of dying. Given a few days, they should be able to regain their stamina and return to their units. Also, most of the casualties were because of those two.”

As Laura concluded her report, Ryoma heaved a sigh and leaned back in his chair. What were the emotions filling his heart? People had died because of his orders. It wasn’t because of an accident or circumstances beyond his control either. He’d initiated this war and ordered his men to march to their deaths. Though they were soldiers bound by duty, most people wouldn’t follow such orders.

I can’t get used to this. Anyone who does is a terrible human being.



Ryoma's feelings were rife with contradictions. Ever since he'd been summoned to this world, he'd ordered people to die countless times already. Their lives were in as much danger as they were when he'd sent them to slay monsters in Wortenia, or when he'd ordered them to eliminate the surrounding nobles' spies. Ryoma weaved all sorts of schemes to help them and provided them with the finest equipment he could, but no matter how cunning his tactics were or how effective his equipment was, some would inevitably die. Each time they did, Ryoma was torn between the necessity and the foulness of his acts.

In the end, it didn't matter if he was at home or in another world. Sacrifices had to be made in order for things to change, and those in the position to lead had to pave the way with their subordinates' blood. It was callous and cruel, and were Ryoma to be sacrificed, he wouldn't tolerate it. But it seemed no god could create a world where sacrifices were unnecessary. Nor could mere humans achieve such a fantasy.

And so Ryoma had only one way to deal with this: to work as hard as possible to minimize those sacrifices while etching each one into his heart.

"This just shows that those two are real monsters," Ryoma said. "And that my army is a match for the surrounding territories' soldiers." Ryoma turned his gaze toward an ax hanging on the tent's pillar. "Though I guess they did leave me one big parting gift."

Ryoma hadn't expected Robert to act the way he did. It was merely luck. Ryoma had coincidentally seen Robert on the battlefield, and somehow he had managed to block Robert's attack. Ryoma wasn't confident he could have blocked a second one. Nonetheless, he acted like he was prepared for any unexpected developments.

Laura added, "The gear we purchased from Nelcius is proving surprisingly effective. I'm sure if you were to sell them in another country, they would go for a hundred gold coins each."

"Yeah, they worked as well as I expected."

In preparation for this war, Ryoma had racked his brains over how to protect his soldiers. The Wortenia Peninsula originally had no denizens. There were demi-human villages, but since they were hostile toward humans, Ryoma

couldn’t expect taxes or conscripts from them. If he wanted to develop his domain further, he had to expand his territory somehow. But to do that, he needed an army to fight off the surrounding nobles and other countries. It was a catch-22.

In the end, Ryoma chose to buy and train slaves, forming an army that way, though slave soldiers were an expensive investment. He couldn’t do what the ruling class did and use commoner conscripts as disposable soldiers. Ryoma wasn’t keen on treating his soldiers like that in the first place. His only choice, then, was to increase their individual strengths.

Of course, going to all that trouble to educate his soldiers only for them to die in battle would be a huge loss. To prevent that, Ryoma relied on the endowed thaumaturgy the demi-humans, particularly the elves, used. Even now, demi-humans still made such equipment, and it sold for high prices due to its powers.

“Enchantments to reduce weight and strengthen armor are the most common additions,” Laura stated, “but I believe humans struggle to produce them with such efficiency.”

Ryoma nodded. “Prana consumption can greatly influence the outcome of battle. Trading with Nelcius was the right thing after all.”

An armor’s efficiency was mostly due to the quality of the raw materials and its thickness. It needed to be hard, resistant, and thick, but at the same time, as light as possible. Making something with those contradictory conditions was difficult, which was why the demi-humans’ crafting techniques were so desirable.

For now, we have to make sure news about our gear doesn’t leak. I’ll need to tell the Igasaki clan to remain vigilant.

The armor Ryoma had bought from Nelcius greatly increased his soldiers’ performance, allowing them to easily overwhelm the enemy side. But in the end, it was only a difference in gear, and equipment didn’t pick who used it. At least if some of their armor were stolen, no enemies would be able to replicate the enchantments easily. Even so, it was better to nip those kinds of dangers in the bud.

