

# RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**



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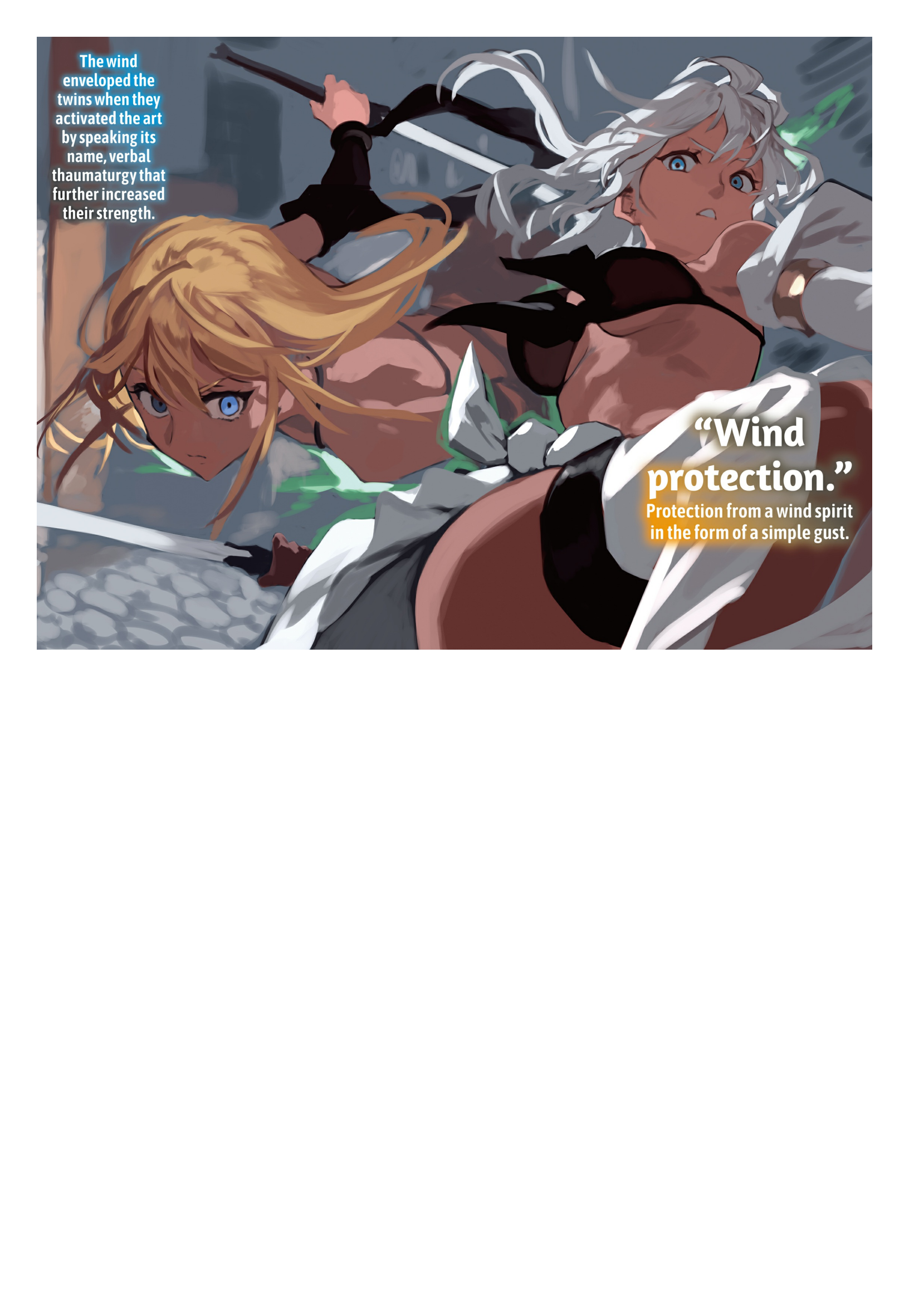


Lione—also known as the Crimson Lioness—and the mercenaries who worked under her: Sudou considered them all battle-hardened warriors.

Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria were brave and fiercely feared generals of the Rhoadseria kingdom.



# RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



The wind enveloped the twins when they activated the art by speaking its name, verbal thaumaturgy that further increased their strength.

**“Wind protection.”**

Protection from a wind spirit in the form of a simple gust.





**“His Excellency  
Baron Ryoma  
Mikoshiba has  
arrived.”**

**Silhouettes  
appeared in the  
doorway of the  
pavilion.**



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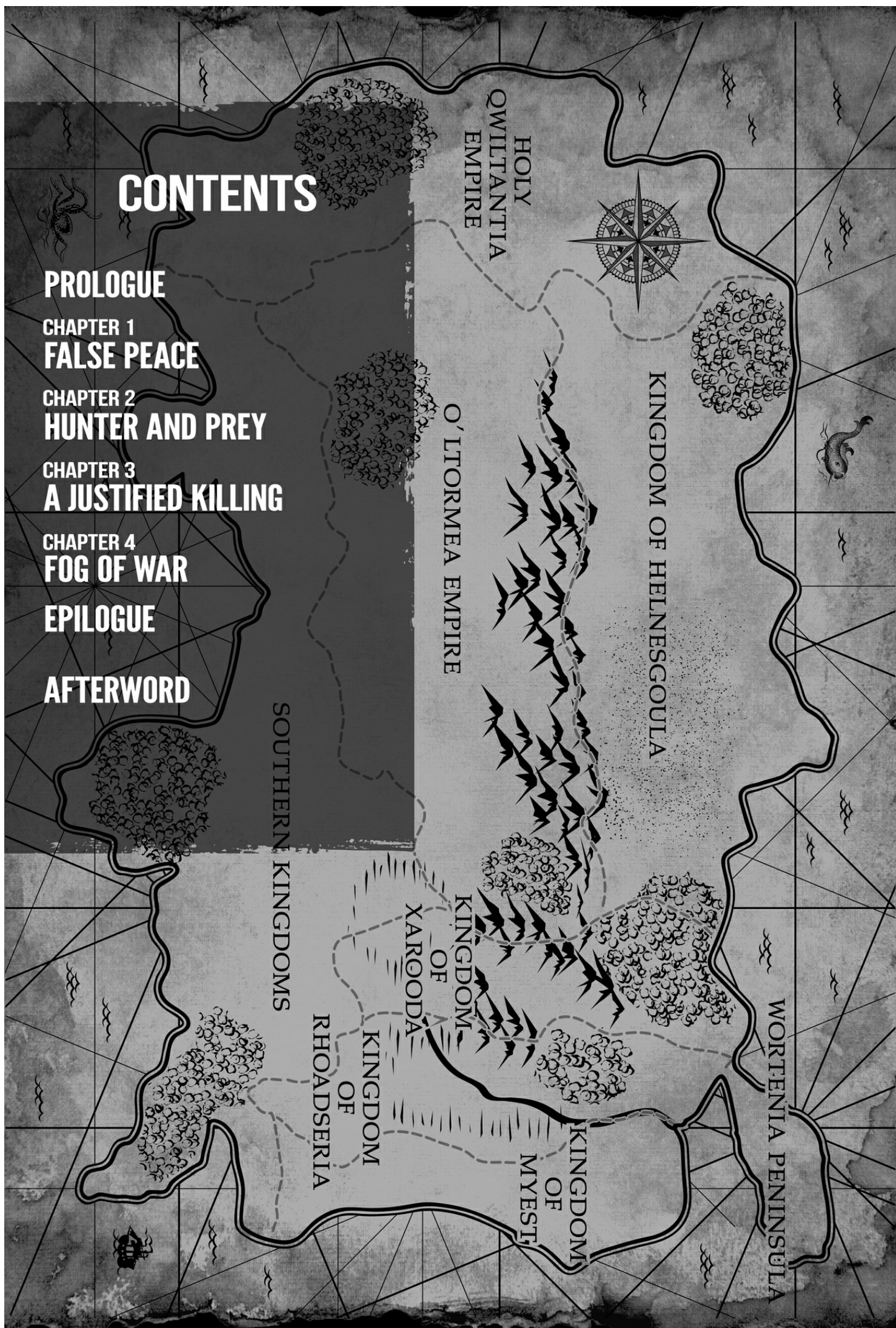
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# Prologue

Below the mountains, the sun began to set as the waves peacefully flowed, and a flock of seabirds gathered. Merchant ships with white sails pushed through the ocean, aiming for the port. Fishermen operated small fishing boats and cast their nets into the sea to earn their daily keep.

The various colors of the sunset dyed the sea near the mundane, peaceful, ordinary port town. However, some held opposing feelings as they looked at the idyllic view.

*A sinister red... No, a crimson or a vermilion... Some may even say scarlet. No matter how you put it, it's certainly a color that makes you tense,* thought Akitake Sudou, feeling no need to elaborate as he set foot in a room.

The sunset shone into the room through the window, resembling the color of blood and burning flames. There was a saying that red leaves were like flames, and one could say the same about the sun's evening glow. It wouldn't be surprising if one thought the spark of war engulfed the world outside the window. Unlike the flames of red leaves, the spectacle lacked something to make the viewer marvel at it. Death and an indescribable foreboding were present. For some reason, the room generated the sense of being on a battlefield, the air laden with the scent of blood and iron.

*Still, I must say that the color shining through does suit her...*

His eyes reflected the scene of a woman lying on a bed. If she dressed up, none could match her beauty, and her elegant features showed she was of noble birth. Her shimmering silver hair was evidence of her relation to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, which held dominion over a third of the eastern region of the western continent. The woman belonged to an elite class, of which only twenty people existed in the western continent. She had both beauty and power, something which many coveted. Sudou wondered if it was okay to consider himself chosen by God to have such a favor before him.





Yet there was an ominous atmosphere around the woman. Something was captivating about her—a shadow behind her beauty.

*This is the perfect scene for her. Perhaps her presence in this room makes the sunset feel so ominous...*

The woman who stood between life and death was scared, angry, and regretful. It was clear from the anguish that colored her face. A humble room did not suit this woman. And it also raised the question of what a woman of such nobility and status was doing in the southern part of the Kingdom of Brittania. That was especially the case since they were in a cheap, run-down inn room in the backstreet of Birmingham, enduring this nightmare.

Naturally, there was only one reason for it.

*Lupis Rhoadserians... The woman was robbed of Pireas. Now she's a pitiful ruler with nowhere to go. It is the perfect setup for a light novel or manga.* Sudou's lips twisted sarcastically.

Japanese people were fond of rooting for the underdog, like in the tale of Minamoto Yoshitsune, whose older brother, Minamoto no Yoritomo, had ostracized him. They had a weakness for tales where nobility fell from grace. Thus, the situation that Lupis had found herself in resonated with a Japanese person like Sudou.

*A hero, brought in from another world, would probably sympathize with her and strive to help her recapture her kingdom.* Sudou exhaled as he allowed such whimsical fantasies to fill his mind. He was aware that there was zero chance of that happening. *In reality, Ryoma Mikoshiba would play the role of the summoned hero...*

He had devised many plans to ensure that wouldn't happen.

*But life is really unpredictable. She probably brought this on herself, but I still find myself sympathizing with her as she lies there. And I can't say I don't share some responsibility.*

When the previous civil war ended, the consequences became the cause of the anxiety hidden away in Lupis's heart. Sudou was the one who had driven Ryoma Mikoshiba to the barren land of the Wortenia Peninsula. If one were to



dig deeper, one would find that Sudou was also the one who had come up with the idea of dispatching Ryoma to the Kingdom of Xarooda, causing a definite rift between Queen Lupis and Mikhail.

Moreover, Sudou had plenty to do with Lupis's current predicament. He looked at her with a hint of sadness, something easy to do as the victor in the situation. Was it hypocritical of him? Or was it genuine?

Those who knew Akitake Sudou would say hypocrisy or determine it was his pervasive sarcasm. Their judgment would be correct and incorrect. The person in question had yet to reach his conclusion. Sudou could not understand the inner workings of his mind as human feelings were complicated and mysterious, often full of contradictions.

*Nevertheless, that doesn't mean I'll go easy on them...*

Since Sudou was ruthless and cold-blooded, he would do even the most inhumane things to his enemies. That didn't mean he harbored no humane feelings, though. If anything, he was more compassionate than the average person, but he rarely showed that side of himself. The problem lay in the fact that the targets of that compassion were severely limited, and there was rarely a time when his emotions confused his decisions.

*Plus, I did go out of my way to save her.*

Lupis Rhoadserians was still useful and was the perfect trigger for war in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. If Sudou were to launch an operation against the nobles of Rhoadseria or if the O'ltormea Empire were to invade Rhoadseria, the mere existence of this woman would cause people to rally. That was why Sudou even used a long-distance transportation thaumaturgy spell, which used a lot of prana, to bring her to the inn. Sudou had already harnessed a large amount of prana.

Ordinary thaumaturgy users could easily use large-scale thaumaturgy; however, it would exhaust them entirely in one single use. Reaching the banks of the River Thebes would have still proved difficult. Although, with enough thaumaturgists, it would be possible to have a continuous chain of them casting the spell. Only a limited number of thaumaturgists could cast a transportation spell from the center of the Rhoadseria to Birmingham, a central trade hub

between the Kingdom of Tarja and the Kingdom of Brittantia. Even if one were to scour all the western continent in search of those who would be able to cast such a spell, it wouldn't be a very high number.

*The amount of prana used for teleportation thaumaturgy depends on the distance that needs to be covered. Fortunately, this old body of mine could handle it.*

Of course, Sudou was jesting with his mention of "old body."

The thaumaturgical difficulty increased if the user had to transport a third party along with them. It was only natural since they would not have enough prana to execute the spell or the ability to control it. Depending on the talent of the caster, it wasn't uncommon that casting such a spell would render them immobile because it was harsh on the mind and body.

Should the technique fail, the thaumaturgist might have to atone for it with death. Thus, Sudou's use of such risky and high-cost magic was not an act of goodwill.

*I can't do a lot right now, but having a few options is nice.*

The most important thing to consider when materializing plans was to ensure there were various options. Even a card that one thought useless could become incredibly powerful, depending on time and circumstance.

For Sudou, he only had one option at present. He knew he had nothing to gain from pity as he approached Lupis's side.

*Of course, this all depends on whether we can keep her alive.*

After Sudou confirmed her breathing and pulse, he soaked a towel in a washbasin on top of a shelf. He then tightly wrung the towel before using it to wipe the sweat from Lupis's forehead.

*I need to ask Saria later for a change of bandages.*

Bandages covered all of Lupis's body. Her wounds were so severe that the blood had leaked through the bandages in some places. A deadly poison also coursed through her body, leaving her soaked in sweat. Sudou should have wiped her all over and changed her bandages. Even though he was usually



brash, he hesitated to do all of that with an unconscious, unmarried woman. After all, she was the queen of a nation. For how bold he was, it was still hard to do.

*Despite everything, I shouldn't be so wet behind the ears that I mind doing something like that. I guess I shouldn't do it. If they caught me, it would put my honor on the line.*

Sudou wanted to avoid being labeled a pervert by the women in the Organization. Plus, Lupis Rhoadserians was far from Sudou's type. He found her beautiful, but she was too young and fragile for him. Instead, he preferred a mature woman with more experience—and much more filled out in places.

*I'd never be able to explain that to a woman.*

Sudou would find it impossible to use that as the grounds for his defense if caught. If this were a battlefield instead, he would have no qualms about stripping someone naked, no matter who they were. He would deal with them as he saw fit.

No one would mind if this situation were an emergency during a mission for the Organization. Doctors took women's clothes off when performing medical treatment, and they never hesitated to do so. Although this inn was under the management of the Organization, they mainly used it for everyday activities. Lupis had already undergone all the treatment possible, and her survival was now a matter of stamina and fortitude. The appropriate person to change the bandages was out on business. Even though Sudou understood it would be a while before they would return, he didn't need to do such an immoral act that he could face criticism.

When considering his connection to Lupis, it was clear that he should avoid anything that could lead to unnecessary trouble.

*That, and there's also Lupis's personality to consider. Even though I saved her, she's the kind to have a grudge over the most trivial things.*

He had rescued her from disappearing into the River Thebes. Anyone who would have done so would say that she should still be thankful and have no grounds for complaints, even if they had seen her unclothed.

Regardless, some people in this world couldn't think of it that way. From Sudou's perspective, there was a high chance that Lupis Rhoadserians was one of those very people. She had an astonishing amount of pride and a warped sense of entitlement. Even people from modern society in Japan could get sued when performing lifesaving actions, so there was hesitation to use an AED on the opposite sex. It was fundamentally the same situation. No issues would emerge when removing a woman's clothes to save her. Or at least, that was the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's official stance on it. Acting with the precondition of no ill intent should have been enough to avoid a lawsuit.

The issue was that it depended on how the victim viewed it. If they believed the treatment to be sexual, then they might sue on those grounds. The police would have to accept it, as was written in Article 63 of the Criminal Investigation Code, should the victim press charges. Whether it would go to trial was a different matter. But the police wouldn't have accepted a complaint they could not turn into a criminal case. A human rights lawyer or similar people who might intervene could compel them to take the complaint, leading to an investigation and confirmation of the details.

As a result, a person would have to explain everything to the police no matter how well-meaning they were or if they tried saving another's life. If one couldn't declare their innocence, they might get prosecuted for their actions.

In modern society, one was innocent until proven guilty and would be under suspicion. It was normal that some people didn't think that way. Being prosecuted could damage a person's life. Putting aside whether one could win or have the funds to afford the lawsuit in the first place, the main thing to consider was the difference between civil and criminal trials. Civil trials had a generally lower hurdle when it came to establishing the truth of a situation.

Hence, some people thought not getting involved when someone was in danger made more sense. Especially considering that they risked being sued if they helped a stranger. It was a natural conclusion to reach. One's conscience might nag them to do the right thing, but since being sued could affect one's family, it might be safe to assume no one would be against ignoring one's nagging conscience. Sudou's current state of mind might have been similar to that of a modern man in Japan who felt grief.



