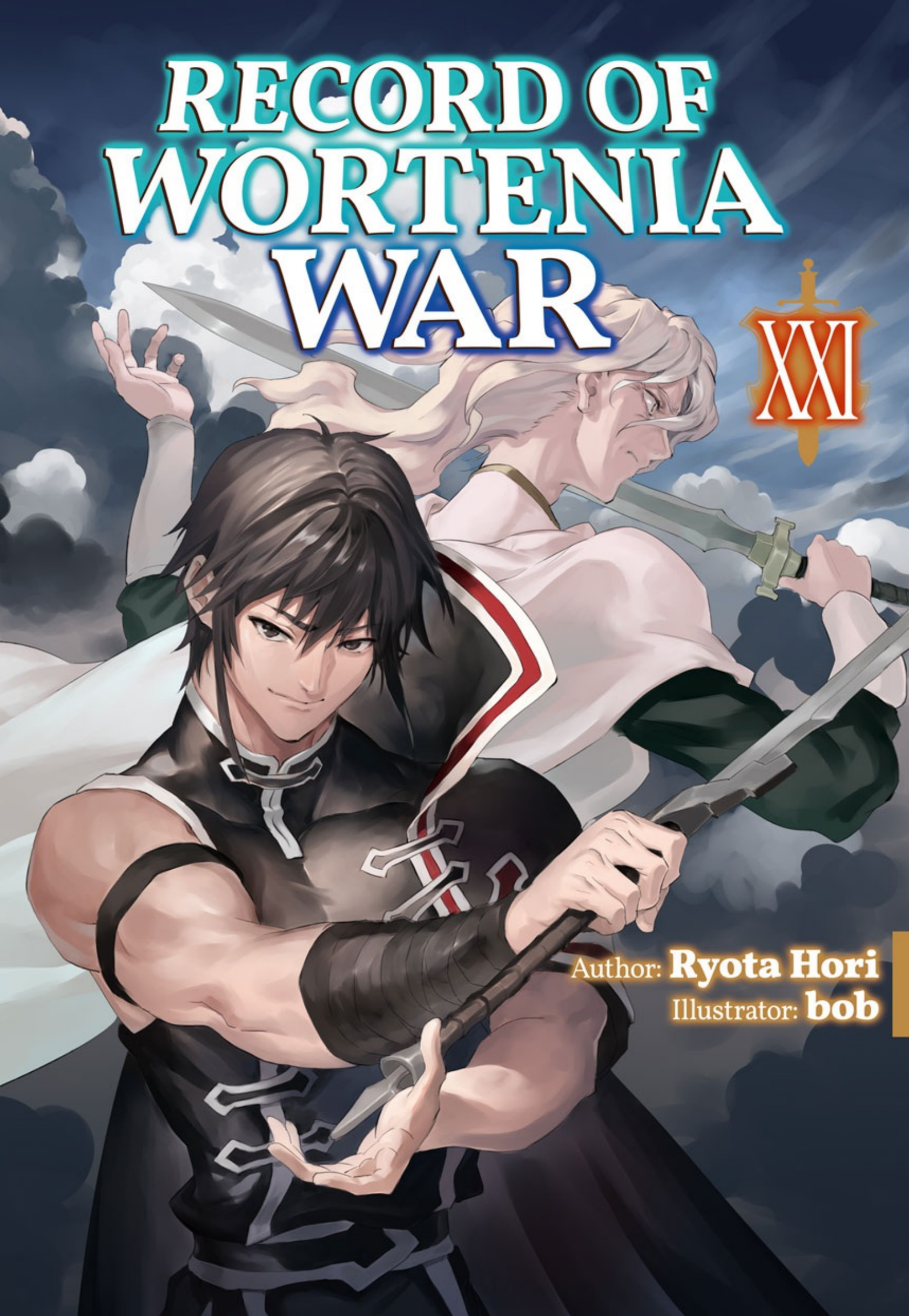
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

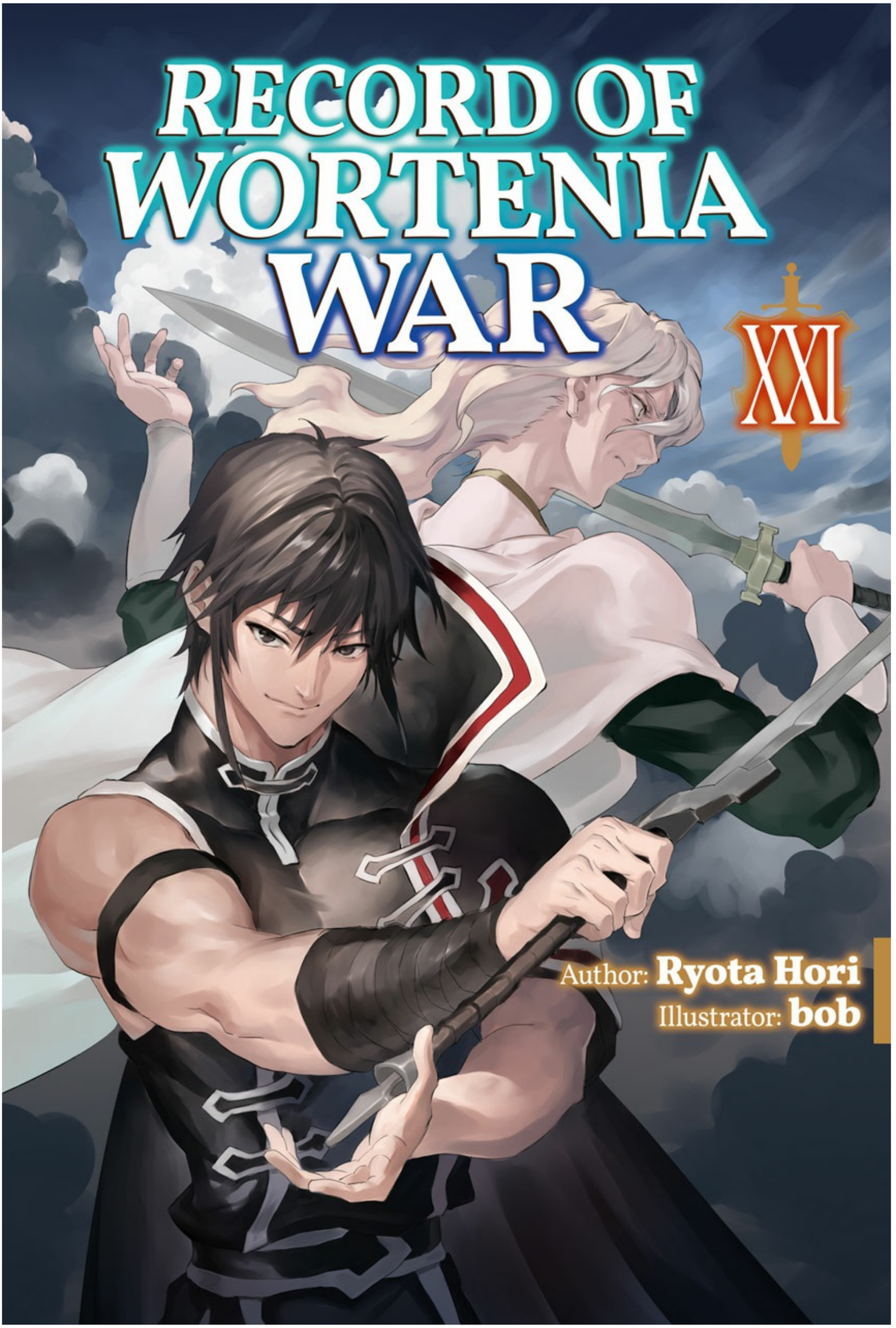
XXI



Author: **Ryota Hori**
Illustrator: **bob**

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

XXI



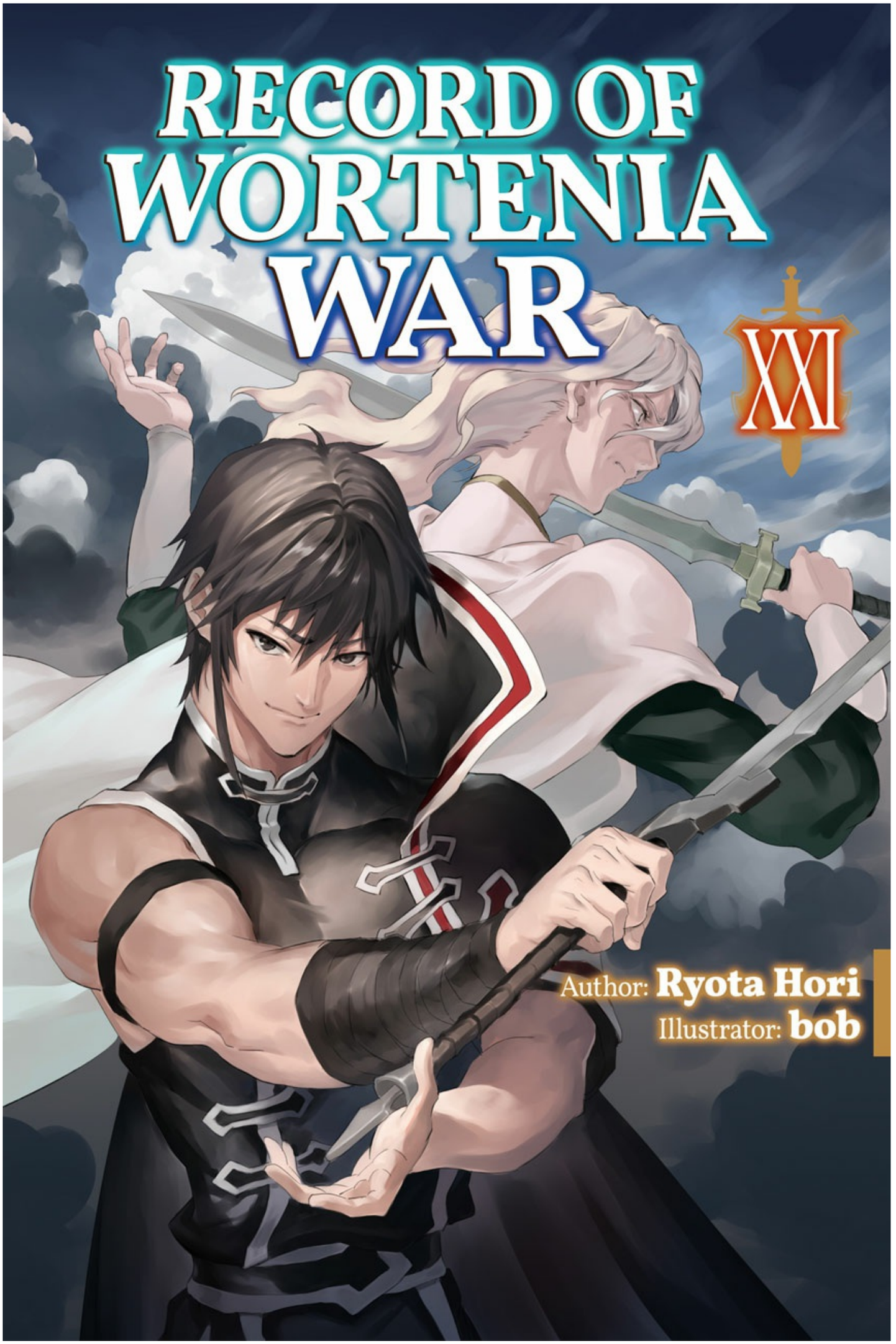
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RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

XXI



Author: **Ryota Hori**
Illustrator: **bob**

Prologue

Thick clouds hung over the sky, obscuring the sunlight even though it was high noon. One could say the weather accurately reflected the fate of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Nobody felt that suffocating realization more keenly than the commoners.

They were the lower classes, the weak peasants oppressed and extorted by the nobility. Despite that, and perhaps because of that, they could instinctively feel the encroaching presence of the giant, two-headed serpent that threatened to swallow their country whole.

Said serpent had already begun consuming several villages and towns. Its cold, lifeless, crimson serpentine gaze fixed on a new prey—the Town of Drusen, the domain of Viscount Rancard. At this very moment, the influential people of Drusen were in the middle of a meeting that would decide their town's fate.

All of them had gathered in the hall of the mayor's estate, built in the middle of the town. Such people present were those like the guild master, the bank's manager, and the heads of firms. Many were undoubtedly commoners as far as the class system was concerned, even if they were close to being nobles in terms of power and wealth.

Their exceptions would usually be dignified, for wherever they went, they knew they were some of the most powerful people in Dursen. But this time, there was no shadow of their usual pride and self-worth, only doubt and distress when facing a question without a correct answer.

"So... What are we going to do?" grumbled the mayor, who managed the room, as he looked around the room.

At this rate, the men who had gathered would achieve nothing but glare and growl at each other. If they were going to reach a conclusion, they'd need to discuss it. Regardless of a solution's viability, the group needed to come up with something, or their discussion wouldn't even start.

None of them said anything, as they'd have said something if they had a suggestion. The attendees fully knew the predicament Dursen was in but couldn't devise a miraculous solution that would turn the tables and save them from this terror.

They all had something to say about the situation and might not have had a good suggestion, but they were all tormented by the happenings. Of course, they knew better than to speak to the anger and frustration they felt because the moment they spoke out loud about it, there'd be no stopping their emotions. If they made their decisions based on those raging feelings, they could wipe their town off the map. That fear held them in check, and the mayor could see that.

After all, we're going up against the Devil of Heraklion and his army, the mayor thought.

That army routed the northern subjugation army, which boasted over two hundred soldiers and became a gigantic viper that threatened to consume the entire kingdom. Not a single one could maintain their composure in the face of a threat of that magnitude.

But that wasn't to say they could just sit idly and wait.

"We'll never reach a conclusion if you just hold your tongues," the mayor finally said.

The influential people hung their heads, hoping to avoid his gaze, and were aware that the more they stalled on making a decision, the more they stood to lose. At the same time, no one wanted to take responsibility. They all wished someone other than themselves had gotten the ball rolling so they could all just go along with another's decision. Perhaps they knew that if the talks didn't progress, the duty of deciding would fall on the mayor's shoulders.

Cowards, every one of them only cares about saving their own hides. Scorn and anger bubbled up in the mayor's heart for a second, but the agitation soon died down. *No, I'm trying to save my own hide just as much as they're trying to save theirs. And at least they're here. That alone makes them better than the fools who refused to heed my call for a meeting.*

The mayor looked around the room again and sighed as he confirmed the

number of empty seats. Less than a third of the influential figures answered his call for a meeting. Nearly half of the people who didn't attend this meeting had fled the town with their servants and families. Those that remained claimed needed to recover from sudden fevers and stomachaches. No one took their excuses seriously. They were all just afraid of having the responsibility for these choices thrust upon them.

Not that I can fault them for that.

The mayor wished he could throw everything away and flee this town, too, but reality wouldn't allow him to do something so irresponsible.



Things would have been different if the Rancard Viscounty had issued an

evacuation, but if the mayor fled at his own discretion, both he and his entire clan would have faced treason charges. He was not allowed to escape or bear the oppressive atmosphere as time passed.

He had to propose a solution within a time limit, and if he failed, the whole town would be destroyed. That included the nobles and friends living in this town.

How did things come to this? Just a few months ago, Dursen was promised a wealthy, prosperous future...

This town acted as a relay point between the Rhoadserian capital Pireas and the citadel city of Epirus, the lynchpin of the country's northern defenses. Since Viscount Rancard was a prominent member of the nobles' faction, his town's protection led to many caravans passing through it, stimulating business.

While Dursen wasn't large enough to be called a city, even if it was built to stimulate trade, it didn't boast the same market as central financial hubs like Pireas or Epirus, the largest city in the north. To Viscount Rancard, though, the town of Dursen was akin to a chicken that laid golden eggs.

We're on a crossing of highways that connects to all four corners of the kingdom, and our terrain is ideal for gathering goods and supplies. The Rancard Viscounty know this, and that's why they treated this town well for generations.

That favoritism was clear from how Dursen paid lower taxes unlike other towns and villages in this domain. Among the Rhoadserian nobles, who only saw the commoners as tools to support their own livelihood, the Rancard Viscounty's political measures were quite unusual. Maximizing tax revenue required a lot of work. Most nobles didn't bother to do so and instead extorted their commoners, squeezing a fruit as hard as possible to make it yield the most juice.

An example from the Edo period, Haruhide Kamio, who served Yoshimune Tokugawa—known for revitalizing the Tokugawa shogunate's influence—was famous for reorganizing the government's finances. He was also known as a ruthless official and had been reported to have said that "Commoners, like sesame oil, yield more the more you press them."

But perhaps that wasn't so surprising since "organizing finances" often

involved tax increases. Taking taxes from the easiest source was a natural conclusion.

In contrast, the Rancard Viscounty increased the fruit they sought to gain juice from while fostering each fruit to grow larger. To the commoners, this was a favorable treatment that raised the share they got.

This wasn't to say that the Rancard Viscounty, across its generations, was a merciful noble house. There were other towns and villages across their domain, and they didn't receive the preferential treatment Dursen did. Instead, they paid the same tax rate other territories in Rhoadseria did, where the lord took seventy percent, and thirty percent remained with the villagers. They only gave Dursen preferential treatment to stimulate trade and draw in merchants. Given that the financial strength they gained allowed them to rise within the ranks of the nobles' faction, one could say that their tactic was a success. It was a classic case of investing money to make more money.

Thanks to that, Dursen boasted greater financial power than other towns in the viscounty's domain and stood head and shoulders above its neighboring communities. Even commoners from other neighboring domains looked up to Dursen in admiration.

To most commoners, the land they're born and raised in and its surrounding towns and villages are their entire world.

Even nobles couldn't freely travel as they pleased. Since the nobility abhorred new blood tainting their veins, they mostly married among themselves, meaning most noble houses had some familial connection to others. Based on their talents, they were dispatched to the capital to find employment under the royal family. Nobles rarely spent their lives entirely within their own domain, except those too sickly to travel far.

Those born into the lower classes lived much simpler lives, especially as the ones born in agricultural villages lived and died on the land. Some commoners became adventurers or mercenaries or found employment as merchants.

Such commoners traveled the land and even ventured as far as other countries, where they fought in wars as hires. Alternatively, they were hired to explore new lands to be inhabited when monster attacks reduced villages to

ashes. But few people went out to journey across the land of their own will, nor were they allowed to, because most governors forbade commoners from freely moving across different domains.

So, to commoners living around Dursen, this town looked like a big city rivaling the capital. The food and sundries they needed for their everyday lives, as well as hoes and other agricultural tools, were all obtained in Dursen.

But this is all a thing of the past.

Over the last few months, this city completely changed its appearance. It all began when Baron Mikoshiba won his war with Count Salzberg, head of the ten houses of the north, and began his hostilities with Queen Lupis.

The highways that were once full of people became empty, and there was no sound of merchants setting up stalls to sell their wares. For a town established as a relay station for trade from all across the country, this was a matter of life and death for Dursen.

Everyone in this room knows this.

Once the rooster can no longer lay golden eggs, it has only one fate ahead of it—and they could feel it approaching. Right now, they had to deal with an even bigger problem approaching them, which was why they were trying to find a way to survive.

Amid this silence, one man spoke up.

“If we can’t expect reinforcements for the garrison, I think our only option is to accept the Mikoshiba barony’s call for surrender, is it not?”

Everyone’s eyes fixed on the speaker.

“And you are?” asked the mayor, narrowing his eyes.

The speaker was a man in his late twenties, his eyes glinting with firm will. His slender, thin physique and calm demeanor gave him a capable, wise appearance, which came across as slightly neurotic. His neatly combed-back blond hair seemed to support this impression.

But that said, he’s awfully young... He was certainly an adult man but still younger than everyone else here. Something about him felt off to the mayor,

though. *Hmm? I feel like I might have seen his face before... Who is this?*

Since he was present here, he clearly wasn't an average young man from the town. It was evident he came from a wealthy family based on his high-class silk clothes. Yet, his age made it appear like he wasn't one of the town's influential people.

His disposition could have influenced things as some people were talented enough to be given authority and status, even at a young age. Ryoma Mikoshiba, the cause of their current predicament, was one such example. People like that had a certain air to them since one's station and experience fostered dignity as well as confidence in such people.

But that's not the case with this man.

He could sense talent in this young man, but he felt less like someone who occupied the top and more like one who assisted those who were. Besides, if there were someone that young and influential, the mayor would have known him.

But I do remember him from somewhere.

The mayor tried to sift through his memories after becoming frustrated with his inability to recall who he was. Then, the deputy mayor, seated next to him, whispered into his ear.

"This is the representative of the Dursen branch."

"The representative? Oh, you mean the bank's branch?" responded the mayor. At that moment, he remembered the young man's identity. *Now that he mentions it, it is him. I thought I saw his face, but that's the young man who's always around the branch manager.*

A bank branch had been set up in Dursen because it was the central hub of the surrounding towns and villages. So long as one wasn't making illegal deals, most people didn't carry their money on them since it would be dangerous. This was especially relevant since people here dealt with money using coins, which were much heavier and cumbersome than paper money.

Paper money was much more portable and convenient, so utilizing it would have been a much better option. Sadly, the decision to issue paper bills needed

to be backed by significant national power.

In this world where countries rose and fell, no nation had the reliability and stability to ensure their bills had any value. If one couldn't prove their bills were worth more than paper scraps, they wouldn't be able to adopt paper currency, no matter how better of a system it may be. Gold and silver coins had inherent value since they were made from rare metals, but paper money was worth nothing.

Most royalty and nobility ruled through hereditary monarchies, and their regimes had great authority and power. If a country were dead set on putting a paper money system into effect, they would have been able to force it. Doing that would be meaningless. As long as merchants didn't acknowledge the value of that money, they would only be printing a large amount of useless tissue paper.

A few decades ago, banks began exerting considerable influence over this world. At first, they were only seen as moneylenders that allowed people to borrow money for collateral. But they began working in tandem with the guild the adventurers and mercenaries worked for, rapidly increasing the banks' growth.

Not every city and town had its own branch, and villages far from the highways still had to barter in goods instead of coins. No one would see the value in building a bank branch at places like that, as all it would do was draw in bandits. But in a town built for trade, like Dursen, only relying on cash to trade would be difficult, so a guild and bank were built there.

Everyone in this room had bank accounts and used them every day, meaning the branch manager would have more influence than most of the people present. The only ones who could match or exceed his authority would be the governor, Viscount Rancard, the mayor, and the manager of the local guild branch.

That's why I invited him to this meeting.

But he didn't arrive, instead sending a representative. If he truly were sick and tried to attend the meeting regardless, he wouldn't be able to come up with any good suggestions. In that regard, maybe it didn't matter who was here.

