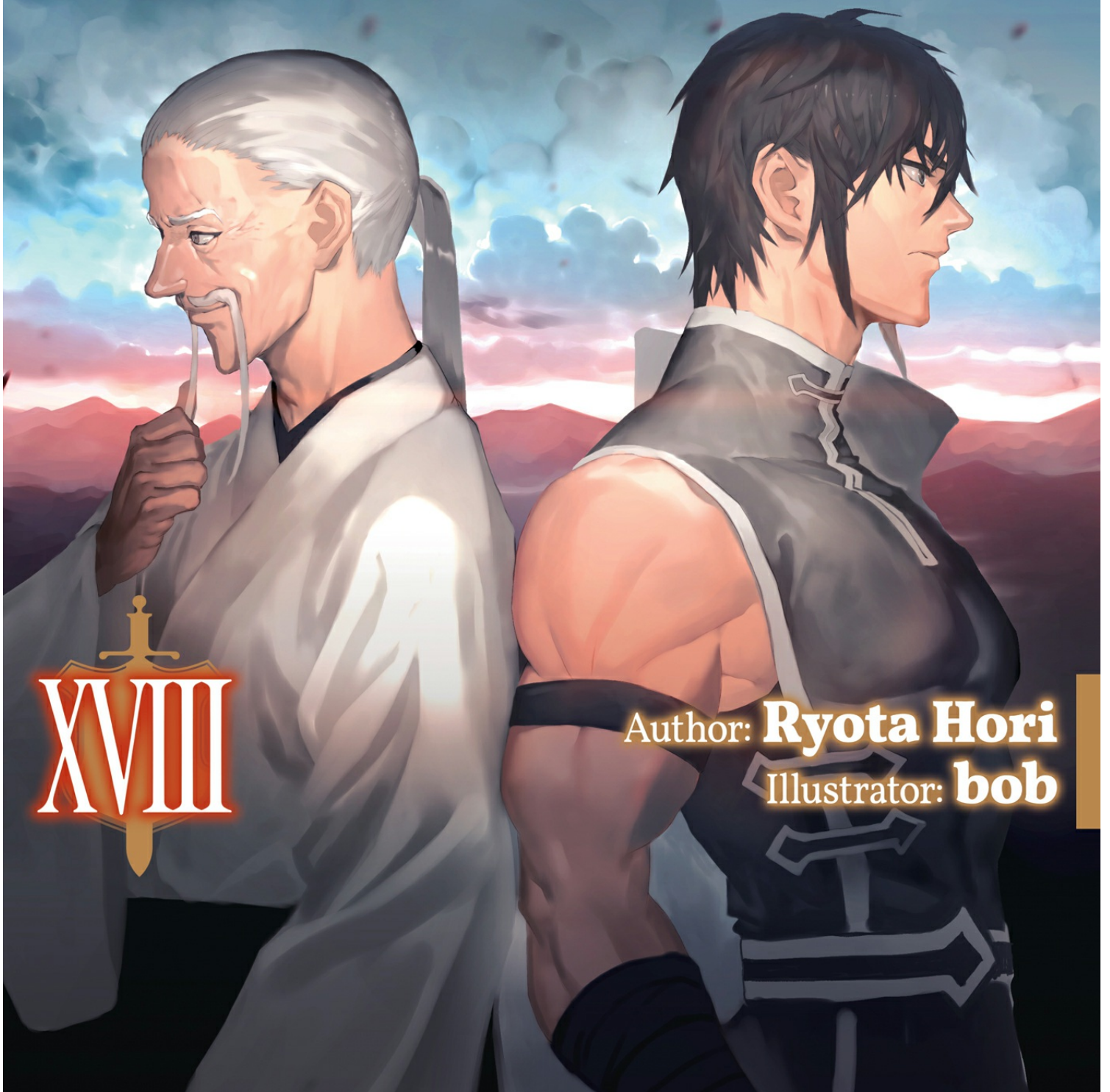



RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



XVIII

Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**

An anime-style illustration of two characters shaking hands. The character on the left is a young woman with long, dark hair and purple highlights, wearing a dark blue and purple outfit with a black bow at the neck. She has a determined expression. The character on the right is a young man with long, dark hair, wearing a dark blue and grey outfit. He is looking down at their hands. The background is dark and moody.

Both of them
knew that making
this choice was
their only way.

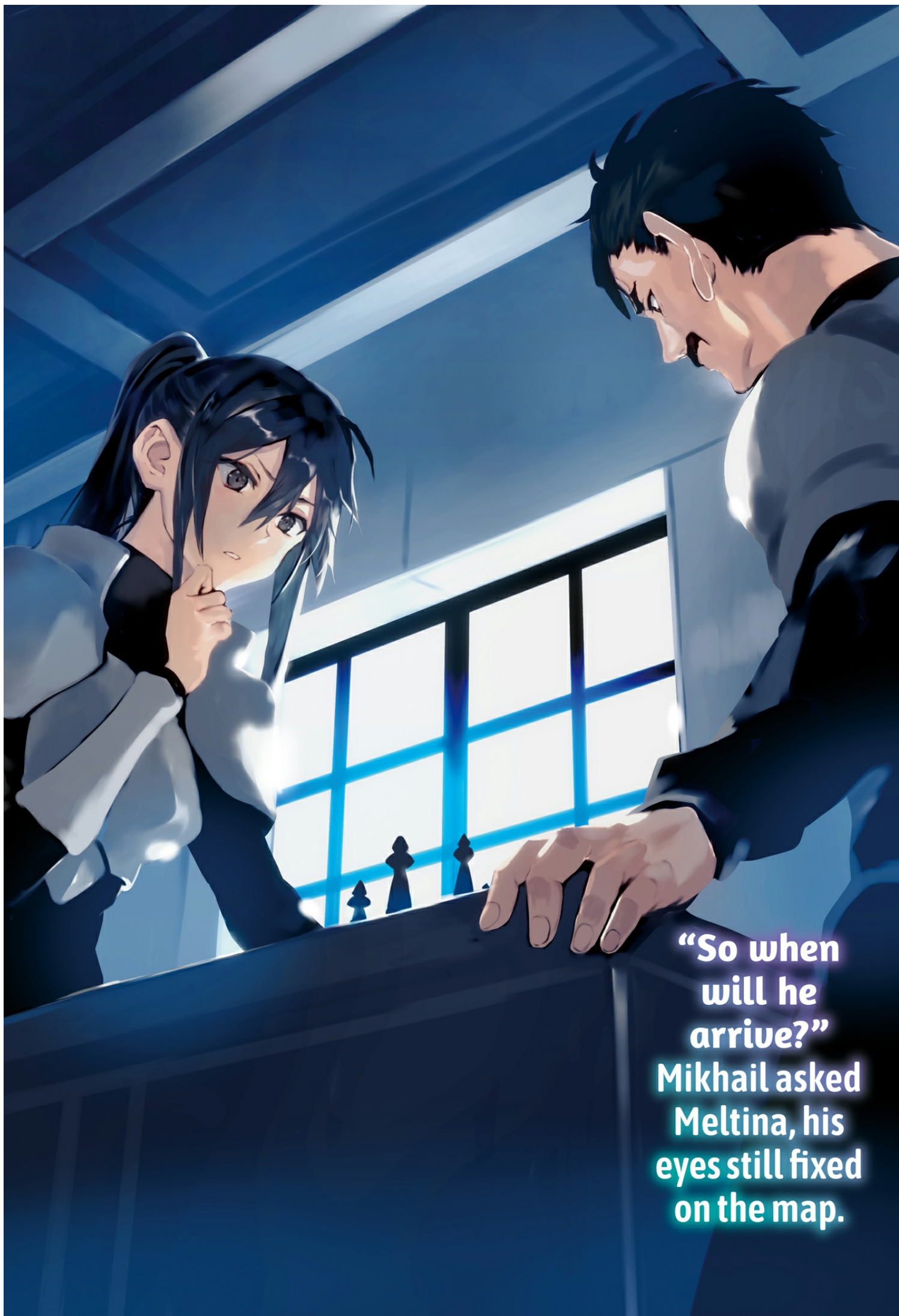
The two of them
glared at each
other for a long
moment, after
which they both
reached out to
shake hands.

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



While Signus
Galveria attacked
the western one.

Robert Bertrand
attacked the eastern
detachment.



**“So when
will he
arrive?”
Mikhail asked
Meltina, his
eyes still fixed
on the map.**

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

BATTLEFIELD INVESTIGATION

CHAPTER 2

DECEIVERS' DEN

CHAPTER 3

BONDS OF BLOOD

CHAPTER 4

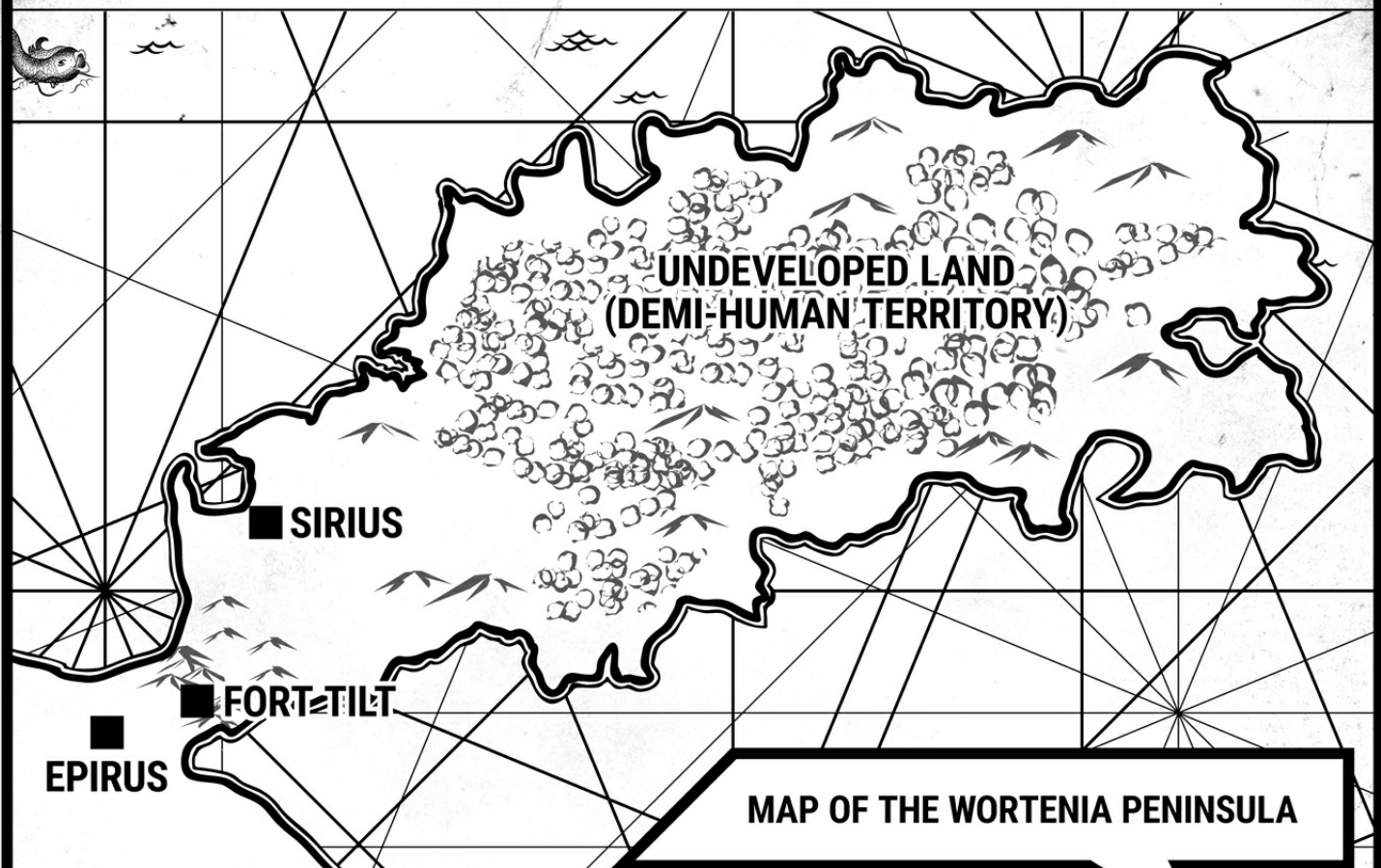
THE HEIR TO ONE'S WILL

EPILOGUE

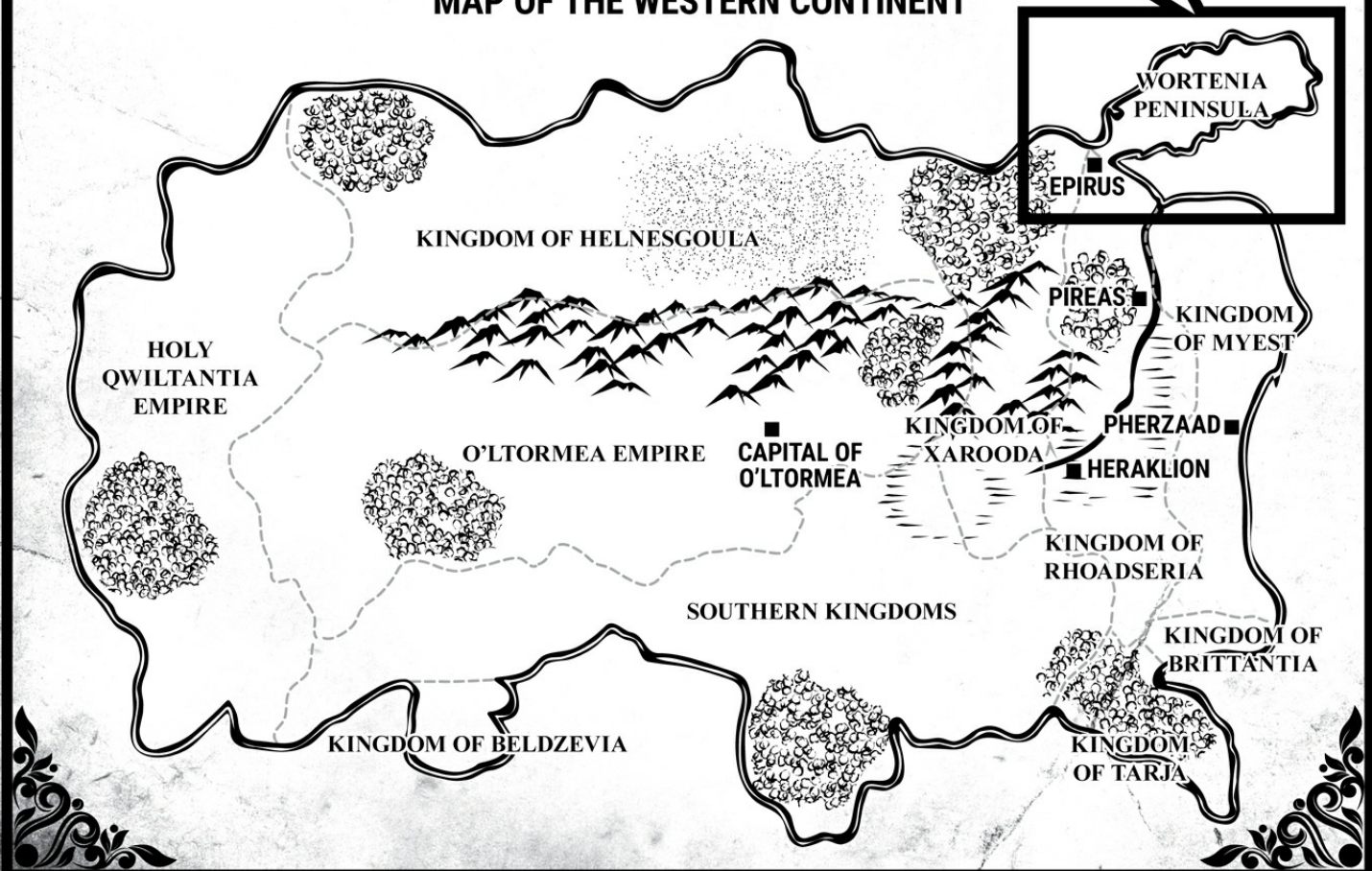
AFTERWORD



WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



MAP OF THE WESTERN CONTINENT



Prologue

The Kingdom of Rhoadseria was one of the three kingdoms that made up the western continent's eastern region. The country boasted a long and proud history, but other than that, it had very little to distinguish itself. True, it had vast plains and abundant water sources, which allowed it to become one of the few agrarian countries in the continent, and its soldiers were well trained and strong, but its national power was dwarfed by the continent's three great powers, one of which was the O'Itormea Empire.

Rhoadseria wasn't a feeble kingdom that would cave under any threat, but the collective opinion among those familiar with the continent's political landscape was that it was, at best, a medium-ranked country in terms of strength. But despite its lack of national power, its capital, Pireas, was a large, orderly, and imposing citadel city. Its streets, paved with flagstone, were full of people hurrying here and there. The architecture of the buildings displayed the city's history, and the structures were made of sturdy stone and plaster, likely as a countermeasure against fire. The entire city had been built in preparation for war.

In this world, the birth of new nations and the fall of strong countries wasn't at all unusual. Heroes who gained glory on the battlefield could climb to the rank of king through martial prowess, and it wasn't unheard of for even celebrated countries on the cusp of unifying the continent to collapse overnight from internal strife. Just in the western continent's south, a region known for its constant wars, several countries had collapsed in a matter of decades. Even the O'Itormea Empire, an impressive power that had expanded its influence and now sought to unify the continent, had only risen to such power since the current emperor, Lionel Eisenheit, took the crown.

It was said that fortune and misfortune tended to alternate, and that was true for entire nations as well as for individuals. Rhoadseria had carved out five hundred years of history in this world showcasing that pattern. It was on this day that Rhoadseria would welcome a man of remarkable exploits into its gates.

Very few celebrated this man's historic achievements though. The grand majority regarded him with confusion and dread. Sensing the coming storm about to descend upon the kingdom, they couldn't help but be overcome with anxiety, so they simply watched as the knights marched on, holding a banner for the God of Light, Meneos. Depicted on the banner was a cross, a scale, and a sword that symbolized the strength and desire to uphold the God of Light's will.

At the end of a dim alleyway was a tavern. Normally it was filled with the cheers of drunken patrons and the coquettish voices of its barmaids, but a different atmosphere surrounded the place today. Business wasn't quite as booming as usual, but only a fifth of its tables were free, and it was still early evening. A few hours remained before the tavern's rush hour began, and with the majority of its tables occupied already, the tavern seemed to be doing good business.

The tavern's slight decrease in customers lay with the inexplicably suffocating air hanging over it. The barmaids didn't go among the drinking men, instead standing against the wall as they watched over the patrons. A few of them were diligent enough to check on the tables, ensuring that the customers had enough snacks to go with their drinks, but no one seemed to particularly praise their devotion.

Indeed, not even those devoted girls were truly focused on work. Their eyes and ears weren't fixed on the patrons' orders, but rather on the conversation taking place. Their anxiety was to be expected too, considering what had happened the last few days.

In the midst of this oppressive atmosphere, a man seated in the center of the tavern whispered softly to his companion. He was a middle-aged man with a beard. He wasn't very tall, but judging by the thick, tanned arms jutting out of the sleeves of his linen shirt, it was obvious that he was a manual laborer working by day in the slums. The man sitting opposite him looked to be his colleague. They had likely come here seeking some respite after a hard day's work, but their expressions implied they weren't enjoying their drinks very much.

"They say the Temple Knights' Eighteenth Order has been dispatched as

reinforcements this time. Experts when it comes to hunting heretics, they are,” the bearded man said as he gulped down the booze in his mug.

Although the majority of the capital’s forces were stationed on the city’s outskirts rather than the interior, the citizens didn’t find it encouraging to see an army marching through the main street and holding up the church’s banner, especially since the knight order in question was an infamous one.

“The Colsbarga Grave Diggers...” the other man whispered, his voice thick with contempt and disgust.

The Church of Meneos’s influence spanned the entirety of the western continent, but how much power they exerted over a region differed by country. The three kingdoms of the east, which included Rhoadseria, were the farthest geographically from the holy city of Menestia, so the church’s influence over them was relatively weak. However, that only applied to those in power and authority, such as the nobility. The church’s customs were still a part of everyday life for the common citizen. Most people called on the church’s priests to oversee ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals, and in times of famine, they went to the church because it gave away food to the hungry. Priests also used the churches as schools, teaching orphans and the poor how to read and write.

In that regard, the Church of Meneos did have some degree of recognition in Rhoadseria, but that was the extent of its relationship with the country. To most people living in the three kingdoms of the east, it was nothing but a convenient tool. That much was clear from the fact that only one percent of Rhoadseria’s population periodically visited the churches for prayer.

That wasn’t to say Rhoadseria’s people denied or opposed the Church of Meneos or its teachings, nor did it mean that they didn’t practice its customs. The God of Light, Meneos, was one of the Six Pillars—gods worshiped in the western continent since ages past. He was, in fact, known as the strongest out of the six. The church’s scriptures stated that Meneos wasn’t the singular, absolute god, but in practice, the church treated him as if he were. This discrepancy had led to a decisive break between beliefs of Rhoadseria’s people and the Church of Meneos’s teachings.

It wasn't a matter of who was right or wrong, but merely a question of what aspect of the faith one chose to stress. Or perhaps, in an even more basic sense, it was a question of how to interpret the scripture—a personal, emotional decision. Unfortunately, such simple arguments could, at times, cause tragedies. That was a major factor in the rivalry between the three kingdoms of the east and the Kingdom of Helnesgoula.

At present, the Church of Meneos hadn't done anything to aggravate relations, but looking at the western continent's history, differences in faith had led to immense bloodshed, and not even that far back in the past. It was beyond the lifetime of those living in the present, but the memories of what had happened passed from parent to child to grandchild and were carved into Rhoadseria's collective consciousness.

Those memories included the tragedy of Gromhen, which had taken place sixty years ago. The ones who had instigated that incident were notorious to Rhoadseria's people, and no citizen could maintain their composure upon hearing the infamous name of the Colsbarga Grave Diggers. Not to mention, the citizens were already shaken by the royal edict that had been passed down several days ago.

"I know that, given the situation, we have no choice but to turn to an outside force for help," the bearded man whispered. "And if this is Her Majesty's decision, I can put up with the church being here. But of all people, that unit—the Temple Knights' Eighteenth Order? Calling those fanatics here? I don't know what the palace is thinking..."

"And it was just the other day that Her Majesty declared Baron Mikoshiba a traitor to the kingdom," the other man replied, nodding weakly.

They spoke in hushed voices because they couldn't afford for others to overhear their topic of discussion, but despite that, everyone in the tavern heard them. There was no mistaking the meaning behind their words either; everyone present felt the same way.

Just a few days ago, the royal edict condemning the Mikoshiba barony for treason had shaken many citizens to the core. Not only had the queen charged Baron Mikoshiba with the serious crime of attacking the House of Lords, but she

had marked the entire barony as traitors to the crown as well. In consequence, she had declared an expeditionary force would be organized to punish them.

The difference in status between the nobility and the commoners was vast. The affairs of those who lost their standing or came to power in the palace didn't directly affect the lives of the commoners.

But everything has its limits, the bearded man thought to himself, gripped by an inexplicable anxiety.

In cases like this one, when an army was being organized, the commoners would absolutely be involved. Forming an army and going to war required a great deal of manpower and supplies. The expeditionary force would need to gather equipment and rations, which would make the prices of goods skyrocket, and as a result, that would put a strain on the commoners.

There were already early signs of this beginning to happen. In the few days since the edict, the price of wheat had risen by ten percent. And that wasn't limited to just wheat; other foodstuffs, like beef and pork, were rising across the board, and the prices of weapons and medical supplies were beginning to go up too. The price of iron, used to make armaments, had all but tripled.

To the commoners, war was an atrocity that caused them no end of trouble, but to merchants with political ties, it was a golden opportunity to make money. For all the merchants were concerned, they were just out to make a profit, and the sky was the limit when it came to how high they could raise the prices. Nevertheless, to capitalize on such chances, one needed power and funds, and retail merchants who sold wheat to the masses weren't particularly graced with those assets.

"The butcher shop opposite mine closed up today," the other man said. "Apparently they have stock for a while, but they complained their wholesaler won't sell them anything."

The bearded man clicked his tongue. "Yeah, some of the bigger companies are buying up all the food. No retail butcher shop can compete with that. All the same, they're lucky enough that they didn't have to sell off their kid. The big question is, when will this end?"

Multiple factors could affect a business's survival, such as weather conditions,

plagues, and wars. The merchants, even if they'd never studied economics or business management, knew this at an instinctual level.

Rumor had it that this expedition was going to be a large one, so the citizens were gripped with doubt and anxiety. After all, this war would be held within Rhoadseria's territory. Whichever side won, the conflict would strike a critical blow to the kingdom, which had yet to fully recover from the civil war a few years ago.

And honestly speaking, I'm not sure how many of the crimes the palace charged Baron Mikoshiba with are true...

It wasn't that the bearded man assumed that Baron Mikoshiba was an innocent victim being hunted for false charges, but the capital's people weren't naive enough to blindly believe the palace's edict. There weren't many reasons a man regarded as a national hero would elect to rebel against his country. The people had only been told that he was charged with treason, but the details of his crimes hadn't been disclosed, which made the whole affair seem questionable.

"Baron Mikoshiba... Many of the nobles are following the palace's example and openly criticizing him," the bearded man explained. "It probably has to do with the hearing in the House of Lords from a few days ago, but who's to say how much of it is true, right?"

It was a simple question, but honestly speaking, the bearded man wasn't looking for an answer. The other man, however, grimaced. He realized how dangerous a topic this was.

This tragedy had taken place in the House of Lords, the cornerstone of Rhoadseria's law, and if the nobles caught wind of this conversation, the two men could be in mortal danger. But even so, the bearded man kept talking. It was because this was such a dangerous topic and because the facts were so unclear that they couldn't help but discuss it. At the same time, the topic wasn't too dangerous to discuss in a back alley tavern over drinks, so the bearded man kept his eyes on their surroundings and kept his voice down.

"The rumors I've heard say there were a lot of bodies back there. You heard about that?"

The law in this world was quite limited and could do very little to maintain public order. Once one left the cities, the highways were a dangerous place where monsters prowled and bandits lay in hiding. It was different when crimes took place inside the cities, though. Outside the wall of Pireas were slums, where public order was barely a thing, but incidents of this scale didn't happen even there.

Regardless of what the truth is, there were dozens of victims. Things like that don't happen often.

It was natural that those unrelated to this incident would be curious about it. That said, this exchange should've been nothing but idle chatter at a nighttime tavern. For all the bearded man was concerned, he was only speaking of rumors, but his friend's reaction to his question took him by surprise. His friend seemed frightened by something.

"What...? Don't tell me you actually know something," the bearded man prodded.

His friend hesitated a moment, then in a grave voice said, "Apparently, what they say is true. The leader of the House of Lords, Marquis Halcyon, and all the major nobles under him were murdered. Except..."

"Except what?" the bearded man asked.

His friend clammed up. He knew what he was about to say was true, yet he hesitated because he knew the danger in saying it. He only wavered for a second, though.

"From what I've heard, the truth is that the House of Lords tried to set Baron Mikoshiba up, and he killed them in retribution..."

The bearded man's eyes widened in surprise.

"They say the nobles criticized Baron Mikoshiba's war with Count Salzberg," the other man continued. "Apparently, Her Majesty did the same, and this was why the hearing was held. But Baron Mikoshiba presented evidence of Count Salzberg's corruption."

The bearded man laughed. The northern regions, which had been under the rule of Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north, weren't that far from

Pireas. Therefore, the count's reputation had reached the ears of those living in the capital, so the idea of Count Salzberg being a corrupt noble didn't strike him as implausible.

Seeing the bearded man's reaction, the other man went on. "But Marquis Halcyon and the House of Lords publicly dismissed Baron Mikoshiba's claims and focused only on pursuing his crimes. Doing that incurred his wrath and brought down his retribution. That's the truth of this incident, from what I've heard."

The bearded man picked up the bottle of ale on the table and took a swig before looking up at the ceiling and heaving a sigh. His mind was occupied with thoughts of disillusionment with his own country and disgust for the nobles who'd tried to eliminate a hero. For the common citizen like him, this whole affair seemed far out of reach. Nonetheless, hearing this story of how a man he admired fell from grace filled him with emotion.