*While I can't say this for sure, just thinking back on everything caused by Ryoma Mikoshiba and this woman... The wise decision would be to avoid needless danger. She seems to have stabilized for now.*

Not everything that had transpired between Ryoma Mikoshiba and Lupis Rhoadserians came about from who she was as a person. From a political standpoint, they couldn't avoid coming into conflict. There were even cases where it could be said she had made the right decisions based on how things worked in this world. Perhaps the future of Rhoadseria might have been very different if Lupis had been a capable queen.

*Even though I wouldn't say she's arrogant, she does have a high level of pride for a royal.*

That remained true even though Ryoma Mikoshiba had forced her to flee Pireas. Her status and pride as a royal was probably the only thing she had after losing her close aide, Meltina. Absolutely zero possibility existed that Lupis would be calm at the idea of an unknown, commoner man seeing her naked.

*Worst-case scenario, she may even choose death over that.*

Lupis would need an uncommonly strong will if she were to decide to live in her current situation.

Not to mention, she was royalty.

To clear oneself of any shame, it wasn't unheard of for a member of the royal family to choose an honorable death.

Suicide wasn't always the answer, but many people would rather die than continue to live in their idea of hell. Sudou couldn't disregard the fact that once she awoke and realized the gravity of her situation, she might take extreme measures. Thus, he decided it was the wiser option not to do something that could further increase that risk.

*They hit her with a rod shuriken laced with poison. A shuriken often has poison, so that part wasn't surprising. It just means he was out for blood, or at least the assassin he sent was. Either way, does this mean he also reached his limit?*

Ninjas famously used shuriken, which were not normally lethal weapons, but

a more experienced ninja could aim for a person's vital areas and kill them.

That said, a shuriken would only be effective over a ten-meter distance. Any further would make it hard to deal lethal damage, even if it cut the skin. Shurikens excelled in portability, and one could fire them in quick succession. However, other ranged weapons, such as bows and guns, were better due to their range and being more lethal.

Therefore, it was common for ninjas to douse their shurikens with poison.

Shiho shurikens or happo shurikens were a style of shuriken with several small blades attached. Both were easier to throw and more likely to inflict harm on an enemy since their purpose was to administer poison directly into the target. Judging from that, rod shurikens were better at penetrating when doused in poison, which made them even more deadly than the other kinds of shuriken. It seemed safe to assume Ryoma Mikoshiba held murderous intent toward Lupis.

*Anyone would say this looks like Ryoma Mikoshiba wishes for Lupis Rhoadserians's death.* Sudou looked at the woman lying in front of him. Considering her wounds and the strength of the poison, it would have been tough to deny that Ryoma wanted her dead.

*But... Is that really the case here?*

Ryoma Mikoshiba wouldn't try to kill someone in such a roundabout way. On the off chance he used shurikens, he would go for the killing blow, decapitate them, and take their head as proof.

*However, at that time, they were...*

Sudou had used thaumaturgy at the time of the attack to observe from afar. From what he could see, the assailants had no intention of retrieving Lupis's body. After confirming that she had sunk to the bottom, they immediately retreated.

*They probably assumed there was no chance Lupis could have survived. But it wouldn't be simple to rescue her based on the volume of the water in the River Thebes.*

It seemed the ninjas had retrieved Meltina's body and had made a swift



retreat to avoid witnesses, which was not a bad call to make.



However, that didn't dispel the unease Sudou felt. He heaved a deep sigh as he looked at Lupis's face.

The situation felt like a maze with no exit. There was no way for Sudou to know the best course of action. But as a result of Sudou and the others' devoted care, the sleeping princess awoke a few days later.

†

It was a night without moonlight.

Lupis Rhoadserians woke up in a dark room on top of a hard bed.

*My throat...* she thought.

Her eyelids felt heavy, and her vision was blurred. She had no strength in her muscles, barely able to breathe, let alone move, without her whole body screaming out as a dull pain flowed through her. Something she could be sure of was that her consciousness was crystal clear. The first thing she felt was severe thirst.

"W-W-Water..." was the first thing she said.

Currently, she didn't care where she was and only thought about her desire to wet her dry throat. Usually, as the ruler of a country, a waiting maid would have tended to her. It would be a simple task for her to have water brought to her. Now, she was a queen of ashes, with no one by her side. Thus, no one could hear her ask for water.

However, someone soon granted her wish. A light suddenly illuminated the dark room, followed by the voice of a young woman.

"Please wait a moment." A woman stood up from a chair near the bed. She then picked up a spout cup from a bookshelf near Lupis's bed pillow. "Here you are."

The woman brought the cup near Lupis's mouth. It tasted like the sweetest nectar, more delicious than any luxury tea or liquor. The cool liquid soaked its way into Lupis's dehydrated body.

"Thank you..." said Lupis, although unable to speak clearly.



The woman lightly nodded in response.

“Where am I? Are you the one who rescued me?” asked Lupis. It seemed she had realized what was happening as her voice became clear and serene. Although Lupis didn’t have the talents of a politician, she had received the best education in the land. She still carried herself in a manner befitting of a monarch, albeit a former one. Her pronunciation and tone remained smooth despite her inability to speak well, perhaps thanks to hydrating her throat. Moreover, she wore a vigilant, tense, and ever so slightly stiff expression. After all, Lupis could only remember being attacked and falling into the river. She also recalled Meltina Lecter’s frantic demeanor, her face covered in blood. Lupis was all too aware that there was no chance that Meltina would have survived those severe wounds.

*That means someone else other than Meltina rescued me, but...the question is, who was that?*

Lupis had an understanding of the situation she was in. As someone had attended to her wounds, she could at least conclude these were not the assassins who sought to take her life. That didn’t mean they were allies.

She wondered who the woman standing before her was. Her first priority was confirming her identity.

*She may be a spy from the southern kingdoms or O’ltormea.*

There was also a chance that she could be an unrelated third party who had found Lupis on the brink of death and saved her. The likelihood of that kind of luck was one in a million. Rather than assuming it was mere coincidence, Lupis started to think her rescue was intentional. As it would happen, her concerns were spot-on.

“I could see some light coming from the room, so I came to check on you. I see you’ve woken up. That’s a relief.” A relaxed male voice echoed through the room.

Lupis looked in the direction of the voice. Her eyes widened in surprise, as she spoke the man’s name through gritted teeth.

“Sudou Akitake... It’s you...” she uttered.

She sounded surprised as well as angry and suspicious. That was the expected reaction since Akitake Sudou was an enigmatic man, neither friend nor foe.

They had exchanged words before, when he had presented Lupis with a plan to help her out with a difficult situation. She didn't think he did it out of the goodness of his heart.

*No... In fact...*

Lupis understood there had been a shift in responsibility. Despite Sudou's intentions, Lupis Rhoadserians had the final say. At the time, Lupis and her vassals had no real reason to reject Sudou's plan because it was the most appropriate. Even though it had backfired in the end, it would be unfair to question who was ultimately responsible for that failure. It was a whole different story whether Lupis truly accepted that burden. She understood that but could not separate her responsibilities and failings, which was one of her biggest drawbacks.

As if Sudou sensed Lupis's innermost thoughts, he displayed his usual arrogant smile as he approached the bed.

"Thank you, Saria," said Sudou before looking at Lupis again, then shifting his gaze back over to Saria. "Could I ask you to make something for Lady Lupis? I apologize for asking this of you so late, but maybe some easy-to-digest soup would be nice."

He was mindful that Lupis hadn't eaten for days due to her being unconscious. However, that probably wasn't the only reason he had asked for that.

Sensing Sudou's intentions, Saria nodded lightly. She bowed toward Lupis, then quickly left the room. When he confirmed she was gone, Sudou turned around to face Lupis.

"Long time no see, Your Majesty. I'm unsure if our meeting like this is fate or some form of irony." Sudou laughed, yet Lupis felt rage boiling within her.

"So, why did you save me? What are you after?" responded Lupis, aware this was not the place to raise her voice. She kept calm, even if she appeared like she had just eaten a bitter-tasting bug.

“Now, now, what unprecedented words. I put my life at risk trying to rescue you.” Had someone ignorant of the situation listened to him, they would think it was a laudable statement. But it was obvious how far removed from the truth it was, making Lupis not believe anything he’d said.

“Am I expected to believe that? Do you think I am that stupid?” questioned Lupis.

Sudou shrugged in response because he knew that Lupis didn’t trust him. He had somewhat predicted Lupis’s reply but was also taken aback by it.

*Well, she has been through a lot up until now, thought Sudou. She has probably matured a great deal from that. I’ve heard many reports about her from the Organization’s spies. Now that I’m talking with her, I see what they meant.*

Sudou considered Lupis Rhoadserians as a likable person, yet a mediocre ruler who lacked any qualities suitable to be a politician. That was an analysis of what he had heard from others and from speaking with her. One could say Sudou’s judgment was precisely correct.

For better or worse, Lupis was an ordinary person with no special talents. That made her wholly unqualified to be a ruler in this war-torn land. Even though she had failed at being ruler, that did not mean she had failed at being human. Lupis Rhoadserians was good-natured for a person belonging to the continent’s ruling class. At least she never imposed high taxes on the people of the country to fund her lavish lifestyle and had attempted to complete her tasks as a politician. Many could regard her indecisiveness as thoughtfulness, and her leniency toward her family members as a show of compassion. Depending on how you viewed her drawbacks, they could seem more like merits. If Lupis were a commoner instead of a nation’s ruler, she might have had a peaceful life surrounded by loved ones. Even though she had broken her original promises as a monarch, she upheld her agreements with mercenaries. Such a decision would have been unthinkable for a politician, especially if they found themselves in a disadvantageous position such as Lupis was back when she ruled.

*Had another ruler of the western kingdoms tried to hold their ground against*



*Ryoma Mikoshiba, he would have chased them into an even worse situation,* mused Sudou.

Ryoma and his comrades might have first come before Lupis as enemies, and even if he had negotiated his way out of it, one couldn't imagine that Lupis would fight for Ryoma and the others' innocence with the guild. Ryoma and the others could have very well been executed once they had played their part and were no longer useful. If anything, relegating Ryoma to the Wortenia Peninsula might have been a suitable punishment since it was a feared place overrun by monsters. But that did not change the fact that he was gifted land. That resulted from Sudou using Lupis's guilt for his benefit while doubling up as a display of her good nature.

To put it simply, Lupis was a good person.

There was currently no longer any trace of that good nature left within Lupis. Instead, a spark of distrust blossomed in her eyes.

*As expected, it'll be harder to convince her I mean well. If I keep my intentions to myself, she'll be more stubborn,* thought Sudou, choosing to be honest with Lupis.

He paused for a moment.

"Well, naturally, I have various expectations," he said.

"I expected as much." replied Lupis. Sudou nodded in response. Then, a cold smile crept on Lupis's face as she asked her next question. "What use am I to you now? I've lost my throne, Meltina, and Mikhail."

The question came from Lupis's heart, yet it was contradictory. Even though she had accepted she was no longer of use, she knew that Sudou didn't save her with only good intentions in mind. She harbored somewhat of a self-deprecating feeling.

*This is rather complex,* he noted, not wanting to point the contradiction out. He would gain nothing from pushing Lupis's mind into further turmoil. Thus, Sudou told Lupis why he saved her.

"Please do not worry about that. You may not be of any use right now, Your Majesty. However, that does not mean that will forever be the case. I guess you

could say you're more of an investment with a possible risk of not paying off," related Sudou.

Lupis cocked her head in confusion before displaying a wry smile, understanding Sudou's aim. He was incredibly to the point, but she sensed he was telling the truth.

"I see... Then, you'll be waiting for a while to see that pay off," responded Lupis.

"You cannot even get out of bed yet, Your Majesty. All I can do is wait."

"Right... Especially in this condition I'm in..." Lupis tried to move as she spoke but could not withstand the sharp pain coursing through her body, giving up and letting it go limp.

Sudou shook his head in response. "Don't push yourself. Please rest for now. It's a miracle you're alive after those injuries. I think you're over the worst, though you might need several months to fully recover."

Lupis's body was battered and bruised, wounds covered her, and poison still flowed through her veins. Because of Sudou's appropriate emergency care and available use of large amounts of high-quality medicine, she had narrowly avoided death. But she was still an injured person who required bed rest. There was also the possibility she would suffer aftereffects from the poison. It would have been appropriate to cut the conversation off, eat a light meal, and go back to sleep. Although Lupis was aware of that fact, she wanted to know something.

"That's true. Even just talking like this is difficult for me. Still..."

Sudou sensed from the spark in her eyes that she wanted to know more. "Are you curious about the condition of the royal capital?" Sudou asked.

Lupis nodded softly, and Sudou let out a small sigh. He couldn't really say that now was the best time for him to tell her the current state of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. If Lupis were to know the truth of the situation, she might fly into a rage, which would only worsen her condition. Yet he also felt that it wouldn't be the best decision to not tell her either.

*Well, I will have to tell her eventually. Plus, she may not rest well if I don't tell her while she's here,* thought Sudou.

After swiftly weighing up the pros and cons of telling Lupis, he finally concluded that he should tell her.

“Well, it is as you would imagine,” he said. “The Kingdom of Rhoadseria has welcomed Princess Radine as their new queen, and peace seems to have been restored under the new regime. The nobles have also sworn loyalty to Queen Radine.”

“I see,” said Lupis as she bit her lip.

“You don’t seem that surprised.”

“Yeah... Meltina updated me about what was happening after I fled the capital.” It was a part of the information Meltina had reported while Lupis decided on a place to flee. Hearing it once again from Sudou made her body shake with anger and disgrace. Even then, she did her best to remain calm.

“Then, what happened to *him*? Is he the prime minister of the kingdom? Or has he now become general in Helena’s stead?” The man she alluded to was the one whose movements she was most curious about. It was only natural that Lupis wanted to know the current situation of her most sworn enemy. Still, she did not expect what Sudou had to say on the matter.

“Ah, yes. Mikoshiba. It seems he wishes to return to the Wortenia Peninsula,” said Sudou matter-of-factly.

Lupis had no reason to doubt it, then replied, “What?”

“It seemed he had no interest in becoming prime minister and turned down the role of general and being the leader of the knights.”

Her eyes opened wide. “That...can’t be.”

If Sudou told the truth, Ryoma Mikoshiba had chosen to distance himself from Rhoadserian politics. The only reasonable inference was that he had done so in order to focus on developing his own territory. Sudou then explained the information the Organization’s spies had gathered regarding the royal capital.

“Viscount McMaster has taken on the role of prime minister, and Helena Steiner has taken command of the knights. Quite a bold decision, although it poses no issue for the kingdom itself,” added Sudou, smiling wryly.



All one could do was laugh.

*He's probably considering independence from the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, which will lead to him planning to dominate it.*

Ryoma was probably still in the preliminary planning stages, but that meant he was missing a prime opportunity. He was throwing away the chance to gain control of one of the leading western countries. It seemed like an act of madness. Lupis had yet to come to the same conclusion as Sudou.

"That's unthinkable..." Lupis had expected Ryoma Mikoshiba to carry out a plot to use Radine as a puppet ruler to seize the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. That was why she feared Ryoma Mikoshiba and tried to eliminate him, yet he had subverted her expectations. Sudou felt the same way but had no intention of telling Lupis. People like her, who had long endured power struggles with nobles, couldn't understand Sudou's point of view, even if he explained it to her.

*Ryoma is ambitious, yet modest and careful. He's an interesting man, that's for sure.*

It was ambitious to strive for independence from Rhoadseria. After all, he was trying to create a country with ex-mercenaries. One could also say he was humble for not aiming for control of the nation right away. Had he become prime minister, he could have used Queen Radine as a puppet ruler and run the kingdom.

*This is a mere guess, but I assume Ryoma Mikoshiba is taking a step back to assess the reach of his control.*

Of course, Sudou had no concrete evidence to support that. If anything, it was simply a possibility he had deduced from the current situation. There was no other explanation for Ryoma's decision.

*Well, there is no doubt that the Mikoshiba barony excelled in military might; its main personnel have a bias toward the military.*

Ryoma's forces comprised the best of the best, like Lione—also known as the Crimson Lioness—and the mercenaries who worked under her. Sudou considered them all battle-hardened warriors, making Ryoma's force one of the

strongest throughout the western continent. Not to mention, Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria, formerly known as the House Salzberg's Twin Blades, were also brave and fiercely feared generals of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. As individuals, they represented the kingdom while they boasted outstanding skills as generals. Moreover, Ryoma had mastered a powerful verbal thaumaturgy which existed in the Wortenia Peninsula. Doing so had allowed him to build relations with the demi-humans who wandered the monster-infested plains in a perpetual struggle of life and death.

*Then there are those two sisters who follow Ryoma Mikoshiba everywhere, like his shadow.*

Sudou wasn't aware of how Ryoma had met them. Nonetheless, they seemed to be the main reason behind Ryoma Mikoshiba's escape from the imperial capital and the clutches of Shardina's extensive security network. Aides like those sisters, who excelled in combat and command, stood as testament to the quality of the personnel within the Mikoshiba barony.

*Dear me, I can only describe it as a treasure trove of talent.*

Several people in the Organization matched the same level of influence over the western continent. Even so, Sudou could not deny the amount of talent Ryoma's subordinates held. Considering that even his regular soldiers had mastered martial thaumaturgy and had weapons that had utilized the dark elves' abilities, his military power was far from that of a mere local lord. If Sudou's analysis were correct, then Ryoma's military would rival even the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, which had held sway over the eastern part of the western continent. The Mikoshiba barony's martial strength greatly outshone its nominal political clout.

*They also have Counts Bergstone and Zeleph in their ranks, who both excel at politics.*

Sudou saw both of them as unusually talented among the nobles of this world. There was also no doubt that Simone Christof was managing the barony's finances. One could not simply run a country with talented personnel alone. The key was also having competent bureaucrats and government officials, who in military terms, were on the same rank as mid level

commanders or soldiers. In a world with many illiterate and innumerate individuals, it was difficult to train staff to the level required.