Still, that clarifies what our policy should be going forward.

Ryoma was already formulating a few tactics. All that remained was to pick the one that best fit this situation.

If we hold our ground, they can't break through our lines even with their numbers. The problem is those two...

Robert and Signus could each single-handedly turn the tides of battle. The fact that Ryoma's soldiers had boxed them in and the two had still managed to break out was proof of their power. The safest way to deal with them would be to order the Igasaki clan to assassinate them. Or perhaps Ryoma could manipulate and trick Count Salzberg into killing them for him.

Ryoma wasn't keen on either of those options. Robert and Signus were fearsome enemies, and if they were to attack Ryoma without regard for their own lives, who knew if Ryoma would be able to push them back.

But...if I can turn them to my side, they'll be valuable allies.

Ryoma's objective wasn't to control northern Rhoadseria. The dream he envisioned required as many skilled people as possible, so he needed to turn even his enemies to his side.

I have to make this gamble.

"I'll take Sara and five hundred men and head south," Ryoma declared. "I'll leave the other five hundred to hold the fort."

Laura's brows twitched. "Understood. Should I take command of the frontlines, then?"

"Yeah. I'm counting on you. Lione will help you out too."

Sensing Ryoma's resolve, Laura nodded. She understood his intentions perfectly.

And so, as countless plots and schemes began to move, the first day of battle —the preliminary stage of this war—drew to a close.

Epilogue

At the same time Ryoma Mikoshiba's army formed its camp on the outskirts of Epirus and began locking blades with Robert and Signus...

To the east of Rhoadseria, the Kingdom of Myest's most celebrated general, Ecclesia Marinelle, received a summons from her sovereign, King Phillip.

Ecclesia was nervous, and her lips were dry. Her anxiety stemmed from the fact that she wasn't meeting the king in his audience chamber as usual. Instead, she had been instructed to come to his personal office. Knights stood guard at the door, and only the king's most trusted aides were allowed inside. As proof, besides Ecclesia and the king sitting on the sofa opposite of her, sipping his cup of tea, the only other person present was the prime minister and leader of the kingdom, Owen Spiegel.

This wasn't the first time Ecclesia had been beckoned to this room. Though she was young, she'd fought countless battles since the day the former General Marinelle entrusted her with his position. Her martial feats and offensive prowess earned her the feared name of "The Whirlwind."

Ecclesia's position as general gave her authority over national defense. Unlike Rhoadseria, control of Myest's armies was divided between three generals. Despite the fact that everyone looked down on her for being a woman, Ecclesia had climbed the ranks and become one of those generals.

Because of her position, the king had asked for her opinion regarding the country's fate countless times before, and Ecclesia had explained her outlook to him multiple times. That didn't mean she wasn't still nervous in his presence, though. There was always a great distance between her and the throne, and knights were always present to guard the king. In addition, conversing with the king required one to stand on ceremony and speak accordingly.

But a meeting in the king's office wasn't like an official audience. And King Phillip often called Ecclesia here rather than the audience chamber. She honestly would have preferred if he'd called her there instead.

No matter how many times he asks me to meet him here, it's always nerve

racking. I know I should appreciate the fact that he's attentive to his retainers, but...

Ecclesia watched the king sitting opposite of her. He was an older man, approaching his sixties. But despite his age, he was still amicable and openhearted. He also looked younger than one would expect; his hair was still as black and sleek as Ecclesia's.

King Phillip had inherited the throne in his twenties, and he'd ruled for over thirty years. His reign was a good one, and he knew the importance of economic power. He spared no expense to develop the port towns of Myest, including the largest one, Pherzaad.

He was also wise in the ways of war. Myest had spent ages fighting over territory with the Kingdom of Brittania in the south. Not only did he safeguard Myest's territory, he'd even slain one of their prized generals himself. He was of medium build, but rumor had it his skills as a warrior were impressive. Among the other sovereigns of the western continent's eastern regions, one could very well call him a war hero.