But this young man is his representative? I heard he was unwell, so I doubt he's feigning illness like the others. Still, isn't this man a bit too young for this? He did stimulate this stagnant meeting.

Many of the gazes fixed on this young man had an air of contempt, making it clear they made light of him. The mayor couldn't fault them for having this impression. It was an unexpected suggestion from an unexpected person. Kicking off a discussion was more than good enough, but it didn't mean the mayor agreed with his suggestion.

Surrendering to Baron Mikoshiba? I suppose it is a realistic suggestion, if nothing else.

Everyone could see the young man's words were quite grounded and pragmatic, but they also understood the drawbacks and price they would have to pay.

"You say we should capitulate to him, but that's easier said than done. Have you considered what might happen after we surrender?" questioned the mayor.

"Indeed. Yes, in the immediate sense, we could surrender to Baron Mikoshiba and ask for his protection, but that would mean revolting against the Rancard Viscounty," declared the young man.

"No, it'd be more than just betraying the viscounty. If Queen Lupis wins the war, we'd be branded as traitors against the kingdom and executed."

"To begin with, are you really willing to disgrace yourself by accepting that upstart's rule?"

The guests in attendance all brought up opinions to the contrary. Considering how they all held their tongues so far, this was quite a change for the better.

Regardless, the young man carried on while ignoring the angry gazes thrown his way. Despite being young enough to be called a boy, he had nerve and courage. Or perhaps he was driven by some conviction. Either way, he didn't seem to flinch in the face of their anger and spoke up.

"Of course, I feel the same way as all of you. I hate nothing more than having to bend the knee to that upstart. This war isn't over yet, and it's possible Queen

Lupis might be able to turn things around.”

Hearing this, the mayor crossed his arms and nodded, thinking, *Yes... The chances of that are slim, but it’s still possible.*

Queen Lupis’s northern subjugation failed as the Mikoshiba barony’s army marched on the capital, making the war seem in their favor. The kingdom appeared almost guaranteed to lose when looking at the state of the war impartially.

But the war wasn’t over yet. On the off chance Queen Lupis won, anyone who sided with Baron Mikoshiba would be punished.

“As long as we can’t dispel that chance, accepting the Mikoshiba barony’s offer of surrender is dangerous.”

The other people in the room all hummed in agreement.

“Indeed. If Queen Lupis were to win, they would brand us traitors who sided with a rebel. At worst, we’d be sentenced to death.”

“Knowing how merciful Queen Lupis is said to be, she could take the fact we were coerced to do so into account, but we cannot rely on that. Even if we avoid the death penalty, we would not be treated as we were until now.”

“If nothing else, we’d be expected to pay a hefty sum in reparations.”

Their concerns were justified—even if they had to take a lighter punishment, they would lose the prosperity they enjoyed until now. The young man knew they would react this way and let his voice be heard once more.

“However, we cannot reach our governor, Viscount Rancard. In that regard, the viscounty already abandoned this town to its fate.”

The others exchanged concerned looks and spoke up.

“Well... Yes, that’s true...”

“Can we say for sure they abandoned the town, though?”

“I think the fact they haven’t contacted us for so long is all the confirmation we need,” said the young man, shaking his head.

Everyone present had suspected as such. The governor would have given

instructions—be it an order to surrender or to mount a do-or-die resistance at all costs. This was especially true for Dursen, since it was Viscount Rancard's financial lynchpin.

So if he hasn't given us any orders, it can only mean one thing.

Everyone, the mayor included, harbored this doubt. The young man carried on, reaching the heart of the matter.

"There's no definitive proof yet, but... According to my information, Viscount Rancard has already fallen in battle."

All the anger and emotion that filled the room until now instantly turned to silence, followed by confused murmuring.

"It can't be..."

"No, but he's right. If the viscounty isn't contacting us, it might not be a lie..."

"But without proof..."

"No, considering how the northern subjugation army passed the town by the other day, it seems likely..."

"If that's true, we can't wait for orders from the viscounty..."

The young man's words were only unconfirmed news, it might be true, but they also didn't want to believe it. Anyhow, the young man kept their expected reactions in mind and unleashed his second blow.

"The people I sent in reported back, saying that during the open battle the other day, he died when the enemy charged into the queen's forces. The viscounty is currently in a state of confusion. And the reason is..."

At that point, the young man trailed off for dramatic effect and looked around. If Viscount Rancard really died in battle, it would be a believable reason for why the viscounty didn't send a messenger to Dursen.

The mayor sighed and gravely said, "If what you say is true and the viscount is dead... His first and second sons are probably squabbling over his inheritance. I can only presume that's what happened, but given the situation, it seems likely."

All the others clicked their tongues or sighed, none of them denying his words. Succession feuds were among the most likely reasons nobles died in Rhoadseria. In other words, conflicts arose when the choice of a noble's successor resulted in family feuds.

The viscount should have been faster to make his choice, thought the mayor, also clicking his tongue.

Viscount Rancard had a wife and three concubines, including several other concubines who lived in a second residence. That was an above-average number of women than most Rhoadserian nobles. His financial strength made it unsurprising, some even saying he was limiting himself to so few women. Many in his position would lay hands on commoner girls or be vile enough to steal the wives of their subordinates. Compared to that, there was no ethical dispute about how many mistresses Viscount Rancard had.

Since nobles placed great importance on keeping their bloodline alive, having multiple wives was a natural conclusion. However, this was also often the cause of unpleasant disputes among their relatives.

For instance, Viscount Rancard's son from his legal wife was a foolish, lazy man, and his second son, born from his mistress, was a knight of irreproachable conduct, regarded as the preferred candidate. This terrible situation created a truly tragic situation, where the legal wife considered the mistress and her child threats to her pride and position.

No, it's more than just viewing them as a threat. She'd actively try to eliminate them.

Although the legal wife was a very tolerant and accepting woman, those around her wouldn't let her disregard the mistress and her son. From the perspective of the viscount's vassals and distant relatives, this would be a chance to act on their ambition. If the two children had an age gap of a decade or two, things might have been different, but the two sons were born mere days apart. This dispute had been ongoing for as long as the two have lived.

And if that rumor is true...

It might be true that the second son was born first, but they rewrote the time of his birth to ensure the legal wife could save face and keep her position. There

was no way of confirming that, but since the commoners found out a few years ago that the elder son was a dimwitted oaf, those rumors became rampant.

With all that in mind, possible discord slumbering in the Rancard Viscounty wasn't denied. Now, disputes erupted at the worst possible time.

None of us expected the viscount would die in battle.

One would usually expect for the inept son to be disinherited and the second son to be named successor. That would protect the family name and ensure the domain was passed onto the right hands in the next generation.

But a parent wouldn't necessarily think poorly of their less successful son.

As a father of three, the mayor knew this well enough, and this was why the viscount stalled on naming his official successor. But his fatherly love put them all in a terrible predicament.

"Dammit! This is horrible!"

"What are we to do, then?!"

"It's all his fault! The Devil of Heraklion! He brought catastrophe upon us!"

The men all raised their voices in sorrow, realizing the magnitude of their dilemma. It had forced them to look into reality, against their will, but the young man didn't stop there. He spoke up again, twisting the knife further.

"That said, we shouldn't expect any orders from the viscounty. Not anytime soon, at least." The young man cast his gaze out the window. "This leaves us with the question of how to deal with the Mikoshiba barony army camped outside town. When the viscount joined the northern subjugation army, he left the city's garrison at less than a third of its size. We only have a hundred or so troops in town right now. Arming every man in town could increase that number to a few thousands or even over ten thousand if we include the women and children. But they'll only make for an unorganized mass. Even if we fought back against the Mikoshiba barony, we'd lose within a day or two."

With this, he thrust the last, decisive words into their hearts.

"Then what are we to do? Accept their call for surrender and let them enter the town? Or raise our army to fight, even if it costs us our lives? If we fight, the

Devil will almost certainly order his men to massacre us all. I hear that he's lenient toward commoners but merciless against his foes."

A few of the men screamed upon hearing this. Baron Mikoshiba's rule benefitted the commoners, making it easy for them to live. He did not demand high taxes that forced people to sell off their family members to slavery, nor did he abduct people's wives or daughters to make them into his playthings. If nothing else, his regime was much better than the tyranny of the average Rhoadserian noble.

However, accepting his rule meant that they needed to obey his laws. He didn't treat commoners well, in particular, but protected his subjects for as long as they complied and cut down everyone else.

If we oppose him, he'll reduce our city to ashes. They heard the rumors of what became of the towns and villages that rejected his reign. *There's no guarantee it won't happen to us too.*

If they ever opposed him, the Devil of Heraklion would spare them no mercy. Noting how he exterminated the Ten Houses of the North, he wouldn't hesitate to turn to cruel tactics if needed.

We have no choice but to brace ourselves..

The moment he realized this, something within the mayor changed. All the indignation he felt for the Rancard Viscounty and the Mikoshiba barony, the feeling of a man scrambling to save himself, cleared away. What he found instead was, perhaps, the resolve to gamble his own survival to protect the people of this town.

"I understand what you're trying to say. Your view of the situation is probably correct," said the mayor to the young man as he came to his final decision.

"What will you do, then?" the young man asked.

"Well, fighting that army would be suicide. We have no choice but to accept their offer for surrender."

The choice had decided the town's fate, yet they still couldn't see where this would lead them. Few people in this entire world could possibly know that. In the end, the weak could only play out the scenario drawn out by the strong.

On that day, the town of Dursen joined the Mikoshiba barony's banner. The two-headed serpent now coiled around a blade with its gold and silver scales, slowly continuing to slither ahead as it consumed the kingdom.

Chapter 1: Those Who Wander in Search of Light

A few days had passed since the northern subjugation army returned to the capital, Pireas. They were prepared to win with their two hundred thousand troops compared to the Mikoshiba barony's less than fifty thousand troops. Even an amateur with no tactical or strategic experience could see the chances were in Queen Lupis's favor.

As such, the commoners didn't revolt despite the northern subjugation buying many supplies to be well-stocked for the war, which pressured them financially. Victory seemed assured. The nobles participating in the northern subjugation would split up the Mikoshiba barony's riches among themselves, and the leftovers would reach the hands of the commoners. It was this knowledge that allowed the people to endure.

Expectations were betrayed as the northern subjugation army lost the decisive battle at the Lunoch Plains. Seeing the army return to the capital with its tail between its legs shocked the people.



After all, this wasn’t just a simple defeat because it was a military campaign

that mustered many troops and led by the queen herself. The battle that began in the Lunoch Plains was pushed all the way back to the Cannat plains, near Epirus, where the state of the battle could have moved the fighting back and forth between the two areas.

The problem was that the fighting ended in the Cannat Plains, closer to the capital, and that didn't make it a narrow defeat. Moreover, the Mikoshiba barony army pushed the northern subjugation back and forced it into a pitiful retreat. This was a major defeat that shook up the very foundation of Rhoadseria.

As such, the palace sent out an edict saying that the defeat wasn't to be publicly discussed. After the army's return, the number of patrolling troops increased, and if they were to hear anyone speak of this defeat, they would hang that person.

There was no stopping the rumor mill. Even with no one saying it aloud, the very sight of defeated soldiers returning to the capital showed what happened. The rumors that the Mikoshiba barony army was marching on the capital in pursuit filled the people's hearts with anxiety. This included anger and resentment toward Queen Lupis, who established the northern subjugation and led it to its crushing defeat.

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That night, a man and a woman shared drinks in Pireas' castle.

"My apologies for taking so long to greet you. I'm delighted to see you return safely. One would expect no less of Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War," said Mikhail, holding up his glass to Helena, who sat opposite him. His words were full of respect and admiration.

"Thank you." Helena nodded and raised her own glass. "We've returned alive, one way or another."

"All as per the will of the gods?"

"If I had to say, their protection does not extend to me," Helena replied jokingly. "I suppose we can simply attribute it all to good luck."

He likely intended to brighten up the dark spirits of the place, but his efforts were for naught. It was clear from Helena's expression that she had forced this attempt to answer his jest.

"I see... To good luck, then."

"Yes."

The two sipped on bloodred wine, their expressions full of pain and regret. After all, the northern subjugation cost the lives of tens of thousands, and they weren't above feeling the weight of responsibility for those losses.

"Honestly, I didn't think the northern subjugation army would prove so frail or that we'd be pushed back to the Cannat Plains."

Mikhail's words were heavy with regret, as such a defeat meant that securing supplies was a meaningless gesture. His decision to give up on the possibility of proving his mettle on the battlefield was also worthless.

"Things were challenging on your side too," Helena said, trying to console him. She regarded Mikhail's work favorably, but her attempt at encouragement only made his expression cloud over.

"Yes. The incident in Epirus was simply that fatal. Even though we knew he might try to cut off our line of supplies, I never expected him to go on such a bold tactic."

Helena nodded. “An ordinary man wouldn’t have done something that bold. It’s far too great a price to pay.”

Burning down the northern regions after he went to such great lengths to capture that land was unthinkable and usually a terrible tactic. Helena wouldn’t have done that if she were in Ryoma’s shoes. No one in their right mind would.

And that’s why it worked, thought Mikhail.

A bad tactic taken too far can play into one’s favor because they would know the enemy might never see it coming. The worst part was that they were up against an opponent who wouldn’t think twice about using such cruel tactics.

“I will say that our choice to rely on superior numbers wasn’t a bad idea. But since we were against that boy, we certainly overestimated its effectiveness,” Helena sighed.

“Yes,” said Mikhail, nodding slightly. “We didn’t underestimate that many by any means, but... That made us think the large army we built up would be enough to crush him.”

“That’s exactly right. Maybe I’m just losing my edge,” remarked Helena, shrugging with a self-deprecating smile.

The outcome of that was this recent defeat. Mikhail was rendered speechless but followed with a vague smile.

“Lost your edge? You’re taking your jokes too far.”

“You think? I can only hope so.” Helena tipped the bottle to fill her glass again, then took another sip.

Both drank from a bottle Mikhail got from the castle’s wine cellar. It cost more than any commoner could ever hope to get, and they were chugging it like water or cheap ale in the tavern. As far as drinking high-class wine went, Helena was doing so improperly, but tonight she very much wanted to drink her problems away.

Mikhail couldn’t find it in him to stop her, and he himself felt the same way. The two continued to sip and refill their glasses for a while.

We’ve underestimated that man. Yes, we did. But that was the only factor in

our defeat.

Mikhail couldn't deny that their overwhelmingly large army made them overconfident and complacent. Helena had madea partially accurate analysis of the situation. Relying on sheer numbers was a straightforward tactic lacking elegance and glory, but it had certainty. A smaller army overcoming a bigger one was a far more impressive achievement, and strategies that flip the script were often the stuff of heroic tales and stories. If nothing else, they were good dramatic developments.

Realistically speaking, the side with larger numbers was typically the victor. In that regard, the northern subjugation army's approach seemed like the right decision.

Even though we chose the right tactic, our campaign ended in defeat. Why? The biggest problem was that the northern subjugation army had lost momentum at every important point. *Like in Epirus. Occupying that city boosted our troops' morale, but that fire attack happened.*

Said event had brought down the soldiers' boosted morale and took the wind out of their sails. The same thing happened when they tried to attack Fort Tilt, where they were initially clamoring, eager to topple the fort in one fell swoop. But the firm defenses led to a stalemate that hurt their morale again. That was the state of mind in which they had to approach the decisive battle on the Lunoch Plains.

We were so focused on having a large army that we forgot it was a disorderly mob. We should have kept in mind that they were a mismatched army.

Or perhaps they'd have been better off not overthinking things and sending their finest troops on a charge into the enemy. Still, this was all hindsight and something one could only say once the war ended and they'd settled their loss.

Besides, Mikhail truly didn't believe Helena's claims that she lost her touch. Helena Steiner stood above all as a warrior and a general leading an army. Physically speaking, she may have been growing old, but her mature intellect was as sharp and prudent as ever. Mihkail knew this all too well as someone who stood beside her on the battlefield.

One of the reasons we lost was that we couldn't control the nobles' actions.

There's no doubt about that.

Mikhail didn't believe all the nobles who participated in the war were devoted to Queen Lupis, and neither did she place faith in the nobles' loyalty. Despite that, he didn't think they would be so forward with their selfishness. The nobles had made foolish, absurd demands during the occupation of Epirus and the siege on Fort Tilt, making them a strain when planning strategy.

That's just one factor behind our loss. He didn't doubt Helena's abilities but couldn't fully trust her loyalty or pinpoint her intentions. *Couldn't she have come up with a better way?*

The idea that the northern subjugation could fail with Helena at the helm seemed absurd based on her past achievements and abilities. But Mikhail also felt ashamed to think this way because he wasn't confident he could have performed better than she did. Expecting her to do better than he could would be cowardly of him. Though he knew that, emotionally speaking, he couldn't reason like that. The doubt kept gnawing away at his heart.

Many of Rhoadseria's nobles are arrogant and selfish, and very few know the horrors of war. They let themselves ride high on the fact we had two hundred thousand men and tried to satisfy their greed.

Mikhail and Queen Lupis considered this when they drafted this army, so this outcome was obvious. However, even the nobles weren't arrogant enough to lose sight of everything.

They're greedy but are fairly obedient to those stronger than them.

And Helena Steiner was strong. If she were to use her authority to give an order, she could have pressured the nobles into obedience.

Lady Helena would have handled them if she had been intent on keeping them under her thumb. Yet she chose to hold her tongue. She didn't act, or perhaps, couldn't act. Even with her lack of assertiveness, she fulfilled her duties.

Either way, she didn't put forth her best effort. But he couldn't question Helena about it. Regardless, Mikhail harbored a hint of annoyance toward her. He couldn't see her as an ally as he had thoughts and complaints about her.

If she had been more cooperative with Her Majesty's regime to begin with,

this wouldn't have happened. He knew that asking for this now was wishing for the impossible, and Helena couldn't be held responsible for that. *In the end, the cause of all this was Her Majesty's flaws.*

Queen Lupis knew that her greatest flaws were her lack of leadership skills and decisiveness, which her closest aides, Mikhail and Meltina, couldn't deny. Because of that, she lacked confidence and couldn't trust a vassal more capable than her.

From the royal house's perspective,the nobles had monopolized national politics for years, and there were very few trustworthy vassals. Queen Lupis could only trust people like Meltina and Mikhail, who'd shared the good and the bad with her since she was little. After all, in the last civil war Kael Iruna switched to the nobles' faction. People can appear loyal on the surface, but there's no telling what they think under the surface.

As such, one couldn't say that Queen Lupis's lack of faith in her vassals could be attributed solely to her qualities as a ruler. Her relationship with Ryoma Mikoshiba resulted in a fundamental break because Queen Lupis was simply too suspicious.

And that's affecting her relationship with Helena as well.

Since Helena boasted such a celebrated history, Queen Lupis felt inferior. Mikhail could understand this as he harbored a grudge toward Ryoma Mikoshiba based on such feelings. It was similar to how a child born to people with a high social position often felt inferior to their parents.

The fact Her Majesty was once renowned as a general princess only makes it worse.

As a princess, Queen Lupis served as the Captain of the Royal Guard, but her combat experience didn't amount to much. At best, she fought bandits that ransacked the area near the capital or when she went out to hunt monsters a few times. Even so, she participated in battle as a commander and followed operations set up ahead of time by her subordinates. While one could say she had combat experience, that didn't mean she understood the harshness and cruelty of the battlefield.

Of course, she's royalty and doesn't need to fight herself. In that particular

situation, she couldn't fight on the front lines.

It would have been one thing if she were still a princess, but a queen couldn't wield a sword on the battlefield. While this world did have the power of martial thaumaturgy, nobles and royalty could actively fight on the battlefield. But within the logic of this world, it was unusual for them to do so. People of such high social standing only fought if they were trained warriors with genuine talent and technique.

These people only got involved when there were many heirs, so the death of one or two members wouldn't threaten the continuation of their house or when their survival was on the line.

In this regard, Queen Lupis served when Princess Radine's existence wasn't known and was the only heir to the Rhoadserian throne. Noble houses drew on the royal family's blood in the kingdom's long history. The first head of the Gelhart Dukedom married the founding king's younger sister. Many other duke and count houses married members of the royal family over the ages. So, there were other people but Queen Lupis who might succeed her.

But being the direct descendant of the king has a different weight than having a few drops of royal blood running through their veins.

None of this changed how Queen Lupis was an irreplaceable presence to Rhoadseria. The former king, Pharst II, made Lupis Captain of the Royal Guard to help her gain prestige for when the royal family took back real power from the nobles. But he did make sure she was well-guarded.

That only made Her Majesty aware that she was only a nominal ornament. But Lupis would have been better off accepting her fate as nothing but a symbolic leader or being too ignorant to notice it. *She was neither... For better and for worse.*

Either way, the discrepancy between Queen Lupis's expectations and reality was vast. No matter how conflicted she may have felt, the commoners still saw her as a hero since she did guide the kingdom to victory in the civil war. To her, that praise was nothing short of a bed of nails.

And that sense of inferiority connects to her distrust of Helena.

Queen Lupis believed she was weak. If she was, it stood to reason someone as strong and skilled as Helena would be loyal to her. There was no proof that Helena conspired to betray her or had questionable allegiances based on other people's points of views. Mikhail couldn't say aloud that he believed that Queen Lupis had a persecution complex. But this was Queen Lupis's choice to make, and not believing in Helena meant Mikhail's opinion was meaningless. Meltina was also cautious of Helena, inspired by her liege's feelings, and Mikhail was much the same.

Others might not have been hostile with Queen Lupis, but they couldn't be friendly either. Despite Mikhail harboring much respect for Helena, he couldn't ignore his queen's will. This issue wasn't about right or wrong but a problem caused by people's unpredictable emotions.

And those kinds of problems are the most deep-rooted.

There was no correct solution for such an issue. Helena participated in the northern subjugation as supreme commander, though that was a provisional title. She still led the army and was given authority over it, which might come across as just a semantic problem. That said, something felt off when one heard Helena was the "supreme commander."

That was what made Lady Helena's position so unstable.

The right to command the nobles participating in the army was exclusively in the hands of Queen Lupis. Helena and Mikhail could give out orders because Queen Lupis had permitted them to do so. But that meant they were simply her proxies, and the nobles knew that.

Everything would change if Her Majesty doesn't trust one of her proxies.. But what exacerbated the problem was that Queen Lupis's distrust of Helena was evident to the nobles. *What made it even worse was that Queen Lupis didn't want to discharge Helena from her role despite being so wary of her.*

She couldn't give Helena any real power because she didn't fully trust her—that much made sense. But there was no other worthy commander who could take her place.

In the past, Meltina and I would have taken on the roles of general and commander without regard for whether we were truly capable of those roles.