*Better yet, I can imagine those working on internal affairs rushing around like headless chickens at their underdevelopment headquarters in the Wortenia Peninsula.*

Based on their situation, it made sense they thought ruling the reborn Kingdom of Rhoadseria was impossible. Even if it were possible for Ryoma Mikoshiba to rule it with military power alone, he could not do so forever.

*Despite how people understand that, it's in their nature to want to rule anyway.*

People here did not hesitate to grasp opportunities when presented to them because it was an instinct for a lot of people living in a war-torn world. Not to mention, human nature dictated that a person go to extra lengths, if necessary, to ensure they secure their gains from said opportunity.

*But Ryoma Mikoshiba has shown us that he keeps those feelings at bay. He retreats and attacks when needed. My, my, he is quite terrifying.*

Ryoma succeeded as a ruler because he knew himself and his enemy incredibly well.

*All right, I'll let it rest for today. We'll continue this discussion another time.*

Lupis had yet to recover from the news. She remained in a daze as Sudou politely bowed his head and quietly left the room. What Lupis required was rest.

*She'll also need some time to organize her thoughts.*

Lupis would begin to process the loss of her most trusted confidants, Meltina and Mikhail. Once she had come to terms with their loss, only then could she play a part in Sudou's plans.

"This is about to become a lot more interesting. When I imagine the two of them reuniting, I get all too excited, especially for a man of my age," whispered Sudou to himself as he left the room. The conflict stirring between Lupis Rhoadserians and Ryoma Mikoshiba made for very captivating entertainment



for a third party.

*Also, there is Saria. I thought she would stay with Lady Helena.*

Helena Steiner's daughter, Saria, had left the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and now worked under Sudou as an ordinary member of the Organization. Anyone else would have probably decided to stay with them. While that wasn't the case for Saria, it was a very unexpected blessing for Sudou.

*I have no reason to doubt her loyalty. I'm glad I could keep one of my most important pieces.*

Even though Saria's devotion to the Organization was unquestionable, her feelings regarding her familial relationships were a different matter. She no longer saw her mother as her guardian.

*It still stings a little. Although that may be obvious, considering I invested a lot of time and labor into that whole situation.*

Slavers had abducted Saria from her mother and abused her as a sexual plaything. Because of her mental illness, she was soon to be killed. But Sudou had saved her from the grimy hands of a slave trader and looked after her, nursing her back to health. As a result, Akitake Sudou was like a father figure to Saria Steiner.

However, that was not purely because of Sudou's goodwill.

Ultimately, Saria getting kidnapped in the first place was a part of Sudou's plan. Rescuing her was nothing more than the result of a whimsical yet calculated decision. That said, Saria had no idea about any of that and still regarded Akitake Sudou as more important than her mother, which might have worked in Sudou's favor. And he was very aware of how skilled and useful a pawn Saria would be.

*She'll be a perfect companion and a close observer of Lupis, who has lost both her closest confidants, Meltina and Mikhail,* thought Sudou. He also considered that Saria could act as an ace in the hole if the opportunity arose for him to plot against Helena again. It was like season one of Sudou's favorite drama had finished, and he was impatiently waiting for the next season to begin. That, or he had the excitement of a skilled chef who had a variety of ingredients in front

of him and wondered about all the food he could make. Most of Sudou's thoughts were still about hypothetical situations that *could* happen soon. For that reason, he emphasized more realistic situations than an uncertain future.

*Ryoma Mikoshiba is already planning his next move. I'm eager to reunite him with Lupis Rhoadserians, and it all depends on whether I can slip past his next plan.*

Sudou hadn't chosen the Kingdom of Brittania to have Lupis rest because it neighbored the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. The face of a young man appeared in Sudou's mind, one who had somehow ended up among the ranks of the Organization.

*For now, let's just see how good he is.*

The work given to the young man would start a ripple effect throughout the western continent. At the same time, it was a test for him.

*I wish for him to take on a part of the Organization and lead the next generation. It's also interesting that he has some relation to Ryoma Mikoshiba.*

The test would decide if the Organization required new management. That was another of the reasons Sudou had brought Lupis here to Brittania.

*A new wind is blowing in...*

Sudou smiled disdainfully as he impatiently waited for a new war to begin.

# Chapter 1: False Peace

Two weeks went by since the siege of the royal castle had ended due to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria losing to the Mikoshiba barony. The sun shone brilliantly through the white clouds in the blue sky from the west around two in the afternoon.

In Peripheria, the royal capital of the Kingdom of Xarooda, King Julianus I worked in his office. As a king, having his day being filled with various government affairs was just a part of his ordinary life. Internally, Julianus was not as calm as he appeared on the surface, mainly due to the contents of a report he held.

“Thus concludes the report, Your Majesty.”

“Good work, Joshua. Even though it’s one of our neighboring countries, time is of the essence. It must have been difficult for you to gather intelligence, with us lacking budget and personnel. Pat yourself on the back for that,” Julianus told Joshua Belares, the current general of Xarooda. He had taken on the role after his father’s death. Considering the instability in Rhoadseria, it was no easy feat for spies to infiltrate the country. So, it was natural that the king would commend Joshua for his work.

*It looks like things have calmed down for now,* thought Julianus.

If the written reports were correct, the circulation of goods would restart. At the very least, the civilians living within the capital could return to their ordinary lives. In all honesty, Julianus would say that the present report wasn’t enough. That was plain to see from his expression as he looked up after confirming the details.

“It’s been only half a month since the fall of Pireas... I heard that while she is still a young maiden, the newly crowned Queen Radine is quite skilled in politics. While I feel sorry for Lupis having her country taken from her, maybe it was a blessing in disguise,” uttered Julianus, exhaling with relief and regret. Joshua tilted his head slightly to the side.



“Is that so? I thought that was the result of having Helena Steiner and the newly appointed prime minister, who goes by the name of McMaster, by her side,” responded Joshua. His thoughts were a shared, common opinion upon hearing the age of the young queen. Yet Julianus shook his head.

“Certainly, it is difficult to think that it is Queen Radine alone. But there is no need for a ruler to be so well-versed in every facet of politics. We have retainers who rally us and work selflessly on government affairs—which is more than enough. The problem therein is one must give those retainers a chance to show their ability and loyalty... Or am I wrong?”

They were words stained with experience. Joshua was quick to pick up on what Julianus was hinting at. The young general, pride of Xarooda, then smiled wryly.

“You’re right... We have seen recently the self-destruction that can follow if they do not receive the opportunity,” said the young hero of the Kingdom of Xarooda, shrugging his shoulders. There had been whispers of the nickname “Falcon” for him, in and out of the country. One could take his shrug as rude in front of the king of a country, but he had lost most of his former arrogance and showed that a person’s status did make them who they were. As a result, Julianus didn’t feel the need to correct him. That would not have been the case were the king holding an audience from the throne; in that case, he would have some scathing words of advice to give to Joshua. Regardless, Joshua would never display that kind of attitude in front of other nobles, only doing so since he and Julianus stood alone in the office currently.

“She’s gone through so much too,” said Julianus in a sorrowful tone, lifting both his elbows and leaning on the table. He rested his chin on his hands. “Apologies, Joshua. Could you give me a moment?”

Julianus then softly closed his eyes, sinking into his sea of thoughts. It was a habit of his when he had something to contemplate. Joshua bowed before leaving the room, making sure not to disturb the king’s train of thought.

*She could have led a peaceful life had she not accepted such a disadvantageous position as being monarch. I could say the same of myself.*

His fear for the future twisted in his heart. The Mikoshiba barony had spoken



about removing Lupis Rhoadserians before. Julianus had even expected the Kingdom of Rhoadseria would not match Mikoshiba's military strength.

*Lord Mikoshiba and Lupis are leagues apart in terms of ability too...*

Anybody could realize how the war would play out. Even so, Julianus wasn't feeling down due to being weak. There was currently no one who didn't feel uncertain about Xarooda's future.

*According to the spies' reports, the situation was calm even though a new queen sat on the throne... But that makes me curious about what will happen.*

The war between Rhoadseria and the Mikoshiba barony had also heavily affected Xarooda. It wasn't that simple for Xarooda to follow current events in their neighboring country. They had the same number of spies gathering information in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria as in the O'ltormea Empire and the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. It was an unusual scale of operation because Rhoadseria was an allied country. This action was probably because of the sense of panic they harbored, considering that the future of Xarooda could change drastically.

*At any rate, we'll need the strength of other countries to stop O'ltormea from succeeding in making a hegemony of the western continent. The empire boasts a lot of national strength. If Xarooda is to cross swords with them, we would not do it alone.*

As the king, it was a hard reality to accept. However, the Kingdom of Xarooda could not afford to cling to such trivial pride. Thus, they needed to cooperate with other countries in order to fight against the Empire's powerful military force. It would be paramount for the three eastern kingdoms—Xarooda, Myest, and Rhoadseria—to band together to maintain their independence.

*We can't trust Helnesgoula too much, even if we consider them the leader of the alliance.*

After all, the ruler of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula and leader of the four-nation alliance was none other than Grindiania Helnescharles, also known as the Vixen of the North. Contrary to her magnificent appearance, she ruled with an iron fist—fair yet extremely fierce in politics. It was difficult to fully trust the woman who, with a calm yet ruthless attitude, allowed her relatives to be

murdered in cold blood to achieve sole power. In addition, she would sometimes cooperate with her long-term enemy, the O'ltormea Empire, depending on which direction the wind blew.

*Well, that goes for that man too.*

Julianus pictured a young man with a mature face. Lupis was no match for his incredible power.

*His raw strength as a warrior and his talent in military, political, and diplomatic affairs... His steel will allowed him to keep a firm control of everything.*

He could be an ideal ruler. Julianus was incredibly curious about what sort of upbringing he had that made him who he was. It was Julianus's first time in his many years as ruler that he had encountered such a person.

*What if he's a monster of sorts...? Well, he was named the "Devil of Heraklion." He must seem like a devil to those who oppose him.*

The man had quite the notoriety, and the "Devil of Heraklion" was neither presumptuous nor an insulting title. If people disliked him, his foes would name him after an insect or a beast. One would not use such an overblown title as "devil." His terrifying presence made people curse him as a devil while prostrating themselves before him out of fear.

*I would hand the throne over in peace if my son could withstand even a fraction of that man's power. That, or I could have him marry my daughter. Those twins would probably be incredibly envious, though.*

Ryoma Mikoshiba held such an abnormal, strange, and ferocious presence around him that Julianus found himself caught up in such absurd thoughts. It was a huge source of irritation, for Julianus lacked the strength and army to rival such a ruler as Ryoma.

*We've yet to recover our ranks from the previous war. Joshua is doing a good job, but he is still too young to fill in for his father, Arios Belares. Compared to him, Joshua is incredibly inexperienced. Not that any of it is his fault, of course...*

Joshua's father, Xarooda's Guardian Deity, had given up his life protecting his country from the O'ltormea Empire's invasion. Julianus's eyes welled up with

tears as he remembered Arios. Many had treated Joshua Belares as a nuisance for a long time due to his rough and rude attitude. But in a kingdom now known as the Land of Warriors, he had matured into a symbol of military prowess. His power as a warrior was on par with Baron Mikoshiba's skill with the dual blades, and he was excellent at commanding his troops. Joshua's strength held off the invasion after O'Itormea killed his father in the war. Although, he wasn't enough to stave off the danger heading toward Xarooda.

*If only someone could stand beside him and share the burden.*

While he appeared aloof to those around him, Julianus knew that Joshua carried an unordinary burden as part of the Xarooda military. On top of that, he lacked experience in strategy and the political strife within the royal palace.

*As I thought, the burden being too heavy is a problem...*

Plenty of work often burdened talented people, as expected. Still, there was also a limit to how much a human could handle. This world was similar to Ryoma's home in that one day lasted twenty-four hours, and regardless of one's abilities, the length of a day was a universal fact. Julianus was aware of that and did not turn a blind eye to it.

In any case, Joshua was in charge of not only spying and counterespionage but also logistics and organization. Joshua could lead the troops on the front line as a commander if the O'Itormea Empire were to try to invade again. No matter how many men they had, would it be enough?

*It seems Grahart and Greed have been helping Joshua as much as they can, but... Is it enough?*

Grahart Henschel and Orson Greed were some of the best warriors in the Kingdom of Xarooda. To Julianus, they were his most trustworthy retainers. Both had staggering amounts of power and experience as soldiers, surpassing even Joshua. For all they excelled as warriors, they shamefully lacked resourcefulness and were not suited for navigating politics. They excelled at leading troops, attacking enemies head-on, and pulverizing their formations. This did not carry over to more subtle skills such as understanding the intentions and motivations of others, outsmarting their enemies, or more administrative skills like managing provisions for their troops.

They had received a certain level of education to look after themselves, even if that was just being able to wipe their own behinds. The reality was that there was no hope for them to lead the entirety of Xarooda's army. Thus the responsibility fell onto the man with more ample wisdom and knowledge. That was the one downside of being a nation renowned for its military might.

*The nobles, who should lead the country's politics, are no help either.*

Regardless of that, he couldn't remove the nobles from power. The situation resembled the one Lupis found herself in, though there were slight differences.

*I have to work on improving the current situation for the next ruler.*

Making peace with the O'ltormea Empire was a last-ditch effort to stabilize the country. Unfortunately, there was still a long way to go before they could achieve that.

Julianus's train of thought was suddenly interrupted when he coughed.

Phlegm caught in his throat, causing him to cough lightly. Julianus pulled out a silk handkerchief and wiped his mouth with it. He then looked at it, noticing fresh, red blood mixed in with contents. And so, he folded the handkerchief up and returned to his pocket.

*I'm still not free of this cough.*

Julianus had developed this cough several months ago and assumed it was a mere cold until weeks passed with no improvement. After a visit with the royal physician, he learned that it was simply complications caused by his age and overwork, with nothing to worry about. His cough showed no signs of stopping, and recently he had noticed blood mixed in with the phlegm. That said, Julianus still had checkups with the physician and was taking prescribed medicine, feeling there was no more he could do. Since his coughing fits were short, and he was doing fine, he didn't feel his life was in danger.

*I guess it is just my age,* mused Julianus as he took the prescribed medicine from his desk drawer. He poured himself some water and took the medicine, intending to take a nap to help clear up his throat.

*I'm not dying just yet...*

He then leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, aiming to rest briefly. Julianus hadn't been blessed with heirs, so he knew that he had to survive his illness to withstand the attacks that threatened the Kingdom of Xarooda—that was the only option left.

As the king of Xarooda drifted off to sleep at his desk, a young woman in the neighboring country harbored similar worries.

Two weeks had passed since the war ended at the royal capital of Pireas in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. The atmosphere that once burned with bloodthirst and fighting spirit no longer remained. Villages and towns around the royal capital had returned to their everyday routine, bringing food and goods to Pireas. Merchants from neighboring countries had sniffed out business opportunities and were gradually appearing in the capital. All of which signaled that the war was over—but not that everything had returned to how it was before the war.

The life the city's inhabitants led before the siege had left no mark, only remaining in their memories, similar to the memories held by the older generation, who would nostalgically tell tales of the old days. And it would not be Queen Lupis's reign that they looked back on fondly, but that of her father, Pharst II. A lot had changed for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria these past few years. It was truly a time of upheaval, in which the waves of chaos tossed around the citizens of the royal capital. That might not have been the most accurate way to put it—but at the very least, many were affected. Regardless of their level of influence, everyone in the kingdom could not outrun the wave that poured over the city. Thus, the queen who rose from the chaos could be said to have been the one person who had to endure it all.

Rulers spent most of their lives in their offices.

A young woman sat at the desk in her office, elbows leaning on the table and supporting her head. Mountains of documents kept appearing before her with no break.

"Haa..." The young woman let out a deep sigh. She seemed to be around her mid to late teens and would soon no longer be a "young woman" but a "fully



fledged woman” as she approached maturity. She was the age where one should have plenty of energy, eagerly dreaming of their future. However, in her sigh lay the weight and agony of someone much older. Her sadness resembled the grief of an overworked salaryman, unable to catch up on work. At any rate, she did not look like the powerful figure she was.

No matter how much she sighed, the pile of documents showed no signs of decreasing. She lightly stretched and restarted her work, wearing a look of defeat.

*Why am I stuck doing this kind of stuff?* she thought, even if the answer was obvious. The documents handed to her were all important matters linked to governance of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, most of which required her final approval. It was surely strange for a young woman under twenty to deal with these sorts of documents.

*There’s no end to them. Looks like I’ll be having a late dinner today too.*

No guideline stated that a ruler could not eat until they completed their work. The maids and kitchen staff who served her all wished for her to have dinner at a certain time, but the young queen didn’t want that. She preferred to enjoy her dinner after completing all of her work. Of course, if she put off eating too late, the food would get cold.

*Although, being queen means all my food must be tested for poison, so it ends up going cold either way.*

Risk one’s life, or enjoy one’s meal. The ultimate decision.

*But all I’ve had today is cookies and sandwiches for lunch.*

Light foods such as sandwiches were just as delicious cold, but it wouldn’t be enough for a woman to have such light meals for both lunch and dinner. As she thought about the light meals she had for breakfast and lunch, she wanted to eat the full course supper prepared by the talented chefs at the palace. She harbored these thoughts as she continued to sign the documents. That was all that was required to confirm them—a simple stamp. It was a short task which took mere seconds to complete. There was not nearly enough time to examine each of the documents before she stamped them. She would have needed a day to read the contents of the documents from start to finish.



While the young woman could read, her unusual upbringing had not allowed her to receive the usual royal education. Although she was a recognized member of the royal family, her status meant she underwent a less rigorous education than a usual royal. Although she could read and write, that did not mean she could deal with the matters appropriately. The government officials and secretaries who served her were very much aware of this.

