

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



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“Father,
may I have
a word?”

Viscount
McMaster
raised his
hung head.

RECORD OF
WORTENIA
WAR



The Battle for the Capital

On such a day, a large group of people donning black armor appeared on Pireas's outskirts.



**“Yes,
Helena.
It’s been
a while.”**

**“It sure has,”
said Helena,
hanging her
head glumly.**

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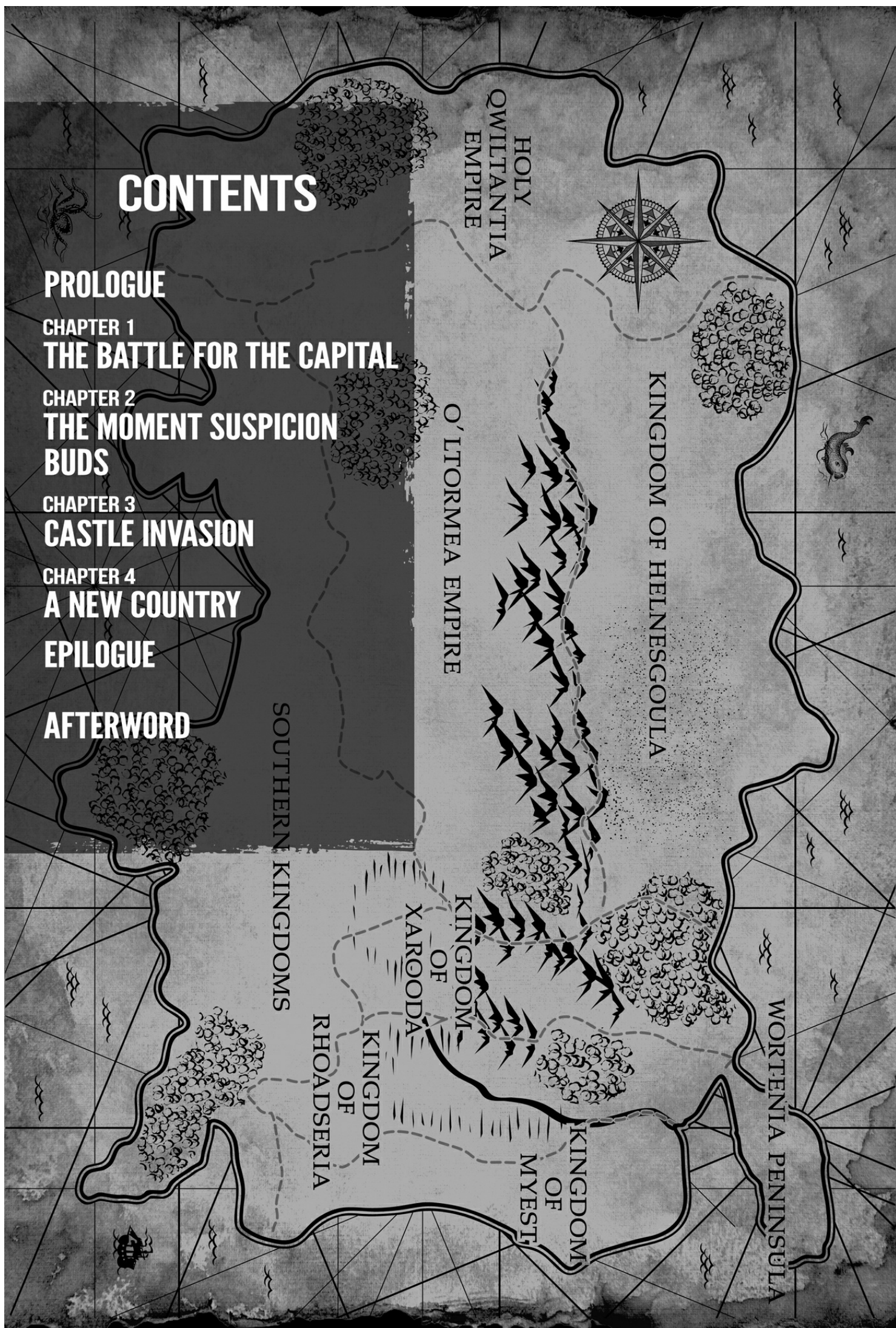
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Prologue

The sky turned a maddened red, and night was about to descend over the world as a heavy silence loomed over Viscount McMaster's estate. Guards stood at their posts while maids and butlers walked the halls with serious demeanors, clearly nervous.

It made sense, given who visited the mansion earlier that day—Viscount Furio Gelhart, leader of the nobles' faction. He was a man who once held enough power over the Kingdom of Rhoadseria to rival the crown.

But he had his rank lowered from duke to viscount by Queen Lupis after losing the civil war and lost his right to govern the grain-producing region of Heraklion, known as the kingdom's breadbasket. His current might was a far cry from what it once was. But most people living in Rhoadseria knew that the name still carried absolute power and authority.

Having a man of such high status visit the mansion was nothing short of a bolt from the blue.

I hope nothing bad happened to the master or the young miss, thought Erin as she cleaned up the arbor where the secret talk between the viscounts had happened.

Having an acquaintance come for a surprise visit was usually inconsequential for a commoner. They could turn the guest away if it was not a good time. But nobles were bound by a different set of rules.

Formal etiquette demanded that a visit be scheduled days, if not weeks ahead of a time. A messenger suddenly showing up on one's doorstep and reporting that a noble was coming to visit was quite unusual.

In Rhoadseria, nobles were a special class abiding by tradition and etiquette, and such sudden visits were deemed poor manners. The only exceptions were when there was a major difference in rank between the two people or if they were close.

This case was neither of those. Viscount Gelhart might have been a duke once, but he was now of equal rank to Viscount McMaster. Gelhart only held more influence while he led the nobles' faction. One could even claim Viscount Gelhart was lower in rank due to his demotion and still being new to his viscount title.

Viscount McMaster was like a senior officer compared to him. If their commander were to die and the question of who would take charge became relevant, McMaster would be there to take his place. As such, Viscount Gelhart was technically his junior.

So you would expect Lord Gelhart to show our lord more respect.

Of course, the power balance within noble society wasn't so simple that it could be boiled down to mere rank. But if nothing else, no one among the servants working under Viscount McMaster would argue with Erin's opinion.

Another issue was Viscount Gelhart's existing relationship with Viscount McMaster. Since Viscount McMaster was loyal to the royal house, he saw Viscount Gelhart's abuse of authority as an insult to the crown. Viscount Gelhart, meanwhile, only saw Viscount McMaster as a stubborn, hardheaded, idealistic dreamer incapable of seeing reality for what it was.

The two didn't openly oppose each other, but this was only because they kept a safe distance from each other.

The two houses' relationship isn't a friendly one. As far as I know, the two had never interacted since the day the lord inherited the headship.

Relationships within Rhoadserian aristocratic society ran on tight blood bonds. The country had existed for nearly five centuries, and no noble house lacked blood bonds with one another. That didn't mean two houses had to be close or get along.

Viscount Gelhart and Viscount McMaster were distant relatives then. They didn't oppose, but held a negative opinion of, each other and tried to keep their distance.

And now he came for a meeting.

It was clear as day that whatever reason Viscount Gelhart had for going there

couldn't have been something trivial. Sentries and maids cleaning the house wouldn't be privy to small details about this, so Erin had no way of knowing what the two viscounts discussed. The only ones who would know were the two men themselves.

Only Rosetta McMaster, beckoned to the lord's study after the conversation finished, knew what had transpired. Not even the butler who managed all the servants in the lord's name or the head maid would know.

That wasn't to say Erin was in the dark. Based on her seniors' tense expressions, even a commoner maid like Erin could tell if this was a promising or unfortunate development. It was much like a forest animal keenly sensing the changing weather. Her intuition warned her, and that was true for all the other servants in the mansion.

Whatever it is, it's not good.

"I know how you feel, but keep working," a voice suddenly reached her ears.

Erin turned to look toward the source of the voice. A senior maid charged with training her stood there with stern eyes. The senior maid scrutinized Erin as she was supposed to be cleaning, but her hands weren't moving since she had become lost in thought.

That said, there was no sarcasm or criticism in her voice. She, too, experienced the same anxiety Erin did but was experienced and professional enough not to let it show. All she did was gently chide her restless colleague.

"My apologies," apologized Erin, who then resumed cleaning the desk. She pulled herself back together, her hands wiping more forcefully than before.
There's nothing I can do, but...

Erin was an ordinary commoner girl from a relatively large village in the McMaster Viscounty. Her family was in the service of the village headman and was relatively affluent as commoners went. Otherwise, there was nothing of note about them.

In this tumultuous time in Rhoadseria's history, there was little Erin, who lacked any talents to speak of, or her family could do to help the McMaster viscounty. The same applied to many workers in the mansion, especially since

they saw it as the precious estate of their governor. Though they may have faked composure, they all watched with bated breath as their master remained locked up in his study. All they could do was go about their daily duties.

“Oh? It’s gotten awfully cloudy, hasn’t it...”

Hearing this, Erin looked up to the sky. The blue sky she had seen earlier was gone, with a layer of dull clouds in its place, covering the sun. An overcast sky.

“Looks like it’s about to rain.”

Erin felt a droplet of rain hit her face, and something flashed in the sky as rain hit the ground. A sudden thunderstorm, accompanied by powerful winds. The open arbor was exposed to the wind and the rain, meaning their cleaning would become moot.

But the sky was clear earlier... No amount of complaining would change the weather.

“Erin, shall we return to the estate?” asked the senior maid.

Erin nodded in response and quickly put her things away, praying her lord would be safe and sound.



Thick raindrops pelted the room’s window, and strong winds rattled the windowpane as lightning streaked across the sky.

A complete storm... There was no sign of one coming, though. The woman looking out the window sighed. A few hours ago, the sky was the very image of a sunny day, but it had darkened quickly. *It’s like an ill omen.*

The unexpected guest had said something that could tear the Kingdom of Rhoadseria apart. Seeing a sudden storm on a day like this truly felt like the work of some power that exceeded the realm of man.

Flickering candlelight cast shadows and danced across the ceiling. Two people were in the room, and one was a muscular middle-aged man clad in a noble’s suit. Plate armor would have been a better fit on him because he was one of Rhoadseria’s greatest warriors and the master of this estate. His biceps were large and bulging, as were his thighs.

His physique didn't mean that he was overweight, but that he had the toned body of a trained warrior. But while he was indeed bulked up and stern, his body also had feline-like flexibility. His clothes hid his scars and a black eye patch covered his right eye, evidence of his history on the battlefield and affirmation that his reputation was well deserved.

This man was Diggle McMaster, one of Rhoadseria's greatest warriors and the head of the McMaster viscounty. Although he was a noble who assumed the headship passed down to him from his ancestors, he was fiercely loyal to the crown. He also criticized the nobles' faction for their tendency to expand their power, seeing it as an insult to the royal family. Most of the time, he was a fair, open-minded man full of dignity and confidence, boasting the strength and merit to match them.

As one would expect, his subordinates and subjects trusted him. Now he sat in his study, lost in thought with his elbows placed on his desk and hand folded under his chin. One could see his anxiety, annoyance, and doubt.

Watching over him was his daughter dressed in men's clothing—Rosetta McMaster.

It only makes sense he'd feel this way, she thought.

A sigh escaped Rosetta's peach-colored lips. The scene was similar to a few days ago, except back then, she regarded her conflicted father with impatience.

There was a way to protect everything we have, after all.

He was torn between his loyalty to the royal house and his responsibility to his subjects. As a noble and governor, Viscount McMaster had many responsibilities, and those duties barred him from picking the easiest, safest choice.

It was because she knew this that Rosetta felt impatient. But she no longer felt annoyed with her father's lack of decisiveness. Based on what her father told her after he met with Viscount Gelhart, it was natural he'd be troubled.

Still, I can't believe Viscount Gelhart would devise such a plan. Rosetta felt a chill run down her spine when her father told her of their talk.

An uprising.

That single word shook Rosetta's heart.

That was a possibility I considered, but...

The northern subjugation's defeat and Queen Lupis's diminishing rule made it obvious nobles would give up on her to preserve their families' honor. Viscount Gelhart had a noticeable fixation with power and authority, and monopolized national politics. While losing the civil war had cost him his vast domain and lessened his political power, his essence as a noble and a politician had not changed.

Viscount Gelhart might have lost the civil war, but it was only because that man steered the flow of battle that way. Queen Lupis didn't make him yield on her own.

The same man who directed the tides of war had left Queen Lupis's side and marched his armies on the capital. This occurrence meant that Viscount Gelhart had no reason to fear the queen anymore, and thus went to Viscount McMaster with an offer.

I'd think father had gone mad if he weren't struggling over his answer. Forcing Queen Lupis to abdicate the throne and setting up Princess Radine as the new queen is quite the shocking offer.

Of course, Viscount Gelhart never used the word "uprising" during his talk. All he did was recommend that Queen Lupis abdicate, but he did that strictly to remain respectable.

The queen won't step down peacefully.

The Mikoshiba barony army was marching toward the capital, and only three strategies could stop it. And the first was to meet them in combat outside the capital. In other words, a do-or-die gamble. Winning would make negotiations much smoother.

And if they could claim the baron's head, all their failures until now would be undone.

If that were to happen, much of the distrust directed at Queen Lupis would dissipate. It was very much the ideal solution for the present administration.

But it's not a realistic one.

Given they were still licking their wounds from their previous defeat, meeting the Mikoshiba barony's army in direct combat was a dangerous choice. In terms of morale plus the soldiers' skills and equipment, the scales of victory favored the Mikoshiba barony.

This means the only available strategy would be to force a siege battle and stall for time.

Queen Lupis could adopt the same siege tactics Ryoma used during the northern subjugation. Since fighting the Mikoshiba barony head-on would be difficult in these conditions, the established theory stated that forcing a siege would be the next optimal idea.

Even if she did that...

Pireas had firm walls, and the nobles' army boasted two hundred thousand soldiers. Queen Lupis could conscript the capital's citizens, further bolstering the garrison. This made holing up in the city and braving a siege appear to be a good tactic.

But you need to expect reinforcements if you're going to win a siege. And what's more...

Maintaining morale during a siege was exceptionally difficult. Even when an army used walls to deflect attacks, sieges limited the defending side's offensive options. So long as a unit didn't march out of the gates to engage the enemy, their only means of attack would be to employ bows, throw stones, or use martial thaumaturgy for long-range offensive spells.

A siege battle meant the defending side could only counterattack and never hold the initiative. Only when the enemy attacked could they strike back and whittle down the enemy's numbers.

It's possible to go for an endurance battle and wait for the enemy's food supplies to run out, but that requires preparation.

After preparing for a large-scale expedition like the northern subjugation, they couldn't possibly stock up on supplies. Mikhail Vanash had attempted to scrounge up extra soldiers and supplies, but there was still a limit to what he

could do. Rosetta estimated that the city's food would last a month to a month and a half at best. Even then, it would be possible only by rationing how much every soldier and civilian got.

They would have to either find a way to bring in food from outside the capital or wait for the Mikoshiba barony to retreat, or else the city would become a hell of starvation.

More than anything, that man will show no mercy if the queen tries to hold a siege. He'd use any means necessary to take the capital down, and that would damage the city.

Rosetta's view of Ryoma Mikoshiba was that he was a man who was quite lenient toward his allies but ruthless against his enemies. If the need called for it, he wouldn't think twice about slaughtering the millions living in the capital.

Even if he didn't go that far, the damage caused by the siege battle would strike a major financial blow. People would desert the surrounding towns and villages, and key industries like agriculture would decline. More refugees would flood the capital, further undermining public order.

And what would that cause?

Even if by some miracle Queen Lupis were to beat Ryoma Mikoshiba, her political power would decay. Once that happened, would the nobles still swear allegiance to her when she was weak?



Rosetta doubted this switch in loyalty after witnessing and hearing plenty of horrible stories about the nobles of Rhoadseria. Queen Lupis had struggled to unify the kingdom, which reinforced the lack of loyalty. The nobles would turn to self-preservation, and a power grab would occur. A civil war might break out until only one noble remained to rule.

Either way, this country is done for...

Perhaps the country might get destroyed, or maybe its name would change. Either way, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria had no bright future in store. Anyone with an eye for the situation would notice this. All this was to say that opting to hole up and win a siege battle would be a bad play.

That means the only remaining option is to broker peace through surrender. And yet, Her Majesty would never make that choice.

Were Queen Lupis capable of making that choice, she wouldn't have suffered defeat, and the northern subjugation wouldn't have been necessary.

There's no brokering peace at this stage. Even if Queen Lupis had wanted that, no one would accept the idea.

Had the houses that participated in the northern subjugation lost only troops, there might have been a chance to reach a compromise; however, many houses had lost their family heads or heirs. The nobles would likely cry out in objection to peace overtures, asking why the northern subjugation had to occur if Lupis was just going to make peace. Some might even go as far as make an attempt on Queen Lupis's life.

And Queen Lupis and her lieutenants know it.

Besides, Ryoma Mikoshiba held the advantage in this situation, and it was questionable if he would even be interested in negotiating with Queen Lupis after she had caused him so much trouble. In other words, it might be too late to deal with the Mikoshiba barony.

Without favorable terms or a bargaining chip, I doubt he would spare Queen Lupis's life. And something like that probably doesn't exist.

Rosetta couldn't imagine anything short of a miracle that could produce such

a situation. Although if anyone could find a reason to let Queen Lupis live, it would surely be Ryoma.

Either way, this won't end well for her. No matter which choice she made, Queen Lupis and her cohorts' fate was grim. In chess terms, they were essentially in check. *That's only when seeing the situation from Queen Lupis's position.*

The problem was that the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and its queen were intrinsically linked. In this world, a country's sovereign was synonymous with the nation itself, a sacred symbol. The tyranny of the nobles impacted her power and influence, but the Kingdom of Rhoadseria belonged to its queen, Lupis Rhoadserians.

The situation changed when one viewed a ruler as a mere administrator of the country. If the king or queen were no longer synonymous with the country, then a change of ruler could happen if needed.

It only makes sense people would come to that conclusion in this situation. The only question is whether it happens sooner or later.

Rosetta wasn't arrogant enough to think of herself as a genius and assumed anyone would reach the same conclusion she had. The only difference was when they would do so and whether they would have the resolve to act on that realization.

That would mean straying off the path of a loyal retainer, of course, and whether one dares to make that choice depends on the person.

Revolting against the queen. Such an act of high treason was a transgression for which the queen could execute the criminal and his entire clan. And yet, this revolt was the countermeasure Rosetta had kept a secret.

In that regard, Viscount Gelhart's proposition might be a windfall for us. If I had suggested treason to father, he would have become furious.

Viscount McMaster would normally have refused Viscount Gelhart's offer with no second thought, then called for an audience with Queen Lupis and marched an army on Viscount Gelhart's estate. This was a chance to renounce and dispose of a man he was wary of and had opposed for years.

He'd have done the same to Rosetta if she had gone to him with the same idea. Knowing his daughter had entertained the idea of treason would have pushed Diggle McMaster to cast her away, even if it caused heartache or tears.

But now things have changed. Things have become that much worse compared to the last civil war.

Even if he were to report on Viscount Gelhart's intentions to create an uprising, the situation wouldn't change for the better.

Because the northern subjugation has failed, the army's morale is at its lowest point. And Queen Lupis has shut herself off in her room. Father could arrange a meeting with Meltina Lecter or Mikhail Vanash, but even that would take too long. I doubt we can rely on Queen Lupis to make the right call. Even if they slew Viscount Gelhart, I'm not sure the Rhoadserian soldiers would accept it.

The painful blow of defeat had yet to heal. If Viscount Gelhart were executed, that could negatively influence the army.

From the soldiers' perspective, Viscount Gelhart was loyal despite his bad reputation and past offenses. He had sent his troops to the northern subjugation at Queen Lupis's orders. Telling the soldiers the viscount was a traitor needing to be killed would baffle them.

On top of that, many of the nobles had seen their strength diminished by the northern subjugation's failure.

If Viscount Gelhart were to start an uprising, it would likely be impossible to nip it in the bud.

At worst, the capital would become a bloodstained battlefield at the hands of its own defenders before Ryoma's armies attacked.

In terms of where we stand, nothing's changed. No, considering Viscount Gelhart has resolved to rebel, things might have taken a turn for the worse. But...

Compared to a few days ago, the situation had gotten even more dire. The head of the nobles' faction revolt would deal a crippling blow to Queen Lupis as the Mikoshiba barony army marched toward the capital. This was a terrible development for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

But there was a silver lining.

It depends on how the talks go, but father could gain something from this.

Having plenty of options wasn't always good, especially when grappling with choices that forced one to go against their personal beliefs or risked drawbacks because those options made them waver. The more one sought to protect, the more one had to lose, which led to becoming paralyzed from the pressure to make a choice.

In this regard, narrowing one's options made choosing which path to tread easier.

Father has his back against the wall right now, so he'll have an easier time making harsh, painful choices.

All that remained was to make him recognize the reality of their situation and have him pick the ideal path. *The silver lining here is that Viscount Gelhart's made it easier for me to persuade father.*

Viscount Gelhart had his troops stationed within the capital as part of the garrison and was preparing to rebel. Since there was no way of stopping him, their options boiled down to two choices.

We either follow Queen Lupis on the road to ruin or pick the path ensuring House McMaster's survival.