That thought made Mikhail stifle a self-mocking smile. Having experienced many hardships forced Mikhail and Meltina to mature and understand their capabilities. Simply put, they learned their place.

Granting her a formal title like commander in chief of the Rhoadserian military or commander of all the knight orders would have cleared up Helena's position. But Her Majesty did not elect to do that. Even Mikhail could see this was a clear reason. *And Lady Helena also regards Queen Lupis with estrangement.*

Helena took her job seriously, never cutting corners or disobeying orders, but one could only see this as her doing the bare minimum. One couldn't actually fault her for it. Ideally, people go about their careers passionately, but nobody can force that upon a person. Given how unassertive she was, Mikhail felt he was right to think like that.

This wasn't to say he didn't respect her. The human heart is rife with contradictions. One could feel affection for a person they hate and trust someone they suspect.

I cannot fault Her Majesty for her inconsistencies, can I? With that, Mikhail refilled Helena's empty glass and said, "I've heard about what happened to Sir Chris from Meltina. It's unfortunate. He challenged that man to a duel to buy Her Majesty time to escape, yes? Thanks to him, Her Majesty evacuated the battlefield unharmed, and you arranged for it all ahead of time. I sincerely thank you."

Helena hung her head, nodding weakly, and responded, "We had little choice. In those circumstances, we had to prioritize Her Majesty's survival."

There was deep sadness and regret to her voice. As Frank Morgan's grandchild, Chris wasn't just a former aide's relative. Ever since the civil war, he had been with Helena on every battlefield she was on, including the expedition to Xarooda. While she was too old to be his mother, they regarded each other as comrades.

Few people matched Chris as a soldier and warrior. The skills passed down in his family made him possibly the best spear-wielder in the kingdom. He was a first-grade warrior and had worked for Helena in intelligence and tactics. His youth meant he lacked experience, but he was still one of the most promising

knights, worthy of carrying Rhoadseria's future. Losing Chris was a terrible blow to Helena and was like losing her right hand.

"I hear Sir Chris's fate is still unknown."

Helena shook her head.

He continued, "Given the chaos on the battlefield during the retreat, it only makes sense. In that regard, no news is good news, but..."

No report of Chris's death had arisen, and Mikhail wasn't wrong, but this did nothing to support his survival. It was just a matter of perspective, as many families of the northern subjugation soldiers believed their loved ones were alive until their deaths were confirmed. Assuming someone was dead before an official report came across as cruel.

But that was only true of rank-and-file soldiers. Helena had seen many harsh battlefields, and her instincts as a soldier compelled her to coldly regard reality for what it was. She knew all too well the pain of clinging to faint hope only to be betrayed by the cruelty of reality.

"It's been days. We can't be too optimistic. If Chris survived and got away, I can't imagine he wouldn't try to contact us," said Helena.

"Which is to say?"

"He's probably dead or captive. Or otherwise injured and incapable of moving, but there's no way of confirming any of these right now."

Mikhail nodded and thought, *He's far too valuable a man to abandon. But in our current state, we can't do much.*

As cold as it appeared, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria was in a state of unease to concern themselves with the fate of a lone knight. Most of the nobles who participated in the northern subjugation ended up dead or missing. It was a defeat of historical proportions and left major claw marks on the land.

The northern subjugation army maintained order when retreating to the capital, but most nobles shut themselves off at their estates once they arrived. On the surface, they claimed they needed time to process their defeat. Looking at how the doors to their homes were closed, they felt strong aversion for

Queen Lupis and her army. Many had already begun returning to their domains with no intention of fighting under her anymore.

Because of that, the soldiers stationed in Pireas had terrible morale. There were no riots or rampages, but this was only thanks to the actions of military leaders like Helena and Mikhail.

All that is despite the fact that man is gradually marching on us. Mikhail loathed what the nobles did, but he couldn't only blame them in this situation.

"How is Her Majesty doing, by the way? Same as before?" Helena asked.

Mikhail frowned. Saying the truth here would be comparable to disparaging his liege. He also felt guilty about lying, so he remained silent. His attitude and expression, however, spoke to what he thought.

"I see... Well, I suppose one can't blame her. She's as affected by this as any of us, if not more," Helena said with a strained smile.

Grief and resignation. A natural reaction to this situation. Mikhail sighed softly as he noticed the emotion in Helena's eyes.

The situation they were in was very much the worst possible scenario. Queen Lupis hid in her room in the castle as soon as she returned and refused to leave. Thankfully, they were already planning to hole up inside Pireas. This was the strategy agreed upon by Queen Lupis, Mikhail, Meltina, and Helena. Albeit, they had little choice but to wait and brace for a siege.

Still, this was their best option. The problem was that Queen Lupis, the ruler of this country, shut herself off in her room after making that decision.

"What do we do now?" Helena asked.

Mikhail answered with a sigh. "There honestly isn't much we can do. Our only option is to have Meltina stay by her side and watch over her. I'd rather not resort to forcibly dragging her out of her room."

His words were full of doubt and inner conflict since he didn't know what to do here. How he felt was akin to a parent in the modern world dealing with a shut-in child. There wasn't much to do in that situation; one would drag the child out of the room or hope they got better over time.

Since there was no clear-cut solution, Mikhail was terribly concerned.

“Yes, I imagine, but... You do realize we don’t have much time?” asked Helena.

Mikhail nodded, angry at the one who drove his liege into this predicament. *I know why she’s doing this. It’s because she’s afraid of him.*

Meltina told Mikhail about the events of the battle on the Lunoch Plains, including how Ryoma Mikoshiba charged hellbent on claiming Queen Lupis’s head. Thanks to Meltina’s quick thinking and Chris stalling him, Queen Lupis retreated unscathed.

Just because she was physically whole didn’t mean she got away unaffected. She was already in the exceptionally stressful environment of the battlefield when Ryoma came at her with discernible bloodlust. That experience left a deep scar on Queen Lupis’s psyche.

In simple terms, she was traumatized, as many new recruits in war tend to be.

Emotional wounds heal with time, but...

With their defeat fresh in Lupis’s memory, Mikhail and Meltina waited and watched for the time being, but they couldn’t leave her alone for much longer. The nobles already doubted her caliber as ruler following this defeat. If news were to come out that the queen was unfit to command the siege, it could cause issues. Even the nobles that followed Queen Lupis out of loyalty would become so uneasy they might consider betraying her.

After all, loyalty was granted in exchange for protection. If the queen couldn’t uphold her duties but expected her vassals to remain loyal, this might cost her life.

Even under these circumstances, Mikhail was somehow able to request soldiers from the surrounding domains and gathered seventy thousand soldiers in the capital. He would have gathered another fifty thousand men in reinforcements if he had two more weeks.

With that we’ll have over one hundred thousand... The nobles being back in their domains means we can’t expect to mobilize the soldiers that returned from the northern subjugation. It should be possible to muster another fifty thousand.

And this time, we'll be fighting a defensive battle. That should be enough to settle the score with that man.

Mikhail's heart burned with anger and bloodlust toward Ryoma, but this wasn't the grudge he once harbored.

"I know. But we can't quit at this point. If we don't withstand this, that man will destroy this country."

Helena gazed at Mikhail as he spoke, his words standing for his iron will. He would do anything to protect his beloved country and respected legion. Despite them being backed against the wall, Mikhail's fighting spirit remained firm as he still sought a way to defeat Ryoma Mikoshiba. Like an evildoer seeking salvation from God.

Looking at Mikhail, Helena sighed softly and thought, *This man's ready to fight to the death.*

Realizing the northern subjugation he led failed, and his kingdom was on the verge of ruin, tormented Mikhail. As he was burdened with guilt and resolve, he would get the capital caught up in his battle with the man he hated.

Like a soldier laying down his life for his country...

Helena's expression was full of sorrow, perhaps out of pity for Mikhail. She sipped on her glass again, shifting her eyes to the empty bottle standing on the table beside them.

†

Away from the walls of Pireas was another man tormented by Ryoma Mikoshiba's activities.

"Seriously, this is so problematic... What am I supposed to do?" whispered Genzou Tachibana as he hid in the shadows of the trees, looking at the encampment where the Mikoshiba barony banner of a two-headed silver and golden snake coiled around a sword flapped. His hand reached his left pocket, where he had hidden the letter they'd entrusted him with. *I didn't think delivering a letter could be so tricky.*

It had been a week since Tachibana left the Church of Meneos encampment. He was a secret messenger, so taking the time and caution to remain hidden made sense. But seven days was a long time.



And all of that is because of the multilayered patrol network they have set up.

Since this was the primary encampment of Ryoma's army, guards constantly patrolled the perimeter to prevent enemy raid parties or traps set in their path, as all military movements did. This patrol network, though, wast meant to block enemy armies.

If one were to compare this strategy to fishing, it'd be like using a large round haul net with larger holes, allowing smaller fish to escape, to catch tuna. On its own, Tachibana could easily slip through this trick. The problem was that there was another special defensive network, one that didn't counter enemy armies.

This defensive army observed the enemy army's movements, with their primary objective being gathering intelligence, assassinating, and launching surprise attacks on small groups. Basically, they were established for counter-intelligence and nonstandard combat.

However, recon forces were most wary of enemy forces and not a spy like Tachibana. There was no denying that the maneuvering of spies in small numbers could change the tide of battle, even more so than the large armies on the field. Ryoma used such covert activities to allow himself to get as far as he had gotten.

As a result, the Igasaki clan and Nelcius dark elf elites supported the Mikoshiba barony army in secret. Tachibana had greatly miscalculated by not accounting for these measures.

Though I didn't underestimate young Mikoshiba, I hadn't thought his security would be so strict. I guess he really is that old man's grandkid.

Tachibana felt his skin crawl due to the presence of the shadowy figure. While he couldn't see or hear them, they were there, one with the dark, and he could keenly sense them.

These are probably spies from the kingdom's side. I don't know who sent them, but young Mikoshiba has made quite a bit of noise since coming to this world. There's plenty of people out for his blood.

Now and then, he could see sparks in the dark—likely from blades clashing with an occasional groan echo in the trees. A spy or assassin out to get Ryoma Mikoshiba got caught in the barrier and forced into combat.

But my luck is worse than I expected.

Tachibana scratched his head, cursing his luck under his breath. The Mikoshiba barony army had split into three groups, which was a problem. This move wasn't an unusual strategy, especially if they wanted to push back the northern subjugation army. Being in a large group would give them the advantage, but since they were marching while seizing surrounding towns and villages, splitting up their forces allowed them to finish the occupation faster.

Should the northern subjugation army launch a counterattack, having superior numbers could encourage them and increase their possibilities to attack the smaller force. With all that in mind, this division was a viable idea.

But that makes it harder for me to pinpoint which group Mikoshiba is in.

The source of Tachibana's bad luck was that the Mikoshiba barony army had already split up when he'd left the Church of Meneos to catch up. Upon doing so, he didn't know which unit Ryoma was leading.

Still, Tachibana had to ensure the letter reached Ryoma's hands. Asuka Kiryuu's fate was hanging in the balance, including the future of his savior, Rodney Mackenna. If this letter fell into enemy hands or failed to reach Ryoma, Tachibana wouldn't know how to handle the regret.

Believing in his luck, Tachibana followed the central unit only to realize Ryoma wasn't there, which was a painful blow. All he had to do was deliver a letter, but he had spent a whole week trying to fulfill this task. He could only conclude that his luck was cursed somehow.

I'd need pretty bad luck to get dropped into this hellish world, to begin with.

And yet, Tachibana was still luckier than most, as he had found a way to survive in this world. But this was of little consolation right now.

Just when I thought I caught up to him, I ran into this patrol network, and in the midst of combat, at that.

His only saving grace was that he wasn't their target. Had he gotten in the patrol network's way, he'd have been attacked from every direction and killed.

This wasn't to say Tachibana was perfectly safe at present, however.

Something came flying from the darkness toward the tree Tachibana was hiding behind—a rod. Thankfully it was thrown there by accident, no different from a stray bullet.

No one's discovered me yet, thought Tachibana, relieved, after looking around with his breath held.. He withdrew the rod thrust into the tree and sighed. *A rod shuriken ... What an old-styled weapon. It's hard to believe some people would use something like this here. This world never ceases to surprise.*

Tachibana already realized the connection between this world and the one he came from, so the possibility of someone from ancient China or Japan arriving here with ancient assassination tools wasn't implausible. A rod shuriken shouldn't have come as that much of a surprise.

Unlike the star shuriken, which was thrown with a spin, the rod shuriken stabbed its target with considerable force, making it a weapon difficult to use. While there were some tricks to its shape and center of gravity, this type of shuriken was still a rod. Simply throwing it didn't guarantee its tip would hit the enemy, and even if it did, getting it to actually stab into the enemy was a difficult task. Nonetheless, Tachibana knew he wouldn't be able to do it.

It takes a lot of skill to use a rod shuriken.

Putting aside the possibility of actual ninjutsu, one needed to handle throwing weapons proficiently.. Somewhere in this darkness, a fight using such throwing weapons was occurring.

A shuriken, eh? If I were like a ninja from some cartoon, maybe I'd be able to sneak in here more easily.

Genzou Tachibana was, at his core, a regular civilian. He was an ordinary middle-aged man, the child of an average salaryman and a housewife. When the time came for him to find employment, his good results at the judo club let him choose to pursue a career as a police officer.

Even though he boasted an above-average sense of justice, he wasn't some hot-blooded detective like in the movies or had a noble bloodline or origin. He may have had a distant ancestor who'd been a samurai centuries ago, but his family was perfectly plain..

Maybe being the descendant of ninjas would have been good right about now. It'd make life here more interesting, he thought with a self-deprecating smile.

Back in the juvenile division, he would read novels about characters that got reincarnated to other worlds, so he'd have something to talk about with the teens he had to deal with. Twists like that were common in such stories.

Tachibana read all sorts of such novels and comics, but there was no way ninjas existed. There would have been no place or chance for those with ninja ancestors to use those techniques in modern Japan. Beyond acted-out spectacles, those who practice ninjutsu or had that heritage wouldn't use it in combat, stealth, and assassination.

Even so, Tachibana wasn't unskilled and had been more than a uniformed police officer. He was a professional from the fourth detective division, where he investigated and arrested organized crime groups like the yakuza and mafia.

All the mortal danger he'd faced and his experience doing stakeouts taught him proper stealth, similar to ninjas. Beingsummoned to this world made him acquire even more skills, whether he liked it or not.

He had little experience fighting on the battlefield as a soldier, but his tasks amounting to spying let him polish these skills. And that skill was sufficient for detecting this shadowy battle and avoiding getting caught up in it.

But what do I do now? Do I just wait for the storm to pass me by? Ideally, he would wait for this hidden fight to end, then contact one of the Mikoshiba barony's spies and ask for a meeting. *This way, the letter won't fall into enemy hands by mistake.*

The worst scenario, however, would be him getting caught up in this battle and mistaken for an enemy.

If that happens, I'll have to fight them off, and it'll take a long time to resolve the misunderstanding. At worst, he'd be killed without question. *After all, I can't risk killing them.*

Tachibana was confident that he could come out on top if he fought these spies in the dark, intending to kill his opponents. Fighting someone on that level while being forbidden to injure or kill them would be extremely difficult. Given

the task at hand, he couldn't hurt Ryoma's subordinates.

Killing them would make this matter much too complicated.

Because Tachibana had investigated Ryoma's disappearance before being summoned to this world, he knew the boy's appearance. Ryoma, however, didn't know Tachibana but could probably surmise he was Japanese based on his appearance and behavior. But Ryoma could never know he was a police officer or summoned to this world alongside Asuka Kiryu.

This uncertainty showed how Tachibana could not prove who he was or his affiliations. At worst, Ryoma could assume he was a third party using Asuka's name to get closer and hurt him. Sending Tachibana was better than sending someone unrelated to the matter, though nothing was harder than proving one's identity.

If Koichiro was there, things would be easier...

For a second, Tachbna thought back to the old man he parted ways in Beldzevia with a bitter smile. When investigating Ryoma's disappearance, Tachibana visited the Mikoshiba household. That was where Misha Fontaine, the court thaumaturgist of the Beldzevian court, summoned him to this world alongside Koichiro. But when they made their getaway, Koichiro stayed behind to stall for time and ensure his and Asuka's escape.

In truth, Koichiro found out several months later that Asuka and Tachibana were sheltered by the Church of Meneos and had been watching over them from the shadows since. Koichiro and Ryoma knew Asuka was participating in the northern subjugation as part of the Church of Meneos.

In that regard, Tachibana could simply walk into the Mikoshiba barony army camp and state his business. But since he didn't know Koichiro was at Ryoma's side, he had to think carefully before deciding. No matter how long he agonized over the decision, fate was cruel.

A voice resounded through the woods as the fighting subsided and silence descended over the area.

"Who's that over there?!"

Then, a black figure cloaked in black and carrying a short spear lunged down

from the treetops.

†

Shortly before that happened, Dilphina led the Black Serpents in their mission of guarding Ryoma. Her face had the usual cold, sharp glare, and her fair features were in a graceful ice mask.

Examining her face, though, revealed the fatigue and tension in her eyes. Days of nonstop fighting have taken their toll on her. Dilphina was, of course, skilled even among her fellow dark elves, the daughter and heir to the Mad Demon Nelcius.

It had only been a few days since she cut into the enemy lines in the decisive battle against the northern subjugation army. But she wasn't so frail and fragile as to be exhausted. Spending day and night without rest, fending off assassins and spies, had worn her out.

"I swear... No matter how many I kill, more crop out of the woodwork," Dilphina said, rustling her sleek hair in annoyance.

"It's only natural. To them, slaying the lord would end this war," said Izolde, smiling without a hint of fatigue.

She's always so energetic... Or maybe I'm just getting older, Dilphina thought.

Izolde was indeed the youngest member of the Black Serpent elites. She was physically mature, but mentally speaking, she was still young. That said, the Black Serpent members have all gone through the rite of adulthood. Perhaps Izolde's youthful brightness just came naturally to her.



“That’s true,” Dilphina nodded.

“That’s right. And since you haven’t had much chance to work so far, prove your worth now! You can’t afford to lose to those twins, you know, Dil?”

Dilphina met Izolde’s frank words with a strained smile, though she couldn’t deny she harbored this concern.

That man does trust me, but compared to the twins...

It was perhaps inevitable she couldn’t match them since they had been at Ryoma’s side through thick and thin ever since he was summoned to this world. Formally speaking, they were his aides. In terms of status, Lione—who rose the ranks to become a general under his command—or Nelcius—who commanded a major faction under the barony’s control—outranked the twins.

The height of one’s status didn’t necessarily match their degree of trust they had, as the twins had a special place at Ryoma’s side that was evident to all of the Mikoshiba barony’s retainers.

Looking in from the outside, it’s clear he’s not in intimate relations with the twins. Albeit, I don’t understand how that’s possible.

Even as a dark elf, Dilphina could tell the Malfist sisters were beautiful and were serving a young man in the prime of his manhood. Noting how the Malfist sisters made their yearning for Ryoma visible, their relationship becoming intimate seemed like a natural conclusion. Yet, it seemed this wasn’t the case.

He doesn’t seem to have a dislike for women.

If Ryoma were homosexual, she’d understand and ask her father Nelcius to have a handsome man from their tribe serve at his side instead. Some elven men were even so fair they were known as living gemstones.

But that’s not the impression I’m getting.

Dilphina thought he was attracted to women, as she’d heard of cases where he’d join Boltz and Mike, Lione’s subordinates, when they went to town to play with the ladies. He returned after dawn more than once or twice, only to be met with cold glares from the sisters and Lione.

With that in mind, it was hard to imagine Ryoma was homosexual. For some reason, he didn’t enter any intimate relations with any of the women who

fancied him, and Dilphina didn't understand why.

An Igasaki ninja came in to report, pulling Dilphina out of her thoughts.

"Someone else got caught in the net, yes?" she asked.

"They're marching to our formation from the southwest through the forest. There's a dozen or so of them," the ninja replied.

She didn't ask who sent the assassins, nor did the ninja say it, and it didn't matter on whose orders they were acting.

But if I had to guess, it's almost certainly some Rhoadserian noble who participated in the northern subjugation.

Assassinating Ryoma would undo their defeat on the Lunoch Plains, and even if it failed, it would stall his army's progress. Then again, it could be the Church of Meneos' group, who remained on the backlines. The fact that the Mikoshiba barony was working with the dark elves, in particular, could result in them turning against Ryoma, since expelling the demi-human races was part of their doctrine. On top of that, the O'ltormean Empire could have sent assassins too.

One would be hard-pressed to find a person who had more people wishing to take their life than Ryoma did. Looking into who sent the assassins was meaningless. Regardless of the evidence, finding and complaining to whoever had done this would achieve nothing.

Even if they captured the assassins and tortured them for information, they would not know if what they said was true or enough to accuse someone. They'd be laughed off or ignored, or denounced for making accusations based on vague evidence, then have to apologize.

Rather than deal with that meaningless question, simply disposing of the assassins was much more significant. In this case, however, the number of attackers struck Dilphina as strange.

"Really... I'm sure you wouldn't make a mistake here, but aren't there quite a few of them?"

"They're likely using temporary hires for the jobs."

"You mean assassins hired for money?"

“Yes. Training reliable spies is difficult and requires time and money. But if one is willing to pay in coin, there are adventurers and mercenaries who would handle the dirty work. And then there are groups like us.”

“Yes, indeed,” Dilphina nodded. “Whoever hired them would resort to any means to see this done.”

For assassinations, two types of people would agree to do it—those lacking expert knowledge in assassination, and assassins or spies trained for this type of work. The former included family or friends helping the assassin; otherwise, they were knights or warriors moving out to eliminate a target in secret. The latter naturally guaranteed greater success at the job.

If one were to compare it to cooking, the former were like amateurs cooking at home, while the latter were professional chefs. Asking experts for work always seemed like the more expensive option, and training someone in your service to that end could take years and require appropriate training facilities.

The enemy had sent in over forty assassins, and those were the ones Dilphina was aware of. That number was just the ones her unit eliminated, not accounting for the other two formations marching along the same route and the hundreds of assassins she assumed they killed. . But them not giving up meant they were quite persistent.

With that thought in mind, Dilphina began giving the order to strike back. “Fine, then. For now, let’s go about it as always. The Igasaki clan members will function as our hunting hounds. The spot will be the large rock to the southeast of here. Understood?”

The ninjas would lure the enemy to a spot where Dilphina and her Black Serpents would wait to ambush.

“Understood. We shall be off, then.” The ninja turned his back to her and disappeared into the dark woods.