Though Phillip was a strong sovereign, he was by no means a stern person. He followed the rules of decorum with official audiences, but he was a very frank man outside of such settings. He was an easy ruler to serve, or rather he presented himself that way.

Be that as it may, those serving under him didn't necessarily share the same perspective. After all, Ecclesia wasn't comfortable being in his office like this, to say nothing of drinking tea served by the king himself.

The steam rising from Ecclesia's cup smelled of tea leaves ferried over from the southern continent. It had been imported by the royal house. It went without saying that it was absurdly expensive, and it was often served as a reward of sorts. Serving it to a retainer in an ordinary setting like this was excessive, to say the least.

Yet Ecclesia had had such tea time and again, whenever she was called to this office. No matter how many times the king served it, it was always difficult to drink it. She merely sat on the sofa, stiff as a board. As far as Ecclesia was concerned, she wanted to be done with this as quickly as possible and leave.

Phillip, by contrast, smiled at her serenely. “What’s the matter? Your tea’s going cold.”

He meant no ill-will. And since he’d served her the tea already, it didn’t matter if it went cold; he’d already fulfilled his duty as host. But Phillip was genuinely concerned that she might end up drinking cold tea. He wasn’t trying to force her to drink it, yet it was hard to gauge what his intentions were. The difference in status between a king and his retainer was simply too vast. The only one who could truly know Phillip’s intent was Owen, who had served him for many years.

Ecclesia was too nervous to notice Phillip’s concern, and she hurriedly brought the cup to her lips. However, she sipped it too fast and burned her mouth.

“Ow!”

Ecclesia’s girlish yelp certainly didn’t fit the occasion. It had sounded almost childish. If any of her subordinates, who only knew her as a dignified general, were to see this, they’d be shocked beyond belief. Plus, she’d acted this way in front of the king, which was certainly unforgivable. She could even be charged with irreverence for this.

Phillip didn’t blame her, and instead laughed pleasantly. He then produced a silk handkerchief from his shirt’s pocket and offered it to her.

“No need to rush. Use this.”

It was a gentle gesture a father might show his beloved daughter.

Owen quietly sighed, so as to not draw his liege’s attention.

I swear. Lady Ecclesia is one of your retainers, Your Highness. I know she is your younger sister’s daughter...but you must consider your position as king and act accordingly.

Ecclesia Marinelle was King Phillip’s niece by blood. Though her mother had married into House Marinelle, she was still royal by birth. This meant that Ecclesia had a claim—albeit a very weak one—to Myest’s throne. However, before Ecclesia was even born, Phillip had produced ten children between his wife and concubines, and all of them happened to be males. When it came to

inheriting the throne, men were preferred over women.

But when all ten offspring were boys, one naturally wanted a daughter as well. And then Ecclesia was born. When Phillip heard of his niece's birth, he rejoiced without caring much for what those around him might have thought. Indeed, he cherished her in a way that was almost conspicuous. Phillip did end up having a few daughters of his own, and he rejoiced to see them come into the world too, but it seemed he couldn't forget the joy he'd felt when Ecclesia was born.

As such, he treated his niece like someone truly special. For all he was concerned, Ecclesia was as much a daughter to him as his own girls. When she was little, he'd invite her to tea at the palace every day. Even when Ecclesia inherited the headship of House Marinelle and became a general, Phillip had regularly invited her over.

Theirs was a heartwarming relationship, to be sure. But Owen felt that the king couldn't afford to waste his time on leisurely teatime, not today at least.

"Your Majesty, isn't it about time?" Owen whispered into Phillip's ear.

"Ah, yes, right you are." Phillip's brow furrowed for a moment, but he soon recalled the importance of the matter at hand. He turned to Ecclesia, the smile gone from his lips.

"I called you here today for a reason," he said, a sagacious gleam in his eyes.

Ecclesia stiffened at his change in attitude. She looked at the king not as a niece, but as the general known as The Whirlwind.