With that thought in mind, Rosetta said, "Father, may I have a word?"

Viscount McMaster raised his hung head, his sole eye looking at her with doubt, misgivings, and dread. His expression didn't fit one of Rhoadseria's most celebrated warriors. Rosetta couldn't help but feel some pity as she was about to tell her disheartened father something that would wound his warrior's pride—a plan wrought with indignity.

But it's necessary if we're going to survive.

And so Rosetta, hardening her heart while carefully picking her words, asked Viscount McMaster a question. She knew him breaking into an emotional outburst would be the most troublesome outcome.

"Father... I understand your feelings on the matter as a noble of this country.

Do you think agonizing over this will affect the outcome?”

Sadly, no amount of careful wording would change his reaction. Viscount McMaster’s eye flared with rage and glared at Rosetta with murderous intent. He had no trace of the indecisive, concerned attitude from earlier. The fighting spirit of a warrior hit Rosetta with an intensity that rivaled physical force, but she did not flinch.

“Given our family values and loyalty until now, it’s only natural to feel hard-pressed to support Viscount Gelhart’s idea. I understand that the honor of our legacy weighs on you,” said Rosetta, bowing her head.

Viscount McMaster asked her morosely, “And knowing all that, you still tell me to do this?”

“Yes, I’m sure that clinging to your loyalty to the royal family will do little to change anything. All you would do is ensure we become another noble house that falls to ruin alongside the Rhoadserians royal family.”

It was a cold, callous conclusion. While Viscount McMaster trembled in anger and sorrow, he did not raise his voice at Rosetta.

“Surely there’s still something we can do to protect Queen Lupis and this country... What if Xarooda or Myest were to dispatch soldiers?”

Rosetta, however, shook her head in denial of the idea.

“And have our country become their vassal?”

He was at a loss for words before he tried to argue. “They won’t demand that. Myest and Xarooda have blood ties with our kingdom and have been our allies in the union with Helnesgoula. If we could appeal to their sense of justice—”

By the time Viscount McMaster trailed off, he tiredly covered his face with a hand as he saw this couldn’t happen. Seeing this, Rosetta sighed softly.

We have good relations with Myest and Xarooda, so asking them for reinforcements isn’t a bad idea. But these are all recent developments... Just a few years ago, we were locked in border skirmishes with those countries, and they won’t selflessly offer us aid.

At best, Myest and Xarooda could send supplies, depending on the

negotiations. For an offer of future payment or ceding a border territory, they would lean toward taking that deal but not dispatch soldiers.

They'd need to arrange the situation with their countries' nobles, even if they sent us reinforcements.

Preparing an expedition to help Rhoadseria would take months. It would be meaningless for them to arrive months later with the Mikoshiba barony knocking at the gates.

Besides, that man is why Rhoadseria's relations with Myest and Xarooda improved. They're only allied with us because Ryoma Mikoshiba became affiliated with Rhoadseria.

Rosetta wouldn't have proposed this if she saw any other viable option. "You have my deepest apologies for my failure to fulfill my duties as your daughter, father."

During the O'ltormean Empire's invasion of Xarooda, Ryoma Mikoshiba led the expedition with Helena Steiner. He had burned down the O'ltormean supply depot at Fort Notis to cut off their supply chain.

More than anything, he had convinced the shrewd Vixen of the North, Grindiana Helnecharles, to set up the commerce treaty that served as the basis of the four-kingdom union. Rhoadseria's recent international successes were the result of dancing to his tune.

When choosing between Queen Lupis and Baron Mikoshiba, it's clear who Myest and Xarooda would rather side with. Had Rosetta ruled Xarooda or Myest, she would have opted to help Ryoma and focused on associating with him. He might be merciless to his foes, but he's kind to his allies.

Rosetta didn't truly know Ryoma Mikoshiba since she only met him once during the evening party a few months ago. But the few words they exchanged were enough to inspire trust in the man.

He didn't even try to take advantage of knowing our secret.

Maybe he didn't do so to instill a sense of trust in Rosetta. Ryoma's refusal to exploit another person's weakness came across as unusual after he had lived many years in the greedy, opportunistic society of Rhoadseria. This behavior

intrigued Rosetta, so she used her connections to gather information on him. That was how she learned what a fearsome man he was.

I'm sure of one thing. We must not oppose that man.



Rosetta hadn't reached that conclusion from some unique understanding of the situation. Her father, Diggle McMaster, had received the same information. Putting aside whether they thought about it for emotional reasons, they came to the same conclusion.

As such, Rosetta gently asked, "Father, I'm sure you understand those countries won't save Queen Lupis if it means turning against that man."

The inner conflict was a simple matter of who was helpful. Queen Lupis's regime had always been unstable and incapable of handling internal affairs. In the meantime, Ryoma had forged a union that served the interests of all the countries involved and stopped the O'ltormean Empire before. He was of more national interest than she was.

Even if the O'ltormean Empire wasn't a foreign threat, they might have opposed him for being a hero that rose from commoner background, thought Rosetta.

Likewise, Myest and Xarooda could have also considered invading Rhoadseria and disposing of Ryoma. But the O'ltormean threat at large required the three kingdoms to be intact to guarantee their safety. Having a ruler who couldn't maintain control over her country in such a precarious situation was a tangible risk for them.

Finding a way to eliminate such risk without interfering was in their favor. Neither kingdom could help Queen Lupis, and listening to Rosetta's explanation made Viscount McMaster frown in sorrow and speak up.

"You are saying I should accept Viscount Gelhart's offer? Maintain our family name, even if it means tarnishing it with the shame of treason?"

Rosetta shook her head in denial and said, "We can't follow Queen Lupis—that would be suicide. And we can't let Viscount Gelhart take control of this kingdom. If we let him have his way, the nobles' faction's power will grow, and he will subject innocent commoners to misery and oppression."

When Viscount McMaster heard this, he contorted his face in displeasure, then responded hesitantly, "Then what are you suggesting? You probably want me to submit to that man, and I've considered that. But if Viscount Gelhart is

trying to instigate a revolt, he must already have made a pact with that man. Right?”

Rosetta nodded. “You’re probably right in assuming that.”

Should Viscount Gelhart oust Queen Lupis, that would be meaningless if the war with the Mikoshiba barony didn’t end. Making a pact with Baron Mikoshiba must have included a stipulation about his role in Rhoadseria’s future regime.

“He likely plans to install Radine Rhoadserians as the new queen, with him holding all the real power as her prime minister.”

“That sounds like something that slimy bastard would think of...” whispered Viscount McMaster in disgust.

There was no other way of putting it. Viscount Gelhart was plotting to take over Rhoadseria, which promised an even darker future for the kingdom than the regime of Queen Lupis.

“But that man would likely accept that offer...”

“You think Baron Mikoshiba has no desire to rule over this country?” asked Viscount McMaster.

Rosetta nodded again. Queen Lupis’s dispute with Ryoma stemmed from her viewing him as dangerous and plotting to eliminate him. Ryoma was defending himself.

While it surprised most people to hear this, Ryoma held a fundamental stance of nonaggressive defense. Viscount Gelhart knew this from his conflict with Ryoma during the civil war.

Otherwise, he wouldn’t be planning a revolt at this point.

When Ryoma was a wandering mercenary, he didn’t purposefully oppose Viscount Gelhart. It was simply the circumstances that pitted him against the duke. His opposing Gelhart was not something to overlook.

Reasonably speaking, Viscount Gelhart dethroning Queen Lupis wouldn’t stop the Mikoshiba barony’s advance. That didn’t mean the viscount would join the side of an upstart like Ryoma.

In other words, he only acted because he had some guarantee he could retain

independence from him. And this would mean that Ryoma had no interest in ruling over Rhoadseria.

“From the baron’s perspective, it doesn’t matter who takes over Rhoadseria as long as they don’t act against him. Whether Viscount Gelhart devours this kingdom from the inside out is of no interest to him,” explained Rosetta.

Viscount McMaster seemed baffled by this response and asked, “But why? Why wouldn’t Baron Mikoshiba seek to rule over this country in this situation?”

It was a natural question to ask since those in power sought further influence and more territory, like a merchant expanding their business. Even a warrior like Viscount McMaster felt the same way. He swore allegiance to Rhoadseria to have his right over his domain acknowledged by the crown so as to earn more land. This was especially true when the kingdom was in such a precarious state.

Assuming no natural disaster would upset the course of the war, the Mikoshiba barony seemed poised to win. Viscount McMaster thought abandoning his duties in this state of emergency was reckless negligence.

But that’s just based on his logic as a noble. As far as Rosetta could see, Ryoma’s desire to rule a nation like Rhoadseria was minimal. That’s clear from how he’s been fighting this war so far.

The best evidence to support that assumption was how he razed the citadel city of Epirus. Said attack struck a blow against the northern subjugation, even if it was a poor plan, considering the region’s future. He had rendered the citizens who escaped the city homeless, and this would leave a major hole in the area’s tax revenue for years to come.

“There’s no way he wasn’t aware of the consequences. So I think it’s safe to assume he has no intention of taking over Rhoadseria,” continued to Rosetta.

“Then what is he trying to achieve?” replied Viscount McMaster.

“He must plan to maximize his income by setting the Wortenia Peninsula as a trade center.”

“Like what the Kingdom of Myest is trying to do?”

“No, it’ll probably be a country with even more focus on commerce.”

Viscount McMaster crossed his arms and growled. As a noble fixated on warrior ideals, this idea was hard to fathom and novel by this world's standards.

In the western continent, a country's primary industry was mainly agriculture, with forestry as a secondary industry. Myest had territorial waters and focused on fishing and trade. Only a few countries engaged in commerce this actively, and they still sought to expand their territory. In a sense, choosing not to expand his domain appeared efficient.

"Considering the months and years of effort it takes to gain the loyalty of a rival country, it's not a bad idea. And if my hypothesis is correct, we might still negotiate with him."

Viscount McMaster regarded Rosetta with confusion because he didn't understand how they'd do that. But what she said next made his eyes widen in shock.



"Princess Radine taking the throne while expelling Viscount Gelhart... I thought she was still a girl, but Rosetta has become reliable. I suppose I didn't see her capabilities."

When Rosetta left the office after finishing their talk, Viscount McMaster murmured this to himself. On his desk, he had a treasured bottle of wine made when Rosetta and her brother Grad were born. He had intended to open it when he would pass his viscount title to Grad.



He focused on the reddish liquid he poured from the decanter, smiling.

Now that I've lost Grad and have no heir, I never thought I would get a chance to open this bottle, thought Viscount McMaster. *But to think this day would come. Fate takes us down a winding, unpredictable path.* But he was glad to be mistaken. *I shouldn't have underestimated her on account of her being a woman.*

Viscount McMaster did not especially look down on women, but male supremacy was a tradition in Rhoadserian aristocracy. Due to this, he couldn't help but feel that women were inferior on some level to men.

No. It's that man—he changed her.

With her twin brother's death, Rosetta had to discard her life as a woman to protect the McMaster viscounty, making up his title and territory, from other nobles seeking to take over it. She assumed the role of her brother, carrying herself as a man in both heart and body. Ever since she met Ryoma Mikoshiba and spoke with him, something in her heart changed slightly.

That change broadened her outlook as a politician and unconsciously roused the feminine part of her personality that Rosetta had kept buried for so long. Their conversation tonight made Diggle McMaster feel that change vividly, yet he didn't find this unpleasant. If anything, he was relieved.

He poured more wine from the decanter into his glass, relished its fragrance, and sipped from it. Along with the thick, acidic bitterness of aged wine, the rich, sweet flavors of grape and strawberry filled his mouth. It was a flavor that carried the weight of years of fermentation, and in that regard, no drink could be more suitable for this historic day.

"Now... I have another job to do," he whispered.

Then, Viscount McMaster spread a piece of parchment over the desk and began writing on it with a quill. He did so believing he was making the right choice for Rhoadseria's future.

Chapter 1: The Battle for the Capital

The sun shone brightly and clearly, and the azure sky made it hard to believe a storm had raged through the area two days ago. On such a day, a group of people donning black armor appeared on Pireas's outskirts. They held a striking banner of a two-headed serpent with gold and silver scales coiled around a sword above them.

The serpent's red eyes glared menacingly at the Rhoadserian capital, as this was the banner of the most feared man in the kingdom. People across the western continent would be hard-pressed to find someone unaware of the exploits of this banner's master.

After beating the northern subjugation army in the previous battle, the Mikoshiba barony marched on. They occupied every settlement and town in their way, finally regrouping at the outskirts of Pireas.

The Mikoshiba barony army stood at forty-five thousand soldiers, slightly diminished by placing guards at the occupied settlements. Dark elves from the Wortenia Peninsula no longer hid their presence after showing off their power in the last battle. Most of those elves were strong hunters and experienced verbal thaumaturgists, and every one of them was an elite that matched an intermediate-class knight.

On the opposite side, Queen Lupis and the Rhoadserian nobles holed up in Pireas. Though they had lost many troops in the failed northern subjugation, Mikhail Vanash had forced the nobles of the domains surrounding the capital to send in more soldiers. Because of this, they could bolster their ranks back to nearly two hundred thousand.

This amount placed the difference in the armies' sizes as roughly one to five. It appeared the Mikoshiba barony army was to surround and attack the wall, despite appearing at an overwhelming disadvantage. After all, the rule of thumb was that a force three times the size of a garrison was needed to win a siege.

But the soldiers defending the city seemed to feel otherwise.

“That’s the Mikoshiba barony’s banner!”

“He’s finally here... The Devil of Heraklion.”

Sentries on the lookout tower atop the wall knew this day would come and reported it. And this made the surrounding soldiers murmur and whisper—but not out of anticipation or thirst for victory.

“Don’t panic. Just remember your training.”

“We’ll be fine. All we have to do is shoot them from the walls. You’ll probably hit them with your eyes closed!”

“If you want to survive, hold your ground and fight!”

These words came across less as an attempt to embolden and encourage the soldiers and more like a parent or teacher reassuring a child. It was natural because this was many of these soldiers’ first battle. These inexperienced soldiers felt strain since they would fight against an army led by the infamous and ruthless Devil of Heraklion, Baron Mikoshiba.

He had crushed the northern subjugation and its two hundred thousand men with an army a fourth its size, which he likened to ravenous demons. The soldiers behind the wall couldn’t remain composed, knowing that if they lost this battle, their homeland of Rhoadseria would be wiped off the map.

But they couldn’t afford to flee since they had seen several fellow soldiers beheaded in the capital’s plaza for desertion. This action was a drastic measure to enforce discipline and eliminate dissent. The fact remained that the Rhoadserian army maintained control thanks to it. Even Meltina, who ordered the executions, couldn’t tell how long it would hold the army together. For the time being, it proved to be effective.

When the soldiers heard the Mikoshiba barony army was on the move, they instantly prepared to go on the defensive. As they informed the others of the enemy’s approach, they donned the cheap armor provided to them and reached for their weapons.

They obeyed their respective unit captains, knowing that refusing would only

lead to an execution. But they didn't give off the resolve of a garrison prepared to lay down their lives to intercept the enemy army. The only emotions they felt were of fear and confusion as they remained obedient in an abnormal situation.

Threatening and coercing them just isn't enough, thought a battalion commander.

One couldn't expect every single soldier to be high on morale since the capital's garrison comprised an assortment of conscripts from the surrounding domains. After the northern subjugation loss, few capable commanders remained, and the training period following the units' formation had shortened.

Nevertheless, this was the last resort Mikhail and Meltina had conceived to ensure superiority over the Mikoshiha barony, but it resulted in flaws. Many units had their numbers bolstered by peasant conscripts, which meant those soldiers didn't amount to much in quality.

Very few nobles had professional soldiers under their employ. Unless they had domains with incredible financial strength, these nobles couldn't assemble a standing army. Most of their troops were conscripts, with such professional soldiers serving only as commanders.

The difference in skill and morale between conscripts and professional soldiers was like night and day. Both also had different commitments and desires to battle. Professional soldiers trained for combat daily, and the conscripts couldn't match that because of their civilian lives. With that in mind, the Rhoadserian army's morale was at rock bottom.

As long as we remain here and hold the walls, we can find a way to fight them off.

Of course, the defending side could not get away with having low morale due to its importance in a siege. Even so, a decrease in morale during an open battle could lead soldiers to scatter and flee. That was a luxury the soldiers in the capital didn't have, making it easier to hold them together as an army.

But there's a limit to how long that can last. The top brass have to come up with something.

Currently, the threat of brute force held the army in place. Soldiers would

eventually start doubting their commanders' ability to lead them. When that suspicion overcame the threat of violence, the soldiers would turn on their country. But it would be a while before that happened.

For now, we have to fend off the enemy!

The enemy army grew as it came over the horizon, and the battalion commander noticed the armor and weapons of the black-clad soldiers approaching them. They likely were about three hundred meters away from the walls.

"Prepare the bows and stones!"

"Start heating the oil! Be careful not to burn yourselves!"

Shouts and orders traveled across the wall. Bows and ranged weapons seemed like a useless, cowardly method. And that perception wasn't entirely unfounded, since stones and arrows fired from ordinary bows barely hurt a knight-class soldier capable of martial thaumaturgy.

Knights that could use verbal thaumaturgy came off as superhuman, and most wore heavy armor that had its weight reduced by endowed thaumaturgy. This lighter load allowed them to charge across the battlefield unrestrained. They could even block and sweep aside arrows that rained on them.

An archer had to fire many arrows to kill an opponent using martial thaumaturgy from afar. The sole exception to expending a lot of effort was the use of wide-area verbal thaumaturgy spells. Still, few people on this continent were capable of wielding spells powerful enough to kill a warrior who had reinforced their body with thaumaturgy. Only a few countries, like the O'ltormean Empire, welcomed verbal thaumaturgists.

Because of that, weapons usable by the defending side in a siege were quite limited. Ordinary weapons like swords and spears only came into play after the enemy breached the walls or broke through the gates. Thus, despite the many reservations and disadvantages, soldiers still used bows and stones in siege battles.

Using the defensive installations wisely and killing enemy soldiers from afar had the rare effect of boosting morale. Sadly, it seemed this common

knowledge didn't apply to the soldiers on Pireas's walls.

"Hey! You lot, line up!" barked the battalion commander, and the soldiers under him formed a line.

Most followed orders obediently, nocking their bows and getting into position. No matter how much their commanders tried to rouse them, the soldiers' morale remained low. Their hearts fluttered in different directions, with fear pulling them one way and their sense of duty in the other.

Damn it all! We can't fight like this! thought the battalion commander as he continued barking orders.

He was a skilled warrior who participated in the northern subjugation, fought in the Battle of Fort Tilt, and later survived the battle on the Runoc Plains. Raising his troops' spirit should have been easy for him.

But no matter how much he scolded or encouraged them, their morale remained low. There was not a shred of the passion he usually felt from soldiers about to put their lives at risk on the battlefield.

They were like puppets in human form. No, the fear the Mikoshiba barony army incited made them worse than puppets. Still, he had to lead these men into battle.

God of Light Meneos, grant us your protection.

Although the commander wasn't a man of faith, he had no choice but to pray just like others did in desperate times. The ones said to be the God of Light's representatives, the Church of Meneos, had abandoned the capital. So, the commander's prayer would have been comical if it wasn't such a pitiful sight. Yet, he heard others muttering prayers around him.

Part of the Mikoshiba barony army broke off from the main force and slowly approached the capital, so it wasn't long until that detachment was within firing range. The lookouts kept a keen watch over the enemy, the archers stood at the ready, and a bell rang out. It was the signal to open fire, accompanied by the commanders shouting the order.

"Shoot!"

Countless bows nocked like the crescent moon aimed upward and loosed their arrows, which fell in a round curve, shrouding the sky in black. It was like looking at a cloud of locusts.

The black armored soldiers didn't stop walking, using their armor and shields to block the arrows.

"Dammit, it isn't working," cursed the battalion commander under his breath.

But he kept his voice low enough to avoid discouraging soldiers. Even so, he felt despair and realized they lacked the means to deal with this threat.

The rumors were true. Not only are the Mikoshiba barony soldiers capable of martial thaumaturgy, they also don armor with endowed thaumaturgy. How much money does Baron Mikoshiba have?!

Unfortunately, the rumor had spread among the soldiers before the northern subjugation began. Defeated soldiers who previously served Salzberg County told stories of what they saw in the war, and these reached ears at the capital. But few people—including this battalion commander—took the rumors seriously at first.

Who'd believe a story like that? Rhoadseria is one of the leading countries on the continent, and endowed thaumaturgy gear is expensive. It would have been easier to believe if it was just part of the armor. Outfitting the Monarch's Guard and Royal Guard with this kind of equipment is a tall order.

The Monarch's Guard and Royal Guard were significant enough that no expense was too much, and so they used equipment strengthened by endowed thaumaturgy. Both groups stood by whenever the queen attended diplomatic meetings or rituals. These knight orders represented Rhoadseria's honor and acted as ceremonial guards.

So they'd have more expensive equipment than most.

That said, a knight order in the Rhoadserian military had twenty-five hundred men, meaning the Royal and Monarch's Guards together had five thousand men. But there was no concept of uniform standard in this world. Although craftsmen could make similar-looking armor, they couldn't create it to all perform exactly the same because they crafted it by hand.