*I wonder if it's better if I don't get involved in all the details.*

Even though it was her duty to approve the documents, she did not need to confirm the contents of every document. She only had to do so if it were a document concerning the life or death of a member of the royal family, in which case she would take all the time necessary to confirm the details. Relevant departments had already approved most of the documents piled high before the young lady, and she just needed to sign them to confirm the decisions that had been made. In extreme cases, she could get by with stamping and not even glancing at the contents. Not to mention that the newly appointed general, Helena Steiner, and the similarly appointed prime minister, Diggle McMaster, had already confirmed the contents of the documents as her closest vassals. One could say there was no need for the queen to decide anything about which proposals were implemented.

*All of this is way above my head, anyway.*

Currently, she was in no position to make such significant political decisions, as she was merely a peripheral member of the royal family up until two weeks ago. Before, she had a life with no sort of authority, which Helena and Diggle knew.

*Well, there's no way anyone would even let me participate in government affairs before.*

It was the expected course of action. After all, the young woman was a potential political enemy that threatened Lupis's authority.

If Radine had tried getting involved in politics instead of sitting on the sideline, there would have been no possibility that she would have survived this long. Others would undoubtedly have made her death appear as an accident or a complication from an illness—and that wasn't her just being paranoid.

*From her point of view, I'm nothing but a mere fake, she thought.*

From the young woman's perspective, Lupis Rhoadserians was difficult to approach because the former queen only saw the younger woman as a hindrance. Although they were half sisters with different mothers, Lupis had only reluctantly acknowledged that fact due to various political factors, which was reasonable.

*It's not like I'm confident about being royalty either.*

After all, Radine had no concrete evidence linking her as a blood relative to the previous king, Pharst II. Identifying blood groups, not to mention DNA, was still unreliable in this world. The only evidence the young woman had to link her to the king was her silver hair and the pendant the king had given her mother. Silver hair was rare among the general population but a common trait for those of the Rhoadserians royal line. She had also heard from her now-deceased mother that her father was a man of high rank. However, it was hard to say if that was actual evidence.

*Still, it's not like only people with Rhoadserians blood have silver hair, and who knows how honest my mother was being.*

It could have been a comforting lie from her mother. It was also difficult to use the pendant from the king as evidence, because a skilled craftsman could have easily forged it, and there was no way to prove the original owner. For Lupis to accept the young woman as one of her own based on that alone would have been strange. The young woman had a good idea of how Lupis felt, and as a result, she kept her distance from Lupis as much as possible.

*It's just best if neither of us interact with one another.*

However, the young woman's kindness and worldly wisdom had backfired on her.

"Your Majesty, I apologize, but could you please also look at this document?" asked a bureaucrat as they added another document to the pile. While the bureaucrat had placed it gently on top, it still sent a shock wave to her chair, causing her to smile wryly.

"They just keep coming... It's giving me a headache," said Radine

Rhoadserians. She was the head of the castle and the dramatically ill-fated young woman who had become the ruler of this country.

No amount of complaining would reduce the paperwork.

*There's nothing I can do about it, I guess,* thought Radine as she reached out for a document.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the office door. The bureaucrat looked to Radine for confirmation, and she responded with a slight nod. When the bureaucrat opened the door, a scent of flowers filled the room. Radine looked at the woman pushing a cart into the room and smiled. The woman beamed brightly in return.

"Your Majesty, would you like to take a break? Everyone helping you must be equally exhausted," said the woman.

Radine wore a doubtful expression in response to those words, as she wasn't so stupid that she didn't understand the implications of the woman's suggestion. Yet she formed her usual smile and glanced at the bureaucrats, gently nodding.

"Okay... Shall we take a moment?"

The bureaucrats all nodded slightly before leaving the room.

"So, what would you like to discuss...Charlotte? I see you've personally prepared our tea."

Charlotte Halcyon smiled calmly and picked up the teapot she had prepared.

"Today's tea is from the central continent of Lisnors. I recommend you enjoy it with this sweet known as a macaron," said Charlotte, pouring the amber liquid into a cup and filling the room with an even richer aroma. "Here you are, Your Majesty."

Radine looked at the tea and sweets placed on the table and smiled.

*Tea from Lisnors is a famous and luxurious item. That goes for the sugar too. There is usually no issue serving this to a queen. However...*

The meaning behind the gesture changed because Charlotte Halcyon had brought it.



Of course, she had not done so out of concern for Radine's health. Radine had been working since the morning, and it was far past lunchtime. But there was no need for Charlotte Halcyon, the daughter of the esteemed Marquis Arthur Halcyon, to play the role of a maid. Charlotte secretly boasted great power as a lady-in-waiting in the royal court. While nothing forbade Radine from preparing tea on her own, when considering her position, it would have made more sense if one or two low-ranking maids had served it instead. Since Charlotte had brought the wagon here herself, there was an obvious conclusion.

"I see... That's what you wish to talk about," said Radine, reaching for a macaron. *Tea leaves from Lisnors are one of the most successful trade items in the Mikoshiba barony. Not to mention, I heard from Helena that macarons were one of Baron Mikoshiba's favorite sweets. It's a rather intricate item.*

The multicolored macarons were exquisite, emitting a sweet scent and resembling a piece of art. It differed from the sweets that Radine knew since this was an item that required a very skilled chef using only the finest ingredients. Not many people in Rhoadseria were skilled enough to make such a luxurious sweet. It would be impossible to obtain even for Radine as the queen of the country.

*He has the financial power to do this, backed up by military power.*

Radine tossed the macaron into her mouth and let the flavor enthrall her. The pillowy dough on the outside was crunchy and delicious, while the cream inside wasn't overly sweet, permeating one's heart. The aftertaste of unsweetened tea complemented the cookie nicely, but Queen Radine wasn't mesmerized by the sensation for long.

"It's delicious. I wonder, does that man often enjoy such delicious sweets?" Radine obviously referred to a certain someone, and Charlotte chuckled.

"You're very quick-witted, Your Majesty. The previous ruler wasn't that fast to pick up on such subtleties. Made for a very boring prank."

Radine tilted her head. "Is that true? I think you were being quite obvious."

Charlotte, a very prominent female member of the royal court, had also emptied the room of others under the guise of them taking a break. All of that meant she had something she wished to talk about that others should not be

privy to.

*Not to mention, she brought goods that are heavily related to the Mikoshiba barony.*

Radine believed Charlotte hinted toward a discussion relating to Baron Mikoshiba. Yet that didn't seem to be the case for Charlotte.

"That man isn't foolish nor a bad person... But he has an emotional side. I'm sure you'll soon understand," stated Charlotte with a regretful expression.

"That's rather candid of you to express such an opinion. Though, I can't disagree with it," replied Radine, smirking. Charlotte's critique was spot-on, even if one couldn't easily tell it was correct. Meltina and Mikahil, who had suffered alongside Lupis, would probably have a lot to say in protest if they were to hear it. A person's opinion of someone changed based on their relationship with said individual. Many people in Rhoadseria would have agreed with Charlotte.

That said, among the populace there would also be a lot of criticism aimed at the ruler of the country, although it was mostly all meant for the former ruler.

*While they do refrain from expressing themselves too harshly, they could get imprisoned or even executed for saying such things,* noted Radine. She would not question Charlotte's intention. *I don't have many allies, after all.*

Viewing all the masses as allies would raise her numbers somewhat, but it was difficult to deny that she lacked resourceful allies who could help run the country. Many potential allies still fostered a hatred for Ryoma Mikoshiba. That was understandable—a lot of nobles and knights had lost their lives in the northern subjugation.

*Looking at the current state of the kingdom, making an enemy of the Mikoshiba barony would be equivalent to suicide.*

The nobles knew that and didn't make their disdain for the man publicly known. Even though they understood it all too well, that didn't mean they were able to keep their feelings bottled up. The hostility almost burst out the seams at meetings when discussing the country's management. Their desire to shave

away at the Mikoshiba barony's political and military power was evidence of this fact. The nobles' antipathy had, however, clashed with Helena and the others who were well aware of the Mikoshiba barony's strength and the current state of the kingdom.

*Well, it's not like I don't understand how they feel.*

However, Charlotte had made a noticeable distinction between herself and the nobles.

*Among all the nobles who hold hatred for that man, Charlotte has been one of my allies since the very beginning.*

Despite losing her father, Charlotte had made a very rare example of seemingly not holding any hatred or loathing toward Ryoma Mikoshiba or his retainers.

*I'm still unsure if she is holding back and waiting for an opportunity, or if she really doesn't hold any ill will toward him.* Either way, Charlotte Halcyon was an influential retainer who knew it would be foolish for Radine to criticize her. *I wonder if she considered that and showed it by joining me.*

To Lupis, Charlotte had been someone who had become a different kind of mental support, distinct from Meltina and Mikhail. Nonetheless, Charlotte was quick to throw Lupis to the side.

*I do find it rather suspicious.*

However, it was a suspicion that would bear no answer. There would be no sense in Radine turning away such a powerful game piece as Charlotte based on slight suspicions.

*Plus, there's no real reason for me to continue observing Lupis's failures.*

Believing in people was harder than all else. People had suffered fatal wounds from believing in those who were untrustworthy. But it was likewise dangerous to doubt everyone, because feeling distrusted could also move a person to betrayal.

"Your Majesty... Is it not to your liking?" Charlotte spoke timidly. Radine remained deep in silence for a long while before she gently shook her head.

“No, I thought I ought to be careful too.”

“I see. Although I haven’t worked with you for long, you’re doing well as far as I know.”

“I hope that is the case.”

Charlotte smiled gently, nodding to Radine’s apprehensive words. Radine had no experience with political work but managed her daily tasks thanks to the help of Helena and the others working for the crown. Additionally, she only had talented people helping her due to her abilities. She approached the task of ruling differently than Lupis, who was adamant to take the initiative personally. And Charlotte knew Radine wouldn’t have agreed with that based on her silence and smile. Radine then moved onto the main subject.

“So... I assume you wish to discuss how we plan to proceed with the Mikoshiba barony, right?”

Inevitably, a sense of hesitation was present in her words. Although unsure, her conclusion was correct.

“Yes, I thought it would be best to ask you your thoughts directly, Your Majesty.”

“I see...” *She wants to know my decision.*

Radine had already cleared up how she would proceed with the Mikoshiba barony. Both Viscount McMaster and Helena had already acknowledged it. They had already discussed the details, but had yet to announce them publicly. If someone carelessly leaked the information, there was a chance that the nobles would suddenly riot.

*Well, it’s not the most interesting plan, but...*

The plan was to use the Mikoshiba barony’s army and financial strength to sustain the country. Simply put, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria would humiliatingly become a vassal state to the Mikoshiba barony. The kingdom boasted a five-hundred-year history yet had to bow before an overnight aristocrat—with dubious beginnings—and his band of mercenaries. It was an emotionally difficult pill to swallow.

*But we have no other choice...*

In terms of territory, Rhoadseria had leagues more land than the barony, but could not manage the country properly because of lacking military and financial power. They had no other hand to play: the simplest and most realistic measure to take was to bring Rhoadseria under the Mikoshiba barony's protection.

The kingdom was in an unprecedented state of instability ever since Radine took over the throne from Lupis. Huge tax losses had occurred because of the influx of refugees. While everything seemingly was returning to normal on the surface, one would soon notice the sparks of war and chaos flickering in the background. Radine could only run the kingdom due to the Mikoshiba barony's prowess. Without its support, the remaining nobles would no doubt begin to plot to overthrow the throne, seeking greater authority, leading to citizens also revolting.

*It would be safe to assume that making an enemy of the Mikoshiba barony would be suicide. No matter how one feels about it, there is no realistic option other than to keep him on our side... Even if that does lead the nobles to revolt.*

Besides, it wasn't such a bad choice when looking at it logically. Having Rhoadseria's greatest adversary as an ally during such a time would benefit the longevity of the kingdom—another huge benefit.

*If we announce that we are a vassal state, the nobles within the kingdom will revolt. The Mikoshiba barony might not even accept us as a controlled state.*

There were a lot of benefits for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria to gain by coming under the Mikoshiba barony's influence, even if the kingdom's people didn't find it an appealing offer. Though, they could negotiate those terms. An official document could allow the barony and the kingdom to maintain the pretense that they were equals, even if the truth of the actual arrangement differed significantly.

*Plus, a vassal state can take on many forms.*

The term "vassal state" sounded humiliating, often invoking the image of a slave and master. However, there were two forms of vassalage: one where a state treated another like a slave, and one where the other retained a level of autonomy and discretionary power.



The question was, which would Rhoadseria become?

*From that man's perspective, giving a rebellious kingdom some discretionary power would be more beneficial than meddling in its affairs. He could also aim to benefit from trade agreements too. It would be the safer, more effective option and something that he could realistically negotiate.*

In any case, Rhoadseria was vastly larger than the land that the Mikoshiba barony held, even with the cession of the northern continent. That also meant the Kingdom of Rhoadseria had a great deal more people.

*No matter how he feels about it, I'm sure he also understands the problems that would arise if he cut ties with us.*

Radine knew that Ryoma Mikoshiba wished to become independent from Rhoadseria. This fact partially explained his aversion toward the kingdom.

*It's understandable that he feels that way. He was essentially used, then betrayed at the end of it all.*

Whether that was true was a delicate matter. It was undeniable that Lupis had deceived Ryoma Mikoshiba, who was a pitiful victim. In this situation, an emotional aspect arose. Moreover, Ryoma Mikoshiba harbored disgust toward nobles.

*Judging from how he treated Counts Bergstone and Zeleph, he had no admiration for nobles who paid no attention to their duties and instead merely clung to their power.*

Unfortunately, those nobles were a dime a dozen in the kingdom. Ryoma Mikoshiba had adamantly refused all positions Radine had offered, showing how much he didn't want to associate with dimwitted nobles. Regardless of how Ryoma Mikoshiba felt, cutting ties with Rhoadseria would be impossible.

*Cutting said ties with us would cause the barony net losses, even when considering the economic benefits.*

Should he completely break away from Rhoadseria, he would throw away a commercial market several times larger than the land he owned. Moreover, the Mikoshiba barony would have no choice but to maintain relations with Rhoadseria if the O'ltormea Kingdom invaded Xarooda again. Of course, there

was no way Radine could share such thoughts with Charlotte.

*At least not until I hear her opinions on the matter...* “Okay... But I think I would like to hear your opinion first, Charlotte. As it’s a matter that concerns the nation, it’s not something I can talk about freely,” said Radine with a probing look.

Charlotte had picked up on the nuance as she raised her hand to her chin and tilted her head with a smile that soon disappeared. The familiar, older-sisterlike Charlotte no longer stood before Radine. Instead, there was the woman who had risen to the rank of marquis despite her gender.

“Understood. It makes sense why you would think that, Your Majesty. I wasn’t considerate enough,” responded Charlotte.

Asking the queen for her opinion was akin to digging into the nation’s plans, essentially prying into state secrets. It was entirely natural that Radine could not reveal anything.

So Charlotte, with a piercing look in her eyes, shared her thoughts on the matter, which was a dangerous gamble to take as a high-ranking noble leader. Leaks of their conversation might affect her house. After all, how the kingdom dealt with the Mikoshiba barony was a delicate issue. Once Charlotte had shared her thoughts, Radine shared her intentions to live up to the resolution of the great woman, Charlotte Halcyon.

Once Charlotte had finished her conversation with Radine, she left the office and maneuvered the cart through the palace corridors.

“I never expected that she had thought that far ahead. Even though she is of commoner origins and hasn’t received a proper education, she is incredibly prudent.” Charlotte’s face was stiff like a Noh mask. She had let those words slip out because no one was around to hear her, though it wasn’t something the usually cautious Charlotte would say. Radine had surprised her so much that a deep thought escaped her lips.

*Moreover, Her Highness has even thought as far ahead as marrying Baron Mikoshiba,* thought Charlotte.

For the ruling classes like nobles and royalty, a judicious marriage was the most effective method to strengthen one's position. When considering reconciliation with the Mikoshiba barony, uniting under marriage wasn't an unrealistic option.

*If he has that much financial and military power, then nobles throughout the kingdom should be requesting to marry him.*

Families with an unmarried daughter wouldn't easily give them away until they were suitable for marriage. It wasn't difficult to imagine some families taking in adopted daughters just to have them marry Ryoma Mikoshiba. That was how impressive his achievements were; his martial prowess was a particularly alluring trait. Given that, Radine's line of thinking was sound. Even Charlotte had entertained the possibility of marrying herself off to Baron Mikoshiba.

*That's a logical conclusion for me to come to as someone raised as a noble. Yet for Radine, the queen, it was rather unexpected she was readying herself for such an option.*

It was the best path to take. If Radine were to marry Baron Mikoshiba, that would ensure he remained as Rhoadseria's protector. Radine would opt for a system that allowed Baron Mikoshiba to support the kingdom, and seeking unification through marriage was the only way to reach that goal.

When faced with a difficult foe, the best thing to do was try to make them an ally instead.

*Even if Baron Mikoshiba annexed the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, I'd expect him to do it properly. As expected of the Devil of Heraklion—although he goes by that name, it seems to apply only to the battlefield.*

In essence, Rhoadseria would be his wife's hometown. Despite the hatred he carried for nobles, he was not a ruthless man; it was human nature that he would do his best to annex the country appropriately. At least, that was certainly more likely to happen than him marrying some noble's daughter. Even if Ryoma Mikoshiba was a heartless demon, when considering his character, it wasn't something he would do recklessly. While many regarded him as cold and ruthless on the battlefield, he would not have so many vassals working

alongside him if he were a truly demonic leader. A bad reputation could hinder him as he tried to expand his land.

*But...at her young age she has already considered marriage.*

It was impossible to say if anything would come of the idea, as even political marriages depend on the other party's intentions. However, it was not the wrong decision regarding the future of the kingdom. In fact, it was the correct decision to make as a member of the ruling class. Charlotte had suggested a political marriage when she explained her thoughts to Radine.

*When one of the people in a political marriage is the ruler of a kingdom, that tends to change things a lot.*

Radine Rhoadserians was still a young teen. While Charlotte understood it wasn't likely the case, Radine was at an age when one would have innocent fantasies and hopes about marriage. Not to mention, Radine had lived as a commoner and received no formal royal education from a young age. Charlotte didn't expect Radine, who wasn't raised as a future ruler, to consider political marriage.