"And what's that, my liege?" she asked.

"I'm sure you've heard of how the commoners in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria have risen up in revolt recently."

Ecclesia nodded. Since Rhoadseria neighbored Myest, they needed to keep an eye on the revolts. Through forging an alliance with the beast of the north—the Kingdom of Helnesgoula—the three kingdoms of the east had been able to repel the O'ltormea Empire's invasion of Xarooda. But one defeat wasn't nearly enough to extinguish the empire's ambitions of unifying the continent.

Xarooda was currently negotiating a cease-fire with them, but once the empire finished rearranging their forces, it could once again go on the offensive. Though the reinforcements from Rhoadseria had already left, Xarooda remained vigilant. This was why Helena Steiner had been given eight thousand soldiers to watch over Xarooda's border in the city of Tritron.

Nevertheless, revolts at a time like this placed Rhoadseria in a precarious position. They would have a difficult time blocking any invasions from O'ltormea. After all, Myest was on the eastern coast of the continent. Their longtime opponents, the Kingdom of Brittania, blocked their path to the south. So if Myest were to send reinforcements to Xarooda again, they would have to either sail across the sea or march across Rhoadseria.

Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba had taken care of the pirates who had long nested in the Wortenia Peninsula. Using the town of Sirius as a relay point, they were developing northern sea routes into Helnesgoula. But even so, transporting soldiers by ship was different from delivering merchandise. Going to Xarooda by sea wasn't a realistic option. Most soldiers couldn't swim. Only if they happened to be fishermen or sailors were things different. People in those professions learned how to swim since they were in constant risk of falling into rivers or the sea.

The same could be said of Myest's navy. Swimming was part of their training regimen. But only very few members of Myest's ground forces knew how to swim. They focused more on fighting in armor and on horseback. Learning how to swim wasn't a priority for them. Because of this, boarding them on military vessels and ferrying them across the ocean was a dangerous prospect.

If they were to run into a storm, the waves would wash away most of their troops. In truth, many of them would likely refuse to even board the ship out of fear. So while it might be possible to teach them how to swim in the future, Myest's only option at present was to march through a land route.

"I've heard that their military was trying to come up with some countermeasures, but...we've received word of another major problem," Phillip said, looking up at Owen and urging him to speak.

Yes, of course, Ecclesia thought. *Lord Owen is both the prime minister and the*

one in charge of gathering intelligence from other countries. Something must have happened in Rhoadseria.

Ecclesia swiftly deduced that something must be wrong and looked at Owen. Owen nodded in satisfaction and began explaining.

“Roughly a week ago, a spy I deployed to Rhoadseria sent me a report. Apparently, the Mikoshiba barony, the ruler of the Wortenia Peninsula, has declared war on Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north.”

Ecclesia’s eyes narrowed with a dangerous glint. This was another country’s war, but it wasn’t something Myest could ignore. She now understood why she had been called here.

“Are you certain this is true?” Ecclesia asked.

There was no point in asking for confirmation. Phillip was present, and Owen wouldn’t report mere rumors to the king. Still, Ecclesia had to ask.

“Yes. In fact, since receiving the news, I’ve tripled my information network’s watch on northern Rhoadseria to quickly gather more information. And this morning, I received a messenger pigeon with urgent news.”

Owen took out a letter that had been decrypted and then translated and handed it to Ecclesia.

“I see,” Ecclesia said, skimming through it. “If this letter’s contents are to be believed, hostilities must have opened by now.” She heaved a deep sigh, a strained smile on her lips.

Watching Ecclesia’s reaction, Phillip asked, “What do you think?”

What he meant by that went without saying.

“I swear. That man acts in unexpected ways,” Ecclesia responded, shaking her head. She seemed shocked.

Ecclesia had a fairly decent understanding of Ryoma’s position. She had watched him use the trade pact with the Kingdom of Helnesgoula to stop the O’ltormean invasion of Xarooda. Thanks to that, Myest’s economic position was stronger than ever. If all went well, Myest’s economy would double and triple within a few years. It was hard to ignore the man who had made that happen.