On top of that, one could not find craftsmen capable of endowed thaumaturgy because people viewed endowed and verbal thaumaturgists negatively. The Rhoadserian court had a court thaumaturgist unit, but they served more as civil officers. Thus, the northern subjugation didn't recruit them, as they placed martial thaumaturgy in higher regard.

Warriors on the front lines saw verbal thaumaturgists as cowards who focused on support spells or long-distance attacks. This was prejudice and a misunderstanding, and some people were aware of the truth. The battalion commander, for instance, knew the importance of endowed and verbal thaumaturgy.

But it's hard to shake off a long-lasting tradition.

And so, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria did little to train verbal and endowed thaumaturgists, which encouraged them to leave for other countries. No one appreciated working in an environment that scorned and made light of them. The only ones that would remain were those not talented enough to be desirable by other countries or extreme patriots who loved Rhoadseria.

The gear given to the Monarch's Guard and Royal Guard was of average quality.

And it's because it was average that they got them in bulk.

If a knight felt displeased with the quality of their gear, they were free to acquire better equipment out of their pocket. Procuring even those mediocre sets of equipment took a great deal of funds.

All this meant was that even a country on the scale of Rhoadseria couldn't equip its soldiers with endowed thaumaturgy gear. It stood to reason that a mere provincial governor shouldn't be able to get his hands on such expensive, precious equipment.

But the enemy soldiers don't stagger or flinch when our arrows hit them. The rumors must be true, then. I was beginning to suspect...

The battalion commander had come to believe the rumor was true during the previous battle. Despite thrusting his spear as hard as he could, he couldn't so much as scratch the enemy. The only ones who could hope to beat these

soldiers in battle were knights or warriors on the same level.

This situation was quite unnatural and strange. If nothing else, the battalion commander never saw an army like this in his long tenure. Others had felt this contradiction, but they ignored it. Admitting this fact would have broken their spirits, and now that reality raced toward them.

And it's the same now. You can't just march through a rain of arrows unscathed. The marching enemies displayed no fear and stood as proof they were fully confident their armor would protect them. *But if that many arrows don't even faze them, this is the worst possible thing that could happen to us.*

Even without endowed thaumaturgy, regular plate armor protected against arrows but wasn't secure. The joints and certain spots in the armor were less defended out of necessity, as otherwise one wouldn't be able to move in the armor. Being hit in those spots could get one wounded.

In addition, knights capable of martial thaumaturgy could draw strong bows that an ordinary man couldn't pull. There were archers on the western continent who could penetrate even a dragon's scales.

Knowing these weaknesses was useless since improving armor to overcome them was difficult. Steel plate armor seemed like the strongest type in terms of nonendowed equipment. Improving it was a tall task, however. The simplest solution would be to cover the joints with metal, but doing so would impede the joints' ability to move. More than anything, armor with that much defense would be incredibly thick and heavy.

Even a knight capable of martial thaumaturgy would find armor that heavy a significant burden. So, a soldier who didn't even learn to use thaumaturgy couldn't possibly move in such armor.

Increasing the defensive capabilities of armor was an important factor in battle, for sure, but that alone didn't guarantee one's survival. That was why craftsmen spent their days meticulously at work, picking the proper materials and maintaining just the right weight to balance defense and mobility.

However, the armor of the Mikoshiba barony ignored such restrictions. They wore armor with the mobility of leather armor and a defense that exceeded even plate armor. And there was only one way they could have possibly

achieved that.

The realization that the rumor he heard was true weighed on the battalion commander's heart, and he bit his lip hard in bitter frustration until the ironlike taste of blood filled his mouth. He couldn't afford to have his soldiers stop shooting arrows, so he ordered them to keep firing despite knowing their damage was paltry.

Stopping the soldiers clad in black was futile. About ten soldiers at the back of the group approached the gate while carrying a large log, likely a battering ram, with its tip reinforced with metal. Following close behind them was another group with long ladders.

And with them on the move, archers on the rear of the Mikoshiba barony forces fired arrows, aiming at the soldiers on the walls.

"The enemy's approaching the walls! Prepare the rocks!" ordered the battalion commanders.

Just then, the soldiers put down their bows and picked up stones. Stone throwing was the simplest but most effective method of ranged combat.

"Good! Throw them down!"

The soldiers threw rocks at the approaching enemies. Perhaps the greatest benefit of stone throwing was that it was easier than using a bow and arrow. While the method gave off a childish impression, even endemic of the weak and powerless, it was a powerful method at heart.

During Japan's Warring States period, Shingen Takeda organized a unit of dedicated slingers. In the Old Testament, David slew the hulking Goliath by pelting him with stones. Throughout history, the rock proved its usefulness as the most basic and accessible weapon to man.

You may need to pick the right size and shape of a stone before you throw it, but you can find them lying around just about everywhere.

It took devoted fletchers to make bows and arrows, tightening the bowstrings and preparing the arrowheads and feathers. On the other hand, anyone could pick up a stone and throw it. That made it a more convenient and accessible weapon. Accurately hitting a target with an arrow took more practice than

using a stone. Rocks' ease of use made for a great boon.



Practicing throwing stones made one more accurate, but that didn't change the fact that anyone could throw a stone. For that reason, slinging stones at the enemy was the ideal method of combat for a hastily gathered defensive army.

And when you're on the defending side of the siege, you should throw rocks too large to be thrown by hand.

The stones used in field combat differed from those in sieges. Soldiers generally employed pebbles and stones big enough to fit in one's hand.

Be it as simple as simply throwing them by hand or using a sling—like the Waraka weapon used in Peru—stones were only so large. They couldn't be too heavy or they wouldn't travel far since one had to use their physical strength to throw them.

But this didn't apply to the defending side in a siege because they could throw rocks down from the wall at the approaching enemy. Though it wasn't rock throwing, they rolled them down and let gravity handle the rest. The impact of such a falling rock was more than sufficient to kill a man. It was questionable if this would hurt the Mikoshiba barony army, but it was better than nothing.

Plus, the oil is almost ready.

As the battalion commander glanced at the pots full of steaming, sizzling liquid, he gave his next order.

“Now listen! Don't falter, don't fall back! Fight while prepared to die for our homeland!”

With that said, the battalion commander swung his hand like he was slashing at some invisible enemy. And then, numerous rocks and potfuls of sizzling oil poured down the walls.



The Mikoshiba barony had an encampment on foothills not far away from Pireas. Asuka Kiryuu sat in the center of the camp behind layers of defenses, looking at the sky.

“What a beautiful moon... This glowing, vivid light,” she said, reaching for a batch of cookies on a plate inside a basket. *It's good... Well, a professional cook*

made them.

Asuka smiled as she munched on the cookies made by Kikuna Samejima, the chef Ryoma recruited. The basket resting beside her also had a container of tea. Still, there were too many cookies for her to eat alone. Despite sweets being hard to come by, a cook on Kikuna's level made these worth their weight in gold.

These could sell for ten thousand yen in Japan, I suppose? And it's only possible because of Ryoma.

She didn't know the exact price of these cookies, but she could guess. In Japan she would have shared these with friends. Sadly, sharing cookies of this quality in this world would only bring unwanted trouble.

But if I eat all of these, I'll get fat.

With that in mind, she reached for the plate and uncorked a wooden canteen to drink some cold tea. It was the very image of someone feasting while gazing at the moon. She was sitting in front of a map a short distance from Ryoma's tent to spare Asuka from the sight of soldiers moving about.



Yet, no one doubted that Asuka was a person of great importance to the Mikoshiba barony. Their leader had participated in her rescue, so they provided Asuka security similar to that of a prime minister in Ryoma's home world. Skilled Igasaki ninjas followed her, whether she liked it or not. Such preferential treatment could burden the person receiving it. Asuka was a simple student from the middle class before being summoned to this world. All this attention put a hefty amount of stress on her.

But Asuka understood her position, which made her spread a blanket outside her tent and gaze at the beautiful moonlit sky alone. Though she did this to relieve some stress, her thoughts kept returning to Ryoma. She was overjoyed when he rescued her from the Church of Meneos camp. They were like a hero and heroine from a story. That joy had evaporated by this time.

"A war..." The words spilled from her shapely lips, laced with doubt, regret, and sorrow.

Being alone filled her with more doubts, and it felt like it defeated the purpose of this moment of respite. Looking at the moon among the heavens conjured such thoughts.

Why do people have to fight?

Many moons had passed since Asuka arrived from peaceful Japan to encounter more death than she ever cared to see. It was a harsh reality that someone from that background would struggle to tolerate.

People could get used to anything, even hell, and Asuka found that seeing others die didn't faze her as much as it used to. When she traveled from the Holy City of Menestia through the southern kingdoms and across Rhoadseria, she witnessed the cruelties of this world many times.

I saw wives who lost their husbands to war sell their children to slave merchants. Or they sold themselves to pay for their sick children's treatment.

She struggled desperately to change this cruelty but faced the harsh, unyielding reality. On one occasion, Asuka came across a weeping mother after she had sold her children into slavery. She gave the woman money to buy back her children, but when the woman reached the slums where the slave

merchants were based, she was mugged and killed on the streets.

The one who mugged them was the man living next door to them. Debt collectors drove him to a situation where his only option was to sell his daughter off. That was when he spotted Asuka giving the woman money, which spurred him to commit the crime.

When Asuka pressed him for answers, the man hollered back at her, asking why she would help that woman but leave his daughter to her fate.

He lunged at them as he shouted at her with a desperate voice, and Asuka couldn't shake him off. Rodney and Menea then hurried over, alerted to the situation by Tachibana. Had they not been there, the man could have killed her.

Asuka had learned her ignorant attempts at goodwill would bring sorrow to other people. As the man fell to Menea's sword, Asuka realized how helpless she was. Although Asuka's noble and praiseworthy intentions ended in tragedy, no one could criticize her for her actions. She then learned she couldn't save everyone and feared the misfortunes she could unintentionally cause.

Since that incident, Asuka tried to improve her outlook on reality to understand her limits. She knew that irresponsible kindness and negligent decision-making could take lives.

Three days had passed since Ryoma began the siege of Pireas, but the deaths Asuka heard about still took her aback. The situation was uncertain, with neither side having the advantage. Every day, a few soldiers died on each side, and knowing her relative was an instigator of the conflict bothered her.

I know this war is greater than me...

Asuka couldn't stop Ryoma as much as she wanted to end the war. If it prevented people from hurting and killing each other, she thought Ryoma would be better off surrendering to Queen Lupis. Perhaps that was a reasonable conclusion from the perspective of someone who grew up with modern values and held that a single life was precious.

Had she been thrust into this situation before, Asuka wouldn't have thought twice about talking to Ryoma about this matter.

But all I'd be doing is just putting Ryoma on the spot. No, even if Ryoma

listened to me and stopped the war at this point...

Those who reject conflict and advocate peace define war as an evil to be averted, believing that ending the fight will achieve stability. In their eyes, dialogue could solve any problem and dispute.

But dialogue can only solve a conflict if both sides want to see the conflict resolved peacefully. What's more, they need to be willing to compromise and accept the other side's demands even if it means accepting an immediate drawback for themselves.

That's impossible even for modern society. So once a war starts in earnest, words alone aren't enough to stop it. The only thing that can stop a war that's already underway...

Sometimes, children reconciled or enemies became friends, like in comics. But cases like these were ideals at best and fiction at worst. A small argument could strengthen a relationship, assuming a power balance existed between both parties. This scenario included those involved taking the same losses.

What would happen if Ryoma ended the war with Queen Lupis? From what Asuka knew, Queen Lupis Rhoadserians didn't give the impression of a wise woman. She feels like the type who'd let her emotions guide her decisions and drive her into ruin. On top of that, she takes pride in being in the highest class in the world.

Queen Lupis couldn't stop the war, as doing so would enrage the nobles who participated in the northern subjugation. If Ryoma were to propose peace, she'd send a great force of soldiers to attack or pretend to accept while plotting to assassinate him.

As told in the *Taiheiki*, only one can reign at the top. That aptly described Ryoma and Queen Lupis's relationship as irreconcilable enemies. One would live while the other would die.

Besides, my words alone won't stop Ryoma.

Even if Asuka asked him to call for a ceasefire, he'd either shout at her to face reality or mock her for hypocrisy. A third party asking him to do this would get called untrustworthy. Actually, the most likely thing he'd do was to keep quiet

and shrug her off with a smile.

“After all these preparations, he can’t just stop,” said Asuka with sorrow.

The battle had been evenly matched ever since the siege of Pireas began, even up to this moment. So far, the Mikoshiba barony army had failed to break through the gates and invade the capital. Thanks to the powerful equipment Ryoma’s soldiers had, they suffered fewer losses than the Rhoadserian army.

Of course, their armor and helmets wouldn’t reduce the casualties to zero, no matter how good they were. They wouldn’t get away unscathed if a large rock hit them on the head from atop the walls. And no armor could protect one from sizzling oil slipping through the gaps.

Besides methods like attacking with stones and arrows, one could pierce a relatively poorly protected spot in a stroke of bad luck. Most soldiers hurt this way only got scratches and bruises that could heal given a day of rest, but the more unlucky ones had serious wounds or lost an arm or leg.

Thankfully, Ryoma’s army had nostrums provided by the dark elves, which could heal almost any injury that didn’t result in instant death after a month of treatment. With the help of these nostrums, soldiers could return to the line of battle quickly.

And this is because of his meticulous planning.

In the Achaemenid Empire in Ancient Persia, there was a unit of soldiers called the Immortal Guard. It consisted of ten thousand men, and each soldier that fell ill, went missing, or died had a new soldier immediately replace them. Regardless of how many died, the Immortal Guard’s numbers remained consistent. To an enemy, it must have been a terrifying unit to fight, like a swarm of zombies in a horror movie.

While the Mikoshiba barony’s brand of immortality was different, their strength was essentially the same as the Immortal Guard.

An immortal army that never dies no matter how much you attack it...

The fighting had raged for three days as the Mikoshiba barony army launched multiple offensives while the capital’s defensive army repelled them thus far. On the surface, the armies appeared comparable but quickly differentiated

themselves by how they fought.

If nothing else, Asuka couldn't imagine how anyone might protect themselves from an enemy that never got tired or died. She would never want to pick a fight with an opponent like that.

Why isn't he just finishing off the queen? The less drawn out this war is, the fewer people on his side have to die. Elite soldiers like them were still flesh and blood. Having fewer casualties didn't change the fact that lives were lost. *Knowing Ryoma, he wouldn't stand for such needless losses.*

Seeing that Asuka had known Ryoma for more than a decade and a half, this doubt crossed her mind. The most efficient way of minimizing losses in war was having a foolproof plan. Otherwise, the next best thing would be hatching a plan that ended the conflict as soon as possible. Either way, these methods would lessen the damage.

Despite the Mikoshiba barony having the upper hand, the fighting was sluggish after only a few days. And Asuka didn't understand Ryoma's intentions in prolonging this war.

She knew Ryoma was a man who could be cold and ruthless, but he had a merciful side. The man took no twisted pleasure in killing people or making others suffer.

"Is he trying to be cautious? What is he thinking?" whispered Asuka, sighing. *Who's to say...? Maybe coming to this world changed him.*

Asuka wanted to believe he was still the same person, but she had to discard any preconceptions when summoned to this world. She knew the reality of this world was severe enough to change her, for better and worse. Who was to say Ryoma didn't go through the same thing? Everything made her face the possibility she didn't know her cousin as well as she thought; she wanted to believe him but couldn't and felt tormented.

I know he's busy right now. He has a war to lead, after all.

As the head of the Mikoshiba barony, Ryoma led an army of tens of thousands. Even with skilled lieutenants working under him, he remained extremely busy. A self-indulgent part of her wished he could make the time to

Speak with her some more.

It was then that she heard a man's voice from behind her.

"Well, Ryoma has a lot on his plate. Why don't you ask him if it bothers you that much?"

When she jolted and turned around to find the source of the voice, she encountered an old man standing there with a teasing smile.

"Oh... Don't startle me like that, grandpa!" exclaimed Asuka, pouting and averting her gaze from him peevishly.

Noticing this, Tachibana, who stood beside Koichiro, laughed out loud.

"And if you're here too, say something, Mr. Tachibana!" she added, hugging her knees and puffing up her cheeks angrily.

This response only prompted Tachibana to laugh again.

"Ah, pardon, Asuka," said Koichiro. "I was just walking through the camp with Mr. Tachibana here when we noticed you lost in thought. I wasn't sure if we should say something, but Mr. Tachibana insisted we should."

"Come on, Koichiro. That's not fair. All I said was that she looked brooding and maybe we should talk to her," replied Tachibana.

"Oh... Was that what you said? I swear, my memory's been failing me recently. I'm sorry, then. I guess I'm going senile?"

Tachibana could only smile uncomfortably and shrug. While the pair hadn't spent much time together, he could tell with a glance that this flippant old man was not senile. In all his rich experience as a police officer, Tachibana had never met a man as wise and brave as Koichiro. And he could tell why Koichiro was speaking nonsense.

"What's more... That's quite the fancy snack you're having. Did Miss Samejima make them?" said Tachibana, starting with an innocuous topic to break the ice.

"Yes. Would you like to try them?" asked Asuka. "She made them especially for me, but I can't eat this many."

Asuka pulled two canteens from the basket and handed them to Koichiro and Tachibana. She invited them to take a seat, to which the men nodded, took the canteens, and sat down with Asuka between them.

After a bit of silence, Tachibana finally asked, “You look like you have a lot on your mind?”

Asuka nodded slowly, feeling no need to hide her emotions.

“I can’t blame you... Sometimes, I can’t wrap my head around everything that boy does. So it only makes sense it’d bother you, Asuka.”

Tachibana had a lot of mixed feelings about Ryoma. The information he’d gathered when investigating the boy’s disappearance led him to determine Ryoma was extremely dangerous. But criminals were those judged guilty by the justice system. When taken to the extreme, one could say that even a killer or a rapist didn’t count as a criminal so long as the court of law found them innocent.

And it’s not like Ryoma’s some perverted murderer who relishes killing, thought Tachibana. *He’s just a high schooler who probably wouldn’t do anything crime adjacent if he could help it.*

The problem was that this same former high schooler was now invading an entire country.

If necessary, he could go through with anything. Decisiveness like that is usually a good thing, but not so much when considering and committing murder.

Based on the cutthroat nature of this world, hesitation would come off as mad. Even Tachibana admitted it was a harsh reality after spending time in this world and staining his hands in blood to protect Asuka. While one could say murder was wrong, he couldn’t remain self-righteous due to his experiences.

But I can’t justify him either. If nothing else, he couldn’t endorse Ryoma’s actions. And that meant he had to decide how to process the aversion and discontent he felt for him.

“You can’t understand him either, Mr. Tachibana?” Asuka asked, looking surprised.

His words had most likely shocked Asuka, but her reaction made him scratch his left cheek with a bashful smile.

“I’ve been a police officer for years. And in this world, values and ethics like mine probably come across as hypocrisy despite living by them for years. But I can’t just...cast them away. You realize that those who stick to their values in this situation won’t end well, right?”

Even a lawless place that endorsed murder was just subject to the circumstances of its environment. This difference confused those who weren’t native to it, like a Japanese person visiting a country abroad for the first time. They’d become lost if they stuck to their notion of common sense in a foreign nation.

He continued, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do. In the end, you don’t need to overthink it...”

Asuka nodded briefly as Tachibana and Koichiro kept her company during this moonlit break. Their presence lifted her spirits, as her initial forlorn expression cleared up.

“I think I’ll go to sleep, then. Good night,” said Asuka, stifling a yawn and standing up. She didn’t know the exact time, but the moon’s position looked like it was past midnight, an appropriate moment to retire.

“Yes, good night,” said Koichiro as he nodded.

“And you too, Mr. Tachibana... Pardon me.”

“I’m sure the change in environment is hard on you, Asuka. Take your time and rest,” said Tachibana.

“I will. Thank you.”

Again, Asuka bowed and walked to her tent with the basket. Once Koichiro confirmed she had left their sight, he called out to Tachibana. His face no longer had the wisecracking expression of a witty old man, instead appearing as a worried grandfather as he spoke up.

“We caused you some trouble, didn’t we?”

“No, I was worried about her too,” said Tachibana, shaking his head. “Don’t

let it bother you.”

These were his genuine thoughts, since he saw Asuka like a little sister. They’d been together since they got summoned to this world and had faced many dangers. Their age gap was too large for anything romantic to develop, showing they were just friends. The closest word would be comrade, leading him to accompany Koichiro when he became concerned for Asuka and go along with his jokes.

“I’m relieved that you would say that,” responded Koichiro, bowing his head.

It was hard to tell from his dignified and confident attitude that Koichiro Mikoshiba usually emphasized politeness and was forthcoming in showing gratitude.

Hence, Koichiro treated Asuka like his granddaughter and showed gratitude to the man who helped save her. Tachibana then bowed his head to Koichiro.

“If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know. I can’t simply be here without earning my keep,” said Tachibana.

“Yes, my grandson will be happy to have you helping us.”

Tachibana nodded earnestly, with no choice but to collaborate with the Mikoshiba barony. Besides, Ryoma wouldn’t keep him around for free, even if he had protected Asuka for so long.

As a man, this entire situation riles me up, thought Tachibana.

While he couldn’t approve of war or murder, a warlord poised on the brink of bringing a country to its knees excited the heart. Indeed, situations like this would give one a reason to live after being cast into this world.