*When I first heard what Her Majesty had to say, I thought Helena or Diggle had put the thought into her head.*

The plan wasn't something a person of Radine's age normally would have devised. But the more Charlotte spoke with Radine, the more she realized she had gotten the wrong idea. She had unexpectedly learned the resolve of the young girl who now sat on the throne, leaving her feeling ashamed of her actions and thoughts.

*What an irony... The scorned illegitimate child actually can rule...*

Charlotte viewed Lupis Rhoadserians as a good person, albeit dimwitted and irresponsible. Lupis hadn't been willing to take responsibility for her actions, refusing to do so out of fear of getting hurt.

*Lupis would have been much better off as an ordinary citizen with no responsibility.*

But the reality was different. Lupis Rhoadserians was the ruler of a country, and the future of its people lay heavy on her shoulders.

*Of course, Lupis understood that herself.*

That was why she had put a variety of policies together.

*Not all of them bore fruit, though. One could say it was bad luck, but that wasn't the only reason.*

In Charlotte's view, success as a ruler all depended on whether one had readied themselves. If it were Lupis, she would not even consider a political marriage with Ryoma Mikoshiba.

*I can't say if it's because she doesn't like his looks, the fact that his origins are unknown, or some other reason. But I can say that she would never opt to marry him.*

To put it simply, she wasn't prepared to sacrifice herself.

*That's where Radine differs.*

The two of them had different levels of readiness to lead a nation.

Lupis, the legitimate heir to the throne, despised responsibility like a commoner. Meanwhile, Radine was the illegitimate child, raised as a commoner, who received no formal training yet was prepared to do her duty as ruler.

*It doesn't get more ironic than that.*

Charlotte despised the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, where they regarded one as inferior for being a woman and nobles hungry for power battled in the shadows. High taxes squeezed the people dry, and their discontent had reached those in the royal capital. Just who in their right mind would be proud of such a country? That was why Charlotte sought to ensure her and her family's survival.

Although she had acted like a friend toward Lupis, she had been using the former queen. She didn't feel as if she was doing anything wrong because she didn't regard Lupis as the ruler of the kingdom. When Radine took the throne, Charlotte first acted to protect her family by working for Radine, seeing her service as a method to achieve that goal.

*I had initially planned to use her...*

Once Charlotte saw Radine try her hardest to navigate unfamiliar politics, she

recalled her duties as a noble. That led her to state her opinions before Radine, even though she was well aware of the current situation and the danger of doing so. However, it seemed Charlotte's resolve was very naive compared to Radine's. Not that Charlotte thought that was a bad thing; it was a happy and refreshing development.

*I ought to tell the others what happened,* thought Charlotte as the image of other influential noblewomen in the royal court crossed her mind. Even though those women were associates who lived within the same court, they had a strange relationship. They were supposed to be mutual enemies due to power struggles between their families, but in practice they were neither friends nor foes.

They had overcome their ostensible conflicts to endure the current hardships together as allies. After all, one wrong move in the leadership of a noble house could spell disaster, leading to their destruction. In these times, the best course was to rely on people in a similar situation. A strange twist of events—foes becoming friends. Or rather, a situation where those blessed with peak political ability would survive.

The women Charlotte referred to were similar to her in that they were strong women who had become head of their houses. She would need their help to see Radine's plans come to fruition.

*They'll probably be very shocked to hear what I have to tell them.*

Charlotte saw a maid approaching from the opposite direction.

"Apologies for disturbing you while you work, but could you pass on a message for me?" Charlotte called out to the maid.

"Yes? To whom?" the maid responded.

"If you could tell Bettina that I wish to gather everyone for a spot of tea, that would be great. She'll know what to do from there. Ask her to prepare it for four in the afternoon at the usual spot. And could you also mention that I'd like to try the Lisnors tea she has? I'll bring macarons to have with the tea."

The maid's gaze became piercing. For noble ladies, a tea gathering wasn't as relaxing as one would imagine, and was quite the opposite instead. It wasn't a



fun event at all, nor was it a time for socializing; it was a battleground for influential families and a secret gathering for conspiracies. At the very least, the Halcyon family head would not host a frivolous event. Those unaware of that fact wouldn't survive in this royal court.

The maid's look disappeared immediately. She was well-informed about the danger surrounding the power struggles of the court as a result of working there. Charlotte would only entrust someone equally in the know with the duty of delivering her message.

"Of course," said the maid, bowing her head.

Charlotte took some gold coins from her breast pocket and handed them to the maid. "Here's some payment for the trouble."

"Thank you. I'll get right to it." The maid bowed deeply before turning on her heel and heading off. Usually, a simple task like passing on a message didn't require such payment, but Charlotte knew too well that now wasn't the time to be frugal. People generally only acted when motivated by some potential benefit, similar to how a car wouldn't run without gasoline. For money, people would likely do a better job the more they received.

*All right. With this I can ensure she'll pass on the message. What comes next will depend on the women's opinions. Though I'm pretty sure we've already reached a conclusion.*

The people attending the tea gathering would all be members of high-ranking families, all women equally talented as Charlotte. One wouldn't expect such women to come to an unreasonable conclusion. While there might have been some errors to their thinking, they would mostly reach the same decision as Charlotte. In actuality, Charlotte had an idea of the outcome already.

*Another issue is...I need to approach the subject in a manner that doesn't affect anyone's honor.* Charlotte presumed the women weren't foolish enough to care about keeping face, of course. However, that was purely conjecture and not a definite fact. Based on the situation, an outburst of emotions could occur. It was also possible that the ladies would consider what was to come and withstand the current situation. Allowing them to withstand the situation could become an issue. Complaints, if left to fester, could accumulate.

*On top of that, this will be with people who were once my rivals.*

This wasn't the first time negotiations had taken place. Even after they decided to support Radine, discussions wouldn't end. It was only natural that Charlotte would hope for negotiations that let her keep face for the others.

"Very well, I should probably get ready for the meeting," said Charlotte to herself. She had asked for tea from Lisnors and mentioned she would provide macarons; these items discreetly hinted at the meaning behind the sudden meeting. Therefore, she had to prepare. *The question is where do I get my hands on some...*

Originally, Helena had some macarons at a meeting with Baron Mikoshiba. She had fallen in love with the flavor, so much so that Ryoma Mikoshiba gave her the recipe, which she then shared with the chefs at her estate. With their stylish exterior and variety of flavors kneaded into their colorful dough, macarons had become widespread among the nobles within the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. But the flavors were hit and miss.

*The macarons the chefs here make can't even hold a candle to the ones we received from Ryoma.*

The palace chefs had, however, done well in replicating the shape and producing cookies of a quality appropriate for the queen. Charlotte thought that to be the case, based on Queen Radine's reaction to them earlier. She found they weren't as chewy as the ones she had shared with Helena.

*I wonder if I could ask Lady Helena to share some with me again.*

As far as Charlotte knew, Helena and Baron Mikoshiba were rather close due to their past experiences. There were rumors Ryoma Mikoshiba refrained from conquering the Kingdom of Rhoadseria out of consideration for Helena. Considering that dinner parties and tea gatherings were a common method of exchanging information, there would be a high chance of Helena having some macarons made by Baron Mikoshiba's chefs.

*I have no idea if the rumors are true, but I don't believe they're all lies either.*

The idea that Ryoma spared Rhoadseria just for Helena was a dubious tale, at best. There was no way one woman decided the fate of an entire country. If

they were lovers, then Charlotte could believe it. Yet Helena and Ryoma Mikoshiba's relationship resembled that of a grandmother and grandson—not mother and son due to their age gap. Imagining a romantic relationship between this man and woman was difficult.

*According to my information, nothing suggests Baron Mikoshiba prefers older women.*

Charlotte had received information Ryoma would go to entertainment districts with his subordinates and often chose young, beautiful women to spend the night with. If anything, he wasn't one for older women or little girls. But he held some consideration for Helena, and she seemed to care a lot for Mikoshiba. Helena knew that a full frontal attack against Baron Mikoshiba would spell disaster, and there would be no end to the war, even if they were to somehow win.

As a result, there was probably a high chance Helena would be willing to share some of the goods she had received from Baron Mikoshiba with Charlotte.

*It wouldn't be the best idea to anger the women I'll be meeting with today.*

Charlotte was not pleased she would have to bother Helena for sweets, especially when she was involved in important work regarding the future of the country. But it was a small price to pay if it meant avoiding bringing about any discontent from Charlotte's friends with their discerning sweet tooth. People were happy eating delicious foods, while some would become angry when eating something not delectable. Helena, this country's greatest general of all people, would understand that.

*Lady Helena will surely understand. My only worry is that she may have eaten them all herself.*

A wave of worry flooded Charlotte's chest. No matter how much Helena understood Charlotte's intentions, if she had eaten most of the macarons, she would have none to share. That said, Helena was in her sixties, soon approaching her seventies.

*Considering Lady Helena's age, I can't imagine she's actually eaten them all,* thought Charlotte as she pushed the wagon, eagerly awaiting the future the

new queen had in store for the country.

## Chapter 2: Hunter and Prey

Pireas, the royal capital of Rhoadseria, was a stronghold city with thick stone walls surrounding it. Five hundred years after the establishment of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, Pireas boasted of being an impenetrable fortress. To those living in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, the royal capital was another world. In more modern terms, it was similar to how those who lived in the countryside in Japan admired Tokyo. However, that once admired city was no longer like it was before. It wasn't due to people fleeing the city because of the war, since many still lived within its walls. Overall, it was a large city on a large continent, with a population reaching millions. There was no way its people would abandon the capital so quickly, even after witnessing the terrors of war.

But the liveliness and passion naturally generated by the residents was missing. It felt more like there was an oppressive atmosphere hanging above the city. This feeling was fitting for a capital city that had just lost a war, for better or worse. The leader of the country was still a member of the Rhoadserians family. Although Lupis Rhoadserians had fled the city, Queen Radine, who had taken over the throne in her stead, was part of the royal family despite the dark rumors surrounding her birth. That wasn't to say that everything would be the same just because a Rhoadserians was ruling again. It was something more than Lupis handing over the throne to Radine. The true ruler of this country was now a young supreme ruler who brandished a banner of a sword entwined with a two-headed snake with gold and silver scales. The unease present made sense under the current situation.

It was a suitable illustration of a losing kingdom on the verge of change. The tragedy of those caught up in the waves unfolded in the corner of a town near the royal capital walls. However, the affair wasn't a tragedy brought about by the winner of the war, Baron Mikoshiba.

"How could this happen..." The words fell from Adam's mouth. He and others were in front of a restaurant on one of the back streets that forked off from the main road that ran through Pireas toward the royal castle. A young couple ran a

restaurant that had opened around a year and a half ago, but it was unknown where they had learned to cook. Regardless of their age, the food they made was delicious, affordable for regular people, and rather famous among those who lived in the city.

The wife was talented, generous, and sociable, so it made sense that the restaurant had many customers. Still, the restaurant was small and cozy, as twenty people could fill the establishment, which meant that they had to line up more seats outside the restaurant. Even then, there was no end to the customers day after day, showing the young couple were very talented chefs.

*I wonder if it's true that they previously worked as chefs for a noble family.*

That was merely a rumor, but the couple were talented enough that it was hard to deny outright. The restaurant had garnered such a good reputation in the neighborhood that commoners in nearby districts had warmed up to the restaurant. Moreover, the couple had become cherished friends of Adam and those who lived in the neighborhood.

*Finally, we can go back to how it was... I can eat my fill of their delicious food... Or so I thought.*

Adam wished that as a customer who had regularly visited the restaurant since it opened. But monsters had trampled on his ordinary yet peaceful wish.

*Should I have stopped them when they said they would open a restaurant?*

As a result of the war, food distribution stagnated, forcing the couple to close up shop for a while. They had reopened mere days before. Then the worst happened.

*I know the nobles have been up to no good and pushing their weight around since coming here from their territories as a result of the war...*

But that didn't mean they could stop the couple from reopening. The restaurant was their only means of income, and its closing would stop that inflow. Not to mention, they had to pay high taxes as they lived within the royal capital. If they could not pay their taxes, they would become slaves, so it was only natural they wanted to resume business as soon as possible. Their decision to reopen the restaurant was a little premature, though.



“I’m begging you! Please stop! At least, spare my wife!”

“Please stop!”

A young man, who appeared to be in his early twenties, had his head pushed on the ground as he begged. Then, a young woman, seemingly his wife, screamed. It was a pitiful scene as the young man could not move because of the onslaught of blows. The men surrounding the young man continued to rain down blows with sheathed swords. No matter how lucky he was, he would surely have had multiple fractured bones. The pain he felt in his right leg and left shoulder meant there was a higher chance they had been broken. Wounds covered his whole body.

Even though he received wave after wave of blows, he still begged his assailants on behalf of his wife. The scene would make most people feel a sense of pity, even his assailants—if only they were people with ordinary feelings. But the men hitting him were monsters in human form, and there was no point in pleading or begging to monsters. Cries for mercy just spurred them to attack further.

*I can’t believe this... How could this happen? Everything was so ordinary just before.*

The couple was in danger of losing both their honor and lives. If anything, it was simply a matter of which came first. To those working in food and drink, this was an everyday occurrence. An overblown need for the limelight and for approval, coupled with the privilege of being a member of a noble family, had resulted in the leading young man of the group losing his temper. He then found fault with the wife, who served the customers, which led to the husband trying to stop him and receiving even more blows in full view of the public.

What came next was the usual pattern of events. Violence invites more violence. The fact the wife was a beautiful young woman only made matters worse. Adam could only stand still as the scene unfolded before his eyes. The other onlookers must have felt the same way as they surrounded the scene. Adam’s body trembled. Blood dripped from his clenched fist as the nails dug into his skin. He felt rage like he had never experienced before in his life.

No one could remain calm in the face of such inhumane acts. Yet Adam stood

still, feeling as if his feet were nailed to the ground. He knew he could easily turn the tide but couldn't make the first step due to a primal terror. Fear of suffering the same violence held him back, though his anger and hatred were visible.

*Why is no one doing anything? Why can't I help them?*

Such questions clouded Adam's mind, even though he knew the answer. Just like he could not move due to fear, the people around him could not move either. In times like these, people could only choose from two options. They could abandon the young man or seek help from a third party. No one would dare to simply desert him, so their only choice was to look for someone who could help.

*I need to call for someone. But who?*

Usually, one would call for the guards at a time like this. The organizations with power in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria were knights, guards, and others in similar positions. Guards were required to protect people of significance and patrol the area. In other words, they were akin to modern-day police officers. Since this situation was a little different, Adam couldn't call for the guards. The monsters assaulting the young man before his eyes were those very same guards that should have been protecting the royal capital.

"Go on then, say something! You want to charge us for the food and booze? Just who do you think this person is?" shouted one of the monsters, pointing at a younger member of their group who was holding on to the man's wife, licking his lips in a vile manner. The younger man had handsome features notable even among nobles. He wore intricate plate armor of seemingly higher quality than the gear worn by the other beasts around him. It was easy to see he was a financially stable noble whose clean-cut features contrasted with his vulgar expression.

He groped the wife's breasts as he restrained her with both arms behind her back, demonstrating a dark, sinister lust through his demeanor.

"I don't want your money. Please, just let my wife go... I beg of you..."

"I'll do anything, so please spare my husband. I'm begging you, don't hurt him anymore."

The two yelled out, each concerned for the other's welfare. Sadly, it was an act that further empowered the beasts who were drunk on blood and violence. The beasts surrounding the young couple sneered cruelly as the victims continued begging.

"To hell with that! No way we're just gonna let you off so easily!"

"Y'know, we came all the way from Viscount Romaine's territory just to look after ya! Our issue with ya is ya don't seem to be all that grateful!" bellowed a beast, kicking the husband in the side with his iron-reinforced boot. Such a blow must have pulverized the young husband's rib, and he bent over like a shrimp and called out in pain.

One of the beasts then spat on the young husband and whispered into his ear. "You're just a dumbass who doesn't know his place. This chap right here is Viscount Romaine's successor, Lord Mario!"

The surrounding beasts all raised their voices.

"That's right! Besides, we're the guards formally requested to secure the capital! Going against us is going against the Kingdom of Rhoadseria!"

"Should we punish you as traitors? We can just say you're spies for Baron Mikoshiba, and it'd be a quick ending for you and your shivering wife!"

"That goes for you lot gawking at us too! Any complaints, we're right here! We'll be *happy* to help!"

From their words, it was easy to see they were drunk. Even so, they probably weren't bluffing, since most nobles in the kingdom were arrogant and corrupt. Nobles rarely rampaged within the royal capital like this, though it was not unheard of. This behavior was most likely the norm where the group of beasts came from. Considering the situation the Kingdom of Rhoadseria was in currently due to losing to Baron Mikoshiba, nobles wouldn't receive harsh punishment for acting out. The kingdom wouldn't be relying on guards summoned from other regions to keep the peace if it had the resources to punish nobles like these. The beasts themselves knew that.

"Go on, call for the other guards! As if anyone would dare strike back at Lord Mario, Viscount Romaine's successor!" shouted the beasts as the onlookers, as

well as the young husband and wife, gazed at the ground.

The onlookers wanted to do something but could not compete with the monsters, leaving everyone frustrated. These monsters were official guards, meaning there was nothing anyone could do. All the crowd could do was wait for the storm to pass. Even if they called for other guards, they were up against a noble. The other guards might not have even had the courage to help the young couple. Perhaps if someone who took pride in their job were to come along, they could have calmed the situation down, even if they were likely to be punished for intervening.

In the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, the gap between the commoners and the aristocracy was huge.

*Why did this happen to us?*

More questions welled up in Adam's mind, and rightfully so. It wasn't easy to ensure the impact of war only affected the battlefield and the surrounding areas, and the longer a war went on, the greater the impact would be. Basically, a conflict that ended quickly would have less of an effect on the civilians. The damage to Pireas from the recent war was minor, especially considering the destiny of the country was hanging in the balance. Other countries would have suffered more in similar attacks, and there was only one reason Pireas hadn't sustained that much damage.

