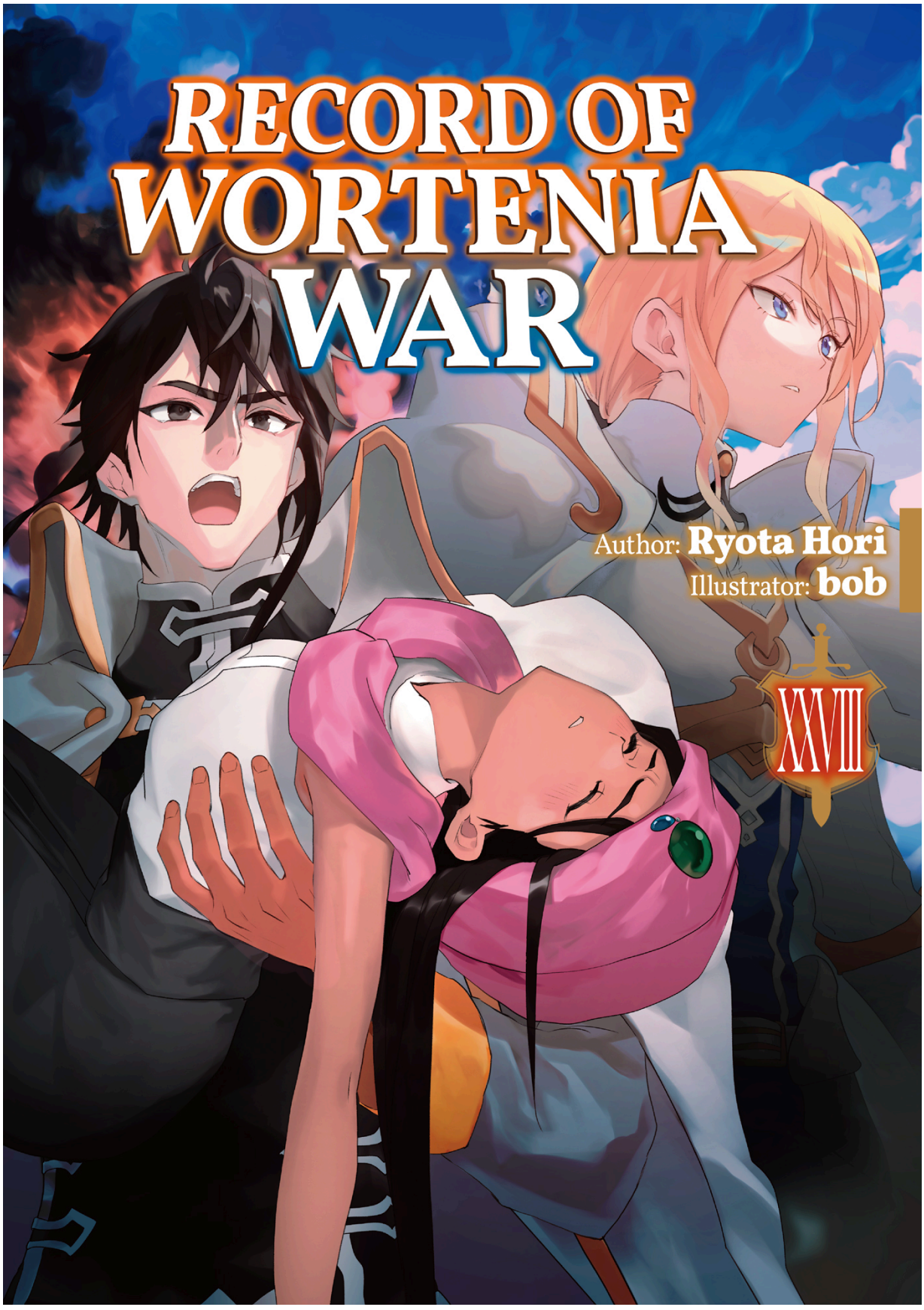
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

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

XXVIII


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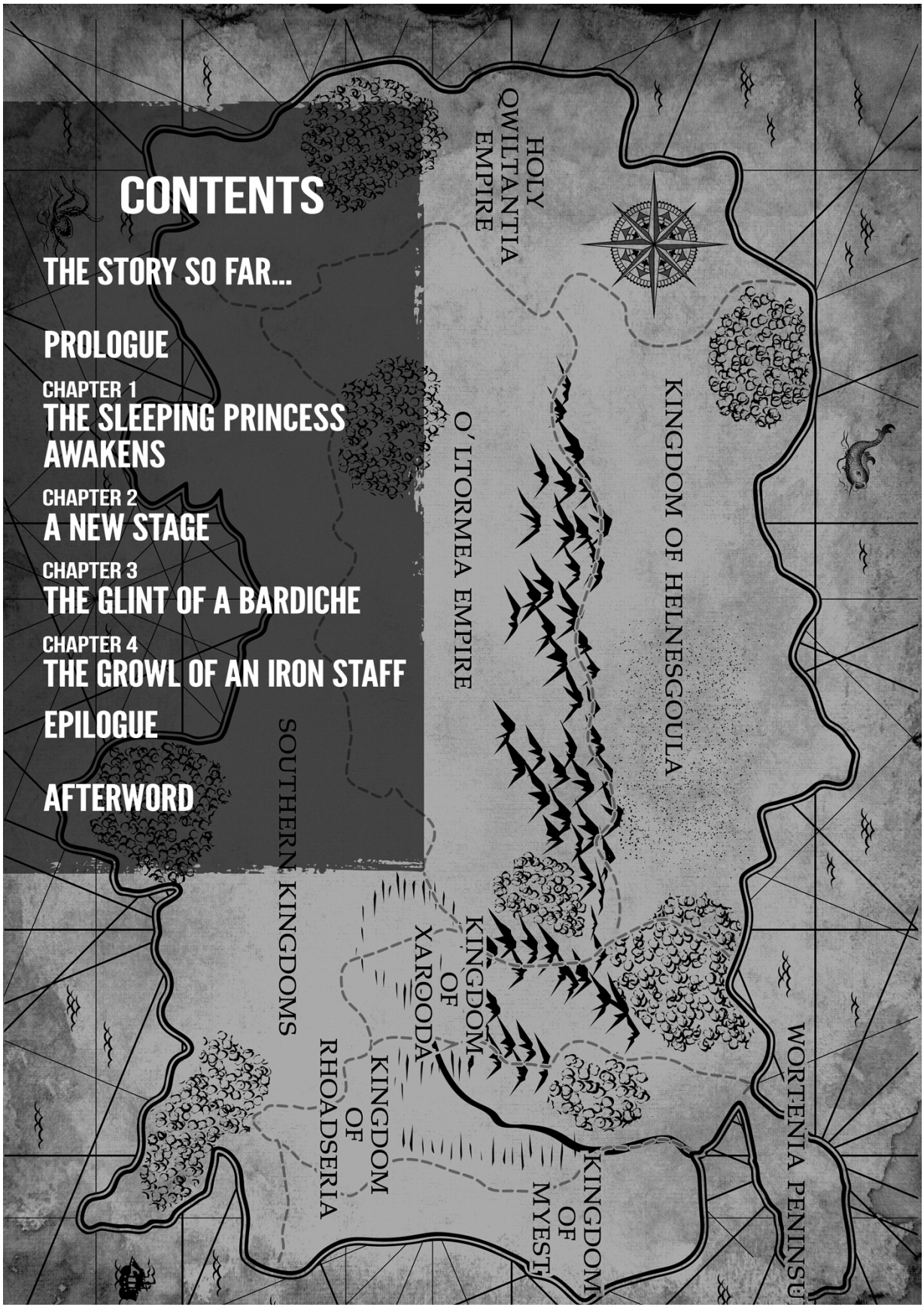

"Yah!!! Charge! Break through their lines!"
A deep roar echoed across the battlefield.
His name was Robert Bertrand, a formidable general trusted by Ryoma Mikoshiba.
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR




Yet here I am, dressed in formal attire, forced to endure stiff and tedious negotiations.
On either side of the table sat Ryoma Mikoshiba, representing the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, and Harisha, representing the Manibhadra tribe.


Koichiro reached into his pocket, pulled out a letter, and handed it to Ryoma.
"It's what you've been looking for."
At those words, Ryoma's eyes widened in surprise. He quickly tore open the envelope and took out the


letter, scanning its contents.



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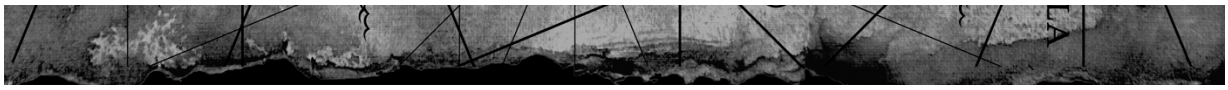


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The story so far...

Ryoma Mikoshiba, a Japanese high school student, was summoned to a world called Earth by a ritual performed by Gaius Valkland, the court thaumaturgist of the O'ltormea Empire. Armed with his quick wit and decisiveness, he escaped from the imperial capital and fled the perilous situation.

Later, through a series of extraordinary encounters, Ryoma found himself entangled in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria's civil war. As a reward for his achievements during the conflict, he was granted control over the Wortenia Peninsula, a dangerous frontier region known as a demon-infested land. Alongside a pair of beautiful twin sisters and a redheaded mercenary, Ryoma eradicated the pirates infesting the Wortenia Peninsula and dedicated himself to developing the territory.

However, this hellish world did not leave him in peace. Ryoma and his companions were swept up into numerous conflicts. These included the first invasion of Xarooda instigated by the O'ltormea Empire's ambitions for continental domination, and the northern subjugation, sparked by a feud with Queen Lupis Rhoadserians of Rhoadseria. Because Ryoma had survived these relentless wars, he rose to the highest noble rank possible in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria: an archduke.

Even as Ryoma achieved this, new trials awaited him. The neighboring Kingdom of Xarooda faced turmoil when King Julianus I suddenly fell gravely ill, and the O'ltormea Empire launched another invasion.

The Mikoshiba Grand Duchy was thrown into chaos as it scrambled to respond to the crisis. At the same time, Brittantia and Tarja, two powers in the southern region, began their assault on the Kingdom of Myest, Rhoadseria's eastern neighbor. The two kingdoms laid siege to the fortress city of Jermuk, the cornerstone of Myest's

southern defenses.

Ryoma Mikoshiba, forced to contend with wars on both eastern and western fronts, launched an expedition to the fortress city of Jermuk in an effort to quickly reduce the scale of the conflict. Yet, a shadowy Organization operating in the western continent orchestrated this expedition as part of a scheme to take Ryoma's life.

When Ryoma received reports of the king of Myest's assassination and the ascension of Owen Spiegel to the throne, he also learned that Alexis Duran, a covert agent of the Organization, was leading Myest's army southward toward Jermuk. Realizing that the entire chain of events was a ploy targeting him, Ryoma decided to withdraw to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

Having retreated to the southern fortress city of Heraklion, Ryoma began searching for a new path forward to turn the tide in his favor.

Prologue

A perfectly round moon hung in the night sky, visible from a room in a corner of the castle towering over the fortress city of Heraklion in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Plush carpets covered the floor, and the furnishings in the room, clearly crafted by renowned artisans, reflected luxury at a glance. It could have been the office of the castle's lord or a guest room meant to welcome esteemed visitors. Either way, furnishing this room undoubtedly required considerable wealth.

In that room were a man and a woman. The woman lay quietly asleep on the bed, her hands clasped over her abdomen. She appeared to be in her mid to late teens. Clad in a white nightgown, her tanned skin and Asian beauty were striking. However, her beauty was not the kind typically associated with femininity. To those who knew her, she likely evoked the sharp elegance of a finely honed blade rather than the delicate charm of a flower. Even her toned physique suggested she was far from a sheltered young lady confined to the safety of home.

On the other hand, the man sat in a wooden chair placed beside the bed. He seemed to be in his early to mid-thirties, possessing a powerful, muscular build and cold, intelligent eyes. His commanding presence and resolute expression marked him as a man well suited to leadership and the control of others.

In fact, his rank was exceptionally high. Among the Manibhadra tribe currently stationed in Heraklion, he held the second-highest position—a distinction that left no room for doubt about his authority. Despite his imposing stature, worry and uncertainty etched his face.

"Another day without change... Should I be grateful that her condition hasn't deteriorated, or lament that another day has passed with no progress?"

These words escaped his lips in a quiet murmur. Pale moonlight streamed in from the window, adorned with white lace curtains, gently illuminating the face of the woman lying on the bed. The serene light seemed akin to the blessing of Neterfishea, the goddess of the moon and compassion, one of the many daughters of Meneos, the king of the gods in the world of Earth. Regrettably, even the calm radiance of the moon's blessing seemed powerless to awaken the sleeping woman. The man extended a hand toward the sleeping beauty who had yet to open her eyes. He gently stroked her lustrous black hair, his expression a mixture of sorrow and yearning.



“She looks so peaceful while she sleeps...” The words slipped quietly from the man’s lips as he gazed at the woman’s serene face. His hand reached out and gently rested on her forehead. “What kind of dreams could she be having? No, she’s likely not dreaming at all.”

Feeling the warmth of her skin through his palm, the man exhaled a deep sigh of relief. The expression on his face resembled that of a father anxiously watching over a sick child. In truth, the woman lying before him was not a complete stranger. Though the age gap made it difficult to see her as a daughter, she was like a much younger sister to him—an interpretation that was not far from the truth.

After all, I do share blood ties with the young lady, the man thought.

Of course, care was taken to ensure these ties were separate. However, the oni tribe, being an insular and small ethnic group, had its own dynamics. Despite their relative isolation from other tribes, intermarriage generally occurred within their own community.

As a result, the influential families within the Manibhadra tribe often shared intertwined bloodlines, a reality not unlike the noble families of Earth’s aristocratic societies, who similarly preserved their lineage. Whether they were human or otherwise, intelligent beings tended to think in remarkably similar ways. Thus, it was undeniable that they fell within the bounds of kinship. And yet, for the briefest of moments, the man’s extended hand faltered, hesitating slightly. It was no mere illusion. Perhaps this hesitation stemmed from a reflexive sense of guilt at touching an unconscious woman of marriageable age. Of course, the man harbored no malicious intent. But even so, when asked if his actions were appropriate, he could not confidently say they were beyond reproach.

Being alone in a room with an unconscious woman is hardly ideal to begin with.

This hardly needed to be said. At the very least, having a third party present would have been prudent. Ideally, it should have been a female servant or maid. Not that the man bore any improper thoughts, but being alone in a room with a woman of her age could easily invite unfounded suspicion from others.

Ridiculous, really...

In truth, such suspicions would amount to baseless accusations or what one might call the malicious speculations of small-minded people. From the man's perspective, the very idea of taking advantage of an unconscious woman was so absurd that he felt inclined to question those who entertained such notions. He was a man of considerable rank and authority within the Manibhadra tribe, and many women in the tribe would gladly vie for a single night in his company. Quite literally, he had his pick of the lot.

Moreover, the man did not possess any twisted sexual inclinations that would motivate him to force himself upon someone against their will. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that he harbored a deep disdain for such individuals. To him, there was absolutely no need—none whatsoever—to act upon an unconscious woman lying in bed, no matter how beautiful she might be. To be even more precise about his feelings, the man simply found no enjoyment in the idea of sharing a bed with an unconscious person.

Paying for a working girl is cleaner, leaves no complications, and is far more enjoyable.

Given his current position, such an improper act was out of the question. This place, after all, was enemy territory.

True, we're being treated as guests for now. But at its core, our situation hasn't changed—we are still prisoners. To indulge in such a frivolous distraction under these circumstances... I'm not that foolish. And if I were to make such a reckless mistake, that man *would not hesitate to cut me loose and remove me from the negotiations.*

That outcome was as plain as day. Knowing this, there was no way the man would intentionally choose such a dangerous course of action. Explaining this logic to others would be a waste of time, though. In reality, whether it was the truth was irrelevant. The prying minds of those around him were never genuinely interested in the truth anyway. People often formed their own assumptions about others, passing judgment freely. And for what purpose? Simply to amuse themselves by spreading wild speculation and assuaging their own dissatisfaction. This tendency seemed like an inherent flaw

among intelligent life-forms. Though the world of Earth had yet to develop tabloids or gossip magazines, if someone were to introduce them, there was no doubt they'd be incredibly popular. Once unleashed, rumors could not be stopped. While the proverb, "A person's tongue cannot be silenced," did not exist in this world, its truth remained universal across all worlds. The man understood this all too well.

That's why I must avoid behavior that invites suspicion. It's a foolish, ridiculous issue, but unavoidable.

He could ignore the idle gossip entirely, but that was an unrealistic choice for someone living within the confines of society and in his position, where every action and word had to be carefully considered. Even trivial suspicions could snowball, eventually tightening a noose around his neck—or worse, threatening the lives of those closest to him. That was the burden and responsibility of leadership. Despite this understanding, the man still refused a third party's presence and remained alone in the room with the sleeping woman. At times, people made decisions that defied reason or logic. Perhaps, in his case, it was to secure the solitude he needed to confront his own inner turmoil—a time to dispel his doubts. If so, then accepting some degree of risk might have been an unavoidable necessity.

Two weeks have passed.

This man was Rahizya, and he was the son of the elder who led the Manibhadra tribe—a group also known as the Outlanders—residing in the dense jungles of the southern regions of the continent. However, Rahizya's typically confident face had vanished due to a painfully clear reason. A heavy sigh escaped his lips. Nearly two weeks had passed, yet the sleeping princess showed no sign of waking. Rahizya remained unsure of how to handle the situation, though he had certainly considered possibilities. A man as adept at scheming and intrigue as Rahizya could easily predict what might happen. The issue was simply that he didn't want to acknowledge the reality. But no matter how much he tried to avert his gaze, the facts before him would not change.

And the time to make a decision he had been postponing was

drawing ever closer. Rahizya knew this instinctively. He also understood what was required to make that decision.

Surviving the explosion was, without question, a stroke of luck. There's no denying that. Fortunately, there were no visible major injuries, but still...

On that fateful day, Rahizya and around two hundred soldiers assigned to guard him had fled the main camp at the center of Brittantia and Tarja's forces. Amid the chaos, he had found and rescued Harisha, who had been blown away by the blast and left unconscious on the ground. Her survival was nothing short of divine intervention; the explosion had decimated the five-thousand-strong war elephant unit under Harisha's command. When Rahizya searched the area near the blast's epicenter, the only survivor he found was Harisha, who now lay in bed, deep in slumber.

Of course, Rahizya and Harisha were adversaries in the power struggles within their tribe. They had frequently clashed, their arguments fierce and heated. This did not mean they despised each other enough to wish the other death. To be more precise, Harisha's death would have been far more problematic for Rahizya than beneficial. If she were to perish, the Manibhadra tribe would suffer a significant blow.

Most likely, internal conflicts would escalate to a point where resolution would become impossible.

That scenario remained plausible, and it had been avoided. When Rahizya witnessed the devastation on Lubua Plains, Harisha's survival felt like a blessing from the heavens—a stroke of fortune for which he could never be too grateful.

Yes, I should be thankful, even if this fortune is imperfect. Within that gratitude lay a complex mixture of frustration, dissatisfaction, and perhaps even anger. Surviving was an incredible stroke of luck, but that alone was not enough. *No, considering the sheer intensity of that explosion...*

Rahizya's mind vividly recalled the scenes from that day, which was nothing short of literal hell. For someone faint of heart, witnessing such a horrific scene might have driven them to madness. The bodies of the Manibhadra tribe's soldiers strewn across Lubua

Plains were grotesquely mutilated. Only a handful of corpses still retained any semblance of human form. Such carnage was rare, even in a world perpetually ravaged by conflict.

Rahizya, a member of the Manibhadra tribe with countless combat encounters and near-death experiences, could still recall the chill that ran through him upon seeing the devastation.

A pillar of light descended from the heavens, immediately followed by a column of fire. It was like something out of myth. They say Indra's Vijaya, the weapon he used to fell our oni ancestors' progenitor, could obliterate entire armies with a single blow. I wouldn't be surprised if Vijaya was indeed the cause of this.

He had no idea what Vijaya actually was; he only recognized the name through the myths passed down among the yakshas. Whether Vijaya was some form of weapon or arcane magic remained unclear. Among the Manibhadra tribe, not a single person could provide a definitive explanation of what Vijaya truly was. Even the elders, revered as the keepers of the tribe's accumulated wisdom, could not shed any light on it. Rahizya doubted that—even if he traveled across the entire southern region of the western continent, asking every oni he met—anyone could provide an answer. Still, he had heard of its terrifying power since childhood. The scene Rahizya had witnessed that day was so overwhelmingly vivid that it evoked visions of that legendary weapon described in the myths.

Of course, myths are ultimately just fairy tales. I know that, thought Rahizya. Whether entirely fabricated or rooted in kernels of truth, not all the stories handed down as myths were based on historical reality. *At the very least, I've never believed the myths of our tribe to be literal accounts of history.*

Naturally, Rahizya did not intend to publicly state such a view or hold myths in contempt. He understood deeply how essential these myths were in preserving the pride and unity of the Manibhadra tribe. But that didn't make him naive enough to accept every part of the tribe's legends as absolute historical fact. This rationality and his prioritization of logic over blind belief were hallmarks of Rahizya's pragmatic and realist nature.

But the sheer destructive force of that... If someone told me the

gods of myth wielded this weapon, I might just believe them.

Regardless, Rahizya couldn't determine whether the legend was factual. What mattered was that he perceived it to be true at that moment. The towering mushroom cloud seared four simple letters—*fear*—into the hearts of all who beheld it. It made no distinction between human and oni. Faced with such overwhelming destruction, there was no being, no creature, capable of witnessing it without succumbing to fear.

Beyond that primal fear inherent to all living beings, Rahizya's sharp mind never ceased its relentless analysis of the situation. Whether that was a blessing or a curse, this unavoidable obligation to contemplate the fate of his tribe burdened him.

However, the cost of that clarity was steep. For any ordinary person, memories of such a scene would be too horrifying to ever recall willingly.

The vast cratered ground, blanketed by a mountain of blackened, charred corpses...

While the sheer horror of the sight was one thing, what truly defied description was the raw stench of burning flesh accompanying it. It was a level of devastation that could easily trigger PTSD in anyone with even a modest tolerance for such atrocities. Yet Rahizya could not afford to flinch in the face of such horror. Why? Because there was no guarantee that the devastation he had witnessed would not occur again.

No. If it happened once, there's no reason it can't happen twice.

Knowing the possibility existed, he had no choice but to analyze the situation and prepare a countermeasure. Even if his calculating intellect had already concluded that no effective method of defense existed, he could not stop himself from trying.

It must have been the result of intense blasts of heat and shock waves. Judging by the size of the pillar of fire that erupted from the ground, the explosion must have been extraordinarily violent. The flying debris and rubble would have naturally shredded anyone exposed.

Rahizya, a denizen of the terrestrial world, could not comprehend the extent of the destruction he witnessed. Yet, it resembled what

might happen to a victim of a shotgun blast at point-blank range. Amid all this, the sole survivor was Harisha. Not only had she survived, but she had done so without so much as a broken bone or a burn.

How on earth did she make it out alive?

By the standards of their world, this was nothing short of the best possible outcome. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it a gift from the goddess of fate. Still, it wasn't a blessing Rahizya could embrace with unbridled joy. The goddess's blessings often came with a price proportional to their magnitude.

And paying that price a second time is not an option. The image of Harisha's beloved war elephant, scorched and lifeless, flashed through Rahizya's mind. *Paopabu, the king among the great beasts...*

This magnificent creature, raised alongside Harisha since childhood like an older sibling, was also the Manibhadra tribe's most formidable of the four-tusked elephants.

To think such a mighty king of the four-tusked elephants would be lost in such a minor skirmish... The cost is too great. Lady Harisha will be devastated when she learns of this.

Like the Manibhadra tribe, other yakshas had long faced marginalization and been branded as *outsiders*—people unfit for the civilized order. The native populations of the western continent saw the yakshas, who had migrated to the southern regions, as alien intruders, something peculiar and unwelcome. Yet, they were far from being helpless victims of persecution. That, too, was undeniable.

Indeed, the yaksha had maintained their independence for centuries—perhaps even a millennium or longer—refusing to bow to the meddling of the southern nations of the western continent.

They had been able to fend off external interference for so long due to many reasons, and one of them was undoubtedly the existence of creatures known as *war elephants*. The yakshas, including the Manibhadra tribe, had secured their autonomy by domesticating and utilizing the mighty four-tusked elephants.

With such massive creatures at their command, it's no wonder

they were a menace to their enemies.

While these beasts might pale in comparison to the monstrous creatures classified as "giant species," the four-tusked elephants were clearly apex herbivores within the dense jungles of the southern regions.

Submitting a guild commission to hunt a four-tusked elephant would require, at a minimum, adventurers or mercenaries Rank A or higher. In some cases, only elite Rank S operatives would be deemed capable of handling such a task. It wasn't uncommon for such high-risk commissions to languish on the guild's bulletin boards for years without a single taker.

To make matters worse, those creatures are intelligent.

Elephants rivaled—or perhaps surpassed—horses in cognitive ability and were said to mourn their dead, a trait indicative of profound emotional depth. To experience such emotions required a significant degree of intelligence, and the emotional richness of elephants left no doubt about their mental capabilities. This truth held for the four-tusked elephants native to Earth as much as it did for their mundane counterparts on Rearth. Furthermore, the yaksha fiercely guarded the secret of beast mastery arts, which could enhance the intelligence of the four-tusked elephants.

It was as though these beasts became tanks with minds of their own, analyzing the battlefield and making decisions autonomously. For the Manibhadra tribe, the four-tusked elephants were vital tools of warfare and a decisive factor in their survival and prosperity. These elephants were far more than mere instruments of war; they were family. This sentiment was neither pretense nor rhetoric but the very essence of the beast mastery arts.

Perhaps Paopabu's enormous body served as a shield. Whether by chance or intent, it doesn't matter. Most likely, it was intentional. He put himself in harm's way to protect Lady Harisha.

There was no evidence to confirm this theory, but Rahizya was convinced it was true. And it was precisely this conviction that troubled him.

How am I supposed to tell Lady Harisha when she awakens?

To Harisha, Paopabu was not just a beast. He was like an elder

sibling, having grown up alongside her since childhood. The loss of such a cherished companion would undoubtedly deal a devastating blow to Harisha.

Considering Lady Harisha insisted on leading the charge...

From the beginning, this had been a war they never wanted, as Harisha always found allying with the yakshas' long-standing enemies—Tarja and Brittantia—to be a source of deep dissatisfaction. The frustration had undeniably been churning within her heart ever since the negotiations began. In truth, the period leading up to the war had been marked by intense clashes between Harisha, who prioritized the tribe's traditions and pride, and Rahizya, who sought practical solutions to the immediate crisis. Nevertheless, in her determination to do what was best for the tribe, Harisha volunteered to lead the vanguard. It was her way of reconciling the tension between the ideals she held dear and the harsh realities confronting her. Her decision reflected her consideration for the future of the Manibhadra tribe.

But the result of that decision...

It was no one's fault. Every life on the battlefield was equal, and survival or death was determined by individual skill and fortune. In that sense, Harisha need not feel responsible for Paopabu's death. But emotions often disregarded such logic. Harisha would almost certainly come to deeply regret her decision.

And to make matters worse, her entire unit was annihilated... Knowing how proud Lady Harisha is, it's not impossible to imagine the worst-case scenario.

There was a real possibility that Harisha, overcome with guilt and despair, might take her own life to atone for the defeat.

"But thinking about such things now is pointless, isn't it? Perhaps it's time for me to steel myself as well," muttered Rahizya. His voice was harsh and cold. Blood dripped onto the floor from between the fingers of his clenched fists.



The excessively tight grip was the result of anger and regret. His nails dug into his flesh, causing pain to surge through Rahizya's body. However, this physical pain was likely nothing compared to the emotional pain Rahizya was experiencing.