Besides, there’s a few questions I need answered.

First, there was the question of how Koichiro Mikoshiba had returned to his home world after being summoned many years ago. Perhaps discovering that could allow Tachibana to do the same.

Even if I found out how to get home, I’d probably need to consider my options carefully.

If the way home were easy, Koichiro would have told Asuka and Tachibana

about it long ago. That he hadn't done so implied it was either impossible or carried considerable risks.

It's probably risky. At worst, the trouble it would bring might affect others.

Why had two of Koichiro Mikoshiba's blood relatives been summoned to this world? Tachibana couldn't answer that question since the old man gave no clear answers when questioned. Something wrong had happened and it couldn't be referred to as bad luck. As far as Tachibana knew, the summoning spell chose people randomly from their world's entire population.

Though this is speculation, I would guess Ryoma Mikoshiba's deceased parents were also...

During his investigation, Tachibana examined Ryoma's family heritage and noticed that both of Ryoma's parents appeared deceased in reports. As far as Japanese law was concerned, they were dead. For all his attempts to investigate it, Tachibana found no record of their cause of death or their burial location.

They filed them legally dead after disappearing. And this is the proper way of handling it, given the question of Ryoma's parental authority. Families don't declare a missing family member dead because they want to believe their relative is still alive.

Different families have unique circumstances, but Tachibana's intuition told him something was off. With those issues unresolved, Tachibana couldn't conclude that returning to his world would be easy. He needed a way to live in this world, as hellish as it might be.

"I'm not sure if I'll be of much help, but I'll do whatever I can," said Tachibana.

"Shall we retire, then?" asked Koichiro.

"Yes... It's gotten quite late."

The two got up from the blanket on the ground and walked to their tents.

"Not to change the subject, but can I ask you something?" said Tachibana.

"Oh... If I can answer it, go ahead," responded Koichiro with a smile.

Seeing this, Tachibana raised his misgivings and said, "It's just... It's the same thing Asuka was asking. Why isn't Ryoma taking down the capital right away?"

Koichiro's smile deepened into a mischievous smirk.

"I see, I see. So that's on your mind." Koichiro rubbed his chin as he looked up to the sky, speaking with his usual teasing tone. "He could use brute force and take down the capital. It would take little time and wouldn't cost him many losses."

"I think so too," said Tachibana. "How he's been fighting for the last three days has felt off. He doesn't need to make the same mistake as Queen Lupis."

Koichiro nodded, since assaulting a fortress with an entire army to take it down was usually a bad idea. It was only advisable when one had a larger army or no other choice.

Queen Lupis didn't take advantage of this tactic during the northern subjugation due to lack of information regarding Fort Tilt's terrain and insufficient siege weapons. As such, Ryoma couldn't think about doing the same at Pireas.

"If he's trying to avoid casualties, he could poison their water or catapult decaying corpses into their walls to spread the plague. There's no shortage of ways he could attack the capital," added Koichiro.

"Poison and plague?" asked Tachibana, his eyes widening. "That's all very...extreme."

All these were effective tactics and possible with a catapult. But there were two hundred thousand soldiers and over a million civilians in the capital. Unleashing poison and plague would turn the city to hell, which appeared as a cruel, heartless tactic.

It'd be one thing if he had no choice, but it isn't necessary in this situation.

Said idea was one Tachibana couldn't endorse but wouldn't be too vocal about in the face of his new employer's relatives. His feelings were apparent in his words, and Koichiro smiled in response.

"Don't worry. A time might come when he must resort to that, but not today. Choosing those tactics would topple the capital quickly, though it would require more cleanup." Koichiro paused and looked around briefly before continuing, "Ryoma is waiting."

“Waiting... Do you mean for the army marching in from the south to arrive? Or are there reinforcements coming in from another country?”

One would only draw out this war because they were waiting for reinforcements. Koichiro disagreed, saying, “That’s not it. Ryoma is waiting for patriotic knights that love Rhoadseria, for those who could reshape it into a better country.”

Patriotic knights...? thought Tachibana, baffled. *Is he plotting to use the famous Helena Steiner?*

Tachibana didn’t know the details, but he’d heard of Rhoadseria’s fabled general. Having her on their side would indeed be an advantage.

I’ve heard Ryoma and Helena Steiner were close friends, but I wonder...

Koichiro’s tone implied something else was at hand. Still, the old man had no intention of giving a clear answer.

“But don’t worry. It won’t be long before this war is over,” said Koichiro, then laughed aloud.

At this stage, Koichiro saw the end of the war. Although Tachibana still had doubts, he didn’t feel dissatisfied with the answers he got.

He’s right. I’ll see how this turns out soon enough.

The look Tachibana received from Koichiro made him confident that the Mikoshiba barony had secured victory. He kept this impression firmly in his heart as he thought about the face of the boy who was to be his new master.

Chapter 2: The Moment Suspicion Buds

Dawn arrived early in Pireas as of late.

Although this didn't apply to the sunrise every day, people woke up and began working promptly in the capital. It had been a week since the Mikoshiba barony's battle over Pireas began. The attacks occurred day and night, and the Rhoadserian army's garrison had put up a good fight.

That wasn't to say fortune had come without a price, as those who lived in this castle paid the price.

Before dawn, guards operated their stations in all the key positions in the castle. All of these activities happened after 2 a.m. when most animals and people were sleeping.

Unlike modern society with its switch-activated light bulb, illuminating the night was not easy in this world. Some lamps used fish or vegetable oil or tools made with endowed thaumaturgy, though they were costly methods.

While the castle was on high alert and prepared for emergencies, people could not easily stay up all night for these situations. In this world, they woke up at dawn and returned home to sleep at sunset.

Despite that, the castle was alive with activity at this late hour since more soldiers performed guard duty at night than usual. One maid watched the soldiers moving about as she pushed a cart through the corridors. Based on the direction she came from, she was returning from delivering a night meal.

Did the head maid order it? I don't know who asked her to do this, but poor thing. Having to work at this time of night... thought a soldier on patrol as he passed the maid.

All the maids would be asleep in bed at this time of night unless there existed an emergency. Or at least, that was the routine before the Mikoshiba barony attacked the capital.

But just a week ago, the situation had changed.

How long can we keep living like this?

Boredom and a sense of wasted effort that bordered on resignation gripped the soldier's heart. No one knew how long the city wall would last, and only a few people working in the castle maintained their morale. Many of the soldiers who participated in the northern subjugation still felt rattled by the horror of facing the Mikoshiba barony soldiers in battle. Other troops gathered by the local nobles to defend the capital lamented they were in a losing war.

It was hard putting their discontent into words. They had to perform their duties all day to defend the capital with no break times. Depending on the circumstances, they sometimes had trouble making time for meals or to relax.

The soldiers were unfamiliar with this concept, but the workload they dealt with was even worse than modern sweatshops.

I realize this is an emergency, and I love this country as much as anyone, but... Didn't this war start because Queen Lupis and some power-hungry nobles viewed the hero of the last civil war, Baron Mikoshiba, as dangerous?

This doubt crossed the soldier's mind now and then. Receiving the Wortenia Peninsula as his "reward" for his distinguished service was nothing short of harassment. During the O'ltormean invasion of Xarooda, he joined the expedition despite being busy developing his domain.

After all, he was a hero who had participated in every recent Rhoadserian war. Queen Lupis had some blame over this war for trying to expel this man.

If I were treated like that...

Perhaps he wouldn't outright rebel against the country, but he would be enraged; this soldier knew how tyrannical Rhoadserian nobles could become. He wasn't pleased with putting his life on the line for people like them, even if it was in the name of his homeland.

Do we really have to sacrifice this much to defend the country?

The seventh day of fighting had ended, and he couldn't tell if it was a very short or long week. Either way, these were seven suffocating, endless days. The ration sizes for food and water were unsatisfactory. Even when he was allowed to rest, lying in bed while listening to the voices echoing from outside the castle

made it difficult to fall asleep.

No. Compared to the others, I'm lucky to have my own room.

The soldiers from the surrounding domains didn't have barracks prepared for them. They had to stay in campsites in large areas like the parade ground, where they slept on the cold earth with only a blanket to keep them warm. Castle guards were luckier as they had proper lodging, even if they couldn't get sufficient sleep.

Having to fight in such conditions meant they would inevitably start doubting the validity of this war. But speaking or even nonverbally expressing such doubts was dangerous.

Saying the wrong thing could get you executed on the spot for treason.

Several soldiers had faced execution for being uncooperative during their missions or arguing about their orders. Their deaths set an example, and that intimidation tactic was effective.

When you consider how much they care for the country...

A man and a woman serving Queen Lupis crossed the soldier's mind. One of them was Meltina Lecter, who returned Queen Lupis to the capital after her defeat in the northern subjugation. The other was Mikhail Vanash, the one handling the capital's defenses.

I've heard many rumors about them. Even so, one cannot doubt their loyalty.

Many soldiers, even their fellow knights, mocked Mikhail and Meltina by calling them fools. While they were first-class warriors, they weren't politicians, nor did they have aptitude as commanders. They were pure warriors, and were in their element when holding a weapon and fighting an enemy.

During the previous war, Mikhail's foolhardy nature made him a prisoner of war when he walked right into a trap trying to capture the traitorous Kael Irunia.

This is all in the past, of course.

Both Meltina and Mikhail had learned from their mistakes to become more capable commanders. As proof, the capital mounted a quick defense after the

defeat in the northern subjugation, thanks to Mikhail's efforts. Those who knew Meltina's prior narrow-minded personality years ago would be impressed to see her take the reins, cooperate with Mikhail, and help Queen Lupis, who had shut herself off in her room.

But everyone's still extremely critical of those two.

Human nature forced people to forget others' achievements and recall all their failures. Because of that, those around Mikhail and Meltina doubted the validity of their leadership. People may have been cooperative on the surface but never devoted everything they had to being successful.

Under such conditions, even the most carefully planned strategy could not meet expectations, making it seem less trustworthy. It was a vicious cycle.

And that's why...

Even with many soldiers stationed in the capital, the knights and nobles who commanded them didn't use them proactively. It created a situation where the soldiers felt isolated and hopeless.

"If Lady Helena could at least help them just a bit, the situation would surely change... But that's not possible..." The words spilled from the soldier's lips.

Helena Steiner, Rhoadseria's fabled Ivory Goddess of War who had braved many battlefields, was considered the strongest and best of the knights. Matters of the kingdom's army and defense would usually fall to her. With her glory and accomplishments, she would have inspired the soldiers and roused the opportunistic nobles and knights to act.

Even though Helena remained passive in this war, that problem stemmed from how Queen Lupis and Meltina had approached her. They used said approach because they sought to eliminate Baron Mikoshiba. Rumor had it that Helena was displeased with her treatment and was in cahoots with that man.

The soldier didn't know if that was true, but it didn't seem entirely unlikely based on her situation.

In this position, anything Lady Helena plans doesn't matter because Her Majesty would never trust her.

The reputation of Queen Lupis and her aides would plummet if they used one of Helena's plans that then succeeded. This show of incompetence would be that trio's death warrant.

The bigger issue was that everyone expected them to act in self-preservation, even in this situation.

But it's hard to tell if their demise would happen. Since they don't trust us, we don't trust them either.

No one believed their peers—mutual mistrust. With that thought in mind, he focused on the maid walking away and had nothing but anxiety for his country's future weighing on his heart.



A room in the castle was always active, with its lamps and lanterns making the notion of time meaningless. Meltina Lecter sat by a table with her colleague and most trusted ally, Mikhail Vanash.

The pair had noticed how others frowned upon them since the northern subjugation failed, and the pair deemed themselves the most loyal to Queen Lupis now. Mikhail and Meltina's usual mistrust became much more pronounced over the recent weeks. And that noticeable attitude made Meltina and Mikhail receive more hostility and become isolated.

Mikhail knew this situation would worsen things for them, but he didn't know how to improve their standing.

There's nothing I can do about that now. Given Meltina and Queen Lupis's situation, she's hardly getting any sleep, thought Mikhail.

Ever since they returned to the capital, Meltina spent her days visiting this war room and Queen Lupis's room to help comfort her liege's aching heart. She occasionally went out to the walls to inspect developments in the war, having no time for breaks. As such, she had to make do with small, simple meals she could eat quickly.

And she's hardly been getting any time to sleep either...

He was in the same situation; the only difference was that Meltina was a

woman. That would not change, even if Meltina trained more than any male knight. Mikhail had put as much effort into his training as she did, which showed in the noticeable difference in their endurance. Men's physical advantages made a tangible difference in situations like this.

Honestly, we shouldn't be holding a strategy meeting in the middle of the night. I know I should be counting on someone else...

But with the Mikoshiba barony attacking them, Mikhail couldn't handle things alone. Meltina was the only commander he could trust.

Frankly, relying on someone else to help might have been the correct answer. But Mikhail couldn't do that because he needed to give the other person something. Regardless of whether they were drafting a plan or deciding a future policy, he would defer to their intentions and beliefs. That was the bare minimum of respect given to someone offering their aid.

If I did that, Meltina and Her Majesty would start suspecting me.

Those two would barely remain composed because they knew they had Mikhail's unconditional aid. If their trust in him were to crack, Queen Lupis would lose her grip on reality and slip. Mikhail realized he had to maintain the status quo at all costs.

With Meltina in this state...

Mikhail gazed at Meltina, who had her eyes fixed on the map. Despite being devoted to her work, her ghastly resolve went beyond passion and was concerning. He couldn't stand to see her so emaciated and exhausted.

Still, Meltina overlooked Mikhail's worries.

"I can't read his plans," she said, still absorbed in the map. "I think he's planning something, though. What do you think, Sir Mikhail?"

As Meltina spoke, she gnawed at her fingernail in an angry gesture. They looked over a map of central Rhoadseria, with the capital at its core. Upon the map, they set black-and-white game pieces. Around twenty white pieces on the capital symbolized the Rhoadserian army, while five black pieces to the northeast were the enemy.

In terms of sheer numbers, the Rhoadserian army outnumbered the enemy army four to one.

We'd usually have the overwhelming advantage here. Anyone would want to believe Meltina's reading too much into this.

Before the northern subjugation, Mikhail would have believed numerical superiority might ensure victory. The basis of strategy and tactics was to gather more soldiers than the enemy. Yet, skilled commanders could use a smaller army to overcome an opponent with greater numbers. Such victories were feats of martial glory, and many people known as heroes reached that status by winning battles against the odds.

Still, the importance of numbers was the foundation of all tactics and strategies. No military treatise in existence would deny that Rhoadseria had the edge.

Unlike last time, we hold the advantage. Our best play would be to stay holed up inside our castle, as the Mikoshiba barony can't remain away from their home turf forever. We should bide our time, wait for the enemy to retreat, and launch a counterattack as they try to flee... thought Mikhail, but he was unsure if defending the capital until the enemy decided to retreat was feasible. *Should we try to engage them in open combat, then?*

This idea made him restless, as engaging the enemy in open combat meant leaving the safety of the walls. If they were to keep the vast area of the capital protected, they couldn't deploy all two hundred thousand troops.

Should we choose that option, we'd only be able to deploy a hundred thousand to one hundred twenty thousand soldiers.

An army over twice the size of the Mikoshiba barony should have no cause for concern. But after their previous defeat against the same enemy, it didn't feel like a guaranteed win anymore.

Just like Meltina said, not knowing what he's planning is unnerving.

Mikhail contemplated Meltina's question before finally speaking up. "Yes... Like you said, his actions feel a bit strange. I find it hard to believe he'd insist on launching a direct assault on the capital."

“You think so too? But if that’s the case, what is he planning?” asked Meltina.

Seven days passed since the Mikoshiba barony began its siege of Pireas. The barony’s soldiers had been charging at the walls to break through the gates with battering rams or scale the walls with ladders. These were all classic tactics for an attacker in a siege battle, textbook examples taken from military treatises.

It all seems far too plain and much too monotonous.

Military plays like this relied on superior numbers, which applied to the same war treatises that recommended these tactics. The Mikoshiba barony ignoring this logic and sticking to traditional tactics felt oddly mismatched. To add to that inconsistency, their attacks over the last few days lacked variety and force. They were rather aimless attacks launched strictly out of inertia.

The Mikoshiba barony’s soldiers are definitely strong, with weapons and equipment better than ours. They might not take losses in these attacks. Maybe they estimated how many supplies we have and are trying to starve us. But they didn’t need to attack the gates if that was the case.

To apply pressure and starve Pireas, the Mikoshiba barony army would only need to keep their cavalry stationed nearby to keep the Rhoadserian army in check and prevent any forces from leaving the gates. There was no need to have their soldiers storm the walls while being pelted with arrows and rocks.

Mikhail wasn’t foolish enough to think Ryoma Mikoshiba wasn’t aware of that. If so, what was he trying to achieve at the cost of these seemingly needless casualties?

I doubt he expects us to respond by fighting his army head-on. That leaves...

Another option arose, but Mikhail didn’t want to consider it.

“He’s probably waiting for some insider to make their move,” said Mikhail.

When Meltina heard this, she twisted her face in anger. For a knight so loyal to Queen Lupis and so brimming with love for Rhoadseria, betrayal was the most loathsome idea. In her eyes, having their entire family executed for the crime wouldn’t be enough to absolve a traitor of the sin of treason.

Had it been a few years ago, the mention of treason would have made her raise her voice and slam her fist against the table. Meltina had learned to restrain her emotions but couldn't fully control them. With her shoulders trembling, Meltina slowly spoke up.

“Do you think... It's Helena Steiner?”

That would be a significant weak point for the Rhoadserian army. Helena joining Ryoma's side would end the war immediately. While this was a possibility they had recognized, there was a reason they never acted to prevent it.

“Those two have been close since the last civil war,” said Mikhail. “That didn't change when he took over the Wortenia Peninsula. There was also the issue of them being in the expedition to Xarooda, making it clear they're trusted friends.”

“But she acted as the commander in chief of our army in the northern subjugation. Did Mikoshiba plot to have her join his side after all this?”

Meltina already suspected Helena might betray them, so she alluded to that name first when Mikhail mentioned a possible insider. Despite that, she also brought up a counterargument.



She's considered the possibility, but wishes to deny it... After all, Meltina admires Lady Helena.

Meltina was a female knight, and Helena was an aspirational figure for one climbing the ranks. So Meltina didn't want to believe a woman she looked up to so much would sell her kingdom out like this.

We can't let personal feelings influence our judgment at a time like this. As far as Mikhail could see, there was no reason preventing Helena from betraying Queen Lupis. *Not after how they treated her.*

No one would risk their lives for a sovereign who doesn't trust them, and that reflected Queen Lupis's caliber as a ruler. Mikhail intentionally didn't mention this issue since this would stir the hornet's nest, deepening the antagonism between Queen Lupis and Helena.

He continued, "For all that man is concerned, having her by his side is natural due to her abilities and relationship with him. Of course, it's possible his scheming extended to other nobles, but she's by far the most suspicious."

Meltina couldn't argue with that.

It's only natural. We couldn't trust her, knowing full well a time will come when we must pay the price for that.

Mikhail could only think of one reason Helena would betray the kingdom—her relationship with the queen failing. Therein lay the problem.

This is not surprising, given Her Majesty's upbringing...

Rhoadseria had suffered under the tyranny of the nobles since the reign of the previous king, Pharst II, and their corruption had been eating away at the country even before he took the throne. When the problem surfaced, Pharst II lacked the power to oppose the nobility's control. To that end, he firmly educated his only daughter and then sole heir, Lupis, instilling in her the purpose of restoring the royal family's power. She became a general princess to increase the royal family's control over the knights.

An inevitable outcome of this education led to her being wary and antagonistic of the nobility since childhood. She did not see the nobles as her

allies in running the country but as threats to the royal house's sovereignty.

For this reason, King Pharst entrusted the knights with Her Majesty and gave her a knight's education.

The king must have reasoned that if the nobles were untrustworthy, he would turn to the knights and use them to restore the might of the royal house with Lupis at its center.

But that plan went awry when the late General Albrecht used the knights to seize power.

Knights loyal to the crown existed back then, but they were all dispatched to periphery domains far from the capital. Queen Lupis felt the knights had abandoned her. As such, she could only trust Mikhail and Meltina, the two aides who had served her since she was a girl.

This event meant Queen Lupis never had a chance to connect with the knights. And this is why she can't trust Lady Helena.

General Albrecht's tyranny discouraged her from trusting the knights, giving her the impression that Helena—the famous and reputable Ivory Goddess of War—wouldn't be devoted to a powerless monarch like her.

Those two issues are piercing into Queen Lupis's heart like wedges.

Said misconceptions hardened Queen Lupis's heart, making her distrustful. Driven by her attitude, Mikhail and Meltina also treated Helena coldly, which led to the knight assuming her vague, undefined position.

Trust goes both ways. One side not displaying trust means the other side won't be able to believe in them either.

Queen Lupis wouldn't believe in Helena, who couldn't trust her. It was simple logic. Restoring faith in someone who wouldn't put faith in you was difficult.

Maybe we should have taken things step by step to build our trust with Lady Helena. Still, we can't give up now.

Mikhail recognized Helena Steiner as a woman with a noble heart, not as someone who would mock the queen for being weak. If Queen Lupis put in good faith and effort, Helena would eventually acknowledge that and swear

loyalty to the queen.