The conflict between the Mikoshiba barony and the military forces of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria had reached a hasty conclusion. A considerable amount of time had passed since the beginning of the northern subjugation, but the siege of Pireas itself had finished in a relatively short period.

*Even though the war had such an unsatisfying end, that Devil didn't even try to sell us off as slaves.*

Regular people's fates were usually tragic after losing a war, as men were conscripted as soldiers and sent to the battlefield. As a result, a majority would lose their lives or receive such grievous wounds that they would no longer be able to lead a normal life. Prisoners of war could avoid such unlucky fates and work as slaves. Soldiers rarely survived wars in which they lost uninjured and returned to a normal life. Many men on Earth experienced those consequences.

That wasn't to say women didn't equally meet perilous fates, and it wasn't always because of the war. Most of their suffering happened before and after wars. Women very rarely participated in battle. Of course, that didn't mean there were no female soldiers here on Earth. Plenty of generals represented their countries, like Helena Steiner and Ecclesia Marinelle. In this way, Earth had an egalitarian society like that of the modern day. But that only applied for those who excelled in combat, such as mercenaries and knights.

Due to martial thaumaturgy, one could strengthen their body, minimizing the gap in physical strength between men and women. Those who hadn't learned martial thaumaturgy and led ordinary lives noticed the difference in physical strength between genders. Men recruited as soldiers made sense of this quickly.

Few nobles or royals would send untrained women as soldiers to war due to the cost-effectiveness and lack of physical aptitude. The only exception was if a country felt outnumbered during a siege; then it would conscript women to bulk up numbers. But that was a desperate measure the weak took if there was no end in sight to the war.

Women often served as combat service support, but seldom crossed swords with enemies. So, why did women meet tragic fates even though they were rarely on the front lines? The answer was that the men who went to war returned with the heart of a beast. Their guilt for doing something so irregular as killing someone, combined with the fear that they could get killed, was enough to drive them to madness.

In order to suppress that madness and forget the horrors they had seen and committed, many soldiers often sought the soft skin and the touch of a woman, even if it meant doing so without the consent of the other person. Such was the manifestation of every living being's survival instinct, but that didn't matter for the person who was the target of such animalistic drives. Claiming it as a human instinct felt like an attempt at justifying their horrific behavior. That said, Adam had also been conscripted as a soldier and had done anything to survive. He had lived for forty years yet held a dark past that he hadn't even shared with his family. While Adam didn't condone or agree with the actions in front of him, he understood why the beasts found peace of mind in behaving thus. As an older

man, he wished he could have offered some words of comfort to the young man who cowered before his eyes.

*However, these men are different. They're simply pieces of shit,* thought Adam.

People often said criminals had a motive to commit their crimes, which had some logic. Those born in poverty usually committed crimes to survive, but some were born into better circumstances and committed crimes out of choice. They were beasts with twisted mindsets, gloating about how they had willingly harmed people. All Adam could do was stare as the scene unfolded, burning into his vision.

*I can't run away... There's no way...*

There was nothing anyone could do. At this rate, the young man's wife would be taken away and used as a plaything. Even so, no one attempted to escape. Although weak, it was their way of protesting the situation since everyone who worried for the couple all had the same feelings. They all prayed that before the gaze from so many witnesses, the beasts would give in to shame, remember their morals, and leave. They knew it was meaningless, but they had no other way to help. As if to make their prayers even more obsolete, one beast kicked the young man again.

"What's wrong, eh?"

"You wanna protect your wife, right? You ain't got time to be squealin'!"

A beast lifted the young man to his feet in order to take another swing at the young man's face, all while the other beasts jeered. But it was no mere slap. The strike from the beast's golden bracer connected with the young man's face and sent a small white object flying from his mouth. The young man seemingly lost consciousness as he fell to his knees.

"Aah..." gasped the young man.

*This isn't good... They're going to kill him,* thought Adam. If they kept this up, the young man would not be long for this world. However, something happened that would subvert those expectations.

"Apologies. May I pass through?" A calm voice came from behind Adam. The

speaker's apparent serenity clashed with the sense of urgency in the air. The calmness irritated Adam, causing him to raise his voice and feel like taking a swing at the person trying to pass through. But he choked on his words before he could reprimand the person.

"Huh? What's that? You're..." Adam trailed off.

A noble dressed in black silk stood before Adam. Although the man's clothes were of high-quality materials, they had a simple design, contrary to the more intricate and gaudy designs popular among Rhoadserian nobles. At first glance, he resembled a battle-worn soldier or an adventurer. Judging from the young man's demeanor, he probably had noble standing. Even though he looked a little older than twenty, he displayed a calm nature that, paired with his somewhat aged face, would place him closer to his thirties. Behind the man were two young women both dressed like Arabian dancers—one with silver hair and the other with blonde hair.

*What are nobles doing here...?*

The man wasn't wearing armor like Viscount Romaine's son and really seemed to be a noble just passing by, even though it was odd for a noble to walk through a back alley like this one. The beasts who had been assaulting the young man couldn't hide their bewilderment at the sudden appearance of a noble.

"Which house are you from? We are currently in the middle of something right now. Could you take a different street?" one of the beasts asked, showing some politeness. No doubt he was aware that when faced with another noble, they wouldn't be able to use their authority as members of Viscount Romaine's house. However, the man with the older face ignored them and crouched near the young man on the ground.

"I see... You've received some harsh punishment. Excuse me, I'll need to touch you a little," said the man.

Without waiting for a response, the stranger placed his hand on the injured man.

"As I thought, they really did a number on you. You have both arms broken, and your rib cage has a comminuted fracture. Thankfully, your bones haven't



caused any harm to your organs, so your life isn't in any danger. You won't be able to cook for a while, though... A shame. I was hoping to taste some of your delicious cooking."

The man stated the obvious; it was only natural that the young man had a broken rib cage after enduring a kick from steel-reinforced shoes. There was no way the young man could cook, and his injuries were so severe there was no guarantee he would fully recover.



Considering the current situation, saving his life would be difficult enough. Although he faced grievous injuries, the newcomer nobleman remained calm, sighing as he turned around and spoke.

“Too bad... Medicine.”

“Excuse me. Please let me through,” said the silver-haired woman, disappearing into the crowd as if a single word had conveyed a command. She soon returned with a small bottle, her hands clasped around it. “Is this enough?”

“Yeah... Should be.”

The man observed the bottle of medicine the silver-haired woman brought and nodded slightly. He then took the bottle and brought it near the young man’s mouth without hesitation.

“I know it’s hard to swallow with the pain, but please try and drink this,” continued the man, pouring a purple liquid into the young man’s mouth. It caused him to cough violently, though he knew it was medicine. He desperately tried to swallow it even as it leaked from the corners of his mouth. The pain subsided, and the young man realized the man in front of him was trying to save him. Thus, he desperately tried to cling to this sliver of hope before him.

“My... My wife... Please... Help my wife...” slurred the young man, doing his best to plead.

“Don’t worry... I’ll deal with that shortly,” said the man, who motioned to the women behind him.

The young man then lost consciousness, perhaps relieved they had saved him. Meanwhile, the group of beasts watched everything take place in silence. From their point of view, it seemed like their plaything had been stolen from them. Letting a stranger interfere and do whatever they wished would be a major hit to their honor. They normally would find fault with the man trying to save the young man, but they did not attempt to stop him. The nobleman was fairly confident in his actions.

“Hey, do you even know what’s going on right now?” spoke up a beast without an inch of the politeness from before. To the beast, the man was not

simply an intruder but an enemy who had interrupted his fun. He hadn't attacked yet only because the man's overwhelming presence intimidated him. The beasts had all nonchalantly surrounded the man, meaning they were ready to fight if needed. The man didn't respond to the beast's movements.

*He's like a king or something...*

Adam was in awe of the man and his vigor. Suddenly, someone's name appeared in his thoughts, purely by whim. He had no way to prove if it was true, yet Adam felt convinced he was correct.

"Baron Mikoshiba," whispered Adam. Unfortunately, it was louder than he had intended. A look of fear covered the beasts' faces. Adam looked around, disregarding everyone else's reactions, and noticed the Mikoshiba barony's crest on a flag fluttering on the horse carriage behind the crowd. The crest had a two-headed snake with gold and silver scales entwined with a sword.

*Is it really him...?* Adam felt a chill run down his spine. To those living in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, Baron Mikoshiba—the Devil of Heraklion—was both their savior and a terrifying traitor. Bards had sung about his military prowess from the kingdom all the way to the far reaches of the western continent. Many said he was a man of wisdom who had successfully led Lupis Rhoadserians to the throne. But Baron Mikoshiba was also an accomplished villain who had destroyed Count Salzberg, former protector of the northern territories, and had seized full control. He had showcased his ability by recruiting the Twin Blades of Count Salzberg, the legendary warriors Signus Galveria and Robert Bertrand. Plus, he possessed the demon-infested Wortenia Peninsula and was king of the blasphemous demi-humans who lived there. Hearsay claimed that when he killed his enemies, he would bathe in their blood as proof of their annihilation. While most tales were exaggerated, there was some truth to them too. Ordinary citizens felt both adoration and fear for him.

Strangely, Adam felt no fear even though Ryoma Mikoshiba stood before him.

*He's less scary and more...* Adam felt a sense of awe. If he were to explain what he was feeling, it would be that. He then prepared himself mentally for the bloodbath that was about to follow.

A beast looked at Ryoma with an investigative gaze, expressing unease and

bewilderment. They must have also noticed the crest on the carriage.

“*The Baron Mikoshiba? Is it really him?*” They had also heard the rumors surrounding Ryoma Mikoshiba, and likely did not want to believe it was indeed him. But they also couldn’t *deny* it was him. After all, the noble standing before them matched the rumors.

“He is dressed like a noble, and the crest on that carriage is Baron Mikoshiba’s... Would such an important figure even come here?”

“Those two young women behind him with the gold and silver hair... Aren’t those the twins who serve Baron Mikoshiba?”

While one couldn’t say all the rumors were true, that didn’t mean they were all lies either, a thought that sent the beasts’ emotions into disarray.

“Lord Mario, what should we do? Isn’t this guy kinda a big deal?” a beast asked. Mario was still holding the young man’s wife with her arms behind her back. He had remained silent the whole time, and the other beasts raised their voices in agreement.

“Right... There’s other girls, anyway...”

“If we back down, they should back down too. I know it’s Baron Mikoshiba, but I doubt he’ll want to go head-to-head with Viscount Romaine just for a couple of commoners, right?”

They were happy to take a violent approach with commoners but were much more timid when it came to other nobles. Even though they preyed on the weak, they cowered before the powerful. But their opponent now wasn’t merely a noble. He was one of the most dangerous men in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. His noble house’s military was one of the strongest in the kingdom. Viscount Romaine was in no position to pick a fight with Baron Mikoshiba. Not to mention, Mario held no official title even though he was next in line to be a viscount. Before an actual baron, he was just a successor—a weak one, to boot. Mario snarled at the weak yet tuck his tail between his legs when facing people stronger than him. While that was a logical approach, it was also a sign of being low in character.

*They’re not afraid to speak their minds, huh? Well, I should expect that of*

*lowlifes who would attempt to steal a man's wife and make her their plaything in broad daylight.*

Ryoma smiled wryly at their behavior. He didn't feel the need to take Viscount Romaine's power into consideration. Even if they were more powerful than him, the conclusion would be the same. Justice and morality didn't depend on how strong or weak someone was.

But it seemed Ryoma's thoughts had shown as Mario Romaine's face twisted ugly as he shouted. "Are you stupid? As if I'm gonna step down! You think I care about Baron Mikoshiha? He's just a conceited upstart!" shouted Mario, throwing the wife aside before taking his sword from its sheath on his lower back. The wife collapsed as she collided with a stone wall, appearing to hit her head. Ryoma, seeing her fall and lie still, signaled to the twins for them to tend to her. She might have had no visible damage, but there could have been internal damage.

"Hey, you all right?"

"Stay with us!"

A group of men noticed Ryoma's signal and came running out from among the crowd. They bowed toward Ryoma, then headed over toward the young man's wife, carefully picked her up, and swiftly left the area. Ryoma was worried about her injury but was more concerned about getting her away from Mario fast.

Mario didn't react at all to the men. He would have never willingly let the wife and her husband escape; doing so would make his attempt to attack and humiliate the couple for his own enjoyment meaningless. And so he turned his attention toward the person who had interrupted him.

"Hey, asshole! Got a problem?" yelled Mario, pointing his sword at Ryoma. The beasts, seeing their master take that attitude, all followed suit. One by one, they unsheathed their swords. Ryoma shrugged as he laughed at them.

"Heh... Quite the impatient lot..." Ryoma hadn't asked them anything, placed any blame on them, or even stated his name or rank. Instead, he had given medicine to the young man they had heavily injured, as well as responded to his pleading asking that they save his wife. Still, he never once said he planned to

capture Mario and his group. In other words, negotiating was still an option for Mario—not that Ryoma had any intention of doing so. It wouldn't have been strange for Mario to assume a sense of camaraderie between two Rhoadserian nobles. Anyone uninformed observer would have assumed that both would patch it up.

If he were dealing with a meddling commoner, no matter how violently Mario responded, it wouldn't have been an issue. But now there was another noble involved, complicating things. As a noble, Ryoma could have overlooked the situation, which could have led to exposing the vulnerabilities of a rival noble house.

Should one take that risk, it would be safe to say that Mario was simply educating or correcting a rude commoner.

*Regardless of that, they have drawn their swords.*

Judging from their actions, they hadn't thought this far ahead. Ryoma had expected Mario to come forward to justify his selfish actions and was disappointed that he did not.

*Well, it won't change the outcome anyway.*

No matter if the beasts behaved modestly or threw their weight around, it would invite the same result. After all, Mario and his group were the kind of people Ryoma despised, and there was no need to uphold Japan's law and morals here.

*I'm glad I can tear these lowlifes a new hole and not worry about repercussions. That's one of the benefits to this world. One of the few benefits of living here.*

Laws and ethics existed here on Earth, but compared to modern Japanese society, it was a lot easier to bend the rules where needed. The law of the jungle was prevalent here, as it was a world where the strong made use of their power.

These men were beasts who had taken human form, and Ryoma was a beast hunter—monsters who harmed humans were to be put down. Ryoma showed the smirk of a demon as that thought came to mind.



“What’s with that smirk of yours... Are you looking down on me? On House Romaine? Do you think we’re scared of you?!” screamed Mario as his grip on his sword trembled slightly with fear and anger.

Ryoma stood still, staring at Mario silently with disdain and ridicule. His gaze was more provocative than words, which spurred them to attack. Their anger and fear had hit the boiling point, sending Mario over the edge.

“That’s enough! Kill him! KILL HIM!”

The rest of the beasts readied themselves.

“Are we really doing this? What about the civilians?” asked one of the beasts.

“I don’t give a damn about them. Everyone’s trying to make a fool of me! There’s no way Baron Mikoshiba would be here, of all places! He’s a liar. I’m gonna do something about it, starting with killing everyone here!”

It was a nonsensical, desperate order from Lord Mario. An impersonator would not go as far as preparing a carriage with Baron Mikoshiba’s crest, nor would he necessarily even resemble the figure in the tales bards had told. It was also virtually impossible for him to fake having the rumored blonde and silver-haired twins along with him as maids. Plus, they were in Pireas, capital of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

The beasts had the pretense that the young couple had been rude to the nobles, and thus they had attacked in retaliation. However, killing Adam and everyone there would force the upper ranks of the knights to act, and Helena and Viscount McMaster would catch wind of it.

*If this were a district controlled by Viscount Romaine, then he could use that power to silence everyone. It wouldn’t be an excuse to kill nearly twenty people in broad daylight, though. Still, I could imagine him doing that.*

It seemed, however, that none of this had occurred to Mario.

*He’s like a bad guy out of a historical play. But at least now I have a good reason to act.*

Mario’s band of beasts was confused and had no choice but to follow his orders. They no longer had any means of retreat. The beasts roared as one of

them slashed at Ryoma.

“Too slow,” said Ryoma, stepping forward with his left foot and punching the beast’s lower jaw while he was wide open. He grabbed the man’s throat and slammed him into the stone wall. The beast’s skull smashed on the surface, raining fresh blood everywhere. It was an outstanding show of skill. Adam, the civilians, and the group of beasts were all at a loss for words. Ryoma then called for their deaths.

“Show them the true fear of controlled violence...and then kill them.”

“Understood!” responded the twins, who had been standing still the entire time. The two of them approached the group of beasts, closing the gap while strengthening themselves using martial thaumaturgy. Their Muldahara chakras hummed as they spun, and the prana produced by those chakras opened their next chakras. All six chakras, from the Muldahara in the perineum to the anja chakra in the middle of their foreheads, rotated and granted their bodies physical abilities which were among the strongest in the world. If the twins took part in a battle of strength with a giant such as a pro wrestler, they would easily win—it would be akin to twisting a baby’s arm. The twins were gifted with rare talents, which had improved thanks to harsh, vigorous training and many battles fought alongside Ryoma Mikoshiba. In reality, they didn’t even need to strengthen their bodies anymore.

The beasts before them weren’t ordinary people like Adam and the other onlookers, nor were they battle-hardened mercenaries like Lione and her group. They weren’t even soldiers who had endured severe training or a grueling selection process. The two women had followed their master’s orders and sought further power to be able to enact them.

“Wind protection.” Verbal thaumaturgy—further increasing their strength. The wind enveloped the twins when they activated the art by speaking its name. It granted protection from a wind spirit in the form of a simple gust. Only a few throughout the whole continent had witnessed the twins strengthening themselves with verbal thaumaturgy. The thaumaturgy they had used was an ability that Ryoma had yet to master.