Dilphina and her dark elves’ relationship with the Igasaki clan was that of equals, as both were retainers serving the Mikoshiba barony. In terms of number and their status as indigenous to the Wortenia Peninsula, Ryoma treated the dark elves with the utmost respect. Meanwhile, the Igasaki clan were experts in espionage that lived and died in the shadows, which was not

necessarily true of the dark elves.

At the battle of the Lunoch Plains, Nelcius led a force of ten thousand dark elves. Besides being retainers, they were cooperators and allies of the Mikoshiba barony. It was for this reason that the Igasaki clan regarded them with respect.

They do feel a bit overly formal, though.

The dark elves had high regard for their chiefs and the like but didn't have the same class differences humans did. Dilphina realized, however, that she needed to be mindful of that when interacting with humans.

Thus, Dilphina disappeared into the woods with Izolde in tow.

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Countless dead bodies littered the forest clearing, many covered in shurikens while others had snapped necks. It looked like the site of a truly gruesome battle.

Dilphina calmed down, caught her breath, and swung her bloodstained spear.

"Phew. That should do it..."

It wasn't a difficult battle, but relishing the experience of slaying enemies with some experience gave Dilphina euphoria.

"Dil, we're done on this end," Izolde said, appearing behind her.

"Good... Is anyone hurt?"

"Nope, no one. They put up a hard fight, though."

"Where's everyone else?"

"Two enemies noticed our diversion and broke out of our encirclement, so Eustia joined the Igasaki clan members in chasing them down."

Hearing this, Dilphina furrowed her fair brows. "Right... I suppose I underestimated our enemies. I didn't think they'd break through our network."

"I'm sure she'll be back soon," said Izolde, smiling.

Dilphina nodded. Humans weren't gifted with good night vision, even if they

could use martial thaumaturgy to bolster their eyes. The darkness that required a torch to navigate was where the dark elves were at their strongest since they could move unimpeded, just as they could under daylight.

The Igasaki clan were humans who had better trained night vision, but they were no match for a dark elf's eyes. So, they employed the help of the dark elves to secure their perimeters during the night.

The fact they broke through our patrol network is concerning, though.

The Igasaki clan's network was so precise and careful that even an ant couldn't slip in with them unaware. However, an enemy caught by that network created a disturbance, which no longer made it airtight. It was like a spider web; when prey struggled to free itself, it could tear part of that web.

I doubt someone else will launch an attack on us at this time.

Since these spies were strong enough to give Dilphina a fair fight, they weren't disposable pawns. The chances of another attack existed..

Or maybe someone completely separate from the first attack would try to attack now.

The chances were slim, but the question was how much she could keep that possibility in mind. Because of that, Dilphina ordered Izolde to rebuild the barrier.

"Izolde, you and everyone except those pursuing the escaped enemies are to rebuild the network."

"Understood. What about you, Dil?"

"I'll check there aren't any stragglers left," Dilphina said as she gripped her lance and hopped over to a nearby tree branch. The branch was ten meters above ground, and to jump that high without a head start required martial thaumaturgy. Dilphina then closed her eyes and focused. She took a deep breath, expelling all the impure air from her body and taking in fresh air. The prana circulating in her body moved from the perineum near her tailbone to the top of her head.

This was like the microcosmic orbit, a cultivation technique in Taoism.

Perhaps it was introduced to this world by an otherworlder or coincidentally developed in this world. As a dark elf warrior, Dilphina had no way of knowing, nor was she too interested in the answer. To her, this was an ancient breathing technique passed down by her clan and taught to her by her father that allowed her to activate her chakras and circulate her prana.

With her senses keenly sharpened, she focused her nerves on the dark forest around her.

That's the presence of animals. A deer or a bear, perhaps.

She felt the breath of several life-forms, but they weren't human. A moment later, Dilphina sensed something else. Someone else, a third party hid in the nearby trees.

This is...

His presence was so faint she wouldn't notice it without focus, and anyone who didn't have Dilphina and Nelcius' skills wouldn't notice him through the trees. For a brief moment, he gave off a presence that differed from the animals and the trees.

I'm not imagining this. This person is intentionally cloaking their presence.

Which meant this was an enemy. At that moment, Dilphina's let out a sharp whistle. This was a signal decided ahead of time, which meant they were all to switch to high alert.

"A hundred meters to the southwest, in the shadows of the trees!" she shouted and lunged off the branch, speeding toward her target. In coordination with her movements, Izolde swiftly led the surrounding troops to charge in the direction Dilphina specified. *That's him!*

Soon enough, Dilphina spotted Tachibana hiding behind the trees. She shouted, demanding to know who he was as she descended upon him.

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Having identified his attacker, Genzou Tachibana's eyes widened in surprise.

Dark elves... Dammit!

He briefly noticed the attacker's fair features and distinctive pointed ears lit

up in the moonlight, marking her as nonhuman. Few places in the western continent were home to demi-humans, and no elven settlements were in these woods. So the answer was clear.

What should I do? At this rate, they'll think I'm one of their enemies and kill me!

Though panicked, Tachibana thought quickly on his feet. He hadn't expected to fight here and be detected like this. Although his heart was in shock, the rest of his body reflexively took position to intercept the attack. After all, one had to put their life on the line to survive in this world. Anyone who couldn't defend themselves from an attack wouldn't last.

Tachibana drew the baton on his belt and desperately blocked the spear aimed at his throat. This was his weapon of choice, used to navigate danger even before being brought here. He trusted this baton more than any pistol.

An intense crashing sound shook the night and sparks sprayed through the air. His opponent did hold back somewhat, but if he'd taken that blow head-on, he'd have been knocked out.

Dammit! Do I have to fight?!

Fighting was the worst possible development here, but it didn't seem like he'd be able to run away. This attacker discovered Tachibana when he tried to hide so they could follow him. Moreover, Tachibana was alone and isolated, but the same wasn't true of Dilphina. The more time passed, the more the enemy tightened their net around him.

No, fighting here would be bad. But if I can't run...

Tachibana then made up his mind after going through the alternatives and chose a gamble. He leaped back a step's distance, threw away his baton, and raised his hands.

"What is this?" Dilphina asked, her spear aligned horizontally and fixed on him. "If you're trying to get me to lower my guard, it won't work."

Dilphina knew that the right choice would have been to skewer him. Even so, he was skilled enough to block her blow whether she struck with the intent of killing. Despite that, he discarded his weapon and seemed to surrender. Once

Dilphina displayed curiosity toward him, his plan worked.

“My name is Genzou Tachibana. I’m here to deliver a letter to Baron Mikoshiba. Please, allow me to meet with him.”

And so, Tachibana revealed his name and intentions, believing that was the best option.

Chapter 2: The Delivered Letter

It was around 2 a.m. at the camp outside the town of Dursen, which had the banner of a double-headed snake with gold and silver scales coiled around a sword—the Makoshiba barony's emblem. One could say that the camp was so well-defended that physical walls surrounded it. The tent at the center housed the young warlord leading this army, who sat with his arms crossed as he stared out into the air.

Having finished all manner of paperwork, he was considering his future options. *Everything's going according to schedule so far.*

He mapped the area surrounding Dursen in his mind. Located to the north, with Dursen as its base, was Viscount Rancard's domain, with towns of Thelmes and Anpol to the south. These three towns formed a vital position for Viscount Rancard.

And took the most significant town of those three, Dursen. They treated this with a great deal of dislike, but we won them over. It's unlikely they will do anything until this war is over.

Ryoma sneered, recalling how the delegation returned to town smiling after meeting him. On the evening of the day before, they finally accepted Ryoma's call to surrender and agreed to place Dursen under the Mikoshiba barony occupation. Even after hearing that, Ryoma didn't have his army enter the city, nor did he demand any gold or supplies.

This surprised the Dursen delegation, and they reacted with great relief when they realized Ryoma wasn't lying. A conqueror occupying a city in this world shared their supplies, which was a privilege and necessity since one had to do so to support their army.

In the face of this necessity, most conquering armies acted much the same as they took from wherever it was easiest—simply put, commoners—and resorted to force if necessary. The tyranny of those in power was even more marked than in modern society; if they deemed it necessary, they would not think twice before resorting to violence.

The northern subjugation army was a good example of this. When Ryoma's starvation tactics led to a lack of supplies, Mikhail forcibly gathered supplies from the region around the capital. With the country's survival hanging in the balance, he'd acted with exceptional reasoning.

When your country's on the brink of collapse, any attempt you'd make to sugarcoat things goes out the window. Upholding ideals can be important, but when you take it too far, it can do you harm.

This outlook was something many of the people living in this world understood naturally and had accepted. So, Ryoma's decision came across as baffling to those from Dursen.

In a serious tone, Ryoma said, "I know the starvation tactics drove the kingdom to requisition supplies and everyone's livelihood has become strained. I'm not going to make things harder for you."

Hearing those words made any enmity and caution they felt for the man waver. Still, Ryoma had his own reasons for saying that.

I'm not going to use supplies taken from the enemy. God knows what's in them.

Sun Tzu's Art of War tactics chapter mentioned that rations stolen from the enemy were more valuable than those from one's home country. But this also applied to weapons, armor, and medical supplies.

Carrying supplies from one's country required horses and a workforce, which needed food and supplies to make the trip. Taking a ton of supplies to the frontlines consumed the same amount, if not more.

In Japan's history, people would reap the crops of other's fields to steal ownership over their fiefdoms. This practice was called harvest violence, which warlords used during the Warring States periods to strike financial blows to other warlords.

Being able to both take from the enemy and bolster your own side was like striking two birds with one stone, as it made stolen supplies have greater value most times. On top of that, stealing from the enemy's commoners affected their country's economy. This was something Ryoma fundamentally agreed

with.

But only under certain conditions.

There was no guarantee the stolen supplies were safe to use. For example, it was easy to ensure food stolen from crops on a field was safe to consume but not from a granary. If Ryoma were part of the Dursen delegation and inclined to stall or hurt the enemy army, he would consider poisoning the food.

Poisoning all the food is difficult, but still.

Even if one intended to poison the enemy, it wasn't necessary to taint all the food or use a lethal substance. Using some poisonous mushrooms growing in the woods or, for lack of a better option, spoiled food and mixing them into the supplies was enough.

Doing that also makes it easy to claim it was all an accident. Those were relatively accessible methods that just made whoever ate them sick. *But that's good enough.*

Crippling a single soldier didn't amount to much unless many soldiers developed fevers or came down with stomachaches, meaning they could end up ignoring their commanders' orders. The army could call doctors, but that would still result in several days of delay that lowered the enemy's marching speed.

One could easily assume that such ailings weren't a big deal. Warriors fighting with sword in hand begged to differ. Sending soldiers to fight in that condition was akin to sending them straight to their deaths.

And commanders can't always gauge the state their soldiers are in.

For commanders, the number of soldiers they had was a factor that could decide whether they won or lost. They wouldn't send severely sick or gravely injured soldiers out to fight, though soldiers feeling ill wouldn't necessarily convince them to send fewer forces.

And preventing poisonings like that is relatively tough.

The only foolproof way of ensuring food wasn't poisoned was using poison tasters. While one could employ animals for this, it took time and preparation.

Even if one went that far, eliminating the possibility of poisoned food was not easy.

Of course, if they were to mix poison in our food, they'd meet retribution. But people don't necessarily think ahead when backed into a corner.

The threat to the kingdom could give them the resolve to act even if their families were in danger. Or maybe they had their families evacuate ahead of time, minimizing the loss of life retribution could bring.

Food wasn't the only issue because the enemy might hand over weapons with broken clasps, making them fall apart or malfunction during battle. They could have done any number of these things if they didn't mind resorting to any means or fear losing their lives.

And if they knew the enemy would go after their food and supplies, they'd tweak them ahead of time.

With that in mind, Ryoma realized the danger of stealing enemy supplies and putting them to use. He didn't deny Sun Tzu's opinion on the merits of this tactic but wouldn't believe in everything from the Art of War.

When you think about it that much, the obvious answer is not using the supplies you take.

In other words, one needed to make sure they weren't careless enough to reach the point where pillaging the enemy was their only option.

Besides, you're bound to come up short on something if you depend on getting supplies from the field. While I don't have to spare the people here, pushing them too hard isn't a good idea either.

Ryoma had no intent of hurting the people of Rhoadseria more than he had to. However, he wouldn't hesitate to use any cruel tactic on them if he deemed it necessary.

Maintaining a balance between mercy and cruelty is important.

Merciful people were easier to adore but perceived as exploitable. Cruel people ruled efficiently through terror and opposed those who pushed them too far.

In the case of the Mikoshiba barony, their recent victory on the Lunoch Plains boosted the army's morale. The soldiers felt invincible. But favorable conditions opened the chance of mistakes, and inflated confidence could turn to arrogance leading to ruin.

The scariest part is the possibility of the occupied towns and villages rebelling.

Due to Mikhail's orders, the remaining soldiers in the nobles' domains had gathered in Pireas, leaving the surrounding towns and villages unprotected. Any soldiers there only numbered from the dozens to a few hundred, and citizens armed with hoes and spades wouldn't put up significant resistances. The difference in strength between such commoners and his soldiers was like heaven and earth.

But war isn't won based on such factors.

If a rebellion broke out while he was attacking Pireas, it could end up flipping the script on him. At worst he'd lose contact with his stronghold in the Wortenia Peninsula, and the Mikoshiba barony army would get stranded in the heart of the enemy's domain. His soldiers wouldn't be able to exhibit their full strength and make this war for naught. As strong as his soldiers may have been individually, mental pressure was unavoidable and would block their capabilities.

Evil must be capable of doing good, and good must be capable of doing evil.

Not taking any supplies or informing the enemy they intended to do so would come across as unnatural. Ryoma still needed to keep up the appearance of having gained something here.

And so, his response was an act. Saying that he didn't take their supplies to protect the livelihood of the commoners gave the impression that he was a merciful man. Additionally, it was the most effective way of dealing with the cornered nobles of Dursen.

Apparently, the Igasaki clan has captured a lot of spies recently. Probably to stall us until the northern subjugation army returns to the capital.

Dilphina reported taking out quite a few spies, even if Ryoma had no idea she was still engaged in doing that at that very moment. But he was kept up to

speed on the enemy's recent actions.

Are they really going after me or doing it to keep us in check?

The enemies weren't fools. Peacetime had moments of calm, but they were in the middle of a war. Ryoma would have all manners of measures in place to keep away spies, and the enemy knew that. Surely they didn't think they'd be able to assassinate him.

Since they failed to take him down the traditional way using their army, perhaps they would resort to any means to do it. Even so, this all depended on circumstances permitting it, which he guessed was to keep him and his army in check.

I don't know who's leading these efforts. They likely just tried to buy the northern subjugation army time to return to the capital.

After a major defeat, the question becomes how to minimize losses while on the retreat. An army hit from behind was a target that could easily be defeated, no matter how large it was.

For instance, Shimazu Yoshihiro employed retreat tactics like the Zazenjin or Sutegamari, where he left behind military units in key positions during the Battle of Sekigahara. Those unsacrificed themselves for him to stall his pursuers.

These attacks were similar to this in nature.

But I can tell that they're hoping to kill me. If I had to guess, Mikhail or Meltina are behind this. Either them or some relatively shrewd noble... I can't see Queen Lupis doing this.

This tactic was brutal because it used people as disposable chips, which made it effective yet risky. The physical harm caused by throwing away soldiers made it so others would regard whoever ordered this tactic as cruel and inhuman. It also made it so subordinates didn't trust their superiors because no one enjoyed being expendable, unless they were highly loyal.

Unless they were psychopaths incapable of empathy, the weight of making that choice weighed on people's consciences. Because of this, few people knowingly accepted those risks and made that choice.

Using such cruel tactics required intellect and a certain human quality. Employing such ploys necessitated extreme caution and a great deal of resolve, and Queen Lupis lacked that streak.

She doesn't have the nerve or resolve to do that.

Queen Lupis's nature was that of a selfish person who hid that trait behind a thin veneer of kindness and benevolence. She had a weak will that gave in to the opinions of those around her while claiming she wanted to preserve the peace.

On this front, Ryoma held Mikhail and Meltina in much higher regard. For better or worse, those two looked back on their flaws to learn and mature. Moreover, they wholeheartedly supported the kingdom, the royal family, and their queen. There was a bit of foolishness to that effort, and Ryoma didn't deny the nobility's determination.

Not that I'd want them working under me, though. Ryoma yawned as it became late before he knew it. *I'll turn in for the night for now. Gotta get up early tomorrow, after all..*

Even a warlord that mastered martial thaumaturgy couldn't stave off the sandman. He stretched and got into the bed at the corner of his tent. He must have been quite tired, because his consciousness drifted away as he wrapped himself in the blanket and closed his eyes.

But there was no rest that night for the young conqueror, it seemed. He didn't hear any voices or shuffling. All he sensed was the slightest disturbance, which immediately sent Ryoma him to sit up, perfectly awake, and reached for Kikoku, which rested at his pillow side.

I sense someone... Upon doing so, his grip on Kikoku's hilt grew tighter.

It was unlikely that anyone with the necessary skills could slip through every layer of defense as Igasaki ninjas and soldiers patrolled the camp's perimeter. In this regard, Ryoma's caution could be seen as excessive to the point of paranoia. Regardless, no defense was perfect. As slim as the odds might have been, he couldn't deny the possibility of an assassination.

One could see this caution bordering on cowardice, but Ryoma was both a

warlord and a warrior. He knew that even with many soldiers, only he could defend himself. So, he followed his faith in both mind and body while believing that none of his retainers would disturb his sleep at this time of night.

And this was why his voice was calm even though he had just woken up.“What happened?”

The figure standing in the middle of the tent deliberately and tensely examined Ryoma’s reaction. It was one of the trusted Igasaki ninja, surprised to hear their lord call out to them at a time when everyone but the sentries were fast asleep. They quickly hid their surprise and spoke.

“Dilphina intercepted an enemy attack earlier.”

Ryoma frowned at those words. Surely the ninja didn’t come here in the middle of the night to inform him about this? They could have reported that in the morning. The fact they did so meant something unusual must have happened. Rising out of bed, Ryoma stood in front of the kneeling ninja.

“Did they break through Dilphina’s interception?” he asked with a hint of surprise.

He truly felt something about this situation was unusual. After all, Dilphina was a skilled lance warrior, her skills taught to her by her father, Nelcius the Mad Demon, making her skill with the spear one of the finest in the Mikoshiba barony. Only a dozen or so in the entire continent could possibly match her prowess, including Chris Morgan.

The long-lived dark elves had rich reserves of prana, making them skilled verbal thaumaturgists. They also had ample experience as hunters through their lives in the monster-infested Wortenia Peninsula. When it came to unconventional warfare, few could match her.

The ninja shook his head and responded, “No. The assassins were disposed of without issue. But she ran into an unexpected intruder.”

“An...intruder,” Ryoma said pensively.

Ryoma could tell the ninja wasn’t sure how to regard the intruder, implying it wasn’t simply a third party that became involved in the fighting. This piqued Ryoma’s curiosity.

“And? What became of them?” he asked.

In response, the ninja took a letter from his pocket and handed it to Ryoma.

A letter of surrender? He could have said a messenger from some noble arrived.

It wasn’t unnatural if, after he beat the northern subjugation army to submission, some of the nobles lost their confidence in Queen Lupis and sought to turn to Ryoma’s side. This was urgent enough to justify waking him up in the middle of the night.

Why would he be so hesitant to talk about it? Ryoma suspiciously took the envelope. *Huh? A noble with his own emblem came to this country?*

The wax seal on the letter had the emblem of a wolf holding a sword in its mouth. Noble houses having their emblem was not rare, but he could not recall a Rhoadserian noble with one like this. Ryoma had risen to power after the previous civil war, so he didn’t recognize other nobles’ emblems. When going to war with Queen Lupis, he gathered information on most nobles to understand how the enemy armies had organized. But none of those houses matched this emblem.

Is it some minor noble?

Ryoma didn’t discriminate between major and minor nobles, but there were reasons for their inferiority. They were either capable but hated by people in power or made a blunder in the past that resulted in their family being stripped of power.

Once he read the letter, any such questions left Ryoma’s mind entirely.

Perhaps noticing the change in Ryoma’s expression, the kneeling ninja gingerly said, “Master?”

“Oh, sorry. I’ll see the man who brought this letter, Mr. Tachibana. We might have to change our strategy based on how things go, so I’ll have to speak to everyone. You’ll have to get them out of bed, but gather them here for me.”

The ninja nodded and disappeared into the darkness. Left alone in the tent, Ryoma fixed his clothes and pondered the letter.

Hm... Rodney Mackenna, huh...? An unexpected letter from an unexpected person. But if he remembered, Koichiro spoke highly of him. *If nothing else, he has a good eye for seeing how the tides shift.*

Shortly after slaying their court thaumaturgist, Misha Fontaine, Koichiro escaped Beldezevia and discovered that Asuka Kiryuu was in the Church of Meneos' capital, the Holy City of Menestia. For a time, he watched over from afar.



The Church had considerable influence over the city, so rescuing Asuka from

there would have been difficult. But seeing it would endanger the girl he loved like his own granddaughter, Koichiro decided not to do so.

I'd imagine he wanted to rescue her using the Organization's power, even if it meant leaving mountains of corpses behind. One could call him a terrible monster for coming to this decision. *Starting a war to save one relative... But if Asuka was in danger, Grandpa wouldn't think twice before doing it.*

To Koichiro, Asuka was an irreplaceable part of his life. He cared for her as much as he did for his direct grandchild, Ryoma, if not more. Koichiro wouldn't leave Asuka in danger, and neither would Ryoma.

We both have a soft spot for her, Ryoma thought with a self-deprecating smile. *And if it were me in Asuka's shoes... Well, he wouldn't come save me.*

Ryoma knew his grandfather loved him dearly, and he didn't question that affection. Koichiro had raised him harshly to the point where some might see Ryoma's training as abuse. Indeed, there was even a time when people learned of the intensity of their training and reported them to child services, who came in to visit.

For as long as Ryoma could remember, Koichiro treated him with more love than harshness, not spoiling him. They acted more as father and son than grandfather and grandchild. Koichiro was also Ryoma's teacher who trained him in martial arts. Overall, their relationship was far too complex to describe with a single word.

Not only would he not save me, he'd drop in to scold me for not getting out of the scrape.

Compared to that, his relationship with Asuka was simple. He did teach her a bit of martial arts, but he didn't train her in the Mikoshiba Mortal Arts. His affection for Asuka was more akin to a grandfather spoiling his granddaughter. It was a difference in their position, not how much he loved them. So long as Ryoma was to live on to become the heir to the Mikoshiba Mortal Arts, this was unavoidable.