Not only did Lupis have trouble maintaining order in the kingdom, she also failed to restrain the interference of the nobles and antagonized Ryoma, who had helped place her in the throne. Those things ruined Helena's relationship with Queen Lupis.

"Then what do we do? Do we have her executed?" asked Meltina.

Mikhail shook his head and said, "If we do it without any supporting evidence of wrongdoing, we'd just be making things harder for ourselves."

Even if they had evidence, executing Helena Steiner as a traitor would have horrible consequences. The knights might suspect Mikhail and Meltina had conspired to get rid of her, and the nobles would claim the same.

"Then there's nothing we can do, is there?!" Meltina burst out angrily.

So, Mikhail shook his head silently again. "No, we still have one play. I'll speak to Lady Helena directly."

Meltina's eyes widened in disbelief. Speaking to the person they suspected most of colluding with the enemy? Mikhail, however, met her confusion with a strained smile and said what he thought.

"In truth, we should have spoken to her much earlier."

His words were full of emotion. They should have spoken to Ryoma, as well. Indeed, this realization came too late since their armies had locked blades and blood had spilled, making talks impossible. But with Helena, there were still only rumors. Even if they were right about Helena, there were still loose ends and the possibility of persuading her not to act on traitorous intentions.

"But if we do that, what of Queen Lupis's..." muttered Meltina.

Would doing that not harm Queen Lupis's dignity? Although she had left the question unsaid, Mikhail answered to the contrary.

"I know. Queen Lupis might consider this a betrayal on our behalf, depending on how things go. We must covertly stay in contact with those around us to act with her best intentions in mind. That includes going against Her Majesty's will... I believe that's our duty as loyal retainers to our queen."

Meltina hung her head, realizing that despite simply believing Queen Lupis's will was supreme, going against those wishes was better judgment. But countless intentions and desires kept her from acting.

"Yes... I do think you're right."

While Meltina didn't want to admit this, she had to pick between acknowledging it despite her misgivings or willingly looking away from the facts. That was why Mikhail belatedly volunteered to speak to Helena, even if they had to confront a harsh reality. And if Helena was colluding with Ryoma Mikoshiba, he was prepared to apologize for all their past misgivings and plead with her to help them.

At this point she could say anything. Perhaps a show of sincerity would inspire her to change her mind.

He had reached the heights of wishful thinking. Helena could reasonably refuse to hear Mikhail out altogether. Even so, he believed—or wanted to believe—that there was still a chance since this was their Ivory Goddess of War. At the same time, the cold, calculating part of his mind braced for the worst.

If the rumors are hearsay, then that's good. But if they're true, I'll need to be persuasive. Otherwise, I will have to slay Lady Helena with my own hands. Even if it means forfeiting my own life in the process.

He believed this was his only way of taking responsibility as Queen Lupis's retainer and as a man who guided this futile war.

"Of course, this is all too late..." said Mikhail with a self-mocking smirk.

His determination, though unspoken, was clear in his voice. Grief struck Meltina and was momentarily visible in her expression.

"Very well..." she said, sighing. "I'll explain things to Her Majesty."

This was a task only Meltina was qualified to handle as a fellow woman and Queen Lupis's oldest, most trusted aide and emotional support. Someone unrelated to the matter reporting the outcome of this event would distort Mikhail's true intentions and emotions.

"Thank you," said Mikhail, then bowed his head to her.

Here, a knight who lamented Rhoadseria's fate made a decision with his life in the balance. But the two of them had no way of knowing what they had set in motion and the horrifying extent of the malice threatening to blanket their kingdom.



On the afternoon that Mikhail talked with Meltina, a guard patrolling the southwestern gate of Pireas saw knights disappearing into a back alley near the slums. The event occurred opposite the northeastern and northwestern gates of where the Mikoshiba barony army was attacking. As such, the area was relatively peaceful.

"Hey," said the patrolling guard, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. "What are these knights doing here?"

He only spotted the knights coincidentally when he walked by a crossroads and accidentally looked to the side. The slums went beyond the gates and were known as a place where public order was the worst in the whole city.

That disorder was relative to the rest of the capital, meaning it was not actually particularly dangerous. If nothing else, many considered the commoners who lived here the top class as far as Rhoadserian peasants went.

Even so, no one expected members of privileged classes like nobles and knights to be in this part of the city. Because of that, it struck the patrolling guard as unusual to see these knights.

And we're in the middle of a war, thought the patrolling guard. *Regular soldiers might occupy this area, but knights wouldn't be loafing around here.*

Since the capital enacted martial law and started rationing food, eateries were closed for business as people could not leave their homes. Under such conditions, no reason existed for a group of knights to go into a back alley.

"What's wrong? Why are you just standing there?" asked a fellow guard, noticing his apprehensive gaze.

"Nothing, it's just that I spotted a group of knights going into that alley... I was wondering what they were up to."

“Knights? What unit were they from?” inquired his colleague.

“I don’t know... But I think they had the same design on their armor from the brief glimpse I got. Looked fancy too. Maybe some of them were Royal Guards or Monarch’s Guards.”

Only knights in service to the crown, the royal family, and major nobles had uniform armor. Applying a standard design to all armor was a major expense because expert blacksmiths had to forge it. Standardization didn’t exist in this world, so having matching equipment implied they were powerful. The Royal Guards and Monarch’s Guards emphasized design in their armor due to their roles. This detail made the guard assume he saw knights from those respected units.

“There were Monarch’s and Royal Guards mixed in? That’s peculiar,” responded the colleague.

Knights in these orders rarely teamed up with members of other knight orders, since they were Rhoadseria’s elites tasked with protecting the ruler and royal family. Their pedigree, economic standing, and personal abilities were part of getting chosen for the role. The Royal and Monarch’s Guard were regarded as special, not mingling with other knight orders despite being two of the many orders under the direct command of the Rhoadserian royal family.

After all, forming a mixed unit of knights with different levels of skill and aptitude would be challenging. While this might happen during unusual emergencies, one wouldn’t expect to find such a group at a gate far from the front lines.

“What do we do...? Do we check in on them?”

The guards exchanged looks since they would usually remain uninvolved. But this was wartime, and letting suspicious activity go uninspected would be negligent of them. Knights under the queen’s direct command in such a slum registered as suspicious. And yet, an ill premonition brewed in the guard’s heart.

“Isn’t Lady Helena’s estate nearby?” said the guard anxiously.

“Hey... You don’t think...!” The other guard raised his voice, catching onto his

intent.

“But isn’t it?” started the guard, daunted but not backing down. “Besides, you’ve heard the rumors.”

The fellow guard fell silent as their captain approached.

“You two,” said the captain firmly. “Return to the barracks and call reinforcements, understood? And get some other knights to join you, if possible.”

Both guards’ expressions tensed up in alarm. It was an idea they all considered, but no one dared propose aloud.

“Should we really go that far, though?” asked a soldier.

Although the guards found the knights suspicious and couldn’t overlook that behavior, calling for reinforcements and a separate group of knights was a major decision. Knights were more difficult to suppress since they could perform martial thaumaturgy. If the suspected knights got caught doing something wrong, ordinary soldiers wouldn’t be of much help.

Furthermore, the soldiers would be responsible if the knights weren’t doing anything strange. But the captain didn’t back down from his initial choice.

“If we overstep our bounds, I’ll assume all responsibility... Either way, hurry up and call for them.”

The captain had no proof to back his suspicions, yet the sixth sense of the soldier beside him blared out an alarm that filled him with the same unease as if he had set foot in an enemy trap. With the responsibility of defending the capital, they couldn’t back down.

It would be better if nothing were suspicious about the matter, as they would just get scolded, which was preferable to standing by and letting the enemy have their way. Sensing the captain’s resolve, the other soldiers nodded and ran to the barracks. The remaining guards followed the suspicious group into the alley.

Thus, the Rhoadserian kingdom’s final day dawned.



“An uprising?!” roared Mikhail as he heard the messenger’s words. “Are you sure that information is accurate? You’ll pay dearly if what you just said is wrong!”

Meltina, also in the room, looked on with a stiff expression. The way Mikhail lost his temper was natural, considering the second-worst scenario they could imagine happening. Despite flinching from Mikhail’s anger, the messenger spoke clearly.

“This information is correct. Patrolling soldiers encountered a group of knights moving about suspiciously. When they asked the knights for their affiliation, their response was to draw their weapons and some of our soldiers ended up dead. Other knights hurried to support the soldiers and engaged in combat. They’re fighting as we speak!”

“What unit are they from?”

“Unknown. They’re a force from several orders. According to the report, some appeared to be from the Monarch’s Guard or Royal Guard.”

This is bad... This is very bad, thought Mikhail as he clicked his tongue sharply. He knew it was only a matter of time before the situation became critical, but he had believed they had more time until that happened. *What do we do? No, who do we mobilize?*

Knights were clearly involved in this revolt, which meant a predicament. Only other knights could deal with their martial thaumaturgy in order to suppress and arrest them.

But we’re in the middle of a war. Do we mobilize knights?

What made this situation harder to handle was that they had no idea of the scale of this revolt. A single knight order company could subdue a dozen individuals. However, a hundred insurgents might complicate things.

“And we have no way of knowing they’re the only insurgents...” added the messenger.

Deploying forces carelessly and having them be part of the uprising would

spread chaos further.

“Can we ask for the nobles’ private knight orders to help?” asked Meltina.

Mikhail fell silent and swiftly considered the pros and cons of doing so.

It’s not a bad option. There aren’t many knights we can trust with the Monarch’s and Royal Guard implicated. Would the nobles even obey us if we sought support from their forces?

Nobles outright rejecting or ignoring their call to arms would still be preferable to some alternatives. At worst, they could see this as a golden chance to join the uprising.

“No. I will set out to resolve the situation. Meltina, stay by Her Majesty’s side, just in case.”

Meltina handily realized Mikhail’s misgivings and nodded. She was also unsure about the idea she proposed. “Very well. May luck and victory shine on your path.”

As Meltina was about to bow her head, the castle suddenly trembled under their feet. Mikhail staggered from the unexpected quake as the rumbling of something large crumbling reached them from the window.

“What?! What’s going on?!” he called out.

Yet, no one answered him. The surprising quake sent Meltina tumbling to the floor. She looked around, trying to grasp what just happened.

It couldn’t be an earthquake, could it...? he thought immediately.

Earthquakes weren’t an unheard-of occurrence. Typhoons, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, and other natural disasters happened here just like in Ryoma’s world.

Unlike Japan, Rhoadseria only faced major earthquakes every few decades to once a century rather than dozens per year. Mikhail had experienced one such earthquake as a child, allowing him to remain calmer than Meltina could in this situation.

What are the odds of it happening at a time like this?

While he couldn't believe this phenomenon had happened coincidentally during an emergency, he could not deny the possibility. Natural disasters cared little for when or where they took place. A calamity like an earthquake would strike even if they faced enemies and were on the brink of an uprising.

Another messenger hurried into the room, not bothering to knock, and instantly shouted, "I bear urgent news! The Mikoshiba barony army has destroyed the walls and is charging into the city!"

Meltina and Mikhail turned pale, and the roaring from the walls reached their ears. At that moment, Mikhail felt all the strength leave his body. Every unrelated event then made sense and formed a single image—one that a single man painted.

"It...can't be..." Nothing else could explain the string of events happening one after another.

"Sir Mikhail... Is this his doing...?" asked Meltina, her voice feeble.

She instinctively sensed Rhoadseria's reckoning was at hand. Even so, the two still had work to do.

Not yet. So long as Her Majesty is fine, we still have a chance.

Then, Mikhail decided they had to abandon Pireas and swiftly explained his plan to Meltina.

"I'll go organize the troops. Now that he's breached the walls, it's only a matter of time before that man invades this castle. Meltina, hurry to Her Majesty's side and have her evacuate the castle while I stall them."

"Sir Mikhail... Are you saying we should abandon the capital?!"

"I am. Trying to fight a defensive battle here could put Her Majesty's life in danger. Doing so could lead to the royal bloodline's destruction!"

With that said, Mikhail left the room and charged into battle with his life on the line. Meltina could only watch him go, her eyes fixed on him despite tearing up. She burned the visage of her comrade walking to his death into her very eyes.

Chapter 3: Castle Invasion

“I can’t believe this was his plan,” said Lione as she focused on the devastated wall with an amused smile. “For a moment, I thought we were taking it slow with the offensive. I guess the boy always surprises us.”

Her smile showed how she was prepared to lunge on her prey. As Lione had mostly been away from the front lines since the battle on the Runoc Plains, she was itching to fight and live up to her title of the Crimson Lioness.

Standing beside her was Gennou Igasaki, stroking his beard while observing the aftermath of the walls’ destruction with a satisfied expression.

“The lord’s ideas are as impressive as ever. It’s hard to believe we destroyed such firm walls so easily,” replied Gennou, shaking his head.

An unspoken exasperation hid behind his amazed words. Ryoma had planned to dig tunnels that burrowed under the walls and activate an earth element verbal thaumaturgy called Earth Sink. With the support of the earth beneath the walls suddenly gone, they would collapse and be unable to support their own weight.

The plan took advantage of the ground on which the walls stood being defenseless, even with the measures set up to nullify thaumaturgy cast on the walls themselves. And the plan was simple when put into words, but no one else would have conceived the idea.

While Gennou’s surprise was understandable, Lione just shrugged.

“It goes to show we’re serving a reliable man. And that’s a good thing. With all the preparations set up ahead of time, the job itself was easy enough.”

Lione was being honest. In terms of the quality of each soldier, the Mikoshiba barony army was overwhelmingly superior to the opposition. Now that the pesky walls were gone, all that remained to end the war was to flood into the capital and capture all the key points.

Enemy morale is at rock bottom. There’s almost no one left who’s loyal

enough to draw their sword, thought Lione.

As far as Lione could tell, the only ones who still fought for Queen Lupis were Mikhail Vanash and Meltina Lecter. Other loyal knights might remain, but those two were the only remaining threats when considering commanders and true warriors.

The fact that one of the three kingdoms of the east is down to two knights willing to fight for their country's survival is a sad state of affairs. Or maybe they have someone still helping, a pearl hiding among the trash, like our lord?

To Lione, her life as a mercenary made war a calling for her because she lived and died on the battlefield. She wanted to have a meaningful death—one where she fought not for money but for a man worth giving her life for.

Lione had followed Ryoma to the Wortenia Peninsula after the civil war as his skills and ambitions drew her in.

And, well, I won't die that easily when I'm working under him.

Ultimately, Ryoma's efforts were all meticulous, down to the last minute detail. She thought the siege battle was oddly long, but it led to the walls falling apart. Thus, she wondered what kind of education could have produced a monster like him.

I guess having a leader who's far too skilled is much better than having an incompetent one.

The scenery Lione looked at was the outcome of what happened when an incompetent leader ignored reality and acted in the name of her feelings and ideals.

"Still, I would like it if he let us do our side of the work sometimes. Can't help but worry that he thinks we're incompetent."

Although having a reliable leader was encouraging, that leader being too good could be concerning.

"Surely you jest," said Gennou, cracking a wry smile. "The lord trusts you dearly, Lady Lione. I find it hard to believe you would say that."

"True. To put it another way, I wish I could put in the kind of work that

matches his trust.” Lione cackled, then threw a glance over her shoulder.

A force of ten thousand heavily armored soldiers stood there with Nelcius’s elite dark elf units guarding the rear. They all had resolve and were ready for battle, the air hot with their fighting spirit. The force was like a pack of beasts preparing to storm the kingdom’s capital.

“Now that the dust has settled, let’s get started,” whispered Lione, then smiled at Gennou. “By the way, don’t ya have preparations to attend to, old man?”

“No need for concern,” said Gennou, shaking his head again. “Sakuya already arranged everything perfectly.”

Gennou bowed to Lione and turned on his heels. Lione watched the old man leave, then raised her hand to signal Boltz, who stood behind her.

“All right, let’s get started, boys. Let ’em all hear ya!” She thrust her fist into the air and swung her sword toward Pireas.

At the crumbled walls of Pireas, the screams of Rhoadserian citizens and soldiers caught in the middle of the fighting echoed from every direction. Amid the chaos, Lione’s heavy infantry unit marched in. The sporadic counterattacks of small groups of soldiers didn’t amount to much against Lione and her forces.

Their chain of command is in shambles. Maybe a very skilled commander could have handled all these unexpected developments.

The wall the Mikoshiba barony army had destroyed was right between the northwestern and northeastern gates. By contrast, the defending army’s chain of command had their base in the castle in the center of the capital, with a forward command post set up at every gate. Most times, an enemy army would attack from the vicinity of one of the gates.

Knowing this was what the defending army expected, one could attack the walls. They also reinforced the ramparts with endowed thaumaturgy, so physically destroying them required the use of large-scale siege weapons like battering rams, siege towers, catapults, and ladders.

Attackers could overcome said fortifications using weapons to destroy or scale the walls. That wasn’t to say armies always employed siege weapons.

Siege engines were expensive to use. The most common one used on the battlefield, the battering ram, was a relatively simple device made of lumber and reinforced with metal to batter through the walls. Even this simple, blunt weapon wasn't easy to assemble during a battle.

Any siege weapon used in battle, such as a battering ram or siege tower, had to be manufactured beforehand and carried onto the battlefield. The same applied to catapults, ladders, and other large-scale siege weapons that were too conspicuous to be moved in secret. During the daytime, anyone could spot them with no issue.



With all these problems in mind, the biggest question in a siege battle was how to destroy the gates and rush into the capital.

This time, the boy flipped the script.

If nothing else, nobody in this world would have devised a way to destroy such large walls without using siege weaponry. A large-scale ritual using verbal thaumaturgy to destroy walls reinforced with endowed thaumaturgy made more sense than what Ryoma did.

Under such conditions, the units could not expect this turn of events or react appropriately. After all, Laura and Sara were launching attacks on the northwestern and northeastern gates.

And they're giving the kingdom a hard fight too, mused Lione. The Mikoshiba barony would have broken through the gates by now if the defending army had underestimated them. *I doubt the enemy's that dumb, though.*

As a result, they had to redirect the guards defending that area so no forces could attack Lione's unit. The only soldiers remaining were the rear guard in the castle at the center of the city. Anyhow, it would take time for news of what happened on the front lines to reach the castle.

More than anything, Viscount Gelhart's groundwork is paying off.

Viscount Gelhart's scheming caused disgruntled members of the Monarch's Guard and Royal Guard to stage a massive uprising in the capital's southwest corner. The capital's garrison naturally had to send in men to suppress it, which meant it was questionable if anyone could deal with Lione's unit.

Precise information sharing and appropriate positioning of your guards are necessary for intercepting an enemy force.

Commanders, above all, needed resolve and skills to control chaotic situations, and Queen Lupis had no people like that under her authority. Any person Lupis might have had with such skills was already in Ryoma's hands, determined to create a Rhoadserian kingdom under a new ruler.

But very few people were aware of that.

In the end, she's just picking up the tab for everything she's done so far.

Everyone had to pay for their transgressions, and those who failed to do so left the tab for their family and close friends. And when that happened, just like with debt, one must pay in interest as well.

If one didn't like that, their only option was never to accrue that debt. Often, those in positions of power and authority had a way of forgetting that.

"Lady Lione, we've secured a path to the castle!" yelled a soldier.

"Good. We march on, then. Listen up! We're making this flashy! Keep their eyes fixed on us!" Lione looked at the castle with a smirk, thinking about how Ryoma was likely moving through the underground tunnel.



As Lione crossed the walls and entered the city on the surface, a group walked through the capital's underground with the light of a lantern guiding them. Countless footsteps reverberated through the subterranean gloom, as dark as the road to the underworld.

About fifty people comprised the group, with Igasaki ninjas leading it to serve as vanguards in case of any danger ahead. Ryoma Mikoshiba followed them clad in black armor, Kikoku sheathed at his waist, and a cross-shaped pipe spear in his hands. Behind him, serving as rear guard, were Dilphina and her elite dark elf Black Serpent unit.

They had a single objective: to strike the final blow to end this absurd war. Before long, the group stopped before a steel door, reaching the staircase leading up to the castle as planned.

"Milord... This way," said an Igasaki ninja.

Ryoma nodded, signaling the ninja to approach the door. It seemed to be locked. After he examined the nearby pillars, the door clicked and swung open toward them with the sound of a spring moving.

It happened just like Douglas said, thought Ryoma.

In the past, Douglas Hamilton had opened the door in the same way to use the escape tunnel from the House of Lords. The door mechanism might have been different because this was another door. In that case, the dark elves

would have used verbal thaumaturgy to blow the door open. Yet Ryoma preferred they went about their mission quietly if possible.

Even though the enemy was in disarray due to Lione's diversion, the castle still had a considerable garrison. The noise of the group's verbal thaumaturgy would have exposed their presence.

Avoiding detection is a big help. When we return, I'll have to reward Douglas for his help.

Although Douglas was once a corrupt clerk, he was now a denizen of Sirius in the Mikoshiba barony. Since he knew how to read and write while being knowledgeable in such affairs, he had a chance to work in the port to handle financial clerk responsibilities.

He had become corrupt because of his daughter's sickness. Fortunately, she had recovered and was healthy enough to get out of bed thanks to the nostrum provided by the dark elves. Douglas went through what can be called rehabilitation, and his assistance was nothing short of admirable.

I was right to believe in him.