"I see... It does sound likely. The nobles never did like him—that much is fact—but..." The bearded man shook his head and directed a questioning gaze at his friend. Something about his story felt off. "Where did you hear this, anyway? How do you know all these details?"

His friend's story seemed plausible, and normally the bearded man wouldn't have questioned it, but this time it included undisclosed information about the nobles' conspiracies, and that changed things.

No, it's too detailed to be a rumor.

His friend knew too much for this to be just hearsay he'd heard in the tavern, so it made sense that the bearded man was suspicious.

"I heard about this from my cousin," the man explained in a hesitant tone. "She heard about it from a colleague of hers, who works as a maid in the House of Lords' kitchen. That's how she knows all these details."

"I see... Right, come to think of it, you did mention your cousin works there."

The other man nodded. Most nobles didn't pay much mind to what their servants did. That didn't mean servants could freely reveal blatantly top secret information, but there wasn't much security when it came to small, fragmented

bits of information. Thanks to that, servants were much more well-informed than their employers realized, and this was one case of that.

“Yeah, I can believe that,” the bearded man said, taking another swig from the bottle. Even with no solid proof, that explanation made the story credible enough.

The other man nodded, reached for his own bottle, and sighed.

Seeing this, the bearded man jokingly said, “But thanks to that upstart, life in the capital became much easier. It’s a shame, really.”

Ryoma Mikoshiba was known as the Devil of Heraklion, and he had the worst possible reputation among the Rhoadseria’s’s ruling class, but the common class regarded him with a mix of fear and awe. Not many commoners viewed him negatively. In fact, they regarded him highly because he wasn’t as tyrannical as most nobles were.

Of course, since his domain in the Wortenia Peninsula was a no-man’s-land with no real population to speak of, even if Ryoma had chosen to act like a despot, he’d have had no one to exploit to begin with, and that came before the man’s kindness or his personality. Only those involved with Ryoma could know that, though.

While the nobles saw him as an upstart and scorned him, the commoners only thought the better of him because he wasn’t concerned with the nobles’ prejudices. The fact he didn’t believe his bloodline was superior to others’ meant he probably wasn’t prone to the bigoted approaches typical of nobles.



Despite all that, there was another reason why Rhoadseria's commoners favored Ryoma, and that was the major financial power that the Mikoshiba barony held. The Wortenia Peninsula, which jutted out of the western continent's northeastern shores, was a key position in the northern sea routes. Thanks to its location, it could trade with other major countries, like the Holy Qwiltantia Empire or the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, and recently it had even opened trade with other continents. Wortenia wasn't a match yet for the Kingdom of Myest's greatest trade city, Pherzaad, but it was certainly solidifying its status as an important relay point between the continent's northern and eastern regions.

Thanks to that, the Mystel Company, which was based in the citadel city of Epirus, was able to expand its trade sphere as far as the capital. Qwiltantian teas, spices imported from the central continent, and other such eye-catching goods were becoming a part of life for people in the capital.

"Teas and spices becoming cheaper is a good thing, but..." his friend began.

The bearded man nodded gravely. Spices had been available in Rhoadseria's markets even before Wortenia's development, but there weren't a lot of them in circulation. Spices weren't unknown to the capital's people, but they were rare and expensive luxury items. The biggest reason for this was a lack of ports in Rhoadseria. Most of the luxury items, such as teas and spices, in circulation in Rhoadseria's markets were bought in bulk from Myest's port in Pherzaad, from where they were carried to Rhoadseria by overland routes.

Needless to say, these overland caravans were limited in their capacity compared to ships, which meant higher prices. However, once these commodities had started being carried in from Wortenia to the citadel city of Epirus, where its merchants sold them to the capital, things had begun to change. The fact that the goods didn't need to cross any national borders was especially important.

The Kingdom of Helnesgoula had made a treaty of commerce with the three kingdoms of the east under Ryoma Mikoshiba's initiative. This treaty created a uniform tariff rate across the four kingdoms, as well as standardizing the border crossing procedures, increasing profits for all four countries involved. The

nobles across all these countries were equally affected by the boons of the treaty.

Naturally, standardizing the tariff rate did lower tax revenue, and not being able to freely impose tariff rates influenced domestic industries within one's own country. Nevertheless, with imports and exports increasing, business across Rhoadseria as a whole saw an upturn, and the simplification of border crossing procedures saved merchants time and costs. As the countries grew wealthier, those benefits trickled down to the lower classes as well.

That makes our lives much easier.

The bearded man's job was loading and unloading crates for a company that dealt in spices and crops, and his wage had seen a considerable increase due to the amount of traded goods increasing, resulting in a shortage of laborers. Thanks to that, he was able to afford expensive luxury items like teas and spices that had been out of his reach before.

Everyone in the four countries—be they nobles, merchants, or commoners—profited from this arrangement. Still, not everyone profited from it equally. While overall costs went down, most nobles didn't have ports in their domains, so the majority of goods still came from Myest. That applied to most nobles—except for Baron Mikoshiba, who owned a port within the Mikoshiba barony.

Baron Mikoshiba's financial status had skyrocketed. Using a sea route to bring Qwiltantian and Helnesgoulán wares into Rhoadseria meant he could cut the costs of importing from Myest. As a result, high-quality goods were sold in Pireas in high volume and at reasonable prices. It had only been a few months since the Mikoshiba barony occupied northern Rhoadseria, but even in that short period of time, it had improved the quality of the commoners' lives in the capital.

Everyone still profits from it, even now.

But in the future, that could change. The stronger the Mikoshiba barony became, the more it could control the circulation of goods all over Rhoadseria. If that were to come to pass, the nobles and the purveyors to the government that received their protection could end up experiencing a true hell. Anyone savvy in the ways of the world could imagine that future, and the nobles

couldn't just ignore that possibility.

That's probably why the nobles hated him so much.

They likely first antagonized Ryoma just for the fact that he was a commoner who rose to noble status, but then the financial might the Mikoshiba barony had amassed struck terror into the nobles' hearts. It was quite possible this fear was one factor behind this series of incidents.

It happened because it had to happen.

But that didn't make these events easier to accept.

"Oh, and the cost of pepper and cinnamon has fallen too." The bearded man shook his head and shrugged. "And we've been getting in new things we've never heard of before, like star anise and thyme. The lady living next door, who runs a diner, told me that. I met her today, and she said this incident might make it impossible to get things anymore. Apparently, the Mystal Company is selling the branch they were about to build in the capital."

"I hear the same thing about salt," the other man said. "There weren't as many corrupt merchants who were overselling its price, and it made life much easier."

They both sighed. It felt like just when their daily lives were starting to improve, shadows enshrouded them once again.

For the commoners, who were struggling to make a living every day, this was much more important than the country's survival or dealing with the Mikoshiba barony's rebellion. In fact, so long as their taxes were low and costs of goods remained cheap, they didn't care one bit who ruled over them. If they believed the Mikoshiba barony's rule was more beneficial to them, they wouldn't hesitate to leave this kingdom behind them.

At present, however, this was merely a fantasy. Since the queen has already branded them as traitors, it was highly unlikely she would reinstate the Mikoshiba barony's rights. If the northern expedition were to succeed, the Mikoshiba barony would be completely slain, and all those related to them would be executed as well. Included in that were the Mystal and Christof Companies, who helped back the Mikoshiba barony financially.

Officially speaking, the Mystel Company and the other members of the trade union weren't considered subordinate to the Mikoshiba barony, but they clearly weren't unrelated, and the nobles weren't naive or foolish enough to spare them. They had been willing to cooperate with Ryoma and therefore would be marked as enemies to the kingdom.

They'll either be slaughtered or squeezed for all they're worth, but either way, they won't be able to continue doing business.

If that were to happen, then once the northern expedition ended, the prices would spike back up, and life for the capital's commoners would become harsher than ever before.

"But speaking of... When did you start regarding Baron Mikoshiba with so much respect?" the bearded man asked his colleague. "You used to call him a whelp and an upstart." It had been troubling him for a while, but it was only now that he found the right time to ask. Once he'd realized this, he naturally became very curious as to what had triggered this change.

His friend scratched his head awkwardly. "Well, I hate the nobles as much as the next guy, but the more I hear about that man, the more I start thinking he's not like the other nobles in this country."

"You..." the bearded man looked at him, taken aback.



His friend was talking about a criminal who'd been branded a traitor. Respecting such a man was reckless and dangerous. But at the same time, the bearded man could relate.

The commoners weren't fools. It was only because they understood that there were class differences that they toadied up to the nobles. In actuality, though, most commoners loathed them. Taverns like this one were places where commoners let out their pent up aggression toward nobles. Still, they were just as able to make out who was truly worthy of their admiration, and the other man recognized Ryoma Mikoshiba as a noble worthy of respect.

"What's going to happen to this country next?" the bearded man wondered, looking up to the ceiling.

There wasn't much they could do to change the fate of the kingdom. They could predict the coming of the storm, but all they could do was hold on and try to weather it. Most of the people in this tavern felt the same way too. People seated at other tables spoke quietly of similar topics.

That was why they gathered in this tavern to drink—to look away from the bitter, infuriating reality they lived in, at least for a short while. It was true for the patrons as well as the employees, who currently had little to do. That was why none of them noticed the one person in the tavern who felt differently.

One woman stood against the wall among the barmaids, a smile on her lips.

Zack Mystel and his merchant union really are skilled. They know when to pull out before things get dangerous.

Any normal merchant would hesitate to leave the capital and its economic sphere behind. After all, profits were beginning to rise. Their money tree was finally starting to bear fruit, so most people would think twice before throwing this chance away.

If the expeditionary force, which was rumored to have two hundred thousand soldiers, were to be dispatched, northern Rhoadseria would be reduced to ashes. Rationally speaking, there was no place for business at a time like this, but it would be some time before Rhoadseria's army marched. Most merchants

would linger, doing business until the very last second with the hope of making a bit more coin before their time was up.

Besides, if the Mikoshiba barony were to lose the war, the kingdom's army would no doubt crush it, and the consequences of that would extend to the Mystel Company as well. To overcome that, the Mystel Company would need all the coin they could get.

Nonetheless, Zack Mystel chose not the profit that lay right in front of him at present, but the profits he could make in the future. Retreating from the capital's business sphere was part of that.

I guess the lord wasn't wrong to trust him as a merchant.

Even after he'd sent his daughter Yulia to marry into House Salzberg, Zack Mystel had used her marriage in his favor. He had Yulia run House Salzberg's finances, allowing his firm to build up a fortune. This was a testament to his abilities as a businessman with political ties. And right now, those abilities were about to eat away at Rhoadseria, under Ryoma Mikoshiba's orders. Zack Mystel's actions right now were only the first steps in laying that groundwork.

Everything is going according to the lord's plans. That just leaves...

The woman observed her surroundings, holding her tongue as she kept her mission in mind. Such was her role, and the role of her clan—those who moved as shadows.

Chapter 1: Battlefield Investigation

That night, in a corner of the palace, a man and a woman sat around a table. Spread out on top of it was a detailed map of the Cannat Plains, spanning the regions northeast of the capital. The map was dotted with game pieces that stood for armies on the battlefield.

The man's name was Mikhail Vanash, a confidant and chief vassal of Queen Lupis Rhoadserians of Rhoadseria. Sitting opposite him was Meltina Lecter, who had been promoted to the role of defensive commander of the capital region.

This secret meeting between them was not a peaceful one. These two had the combined might of the Rhoadserian army at their disposal, and if they were to join forces, they could easily seize the capital itself. However, the power and authority they were graced with also meant there was no end to their concerns, and their important positions meant they had much to do. This meeting was so they could discuss how to deal with the cause of their troubles.

"So when will he arrive?" Mikhail asked Meltina, his eyes still fixed on the map. His voice carried a hint of displeasure, for whatever reason.

The agreed upon time had long since passed, and given Mikhail's and Meltina's positions, tardiness went beyond simple discourtesy. They were people of high standing, and normally they would have already left after spending so long waiting for no reason—especially considering who they were waiting for. Even so, Meltina couldn't know everything that man was doing.

"Who's to say?" she said, shrugging. "He has a way of coming and going wherever and whenever he pleases. He may be plotting some kind of scheme as we speak."

Mikhail clicked his tongue, returning his eyes to the map. He knew that pressing Meltina for answers would get him nowhere.

Seeing Mikhail's attitude, Meltina let out a sigh.

If he's going to run late, he could at least send a messenger saying so. We're

busy people. What a troublesome man.

Meltina had her own share of complaints about the man Mikhail spoke of, and it wasn't limited to his wasting their time. Akitake Sudou was overall a strange man whose allegiances were hard to place.

In the previous civil war, he'd been connected with the nobles' faction as Princess Radine's associate, but once the war began, he went against his faction and served as mediator when Duke Gelhart swore allegiance to Princess Lupis. After all that was over, he walked through the palace halls with his head held high, building connections with the current regime.

His attitude was so unfazed and nonchalant that Meltina could no longer complain about it; she simply regarded it with awe. It was for this reason that Mikhail, who abided by his knight's honor, couldn't bring himself to get along with Sudou.

If this was Sir Mikhail as he was just a few years ago, he'd have stormed out of the room by now. At worst, he'd have even drawn his sword.

Meltina herself realized that Sudou was worth exploiting, but she didn't find interacting with him a pleasant experience. That was only half the reason Mikhail was so upset, though. They'd entered this room more than ten minutes ago, and for all that time, he'd been staring at the pieces on the map—for another reason altogether.

That makes Sudou's tardiness seem like nothing in comparison.

Meltina felt much the same way. During the evening party at Count Salzberg's villa, she had tried to have Ryoma Mikoshiha assassinated, but the news of the failed attempt hadn't come as much of a surprise. They had planned the assassination out accordingly, but it was mostly meant to keep Ryoma in check. Had it worked, it would have been a great boon to Meltina, but its failure wasn't a major problem.

It was the same for the plan they'd set into motion on the Cannat Plains. It was, ultimately, only a stepping stone toward the next major battle. However, things were very different if they didn't deal much damage to the Mikoshiha barony.

No matter how many times I look at it, it's still hard to believe.

The pieces on the board were set in the exact positions the units were deployed in during yesterday's battle. They had questioned the surviving soldiers time and again to produce a report, which Mikhail had used to set the pieces now. It was, in all likelihood, a very faithful recreation.

No matter how Meltina examined the map, the units' layout seemed to be without fault. The kingdom's knights, led by Clay Nilsen, had had an overwhelming advantage. Of course, she could only assume that based on the positioning of the pieces, which didn't reflect factors like the soldiers' morale or the commander's state of mind. That made it difficult to draw any decisive conclusions based on just that, but she could confidently say that this formation should not have taken a one-sided defeat. Mikhail, who was looking at the map with a bitter expression, probably saw the same thing.

Nonetheless, the reality of what had happened differed from their predictions. Their calculations had ended up shattering like delusions against the facts of the battle.

We gave Nilsen minimal forces because we didn't want him to win by sheer numbers, but still, with this formation, I never thought the enemy would deal this much damage to him.

When they had prepared for this operation, Meltina and Mikhail had decided to take a gamble by limiting how many troops they mobilized. They decided to use only the Fifth Knight Order, led by Captain Nilsen. There were a few reasons for this.

First, strategically speaking, they had to minimize their numbers as much as possible to ensure that the enemy didn't pick up on the presence of the ambush forces lying in wait. If they had mobilized a larger army, big enough to wipe out the enemy, then the enemy's forces would have easily detected them and avoided the ambush.

Likewise, it would have been problematic if the main force, which served as a buffer to halt the enemy army's march, had been too large. If they had shown their numerical advantage, it was likely that Ryoma would have instantly ordered a retreat.

At the same time, they didn't want to resort to asking the nobles from the surrounding regions for military aid. Since Queen Lupis sought to build a regime where the monarch held absolute power, creating any outstanding debts with the nobles would have placed her in a disadvantageous position.

The choice to limit Nilsen's forces was both tactically and politically sound, but that aside, Meltina and Mikhail had had a bad feeling about Clay Nilsen.

I don't want to say that this is all Sir Nilsen was capable of, but...

For a moment, that thought crossed Meltina's mind, but at the same time, she knew that couldn't possibly be true. House Nilsen was a line of knights that matched House Lecter in its abilities—a distinguished house that could be traced back to the kingdom's founding. Clay Nilsen did openly brandish his pride as a descendant of high-ranking knights, much like the deceased General Albrecht had, but as far as she knew, he hadn't treated his subordinates cruelly. In this country, where many misused the authority afforded to them by their noble status, he was quite the unusual man.

His abilities as a knight had been exceptional. His subordinates had trusted him, and he had been a first-rate commander. He had no lack of experience either, having claimed the heads of many enemy commanders during wars with the Kingdom of Brittania. He'd excelled in spirit, technique, and physique, and maintained an unwavering loyalty to the Rhoadserian royal family. He was, without a doubt, an outstanding knight of Rhoadseria, worthy of carrying the responsibility of a commander. Meltina wasn't one to dispute that, and she had hoped she could use his abilities to realize her ideals.

But this skilled knight had had his problems—problems that could prove fatal for Queen Lupis.

The responsibility doesn't rest solely with Sir Nilsen.

Clay's problem was that House Nilsen had been on good terms with House Albrecht for generations. Given that Rhoadseria had over five hundred years of history, that wasn't at all odd. Rhoadseria's strict class system and lack of social mobility meant that marriages between commoners and nobles were unthinkable. There were cases where nobles took commoner girls they found while touring their domains as mistresses and lovers, producing illegitimate

children in the process, but it was unthinkable that they would make these women their concubines or legal wives.

From a modern perspective, where the ideals of fundamental human rights and equality were upheld, that might come across as a blatant act of discrimination, but in this world, where the class system reigned supreme, this was common sense. On the other hand, nobles and knights had a duty to maintain the honor of their family's name, which was upheld much more firmly than one might expect in modern society. As a result, those in the upper classes had to marry within the limited pool of families in the nobility.

Most of Rhoadseria's ruling class was bound by ties of blood on some level. That went for Meltina's own family, House Lecter. She had blood ties to most nobles in the country, although her family didn't actively nurture such relations with most of those noble houses.

When it came to House Albrecht and House Nilsen, the circumstances were different. Their ancestors had been inseparable friends, so the two houses maintained a close relationship that had remained uninterrupted throughout Rhoadseria's history. Over the last few decades, they'd become even closer.

He probably did it as a means to maintain his influence and authority, though.

The first thing those who possessed power and influence concerned themselves with was gathering allies that would help them maintain and protect that power and influence. Therefore, Clay Nilsen had taken Hodram Albrecht's sister as his wife, and his aunt and niece had married Hodram's uncle and nephew, respectively.

Each family was a line of high-ranking knights, so their social statuses matched, but this meant that Clay Nilsen had secured his position as an ally and sworn friend to General Albrecht, head of the knights' faction.

Normally, this kind of marriage wouldn't be a problem, but Sir Nilsen was simply too close to General Albrecht.

General Albrecht was no longer among the living, but even so, he had reigned over the knights' faction for too long, and his influence still lingered, even posthumously. Many people found fault with Queen Lupis's regime, and some of them longed for the days when General Albrecht was still in charge. On top

of that, the fact that Queen Lupis couldn't judge many of the members of the knights' faction after the last civil war was a major issue.

The knights are important when it comes to maintaining order within the country. If she were to execute them, the country's military strength would weaken, so Her Majesty decided not to judge them for their transgressions.

The biggest miscalculation she'd made with this decision was that it was poorly received by the knights who had been treated badly during General Albrecht's tenure as general, as well as those who had lost many things to the knights' faction's oppression. For example, Chris Morgan had been mistreated as a knight for a long time despite his impressive, godlike skills with a spear. Chris's grandfather, Frank, was a close associate of Helena Steiner, and to that end, General Albrecht doubted and loathed Chris.

Frank was on his deathbed due to the crippling effects of Carrion disease. His family couldn't obtain the necessary medicine to treat him, but the reason for that could be traced back to General Albrecht for applying pressure on merchants who supplied medicine, forbidding them from selling the nostrums to Frank's family.

For those reasons, Chris regarded General Albrecht and his clique with enmity. At present, Chris took his grandfather's place as Helena's right-hand man, but that didn't undo the years of oppression General Albrecht had inflicted on him and his family.

There were many people in much the same situation as Chris. In fact, Chris was one of the lucky ones, because he was only treated coldly. Some of his enemies had been forced to watch their wives or fiancées being raped, while others were abused so terribly that they eventually chose suicide. And once a civil war ended, those victims were normally allowed to direct their rage onto their aggressors. The law of retribution, it seemed, was an unchanging truth in this world.

That's just a natural conclusion, after all.

Victims of crimes longed to pass judgment on their aggressors, and when they weren't satisfied with the judge's sentence, they sought to take justice into their own hands. When the strong and weak changed places, victims sought

retribution.

Meltina understood this, and this was why she'd kept a watchful eye on these young knights, who were now known as the queen's faction. Since the situation hadn't improved much since Queen Lupis came to power, these knights still had a reason to vent their frustrations.

But what we didn't predict was that this resulted in Nilsen creating his own faction among the knights.

Same as how victims had their reasoning, the perpetrators had their own logic too. Even if the assailants did feel apologetic, they couldn't very well pay with all their fortune or their lives. It was clear that it should have been Queen Lupis's place to reconcile with the new faction, but at the time, she'd had to prioritize maintaining control within the country. And not long after, the O'ltormea Empire had launched its invasion on Xarooda. With those factors in play, she hadn't had the opportunity to reconcile.

And so time went on, and what was originally but a small spark of rebellion had flared up and spread to uncontrollable levels.

I'm sure Sir Nilsen had no desire to rebel against the kingdom, but...

Meltina wasn't doubting that, but the truth was that Clay Nilsen and his faction were a nuisance for Queen Lupis's regime, so they had decided to use him for this scheme. Having one of their enemies clash with another meant they would profit both ways.

The Battle of the Cannat Plains was nothing but a stepping stone for our next battle. It would have been best if Sir Nilsen had taken that man's life while he was at it, but Sir Nilsen's loss doesn't hurt us much. Plus, he revealed what the enemy is capable of, which puts us at an advantage. But...

Meltina hadn't expected their army to suffer a one-sided defeat.

I can understand why Sir Mikhail is so upset.

It was easy to say that their prediction had been off, but they had invested time and preparations into this scheme. It was frustrating to see it turned upside down with such ease.

With that thought in mind, Meltina said, “I can only assume they knew the detachments were there ahead of time. That’s the only acceptable explanation.”

“Probably,” Mikhail muttered, not looking up from the map. “He must have some pretty skilled spies working for him. Or maybe...”

“Someone leaked our information?”

“There isn’t any positive proof of that, though.”

Clay Nilsen’s tactic had been to use his main force to stall Ryoma’s army so that detachments could strike them from the flanks once the timing was right. It was a fairly orthodox, by the book ambush tactic. If anything about it was novel, it was that he split the ambush detachment in two. Otherwise, it was an utterly uninteresting strategy, although it fit Clay Nilsen’s honest personality.

But he saw through Sir Nilsen’s plan. He had to have known there were soldiers lying in wait.

Meltina moved the game pieces over the map. The detachments Clay had lying in wait in the forest had taken a detour around the battlefield to strike at the enemy’s flank undetected, but Robert Bertrand’s and Signus Galveria’s units had suddenly attacked them and wiped them out. It had apparently been a one-sided slaughter. After that, Robert and Signus had struck at Clay’s force from behind, their forces emboldened by having wiped out the detachments.

“It’s not clear how he knew about the hidden detachments, but...” Mikhail looked up at the ceiling and whispered, “It only makes sense. They don’t call him the Devil of Heraklion for nothing.”

His words were full of bitter recognition for his enemy’s prowess, but Meltina could also sense jealousy, envy, and respect for Ryoma in them. She could tell those feelings were there because she also held similar feelings in her own heart. Any self-respecting warrior would surely feel the same way. Everything has its exceptions.

“Recreating the Battle of the Cannat Plains, are you? You two seem absorbed in it too.”

Suddenly, a third voice spoke up, prompting Meltina to swiftly turn around.

Upon confirming who it was, she clicked her tongue loudly.

“Sudou.” Meltina directed a sharp glare at the man they’d been waiting for. He had finally decided to show himself.

Seeing Meltina’s gaze, Sudou sighed.

Such cold eyes... She must really hate me.



The glint in her eyes was one of loathing. Of course, few people would greet someone who was hours late to an appointment with open arms, and in that regard, Meltina's behavior was reasonable. Sudou knew better than to audibly complain.

Meltina didn't seem inclined to say anything else, be it out of resignation or some other reason. This silence was, perhaps, a small way in which she could get back at him. Mikhail, however, as the other offended party here, wasn't going to keep silent.

"So after you're so thoroughly late, you don't even bother to knock before you come in," Mikhail scoffed, giving Sudou a glance. "You really have no perception of manners, do you? If you're going to loiter around Her Majesty's castle despite your lowly station, the least you could do is adhere to decorum."

His words sounded arrogant, but if nothing else, they were true. The fact that Mikhail was only resorting to sarcastic remarks in this situation was almost gracious of him, because normally Sudou's head would have been sent flying by now.

Sudou was unfazed by their attitudes. An ordinary person would have become flustered and started apologizing, but Sudou simply walked toward the desk with his usual flippant smile.

"Now, now, you must understand that I am extremely busy," Sudou said, his voice not the slightest bit apologetic. "I did keep you waiting for quite a while, but I ask that you understand my predicament here. I work day and night for the sake of this country."

Mikhail glanced at him suspiciously. "Hmph, assuming you really are working for our country."

Sudou shrugged. By now, he could calmly ignore people's suspicious stares. He had a thick skin unmatched by any.

"Why, that's slander. And I thought that you, of all people, knew how much I work for this country, Sir Mikhail."

Their gazes clashed over the map, sparks flying between them. Nevertheless, Mikhail couldn't deny Sudou's words. And unlike in the past, Mikhail had

learned how to keep his emotions repressed.

Seeing her colleague's growth on full display, Meltina smiled. As she did, Sudou approached the map, his eyes flicking toward her. After looking at the positions of the game pieces, he sighed deeply.

"But honestly, Ryoma Mikoshiba really is a troublesome man," he uttered, his voice a mixture of amazement and sarcasm.

The ambush detachments' presence on the battlefield had been top secret information. Excluding Mikhail and Meltina, who had come up with this strategy, the only one who had understood the full picture of what they were planning was Clay Nilsen, who'd led the main force.

Still, there was no guarantee that the enemy's scouts wouldn't have spotted the detachments. Knowing this, Clay had split the strike force in two and had the other half lie in wait in two detachments in the forested area behind the main force—as per Meltina's suggestion—but in the end, that had given Ryoma the chance to individually defeat each detachment.

"This formation... Though he tried to ensure success by splitting up the strike force, it resulted in both detachments being beaten," Sudou said, picking up a few game pieces symbolizing cavalry from the Mikoshiba barony. He moved them in a wide arc toward the strike forces hidden in the forest. "The flaw with strategies involving surrounding the enemy is that they present a chance for the enemy to individually strike down each unit."

"We knew that," Mikhail said bitterly. "Lady Meltina and I kept that in mind, but..."

Sudou gave Mikhail his usual, constant smile. He wasn't mocking Mikhail, though.

Surrounding the enemy to wipe them out is not the easiest play, but I find it hard to believe there was a problem strategically speaking.

Surrounding the enemy was a highly difficult tactic to employ, with the bottleneck being coordination between the units.

For instance, in the Warring States period of Japan, House Shimazu, who ruled over Kyushu from their base in Satsuma, used the tsurinobuse tactic, a model

example of a surrounding strategy. Well, Sir Nilsen using his main force as bait while ambush detachments swoop in from the flanks to attack simultaneously is a bit different from the tsurinobuse, but it's in much the same vein.

Meltina and Mikhail didn't know about the tsurinobuse tactic, but even across different worlds, people seemed to come up with the same ideas. The tsurinobuse was based on fooling the opponent into thinking that their offensive drove the opposing army into retreat, guiding them into position where an ambush force could move in to surround and finish them.

House Shimazu won many battles using this tactic. The problem was that other warlords in the Warring States period didn't employ it. Similar tactics were around, but those were merely analogous ones used throughout the entirety of the Warring States period. House Shimazu was the only one regarded and feared for having this trademark tactic.