And thanks to that, Ecclesia had learned of the fissure between Ryoma and Queen Lupis.

A vassal that's too skilled is dangerous, eh? Even the queen he helped put on the throne fears him now.

Nothing scared an incompetent ruler more than an overly competent ally. They saw those more skilled than them as latent threats to their authority and sought to expel them. If Ryoma had done nothing, Queen Lupis would have eventually moved in to eliminate him. Ryoma wasn't foolish enough to overlook that.

This almost feels like a foregone conclusion...

Ecclesia had only spoken to Ryoma on three occasions during the expedition to Xarooda. Her relationship with him was admittedly pretty limited. But even in that small amount of time, she'd quickly grasped the extent of Ryoma's strength, talent, and potential.

"If I had to guess," Ecclesia continued, "Ryoma instigated the commoner rebellion to throw Rhoadseria into chaos and to wrest control of the northern regions."

Phillip and Owen nodded.

Ecclesia then added, "The question now is how is Myest going to react?"

"Ecclesia, out of everyone in this country, you best know Baron Mikoshiba. That's why I want to ask you," Phillip said, then paused. He took a deep breath before fixing his gaze on her again. "How would you handle this, Ecclesia?"

Myest's fate hinged on this question. There were three ways they could handle the situation. They could assertively interfere in the war, step forward as arbiters to peacefully resolve it, or simply do nothing and watch things play out. But be it direct interference or peaceful mediation, Myest would have a hard time interfering in a territory dispute between another country's nobles. The only way they could interfere was if the Mikoshiba barony directly asked them to do so. And that would strain their relationship with Rhoadseria.

From Queen Lupis's perspective, no matter which choice Myest made, it would infringe on her royal authority. With the threat of a second O'ltormean

invasion looming ahead, this was a dangerous option.

Myest's only real choice was to not interfere. Still, noninterference wasn't a wise option either. Myest's leadership pinned a great deal of hope and expectation on the Wortenia Peninsula as a relay point for the northern sea routes. On top of that, Wortenia's location on the northernmost tip of the continent was a prime position for trading with the northern continent. In the future, it could easily become the most prominent trading port in all the western continent.

If Myest's economy was to continue growing as expected, its military strength would also grow accordingly. Finally, it would no longer be a mere dream to break the deadlock with the Kingdom of Britannia and increase their territory. A bigger army also meant that they could compete against the O'ltormea Empire.

Furthermore, the Wortenia Peninsula was home to many unique types of monsters, and the ingredients from hunting them could be used to brew unique medicine and craft special gear. Such merchandise was desirable, and they were sold to both Pherzaad and other ports. Letting those valuable items disappear from the market would strike a hard blow to Myest's current economy.

It was in Myest's favor to continue their relationship with Ryoma. If possible, they wanted to prevent Queen Lupis from destroying the barony. Rhoadseria's royal house had held onto the peninsula for years and let it go wild. Very few people could successfully develop it. One could search this whole world over, but it was doubtful whether they'd find anyone else capable of it. That was why they wanted Ryoma to retain the barony.

We already have our answer. The question is whether he can overcome Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north on his own.

Ecclesia was already forming her answer. Normally, it would be utter madness for a mere baron to challenge Count Salzberg, a count who controlled all of Rhoadseria's northern regions. But from what Ecclesia knew of Ryoma, he wasn't a foolhardy man.

He must have some plan. I don't know what it is, but... Very well. Let's see what he's capable of.

With a cold smile, Ecclesia parted her lips to give Phillip her answer.

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 since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

We've reached volume 12. It feels like reading books has been going out of fashion in recent years, and sales haven't been going up. I hear many of my fellow authors in the industry have had their publications canceled. Thankfully, *Record of Wortenia War* has been selling favorably, both in ebook format and manga, and so we're still trucking along. The fact that this work, which isn't award-winning or anything of the sort, is lasting so long is something of a miracle. That's all thanks to your support as readers, so allow me to take this chance to thank you again.