This dynamic was a question of a relative being weak and needing protection. Ryoma was undoubtedly strong, and Asuka was weak and needed saving. Since Koichiro cared so much for her, there was only one reason he didn't rush to her

aid.

It was because he decided that she'd be safe in Rodney Mackenna's care. Koichiro didn't speak of it aloud, but he must have trusted Rodney. *And he did mention not killing him when he secured the firearm in Galatia.*

When they met some days ago, Ryoma learned of the events since Koichiro was summoned to this world, including the Galatia incident. Koichiro told Ryoma that he didn't kill Rodney at the time, which was baffling.

The Mikoshiba Mortal Arts is an art based on killing the opponent as efficiently as possible and protecting your own life.

Once a practitioner locked blades with another, it would end with one or the other dying. It was an anachronistic approach, but by maintaining this mentality, the Mikoshiba style could keep its purity and lethality even during the peacetime of modern society.

Despite that, Koichiro only severed one of Rodney's arms and neglected to kill him. He likely kept Rodney for his nature and authority within the church, acknowledging he would be capable and willing to protect Asuka.

And if this letter is correct, he was right to believe that.

Ryoma looked down at the letter in his hand wordlessly. The proposal in this letter greatly endangered Rodney's position within the church, and he wasn't sure if one would go that far to save a girl that appeared from another world.

Some people had thankless virtue, but they were few and far between, especially in this world where it was survival of the fittest. Knowing such a person rescued his relative felt like such a stroke of luck that Ryoma had to think there was something contrived to it all.

Maybe I'm just too jaded. I hope so, at least...

Ryoma working alone was not an issue, but he was the head of the Mikoshiba barony. He had responsibility over a domain of tens of thousands of people, which weighed him down. Nevertheless, the desire to save Asuka Kiryuu tugged on his heart as much as it did Koichiro's, if not more.

Genzo Tachibana...

Koichiro told Ryoma about this man. He was a police officer who visited Ryoma's home a few times to investigate his sudden disappearance from his high school. The middle-aged man was unfortunate enough to be summoned into this world with Asuka.

Of course, Ryoma wasn't naive enough to blindly trust the man just because he came from the place he did, but this was still a factor.

Guess I should talk to him before I make any decisions. With that in mind, Ryoma left his tent while considering how to save Asuka.

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"Wait here. We'll call you over in a moment."

Dilphina stopped in front of a large tent at the center of the camp and spoke to Tachibana. Tachibana heeded her words and froze where he stood. He gave a slight nod to Dilphina, who vanished into the tent, then swiftly glanced over the two sentries guarding the entrance.

They're young but very well-trained. And looking at them close up, their gear is of good quality too. Better than most soldiers would have.

As he passed by the patrolling soldiers on the way here, Tachibana questioned this a few times, and it seemed he was justified.

Even with torches around the camp, it's hard to see through the darkness and tell for sure, but it's on a whole different scale from the Church's camp. The atmosphere about these soldiers is on another level.

The Church of Meneos' soldiers were not incompetent. They were ardent believers who formed a force that dwarfed private armies from Rhoadseria. This was especially true of the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights, who were elites boasting combat prowess that exceeded the Royal Guard and Monarch's Guards of this country.

Even compared to them, the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers stood out from all of those with their degree of training and the quality of their gear. There was no doubting their morale either.

Their will is as firm as the Church's soldiers of faith. This is the army of a man

planning to take down an entire country.

It was likely even the most rank-and-file soldier had the objectives of the war explained to them. He didn't sense from them the irresponsible compliance some soldiers had, who only stood on the battlefield because they received orders. They were highly motivated, and Tachibana was keenly aware of this based on how he had managed subordinates in modern society.

Keeping one's subordinates motivated wasn't simple and was much easier said than done. During Tachibana's tenure as a police officer, this predicament troubled him more than once.

Still, leading such a large army when he's barely twenty... Aside from his deceased parents and large physique, nothing about him stood out when I looked into him back in Japan.

Tachibana recalled ordering his colleague, Kusuda, to look into Ryoma's relationships.

No... Come to think of it, there were a few points, albeit they weren't directly related to him. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but...

Oddly, it seemed there was always trouble around Ryoma. There was no proof he was ever involved, and most of those were mostly cases of delinquents who got what they deserved.

I mean, it was the case of an elementary school teacher who overlooked bullying reports the board of education had made. Then, a group of delinquents who robbed, extorted, and raped in the area gotknocked out.

In all those cases, Ryoma was neither the victim nor the perpetrator. It was hard to say if he was even involved.

After all, that teacher was from the same elementary school but was the homeroom teacher for another class. They might have known each other by face, but that was about the extent of young Ryoma's relationship with that teacher. As for the delinquents, they were active in an area not far from the Mikoshiba household. Whoever attacked them was apparently skilled in martial arts.

Ryoma's martial arts experience made him appear suspicious, but that wasn't

enough to link him to the attack. Kusuda, who gave him the report, didn't put much weight to it, and Tachibana didn't deem it worthy of deeper investigation.

Both cases were of people who were likely to buy people's ire. They shelved the investigations because too many people were involved.

In the teacher's case, they lynched him online and forced him to flee the city. The delinquents had their arms and legs broken, having long-lasting effects. Both cases were regrettable and pitiful, but were nothing compared to the countless other victims they'd hurt. As a police officer, he couldn't say that aloud, but he believed they got what was coming to them.

But he couldn't help but have his suspicions, which his position allowed to a certain extent. While such paranoia was an occupational hazard in his home world, Tachibana was oddly grateful for it in this one. As that thought crossed his mind, Dilphina stepped out of the tent and spoke.

"Thank you for waiting. The lord wishes to speak to you."

"Understood," said Tachibana, then he set foot inside the tent. When he did so, he felt like someone had thrust a sharp blade against him.

"Something the matter?" Dilphina asked, noticing his sudden reaction. The elegant smile on her shapely lips implied she knew perfectly well what happened to him.

This damn woman is teasing me...

He had developed some respect for her after their clash in the woods earlier, but what she said ruined it. Trying to smooth his emotions over and hide his displeasure, Tachibana kneeled.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Genzo Tachibana. Thank you for granting me an audience at such short notice."

Three people were seated at a rectangular table at the tent's center. Once Tachibana spoke to them, they fixed their eyes on his kneeling figure, and the pressure he felt upon entering the tent grew even more.

Such an oppressive aura...

Sitting at the furthest seat was the young warlord, Ryoma Mikoshiba, with his

grandfather and closest aide beside him. Even if he was a noble, the matter concerned his relative, so it was natural for him to attend to it even if he had trusted retainers. Tachibana was surprised to see Lione the Crimson Lioness here, but it was within expectations.

But Koichiro Mikoshiba's presence was something that took him by surprise.

I didn't expect to meet him here...

What concerned Tachibana the most was whether he could prove his identity when delivering the letter. His inability to do this made contacting the Mikoshiba barony army difficult. With Koichiro present, it was a different story.

It made all his efforts so far feel wasted, but Tachibana kept up his formal greeting. This may have been a secret message, though it was still the decorum expected when speaking to an authority figure in this world.

Ryoma, however, raised a hand, gesturing him to stand up. "There's no need for all that. We're short on time right now. Why don't you take a seat over there?"

Since Ryoma, the man with the most authority in the room, asked him to do so, Tachibana wouldn't argue.

"Excuse me, then," Tachibana bowed his head and settled into his seat. Yet he sensed Ryoma's presence. *This man really is a monster.*



This wasn’t just a matter of his physique or social status. Tachibana’s instincts

informed him that something basic and primordial about this man, his very essence as a living being, was on a whole other level.

And him, too...

He had witnessed Koichiro's might during the incident in Beldezvia, but that was only one side of this man. As he pondered this, Koichiro spoke up.

"It's been a long time, Officer Tachibana."

"Yes. You saved my life back there."

Koichiro stayed behind at the time to keep the Kingdom of Beldezevia from pursuing them. Tachibana had been suddenly thrown into another world and instantly cast into a scene of carnage. Usually, he'd have questioned the old man since he seemed the most knowledgeable. For the time being, he silenced his curiosity and thanked him instead—a show of his maturity.

"Ah, don't mention it. You did help Asuka out a great deal, so thank you too," said Koichiro.

Even if he was a police officer, no one would have faulted him for prioritizing his life here. Koichiro wasn't so selfless as to take the fact he protected a girl who was summoned with him for granted.

The same was true of the young warlord. The intimidating air from earlier died down, and Ryoma rose from his seat.

"Yes, I ought to thank you. You have my deepest gratitude for protecting Asuka, Mr. Tachibana," Ryoma said, bowing his head deeply to Tachibana.

Lione looked on in surprise but didn't say anything. She simply looked on with a faint smile on her lips. Tachibana scratched his head, his expression awkwardly at seeing this young warlord bow his head to him.

I didn't think he'd thank me so earnestly... I guess he is related to her.

Even as a police officer, he rarely saw someone thank him so earnestly. As Ryoma settled back into his seat, Tachibana got right to the point.

"I believe you already read Sir Rodney's letter. Can you answer his suggestion?"

Ryoma looked at Koichiro briefly, then said, “I’ve read Lord Rodney’s letter, and I understand the situation.”

“Meaning?” Tachibana asked, confirming his intent.

Ryoma responded, “Yes... We must take Asuka under our wing urgently. Since this is a very selfish request on my behalf, I need your side’s help. Be aware that helping me could potentially endanger your position within the Church. It’s probably for the best if we discuss the danger involved first.”

Tachibana jerked his head in a nod. He knew full well what Ryoma was concerned about.

So it does come down to this. Like Menea thought.

Rodney initially thought it would be a simple matter of sending Asuka away, but Menea Norberg was much too exhausted to believe it would be that easy. At worst, their actions could be considered treason against the Church.

When Menea gave Tachibana the horse that took him here, Menea warned him about this possibility. To that end, she granted him free rein.

As such, Tachibana effortlessly said, “That’s fine. They have given me the right to decide on this matter.”

And they did so because this was the one way to save Asuka from fate’s unpredictability. If it worked, Rodney would not think twice about laying down his life.

†

The following morning, the Mikoshiba barony army hurriedly reorganized its forces. As the one charged with dividing the soldiers, Lione grumbled to herself.

“Seriously, the boy makes some pretty forceful demands...”

A sudden request to divide an army of ten thousand men in two would confuse anyone. Organizing an army wasn’t simply shifting several people. Multiple soldier types, like spearmen, archers, and knights, needed to be divided equally, and their gear needed management too.

Doing this would take several days, so she would usually refuse Ryoma’s demand to do it in half a day.

Also, he wants me to stall by leading the siege of the capital while he leads a small rescue party.

This was an extremely reckless gamble. After all, Lione only had an army of seven thousand at her disposal, and she was to lead it as scheduled to meet up with Laura and Sara’s detachments to surround the capital. Ryoma and Koichiro, meanwhile, would lead a force of three thousand men to rescue Asuka.

Lione agreed this was the safest plan, given they were limited in how many soldiers and commanders they had for this operation. But it was still a desperate last resort.

Until now, Ryoma made many choices that seemed reckless or risky, but he took considerable time and preparations for said plans. This time, however, the circumstances wouldn’t allow for that. He tried maintaining his composure, but Lione could tell he was anxious with a relative on the line.

Not that I can’t relate.

She had no family because the warring nature of the western continent swallowed them up. If one of them were alive, Lione would throw away everything to save them, proof of her filial love. Despite all her complaints and dissatisfaction, she didn’t object to Ryoma’s decision, even if it was as daring to save Asuka himself.

But having the old man handle the negotiations feels off...

Besides the people who would participate in the rescue efforts, Ryoma needed someone who could negotiate with the Church of Meneos. He would ideally fill that part, but having the warlord handle negotiations with the Church while his army was marching on the capital would appear unnatural. Since he insisted on leading the rescue party, someone else had to fill that role.

Though Lione headed for the capital, she wasn't suited for negotiations to begin with. She was skilled at fighting on the battlefield, but politics and diplomacy were not her expertise. The same applied to many of Ryoma's retainers like Boltz.

When it comes to diplomacy and politics, Counts Bergstone and Zeleph are the best at it out of everyone in the barony.

Unfortunately, both stayed behind in Epirus to assist with the Wortenia Peninsula's development. Calling them over would be difficult, and they couldn't ask Zheng and Veronica to fill the part, as they were members of the Organization. Although the Organization kept its information strictly secret, the Church of Meneos scrambled to learn anything and everything about them. And if Veronica and Zheng were to end up clashing with the Church, the plan to save Asuka would fall apart.

By process of elimination, Koichiro alone remained the sole option, even if Lione had her misgivings over whether he was the right man for that job.

That old man's crazy strong. I know that.

She saw him duel Signus, which made everyone acknowledge his prowess. Many members of the barony were skilled fighters, but very few could beat Signus Galveria and his metal staff.

And he did it while hardly moving from his spot. I wouldn't be able to pull that off.

If Lione or others couldn't perform that achievement, Ryoma was the only one who could reasonably do so. Among soldiers and mercenaries, strength was what set the pecking order.

Because he displayed such strength, many people, such as members of the Crimson Lion group, regarded Koichiro with great respect. She never saw him

lead an army, so she wasn't sure about his skills as a commander. If nothing else, his martial prowess reached the point of mastery.

But handling negotiations? Can he really pull that off?

Negotiations were handled with words, not swords. From Ryoma's perspective as his grandchild, Koichiro was an eccentric old man. But Lione mostly saw him as a witty, social person. Even so, he wasn't exactly equipped with a force of personality.

There was another reason for her doubts: Koichiro Mikoshiba's external position remained undecided.

Well, Nelcius said he'd have that taken care of, so it'll probably be fine. Still...

Apparently, some dark elven medicine could change one's appearance. Lione had no idea how it worked, meaning she couldn't express an opinion.

Still, there's no one else who can handle that role...

With that thought in mind, Lione went about her duties as a retainer serving her lord.

Chapter 3: Ceasefire Negotiations

A few days had passed since Tachibana's talk with Ryoma Mikoshiba. The sun shined at high noon over the Church of Meneos encampment set up in the forested region of the Cannat Plains. Having returned from his secret mission, Genzou Tachibana shared the details with Rodney and Menea.

"And so, the Mikoshiba barony army has now split in two. An official messenger should reach the Church in a few days."

"I see... Good work," said Rodney as he nodded upon hearing the full report.

The report Tachibana delivered had some details Rodney didn't expect, which wasn't all good news. Yet he unexpectedly expressed relief and concern.

Tachibana bowed his head deeply to Rodney and said, "No... If anything, pardon my late report."

Even though he reported it later than expected, that wasn't necessarily his fault. Tachibana could not know that Ryoma's army would split into three wings or be in a state of high alert due to repeated assassin attacks. Perhaps he could have handled the situation more aptly, but luck and the ever-changing factors influenced this mission. Regardless, he blamed himself for all that.

"No, don't let that trouble you." Rodney held up a hand to cut his apology off. "It did take you longer than we expected, but that was out of your hands... We should have kept all of that in mind. Either way, it's all behind us now. Don't beat yourself up over it."

Menea, who stood nearby, nodded in agreement. They were both satisfied with Tachibana's work.

"Yes, thank you very much," Tachibana spoke in gratitude.

"For the time just rest, and pay Asuka a visit later. She was worried about you being gone."

Tachibana nodded briefly and left the tent. Rodney and Menea watched him leave, and remained silent for a while.

“Now then... What next?” said Rodney with a sigh.

Menea regarded him quizzically, but seeing the smile on his lips made it clear what he was trying to say. Despite that, she asked him with a deliberate tone.

“What is it? I’d say this is a great outcome.”

Rodney nodded and replied, “Yes, this isn’t bad... But it gives us more things to think about.”

He leaned against the backrest, folded his arms and looked up. Seeing this, Menea chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Nothing. It’s just not often I see you think so hard.”

Rodney frowned in displeasure. “I’m always thinking... But you always tell me I don’t think things through enough.” He appended with a sheepish smile, scratching his head awkwardly.



But then, his joking smile wavered.

“That said, Koichiro Mikoshiba being part of the barony is an interesting development. That would mean that, just like we thought, a grandfather and his grandson were summoned to this world. Based on what Asuka told us, her grandfather got caught up in her summoning. I guess there has to be a connection between them.”

“Yes. I can’t imagine the reason behind it. There has to be some kind of cause.”

Having originally been a noble, Rodney had a basic understanding about summoning and otherworlders. As far as he knew, it involved activating a certain thaumaturgical spell that summoned a person at random, as well as whatever or whoever was in their vicinity. But he had never heard of a case where multiple instances of the spell summoned members of the same family.

Of course, it’s not like the background of every person summoned was recorded, so there was no telling what the details were. For all I know, there might have been cases like that in the past. If that had happened, they would have been too few.

One couldn’t say it was impossible. But the fact Ryoma, Koichiro and Asuka were all summoned into this world couldn’t be a coincidence. It was as rare as multiple people in the same family winning the lottery.

“And then, there’s that thaumaturgical sword, Ouka.”

“Yes. must have brought it from our world to Rearth. Koichiro Mikoshiba might be a returner. So he either carried it with him when he returned or found the thaumaturgical sword at some point. It’s impossible to tell at this point...”

Even as Menea said that, she doubted Koichiro found a sword brought in by someone else. Rodney felt the same way.

“The chances of Koichiro finding the sword after returning to his homeworld are slim. Asuka’s sword is a high-class thaumaturgical weapon with a will of its own. That much is clear from how I couldn’t circulate my prana to activate its spell. Even though she’s gotten more skilled recently, she’s sadly still nowhere near good enough for a thaumaturgical sword to acknowledge her as its master.”

This property wasn't limited to thaumaturgical swords. Thaumaturgical vessels were given power through endowed thaumaturgy and had a will of their own based on their quality. They read their user's strengths, convictions, and ambitions, only allowing people they acknowledged as their true masters and owners.

Blood relation was a factor they took into consideration.

In all likelihood, one needed Mikoshiba blood running through their veins to use Ouka. Or maybe the sword responded to Koichiro's emotions.

Such was a likely reason Rodney couldn't get Ouka to exhibit its true strength despite being able to draw it from its scabbard. Either way, it was clear it was a special weapon one couldn't use unless they had a link to it.

Considering all these factors, Koichiro finding such a weapon appeared unlikely. The natural conclusion was that Ouka had been forged for Koichiro's hands, which would not have been easy.

Rodney was a captain of the Temple Knights and had quite a fortune to his name. Investing everything into forging a thaumaturgical sword would not guarantee a sword of Ouka's quality.

But still, he's a monster who could slay the Beldzevian court thaumaturgist and escape that kingdom's vengeful pursuit. Given how skilled he was, it seemed plausible that he had that katana forged for his exclusive use. That begged the question of who could have funded that endeavor. Be *it a coincidence or an inevitability, it's clear that fate can be fickle.*

Things converged on the Mikoshiba family too much for it to be a coincidence. Rodney's shoulders shuddered when he arrived at that conclusion, and Menea seemed to feel the same way.

"Then there's only one thing to do. Are you ready?" she asked.

"Yes, well..." Rodney's expression took on a vicious visage. "We finally found a lead to trace back to the truth. And if we follow it, I have to be prepared."

His expression was a sharp fury, all too different from his usual behavior. Perhaps this was Rodney's true face as a man fixated on revenge. But seeing him like this, Menea said nothing.

Menea and Rodney needed to learn the truth. That alone was the only way these two would see their wishes granted.

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A few days later, like Tachibana said, a small army clad in black uniform appeared from the southwest. The group carried a banner with a double-headed serpent with gold and silver scales coiled around a sword that glared at the encampment.

“Oh... Are you sure this is the Mikoshiba barony army?” Cardinal Roland asked in surprise upon hearing the report.

He was no doubt asking himself why they appeared now, but he also realized this was not worth pondering.

It’s been nearly ten days since the decisive battle between the northern subjugation army and the Mikosihba barony ended. I thought Mikoshiba would aim to take the capital as soon as possible. But first, we must confirm this is actually the Mikoshiba barony’s army.

At Cardinal Roland’s order, scouts were deployed from the Church of Meneos encampment to confirm the approaching army’s affiliation. This was a natural reaction as a battle started when one recognized another army’s presence.

The deployed scouts rode on horseback and headed southwest, kicking up dust in their wake. Their faces twisted with tragic determination and a sense of urgent duty as their task was dangerously important. They were, after all, going up against the Devil of Heraklion.

These scouts didn’t think the young warlord was using this force personally but clashing with his army would undoubtedly result in huge losses. On top of that, all of the Mikoshiba barony’s army was a pure combat unit made up of professional soldiers capable of martial thaumaturgy. Most were fiercely strong, equivalent to what the guild would consider Level 3.

Moreover, the Mikoshiba barony had soldiers strong in group and one-on-one combat. Their gear was of first-class quality, made of materials harvested from the monsters native to the Wortenia Peninsula. One could not be too careful around such an army.

Even the high-grade knights of the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights, the most elite unit of the Church of Meneos, didn't have gear of such quality. While they could beat the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers in a fight, they would take losses. All the members of the Church who witnessed the decisive battle a few days ago realized this.

This also applied to Cardinal Roland, who ordered the scouts to set out as if preparing to make some sacrifices. The report the scouts brought back was something the cardinal didn't expect, though.

The Mikoshiba barony army stopped marching?

Cardinal Roland couldn't mask his surprise at hearing that the Mikoshiba barony army stopped at a spot several kilometers away from their camp. As an army, the Mikoshiba barony's forces had focused on swift offense and were also skilled at surprise attacks. This action gave Cardinal Roland the impression that they weren't very experienced at attacking enemies from the front.

Is this supposed to mean they didn't come here to fight? The doubt crossed his mind repeatedly, but there was no answering this question. Cardinal Rolan then asked the captain of the scout unit, "Did they say that? That they're not here to fight us?"

"Yes. On top of that, they gave us a letter..." said the captain, handing over a piece of paper.

"What is this?"

"A letter from Baron Mikoshiba."

Indeed, the wax seal on the letter had the Mikoshiba barony emblem pressed onto it.

"So it seems. Very well. Good work, you may stand down." Cardinal Roland asked the captain to leave the room. This letter was sensitive, and not knowing what the letter contained, he wanted the room to himself.

He slowly tore off the wax seal and read the letter.

I see... A meeting.

The suggestions was one Cardinal Roland didn't anticipate, seeing that

Ryoma's methods made a declaration of war more likely. Ryoma Mikoshiba carried an air of dangerous unpredictability, and everyone around him sensed that. And so Cardinal Roland was shocked but couldn't remain in that state for long. He instead pondered the meaning of this letter.

I can understand him sending a messenger, but... No, if anything, him not contacting us until now is probably the strangest part. Asking for a meeting so suddenly? Is this some trap to lull us into being careless?