The reason for that was the preconditions required for the tsurinobuse tactic to work. Ordering a false retreat was easier said than done. In a world with limited communications, one could deliver instructions to soldiers using flags, bells, and sounds, but those instructions couldn't be very detailed. The commanders and soldiers needed to be disciplined and had to understand the tactic perfectly.

If the soldiers were to actually believe the situation was unfavorable, the entire battle would start falling apart. The decoy unit needed to retreat in an organized manner, and that was difficult to do. What's more, the decoy unit and the ambush unit had to match their timing perfectly, which was also a tall order.

With all these factors, the tsurinobuse tactic was very lethal, but it was also a high-risk gamble that would either allow House Shimazu to turn the tables or have the rug pulled out from under them.

That said, I don't think Lady Meltina's judgment was wrong here.

Meltina and Mikhail had limited how many troops Clay could take along, but because of the coordination required to successfully surround and crush the enemy, using only the Fifth Knight Order, which were Clay's direct subordinates, wasn't a bad decision.

One of the biggest problems with organizing an army was mixing together units with different chains of command. At its core, a war was fought with a mass of people, and it took a long time for people to build trust with each other. Soldiers from different units didn't necessarily see people from other units as their comrades, even if they were in the same Rhoadserian army. If nothing else, soldiers didn't regard soldiers from other units in the same light as they did their squadmates.

That was also true for the battlefield. In order for soldiers to march to the same beat, they needed to understand and know one another.

An uncoordinated army is no different from a raging mob.

Take, for instance, an army made up of commoner conscripts. They became emboldened when their army had the advantage, but they scattered right away once the tide of battle turned against them. Each soldier only cared about saving their own skin; they had little concept of loyalty, to say nothing of concern for those around them or the overall state of the battle. Conscripts were certainly a good choice to build up large numbers, but they didn't necessarily live up to the potential their numbers implied.

Of course, the Fifth Knight Order hadn't done something as reckless as employing conscripts to bolster its ranks. If they had needed more soldiers, they'd have taken knights from other knight orders in Rhoadseria. Even so, mixing in soldiers from different units with different chains of command was risky.

In professional baseball, there were cases where an all-star team that had bought up all the good players from other teams ended up losing to a team without any standout players. In those cases, the loss was still attributed to the losing team's lack of coordination. The same reasoning applied here.

Based on her tone, it seems Lady Meltina thinks limiting Sir Nilsen's forces was a poor choice, but forcing in knights from other orders might have been an even worse move.

Sudou's intention wasn't to speak in Meltina and Mikhail's defense, but from an impartial point of view, he didn't believe their plan was inherently flawed.

Which means, the issue must be...

Sudou himself had predicted that Ryoma Mikoshiba would win the Battle of the Cannat Plains, and his prediction had proved right.

But that was only my thoughts on the overall result of the battle.

Sudou had indeed predicted that Ryoma would win, but he had also predicted that this victory would cost him half his forces. However, the investigation report of the battle found that most of the corpses on the Cannat Plains belonged to Rhoadserian soldiers.

There were between twenty-five hundred and three thousand knights in the Fifth Knight Order. Meanwhile, Baron Mikoshiba's army had only roughly five hundred men.

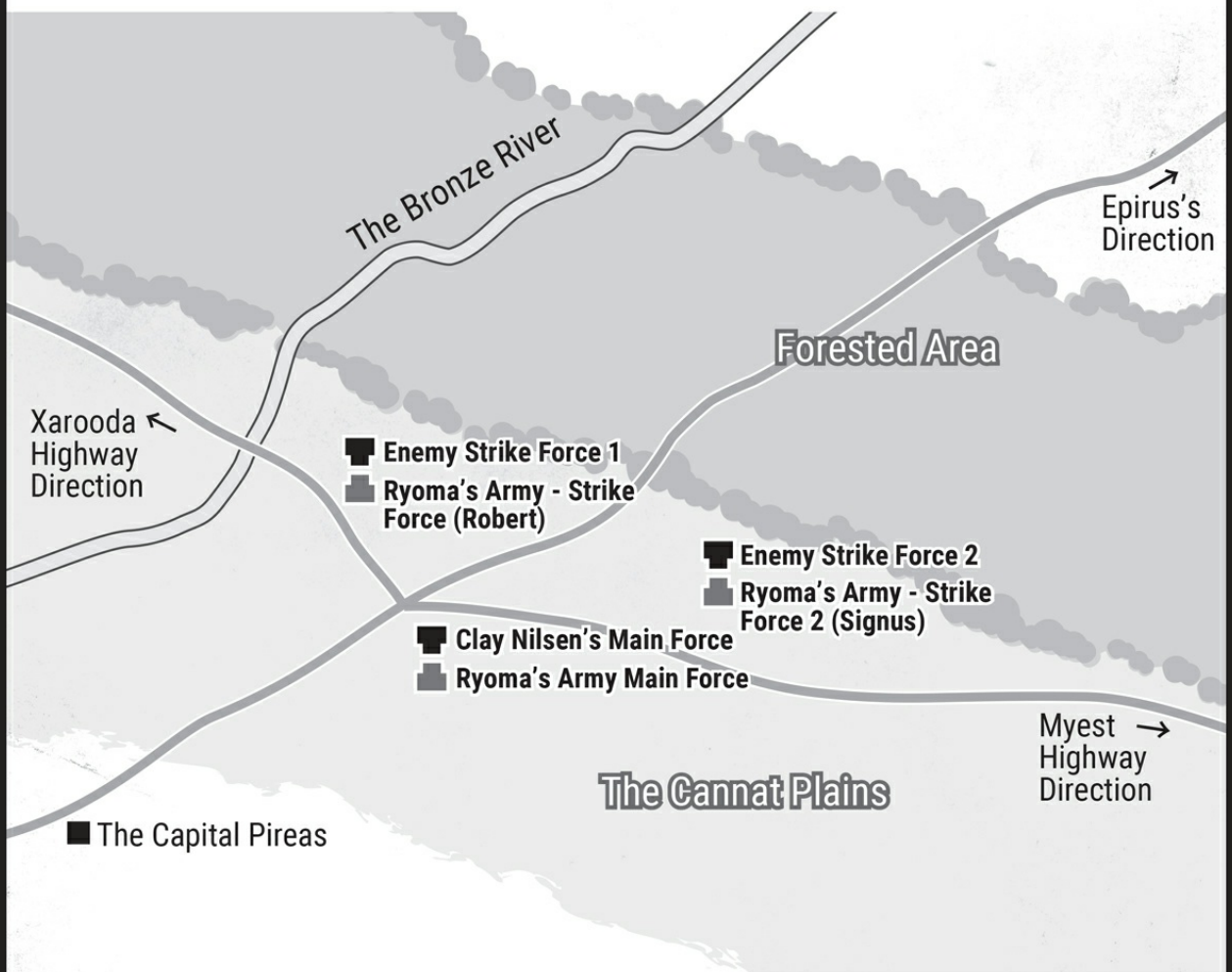
This meant that Ryoma had won despite being outnumbered by nearly six to one. The Battle of the Cannat Plains was only a preliminary battle building up to the war to come, though. Historically speaking, this fight wouldn't have much impact. The history books would only regard it as a trigger for the northern expedition. However, the details of that battle would leave a brilliant mark on the annals of military history.

And they even slew Sir Nilsen too.

Slaying the enemy commander on the battlefield was easier said than done. Fundamentally speaking, human lives all had the same weight, but status and position could make that weight fluctuate in practice. A king's life and a slave's were technically worth the same, but with the price tags society placed on people, the former's life was worth more than the latter's. Whether this was a good thing or a bad thing was inconsequential; it was simply the way of the world.

In much the same vein, a commander's life was worth more than that of a soldier locking blades with the enemy. Any one soldier was expendable and replaceable, but officers capable of commanding the battlefield were few in number. Naturally, many commanders fortified the defenses around them. That way, if they sensed the situation was going against them, they could choose to retreat. This was a privilege an ordinary soldier didn't have.

The Battle of the Cannat Plains 2



《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》

That means the battle was decided before Clay Nilsen could choose to retreat.

At first, when Ryoma Mikoshiba's unit clashed with Nilsen's main force, Nilsen had sent runners to the detachment units, but this had turned out to be the chance Ryoma had been waiting for.

After receiving Nilsen's message, the detachments lying in ambush had begun marching toward the battlefield, when they had been attacked by Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria. Signus had attacked the eastern detachment, while Robert had attacked the western one.

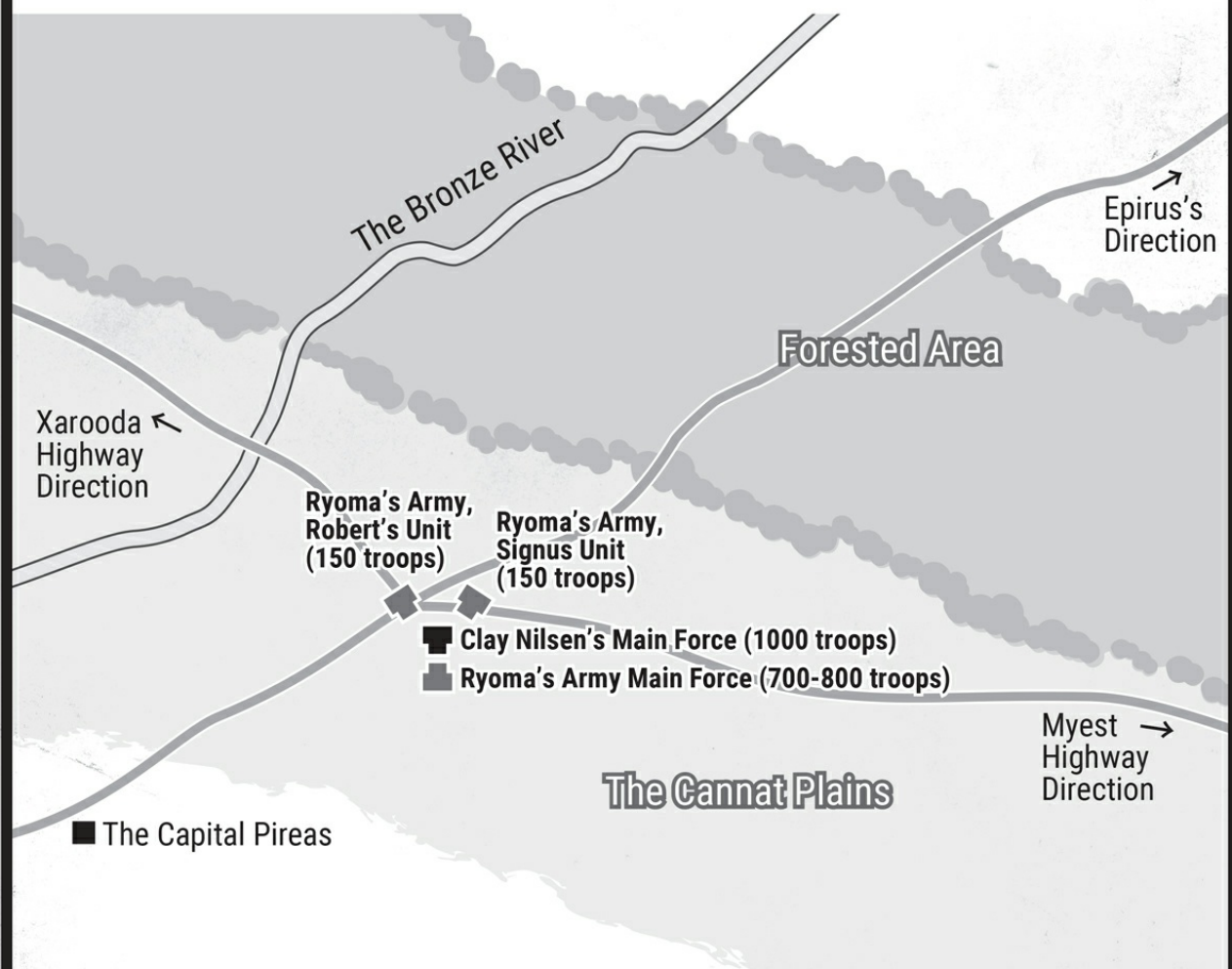
Based on what survivors from the detached units had testified, both of their units had between 100 to 150 troops, but the two commanders leading the enemy charge boasted strength worthy of war gods. Their axe and staff had roared through the wind, sending people flying and crushing the detachment units.

At that point, the outcome of the battle was already decided.

Sudou removed the two pieces that stood for the ambush detachments from the map. Mikhail and Meltina watched him do so, their expressions bitter. As harsh as reality was, they couldn't deny what had happened.

After Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria defeated the detachments, they struck the main force that was stalling Mikoshiba's army from behind. Sir Nilsen's formation fell apart, and he died in battle. Then, having regrouped with all his forces, Mikoshiba returned to his stronghold in Wortenia.

The Battle of the Cannat Plains 3



《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》

Having moved the pieces around, Sudou got a better image of the battlefield, which made it obvious why Meltina and Mikhail kept staring at the map for so long.

Yes, the more you look at this, the harder it becomes to accept.

It still wasn't clear how Ryoma Mikoshiba had known about the detachments Nilsen had sent out, and because of that, Meltina and Mikhail couldn't come to terms with this outcome. They kept looking for flaws in their plan, even though there were no such flaws to be found.

But I suppose the answer to that question lies with Koichiro Mikoshiba.

This was only speculation on Sudou's part, and he couldn't prove it, but he was confident that this was almost certainly the reason Ryoma had found out about this plan.

From what I've heard, he was staying in Pireas at the time.

Sudou had previously received a request for a meeting from one of the Organization's Elders, Liu Daijin, otherwise known as Liu Zhong Jian. However, Sudou hadn't seen Koichiro Mikoshiba in person during that meeting. Still, Koichiro Mikoshiba was known by all members of the Organization. He was regarded as a hero, and that title carried a weight that even Sudou couldn't ignore.

Because of that, Sudou had the Organization's people assist Koichiro as per the man's wishes, while keeping an eye on him at the same time. He knew that Koichiro came to Pireas in pursuit of a girl called Asuka Kiryuu and that he stayed in an inn under the guild's management.

But he and his group vanished from their inn, leaving Asuka Kiryuu here in the capital.

If Koichiro Mikoshiba had decided to leave despite Asuka Kiryuu's presence in this city, he could have only gone to one place. He had gone there with information on Queen Lupis's plans and delivered it to Ryoma, who had just made his escape from the House of Lords.

I swear, that man always exceeds my expectations in the most troublesome

ways.

Sudou chuckled, feeling emotion rising up from his heart. Seeing this, Meltina and Mikhail looked at him suspiciously, but Sudou wasn't in the right state of mind to care much for their staring. Had Sudou been all alone in this room, he'd have laughed out loud.

Well, there's no need to jump to conclusions. For now, I'll just have to wait and see how he worms his way out of the next war. And if he does manage to wiggle his way out of that...

And that laughter would have been of joy—of elation at having found the last piece of the puzzle that would grant his wish.

“Sudou... What are you thinking?” Mikhail asked when Sudou's shoulders finally stopped shaking with restrained laughter.

Oh, my, no good.

Sudou spoke cautiously, masking his true wish. “You see, I was just thinking that Ryoma Mikoshiba really is one lucky man.”

Sudou was speaking from his heart, but those words also contained a hint for the solution to Meltina and Mikhail's concerns—a present from Sudou to them, in a sense, meant to solidify the trust Sudou was trying to build between him and them. Meltina, however, didn't understand that hidden meaning and could only regard him with apprehension.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

Mikhail nodded in agreement. Neither of them understood what he was getting at.

Sudou snorted. “No matter how smart and well-prepared someone might be, if a person doesn't have good luck, they'll fail at everything they do. A lucky man will find the right means to deal with a situation at just the right time. That's all.”

If the information about the detachments hadn't been leaked to Ryoma, the Battle of the Cannat Plains would have ended very differently. If Ryoma hadn't been supported by two powerful commanders like Robert Bertrand and Signus

Galveria, he surely wouldn't have been able to dispatch the detachments as quickly as he had. If he hadn't had the famed former mercenary, Lione the Crimson Lioness, leading his main force, the force might not have weathered the numerical disadvantage until Robert and Signus regrouped with them.

If, if, if... There were so many ifs, so many hypothetical possibilities, and at every turn, Ryoma Mikoshiba had made the ideal choice. Thanks to that, he had been able to return to the citadel city of Epirus without any major losses.

"Of course, I acknowledge Ryoma Mikoshiba's skills. When you get right down to it, his victory at the Cannat Plains could be attributed to his meticulous nature. I won't deny that. But at the same time, factors other than his capabilities played a big role in this."

"And you're saying those factors were that he was lucky?" Meltina asked.

"Yes..."

Mikhail clicked his tongue. Nothing was more important to a warrior on the battlefield than luck. A warrior's duty was to risk their lives in battle, so one had to pray to the powers that be that they were blessed with luck.

Knowing that his mortal enemy was blessed by those higher powers wasn't something Mikhail was pleased to hear. Meltina, by contrast, spoke up cheerfully.

"Luck, you say? That's good to hear. After all, there's no defending yourself against luck."

Mikhail, doubting his ears, gave her a look.

"Luck is the will of the gods, and there's no point in lamenting it," Meltina said as she shook her head. "Besides, no one stays lucky forever. Luck eventually declines, for everyone. If luck saves him from an arrow, we only need to shoot a second shot. And if luck saves him from a second shot, we fire a third."

Unlike her expressionless demeanor earlier, her eyes now glinted with bloodlust.

Sudou silently snickered at her transformation.

It's like I thought. All she needed was a little confidence. Well, she is still

young.

As aide to Queen Lupis, Meltina had risen to a high station while still very young. Many had mocked her in the shadows, calling her a brownnoser of the queen who threw her weight around with borrowed authority, but Meltina herself had realized she had no merit to her name, so she had put in the effort to gain the abilities necessary to fulfill her position.

She was constantly torn between her pride, knowing she was doing her best, and her dread, wondering if she had overlooked something important. This was why she was desperate to analyze the Battle of the Cannat Plains; she was afraid that it was through some fault of hers, by some mistake she'd overlooked, that the battle had ended in defeat. Nevertheless, despite looking and looking, she hadn't found any mistakes or flaws, which had only made her more anxious.

Fortunately, Sudou's explanation made some puzzle piece that she'd missed click into place, and that feeling was the reason behind her current expression.

"And no matter how much luck that man has on his side, we'll just have to pressure him with greater numbers until we trample over his luck. That's why we're organizing two hundred thousand troops to subjugate the north."

She turned to the man sneering before her and declared, "And Sudou, you'll cooperate with us."

She spoke out of belief and faith in her beloved, respected queen. Mikhail could only nod, affirming his colleague's words.

With the meeting over, Sudou left the room. Meltina and Mikhail wordlessly watched him leave, their gazes cold as ice. If Sudou had seen them, he'd have reconsidered his opinion of them.

The emotions in their eyes were very human—mockery and scorn. They saw themselves in the center of the stage. They gauged their relationships with others through benefit and loss, and they saw their fellow men as pawns to be used.

"That man... He's a real piece of work," Mikhail muttered.

"True, but you knew this the whole time already, Sir Mikhail," Meltina said.

Mikhail nodded. “I know. And I realize that if we’re going to bring about Her Majesty’s ideals, we’ll have to manipulate people like him too. To make sure we make those ideals a reality, I’ll cast aside my knight’s honor if I have to.”

“Yes. I’ll give up the moral high ground to make sure we weaken the nobles’ power and turn our homeland into a kingdom that’s truly ruled by Her Majesty. I’ll use that man for all he’s worth to see that we do it. We will make that ideal a reality.”

The two of them nodded at each other. Everything in Lupis Rhoadserians’ name... That was their justice. That was their conviction.



After his meeting with Meltina and Mikhail, Sudou walked through Pireas’s back alleys, the devil’s smile smeared across his face. If the queen’s two attendants were to see him now, they wouldn’t dare consider using Sudou like a tool.

A total of two hundred thousand soldiers... This war really holds the country’s fate in the balance.

Ryoma’s massacre at the House of Lords had earned him the wrath of Rhoadseria’s nobility. As a result, the nearby nobles had begun mustering their soldiers around the capital’s outskirts, and the number of those soldiers was growing by the day. Many more soldiers were marching to the capital all the way from southern Rhoadseria. When Meltina said the expedition force would be two hundred thousand soldiers in size, it was no exaggeration. All of Rhoadseria’s nobles were pooling together their soldiers to assemble one large army.

Deploying an army this large to wipe out one frontier governor felt like excessive force. After all, Baron Mikoshiba’s forces were at least ten times smaller than what the Kingdom of Rhoadseria planned to field.

Normally, you’d assume this war was over before it even started, but... Heh.

Sudou still couldn’t say that Rhoadseria would win this war, because he’d seen Ryoma Mikoshiba’s abilities in person. After ordering an Organization sniper to shoot Ryoma through the stomach, Sudou had lingered in the Cannat

Plains and observed the battle. He could vividly remember the individual strength each and every one of the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers had exhibited.

They had mobility and defense, and their charge when they went on the offensive... They were all first-rate, if not better. And their commanders were skilled too.

Sudou's thoughts wandered to the woman he'd watched command the main force to use stall tactics.

Lione, the Crimson Lioness. Since her days as a mercenary, she's been known for her abilities, but the way she stalled for time without taking many losses was impressive. She probably has a wide outlook that lets her see the entire battle. Maybe it even borders on clairvoyance?

Though he knew that was impossible, Sudou couldn't help but toy with the thought, a sardonic smile on his lips. Clairvoyance was a Buddhist term that described the ability to oversee everything, and needless to say, Lione hadn't been graced with such supernatural powers. However, her outlook was vast enough that it made Sudou wonder if she did.

Sudou didn't know if it was some quality she'd been born with or if it was a skill she'd honed through live combat in her mercenary days, but either way, she was exceptionally talented as a battlefield commander. What's more, her efficiency as a frontline commander was especially noteworthy, mostly owing to her balance of offense and defense. A leader who could command both on the front lines and from the rear was notably skilled. If Lione were to serve some country or another, she would surely rise to the rank of general with her talent.

Let's not forget Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria's charging force. I imagine even the O'ltormea Empire's royal guard would be hard-pressed to stop their attack. I wonder how many people in the Organization can match them. Perhaps we would beat the pair one-on-one, but on the battlefield? I doubt it.

In the Battle of the Cannat Plains, the Twin Blades had demonstrated that they were strong enough to change the tide of battle. Their prowess went beyond that of a mere human. Not only did they boast great personal strength, but they were extremely talented frontline commanders.

The way they turned around to attack the main force after they wiped out the

detachments... It was poetry in motion.

The most important part of surrounding an enemy was the coordination between the split units. In particular, coordinating when the units were to charge into Clay Nilsen's main force was particularly difficult. Nonetheless, Signus and Robert had gotten the timing down perfectly.

I feel like I got a personal demonstration about the reason they were called Count Salzberg's Twin Blades.

In terms of individual strength, some of the Organization's members could match those two. Sudou himself could kill them if he was so inclined. A fight on the battlefield, though, was between groups. Beating the Twin Blades there would require more than just personal strength, and it was doubtful anyone in the Organization could do so.

Plus, there's the twin girls serving Ryoma Mikoshiba. It's all very fascinating. It does seem like Mikoshiba is a dark horse worth betting on.

Because of the quality of both its soldiers and commanders, the Mikoshiba barony had the edge, so it was hard to say the Kingdom of Rhoadseria truly held the advantage.

But the numbers really are problematic. One must never underestimate a numerical advantage, even if that army is nothing more than a disorderly mob. He'll need a plan to beat a force that large.

Sudou's intuition told him that Ryoma Mikoshiba was plotting something. Ryoma was currently occupying the citadel city of Epirus, but the Organization's spies had discovered that his forces had diminished to roughly half their original size. In that case, he would need to reorganize his army to make his plan work, which was why he'd returned his forces to their home base. The problem was that Sudou couldn't guess at what his plan was.

The most likely option would be to turn nobles who are displeased with Queen Lupis's regime over to his side, but...

If Sudou were in Ryoma's shoes, he would definitely use the nobles. It was the most effective way to narrow down the numerical disadvantage.

But to do that, he'd need someone in the queen's faction on his side. Count

Bergstone and his relatives were stripped of their territories after this uproar, so...

Count Bergstone, who'd been a comrade of Ryoma's since the civil war, would have been the perfect candidate to help Ryoma draw in other nobles to his cause, but now the count was in no position to move. Even if Count Bergstone were to act, it was hard to believe he'd achieve much. Meltina and Mikhail had already set countermeasures to see to that. In other words, if the count were to act right now, it would be too late.

But then another man crossed Sudou's mind—Furio Gelhart, the head of the nobles' faction and the man who triggered the civil war.

Viscount Gelhart would certainly have a negative opinion of Queen Lupis.

Gelhart once went to war with the queen under the banner of the false Princess Radine. Sudou's negotiations had reduced his punishment to a mere demotion to viscount, but there wasn't a more perfect candidate to use for such a plan. Nonetheless, Sudou instantly denied the possibility of Ryoma using Viscount Gelhart.

A privileged noble like Viscount Gelhart would never associate with a former commoner like Mikoshiba. Besides, since the queen has agreed to restore his duke title in exchange for his cooperation with this war, he will help her at all costs.

Indeed, from what Sudou had heard, more and more noble houses had responded to Viscount Gelhart's call to arms and were sending out their soldiers. Even with his title demoted to that of viscount, the influence he'd spent years building up wouldn't crumble that easily. If nothing else, the other houses loyally served him in preparation for when his ducal title would be restored.

At the same time, there's no telling what Viscount Gelhart is planning. I can't completely discount the possibility that he's working with Mikoshiba.

Having worked as a mediator for Viscount Gelhart in the past, Sudou was still close to him. Recently, however, the viscount had grown distant. Even considering that the viscount had returned to his domain to organize his forces for the subjugation of the north, Sudou still got the feeling that something was

off. He couldn't say for sure if Gelhart was really cooperating with Queen Lupis to have his title restored, or if he was doing it out of other considerations.

Many of the nobles who are distant from Queen Lupis were invited to the evening party the Mikoshiba barony held at Count Salzberg's estate. I've heard Mikoshiba made quite the show of his financial strength. Now, let's see... How will things turn out?

Who was friend and who was foe? Honestly speaking, Sudou couldn't predict what the nobles might do. And on top of everything, the expedition from the Church of Meneos was soon to arrive.

Hearing that the church dispatched the Temple Knights' Eighteenth Order was a bit of a surprise.

The Eighteenth Order was stationed in a neighboring country, so it made sense that it would be dispatched to Rhoadseria. Still, there must have been some meaning behind the fact that the church's top brass had deployed the Eighteenth Order, which had caused the tragedy of Gromhen, to the very kingdom that was the victim of that atrocity.

"If the Eighteenth Order were chosen because they were closest, there's no problem," Sudou whispered to himself. "But, well, I could just ask Cardinal Roland later. Either way, all I can do is keep working to see my ideal fulfilled."

With that, Sudou swiftly disappeared into the alleyways, looking up at the bloodred moon floating in the heavens as if he was relishing in the sheer chaos of this situation.

Chapter 2: Deceivers' Den

That day, a solemn atmosphere hung over the palace in Rhoadseria's capital. The sentries standing guard in the audience chamber were more tense than usual, like soldiers about to depart for war. The nobles gathered on both sides of the room looked just as nervous.

In the midst of all this, three guests walked slowly toward the throne where Queen Lupis was seated. The one leading the trio was an aging man clad in an extravagant priest's garb. In contrast to those around him, he didn't seem the slightest bit nervous and instead wore a pleasing smile on his lips. Be that as it may, despite his agreeable demeanor, he gave off an inexplicable air of dignity that pressured those around him. He walked with the confidence that he had the gods' blessings on his side.

Following closely behind him were two knights, who were obviously his bodyguards. Aside from that, they also served as part of the diplomatic delegation. The metallic great helms they wore hid their expressions, but their armor and swords were decorated here and there, and their capes were pure white with golden threads. Most eye-catching of all were the crests emblazoned on their capes. They bore an image of scales—a symbol of the God of Light, Meneos, who governed over justice and law—and the symbol of a cross. This alone made it clear what the knights' social status was.