When I think back to the scenes on the battlefield, it's a blessing that Lady Harisha's life was spared. But if she remains unconscious and cannot even drink water, no matter how strong a yaksha's body is, there's a limit to what can be done. If Lady Harisha doesn't wake up...

The worst possible outcome clung to Rahizya's mind, refusing to leave. Moreover, he had no way left to prevent that terrible outcome. The yaksha and other oni were born with a rich life force and sturdy bodies, giving them a significant advantage in this world governed by the principle of survival of the fittest. Given that, it was undeniable that oni, including the yaksha, were biologically superior to humans.

Despite this, the oni were still just a type of demi-human, meaning the yaksha were regarded not as gods but as demonic beings. Though they had some similarities, gods and humans differed greatly. In reality, Rahizya and his kind were not gods.

If humans were the ones said to be the ancestors of our kind, it might be different.

The yakshas' vitality surpassed that of humans, but that did not mean they were supernatural beings like gods or demons. Their biological traits as living creatures limited the superiority of races like the yaksha. They needed food and water to maintain life, just like other organisms. They could not live by consuming mist or clouds like a sage. Moreover, in this world, there was no advanced medical technology like feeding tubes or intravenous drips for patients in comas. Rahizya could not even imagine such techniques existing in another world, such as the one known as Rearth. Consequently, the only way to take in fluids and nutrients was for the individual to swallow them voluntarily. But for the unconscious Harisha, that was literally impossible.

All Rahizya could do was occasionally wipe her lips with a damp cloth. However, this minimal action was clearly insufficient to ensure

her survival by providing the necessary fluids. Of course, it was better than doing nothing. But if anything, it was more an effort to keep Rahizya satisfied rather than being an effort to prolong Harisha's life. He understood that better than anyone else.

As someone with no knowledge of medicine, there is nothing else I can do. Even if the tribe's healer were here, I doubt they could do anything.

In this world of underdeveloped medical technology, no machines were available to take X-rays or MRIs to examine the head. If there were no visible external injuries, the doctor would simply assume that there was no problem with the patient's body. Naturally, no clear treatment method existed, so the only conclusion was to monitor the situation. At this point, the matter of Harisha's awakening was in the hands of the gods.

"I'm reaching a point where my strength is diminishing. If Harisha doesn't regain consciousness soon, I can only expect a few more days at best. The real issue is how *that man* will act if it comes to that."

Rahizya and Harisha were staying in a room within the fortress city of Heraklion as guests of Archduke Mikoshiba.

The treatment they had received was quite generous; the furnishings in the room were luxurious, and a dedicated maid took care of them, ensuring that they lacked nothing in their daily lives. A renowned doctor had been arranged for them, and the use of rare medicines had been permitted. Rahizya, a powerful figure in the Manibhadra tribe, had never received such lavish treatment from any other faction. However, Rahizya was not naive enough to accept such kindness at face value.

The treatment is excellent. But it's obvious this is being done with a clear purpose, mused Rahizya. It was unthinkable that an enemy general would receive such favorable treatment without an underlying motive. *Though they treat us as honored guests, I cannot forget that we are closer to prisoners here.*

Additionally, Rahizya did not have the freedom to wander outside the room and even had to request permission from the guards outside the door for basic needs like going to the bathroom. One

would not be wrong to say that he was effectively being confined. Rahizya understood the true motive, even with the surface justification of protecting an honored guest. Despite the inconvenience, he recognized it as a reasonable precaution. Only half a month ago, the Manibhadra tribe had been at war with Archduke Mikoshiba's forces. It was no accident that Rahizya's two hundred soldiers were assigned to stay at the training ground in the southwest of the fortress city of Heraklion. The deliberate separation from Rahizya and his men was evident.

They must be wary of me using my subordinates to scheme.

Rahizya had no ill intentions toward Archduke Mikoshiba's family in his current situation. With Harisha in a coma, any attack would obviously lead to poor results.

Even if I led an assault with my men, with only two hundred soldiers, it wouldn't be enough.

One could stage an effective ambush with careful preparation. Moreover, all two hundred of Rahizya's soldiers were among the best in the Manibhadra tribe; they had combat strength exceeding what one might expect from their nominal number of troops. However, Rahizya and his men stayed in Heraklion only because the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's army had pulled out of the battle at Lubua Plains and retreated to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. This was nothing but a consequence of coincidence. As a result, Rahizya had no knowledge of the fortress city of Heraklion.

With Harisha remaining unconscious as an additional burden, taking any hostile action against Archduke Mikoshiba's family would be an act of sheer folly, far beyond recklessness—essentially suicide. Rahizya understood that Ryoma Mikoshiba was also aware of this.

But if the roles were reversed, I would likely give the same order.

Rahizya would certainly not launch an attack in this situation. Because it seemed so impossible, there was a certain value in considering such a desperate move. A surprise attack works by exploiting the human tendency to dismiss the unlikely.

And there's no way that man doesn't understand this possibility.

The easiest way to avoid such a risk would be to execute Rahizya and his group outright. If they killed them without question, it would

eliminate the need to manage them or worry about unnecessary trouble. Death would mean the removal of all risks. However, Ryoma Mikoshiba chose not to take that option, and this wasn't out of pity for the defeated.

Rahizya's mind flashed to the face of the young man he'd first met a few days ago, an older face that had been more intense than he expected. *He's not as cruel as the rumors suggested. But even so, it's clear at first glance that he's not simply a good-natured fool. He's certainly no simpleton. The gentle smile hides a gaze as sharp as steel... Those eyes see through everything in the pursuit of logic. A man like that would never choose to merely make us prisoners.*

Of course, Rahizya had no concrete proof of this. But when he laid eyes on Ryoma Mikoshiba, he could sense the cold, merciless predator in the man. In many ways, Rahizya embodied the same kind of predator.

Looking at it this way, I can begin to understand his thoughts. Rahizya had, albeit vaguely, come to grasp what Ryoma Mikoshiba's aim was. Perhaps this also proved both men were the same. *There's no doubt that man is waiting for the right moment. Likely when Harisha's fate is clear... More accurately, he's waiting for me to give up on her... All of this is part of a strategy to manipulate our tribe to suit his needs.*

At the moment, Ryoma had no reason to negotiate with Rahizya due to the possibility of Harisha regaining consciousness. As a vice commander, Rahizya didn't have the authority to make decisions in negotiations with the enemy. No matter how carefully Rahizya might negotiate, there remained the possibility that Harisha, as the commander, would overturn everything with her decision.

Considering her personality, it's certain she would reject any agreement out of defiance toward me, Rahizya considered. There was no logic to this. The more logically Rahizya explained things, the more Harisha would likely reject his words. *But if her strength begins to fail, the situation will change.*

In that case, command would naturally fall to Rahizya by seniority. This chain of command was the key point to evaluate.

Rather than waiting for the young lady's recovery, should I just

end this? The idea had suddenly crossed Rahizya's mind. Was it the cold calculation of a ruler or perhaps the emotion of someone who shared the same blood? Rahizya couldn't distinguish between the two but quickly shook off this notion.

It was a foolish thought... If Rahizya were to choose that path, there would have been no need to desperately rescue Harisha from that hellish battlefield, nor would he have wasted two weeks. He gently reached for Harisha's forehead and stroked it tenderly before quietly leaving the room.

As he exited, he prayed to the goddess Neterfishea, hoping that a miracle would occur for Harisha once more. Rahizya didn't truly believe that the gods would answer his prayer. But it seemed that the gods in this world were beings with a sense of humor. Perhaps they were like mischievous gods who enjoyed toying with the hearts of people, watching them worry and agonize.

Two days later, the gods granted their favor to Harisha again as if answering Rahizya's wish. This would lead to a new path for the oni, including the Manibhadra tribe from the southern region of the western continent. However, no one knew what lay at the end of this path—not even the gods, who were not of human origin.

Chapter 1: The Sleeping Princess Awakens

Thick gray clouds covered the sky, making words like cloudy and overcast perfectly describe the weather. Although, this was more than just an overcast sky. In the distance, flashes of lightning streaked through the clouds, and thunder echoed across the heavens. Raindrops began to pelt the window glass. Soon, a storm would arrive. It wasn't just any storm but a fierce tempest akin to a god of destruction, sweeping away everything in its path.

Could it be said that this weather was a foreboding omen, hinting at the fate of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and the other two eastern nations? Such thoughts were nothing more than delusions or fleeting whims of the mind. No correlation or causation existed between the weather and the destiny of nations. Yet, human hearts did not always move according to reason. Indeed, human behavior rarely exhibited consistency and rationality. However, this unpredictability and instability driven by emotion were precisely humans' natural reactions.

Even the young conqueror, who had risen to the highest rank of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria's nobility as archduke, was no exception. A thunderclap interrupted his thoughts. Just then, the sound of a quill scratching across paper that had been echoing in the room ceased. Ryoma Mikoshiba, seated in the office chair once used by Furio Gelhart—who had formerly led the nobles' faction of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria—paused his battle with the stack of documents before him. He placed the quill he held back into the inkpot on the desk. A sharp click of his tongue escaped Ryoma's lips. Such a display of irritation was unusual for someone often described as overly composed. He set the documents on the desk and glared at the sky beyond the window.

As if dealing with an endless stream of issues wasn't enough, shortages of people, time, and resources plague me daily and leave me with a constant headache. Now, this dreary weather piles on top of it all. I was finally starting to focus, and then this damn thunder decided to interrupt me.

The look in his eyes betrayed his frustration at having his work disrupted. Still, it was hardly surprising because there was nothing more precious than time to Ryoma. If time could be bought with money, he would have spared no expense, piling up mountains of gold coins to acquire it. The workload demanded of Ryoma Mikoshiba was truly staggering.



Moreover, his work wasn't simply a matter of skimming the contents and stamping approval without thought. Reorganizing the military was a particularly labor-intensive task. While Ryoma did not intend to launch another expedition to the Kingdom of Myest at the moment—at least not in the immediate future—that didn't mean he could neglect the reorganization or the replenishment of supplies.

Just as preparation is crucial for earthquakes or typhoons, military readiness also hinged on proactive measures.

This is particularly true when I can't fully predict how Alexis Duran and his collaborators will act. In such uncertain circumstances, thorough preparation is essential. Besides, executing that particular strategy will require significant groundwork. Money, weapons, provisions... I've managed to involve the surrounding nobles, so it should work out somehow, but even coordinating them takes effort.

The document he was working on was an order to transport weapons from the capital to Heraklion. Fortunately, Queen Radine deeply trusted Ryoma and had granted him extensive authority. Ironically, this very freedom served to further strain Ryoma's time. He had to make every decision personally, and the result was plain to see—he was, quite literally, overwhelmed to the point that he'd take any help he could get.

Well, that's only natural. This situation is like a newly established startup, with me running it as a one-man operation.

Many talented individuals surrounded Ryoma. Even for an archduke, it was rare to boast such an impressive assembly of talent, not just in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria but across the entire western continent. By looking around the continent, the pool of talented warriors could be narrowed considerably.

This group consisted of the best of the best. However, their talents leaned more heavily toward military affairs.

More specifically, most of them are the kind who shine on the front lines of the battlefield rather than commanding from the rear.

There wasn't a single incompetent subordinate serving the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy. One could describe each one as an exceptional talent without exaggeration. Additionally, they were all

versatile individuals, possessing a certain level of competence in both military and administrative matters. While individual preferences and strengths might vary, they could all handle paperwork to at least a satisfactory degree. These individuals were undeniably the pillars and treasures supporting House Mikoshiba.

Even so, no matter how capable my subordinates are, it's difficult for a single noble household to carry the fate of an entire nation.

When it came to influencing the destiny of neighboring countries, it was inevitable that their manpower would fall short. Their extraordinary competence—that could be described as almost terrifying—was evident in their ability to handle things so well. The result was the mountain of documents stacked on Ryoma's desk. To make matters worse, the young conqueror at the head of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy was renowned for his military prowess and knowledge, earning him the title of War God, but he lacked the practical administrative work skills. Though he had gained considerable experience, there were natural limits to how fast he could process tasks.

Seriously, even working nonstop since morning isn't enough. No matter how much time I have, it's never enough...

Ryoma's gaze shifted to the towering mountain of documents before him. After rushing through breakfast this morning, he had spent more than three hours seated at his desk, wrestling with the unending pile of paperwork. Yet, he had barely made it to the foothills of this metaphorical mountain, let alone its summit. Precisely because of this, he wanted to push forward, even a little. Despite knowing that, Ryoma didn't reach for the quill resting in the inkpot before him. Instead of trying to regain his lost focus, he briefly paused. Or rather, it might be more accurate to say that the disruption of his concentration had diminished his motivation to continue.

Pushing myself too hard probably won't yield good results...

Admittedly, even Ryoma felt this was a bit of an excuse. The fact he entertained such thoughts revealed his current state of mind. As if sensing her lord's mood, Sara, who had been assisting him with the paperwork at his side, silently rose and began preparing tea. It

was a perfect demonstration of unspoken understanding. One could even call it a harmonious rhythm between them, especially since Ryoma did not attempt to stop Sara's actions. Leaning back in his chair, he directed his gaze toward her retreating figure. It was, perhaps, a rare moment of respite for the conqueror. Yet, even in this brief pause, Ryoma seemed far from being able to enjoy the luxury of relaxation.

A flood of grievances swirled within his chest against the god of light, who was said to have made this world of Earth.

Meneos could show a little more consideration, couldn't he? Here I am, working desperately every day on tedious paperwork I don't like, all to prevent the O'ltormea Empire from overrunning Xarooda. The least he could do is cut me some slack. But this is typical of the bastard who created this hellish world in the first place.

Ryoma lightly rubbed his temples and let out a deep sigh. Of course, he knew all too well that this was nothing more than misdirected frustration. But dissatisfaction was an inescapable part of human life. People constantly struggled between discontent and compromise from the moment they woke up until they slept. It was human nature to feel dissatisfaction—even with things beyond their control, like the weather. Ryoma was no exception. For this reason, gods often became convenient outlets for frustration and anger. No matter if his complaints were unreasonable, Meneos wouldn't call it harassment or demand an apology.

Well, it's not like I can vent my frustrations on my subordinates.

This was something Ryoma prioritized as part of managing the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy. People on Earth, a world with rigid hierarchies, exhibited exceptional patience. Even if their lord subjected them to unjust criticism or behavior, they were inclined to endure it silently without protest. This tendency was often glorified with ideals such as loyalty and chivalry, suppressing those who bore the brunt of such injustices.

There are even stories of knights who continued to devote themselves to absolute loyalty despite having their wives taken by their lords.

Such was the reality of Earth.

The truth of such tales was uncertain as they remained firmly in the realm of rumor and hearsay. These incidents rarely saw the light of day, let alone made it to court. This was hardly surprising, given that the perpetrators were often the lords or their close kin—the very ones who would serve as judges. Moreover, the methods of communication in this world were severely limited. Unless someone deliberately spread rumors, the reach of any piece of information remained highly localized.

I'd like to believe these are just absurd rumors, but...

Even if such stories were true, Ryoma wouldn't be shocked. If anything, he'd find himself reluctantly nodding in grim acknowledgment. Ryoma Mikoshiba had already spent several years on Earth since being summoned here. In that time, he'd been forced to understand that the brutal logic of survival of the fittest governed this world. The rigid caste system here drew a clear line between the strong and the weak. That same system often disregarded reason and justice, serving instead to enforce those divisions.

In some ways, the hierarchical structure of this world might reflect the philosophy of Confucius when he said, "Though the sovereign fails to act as such, the subject must remain loyal." Or perhaps it aligns more with the sentiment of Wang Zuo, who proclaimed, "A loyal subject cannot serve two masters," before taking his own life. Either way, it's a mindset I can neither comprehend nor accept.

If the subject of loyalty were a competent king, Ryoma wouldn't refute the words of Confucius or Wang Zuo.

Alternatively, even if the ruler's abilities left something to be desired but they were a person overflowing with virtue and committed to justice, Ryoma might understand their stance. A king didn't necessarily need to be an unparalleled hero or a sage capable of unfathomable stratagems.

A monarch who reigns not by their own abilities but by the support of their vassals... Someone like Liu Bei, who rose to become the Emperor of Shu Han, might be the perfect example.

The Liu Bei depicted in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was a hero brimming with benevolence and righteousness. But he wasn't

portrayed as an exceptional warrior or a genius strategist. Of course, he wasn't without talent. After all, he rose from being a humble mat weaver to becoming the Emperor of Shu Han. In a Japanese context, one might compare him to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a peasant who became a taikou—a regent.

But from what Ryoma had heard, Liu Bei hadn't been the type of ruler who led through his own exceptional abilities. His sworn brothers, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, likely surpassed him in terms of martial prowess. Regarding political maneuvering and strategy, Zhuge Liang left an undeniably greater legacy.

Yet, it's rare to find anyone who would argue that Liu Bei was unfit to be emperor.

Liu Bei's talents were less important than the loyalty and sense of justice people believed he embodied. That sense of justice and loyalty to his country drew so many people to Liu Bei and inspired them to follow him. As such, the primary antagonist of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao—a skilled warrior and a strategist capable of annotating Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*—was a stark contrast to Liu Bei.

Considering that Records of the Three Kingdoms *is a historical text and was written during the Ming dynasty, their fictional portrayals differ significantly to their historical counterparts. The truth remains obscured in the shadows of history.*

As a novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was fictional at its core. It drew heavily from historical facts, but it was difficult to take every account as a historical truth.

There's even research suggesting it's seventy percent historical and thirty percent fictional, thought Ryoma. The real issue lay in which parts made up that thirty percent of fiction. *For all we know, Liu Bei could have been a warrior who surpassed Lü Bu, considered the strongest in Romance of the Three Kingdoms, and a tactician more brilliant than Zhuge Liang.*

Such a possibility seemed unlikely, but it couldn't be entirely ruled out. Still, even if Liu Bei had truly been the kind of ruler depicted in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*—a monarch who relied on the support of his vassals—it wouldn't have been a problem at all.

What truly matters is that Liu Bei's vassals found him worthy of their loyalty and saw value in dedicating their lives to him.

At the very least, Liu Bei did not neglect state affairs, indulge in corruption, or fail to fulfill his duties and obligations as a ruler. He must have heeded the advice of his vassals and dedicated himself wholeheartedly to his nation and its people. That alone demonstrated a sufficient quality of leadership and fulfillment of duty for someone in a position of power.

However, Confucius preached that even if a ruler fails to demonstrate virtue or fulfill his responsibilities, vassals must still carry out their own duties. Similarly, Wang Zhu, who served the King of Qi, advised his lord in vain and ultimately saw Qi fall to the neighboring state of Yan due to his ruler's folly. One has to question how far loyalty to such an inept leader truly holds value.

If there was any value in such loyalty, it likely lay in self-indulgence, as people became intoxicated by the concept of loyalty. But few people could find meaning in that and devote their lives or sacrifice everything for it.

If it's solely about risking one's life or future, perhaps there's no problem. But absolute loyalty should never be upheld as a model for behavior. It's akin to continuing to work for a boss who refuses to pay your wages despite running a profitable business.

The sense of nobility attached to the word "loyalty" could certainly make it a deceptive and misleading ideal. Shifting one's perspective made it easy to see how the words of so-called saints and loyal subjects could be utterly foolish and disconnected from reality. Such unrealistic ideals were bound to collapse in some way at some point. At the very least, blindly adhering to loyalty without question was undoubtedly wrong.

In fact, I've seen an example firsthand: Meltina Lecter.

Meltina Lecter was, without a doubt, a knight of unwavering loyalty. Ryoma wouldn't deny that statement. However, it was hard to say it led her to make the best choices for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and its people.

In the end, it's all about what to sacrifice and what to protect. Finding the right balance is probably the most difficult part. It's

literally like using the right dosage: "Use as directed, for proper effect."

Loyalty wasn't meaningless, but there was a limit to it. The issue was that there was no clear line marking that limit. What existed was only the result.

Ryoma Mikoshiba ascended to his current position by removing the foolish Queen Lupis Rhoadserians from the throne, a move those from this world would view as treason. However, some benefited from that "treason." In the end, those who benefited from the decision praised Ryoma, while those who suffered from it harbored hatred.

To assert justice and reason, sacrifices are required.

If the opposing party held a higher position, the sacrifices required were even greater. But turning away from justice and reason just to avoid making sacrifices wouldn't make the need for those sacrifices disappear. In the end, someone would have to bear the consequences. Thus, one had to think carefully about who would make those sacrifices and adjust accordingly.

I find it foolish to continue pledging loyalty to a clearly foolish ruler, thought Ryoma. However, there was an unavoidable aspect to following such a person. *Confucius lived during the chaotic final years of the Zhou dynasty, which marked the beginning of the Warring States period in China. Given the state of the world at the time, it might have been inevitable. The country would have fallen apart if people were to have overthrown every foolish ruler who ascended to the throne.*

If forceful overthrows reduced the country's power every time a foolish king sat on the throne, the nation's strength would inevitably decline.

This would have been particularly disastrous in an era of warfare.

To avoid this chaos, vassals choosing to endure might not have been wrong. The same could be said for this world as well. In a land plagued by constant war and the threat of monsters, people wouldn't survive if they showed anger at every minor issue. The practical reality was that one couldn't always act on their emotions when part of a group.

This is why law and order sometimes ruthlessly cut through people's emotions. Even if they're called "heartless," so be it...

When forming a group, law and order were necessary. But above all, the most important element was the ruthlessness required to enforce it. You couldn't maintain the group if you constantly considered individual emotions and situations. This management was one of the most critical factors in a rule-of-law society. An example might be the prohibition on personal retribution by crime victims against the perpetrators.

In cases of drunk driving where someone is killed, the perpetrator is rarely tried for murder. That's the law in modern society, but I doubt many people are truly satisfied with that outcome.

If one could prove that the person intended to kill, it was a different case. But in most situations, the most severe charge the prosecution pursued was vehicular manslaughter, not murder. This charge was often a more favorable outcome than what could happen. The legal requirements for proving vehicular manslaughter were strict and challenging to meet, so prosecutors often sought a lesser charge, such as negligent driving causing death or injury.

For the family members of the victim, however, it may feel no different from murder. Deep down, they may feel the perpetrator should pay with their life.

It didn't matter whether the death was accidental or intentional. What mattered was the outcome, which was why the family felt anger toward the perpetrator and hoped for the harshest possible punishment from the prosecutor. When the family learned the sentence was unexpectedly light, they might feel betrayed by the judicial system and express their outrage. No matter how disillusioned the family was with the judicial system, taking matters into their own hands and seeking revenge was a crime. No matter how unreasonable the court's judgment might seem to an individual, it would lead to chaos if they took revenge based on their emotions. As such, the law was sometimes applied with a coldness that felt unbearably harsh, which was also true in this world.

The laws were likely colder and more severe in this world with its rigid class system and no concept of human rights. In modern

society, if a person was dissatisfied with the result of a trial, they could appeal or even pursue a civil lawsuit in addition to a criminal one. However, such options were not conceivable in this world. Someone dissatisfied with a lord's ruling could theoretically appeal to a higher court in the royal capital, but such cases were virtually nonexistent.

Simply showing the intent to appeal could lead to being killed by the lord, mused Ryoma. The people of this world understood this consequence deep in their bones, showing they were willing to swallow minor injustices. *But even so, they are merely enduring it. They don't lack dissatisfaction or anger, which holds true even for a knight whose lord has taken his wife.*

Devoted though a loyal subject might be, they were not emotionless stones. They just had a higher threshold for tolerating dissatisfaction and anger.

It's like pouring water into a cup without a plan; eventually, it will overflow.

The people's anger would eventually surpass its limit if continuously oppressed. The real problem was that many people failed to understand this simple truth. Or perhaps, even if they did, they would still oppress others—wearing the mantle of class.

In Japan, there was a lot of noise about things like power harassment and moral harassment.

Anger and frustration were natural human emotions, so trying to eliminate them would be no different than denying the very existence of humans as a species. However, using these emotions as a shield and lashing out at others based on one's feelings was immoral and unacceptable to society.

Therefore, the important thing is how to deal with anger and frustration.

It was crucial to be careful about where one vented their dissatisfaction. For someone like Ryoma Mikoshiba, who inspired the loyalty of others by demonstrating an attitude and behavior that set him apart from many in the aristocracy, his caution in this area was warranted.

The Mikoshiba Grand Duchy in Rhoadserian nobility lacked the

spiritual foundation of tradition and history. Unlike other noble houses, there was no room for development by doing the same things as the others.

Hence, the key is differentiation. It's just like the saying "Look at others' behavior and correct your own."

Simply acting differently from the arrogant, inconsiderate attitude of the foolish Rhoadserian aristocrats would undoubtedly raise Ryoma's reputation. This could be called the "teachable moment" approach.

In that sense, the idea of gods is quite convenient. If your unreasonable anger is targeted at a god, it won't harm anyone. On the other hand, I might receive divine punishment someday, Ryoma considered, seeing he didn't follow any specific god but had never denied their existence. *I may have to pay the price for all I've done one day, especially in a world where gods can exist.*

After all, there were supernatural powers like thaumaturgy. If Ryoma were to fear divine punishment, he wouldn't survive in this world. Committing one or two acts of disrespect toward the gods hardly counted as a major sin.

My hands are already stained red with blood.

But even so, there was no option to simply give up and throw everything away now. Ryoma Mikoshiba's life no longer belonged to him alone. Just then, he heard water being poured into a teapot. A distinctive, refreshing mint fragrance filled the room, drawing Ryoma's attention.

"Mint tea today? That's unusual," Ryoma said.

"Yes, I thought it might help refresh you more than the usual black tea, Your Grace. For snacks, I've prepared cookies from a recipe I learned from Ms. Kikuna." Sara then placed a teacup in front of Ryoma and poured the light greenish-yellow tea into it. Upon hearing her words, Ryoma couldn't help but grin.

Indeed, this feels more suitable for my mood now than the usual black tea, but being so easily understood is a bit unsettling. Or is it just that I'm an easy person to read?

Ryoma reached for his teacup, feeling pleased and slightly embarrassed that someone understood him so well. The rising steam

tickled his nostrils as he carefully brought the rim of the cup to his lips. The liquid, kept at just the right temperature, filled his mouth. He felt the pleasant sweetness and refreshing mint flavor gently soothe his agitated heart.

This sweetness is different from sugar. It has a hint of floral scent, so this must be honey. Next, Ryoma picked up a cookie that Sara had placed next to the cup and popped it into his mouth. *Delicious... They say eating sweets calms the mind, and it's true. Well done.*

The cookie was just a simple baked good. However, its perfection made it the finest dessert. The flavor was something you would rarely encounter in this world.

As expected of a recipe Ms. Kikuna taught her. Ryoma visualized the face of the woman responsible for the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's kitchen.

Kikuna Samejima, a professional chef who had trained in French cuisine before being summoned to this world, had exceptional culinary skills. She was also a dedicated scholar, expanding her knowledge of French cuisine as well as Japanese and Chinese cooking, aiming to broaden her range of flavors. Her skill in desserts, the final course of a meal, was on par with those of the finest chefs anywhere. If Kikuna had taught her, there was no way the cookies Sara made would have been anything less than delicious. Sara's cookies had other qualities that added to their excellence.



With a satisfying crunch, the cookie broke apart in Ryoma's mouth. Once all the cookie crumbs disappeared down his throat, he brought the cup to his lips again.

I see... By using honey, she's balanced the sweetness from the sugar in the cookie. It pairs well with the refreshing taste of mint. Not bad at all, thought Ryoma. When pairing beverages with sweet treats, avoiding adding sugar or other sweeteners was preferable. Adding sugar to the tea would overlap with the sugar in the dessert, making the aftertaste feel heavier. Contrasting flavors like bitterness or acidity would be best to avoid that. *If one wishes to enjoy the natural taste of an ingredient or dish, the combinations should be considered.*

Combinations essentially meant being mindful of the harmony with the natural flavors of the ingredients, although this wasn't an absolute rule for dining. Ryoma's grandfather, Koichiro, had raised him with this perspective, firmly instilling his philosophy. That said, preferences varied widely from person to person. There was no definitive right or wrong, and these preferences could also change significantly depending on age and circumstances.