*Perfect control... Not that I expected any less.*

When strengthening the body with martial thaumaturgy, it affected all aspects of the body—muscular strength, agility, reflexes, and so forth. Verbal thaumaturgy, on the other hand, focused on doing this only to specific parts of the body, and was very useful for heightening senses such as vision or hearing. However, such qualities as muscular strength and agility were a different story. Of course, one could punch someone or swing a sword at someone with all their strength as much as they liked. But there was no guarantee the opponent would sit and take it, despite how powerful the blows were.

It was better if they guarded, but if they dodged, it would leave an opening. *Meaning one would have to abandon their weapon.* Not to mention, from a balance standpoint, strengthening oneself with verbal thaumaturgy could be dangerous. When Ryoma saved the Malfist sisters, he experienced a speed boost from the wind protection. He wasn't confident he could fight normally under the effect of that thaumaturgy. To use an automotive analogy, it would be like changing the engine of a car to a lightweight F1 engine but leaving the rest of the vehicle as it was. Or like adding nitro to gasoline, which one often saw in movies or manga.

*They actually used nitrous oxide. In Japanese, it's often written as "nitoro," when in reality it should be "naitoro."*

*Nitoro* possibly had more impact. How one wrote it didn't change the fact that it caused the engine to work faster and that one would need to prepare before using it. If one neglected to prepare, the engine could break, or the car might not keep up, leading to damage. Strengthening one's body with verbal thaumaturgy was similar to that. With enhancement alone, verbal thaumaturgy could specialize and focus on a superior body part. For example, fire protection—a type of thaumaturgy that strengthened one's attack by increasing muscular power—only did that. It didn't strengthen vision, reflexes or even the bones themselves. As a result, a person strengthened with fire protection could feel everything when punching someone full force—not only would they harm their opponent, but they'd probably break their own hand in the process. It was similar to boxers known as "hard punchers," who often hurt their hands when punching sandbags because they could not withstand the power in their own punch.

*Being too powerful could lead to one hurting themselves.*

That was the strengthening effect of verbal thaumaturgy. To avoid the risks, one could limit how much they strengthened themselves and keep it at an easy-to-control level. However, that could render the verbal thaumaturgy useless. In comparison, using martial thaumaturgy instead strengthened the whole body. It wasn't as effective as the strengthening effect from verbal thaumaturgy, but it was more manageable.

In short, verbal thaumaturgy was more efficient, yet harder to control, whereas martial thaumaturgy was less effective but easier to control. A skilled martial thaumaturgy user could concentrate some of the power on heightening their senses, such as their vision or hearing—its scalability was helpful, giving it an edge over verbal thaumaturgy. As a result, verbal thaumaturgy wasn't as highly regarded as its martial counterpart, though it did have its uses.

Although verbal thaumaturgy could strengthen others, martial thaumaturgy could not.

*If someone is already strengthened with martial thaumaturgy, they can use verbal thaumaturgy to become even stronger. That does depend on how one uses it and the user's ability.*

Even if an ordinary car wasn't able to use an F1 engine to its fullest capability and got further modified in some way, it could still make some use of it depending on said modifications.

Proof of that was happening in front of Ryoma Mikoshiba. Before anyone noticed, the twins had been hiding something beneath their swimsuitesque pareus and unsheathed their scimitars. The blades were sharp, ruthless, and as cold as ice.

For hunting prey, the twins Laura and Sara Malfist strengthened their bodies using verbal and martial thaumaturgy. They had undergone martial training as warrior slaves, so this was nothing for them.

Each time their curved swords gleamed in the light, heads and arms flew through the air. Screams of pain rose from the beasts disguised as humans as their red blood painted the stone pavement and their corpses began to pile atop it.

It began with two bodies, followed by two more in a few seconds. Every time the twins moved and swung their swords, more bodies appeared. The beasts fought earnestly, yet they were no match for the twins. Even if they tried to land a hit, the twins would simply cut through it. The beasts could neither do any damage nor protect themselves. This situation resembled how the beasts had assaulted and ridiculed the young man and his wife, where overwhelmingly stronger people committed violence. The difference was that the twins did not even have an inch of intention to humiliate the beasts. Their only aim was to end their lives.

“What the hell are you all doing?! Fight back! I’ll pay you however much you want, just kill them!” yelled Mario, his face pale.

Mario had taken many lives before but had always done so from a safe distance. As a noble, Viscount Romaine’s knights protected him. Because he had only ever killed from a superior position, he now trembled with fear for his well-being as he faced this genuine display of violence.

*He’s probably never once thought someone would kill him,* noted Ryoma.

Although Mario Romaine had caused so much chaos himself, he had never felt danger or a sense of guilt. Perhaps he appeared like an optimist, when in reality he was missing something vital mentally. From his point of view, the cries of the young man and his wife suffering severe wounds meant nothing. Thus, he felt no guilt. After all, he was next in line as head of House Romaine. The young man and his wife were mere commoners who lived in the city, and most nobles saw the common folk like cattle who paid taxes. In other words, nobles had a sense of power over life and death, meaning they couldn’t imagine said livestock defying them—and if the cattle did so, nobles would simply “scold” them.

*Not that I can even understand such a nauseating thought.*

In modern society, livestock being happy and having privileges was a recent development. For a long time, humans had exploited livestock, and none had complained or requested better treatment. As humans could not live without taking other lives, one might have said that it would be strange for humans to treat livestock like pets, giving them love and becoming attached to them. Of

course, there were varying views on this. There was no reason to beat them to death with sticks or needlessly abuse them. People wouldn't tolerate or allow this, based on modern values.

That said, it was somewhat understandable that this world differed from Japan in that the high-class aristocrats had this horrible view, whether one agreed or not. Humans were capable of magnificent emotions such as love and friendship. But when they viewed someone as less than their equal, they were capable of inhuman behavior.

*I still don't quite understand how the common folk are viewed as livestock, but can also be seen as sex objects.*

Some people lusted for beasts. Ryoma didn't know such people, but he had learned about them from books. Naturally, people with such a unique disposition were extremely few. Perhaps Mario Romaine also enjoyed such things. At any rate, it was the safer choice to think of the common folk as people as well as livestock. There was a high chance that people thought of whatever best suited their desire, which was a more human way of thinking. Humans saw only what they wanted to see. Mario probably didn't feel his thoughts were contradictory; normality was subjective.

Ryoma felt deep down that Mario was not the kind of person he would want to form a relationship with.

*Though I can't really say that I'm normal either...*

He knew his mindset was unusual, even in modern society, and often considered how he had been a mere high schooler in Japan. The beasts met their cruel ends as he mulled over these thoughts.

"Master Ryoma. It is done." Laura and Sara silently bowed their heads. About ten seconds had passed since they had begun their slaughter—not even half a minute.



“Good job,” said Ryoma as he patted both of them on the head.

He then turned his gaze toward a half-frantic Mario, who looked at the corpses of his subordinates.

“Where’s all that attitude gotten to, eh?” Ryoma laughed as he looked at the pool of liquid near Mario’s feet. Even though first-time soldiers on the battlefield typically had the same reaction, this was no way for a noble to react. Mario did still have a hold of his sword, which was something.

“Did you see that?! This devil wiped out my subordinates!” shouted Mario.

“I don’t think so... In fact, I’m the one who saved the good-natured citizens from those perverted claws of yours. Do you have a problem with that?” replied Ryoma, stroking his chin with his finger and laughing slightly. There was no other way of putting it from Ryoma’s point of view. Whether it was true or the correct action was a different matter. The large majority of the people present thought the same as Ryoma, and the onlookers’ eyes had blame, disgust, and cold disdain toward Mario.

Ryoma was in the right. Mario was in the wrong and was the only one who thought different.

“Do you even know who I am? I’m next in line to be Viscount Romaine! There’s no way the House of Lords and the royal court will remain silent and let this happen!”

Ryoma chuckled. That might have been the case before Queen Lupis escaped the royal capital. The House of Lords had become a hotbed of corruption in which they strove to protect their own rather than manage the tyranny and oppression nobles committed. The royal court feared backlash from the nobles who wielded the true power, often leading to equivocal decisions. Meanwhile, House Romaine boasted a higher-than-average sense of power and authority. Thus, the influence and personal connections of nobles determined whether they had done right or wrong. In the past, if Ryoma Mikoshiba had helped the young couple, House Romaine would have considered it a personal attack. In times like that, no one cared about the advantages and drawbacks of the matter.



Had he not been careful, the young couple might have been pressured into saying that Ryoma was the one who attacked them, which would become the truth. That was how much influence the nobles had in Rhoadseria; they held most of the power. But that was now a relic of the past. No noble could threaten Ryoma like before, and even the royal court struggled to look Ryoma in the eye.

*He doesn't seem to realize times have changed. Almost makes me pity him.*

The concept of law as well as good and evil had not changed, remaining like a measurement ruler, so to speak. But no uniformity existed when deciding on the facts of the matter. Though the gradations on the ruler didn't change, the length would, depending on where it started. The law was ultimately a tool that depended on the person using it for good or bad. And so, Ryoma slowly approached Mario.

"Stay away! Don't come near me!" raged Mario. Even his positive mind seemed to predict what would happen next. "Damn it! Everyone's making a fool of me!" And yet, he chose not to flee—a result of his pride as a noble.

*Well, it's not like I planned to let him go,* mused Ryoma, shooting a cold glare at Mario. When faced with a pest like a cockroach, not many people would let it go, even if they pitied it. That went for both ticks and spiders. People knew that if they let one go, it would hide away in the house somewhere and breed. No one wanted to take such a needless risk. *That's why we remove such pests...*

Ryoma saw Mario as just that: a pest.

"Die, devil!" bellowed Mario, swinging his sword out of desperation, in spite of appearing well trained. At least his stance was that of a highly skilled swordsman.

However, Ryoma noticed a simple opening. Mario was so focused on overpowering Ryoma that he had devoted all his strength to offense and had no form of defense. Although he seemed prepared to protect his abdominal area, he had failed to do so for the lower half of his body, leaving himself wide open. Ryoma casually closed the distance between them, aiming a strong kick at Mario's exposed crotch area.

In terms of attacking, that area was such an easy bull's-eye that Ryoma did

not even need to aim. Considering Mario's crimes that day, it felt like an appropriate punishment. Even though a light amount of damage would have been enough, Ryoma had put enough power behind his kick to break bones. He felt something pop as his kick connected with Mario's groin. The effect became very apparent as a sensation similar to crushing grapes traveled through Ryoma's foot. Mario Romaine stopped dead in his tracks.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!" An otherworldly scream left Mario's lips. He clutched his groin with both of his hands before tumbling to the ground and rolling around.

A thick, red liquid began to flow down his hands. The onlookers turned pale as they watched over the scene. The men had especially gone extra pale, though one could understand why. Ryoma, however, was unfazed by the reactions of those around him and looked down on the groveling Mario, whose face was wet with tears and snot. He had the face of Yama, a king in the underworld, as he stared at the criminal he was about to punish for being guilty.

"H-Help..." begged Mario weakly. Having his most vital body part destroyed so easily left him with no strength. He was suffering from great pain yet hadn't passed out; he didn't have the strength left to form any further words to appeal his situation. He now resembled the young man he had been beating moments before. He had played the villain and had no one to protect or pity him. And a man called Ryoma Mikoshiba would decide his fate.

*Some people may sympathize with victims of oppression, but that's not to say they can act on it. That's a whole different story.*

It was the same as how no one had helped the young man. But there were no people who wished to sacrifice themselves to help Mario, who had been violently attacking others.

"Sorry... I don't speak asshole." Or *"arrogance," for that matter*. Ryoma would have felt more guilty if he had stepped on an ant. "Well, try to lead a better life in the next one. That's *if* there is another life after this." He suddenly lifted his right leg, aimed it at the crying Mario, and kicked. His boot's heel bore his entire weight as he pulverized Mario's head, standing on it. The sound of bones breaking and something like a tomato getting crushed echoed through the streets. A large circle of blood bloomed on the ground, showcasing an awful

way to die.

“Ugh...”

“How brutal...”

Some onlookers began to weep, unable to withstand seeing Mario’s cruel fate. The person behind such a merciless killing remained calm.

“Oh... I’ve ruined my shoes. My trousers too... Guess I’ll just throw them away. I can get another pair made, after all.” Nobody would notice the blood covering Ryoma’s clothes since he wore black, high-quality leather shoes and trousers. But Ryoma had no intention of cleaning and wearing them again.

“Master Ryoma. There’s some on your face too.” said Laura, handing Ryoma a handkerchief.

“Oops, my bad. Thanks.” Ryoma took the handkerchief and wiped his cheek with it. He acted like the scene was totally normal, yet everyone stood dumbfounded. They seemed to be at a loss for words, having witnessed something so far removed from their everyday lives.

## Chapter 3: A Justified Killing

A few days went by since the incident with Mario Romaine. Even though it was around 8 p.m., most of Earth would be fast asleep around this time. While nobles had access to candles and lights for daily use, it would be disrespectful to visit someone's house around this time.

Yet even at this time, in a corner of Pireas, Helena Steiner had a visitor at her manor. She hadn't planned to meet Ryoma at this time, but the maids had still shown him to a room where she and the newly promoted Prime Minister McMaster stood.

"Long time no see, Viscount Diggle McMaster. Oh, apologies, you changed your name to that of the first McMaster viscount, right? Derek, was it?" stated Ryoma as he held out his hand. Behind him, as always, were the twins wearing maid outfits. Usually, he would have asked the maids who had guided him here to leave the room. But no one could ask that in the current situation, so Ryoma would have been incredibly careless to judge his actions in a situation like this.

"That's right. I've become the prime minister of this country while remaining a viscount. I decided to go back to basics and change my name," uttered Viscount McMaster, smiling widely as he took Ryoma's hand.

"I see. Well, I, for one, think it was the right decision to make. It definitely feels like you're turning over a new leaf," replied Ryoma, returning the smile.

They were simple pleasantries. After all, a viscount had become the prime minister of a country. It had been around five hundred years since something like this had occurred in Rhoadserian history. Such an event was very uncommon throughout the entire western continent and a spectacular achievement. It would have been strange for Ryoma not to mention McMaster's new position. Depending on the person saying it, one could interpret the comment differently. Ryoma was simply being honest, but McMaster might have thought otherwise and sneered at Ryoma's words in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment. On the surface, he looked congenial. Judging

from the slight squeeze from McMaster when he shook hands with Ryoma, he didn't seem very pleased with Ryoma.

"Apologies..." added Ryoma.

"Please, don't worry about it." The two smiled as they quietly let go of one another's hand. It was a relaxed interaction between two adults, though it was not entirely unproblematic.

*I didn't mean to make any snide remarks or anything,* thought Ryoma.

Sometimes, people's nonchalant words could upset the other. McMaster might have felt Ryoma indirectly alluded to how McMaster had cut Lupis off and replaced her with Radine. It was a result of a paranoid complex that McMaster had developed from guilt. Given the difference in positions between Ryoma Mikoshiba and Viscount McMaster, it wasn't unreasonable for him to assume Ryoma was making a rude comment.

*Hmm. Regardless of how I feel about it, I wonder if I was a bit too careless with my wording?*

Ryoma had also helped Radine and steered the direction of the country. As a result, he wished to maintain good relations with Viscount McMaster.

*Even if we were to be on bad terms, he's not the kind of person I'd want to cut off entirely.*

Indeed, that was always a possible outcome. Considering the military strength and the power he possessed—both of which surpassed a mere baronial house—that answer became quite clear. Ryoma had only the official standing of a baron, but in terms of authority, he surpassed Queen Radine. Even though Viscount McMaster was prime minister, he could not oppose such power. Should McMaster do so, Ryoma's plans from here on out would require a lot of adjustments. Unfortunately, Viscount McMaster was not easily replaceable.

*There's not many useful people here, to begin with, and even fewer people I could task with assisting Queen Radine. I also need to find people who don't view me as the enemy.*

Rhoadseria used to have feeble-minded and dimwitted nobles; few people could navigate national politics. As a result of Gelhart and his cronies going to

the chopping block, there were fewer usable pieces at Ryoma's disposal. The nobles who were part of the noble faction were good pawns, but it was unclear if they would stay loyal.

*Well, if you're going to undermine a country, you need to be capable enough for the task.*

It was general knowledge that the bad guys in history who undermined their own country were highly talented individuals with no love for the country itself. That made sense; complete idiots wouldn't be able to run a country—even if they had such an important position, the people around them would only drag them down. This environment led to mostly evil political groups—who would control their greed and keep up appearances—coming into power.

*It'd be great if we could get rid of such factions. But they do have their uses. Having a noble who is highly devoted and holds strong morals like McMaster is incredibly critical. I don't want to jeopardize our relationship over such a trivial matter.*

Ryoma did not have much of an opinion regarding McMaster changing his name. For example, many people used pen names or nicknames in modern Japan. But there were a lot of restrictions when changing one's name: one would first have to apply to change their name at the courthouse and explain why they wished to do so, such as their name causing issues in their day-to-day life. It wasn't impossible, though. Even one of the great unifiers of Japan from the Warring States period, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, had changed his name so he could lead a new life. He had gone through various names, like Kinoshita Tokichiro and Kinoshita Hideyoshi, then onto Hashiba Hideyoshi, before settling on Toyotomi Hideyoshi. When including his childhood name, Hiyoshimaru, he had gone through five names. Compared to that, Viscount McMaster had only changed his name once—not that it really meant anything.

It might have been a little strange for Ryoma as no one around him had changed their name. He really hadn't meant much when he commented on it. In any case, Ryoma could not cut ties with him because he was the head of House McMaster, a family that had served the kingdom since the first king.

*I'll have to be careful when discussing this topic in the future.*

One awkward response could give offense. Thus, Ryoma had decided to let it slip and chose not to discuss it further. Viscount McMaster seemingly had picked up on Ryoma's thoughts as the two gave each other a slight nod amid the unpleasant atmosphere. Then Helena greeted them both. She had been sitting on a sofa alongside the wall, watching over the two men and enjoying the show.