More than anything, though, their gazes behind their helmets and their posture were proof of their skill, which was to be expected. They were members of the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights, one of the most capable and accomplished knight orders in the Church of Meneos.

Watching them approach, Queen Lupis sent a signal with her eyes to Meltina and Mikhail, who stood at her sides, and nodded briefly. She then solemnly said, "Cardinal Roland, I thank you for coming all the way over from Menestia. I welcome you to my country with open arms and thank you for offering help to my kingdom in its time of need. Let us take this day as a chance to mend the

scars of our painful misunderstandings and the tragedy that followed them.”

The moment those words echoed through the room, all the nobles held their breaths. Everyone present knew what this day meant. Rumors were already spreading that the Temple Knights would serve as reinforcements for the expedition to the Wortenia Peninsula. This decision would have repercussions on Rhoadseria’s national policy and the people’s sentiments, so to make this choice, one would have to make adjustments beforehand. At the very least, the queen couldn’t decide this matter all on her own. Queen Lupis knew this, and she’d prepared thoroughly so as to not cause any unnecessary backlash.

In that regard, one could say this matter had already been decided, which shouldn’t have come as a surprise to the nobles. Even so, most of the people present in this room were half in doubt about using the Eighteenth Order, owing mostly to the events of the past. They didn’t want to believe it, but now that the queen had spoken, there was no doubting it anymore. The nobles watching on realized it was the kingdom’s consensus that they accept the Church of Meneos’s army.

Nevertheless, one person couldn’t help but feel conflicted about this happening, and that person was Queen Lupis herself, the very woman who’d greeted Cardinal Roland.

As far as I can tell, few people have noticed that Queen Lupis has mixed feelings, though.

There was nothing questionable about her attitude as she sat on her throne. She had a welcoming smile, and diplomatically speaking, there was nothing with which to find fault in her conduct. The nobles’ expressions made that clear. Most of the people in the room took Queen Lupis’s words at face value.

But Cardinal Jacob Roland, the Church of Meneos’s representative in this land, could see that she was very much forcing herself to keep up this facade. Cardinal Roland’s eyes could easily perceive that her right hand, which was sitting on the throne’s armrest, was extremely tense.



Her attitude is friendly, her words are warm, and her intonation is all natural. At first glance, it seems she's being very welcoming, but... Hm, let's see.

Cardinal Roland fixed his eyes on a certain point on the throne.

She could just be nervous, but, well, it seems to me that she's suppressing some anger and humiliation.

The Church of Meneos wasn't made up of lofty, virtuous people. Much like every regime in this world, including Rhoadseria's, the church had to fight and struggle day and night. As a superpower with influence all over the western continent, one country's battles couldn't compare to the scale and intensity of the church's struggles. They threatened, pacified, and deceived. Many of its members had no belief in the faith and were simply lowly jackals hiding behind the shield of "the will of the gods." After having contended with them for so many years, Cardinal Roland could see through Queen Lupis's pretending with ease.

However, even though he could see through her lies, Cardinal Roland didn't regard Queen Lupis with hatred or disgust. Quite the contrary, in fact. He felt genuine pity for her.

I can't very well blame her. Unfortunate events aren't so easy to forget.

The three kingdoms of the east didn't want to get involved with the Church of Meneos if possible. The long history that had been carved into the western continent's soil stood as evidence of their opposition, and given the past the two knights behind Cardinal Roland had, the entirety of Rhoadseria's people surely viewed them with animosity.

After all, the Temple Knights had dispatched the Eighteenth Order, an elite group also known as the infamous Colsbarga Grave Diggers. True, the tragedy of Gromhen was a thing of the past and few people knew what had really happened there, but the stories had been passed down from parent to child to grandchild. For those involved, the stories were equivalent to facts. They were deeply rooted in Rhoadseria's people regardless of social standing.

Still, Queen Lupis couldn't afford to reject the Church of Meneos's reinforcements. In its present state, Rhoadseria couldn't handle any friction

with the church. Cardinal Roland understood this, so he bowed his head to Queen Lupis, treating her with respect.

“I’m honored by your words, Your Majesty,” he said, slowly beginning his congratulatory address. “This day will surely leave a brilliant mark on Rhoadseria’s history, and I’m sure the God of Light will share his divine protection with your just cause.”

This was his average, routine greeting, but despite the fact that it was merely a formality, those words were what Queen Lupis wanted to hear right now.

“Thank you very much, Cardinal Roland. With the blessing of a cardinal, a representative of God such as yourself, I know that Meneos has acknowledged the rightness of my cause.”

Cardinal Roland wordlessly bowed his head to the throne.

After finishing his audience with the queen, Cardinal Roland walked through the palace’s corridors, followed by his bodyguards. He was headed for the queen’s office. They had finished their official greeting, but they still needed to discuss more clandestine matters behind closed doors.

Queen Lupis’s words and attitude during their audience came to the cardinal’s mind. He had to ask himself why she’d accepted the Church of Meneos’s support, but in a sense, the answer to that was evident.

Her regime hasn’t been going too well. I can’t say that’s entirely her fault, but the people will be hard-pressed to understand her struggles.

Queen Lupis had managed to attain the throne by winning the civil war, but her reign hadn’t been a good one so far. The realm had been ravaged by years of the nobles’ tyranny and the scars of the war. National finances were in dire straits, and the nobles who held local authority over the kingdom’s domains refused to obey her decrees.

And in the midst of all that, O’ltormea’s invasion of Xarooda had struck a truly lethal blow to Rhoadseria. Due to that, the commoners lived in destitute poverty. Financially speaking, the country was in its death throes, and economic collapse was a very possible outcome.

The economic depression meant that the social welfare policies Queen Lupis had tried to enforce had all ceased to function.

Restoring the sovereign's authority by investing in welfare work to support the people's livelihoods isn't a bad idea in and of itself. Except...

The Church of Meneos was familiar with the effectiveness of this method, as they gathered and raised orphans, but it meant nothing if one didn't keep it up consistently, all the time.

Canceling it halfway through is the worst possible thing she could do.

Once people got their hands on something, they hated nothing more than to lose it. If they never had that something to begin with, being denied didn't hurt, but once they had gained it, they refused to let go. This held true for social welfare and public utilities.

I do think it was a painful decision for Queen Lupis to make.

Queen Lupis had decided to end the welfare work because she knew the national budget was in crisis, but the situation had still been salvageable at that point. When Ryoma Mikoshiba joined the expedition to Xarooda, he formed a trade treaty between the Kingdom of Helnesgoula and the three kingdoms of the east. Thanks to that, the finances of each country had greatly improved.

Of course, the improvement wasn't immediate, but the treaty definitely revitalized trade among the countries involved. The tariff restrictions had caused a temporary drop in tax revenue, but that was only a by-product of the increase in trade activity. Given a few years, the countries were guaranteed to make more profits than ever before. However, before that could happen, several incidents had taken place.

Was that just coincidence, or an inevitability?

The one who'd suggested the trade treaty was Ryoma Mikoshiba, who'd accompanied Helena Steiner to Xarooda. He was also the one who'd caused the tragedy in the House of Lords and tried to drive the country into ruin.

Did he plan all of this ahead of time?

If this was all just coincidence, Cardinal Roland could only say that Ryoma was

a very lucky man—lucky enough that the gods must have been giving him their favor. The cardinal had to assume this was all luck, because the idea of Ryoma having planned everything was simply too frightening.

Being a major member of the Church of Meneos, Cardinal Roland survived the dangerous world that was the church's higher echelons and was a terrible monster in his own right. Even so, he wasn't confident that he would've been able to achieve the same things Ryoma had if he had been in the same position. If he were to assume that everything Ryoma did since becoming Wortenia's governor was all part of his plan, then there was only one answer.

He's a devil. That's all I can say. They call him the Devil of Heraklion for good reason.

Of course, Cardinal Roland didn't entirely believe it, but some part of his heart warned him that he mustn't completely discredit the possibility.

But there really isn't much he can do this time.

Having made enemies of all of Rhoadseria, the only way the Mikoshiba barony could possibly win was through diplomatic help. Normally, a single noble asking another country for military aid would be met with silence. While it might be possible if his land bordered with another country, the Wortenia Peninsula was just that—a landmass surrounded by sea from three directions, its sole land route on the southwest border connecting it to Rhoadseria.

Ryoma Mikoshiba could offer northern Rhoadseria in exchange for aid, and it might be a viable bargaining chip, but if a country were to agree to that deal, Rhoadseria would view it as an enemy. No country wanted northern Rhoadseria badly enough to risk going to war over it. After all, Ryoma's schemes had left it ravaged.

In other words, there's no chance Myest or Xarooda would offer Baron Mikoshiba reinforcements.

The only person who might help him was the Vixen of the North, Queen Grindiana of Helnesgoula, but she was occupied dealing with the Holy Qwiltantia Empire and the O'ltormea Empire, meaning that the chances of her sending reinforcements were slim.

Besides, Queen Lupis had sent a secret message to her just in case and gained Grindiana's implicit promise that she would not involve herself in the subjugation of the north. That way, Grindiana wouldn't be able to make any excuses that Queen Lupis hadn't contacted her about it. Also, when buying supplies from different countries, Queen Lupis had brokered agreements of noninterference from those kingdoms as well.

I heard she was inexperienced with politics, but Queen Lupis has matured considerably. Or maybe she was heeding advice from her aides?

The preparations for the subjugation of the north were nearly complete. All that remained were for the forces of the southern nobles to arrive and for the army to gather the supplies bought from other countries, after which Queen Lupis would only need to give the order to start the subjugation. Then a force of two hundred thousand Rhoadserian soldiers would lay waste to the Mikoshiba barony—a future as probable as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west.

Cardinal Roland was beside himself with expectation. Was Ryoma Mikoshiba a mere fool, or would he prove himself a resourceful hero once more?

“Your Grace, please come this way.”

Those words pulled Cardinal Roland out of his reverie. While he had walked, lost in thought, the chamberlain leading his group down the hall had stopped before a door.

“Yes. Thank you,” Cardinal Roland said to the chamberlain, then opened the door and entered the room. His informal meeting with Queen Lupis was about to begin.

She will likely ask me to not interfere with the war. I hear she already asked Myest and Xarooda.

Besides that, Queen Lupis probably wouldn't ask for much. All she wanted was for a representative of the faith to acknowledge the subjugation of the north so she would have the formal recognition that the gods sided with her cause. At the same time, though, she had to remain cautious, lest her actions increase the church's influence over her kingdom. This meant she needed to keep the Church of Meneos's involvement to a minimum.

Both sides would have to tread carefully through these negotiations.

“Thank you for sparing us your time, Your Majesty,” Cardinal Roland said, bracing himself for the negotiations ahead.

Shifting gears like this abated some of the caution he’d harbored toward Ryoma Mikoshiba just seconds ago. Because of that, Cardinal Roland couldn’t have imagined where Ryoma was and what he was doing at that very moment...and how those actions would turn the very premise of the coming conflict on its head.

A fleet of ten ships was anchored some twenty nautical miles away from Grantran, a trade city on the northern tip of Myest. Drawn on their sails was the emblem of the Kingdom of Myest, the country that boasted the biggest navy and the largest number of trade cogs among the three kingdoms of the east.

Brawny sailors moved along the decks of those ships, working nonstop. Some were scrubbing the floors with mops, some were lifting weights to remain in shape, and some were servicing their weapons. Needless to say, they had good reason to remain anchored in the middle of the ocean: they were waiting for someone to arrive.

At last, the lookout on the mast of the main ship finally called, “Ship spotted from the northwest!”

The men aboard the ships scrambled about. They were anchored in a region far from any trade sea route, so normally no ship would be sailing through these waters. Therefore, the possibilities as to why one was approaching were limited.

One option was that it was a trade ship that had gone off course. The weather easily influenced any vessel, and sea monsters infested the waters. Any number of factors could have sent a trade ship off course.

The more likely option, however, was that it was a pirate ship. The Mikoshiba barony had eliminated most of the pirates who used the Wortenia Peninsula as their hideout, but it hadn’t completely eliminated every single pirate crew in the region. Most of the pirates had left the surrounding waters out of fear of the Mikoshiba barony, but some still frequented Myest’s sea routes, so it was

natural for the crew to be wary of pirates.

As the sailors moved around the deck, a woman climbed out of the ship's interior and shouted to the scout, "Check the crest on the ship's flag!" This wasn't a foolproof method of identification, since a pirate ship could fly a fake flag, but it was still an effective way of identifying a ship's affiliation.

At the woman's orders, everyone around her tensed up. She was in her thirties, with sleek black hair and snow-white skin. She was beautiful, but something in her features was as sharp and cold as a blade. It was clear to all that she had a warrior's nature.



“It’s the crest of a double-headed serpent coiled around a blade!” the lookout shouted back. “It’s a Mikoshiba barony ship!”

Hearing this, the woman, Ecclesia Marinelle—Myest’s general, nicknamed the Whirlwind—gave a satisfied smile.

“Right on schedule,” Ecclesia’s lieutenant said as he climbed to the deck too.

Ecclesia nodded.

A top secret meeting at the request of the Mikoshiba barony, one which was to remain undisclosed to Rhoadseria, was about to transpire. They had decided to meet out at sea so as to minimize any leaks.

Not long after his initial report, the lookout called again, “The ship will come alongside us soon!”

Ecclesia fixed her eyes on the symbol of the double-headed, red-eyed serpent weaved in gold and silver threads on the other ship’s flag.

It sails so fast.

The lookout’s visibility was good; given the height of the post and his eyesight, he could see quite far out. Using the timing of both of the lookout’s announcements, Ecclesia could calculate the ship’s speed, and her estimate turned out to be startling.

It’s very fast. Faster than a ship with square sails should be. Especially considering the wind’s direction right now.

Ecclesia swiftly looked up to the flag flapping above the ship’s mast. The reality of what she was seeing was baffling. Myest was a country of skilled shipbuilders, and she was the country’s general, but even she couldn’t mask her surprise.

The wind was blowing *against* the Mikoshiba barony’s ship.

Myest uses jibs, triangular sails that are stretched with stays supporting the mast. But when sailing in a headwind, it takes a great deal of skill to just maintain one’s speed. Even then, they can’t keep this up...

Excitement filled Ecclesia’s heart. This was proof that she was right to come to

this meeting. She walked toward the staircase leading into the ship so she could prepare for her guest and descended down the stairs into her cabin, her lieutenant following close behind.

“But, ma’am...” her lieutenant said teasingly, “I didn’t know you were looking forward to seeing him so much.”

Ecclesia, the woman known as the Whirlwind, laughed out loud. “Why would I not look forward to it? After all, Lady Helena acknowledged his talents.”

Ecclesia returned to her office, preparing to greet her much-awaited guest.



After riding the *Atalanta*, a galleon that had departed from Sirius’s port, to their agreed upon meeting spot, Ryoma boarded the Myest ship that awaited him and followed an escort to Ecclesia Marinelle’s office. Once they’d exchanged greetings, Ryoma settled on a sofa, and Ecclesia brought out a teapot and personally served him tea. It was a privilege indeed to have Myest’s famed general serve him like this.

Ecclesia poured the boiling water into the circular teapot with practiced motions.

It looks like she prepares tea herself every day.

Being the daughter of the king’s younger sister, Ecclesia had royal blood running through her veins. She even had a claim to the throne, albeit a very weak one, so within noble society, her bloodline was highly prestigious. Ryoma couldn’t help but be taken aback by the sight of a woman of such status personally preparing tea. Moreover, he was impressed by how refined and practiced her motions were.

“Here you are,” Ecclesia said, placing the cup in front of Ryoma.

Is she expecting me to guess what kind of tea this is? Ryoma figured that was Ecclesia’s intention, based on the amused smile on her lips, and picked up the teacup. *It smells like menthol, like peppermint. Reminds me of Uva tea, so it must be from the southern continent.*

He could tell if it tasted good or not, but he couldn’t quite distinguish which

region it was from like some kind of gourmand. He could pretend to know, of course, but if he got it wrong, it would be difficult to dispel the awkward air after, and it could end up influencing the coming negotiations.

With that thought in mind, Ryoma elected to give up. “It’s got a wonderful, moderately bitter flavor. The aroma is rich and impactful, and when I take a sip, it has this exhilarating minty flavor. It’s splendid tea.”

This was a safe, passable answer.

Sensing Ryoma’s objective in his answer, Ecclesia smiled softly. “Yes, that’s what makes tea produced from the Barua region unique.”

Ryoma cocked his head curiously, unfamiliar with the region, and Ecclesia elegantly placed a hand over her lips and let out a chime-like laugh.

“It’s a region in the Torphana Empire, on the central continent. It’s a mountainous strip with high peaks, and the teas produced there all have this unique attribute. The white wine you served at your dinner party was produced in the same region.”

Ecclesia punctuated this with a teasing giggle, a gesture Ryoma met with a sheepish smile. Reconsidering his impression of her, he said, “It seems I need to do my research.”

On the surface, this was a friendly exchange, but their verbal battle had already begun.

I see. So she’s gathered information on me.

Ryoma had asked Simone to purchase most of the food and drinks he’d served at his dinner party through the Christof Company. The company’s galleons had gathered the majority of them directly from their production areas—meaning they hadn’t passed through Myest, which was usually the western continent’s source of imported goods. Despite that, Myest knew where the wines he’d used for his dinner party had been made. Ecclesia had implicitly stated she knew this by using this tea as her weapon, and the purpose behind that gesture was clear.

It’s unlikely there are Myest spies in Sirius, so they either planted them in Count Salzberg’s estate or the Christof Company’s supplier. Or maybe one of the

nobles from the evening party leaked it? Either way, Myest seems to be very wary of me.

So long as one used the appropriate means, gaining information wasn't terribly difficult, especially in cases like this, where it wasn't a closely guarded military secret. Nonetheless, it implied that Myest was interested in Ryoma, because no one sought out information on a person they didn't care about.

"It seems I put you through some trouble," Ryoma said.

"Oh, no, this is all business. But we do believe we can be more cooperative in the future," Ecclesia replied, at which point her expression clouded over. "For instance, rumor has it the Wortenia Peninsula has a demi-human settlement, and apparently they employ advanced endowed thaumaturgy techniques. Plus, there are monsters native only to the peninsula itself that yield rare ingredients for medicine and gear. We are currently purchasing these products from the Christof Company and from Lady Yulia's family, the Mystel Company, but we believe that Myest can be of help with selling these unique native exports of yours."

Ryoma cracked a cynical smile, sensing the true meaning behind her words.

They can 'be of help,' huh?

On the surface, it would indeed be helpful, but in essence, they were asking for a cut of the distribution. They didn't like the idea of the Mikoshiba barony hogging this proverbial pie all for itself.

We have a monopoly on the gear Nelcius's tribe provides us. I can understand why they'd want a cut of that.

Myest was a country of merchants; it largely relied on trade revenue, and trade was governed by the flow of people and goods. For many years, Myest had controlled that flow, and monopolized trade with other continents too. Recently, however, a new entity had formed in the market, and it had shaken the monopoly Myest held.

Myest probably can't ignore us.

Still, the Kingdom of Myest had remained courteous so far. Despite the Mikoshiba barony rising up as a business rival, Myest hadn't resorted to direct

means to crush the opposition.

For us, that's a stroke of luck, but...

Ryoma intended to maintain his monopoly on the endowed thaumaturgy gear, but when it came to ingredients harvested from Wortenia's native monsters, he was actually looking for a new channel to sell them through. Developing Wortenia required a staggering amount of funds, and with Queen Lupis's subjugation of the north approaching, he needed to further reinforce his army. Honestly speaking, every extra coin he could scrounge up would be a huge help.

Unfortunately, Simone and Lady Yulia had recently reported that, for the time being, the most they could do was maintain the status quo. They could begin expanding their market outlet, but they lacked the manpower to maintain that endeavor. At worst, trying to expand would detrimentally affect that status quo.

Ecclesia's offer would benefit Ryoma in that it was essentially a business partnership.

And they're likely offering this because they know of our circumstances.

Ecclesia was a hard negotiator, it seemed.

She's a general, but she has a merchant's eye as well. I wish Lupis could have taken a leaf out of her book. Still, what to do?

Ryoma couldn't just sit there and be impressed with her. His thoughts moved rapidly until he came up with a proposal.

"Yes, I see. You're right. Your help would be mutually beneficial for both of us, but..."

"But what?" Ecclesia asked.

"It's just I heard that Rhoadseria asked Myest to remain uninvolved with regards to our feud, and Myest consented. On top of that, if the northern subjugation begins, we'll certainly be forced into a disadvantageous position. So while I'd love to expand my business prospects, I'm honestly not sure if it's possible right now."

Ryoma smirked. It was a perfect counterpunch. Ecclesia wasn't going to give up this easily, though. She unflinchingly agreed with him.

"That much is fact. Given my country's history with Rhoadseria, we have no reason to refuse Queen Lupis's request. My suggestion was for what will come after the northern subjugation is resolved. And our country will not spare any expense in offering you some degree of aid."

Her words were contradictory.

She accepted Lupis's request, but she wants to help me after I conclude the northern subjugation? It's not what you say, but how you say it, I suppose.

Ecclesia was trying to outfox Queen Lupis, but perhaps this was the essence of politics.

The Kingdom of Myest must think Lupis is a cause for concern.

This was the natural conclusion. Queen Lupis could not rein in the nobles' oppressive ways, and her reign was constantly unstable. Because of that, when their mutual ally, Xarooda, was attacked by the O'ltormea Empire, Rhoadseria hadn't been able to dispatch a proper expedition to aid them—despite the fact that Xarooda was a defensive line that held the O'ltormea Empire in check.

Of course, this was just a single mistake, and if there wasn't any reason to believe it would happen again, Myest would surely overlook it. Unfortunately, there was no guarantee that things would be any better next time.

And this is why they agreed to meet me today.

This feud between Ryoma and Queen Lupis could affect Myest's security. Even Ecclesia's little riddle earlier was a means to probe Ryoma for a reaction. They had placed Ryoma and Lupis Rhoadserians on either end of a scale and were trying to gauge which one to join forces with.

Ryoma cut right to chase. "Can I take 'aid' to mean that you will dispatch reinforcements to assist me?"

When Ecclesias said "aid," she meant they would help when the time came to negotiate with Rhoadseria. But even knowing this, Ryoma intentionally asked if Myest would deploy their army. In doing so, he was testing her.

Silence hung over the room until Ecclesia finally said, “Sending reinforcements isn’t impossible in and of itself.”

She brought her cup to her lips and leveled a testing gaze at Ryoma, carefully examining the meaning behind his words. She then let out a soft sigh.

“That said, the land route will likely be closed off to us. Queen Lupis isn’t foolish enough to blindly believe my country’s word. We would have to rely on a sea route, and since we would have to hide the ships’ affiliations, we won’t be able to dispatch too many troops.”

Her estimate was very realistic. Minute details could go on to influence things ever so slightly, but if Myest seriously intended to send reinforcements, they would have no choice but to rely on a sea route. And since Myest had formally accepted Rhoadseria’s request for noninterference, Myest would have to dispatch those soldiers in an informal manner, which would limit the forces in number. If nothing else, they couldn’t send more than ten thousand troops, and that wouldn’t be enough to oppose the northern subjugation army, which was said to number two hundred thousand soldiers. It would be like pouring water on a hot stone.

Knowing all this, Ryoma nodded profoundly to Ecclesia. It was evident that he didn’t simply want reinforcements.

“May I ask why?” Ecclesia said. “With our kingdom’s might, there are other options you could pursue.”

In other words, she was asking why Ryoma hadn’t negotiated with Queen Lupis for a compromise.

Ryoma remained composed as he honestly answered, “It’s simple. So long as that woman is Rhoadseria’s ruler, we’re all fated to die. If anything, I’d like to ask you one thing: do you think Rhoadseria has any future with Lupis Rhoadserians on the throne?”

His words were brimming with confidence, and his eyes insisted that she must know he was right.

Whether she wants to admit it is another matter.

The Kingdom of Myest and the Kingdom of Rhoadseria had maintained a

neutral relationship for many years. Sometimes they were rivals; sometimes they were allies. They would clash occasionally in small border skirmishes, but history demonstrated that whenever the southern kingdoms or the O'ltormea Empire came knocking at the door, the three kingdoms of the east would join forces to repel them. That relationship was on the verge of changing, however.

"So it really is true," Ecclesia muttered. She had already vaguely come to that conclusion. She had been harboring the same concern as Myest's top brass, which was why she'd come to this meeting today.

The responsibility doesn't lie entirely with Queen Lupis, though.

That was why Ryoma had initially wanted to help Queen Lupis's regime. Unfortunately, Ryoma's feelings had failed to reach the queen, who insisted on repeatedly trying to eliminate him. This meant he was going up against the nation, and his chances of victory would be nonexistent.

Even knowing this, if Ryoma wanted to ensure that he lived on, there was only one thing he could do. He'd have to remove the cancer eating away at Rhoadseria. Much like a medical operation, this came with major risks and side effects. Anyone would choose to avoid this if they had any other alternative, but if there was no other way, one had to make the choice.

Ecclesia gazed at Ryoma, her heart brewing with cold calculation. The decision she was about to make would decide Myest's future.

But Myest seems to have considered this possibility.

Ecclesia was a highborn woman with royal blood, as well as one of Myest's prided generals, but she wasn't the kingdom's sovereign. Normally, she wouldn't have the authority to make this choice on her own. Her expression, though, implied she was allowed to and intended to make that choice.

A long moment passed before Ecclesia finally made her choice.

"Let's hear your conditions then, Lady Ecclesia," Ryoma said.

"This agreement will only be operative after the northern subjugation is resolved, but the Kingdom of Myest is interested in forming an anti-O'ltormea alliance with the Mikoshiba barony," Ecclesia explained. "In exchange for that, my country will lend you an elite unit to help you during the northern

subjugation. Of course, they will be sent as a mercenary group of unknown affiliation. At the same time, we will aid by providing supplies.”

Given Myest’s position, this wasn’t a bad deal. Even if it was in an unofficial capacity, Myest’s general, Ecclesia Marinelle, had declared that she would nullify and void her kingdom’s promise of noninterference. The meaning of that promise was a heavy one.

Ecclesia might not be queen, but it seems she has been entrusted with full authority.

If Rhoadseria was to catch wind of this, Myest would be branded as a treacherous country that went back on its word.

I suppose it could also be a lie to dupe me, but would they go through this many risks just to trick me?

After all, to a bystander, the Mikoshiba barony looked like it was at a severe disadvantage compared to the northern subjugation army of two hundred thousand men. Nevertheless, Ryoma had a plan to defeat Queen Lupis and her army, and he’d only come to negotiate with Myest about what would happen after the war. He could defeat the northern subjugation even without help from another country. Only a select few of his officers knew about his plan, and even they didn’t understand the true aim behind it. Only Laura and Sara understood the full scope of his scheme.

If Myest set out to trick Ryoma for the sake of disposing of him, they wouldn’t need Ecclesia to offer false promises in this meeting. All they’d have to do is abide by their oath to Rhoadseria and remain uninvolved.

But I need them to shoulder more of a risk.

Ryoma understood Myest’s position, but that didn’t mean he’d settle for less in these negotiations.

“Your terms aren’t bad, but I need to add two more conditions,” Ryoma stated.

“And those would be...?” Ecclesia prompted.

“First, I ask that the unit you send be Myest’s prided cavalry archers. Second, I

ask that their commander be Ecclesia Marinelle, the Whirlwind.”

The instant Ryoma said this, their gazes clashed, invisible sparks flying through the air.

“You do understand the meaning behind your request, yes?” Ecclesia asked.

Ryoma nodded unapologetically. “Of course. Let us make it so that among the ‘unaffiliated mercenaries’ you send me, there just so happens to be a woman who looks a lot like you.”

Ecclesia keenly picked up on the meaning behind his words. She became contemplative once more, before eventually reaching for the teacup on the table and sipping on her tea. She then leveled a challenging gaze at Ryoma.

“I understand. Very well. However, I need to append a condition too. Baron Mikoshiba, I request that you serve as an intermediary between my country and the demi-humans.”

Ryoma knit his brow. Her request was unexpected.

So that's her angle. I see she looked into my circumstances. If this is her reason, I can see why Myest would go so far as to renege on their oath to Rhoadseria to approach me. I guess that kind of demand makes sense, considering that they're a trade country that made a fortune off of trading with other continents.