Some people add brandy to their tea, while others put sugar in barley tea.

There was nothing inherently wrong with eating cake while drinking coffee loaded with sugar. Even so, such combinations didn't align with Ryoma's tastes. If he were to eat sweet desserts, he would honestly prefer unsweetened coffee or tea.

And Sara knows my preferences well, yet she deliberately served honeyed mint tea, didn't she?

It was likely a thoughtful gesture to calm the frustration and restlessness that had been stirring within Ryoma. At this moment, that consideration was the most valuable thing for him. If that assumption were true, it demonstrated an insightfulness that could rival his cousin and childhood friend, Asuka Kiryu.

Not only does Sara understand my preferences, but she's also accounted for the balance of flavors, he thought. In a way, that was only natural. *We've known each other for years, after all.*

Officially, their relationship was that of lord and vassal.

The Malfist sisters undoubtedly stood by Ryoma Mikoshiba, assisting him with official duties. Yet describing their relationship as merely that of master and servants would feel incomplete. They were more than just friends but not quite family. If one were to force a description of the relationship between Ryoma Mikoshiba and the Malfist sisters into words, it would likely fall somewhere in that ambiguous middle ground.

Despite being "not quite family," they were also "not quite lovers." As Ryoma smirked, he reached for the teacup again. Whether Sara was aware of his thoughts, she poured herself a cup of tea, pulled over a chair from the corner of the room, and sat down.

"What were you thinking about?" Sara casually asked.

Ryoma turned his gaze toward the window and responded, "Nothing important. It's just that the weather's a mess on top of this already depressing situation. I was just thinking that Meneos really isn't very considerate."

Even though words slipped casually from Ryoma's lips, they had absolutely nothing to do with the thoughts that had been occupying his mind moments earlier. He most likely found it too embarrassing to express his true feelings.

"Oh, Master..." Whether she understood his feelings, Sara placed a hand to her mouth and laughed cheerfully. She glanced at the tumultuous weather outside, furrowing her brows. "It really is quite a storm out there. I can understand why you'd feel like complaining, Master."

Sara's eyes seemed to reflect her anger toward the Meneos, the god of light, for hindering her beloved lord's work. If anyone dared to obstruct the man who had freed her and her sister from the bonds of slavery, even if that someone was a god, she would likely draw her twin blades without hesitation.

After staring at the sky for a while, Sara tilted her head and asked Ryoma, "But, Master... Is the weather really within Meneos's domain of authority? I mean, it wouldn't be strange if lightning or the movement of the sun fell under the god of light's purview, but does Meneos also govern clouds and rain?"

Once Ryoma heard this question, he tilted his head, lost in

thought. The question was simple, yet it struck at the heart of the matter.

"I see... So, it's possible that the formation of clouds falls outside the domain of Meneos's divine authority. It all depends on how we interpret the weather, right?" replied Ryoma.

According to the teachings of the Church of Meneos, the most widely followed faith on the western continent, the god of light created this earthly world. The belief that light and darkness were separated from the primordial chaos and that light gave birth to the world was a fairly common religious narrative. When people thought about the brightest and most radiant phenomena, they likely pictured the sun shining in the sky and lightning cleaving through stormy clouds. Consequently, people had regarded the sun and lightning as manifestations of Meneos's authority and symbols of his power.

During bad weather, it was common for the followers of the Church of Meneos to say, "Meneos must be in a bad mood today." Such beliefs formed the foundation of common sense on the western continent, unquestioned by anyone. At least until now. But that long-standing belief had begun to waver, all because of the question Sara had just posed. Meneos certainly governed the sun, but it became doubtful if the thick clouds that blanketed the sky were his doing.

"I've never given it much thought before, but it's a valid question. If Meneos doesn't have authority over the weather, then my complaints about him are misplaced. Should I direct my grievances toward the god of clouds in that case? If such a deity exists, that is..." Ryoma said, faintly smiling.

The real question lay in whether phenomena like sunny or cloudy weather should be collectively categorized as "weather." Even if Meneos was considered the king of gods and the ruler of light and law, it was hard to imagine that his powers extended to controlling the formation of clouds.

Still, Ryoma did not know if a deity responsible for clouds existed within the teachings of the Church of Meneos. The vast number of scriptures considered sacred texts in the organization was staggering. Even for someone like Ryoma, who enjoyed reading, the

sheer volume made it impossible to study them all thoroughly.

On top of that, there are additional texts known as apocrypha or sealed scriptures that go beyond the publicly available ones, Ryoma mused. While the existence of such texts was acknowledged, very few people had the chance to actually see their contents. *For that reason, it's impossible to categorically deny the existence of a god who governs weather.*

The immense number of scriptures the Church of Meneos considered canonical was simply due to the way the organization had expanded by absorbing other religions over time. This growth also explained why the Church of Meneos did not deny the existence of other gods despite venerating Meneos as the creator and supreme deity.

As far as I know, the religions of this world—commonly referred to as the "earthly world"—either follow a polytheistic framework where many gods exist or base monotheistic doctrines on the foundation of their institutions.

Indeed, it wasn't as though people only worshipped Meneos on the western continent.

Claiming to be the king of gods without subordinates wouldn't make sense. It's only natural, in a way.

Moreover, outright denying the existence of other gods simply because they did not align with one's doctrine was dangerous. Followers would not remain silent if others denied their god, which was true on both Rearth and this world. In fact, the significance of gods was likely far weightier in this world than on Rearth.

If it stopped at just arguments, that would be ideal. But most likely, it would escalate into bloodshed and armed conflict, thought Ryoma. The founders of the Church of Meneos had probably understood this danger. *That's why they settled on a compromise, framing it as a relationship between a chief deity and subordinate gods. Wasn't this called monolatry or something similar?*

This doctrine involved worshipping one primary god without denying the existence of others. Though it introduced a hierarchy, it was a practical compromise.

"But even if there is a god who governs clouds or weather,

wouldn’t the creator god bear some responsibility as the ruler of this earthly world? If that’s the case, blaming Meneos might not be entirely off base, don’t you think?” asked Ryoma.

Despite Meneos lacking domain over the weather, he was still the king of gods. From that perspective, one could argue that all outcomes ultimately fell under Meneos’s responsibility.

After all, isn’t it said that a subordinate’s failure is the superior’s responsibility? This relation was an idealistic view, but few leaders truly bore such responsibility. Still, at least in theory, it was a valid perspective.

“That’s true... Logically speaking, at least. But if any followers of the Church of Meneos heard that, they’d probably fly into a rage,” Sara remarked with a cheerful smile before bursting into laughter.

For the Malfist sisters, who hailed from the central continent, the teachings of the Church of Meneos were merely stories of another faith. While they might respect it, they certainly didn’t adhere to its beliefs.

Ryoma shrugged lightly at Sara’s comment. *Well, all of this is based on the premise that gods actually exist.*

Whether one accepted the existence of transcendent beings known as gods or approached the subject with scientific reasoning would likely lead to entirely different conclusions.

“Scientifically speaking, there’s no causal relationship between the sun’s movement and cloud formation. At least, that conclusion would hold truth if my astronomical knowledge applies to this world,” he said.

“Astronomy...?” Sara tilted her head slightly, clearly puzzled by the unfamiliar term.

Seeing her confusion, Ryoma simply smiled and silently shook his head.

If Ryoma explained it, Sara would likely understand. Laura and Sara, hailing from the knightly class, were among the most skilled in the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy and possessed keen intellect and insight sharp enough to assist Ryoma in his administrative duties. Their ability to instantly grasp the essence of things made terms like “prodigy” or “genius” seem perfectly fitting. However, even geniuses

had their limits.

Well, it's not exactly fair to expect Sara to grasp the concept of astronomy right away, especially with no prior knowledge. After all, impractical studies tend to be looked down upon in this world.

Astronomical knowledge was essential for sailors determining their position during long-distance voyages. People had accumulated that knowledge on Rearth long before the Age of Discovery. The same was true in this world. For trade between continents, such knowledge was indispensable. However, for everyone else, the stars in the night sky often held no more significance than mere lights in the dark. Sara had received one of the finest educations available in this world, but her expertise lay primarily in the military domain.

Whether anyone in this world studied astronomy as an academic discipline was doubtful. This lack of knowledge was hardly surprising in a society where just being literate was enough to be considered part of the intellectual elite. It was certainly not a world where just anyone could attend a school and have access to learning. At that moment, vivid memories flooded Ryoma's mind of trudging through a desert battered by sandstorms, desperately searching for an oasis while trying to uncover a way to return to Rearth.

Just as Annamaria secluded herself in Mireish to immerse herself in her research, there might be someone in this world studying astronomy like Galileo or Copernicus.

Even if such an individual existed in this world, it would likely take decades for their research to gain widespread recognition. Facts only gained significance when society acknowledged them. But changing long-held beliefs and perceptions required considerable time and effort.

History has proven that time and again.

While this rejection might not be as extreme as the witch hunts of the Dark Ages, Galileo and Copernicus—who lived during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when Christianity wielded immense authority—were seen as challenging the divine order. Their groundbreaking contributions took a long time to receive widespread appreciation.

People in modern society even harbored a strong aversion to

genetic engineering in humans, perceiving it as an encroachment on the divine.

And then there's the question of whether the heliocentric model can even be applied directly to this world...

Gravity existed, and living beings maintained their vital functions by breathing in oxygen from the air. As far as Ryoma could tell, the fundamental principles governing this world were the same as those of Rearth. Of course, Ryoma wasn't an expert in meteorology or astronomy, so he couldn't be entirely sure. The natural laws of this world superficially appeared to align with those of his world. From that perspective, it seemed reasonable to assume that Earth revolved around a star.

But that assumption was only a strong possibility, not a certainty.

If the heliocentric model holds true in this world, the sun must typically be beyond those thick clouds.

The presence or absence of clouds would not have impacted the sun's movement if the heliocentric model, where the planets revolved around the sun, applied to this world. Plus, the stars should shine in the sky like jewels, proving that the light from distant stars took thousands, if not millions, of years to reach the atmosphere. At the same time, it was possible to consider each of these stars as gods.

Many religions, including Taoism and Shinto, view gods and stars as the same. In ancient China, I believe they referred to them as star catalogs or something like that.

For example, Taoism deified the North Star as the "Emperor of the Purple Cold North," while Shinto associated the god Amaterasu with Venus. Ancient China referred to Mars as the "star of disaster," whereas ancient Rome viewed Mars as the god of war. Across both the East and the West, such examples are numerous.

Of course, historically, many cultures have equated stars with gods.

Ryoma did not perceive this as a reality but as knowledge he had acquired within the realms of cultural and personal interests. For modern people, the North Star and Venus were simply celestial bodies, and it would have been unthinkable to equate them with

gods. However, it could not be completely ruled out either.

After all, this isn't my Earth. In the end, the accumulation of evidence through science is what's important, thought Ryoma. Proving the facts was crucial, and a steady accumulation of evidence was necessary to do so. *Considering that this world may not even have the concept of "science" as we know it, it's hard to say if it will take a hundred years or a thousand...*

Perhaps it was a realm beyond human proof. Until the issue was resolved, the existence of gods could not be confirmed or denied. Ryoma had recently witnessed what could be considered a divine miracle, but just because it was a miracle didn't mean it was a blessing for everyone.

"But if gods exist, they must really enjoy toying with people..."

When Sara heard Ryoma mutter, she nodded slightly and must have sensed the implication in her master's words. A look of concern appeared on her beautiful face.

"To be honest, I didn't think there was any hope of recovery..." she said.

"Exactly... It truly is a miracle, or perhaps it's the work of a demon? Either way, I never expected her to regain consciousness from that state."

The mint tea Sara had prepared helped calm Ryoma's nerves, but his blood pressure spiked again as soon as he recalled the worrying situation. It might have been more accurate to say that once his mind had calmed, he had the mental space to focus on the concerns he had been trying not to think about.

"Well, Harisha waking up was a miracle. There's no denying that. But it's hard to welcome this with open arms. The need to rewrite the script at this point was an unexpected miscalculation. Based on Harisha's behavior, the time spent convincing Rahizya could literally become a waste."

"Yes, depending on the outcome of tomorrow's negotiations, we might need to reassess your strategy from the ground up," Sara replied.

"Since we also need to proceed with negotiations with the Organization, I don't want to be bogged down by them too much...

That's probably going to be difficult," said Ryoma, grabbing another cookie from the plate and tossing it into his mouth.

Ryoma's frustration was understandable, as it all stemmed from the sudden miracle that happened three days ago. Or perhaps calling it a nightmare might be more fitting. Harisha, who had been in a coma for more than two weeks, suddenly woke up. That in itself wasn't a bad thing; it could even be called fortunate. However, with any kind of fortune, timing was crucial. Ryoma hadn't necessarily wanted Harisha to wake up. Yet he couldn't answer, if asked whether he would have preferred her to remain in a coma.

From that perspective, the timing of Harisha waking up wasn't ideal.

Given that Rahizya was well suited as a negotiator, it would have been better for Harisha to have died while unconscious, allowing things to proceed without any lingering issues. However, it was too late to turn back time before Harisha's awakening.

If we had to stick with Rahizya as the negotiator, we would have had no choice but to let Harisha die, but that would be a bad move at this stage, Ryoma mused. Wanting someone to die and wanting to kill them were two completely different things. This point was where things got really tricky. *So, I guess there's no choice but to start over.*

Now that Harisha had awakened, all the secret negotiations with Rahizya had become null and void. With her regaining consciousness, Ryoma had no choice but to change his negotiation partner from Rahizya to Harisha.

Rahizya is a competent man. I've learned that well through my negotiations with him. He's certainly coldhearted and a realist. Moreover, he's someone who is not afraid to do whatever it takes to achieve his goals. He's a type that's troublesome to have as an enemy. But at the same time, he genuinely cares about the future of his tribe.

That loyalty was visible in the attitude of the soldiers who followed him as his guards. He would be the perfect match as a negotiator for Ryoma.

Considering Rahizya's shortcomings, having Harisha take on the

role of negotiator might not be so bad after all.

The problem lay with Rahizya's position. No matter how capable Rahizya was, he was just the deputy commander of the unit, merely an assistant to Harisha. If she had remained unconscious, a substitute could have stepped in as an emergency measure. With Harisha now awake, no one could continue in that role.

Well, it's more accurate to say it's not so much that everything was undone but rather that it became meaningless.

Nevertheless, the conclusion remained unchanged. A deep sigh escaped Ryoma's lips.

In response, Sara quietly told him, "It would be ideal if Rahizya could continue as the negotiator."

Maintaining this status would indeed be the best outcome. However, at Sara's words, Ryoma smirked and shook his head.

"It's probably not going to work. From what I've heard, Harisha is quite stubborn and clings to her own opinions. If we try to move forward with negotiations without her, it's clear that she'll become obstinate. It'll only create more trouble."

The situation was already complicated enough, and there was little time left for the Kingdom of Xarooda to face the threat of the O'ltormea Empire. Because of that, Ryoma wanted to avoid making the negotiations even more difficult than they already were.

"Still, they really do say that warriors are resilient. It's remarkable to think that within three days of regaining consciousness, she has no health issues and can eat normally... She's certainly inhuman."

"Yes, I've learned that we must feed hungry soldiers carefully after siege battles to avoid it becoming a matter of life and death. I'm honestly surprised. Of course, this situation may be a bit different."

The implication behind Sara's words was unmistakable. At her words, Ryoma nodded deeply in agreement.

"Well, that's why she's called a demon."

Harisha had been in a coma for over two weeks. Normal thinking would suggest that her memory or mental state might have been affected in some way. Furthermore, Harisha's body would have severely deteriorated due to dehydration and malnutrition. At the

very least, if she were human, she would not have so quickly returned to her normal daily life just because she regained consciousness. She would need to remain bedridden for a week or more to recover, and there was a good chance she would have to use a wheelchair until her atrophied muscles regained strength. No matter what the patient claimed, doctors and family wouldn't accept such a thing.

If an unconscious patient woke up, they would be told, "Let's observe them for a while." No one would ever criticize this as a misdiagnosis.

Ryoma didn't have formal medical knowledge, but this information was common sense. For Harisha, a demonlike creature called a yaksha, such modern common sense appeared irrelevant. On the day she woke up, she only had a clear broth without any solid ingredients. But by the next day, she was already complaining about hunger, asking her maid to bring her meat and bread.

The fact that she has an appetite and can eat normally is something to be happy about. Or it should be, anyway.

Eating was undeniably essential for humans to get the nutrients they needed. In modern society, there are ways to provide nutrition without eating, thanks to advances in medical technology. Artificial heart-lung machines and intravenous feeding could keep patients alive for years, even when they were unconscious. Even direct feeding through a stomach tube was possible. But just because these methods were technically possible, no doctor would claim that food was unnecessary.

Nutritional intake through means other than food, such as IV drips or stomach tubes, was only a substitute when forced by emergencies or illness. Moreover, eating was not just about nutritional intake.

Eating is literally the source of vitality for tomorrow.

As people said, eating brought happiness. Humans derived joy from eating, which was why people who could not do so could mentally break down. Eating was that important to humans.

However, in certain circumstances, that crucial act of eating can literally become deadly. Wasn't it called refeeding syndrome?

Ironically, something so essential for life could become a cause of death.

During the Sengoku period, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi was still using the Hashiba name, records showed that soldiers who had endured a four-month siege of Inaba Tottori's Castle died after eating rice given to them upon surrendering.

Still, it was unconfirmed that Harisha had developed refeeding syndrome. Ryoma, an amateur, couldn't predict what level of starvation would lead to refeeding syndrome. But even though he recognized the danger, he couldn't ignore the importance of the negotiations.

If she woke up from a coma just to die quickly, then I couldn't make use of her, and if strange rumors spread, it would affect things later. So...

Ryoma had a very pragmatic line of thought, but it was his honest opinion. Otherwise, why would he waste precious medicine and use a doctor to treat an enemy?

After all, this world doesn't have Geneva Conventions or any such regulations about the humane treatment of prisoners.

Thus, there were no internationally agreed-upon standards for handling prisoners of war, and the fate of prisoners was usually predetermined. Most of them were executed or sold into slavery. Chaining them up and keeping them hostage for ransom was the other option, and was common in this world.

Ryoma allowed Harisha's treatment, even ignoring such cultural norms, but not because he had become a humanitarian. His true nature was far from a distorted personality that enjoyed torturing or executing enemies, but he wasn't naive enough to suddenly embrace brotherhood and universal love for humanity. He simply allowed Harisha's treatment simply because it was the most convenient option for the next step in his plan.

When Ryoma received the report from Laura that Harisha had regained consciousness, he ordered that she be given only a light broth to avoid putting strain on her stomach. Even such consideration meant nothing in the face of Harisha's strong desires, especially since she and Ryoma had only recently become enemies.

On top of that, it was a crucial time to resume negotiations for the future.

Naturally, he didn't want to do anything that would cause Harisha to become displeased before those important talks.

"Everything hinges on the meeting with Harisha. Depending on the outcome, I may have to speak with Rahizya again." Ryoma let out a sigh that seemed a mix of resignation and disbelief. It was the sort of feeling a high school student might have on the eve of their entrance exams. Either way, it was still a matter for tomorrow.

Today, Ryoma had a mountain of work to do.

"Well, whatever... I'll think about tomorrow tomorrow. For now, let me have another cup of hot tea. This time, with a bit more honey than before."

"Yes, right away."

"Please."

Ryoma nodded slightly to Sara, who began boiling the water again. He popped another cookie into his mouth and swallowed it with some mint tea after it cooled down a bit. Then, he glared at the cloudy sky outside the window.

Isn't it about time I got some divine favor, huh, Meneos? Well, I'm not expecting much...

He likely directed the anger in his eyes at the gods who had never smiled upon him. But the next day, Ryoma's expectations would face an unexpected conclusion. No one could foresee what would happen at that point; not even the three goddesses who were said to control human fate.

Chapter 2: A New Stage

Warm sunlight streamed into the room from outside the window. It was a calm and gentle day, as if yesterday's stormy weather had been nothing more than a lie. The weather seemed like the god of light Meneos was trying to make up for his recent foul mood. Truly, if one could lie down on the grass, read a book, and enjoy a well-prepared meal, it would undoubtedly be the most elegant and delightful of times. But no matter how nice the weather, not everyone could bask in its blessings. There might have been more people who could not enjoy such blessings than those who could. Come rain or shine, unfortunate individuals could not rest and had to fulfill their duties. One chamber of the fortress that stood as the heart of the southern region of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, the fortress city of Heraklion, had such an unfortunate soul.

Ryoma Mikoshiba glanced at the blue sky visible through the room's window and clicked his tongue.

It's like yesterday's storm was just a lie, thought Ryoma.

As the saying "calm after the storm" went, good weather often followed a day of rough weather. But even understanding that, it was human nature to find it hard to accept.

That damn god keeps finding ways to grate on my nerves even now, he mused. Perhaps it was a state of mind akin to the saying "If you hate the priest, you'll hate even his robes." *Seriously, the weather is perfect for a nap. Yet here I am, dressed in formal attire, forced to endure stiff and tedious negotiations.*

For a brief moment, such thoughts flitted through Ryoma Mikoshiba's mind. Lounging under the shade of a tree, nibbling on sandwiches prepared by the Malfist sisters, would undoubtedly relieve his daily fatigue and stress. He bore the heavy responsibility of the nation's fate on his shoulders, so such a moment would be an irreplaceable bliss. In the end, that was nothing more than a

fleeting, hollow fantasy. No matter how much authority Ryoma wielded, there was no way he could request a postponement of the meeting simply because of the weather. Besides, the meeting wasn't something he could complain about.

After all, the negotiations between the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy and the Manibhadra tribe were about to begin in earnest. One could not casually cancel such an important discussion.

If I were to do such a thing, the already difficult negotiations would become even more troublesome.

That possibility would render meaningless all the trouble Ryoma had gone to by dressing in a Rhoadserian noble style that he didn't even like. Even so, it was hard not to feel the urge to rip off the scarf tightly wrapped around his neck when gazing at the cheerful weather outside the window. Indeed, Ryoma had the right to murmur a complaint or two in his heart with this impossibility.

Well... For now, I'll just focus on fulfilling my role. With that self-reminder, Ryoma dismissed such trivial thoughts and turned his gaze back to the room.

A long ebony table stood at the center of the room. On either side of the table sat Ryoma Mikoshiba, representing the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, and Harisha, representing the Manibhadra tribe. Rahizya sat beside Harisha as an assistant and witness while the Malfist sisters stood behind Ryoma, ready to assist him.

Not bad... I had the twins search for clothes based on the descriptions I got from Rahizya, and this should leave a decent impression on the other side.

Harisha was dressed in loose-fitting attire resembling an Indian Punjabi dress. On the other hand, Rahizya wore an outfit similar to an Indian sherwani, accompanied by a turban wrapped around his head. Both outfits were said to closely resemble the traditional formal wear of the Manibhadra tribe—essentially, their ethnic attire.

The outfits weren't exact replicas, merely similar. If there had been more time, Ryoma could have asked Simone Christof, the head of the Christof Trading Company, to procure the genuine articles. But time had been far too short. The fact that the Malfist sisters secured clothing that bore a decent resemblance in such a limited time was

fortunate, thanks to them hailing from the central continent.

Well, there's no way to get actual Manibhadra tribal attire around here. Still, finding clothing similar to what's worn in the central continent was sheer luck. Without Laura and Sara, I wouldn't have even thought of ordering something from Pherzaad.

On the western continent, where Western-style clothing dominated, outfits akin to those worn in regions like India or Arabia on Rearth would undoubtedly attract attention. At the very least, such attire wasn't the sort of thing you could casually purchase at a local clothing store. The only places where they might be available were cities that conducted trade with the central continent, which made them quite expensive. For something to clothe captives, the cost was undeniably extravagant. Despite Ryoma knowing this, he still invested a considerable amount of money and effort to procure attire resembling their ethnic clothing. Perhaps Ryoma did this to prevent Harisha and Rahizya from feeling humiliated.

There's no way they could prepare clothing suitable for themselves to wear at these talks. We had to take care of that for them.

For negotiations, clothing held significant meaning. A person's appearance often determined first impressions that were said to be extremely difficult to overturn.

Such notions are often criticized in today's world as "lookism." But given how much information humans gather through sight, it's only natural.

The impression created by appearance was composed of various factors. Moreover, these factors could be divided into those that could be changed by an individual and those that could not. While changing features like facial structure or body shape was difficult, altering things like hairstyles or clothing was relatively easy. Factors like body odor or the cleanliness of one's fingernails—details that hinted at one's lifestyle—could also be considered part of appearance. Among these various elements that shaped impressions, clothing occupied a particularly significant role.

I'm not someone who cares much about clothing personally, but formalities matter. It's all about choosing the right time and place.

Ryoma wasn't especially interested in fashion, but he understood the minimum social expectations for one in his position. What mattered most was wearing clothing appropriate to the time, place, and occasion (TPO). An outfit could lead to embarrassment if it wasn't suited to the context.

For example, people would not see a man as fashionable if he wore a patterned suit with a white or patterned tie to a funeral. They would deem him inconsiderate. But if he arrived at a wedding in a black suit with a black tie, the bride and groom would likely consider it an insult. Those were just extreme examples. Nonetheless, people were often required to adhere to TPO when choosing their attire. From that perspective, this meeting was akin to a diplomatic engagement between nations, though it was an unofficial negotiation.

Harisha and her group were not formally appointed envoys with full authority from the Manibhadra tribe. Considering the nature of this meeting, it was a forum to discuss ceasefire negotiations and economic assistance. That was precisely why Ryoma had dressed in noble-style attire to participate in the talks. But what would happen if Harisha and her companions, the negotiating partners, participated in the meeting dressed in their everyday clothes?

Without a doubt, Harisha and the others would feel insulted. Even if the negotiations went smoothly, there would inevitably be lingering resentment.

The occasion was like attending a formal party where everyone else was dressed up while one was forced to show up in a T-shirt and jeans due to financial constraints. The disparity would surely make one painfully aware of the difference. Of course, someone completely shameless might eat and drink without a care. But most people weren't that thick-skinned. Based on Rahizya's description of Harisha's personality, the outcome of such a scenario was as clear as day.

Harisha would leave the room, her pride wounded and burning with humiliation. She might even refuse to participate in the first place. While she might endure for the sake of her tribe, it's not worth gambling on such a slim possibility. That leaves us with no

choice but to accommodate them.

Rahizya and Harisha had been captured on the battlefield, and their only possessions were the armor and helmets they had worn during the Battle of Lubua Plains. That attire might suffice if the meeting occurred on the battlefield, where the dust of war was the norm. However, attending in full armor was far from ideal since the meeting was in a chamber within a castle. Their only alternative was the clothing Ryoma had issued to them as everyday wear. While it was considered everyday wear, the clothing was of a reasonable quality. But wearing such casual attire to the meeting would be completely inappropriate, considering the nature of the discussions that were about to take place.

For commoners, their regular clothes could easily pass as their best outfit for special occasions. However, it was undeniably unsuitable for nobility to wear in a public setting. Perhaps it wasn't as casual as T-shirts and jeans, but it could hardly be considered attire appropriate to the TPO. Harisha and her companions were certainly aware of that as well. This mindset left two options: either they refused to attend the meeting or sold their equipment to one of the merchant guilds operating in Heraklion to raise funds.

The latter course posed its own difficulties. While it might be theoretically possible, as prisoners, Harisha and her group would first need to locate a merchant guild willing to trade with oni-like people, such as themselves. Even if she and her group found such a guild, it was a foregone conclusion they would face steep terms of exploitation. In the end, it was much more efficient for Ryoma to take care of the arrangements himself.