I started working on the web novel in October 2009, meaning it's been ten years since *Record of Wortenia War* started its serialization in *Shōsetsuka ni Narou*. Back then, I never imagined a day would come when this story would be printed as a book. I just wrote it with the intent to use it as practice. But the reviews were better than I expected, and when the first publisher approached me, I was both on cloud nine and unsure if this was really happening. I'm honestly impressed that the series has continued this long. I only hope it will reach its conclusion successfully.

Incidentally, I mentioned this in volume 11's afterword, but last year I ended up in the hospital for the first time. Well, actually, it was twice. Soon after I finished volume 11's manuscript, I was hospitalized again. I wasn't taking good care of my health, and it was time to pay the piper, it seemed.

I have another job besides my writing. Stress from that made me drink more often, and it only aggravated a case of the flu. It was a close call, but it gave me a chance to look back on my life. I'm sure it must sound inappropriate coming

from an author with such an unhealthy lifestyle, but do take care of your health, good readers.

I asked for my own room in the hospital, both for privacy's sake and because a roommate can be quite taxing, and it made my hospital bill quite high. I spent eight days in the hospital, and imagine my surprise when it turned out that the room fee was more than the treatment fees!

It was a huge financial blow, and it caused me a great deal of trouble in my main job. In retrospect, 2018 wasn't a very good year for me. But despite that, there was some good to that year. I caught up on a lot of foreign TV shows during my hospitalization and got to think about *Wortenia*'s future.

I believe I've mentioned this before, but I prefer foreign TV shows to Japanese ones. I used to rent DVDs, but now I'm into streaming services. I mean, I couldn't run home to pick up my DVDs when I was in the hospital, so I couldn't watch them that way.

After all, spending your days in bed is boring, even if you know you have to. You can only play phone games so much. But then I remembered Netflix. Honestly, I wish I'd considered its usefulness before. Besides, even if I have DVDs mailed to me, it takes them a while to get there. And if someone else borrowed a DVD I want, I naturally can't have it. A streaming service doesn't have those problems. My one complaint is that it doesn't have many old shows or movies.

Of course, someone could tell me off by saying that if I have that much time to watch shows, I could spend it on writing something new or continuing *Wortenia*. But watching those shows does give me inspiration, so do forgive me.

Enough of my excuses, though. For the sake of those who begin with the afterword, let's start with this volume's highlights, as has become our custom.

Two key figures in volume 12 are Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria. The source of their troubles is that while both of them are nobles, neither of them are firstborn sons. Tragic heroes, as it were. These two, enemy generals who boast absurd skill, stand in our protagonist's way. Robert in particular shines in volume 12, both on and off the battlefield, so do look forward to that!

Another key figure is Count Salzberg's wife, Lady Yulia. While she looks like a

virtuous woman on the surface and is seen as the de facto ruler of House Salzberg, she is in fact a pitiful woman who has been subjected to years of emotional abuse by her husband. In this volume, she finally resolves to make a choice. And let me tell you, she's not thinking of divorce. It's not that divorce is unheard of among the nobles of Wortenia's world, but since Yulia is originally a commoner's daughter, the class difference between her and the count is too great.

Another point of interest is the backstory of the enchanted katana Kikoku, the one the Igasaki clan's elders gifted Ryoma.

I'll stop here since I don't want to spoil too much, but there's a lot of promising threads in volume 12, so I do hope you enjoy it.

Lastly, I'd like to thank the editors and everyone who helped me in the production of this book. I'd like to think that this time I didn't cause you as much trouble as I sometimes do. But if I'm deluding myself here, please forgive me.

And of course, the fact that I can continue writing this series for this long is all thanks to your support as readers. Hopefully, I'll have the next volume done by July, so do continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War*.