The question was whether he could accept that demand. Saying no would be easy, but then Ecclesia would refuse to answer his demand that she join the forces Myest would dispatch.

So, what will profit me more? Hanging on to that monopoly, or gaining their cooperation?

This was an issue of resolve. The two of them glared at each other for a long second, after which they both reached out to shake hands. Both of them knew that making this choice was their only way forward.

Chapter 3: Bonds of Blood

A woman was seated at the window, looking exhausted. The air about her was dark and oppressing. The moment Chris Morgan, carrying a stack of accounting documents in his hands, opened the door to her office, he gave her a concerned expression.

Breaking the agreement with him is still weighing on her.

The face of Ryoma Mikoshiba, who he'd seen for the first time in a while just the other day, flashed in Chris's mind. Given the circumstances, Ryoma could have cut Chris down right then and there, but after reading Helena's letter, Ryoma had said he understood and let Chris go unharmed.

Chris would never forget the expression Helena had made when he told her what had happened. Her features had been stricken with regret and repentance. She'd looked like a sinner faced with the enormity of her sin. Even today, she still seemed tormented by her choice.

I understand that to Lady Helena, it was a painful decision to make...

As Rhoadseria's general, she'd raced across the battlefield, and in the process, she'd met a hero by the name of Ryoma Mikoshiba and chosen a new path in life. She'd made this choice after a great deal of deliberation—the choice to betray the country she'd defended for so many years.

No matter how inadequate a ruler Lupis Rhoadserians might have been, betraying one's country was a grave crime. It was only natural Helena would think twice before doing so. Despite this, Helena had chosen Ryoma over her country because she was charmed by his abilities and potential. Nonetheless, in the end, the auspicious revelation of her daughter's survival had overturned that choice.

Helena had thrown herself into work, exhausting herself and trying to drown out the guilt. Chris could relate to how she felt.

Which choice would have been better?

Chris honestly didn't know. Given how much Helena had rejoiced upon learning her daughter was still alive, there was no easy answer to that question. It wasn't just difficult for him either; as the one who'd made that choice, Helena too was tormented by it. If this choice wasn't such a painful one, it would have cast doubt upon all the suffering she'd felt until now.

But I never would have imagined Lady Saria's life would have these kinds of consequences.

Chris couldn't help but feel that since Saria's presence threw the situation into so much chaos, she might have been better off dead. Of course, he couldn't say that to Helena. Just the fact that the terrible thought had even crossed his mind felt like it called his basic humanity into question.

Realistically speaking, Saria's survival had created a number of problems. Most of all, it made Helena change her approach with Akitake Sudou. He was, after all, the one who'd protected her daughter. So long as he didn't do anything too appalling, Helena couldn't treat him callously—especially not now, when it turned out that Saria Steiner was an attendant of Princess Radine.

It does feel a little too good to be true...

For the unbiased observer, this suspicion was natural. Her daughter, who was said to have died over a decade ago, had suddenly turned up alive and well with this perfect timing. It wasn't as though similar things hadn't happened in the past, though. There were cases where towns were destroyed by gigantic monsters, only for children who were presumed dead to turn up alive and return to their parents' side a decade later.

Usually, this would be a heartwarming miracle, but Saria Steiner's survival was simply too good to be true, even with evidence like her physical resemblance to Helena's daughter and the pendant. Most suspicious of all was the fact that the man who informed Helena of her daughter's survival was of unknown origins and had somehow managed to slither his way into the palace.

Furio Gelhart may have been demoted from duke to viscount, but he was the leader of the nobles' faction and the man who backed Princess Radine. Akitake Sudou was his advisor, it seems, so Sudou finding his way into the palace isn't that surprising.

But even then, it felt like too many coincidences had overlapped to make this reunion possible.

Who even is this Sudou man to begin with? Is he on our side, or is he an enemy? Why is he even allowed to be at the palace at all? How did he not face judgment?

This question probably troubled the minds of many people in Rhoadseria's court. Formally speaking, Akitake Sudou had no status or official position to speak of. He was, at best, an attendant to Radine Rhoadserians after she'd been officially recognized as a princess, and an assistant dispatched by Viscount Gelhart.

Sudou's position was far too vague. He wasn't a knight guarding the princess or viscount, nor was he a chamberlain. It wasn't even clear if Viscount Gelhart had really ordered him to act. He seemed to hardly ever be at Princess Radine's or Viscount Gelhart's side, instead walking around the palace as he pleased. At that point, could he even be considered their attendant?

Nevertheless, no one voiced their discontent or doubts with regards to him. In fact, many of the nobles and knights who had no territory identified with Sudou. Apparently, Mikhail Vanash was especially close with him. They weren't friends, but Chris's information network had told him that Mikhail periodically met with Sudou, and recently, Meltina Lecter was a part of those meetings too.

I heard that Sudou was the one who helped Viscount Gelhart swear allegiance to Her Majesty in exchange for freeing Mikhail from captivity.

For a time, Mikhail had been ostracized as a war criminal for his acts during the civil war. While the fault for that did lay with Mikhail, the fact of the matter was that had Akitake Sudou not approached Queen Lupis with that deal, his fate would have been written off as that of a knight who'd died bravely in the line of duty. Instead, House Gelhart had swooped in and requested a deal in exchange for his safe return.

Well, normally, no one would have taken that deal.

Not only would Queen Lupis have destroyed her foes, the nobles' faction, but she would have also claimed the head of their leader. That would have been the most certain way of ensuring her opposition was permanently eliminated.

What's more, at the time, Viscount Gelhart had been backed against the wall. His stronghold at the citadel city of Heraklion had failed to conscript the commoners, and many of the nobles affiliated with his faction had begun retreating back to their domains out of fear that the situation would turn unfavorable for their side. Holding a siege under those circumstances would have been impossible for the viscount. The second the battle would have begun, Gelhart's fate would have been sealed. Be that as it may, Queen Lupis had ended up accepting his oath of fealty in exchange for Mikhail's safe return.

Looking at it this way, Sir Mikhail wasn't entirely responsible.

Yet people would often bend common sense if it let them pin the blame on someone, so even though Mikhail didn't willingly or intentionally give Viscount Gelhart the golden chance he needed, people still coldly faulted him for enabling it.

But I guess you can't say he wasn't responsible either. He did abandon his reconnaissance mission to go after his rival, charged his forces into the enemy, and got himself captured.

Regardless of if Mikhail's failings were the result of his own foolishness, the fact remained that Akitake Sudou had made the chance for his return possible to begin with.

Hearing that Sudou and Mikhail are in cahoots does strike me as a bit odd.

The circumstances being what they had been, if Chris had been in Mikhail's shoes, he couldn't have remained composed around Sudou. True, he might not have regarded Sudou as an enemy, but he would've certainly felt reserved around him and would have avoided interacting with him. If nothing else, he certainly wouldn't have chosen to actively associate with him.

Yes, not unless I had a very good reason...

All sorts of reasons could have pushed Mikhail to associate with Sudou, but the problem was that as a result, Queen Lupis had let a latent threat sneak into her regime.

That said, right now I have this problem to deal with.

He placed the papers on the spot for documents requiring Helena's attention

and, despite feeling like it might be forward of him, spoke to his respected superior.

“I think you’re dwelling on this too much. I know you stayed up late last night, but if you keep this up, you’ll damage your health.”

Chris glanced at the pile of documents on the desk.

Handling this many on her own is too much.

A small mountain of documents was stacked on the desk in front of Helena. It would take an ordinary person days to go through all of them, and sadly, nothing could make this pile of papers disappear on its own. The more documents that were processed, the more that would have to come through Helena for approval.

Having been reinstated as Rhoadseria’s general, Helena Steiner was to aid Queen Lupis, the commander of the upcoming northern subjugation. This gave her management of the royal guard and the monarch’s guard, as well as the armies of the nobles who’d boasted about how they would slay Baron Mikoshiba. Consequently, Helena was swamped with work.

At this point, working through the night was a daily affair for her. If she forced herself to go to bed, she’d just have to wake up an hour later. Her meals were also relegated to the short breaks between work. Even with martial thaumaturgy and a physique much healthier than her age might suggest, this was still taxing on Helena’s aging body. However, no matter how much Chris admonished her for it, Helena didn’t have any intention of changing her ways. It was like she was trying to punish herself.

Not that I don’t understand why.

Helena ignored Chris’s concern. “Yes, thank you. I’ll be careful,” she muttered. She didn’t seem annoyed with Chris, yet despite her compliant words, her hands moved just the same. They’d had this conversation time and again already.

With nothing else to say, Chris heaved a deep sigh, bowed, and left the room.



Walking quickly through the palace corridors, Chris made for his room as he thought back to what he'd just seen—the mountain of documents lined up before Helena.

It really does seem that establishing and training the new knight orders is weighing heavily on Lady Helena.

Normally, someone else would handle this kind of work, but since Queen Lupis requested that this be handled perfectly, Helena had taken over it herself.

Since Queen Lupis wants to increase her authority as sovereign, reinforcing the knight orders is a matter of great urgency for her.

Despite claiming to be a centralized authoritarian monarchy, Rhoadseria's political system was closer to feudalism. Some nobles with roles in the palace didn't own land, and although their high positions did support the administration, most of Rhoadseria's aristocracy was made up of governors who ruled the country's territories. They maintained their own armies, collected taxes from their domains, and swayed the law within their territories with their discretionary power.

They're like kings ruling small countries.

They didn't have the authority to negotiate with other countries, but even that wasn't fully controlled by the royal house. For example, Viscount Winzer, who ruled the southern border city of Galatia, had significant authority over military and diplomatic affairs.

In a world where long-distance communication was limited to carrier pigeons, the palace couldn't properly manage the border regions itself. At worst, if the Kingdom of Tarja were to suddenly declare war, it would take too long for a runner to reach the capital and return with instructions. If Count Winzer had to wait for permission to engage in defensive combat, the invaders would have encroached too deep to be stopped by the time he received it. Due to this delay, Rhoadseria's rulers had no choice but to give frontier governors the right to maintain an army, like they had done for generations.

But that could create an opportunity for a rebellion.

That wouldn't happen if the royal house had the power to keep those

governors in check, but over Rhoadseria's five hundred years of history, the royal house's authority had gradually dwindled.

In that regard, Queen Lupis was correct to order Helena to swiftly organize the new units. The problem was the intent behind her order.

Queen Lupis is testing Lady Helena's loyalty. Lady Helena was close to Baron Mikoshiba, so I can understand Her Majesty's misgivings, but still. She's mistreating Lady Helena.

Chris could only shake his head at this absurd test, but that didn't mean he or Lady Helena could just ignore the queen's instructions. Forming new knight orders was an important task, one which would determine Rhoadseria's future; that much was for certain.

The royal house is weak, though. No governor is going to obey a queen who lost all her authority.

The weak were at fault for their weaknesses, no matter how strong they might have once been. The governing nobles only served Rhoadseria and obeyed its ruler because they stood to profit from it. But what kind of profit did they seek?

Safety and stability. No noble would serve a king that can't guarantee those.

There were exceptions to every rule, of course. Some nobles had given up their lives and the lives of their commoners for the kingdom in pursuit of glory and family honor, but those were few and far between. As a knight, Chris respected those capable of such loyalty.

But realistically speaking...

Chris thought back to his own grandfather, who was laying in bed and awaiting death to claim to him. Seeing such a loyal man die, abandoned by his country, made it hard for him to speak of loyalty.

General Albrecht was the one who prevented us from getting medicine for his Carrion disease. Because of him, grandfather is dying in agony, when all of this could have been avoided.

His condition hadn't needed to progress to the level it had. While lethal,

Carrion disease was a treatable affliction. Nonetheless, whenever Chris's family had tried to buy the nostrums to treat his grandfather's disease, the former General Albrecht had interfered with their efforts, preventing them from purchasing them. As a result, Frank Morgan's illness had progressed to its terminal state, and he had become bedridden. The doctor's diagnosis was that he had a month or two left to live.

He probably won't live to see the end of the northern subjugation.

Although Chris was as close to his grandfather as he was to his own parents, he would likely not be there to see his passing. This filled him with regret, guilt, and shame, but as Helena's right-hand man, he had a duty to support her as she commanded Rhoadseria's army. No matter how close he was to his grandfather, he couldn't attend his grandfather's final moments with the situation being what it was.

His grandfather was currently taking intense, narcotic-based painkillers that allowed him to keep his wits about him, but once those wore off, the rotting flesh eating away at his body would cause him agonizing pain. Seeing his grandfather convulse and froth at the mouth from that would crush Chris's heart.

Nevertheless, Chris couldn't lay all the blame all on General Albrecht.

Grandfather was loyal to Lady Helena, as he should have been.

Chris would not deny that, but in the end, this was what had led to Frank Morgan's current fate. The many misfortunes Chris had been put through could be traced back to Frank's stubbornness too.

Maybe the fact that I think he should have been smarter in how he acted is proof that I'm just not loyal enough.

Chris's heart trembled with irritation. Was this because of the age gap between him and his grandfather, or were their personalities just that different? Either way, Chris was torn between his self-interest and his loyalty to Helena, but only because Helena was also wavering.

Having returned to his office, Chris sank into his chair and looked up at the ceiling, wondering which path he should take in the coming war.



Northeast of Rhoadseria's capital, in a bay halfway into the Wortenia Peninsula, was a city nestled deep within the undeveloped no-man's-land. The man who built it had named it Sirius. The name was derived from the Greek language, meaning "the brightest" or "that which burns hardest," and it was the name given to the star that shone brightest in the winter sky. Ryoma Mikoshiba had christened his city with this name, filling it with all of his resolve.

On the same night that Chris started realizing his doubts, two men sat together, enjoying a drink at Baron Mikoshiba's estate, built in the heart of Sirius. One of them was Baron Mikoshiba, who had returned just the day prior from his meeting with the Kingdom of Myest. The other was an old man, his mane of white hair tied into a ponytail—Koichiro.

Both were seated by the window. The moonlight shone down on them as they tipped liquor into their cups on the table between them. Standing by the wall were the twins, Sara and Laura Malfist, dressed in maid uniforms. They were likely there as attendants and bodyguards.



Ryoma trusted Koichiro completely, but given his position, he still had to be careful to some extent, even in the presence of a relative. In a sense, the fact that he was speaking to someone who shouldn't even be here was all the more reason to be careful.

Their glasses contained ice, produced by verbal thaumaturgy, and an amber-colored liquid. Every so often, the melting ice would break, producing a satisfying click.

The old man gazed at his glass and slowly brought it to his nose. "This is good." Words of honest praise leaked from his lips. "Even when it's cold, I can smell how refined it is. It's fine liquor, made by the hands of a master."

"Thanks. I'm glad you like it," Ryoma replied. "It was worth asking Simone to order it from the central continent."

As far as Ryoma knew, the method for producing wine in this world was no different from his home world's. After wine made from grapes was distilled, it was stored in wooden barrels to ripen. However, perhaps due to the climate where the white wine, the base for this liquor, was distilled, the drink's aroma was exceptionally and distinctively strong.

This costs three times a commoner's annual salary. If he didn't like it, it'd be like I got conned, Ryoma thought to himself, directing a reproachful gaze at the bottle sitting on the table.

People had their preferences when it came to alcohol, but Ryoma doubted anyone would say this liquor tasted bad. He'd served this to the nobles during his dinner party in Pireas too. To show off the Mikoshiba barony's financial might, he'd bought all types of liquor, from red wine to white wine, and all of them were the finest money could buy. The food, the alcohol, the orchestra... All of those expenses cost more than any baron or viscount in Rhoadseria could reasonably afford. Not even a powerful count could frivolously spend this much. Ryoma had spared no expense to gather all manner of delicacies.

Not that I got to enjoy any of it back then.

The evening party's objective was strictly to show off the Mikoshiba barony's financial blessings and apply pressure to any nobles who considered opposing

him. He hadn't had the time or leisure to nibble on fine cuisine and sip on wine. He did have a few sips during the party, but that was the extent of his enjoyment.

It's my first time tasting this brandy, but it's not bad. Not sure if it's worth the price tag, though. If nothing else, I wouldn't go out of my way to buy this, Ryoma thought as he sipped on his drink again.

The rich aroma tickled his nostrils as the intense taste of alcohol burned his throat. The ice should have curbed the heat somewhat, but it was a strong drink. It wasn't bad by any means, and if Ryoma were asked about the taste, he would answer that it was good. But was it three-times-a-commoner's-yearly-salary good? Ryoma was inclined to say no. Since market prices were different in this world, it was difficult to convert the value of products into his home world's currency, but by his calculations, this brandy's price was equivalent to ten million yen.

That's excessive for a bottle of brandy, but I guess these kinds of premium products at auctions can go over one hundred million yen. In those cases, the price gets inflated not because of the alcohol, but because the bottles are decorated with diamonds. If I consider the cost of ferrying this bottle from the central continent as about the same price as a premium bottle, I guess it evens out.

The voyage from the central continent to the western continent was a long one. The weather and the wind influenced how many days it took, but a one-way trip typically took several months. A round trip could take years, depending on different factors.

In addition, the waters were full of sea monsters in search of prey, which made the voyage even more dangerous than traveling by land. There was nowhere to run in the vast sea. Due to this, sailing between continents was both a chance to get rich quickly and a dangerous journey that teetered on the razor's edge between life and death.

I guess when I consider the many hardships it took for this bottle to get to me, I shouldn't complain, Ryoma thought as he rotated the glass in his hands and watched the liquid swirl inside it. The cubes of ice that still retained their shape

made a satisfying clicking sound.

And I'm supposed to drink this without ice, I suppose.

The melting ice dampened his spirits a bit, but it did make the taste and aroma a bit more mild.

Not that I'm a connoisseur or some kind of liquor-tasting judge. I'll just drink it however I see fit.

It was an insult to the brewer to put ice in liquor of this quality. Moreover, adding needless fluids to the drink made it harder to appraise fairly. But when it came to enjoying the drink, was there an objectively correct way of doing so? For example, if someone were to write a guidebook on how to drink liquor, Ryoma believed they would suggest different ways of consuming it, such as diluting it in cold water, hot water, or carbonated water. Cocktails and coke highballs were other ways of enjoying a drink too. It was all a matter of taste, and Ryoma and Koichiro liked their drink served in water on the rocks.

Hell, you can put ice in your beer if that's what floats your boat.

The Japanese didn't generally respect this, and Ryoma himself wasn't one for cooling his beer with ice, but some countries in the world did so. In southeast Asia, in Thailand and Vietnam, it was customary to put ice in beer. Ryoma had just happened to read that online back when he was still in Japan, but even years down the line he could recall the culture shock it had given him.

The different ways of enjoying a drink only became an issue when one forced these questions of taste onto other people.

And getting that distinction wrong can result in bloodshed.

It was just a trivial question, but for how insignificant it was, it could end up costing lives sometimes, especially with people like Koichiro Mikoshiba.

Getting on his bad side can be more trouble than it's worth.

Having lived with Koichiro for over a decade and a half, Ryoma knew this all too well. Koichiro was his closest relative, and Ryoma had lived with him the longest, so Ryoma was confident that he understood his grandfather. He was his flesh and blood.

But I guess there were things about him even I didn't know.

Ryoma looked at Koichiro, who was tilting his glass to his lips. Normally, Ryoma would have questioned him by now. After all, he shouldn't be in this world. Koichiro did tell him a fair bit on the night before the Battle of the Cannat Plains, and he'd let a few more details slip by in later conversations, but he hadn't dropped all pretenses and told Ryoma the whole story yet. Tonight was one of the few chances Ryoma had to ask him personal questions before the war with Queen Lupis started in earnest.

Perhaps sensing Ryoma's curiosity, Koichiro lifted his gaze from his glass and whispered, "Well? What do you want to ask?"

"Okay, then..." Ryoma tilted his head in thought for a moment, then sighed deeply. There were too many questions he wanted answered. Why did Koichiro, a resident of Rearth, come to this side? What's more, it seemed as if Koichiro had spent years in this world since being summoned.

I could understand if he didn't know I was here...

That wasn't the case, though. When Koichiro appeared before Ryoma after Ryoma's escape from Pireas, he had told Ryoma that he'd been informed about his situation long beforehand. It seemed unthinkable he would choose not to approach Ryoma before.

Plus, those people who were with him...the Chinese man, Zheng Motoku and the Russian woman, Veronica Kozlova. Who are they?

The way they conducted themselves made it clear that there was more to them than met the eye. They had the unique air of those who'd taken the lives of others.

And many lives, at that.

They must have killed at least a dozen people each. Perhaps they had the blood of hundreds on their hands. Ryoma had no proof to back this, of course. After Koichiro told him about the ambush units, Koichiro's companions had exchanged simple greetings with Ryoma, but he hadn't spoken to them since. Their only communication was the occasional nod when he passed them in the estate's corridors. Ryoma couldn't even call them acquaintances. The only

tenuous connection he had with them was that they were, at best, acquaintances of his grandfather's. But that was enough for Ryoma to pick up on things.

You don't have that kind of air about you from just plain old practicing.

Ryoma sensed an off-putting atmosphere around them that he couldn't quite explain, and he knew he wasn't just imagining things. Police officers often walked around town out of uniform, yet fellow officers could recognize them as colleagues at a glance. It was evident in the habits they'd picked up from their rigorous training—the way they walked, the way they observed their surroundings—countless little gestures that one usually wouldn't even notice.

This could be said of killers too. Ryoma felt the same discomfort one would feel when spotting a predator walking among herbivores. Maybe he just picked up on the fragrance of blood on them—a killer catching the scent of other killers.

From how stiff and straitlaced they seem, I'd say they're soldiers. The Chinese one, Zheng, seems particularly experienced, so I assume he was in some special forces unit. Compared to him, the woman, Veronica... If I had to say, she looks less like the sort to raise havoc on the field and more the commander type, the kind that watches over things from headquarters. That makes her an even nastier opponent.

Killing someone with your own hands and ordering others to do it were two different things, yet they were the same acts at heart. The only difference was if one gripped the weapon themselves, versus someone else doing it for them.

I don't know if they became killers back in our world or if it happened after they got called to this shithole of a place.

This was the answer Ryoma came to by using his keen ability to sense the scents of others. Maybe it was intuition, but Ryoma was confident he was right in his analysis of Zheng Motoku and Veronica Kozlova.

And those two treat my grandfather with a great deal of respect for some reason.

The way Zheng and Veronica behaved around Koichiro was, simply put, like

the way servants acted around their master. Zheng conducted himself like a butler of some sorts, and Veronica acted like a secretary. Ryoma didn't think that was a bad thing in and of itself, but what sequence of events led to his grandfather having a Chinese butler and a gorgeous Russian secretary at his beck and call? Ryoma couldn't even hazard a guess.

And then there's Asuka...

Ryoma's childhood friend and cousin had also been called into this world. Koichiro had told Ryoma that she was safe, so Ryoma had put off questioning him about it, but his patience was wearing thin.

He said she's safe, but there's no such thing as safe here.

He wasn't concerned out of romantic affection for her, but apart from Koichiro, Asuka was his closest relative. He had the war with Queen Lupis coming up, but he could arrange for a few Igasaki ninjas to go to Asuka's aid.

Besides, unlike me, she's too kind and naive for this world.

Asuka Kiryuu was a normal girl, for better or worse. She was a good student, and she had been in the archery club during middle school. She was even fairly talented at it and had won a few tournaments. Most people would agree that she was a pretty girl, graced with both beauty and intellect. She even had a talent for martial arts, and her grandfather Koichiro had taught her a few techniques. If it came down to it, Asuka did have the means to defend herself and even kill if the situation called for it.

Despite that, Asuka Kiryuu was still a normal girl with a kind heart and a lack of malicious intent. Even if she was in danger, she'd sooner run away than pick up a weapon. By no means did she have the resolve necessary to kill someone; she'd rather get hurt herself than be forced to hurt another person.

A sword that lacks the blade called malice... That was the essence of Asuka Kiryuu.

And if this were Japan, that would be fine.

Ryoma wasn't criticizing or trying to disparage Asuka, but in this barbaric, ruthless world, her inherent kindness was nothing but ignorance and weakness.

Countless images crossed Ryoma's mind as silence hung between him and Koichiro, but he eventually said, "Well, I kind of want to ask you about everything." This was really the only question he had. No matter what he asked, he wouldn't be able to make any decisions without a full grasp of the situation.

Koichiro looked at Ryoma with surprise. He then glanced over his shoulder at Laura and Sara, who stood by the wall.

"Are you sure you want those lovely young ladies to hear it too?" he asked.

Koichiro's doubt was a given. This conversation would go into the smallest of details, and Koichiro hadn't brought Zheng or Veronica with him, despite them always being at his side.

"It's fine," Ryoma said with a nod. His words were firm.

Koichiro directed a questioning look at Ryoma, then smirked. "Is that right? I see you were lucky."

"Lucky?" Ryoma scoffed at his comment. "If I were lucky, would I have been summoned here?"

This was perhaps a predictable reply. Ryoma didn't think of himself as lucky in any way whatsoever. Koichiro, however, disagreed.

"No, if you were able to happen upon people you can trust completely even in a world like this, then you must be a lucky man," he said with palpable emotion.

The weight behind Koichiro's words rendered Ryoma speechless for a moment. "I honestly don't know what to say to that," he replied with a sardonic smile.

No matter how one tried to spin it, being summoned to this world wasn't a fortunate twist of fate. There was no shortage of reasons to dislike this place—the lack of public safety, for one, and the monsters that threatened the lives of people. Not to mention, most of the people summoned here from Rearth were merely disposable pawns to serve as soldiers on the battlefield.

It was impossible for a person from a modern society to lead a normal life here. The hardest part was that the culture and standard of living were too different. Modern Japan wasn't a utopia by any means, but compared to the

hell that was this harsh, ruthless world, it was heaven.

Ryoma had been summoned by Gaius Valkland, the court thaumaturgist of the O'ltormea Empire, but he'd been promoted to the rank of baron in Rhoadseria and become the governor of the Wortenia Peninsula. He had achieved far more than most people in his situation had.

Even so, a world without gas or electricity was limited. Back in Japan, taking a bath was as simple as flipping a switch to heat the water, but in this world, it took a great deal of effort to achieve the same thing.

One could put up with these inconveniences, though. A man of Ryoma's status could order his servants to prepare him a bath if need be. He was dissatisfied with the old style, premodern toilets, but he'd used them before during mountain climbing, so he could even tolerate that. The different culture, on the other hand, and mostly the lack of pastimes, was particularly devastating to him.

I can imagine why Count Salzberg was so obsessed with fine cuisine and women. There's hardly anything else to enjoy.

For example, reading was one of the first hobbies that came to his mind. Back when he was in Japan, Ryoma engaged in all sorts of hobbies, but reading books took up much of his time. Nonetheless, ever since he'd been called to this world, Ryoma had never once read a book purely for enjoyment. That wasn't to say that there were no books or texts, but one couldn't just walk into an urban book store to buy them.

Plus, if I want to buy books, I'd have to ask a big supplier like Simone or the Mystel Company.

And even then, he wouldn't receive them as soon as he placed the order. He'd have to wait for at least a month for the books to be purchased, and in some cases it could take years to obtain them. Books were expensive, and while prices could fluctuate quite a bit, the more expensive ones could cost as much as that bottle of brandy.

The reason books were so expensive was that very few of them were produced; that was all there was to it. There was some partial printing technology available, but most books were manuscripts written by hand.

As a result, the literacy rate was very low. Most people knew how to write their names, but only those in relevant professions could read and write fluently. Because of that, few people read books, which inevitably meant there was little demand, so books were in short supply.

Maybe this was a chicken-and-egg problem, but the end result was that books were luxury items. Most books sold by bookstores were technical manuals, and books written for pure enjoyment weren't a thing. What few existed were picture books made for educating noble infants.

I don't know the logic behind it, but somehow I was able to read the Questions and Replies between Emperor Taizong of Tang and Li Weigong in Chinese. I'm grateful for that much.

Being able to read the book in its original language was wonderful, of course, so in that regard, being summoned to this world wasn't all bad, but a strategy manual was hardly light reading.

You only read strategy manuals as a means to survive.

Ryoma's idea of a wealthy, bountiful life was one where he could spend as much time as he wanted doing whatever he wanted. Reading books wasn't enough; he wanted to read books he would enjoy.

Comics or light novels would be nice. And maybe whodunits and historical novels.