Of course, this is a case-by-case situation. Forcing someone to attend dressed poorly could help crush their morale or weaken their willingness to negotiate.

Furthermore, Ryoma had his reasons for not wanting Harisha and her companions to wear clothing similar to his own. This upcoming meeting was critical to the future of the Manibhadra tribe. For such a significant negotiation, there was no need to force them to wear clothing typically associated with a race they had been in conflict with for so long. From that perspective, it was better to make

accommodations where possible. It was a small price to pay if this approach could facilitate negotiations. The only concern was whether Harisha and her companions would understand the thoughtfulness behind Ryoma's efforts.

Despite the common belief that consideration and compromise were essential for successful negotiations, they were not always effective. Sometimes, the other party did not even realize they were being shown consideration, or even if they did, they may take it for granted. For such people, such gestures became literally meaningless. Fortunately, Ryoma's efforts this time did not seem to have been wasted.

"I tried to choose something as close as possible to what you would typically wear, based on what Rahizya told me. How is it? I can't claim it's perfect, given the limited time, but I hope it doesn't offend you," Ryoma told Harisha, scratching his head.

The light comment served as a segue into the meeting. As Ryoma asked, Harisha brushed her hand along the sleeve of the garment, her expression softening into a satisfied smile.

"Yes, it's beautiful, and the texture is wonderful. While there are some differences from what we usually wear, I find it remarkable in its own way." Harisha's smile was radiant. From the genuine expression on her face, her words were clearly not false. She bowed her head as she continued, "Thank you very much for your kind consideration, Your Grace."

In response, Ryoma gave her a deep nod.

"I see. I'm glad to hear that," said Ryoma. As an opening exchange, it was at least a passing grade. *That doesn't mean the negotiations are guaranteed to go my way, though.*

Receiving a gift from someone would naturally make one happy, but that didn't mean it would determine the outcome of a negotiation. One could describe diplomacy and negotiation as the art of smiling politely while accepting a gift with one hand and gripping a knife with the other, waiting for the right moment to strike. At that moment, the sound of the noon bell began to ring. Finally, the meeting to decide the futures of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy and the Manibhadra tribe was about to begin. Surprisingly, Harisha opened

the proceedings.

"First, as the daughter of the Manibhadra tribe's leader and one of the candidates for the next chieftain, I would like to convey our intentions," she said.

This remark was likely a deliberate move to catch Ryoma Mikoshiba off guard. Whether this strategy was Harisha's idea or Rahizya's suggestion was something Ryoma could not discern at the moment. Regardless of its origin, the strategy seemed to have worked brilliantly. It was nothing short of perfect as an opening gambit to seize control of the negotiations. Why? Because it completely defied Ryoma's expectations.

"I gladly accept the benevolence of His Grace Archduke Mikoshiba in offering aid to alleviate the suffering of my starving people. Of course, final approval will require the consent of the elders and my father, the chieftain. But I hope you will place your trust in Rahizya and me on this matter."

When those words reached Ryoma's ears, the man widely regarded as a cold and cunning overlord known for his ruthlessness found himself at a rare loss for words. His expression was one of pure astonishment—a look of someone hearing something far beyond their expectations, the sort that no one would show amid negotiations. As the saying "poker face" implied, exposing one's inner thoughts to the opponent during negotiations or contests was nothing short of foolish. Unless one could master the ability to laugh out loud while crying inwardly—controlling their emotions to such a degree—they would never emerge victorious in the arenas of negotiation or competition. This fundamental rule of the game was something Ryoma Mikoshiba fully understood and had consistently practiced up until now.



After all, Ryoma had been thoroughly drilled by his grandfather, Koichiro, from a young age.

Regardless of how much training a person underwent, they were still only human. Even the most important teachings seemed powerless when faced with truly unexpected developments. Harisha's words were so completely unexpected to Ryoma that he couldn't immediately process them. Ultimately, Ryoma's focus on convincing Harisha left him blindsided, making it understandable that he couldn't grasp the situation right away.

Wait, what did she just say? Did she just agree to my proposal?

At first, Ryoma felt a mix of confusion and surprise. Such unexpected words caused his mind to fall behind in processing them. He replayed Harisha's words in his head several times, then began to doubt his own ears.

Did I mishear something?

This uneasy feeling crossed Ryoma's mind.

Harisha's words were definitely not a figment of his imagination, and Ryoma fully understood that there was no way he had misheard her. After all, he had a certain degree of knowledge about intelligence and reconnaissance operations.

My grandfather drilled me in this. This can't be...

The Mikoshiba mortal arts had been passed down since the Warring States period and contained various techniques and knowledge. Within the Mikoshiba style were eighteen martial arts techniques that a warrior should master and a wide range of other skills and knowledge. For example, it included techniques used by ascetic practitioners, like curses and prayers, as well as medical knowledge to the extent that one could imitate the work of a doctor or pharmacist. The scope was incredibly broad. Moreover, the technical framework of the Mikoshiba mortal arts encompassed skills necessary for conducting intelligence operations. Simply put, these skills could relate closely to ninjutsu or ninja techniques.

The style that Ryoma learned from Koichiro included martial arts like unarmed combat and swordsmanship, which were commonly associated with traditional martial arts. He spent a significant portion of his time training these techniques. The focus on strengthening the

body and practicing throws and joint locks for self-defense made sense in Japan, where carrying weapons was uncommon. However, true classical schools of martial arts were not solely made up of these mainstream techniques.

For example, the Daito-ryu Aiki-jujutsu, aside from jujutsu, also transmitted swordsmanship and shurikenjutsu, martial arts using shurikens. Similarly, karate specialized in striking techniques, and the Okinawan karate schools where it originated also passed down bojutsu (staff techniques) and sai (weapon techniques).

Some martial artists argued that one had to study bojutsu to understand the style used in karate. So, why did many martial arts schools in modern society specialize in specific techniques? The answer was clear.

Many of these schools have survived not as martial arts but as sports or cultural practices aimed at preserving the teachings of their ancestors.

Of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Martial arts need to adapt to the times and the environment, as that is also a part of their nature.

The techniques born in times of war had little use in times of peace. However, if the goal was to pass on the name and techniques of a school to future generations, seeking recognition and having people enjoy the practice was logical. But when this happened, no one was likely to say, "Our school teaches the art of killing." If someone were to say that, most people would avoid that school. Even if a few people made exceptions and joined, the result would likely be disastrous.

Many martial arts in modern society had their sharp edges dulled and now existed as sports. However, choosing to continue as a sport had undeniably resulted in many martial arts losing their focus on self-defense. If a person considered martial arts as a means to protect one's life, knowledge of weaponry became essential because needing to protect oneself generally meant the opponent was armed. The goal of martial arts was to kill the enemy and survive on the battlefield, so specializing in one technique was impossible. Thus, one would seek to absorb and utilize as many techniques as

possible.

The same was true for the Mikoshiba mortal arts, which had been passed down from even before the Warring States period.

The Mikoshiba mortal arts included archery and spear techniques, concealed weapon techniques using hidden items such as manrikisa (chained iron balls), and ancient swimming techniques designed to allow one to swim while wearing clothes or armor. Indeed, the Mikoshiba mortal arts even had records on how to fire matchlock guns and how to prepare gunpowder.

Well, I never properly learned how to fire a matchlock gun.

While Koichiro had passed down the knowledge of matchlock guns, he never actually ordered Ryoma to do any serious training in their use. That said, it was certain that the Mikoshiba mortal arts were a well-rounded ancient martial art system, designed with the primary goal of surviving on the battlefield. Within this system, groups known as ninjas also used espionage techniques, which included methods for concealing one's presence, codebreaking, and a wide range of other practices. One such practice was training to enhance one's hearing so that one could distinguish different voices around them. It was truly a rich repository of techniques, almost like a "department store" of skills.

If modern martial arts focused on honing skills in one specific direction, like a concentrated breakthrough, the ancient style could be considered versatile, aiming to acquire a certain level of proficiency in all areas.

But there was no hierarchy between the two, thought Ryoma. What mattered was the difference in what one could do, as did the time required to master the skills needed to achieve the desired results. *Results were important, but cost-effectiveness was equally significant.*

The crucial factor was achieving the desired results, and the idea that the means didn't matter wasn't necessarily wrong. In the extreme, if one could ultimately protect themselves, it didn't matter whether they used judo, kendo, or any other form of martial art. Nonetheless, the situation slightly changed when considering the labor and efficiency required to achieve a goal.

Practicing swordsmanship or jujutsu would not be as effective for learning espionage techniques, such as those found in ninjutsu, which took a systematic approach to espionage. Sharpening the senses—eyes, ears, and other sensory organs—was more advantageous for information gathering than swinging a sword or practicing throwing techniques. There were methods within ninjutsu to train such senses.

I think ninjutsu training included something like "small sound listening" or something similar.

The Mikoshiba mortal arts referred to this training method as the "dropping needle technique." Although the name was different, the purpose was the same. In reality, there wasn't much difference in the training methods themselves.

This training technique was simple and consisted of dropping a stone from close to the ear onto a board and listening to distinguish the sound, gradually moving the sound source farther away from the ear.

Additionally, the training method was reasonable if the goal was to train hearing. Perhaps Ryoma Mikoshiba's ancestors had stolen a ninjutsu manual from somewhere or heard about the training method from others, and incorporated it into the Mikoshiba style's techniques. Eventually, the goal was to be able to distinguish the sound of a needle falling from dozens of meters away, although Ryoma had not undergone that level of training.

It would be more accurate to say that there was no need to spend so much time and effort to gain superhuman hearing. Indeed, having the ability to distinguish the sound of a needle falling was an impressive feat that resulted from honing one's abilities to their absolute limits. Perhaps it was akin to becoming a kind of superhuman. However, acquiring such an extraordinary ability overnight was impossible. Moreover, Ryoma had not been training with the goal of becoming a ninja.

Even with such intense training, unless one had a specialized job in the CIA or a public security police force, the opportunities to make use of it in modern society would be limited. Of course, if someone in modern society truly needed to engage in espionage activities, the

majority would likely choose to use equipment like bugging devices instead of spending long hours and effort honing their hearing.

Given he had been summoned to this hellish world without advanced technology, no one would have thought to prepare in advance. Truthfully, Ryoma had not slacked off on his training to the extent that he would miss something as important as Harisha's words. Even if he hadn't undergone such specialized training, he could not have misheard Harisha at such close range. The distance between them was no more than two meters despite sitting across a desk. Ryoma understood this, yet he still couldn't bring himself to believe the words that came from her mouth.

Such disjointed thoughts swirled around and appeared and vanished in his mind, likely proving that Ryoma Mikoshiba was unsettled. It was an incredibly rare sight.

One could argue that it revealed an unexpected side of a man who was usually unflappable and never failed to prepare for every possibility.

However, Ryoma was seemingly not the only one surprised by Harisha's words. A faint hint of unease was visible on the faces of the Malfist sisters, who were standing behind him. Silence filled the room. Among them, only Harisha and Rahizya remained calm and composed. Ryoma cast a probing glance at the two of them, showing that his mind had finally regained its usual composure and had started to function normally. The disjointed thoughts seemed to have helped Ryoma regain his balance.

The situation is quite different from what I had heard from Rahizya. Of course, I appreciate that they're willing to accept our proposal so easily. But this woman... What is her true intention? I hadn't heard that she was such a thoughtful person.

Such doubts arose in Ryoma's mind—that he should not take Harisha's words at face value. At the very least, suspecting the other party's intentions was necessary before celebrating openly. As the saying went, "There's always something behind a good offer." In this harsh world, a bit of suspicion was necessary to navigate through it.

Did Rahizya manage to convince her?

Harisha's display might have been natural for a person skilled in

intrigue and strategy. That suspicion was enough to seal Ryoma's lips shut.

No... Perhaps it would be better to just observe things for now. How will Harisha move next?

If Ryoma couldn't come to a clear answer, remaining silent and watching the situation unfold wasn't necessarily a bad approach for negotiations.

As if Harisha had seen through his thoughts, she once again opened her mouth leisurely with a calm smile.

"The details of the assistance we would receive would need some further discussion. However, it would be ideal to proceed with what Rahizya and you initially discussed."

At her words, Ryoma lightly nodded. "So, you would primarily like food assistance?"

"Yes. We mainly rely on hunting, but as various nations have been cutting down forests and expanding farmland recently, game has become scarce. As a result, food has been in short supply. I believe Rahizya has already conveyed this situation to you, so I'm sure you are already aware of it."

With that, a deep sigh escaped Harisha's lips. Her information matched perfectly with the situation of the Manibhadra tribe that Ryoma had heard about beforehand from Rahizya. What mattered was that Harisha had spoken the truth and confirmed it with her words.

I see... So, she doesn't intend to cover this up with lies or bluffs.

At that moment, Ryoma reassessed his previous judgment of Harisha, which stemmed from Rahizya. As she had said, he knew about the situation of the Manibhadra tribe. In that sense, there was little need for Harisha to lie about it, but that didn't mean there was any necessity to bring up that fact again. More accurately, most people wouldn't want to openly mention such things.

For someone like Harisha, who valued the pride of her tribe, this would be a fact she wouldn't want to speak about. In a way, it was a shameful weakness she'd want to hide.

That attitude was a petty form of stubbornness. No matter how loudly someone might declare their pride, it would only sound like

the howl of the weak if reality didn't back it up. Nothing was more pitiful than putting on false bravado just to hide a weakness. Although it was an obvious fact, there was little reason to bring it up.

I had heard that the tribe's pride was important to Harisha, so I thought it would be better to leave that part unsaid. But if she's bringing it up herself, then it's even better.

When conducting negotiations, the ability for both parties to have a shared understanding was the key to success. The real issue, however, was the sudden softening of Harisha's previously hostile attitude. And so, Ryoma decided to ask Harisha directly about the doubts he had.

"Indeed... So you're willing to accept my proposal. In that case, may I assume that you will also accept my requests in exchange for food aid? And are you aware of the price you may need to pay?"

If Harisha were to accept the assistance of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, she would have to pay an appropriate price in return and prepare for any consequences.

He had never once suggested that it would be unconditional aid when negotiating with Rahizya. However, he had no confirmation that Harisha understood this. Even if Rahizya had conveyed this information, there was no guarantee that she had fully grasped it.

After all, unconditional aid doesn't truly exist in this world.

In extreme cases, even those who are passionate about volunteer work did not act entirely for free. Volunteers might not profit monetarily, but people sometimes overlooked that there were other forms of gain. If someone received praise from others for volunteering, they were gaining a form of spiritual profit. It could still be considered truly "unpaid" service if someone continued to serve without receiving any praise or, worse, received scorn instead of gratitude.

However, there would be very few people who would find that acceptable.

At the very least, most people would expect some words of gratitude in return. The term "passion exploitation" existed for a reason—it was because those involved were receiving some form of

emotional benefit. He wasn't sure whether it was the social significance of the work or the purpose of simply working for a particular company. If the salary was poor and no spiritual benefit was gained, he could confidently say that no one would want to continue working in such a place.

From that standpoint, Ryoma believed people would never engage in actions that would lead to their own loss. The apparent lack of profit might be due to making it appear that way or because the spiritual benefits had not been considered.

In the United States, for instance, making donations could lead to tax deductions.

Of course, Ryoma had no intention of criticizing that as being too calculating. The issue, however, was that those receiving assistance had to understand that they also had to be prepared to pay some kind of cost. There was always a catch to a good deal.

Technically, I wouldn't need to verify it this thoroughly. Considering future strategies, I definitely want to avoid a situation where the entire yaksha tribe in the southern part of the continent would resent us.

For Ryoma, the goal of building a relationship with the Manibhadra tribe through this food aid was primarily about resolving a strategic gap created by the political upheaval in the Kingdom of Myest. The Mikoshiba family intended to increase their influence in the southern region of the western continent, and they were moving in that direction, but that was only a secondary goal. If the Manibhadra tribe eventually perished, Ryoma wouldn't necessarily care. However, that didn't mean he wanted to actively deceive Harisha and the others. At the very least, he didn't want to intentionally put the Manibhadra tribe in a difficult situation.

This decision might appear naive from a strategic standpoint alone. However, Ryoma understood well the deep feelings he harbored for his own "tribe," and he had no intention of belittling that sentiment. He instead thought coexistence between them would be ideal.

Well, I admit I might be a bit soft on this.

As such, Ryoma wanted to avoid a situation where Harisha and

the others would later resent him, claiming they had been deceived after agreeing to something too quickly. But it seemed that Ryoma's concerns were unfounded.

"Yes. If we were to receive food aid from Your Grace, there would be no reason for us to ally with the people of the stone city. Furthermore, Brittantia and Tarja would undoubtedly consider us traitors," declared Harisha.

"Would you be fine with that?"

"Yes. Considering our historical grudges against them, we understand that the likelihood of war is high. But that is a reality we have prepared for." Harisha paused for a moment after saying that. After taking a deep breath, she used all the pride and resolve she could muster. "If we must fight them, even if we are defeated in battle, our ancestors will surely welcome us into the land of the spirits."

When Ryoma heard Harisha, his eyes widened slightly.

I see... In the worst case, I was considering spreading rumors to stir up conflict with Brittantia and Tarja, but it seems that's unnecessary now, thought Ryoma. That was the exact depth of the rift that lay between the two kinds of intelligent beings: humans and the demon race. *If that's the case, there's only one thing I need to confirm.*

Historical enmities were, without a doubt, difficult to resolve. This dilemma was not about rights or wrongs or facts, but about reconciling pent-up emotions.

Should the parties involved continue to live in close proximity on the southern continent, the hatred and animosity the yaksha race held toward humans would run deeper than that of the dark elves, who had secluded themselves on the Wortenia Peninsula.

The yaksha race, particularly the Manibhadra tribe, lacking the resolve to bury their hatred and resentment toward humans and still accepting Ryoma's hand would ultimately lead to a relationship in which they were used merely as pawns.

"So, are you prepared to fight alongside me—a human—and join forces? Worst case, your tribe might even condemn you as a traitor."

Ryoma's question carried a hint of malice, but it was unavoidable.

Harisha shook her head with a calm smile and said, “Honestly, I cannot say I’m prepared. At this stage, it would be meaningless to put it into words. Making that decision will take time.”

“I see... You are absolutely right. It seems I have been rushing things a bit,” Ryoma said, bowing deeply in apology.

In truth, hearing someone claim to be resolute at this point would be frightening. If Harisha had easily said, “I’m ready,” Ryoma would have likely discarded her immediately.

After Ryoma’s apology, Harisha gave a small nod and then voiced her thoughts.

“Regarding the matter at hand, I have heard from Rahizya that we could exchange the plants and animal skins we gather for weapons, medicine, and other goods. This has the potential to greatly benefit not only the Manibhadra tribe, but all the yakshas in the southern kingdoms who face the threat of the Church of Meneos’s demi-human persecution. With that in mind, I believe the day will come when I can answer your earlier question.”

Food shortages and hunger were not just a problem for the Manibhadra tribe but for all the yakshas living in the southern kingdoms. If this issue could be resolved, Harisha was open to forming a friendly relationship with Ryoma, the head of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy.

Only the gods themselves could determine whether the relationship would progress beyond that.

Ryoma nodded deeply, then declared with confidence, “I see. You have thought that far ahead, then. Let’s wait for the day we can hear the answer to my question together!”

“Yes, I look forward to working with you, Lord Mikoshiba,” Harisha responded.

What had been anticipated to be a tumultuous meeting ended in success, allowing the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy and the Manibhadra tribe to take a step forward.

This marked the beginning of a new phase in Ryoma’s grand strategy, signaling that his restoration plan had entered a new chapter.

Seven days had passed since the meeting with Harisha had

concluded, and Ryoma was now back in Pireas, the capital of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

In a room of the late Count Salzberg's mansion tucked away in a corner of the royal capital, the young conqueror—who had secretly returned to the city after negotiating with Harisha—sat face-to-face with his grandfather. Darkness dominated the view outside the window. It was likely just past midnight—an ideal hour for a confidential discussion.

On the table before them rested crystal shot glasses filled with amber liquid, accompanied by a bottle of liquor bearing a vintage label. Beside them lay thinly sliced cheese prepared for their enjoyment.

"So, did things work out well with that demoness?" Koichiro Mikoshiba hesitantly asked his grandson, who sat on a sofa with a sullen expression.

This reluctance was unusual for Koichiro, a man of charm and audacious boldness. The words leaving his mouth were those of a grandfather concerned for his grandson's affairs. However, it was unfortunate that, despite the worried look on Koichiro's face, he wasn't truly as concerned about his grandson's predicament as he appeared. The subtle buoyancy in his tone was undoubtedly not a figment of Ryoma's imagination. From another perspective, it might have been an awkward display of trust in the beloved grandson he had painstakingly raised. As the recipient of such trust, Ryoma could not accept it in the slightest because he could see through Koichiro's true intentions.

Damn it... Enjoying someone else's misfortune, huh? Seriously, he doesn't even think to console his grandson, who went through the trouble of sneaking back into the capital, mused Ryoma. Ideally, as a grandson, he would have loved to click his tongue loudly in frustration. However, he understood all too well from years of experience that doing so would only make things even worse. *If I talk back, he'll just get all stubborn.*

For Ryoma, who had never known his parents, Koichiro was quite literally his foster parent. Despite a gap of several years after Ryoma was summoned from Rearth to this world before he reunited with

Koichiro, both had maintained their grandfather-grandson relationship for nearly twenty years.



He knew exactly where the line was—the point at which the older man's mood would truly sour—although people could dismiss things as harmless banter or jokes if they didn't cross that line. In that sense, the two were unmistakably family. Moreover, Ryoma owed Koichiro a debt of gratitude so immense that he could never fully repay it, even in a lifetime. A bit of lighthearted teasing was one thing, but he naturally hesitated regarding serious arguments. As such, Koichiro was not only a figure of unparalleled obligation and gratitude in Ryoma's life but also perhaps the only person to whom he felt utterly subordinate. Even so, that didn't mean Koichiro Mikoshiba was someone Ryoma could respect unconditionally, and he couldn't help but shake his head at the idea.

What a nasty old man... Honestly, I'd never want to deal with him if he weren't family.

Koichiro's fondness for wit and jest, combined with a narrow-minded and obstinate personality, made him a truly difficult figure in any negotiation. Even for Ryoma, who saw Koichiro as a grandfather who had stood in for his parents, tolerating his problematic behavior and words wasn't exactly easy. Ryoma wasn't naive enough to point this out and stir up trouble. After all, he was about to ask a favor of this difficult and conniving grandfather.

"Yeah, I managed somehow. It caused me plenty of worry, but in the end, I was able to wrap things up fairly smoothly." With that, Ryoma gave a slight shrug.

Koichiro Mikoshiba, watching him, let out a hearty, amused laugh and said, "Oh, is that so? When I read your letter, it sounded like things were going to be quite difficult. If it all came together smoothly, then so much the better."

"Well, now we've lit a fire under Brittantia and Tarja. It's still just a spark, but if we play our cards right, we can turn it into a raging inferno."

Ryoma smirked as he spoke, and Koichiro nodded deeply in response. Was his expression one of grandfatherly affection and concern for his grandson? Despite Koichiro knowing Ryoma had gone out of his way to call on him for some important reason, he was true to his nature as a connoisseur and lover of fine spirits and

hadn’t forgotten to savor the drink before him.

Koichiro raised the crystal shot glass in his hand slightly toward Ryoma in acknowledgment. He then slowly brought the rim of the glass to his lips, taking a delicate sip. After letting the liquor linger in his mouth for a moment to savor its taste, his throat moved as he swallowed.

Closing his eyes as if relishing the aftertaste, Koichiro eventually spoke in a measured tone.

“Hmm, this is an excellent drink... Rich, aromatic, and remarkably smooth. As expected of a Macallan 1946. After over half a century of aging, it’s been refined to perfection. Truly well matured.”

Koichiro nodded with satisfaction, clearly impressed by the quality of the liquor. Judging by his reaction, it seemed he was thoroughly delighted. Watching Koichiro’s obvious enjoyment, Ryoma couldn’t help but sneer.

Good grief... I went out of my way to call him here for an important request, and he’s already drinking before we’ve even started talking.

Ryoma had poured the liquor into the shot glass in front of Koichiro, but he hadn’t done this to encourage his grandfather to start drinking right away. It was simply a matter of a young man making a request and following the minimum etiquette he owed to the person who had raised him. He had not truly anticipated that Koichiro would start drinking from the shot glass in the middle of their conversation. After all, the matter he was about to discuss was a major gamble for the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, a bold move that would require a significant shift from their existing strategies. That was precisely why neither Laura nor Sara, whom Ryoma trusted deeply, were in the room. The two were stationed just outside the door, prepared for any unforeseen circumstances. In fact, within a one-kilometer radius of the former Salzberg mansion, elite Igasaki agents had established layer upon layer of barriers to guard against unexpected intrusions. All of this was for the sake of the conversation that was about to take place.

Koichiro, perceptive as he was, could not have failed to notice how cautious Ryoma was being. Even knowing this, he boldly drank

before the discussion started.

For all his faults, my grandfather certainly has some remarkable nerve.

Of course, this was far from a compliment. If anything, it was closer to a veiled insult or a jab. Although Ryoma kept these thoughts concealed, they subtly seeped into his gaze. As the saying went, his eyes spoke louder than his words. However, Koichiro showed no signs of remorse, even under the reproachful gaze of his grandson.

The fact that he once again brought the shot glass to his lips was proof enough of that. The amber liquid inside the glass slid down his throat, burning slightly as it made its way to his stomach.

After quietly savoring the aftertaste, Koichiro reached for a piece of cheese on the table, nodding in satisfaction. It seemed this was his idea of pure bliss.

"Still, I'm amazed you managed to get your hands on such a fine drink. Something like this is rare, even in Japan. To think I'd be able to taste it here in this otherworld... Truly, the saying 'Fortune and misfortune are intertwined like a rope' fits perfectly," said Koichiro, carefully examining the bottle with the label marked "1946."

His amazement was entirely justified.

A whiskey distilled more than half a century ago is hardly something that you'd expect would still be around.

Alcohol could generally be divided into two types: those meant for consumption soon after production and those suited for long-term aging. The former included items like beer and sake, while the latter typically encompassed wine and whiskey. Of course, there were exceptions—some sake varieties were aged for several years, and everyday wines and whiskeys were often consumed young. However, there were bottles aged ten years, twenty years, or even longer within the realms of wine and whiskey known as vintage or cult wines and spirits. These rare and highly sought-after liquors were sometimes traded for prices so exorbitant they'd make one's eyes widen in shock. In fact, they were not always items one could simply purchase, even with money. Prerequisites such as wealth, connections, and a deep appreciation of fine liquor were necessary.

But the ultimate requirement was the guiding hand of fate, akin to a celestial alignment. Among such rare and coveted liquors, the Macallan 1946 held a special place as one of the dreams of connoisseurs—something every true enthusiast hoped to taste at least once in their lifetime.

Koichiro was naturally astonished to be able to savor this wine on Earth, a magical and treacherous world separated by a void from Rearth, where it originated.

"If you're that pleased, then I'd say it was worth the effort to get my hands on it..." Ryoma nodded with a deep sigh.

Perhaps he felt a mix of sorrow and frustration witnessing his grandfather consume such a precious bottle. For Ryoma, who had developed a taste for good liquor at a young age, it was a loss that cut deep.

Truth be told, it was pure chance that it ended up in my possession.

Humans were generally the ones summoned from Rearth to the world of Earth. That did not mean nonhuman entities were never summoned. More accurately, they were often caught up in the summoning alongside humans. Summoning occasionally included animals, plants, electronic devices, and even works of art.