Under the secret pact between Cardinal Roland and Queen Lupis, the Church of Meneos participated in the northern subjugation but never fought on the battlefield. Their participation hinged on promoting the northern subjugation fighting a holy war under the protection of the God of Light Meneos.

Cardinal Roland knowingly agreed to Queen Lupis's suggestion because the pope ordered him to investigate Ryoma and his possible connection to the Organization. The war allowed him to do that up close.

And that was why the Church of Meneos deployed forces in the Battle of the Runoc Plains. They were stationed far from the front lines, at the Cannat Plains' side of the battlefield. Even when the northern subjugation army retreated, they didn't budge from their position.

It seemed like a cunning thing to do for a man of faith, but clergymen in this world were corrupt enough to be denied entry to whatever heaven they preached to. If one had no responsibilities to fulfill, they could spout any absurd sermons they wanted. Making those ideals a reality meant paying a high price and staining one's hands in the world's muck.

Having climbed to the rank of cardinal in the Church of Meneos, Roland knew this sad reality all too well. And this was why he couldn't easily believe the contents of this letter. Then again, these kinds of negotiations presented a chance at profit.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as they say... This, too, is the will of God.

Considering that, Cardinal Roland returned to his desk, took out a quill, and read the date written in the letter—praying, all the while, for his god's protection.

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Two days later, the soldiers in the Church's camp lined up and prepared to greet their guests. It was past 2 p.m., a perfect time for a meeting.

"They're coming!"

At the sound of that call, the soldiers drew their swords and pointed them to the sky as etiquette. Aside from the gestures reserved for the Pope, the highest authority in the Church and Meneos, this was the highest degree of respect they could display.

The Mikoshiba barony's messenger entered the camp to this welcome, accompanied by soldiers clad in black. Above their heads, their banner flapped imposingly in the wind.

"Welcome and well met!" said Cardinal Roland, walking out of the tent with a grin and personally greeting the group. "We greet you, Lord Bahenna." His attitude was quite friendly, and if nothing else, wasn't the way one would look at an enemy.

But no one can tell how much of this facade is honest, thought Koichiro.

One can make any display of friendliness while having malicious intentions. And the same could be said of Koichiro, who presented himself to Cardinal Roland under the alias Bahenna. Perhaps hiding his name and status made Koichiro's situation worse.

Well, my name and status aren't the only thing that's fake.

Koichiro looked different than ordinary. His skin was as white as a Caucasian man's, his hair and beard were a blond shade, and he wore his hair in a bobbed style tied at the back rather than his usual ponytail. His attire, too, changed from a Japanese style to a noble's expensive outfit. The biggest change was to the color of his eyes.

His facial structure hadn't changed, but few people would recognize Koichiro now. In that regard, there wasn't a shred of truth to Koichiro's story. He had assumed the identity of Jacob Bahenna, a relative of the deceased Viscount Bahenna.

House Bahenna was one of the ten houses of the north left ruined when Ryoma took over northern Rhoadseria. Koichiro's cover story was that he, as Jacob Bahenna, took on the role of messenger to facilitate rebuilding his family's status. Once this negotiation ended, this relative of House Bahenna would suddenly come down with illness and pass away, never to be seen again.

In other words, this was the first and last time Koichiro would play this role. The real Jacob Bahenna actually fell ill before Ryoma began his war against the northern regions and passed away briefly after the fighting began. They used his name since it only took a minor rearranging of the events to make it plausible. Of course, Koichiro dropped no hint as to any of that as he answered the cardinal's greeting.

"Your Holiness the Cardinal. I'm honored by you greeting me in person," he said, bowing how Rhoadserian nobles have been trained to do.

He was improvising, but his practice had paid off. Cardinal Roland answered his greeting with a smile.

"Oh, no, I'm always glad to welcome a new friend. No need to act reserved. Do come in." Cardinal Roland gestured for him to enter the tent.

Koichiro followed him obediently. To those looking on, this looked like a formality between Cardinal Roland and a guest, but that was nothing but a falsehood. Koichiro held back a self-deprecating smile at how different he looked and dressed compared to usual. Though, he realized why this disguise was necessary.

I can't let them recognize me as a member of the Organization.

The Church and the Organization were irreconcilable enemies. If Cardinal Roland learned of Koichiro's position as a past member of the Organization, he would try to capture him to draw information out of him. And this was regardless of if he was a formal messenger for the Mikoshiba barony.

After all, the Church wouldn't overlook any clue that might lead them to the Organization. The question was, why was there such a bitter rivalry between the two groups?

There are many reasons behind that, of course.

The biggest reasons were their vested interests in matters of power and money. It was always the same reason that drove conflict in the human world that applied here and in Rearth. This conflict didn't start solely for such basic reasons.

The biggest one was that the Church used otherworld summoning to abduct many people like us and use us as slaves.

The Organization was mostly composed of otherworlders called into this world via the summoning spell. Of course, the church wasn't the sole user of this spell. Many countries across this world used it, albeit on a different scale. But the Church of Meneos stood head and shoulders above the rest because they used it several times a year, even summoning over a hundred people.

The more they do it, the more people from our world get enslaved and subjected to their wrath. And more people grow to hate and resent the Church. That's what led many Organization members to look upon them with hostility.



To prevent more victims like them from turning up, the Organization kept an

eye on the Church's activities and tried to weaken it, cutting into the profits of their hated foe. It seemed like the natural conclusion. As time and their deception continued, the Church recognized someone opposed them. Incidents written off as misfortunes were more than coincidence, so they began suspecting a third party.

The Church of Meneos and the Organization locked blades for the first time in an event known as the Battle of Indigoa.

And because of that, the Church learned of our existence.

To this day the Church lacked definitive proof of the Organization's existence, even if they understood a faction nearing their scale opposed them. They might have had more proof; the assertion they lacked evidence was simply what high-ranking members of the Organization, like Zheng and Veronica, were aware of. How deep their knowledge of the Organization ran was still a mystery.

Of course, they likely know nothing. For all we know, they're aware of the whereabouts and identities of Organization operatives.

If that were true, then Koichiro's attempts at a disguise would have been pathetically laughable. But he had to save his beloved granddaughter, and he couldn't afford to cause trouble for Ryoma.

I'm sure this looks like an absurd farce to an onlooker, but yes... thought Koichiro as he settled into the chair Cardinal Roland offered him.

"Well, let us get down to business, shall we?" said Cardinal Roland. "We would very much like to know why Baron Mikoshiba sent you as a messenger, Lord Bahenna. I am honored that a great hero like Baron Mikoshiba wishes to foster relations with us but must ask myself, why now?" Cardinal Roland looked at Koichiro with probing eyes.

Yes, right down to business. Not one to mince words, is he? Regarding swordsmanship, Koichiro was like a strong blade that sought to slay its foe with a single blow. He was the kind of man to force others to yield through reasoning and facts. *It's good for me, but if I'm careless, he could end up cornering me.*

After noting this, Koichiro spoke up.

"Your Holiness, your doubts are understandable. Indeed, if we were to send

you a messenger, the best timing would have been just after we defeated the northern subjugation army. At the time, we were pursuing several noble armies that stood idly by and watched as we fought. Allowing them to return to the capital unscathed would have been a poor strategic choice. So cutting down on their numbers was reasonable, wouldn't you agree?"

Koichiro paused there and flashed a nasty smile as he continued.

"The most important thing for us was to make an overwhelming display of power, strong enough to make the more cowardly nobles consider surrender, you see."

Cardinal Roland furrowed his brows slightly. Koichiro's words stung and pointed out that the Church of Meneos' army did nothing during that battle. The description of 'cowardly nobles' was likely directed at them and carried the implied question of why the Church didn't send a messenger to them after the dust had settled. He didn't deny the validity of Koichiro's question, because he couldn't.

I suppose they could see it that way.

The Mikoshiba barony army was marching to lay siege to Pireas and had their eyes on the capital since before their clash with the northern subjugation army on the plains.

If they intend to lay siege to the city, it only makes sense to lower the enemy's numbers on the field.

And this led to another perspective. If Mikoshiba barony planned this far ahead, why didn't they attack the Church of Meneos' camp? The answer became clear when one assumed that Ryoma had considered the future after the war.

Given that he passed our camp by, he has no intention of opposing the Church.

The Church of Meneos was a major religious group spanning the entire continent, but this didn't mean its influence extended over the land. The southern countries had a national policy of sending their newly crowned sovereigns to the Holy Qwiltantia Empire to be blessed by the church, as they followed Qwiltantia's state religion.

Countries in the continent's center, like the O'ltormean Empire, barely had any relations with the Church. Qwiltantia and O'ltormea were rivals that fought over territory, distancing the Church from that area. And the Church was openly hostile to the Helnesgoula kingdom in the continent's north. Neither of those countries outlawed faith in the Church of Meneos but disliked the idea of having political ties with them.

As such, it was inevitable that the further a country was from the Holy City of Menestia, the weaker the Church's influence would be. This was a world with limited means, restricting their influence over the eastern countries and the overall continent.

Any retribution the Church exacted on a possible attack from the Mikoshiba barony would also be very limited.

This was clear from how deploying the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights took some effort. Since the Church had no sphere of influence within Rhoadseria, deploying larger armies would have been difficult, andBaron Mikoshiba surely knew that.

Such knowledge meant avoiding battle with the Church was part of his strategy for taking the capital. If he wanted to cull the enemy's numbers ahead of the siege, the Church's woodland unit would have made for the perfect prey. While the Temple Knights were quite strong, they were still only a single knight order. The knights who were effective on flatland would also have a disadvantage since the camp was in an area riddled with elevation changes.

If Ryoma recognized the Church as an enemy, he could have split off some of his army to attack their base.

In slaying nobles, he showed off his army's power. What he's trying to say is that it should have pressured us to send them a messenger instead.

It was quite the patronizing statement to make but not an inaccurate one. Cardinal Roland was looking for a reason to negotiate with them, and Koichiro's statement made it easier to move things along.

"I understand Baron Mikoshiba's misgivings. I apologize for your concerns, because of our negligence," said Cardinal Roland. "However, we were bound by our word to Queen Lupis and had little choice but to participate in the northern

subjugation. I must respectfully ask that you understand that.” He couldn’t formally apologize and expected the other side to understand to which Koichiro nodded.

“Then let us try to resolve this unfortunate misunderstanding. What say you to a discussion of our possible, fruitful future?” Koichiro replied.

Cardinal Roland curled his lips into a smile, likely trying to reclaim control over the conversation by taking off his mask as an agreeable, cooperative old man.

“Oh... A fruitful future, you say. I would like to see such a future between your lord and us, but...” Cardinal Roland trailed off and directed a probing gaze at Koichiro. “Is that truly what Baron Mikoshiba wants?”

His words carried with them the implicit question of whether Koichiro had the authority to make such decisions. Negotiating with a person who didn’t have the authority to make choices in his superior’s name was a waste of time.

Baron Mikoshiba probably has that in mind...

Intentionally making enticing offers and bringing the negotiations to a halt or backing out because of a lack of authority was an act that would only exhaust the other side. This happened in diplomacy and business but was a common stalling tactic on the battlefield. Without some collateral, Cardinal Roland was ready to call off the negotiations.

In response to that obvious question, Koichiro slowly took a letter out of his pocket and extended it to Cardinal Roland.

“What’s this...?”

Accepting the letter, Cardinal Roland looked at it suspiciously. Five sheets of paper made up the letter, and reading them all took a while. The sound of paper rustling filled the tent. When Cardinal Roland finished reading, he understood everything while feeling shocked.

Hmm, I understand... I might have made light of this man.

Cardinal Roland had underestimated Jacob Bahenna. He heard of the Bahenna vscounty as one of the ten houses of the north but also knew that Ryoma had defeated them. Moreover, Jacob lacked any martial glory like the Twin Blades of Count Salzberg nor any renown to speak of. Jacob was just a plain man whose competency was questionable.

Jacob Bahenna could have just been another noble who fell from grace, one of many. And so, this man who was sent to handle negotiations wouldn’t have been entrusted with any choices or be justified in having such authority.

Given their initial conversation, Cardinal Roland wasn’t under the impression he was speaking to an incompetent man. He displayed etiquette worthy of Rhoadserian nobility, implying he had a proper education. If nothing else, this man wasn’t a hopeless, good-for-nothing member of a noble family.

But that didn’t make Jacob a good negotiator. Things might have been different if he were the head of the Bahenna viscounty. Even with no real merit, holding a formal position would have lent weight and credence to his words. His words carried no weight since he lacked both or any notable achievements.

So I thought I’d have some harmless conversation with him before politely sending him away.

One could ask why Cardinal Roland greeted him with all the respect of a diplomatic guest, and the answer to apply psychological pressure on him. Being welcomed warmly as a messenger would make Jacob proud and hold a favorable opinion of the Church of Meneos while feeling that the Mikoshiba barony was inferior to them. Cardinal Roland knew that such psychological factors were more important than anything else in negotiations.

The letter from the Mikoshiba barony, aside from the demands detailed

within it, flipped Cardinal Roland's approach upside down.

They entrusted this man with full authority?

It was hard to believe, but the letter included the Mikoshiba barony's emblem as a seal of approval. Cardinal Roland couldn't write this letter's contents off as a lie. They hadn't entered formal diplomatic relations, and the Church of Meneos was only a religious group. As such, they didn't have an embassy but were amid a cross-national agreement.

Because Cardinal Roland dealt with an ambassador given full trust and authority, he had to change how he regarded this man. The cardinal folded the letter back to its previous state and respectfully handed it back to Koichiro.

He assumed I'd react like this the whole time, I'd wager.

The cardinal had his complaints about being tricked. Had Koichiro introduced the letter at the start of their exchange, Cardinal Roland would have treated him differently. He couldn't say this out loud but would have taken action to have negotiations go smoothly. Nonetheless, Cardinal Roland bowed his head in apology, so as to minimize any harm done.

"My apologies for bringing up such trifling manners. I didn't think Baron Mikoshiba had everything thought out to such an extent," said Cardinal Roland.

It was an honest, heartfelt apology that Koichiro met with a magnanimous smile and replied, "Well, I'm afraid I'm not quite sure what you mean, Your Holiness. But if there were any misunderstandings, it seems they've been solved. I believe there's no need to linger on them any longer."

Koichiro's choice to make a fuss here would have complicated matters, even if he were reckless enough to do so in their initial negotiations. Seeing him take this attitude filled Cardinal Roland with relief.

I've heard they had demi-humans under their wing, so I expected them to take a more antagonistic approach..

This was the Cardinal's biggest point of concern with the Mikoshiba barony. He became especially anxious about the future when said concern played out during the previous battle. But his fears seemed unfounded.

While they have Wortenia's dark elves under his employ, the Mikoshiba barony does not intend to fight the Church. At least not openly...

Cardinal Roland believed that there was room for negotiations here. He knew all too well that the biggest issue when negotiating was acting out of reckless emotion.

"Let's begin the negotiations, then. Am I to understand that your demands are as detailed in the letter?"

"Yes. The Mikoshiba barony asks for the Church of Meneos' neutrality in the coming battles and to remain reasonably uninvolved in its annexation of land in the war's aftermath. These two points are what we request of you."

"I see... Yes, that does match the contents of the letter." Cardinal Roland placed a hand on his jaw pensively. *Neutrality and noninterference... Both demands mean the same thing. So Baron Mikoshiba fears the possibility we'll become involved in the war.*

Usually, it would be natural to expect Baron Mikoshiba to ask that the Church allies with him. Despite the Church's forces limitations in the continent's east, they could still mobilize one the size of a knight's order. Also, having the Church of Meneos side with him would allow their side to claim that the mandate of heaven was on their side.

Of course, the weak and powerless priding themselves on having the gods on their side meant little. The mandate of heaven was, in the end, simply a claim or a symbol. But if the victor in a war were to have the divine by their side, it would force everyone to bend the knee and admit the legitimacy of their cause.

This declaration would be a powerful weapon for Ryoma to levy against the Rhoadserian nobles and citizens that opposed him. Some were wavering over whether to side with him or not and knowing the gods were on his side would be what inspired them to give in.

Surely he knows that. In which case, he's probably taking the demi-humans into consideration.

Cardinal Roland held no resentment toward demi-humans, but the creeds of the Church of Meneos had differing views. Even so, he wasn't intent on hunting

down every demi-human on the continent. So long as they lived in their isolated corner of the continent, harmless and out of sight, he didn't mind their existence. Despite his high position, Roland did not blindly believe every single creed of the Church.

Whether he personally held any antagonism toward the demi-humans wasn't the question or the problem here. The problem was that the Church of Meneos, as an organization, held up the expulsion of demi-humans as part of its doctrine.

What to do, then?

There were two choices to make here. One was to stick by the dogma of the Church and carry on the expulsion of demi-humans, even if it meant risking war with the Mikoshiba barony. The other was delaying how to handle the demi-humans and focus on immediate profit.

That said, Cardinal Roland's mind was already made up. *There would be no point to fighting Ryoma Mikoshiba here.*

Cardinal Roland's original goal was to gauge Ryoma's capabilities, not go to war with the man. He only sided with Queen Lupis because he considered using her to further this task. Now that he had a pathway to negotiate with him, he had no intention of going to war with Ryoma out of duty to Queen Lupis. All that remained was to debate which concessions to make and what benefits he would get in exchange.

If the other cardinals learn of this, they'd likely try to get involved. Thankfully, the Church's influence over the east is weak. If I can just get the Pope's approval, they wouldn't be able to act.

And if Cardinal Roland were to use his trump card, he'd be able to explain himself to the Pope and get the approval he needed.

All that's left is to decide what we'd get in exchange. The Church would generally ask for freedom to spread its religion. *But they're wary of us. Preaching within the Mikoshiba barony's domain would be difficult. But if they admit that, the negotiations would end immediately.*

Which begged the question, what else could they ask for?

The best I can come up with is an increase of trade using the Holy Qwiltantian Empire as a relay point, but honestly... This isn't of much benefit to the Church proper.

An increase in trade with the Mikoshiba barony would surely benefit Qwiltantia, but it didn't help the Church itself much. The Church of Meneos was only a religious organization, not a trading firm that dealt with financial activity or a government that dealt with running a country.

All organizations needed money to fund their activities, and the Church was no exception, but that didn't mean they could resort to any means to earn that money. They could receive money through donation but not trade under the name of the Church of Meneos. Doing so would make their pretense of honorable poverty and nobility crumble entirely.

But what option does that leave us with?

If he were speaking for the southern kingdoms, things would be simpler. For example, he could suggest Ryoma deploy his armies to help fend off the O'ltormean Empire, who was still trying to invade the southern regions.

However, that wasn't a reasonable request because the Mikoshiba barony governed the Wortenia Peninsula. Even if he did, they would refuse point-blank or send a small army to take care of it. And that kind of deal wasn't worth bending the Church's creeds for.

Should I perhaps leave this discussion for another day?

The safest option would be to take his time and try another day, given the unexpected direction the conversation went into. At the same time, the experienced Cardinal Roland sensed that today was when these negotiations were most likely to bear fruit.

Cardinal Roland decided to believe in his intuition. But as he thought things through, a doubt surfaced in his mind. *Wait. To begin with, what area does the Mikoshiba barony's domain cover?*

Currently, the Mikoshiba barony's domain contained the Wortenia Peninsula and the northern region, with the citadel city of Epirus at its center. Depending on the success of their conquest, at least half of Rhoadseria would fall to the

Mikoshiba barony's control. Potentially, their control could extend to all of Rhoadseria.

But is that actually what's going to happen?

This would come across as an absurd idea, but war was much like economic activity. When sales were good, one earned plenty, and winning in war meant gaining more territory. In what world would an authority figure who keeps winning in war let land fall back into the enemy's hands? People sought victory and were willing to sacrifice anything to grasp it.

But there are two exceptions to that.

One was when one experienced a crushing defeat. Depending on how many losses one took, they could decide they lacked the resources to fight any longer. In this case, one didn't stop fighting of their own will, but outside factors forced them to do so.

The other reason was that one achieved their tactical objective. In that case, one would choose to move in to settle things rather than focus on winning more battles. Which of these two was Ryoma, then?

Is he the type to stop once he reaches the place he needs or a man who tries to control everything?

But at that moment, Cardinal Roland had a revelation of sorts. After a few moments of silence, Koichiro spoke to Cardinal Roland, who clammed up so suddenly.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, his voice full of concern and encouragement.

Though, his status as an ambassador didn't make him criticize Cardinal Roland for forgetting him and becoming lost in thought.

"Oh, pardon... But yes, I just got my thoughts in order."

"Really? That's good to hear... May I ask for your answer?"

Cardinal Roland nodded in response and calmly said, "As for your request for neutrality, that should be fine. It would just extend our current status quo."

Had Meltina and Mikhail been present, they would have vehemently

protested this extreme statement. At their core, these words declared that he was turning his back on Queen Lupis. But in her current situation, Queen Lupis had little influence, so he didn't feel inclined to side with her.

"Hm, yes... Indeed. And what about the other condition, the noninterference?"

The term non interference implied that the Church of Meneos would pull its troops out of Rhoadseria. If they left too many troops in the country, it would make their claims of neutrality ring hollow. But Cardinal Roland couldn't easily accept this condition. The Church of Meneos' influence over the east was feeble, and he couldn't easily make a choice to make it any weaker.

If nothing else, we'll need some guarantee that we can return to Rhoadserian soil after the war. This was why Cardinal Roland took so long to consider his answer when searching for a middle ground, he asked Koichiro, "There's something I'd like to confirm before I give my answer to that. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Go ahead."

Cardinal Roland smiled in response.

"It's just, you mentioned noninterference, but is that limited to the Mikoshiba barony's domain?"

Just then, Cardinal Roland noticed the way Koichiro furrowed his brows. Had he been a less experienced negotiator, he would have missed it. Koichiro immediately regained his smile, but that momentary tell was all Cardinal Roland needed.

Mhm... It's like I thought.

Having grasped the Mikoshiba barony's intent, Cardinal Roland could confidently deal the hand that would turn the tables.

"You see, in exchange for our noninterference, we would like to demand that —should you win the war—you allow us to station the Temple Knights within the Kingdom of Rhoadseria."

This seemed like a meaningless wish. Ryoma Mikoshiba was on the verge of

destroying Rhoadseria, after all, which meant it would become his domain. The land would fall under the agreement to uphold noninterference.

Upon hearing this, Koichiro laughed out in amusement, but then his face drained of expression as he looked at the cardinal.

“I see, within the kingdom of Rhoadseria, you say...”

Koichiro did not budge an inch on his stance, as it would strengthen the Church of Meneos’ influence. The move wasn’t an issue in the short-term, but it would be a bad play for Ryoma in the long-term. He wasn’t so foolish as to impede his grandson’s path to conquest, so he firmly spoke his mind.