But Ryoma couldn't hope for books like that. No one in this cutthroat, war-torn world would even think to write such books. Pleasure and leisure could only occupy one's mind when they had the free time to indulge in them.

Books sometimes got caught up in people being summoned from the other world, so trade companies did sell some books originating from Rearth. The original *Questions and Replies between Emperor Taizong of Tang and Li Weigong* manuscript Ryoma read he'd found in a company that handled old books, where it had collected dust for years. Ryoma might have been able to find the comics or light novels he longed for so much, but it was doubtful that he could find the entire series for sale, and that would just give his enjoyment a frustrating aftertaste.

All of this might feel like a very trifling issue, and some might even mock him for it, but to Ryoma, books from his world held more weight and value than the lives of other people, in a sense. If Ryoma were told that he could receive every volume of his favorite comic series in exchange for Lupis Rhoadserians's head, he'd gladly kill the queen to do it.

Ryoma would never say he was lucky to have been summoned to this world, but at the same time, denying Koichiro's claim would needlessly hurt the Malfist sisters. He couldn't say anything that implied they were unworthy of his trust. After all, the fact that Ryoma allowed them to be present for this conversation was proof of how strongly he felt for them.

I guess I should properly say it...

But Ryoma felt that doing that would be far too awkward. Instead, he looked at his glass and took a sip.

Koichiro narrowed his eyes and laughed. "Well, if you say that, I won't try to deny it." Then he teasingly dropped a bombshell. "So which one are you thinking of marrying?"

Ryoma choked on the drink he was sipping on, and they both heard the girls gasp.

Seeing their reactions, Koichiro gleefully continued his questioning. "Don't tell me that... You're not thinking of marrying them both, are you? I suppose polygamy isn't frowned upon in this world, but are you sure you've got the stamina to keep it up?"

Ryoma was barely able to keep himself from spitting out his drink, and he started coughing from the shock. The sound of his coughing filled the room, but it eventually died down. Ryoma raised his head and glared at Koichiro while wiping his mouth with a handkerchief.

"You've got attitude problems, you know that, grandpa? Even after coming here, you're still every bit the contrarian you've always been."

Koichiro didn't seem the slightest bit fazed by his grandson's criticism. He simply cocked his head at Ryoma's evasive attitude.

"Hm... But you don't dislike them, do you? I mean, you wouldn't have them

stay here if you didn't trust them."

Ryoma couldn't help but avert his gaze from Koichiro.

Damn old man! He's messing with me!

His own grandfather had pointed out his emotions for the twins to hear, and the only way Ryoma could oppose him was by remaining quiet. Sara's lips parted, and she looked as if she had something to say, but Laura, who stood beside her, raised a hand to silence her.

The two girls' emotions were evident on their faces. They were happy to learn how the master they'd served for many years felt about them. No doubt they wanted to hear it directly from his lips, but while Sara was genuinely happy, Laura was more reserved and knew to silence her sister out of respect for their beloved master's dignity.

Koichiro laughed pleasantly. This was the first real smile Ryoma had seen from his grandfather in a long time.

Koichiro then bowed his head to Ryoma. "Ah, pardon me. I didn't mean to tease you. I thought I'd lighten up the atmosphere, but I ended up getting carried away. Forgive me."

Ryoma couldn't say much else in the face of this honest apology. For a moment, silence settled over the room, but eventually Ryoma heaved a deep sigh and shrugged, smiling sarcastically.

I guess this topic works as an icebreaker.

Since Ryoma never knew his parents, Koichiro was both a grandfather and a father figure to him. Although the affection Koichiro showed him didn't necessarily match what society would consider proper fatherly love, Koichiro was still one of his few living relatives.

Sadly, Ryoma had no time to spare for romance, so he had to get the derailed conversation back on track and put his doubts into words.

"Okay, fine. Let's get back to the topic at hand."

The relaxed atmosphere once again tensed. The young man before them, who up until just seconds ago wasn't willing to speak about his true emotions,

had changed his attitude. Koichiro only saw the man he'd raised into a warrior.

"So, what are you doing in this world, grandpa? And who are these people, Zheng Motoku and Veronica Kozlova? Where did you meet them?"

Koichiro took a swig of his brandy before he began explaining his past—the long, long tale of a man who was coincidentally beckoned into this world and managed to return home through a trick of fate. It took some time for him to tell it, long enough for the new candle Ryoma had lit when he entered to melt into half its size.

"Really..." Ryoma muttered, leaning his back against the sofa and gazing up at the ceiling. "You were a returner who was summoned and managed to find your way back..."

But based on what he said, going back to Japan that way is basically impossible.

Ryoma had once investigated ways to return home, and his search had led him to a woman called Annamaria, otherwise known as the Hermit of Mireish. At the time, Annamaria told Ryoma there was no way back, and though Ryoma hadn't been satisfied with her answer, what Koichiro just told him allowed him to fill in the blanks in her reasoning.

Technically speaking, returning to Japan wasn't impossible, but if he were to do what the Organization did and use the counter-summoning ritual to return home without taking any precautions, it would lead to a tragic outcome.

Not only would it get more people involved for no reason, there's a good chance I'd end up lost in the interstice between dimensions too.

Honestly speaking, Ryoma wasn't unwilling to sacrifice others to achieve his goals. He wasn't going to be a hypocrite and claim he was above taking lives at this point, but he was only willing to go that far if his safety was guaranteed. Even if he was willing to put his life on the line despite that, Koichiro's story made it clear the odds wouldn't be in his favor. Still, this was the first hint he'd heard about a chance to return home. He couldn't give up that easily.

"For the time being, let's put this matter on the back burner," Ryoma whispered and looked back at Koichiro. "So Zheng and Kozlova are serving you

under orders from that old friend of yours, Liu Daijin?”

“Zheng serves under Liu, yes. As for Miss Nika, I didn’t look into her reasons, but she is still accommodating and is willing to help me. But yes, in the end, both of them help me as a favor from my connections within the Organization.”

Ryoma cracked a wry smile. “That’s some pretty friendship you’ve got going there. You know, if you’d have told me you have connections in the underworld, I’d have believed it, but you being friends with a major member of a continent-spanning conspiracy? That’s rich.”

During the expedition to Xarooda, King Julianus I had hinted at the existence of a massive organization that was manipulating the western continent behind the scenes. Ryoma had concluded that it was possible this Organization was the force that seemed to be impeding his efforts at every turn. But Koichiro’s involvement convinced him that he would have to change his approach and refrain from hostile action against them.

Still, there’s no telling if they’re on my side.

The Organization was made up of people summoned from Rearth and their descendants. Their objective was apparently to create “a better tomorrow,” but the means they stooped to in order to achieve that tomorrow was a problem.

It seems they have a pretty big grudge against this world.

As victims torn away from their peaceful lives and forced to serve in this harsh environment, the Organization’s operatives greatly loathed this world and wouldn’t show anyone from it any mercy. This was perhaps the fundamental reason the Organization mongered war all across the western continent.

Emotionally speaking, their contempt is maybe similar to how white supremacists regard other races.

Indeed, given the cultural standards here, the people from Ryoma’s world likely saw this world’s people as uncultured barbarians. It might come across as discriminatory, but there was no other conclusion considering the difference in their respective cultures’ maturity. Added to that was their feelings as victims who’d been forcibly summoned here. For a person from modern society, where human rights were highly valued and a person’s principal rights were always

respected on some level, the summoning ritual was nothing short of abduction.

On top of that, as soon as someone was summoned, a seal of obedience was placed on them and they were sent to the battlefield. For those who'd gone through that, the thought of accepting their life here was sickening.

Well, I killed Gaius and made my escape, so I'm not exactly one for playing nice with the locals either.

Ryoma had been able to escape before he endured any real harm, but most people weren't so lucky. The very premise with which they viewed this world was different from his, and it wasn't a difference that was simple to bridge.

Not that I can't relate to the people in the Organization.

Ryoma too had been forced into this world against his will. Countless people had bent his life out of shape. He would be justified in feeling angry, and it would be understandable if he wished to exact revenge. That didn't mean Ryoma agreed with the Organization's ideals, though. People could be good or bad, regardless of what world they were in. The important thing was how one chose to reconcile their emotions.

I have Laura, Sara, Leone, Boltz, and the other Crimson Lion mercenaries. I also have the Igasaki clan, as well as Robert and Signus. Plus, Simone handles trade.

Losing any one of them would be a painful blow to the Mikoshiba barony, and not just in terms of profit. They were comrades who'd stood through trials and tribulations with him, and Ryoma wasn't ruthless enough to discard them after all this time.

At minimum, I have to ensure my comrades' and my citizens' safety.

Ryoma could only join forces with the Organization once he'd ensured he could do that.

Perhaps sensing Ryoma's mixed feelings, Koichiro earnestly said, "I do understand your position, and I agree with your way of thinking. There's no need to completely discard your grudges, but that doesn't mean you need to obsess over those grudges either."

Ryoma nodded. "I'm glad to hear you say that. Truthfully, changing plans at

this point would have been difficult. So that just leaves Asuka...”

Koichiro grimaced in what was probably a show of guilt. “Forgive me, Ryoma. This is all my fault.”

“No, grandpa, it’s not actually your fault, is it?” Ryoma smiled at Koichiro and shrugged. “I mean, there’s probably a connection, but that doesn’t make it anyone’s fault in particular. If anyone’s guilty here, it’s the gods who made this world.”

Ryoma truly believed this, but hearing it did little to raise Koichiro’s spirits.

“But your parents...” That sight was still burned into Koichiro’s mind. It was a moment he would never forget—the day his son and his bride entrusted their baby with Koichiro and fell into the dark abyss.

Grandpa really shouldn’t feel responsible for that.

No matter how much Ryoma insisted it wasn’t his fault, it wouldn’t stop Koichiro from blaming himself for the rest of his days. In the end, it came down to whether he could forgive himself.

The two men fell silent, and as they sat there in quiet contemplation, Ryoma tried to make sense of the situation.

“We can figure that out later. The bigger question is what are we going to do about the Church of Meneos protecting Asuka?” Ideally, they would rescue her before the war with Queen Lupis began. “We have to consider Rodney Mackenna and Menea Norberg too. You acknowledged their skills, and if people on their level or higher are protecting Asuka, extracting her could be tricky.”

Koichiro nodded. Ryoma had heard about their attack on Count Winzer’s estate and, based on that, concluded that Rodney and Menea were equal to the likes of Robert and Signus.

Grandpa did cut off one of Rodney’s hands, but that’s probably because Rodney was thrown off guard by the surprise attack. He likely wouldn’t be able to exhibit his full abilities at a time like that. It’d be wise not to underestimate either of them.

Still, no matter how strong Rodney and Menea were, if Ryoma were to make

killing them his goal, it wouldn't be too difficult to achieve. However, rescuing Asuka from enemy territory after that would be that much harder.

Koichiro had kept a close eye on Asuka and her entourage's movements, keenly awaiting a chance to retrieve her. He had waited because he knew that if they went about this recklessly, Asuka could end up in danger too.

This was an uncharacteristic display of caution from his typically broad-minded grandfather, but Ryoma didn't find fault with Koichiro's judgment this time. Given Asuka's lighthearted and fundamentally kind personality, it was unlikely she'd just accept them killing Rodney, a man whom she had spent years in this world with and grown close to. Asuka would never want someone else to get hurt because of her. Therefore, proceeding without caution could leave a lasting emotional scar on Asuka's psyche, one from which she might not ever recover.

In addition, they had to keep in mind that Rodney's protection was what kept Asuka safe within the Church of Meneos. Ryoma could easily imagine what would happen to Asuka if Rodney wasn't there to keep her under his wing. An attractive commoner girl was the kind of toy people in power actively sought out.

She'd end up living through hell.

Ryoma owed Rodney a debt of gratitude for protecting his own flesh and blood. Of course, Ryoma didn't assume that Rodney acted out of altruism, but it didn't change the fact that Rodney had sheltered Asuka when she'd been thrown into this world. Because of that, Ryoma honestly didn't want to eliminate Rodney and Menea if he could help it, and though Koichiro hadn't given a clear answer about it, Ryoma assumed that was the same reason he hadn't killed Rodney during the attack on Count Winzer's estate.

Besides, attacking an inn in the capital is dangerous, so our only option is to rescue her in the midst of the northern subjugation.

Nonetheless, relying on force to rescue her would be a dangerous gamble. It wasn't impossible, but many of the Church of Meneos's knights would be stationed at the inn, and whenever Asuka would go out, she'd be accompanied by guards. This made safely retrieving her very perilous.

Things would be radically different if Rodney and his group joined the northern subjugation. Ryoma had no way of knowing whether Rodney would take Asuka with him to the battlefield, but even if Asuka were to remain in the capital, the security around her would be much weaker, meaning they would have more opportunities to rescue her.

Who knows, we might even be able to draw Rodney and his people over to our side.

The safest and most ideal solution would be for Rodney to willingly hand Asuka over to them. Asuka wouldn't have to be tormented by guilt that way. However, as long as Ryoma didn't fully know what Rodney's circumstances and objectives were, this would be difficult to arrange.

Whichever option we go with, it'll be quite the tightrope for Gennou and Sakuya.

When it came to sneaking into enemy territory, the Igasaki ninjas' skills would be imperative, and if they wanted to separate Rodney's group from Asuka, their information-gathering abilities would be necessary as well.

I'll have to raise their wages for this.

A ninja's job was dangerous and demanding, and to make matters worse, most governors looked down upon people who engaged in that kind of dirty work. As a result, most of their tasks were both difficult and unappreciated. That was exactly why Ryoma treated Gennou and his people well. If he mistreated them on top of asking them to do demanding work, it would only be a matter of time before they turned on him.

"I know it will be a burden," Koichiro said as he hung his head, "but please, save her. Save Asuka." It was his most earnest wish.

Ryoma nodded. "Yeah, I'll figure it out. Thankfully, I have people I can trust. That said, I will be relying on you to move things along too. You don't mind, do you?"

"If you have need of my skills, just say the word. I'll do whatever I can to help," Koichiro said with a smile as he reached for his sword, which sat on the sofa's armrest. He believed that doing this was his one chance at atoning for his

crimes.

A peaceful air hung between the two of them. Most importantly, the color seemed to return to Koichiro's features. For a while, the two of them simply sipped on their drinks, but eventually, Koichiro brought up the final question on his mind.

"Speaking of... I see you've been through a lot since being called into this world. I raised you the way I did because I suspected a time like this might come, but I never expected you to rise up and become a governor."

Koichiro seemed genuinely surprised.

"Well, let's just say I didn't become a governor because I wanted to," Ryoma replied, a bitter smile on his lips.

Ryoma had never actively sought to rise to power here. He'd only killed his summoner, Gaius Valkland, out of self-defense. Meeting Laura and Sara had been sheer luck, and getting involved in Rhoadseria's civil war had also been a product of coincidence. The capricious whims of fate seemed to cling to him at every turn.

"So, how are you planning to take care of this?" Koichiro asked. "Lupis Rhoadserians wants you dead. I don't see them ever letting you walk away from this unscathed. Do you have any chance of winning?"

Ryoma's options for facing the subjugation army, which was said to consist of two hundred thousand troops gathered from across the country, were very limited. He would either utterly crush the Rhoadserian military or be crushed by them instead.

"That goes without saying at this point," Ryoma answered. "I made all sorts of preparations to make sure I win."

"Are you going to destroy this country?"

"You're the one who taught me not to leave threats unaccounted for," Ryoma said with a vicious smile. "I'll take this chance to be thorough. I'll probably leave the country's name as is, though."

Ryoma's cruel smile offered a glimpse into his intentions.

“I see. If you are that resolved, then there’s no place for me to tell you what to do,” Koichiro said, then picked up the bottle from the table. He poured the amber-colored alcohol into his cup and gulped it down in a show of respect for his grandson’s determination.



Chapter 4: The Heir to One's Will

A week has passed since Ryoma's nighttime meeting with Koichiro. The sun had just reached its peak, and it was around the time when people finished their lunches and prepared to delve into their afternoon work. Ryoma, who usually worked in his office at the estate, walked with Laura to the training field located in a corner of Sirius.

The training field was an area of exposed soil surrounded by plaster walls where only the most accomplished of the barony's soldiers were allowed to train and further their skills. It was reserved for the soldiers' use, so high-ranking officers like Robert and Signus rarely used it. Needless to say, Ryoma didn't visit this place often either. He only came here during parades or other such ceremonial events, or otherwise to greet the soldiers.

When he and Laura reached the training field, Ryoma looked around curiously.

"Why come here?" he asked.

His surprise was understandable. Their preparations for the northern subjugation's arrival were complete, so all that was left was to intercept the enemy army. Ryoma also had other work to keep in mind; as governor, he had loads of documents to review and approve every day.

I came outside for a change of pace, but...

Ever since he'd returned from his meeting with Myest, Ryoma had shut himself away in his office. He never ran out of work, but eventually his patience could only take so much, so when Laura asked that he follow her outside, he agreed. He was a bit suspicious of Laura's explanation for wanting him to leave, but he'd listened to her out of an honest desire for a change of scenery. At this point, he couldn't help but feel curious about what Laura was doing.

Rather than answer his question, Laura shook her head apologetically. "I'm sorry, Master Ryoma. You'll see when we get there."

At first, Ryoma wondered if there was some kind of ceremony planned, but given Laura's reaction, that didn't seem to be the case. Just then, Ryoma spotted a group gathered in a corner of the training field.

Hm? They don't look like they're training.

The group didn't appear to be doing anything in particular, and since there was no cheering or jeering to be heard, they weren't engaged in a fight of any kind. Ryoma looked to Laura, who seemed to know what was going on, but she just shook her head. This did seem to be the reason she'd brought him out here, though.

"So how did this happen?" Ryoma asked and looked around. There was an unexpected gathering of people there.

That's Sara, and the redhead next to her must be Lione. Opposite them are Mike and the Crimson Lions...and Gennou...? What's going on here?

Gathered were all the core members and senior officers of the Mikoshiba barony. What's more, this was usually the time of day when they would be overseeing the soldiers' training or handling paperwork. Still, considering that some people were missing, it was clear they hadn't completely neglected their duties.

I'm guessing they left their work in the hands of others, but what's this all about?

Ryoma wasn't the kind of grumpy boss who complained about his subordinates slacking off while on the clock. If he were, Lione and her group—who were used to the much more relaxed lifestyle of mercenary work—would surely resign from their positions as his knights.

Ryoma only cared about results. They could slack all they wanted and he wouldn't say a word so long as they produced the outcome he needed. That wasn't to say he didn't care about how they did things, but it only became relevant if they failed. In that regard, serving under Ryoma was relatively easy.

At the same time, Ryoma didn't spoil his men so much that they should feel comfortable shirking work in front of him.

If they are just slacking off, I'd think they'd at least try to keep up appearances

the moment I showed up.

None of them looked away from Ryoma in guilt when they noticed his presence. Quite the contrary, they stared at him with rapt attention. The expectation and curiosity in their gazes actually made Ryoma feel a bit ill at ease.

Well, judging by all this, whatever is going on isn't anything too serious.

Just then, Ryoma's gaze finally settled on the one person who was out of place compared to the rest of the group.

"What are you doing here, grandpa?" Ryoma asked Koichiro in exasperation.

Koichiro didn't seem inclined to answer. He blatantly ignored his grandson and instead spoke to Laura encouragingly.

"Oh, it took you a while! Good work, Laura."

Laura nodded and stood behind Ryoma. Ryoma still didn't know what was going on, but it appeared that the smug, no-good old man crossing his arms before him had concocted this situation. Ryoma glanced at Laura, but she once again shook her head, silently telling him to ask Koichiro for the details.

Damn old man. And he's treating Laura like she's in on this!

Ryoma thought back to his talk with Koichiro the week prior. That night, Ryoma accepted his apology and swore to save Asuka, hoping this would be his way to repay his grandfather for raising him.

But that night was the only time he acted meek around me.

The following morning, Koichiro had returned to his usual flippant attitude. He'd slip away from his bedroom in the morning to train vigorously before dawn, and when he went to bathe afterward, he'd spend thirty minutes soaking in the bath in Ryoma's estate. He'd eat breakfast at eight, demanding a fresh salad, freshly baked bread, and five pieces of ham or sausage to maintain his necessary protein intake. After breakfast, he'd play Go with Zheng, and come nightfall, he'd drink and make merry with Lione, Robert, and Signus.

He was replicating his lifestyle from Japan, which wasn't bad in and of itself. Koichiro, who seemed despondent and regretful, was keeping his spirits up, and

that was a relief, but that would only apply if they were still in Japan.

Of course, Ryoma was willing to play along with his grandfather's whims to an extent. If he wanted to take a bath in the morning, Ryoma let him do as he pleased. This world didn't have gas you could use to heat the water, though, so servants had to heat the water manually, which was taxing work.

I guess you could say it's not my problem since I'm not the one boiling the water personally, but still.

Ryoma couldn't help but wonder if Koichiro thought he was some kind of noble. He was being far too irresponsible and selfish, and Ryoma felt annoyed by that. More annoying still was that everyone else seemed to play along with Koichiro's whims. Ryoma had tried to speak to the servants about it, but seeing them smile after accommodating the old man's requests made it so Ryoma could only thank them. If the others were to utter even a single word of complaint, Ryoma would tell Koichiro off, but he'd remained hands off until now because they seemed to react to Koichiro favorably.

The old man has a strange way of being outgoing and popular.

Koichiro was, at his core, a good-humored man. One wouldn't assume it based on his appearance and his demeanor, but he was a very sociable person, and as a result, his uninhibited behavior somehow bought him the affections of his onlookers. While Ryoma couldn't quite piece together how the old man did it, this was still the reality playing out before his eyes.

After heaving a sigh, Ryoma addressed Koichiro. "So what's this all about? I'm not going to criticize what you do with your time, grandpa, but I'm a busy man, so I'd appreciate it if you could make it quick."

His words were laced with sarcasm and resignation, but given the situation, it was natural that Ryoma would be a bit prickly.

Koichiro, however, wasn't so simple as to care about his grandson's pointed attitude. He unapologetically explained, "Oh, it's not much. Me and Signus over there are having a short spar to decide who'll be paying for drinks tonight. I was hoping you could serve as referee."

Ryoma cocked his head, puzzled, and directed a questioning gaze at Koichiro.

He wants me to be a referee on a bet? I see. No wonder there's such a crowd here. I guess he does do this every night, but the problem is...

Ryoma wasn't going to encourage them to gamble like this, but considering that many of the barony's members were former mercenaries, he recognized that they needed some means of venting their excess energy. Instead, he had tacitly overlooked gambling on the condition that the only thing they could bet on was who footed the alcohol bill. He'd deemed that it would also be an effective way of stopping arguments that could end up escalating into bloody brawls, so this had become an unwritten rule.

Still, even though he condoned it, having the lord of the barony serve as the referee for their bet was absurd.

But if I say no, that'll cause trouble in its own way.

His decision had pretty much been made for him when Laura brought him over. Even if Ryoma were to refuse, Koichiro wouldn't simply accept it. He'd start arguing him down, for sure.

It's probably easiest to just get it over with. Besides, I guess I have been working too hard recently.

As long as he thought of it as a change of pace, he could reasonably put up with Koichiro's whims, so after sighing deeply, Ryoma agreed to be their referee.

The crowd around them cheered at Ryoma's consent—most likely because they were going to bet on the winner of this match too. Plus, they were all seasoned warriors, when all was said and done. They were all curious to see other talented warriors duke it out.

Why Signus, though? Ryoma wondered. Normally, I'd expect Robert to engage in this kind of fun.

Signus was clad in his usual armor and holding his metal staff. Standing beside him was Robert, one hand holding a bottle of liquor and the other resting on his friend's shoulder. Ryoma was a bit bewildered by this, but he couldn't very well question it in this heated atmosphere. He merely sighed once again.

With a smile on his lips, Koichiro glanced at the gathered group, prompting

everyone to take a few steps back and clear the area for them.

“Are you ready, then?” Koichiro called out.

“Ready whenever you are,” Signus said, holding up his iron staff.

Koichiro, on the other hand, didn’t unsheathe his katana, Kikka. He just stood there with his sword at his waist.

The two men were ten meters apart, and both would need to close some of that distance to enter each other’s attack range. As referee, Ryoma stood between the two of them, waiting for them to clash.

Signus is wearing armor, but grandpa is in his usual clothes. It doesn’t feel like he’s underestimating Signus...

Armor was a truly effective piece of defensive gear, worn by many on the battlefield. But this wasn’t a battlefield. True, metallic armor was weighty, which meant Koichiro had the better mobility without it, but Signus was a powerful warrior who’d mastered martial thaumaturgy. Even with heavy armor, he wouldn’t be encumbered to the point it became an overwhelming disadvantage.

Their weapons are different too.

Signus was known as one of Count Salzberg’s Twin Blades. When his staff whirled through the air, it always crushed his opponents. If Kikka were to take a direct hit from his staff, it would snap under the pressure, even though it was a fine blade strengthened with endowed thaumaturgy. Of course, all it would take to fix it would be to return it to its sheath and let it absorb some mana for a time, but it would break for the duration of the battle, meaning Koichiro would lose.

Grandpa would probably just keep on fighting bare-handed, but still.

If this were a true battle to the death, Signus would have no chance of winning, even if Koichiro really was bare-handed. For all his mixed feelings about the old man, Ryoma knew his teacher well enough to know that for certain.

The rules of this match stipulate that the first to lose their weapon loses the

fight.

It was forbidden to kill one's opponent or even gravely injure them, and since Ryoma would have been terribly disappointed to see lives lost over alcohol, these rules struck him as fair.

But they don't look like they're playing around.

Ryoma could feel their ghastly fighting spirit beating against his very skin. The crowd all swallowed anxiously, caught up in the atmosphere of the fight. Before long, Koichiro and Signus's bloodlust reached its peak.

Ryoma swung his hand down and shouted, "Begin!"

The second Ryoma gave the signal, Signus moved. Holding his staff at his waist, he closed the distance with Koichiro at once, launching a preemptive attack.

So he's trying to end the battle fast with a swift attack.

Ryoma could sense how, in the space of a single second, Signus had activated the Vishuddha Chakra, the fifth chakra located in his throat, filling his body with strength. Signus had likely felt the difference in skill between himself and Koichiro and chose to launch a quick, forceful attack since he knew that he stood no chance in a prolonged battle.

Signus picked up speed and swung his metal staff at Koichiro's face. His attack wasn't meant to kill, but even so, the blow was packed with all of Signus's considerable strength just the same. The staff whirred audibly through the air. If it were to so much as brush against its target, it would slice through skin and shatter bone. And since Signus aimed for the head, if Koichiro didn't dodge, a direct hit would instantly kill him.

Signus's staff weighs over thirty kilograms, after all.

The bars used for weight lifting alone were roughly ten kilograms, and Signus's staff weighed over three times that. One of the heroes of the *Water Margin*, Lu Zhishen, the Flowery Monk, had a blacksmith forge him a quarterstaff that weighed sixty-two kin. Kin was a unit of measurement used in the Ming Dynasty, the time the *Water Margin* was written, and equaled about six hundred grams, making it roughly the same weight as Signus's staff.

Either way, most people couldn't handle a staff of this weight. Body builders could possibly lift barbells that weighed forty kilograms, and some women could lift even twice that, but lifting such a weight and wielding something of this weight as a weapon were two different things.

As a weapon, one had to contend with the centrifugal force it produced, and to properly control it, one needed more than just technique. It required one to stand firmly with strength that exceeded normal human limits. Even in this world, few were capable of such a feat. Signus was one of those few.

Although Koichiro faced such a monster of a man, he too was a monster in his own right. As the staff howled through the air, hurtling toward him, Koichiro avoided it with a simple half step to the back. The way he dodged implied that he'd predicted exactly how Signus would charge at him.

Signus didn't pull back his staff, instead sweeping it horizontally, a feat that was impossible for a person with average muscle strength. From there, Signus

linked that swing to his next move. He stabbed, swept, pulled in, and swung down. Signus utilized the most dangerous aspect of a long weapon—its ability to exhibit its full strength even at medium range—to unleash a flurry of consecutive blows.

“Ooooooh!” Signus howled like an animal.

The staff howled as well as it formed a barrier around his body. Any who would intrude upon this barrier would be subject to multiple hits that would shatter their bones. Signus was displaying the might of the man who’d survived countless battles to gain the title of one of Count Salzberg’s Twin Blades.