In addition to summoning through ritual magic, spatial distortions could occur naturally, creating temporary links between Rearth and Earth. These distortions were akin to natural disasters in their unpredictability and suddenness. Just like natural disasters, the time and location of these distortions were impossible to forecast. For instance, it wasn't entirely inconceivable that such an anomaly could transport a wealthy individual's collection of rare whiskies from Rearth to Earth.

A miraculous chain of events brought the rare bottle into Ryoma Mikoshiba's possession. In other words, this was a treasure of unparalleled value, with no guarantee that he could ever obtain another like it. And yet, offering this prized possession to Koichiro was not an act of filial piety toward his grandfather. Koichiro, of course, had long since seen through his grandson's intentions. Understanding this, he still leisurely sipped from his shot glass,

savoring the rare liquor.

That damn old man...

To Ryoma, it was a somewhat coldhearted gesture toward a grandson facing a dire predicament. Yet, he could neither point it out nor criticize his grandfather. The reason was simple: Ryoma's bold, lifesaving plan depended entirely on leveraging Koichiro Mikoshiba's extensive network. There was no other way. As Koichiro perhaps sensed Ryoma's inner conflict, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a letter, and handed it to his grandson. Ryoma tilted his head in curiosity but accepted the letter without hesitation.

"What's this?"

"It's what you've been looking for."

At those words, Ryoma's eyes widened in surprise. He quickly tore open the envelope and took out the letter, scanning its contents. After reading it thoroughly, Ryoma let out a deep sigh, as if to steady his nerves. The contents of the letter were so unexpected that he found it difficult to believe outright.

One of the elders of the Organization, Master Liu, is coming to Pherzaad in two weeks? And he specifically wishes to meet with me?

In some ways, this was a stroke of incredible fortune because it was what Ryoma had intended to ask of Koichiro. He had hoped that Koichiro would arrange an introduction to someone within the Organization. Of course, Ryoma had heard of Master Liu before as one of Koichiro's allies and a key figure within the group.

However, Master Liu's base in the city of Lentencia, located in the southwestern part of the continent, was too far away in this world devoid of modern scientific technology.

Besides, I heard the Organization has regional leaders for each area.

While Liu was indeed the leader of the southwestern region of the western continent, it was unclear whether his authority extended to the far eastern part of the continent. Thus, Ryoma had been considering negotiating with one of the Organization's leaders stationed in his own region. He wanted Koichiro to act as the intermediary for such a connection. Still, a direct negotiation with Liu was far from worthless.

If I don't have to worry about the distance, there's hardly anyone better suited for the role of negotiator than him.

Even if Liu's direct authority did not extend to the eastern reaches of the continent, having him vouch for Ryoma or speak to the relevant parties could drastically change the dynamics of the discussion. This development was extraordinarily favorable for Ryoma. However, he was not naive enough to simply accept the situation and rejoice at face value.

"How did you know?" asked Ryoma.

The question carried an uneasy mix of astonishment and suspicion. It would have been difficult not to be surprised in such a situation. Koichiro responded to Ryoma's reaction with an amused smile, almost as if to tease him.

"I see... Judging by that look on your face, it seems my efforts weren't in vain."

Despite Koichiro's remark, Ryoma repeated his question more forcefully, his tone laced with anger and frustration.

"Let me ask you again. How did you know?"

Who could blame him?

He had gone to great lengths to keep his strategy confidential by assigning the Malfist sisters to handle security, mobilizing the elite Igasaki operatives, and erecting barriers to ensure absolute secrecy. If Koichiro somehow discovered this strategy, Ryoma would naturally suspect a leak.

I can't believe there's a traitor among us, but the information might have leaked somehow.

Even so, Koichiro—the man who had dropped this bombshell—seemed to enjoy Ryoma's reaction and observed it with an air of amusement. He calmly reached for his shot glass again, letting the Macallan flow smoothly down his throat. His composed demeanor never faltered, and Ryoma finally realized his grandfather's true intent.

That damn old man... He was messing with me. He knew I'd get flustered if he handed me that letter in such a cryptic way.

This realization did not bring Ryoma relief. Instead, it ignited a flame of anger deep within him, a seething rage that burned through

his entire body. After all, Koichiro's actions had led Ryoma to question the loyalty and actions of the retainers who had faithfully supported the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy. Even as a joke, it was in poor taste.

However, Koichiro quickly picked up on how Ryoma's gaze had turned sharp and dangerous. He appeared slightly guilty and lowered his head. Koichiro had seemingly realized he had gone too far.

"My apologies. I might have gone too far with the joke. Rest assured, it's not as serious as you think. As I mentioned before, Liu Zhong Jian, the person behind that letter, is an old acquaintance of mine. He's coming to Pherzaad, and I decided to have a little fun with you... Forgive me."

From Koichiro's perspective, he had probably just been teasing his grandson, but he had inadvertently taken it too far. It was hardly a harmless prank—far too cruel for that—but there hadn't been any ill will behind it. Ryoma, however, glared at his grandfather with sharp eyes. After a long moment of glaring, Ryoma realized that Koichiro's words had truly been a joke and sighed heavily, perhaps with resignation.

"That was one hell of a joke, Gramps. I almost thought I'd have to draw Kikoku," he said, his gaze briefly shifting toward the nearby sword. This display was Ryoma's attempt at humor, but those words might have become a reality if Koichiro had not been his grandfather.

"You bring out such a prized bottle but hesitate to get to the point. I was just messing with you, but I admit I went a little too far," replied Koichiro.

Ryoma smirked in response. The reason he had brought out the precious bottle of Macallan 1946 was precisely because of his request. Still, he had hesitated to ask Koichiro for help with the Organization because he couldn't fully grasp the nature of Koichiro's relationship with it. However, Koichiro had seen right through his hesitation.

"Still, Gramps. You understood that I wanted to negotiate with the Organization, didn't you? I don't recall mentioning anything like that in the report I sent you."

But to that perfectly natural question, Koichiro simply shrugged.

"With the political upheaval caused by Myest, sending reinforcements to the Kingdom of Xarooda became even harder. On top of that, the progress of your negotiations with the Manibhadra tribe suggests you're using them as a shield to counter the enemy. If you go out of your way to summon me from Sirius, it's easy to imagine that it's not a request suitable for a letter. Given the situation, I could easily guess you wanted to ask me something related to the Organization."

It was indeed a self-evident conclusion, if you laid out all the reasons and saw the connections. Few people made those connections, so it was truly a remarkable insight. When Ryoma heard Koichiro, he raised both his hands in mock surrender.

"I see... So my intentions were all too clear to you."

"Well, of course. Who do you think taught you?" With that, Koichiro laughed cheerfully. After filling his empty glass with Macallan again, Koichiro took a deep drink and turned to Ryoma with a probing gaze. "By the way, I have one thing I'd like to ask you. If you don't mind?"

"What's with the sudden formality?"

"You've seemed to want to distance yourself from the Organization... So why the sudden change of heart?"

It was a perfectly natural question. As Koichiro had said, Ryoma didn't have a very good impression of the Organization and didn't want to get involved with them. Even when he had heard that Koichiro had once been an executive in the Organization, he had never tried to use it as a means to make contact. Koichiro understood this very well and had never suggested that Ryoma seek assistance from the Organization. In response to Koichiro's question, Ryoma let out a wry smile.

"Well, to put it simply... It's to survive."

"Oh? Is it really that dire?"

"The two-front war is just too much. The situation in Myest changed completely after that political upheaval. Also, the burden on the soldiers has become quite heavy."

Koichiro tilted his head slightly. "Oh? Is it with the soldiers you

trained yourself? I thought you had quite an elite force."

"That's exactly why it's frightening. They push themselves beyond their limits."

A deep sigh escaped from Ryoma's lips. The soldiers of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy were indeed elite troops. Their loyalty was unwavering; even if the situation on the battlefield became unfavorable, they had the sheer power to break through the opposition. This stemmed from many of them being freed slaves. Most of them had been weak individuals who had been stripped of their human rights. Having been liberated from that hell, they followed Ryoma Mikoshiba's leadership without complaint, heading to the battlefield to fight for their master.

The soldiers are reaching their physical and mental limits. They said they could keep fighting, but...

At that moment, the image of the exhausted soldiers appeared in Ryoma's mind. While returning from the rescue of the fortress city of Jermuk to Heraklion, the soldiers of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy had endured a grueling march. They were still capable of fighting, but Ryoma thought about the future and wanted to let them rest in barracks with roofs for about a month.

After all, they still had the mission to head to the Kingdom of Xarooda and fight against the O'ltormea Empire. Ryoma would not hesitate to significantly alter his original plans to accomplish that primary goal.

"I see... But negotiations with the Organization will take time. How do you plan to handle that? Are you thinking of sending the soldiers from Heraklion as reinforcements to Xarooda?" Koichiro reasonably asked.

Ryoma silently shook his head in response. "No. This time, it's an all-out war. We'll be using our trump cards."

Upon hearing those words, Koichiro realized who Ryoma's "trump card" referred to. Aside from the soldiers stationed in Heraklion under the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's command, the only remaining troops available were the defense forces of the Wortenia Peninsula and the dark elf army led by Nelcius.

"Noted. I heard that a letter was delivered to Lord Nelcius as well.

So, that's what this is about... But isn't that a bit too dangerous?" Koichiro remarked.

"Well, it is certainly a gamble in some sense," Ryoma replied. "Joshua responded that he's willing to accept reinforcements, but we won't know for sure until we open the lid. If I consider the kind of country I want to create, it's clear that I'll have to make a bold move at some point. This is just a bit earlier than I'd planned."

Humans and demi-humans resembled each other in appearance and could even bear children together, but they were still separate races. And humans had an inherent dislike for the "other." The most prominent example of this was the Church of Meneos's stance against demi-humans.

There were fewer radical, fundamentalist believers in the eastern part of the western continent, far from the Holy City of Menestia where the sect's headquarters stood. But that didn't mean that the people of the Kingdom of Xarooda would easily accept Nelcius and his dark elves. Even so, Ryoma Mikoshiba had decided to take the risk. In his eyes burned the resolve of a young conqueror caught between ideals and reality. Seeing that resolve in his grandson, Koichiro raised his shot glass and thrust it toward Ryoma as a signal to drink together. Ryoma responded to his grandfather's request and reached for the glass before him.

"Then I won't say anything more," Koichiro said.

"Yeah..."

The grandfather and conqueror lifted their glasses, downing the amber liquid in one swift motion. Both silently hoped that their decisions would lead them to victory.

Chapter 3: The Glint of a Bardiche

The morning sun began to peek over the horizon, and the surroundings gradually grew brighter. One might call it perfect for battle. The nation blessed with such fine weather was the Kingdom of Xarooda, which stood as one of the three kingdoms dominating the eastern part of the western continent. Though filled by towering, rugged mountains that left little room for agricultural plains, it was a land rich in mineral resources and renowned for producing countless master craftsmen, earning its reputation as an industrial state. It was also known as a nation of martial valor, home to a formidable order of knights considered the strongest among the three eastern kingdoms. But there was a reason for this.

Xarooda was the farthest west of the three eastern kingdoms and a gateway for any army advancing from the continent's central regions into the east. The mountains surrounding it made it a natural stronghold and an impregnable fortress—a formidable obstacle for the nations coveting the fertile lands of the eastern region. From its founding to the present day, the Kingdom of Xarooda had fulfilled its role as a gateway with remarkable success. This achievement befitted a nation devoted to martial strength.

However, the renowned fame of the Kingdom of Xarooda had begun to wane in recent years. The reason for this was clear: the invasion by the O'ltormea Empire, the dominant power of the western continent.

Even for the Kingdom of Xarooda, with its pride in martial prowess, facing an overwhelming superpower like the O'ltormea Empire inevitably forced it into a corner. The difference was apparent when comparing the sheer size of their territories. After all, the O'ltormea Empire ruled the continent's central region, while the Kingdom of Xarooda controlled only a third of the eastern region. By a simple calculation, the empire's territory was three times larger. It

was obvious to a child that the Kingdom of Xarooda alone could not hope to stand against the O'ltormea Empire.

Now, a captain was lost in thought within the command tent of Xarooda's main camp in the Ushas Basin that stretched south of the royal capital of Peripheria. This man was Orson Greed, the commander of the Xaroodian Monarch's Guard and the one responsible for the defense of the Ushas Basin. Yet this battle-hardened commander found it difficult to maintain composure in the face of the current dire situation. The regret for that day when the nation fell into hardship and the scales of victory and defeat began to tip toward ruin lingered in his mind.

"It all began with that defeat..." His voice carried a note of seething resentment toward the O'ltormea Empire for the decline of the Kingdom of Xarooda. The causes of this situation did not arise overnight; the signs had been evident for years.

Various internal troubles had plagued the kingdom even before the O'ltormea Empire's first invasion of Xarooda. One of the major reasons was likely the difficulty of establishing centralized control in this mountainous country, divided by rugged peaks. Consequently, suppressing the nobility's independence proved impossible. The Kingdom of Xarooda had a history of relying on the Kingdom of Rhoadseria to the east for much of its food supply, as Xarooda's arable land was limited.

Although the situation was not dire enough to cause immediate famine, from the perspective of enhancing national strength, Xarooda's limited agricultural productivity had undeniably reached a bottleneck. Perhaps the most significant factor had been the loss of Arios Belares, revered as Xarooda's Guardian Deity, during the first invasion of Xarooda.

Even with the loss of General Belares, the invasion by the O'ltormea Empire was ultimately repelled, thanks to the schemes of Ryoma Mikoshiba, dispatched from the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. The economic benefits from the trade treaty Ryoma proposed had undeniably provided the nation with some relief, establishing the four-kingdom alliance under the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. One could argue that it turned misfortune into a blessing. Regardless, the

O'ltormea Empire inflicted significant damage upon the Kingdom of Xarooda during its first invasion.

Quite bluntly, it would be more accurate to say that it left a deep scar on the nation of Xarooda. And that scar continued to grow larger with each passing day.

Some among the nobility appear to be traitors currying favor with O'ltormea. We'll have no way forward unless we suppress their actions, thought Orson.

Spies had been dispatched to investigate the activities of suspicious noble families, but they could not face punishment without definitive evidence. This action was a testament to the kindness and fairness of King Julianus I. Orson had no intention of opposing the king's decision on this matter. Even for a king, it was impossible to carry out punishments without evidence. If Julianus I had resorted to heavy-handed measures to execute suspected traitors, it would have inflicted even greater harm upon the Kingdom of Xarooda. In the worst-case scenario, the nation might have collapsed before O'ltormea's invasion could proceed.

Considering that, His Majesty's decision was correct. He is truly a ruler worthy of his throne.

However, this decision had undoubtedly backfired. These individuals still lived openly as nobles of the Kingdom of Xarooda while cooperating with the O'ltormea Empire. And at the end of this precarious balancing act, King Julianus I had succumbed to illness and was confined to his sickbed.

His Majesty's illness had a significant impact on Xarooda's governance.

It was an entirely predictable outcome. Without the king to oversee state affairs, the machinery of government ground to a halt. Things might have been different if a highly capable chancellor had been present.

With Xarooda still reeling from the wounds inflicted by O'ltormea's earlier invasion, such a hope was unrealistic.

While celebrated as a martial nation that had produced countless knights, the kingdom had placed little emphasis on the training and development of civil officials.

A few more years would have made all the difference...

But such lamentations held no meaning. They were simply the internal grievances of Xarooda, irrelevant to an invader. Shardina Eisenheit, the first princess of the O'ltormea Empire and captain of the Succubus Knights, refused to overlook such an opportunity.

Seizing upon the king's illness, the O'ltormea Empire unilaterally broke its armistice with Xarooda and deployed an overwhelming force of more than two hundred thousand soldiers, breaching the kingdom's borders. This was O'ltormea's second invasion, laying siege to Xarooda and devouring its land bit by bit. More accurately, Xarooda was teetering on the brink of destruction, a disgrace for the kingdom that prided itself on being a martial nation.

Countless people have gone to the battlefield for the sake of their homeland and lost their lives. Captain Greed noted there was no distinction between commoners and nobles in this. The young and old alike had equally perished on the battlefield. *As humiliating as it may be, facts are facts. I have no choice but to acknowledge it, even though it fills me with bitter regret.*

Yet this bitter truth did not extinguish the fighting spirit of Orson Greed, the captain of the Xaroodian Monarch's Guard. Every time he faced this reality, his heart burned with the desire to spill the blood of his hated enemies. That anger and humiliation served as fuel, driving his determination to even greater heights. This was only natural for someone like Orson, the head of the Greed family, which had supported Xarooda's governance since its founding, and the man entrusted with the heavy responsibility of leading the Monarch's Guard. Unfortunately, no matter how fiercely his fighting spirit burned, there were limits to what Orson could achieve.

Many young men have taken up arms and gone to the battlefield to protect our homeland. I must find a way to honor their resolve. He naturally wished this as a captain commanding his troops. The problem was that Greed could not see a clear path to fulfilling that duty. More than anyone, he understood that he alone could not achieve that wish. *I can fight to delay the inevitable for as long as possible. But that alone will not save this nation.*

Xarooda was not on the verge of falling today or tomorrow, but

as long as there was no plan to reclaim the lands occupied by O'ltormea, defeat was only a matter of time. That eventuality was becoming increasingly certain.



However, that does not mean we would ever bow to the invaders, the O'ltormea Empire.

The soldiers and officers and the Xaroodian army, who held their ground in the Ushas Basin and fought battle after battle, shared this resolve. Despite being outmatched, Xarooda's unyielding fighting spirit likely contributed to their survival. Yet, the cost of that determination was immense—unfathomably heavy and unbearably great. The unsurprising murmurs of "peace negotiations"—which were essentially calls for surrender—still lingered within Xarooda's royal palace.

But even if we surrendered, there's no chance the empire would accept it in good faith. They would undoubtedly impose impossible demands.

After all, O'ltormea's pride and prestige as one of the most formidable superpowers of the western continent had been thoroughly shattered when Ryoma Mikoshiba's intervention repelled their first invasion of Xarooda. Since O'ltormea currently had no way to directly retaliate against Ryoma, their fury would turn toward Xarooda instead. It was an unfair reality, but victors with overwhelming power rarely showed mercy to the defeated. Moreover, O'ltormea's true objective remained the complete subjugation of the three eastern kingdoms. Xarooda was merely the opening skirmish in that grander conquest.

Even if O'ltormea outwardly accepted a surrender, they would only use Xarooda as a pawn—an expendable tool for their future invasion of Rhoadseria. Orson Greed understood this, so surrender was not an option for him. The real issue lay in the fact that fools who failed to grasp such an obvious truth still existed within the royal palace. *Those self-serving cowards...*

If he were honest, he would have wanted nothing more than to cut down such traitors, turning them into rust on his blade alongside his comrade and friend, Grahart Henschel. Orson viewed anyone advocating for surrender while countless others spilled their blood for the kingdom as nothing short of traitors. However, there was nothing Orson could do about those vermin. Joshua Belares had entrusted him with the crucial mission of holding the defensive line

in the Ushas Basin, an assignment that was more critical than anything else. At that moment, his attendant entered the tent.

"Your Excellency... It's about time."

Orson Greed gave a silent nod in response.

Mounting the horse that awaited him outside the tent, he set off with his guards in tow, heading out beyond the camp's perimeter. There, Greed's personal force of twenty-five hundred knights of the Xaroodian Monarch's Guard stood assembled in neat ranks, eagerly awaiting his arrival.

"We are ready, Your Excellency!"

With that, the knights raised their spears high toward the sky, their voices ringing in unison. The morale of the knights appeared to be extraordinarily high. Greed raised his right hand lightly in response to the knights and shifted his gaze forward.

Judging by the absence of cooking smoke from the enemy camp, it seems their preparations are complete as well. It's almost time...

Ahead of him lay the fifty thousand-strong army of the O'ltormea Empire, firmly entrenched. It wouldn't be long before the battle began.

"Today will likely be another fierce fight," he murmured under his breath.

The truth was clear as day. This was a battle between O'ltormea's forces, eager to break through the front lines and carve a path to Peripheria, and the Kingdom of Xarooda's army determined to stop them. With the main forces of both armies facing each other, the ferocity of the upcoming clash needed no elaboration. It would truly be a scene of mountains of corpses and rivers of blood. In reality, the two armies had been locked in a fierce back and forth battle that remained evenly matched.

Considering the disparity in troop numbers, it's nothing short of a miracle that we've held out this long.

The O'ltormea Empire army before him fielded around fifty thousand soldiers. In contrast, the Kingdom of Xarooda's army defending the Ushas Basin had managed to maintain a force of just over forty thousand troops. On the surface, the forces might have appeared evenly matched. Anyone comparing the numbers might

not think the Kingdom of Xarooda was severely disadvantaged. But the reality was entirely different because the fifty thousand troops of the O'ltormea Empire were merely *their vanguard*.

In the rear stood the main invasion force of over two hundred thousand soldiers, commanded by Shardina Eisenheit herself. Despite the situation, the Kingdom of Xarooda's ability to maintain a stalemate in the Ushas Basin was nothing short of a miracle, aided by the favorable terrain.

The question is: Whose miracle is it?

Most people would credit Greed, the commander of the entire front line at the Ushas Basin. Back in Peripheria, taverns were abuzz with celebrations of Greed's achievements, with toasts raised to his name every night. There was even talk of bestowing upon him the same title as Arios Belares, the Guardian Deity, elevating him to a status akin to a living legend. This belief was clear evidence that the people had begun to recognize Orson Greed as a new hero, a successor to Arios Belares. At the very least, most of Xarooda's citizens saw him this way. Joshua Belares, who had taken over the reins of governance in the kingdom after King Julianus I was bedridden, actively promoted Greed's military renown as part of a broader effort to bolster national morale.

From my perspective, this narrative is somewhat inaccurate, thought Orson as he directed operations from his command tent. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't entirely the truth either. *At the very least, claiming that my abilities as a commander are what's holding back the invaders is far from correct.*

Such thoughts occasionally crossed Orson's mind. To some, this might seem like a moment of undue modesty or a rare display of doubt unbefitting a general. If a commander doubted their own capabilities, it would only sow unease among their troops. Overconfidence could be dangerous, but too little confidence was equally problematic. It was not wrong to say that a subordinate's accomplishments were ultimately part of their superior's achievements. After all, the superior had to prepare the groundwork so their subordinates could perform to their full potential and achieve results. With Orson Greed serving as the overall commander,

it wasn't entirely inaccurate to say that the final accolades for their successes belonged to him. Indeed, both perspectives held some truth. The real question lay in whether one could recognize and maintain a balance between the two views.

Unfortunately, Orson's self-assessment was likely accurate.

It's not as though our army hasn't achieved results. My men have fought valiantly under my command.

In truth, the results Orson had brought about likely justified the high praise he received. This battle was for the very survival of the beloved Kingdom of Xarooda. Knights serving Xarooda and even ordinary citizens had united to resist the O'ltormea Empire's invasion. Greed's relentless efforts in leading the army from the front lines were undeniable facts. However, not all of their successes could be attributed solely to the valiant efforts of Xarooda's soldiers or Orson Greed's leadership. Said success was due to the extraordinary reinforcements from the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, dispatched by the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy.

Ultimately, Archduke Mikoshiba plans the overall strategy for our forces and theirs.

Greed's role was simply to follow the strategies devised by this man. In a way, he was no more than a puppet, dancing to the tune of another's flute. As he thought this, an image of one particular man surfaced. The man, at first glance, favored a dashing and fashionable appearance. Moreover, the man was somewhat cynical and undoubtedly confident, yet outwardly charming and highly articulate, exuding a cultured aura. That man was Robert Bertrand.

He was one of the three commanders the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy had sent as reinforcements and a figure synonymous with the family's martial prowess. In addition, he was a fierce general leading Xarooda's army and the Mikoshiba forces on the front lines in the Ushas Basin.

I couldn't take credit for his accomplishments as if they were mine. That action would have been nothing less than a disgrace to Orson Greed. *Though knowing him, he wouldn't care about such things anyway.*

Greed's assumption was likely correct. At most, Robert might

insist on being treated to an expensive bottle of wine.

When I first heard the name "Twin Blades" and the tales of his martial prowess, I feared he might be a wild brute. But he turned out to be far more reasonable than I had expected, mused Orson, who had found Robert Bertrand possessed a surprisingly sociable nature. At the very least, he lacked the brutishness often associated with generals famed for their valor. *I recall that at the banquet held at the royal court, noble daughters flocked around him.*

Robert wasn't exactly a handsome man by social norms. But his weathered features, eloquent speech, and occasional glimpses of a dangerous side surely captured the hearts of many women. One could say that he had no trouble with women in the social scene. In contrast, Robert's companion Signus Galveria seemed less skilled in handling such women. Robert was fully aware of this fact and used it to his advantage, although that was merely one side of him.

That man's true nature is that of a fierce tiger. No, perhaps a starving dragon...

Bertrand was a carnivorous beast, sharpening his claws and fangs as he hunted his prey. He also possessed the wisdom and self-restraint to hide his true nature from those around him. In reality, very few people could see through his polished social veneer and perceive his true nature.

Apart from Orson Greed, only Grahart Henschel, the captain of the royal guard, and Joshua Belares could truly see through him.

No general in the Kingdom of Xarooda can compare to that man. Perhaps only the late General Arios Belares, who was once hailed as the kingdom's protector, could have done that. Certainly neither Grahart nor I could match him.

This assumption was Orson's intuition as a warrior. If one were to compare only their physical abilities and skills as a soldier, there might not be a huge difference. Orson Greed was one of the kingdom's strongest warriors and led one of the most powerful military factions. However, a captain needed to *command* an army, not just display personal martial prowess.

It's best to have superior martial skills, but the ability to inspire and unite soldiers is essential, along with a keen strategic sense to

evaluate the battlefield.

Unfortunately, Orson lacked both of these abilities compared to Robert Bertrand. He did not want to admit this but could not deny it.

The only person who might surpass that man is Joshua Belares, the son of the late General Belares, but he is still young and inexperienced. While his potential surpasses his father's, it will take at least another decade for him to fully develop.

This fact cast a shadow over Orson's heart. Even if they stopped the O'ltormea Empire's invasion, the threat to their homeland would not disappear.

As long as our country maintains good relations with Archduke Mikoshiba, he will remain a reliable ally. But no ally is eternal. Since Robert is said to be one of the archduke's closest confidants, I must consider how to maintain an appropriate distance from him.

Indeed, Robert Bertrand's claws and fangs were so sharp that he had been abandoned and left to rot by his own blood relatives. His overwhelming power and talent were beyond dispute, so underestimating him was not wise.

He was so talented that even his own parents and siblings despised him... It's almost enviable. Perhaps that harsh upbringing is what shaped him into such a man.

But that question would never be answered. It was akin to the classic question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

One thing is clear: Robert Bertrand is a man of such caliber that he can change the course of the kingdom's fate. Based on Greed's experience as a military leader in the Kingdom of Xarooda, this was his honest opinion and correct analysis. At least it was an evaluation that no one would openly disagree with. But among the people of Xarooda, how many could truly accept this fact? *In fact, even I have my doubts.*

As a warrior and a commander, it would take immense courage to admit that fact.

Orson Greed's greatness lay more accurately in his efforts to acknowledge his doubts. A person with an ordinary mindset would have a hard time accepting Robert's superior strategy. Instead, they would likely try to find faults or even lie to prevent Robert from

taking the lead. As a captain of the Kingdom of Xarooda, Greed never expressed any dissatisfaction, even when his command was overshadowed by the general leading the reinforcements. He presented himself as the hero who saved his homeland. Even if that was a false image, the Kingdom of Xarooda needed a hero. At that moment, a triumphant horn rang out from the O'ltormea Empire's forces. When Orson Greed heard it, he drew his sword from its scabbard and raised it high toward the sky.

"It's finally here... As we discussed last night, we shall proceed as planned!"

A cheer rose from the soldiers of Xarooda, shaking the earth beneath them.