“The Mikoshiba barony would rather avoid stationing the Church of Meneos’ soldiers within Rhoadserian borders.”

The two glared at each other with gazes that could have sparks flying between them if they had physical force.. They spent a few seconds like this before Koichiro let out a sigh.

“I’m afraid we cannot consent to your stationing the Temple Knights. This is something we cannot budge on. We can, however, cooperate with the Church’s intention of spreading its faith in the country.”

“Meaning?” Cardinal Roland asked curiously.

“What say you to us building more church buildings to facilitate your faith?”

“Build churches, you say?”

That was an unexpected answer.

“Yes,” replied Koichiro at Roland’s confusion. “There are few Meneos churches built in Rhoadseria, and even the ones in the capital are not particularly large. We can assume that your faith’s influence over this country isn’t very strong, right?”

Cardinal Roland’s expression filled with doubt, and Koichiro drove the conversation further, taking advantage of this newly discovered weakness.

“We can begin by expanding the number of churches, no? And we will cooperate actively with the construction efforts. The governors of the different fiefdoms are bound to take badly to Temple Knights in their territory. It

shouldn’t be hard to convince them to build churches.”

“I see...” responded Cardinal Roland, apparently convinced by this explanation. *He’s right. There aren’t many churches in Rhoadseria since it’s quite far from the holy shit... Acting on this suggestion isn’t too bad for us.*

Cardinal Roland cradled his jaw, looking like he was mulling the offer over. In truth, he had already decided.

Stationing the Temple Knights within the country would look bad diplomatically. It would create the preconceived notion we’re planning military action.

If the barony agreed to let the Church station the Temple Knights there, they would have to build a base somewhere. This would certainly spark friction between them and the residents and governors.

But if it’s building new churches, that won’t raise any alarm bells.

Rhoadseria’s churches were few, and compared to a more pious country like Qwiltantia, they differed in scale. The same was true even of Pireas’ churches.

When Cardinal Roland stayed in the capital, he had to stay at an inn called the Mars Pavillion, unlike how he would usually stay at a local church. The reason he stayed at an inn was clear. The capital’s churches were run down buildings in the slums, meaning the Temple Knights and the Cardinal being there was a risk in terms of crime prevention.

In that regard, building more churches in Rhoadseria sounded like a fine idea. Considering that the Church of Meneos had no significant foothold in the continent’s East, this would make for quite the accomplishment.

That wasn’t to say there were no shortcomings to this offer either. Building churches instead of military bases meant the capacity of people they could accommodate was quite different. Even if the Church were to station Temple Knights there under the pretext of security, they’d be limited in how many they could send. But that was nothing compared to the number of churches they could build across Rhoadseria’s vast domain.

A church could only accommodate ten or so knights at best. Stationing a unit of a hundred knights would only be a pipedream. Even if they tried to build a

large church to this end, the Mikoshiba barony wouldn't stand by and let them.

Still, we'll be able to spread our roots into the East. That alone is major... I'm sure this will satisfy the Pope.

No advantages or disadvantages existed with this choice, and it was perfectly possible to see this as leading to a temporary decrease in the Church's influence over Rhoadseria. But Cardinal Roland could see how making a pact here could promise profit in the future. It was an investment, in a sense, and Cardinal Roland wouldn't hesitate.

"I understand what you're getting at. After all, I might have been a bit impulsive. We are willing to accept if you can promise an increase in the number of churches and allow us to preach within the kingdom," said Cardinal Roland, rising from his seat and extending a hand to Koichiro.

"Yes, I believe that this was a very fruitful negotiation," responded Koichiro, accepting the cardinal's hand.

The two shook hands firmly. Sadly, their discussion wasn't over as they needed to draft a formal document detailing the terms of their agreement, and have their representatives sign it in a ceremony. The question was when they were to hold that ceremony.

"Now, as for the date for the signing... Do you have any suggestions, Lord Bahenna?" Cardinal Roland asked, leveling a probing glance at Koichiro.

Signing the contract was no guarantee the Mikoshiba barony would go back on their deal. As of the moment, this was nothing but a verbal promise. In confirming the date with Koichiro, he tested how serious they were about this truce.

They'd probably ask for three months to half a year if this negotiation was a trap.

Diplomatically speaking, the parties would agree and take three to six months to arrange a signing ceremony. Depending on the contents of the pact, it could take even longer than that. It was rare for the signing to occur shortly after the initial agreement.

Real estate was a good example of this. In lease agreements, preliminary

inspections took place before a finalized purchase and the handing over of the property. This is done to confirm no discrepancies with the terms of the agreement or the large sums exchanged.

The same was true in diplomacy. However, in this particular battlefield and this particular war, three to six months was much too long of a time.

Two weeks to a month is about what I'd expect. Based on Cardinal Roland's experience, this seemed like the appropriate amount of time. But Koichiro's answer exceeded his expectations.

"Yes, well, we believe it's best to strike while the iron is hot, so what say you to seven days from us?"

"Oh... Why, that's quite..." said Cardinal Roland as his eyes widened in amazement.

A signing would have taken months to arrange, so hearing him say that was unexpected. Koichiro, though, remained composed.

"We're in the middle of a war, so we should decide on matters like this sooner rather than later. There's no telling what might happen. For example, information about this leaking to Lupis Rhoadserians. So we'd like to abbreviate the formalities and sign this pact as soon as possible."

Cardinal Roland smiled and said, "Understandable. Indeed, I imagine Baron Mikoshiba will be busy going forward."

While surprised, Cardinal Roland didn't oppose formalizing the signing in a week and accepted Koichiro's suggestion soon enough.

Like he said, it's best to strike while the iron is hot.

Unfortunately, Cardinal Roland failed to realize that believing he had the upper hand in these negotiations created an opening in his heart. The mane smiling before him, assuming the name of Jacob Bahenna, had another agenda in mind.

Chapter 4: Those Who Know the Mikoshiba Ways

That night, Cardinal Roland beckoned Rodney to his tent to further discuss the negotiations he had that day. Dick, the leader of the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights, was also present.

Cardinal Roland told the two of the fortunate outcome of the negotiations with a wide grin, then said, “And so, it’s decided that we enter an armistice with the Mikoshiba barony.”

He picked up a bottle of white wine and poured it into a glass set on the table. After relishing the aroma for a moment, he sipped on it.

“Hmm, Qwiltantian wines are some of the finest. I kept it for special occasions, and opening it now was the right idea.”

Afterward, Roland refilled his empty glass, but his hands stopped before he gulped it down. His eyes turned to Rodney, and he flashed a slightly bashful smile. It felt like he was enjoying fine liquor on his own. The bottle belonged to the cardinal, so it was within his rights to drink it alone, and Rodney didn’t mind.

Rodney wouldn’t object to taking a sip, of course, but that was the extent of his feeling on the matter. He wouldn’t demand a glass without the cardinal’s permission or take it personally if the other didn’t offer. This behavior was simply due to Rodney’s upstanding character. Most people would assume that a lofty clergyman not offering his subordinates his drink reflected badly on him.

It’s easy to see he’s simply celebrating and getting carried away, thought Rodney.

Moreover, Rodney had known the cardinal for many years and did not doubt the man’s moral fiber, knowing better than to take offense. It only made sense the cardinal would feel some guilt.

“Hm, this being a momentous occasion, why don’t you two also have a taste?

Wine tastes better when you share it with others," Cardinal Roland said as he fetched a couple of glasses for his attendants.

He happily put the glasses in their hands and filled them up.

"Now, then. Cheers!" Roland said and gulped down the wine from his glass, satisfied with the negotiations.

It is cause for celebration.

Even Rodney could tell how important the truce was to the Church. They would need to retreat from Rhoadseria, but the decision was good in the long term. Although Rodney didn't think it was a big deal, he had something more important to confirm.

"So, Your Eminence... Is the date of the signing decided?" Rodney asked, concerned as the one taskedwith the cardinal's security.

"Yes, I should inform you about that..."said the cardinal, slightly scatterbrained from the wine. "It will take place in sex days, as per the Mikoshiba barony's request."

"Six days? Why, that's on very short notice," Rodney said, surprised.

Such a cross-national agreement being signed in a week—even if they were effectively already in a truce—was much too fast. Dick, who held his tongue thus far, spoke up.

"But Your Eminence... If that's the case, we must report it to the Pope in haste."

"Thankfully, the power of the dragon current is waning," added the cardinal. "Depending on how I feel, I'll be able to report to the Pope as early as tomorrow."

The spell that uses the dragon current...

Reporting to Menestia, which was far to the west, would have usually been impossible. Delivering the letters would take many days since it required several pigeons based on how monsters and birds of prey were in the way. This action threatened the message's confidentiality, though.

If nothing else, it would not be possible to deliver the message and receive

the Pope's orders back in seven days.

Among the highest-ranking members of the Church of Meneos, some had learned a technique that allowed them to speak to the Pope in the Holy City from any corner of the western continent. It was a technique akin to carrying a mobile phone.

While it might sound like a very convenient thaumaturgical spell, it had many drawbacks. It consumed a great deal of prana, and the further the two points communicating were, the shorter the time they could speak.

Seeing that the spell connects one's consciousness to the dragon current to converse, it can backfire and even cripple the user for life.

Despite its utility, these were some reasons people rarely used the spell. Rodney knew of the spell but didn't know how to use it or felt inclined to do so. Cardinal Roland, however, seemed to have no qualms about using it to report this situation.

Given this is about signing the treaty with the Mikoshiba barony, he has to do it. Either way, it didn't change what Rodney had to do..

Having confirmed the information necessary for his role, he spent some time with Cardinal Roland as he drank merrily and left the tent with Dick. None of this was unnatural or noteworthy, but something did change. Rodney didn't notice it, so he simply overlooked how Dick glared at him sharply as he left the tent.

Rodney returned to his tent, where Menea awaited him.

"Oh? Looks like you've had a lot to drink," she remarked.

As he spent time with Cardinal Roland, he reeked of alcohol from how he forced himself to drink. Rodney didn't pay Menea's sarcasm much mind.

"The date's set," he said.

Menea's gaze became sharp. "When?"

"Six days from now, at night."

That was the date decided during Ryoma Mikoshiba's talk with Tachibana. In other words, the signing would occur during Asuka's rescue.

I guess slipping out of camp to finalize the plan would be too dangerous.

Ryoma originally wanted to give Tachibana a Wezalié's Whisper, which would have made the discussion much smoother. Unfortunately, he couldn't frivolously hand over a precious dark elven creation. Things might change once the war ended and they produced many more, but they only had five sets.

Each set acted as a pair people could use to speak among themselves. They employed the power of thaumaturgy but were effectively similar to a phone made from two cups and a string.

Ryoma entrusted one part of each set to each unit leader who headed for the capital to maintain communication. Because of this, leaving one earring with Tachibana so they could iron out the details with Rodney simply wasn't an option.

At the same time, sending a messenger to arrange the time had its risks. The more Tachibana snuck out of the camp, the more likely the Church of Meneos' patrols would capture him. Even if they could come up with the details of the rescue operation on the spot, there was no way of knowing how many days it would take to gather information and prepare. There would have been no way of letting Rodney know about the date ahead of time.

I didn't think they'd use this method, though.

When Tachibana told him about this idea, Rodney thought it was reckless. Looking back on it now, it was a fairly safe method. It was quite simple: Ryoma Mikoshiba would stage the rescue during the night of the ceasefire signing.

With this, Tachibana did not need to make repeated trips out of the camp. He would tell Cardinal Roland any information, which would eventually reach Rodney.

The plan's simplicity and effectiveness displayed the gist of Ryoma's personality and prowess. Uponhearing Rodney, Menea brought a hand to her well-shaped jaw in a pensive gesture.

"It feels like it's happening suddenly. Are you sure it'll be all right?" Since Menea saw herself as an older sister figure to Asuka, her concern was understandable. No matter how brilliant a plan they might have, its success

hinged on preliminary preparations.

“Who’s to say?” Rodney shrugged. “Either way, the die has been cast. All that’s left is to believe in Tachibana’s words and hope Ryoma Mikosihba comes through.”

“What are you saying...? Are you serious?” asked Menea as she frowned.

She wouldn’t say Rodney was being irresponsible here, but he almost sounded like none of this was his problem.

Rodney chuckled. “It’s just that there’s little we can do as it is. Instead of wasting time on concerns like that, we should focus on doing our job.”

“Yes... They put so much work into this, and it’d all be for naught if we end up making a blunder.” Menea nodded in a displeased manner.

Rodney and Menea truly were limited in what they could do.

Six days later, the sun dipped into the horizon, with the pale moon, ruler of the night sky, taking its place. Tachibana took Asuka to a specific spot on that fateful night, where they remained on standby.

“You’re sure this is the meeting spot, Mr. Tachibana?” Asuka asked.

“Yes...” said Tachibana. “All that’s left is to wait.”

When Asuka heard this, she fell silent. She had the uniform she wore when summoned into this world bundled up on her back along with Ouka, the katana she received from Koichiro. These items held emotional significance to her, much like Tachibana felt for his baton.

She looks calm enough, at least on the surface, mused Tachibana. He then noticed the shiver in her shoulders. *Who can blame her, though?*

They were in one of the tents where Rodney stored his spare supplies. This tent, set up near the enclosure built around the camp, was the perfect spot to hide in while keeping out of sight of prying eyes. Bothremained in the tent for a time, tensely awaiting a development, and they heard a faint rumbling underfoot.

“They’re here, it seems,” Tachibana said, relieved.

When he first heard of the rescue plan Ryoma suggested, Genzou Tachibana thought it was absurd. But it seemed to have worked.

Imagine burrowing under the ground.

Tachibana knew tunneling was a viable tactic during siege battles and had been used to get into bank vaults. Escaping through the underground wasn't that strange from a modern perspective, though. But it would be an idea at best, and acting on it would take months.

Yet he did it over such a short period.

Eventually, the ground in the middle of the tent caved in, revealing a hole. They heard something scraping through the soil along with people, and thehole grew as the vibrations heightened.

Right on time...

He glanced at the clock set by the tent's wall, which showed 2 a.m. Dark-skinned hands covered in soil erupted from the hole and grabbed the edge of the hole to pull themselves up.

"Pardon... Did we keep you waiting?" The figure said, looking around and brushing up their silvery hair to remove the soil clinging to it.

Even covered in dirt, the woman's beauty was unmistakable. Most men alive would fall for her, and even Asuka couldn't deny that she was gorgeous.

"No, you're on schedule. It's fine," replied Tachibana, then nodded.

"Well, that's good. And...?" said the woman, smiling gently and checking the tent's interior.

She was, after all, in enemy territory and had another goal to accomplish.

"You're Asuka, then?" She confirmed, seeing Asuka was the only other person there.

Tachibana wouldn't mistake Asuka for someone else, of course but understood they had to make sure. Asuka took a step forward and bowed her head.

"Yes... It's nice to meet you."

“Very well. I go by Dilphina. A pleasure to meet you too.” The dark elf woman smiled kindly, but her smile faded. “You’ve heard what comes next, yes?”

Tachibana and Asuka both nodded.

“Good. Let’s go.” With that said, Dilphina approached the pit’s edge again asAsuka and Tachibana peered into it. “It’s pretty deep... Isn’t it?”

It looked fifteen to twenty meters deep, which was about five stories.

They probably had to dig deep so the vibrations wouldn’t expose them.

Tachibana wasn’t particularly afraid of heights, but this was still daunting. At the bottom of the shaft, they could see the faint light of a lamp wavering, implying there were people below them.

“When I get to the bottom, I’ll use the lamp to send you a signal. You can place your hands and feet along the pit’s walls to climb down.” She then smiled at them teasingly. “Of course, if you’re not confident you can climb down the wall, you’re welcome to jump like me. I’ll catch you at the bottom. Make a signal with a torch if you do.”

The depressions in the wall were for Tachibana and Asuka, so Dlphina dived into the darkness. A moment later, the light of the lamp moved in a circular motion.

“It’ll be fine, but let me go last just in case,” said Tachibana.

He hesitated whether to go first, but their greatest fear was that someone would interfere and make them leave someone behind. Taking that into consideration, having Asuka go first was the right idea.

“Let’s be off, then,” she said, placing her hands on the edge and gingerly climbing down.

She soon disappeared into the dim darkness of the pit. Tachibana would usually call out encouragingly, but doing so could draw the attention of patrolling soldiers.



They didn’t use a rope for the rescue to avoid leaving any signs that might tie

the Mikoshiba barony to the operation.

It's almost time...

He looked at the bottom of the pit and, seeing the lamp move in a circle again, sighed in relief.

She reached the bottom. At this rate, they'd finish in the nick of time. *But there's no time to climb down slowly.*

Tachibana picked up one of the torches on the wall and tossed it to the bottom of the hole. Seeing this, Dilphina understood his intentions, and the light at the bottom of the pit turned red and once again moved in a circle.

He stood at the edge of the pit. Taking a deep breath, he jumped into the darkness, and an inexplicable sensation overcame him.

So this is what plummeting down feels like. If nobody catches me, this is suicide.

Falling from five stories was enough to kill a man, and they would have grave injuries. Oddly enough, Tachibana felt no fear. Fortunately, someone had caught him as he felt something soft brush against his cheek and a faint sweet smell.

"I'll admit... You're brave. I can appreciate that," said Dilphina as she lowered Tachibana to the ground.

Tachibana regarded her with a hint of confusion, but she simply smiled. Still, the rescue operation was only beginning.

"I'll plug the hole, then," Dilphina said, and she began chanting. "Spirits governing over the earth, change your forms! Earth Creation!"

This chant was a shortened version of a verbal thaumaturgy spell, but its effect was just as potent. Even if someone were to enter the tent, they'd find no evidence there was a hole there.

"Wow..." Asuka muttered in surprise.

"Now, let's hurry. The diversion should start any minute now." Dilphina swiftly picked up the lamp and signaled at Izolde, who was waiting further away.

“Yes, ma’am!” Izolde said and disappeared down the tunnel.

Dilphina sent her ahead, likely to report the situation, then turned to look at Tachibana.

“We have to hurry. It’ll be a climb that’ll take some effort.”

Tachibana and Asuka nodded and followed. After walking for some time...

We’ve been going for over thirty minutes, Tachibana thought and glanced at Asuka.

Walking through the tunnel over two meters in height wasn’t a problem, but progressing through it for so long was tiring, mentally and physically. There was no view to distract from the situation, only exposed earth. While the slope was gentle, it was still a climb that would tire Asuka, given her stamina.

But she’s not complaining.

Asuka understood the situation perfectly well. Dilphina noticed and appreciated this because she’d been gradually slowing down the pace of their trek for her sake. She had done this out of respect for Asuka’s brave attitude and a sense of duty toward the mission her master, Ryoma, entrusted her with.

Eventually, the climb ended.

“Good work... You made it,” Dilphina said.

Asuka looked up and saw a group of dark elves holding torches. They nodded at Dilphina and chanted once they confirmed she exited the tunnel.

As they chanted, the tunnel vanished because their powers allowed them to create and instantly remove it from sight. In truth, they only caved in the entrance and exit to the tunnel, which was enough to evade the Church’s pursuit.

“This should mask all the evidence... We’ll take a short rest and head out to regroup with the lord,” said Dilphina, then received her lance and ordered her subordinates to hand Asuka a water canteen made of bamboo.

“Thank you.” Asuka sattiredly on the ground, gratefully accepted the canteen, uncorked it, and took a long sip.

Regrettably, things would stop going so smoothly as a man revealed himself between the trees. It was a man who should not have been there since he wore the armor of the Temple Knights.

“Oh, now this is interesting... I don’t have the foggiest clue what this is all about, but am I to assume your friends were the ones who attacked our camp earlier?” declared the man, staring at them.

Dilphina was confused. What was a member of the Temple Knights doing here?

How? We have the area secured.

It was unusual for the enemy to come so close without her scouts reporting on it. Only a skilled soldier could sneak through their patrol, especially if he acted alone.. This situation was something to address later. What mattered was how to handle this bothersome man.

This is unexpected. Were we too careless? Still, there’s only one of them. We can handle this much!

Dilphina clicked her tongue, then held up her spear and thrust it with blinding speed. However, the enemy blocked her, and a loud metallic clang accompanied it.

“Who are you?” she whispered, stunned.

Her hand, gripping the spear, became numb. But the man didn’t respond to her question and reached for the quiver on his back. He drew three arrows between his fingers and nocked them against his steel bow.

“Let’s whittle your numbers down, shall we?” he said.

His motions were all too natural, proof of mastery that came from tens upon hundreds of thousands of usage. The lethal coldness that threatened to take their lives stunned Dilphina as the sight of his skill bewitched her.

“Oh, no! Dodge it!” shouted Dilphina out of reflex.

But his arrows hit the dark elves standing behind Asuka and Tachibana straight in the forehead. And the nightmare didn’t end there. Dilphina blocked the first arrow he fired at her, but then he fired another. And then another. He

ended up firing nine arrows in quick succession.

Such skill... And the force of his shots, thought Dilphina. *I can't believe he just wiped them all out.*

Dilphina could barely block all his arrows and sadly not say the same for her subordinates. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw them lying lifelessly on the ground.

These were elves gathered from the village for this mission. Dilphina normally commanded the Black Serpent unit and had to do with these members to fill the vacancy. They were all hunters in the village but had no combat experience.

Their running into this monster of a man in their first battle was a cruel twist of fate. And yet, the fact they protected Tachibana and Asuka was worthy of praise.

I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. You did well.

On the battlefield, everyone was equal. While the grim reaper's scythe swung to take all lives equally, luck and skill could enable one to dodge it. In that regard, they were unlucky. And the question was whether Dilphina still had the luck to survive.

I probably don't. Activating martial thaumaturgy now would just be presenting an opening for him to shoot.

Since it didn't require chanting, like verbal thaumaturgy, activating martial thaumaturgy was much faster. The process took longer, and Dilphina saw she was up against someone with the resolve to fight. Even if she faced him with all her power, her chances of winning were about fifty-fifty.

In which case...!

Dilphina swiftly closed the distance at once and raised her voice in a loud shout.

"Forget about me and run, you two!"

Tachibana and Asuka heard her, but the latter didn't move.

"Tachibana!" Asuka called out.

“I can’t move. I got shot through the stomach. Leave me and go, hurry!”yelled Tachibana.

Most likely, one of the arrows the elves failed to block got him. Though he had deflected the arrow, all that did was curb its momentum and make it gouge into his stomach from behind. Tachibana thankfully avoided an instant death, but he couldn’t run in his current state.