While Douglas was loyal to Ryoma now, there was no guarantee Douglas wasn't seeking to betray Ryoma because they used to be enemies. As such, Ryoma couldn't deny feeling anxious over the information being trustworthy and had to bear subordinates who still doubted Douglas.

However, Ryoma stood by his decision to trust Douglas and accepted the man who had switched to their side. He knew this choice was a gamble, but Douglas had met his expectations.

I did have a backup plan set up just in case, though.

The men's actions were the most genuine form of trust. Trust relied on putting your faith in another while not being dependent on your belief in them.

Standing beside the door, Ryoma gave the Igasaki ninjas their next orders.

"All right, so far so good. It could be time-consuming, but I need the Igasaki ninjas to go up and check the area. Many knights will be patrolling the area if we're right. If dealing with the patrols goes well, we should be able to sweep

this place quickly!”

The Igasaki ninjas nodded briefly and swiftly ran up the stairs. And after waiting a long while, one of the ninjas returned to Ryoma’s side.

“I have a report from my comrades who snuck ahead. The castle’s garrison unit headed out to intercept Lione’s unit that breached the walls under the leadership of Mikhail Vanash. But Meltina Lecter has left the castle’s command post. The disruption of the chain of command has left the guards confused and unorganized.”

Ryoma nodded, thinking, *Yeah, I’d expect them to do that. Those two care too much for the queen...*

Regardless, Mikhail and Meltina were not fools. From their perspective, the sudden invasion of the capital had pushed the queen’s side to the brink of collapse. Such a situation gave them no choice but to defend Queen Lupis’s life. In their eyes, she was more important than everyone in Pireas. They believed that the survival of Queen Lupis guaranteed the survival of the Rhoadserian kingdom.

Still, Ryoma knew that belief was false. *Now, let’s apply the finishing touches.*

Lione was undoubtedly engaging the defending army in combat. According to the Igasaki ninjas, Viscount Gelhart was causing a diversion near the southwestern gate as planned.

It’s been so long... But we can settle that score.

A mixture of joy and loneliness crossed Ryoma’s heart, which was only natural under the circumstances. He was about to put an end to a yearslong grudge.

He had set things in motion a long while ago to ensure this happened so that he and his allies were safe and the Wortenia Peninsula could develop. Ryoma knew he would sacrifice much to achieve his ambition, but he wouldn’t back down now.

Especially since, in this world, everyone has to sacrifice others to survive.

No matter what words one used to embellish their cause, they couldn’t achieve their goals without sacrificing others. The only world where this rule

didn't apply was one where everyone was miserable. One could go so far as to say that joy could only exist based on someone else's sacrifice.

For instance, finding a significant other was wonderful. Yet, it could mean you were taking the place of another one who longed for that person. The same applied to people vying for a position at work or getting accepted into a school. In simply being alive, people competed for who was more worthy of resources. The question of who got sacrificed in the process remained in the wake of that.

What decided the victor was whatever placed a person in a superior and advantageous position relative to another—be it power, knowledge, or material fortune.

That, Lupis Rhoadserians, is why you and your country will become my sacrifices. And if you don't like that, stand up and fight back.

Ryoma knew better than anyone that this wouldn't happen, as he was the one who set up this situation. In a sense, what he spoke about was the philosophy of the strong, which undeniably held truth.

A vicious, animalistic smile played over Ryoma's lips.

"Then the Igasaki ninjas are to split up with us here, as decided. I'm counting on you to sweep the place clean of enemies and secure the target."

The Igasaki ninjas lowered their heads in assent and hurried up the stairs, showing they were astute and flexible warriors. They were also capable of martial thaumaturgy on top of that, meaning the average knight would be no match for them.

But they were still ninjas, more geared toward surprise attacks and assassinations than fighting an enemy head-on. And in infiltrations of enemy territory like this one, they were more effective as skirmishers than warriors.

They had to scatter across the castle and eliminate sentinels and knights they came across using their best judgment. The word "sweep" was a fitting one for their task.

Once Ryoma saw the Igasaki ninjas depart for their task, he spoke to Dilphina's unit standing behind him.

“All right, let’s go!”

With that said, Ryoma sprinted up the stairs and made way to Lupis Rhoadserians’s bedroom located on the castle’s top floor. The corpses of sentries with their throats slit littered the corridor—likely taken out by the Igasaki ninjas. As per Ryoma’s orders, the ninjas were taking over the castle at a steady pace.

And so, Ryoma marched through the empty castle in pursuit of Queen Lupis. But he had come to the location personally because he sought someone other than her.

When Ryoma reached his destination, a woman stood in his way. Once this woman appeared, Dilphina and her unit shielded him like guards. Ryoma, however, stopped them and walked to face the woman.

So that’s what you’re doing. You want to fight me here...

They were in a hall standing between the staircase and the individual rooms. This area wasn’t spacious enough to deploy a military unit, making it ideal for one-on-one combat.

Based on her attire—white, shining armor worthy of her title as the Ivory Goddess of War—she likely hoped to use this place as a chance to settle the war. The way she looked in that armor gave the impression she was more than human.

“The one I was waiting for has finally arrived,” she said.

“Yes, Helena,” agreed Ryoma. “It’s been a while.”

“It sure has,” said Helena, hanging her head glumly.

Seeing Ryoma in the flesh made her resolve waver somewhat despite having decided to see this through.

“I didn’t think a day would come when I would meet you here. No, perhaps I should have expected you’d come.”

Helena’s words were contradictory but represented her state of mind. As the supreme commander of the Mikoshiba barony army, Ryoma had no reason to put himself at risk by storming the castle personally. He only had to use the

Igasaki clan's expertise in detection and espionage or Dilphina and her troops to eliminate Queen Lupis as he watched from a safe distance.

Though Ryoma knew this well, he had elected to come to the castle for one reason: to speak to the woman who faced him. Helena had also come to exchange words with Ryoma one last time.

"Let me tell you that Her Majesty isn't in her room."

Usually, this news would be catastrophic for the Mikoshiba barony army. They had just charged into enemy territory only to learn the leader gave them the slip. Yet Ryoma nodded in a composed manner.

"That's what I thought. Meltina must have snuck her away." There was no surprise or disappointment in his expression. All he did was accept the facts presented to him.

"You're not surprised," said Helena, taken aback by his attitude.

"I mean, knowing what they're like..." responded Ryoma with a cold grin, earning him an ironic smile from Helena.

She knew Ryoma didn't see Lupis Rhoadserians as his match, even though she was the queen of this country.

"If it were anyone else, I'd call that remark arrogant. But when you say it, it's somehow convincing," she said.

Queen Lupis was indeed no match for Ryoma since she was dancing on the palm of his hand all this time. No matter how meticulous his plans were, unexpected developments could happen. However, any slight miscalculation at this point would not change the outcome. Ryoma had made enough preparations to speak with confidence.

Ever since he heard Meltina had vanished from the castle's command post, he knew she must have been planning to flee the city with Queen Lupis. So, it would have surprised Ryoma if Lupis stayed in her room.

Helena sighed at Ryoma's response, realizing the shocking news she just delivered was of no consequence to a man ambitious and resourceful enough to bring this country to its knees. And with deep sorrow, she told Ryoma why

she stood there.

“Allow me to apologize before I draw my sword... I’m sorry. I’m sorry for betraying you back then...”

Her voice filled with sadness like it’d come from the very core of her soul. The betrayal she spoke of resulted in her breaking her pact with this young conqueror. It was a choice that lingered as a painful scar on the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, a regret that tormented her.

It would be unsurprising if Ryoma blamed Helena for her betrayal. She had come here because, deep down, she wanted him to condemn her choice. But Ryoma had no intention of doing this, and he didn’t know why. Perhaps he was too fond of Helena, feeling no anger toward her.

Ryoma felt quite the contrary. He truly wanted to heal her sorrow, which was unusual for him, and this emotion somewhat confused him. Moreover, he was the kind of man who was ruthless toward those who betrayed him, yet it seemed there were exceptions even to that rule.

Not bad, though. I guess I just like Helena Steiner too much.

His emotions weren’t of romantic love, given that she was old enough to be his grandmother. That wasn’t to say there weren’t wealthy older women with young lovers, but those were rare. If nothing else, Ryoma wasn’t attracted to Helena.

Rather, his affection toward her was simply as a fellow human being he respected and admired. Her friendly, noble, refined personality charmed and drew him to her. For that reason, Ryoma smiled as Helena stood there battered and awaiting judgment.

“I know. You made the obvious choice in your position. Having your dead daughter turning out to be alive isn’t something you can remain indifferent about.”

Helena’s eyes widened in shock. “You knew?”

“Yes. After Chris delivered your letter, I had my people infiltrate the capital to investigate.”

Helena's parting letter and the apology for her betrayal were a bolt from the blue to Ryoma. The letter came from nowhere and greatly confused him just as he had escaped the House of Lords to return to Sirius. And so, he instantly ordered the Igasaki clan to look into why she sent that letter.

"Is that right... You must have thought I was a truly foolish woman for falling for such a petty lie."

Although Helena was overjoyed to find her daughter was alive, a part of her heart doubted this miracle. After all, the one who told her about it was the elusive Akitake Sudou, the most suspicious man in Rhoadseria.

The locket he handed her had a portrait of her daughter, and when she met the girl, she did find a distinctive mole on her shoulder. When she saw that proof, she happily accepted her daughter. And yet, some part of her couldn't help but refuse to believe Saria had survived.

Ryoma shook his head and said, "It seems too good to be true, but it'd be hasty to assume your daughter's survival was a lie."

Sudou was suspicious, and Ryoma acknowledged the man was a dangerous enigma. Despite both men being Japanese, making him Ryoma's compatriot, everything about him was mysterious and elusive. Ryoma would have even tried to eliminate him, but Sudou was exceptionally adept at wiping away all traces of his existence. His evading the Igasaki clan's pursuit meant he had unique skills.

Since Sudou had mediated Saria's return, he surely didn't do it solely out of goodwill. It only made sense to assume that this was a plot to keep Helena in check.

That doesn't mean Saria is necessarily a pretender.

Deciphering her identity would be difficult since there were no DNA tests to determine parentage, unlike in modern society. There were multiple methods, like the single-strand DNA and mitochondrial DNA types. Even so, those scientific methods used statistics by examining part of the DNA.

The mole on Saria's left shoulder and the locket Sudou had made it safe to assume she was real. Despite this, Helena felt inclined to suspect Saria's

legitimacy since Sudou was involved. She knew she was dealing with a charlatan, and doubted him accordingly.

But even charlatans can tell the truth sometimes.

Furthermore, good lies had a kernel of truth mixed in. The possibility Sudou had prepared a fake Saria Steiner was hard to believe, especially if the girl had physical attributes only Helena knew of. Thus, the case of Saria being real felt more plausible.

At the same time, I can't believe he just had Helena's daughter in his custody and only found out about it when she joined forces with me.

In that case, the conclusion was that Sudou likely had known who Saria was since the time of her kidnapping when she was young. That would have also applied to when they sold her to slavers, toyed with her, and were about to dispose of her. Basically, he had known of Saria's identity as Helena's daughter for over a decade.

Or maybe someone else saved Saria to keep her safe, and Sudou works with them. Nothing else could explain it.

And Sudou played that trump card at the perfect time.

"I think Akitake Sudou knew about Saria's existence the whole time and kept it secret."

Helena's eyes widened in shock as she never expected what Ryoma said. Before long, her expression filled with anger, proving she realized the meaning behind his words.

"Yes... I think I see what you mean. It's possible, yes. Which means Sudou is some country's spy... Maybe O'ltormea, or the southern kingdoms."

"I have no proof, so I can't say one way or another... But I think it's likely."

Those who abducted Saria were assassins hired by a slaver, who was working under the orders of Hodram Albrecht. That man had conspired to steal Helena's position as general. Nevertheless, Ryoma couldn't rule out the possibility that Sudou was the one who implanted the idea to assassinate and abduct Helena's family.

Helena was a fabled general, which meant the surrounding countries saw her as an obstacle.

General Albrecht, a bigoted general who scorned Helena for her commoner background, just so happened to be in Rhoadseria and made for the perfect pawn. If Ryoma were in charge of the national defense of the O'ltormean Empire or the Helnesgoulán Kingdom, he wouldn't overlook such a weakness in a rival country.

I'd make some kind of play.

That was the natural way of going about things in this savage world. Ryoma believed that another entity, not a rival nation, was carrying out their will through this plan.

As far as I can see, the Organization is the most likely suspect. They operate out of sight, hide in the dark, and move with everyone none the wiser.

Before Ryoma left Xarooda, its king, Julianus I, gave him a cryptic warning. The goals of this secret group that worked behind the scenes of the western continent and meddled in the affairs of countries were unknown. But Ryoma was grasping their methods.

Additionally, they took advantage of people's weaknesses to manipulate them. Though this was all speculation, Ryoma could say it was a possibility.

"But no matter," said Helena, sighing and slowly unsheathing her sword. "There's plenty to think about, but it's too late."

The glint of her drawn blade shined over Ryoma's face, both sharp and bleak.

"I wouldn't mind continuing this conversation," replied Ryoma.

Helena smiled, then shook her head sadly. She would have liked this moment to linger forever, but they both knew this wasn't a possibility.

"Me too... But our pleasant chat must come to an end. I want to finish this before someone comes and gets in our way."

"Right... I understand. Having someone get in our way because they can't read the room would be disappointing," said Ryoma with a shrug, likely catching on to who that boorish someone was. Then, he handed his cross-shaped pipe

spear to Dilphina and unsheathed Kikoku.

The fighters stood five meters apart, no longer wearing peaceful and cordial expressions. Their eyes gleamed with the cold, firm will of a sharp blade. The fighting spirit emanating from their bodies turned to tangible pressure, clashing in the air between the two combatants.

Both began the battle by holding their weapons in a middle-level posture, aiming their blades at each other's throats. They took the swiftest posture available in swordsmanship.

And then, they clashed. Red sparks sprayed into the air.



The two pushed each other as hard as they could, then slipped by each other. In the blink of an eye, Helena and Ryoma changed positions.

“To have reached that level at your age...” Helena said. “You really are impressive.”

“You’re something else too, Lady Helena,” said Ryoma, glaring back at her. “I can see why people call you the strongest knight in this country.”

Through sword combat, the two could gauge each other’s skill when locking blades and confirm their impressions. Indeed, Ryoma’s estimate of Helena’s prowess was correct.

Helena’s swordsmanship is neither florid nor graceful, he thought. Many people would say her style is unfit for a knight. Regardless, she’s fierce and practical. I can only fend her off because I investigated her beforehand. Having come to this fight unprepared could have ended poorly for me.

Knights took pride in their swordsmanship skills and often participated in royalty-sponsored tournaments held in Rhoadseria and across the continent to show off their strength and advance their careers. They honed their skills for such events, making them flashy and impressive to rouse audiences.

On the flip side, regulation forbade techniques that were too brutal or seen as cowardly, such as aiming for an opponent’s privates or gouging out their eyes. The battlefield, however, had no rules and allowed everything. But even this cutthroat world deemed that callous brutality had no place on a tournament stage.

The audience would boo a knight who used brutal techniques, causing the participant to lose their chance at being hired by a noble. After all, even nobles seeking knights didn’t want sadists under their employ for safety reasons and because it would draw backlash from their people.

While some nobles had a sadistic streak, others were both nobles and famed warriors, like the late Count Salzberg. People like him, who employed more practical forms of swordsmanship, were few and far between.

Since knights had to work continuously, they were inevitably required to care about appearances. Many then wielded their swords with forms that stressed

theatrical performance, even if they were hard to maintain on the battlefield.

When knights clashed with mercenaries, the latter usually won due to their difference in mentality. Knights like this also lost because they failed to see how sporting matches differed from actual combat.

Helena was free of such misconceptions, and her style of swordsmanship sought to slay her opponents accurately, swiftly, and effectively.

“Of course I am,” remarked Helena, smiling savagely at Ryoma as a seasoned knight. “I wasn’t always called a ‘Goddess of War,’ after all. I had to work my way up.”

Despite Helena’s reputation as Rhoadseria’s Ivory Goddess of War, she came from a commoner background. She wasn’t the child of a noble house or knights, meaning she wasn’t born into a position that commanded people.

Therefore, her reaching such a high rank and garnering so much respect was owed entirely to her experience on the battlefield. She had fought, survived, and gained experience through bloody trials that brought her glory throughout her life.

And that well of experience was not to be underestimated.

The combatants distanced themselves again about ten meters apart. Suddenly, they moved in perfect unison and closed that distance to stand three meters away—a sword’s slash away.

Yet they hardly moved. They were inching toward and away from each other, trying to stay out of their opponent’s attack range while keeping the other within their own.

Ryoma reacted and changed from a middle-level posture to an eight-direction posture, holding Kikoku’s guard at the same height as his mouth. This stance was geared for offense and defense, allowing for mobility.

Helena took a lower-level stance, which excelled in defense. After all, it lets a person break the opponent’s posture after blocking their blow in order to cut them down with a counterattack.

She’s changed to a lower-level stance...

They closed the gap and evaluated each other for openings, even if both were extremely skilled and wouldn't usually present a sign of weakness. Ryoma started using his legs while maintaining his stance. He intended to create a vulnerability in Helena's defense by circling around her, keenly waiting for his chance.

Without warning, Ryoma changed his stance from an eight-direction posture to a high-level posture called the stance of fire. This new mode was an offensive form that cast aside defense for attack power. To compensate for its lack of defense, the attacks it unleashed were swift and packed weight. More than anything, the change in stance caught Helena by surprise.

Even so, Helena was an experienced war hero.

Sparks flew as their swords clashed again, the impact sending the blades moving in a circle as they swung down at each other's heads.

Ryoma swung his sword in a sweep, a downward slash, and an upward one. Helena blocked his savage flurry, sweeping and knocking his blade down, using the momentum to unleash a fatal strike aimed at the back of his head.

But Ryoma bent his body to dodge, resulting in only a few hair strands fluttering to the floor. Had the blade met his flesh a few centimeters away, it would have cut his head in half.

The swiftness of Helena's attack made it seem fearsome, boasting overwhelming force. It would have been foolish of Ryoma to try blocking this powerful attack, as it would have overwhelmed him. Moreover, his sword would have snapped in the process.

Yeah, I see why she's so feared. I knew she'd be strong, but... Not this much...

Helena's build was what one would consider slender, and she was slightly tall for a woman. She weighed half of Ryoma's over one hundred kilograms. Despite that, Ryoma's hand was numb from the impact of battling with her. However, the sensation wasn't enough to impede his combat ability or make him wonder where all that explosive strength came from.

Just as Ryoma was impressed with Helena's skill, she felt the same way about his prowess.

“We’re a match in terms of swordsmanship skills... But what about martial thaumaturgy?”

With Helena’s words as their signal, both concentrated their chakras with the prana circulating through their bodies. A surge of energy ran through Ryoma, the prana awakening the sixth Ajna chakra between his eyes.

Mastering the Manipura chakra was a base requirement to be considered a skilled warrior. Those who grasped the Vishuddha chakra became master warriors, and Ryoma exceeded even that. All this made it clear how much overwhelming strength mastering the sixth chakra brought.

Even with the tens of millions living in the O’ltormean Empire and the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, fewer than a dozen people reached this level. For Ryoma to have unlocked this well of strength would normally mean he couldn’t possibly lose.

He still felt a hint of anxiety, though.

The thing is that I have no information on how far along Helena’s thaumaturgy is.

The highest level of martial thaumaturgy was activating the seventh chakra, Sahasrara, at the top of one’s head. In Hindu yoga, they saw this chakra as a spiritual or mental summit unreachable by ordinary men. A similar belief existed in this world, meaning Ryoma wouldn’t lose in martial thaumaturgy now that he’d reached the sixth chakra. If he were to lose, it would be because he lacked skill.

But this world has exceptions to that rule. And what lies beyond that...

He recognized that as a Level 7 warrior in the guild, they transcended the boundaries of mankind while remaining mortal.

Koichiro had told Ryoma what lay beyond being transcendent, so Ryoma wondered if Helena had reached that level. With most people, Ryoma would not want to be concerned about this matter. Dealing with the Ivory Goddess of War changed things, and he had to consider the possibility of her exceeding common sense.

No, don’t let pointless thoughts cloud your mind.

Ryoma cleared away those ideas and focused on activating his chakras to control the flow of prana. He felt energy surge from the Muladhara chakra in the base of his spine as it gradually climbed his body. As it did so, his nerves sharpened while power filled his muscles.

He lost track of how long it took and couldn't tell if it was just a few seconds or several minutes. What felt like eternity passed him within moments as his chakras revolved at top speed. When Ryoma and Helena's raging fighting spirits reached a fever pitch, they drew close again as if they'd agreed to do so at that exact moment.

Their movements were smooth as they slid across the floor. Martial thaumaturgy and movements they had perfected through training had bolstered their speed, allowing them to move so quickly Dilphina couldn't see them anymore.

Even if they weren't holding back when they exchanged blows earlier, it was clear their first altercation was like two vehicles moving at low gear with the engines not heated up yet. But their engines were now roaring with life, and they switched gears to the highest chakra they could reach.

The loud cacophony of metal clashing against metal filled the room, which didn't let Dilphina register each strike. How many blows did they exchange? Was it ten? Twenty? She wasn't keeping count, but their blows clearly reached the hundreds.