Hours had passed since the start of combat, and the sun had already greatly tilted to the west. Countless corpses lay scattered across the land, their blood flowing out to form rivers.

Both armies had attempted to encircle the other in a crane wing formation at the onset of the fight. After several hours of battle, neither side had achieved their initial objectives, and the formations had collapsed. The battle had already turned into a chaotic melee, yet neither side made any attempt to retreat or reorganize their forces. The commanders of both armies understood that retreating too early would simply result in the enemy pushing them back. Most likely, each side intended to pull back once the sun set. However, this very line of thought was a trap set by the Kingdom of Xarooda.

The hidden, fatal blow was finally unleashed. A cavalry troop of about three thousand surged through the Ushas Basin, kicking up a cloud of dust. This cavalry had been in reserve at the rear of the Kingdom of Xarooda's forces since the beginning of the conflict. Their objective was to capture the enemy general. In a way, they were like an arrow that would pierce through the enemy's formation and strike down their commander. The arrow cut through the frontline chaos and charged toward the defending forces lined up before the enemy's headquarters. It was as though a wild force was racing through an open field. At the head of this force was a single man.

"Yah!!! Charge! Break through their lines!"

A deep roar echoed across the battlefield. The man, clad in black plate armor that wrapped around his muscular frame, rode a specially trained warhorse. In his hand, he wielded a massive bardiche with an axe blade, a hook, and a spearhead on its top. This weapon allowed for efficient sweeping, striking, and thrusting, each mode capable of reaping human lives. But this was no ordinary bardiche; it was made entirely of steel. Although using steel for the entire weapon made it less likely to break, it was much heavier than a regular axe with a wooden haft. It was so heavy that only someone of exceptional physical strength could hope to wield it. Calling it a hand weapon might be misleading since it was more akin to a piece of superheavy artillery. Yet, this superheavy weapon was little more than a tool easily wielded by the man with extraordinary physical abilities and martial skills.

"Get out of my way, you worthless scum!"

The man roared, and his right hand swung the massive axe without hesitation. The violent clash of metal shattered the first defensive line of the O'ltormea Empire's soldiers. It was as if a child were swinging a stick with all their might. But the wind caused by the axe was far from playful. A deadly gale stirred, sweeping through the soldiers of the O'ltormea Empire. It was a wind of death that could easily snuff out the lives of men like candles. The man wielding the axe was a grim reaper.

Each time the axe gleamed, screams echoed, and the earth turned red. Behind this grim reaper was a horde of fiends, his loyal followers. This cavalry of only about three thousand was hardly a significant force in the grand scheme of things. On a battlefield with nearly one hundred thousand soldiers, such a force was hardly meaningful. But one would only draw this conclusion if they only considered the force in terms of numbers. The O'ltormea Empire, with its superior numbers, could afford some casualties and still halt the cavalry's advance with infantry. If they could stop the horses, the cavalry charge would be nothing more than a suicidal act. This was common knowledge for any soldier with battlefield experience. Because the soldiers of the O'ltormea Empire understood this, they

raised their shields and formed simple lines to block the cavalry.

But this attempt failed. The cavalry's charge was not something that could be easily stopped. Why? Because the leader of the cavalry was no ordinary man. His name was Robert Bertrand, a formidable general trusted by Ryoma Mikoshiba. And to the enemy, he was nothing short of a grim reaper.

"This is useless! We can't defeat such a monster!"

"I don't want to die!"

The soldiers who had been holding their shields at the front lines muttered these words, showing that Robert had planted the image of death in their minds. That image of death bound the soldiers of the O'ltormea Empire in both mind and body. Even so, they did not abandon their weapons and flee, because they understood that doing so would mean certain death. After all, these were not conscripts. They were professional soldiers employed by the O'ltormea Empire. Naturally, their training was far superior to the average militia made up of conscripted peasants, and their resolve was undoubtedly stronger. Despite their training, they were still mere soldiers, better at combat than conscripts, but not knights who had mastered martial arts.

James Tret, one of the commanders of the O'ltormea Empire's forces invading Xarooda, had come to understand this all too well. Several months had passed since the beginning of the second Xaroodian invasion, but they had still not broken through the enemy's defenses in the Ushas Basin. The cause of this was none other than Robert Bertrand's prowess. Reports of bad news kept coming in one after another, and the tide of battle slowly shifted in favor of the Kingdom of Xarooda. Regardless, James continued to send orders to rally his troops, as they had no choice but to resist in order to survive. Though that resistance was futile, like a praying mantis trying to stop a cart, giving up meant certain death.

"What are you saying! If we retreat now, it will disgrace the name of the O'ltormea Empire! We must take down that monster at all costs!"

But James understood all too well that his encouragement was meaningless. Robert Bertrand's martial skills were beyond

comparison. Any soldier who tried to face him would be crushed by overwhelming force. The very air around Robert exerted physical pressure, shaking the hearts of the soldiers standing before him.

Only those who had faced the forces of Archduke Mikoshiba could understand this fear. James had also realized that there was more to the cavalry's breakthrough than just Robert's power.

"You monster... This was your plan, wasn't it? Playing tricks like that..." James Tret muttered, looking at Robert swinging his bardiche at the front of the cavalry.

Since the beginning of the war, that man has killed many commanders. But I never expected his true goal was to disrupt our chain of command...

From the start of the war, Robert had deliberately targeted O'ltormea's commanding officers. As a result, Tret's force of fifty thousand had encountered major problems in their command structure, leading to a temporary breakdown in coordination. Reinforcements from the rear filled the gaps, but the newly assembled units had been struggling to operate effectively. Even the slightest delay in coordination could prove fatal. Robert was now advancing toward the disarrayed units, intentionally targeting them.

Perhaps it would have been better not to draw reinforcements from the rear.

Trying to pick off the disjointed units would be an easy task for a monster of a soldier like Robert. James had known this from the start, and now he realized this was why Robert had targeted the commanders. In the end, it was all just a matter of hindsight. As long as O'ltormea had the manpower, it was natural to call up reserves from the rear when casualties occurred.

Was it even possible to target weak soldiers scattered in the chaos of battle?

James had seen through Robert's tactics, but he wasn't foolish enough to think he could replicate them himself. Normally, it would be impossible to discern where the newly reinforced units were fighting. But what was happening here was something beyond the realm of normal. It was like a disaster that no human strength could resist.

And that disaster, in the form of a human, is now feeding on the lives of the Empire's soldiers, growing stronger in the process.

War brought casualties, and Tret's side would suffer losses. But that didn't mean they could afford to lose soldiers like water. The simplest option would be to send a warrior of equal skill to Robert to counter him. Sadly, James had no such warriors in his ranks.

What should I do? There are countermeasures, but should I really just send more soldiers in, knowing the risks? How many warriors across the entire O'ltormea Empire could match such a monster?

There were indeed other candidates. The O'ltormea Empire, the ruler of the continent's central region, was home to countless talented individuals. But those who could challenge someone like Robert were crucial figures in various armies, and moving them would take time and effort. Recklessly shifting them could lead to collapse of the defensive lines along the borders they guarded. The only choice left was to select from the forces already participating in the second Xaroodian invasion, greatly limiting the number of candidates.

The most likely options were the elite knights of the Succubus Knights, led by Captain Shardina Eisenheit. However, even those warriors would likely be limited to the higher-ranking officers, such as the brigade commanders. Robert would likely outclass anyone lesser.

But sending elite members of the Succubus Knights, whose job was to protect Shardina, to the front lines was not a realistic option.

Or perhaps... Rolfe, the knight captain, could defeat him...?

The image of a man known as the Emperor's Shield appeared in James's mind. Rolfe, who had taken command after his predecessor died in battle, was a knight with no equal. James's original plan had been to place him at the rear, keeping him in reserve to counter any new threats. That reserve force would now have to move forward, no matter the cost.

At this stage, it was nothing more than a fruitless gesture, because Rolfe was no longer with them.

The proud knight captain of O'ltormea's royal guard was advancing through the mountains, carrying out the secret mission

entrusted to him by Shardina to break the stalemate.

I had heard of the famed Twin Blades before. But I never imagined they were this skilled... Why do such monsters even exist?

No matter how much James regretted it, he could not turn back the hands of time. As if to mock James's inner turmoil, Robert's cavalry unit charged straight toward his main camp. With every passing moment, the distance between the two forces shrank. It was like a raging storm given human form. Before such a human-shaped storm, people could do nothing but be trampled. James could no longer hesitate as Robert's cavalry had just broken through the final line of defense stationed before the main camp.

"The enemy is charging! The front line, ready your spears!"

Following Tret's command, a wall of spears formed in front of the O'ltormea Empire's main camp. The heavily armored infantry formed a solid wall, prioritizing defense. A normal commander would never think of charging into such a formidable defensive formation. If cavalry were their main force, they would fall back and attempt to break the enemy's formation. If they had archers, they would opt to fire from a distance.

However, Robert Bertrand was a man who defied all conventional wisdom. Around three thousand cavalrymen kicked up dust as they charged straight toward the O'ltormea Empire's spear wall. There was no hesitation in their assault. The cavalrymen did not see the resolute, heavily armored soldiers standing before them. They simply urged their horses forward.

All they saw was Robert's back as he led from the front. This move was a double-edged sword that increased the risk of death for the cavalry's commander. But Robert paid no heed to such risks. He instinctively understood that he was an overwhelmingly powerful predator, one that devoured the lives of the weak. As he faced the final defensive wall protecting the enemy's main camp, Robert finally unleashed all the power he had been holding back. Prana surged through his body at high speed, and the sixth chakra, the Ajna chakra located between his brows, began to spin with a deep hum. This energy granted him even greater strength. His entire body brimmed with power, and his consciousness fixated solely on the

enemy camp.

"Gaaah!"

With Robert's thunderous roar, the axe in his right hand whistled through the air. The next instant, with the dull clang of metal striking metal, red blossoms of blood bloomed across the battlefield, and chunks of flesh scattered. Screams and shouts of rage echoed across the war-torn land. But as a dominant force on the battlefield, Robert paid no mind to the wails of the weak. The strong simply trampled the weak and advanced forward.

Robert focused on the flag bearing the lion emblem of the O'ltormea Empire, fluttering beyond some fieldworks, and the enemy general who stood beneath it.

As if spurred on by Robert's might, the soldiers of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's army behind him began cutting down enemy soldiers one after another.

"Follow Sir Bertrand! Do not stop! Push through in one swift strike!"

"Advance, advance! Crush the enemy beneath our hooves!"

"Slaughter the invaders from O'ltormea!"

"Show them the power of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's army! Charge!"

Battle cries erupted from the cavalry behind Robert. To the soldiers, Robert Bertrand was a war god wielding the might of the divine. Those who followed him were his chosen warriors. It was an overwhelming display of fervor and blind devotion. Yet, such fervor and devotion determined life and death on the battlefield. The defensive wall that Robert's initial strike had weakened crumbled even further under the cavalry's relentless charge.

Quickly sensing the dire situation, James Tret issued a flurry of orders.

"The second line must hold at all costs! If we let them break through here, they'll breach the main camp! Units from the third line and beyond, fill the gaps immediately! Listen well! No matter the cost, we must buy time! Deliver this command to Eldran and tell him to offer his life for the empire and for Lady Shardina's victory!"

This ruthless order was for the deputy general who had

supported James for years. But the decision was unavoidable for a commander whose lines had already been breached right before the main camp. Their options were extremely limited due to their undeniably passive and defensive approach. From a tactical perspective, another possibility was to absorb the charge with the first defensive line while buying time, then maneuver the reserve units to flank the cavalry from both sides and annihilate them. However, Tret deliberately excluded that option.

No matter how brilliant a strategy is, it is meaningless if it cannot be executed.

Rather than risking everything on an all-or-nothing encirclement and annihilation maneuver, he judged that deploying the reserve forces to reinforce the front line would have a higher probability of stopping the cavalry charge. It was a prudent decision, but that did not necessarily mean it would lead to victory. On the battlefield, such cautious strategies often backfired.

Another dire report came from a messenger who rushed into the main camp.

"A message! Vice General Eldran, who was commanding the front line, has been slain!"

When James turned his gaze to the front lines, he could indeed sense the sounds of clashing swords and war cries drawing closer to the main camp.

"Stop them at all costs! No matter the sacrifice, you must halt that man!" James screamed from the depths of his soul. Regardless of how much he shouted until his throat was raw, reality remained merciless.

"It's terrible! The final defensive line has been breached! The Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's army is charging straight into our camp!"

At the messenger's desperate cry, the officers surrounding Tret became visibly shaken.

"What did you say?!"

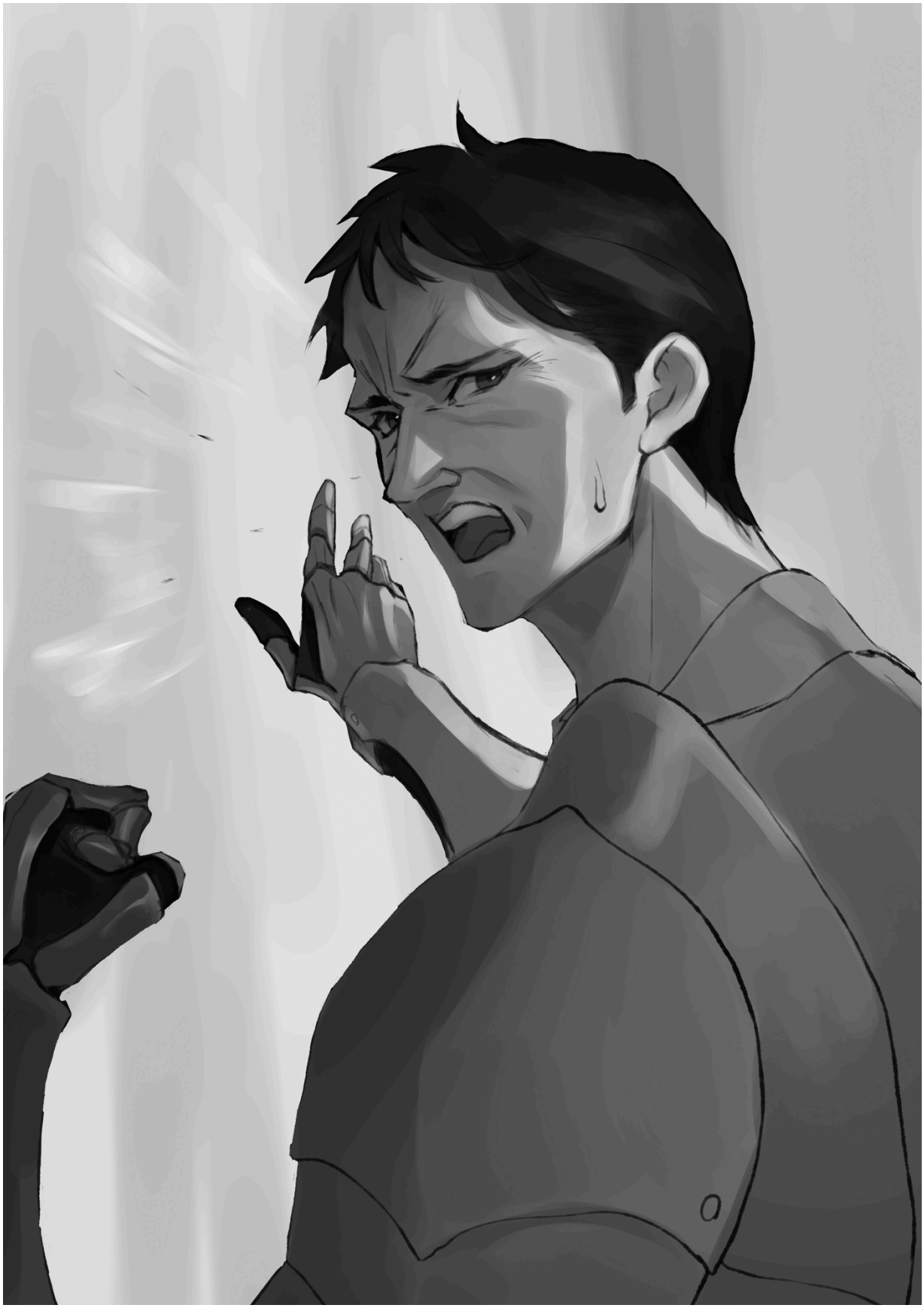
"This is bad! Prepare to intercept them immediately!"

Of course, the main camp where Tret had stationed himself was not entirely without defenses. However, it could not withstand the sharp blades of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's elite troops.

Messengers kept rushing in one after another. From their lips came the ever-approaching footsteps of the grim reaper, drawing closer to James with each passing moment.

This is bad... At this rate...

Just then, the word "defeat" flashed through James's mind. It was an unacceptable reality for him. No matter how much he refused to acknowledge it, reality would not change. The ominous signs crept ever closer to becoming reality with each passing second. Even so, James desperately struggled to hold on when faced with this dire situation.



The battle line would completely collapse if Tret's spirit broke at this moment.

If that happens, Lady Shardina's strategy could fall apart as well.

That collapse would be a significant blow to Shardina Eisenheit. It had already been nearly four months since the O'ltormea Empire had unilaterally broken its armistice with the Kingdom of Xarooda and launched a second invasion. Yet, the invasion force had still not managed to fully secure the Ushas Basin. At the outset of the war, Shardina had planned to occupy the royal capital, Peripheria, within a month. But her calculations were already far off the mark. If James's forces—tasked with securing the Ushas Basin—were to collapse, it could lead to an irreparable breakdown of the front line. And that would mean the failure of O'ltormea's second invasion of Xarooda.

But even knowing that, if things continue like this...

Countless options surfaced in Tret's mind, only to fade away just as quickly. Each choice had its own advantages and drawbacks. At that moment, one of the younger strategists, his face grim with desperation, stepped forward and offered advice.

"Lord Tret, we must abandon the main camp and retreat. It has already been five days since Lord Rolfe departed from here. We have delayed the enemy long enough for him to reach Peripheria."

When those words left the young man's mouth, the other strategists erupted in outrage.

"Are you insane?!"

"What nonsense! Have you lost your mind?"

A storm of insults and scorn followed. The young man's words sounded like a complete dereliction of duty to these strategists who understood the critical nature of this battle. However, James raised a hand to silence them and placed a hand on his chin, deep in thought. In truth, he had already considered the same option.

There is merit to it. That much is certain.

Of course, it was the last resort. Choosing it would be the same as admitting defeat in this battle. If they could not stop Robert Bertrand's charge, this was the best decision they could make. Rather than wasting troops in a futile effort, pulling back to

reorganize was not necessarily a bad option. However, there was one problem.

Had James bought enough time for Rolfe's army to reach Peripheria?

It has already been five days since Lord Rolfe departed. Even if he had to traverse the treacherous mountain ranges of Xarooda, he should be nearing the outskirts of Peripheria by now.

Even if Rolfe's force succeeded in launching a surprise attack, capturing the royal capital would still be a challenge. After all, Rolfe's force consisted of only about ten thousand troops. While not a small number by any means, it was far too few to properly lay siege to Peripheria. But that did not matter. The capture of the capital was not necessarily Rolfe's objective. For that plan to work, Tret's forces needed to remain intact as a functional army. From that perspective, retreating at this stage was not the best strategy, but it was at least the next best alternative. Ultimately, the decision rested with James Tret.

But in truth, he had already made up his mind.

To fail even in a diversionary operation... There is no avoiding the mark of incompetence. But as long as we preserve our forces here, we will have another chance to reclaim victory.

At that moment, James nodded deeply and made his declaration.

"Understood... We will follow this course. We retreat from here."

When the young strategist heard those words, a mixture of relief and joy flashed across his face, showing the exhilaration of having his counsel accepted and the pride of fulfilling his duty. However, even such advice could prove meaningless on a battlefield where life and death hung in the balance.

"Commander! We're in grave danger! Please, flee at once!"

A messenger's desperate cry rang out, followed by screams erupting. The sound of hooves thundered across the ground as an armored beast in jet-black plate tore through the main camp. In the next instant, the young strategist's head was sent flying through the air.

"I am Robert Bertrand! O'ltormea dogs, come and face me if you have the guts!" His roar was part battle cry and part jeering taunt,

accompanied by a whirlwind of destruction.

Each time his axe flashed, screams echoed, and crimson blood soaked the earth. It was pure devastation through overwhelming violence, but the madness did not last long.

Before long, the cries of agony and shouts of defiance faded, leaving an eerie silence hanging over the battlefield. The victor of the battle for the Ushas Basin was decided. Torchlight illuminated the surroundings. It had already been three hours since the battle's outcome had been determined. After cleaning up the scattered remnants of the enemy forces, Robert took a steaming towel from his attendant and wiped his face vigorously.

"Phew... That's a bit better," Robert said, grinning.

But the towel in his hands had been stained a dark red with enemy blood. How many had he killed? The crimson hue that covered his body had already begun to dry, darkening from red to almost black. Either way, it was undeniable proof of the number of enemies he had slain. The victory was worthy of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's most feared warrior. Robert then pulled a bottle of liquor from his saddlebag and took a long swig. It was the taste of triumph.

"Aah... Nothing like it." He exhaled, his voice tinged with satisfaction. "Well, my job here is done. Now it's up to you to finish things, Signus."

With that, Robert raised the bottle toward the direction of Peripheria. As the thick stench of blood filled his senses, he took another drink. He was certain that his comrade, Signus Galveria, would soon savor the taste of victory just as he was.

Chapter 4: The Growl of an Iron Staff

Robert had slain James Tret, a captain of the O'ltormea Empire, securing the Kingdom of Xarooda's victory in the Battle of the Ushas Basin. While Robert indulged in the sweet taste of triumph, Signus Galveria—the other half of the famed Twin Blades—eagerly awaited his turn to take action. Signus was at the training grounds near the royal castle in the capital city of Peripheria. It was just past midnight. He had made his way to the training grounds in preparation for the upcoming battle. Robert, stationed at the front lines, had sent word of a possible surprise attack on the capital by a detached force of the O'ltormea army. Having been entrusted with the response by Lione, Signus had no choice but to steel himself for the task. That said, there was nothing he could do at the moment.

The Igasaki clan has already set up a surveillance network in the vast forest to the west of the capital to detect any movements of the O'ltormean army's detached force, thought Signus. There was virtually no chance that an entire army could slip past that watchful net. *Well, that's only if Robert's words were true.*

Signus smirked at this thought; one could not dismiss Robert Bertrand's words as lies so easily. At the same time, believing them unconditionally was no simple matter.

I'd prefer if they did come.

After all, his position came with no shortage of stress and burdens. If he could forget those troubles, even for a brief moment, that alone would be a cause for celebration. For that reason, Signus stood alone in the open training grounds, quietly refining his martial skills.

"Hm, what a truly refreshing feeling. It seems I'm simply not suited to being cooped up in an office," muttered Signus, taking a

deep breath that resembled a breathing technique passed down in Xingyiquan martial traditions.

However, this breathing technique was not something he had learned from another person. Rather, it was a method of mental discipline that Signus had acquired over the course of his long years on the battlefield. Even if it was self-taught, its effectiveness was undeniable. Feeling vitality surge through every cell in his body, Signus lightly closed his eyes. He gripped his beloved iron staff with both hands and slowly took a stance as he stepped forward with his left foot and turned his body sideways. The iron staff instantly roared through the air, striking down an invisible enemy before him. The motion resembled an overhead sweeping strike from the jodan stance in traditional staff techniques. But it was merely similar in appearance.

In reality, Signus had never formally trained in any established school of staff combat. The staff was far from a mainstream weapon in this world compared to swords or spears. Battlefield experience was the origin of all martial arts techniques. Thus, it was only logical that a seasoned warrior like Signus would develop a stance that bore similarities to traditional staff techniques. Of course, there were also undeniable differences. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the weapons themselves were entirely distinct from the outset. Wood formed the foundation of a conventional staff, but Signus wielded a staff forged from solid iron. Naturally, swinging it required an entirely different level of strength than an ordinary wooden staff. Considering the centrifugal force generated with each motion, the strain on his muscles likely exceeded several hundred kilograms. Since this custom-made iron staff weighed over twenty kilograms, the force might have surpassed a ton. One had to wonder just how immense Signus's strength truly was, given how effortlessly he swung such a weapon.

Lu Zhishen, the Flowery Monk from *Water Margin*, could wield a twenty-eight-kilogram monk's staff with ease. Perhaps Signus's might rivaled even that legendary feat. Yet, the man who had just performed such an inhuman display seemed to have little awareness of his own extraordinary achievement. He believed it was no

different from a child idly swinging a stick in play, though the result of his playful swings was anything but trivial.

At that very moment, a violent gust of wind erupted, swirling furiously around him. One could liken it to a raging gale capable of effortlessly shattering the human body—undoubtedly a power beyond the realm of ordinary men. In truth, only a handful of warriors were skilled enough to even attempt to withstand a blow from Signus's iron staff. For the average person, merely lifting such a weapon would be a struggle—let alone enduring a strike that came at them faster than a major league batter's full swing. Trying to block it would be utterly futile. A spear would snap upon impact. A sword would shatter under the sheer force. Even if one attempted to defend with a shield, there was no way they could fully absorb the blow. No matter how sturdy the shield, it would be no different from trying to stop a speeding car with nothing but brute force.

Signus felt this was nothing more than a casual practice swing. He used his natural physical strength to deliver this strike, even before enhancing his body with martial thaumaturgy. And yet, even someone as superhuman as Signus was not without his doubts.

"Have I grown sluggish from all that paperwork?" he murmured after a pause, shifting fluidly from one stance to another, searching for the source of his faint discomfort. This sensation was likely nothing more than an illusion born from his own uncertainty. In other words, it was a mere misconception or something akin to an obsessive fixation.

Unlike Robert, who had fought alongside Orson Greed to defend the front lines at the Ushas Basin, Signus had indeed been away from the battlefield. He had been serving as Lione's aide, acting as a mediator between the nobility. From that perspective, it was understandable why he might lament his absence. The reality was that his time away had only been a matter of a few months. During that period, Signus had frequently visited the training grounds whenever he found the time, continuing his practice. Such routine training alone was not enough to significantly refine his techniques, but the idea that his skills had dulled in such a short span seemed equally implausible.

By that logic, it was a bit premature for Signus to wallow in self-pity over his supposed decline. Anyone who had just witnessed his previous strike would scoff at the notion that his martial prowess had diminished. But such reasoning was irrelevant to Signus. What truly mattered was whether he could trust in his own strength. And so, as if to dispel the lingering discomfort within him, Signus once again began swinging his iron staff.

How many times had he swung it now?

Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead, yet it had all been worth it. At last, Signus halted his movements.

"It's been a while since my last battle, so I had some doubts. But it seems my instincts have finally returned," he murmured again, gazing upon his longtime companion—the iron staff. In his eyes burned the flames of anticipation for combat. He wiped the sweat from his brow with a prepared cloth, then took up his weapon and resumed practice. It seemed there was still something that did not sit right with him. *Unlike Robert, I am a man who can only live on the battlefield. That's precisely why I must live up to his expectations.*

Signus rarely allowed others to see his deeply hidden resolve. Of course, he was not as rigid or unrefined as he believed himself to be. Compared to Robert, he might not have been the most sociable. Even so, he was nothing if not earnest and dependable in his work, and wasn't as socially inept as he thought. But he could never charm noblewomen with honeyed words that bordered on nauseating, like Robert. Nonetheless, his quiet demeanor had earned him high regard among aristocratic ladies. And to parents with daughters of marriageable age, the dependable Signus was often a far more desirable son-in-law than the flamboyant Robert. It was a testament to the trust people placed in Signus Galveria. If he were truly incapable of social dealings, he would never have been able to serve as Lione's aide, negotiating with the nobility. What one was capable of and the things one truly desired often did not align.

On top of that, there was another reason Signus saw himself in such a light. Because he had been deprived of parental love and treated with indifference for most of his youth, the battlefield was

the only place where he had ever been fairly judged. Aside from the home where he had lived with his wet nurse, Elmada, the one place where Signus Galveria felt truly at ease was the battlefield. In a way, it was almost like a curse as he had spent his days fighting as nothing more than a convenient pawn of war.