Asuka faltered but knew that crying and screaming wouldn’t improve the situation. She turned around and ran north as fast as she could, but all it did was turn the man’s attention to her.

“Hm... It seems that woman is terribly important to them,” he whispered and nocked an arrow.

“No!” Dilphina once again closed in on him.

The man unleashed his arrows in quick succession at Dilphina.

With this, he won’t be able to shoot her down!

Dilphina blocked his second and third arrows with her spear, and each time she did, her hands grew numb from the impact. A dull pain shot through her abdomen when she blocked the fourth arrow.

Huh?

She hadn’t noticed a fifth arrow hidden behind the fourth one until it stabbed her. All it took was a small moment of carelessness, and it was all that was necessary for a hunter to shoot down his prey.

No... Asuka...

The man pulled back the string of his steel bow into a half-circle, and Dilphina couldn’t imagine the amount of tension applied. A human wouldn’t be able to pick up a bow that heavy and use it successfully. He aimed the bow at Asuka’s back.

No!

For the first time, Dilphina panicked because there was nothing she could do. Even if she used martial thaumaturgy, the arrow would still pierce Asuka’s back before she could possibly reach her.

Then, a miracle happened.

“Asuka! Keep your head down!” A man’s shout echoed through the forest, followed by metallic clashing.

A figure then sprung out of the trees and cradled Asuka’s body. Gripped in his right hand was a katana—Kikoku—and at his feet was an arrowhead cut in half.

“Ryoma? Is that you?” asked Asuka fearfully.

“Yeah,” said Ryoma, gently brushing his free left hand through her hair.

“Is it really you?” she asked again anxiously.

“Yeah... Can’t believe it?” he replied with a snarky smile.

Another arrow flying toward them disrupted that sweet moment. The attacker shifted his target from Dilphina, who knelt on the ground wounded, to them.

You pull some interesting tricks, you son of a bitch! thought Ryoma as he cut down the incoming arrow and activated martial thaumaturgy.

Leaving Asuka at that spot, Ryoma charged at the man.

“Asuka, listen to me and run! Allies are waiting past those trees!” he said, streaking into battle.

“Ryoma!” Asuka called out in fear.

Responding to her call was the furthest thing from Ryoma’s mind because arrows rained down on him.

Fifty meters! Ryoma’s charge was undisturbed, and he could tell slowing down meant death. *Thirty meters!*

An arrow fragment he cut down flew by his face, drawing a crimson streak across his cheek. Yet he didn’t stop since he had enough experience to not get fazed by such a small cut.

A bow and arrow are a dangerous weapon, but once you close the distance!

Finally, the two combatants were within slashing distance of each other.

Die!

He drew his sword and slashed in a perfect achievement of force and speed.

But he failed to sever his opponent's body in half. The man swung the steel bow in his hand at Ryoma with an audible whirring. Red sparks sprayed between the two.

Ryoma unleashed a flurry of slashes, then went from a drawing position to an upward diagonal slash to swing it down vertically. At this, he finished off by slashing upwards from the opponent's crotch up to their head. It was a secret technique of the Mikoshiba style known as sakakaze, reverse wind, where a four-slash flurry should have killed.

Despite all that, the man blocked all four of them and struck a blow at Ryoma. Thankfully, it wasn't deep enough to render Ryoma incapable of fighting. The man staved off Ryoma's attack and counterattacked, showing prowess.

This skill wasn't the only problem. Ryoma wouldn't be surprised if the man's skill had been the only reason he took a blow. The problem was the shape of the bow in the man's hand.

That's a hazuyari! That's one unusual weapon he's using, thought Ryoma, narrowing his eyes as he recognized the item.

A hazuyari was a spearhead attachment for a bow that allowed it to become a melee weapon, even implemented in the Warring States period of Japan. One used it for emergencies when the shooter ran out of arrows or the string snapped.

Bows were fundamentally curved weapons, ill-suited for use as a thrusting weapon. One could swing a bow about, but it would be poorly balanced. Fighting off an enemy with your bare hands was preferable. However, a spear was more effective in ease of use and damage.

Ryoma learned how to use a hazuyari as part of the Mikoshiba style, but his perspective was that it was a strange weapon.

But this time, it's nothing that simple.

The blood dripping from the gash on his right arm spoke grimly to that.

"Kikoku! Lend me your power!" Ryoma called out.

As per his call, Kikoku's blade became coated in red. With the mana flowing in

from Kikoku acting as a detonator, Ryoma's body instantly unleashed all its chakras. The words the man wielding the bow then uttered doused Ryoma's fighting spirit.

"I see. You shifted to the lightning blade form, the secret of the Mikoshiba style fencing... And that stride you showed earlier. That was rushing gale, which employed the wind blade form. To think you've acquired such skill and practice at your young age... Impressive."

What the man just said defied belief. It shocked Ryoma several times harder than the fact he blocked his attacks perfectly.

"Impossible... How—How do you know?"

Ryoma wouldn't have usually said anything, as he had no reason to admit a thing to his opponent. But no one in this world could have known the name of the Mikoshiba style.

And he knows about the lightning blade form, which is a guarded secret.

Secret or not, the slashes themselves were nothing more than that. In the end, it was only the name of a form. Somehow the man knew about this, meaning he might have stolen the knowledge of the Mikoshiba style.

"If you're Ryoma Mikoshiba, a successor of the Mikoshiba style, then that woman must be Asuka Kiryuu. So she was hiding within the Church's army... What a twist of fate," the man said with an amused smile.

"Who are you?!" exclaimed Ryoma with no restraint in his tone. He let the flames of his anger and bloodlust roll off him openly. *I'm going to kill this son of a bitch! Why does a man from the Church of Meneos know about Asuka and the Mikoshiba style?!*

For a moment, Ryoma suspected Rodney may have set them a trap, but he soon wrote off that possibility. The man did speak of Asuka, but that didn't explain how he knew about the Mikoshiba style.

Based on what he's saying, it sounds like he only figured out this was Asuka.

As Ryoma glared at him, looking for openings, the man shrugged.

"I am Dick McGall, captain of the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights," he

said, swiftly gaining distance from Ryoma. This was a signal that he wasn't interested in any more combat. He couldn't repair his bow's severed thread, and fighting Ryoma with only a Hazuyari would be suicidal.

But that was Dick's problem.

Whether I sheath my sword is another story. From Ryoma's perspective, Dick had to die right there. Dick seemed convinced that he'll get away, though.

"You still want to keep going? My subordinates are coming over, you know. And you wouldn't want that, would you?"

Hearing this, Ryoma clicked his tongue. Dick was right.

So what do I do? Challenge him again?

If he did that, the signing tomorrow would fail. The same thing would happen by not silencing Dick, which made Ryoma have conflicted thoughts.

"Don't worry. I won't report what happened tonight to my superiors. But dispose of those elves' bodies to hide what happened here. I'll simply say this was a night raid from the Rhoadserian army."

Ryoma glared at him sharply, as this sounded too good to be true. And yet, it didn't feel like he was making things up.

What's his angle?

"You're one cautious fellow, aren't you?" Dick regarded Ryoma with a strained smile. "You take after your father in that regard."

"My father...?!"

"Yes, Ryoichiro Mikoshiba. That's your grandfather... Correct?"

Ryoma couldn't mask his surprise this time. *He knows my father's name?*

Ryoma had encountered a mysterious man saying an unexpected name. Hewasn't born out of the ether, so it only natural he would resemble his father. But his parents were already deceased.

Being told he resembled a father he never met didn't mean much to Ryoma, but there was no denying that this man, Dick, knew his father's name.

"Well, we can pick up this conversation another time,"said Dick with a smirk.

“For now, I’d like you to believe me.”

After hearing this, Ryoma couldn’t pursue the matter any further. He sheathed Kikoku and took a few steps back, marking that he accepted Dick’s proposal.

“Wise choice. I’ll stall my subordinates and buy you time. You’d do well to use that time to escape, yes?”

Dick disappeared into the forest. Ryoma watched him leave in silence, after which a whisper escaped his lips.

“What the hell is going on? Why did that man know my father’s name?”

That was an unanswerable question that didn’t reach anyone’s ears. Still, it encapsulated Ryoma’s current mental state.

The following day, the signing ceremony for the ceasefire took place without incident in the Church of Meneos’ camp. It marked the coming decisive battle between Ryoma Mikoshiba and Lupis Rhoadserians. One could say everything went according to Ryoma’s plan.

And yet, the enigmatic doubts Dick McGall had planted still haunted the young warlord’s heart.

Epilogue

The cold and beautiful glow of the pale moonlight spilled into the room. Washed by that light, a man pondered what he would do in his office at the McMaster home in Pireas' noble quarter.

"What to do?" Viscount McMaster looked at the letter set atop his ebony desk in concern, his mind going in circles. *Joining the Mikoshiba barony's side now, after all this time?*

Doubt ate away at his heart, spurred by this letter inviting him to do so. If he chose to do so, the McMaster viscounty could gain much under the Mikoshiba barony's rule after the war ended. Doing so was tantamount to throwing away the viscounty's pride as a house loyal to the kingdom since its founding.

Profit and dignity. Those conflicting emotions tugged at Viscount McMaster's heart in two directions. But a beauty clad in man's clothing laughed his concerns off.

"Father... How long are you going to keep brooding over this? How long will the head of the warrior house McMaster be so pathetic?" said Rosetta with a shrug.

Those were harsh words to direct at her father, and Viscount McMaster would scold her angrily for doing that. Though, he didn't have it in him to deny her words. He glared at his daughter, smiling on the sofa, and sank back into his thoughts. Seeing this, Rosetta sighed.

My word... Why is Father so conflicted? There's only one way for us to survive, thought Rosetta.

She knew agonizing over a decision wasn't a bad thing. That concern expressed prudence, and recklessly jumping into decisions without proper contemplation could cause painful outcomes.

But there's a time and place for that. Thinking too hard about things could hinder if it took too long. *Especially at times like this.*

As far as Rosetta could tell, the was was all but decided. There were still tens

of thousands of soldiers stationed in the capital, so one could assume there was still a chance they could turn the tables. Mikhail Vanash and Meltina Lecter were preparing the capital for a decisive battle at that very moment. But Rosetta doubted that they could win.

Pireas' gates and walls are sturdy. Its moats are deep and it has sufficient food reserves. It would be possible to remain holed up in this city for six months under siege. But then what?

To successfully survive a siege, one needed plenty of food and the promise of reinforcements. Rosetta noted Queen Lupis lacked both.

They could only get reinforcements from the kingdom's south since they had already drawn soldiers from all the domains adjacent to the capital. With Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria stationed in the southern regions, sending supplies or soldiers would be impossible. Also, Her Majesty's generals are all gathered in the capital, and no one can lead the southern soldiers. Even so, few could hope to beat Count Salzberg's Twin Blades.

It wasn't a difficult conclusion, and Rosetta realized this with her rudimentary strategy knowledge. Even if Lupis Rhoadserians won, the kingdom's fate would turn darker than it was.

Given Her Majesty's abilities, that's what'll happen.

The fact Queen Lupis failed the northern subjugation despite having an army of two hundred thousand men put an indelible blot on her reputation. Defeating the Mikoshiba barony wouldn't suffice to clear her name.

Mikhail and Meltina seem to think that just winning this battle would inspire the nobles to obey Queen Lupis, but that won't happen.

Noble houses that sacrificed much for this war wouldn't soon admit Queen Lupis's authority. This wasn't to say they didn't need to win, but winning wasn't enough.

Her winning this battle is just a prerequisite. What matters is how she'll placate the nobles' discontent after that. But...

Queen Lupis would typically split up the Mikoshiba barony's domain among those houses, but this was the price she offered the nobles in return for their

participation in the northern subjugation. Moreover, the citadel city of Epirus was razed and lost all its function as a city.

The northern regions becoming a battlefield ravaged those lands, and most fatally, their population was scattered. Even if the war ended, rebuilding the north would take time and more than a year or two to heal these wounds.

What noble would want land in that state as their reward?

The prize wasn't worth the effort it took to get it. The nobles would start doubting the royal house's authority and power, and those doubts would inevitably cause more war.

There's little that can prevent that. Right now, Queen Lupis can only make one of two choices.

To dispel the nobles' discontent, Queen Lupis would have to sell the royal house's domain to reward the nobles or pick the bloodstained path of slaying all nobles who spoke up against her.

And she has far too little time to make her decision. If her bad habits take over and she refuses to make a choice, it'll just end in another civil war. Damned if you do, damned if you don't, as the old saying went. And Queen Lupis lacked the strength necessary to overcome that. *If she did, she'd have surrendered before things got this bad. No, the moment she chose to take up arms against that man, it became obvious just how little she was capable of.*

Anyone with a good eye could tell Queen Lupis's defeat was at hand. When faced with such situations, people acted to protect themselves, and Ryoma knew that.

After all, he hosted that evening party.

Ryoma Mikoshiba was skilled at reading people's hearts, which inspired Count Zeleph and Bergstone to discard their positions as nobles in the crown's service and join his side. Other nobles must have received letters like the one Viscount McMaster had.

I can't say for certain, but I'm sure at least Viscount Olgren got one too. And knowing this shrewd relative of theirs, he was unlikely to make the wrong choice. *No, knowing the viscount, he's stubborn enough to remain neutral and*

join Baron Mikoshiba's conquest.

Based on Ryoma's many connections and popularity, he would likely work under the surface. For all Rosetta knew, he was having a secret talk with some noble or another at that very moment.

In other words, Mikhail and Meltina's plans of winning the battle for the capital are nothing short of daydreams.

Regardless of whether Viscount McMaser joined the Mikoshiba Barony, this war would end the same way. Ryoma Mikoshiba had prepared well enough to ensure that, and the viscount's decision mattered little to the young warlord.

From our perspective, whether we join forces with the Mikoshiba barony is the difference between falling into ruin and rising into prosperity, mused Rosetta.

Once Ryoma Mikoshiba won, he would likely deem any noble house that didn't obey him unnecessary and exiled. At worst, those seen as harmful would head to the gallows along with their entire line.

He's kind to his allies, but just the same, he's ruthless to his enemies. Rosetta naturally preferred to side with the Mikoshiba barony. *But the decision is* father's*, and he...*

Diggle McMaster was a stubborn, hard-headed man. In terms of his social disposition, he was a difficult person to handle. But Rosetta knew he was capable concerning martial matters. He didn't quite compare to Count Salzberg's Twin Blades. Nevertheless, he was highly regarded as a warrior and commander.

Although Viscount McMaster was a fine governor, he wasn't as skilled as a politician like Count Bergstone. But his commoners respected him, since he was more than a good ruler, unlike nobles who only cared for their riches. Putting aside her bias as his relative, Diggle McMaster was a capable leader.

If father is lacking in anything, it's luck.

No matter how capable he might be, it was all useless without a time and place to put those skills on display. He also wasn't one to flatter others, which led to him being regarded coldly in noble society and only made things worse. Because of this, Rosetta wished her father would grasp this opportunity that fell

into his lap.

The other problem is whether father can make that decision.

She understood his misgivings. His warrior's honor and pride as a member of a house that traced its lineage to the kingdom's founding days. So he wouldn't hesitate before casting it all away. Considering the future of House McMaster, he had to choose right there and then.

Should I make the decision for him?

This action was a last resort for Rosetta, and it would ruin her relationship with her father. The fact he forced his daughter to go that far would surely shatter Viscount McMaster's pride. He'd rather die than see that happen.

But even so, I...

Were they to prioritize their house's survival or cling to their aristocratic pride and embrace death? Rosetta sighed as she glanced at her father, still tormented by those conflicting emotions. She prayed her father would have the foresight to accept the chance that leaped into his lap.

She prayed to her deceased twin sibling, asking him to protect McMaster viscounty's future.

†

That day, hundreds of knights walked through the main street of Pireas in an orderly line, flying the banner of the Church of Meneos. This knight unit had escorted Cardinal Roland in the northern subjugation left behind in the capital.

The knight unit was only there as a reserve force in case of an emergency. They were headed to the town of Galatia in Winzel County, near the border, after which they would leave the country.

While the knights thought this order came out of nowhere, they couldn't go against Cardinal Roland. The Mikoshiba barony forces deployed near the capital were informed to let them leave. Even with these doubts, they had to obey the order to retreat.

But a man watched over their departure with cold eyes and said, "I had my doubts, but the rumors that the Church is pulling out of the capital are true."

A single carriage stood on the side of the road and inside sat Viscount Furio Gelhart glaring at the Church's flag. He once led Rhoadseria's nobles' faction as one of the strongest people in the country. Still, he got demoted to viscount status after the last civil war.

Gelhart would have devoted his life to Queen Lupis for sparing him, but this man had attempted to take over the kingdom. Although his failures had made him more audacious, he was determined to spin as many plots as necessary to regain the glory of his heyday.

Seeing the Church of Meneos leave the capital meant he needed to revise his painstakingly crafted plans.

"Curse the Church... Are they completely abandoning Lupis?" hissed Viscount Gelhart, his expression contorted in anger and panic.

The Church's retreat could be a fatal blow to Queen Lupis.



Queen Lupis would have had a chance to turn things around if it'd just been

losing in the northern subjugation. But with this...

Indeed, a few hundred knights of the Church of Meneos leaving were inconsequential. The problem wasn't in their military presence, though.

The issue is that the Church leaving gives the impression the gods are no longer on her side, and that's an emotional fulcrum. Suppressing the unrest will cause soldiers to be uneasy.

The soldiers would feel the justice they fought for and believed had crumbled away. This retreat gave the impression that God had abandoned the soldiers holed up in Pireas, and the citizens felt this. And the same applied to the third knight order tasked with escorting them to gates.

They likely want to flee the capital too.

No one wanted to stay on a sinking ship. The same was true for the nobles and commoners.

"I'll have to act quickly after all," whispered Viscount Gelhar as he began plotting his next play. He knew he wouldn't be able to get out of this predicament alone, and his only recourse was to join forces with someone else. The question was who. *I'll have to exclude houses that took significant losses during the northern subjugation.*

Any houses that took heavy blows during the war would hold a great grudge against the Mikoshiba barony. Having their heads or heirs slain in the conflict would make them regard Baron Mikoshiba as their most hated nemesis. They would likely fight, even if they got wiped out. Teaming up with people like that would just be a pointless risk to the viscount.

I should avoid those too foolish to look at the bigger picture among the ones not hurt by the war.

Loyalty to the just cause and the royal house was crucial for the nobles, but that was only a pretense. All that mattered to them was self-preservation by surviving and ensuring their bloodline had the next generation. Sometimes, people mistook their pretenses for their true intentions.

Sticking to your loyalty to the royal house can make it harder to maneuver when the time comes.

Despite being branded as a traitor had its issues, that loyalty meant nothing if it bound you in place as your house fell. The important part was knowing where to draw a line between pretenses and one's true intentions.

Which leaves...

With those conditions in mind, Viscount Gelhart narrowed down the list of candidates. The faces of different nobles crossed his mind. Among the hundreds of noble houses in Rhoadseria, there were, for better and for worse, few people who applied at a time like this.

After a few minutes of contemplation, the viscount narrowed his options to one man.

Yes, he might do.

The face of one fastidious, militaristic noble came to mind as his skills were satisfactory and had plenty of merit. He did have his problems. The man was the head of one of Rhoadseria's few warrior houses. They were a noble family but closer in nature to knights. As such, they opposed Viscount Gelhart during the year he held power over the nobles' faction.

I wouldn't want to meet the man if I could help it, but now...

Few nobles in Rhoadseria had sound judgment, and his house didn't participate in the northern subjugation. When he obeyed Queen Lupis's call to arms and led soldiers to the capital, they couldn't assist on the battlefield because of recent injuries from an accident. That implied he didn't fixate on loyalty. Given that he came to the capital with an army and was a capable commander, he was the ideal man for this task.

We should put aside any personal grievances for now.

Most importantly, no one else fit all the criteria. Gelhart then instructed his driver to head to Viscount McMaster's estate, where he had arrived as an unexpected guest. Once there, they proceeded to the estate's lawn under the gentle sun rays, and their discussion would influence the war between Ryoma Mikoshiba and Lupis Rhoadserians.

Afterword

I doubt many readers remain, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. To those of you who have kept up with the series since volume one, it's been four months since the last release in March. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

Withthe series going twenty-one volumes, I doubt anyone started with this one. But let's stress consistency and tradition here, shall we? I'm sure these intros might have inspired some readers to pick up the series from volume one I should hope so, at least. But who's to say? With a long series like this one, I can only worry that readers might find the length daunting.

I'm ashamed to open the afterword like this, but allow me to apologize. During volume twenty's afterword, I said that I intended to end the long-running rivalry with Queen Lupis, but that wasn't the case. You have my sincerest apologies. This change was because I had to resolve some past foreshadowing. Otherwise, the payoff for it would have felt unnatural later on.

As I said, this series has been going twenty-one volumes strong. Ending the rivalry with Queen Lupis is a major turning point, so it's important to tie up any loose ends before we get there, lest they remain unresolved.

In trying to resolve those bits of foreshadowing, I set up new ones instead. It almost feels like a fruitless endeavor.. But it's impossible to conclude all plot threads at once, and preparing new twists each time the story progresses takes effort.

I already know how I want the story to end. Figuring out the path to get there is the hard part, and when writing, I want to flesh out something more. Writing for a long time makes it so things don't always go as initially planned. I wonder how other authors handle that?

By the way, my editor told me the other day that *Record of Wortenia War* has sold over one million copies! It is a great honor in this day and age where books don't sell as well as they used to. This is a milestone for any writer. Back when I first became an author, said editor told me that only writers who handle

multiple series break one million, and making it as a full-time author would be difficult. Indeed, I've heard that even authors who win newcomer awards rarely last five years in the industry.

It's easy to see my privilege when thinking about it like this. Of course, there's always someone better out there and room to improve.

Now, let's touch on some of volume twenty-one's highlights. First, it's finally time for one of the series' heroines, Asuka, to come under Ryoma's wing. This is due to Rodney's, Menea's and Tachibana's dedication to making it happen. It took quite a bit of trouble, but somehow they managed.

With this, all the original cast members are on Ryoma's side. I was quite worried about getting Koichiro and Asuka to regroup with Ryoma. Thankfully, they met safely.

But the other part of the story is a major turning point for our protagonist—something related to his family but not so much to war. At least not to the battle at hand with Queen Lupis... But it will influence upcoming plotlines, so keep up with the series to see where it goes.

Another major part of this volume was the negotiations between the Church of Meneos and a so-called "Viscount Bahenna" who came out of nowhere. Do read the volume to discover his true identity.

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone who helped make this volume and the readers that picked up this book. Next volume, the plan is to detail the final battle against Queen Lupis.

I intend to keep working hard to bring this series to you, so please continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War*.