The crowd watched Signus’s relentless charge, unable to utter a word. Among all of them, Ryoma alone regarded Koichiro—who was seemingly on the defensive—with a sense of terror. He could see that his grandpa’s defensive stance was solely for show.

He’s reading Signus’s charge.

It was said that Musashi Miyamoto, the famous master of the two-sword school, was also a master of reading his opponent, always avoiding his enemy’s slashes by a mere centimeter. Regardless of the validity of that account, the logic behind it was simple.

However, as simple as reading an opponent and dodging them accordingly might sound, people were still susceptible to fear. Any person standing in the median of a highway would be struck by terror at the sight of a car speeding toward them. They might know that so long as they remained on the median, the car would never hit them, but their legs would still buckle in fear.

The same could be said of trains. A person could know perfectly well that, barring a situation where a train derailed, a train would never run over them as long as they weren’t on the tracks. Nevertheless, when a high-speed train passed people by, they would freeze on the spot because of the wind pressure.

That was a simple, instinctual fear, but it was possible for one to completely suppress it, much like Koichiro was doing right now. Because of this, the crowd watching the fight was starting to pick up on the truth of this match, little by little.

“Hey...something’s off about this.”

“You noticed it too, huh?”

Koichiro had hardly moved since the start of the battle. He merely took a step or two back whenever Signus approached him. This meant one simple thing: Koichiro perfectly grasped the range of Signus’s attack.

Grandpa, you monster...

Ryoma could also do what Koichiro was doing right now, but only when he was facing an opponent weaker than him. If he had to do it against an opponent on Signus’s level, he would be hard-pressed to pull it off. The difference between grandfather and grandson came down to age and experience. In terms of sheer muscle strength, Ryoma had the advantage over Koichiro, but in terms of technique, Koichiro had had much more time to perfect himself. If nothing else, Ryoma couldn’t possibly match him now.

I think it’s just about over...

The exchange had gone on for roughly five minutes, but it was approaching its ending. The intensity of the metallic staff’s swings was gradually dying down. Naturally, swinging a mass of nearly forty kilograms was taxing on Signus’s stamina.

It was at that point that Signus decided to change his attack pattern. The moment Koichiro dodged a sweep aimed at his legs, Signus swung the staff up from below, intending for this to be his final blow. But the next second, the staff went flying out of Signus’s hands. Suddenly, faster than anyone could see it, Kikka shone unsheathed as Koichiro gripped it in his hands. An instant later, Signus’s staff noisily hit the ground.

“Stop!” Ryoma said, raising his hand.

At that moment, Koichiro’s victory was decided.

That night, the pale moon shone down on the estate’s lawn, where Ryoma stood alone, lost in thought. He had taken his shirt off, and his naked upper half glistened with sweat. He was moving with slow, calculated movements, similar to those used in Tai Chi Chuan. But while those motions seemed simple, they

were quite demanding.

I didn't think there'd be that big of a gap between them. My gramps really is a monster.

As Ryoma traced the movements passed down to him by his grandfather, he thought back to the events that transpired earlier that afternoon. The battle had ended as Ryoma had predicted it would.

Signus Galveria was one of the strongest generals in the Mikoshiba barony. He was equal to Robert, and in terms of sheer martial prowess, he was a match for Ryoma himself. But Ryoma knew his grandfather's abilities, as well as the difference in Koichiro and Signus's skills, so he'd expected Signus to lose.

In this world, few people actually devoted themselves to systematically learning martial arts. After all, there was no shortage of places to acquire real combat experience in this war-torn environment.

It was similar to how modern society learned to drive cars. One had to have a license to drive, so everyone attended driving classes before getting one. However, driving classes weren't compulsory; they were simply the most efficient way of learning how to drive. That was why the system allowed people to take the driving exams even if they didn't take classes. But it was obvious to all that without properly studying the material, one would never pass. In practice, only five percent of those that took the driving exam without having taken classes beforehand actually passed, making it an inefficient method.

Martial arts were much the same. In this world, one had many chances to gain combat experience, so most people didn't believe it was necessary to acquire techniques from someone else. Once they learned the basics of how to swing a sword or thrust a spear, all that remained was to plunge into the action and learn the rest as they went along.

Indeed, if one was only trying to build up numbers, teaching just the basics and leaving the soldiers to acquire experience on their own was the quickest, most efficient way. Be that as it may, this method lowered the quality of each individual soldier and limited how far they'd be able to grow.

The only method to overcome this issue was to gain experience through tradition. The Mikoshiba family had studied martial arts for generations, and

Ryoma was the successor to that legacy. Therefore, no matter how talented Signus was, he couldn't match someone who practiced the traditional arts.

Well-polished techniques, huh?

Watching Koichiro effortlessly avoid Signus's ruthless flurry while hardly moving from his initial position was something completely different. Koichiro had overwhelmed Signus, who was using martial thaumaturgy, with nothing but his natural physical prowess. When Ryoma—who believed himself to be his grandfather's equal by now—saw this, he felt nothing short of humiliation.

But the question is, why did he want to show me that fight?

At the end of the fight, Signus and Koichiro had smiled at each other, praised each other's skills, and sipped from the bottle of ale Robert gave them. They'd made it clear that there was no bad blood between them. Yet it just didn't seem possible that they held a match this intense over something as trifling as drinks. The part about them going on a drinking bout tonight probably wasn't a complete lie, but Ryoma had to assume that Koichiro, at least, had other reasons in mind. The fact that Sara and Laura hadn't stopped Koichiro or reported this to Ryoma was the most suspicious part.

I can't imagine grandpa getting them to side with him. I can't imagine grandpa going out of his way to do something unnecessary in the first place.

Koichiro had a taste for sarcasm and a flair for theatrics, yes, but at the same time, he didn't do things for no reason.

Just then, Ryoma sensed a gaze directed at him from the shadows of the garden's trees, but he ignored it and continued his movements. He could tell who it was by their presence. Ryoma then thrust out his fist, focusing all the strength in his body to one point.

"Hah!" he yelled as he unleashed his force like a projectile.

This was similar to what the Chinese art of Kenpo called Hakkei. Ryoma felt the force in his body whirring up from his abdomen, moving up in a spiral through his shoulder and into his fist. He then heard clapping coming from the darkness.

"Spectacular force. Your discipline and practice are clear to the eye."

“Thank you, Zheng,” Ryoma said, unsurprised.

Zheng stepped out of the darkness. “I take it I didn’t startle you much?” he asked, a brow raised.

“Well, more or less. But...”

Zheng was, as always, clad in a tailcoat—the very image of a butler. The outfit suited his slender, muscular body well and formed a picturesque image when paired with his calm demeanor. His overall image was so immaculately maintained one could sob in appreciation.

Personally, I feel like maids have more impact, though.

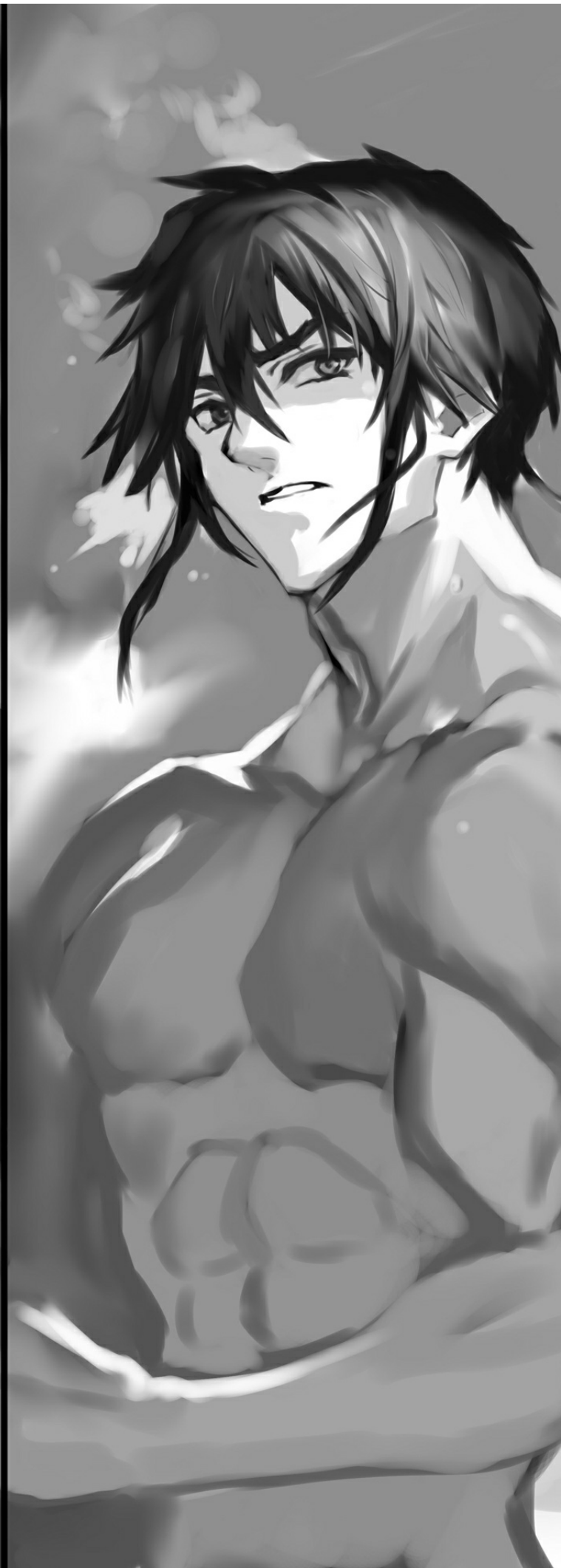
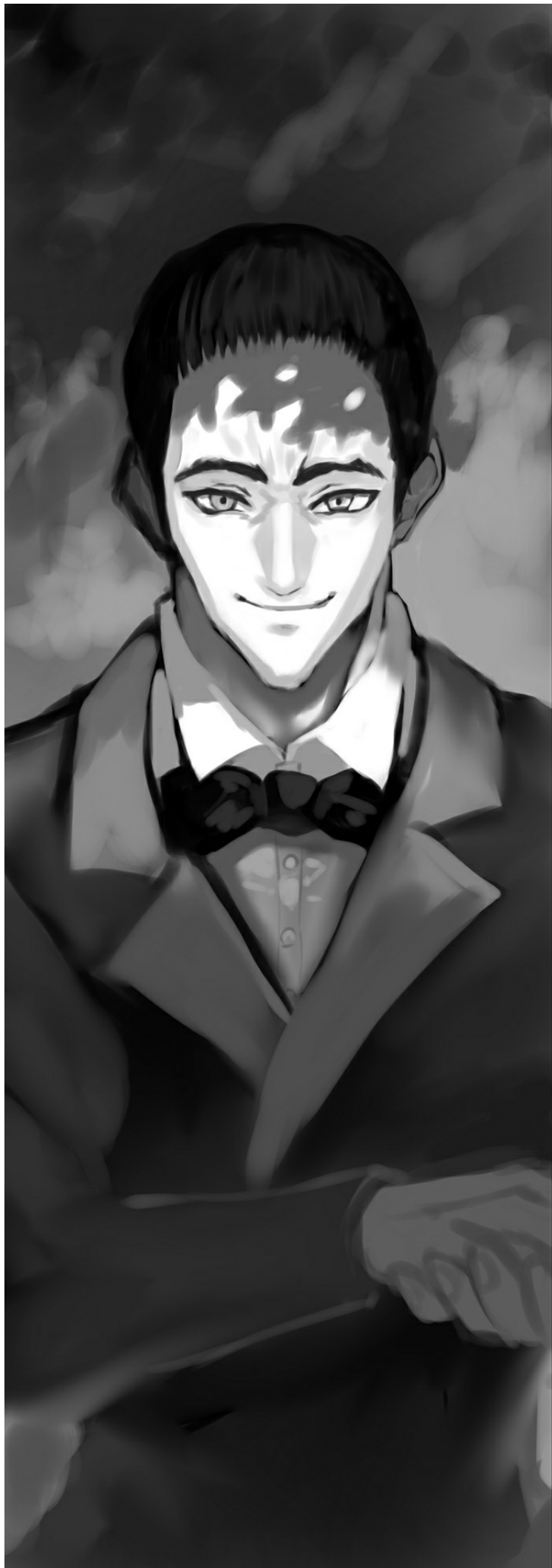
Normally, one wouldn’t care if this was a man or a woman, but when all was said and done, Ryoma was a young man. If he had to pick between a man and a woman, he’d always pick the latter, so if someone from the Organization had to show up here, he’d greatly prefer to see Veronica in a maid’s outfit.

Ryoma continued to entertain that thought, but what Zheng said next pulled him back into reality.

“Were those moves the Mikoshiba mortal arts Koichiro created by mixing different martial arts?” Zhen asked, bowing.

It was a very unassuming question, but Ryoma instantly grimaced. “Did Grandpa tell you that name?”

“Yes.” Zheng nodded, to which Ryoma clicked his tongue.



The Mikoshiba mortal arts—that was the name Koichiro had given to the fighting style he'd taught Ryoma. It was a martial art that mixed elements from Chinese osteopathy; medicinal apothecary; murder arts, which employed swords and spears; and even more mundane fields like horseback riding and swimming. But the name “mortal arts” was really just a name; Zheng's knowing it shouldn't have bothered Ryoma this much. Most people with little interest in martial arts, or even martial arts in Japan, wouldn't care. In fact, no style by that name was known in the modern world.

Nonetheless, for a martial artist, sharing the name of one's art was a deplorable act. In Ryoma's opinion, martial artists were meant to hide the name of their style. Of course, Ryoma was just being cautious of unnecessarily giving his opponents information, and most traditional martial artists seeking to ensure that their style was passed down felt the same.

In the Edo period, each clan had their own style, called a goryuu. Knowledge of each clan's goryuu was not taught to anyone who practiced other schools, even if they were members of the same clan. This was one example of how they rigorously upheld the passing down of one's art, because others learning their techniques could lead to their death.

And Zheng's from the Organization, after all.

Ryoma wasn't going to imply that Zheng was a villain of some sort, but he was still a member of the Organization, and Ryoma couldn't take risks when he wasn't sure where he stood with the group. Still, he couldn't very well kill Zheng to silence him at this point.

In the end, the sole heir of the Mikoshiba mortal arts was Koichiro, and if he chose to reveal its name to Zheng, Ryoma was in no position to criticize his choice—even though he was the next in line to inherit the art.

“I suppose that's fine. At least in this world, knowing about it won't amount to much,” Ryoma said.

It wasn't a problem in the immediate sense that Zheng knew the name of the art. The style had only been passed down in the Mikoshiba family and improved upon by Koichiro, so only members of the Mikoshiba family knew of it.

What's more, Koichiro's improvements made it unrecognizable from its earlier incarnations. Even if the basics were written down somewhere, they were quite different from what Ryoma had learned from Koichiro. Some techniques had been removed altogether, while others might have the same name as old ones but had been improved beyond recognition. In that regard, no one was familiar with this school of martial arts, so even if an outsider were to hear of the Mikoshiba mortal arts, it wouldn't make much of a difference.

But still... I can't say I like it.

While it wasn't problematic if the information got out, there was no point in intentionally spreading it either. If Ryoma could help it, he'd prefer to keep its existence hidden. Both before and after he was summoned to this world, he'd tried to keep the Mikoshiba style secret, even from people who were as close to him as family, like Sara and Laura. In his eyes, this was the right thing to do as a warrior, so hearing that name come from the lips of someone he wasn't close to made him feel ill at ease.

A tense silence hung between the two. Zheng apparently hadn't expected Ryoma to react like this.

Ryoma sighed and said, "Never mind. So, can I help you? I'm assuming you came here for a reason."

This was what Zheng was hoping to hear. "Yes," he replied, smiling. "I was hoping to test my skills against you, Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba." He then covered his left fist with his right hand and bowed his head.

The moment Zheng said this, the atmosphere around Ryoma sharpened like a blade. "I'd like to ask for your reasons before I reply."

Ryoma's voice was calm, but behind it was an iron will that made Zheng swallow nervously. Even so, Zheng continued, feeling that he couldn't allow himself to be overwhelmed by a boy ten years his junior.

"I wish to test the mettle of the man Koichiro Mikoshiba, our Organization's hero, raised under his personal care."

With that said, he began to approach Ryoma, despite the fact that Ryoma was standing there defenseless. It seemed he wasn't going to respect Ryoma's

opinion on the matter. In the blink of an eye, Zheng closed the distance between them and stomped on the ground before thrusting his right fist at Ryoma.

It was a perfect surprise attack, and even without martial thaumaturgy reinforcing it, Zheng's iron fist was more than capable of killing a man. However, even that blow, delivered with sheer force and amplified with his leg acting as a pivot, Ryoma easily deflected with his left hand. He then brushed it off and changed its trajectory from left to right.

"Throwing an attack like that all of a sudden is dangerous. And from the way you stomped on the ground, I'm guessing this is Bajiquan?"

Despite his words, Ryoma's tone implied that he didn't feel he was in any immediate danger. He remained upright, his posture unchanged.

Zheng moved away from Ryoma to fix his stance. "Unfazed even after that? Then how about this?!"

Before he'd even finished speaking, Zheng pounced at Ryoma again. It was a feint of sorts—a trifling trick—but such tricks could change everything in a battle. Unlike his first blow, which was a straightforward punch typical of Bajiquan, Zheng closed the distance this time in a curve. He then turned, moving his punch in a wide trajectory and swinging his right palm down at Ryoma.

If Zheng's first attack was a straight punch, his second was more of an arm swing. It was as if his hand were a sword that lashed out like a whip. Ryoma countered it by raising his left hand, blocking it with his forearm. He was trying to block the attack in order to follow up with a joint lock, but that was what Zheng was banking on. The instant his right palm made contact with Ryoma, Zheng folded his left arm and thrust his right elbow out as if he were bashing his entire body into Ryoma.

If this attack had hit, it would have resulted in instant death, but Ryoma spread his legs and swiftly dodged it. He couldn't completely avoid it, though, and a splash of red flew through the air. Zheng's elbow had managed to skim the skin along Ryoma's flank, and from there, he would have continued his flurry of attacks with flowing motions if Ryoma hadn't acted swiftly.

As Ryoma watched Zheng once again move away from him, he ran his fingers over his stomach, confirming that blood was dripping from the wound. Feeling the liquid sticking to his finger, he realized it was just a graze, and his mind filled with relief.

First he went for a Bajiquan thrusting punch. Then he went for a Piguaquan thrust, allowing me to block it, and an elbow thrust. I think it's called Rimon Chochu?

Had Ryoma failed to dodge it, Zheng's elbow would have stabbed into his defenseless flank, shattering his ribs and damaging his liver and kidneys. At worst, it would have killed him on the spot.

That was really close. It's a good thing I figured it out at the last second.

Ryoma knew of Bajiquan thrusting fists solely because Kocihiro had told him of them. He could barely recall or memorize the names of the techniques, but had it not been for that superficial information, he likely wouldn't have dodged Zheng's attack.

"You said that you just want to test my mettle, but you're employing some pretty dangerous moves," Ryoma muttered with a sarcastic smile.

If the elbow thrust had led into a flurry of attacks, Ryoma would have been in a precarious position. Even without martial thaumaturgy to reinforce them, Zheng Motoku's fists were deadly weapons. His techniques were honed and backed by decades upon centuries of uninterrupted history. His every movement and attack were refined by unmatched proficiency in the art.

Martial arts were kept hidden and esoteric to begin with. They stressed one's nature and talent, which set them apart from modern martial arts, which could be acquired by anyone who paid money to learn them. Of course, this wasn't to say martial artists were wrong to expect payment; even they needed to put food on the table. If one made a business of their arts, it only made sense to take in as many students as possible. Still, most such students didn't learn the true essence of the art.

On the other hand, there was a reason this knowledge was kept secret. They were, after all, methods for taking lives. They did have the benefits of self-defense and body sculpting, but those were merely by-products of the

technique's real function. For this reason, martial arts schools didn't recklessly pass their style on to others. When they did decide to take an apprentice under their wing, they imparted all they knew to them. Once fully admitted into the school, a disciple was considered family and would often move into their teacher's home.

Ryoma had dodged Zheng's attacks twice over, which was more than enough to test his abilities.

"What do you think?" Zheng asked proudly. "That is the power of the same Bajiquan that produced the God Spear."

"So your Bajiquan is the same as Li Shuwen's? No wonder, then," Ryoma answered.

That explanation made everything click into place. Li Shuwen was born in Changzhou of the Hebei province at the end of the Qing Dynasty. He became known as a famous martial artist whose skill at Bajiquan was so great that it was said he needed only one punch to kill his opponent. His skill with the Liuhe Daqiang spear made him renowned as God Spear Li.

To that end, the term "God Spear" took on a special meaning for practitioners of Bajiquan, and this was why Ryoma immediately understood the implication behind Zheng's words.

"But then you mixed in Piguaquan in that second attack," Ryoma noted, to which Zheng smirked.

"So you recognized that. I always thought Piguaquan wasn't well-known in Japan. I see. You're very knowledgeable for your age. Perhaps I shouldn't have expected any less from Koichiro's grandchild."

Ryoma shrugged. "Well, I just looked it up online once."

Chinese martial arts had a vast number of branches and styles. Learning about every single one, even on a general level, would be incredibly taxing. Zheng had used Piguaquan, which centered on long-range attacks, to close the distance and finish him off with one blow. That combination was the most simple and effective approach, which was why Ryoma knew how to dodge it.

Zheng shook his head. "Being too modest can come across as sarcasm," he

said. “My Piguaquan and Bajiquan aren’t so unpolished that one could block them based on simple hearsay.”

The most used tactics were only so common because they had the highest ratio of success. Even from Ryoma’s perspective, Zheng was a master martial artist who had accumulated a startling amount of experience. The fact that he’d avoided an attack from Zheng with nothing but a single cut on his skin was proof of Ryoma’s abilities.

Zheng changed his posture, preparing to launch a third attack. Ryoma, as always, remained in the same position. Their gazes clashed, and sparks flew between them. Zheng slowly edged forward, closing the distance again.

Now... What do I do?

Zheng’s right leg was thrust forward—the most orthodox of Bajiquan stances, which kept the median line hidden.

He’ll probably go for a straight punch to my center of mass...

The most advanced techniques were rooted in the most basic moves. Li Shuwen was a martial artist who, through his overwhelming degree of mastery and discipline, had embodied the concept of a one-blow kill. And Zheng, as heir to that legacy, was also capable of killing with a single blow. That didn’t mean he’d always stick to throwing straightforward punches, though.

I’d have it much easier if all I wanted was to kill him.

Since Ryoma didn’t know if Zheng was on his side or not, it made it difficult to act. If Zheng was clearly an enemy, Ryoma would just have to kill him; if Zheng was on his side, he’d spare him. Knowing where Zheng’s loyalty lay would make it easier to know how to approach him, but not knowing if he was friend or foe made things tricky.

Also, the fact that Zheng was so close with Koichiro made it all the harder for Ryoma to decide how to handle him. Besides, Zheng hadn’t used martial thaumaturgy to reinforce his body, so for that reason, they could still call this a mere practice match.

This is like a bad joke...

Be he friend or foe, so long as Zheng's fighting spirit remained intact, Ryoma would have to fight back against him, if only in self-defense. This left Ryoma with just one option.

No way around it...

Ryoma decided to make an all-or-nothing gamble, but suddenly, Zheng, who was slowly inching toward him, suddenly changed his stance. He broke his posture and took a wide step forward. He stomped against the ground, and the next instant, closed the distance to Ryoma straight ahead, like an arrow loosed from a bow—with his right fist thrust forward.

I knew it. He went for a Kappo!

Zheng rapidly closed in on Ryoma. It was as if he were sliding along ice. This was Kappo; by stomping from a great distance, he used that momentum to close the distance rapidly.

This Bajiquan technique would catch most opponents by surprise. What's more, Kappo wasn't solely a method for closing in on an opponent either. The true meaning of Kappo was to apply more body weight to the strike. It wasn't so much a punch as it was a body slam using one's fist.

Because of this, trying to block it with one's arm was dangerous. If Ryoma were to do so, Zheng would simply fold his arm like he did with his elbow thrust earlier and proceed to bash into Ryoma with his back or shoulder. If Ryoma were to take a body blow after such a charge, even his large form would be sent flying.

Ryoma, however, saw through Zheng's plan. The Mikoshiba mortal arts techniques, which had been etched into Ryoma's mind so much they were basically an instinct, allowed him to evade Zheng's fist.

It wasn't a simple dodge, of course. As he slipped past Zheng's flank, Ryoma sent a blow at his opponent's jaw, his fist scooping up from under Zheng's outstretched arm. Taking advantage of his momentum, he delivered an unexpected counter that momentarily befuddled Zheng's senses. He then used his hand to grab Zheng by the jaw as he swept his opponent's legs.

Zheng's body flew through the air, and after a second of weightlessness, his

head hit the ground, propelled by the force of Ryoma's brute strength. The impact caused a moan to escape from Zheng's lips.

Ryoma's counterattack didn't end there, though. He chose being certain and decisive over being cautious.

"You're lucky there wasn't a stone where your head landed, Zheng."

As soon as he heard those words through his muddled consciousness, Zheng's mind went dark.

Confirming that Zheng was unconscious, Ryoma, who was pressing his knee against Zheng's carotid artery, let go of him and got to his feet. He looked down at Zheng's limp form and called out to the dark.

"So...how long are you going to keep watching, Miss Kozlova?"

He was speaking to someone who'd been hiding in the darkness and watching them spar. He'd pressed his knee against Zheng's neck because he'd noticed her presence.

"Excuse me...? You noticed me, did you?" The woman revealed herself, her silver hair glinting in the moonlight.

"Well, vaguely." Ryoma cracked a wry smile at the young, alluring woman that appeared before him.

Veronica inclined her head. "Vaguely?"

As a matter of fact, Ryoma had sensed a presence in the darkness, but he hadn't been able to tell who it was.

But judging by the situation...

Ryoma shrugged. "I mean, I assume grandpa had you watch. Watch over Zheng."

Veronica smiled, and that alone proved that Ryoma was mostly right on the money.

Zheng and Veronica were members of the Organization, but ever since they'd come to Ryoma's side alongside Koichiro, they hadn't made any moves. They hadn't displayed any visible enmity toward Ryoma either. Whenever he passed

them by in his estate, they merely bowed their heads respectfully. However, Ryoma did sense some animosity and envy in Zheng's eyes, which had led to his actions tonight. Normally, one might expect Zheng would launch an attack out of a personal grudge or jealousy, but Ryoma had a hard time believing that was why Zheng had done this.

He was taught Li's style of Bajiquan, including the secret arts of it, like the Fierce Tiger Climbs Mountain...

Bajiquan also had a trump card in the Ba Da Zhao technique. Any of those were dangerous moves that could, if performed correctly, easily kill a person.

But he didn't use any of them on me.

If Zheng had seriously wanted to kill Ryoma, there was no reason he wouldn't have used those techniques.

And if he was a pupil of Li's style of Bajiquan, he'd be versed in using the spear.

There were no limitations on carrying weapons in this world, so there was no reason to fuss over killing an opponent bare-handed.

But Zheng did have a will to fight. You can tell that much from these footprints.

Zheng's stomps had left visible marks on the flagstones—a show of how serious he was. It was clear he hadn't been holding back against Ryoma. He likely wouldn't have minded if Ryoma had died.

But still, I didn't feel any bloodlust from Zheng.

Zheng's fighting will was true and genuine, but there was no bloodlust in it. The whole thing had felt similar to a sports match. A boxer hit their opponent mercilessly and seriously, showing no restraint, but that didn't mean they sought to kill their opponents. Nonetheless, unfortunate accidents could happen. This was much the same, and that fact led Ryoma to one conclusion.

"He did all this just to test me. Is that why? I have no idea why he'd go that far, though."

Veronica nodded. "Yes, Sir Koichiro said he wants us to help you," she

explained.

Ryoma couldn't help but smile sardonically to himself. Her words made him realize Koichiro's intent.

I see. Hm... And that explains the incident today...