As an overwhelmingly powerful warrior, Signus had adapted to that hellish existence and amassed countless military achievements. That was precisely why he could not help but feel fear. He feared he might be unable to wield his full strength when it truly mattered.

Not yet... It's still not enough...

Driven by that restless anxiety, Signus continued to swing his iron staff. For a warrior who risked his life on the battlefield, such preparation was only natural. There was another way to interpret this, which stemmed from how both he and Robert were perceived. Those around Signus Galveria clearly held him in the highest regard. That alone proved his recognition as one of the strongest warriors in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. If one were to search for warriors in Rhoadseria who could stand on equal footing with Signus, the number would barely reach five.

Helena Steiner, the Ivory Goddess of War, was in a league of her own. The only other name that could be mentioned in the same breath as Signus was his counterpart, Robert Bertrand. In the context of formal martial competitions, the conversation might shift slightly. There was no shortage of renowned knights and warriors in Rhoadseria, one of the three great nations of the eastern region of the western continent. Many would readily name Chris Morgan or Leonard Orglen among the most formidable fighters. Their reputations were built solely upon victories in tournaments, but that was not to say that they were weak—far from it.

Ultimately, a tournament was nothing more than a controlled test of skill. The moment real combat—where lives were on the line—entered the equation, the entire dynamic changed. Even in the modern world, there were cases where highly skilled martial artists or professional fighters fell into street fights against untrained opponents, sometimes even losing their lives. This happened because martial artists developed their strength to shine in the

specific, regulated environment of a competition. Of course, this did not mean that martial arts were meaningless or that fighters were weak. That also did not mean that they were absolute warriors. In that sense, Chris's and Leonard's strengths were fundamentally the strength of the arena.

That said, there's no denying that those two possess exceptional talent.

Even their lord, Ryoma Mikoshiba, and Helena had acknowledged it. Compared to Signus and Robert, their evaluations would undeniably fall a step lower due to the difference in the number of life-or-death situations they had endured. Although the Twin Blades had mastered martial arts and honed their skills, it was not enough. This truth was something their lord understood well. One could easily imagine this because he had sent Lione and the other two veterans as reinforcements to the Kingdom of Xarooda.

As such, Signus would often muse, *Perhaps I am capable as a warrior, but when it comes to the qualities needed to lead troops or the tactical insight required of a general, I am no match for Robert.*

This anxiety settled deep within Signus's heart, sinking like sludge at the bottom of his soul. Whether said thoughts were true was uncertain. One could only find the answers in the battles where life and death were on the line. If Ryoma Mikoshiba learned that Signus harbored such anxieties, he would probably be taken aback, wide-eyed, or simply laugh it off as a bad joke. To Ryoma, it would likely seem like just another poorly executed jest. But the human heart was a genuinely mysterious thing.

Signus felt deeply ashamed of his own feelings for thinking this way, so he could never compromise regarding his martial arts. If he compromised, he knew that he would be betraying the expectations of his lord, the one who had shown him the way of the warrior. Because of that, Signus sincerely wished to meet an enemy worthy of the martial arts he had diligently trained in. He believed that it was his only role to prove his worth to his lord through the use of the skills he had mastered.

Now that my rhythm is back, I'll go ahead and do another hundred repetitions.

Before Signus realized it, a puddle of sweat had formed beneath his feet. It was preparation for the coming days.

The very next day, Signus's earnest wish was fulfilled when a scout from the Igasaki clan brought news of the discovery of a detached force from the O'ltormea Empire. To the west of Peripheria lay an expansive forested area. Beyond that, one could see the towering mountain range that separated the central and eastern parts of the continent. Local woodcutters, let alone adventurers hired for plant gathering, rarely ventured into the depths of this forest.

Said place could be considered a wild kingdom where monsters and fierce beasts engaged in a constant struggle for survival. However, the situation seemed different in the past few days. The beasts living there had instinctively understood this change, retreating into their dens, quietly waiting for the storm to pass. The sun had already set beyond the western horizon, and the veil of night was beginning to take over the land. Although a pale moon hung in the sky, conditions were not ideal for conducting reconnaissance.

Signus's enhanced vision allowed him to detect the movements of the army advancing through the mountain pass.

"I see... The absence of a military flag is suspicious. First of all, we haven't received any information about the Kingdom of Xarooda's army being in this area. So that must be the O'ltormea Empire's army that Robert mentioned," muttered Signus, who had hurried to the site after receiving the report from the Igasaki clan.

"Yes, I never truly believed that a separate unit actually existed... I am deeply ashamed of my lack of faith in Lord Bertrand's prediction," the shinobi said, bowing deeply and giving Signus a slight nod.

"No need to worry about it. After all, we've successfully found the detached force, haven't we?"

Signus didn't reprimand the shinobi because few people could do so after hearing such words. Although Lione had sent Signus out due to the possibility of the enemy advancing, she couldn't believe what

Robert had suggested.

I was half in doubt myself, after all.

Of course, it wasn't that he didn't believe—swinging the iron staff to knock the rust off his body made that clear—but he couldn't claim to have fully trusted Robert's prediction. Even Robert, who first perceived this separate unit's existence while defending the Ushas Basin on the front lines, couldn't explain why he sensed it. Naturally, it would be an unreasonable request to expect others to understand what he felt. However, such instincts were often the deciding factor in battlefield outcomes.

Well, there are a few reasons why Robert might have felt that sense of unease.

If he were forced to name one, it would be that the O'ltormea Empire continued using traditional tactics despite how much it was struggling to conquer the Ushas Basin. Given the vast number of troops the O'ltormea Empire had, it wouldn't be that unnatural of a strategy.

If your numbers are greater than the enemy's, it's better to simply charge straight at them. A poorly executed ploy could backfire. Signus had come to understand this axiom through years of surviving on the battlefield. Even though the O'ltormea Empire was superior in strength, they had no reason to cross the mountains and launch an assault on the royal capital when they couldn't even break through the defensive line in the Ushas Basin. The traditional tactics were the foundation of winning a battle. *But it's precisely for this reason that the value of a clever strategy arises.*

Shardina seemingly understood the psychology behind this principle and had devised such a strategy only because she had lived amid political machinations since childhood. It was a tactic that took people by surprise. Had there been no warning from Robert, her scheme would have likely succeeded.

In that case, the situation would have swiftly tilted in favor of the O'ltormea Empire.

If the O'ltormea Empire's separate detachment had successfully launched an assault on the royal capital of Peripheria, Xarooda's forces stationed in the Ushas Basin would have been forced to rush

to its aid to prevent the capital's fall. Capturing Peripheria would make the defeat of the Kingdom of Xarooda all but certain.

Meanwhile, the O'ltormea Empire would only need to respond to our movements accordingly. There was no need to even think about which side was in a better position. *The O'ltormea Empire doesn't even need to capture the royal capital.*

The ideal outcome would have been for the separate detachment to take Peripheria. But Shardina likely didn't expect that much of a victory.

No, it would be more accurate to say she didn't need that much of a victory.

Simply having the O'ltormea Empire appear near the royal capital would be victory enough, so the likelihood of them wasting forces on a reckless tactic was low.

War-weariness has been spreading among the nobles. If the O'ltormea Empire shows itself near the royal capital, even the citizens of the capital who are loudly calling for resistance would likely lose their resolve.

The situation was somewhat understandable because King Julianus I was bedridden and the young Joshua Belares had taken overall command of the kingdom's forces. Such psychological wavering could, at times, shake up a battlefield stalemate significantly. In that sense, the O'ltormea Empire's move could indeed be called a clever strategy.

"But once such a scheme is seen through, it's nothing more than a foolish plan," said Signus, displaying the smile of a predator, hungry for its prey. For Signus, this battle was the one he had been waiting for. The only thing that mattered to him was to crush the enemy before him with the iron staff gripped tightly in his right hand.

"All right, we'll proceed as planned."

"You know the length of the fuse, right?"

"Yes, there's no problem."

The locations for the ambush had already been selected, and preparations had been completed. All that remained was to confirm the actual route the detached unit would take, and that would mean

the annihilation of the O'ltormea Empire's forces.

Robert, that bastard... I was going to treat him to a drink if this turned out to be a wild-goose chase. But it looks like he'll have to treat me instead. Signus self-deprecatingly and involuntarily smirked at his earlier inability to trust Robert's prediction.

Unaware of Signus's thoughts, the O'ltormea Empire's detached force of ten thousand soldiers began their march toward Peripheria under the cover of night. Little did they know, this would be the start of the road to their doom. A few hours later, the moment came, and it came suddenly.

The first person to sense something off about the terrain was none other than Rolfe, who had been entrusted by Shardina with the command of the detached force.

Are we really going to march between those hills? Rolfe mused.

As expected of a battle-hardened warrior renowned as the Emperor's Shield, Rolfe instinctively felt something unsettling about advancing through the hills that loomed ahead of the marching column. Perhaps it was a kind of premonition. After all, the detached force numbered ten thousand soldiers. While not an overwhelmingly large force for a siege, it was by no means a small army. Thus, if they wanted to reach Peripheria while avoiding unwanted attention as much as possible, their marching route was inevitably limited.

Of course, there are alternative routes...

Choosing said routes would mean exceeding the arrival deadline set by Shardina, which Rolfe wanted to avoid at all costs.

When he received a report from the scouts he had sent ahead, confirming that there were no abnormalities, Rolfe ignored the unease he had felt. Was this choice driven by loyalty to the empire? Or was it arrogance born from commanding such an overwhelming force? Even Rolfe likely did not know the answer. Regardless, that decision would cost him dearly once the vanguard of the detached force entered the valley between the hills. Suddenly, the ground trembled with a deep rumbling.

In the next instant, an avalanche of timber and boulders came crashing down from the hills, descending upon the O'ltormea

Empire's army.

"Full stop! Halt the march!"

"Are there any wounded? Unit commanders, check on your men and report immediately!"

Amid the billowing clouds of dust, shouts rang out from all directions—a natural response. Rolfe received one report after another. Based on the reports, it seemed that the damage was less severe than expected. Around two hundred soldiers from the leading units had been caught in the landslide, but for a detached force of over ten thousand, the losses were not significant enough to hinder the operation. However, there was a major problem. The narrow valley between the hills had been completely buried under rubble and timber, making further movement impossible. It was too soon to say for certain, but clearing the massive debris and restoring a path for the army would take days, even if all ten thousand soldiers worked tirelessly day and night.

Was it just a coincidence?

That doubt flashed through Rolfe's mind, only to vanish when flames erupted from the forest to his left. As a rain of arrows poured down in tandem the rising flames, Rolfe realized that Shardina's strategy had been discovered. A battle cry echoed from the forest to the right. Simultaneously, countless figures emerged from the depths of the trees, thrusting their spears forward as they charged. These figures ruthlessly cut down the soldiers of the detached force, who were still disoriented from the landslide and falling debris.

"What are you doing?! It's an ambush! If you value your lives, form a defensive circle now!" Rolfe's furious roar snapped his soldiers out of their confusion, forcing them back to their senses—at least for a few of them. The only soldiers who managed to regain their composure and formed a defensive circle under Rolfe's command were those closest to him. At most, their numbers did not even reach five hundred. Even that formation was steadily shrinking, the clash of blades mixing with the screams and wails of the dying. *I never imagined there was someone capable of seeing through our mission's existence.*

Rolfe's mind swirled as it struggled to accept the reality unfolding

before him. For a commander of his caliber, this was an exceptionally rare lapse in judgment. Those who acted with absolute confidence in taking their enemy by surprise often found it hardest to maintain composure when the tables turned against them.

Just then, a sudden gust of wind struck Rolfe's face. He instantly threw himself to the ground, disregarding his pride and dignity. That instinctive reaction saved his life. Something containing immense force tore through the air above him at incredible speed. A deafening metallic clang rang out a moment later, followed by the sickening sound of an explosion. Rolfe's adjutant, who had been trying to restore order behind him, had his head obliterated. Something warm and wet splattered on Rolfe's face. As he wiped it away, he saw the red-stained fragments clinging to his skin—thin, stringy fibers mixed within. Judging from their texture, it was likely a torn piece of scalp from the unfortunate adjutant who had just taken Rolfe's place in death.

The death was the result of a blunt weapon's impact. Rolfe then noticed the man standing before him was drenched in red from head to toe. How many unfortunate soldiers had lost their lives to him? It was likely in the hundreds. Despite being covered in blood, he appeared completely unscathed. That alone was proof of his extraordinary skill. As Rolfe caught sight of the iron staff gripped in the man's right hand, he realized who was behind this ambush.

"I see... Judging from that staff, you must be one half of the Twin Blades."

"Aah. And you must be the Emperor's Shield, the one who stood as a bulwark for Emperor Lionel."

At those words, a tense expression flitted across Rolfe's face. Was it because he had encountered such a formidable opponent in an unexpected place? The feeling was rare for a warrior of his renown, known as the Emperor's Shield. But in this case, it was understandable. After all, the man standing before him was one of the greatest warriors in the entire western continent. In terms of reputation and accomplishments, the two could be considered equals. From Rolfe's perspective—having already passed the milestone of age fifty—Signus could still be considered a rising star,

part of a younger generation of talent. However, victory was not determined by reputation or age alone. And for Rolfe, facing an iron staff was a particularly troublesome challenge.

Can my shield withstand this man's blows?

That question flickered through Rolfe's mind and caused an unease he had never felt before. Considering the iron staff in Signus's hands, Rolfe's unease was not entirely unfounded. Of course, a shield was an excellent piece of defensive gear. Beyond its defensive capabilities, it also possessed the versatility to be used as a weapon. One could use its strength and weight to strike an opponent, or charge forward with it raised. In the hands of a skilled warrior, a shield could transform into a deadly tool of offense as well as defense. Moreover, unlike other armor, a shield could be easily discarded if necessary. This was a significant advantage on the battlefield, where unpredictability reigned. A person might remove their helmet in certain situations, but removing one's armor during a battle was nearly impossible. While a shield was undoubtedly a formidable defense, it was not an all-encompassing safeguard against every threat. Its strengths and limitations were clear, and its effectiveness depended heavily on the type of weapon wielded by the opponent.



Special caution was necessary when facing a blunt weapon with a shield, particularly when evading an attack was not an option and one had no choice but to block it head-on. Raising a shield to absorb an enemy's strike was an incredibly difficult feat. In many cases, the sheer impact could break one's stance. Merely losing balance would actually be a fortunate outcome. In the worst-case scenario, the force of the blow could shatter both the shield and the arm holding it. Rolfe's longsword was designed for one-handed use, meaning its blade was unfortunately relatively short. The longsword was barely half the length of Signus's iron staff. That meant Signus could strike Rolfe from beyond his reach, launching attacks from a distance where his enemy's sword could not retaliate.

This incompatibility was undeniable proof that Signus Galveria was Rolfe's natural enemy. When Rolfe realized just how poorly matched he was against this unexpected opponent, he cursed inwardly.

Damn it. Why is this bastard here? The question was perfectly reasonable. But there was no time to dwell on it. Amid the clash of steel ringing out around Signus and Rolfe, they locked eyes and ignored everything else for nearly ten seconds. But that was more than enough time for each to gauge the other's skill. *His gaze, his sense of distance... Just as the rumors say. No, he's even better than I'd heard.*

Rolfe's left hand tightened around the grip of the shield bestowed upon him by the emperor. He likely planned to block Signus's strike with the shield and launch a counterattack. It was an extremely orthodox strategy for a warrior who wielded both sword and shield. This fundamental approach fully used the shield's defensive capabilities, making it all the more formidable. Rolfe knew well that returning to basics was the surest way to increase his chances of survival.

Well? What will you do? I have no problem continuing this standoff!

There was no denying that Signus, with his iron staff, was Rolfe's natural enemy. At least from the perspective of individual combat, Rolfe was at a severe disadvantage. On a battlefield where countless

variables influenced the outcome, individual matchups never determined victory. Rolfe commanded the mighty army of the O'ltormea Empire, ten thousand strong. From what Rolfe could see, the Xaroodian forces under Signus's command barely numbered a thousand. The ambush had thrown the imperial troops into disarray, but the tide would inevitably turn in their favor. Quite literally, time was on Rolfe's side. And in this battle for time, his shield would be his greatest weapon. In the hands of a warrior as skilled as Rolfe, the shield's unyielding defense was akin to a fortress standing impervious against the storm. A reckless attack would be nothing short of suicidal.

To Rolfe's surprise, Signus had no interest in drawn-out mind games and chose to strike first. As he lifted his iron staff high above his head, Signus inhaled deeply. He delivered a textbook overhead strike. It was, without a doubt, a blow carrying his entire body weight and was an attack fueled by sheer, unrelenting force. Right after, the iron staff came crashing down upon Rolfe's raised shield with a deafening roar. The impact sent a metallic clang reverberating through the forest. Sparks flared between them, glowing crimson in the dim light. The sheer intensity of the clash even made the surrounding soldiers pause for a fleeting moment.

But Rolfe, undeterred, had blocked the monstrous strike. Was it his unparalleled skill? Or the fact that he had activated the Vishuddha chakra in his throat to enhance his body's fortitude? Either way, he had endured the attack. That wasn't to say he emerged unscathed. A sensation like a lightning bolt surged through Rolfe's entire body.

What a terrifying force...

Activating the Vishuddha chakra—the fifth chakra located at the throat—was proof of his mastery, a sign that he had reached the highest echelon of warriors. It was an ability reserved for those who stood as champions of their nations. And yet, Signus stood beyond even that as a monster who had transcended human limits. He had activated the Ajna chakra, the sixth chakra at the center of the forehead. Only a single level separated the Vishuddha chakra from the Ajna chakra, but the difference in power between the two was

like night and day. Even so, Rolfe had successfully blocked Signus's strike and only experienced numbness throughout his body, which was nothing short of a miracle. But Signus was not the type to grant his opponent even a moment's respite. He instantly twisted his iron staff, seamlessly shifting his stance before launching a savage horizontal strike, leading to another deafening clash of metal against metal.

Damn it... All I can do is deflect.

But before Rolfe could even catch his breath, a third strike slammed into his shield. And it didn't stop there.

A fourth blow.

A fifth.

A sixth.

One after another, Signus's iron staff crashed down upon Rolfe's shield in a relentless onslaught. Seconds passed, and already, over twenty strikes had been exchanged. Yet, the storm showed no sign of abating. It was nothing less than a hurricane of pure, unrelenting violence. Each deadly raindrop carried enough force to snuff out a human life with ease. Still, Rolfe endured and raised his shield, bracing against the storm, refusing to be swept away. One thought consumed Rolfe as he endured the onslaught: When would this storm finally end?

Why? How can he keep striking like this, without pause?

Normally, one needed a brief moment to reset their stance after a single attack. This was an absolute truth, whether one wielded a sword or a spear. Nonetheless, Rolfe understood that two or three consecutive strikes weren't impossible. In the imperial swordsmanship style he had mastered, there existed a technique where a downward slash could instantly reverse course—tracing its path back up to sever an enemy's head in one fluid motion. But such techniques required extraordinary physical ability.

Even then, successive strikes should always be weaker than the initial blow... Yet this... This isn't weakening at all. These attacks are only getting stronger!

From a purely mechanical standpoint, it was possible to maintain such momentum. Given the weight of the weapon, sustaining

enough force to shatter bone should have been nearly impossible without the masterful coordination of every muscle in the body. As Rolfe watched Signus's iron staff spin with terrifying speed, he finally understood.

I see... The staff is nothing more than a blunt rod. It has no edge. But precisely because it has no edge... If he keeps shifting his grip, he can fully harness centrifugal force!

Signus seamlessly rotated his own body, shifting his stance while alternating his grip, allowing him to maximize both ends of the iron staff in relentless succession. This was not just a circular motion. His strikes did not merely trace a simple ring. Rather, they weaved through the air in every direction—high, low, even diagonally. It was not a circle. It was a sphere. The compelling storm of destruction was a technique that perfectly capitalized on the nature of blunt weapons, showing the ultimate mastery of the iron staff. This attack also maximized the characteristics of a blunt weapon, like a staff. The staff, which had no blade, could be held in different ways as needed and embodied the essence of such a weapon. Unlike the rain of arrows or bullets, this relentless, fierce series of attacks would never run out of ammunition.

As long as Signus Galveria did not choose to stop or there was no external interference, this circle would never be broken.

What kind of man is he?

Nonetheless, Rolfe continued to hold up his shield, enduring the continuous strikes Signus unleashed, while seeking an opportunity to counterattack. Rolfe would have had no chance of winning if this had been a one-on-one duel in an arena. He was being relentlessly attacked from outside his range by a warrior with such skilled techniques. If this continued as it was, he would eventually suffer a fatal injury. That did not mean that Rolfe could injure Signus's body, even if he swung his sword. Still, he looked around for any means of escape.

If I can just endure this, the soldiers in my army who are around should come to my aid. If I can time it right, I might still have a chance.

Should Signus get distracted by those soldiers, even for a

moment, he could slit his throat in that instant. But one could argue that Rolfe's calculation was somewhat overly optimistic. Finally, a scream that defied words burst from Rolfe as another blow struck.

"Gaaah!"

He had failed to block the strike from the iron staff that Signus had swung horizontally. That was the precise moment that determined the battle's outcome. It was also when Rolfe paid the price for his defeat, with the shattering of the shield granted to him by the emperor and the crushing of his left arm. Rolfe crouched while Signus looked down upon him. The air of the battlefield, which should have been burning with intense fighting spirit, then froze.

Perhaps this happened because of the despair of the soldiers of the O'ltormea Empire, who had desperately tried to assist Rolfe.

"Protect Lord Rolfe!"

"Do whatever it takes to separate the two!"

Such cries echoed across the battlefield. They, too, must have understood that this was the last chance to save Rolfe's life. However, these desperate cries from the O'ltormea Empire soldiers were quickly drowned out by the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's soldiers, who had been positioned to protect Signus. Amid this melee, Signus slowly repositioned his iron staff and raised it above his head. It was perhaps a tribute to Rolfe, the warrior who had withstood his fierce series of strikes and never once broken his fighting spirit until the very end. And then, the moment finally came.

"This is the end."

Signus swung the iron staff down toward Rolfe's head as the latter knelt on the ground, groaning. The blow was unquestionably capable of taking Rolfe's life.

However, Signus's strike did not shatter Rolfe's head into pieces. The light, ringing sound of a sword's guard echoed across the battlefield. And in the next moment, the tip of Signus's iron staff flew through the air.

When had he appeared? Behind Rolfe, a single man stood. However, this man did not appear to be a soldier in any way.

He wore a cloak with a hood, but underneath it, he had silk garments adorned with lace, as a noble would wear. Though he was

a middle-aged man who seemed out of place for the situation, he had clearly saved Rolfe from mortal peril, based on how Signus saw the sword gripped in his right hand.

"Phew... I somehow made it in time, although I didn't intend to intervene openly. Setting aside the loss of soldiers, it would have been a bit troublesome if Lord Rolfe, who has His Majesty's deep trust, had been killed in battle," the man said, letting out a small sigh.

"Who...are you...?" responded Signus, feeling the man's calm confidence in his words. What churned in his heart was not the shock of having his beloved iron staff's tip cut off. *Absurd... How could I not have noticed him?*

In battle, unforeseen circumstances could happen at any moment. For Signus, who had survived countless battlefields, this fact had been engraved into his very instincts. Although he was frustrated at not having been able to defeat Rolfe, that problem didn't extend to becoming a major issue. Despite the chaos of battle, Signus had kept an eye on his surroundings. At the very least, he was not the type to overlook the possibility of interference when he was about to deliver the final blow. With the tip of his iron staff cut off, Signus was naturally on high alert. He took his now slightly shorter staff and assumed a middle guard stance. A dense killing intent oozed from his body. It was an oppressive aura so fierce that ordinary people would be unable to even move their bodies in response.

Even when faced with Signus's killing intent, Rolfe's savior remained unfazed.

"Hmm... This is exactly like the 'One Side of the Heart' used by Matsuyama Mondo. If a person's heart is weak, they will be like a frog staring at a snake and unable to move. Quite impressive, but it doesn't work on me," the man said, smiling faintly and shrugging his shoulders. Despite acting seemingly vulnerable, it was concerning that he showed no opening for Signus to attack.

Did he just shrug off my intimidation? And even while joking, he hasn't shown any opening for me to exploit... What kind of skill does

this man have?

Signus had never heard of someone named Matsuyama Mondo or the technique known as "One Side of the Heart." It would be strange for Signus, a resident of Earth, to know the name of Matsuyama Mondo, a famous swordsman from Rearth's early Edo period who was also known for his use of the Nikaido heiho style of swordsmanship. Signus could only raise his vigilance another level against the man who showed no concern whatsoever for his intimidation.

"I'll ask you again. Who are you?"

In response to Signus, the man slightly tilted his head.

"Hm... This exchange feels strangely familiar, though the roles are reversed compared to that time. Well, it's fine. It is quite hurtful when someone doesn't answer after being asked their name." The man smirked lightly while returning his sword to its sheath. He then easily scooped up the crouching Rolfe and leaped back, escaping from Signus's range. From the way he moved, it was clear that the man had enhanced his body through some martial technique.

At the very least, he must have activated the Ajna chakra, thought Signus. Without that chakra, one couldn't explain such movement, meaning the man in front of him was at least as strong as Robert or Signus. *Interesting...*

The exhilaration of meeting a long-awaited strong opponent stirred deep within Signus's body. Unaware of Signus's rising excitement, the man quietly lowered the groaning Rolfe to the ground. The man then elegantly bowed his head toward Signus.

"It is an honor to meet the famous Twin Blade Signus Galveria for the first time. My name is Akitake Sudou, and I serve as a sort of advisor to Princess Shardina. Please, allow me to be of service."

The gesture was elegant and followed noble etiquette. However, upon seeing this, Signus felt a hidden malice behind Sudou's words and actions. That was exactly what Sudou intended, as he deliberately mocked Signus by adhering to noble etiquette on the battlefield. Was this the confidence of a strong man? Considering the distance between them—nearly ten meters—it was not that surprising that Sudou had assumed he was out of Signus's attack

range.

With the tip of my staff cut off, it's shorter now. Even though he's enhanced his body with martial thaumaturgy, the distance is a bit too far to land a blow... Right?

Akitake Sudou had clearly read the distance well, which was why he remained calm, smiling, and completely composed.

But that's underestimating me a bit!

In that instant, Signus took a large step forward and closed the distance rapidly. However, that move was also within Sudou's calculations. The sneer that appeared on Sudou's face eloquently conveyed the confidence in his heart. Even though he was still out of range, Signus unleashed a full-powered strike from the middle stance. At first glance, it appeared to be a simple, straight thrust. But within it was everything Signus Galveria had accumulated through his years of martial training.

"Take this!"

Signus's body, which had been facing left, spun around as he shouted. At the same time, he supported the iron staff with only his right hand and thrust it toward Sudou's face. Only Signus could execute this strike thanks to his years of experience and overwhelming strength. However, even this ultimate strike was ineffective against Akitake Sudou. With a violent metallic sound, red sparks flew through the air.

"Hmph... That was quite interesting... Extending the range with your shoulder, huh?"

Those muttered words reached Signus's ears.

Did he block my strike?

Unbelievably, the strike delivered by Signus Galveria, a martial artist who had put everything into it, had been blocked. But Signus didn't freeze in disbelief. Instead, he immediately resumed his stance and glared at Sudou cautiously, remaining vigilant as he took a few steps back. The fact that he didn't launch a follow-up attack right then and there suggested that the shock he had received was significant. In response, Sudou raised the sword he was holding and displayed it.

"Your strength in supporting the iron staff with only your right

hand was impressive, but what caught me even more off guard was the twist you added to the thrust... Truly, my beloved sword is now ruined."