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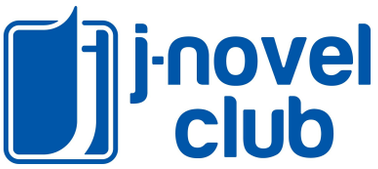
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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 12

by Ryota Hori

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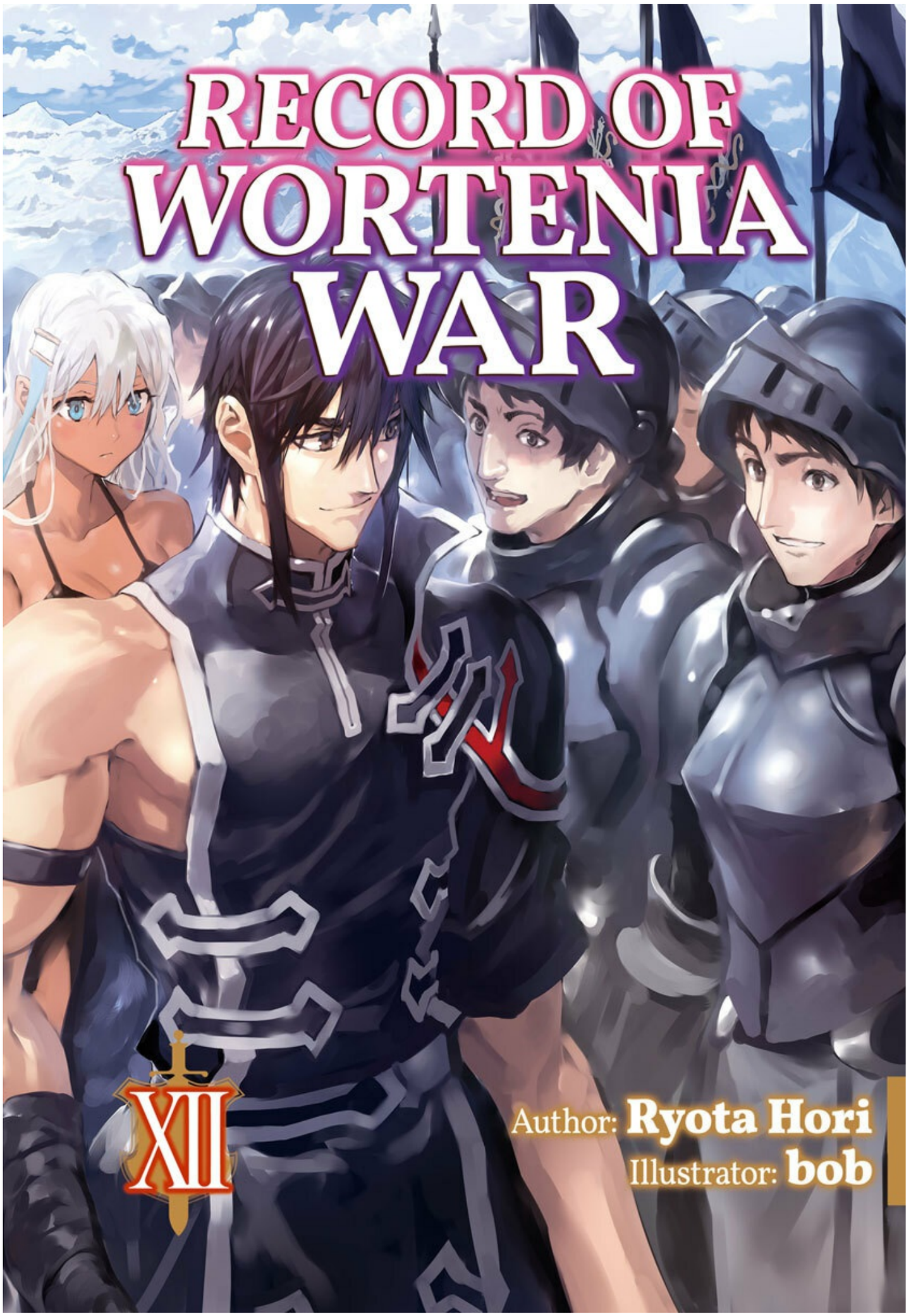
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