Earlier that day, Koichiro had challenged Signus to a duel to show off his skills and power to Ryoma. Indeed, with Queen Lupis's northern subjugation fast approaching, involving new allies when he wasn't familiar with how skilled they were wasn't advisable. But if Ryoma's attitude remained vague and undefined as it had been until now, Koichiro and his two attendants' positions would have remained unclear, and it could've caused friction among Ryoma's other subordinates. In order to resolve this, Koichiro had come up with that match at noon.

Not surprising. I pretty much did the same thing once before.

Back during the civil war, Ryoma had killed a famous assassin known as the Black Spider to gain the trust of the mercenaries. Koichiro's match with Signus was much the same.

And Zheng attacked me tonight to test my skills. From what grandpa tells me, they're both ranked quite high in the Organization...

Given Zheng's position, he couldn't easily make the decision to help Ryoma, even if Koichiro had asked him to, so he had to test Ryoma. By challenging him as a warrior, fist to fist, he would then sense what Ryoma was capable of.

"Well, did I pass your test?" Ryoma asked.

Veronica smiled and nodded. "Yes. I'm sure Zheng will be satisfied too."

Some time later...

"Where am I...?" Zheng groaned and opened his eyes, realizing he was looking up at a canopied bed. He sat up, but then froze when he heard a woman's voice.

"You don't have to get up. Sleep."

"Nika...?"

Zheng turned to look in the direction of the voice. After confirming that it was indeed her, he did as she said and lay back on the bed.

Veronica, who was seated on a nearby chair, snapped the book she was reading shut and placed it on a table.

“I didn’t think you’d lose like that,” she said with a smile. “And I don’t think it’s your fault at all. That man, Ryoma Mikoshiba, really is a monster.”

Her voice was full of surprise and joy. Zheng simply held his tongue and looked up at the canopy. He didn’t deny her words, however, mostly because he felt the same way.

A bystander might have thought that Ryoma and Zheng’s fight was by no means one-sided. After all, Zheng was always on the offensive, which gave the impression that he had the upper hand. But that wasn’t the truth.

I couldn’t do anything. That much is fact.

It wasn’t a duel to the death, so in that regard, Zheng hadn’t been giving it his all. If he’d really wanted to kill Ryoma, he’d have brought forth his favored spear. The same could be said of Ryoma, though.

If he’d been serious about the fight, I wouldn’t have gotten away with just a concussion.

Zheng had seen the fist Ryoma made before he called out to him. The Mikoshiba mortal arts, which could be considered an offshoot of Japanese martial arts, incorporated elements of Chinese martial arts as well. It likely included ways of thinking similar to Zheng’s, but the level of proficiency Ryoma had exhibited was such that no one could say he was merely aping Chinese martial arts.

The amount of force and focus behind Ryoma’s punch was enough to make even Zheng, a master of Bajiquan, pause in shock. If all that focused force were to strike the human body, it would easily kill its target.

But he never used that punch.

This, more than anything, proved that Ryoma had no desire to kill Zheng.

“Sir Koichiro did raise him,” Zheng responded. “I suppose it stands to reason.”

Zheng had mixed feelings about Ryoma. Zheng had originally served as the butler to Liu Daijin, one of the Organization's elders. This had doubled as an apprenticeship, as Liu had tempered him into his successor as one of the next elders. At the same time, Liu had taught Zheng, and he'd told his apprentice many tales of Koichiro Mikoshiba and his exploits. Every time he'd heard those stories, Zheng had grown to admire Koichiro. When Koichiro had once again been called into this world and revealed himself to Liu Daijin, Zheng's admiration had turned to deep respect and affection.

I still owe a great debt of gratitude to Liu, but even so, as a warrior, Koichiro Mikoshiba is...

Zheng truly respected Koichiro, so when Liu ordered him to go on this journey and act as Koichiro's aide instead of his own, Zheng had accepted without a second thought. He had spent a long time traveling with Koichiro and watching over Asuka Kiryuu, so he'd formed a relationship of master and servant with Koichiro, which had gone on to develop into a cross-generational friendship.

When Zheng learned that Koichiro had a pupil in Ryoma, his heart had been beset by envy, and that emotion had gradually swelled. He was jealous that Ryoma had a superior warrior for a teacher.

Zheng's tutelage under Liu Daijin had taught him the importance of having a good instructor. Many people in the Organization wanted to become Liu Daijin's pupil, but only Zheng had been granted that honor.

Learning martial arts was difficult, and finding a good master to train under was even harder. For this reason, Zheng envied Ryoma for his training with Koichiro, a teacher whom Liu himself had acknowledged as more skilled than him.

Since Zheng and Koichiro were currently living under Ryoma's roof, he had to restrain those emotions, but the human heart didn't always conform to logic. The more Zheng tried to tell himself this shouldn't concern him, the more his heart shook. He also had his position as leader in the Organization to consider. Even if Ryoma's grandfather was a hero who'd set the foundation of what the Organization was today, Zheng couldn't look the other way if Ryoma were to oppose them.

Caught between his personal feelings and his duties as a member of the Organization, Zheng was conflicted about what he was to do. When Koichiro proposed that he test Ryoma's skill, Zheng had agreed right away.

Sir Koichiro probably noticed...

That night, Zheng Motoku learned of Ryoma Mikoshiba's prowess, and through fighting him, caught a glimpse of the future Ryoma envisioned.

Ryoma Mikoshiba... He's the heir to Koichiro's will, which means that cooperating with him would be in the Organization's favor.

Perhaps sensing Zheng's thoughts, Veronica rose from her chair, leaned over Zheng, and kissed him on the forehead.

"What are you doing?" Zheng asked her suspiciously.

"I thought I'd comfort a sweet boy, is all," Veronica said playfully. "Take your time and come to your own conclusions, Zheng. Though, I think I know what you'll decide in the end..."

With that, Veronica left the room, praying that her beloved came to terms with his feelings. As she walked away, she also swore that she would help with the war to come.

Epilogue

Countless cavaliers galloped across the plains outside Pireas. The horses neighed as the scent of grass spread through the area and fodder filled the air. Banners stood side by side, flapping in the wind. Sitting in the tents erected on the fields, soldiers serviced their weapons, the partners that would protect their lives, in preparation for the war to come. Their expressions were all grave. Soldiers and runners bustled along the highway.

In the midst of all this, a man and a woman crossed through the gates of Pireas, slowly riding their horses to the Church of Meneos's encampment on the capital's outskirts. It was a strange sight, honestly. They could have gone faster, but instead, they kept their horses' speed to a normal stroll.

The highway was full of people, after all, and galloping too fast could result in running them over. As this highway led to Rhoadseria's capital and served as its major traffic route, it was large, paved, and well maintained. It was spacious enough for several carriages to drive on it undisturbed, proof that it had been built larger out of consideration for pedestrian traffic.

Normally, they could gallop along this highway without concern, but sadly, this was not the case today. Besides the army personnel, a constant stream of civilians living in the capital's vicinity traversed the road, as well as merchant carriages full of trade goods.

The woman sighed as she watched the soldiers. "Still, all of them are here just for the northern subjugation? The nobles must really have it out for Baron Mikoshiba."

It was shocking that this entire army was gathered to defeat one regional governor. It honestly felt excessive.

"Well, apparently, Baron Mikoshiba is a state criminal who attacked the House of Lords," the man replied. "From what I hear, his attack took the lives of many nobles, and since the noble families have been in power since the country's founding, many of them are related by blood. From the nobles'

perspective, the baron killed their own flesh and blood.”

“So they’re clamoring to take revenge on him? I suppose that for nobles, blood for blood is the obvious solution,” the woman whispered, gazing out at the clouds hanging over the horizon.

It looks like what they say about the army having two hundred thousand men was no exaggeration. There might even be more than that, depending on the situation...

The army stationed here wasn’t quite on that scale—maybe half of the total forces, at best, were here. Most of these soldiers belonged to the armies of the governors south of the capital. Many of the nobles with domains in the capital’s vicinity would send their forces directly from their lands when the northern subjugation officially began.

Although it wasn’t the full force, the sight of this army was nothing short of overwhelming. It showed that Rhoadseria was indeed employing its entire military might for this war.

This is all because they conscripted every commoner they could, the woman thought, a twinge of pain filling her heart.



The purpose of this war was to defend the country, and thanks to that, the soldiers' morale was high.

But is that really the right thing to do?

The woman, Menea Norberg, was one of the Church of Meneos's Temple Knights, and she couldn't help but feel very conflicted about this war. She herself had been banished from her homeland in the Kingdom of Tarja and had dedicated her life to revenge. She knew all too well how it felt to lose relatives.

But is this justice?

Menea honestly didn't know what was right. She was also a member of the nobility, but it had been a long time since she'd lived the life of an aristocrat. She'd left her homeland and now served the Church of Meneos, traveling all around the continent. Thanks to that, she saw both sides of the discriminatory relationship between the nobles and the commoners.

She'd seen a noble carriage running over commoner children and killing them, only for the carriage's owner to not care one bit. She'd seen men heartbroken by nobles raping their wives or daughters and treating them like playthings. She'd seen victims like that charge at nobles with weapons in hands, even though they knew they had no chance of getting revenge.

She could understand how those people felt, but looking at the soldiers, she didn't feel like they were acting out of righteous justice. This army only stood for one thing: the sheer scale of the malice and enmity directed at Ryoma Mikoshiba. More than anything, though, she felt uncertain knowing that she was going to participate in this war.

No, it's not just that.

She thought back to the girl waiting at the inn in the capital, the girl she regarded as a younger sister.

"What? What's the matter?" the man asked Menea.

Menea looked at Rodney Mackenna, her childhood friend and her superior in the Temple Knights, and shook her head. Rodney still looked concerned, though.

“Are you worried about Asuka?” he asked.

Menea’s expression clouded over. He’d hit the nail on the head.

I don’t want her to become involved in this, but...

Asuka Kiryuu was an otherworlder girl Rodney had taken under his wing. Fate’s whimsy had crossed her path with Rodney’s, and he’d protected and sheltered her. He wasn’t acting entirely out of goodwill, however.

Rodney was, in essence, a good man. At first, he might have truly taken pity on her, but the sword she carried with her, the katana Ouka, had changed things. Ouka had been left in Asuka’s care by a relative who’d been summoned to this world with her, and it had been discovered that the sword had the power of endowed thaumaturgy.

Thaumaturgy was a supernatural power that was only used in this world. It didn’t exist in Rearth. Similar ideas to it did exist, but they were only in the realm of fiction, which meant that a person just summoned to this world shouldn’t possibly possess weapons with thaumaturgical seals that granted special powers.

But the impossible did happen.

No matter how much Menea might deny the possibility, there was no denying the katana in Asuka’s hands. As a matter of fact, when they found Asuka in the forest of Beldzevia, one of the southern kingdoms, she had just slain a monster called a Third Eye with a single slash. This young girl had performed a feat that even a warrior skilled with martial thaumaturgy would find challenging.

While Asuka had felt the sensation of cutting through the monster and recalled the stench of blood, she’d told Menea that it felt like she did it in a dreamlike state. When Rodney and Menea discovered her, they had also found the corpse of the Third Eye with a slash across its stomach. That told the whole story.

But Asuka is an ordinary girl. She couldn’t possibly have done that on her own, not by her powers, anyway.

Though Asuka wasn’t a complete amateur, she was no match for seasoned warriors like Rodney and Menea. She simply knew a bit of martial arts for self-

defense purposes. She was somewhat athletic, and Rodney and Menea did think she had untapped talent, but at the same time, she had a critical lack of combat experience. She wasn't a warrior.

Despite all that, the girl had been able to slay a Third Eye, and she'd done so with a perfect attack that even Menea wasn't confident she'd be able to recreate.

It's safe to assume the endowed thaumaturgy etched into Ouka was triggered.

The answer they arrived at to explain all these unexpected developments was the Organization. Having realized that, Rodney decided to keep Asuka under his watchful eye, with his protecting her becoming merely a pretense. To him, this was a windfall, a precious chance to pursue the truth of this mysterious group operating for years behind the scenes of the western continent.

Of course, there was no proof that Koichiro Mikoshiba, the man who gave Asuka the katana, was related to the Organization, but considering that he'd slain Misha Fontaine, the Beldzevia court thaumaturgist, soon after his summoning; the skill with which he killed her; and the thaumaturgical sword in his possession, everything about the man seemed suspicious. It was only natural Rodney would suspect the Organization was involved.

They didn't share with Asuka their suspicion that Koichiro might be involved with the Organization. Menea and Rodney had come to this conclusion after taking all the circumstances into account. If the top brass of the Church of Meneos were to discover that Asuka was related to a member of the Organization, things could become quite grim.

After all, formally speaking, the church denied the Organization's existence. As agents of the God of Light, the church's purpose was to promote peace and stability across the continent. They couldn't admit that another faction that rivaled their strength existed.

But many of its higher-ups did unofficially acknowledge the Organization's existence. After all, many members of the church's combat units had clashed with armed units of unknown affiliation. When the church looked into the identity of these armed units, their investigations never found anything. Usually, the church's intelligence unit was capable of unearthing even secrets

covered up by entire countries, but whenever they looked into this group, their searches always came up short.

The fact the church couldn't discover anything about this group on its own implied the Organization was real. So if the top brass of the church were to discover that Asuka might be a clue to finding the Organization, things would end poorly.

She's in a precarious position as it is...

Asuka Kiryuu was a beautiful girl, but this beauty now placed her at a disadvantage. Even now, there were people trying to woo Asuka to their side. Thankfully, Rodney's protection meant they couldn't act directly on these intentions, but it wasn't impossible for someone to act recklessly.

People were capable of any cruelty if they were confident they were in the right. This held especially true for Temple Knights, the group charged with protecting the Church of Meneos. Having experienced live combat made it much easier for their hearts to lean into animalistic rage. If they were to learn of someone who might hold information about their enemy, they would show no mercy.

In fact, it didn't matter if that person had any information or not. The mere possibility of someone having intelligence beneficial to them was enough to mark that person as guilty. At that point, whether Koichiro Mikoshiba actually was related to the Organization or not would be completely irrelevant to Asuka's fate.

Since Rodney and Menea had grown affectionate of Asuka, this was an outcome they couldn't allow.

Besides, the problem right now is Baron Mikoshiba.

That thought tormented Menea. Ryoma Mikoshiba, a national hero who'd suddenly appeared to save Rhoadseria from its plight, had gone on to work with Helena Steiner to save Xarooda from the tyrannical O'ltormea Empire's invasion. These achievements alone made him sound like some kind of fairy-tale hero.

Asuka had been shocked when she learned a man by that name existed in this

world. Normally, one would expect her to rejoice at this unexpected chance to reunite with a relative, but her learning that he'd achieved feats equivalent to that of a mythological hero had changed things.

But if he has the last name Mikoshiba, that means...

Menea didn't know if that last name was common in Rearth. Menea's mother was a Japanese woman summoned from Rearth, and thanks to that, Menea had learned a great deal about her culture, but she didn't know what last names were considered common. It would be natural to assume that Koichiro and Ryoma Mikoshiba were related, though.

Asuka was half in doubt at first, but based on the descriptions of Ryoma's appearance, she did admit he might well be Koichiro's grandson.

But if that was the case, it placed Ryoma in a very complicated position. Koichiro Mikoshiba was suspected of being related to the Organization, and Ryoma Mikoshiba was his grandchild. Nonetheless, all this information was uncertain and came from speculation and hearsay.

Is he part of the Organization or not?

There was so little information at present that even trying to come up with a hypothesis to that question was difficult. Or, conversely, there were too many hypotheses to actually arrive at an answer. This was why Menea was so conflicted.

As far as removing potential risks, eliminating him is a possibility.

That choice could prove to be risky, but at the same time, they couldn't overlook Ryoma. Rodney, who was looking at Asuka with concern, felt the same way, and the church's top brass also held the same stance.

This is why the pope ordered Cardinal Roland to observe Baron Mikoshiba.

As Cardinal Roland's guard, Menea had two missions on this journey. The first was to patrol the land, show off the Church of Meneos's might, and put the believers' hearts at ease. Their true goal, however, was to investigate this young hero. This was the real reason a high clergyman with the rank of cardinal came all the way to Rhoadseria from the holy city of Menestia.

But the situation's already changed.

What started as a simple investigation led to them participating in Queen Lupis's war with the Mikoshiba barony. Considering how volatile the political climate was in Rhoadseria, to ensure that they would be able to gather intelligence smoothly in Pireas, Cardinal Roland had proposed that they join the war as reinforcements. But even the cardinal himself was shocked when the Temple Knights' Eighteenth Order was dispatched.

After all, they're the most skilled of the orders sent to the southern kingdoms. Tried-and-true elites...

One reason this particular unit was deployed here was that they were stationed in Tarja, so they could arrive in a timely manner. Nevertheless it was evident to all that the church's top brass had decided to move from simply investigating Baron Mikoshiba to the logical next phase.

While those thoughts crossed Menea's mind, they reached their destination. The barracks before them flew a banner with the Church of Meneos's crest on it. The sentries, noticing Menea's approach, took the reins of her horse from her. After that, the sentries led them to a tent. This was where Rodney was to deliver the letter entrusted to him.

But where will things go from here?

That was one question neither Menea or Rodney, who'd been chosen as Cardinal Roland's messenger, could answer. After all, the Temple Knights were under the pope's direct command, meaning they only obeyed the pope's orders. A cardinal was in a high position meant to assist the pope, but the split chain of command meant they sometimes clashed with the Temple Knights.

Very few members of the Temple Knights had close relationships with cardinals like Rodney did, and the captain of the Eighteenth Order was particularly on bad terms with Cardinal Roland. There weren't any problems when they requested an audience with Queen Lupis the other day, but that didn't mean they could rest easy yet. To prevent any issues, they'd need to talk things out, but there was no telling what the Eighteenth Order's knights were thinking.

At worst, they might refuse to hand over the right to command them and turn

against us.

In the past, the Eighteenth Order's violent nature had resulted in the tragedy of Gromhen, which had earned them the title of the Colsbarga Grave Diggers.

Menea followed Rodney, praying that their beloved young charge wouldn't end up caught in the middle of this conflict.

The following day, the loud blowing of a horn echoed through Pireas. What followed was a tremor. The neighing of horses and the calls of their riders echoed, and the air surged with heat.

The soldiers formed a column and began their march northeast, seeking to claim the head of the fallen hero who'd become a traitor to their country.

Afterword

I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. To those of you who have kept up with the series since Volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

First, allow me to take this chance to thank everyone. You have my deepest gratitude for picking up this book during these troubled times we live in. I'm sure that the Corona pandemic has forced many of you to change your lifestyle, but I hope that books such as this one will be the kind of cure that will refresh and enrich these difficult days.

Well, *Record of Wortenia War* is pretty bloody as cures go, though. If nothing else, it won't reek of ethanol, but rather of the sweet, rusted fragrance of blood.

If I had the talent for it, I'd have liked to write a romantic comedy or something of the sort, but I'm not sure my literary style would be a good fit for it. And personally, as an author, I don't like that kind of indecisive story that never comes to a conclusion. It feels like a waste of time. In that sense, I'd be better off writing erotic novels. Of course, if I have time to think about writing something else, it'd be better spent progressing on *Record of Wortenia War* instead.

But those musings aside, let's get to the volume's highlights, as is customary.

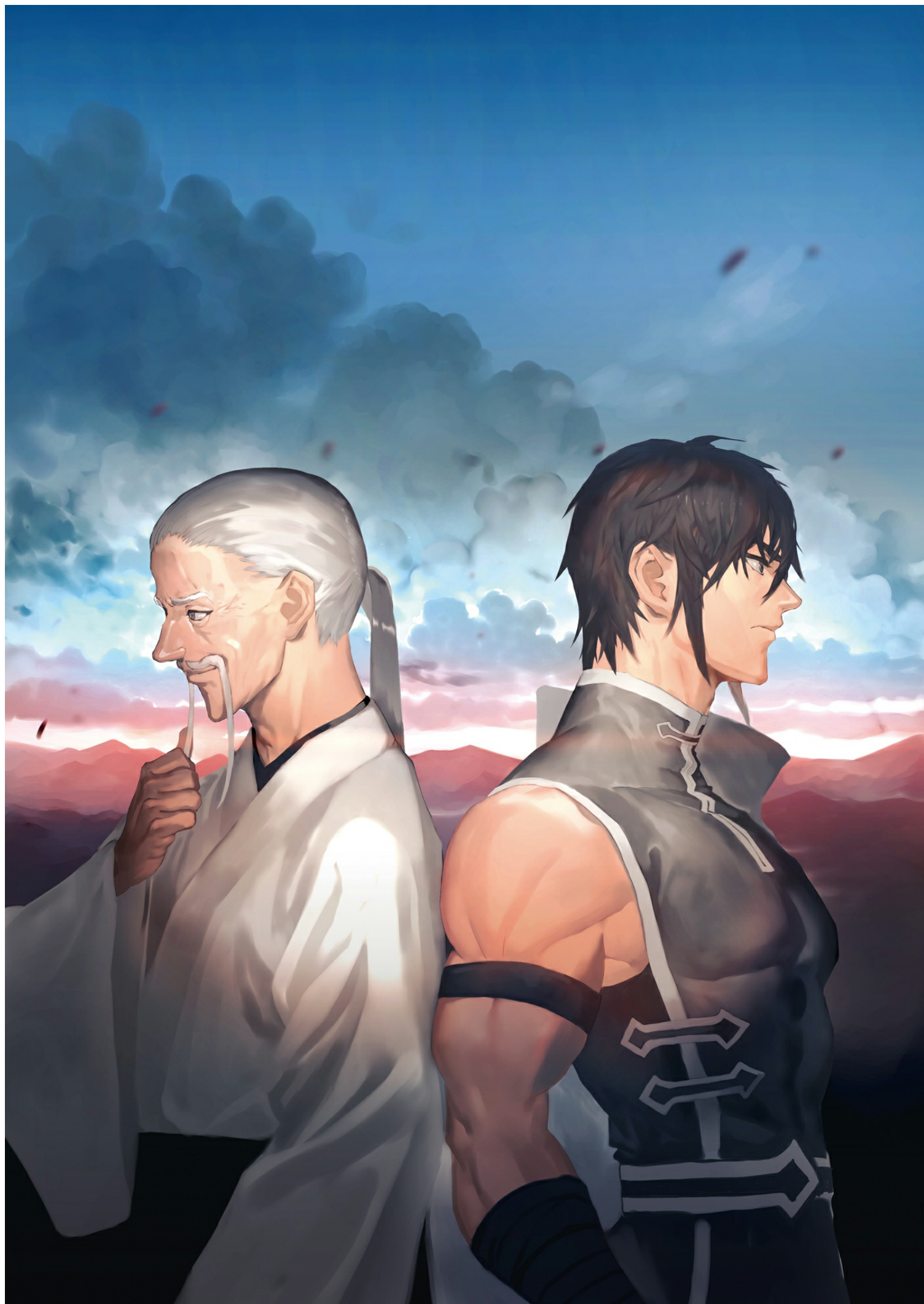
Volume 18 focuses on tying up previous threads and setting the stage for the next volume. First, this volume investigates the events of the Battle of the Cannat Plains, which didn't make it into the previous volume, as well as its aftermath. Next, it follows the Church of Meneos, which sent Cardinal Roland to Pireas, and the anxiety it causes Rhoadseria. Finally, it ends with Queen Lupis's decision to dispatch the northern subjugation to forcefully eliminate Ryoma.

Queen Lupis has gathered an army of two hundred thousand men, with Helena Steiner as its supreme commander. Rhoadseria's nobles burn with anger

and want revenge for Ryoma's slaying of their relatives, and in the midst of all this, Viscount Gelhart offers to help Queen Lupis in an attempt to regain his authority. Different factions all conspire and compete for their own profit, casting Rhoadseria into chaos as the neighboring countries look on. And all the while, our protagonist Ryoma slowly and gradually weaves his plans.

Of course, there's no ignoring the fact that Koichiro joins Ryoma's side. As the author, this is a huge relief, since the stage is finally set for Koichiro to operate openly. After all, I have heard from my acquaintances that the more elderly characters, like Koichiro and Helena, are the most popular. I have to wonder, is my readership's age group higher than I anticipated? Either way, you can expect Koichiro to take center stage.

Last, I would like to deeply thank everyone involved with the production of this book, and you, dear readers, for picking it up. Volume 7 of the manga is set for release soon, so I hope you continue to support *Record of Wortenia War* in both its incarnations in the future as well.



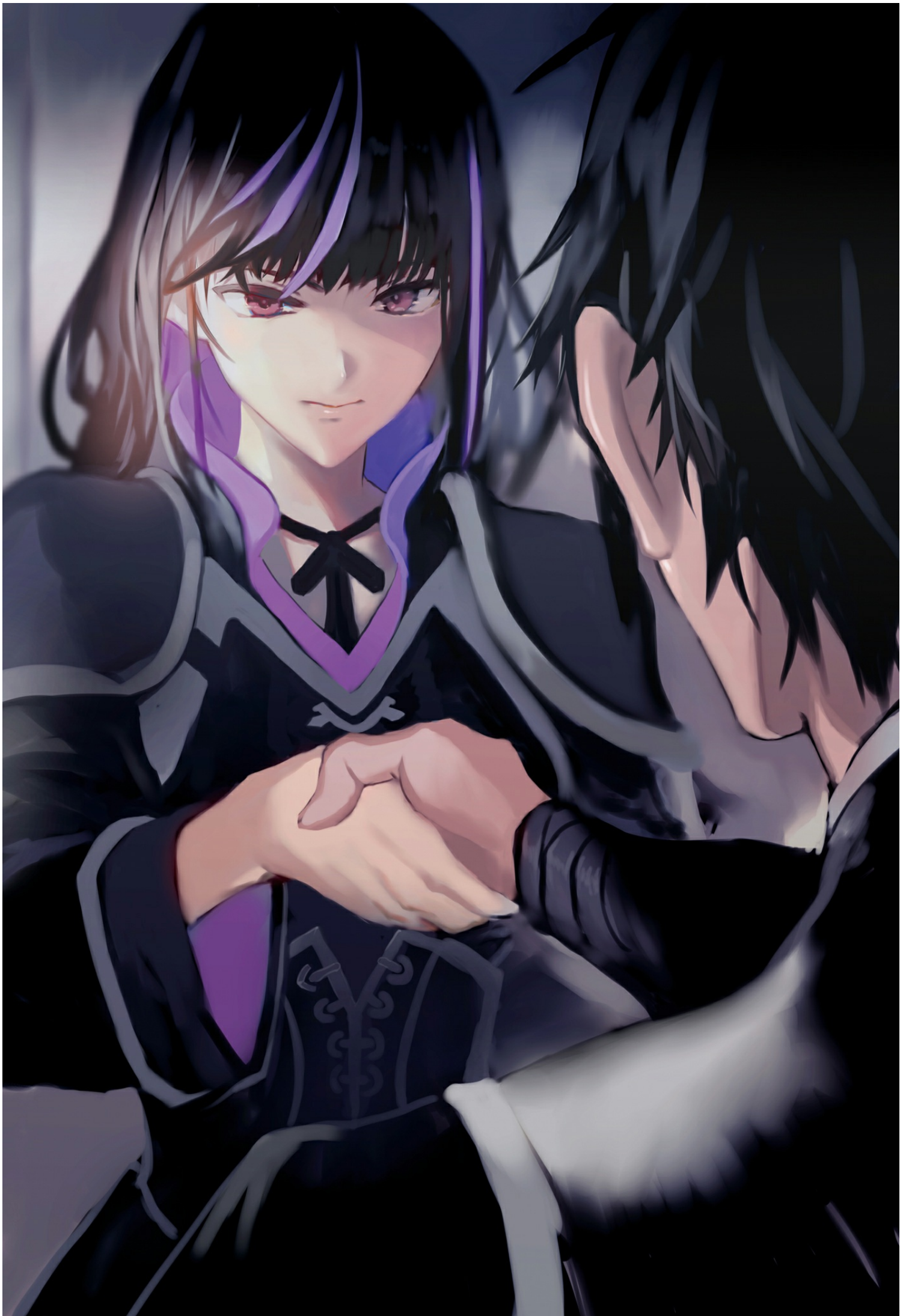






Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Battlefield Investigation](#)

[Chapter 2: Deceivers' Den](#)

[Chapter 3: Bonds of Blood](#)

[Chapter 4: The Heir to One's Will](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)

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[Copyright](#)



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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 18

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal Edited by Suzanne Seals

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