Dilphina and her subordinates could only look at this flurry of slashes in shocked silence. The two involved saw it differently.

"Yes, you truly are something special," said Helena. "At your young age, you already have perfect control over the Ajna chakra."

In truth, the most challenging chakra to activate was the first one, the Muladhara chakra. Once a person learned how to manage it, the rest above it were easy. So, why did most thaumaturgy users rarely master anything over the third, the Manipura chakra? That was because the more chakras one activated, the harder it became to control the prana coursing through their bodies.

The fundamental principle of martial thaumaturgy was to activate the chakras in sequence to gain superhuman strength. It was like using multiple dry cell

batteries in a series to light a lamp and produce a stronger light. However, that consumed twice as much electricity as connecting them in parallel.

If a person charged a lamp with more electricity than its capacity allowed, the lamp would shine bright for a moment until its filament burned away. As such, a man who activated more chakras than he could handle would reinforce his body past his capacity to control himself and collapse under the strain.

This understanding inspired users of thaumaturgy to undergo long and arduous training to master their chakras.

“There’s always exceptions, though. Veritable geniuses brimming with talent like you, Ryoma.”

Ryoma couldn’t help but crack an ironic smile.

“To be fair, I dodged it by the skin of my teeth,” he said, wiping a cut on his cheek.

His fingers felt warm, sticky blood clung to them, even if the wound wasn’t fatal. Ryoma and Helena were a match, but a seasoned warrior like her wouldn’t engage in a pointless battle of attrition.

“Out of respect for your talent and ingenuity, I shall show you what one who has transcended the limits of humanity can do.”

Then, Helena played her trump card. Vast amounts of prana spilled from her body, unleashing a physical shock wave that rattled the hall. Even though it only lasted a moment, the prana gushing out of her body soon died down. That, however, marked the coming of a new threat.

A pillar of light... She really reached the Sahasrara chakra.

Ryoma saw the prana emanating from Helena’s body as a pillar of light. The pillar shot through the tip of her head, connecting heaven and earth through her body. People who reached this level in yoga were saints, while those in Taoist belief were called Xian. Helena reached that same level, the apex of what one could do within the scope of being human.

“What do you think?” asked Helena.

Her voice shifted from that of an experienced individual to one of a young

woman brimming with life. But her voice wasn't the only thing that changed. As Ryoma looked at Helena, she looked like she was in her midtwenties.

Helena displayed youthfulness and beauty that didn't match her advanced age, seemingly freeing her from the constraints of aging. Her skin was as sleek and smooth as a baby, and her ashen hair now shined with a golden luster.



Ryoma stared at her, stunned by something else that wasn't her beauty.

It can't be... Adaptation...

Adaptation was a term in poetry and literature where an artist took a work made by an older creator and remade it in their style with novel ideas and expressions. But the term also had another special meaning.

That other meaning was a Taoist idea incorporated in Chinese martial arts novels, where warriors who reached a new level cast aside their old, emaciated bodies and were reborn in a new form. In a sense, it was a transformation into a superhuman.

Of course, Helena's transformation was nowhere near that radical because she wasn't fully reborn. Her hair and teeth would have fallen off just as grime would have covered her skin if she'd undergone Adaptation. The impurities of aging that had built up in her body would have seeped out with her sweat and dripped onto the floor.

None of that happened to Helena. She had not a single tooth or hair strand fall, nor was she sweating. Luckily, she hadn't shed away her old body for a new one.

It's like every cell in her body rejuvenated.

She had likely circulated that overwhelming amount of prana throughout her body, spurring her cells to activate, reinforce, and regenerate faster. If Ryoma was correct in this assertion, the situation had just swung in the worst possible direction for him.

"Now then, I must ask you to play along with me for a while longer," said Helena.

It seemed like she had vanished, but she moved faster than Ryoma's eyes could follow. A second later, he kicked backward as hard as quickly as possible out of sheer primal instinct. He felt something cold whirl in front of his abdomen.

"Oh? You dodged that. Did you see me move?" said Helena, appearing with a composed smile.

Ryoma cracked a strained smile as he placed a hand over his stomach and judged his injury.

Well, crap.

Although he wasn't injured, that didn't mean he wasn't in a very bad state. If anything, things were getting worse.

I have special armor made from a giant centipede's chrysalis under my clothes, and she cut through it as if it were silk.

Giant centipedes were massive creatures that matched the strength of dragons, and their chrysalides withstood ordinary weapons. Ryoma wore armor made from one such chrysalis, which dark elven endowed thaumaturgy reinforced. Laura had pretty much forced Ryoma to put it on when he decided to storm the castle. Then Sara angrily insisted he do so, making it difficult for him to say no. And so, he wore it under his usual leather armor, which was a good idea.

Anyhow, Ryoma didn't know if that wise decision would go on to prove fortunate. He hadn't neglected to activate the seals of weight reduction and hardening etched onto his armor by the dark elven thaumaturgists. These granted them defensive prowess that matched not just metal armor but even legendary armors that used dragon scales, making his armor a treasure.

And Helena effortlessly tore through this high-quality, treasure-tier armor.

That likely happens when she mixes those absurd physical abilities with her swordsmanship skills.

Moreover, Helena's sword was a top-class thaumaturgical weapon that Ryoma couldn't see a way to deal with.

What am I supposed to do, though? Helena was old earlier, and all I could do was match her.

Saying he matched her was perhaps even an overestimation. To an impartial observer, Ryoma was at a two-thirds disadvantage since age no longer burdened Helena.

Her experience remains the same. Dammit, her getting younger and keeping

all the advantages of her experience just isn't fair. Still, if all I want is to kill Helena, there are means I can resort to for that.

Complaining would get Ryoma nowhere. With that in mind, he saw Dilphina and her troops from the corner of his eye.

No reason required Ryoma to fight Helena solo, as he could fight alongside Dilphina and her unit to overwhelm his opponent. He could also call in the Igasaki ninjas scattered through the castle and have them poison her.

But Ryoma elected not to do any of those things.

Of course not... Killing Helena isn't what I'm after.

The fight wasn't about winning at any cost. Instead, Ryoma wanted to triumph over Helena Steiner in a way she would acknowledge. He had come to this castle for that reason despite the risks.

There's only one way out of this, then.

Honestly, Ryoma wasn't inclined to use this method. Doing so would give him a fighting chance against her, but he'd pay a significant price. One mistake could result in both of them dying.

Just then, silent sobbing reached his ears. The sound of a demon weeping due to her grudge at everything and anything that lives.

Fine. Last time, it ended before we could go all out.

When Ryoma recently fought a Church of Meneos operative during Asuka's rescue operation, he unleashed Kikoku's power. Before they could fight earnestly, the attacker had mentioned his father's name and cut the battle short. Kikoku had been in a foul mood until it faced a formidable foe like Helena.

As Kikoku's master, Ryoma wanted to oblige and calm it down. He slowly stood up, quietly sheathed Kikoku, leaned forward, and dropped his waist.

"What's this? Giving up?" asked Helena suspiciously.

Covering one's sword in the middle of battle was usually a sign of surrender, but Ryoma shook his head in denial.

“So you’re not giving in then, are you?”

“No, I will keep fighting as long as I have the means.”

His statement might have come across as the words of a sore loser or an excuse made by someone on the back foot. Ryoma had somewhat given up, though he did not perceive it like that.

Helena felt the iron will that hid behind his words and smiled. “Is that right? That’s what I’d expect from a relative of Koichiro.”

Despite Ryoma briefly widening his eyes in disbelief, he displayed a bemused smile. That remark almost surprised him just as much as the revelation the Church of Meneos knight, Dick, shared about his father. Still, Ryoma didn’t feel shaken and hoped to ask her about this when given the chance.

“Right. Grandpa told me about it, but you’re the Helena he was talking about?” stated Ryoma.

Koichiro Mikoshiba had shared an old story with Ryoma when they reunited. When Koichiro first came into this world, he traveled the western continent and met a girl called Helena. At the time, she traveled the land alone and sought a lord to serve. That description had made it hard to link the young knight Helena with the Ivory Goddess of War she would become.

When Ryoma heard that story, he never imagined that the apprentice knight his grandfather met was Rhoadseria’s general. Koichiro recalled meeting a woman called Helena as Ryoma told him about the Mikoshiba barony’s situation and Helena Steiner.

Yet Ryoma didn’t think those Helenas were the same person. If Helena acknowledged that, he would have to admit it as fact despite how low the probability might have felt.

“I didn’t have any proof until now, but seeing your posture when drawing your sword... That’s called the Thunderblade, right? I saw Koichiro perform it many times,” she responded.

Her voice resounded with nostalgia. Indeed, she had no proof to correlate Ryoma with the man she knew.

I've never seen Ryoma's techniques, after all, mused Helena.

She felt an odd kinship and familiarity with Ryoma, noting Koichiro and he had similar personalities even if their physiques differed. That wasn't enough to make her assume the two had a familial relationship. At most, she presumed two people from the same country known as Japan came to this world.

Now that she had witnessed Ryoma's skills, her memories of Koichiro overlapped with this experience. Seeing the stance Ryoma took to draw his katana cemented her belief that the two were related.

"Thunderblade... Yeah, you're definitely familiar with it," said Ryoma.

Helena nodded and said, "You'll draw your sword when I attack you. Yes, that might be your only chance now that you're at a disadvantage in terms of brute strength."

Ryoma could not match that said aspect of Helena's now that she had unlocked the Sahasrara chakra and the deepest secrets of martial thaumaturgy. That would be like trying to outspeed a Ferrari with a regular car. But in other areas, like ease of driving and cornering, he still had a chance.

He hoped to strike at the split-second opening Helena would present when attacking him, a gamble taken on the razor's edge of death.

"Do you really think you can win that way?" Helena looked at him, cocking her head.

The art of sword drawing came from the idea of *go no sen*. One stood, fully prepared, waiting for the moment the opponent attacked and broke their defensive posture. *Go no sen* was why none took the first move in karate.

There was no guarantee it would work against someone like Helena, who had exceeded the boundaries of human capacity. The foundations of *go no sen* proceeded from the idea of humans who couldn't go beyond those limits.

He retained his posture even in the face of Helena's doubts.

"Very well, then..."

Helena began speeding through the hall with superhuman speed, making air pressure flow through the room. Dilphina and her soldiers could only watch in

bated breath. Amid all this, Ryoma closed his eyes.

I can't follow the way she's moving either way.

She moved so fast that Dilphina and the others could lose track of where she was at a given moment. Following someone moving that fast with the naked eye was impossible, so he might as well have kept his eyes closed.

If I lose this, I'll look so lame, thought Ryoma, a self-deprecating smile creeping over his lips.

This wasn't to say he had relaxed and grown complacent. Ryoma had his concentration maximized as he waited for the right moment. Though there was no visible indication of the attack, he clearly felt Helena enter his range.

"Kikoku! Lend me your streeeeength!" howled Ryoma.

In that instant, plenty of prana flowed from Kikoku into his body so he could forcibly unlock his seventh chakra. Ryoma Mikoshiba had reached the same level as Helena Steiner.

He swiftly drew his katana, the blade shining a dark red, with red sparks spraying in every direction. The sound of metal clattering to the floor filled the room.

Chapter 4: A New Country

“Im...possible...”

Helena stared in disbelief at how her trusted sword had been cleaved in half. The other half of the blade fell noisily to the floor, marking the end of the duel in a victory for Ryoma.

“Why didn’t you kill me?” she asked.

While Ryoma won by a split-second difference, he would have killed Helena had he lost control of Kikoku at the last second. He should not have spared her, but sheathing his sword answered her question.

“In the end, it comes down to me not wanting to kill you.”

Once she heard this, Helena cracked a bitter smile. “Should I be thanking you, then?”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” said Ryoma, shrugging. “There was another reason, and that was because I needed to ask you for something.”

“Need me for something? Are you going to ask me to work for you?”

Ryoma shook his head, though he’d have liked to ask that. Saria Steiner’s safe return was a chance they had missed. He was so fond of Helena that such a request would not have been so strange. But Ryoma answered to the contrary.

“I think we’ll have to discuss it later. We have an insensitive intruder on our hands,” said Ryoma, throwing a sharp glare at the corridor connecting to the lower floors.

Dilphina’s unit, who had watched the battle, primed their weapons upon hearing this.

“What are you doing here, Mikhail Vanash?!” bellowed Ryoma.

That shout prompted a group of knights to reveal themselves from the lower floor. Roughly a hundred of them—about four times the Black Serpents’ numbers—rushed through with dark hatred burning in their eyes.

For a brief moment, Ryoma noticed them, and his lips curved into a sneer. Then, he did away with that smile and peacefully greeted them.

“It’s been years, Sir Mikhail... I see you’re doing well for yourself.”

His choice of greeting was unconventional by Rhoadseria’s stiff standards of etiquette, even if it was a sufficient way to greet an old acquaintance. Mikhail, though, didn’t heed Ryoma’s greeting and gave him a belligerent glare.

“Traitorous cur! You dare speak to me after plunging this country into chaos?!” shouted Mikhail.

Mikhail raised a hand and signaled the knights behind him. The knights spread out, forming a half circle around Ryoma and his forces. In response to this, Dilphina and her unit quickly surrounded Ryoma to protect him.

“Surrender now, treasonous insurgents!” yelled Mikhail with a victorious smile. “There’s no need for you to stand trial. We will strike you down into hell right here and now!”

Mikhail then glared hatefully at Helena, who stood at Ryoma’s side.

“So you really were colluding with Mikoshiba, Helena Steiner! And you call yourself this country’s Goddess of War?! You’re nothing but another traitor!” It seemed Mikhail had no intention of referring to Helena with respect anymore.

But Ryoma scolded him, “Oh, come now, what basis do you have for calling Helena a traitor? You’re inching into sanctimonious judgment here, which you might regret later. It wouldn’t be the first time it happened.”

Mikhail glared at Ryoma’s sneering remark. “What regret?! Why is she by your side now if she isn’t a traitor?!”

Ryoma shrugged, then said, “Maybe it’s because you stormed in here and started throwing accusations of her being a traitor? I can’t blame her for acting in self-defense.”

“Spare me your absurdities! Why did you not kill Helena after she lost? That doesn’t match your ruthless methods. And that alone proves Helena Steiner is a conspirator and a traitor!”

Mikhail’s assertion wasn’t completely off the mark, but it was not the reason

Ryoma spared Helena's life.

"Well, that's because Helena's much more worth keeping alive than all the others," said Ryoma with an icy smile. "I'd say that's pretty fair judgment on my behalf."

Ryoma then flashed a nasty grin at Mikhail.

"Oh, I don't want you to get the wrong idea, so let me say this. Mikhail, you don't deserve mercy in the slightest. You're nothing but a nuisance to me, and I'd honestly like nothing more than for me and the world to get rid of you right now. Even with all my patience, I have had enough of being kicked around by you and Queen Lupis."

Ryoma highlighted this statement with loud laughter, knowing that this insult and provocation were his honest thoughts. Unlike Helena, the life of Queen Lupis had less value than a pebble to Ryoma. A pebble, even a small one, had a use—you could pick it up and throw it. If nothing else, a pebble wouldn't antagonize and provoke him.

I feel like I'm not tearing into him hard enough, given everything they've put me through, thought Ryoma.

In the beginning, Ryoma got embroiled in this kingdom's power struggles by coincidence and made a pact with Queen Lupis. He'd promised to install her on the Rhoadserian throne to protect himself. When that happened, Ryoma forgave Mikhail for leading a raid on him when he mistook Laura for Princess Radine. While many of Mikhail's subordinates died at the hands of Ryoma's plan during that attack, Mikhail had initiated the attack. Ryoma's side was acting in self-defense.

After that, when Mikhail pursued Kael Irunia for turning his back on Queen Lupis, he went against Ryoma's explicit orders and got captured by the enemy. Ryoma could not be held responsible for that. Mikhail neglected his orders to act as a scout, attacked Kael, and became a prisoner. Thus, he turned into the bargaining chip that enabled Duke Gelhart to negotiate for his life. Mikhail's quick temper and recklessness alone had caused that entire sequence of events.

Regardless, Ryoma's justified demands failed to reach Mikhail.

Mikhail then shouted with all his soul, “Impudent fool! Queen Lupis was generous enough to grant a nobody like you the title of baron and a vast domain in the Wortenia Peninsula! And you met her benevolence with betrayal! You think you can claim the fault lies with her and that justice is on your side?! Do you not see how far you’ve strayed from propriety?!”

The man was under no illusions that Queen Lupis was a perfect, faultless person, nor did he deny the countless problems she had as a ruler. In his eyes, the relationship between a vassal and their ruler was one where the master was fundamentally on higher footing. Even if the ruler acted poorly, a vassal had to obey. Vassals were free to harbor misgivings and even be displeased with their ruler, so they would try to advise or dissuade their lords.

A belief existed that a vassal using such disagreements as grounds to revolt crossed the line into unacceptable territory. Many believed it was the duty of a vassal to be patient and tolerate their lord’s policies even when they were unreasonable. This belief was one of the biggest flaws of this world’s monarchy system.

Upon hearing Mikhail’s accusation, Ryoma burst out in laughter.

Monarchs must act as monarchs, and vassals must act as vassals. Huh...

That was a quote from Confucius’s *Classic of Filial Sutra*, which meant that even if one’s ruler didn’t fulfill their responsibilities, a vassal had to carry them out. Such was a line of thinking Ryoma detested. He wouldn’t deny everything Confucius said. But Ryoma thought his ideas about how one should regard their parents and rulers were anachronistic and actively harmful.

Although the claim Confucius made about leaders seemed wrong, it became clear when translated into modern terms. For example, a child had to respect and fulfill their duty toward their parents even if said parents didn’t uphold their responsibilities. This manner of thinking didn’t make moral, logical sense.

One could say this was a misinterpretation of the philosopher’s words, of course. If that interpretation was correct, it painted a horrifying picture, no matter how different the preconditions were between ancient China and modern society.

Aaah, what a pain... I didn’t consider our ways of thinking were this different.

Trying to understand another culture is scary.

Ryoma always felt this world's values conflicted with his own, and he realized why that was for the first time. But he wouldn't endanger himself and his comrades over Mikhail's beliefs.

I do understand Mikhail and Queen Lupis's position.

Even with that thought, he wasn't entirely above sympathizing with them on a base level. Nevertheless, their actions were far too reckless and driven by emotion. Ryoma could not condone how he and his friends were in mortal danger because of them.

And so, Ryoma decided he would slay his enemies with his own hands.

Given her power, it only makes sense Queen Lupis would go back on her promise to me.

All she really did was try to dispose of her fear by discarding her promise to Ryoma, as she was weaker than him. He was outraged by that on a personal level, understanding that Lupis made this decision naturally as a queen.

The strong only ever considered the weak when they stood to profit from it. From that perspective, Ryoma did understand how one could say he shouldn't harbor anger toward her. One could say that it was his fault for being too naive and stupid for not predicting she would act that way. All he could do was learn from this betrayal and be more cautious in the future.

Hence, Ryoma scoffed at Mikhail's words.

"Do you seriously think I care if you approve of me or not? I'm sorry, Mikhail, but this country will soon be reborn under a new ruler."

Mikhail's face twisted in anger, recognizing the truth of Ryoma's words. The war's outcome was set in stone, even if he killed Ryoma. The capital was under attack, a major blow to Rhoadseria's honor, and the one responsible for this terrible predicament was Queen Lupis.

Nobles would not regard her with any dignity after this, nor would they obey her orders. Even commoners could refuse to live under such a weak queen. Queen Lupis lacked the wisdom and power to prevent that from happening.

And yet, Mikhail would rather die than admit to that fact because it would be too humiliating. The man parted his lips as he spoke the words that marked his last struggle.

“I won’t let everything go your way. Her Majesty has already fled the capital with Meltina, soon to return with an army in tow to retake it.”

“Holy hell,” said Ryoma as he exhaled, expressing disbelief and scorn. “Are you actually that stupid?”

“What?! You dare fling petty insults at me?!” snarled Mikhail.

At this point, Ryoma didn’t have the mental energy to waste on ridiculing Mikhail. He didn’t even want to hide his thoughts and maintain his tone of voice. His heart churned with profound hatred at Mikhail. Helena, stood beside Ryoma with an exasperated expression.

The reports said he’d gotten a bit smarter, but god... He’s so... Dammit, I’m speechless.

Mikhail had made a blunder by letting slip that Queen Lupis had fled the capital. Ryoma knew that she and Meltina had escaped, of course, and had even built his plans around the fact she wouldn’t be in the castle. So, he planned to take her into custody in the city’s vicinity.

The reasoning was that if he were to capture Queen Lupis at this point, many people would demand he spare her.

For example, Counts Bergstone and Zeleph were vassals of the Mikoshiba barony who sought to work with Queen Lupis to reform the kingdom recently. The efforts went nowhere for multiple reasons, which inspired them to turn their back on her despite being members of noble houses with centuries of history in Rhoadseria. That, and their devoted personalities, would make them appeal to Ryoma to let her live.

Ryoma could ignore them, but that would drive a wedge between them, and the same was true of Helena.

Yeah, she did promise to serve me once.

Still, Helena had made that decision based on her best interests and not due

to her loyalty to her homeland. In exchange for her help, she wanted the Mikoshiba barony to restore the kingdom's glory. Since she believed the country had become corrupted, she sought help from an external factor and offered her services.