Sudou threw the sword he had been holding toward Signus. Though he claimed it was his beloved sword, he seemingly had no intention of having it repaired by a blacksmith. The speed at which the sword was thrown exceeded even the velocity of a major league pitcher's fastball. For Signus, it was nothing more than something easily swatted away.

"What kind of imitation is this?" Signus's voice contained what one could describe as disbelief or frustration toward the clumsy actions of a martial artist whom he had regarded as a worthy opponent. But that momentary lapse gave Sudou a chance to show a critical opening. Sudou seized the moment when Signus deflected the sword, then quickly rushed to Rolfe's side and pulled him into an embrace. "Since the situation is turning unfavorable, I suppose I'll take my leave here."

At the same time, light began to spill from beneath Sudou's feet. And in the next instant, Sudou and Rolfe vanished from Signus's sight like smoke. Just then, Signus understood everything.

"No way... That man was a thaumaturgist..."

Among the spells in the field of thaumaturgy were those capable of transferring people or things through space. This explained Sudou's sudden appearance and indicated he was not just a warrior capable of holding his own against Signus but also a high-level thaumaturgist who could invoke teleportation through nonverbal thaumaturgy. That should have been impossible, according to Signus's common sense. But no matter how much Signus's understanding of reality denied it, the events unfolding before his eyes remained unchanged. At that moment, one of the ninjas from the Igasaki clan called out to Signus.

"Lord Galveria, what shall we do next?"

After considering whether to pursue Sudou and Rolfe, Signus shook his head.

"Given that I can't gauge Sudou's ability as a thaumaturgist, pursuing them would likely be futile." Rolfe's head was a regretful

loss. But if a seasoned thaumaturgist activated teleportation, they could move several kilometers. *And if it's a thaumaturgist who can invoke a spell without even so much as chanting, moving more than ten kilometers wouldn't be surprising.*

It was unlikely that Sudou would be able to make many such jumps in rapid succession, but even if Signus began the pursuit now, the chance of catching up was practically nonexistent. Because Signus knew this, it would be a poor decision to chase after Sudou and his group. Moreover, there were still thousands of enemy soldiers remaining before Signus.

From a tactical standpoint, prioritizing them makes more sense.

If he could reduce the enemy's forces by even a fraction, it would still be a significant military achievement. For this reason, Signus gave the order, almost as if to sever any lingering attachment.

"Prioritize the annihilation of the enemy soldiers in front of us! Relay the order to all troops again! Everyone must die!"

As he gripped the now slightly shorter iron staff, Signus charged into the densely packed area of swordplay. He was fulfilling the role of the Twin Blades, seen as the trusted weapon of their lord, Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Meanwhile, a group heading west along the highway from the Kingdom of Rhoadseria was about to bring the war between the Kingdom of Xarooda and the O'ltormea Empire to a new phase.

Epilogue

Seven days had passed since Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria thwarted the O'ltormea Empire's surprise attack. Under the brilliant sun, an army advanced west along the highway, kicking up clouds of dust. The force consisted of ten thousand elite dark elves, part of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's army, dispatched by the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Because of their characteristic dark skin and black-dyed cloaks, from a distance, they appeared almost like the darkness of night itself. Leading this darkness was Nelcius, chief of the dark elves and known by the epithet Mad Demon. He was one of the most skilled warriors among the demi-humans who lived on the western continent, survivors of the ancient holy war. Their destination was, of course, the capital of the Kingdom of Xarooda, Peripheria.

As the army marched along the highway, travelers who happened to be in the way made sure to step outside the protective barrier and clear the path for the soldiers. No one knew what punishment they might receive if they hindered the army's advance. Of course, there was a chance that nothing would happen. Not all commanders leading an army had a strong sense of entitlement. When an army used the highway, it was common for an advance party to be sent ahead to inform people of the approaching forces. Commanders of armies, composed mostly of nobility, believed the lives of commoners held no more value than a stone by the roadside. For this reason, it was normal not to waste time punishing troublesome commoners by halting the march. Such commanders seemed to think that they couldn't afford the time to deal with such things, so it was unlikely bloodshed would occur so easily. However, one couldn't guarantee that the worst-case scenario wouldn't come to pass. In this world, commoners who obstructed an army's march were forced to pay large fines, or even accused of being spies for the enemy and

executed. One could say that it depended on the whims, mood, and circumstances of the strong. What kind of outcome one would face was as unpredictable as the roll of dice.

Regarding the army marching toward the royal capital of Peripheria, that was not necessarily the case. Even though it was an official contingent of reinforcements dispatched by the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, Nelcius and the others from the dark elf tribe honestly wanted to avoid creating unnecessary tensions due to race. If someone were to make trouble and try to obstruct the march, their basic approach would be to resolve the situation peacefully. The escalation of things could have repercussions that could reach Archduke Mikoshiba's family. Only those who were aware of the circumstances Nelcius and the others were facing could understand this reasoning. No one in the Kingdom of Xarooda knew of those circumstances. At least there was no one among the people traveling on this highway, so the weak had no choice but to protect themselves. And there was only one surefire way to handle it: to distance oneself from the place that seemed dangerous. The weak and those vulnerable to the whims of the strong had to take every precaution to avoid trouble. It was a piece of wisdom and a survival tactic for the weak in this strictly hierarchical world that also extended beyond the confines of this world.

The basic principle remained unchanged even in modern society. For example, avoiding areas with poor security to prevent becoming involved in crime could also be considered a legitimate way to protect oneself. In this world, simply stepping outside the house often meant no one could guarantee their safety. People living in this land deeply understood this harsh reality, and so few traveled merely for the sake of sightseeing. Despite this knowledge, it was not realistic to be on guard constantly. At times, some travelers would be captivated by the peaceful landscape, let down their guard too much, and fail to notice an army marching behind them.

This is truly a tranquil landscape. I heard that the Kingdom of Xarooda is going through a difficult time. Since this area is far from the battlefield, the war doesn't seem to be having much of an impact, a traveler thought.

The traveler walked along the unpaved road. His steps were incredibly slow, as if he were just on a casual stroll. Perhaps the peaceful weather and the farmlands cultivated by nearby villages spread out on both sides of the road made the area relatively safe. As a result, the traveler had not noticed the presence of the army behind him. The fact that there were no other travelers around might have been another reason he hadn't noticed the army's approach. But it seemed that the saying "When one god abandons you, another will pick you up," was indeed true. Fortunately, a farmer who noticed the traveler's presence called out to him.

"Hey, you there. Hurry up and come this way! Don't you see the dust behind you? You're going to get in the way of the march!"

The traveler must have noticed the voice. He looked around, searching for its source, and found a farmer standing under a large elm tree by the side of the road and gesturing toward the east. That was when the traveler realized the situation from the rising dust behind him. In a panic, he started running toward the elm tree that was conveniently close to the road. From there, he could quickly retreat to the barrier pillars if attacked by monsters or any other threat, yet he wouldn't obstruct the march. It was, quite literally, a close call.

"Ah, thank you very much. The weather was so calm, and the surrounding scenery was so beautiful that I couldn't help but get lost in it and didn't notice the dust," the traveler said, bowing deeply.

The farmer lightly waved his hand in response.

"Ah, no need to worry about it. Right?"

The farmer turned toward his wife, who stood nearby, as if prompting her to agree. In truth, for him, it was just a simple act of kindness to call out to the traveler. The good-natured farmer might have felt anger if the traveler had not said thank you. But when the traveler expressed his gratitude, it likely made him feel a bit embarrassed.

As such, the farmer's wife, wearing a straw hat and an apron, nodded with a cheerful smile. "That's right. It's already a tough time with O'ltormea being on the offensive. Everyone's on edge because of it."

The farmer nodded deeply.

"Well, that's the way it is. If we can avoid any unnecessary trouble, that's for the best."

The couple laughed, and their demeanor made it easy to tell that they were kindhearted, helpful people. Both seemed to be in their early forties, characterized by their sturdy build, suntanned skin, and friendly faces. They had probably been working the farmland that stretched out beside the road. There was dirt stuck to their faces and hands, and two hoes were leaning against the elm tree.

"For now, we'll take a break, so you should sit here and wait for the army to pass by," the farmer said.

"Yes, I'll take you up on that offer," the traveler replied. As they talked, the three sat on the ground. Somewhere in the distance, the sound of birds singing echoed, and a gentle wind parted the wheat fields. It was indeed the peaceful landscape the traveler had mentioned. However, the army that passed in front of the traveler, kicking up dust, was an entirely different presence, one completely unrelated to such tranquility. When the traveler, idly looking toward the road from under the shade of the tree, caught sight of the army, the first impression that came to mind was of a black tsunami. *What in the world is that? It's all black, isn't it? They must have dyed their armor black, but to do something so extravagant, are they some rich nobles?*

In the western continent, very few people actually tried to standardize the color of the armor they gave soldiers. This practice was probably rare across the entire world. Of course, from the standpoint of the military's appearance, it was an action that had some meaning. However, unifying the armor and helmet colors didn't directly enhance the performance of the weapons or armor. One of the only benefits would be identifying friend from foe. When considering cost-effectiveness, it was not really a practical choice. If one had to spend money unifying the color of their armor, it would be far more logical to increase the number of soldiers instead. Therefore, only a limited number of people could afford to implement such a thing. Elite units directly under the king, like the Royal Guard Cavalry or the Monarch's Guard, sometimes

standardized the color of their armor to distinguish themselves from others. But that was about the only case where it had been seen.

The only examples of such uniform armor that immediately came to mind were the Crimson Flame Knights, the elite force directly under Her Majesty Queen Helnescharles of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, and the Temple Knights, the elite unit under the direct command of the pope of the Holy Qwiltantia Empire.

There were nearly twenty countries on the western continent, large and small, each with their own territories. Said countries were home to hundreds or even thousands of noble families presiding over thousands more military units. Naturally, a mere commoner like the traveler couldn't discern all of them, and it would be unnatural if he could.

But a black-dyed army... I feel like I've heard something about that before. What was it?

As the traveler pondered this, he tilted his head. However, that question continued to smolder in his mind without any answer, lingering like a fishbone stuck in his throat. While the traveler's worries persisted, the black wave gradually drew near. The moment the black-clad soldiers passed in front of him, a jolt of electricity shot through the traveler's body. Yet, it seemed that he had not recalled the affiliation of the army before him. Such trivial concerns had already vanished from the traveler's mind, because the shock he had received was so great.

What is this, the atmosphere that this army exudes... And those uniforms...

The pressure exerted by the soldiers' presence seemed to have overwhelmed him. The traveler swallowed hard. He was nothing more than a commoner, and it was unlikely that he could truly gauge the strength of the soldiers. Even without the ability to assess their skill, he could sense something simply by looking at the soldiers advancing on the road in front of him. The words "fighting spirit" seemed most appropriate for the air they exuded. From the flawless formation of their march, the traveler, though a mere amateur, could easily tell that they were highly trained, elite soldiers. What surprised the traveler even more than that was the quality of the

equipment the soldiers were wearing.

Although I only caught a glimpse through the gap in their cloaks, there's no doubt that their gear is of extremely high quality... The armor is impressive, yet the shape of their spears suggests some degree of standardization. They must have had them made by a workshop. There's no doubt that a skilled artisan crafted them.

In this world, it was rare to see an army outfitted in such uniform gear. Providing standardized equipment to all soldiers would be challenging unless a nation were economically prosperous. After all, artisans crafted the weapons and armor used in this world. No matter how skilled the craftsmen were, maintaining identical strength and shape was a difficult task. Inevitably, there would be some variation in the quality of the equipment. Although there was some distance, the traveler's eyes were not clouded to the point that he couldn't tell. But the armor worn by the soldiers advancing in front of him was clearly of standardized quality. The traveler could tell since he was a merchant employed by the Dolban Trading Company, which was based in the trade city of Myspos and part of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. This company specialized in weapons and armor, dealing specifically with supplies delivered to the kingdom's armed forces.

Naturally, the traveler was confident in his ability to appraise weapons.

The spears the soldiers are carrying are of exceptional quality. And that armor... There's no sound of metal scraping, so it's likely leather armor focused on mobility. It's a texture I've never seen before. That's definitely not ordinary quality.

In addition, the traveler saw that the infantry and cavalry wore the same armor. This meant that the entire group's equipment was identical.

Cavalry and infantry wearing the same armor? Is that even possible? The mounted soldiers could be knights, but then that would mean that all the soldiers in this army are knights trained in martial thaumaturgy. How is that possible? He couldn't make sense of the reality in front of him. *There's no way they would foolishly have knights wearing the same armor as the infantry.*

Those who had mastered martial thaumaturgy were chosen beings beyond the scope of ordinary people. Simply put, the difference in power between the two was as vast as that of a cat and a mouse. But just as the saying "a cornered rat will bite the cat," implied, overturning this power difference was not impossible. If a cornered mouse gathered in a group to fight back, even a cat could suffer an unexpected loss. The same applied to a warrior who had mastered martial thaumaturgy and an ordinary commoner. The former often wore heavy metal armor due to this and as a measure to increase their chances of survival.

Of course, cavalry units focused on messengers or ambushes might sometimes wear lighter armor... But that's only in a very limited number of cases.

At the very least, it was unnatural for an entire army of ten thousand to wear nothing but leather armor. With that in mind, two possibilities emerged. *One possibility is that the cavalry and infantry riding those horses are all commoners and are not important enough to be considered crucial fighting forces.*

According to the western continent's common sense, providing conscripted commoners with leather armor would be better than nothing. A commoner's life was expendable in the world of Earth, although very few foolish lords would waste them recklessly. Since a lord could not collect taxes without commoners, it was only natural to take care of them to some extent. However, that didn't mean it would be worth the effort to train them and equip them properly. If the enemy had warriors who had mastered the supernatural power of martial thaumaturgy, no matter how much training or equipment commoners received, they would never stand a chance. A single touch of the sleeve of a skilled warrior's armor would scatter them. What would remain afterward would be the bodies of the commoners lying on the ground and the weak ones who had their life force drained, allowing their slayers to evolve into even more powerful beings. Many lords considered it a waste to supply commoners with proper weapons. In the end, it all came down to whether a lord placed more value on the lives of the commoners or the weapons they were provided. Thus, most lords would only issue

the bare minimum of weapons to the conscripted commoners. Leather armor was cheaper and easier to supply in greater numbers than metal armor, which made it appropriate as the equipment issued to commoners.

But that couldn't be possible... There was no way those soldiers were mere commoners. As the formation passed halfway in front of him, the traveler became even more convinced of that thought. *Wait a minute... Is every piece of equipment those soldiers are wearing dyed black? And not just that. The craftsmanship of their weapons and armor is remarkably intricate. This is not the kind of gear handed out to ordinary foot soldiers. And their sheer discipline and strength...*

The traveler might not have been as shocked if the quality of the soldiers or the quality of their equipment had been responsible for their formidable appearance. However, maintaining both the skill of the soldiers and the excellence of their equipment at such a high level was not as easy as it sounded.

Simply being wealthy did not guarantee such a balance.

Vast wealth would be necessary. I don't know which army this is, but it must belong to a tremendously powerful noble or even a nation. And to be able to acquire that many pieces of equipment of such high caliber... They must have serious connections.

Several hundred soldiers had passed before him, and every single one of them wore identical armor. The soldiers that followed were dressed exactly the same.

What merchant company provided the materials to outfit a force of nearly ten thousand soldiers? It's certainly not any of our clients. Wait! The crest! If I check their emblem...!

Realizing this, the traveler quickly shifted his gaze toward the banners the army carried. Even if he saw the emblem, his chances of identifying the army's affiliation were slim. After all, very few people in this world could recognize a military force just by the crest on its banner. Unless one was a general leading an army or a herald who specialized in tracking noble lineages and emblems, the average commoner was ignorant of such things. They might recognize the coat of arms of the lord governing their homeland or a neighboring

territory. That was knowledge essential for daily life, and the opportunity to see such emblems in person was far more frequent. However, it became significantly more difficult to recognize an army's standard when it came to the emblems of noble houses beyond the ones governing a commoner's homeland.

The total number of flags of the countries on the western continent was nearly twenty, making them relatively few in comparison. Even so, commoners who could accurately distinguish even those limited national flags were rare. In the most extreme case, there was even a nonzero possibility that someone might not recognize their own country's flag. For noble house crests, identification became even more difficult without specialized knowledge. The western continent was home to thousands of well-known or obscure noble houses. On top of that, the limited means of information transmission posed a significant problem. There were no televisions, internet, or photographs in this world.

That scope meant that unless one had seen an emblem in person, the only ways to learn about its design were to study a specialized book or try to make deductions from vague secondhand descriptions given by someone who had seen it before. Access to such specialized books was restricted to a select few, and it was unrealistic to expect someone to accurately identify a noble house's crest based solely on hearsay. The number of people who could recognize the emblems of foreign noble houses was even more limited.

Because of this, the position of herald existed in this world to track and maintain the records of noble crests. Despite knowing all of this, the traveler did not give up. He was too captivated by the overwhelming sense of peculiarity the army before him exuded. If an entire military force was uniformly equipped with gear impressive enough to catch the eye of a seasoned arms dealer, then his curiosity was only natural. Besides, his efforts were not entirely without merit or hope. Though he was a commoner, he was also a merchant belonging to a major trading company that conducted business with the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. He certainly possessed far greater knowledge and education than an ordinary commoner or

matching that of a low-ranking noble. As if answering the traveler's wish, a gust of wind suddenly blew through, causing the previously drooping military banner to flutter in the wind.

A snake coiled around a sword?

The banner that waved above the soldiers bore the emblem of a two-headed serpent, its golden and silver scales entwined around a sword. For those living on the western continent, this was a familiar crest. The coat of arms of House Mikoshiba was relatively well known to the people of the Kingdom of Xarooda.

During the previous war—now referred to as the first O'ltormea invasion of Xarooda—the young conqueror dispatched to aid their kingdom alongside the neighboring nation's hero, the Ivory Goddess of War, had been etched into their minds as a savior of their homeland. However, that was only true for the people of Xarooda. While the traveler was a resident of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, his position within the Dolban Trading Company mainly involved dealing with clients near the royal capital of Dreisen, located in the northwestern part of the continent.

As a result, he had limited knowledge of the eastern regions—something that now worked against him. Without any particular intention, the traveler unconsciously voiced the question that had surfaced in his mind. He gave no thought to what consequences speaking those words might bring.

"A black field, a two-headed serpent with golden and silver scales wrapped around a sword... And those striking red eyes. It almost feels like I'm being *watched* for real. But what army would march under such an eerie banner?"

His question was not directed at anyone in particular. Either way, it was a perfectly reasonable question for someone who had just laid eyes on an unfamiliar crest carried by an advancing army. The farming couple, who had been watching the military procession from the shade of the trees, answered immediately. The price for that answer was the deeply suspicious looks the couple now directed at him, which the traveler found rather unwelcome.

"You're a fool, aren't you? Just look at that flawless march and the emblem on the banner flying above them. It's obvious whose

army this is, plain as day, isn't it?"

The husband turned to his wife, seeking her agreement.



"That's right... That is none other than the army of Lord Mikoshiba, the very one who saved us in the last war. There's no mistaking that crest. The twin-headed serpent of gold and silver entwined around a sword on a black field!"

This was common knowledge for those living in the eastern part of the western continent, something so obvious that it hardly needed to be said. In truth, that distinctive crest was well-known not just in the east but even in the north and central regions of the continent. Within the Kingdom of Xarooda's borders, very few people wouldn't immediately recognize that emblem and the army it belonged to. Most travelers and merchants passing along the roads were well aware that these soldiers belonged to Archduke Mikoshiba's forces. That was precisely why the traveler's muttered words had been so unacceptable to the farming couple.

"You don't even know that? You're not from the east, are you?" With those words, the farmer's wife fixed the traveler with a probing stare. The warm, good-natured smile she had worn just moments ago had vanished completely. In its place, her eyes gleamed with suspicion and hostility. "You're a foreigner, aren't you? Where exactly did you come from? You're not one of O'ltormea's dogs, are you?"

Then, in one swift motion, the farmer's wife sprang to her feet and reached for the hoe that had been leaning against a nearby tree. Her movements were as quick and instinctive as a small animal sensing danger. When the farmer heard his wife's sudden outburst, his face tensed in an instant. Her words had also made him realize that the traveler before them might be a spy sent by the O'ltormea Empire. As if to shield his wife, the husband swiftly stood up and reached for his own hoe. Judging by the way his right hand tightened around the handle, he was fully prepared to take action depending on the traveler's response. His eyes burned with anger and hatred toward the O'ltormea Empire, their sworn enemy. A menacing air radiated from the couple, spreading into the surroundings. They responded as expected from the people of the Kingdom of Xarooda, a nation renowned for its martial spirit. Even ordinary farmers possessed the resolve to kill an enemy spy without hesitation. If anything happened to her husband, the wife would

surely swing the tool in her hands with all her might and show no mercy. And yet, they still hadn't attacked. Was it because they lacked absolute proof that the traveler was a spy?

"Hey! Say something!"

The husband thrust his hoe toward the traveler's face, threatening him. Behind him, his wife scanned the surroundings, looking for someone to call for help.

"He's definitely suspicious. Shouldn't we get someone? We ought to inform the lord!"

It was like a cornered mouse deciding to fight against a cat. But that was entirely understandable because the O'ltormea Empire's invasion constantly threatened the Kingdom of Xarooda. In such a situation, no one could expect a person to welcome a stranger with open arms. Fortunately, the area east of Peripheria had thus far been spared from the ravages of war.

However, that did not mean they were living in peace and safety. There was no guarantee that the hand of invasion would not reach their land at any moment. Unless one was utterly naive, no person whose country was under attack by an enemy nation would simply accept it without resistance. Although the farmers of Xarooda were known as warriors, they were not trained soldiers. Their combat abilities were limited. At the very least, their chances of standing toe to toe with professional soldiers were slim. It would be more accurate to say that any resistance would likely be futile. But this was not a matter of whether they could fight. They instinctively understood that if Xarooda fell, they themselves would not escape unscathed. The residents of this region had naturally grown more wary of outsiders than ever before. Given such circumstances, the traveler's offhand remark had been nothing short of reckless. Perhaps realizing this, the traveler hurriedly began making excuses.

"No, please, you've got it all wrong! I'm just a merchant from Dreisen in the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. I have business in Birminghen, a border town in the Kingdom of Brittantia. You're completely mistaken if you think I'm a spy from O'ltormea."

Upon hearing this, the husband and wife exchanged glances. Judging by the fact that their wariness did not wane, they did not

believe the man's words. Sensing their distrust, the man hastily continued speaking. His life literally rested on his plea; it was the ultimate test of the salesmanship he had honed over the years as a merchant.

"If I were really a spy, there's no way I wouldn't recognize such a famous crest! That would be far too careless, knowing full well I'd end up in a situation like this!"

The traveler fell to his knees on the ground and pleaded earnestly as a desperate appeal with no regard for appearances. He was on the brink of life and death, making his desperation logical. Perhaps overwhelmed by his intensity, the hostility emanating from the couple subsided rapidly.

"Well... I suppose, right?"

"That's true. You might have a point."

There was a certain logic to his argument.

To the O'ltormea Empire, House Mikoshiba—which had assassinated their court thaumaturgist, Gaius Valkland, and thwarted their first invasion of Xarooda—was a sworn enemy beyond all measure of hatred. It was inconceivable that a spy working for O'ltormea would be unfamiliar with the crest of such a bitter foe. Additionally, there was no plausible reason for them to pretend not to know it. That would only invite unnecessary danger, as had happened just now. Perhaps somewhat convinced by the sight of the man's pitiful plea, the couple finally loosened their grips on their farming tools. Still, the couple did not completely drop their guard and continued to watch the man with suspicion. It was clear they didn't fully trust him yet.

Once suspicion had taken root, regaining that trust wouldn't be easy. The farmer stood protectively behind his wife, watching the man silently with a probing gaze. The silence dominated the scene. How long had they been staring each other down?

Eventually, a deep sigh escaped the farmer's lips.

"Well... I suppose that's true... I apologize."

With that, the farmer finally relaxed his stance. He sighed again and glared at the traveler. It was as if he was reprimanding the man for his careless words, which had startled them. Because of this

tense confrontation, the three of them overlooked the cart that had blended in with the soldiers' ranks.

Unaware of this small comedy unfolding in the shade of the trees, the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's army continued their march westward on the highway. The dark elves had a mission: to carry out the orders of their lord, who promised to show them a new future.

"Heh heh heh... Who would have thought we'd be called into a war with the neighboring country? The lord has certainly made a bold decision," murmured Nelcius, who was commanding the army from somewhere near the center of the formation. His words held neither dissatisfaction nor unease. What did they contain? Perhaps it was the gratitude of a warrior welcoming the decision of his lord, Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Nelcius was a warrior who had earned the title of Mad Demon during the holy war, known as the battle for survival between humans and demi-humans. For the strong, the battlefield was never a place to avoid. For someone like Nelcius, the battlefield served as a second homeland. The battlefield was the only stage where the strong could unleash their sharpened skills and animal instincts without hesitation. And this applied equally to the spear he gripped in his right hand.

"Recently, I've only been commanding units, so I haven't had a chance to use you much. But this time, there will likely be moments when I'll need your strength. I'm counting on you," Nelcius said casually.

His eyes reflected the figure of his partner, someone he had fought alongside during the holy war. That figure was the spear that hung over the hearth in Nelcius's house. It had once been stained red with the blood of many enemies. It was Nelcius's companion, his other half—the demon spear, Gringlanzer. Nelcius had seen countless knights and warriors fall in the bloodbath of the holy war, thanks to the sharpness of his blade and spear techniques. Despite all that, this companion had spent hundreds of years in obscurity alongside Nelcius. He only used it to defend the village during the sporadic monster rampage that occurred once every few decades. Even that

danger had nearly disappeared now that his daughter, Dilphina, and the others had grown into full-fledged warriors. How unfortunate that must have been for such a renowned spear.

No matter how famous the craftsmanship or the maker, a weapon was still just a weapon. Its true value became apparent when it clashed with an enemy's bloodstained blade.

I've kept you waiting for so long, but I can finally wield you to your fullest again.

At that moment, Gringlanzer's tip reflected the sunlight as if responding to its master's heightened battle spirit, illuminating the surrounding area. It was a light of blessing for Nelcius, who firmly believed that the battlefield, where life and death were at stake, was where he truly belonged. The light was also a beacon signaling that a new phase of the O'ltormea Empire's invasion of Xarooda was about to unfold.

Afterword

Though I believe there are very few of you, it's nice to meet those who are picking up *Record of Wortenia* for the first time. To the readers who have been with us since the first volume, it's been a while. My name is Ryota Hori, the author. I'm pleased to have been able to deliver the twenty-eighth volume. Once again, it took quite a bit of time to write this volume. Allow me to take this opportunity to apologize to all of you. I am truly sorry. As you know, the previous volume was delayed due to various reasons, and it seems that had an impact on my pacing, throwing it off track. No matter how much I wrote, I couldn't finish the manuscript.

Even with years of experience as a writer, this was the first time I've experienced such a slump. But anyway, let's move past my grumbling and self-reflection and get to the usual highlights explanation.

This time, it's a continuation of the previous volume. The story focuses on the future of the Outlanders, the movements of the protagonist, and the war from the perspective of the Kingdom of Xarooda. And, of course, the mysterious person who has been scheming behind the scenes recently.

With mysteries upon mysteries, the story will unfold in ways that I hope will keep you excited. Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone involved in the publication of this work and to all of you who have picked up the book. If all goes according to plan, volume twenty-nine will be released in December this year, and I look forward to meeting with all of you again then.

I'll keep doing my best, so please continue to support *Record of Wortenia War.*

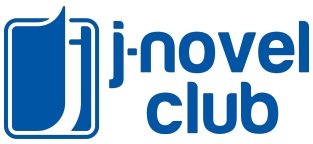
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by Ryota Hori

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