In a sense, it was an act of noble self-sacrifice.

Ryoma didn't fully accept her wish, only intending to do what he could. After all, Queen Lupis was so hostile to him it would be impossible to restore Rhoadseria while that woman reigned. Keeping Lupis alive was one condition he couldn't accept.

So she was satisfied with the idea of me ruling Rhoadseria with Queen Lupis as a mere puppet.

From Ryoma's perspective, establishing a puppet regime with Queen Lupis was a waste of time and energy, which presented more risks than he'd be willing to take. First and foremost, Queen Lupis would not accept it because she'd find the idea intolerable and would secretly attempt to regain power. If he were to act on a promise to Helena, he wouldn't be able to stop Lupis by killing her.

Handling her would be like attempting to soothe a petulant child who could instantly trigger a civil war if not controlled. It would be a disastrous future with no advantages for anyone.

Considering that this is Helena, I can do this.

Ryoma agreed to keep Lupis as a puppet ruler solely to have Helena Steiner on his side. She would join him in turn, even if that meant having the label of a traitor.

If Ryoma had captured Queen Lupis there, Helena would have asked him to spare the monarch. Helena might have even asked him to leave Lupis in a noble family's care for the rest of her life. Given what came next, Ryoma would have had to agree.

Besides, executing Lupis would shock the Rhoadserian people in a significant way

Although Lupis's reign was far from successful, displeasing many citizens,

there was no downplaying the weight of nearly five centuries of history. Executing Queen Lupis as a way for her to take responsibility for the war could trigger a revolt among the commoners.

So I need Queen Lupis to disappear with no one ever knowing where she went. Ryoma set things up so those plans wouldn't change, no matter what Mikhail said. But that's just from my position.

He didn't need to know where Queen Lupis went because knowing it would only worsen his position. That information would force Ryoma to finish his search of the castle and send people to the capital outskirts.

Of course, Queen Lupis might have still been in the city and used this as a diversion to send him looking in the wrong direction.

But I know he's telling the truth.

Why did Mikhail tell him the truth, then?

I can think of one reason. Queen Lupis leaving the capital throws my plan into disarray, and he wants me to know that. By knocking me down, he wants to show he has the emotional high ground.

This ploy was Mikhail's only way to get back at Ryoma after he scorned and mocked him, but it meant nothing.

This is why these people are so dumb.

Ryoma saw them as childish and emotional. They'd see their mistakes if they thought about things for a moment. But they couldn't manage even that. Whenever they found themselves in trouble, they shouted and complained. He honestly couldn't be asked to deal with these people anymore.

Besides, preparations are complete on my end.

Then, he noticed the Igasaki ninjas sneak up behind Mikhail's group. He had ordered them to scout out the castle to eliminate any enemy units they detected, and it was only a matter of time before they found Mikhail. The only reason they hadn't attacked yet was because they awaited Ryoma's reaction.

But Ryoma was done with this man. He gave the order.

"Do it!"

At that moment, countless shurikens came from different directions, attacking Mikhail and his knights. Meanwhile, Dilphina's unit lunged at the knights surrounding them.

The battle had a set outcome. Dilphina's dark elf soldiers easily overpowered and killed Mikhail's troops, thanks to the Igasaki clan's cover. Mikhail blocked the barrage of shurikens with his sword.

"I didn't call you a meathead for nothing, I guess. Your sword skills are impressive," whispered Ryoma, picking up his spear.

Ryoma wanted to waste no time on this man. Mikhail swung his sword in a desperate attempt to deflect the attacks, and Ryoma thrust his cross tube spear, driving its tip into Mikhail's throat. The spear slashed the man's throat open, splattering blood into the air.

"It's almost strange how easy it was," muttered Helena, astonished.

Ryoma smiled, his face covered in blood. "Well, I couldn't afford to waste time on Mikhail any longer."

Had he faced a worthy opponent, Ryoma might have ended this less unceremoniously. He'd have at least stopped the Igasaki clan and chosen to fight one-on-one. Sadly, Ryoma held no respect for Mikhail Vanash.

I do feel a bit guilty, though. Ryoma sighed and focused on Mikhail's corpse lying on the floor, then he said, "With this, it's over..."

All that remained was for Lione to defeat the Rhoadserian army, and the battle for Pireas would end. Without Mikhail and Meltina to command them, the Rhoadserian army could not overturn the tide of this fight. It was clear they would surrender before long.

I need to talk things out with Helena first, though.

That talk would decide Rhoadseria's future, perhaps even more crucially than Lupis Rhoadserians's survival. Ryoma hoped Helena would fulfill a crucial role in that future.

I doubt she'd refuse too.

If Helena were going to turn that down, she'd have given up on this country

ages ago.

“Helena, I need to talk to you about something. Do you have a moment?” Ryoma called out to her.

She had just lost to Ryoma in a duel, and the capital was on the verge of collapse. Thus, she didn’t know what to do next. The queen had absconded from the capital, and the Rhoadserian regime was effectively nonexistent.

Yet she nodded and responded, “Yes... I don’t mind, of course. You were about to say something earlier?”

Ryoma told her the plan he’d made beforehand. Since it was something she never expected, her expression went from skeptical to surprised.

“I’m not doubting your words, but... Are you sure that’s true?” asked Helena with a mixture of suspicion and hope.

The situation made her feel like a person at the bottom of a well and had just seen the slightest rope dangled down to pull them up. But she also questioned why Ryoma would even propose such a thing. It was too good to be true.

Ryoma answered with a strained smile, “If I’m going to be honest, I need someone I can trust with this country. I have my hands full developing the Wortenia Peninsula. Having my next-door neighbor investigating and meddling in my affairs would be a problem for me.”

He directed a questioning gaze at her.

“But if you’re going to refuse, that’s fine by me. It might create more work for me, but I’ll take that loss if other things go as planned.”

This was his heartfelt attempt at being considerate of Helena. Regardless of whether she accepted his request, it wouldn’t influence his plans that much. And Helena seemed to know this. After she contemplated for a bit, she heaved a sigh and made her decision.

“Fine, then... I accept!”

She grinned and pecked Ryoma on the cheek—a gesture of gratitude to the hero who offered the Kingdom of Rhoadseria a future.

A few days passed since the Mikoshiba barony took the capital. The citizens of Pireas were initially confused, but the Mikoshiba barony had a carrot-and-stick policy. Said policy comprised a mix of policing maintained by the implicit threat of military power and the providing of food rations. This approach allowed Ryoma's forces to control the occupation and maintain a semblance of peace.

Amid all this, countless nobles had gathered in the audience chamber of the castle to wait for the late entrance of their new master. Seeing that their queen, Lupis Rhoadserians, had fled, they elected a new ruler at the Mikoshiba barony's direction.

Such an act made the kingdom's defeat obvious and presented nothing but humiliation to many of the nobles. They could remain loyal to Queen Lupis when she had abandoned the country in its time of need, or they could accept Radine Rhoadserians as the queen backed by Ryoma Mikoshiba.

The presence of these nobles in the audience chambers made it clear they had decided. Everyone in this room was also present for Radine's coronation ceremony, which took place the day prior. They hadn't been loyal to the royal family since the beginning or after the failure of the northern subjugation. Instead, they held significant animosity toward Queen Lupis, especially after the capital fell to enemy hands.

In such a situation, no one would swear their loyalty to Queen Lupis anymore. They focused on integrating into the new queen's regime and profiting from it. Most of the nobles not present in the audience chamber were the ones from domains far from the capital. All of the noble families currently present in the city had a representative in this room.

Of all those nobles, a single group stood out. At the center of that group was Viscount Furio Gelhart—the leader of the largest political faction in Rhoadseria—the nobles' faction. He was also the man most excited for the coming queen's inauguration ceremony.

"It's finally time, Viscount Gelhart," said a noble.

"Yes, at long last," replied Viscount Gelhart, nodding collectedly.

He was grinning widely, his face the expression of a man confident his ambitions would come true.

“I’ve been waiting for so long. Many unexpected events happened, but I made things turn out how we wanted,” continued Viscount Gelhart, puffing up proudly.

None of the nobles of this faction regarded him with displeasure or antipathy, acknowledging that Gelhart’s scheming had a major influence on this outcome. They felt like they were at the top of the world. Their only complaint was that the despised upstart rebel Baron Mikoshiba allowed this ceremony to occur.

Yet they knew that Baron Mikoshiba was the one who held power over this city.

He had fifty thousand of his elite troops stationed outside the castle, and he himself was powerful enough to beat Rhoadseria’s Ivory Goddess of War in one-on-one combat. Nobles who only cared for their pedigree and pleasure couldn’t hope to defeat such a martial monster.

There were rumors Queen Radine would nominate her new prime minister, leaving Baron Mikoshiba to prioritize developing the Wortenia Peninsula. From their perspective, they just needed to be patient and brave the storm before they got what they wanted. That was how Viscount Gelhart argued to keep them in check.

Eventually, the bell rang, marking that it was exactly noon. Under the order of the Royal Guard, everyone present got to one knee. Those in the room upheld their etiquette the most, especially since the newly named Queen Radine slowly walked up to the throne. Walking beside her was the winner of the war, Baron Mikoshiba.

It would usually be unthinkable for a mere baron to walk alongside the ruler of a country. One could say he was only doing it thanks to the threat of military might. The nobles lacked the means to deal with that threat. Said nobles could only lower their heads and watch it happen.

Queen Radine stopped before the throne and reached her right hand out to Ryoma. With his help, she slowly sat upon the throne.

“I will now appoint the new prime minister, per the orders of the new queen, Her Majesty Radine Rhoadserians!” As everyone present watched him tensely, Ryoma took out a piece of paper from his pocket and read the name on it.

“Viscount Diggle McMaster! Step forward!”

When the name echoed through the audience chamber, everyone froze up. That was most certainly not the name they were expecting to hear.

“That’s...ridiculous. What is he saying?” muttered Viscount Gelhart in disbelief.

All the nobles looked at each other as a man stepped forward and knelt before Princess Radine. Ignoring the confused reactions of the nobles around her, Radine gave an order to Diggle.

“Viscount Diggle McMaster. I hereby entrust you with the duties and responsibilities of Rhoadseria’s prime minister.”

Her words were a formal royal decree that placed Diggle McMaster in charge of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s politics.

Everyone was speechless until one man made his outrage known.

“What kind of farce is this, Mikoshiba?!” screamed Viscount Gelhart in condemnation. “This is betrayal! You promised me! I spread rumors that Helena Steiner was plotting a revolt and created a commotion in the southwestern gate as a diversion for the Mikoshiba barony army. Those were my accomplishments! Mine! Don’t you dare say you forgot that!”

Gelhart then turned his anger to the other traitor.

“And you too, McMaster! Why should you be made prime minister?!”

“Well, you see... I think it’s best if I explained that,” said Ryoma, looking at him with a composed smile. He motioned toward one knight standing by the wall, prompting them to come over. “You can take off your helmet now, Helena.”

The knight took off their helmet, revealing herself as Helena. All the nobles shuddered at how this person wore the armor of a Rhoadserian general. Upon seeing their reaction, Helena calmly parted her lips.

“Viscount Furio Gelhart! You will be imprisoned in the House of Lords’ dungeon for charges of bribery, corruption, and years of irreverence toward the royal house! All the nobles here are under arrest to ensure none of your

associates escape. Know that this is a royal edict and the queen's will!"

Just then, knights in full armor kicked open the door and rushed into the audience chamber. The event was a carefully planned overthrow of the old noble regime. Helena smiled as the nobles panicked at the sudden change in the situation.



“You!” growled Viscount Gelhart at Helena. “This is... This is a conspiracy! You have no proof! You can’t prove any of this!”

This was a bolt from the blue for Viscount Gelhart, and he was desperate to find some way to weasel his way out of this.

She disregarded his protests calmly and spoke up. “We will present evidence of your crimes in your trial at the House of Lords in the coming days. Count Zeleph spent years gathering it. You should give up hope of getting away with your misdeeds.”

“Zeleph? You mean Elnan Zeleph?!”

Hearing the name of the man he had spent years shunning and fighting a cold political war against made Viscount Gelhart go weak in the knees.

“That’s how it is. I was going to keep my end of the bargain and make you prime minister. The opposition was just too vocal...” said Ryoma, scratching his head and displaying a vicious grin. “I really am sorry, but I can’t let a convicted man lead this country. Isn’t that right, Viscount McMaster?”

With this, Viscount Gelhart finally realized who the mastermind behind this ploy was.

“You! It was you, McMaster!”

Viscount McMaster coldly paid no mind to Gelhart’s shouting, gazing at him like one would at livestock lined up for slaughter. He knew all too well about Viscount Gelhart’s corruption and bribery, perceiving him as a parasite eating away at the nation.

“Leaving this country in your hands would be condemning the people to agony and destitute poverty. Who would ever let *you* be prime minister?!” spat Viscount McMaster, finally venting the frustrations he had built up for years. Helena patted him on the shoulder encouragingly.

And so, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s future embarked on a new path under the care of a new prime minister.

Epilogue

It had been two weeks since Queen Radine had announced her reforms. Two horses galloped at night. The ones holding the horses' reins were small, hooded figures with attire that made their gender vague.

They rode south. Clouds hung in the sky with the occasional nighttime drizzle falling over them. This weather didn't favor travelers, but it was perfect for people trying to remain unseen.

Given the plate armor they wore under their cloaks, these two riders must have had a reason to be out and about. The bank of the great River Thebes came into view as they rode.

"Your Majesty, we should let our horses rest," said one of the riders, a woman, to the other as she disembarked.

The other rider, who was Lupis, also got off the saddle.

"We've been riding for so long. Are you tired, Your Majesty?" asked the rider, who turned out to be Meltina. She gathered twigs from the area to start a campfire.

But Lupis didn't answer.

"Your Majesty?" called out Meltina fearfully. *Still no good...*

In Meltina's eyes, Lupis looked like a dead woman. Although Lupis was very much alive and not a zombie, of course, she was listless to a critical degree. Her eyes stared blankly into the air and hardly responded to Meltina's voice. Lupis would eat when presented with food or sleep when shown a bedroll, but she lacked the will to do anything.

Lupis's fear of that man had ground her heart into dust.

Ryoma Mikoshiba!

Meltina clenched her fist in anger as she recited the name of the hateful devil who had toppled Pireas and reduced Lupis from the queen to a wandering

vagrant. Her heart burned with anger and bloodlust for him. She also had an intense thirst for revenge for the death of Mikhail, who'd been a colleague and almost like a brother to her for many years. Ryoma Mikoshiba was the cause of all those troubles, and she wanted nothing more than to cut his head from his shoulders and release all her hatred by spitting on him.

But I don't have the power to do that anymore.

Radine Rhoadserians had become the new queen of Rhoadseria, and the nobles were scrambling to earn her favor. With the backing of the mighty Mikoshiba barony army, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria came to accept Radine's reign. If Meltina and Lupis wanted to stop that from happening, they should have changed course and hurried back to the capital.

But I have no troops to do that.

The twenty knights Meltina took with them during their escape from the capital had gradually been whittled down by their pursuers or got separated from them in the confusion. By now, the only person still following Queen Lupis's orders was Meltina.

Even if Lupis were to return to the capital with Meltina, she could not do anything. Those in the kingdom would hold them accountable for their loss in the war and sentence the two to the guillotine. The alternative punishment was putting them under house arrest for the remainder of their days in a secluded home in the countryside.

No, I can't accept that... She's the rightful ruler of this land.

Mikhail entrusted Meltina with their queen's life, and Meltina would do everything to return Lupis to the throne in Pireas.

But who can I rely on for help?

They had shaken off their pursuers, but there was no telling how long that would last. Both needed to find asylum somewhere, but she had difficulty thinking where and who could help them.

Usually I'd go to one of the Rhoadserian noble houses for help.

That choice didn't seem applicable now. The Mikoshiba barony army would

crush any noble house that accepted custody of Lupis.

And now Viscount Gelhart is under arrest and has had his nobles' faction destroyed.

The nobles' faction was once the greatest political faction in the kingdom, even eclipsing the royal family. Currently, the new regime had arrested most of the noble houses and pressed charges for years of corruption and lèse-majesté; they would likely be sentenced to execution at a later date.

Thus, Rhoadseria would discard its harmful traditions and become a new country.

Lupis and Meltina saw what they had worked for come to pass. Yet Meltina regretted that these events had come about by the mountain of evidence Count Zeleph had gathered.

We should have made up our minds back then.

She remembered the meeting where Count Bergstone complained about suppressing unrest in the kingdom. Queen Lupis fainted from shock when they reported the peasant uprising, leading to the meeting ending early. It was reasonable to assume that the documents Count Bergstone would have displayed at the time were the same ones Count Zeleph now submitted as evidence.

That thought made it clear they held the trump card but fumbled the timing to use it. While Meltina knew there was no point crying over spilled milk, she couldn't help but have regrets.

Still, what do we do next?

The women's only remaining option, if there were no nobles they could rely on within the country, was to go abroad. But the only active rival Rhoadseria had was the O'ltormean Empire.

Myest, Xarooda and Helnesgoula all hold tight trade relations with that man, mused Meltina. We could seek asylum in O'ltormea, but that would require passing through Xarooda. And if we can't do that, we'll have to pass through the southern kingdoms.

They were headed south now for lack of a better choice, yet the fact remained Meltina had no plan to speak of.

There's the Church of Meneos left, I suppose.

The Church had dispatched Cardinal Roland to assist in the northern subjugation, though he had headed south after negotiating with Ryoma. Regrouping with his forces was a possibility.

Maybe turning to them for help is the way to go, she pondered fleetingly. Unfortunately, that idea would never materialize.

A powerful impact suddenly hit Meltina's right eye. It was when she felt the tears and blood run down her cheek that Meltina fully registered the intense pain. Gripping her eye in agony, she got up and forced Lupis to her feet.

"Your Majesty, we're under attack!" yelled Meltina.

She swung her sword about, knocking down the rod shurikens flung at them. In the process, the shurikens injured her more and more.

"Meltina!" screamed Lupis, seeing the gruesome state her subordinate was in.

They're poisoned... No, I'm... I'm going numb...

The attackers were hellbent on not letting them survive because they'd laced the shurikens with poison that gradually sapped her strength. Even so, Meltina had the resolve to fight to her dying breath.

"Your Majesty! Hurry, get on the horse!" shrieked Meltina through her muddled senses.

Once Lupis got on the horse, Meltina poked the horse's behind with her sword to spur it forward. And then, Meltina's body spasmed as her consciousness sunk into eternal darkness.



The horse's loud neighing and breaths echoed through the Thebes riverside. Lupis rode fast to shake off her pursuers, though the horse was on the verge of exhaustion. All the lethargy she felt earlier was gone as Meltina's devotion somehow brought Lupis to her senses.

Did I give them the slip? Lupis looked back repeatedly to confirm if they still chased her.

Dreadfully, her pursuers were much more tenacious than she was. Another flurry of shurikens tore through the night.

No... I didn't...

Her regret came far too late. The same poison that claimed Meltina was now eating away at Lupis's body. She felt her limbs go numb, and her grip on the horse's reins loosened. Soon, her body fell from the saddle and hit the ground with a painful thud.

The impact of the fall knocked all the air out of Lupis, and her vision dimmed. Even in the face of her encroaching demise, Lupis's instincts pushed her to run away from her assailants in a desperate struggle to stave off death.

Eventually, her body vanished into the river's flow.

Lupis Rhoadserians's story should have ended there, but the Goddess of Fate took pity on her. A man stood downstream from where she had fallen, chanting a verbal thaumaturgy spell. After he'd confirmed something, the man pulled out Lupis's limp, unconscious body from the river.

"What a bother. This poison complicates things. Hopefully, she can still survive," whispered Akitake Sudou as he held a hand over Lupis's forehead, cracking an ironic smile.

Afterword

I doubt many such readers are left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. To those who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume in March. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

We're still amid the Covid crisis, but how are you braving these hard times, good readers? Looking at the news, I see that despite the number of infected people standing at tens of thousands, we've regained a semblance of a normal life.

Like having to go to work in a packed train... What were all the remote work and staggered work hours for? While I would say that working in the office is more conducive to work culture than remote work, I can't say I don't miss sleeping until just before I have to get to work.

But that's enough current events. Let's get to our summary of volume 22.

With this volume, the siege of the capital is over. Although the Xarooda arc happened in the middle of it, this concludes Ryoma's rivalry with Queen Lupis, lasting a full twenty volumes.

It really did take very long. I finished all the setup and foreshadowing, which is a relief. Of course, the tricky part about writing a story is that for every bit of setup you resolve, three more problems pop up.

And let me tell you, this time we've had plenty of new foreshadowing crop up, like Helena's relationship with Koichiro in the past or Sudou's constant machinations. Keep an eye out for what's to come with them. What troubles me, as always, is how to catch up to those topics in a way that's natural and consistent with the flow of the story.

The next volume will start a new chapter in this story focusing on Rhoadseria's new regime, including how Helena and Radine's story links with it. But the schedule isn't set, so take any promises with a grain of salt. I already

know how I want the story to end, but it'll take a while before we get there.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the staff involved in publishing this book and all the readers who picked it up.

I intend to keep working on this series in the future, so please support *Record of Wortenia War*.









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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 22

by Ryota Hori

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