"All right, it looks like you're done with pleasantries. Let's move on to the topic at hand, shall we? I do have a lot I wish to talk about, so I'll start with the least pleasant topic first," said Helena, smiling dryly. "Ryoma, I heard you made quite the spectacle the day before yesterday. Do you know how much trouble you caused for us?" It seemed she had heard about what had happened.

*Well, no surprise there...*

Ever since Ryoma had claimed victory in the siege, Pireas had entered a state of unrest. The commander in chief of the military, Helena, and the newly appointed royal prime minister, Viscount McMaster, were working tirelessly to improve the situation. They also spent a lot of resources on improving their information network.

*Not only did the knights, who were supposed to protect the city, assault and threaten citizens, they also attempted a kidnapping and a murder.*

Speaking in modern terms, it was as if the police had openly broken the law for all to see. Since the knights were under the kingdom's management and their behavior reflected on the kingdom, it added further fuel to the fire. If Ryoma hadn't interfered, then the knights from the altercation would have ended up becoming rapists and murderers. He had stopped them from carrying out more violent attacks, which made the news about what had happened spread far throughout the royal city. In Japan, Ryoma would have received a letter of appreciation from the police and appeared on a news website with his picture. But judging from Helena and Viscount McMaster's expressions, he wouldn't be receiving any compliments. Viscount McMaster looked like he was chewing on a bitter bug as he nodded deeply in response to Helena.

"Quite the trouble indeed. Of course, we cannot simply overlook any slight toward you, Lord Mikoshiba. And we won't allow Mario Romaine to get off

lightly after trying to take a woman in the presence of her husband. Rather than arresting him, you chose to kill him and the other suspects where they stood. You are aware that we have laws in place.”

Helena and Viscount McMaster were speaking the truth. Mario Romaine and his cronies had committed a crime. While on duty, they had arrived at a tavern on one of their patrols and had so much alcohol that they got drunk. When the owner of the tavern asked for payment, they assaulted the owner and his wife—disgraceful actions for a noble. They had also ridiculed and tried to intimidate Ryoma, who was trying to mediate the situation. Ryoma then protected himself when they attacked. It would have been difficult for anyone to criticize Ryoma for that. Though, one could say there was a limit to self-defense.

Although Ryoma was in the right, Rhoadseria had laws. He had killed the man next in line as head of the Romaine family, making it easy to imagine the outrage from the nobles. It was only natural that Helena and Viscount McMaster, two figures who managed the country and had to quell the nobles’ ire, would have a few complaints for Ryoma.

Ryoma simply shrugged it off; he felt no need to regret or reflect on his actions when Helena and Viscount McMaster aired their grievances. After all, Ryoma had only done what was necessary. He did not hesitate, nor did he fear others opposing his choices.

“Well, I don’t do things by half measures, even when doing something as simple as taking the trash out,” said Ryoma, smirking.

Even though Mario and his subordinates were the bad guys in all of this, Ryoma referring to their deaths as “taking the trash out” was surprising. Those were the words of someone entirely confident in their sense of justice. Modern standards referred to it as self-righteousness, but it was impossible for someone to survive in this world without it. One had to have a sense of self-righteousness in a world where force was commonly used. Without it, superior martial arts would have no meaning. No matter how strong a person was, their power became obsolete if they hesitated even once. Plus, not being prepared to wield force was akin to having an unusable sword. One’s sense of resolution helped fill the gap between different strength levels.



*After all, the crime they had committed was clear as day.*

If any activists had overheard what Ryoma had said, they would no doubt turn pale, veins bulging as they criticized him for being a monster. But Ryoma felt like he was correct. After all, they had gravely wounded the young man, and then tried to make a plaything out of the wife right in front of him. There was no way they had been falsely accused. And so, Ryoma felt their crime was evident, and it was only natural that they paid for it with their lives.

“Taking trash out... I see. I can’t really deny that, knowing what he had been up to until then. But I can well imagine this will drive Viscount Romaine mad with anger,” responded Helena.

No parent out there wouldn’t seethe with rage hearing their child’s demise. Even if they could not deny their child’s crimes, they would come up with some sort of excuse, trying to protect their child. There was also the matter of Mario’s manner of death.

“I have to say, I’ve never seen a corpse like that outside of a battlefield... It’s understandable why Viscount Romaine would be incredibly enraged,” continued Helena. After Ryoma had killed Mario, a separate unit of knights heard the report and investigated the scene. The sight they came across shook them to the bones. Viscount McMaster had also looked at the recovered corpse. Mario had his head caved in and his private parts crushed into nothing. McMaster was horrified at the level of violence. Ryoma shouldn’t have resorted to such messy methods if he had simply planned to kill Mario. However, Ryoma had been expecting this criticism for his actions.

“I see... I did foresee this happening,” replied Ryoma. Helena and McMaster exchanged looks.

“Do you mean you expected Viscount Romaine to be seething with rage?” asked Helena.

“Bad guys always have a soft spot for their loved ones. No matter how much a piece of shit his son was, he was still his son. I can’t imagine any parent would stay silent if their child died in such a manner.”

Viscount Romaine had to keep up appearances. If he didn’t lament his son’s death, the Romaine family would be subjected to mockery from the other

Rhoadserian nobles. For a noble, that was a fate worse than death.

“So you knew and still went that far,” said Viscount McMaster, shaking his head. Helena didn’t speak but clearly thought the same thing.

Ryoma pulled out a sheet of paper from his breast pocket and laid it on the table.

“What’s this?” asked Helena.

“A bill,” responded Ryoma calmly. He remained dignified and unfazed, making Helena and Viscount McMaster uneasy.

“A bill? Well, it certainly does look like one...”

“Excuse me, may I have a closer look at it?” mused Viscount McMaster.

“Of course, be my guest,” answered Ryoma as the pair tilted their heads in confusion.

The young couple who had received injuries at the hands of Mario Romaine were mere citizens living in the royal capital. But the wrongdoer, Mario, was the heir to an affluent noble house whose vile behavior led to his death. Considering their statuses and the fact that the perpetrator was deceased, there was no way he could pay for any damages. Worse yet, Viscount Romaine might have demanded consolation money from either the Mikoshiba barony or the young couple, claiming damages caused by Mario’s death. That was a worst-case scenario. When thinking back on how corruptly nobles had behaved in the past, it wouldn’t have been all too surprising if that happened. Ryoma had no worries about that, though.

“First of all, I’ll break down the list of items. The young couple—the victims—will need compensation for their store, all their furniture in said store, and any loss of sales that might result from the store being closed. If any of their food or drink stock goes bad, they will require compensation for that too. Next up will be consolation money for the two of them. I feel around ten thousand gold coins is a good number...and, well, the two of them were very badly hurt and in danger of losing their lives. So, I ended up using some very sacred medicine to save them and have included the costs of that too. As this was all of a result of Mario Romaine and his group’s barbaric actions, I feel it is appropriate that his

father should also pay. I'll skip past the finer details, but it should come to around twenty thousand gold coins in fees."

Ryoma took out a second bill and handed it to Helena and Viscount McMaster. A smile then spread on his face as he continued.

"Here is the bill from the Mikoshiba barony addressed to Viscount Romaine. Ideally, I'd prefer to squeeze more out of him. But I don't think that would be very proper for me as a noble of Rhoadseria, so I'll just round it out and settle for that."



Viscount McMaster and Helena were speechless. Moments before, they were criticizing Ryoma for his actions. Yet the man seemed unbothered by their comments and instead sought compensation from Viscount Romaine. Their only response was to stand there, mouths open wide.

“Are you being serious right now? It’ll be difficult getting this kind of money out of Viscount Romaine. In fact, I think it’ll be impossible,” said Viscount McMaster after a long silence. One gold coin was equivalent to one million yen. One hundred silver coins were equivalent to one gold coin. Considering that one hundred bronze coins were about one silver coin, and a bronze coin was roughly one hundred yen, one silver coin nearly matched ten thousand yen. This was mere conjecture, as the worth of the currency could change depending on the marketplace. Even so, a bronze coin and a yen were almost the same in value.

The estimation was good because one night’s stay at an inn was about fifty silver coins. Thus, thirty thousand gold coins were about thirty million yen. Any ordinary Japanese person would feel ripped off—Viscount McMaster undoubtedly felt the same way.

Viscount McMaster’s family was frugal with their finances, which meant they were better off than most other noble families within Rhoadseria. Anyhow, thirty thousand gold coins would be impossible for even them. One had to be incredibly bold to request someone to pay such a high amount. Viscount McMaster seemed to doubt Ryoma’s sanity.

“I suppose it’s doable, since that’s the amount your average noble family would earn in a year.”

On average, a barony in Rhoadseria encompassed one or two territories, with villages having a population between five hundred and one thousand people. While it was impossible to say for sure, as it depended a lot on the output of said territories based on their goods produced and natural resources such as mines, a barony collected around one thousand gold coins from taxes in one year—one billion yen.

*That is just taxes, though. There are a lot of expenses when ruling a territory as a barony,* thought Ryoma. Simply put, it was similar to annual pay versus net

income. Rhoadserian nobles also had a duty to pay for the military and their internal administration, meaning even more money got deducted from their tax income.

The three things required to run a nation were a military, an administration, and diplomacy. Although their sizes differed, those three things were essential to nobles when managing a territory. However, all of them cost a lot of money.

For example, the military's main costly expense was personnel. Without soldiers, there would be no gluttonous insect of a military to devour resources.

Conscripting civilians to join the military was always an option should one not be concerned about the quality of soldiers. Doing so wasn't restricted to Japan's Warring States period—it had been done for centuries and across cultures. That said, conscripted soldiers tended to lack training and morale. It was an effective way of gaining numbers when faced with a sudden war, even if it wouldn't lead to a military of well-trained soldiers. It was the equivalent to buying goods at a store that prided itself on cheap prices. One could find a good bargain if they searched long enough, but most of the time one found items whose low quality reflected their low prices. Amassing many soldiers meant that tax income took a huge hit, which was another downside to conscription. Sending people from one's territory out to war meant that the circulation of goods within their territory stagnated. Plus, one couldn't rely on a conscript to lead the conscripted civilians.

While the leader wouldn't have to have a high rank such as a knight, it would be impossible for a civilian—who lacked military experience—to lead. A certain level of education would be required, and they would ideally possess above-average ability. With all that considered, the best candidate would be a person who held the rank of a knight. But it wasn't that simple for an ordinary barony to employ someone of that level.

When a knight became a unit's leader, they would also receive a more official rank, meaning they would receive a salary that matched their position. Having a military alone incurred a lot of costs. Considering there were also administrative and diplomatic costs, no matter how much income a noble family had, their finances tended to be in dire straits.

At the very least, noble houses trying to carry out their duties often didn't have much leeway regarding finances. The exception to this would be a noble house with some additional means of making money within its territory, though not many were that lucky.

*Viscount Romaine may have a little more financial leeway, not that it amounts to much anyway,* thought Ryoma.

A viscount usually possessed several small villages and a medium-sized town. A viscount's tax revenue was typically three to five times more than a baron received. But for all the taxes they collected, they had just as many expenses too. Viscounts had general savings, so they could pay if they combined the money from selling all their possessions. Without a doubt, that would mean financial ruin for House Romaine.

"It seems Mario Romaine is quite the spendthrift. He's apparently like his father and doesn't have much in the way of savings." said Ryoma.

"You've done your research, I see," said Viscount McMaster, furrowing his brow.

"Of course. I have a retainer who is well-versed in those sorts of things."

"Count Zeleph?"

"Yes. He was often in the shadow of his brother-in-law, Bergstone, and many underestimated him. But he is very capable and excels at gathering information within noble society." Ryoma had come to his former conclusion based on Count Zeleph's information. This meant his prediction was bound to be ninety percent correct.

"You know all of that, yet you're still trying to back House Romaine into a corner?" responded Viscount McMaster, a hint of anger in his voice.

While one couldn't deny Mario was at fault, the prime minister felt Ryoma was a little hypocritical in targeting them so much. But Helena had come to a completely different opinion as she had been listening to the conversation while enjoying the scent of the served tea.

Ryoma calmly crossed his legs and continued to speak. "That's exactly what I'm doing."

Helena laughed, although she was extremely experienced and had noticed something when Ryoma spoke.

“I see, so that’s why the bill is itemized,” said Helena.

Viscount McMaster panicked, then reviewed the bill. His eyes stopped on one of the items, and he looked at a loss for words. “Is this...the price of the secret medicine you used?” he asked.

A closer look at the itemized charges revealed how costly a bill from the Mikoshiba barony could be. The amount in reparations for the couple was already extravagant. While the expenses Ryoma had requested were almost double that, they weren’t unjustified. For example, the costs for the bodyguards were necessary to prevent retaliation from Viscount Romaine.

House Romaine might have blamed the young couple for what happened, or even look to silence them for good. Thus, there were costs to prevent that from happening.

It only made sense that Viscount Romaine, the cause of all this, was the one to foot the bill. The highest expense there—the secret medicine that Ryoma had used to help the young couple—was a valuable concoction made from materials that only the dark elves of the Wortenia Peninsula could gather. The medicine was priceless because only dark elves could gather the materials, and its creation was a dark elf secret.

*In other words, no one other than I would be able to buy it.*

Ryoma had difficulty determining the value of something so priceless. One would have to traverse deep into the woodland of the Wortenia Peninsula to locate the monsters and plants needed to collect the required materials. Such would be impossible for even a seasoned adventurer from the guild.

Similar jobs from the guild paid from five thousand to ten thousand gold coins as a reward; that was literally the market value for such jobs. It would have been easier if one could just obtain the medicine’s materials with money, though it was natural one couldn’t put a price on an ancient dark elf secret recipe.

Nevertheless, it was clear the medicine was of exceptional quality. Even



though the young man had been badly injured, his ribs would have healed in around two days, and he would no longer be in pain. The young man's wife, who suffered a head injury as a result of Mario throwing her into a stone wall, would also recover well thanks to the medicine. Ryoma had no doubt it was a lifesaving substance.

If money could buy this lifesaving medicine, everyone would want to buy a bottle or two of it—not just nobles. Then why did Ryoma use such an expensive medicine? He wasn't a one for selfless charity, nor was he particularly concerned about money. The reason was quite clear. While it might have been a high-value commodity for others, that wasn't the case for Ryoma.

Ryoma owned the Wortenia Peninsula and had built a strong friendly relationship with the dark elf chieftain, Nelcius, making it a convenient tool for him. He didn't use it a lot, but that didn't mean he kept it stored away like an ancient treasure. He had another reason for using it in addition to that. Said reason was that he could attach any monetary value to it as he wished.

*It'd be hard for them to argue the price with me.*

There were counter-arguments to why he shouldn't have used such a high-value, secret medicine, but since he had chosen to prioritize the couple's lives, it would be hard to argue that decision. Viscount Romaine considered the lives of the civilians to be less than garbage but could not say that publicly.

*If he has a problem with that, all I need to do is to tell him to give me the materials for the medicine.*

Viscount Romaine had no other choice but to stay silent. Even if he were to put out a request at the guild, there was no certainty that he would be able to hire someone to take it. Even if someone took it on, it would take them months or maybe even a year to accomplish it. Whether they could even enter Wortenia was up to Ryoma.

Moreover, Ryoma could keep them waiting at the checkpoint for months. In that case, they would ask Viscount Romaine to pay a ten percent late fee, much like the one listed at the bottom of Ryoma's bill.

*It's also true that there was no other way we could have saved them in such a short time with such severe injuries.*

Should Viscount Romaine refuse to pay the bill, Ryoma would simply put the rest of House Romaine to death and say he was doing it for the good of the people after all the abuse they endured. That would be a welcome relief to the citizens of Rhoadseria, who had been unhappy with how things were being run ever since the civil war.

*I guess that would be in bad taste, but appropriate for who I'm dealing with. I have to make him atone for his sins.*

Plus, Ryoma wasn't *that* evil. If Viscount Romaine owned up to his son's crime and sincerely apologized, Ryoma would be ready to negotiate the bill down. He might even entrust Viscount Romaine's punishment to Queen Radine, since he didn't actually want to receive compensation.

*While it's an exorbitant bill, this is more of a means of threatening him than a bid for actual compensation.*

But Ryoma did not need to target Viscount Romaine alone, because ultimately this was an attempt to pressure the nobles who had refused to cooperate with Queen Radine. It wouldn't have been too much work for him to target another noble with a similar bill, since Rhoadseria had plenty of crooked nobles.

The nobles in Rhoadseria were a mixed bag of gems, and it was safe to assume ninety percent of those "gems" were just ordinary rocks. While it was evident that Mario Romaine had committed a crime, Rhoadseria could not remove Viscount Romaine just because he acknowledged his son's guilt. Ryoma understood there was zero chance of that ever happening.

*If Viscount Romaine were decent, he probably would have talked some sense into his son before he became what he did. Small chance of that being the case, though.*

Ryoma didn't know if Viscount Romaine had been aware of his son's behavior. But it seemed he had a history of using his authority as a viscount to make specific matters disappear.

*This probably would have gotten snuffed out too if there had been any other noble involved, instead of me.*

Ryoma knew exactly what he was in for, which was why he approached it the way he did. He recognized that other nobles wouldn't take him seriously if he took the ordinary path. Plus, Ryoma saw he could have taken the easy route and just accepted that it would not be easy for him to make a noble reflect on their actions.

Helena had seen right through that; once again, they were on the same wavelength. She was old enough to be his grandmother, yet they were like peas in a pod.

"All will be well if he apologizes for his son's behavior and pays the compensation. If he doesn't, you plan to destroy and make an example of him, right? Your goal is to thin out the nobles within the kingdom."

"Precisely. Let's say it's a gift to Queen Radine, congratulating her on her accession to the throne. Would you be willing to accept it?"

Helena's smile shined as she laughed. "Of course. I'm certain Her Majesty will be pleased."

Viscount McMaster's eyes grew wide.

"Lady Helena... Are you insane?"

Viscount McMaster also held some reservations regarding the nobles who selfishly acted for their own benefit, indifferent to how the nation was doing. As a fellow noble serving the kingdom, he felt a sense of camaraderie with them. He was talented and of good character, so worthy of serving Queen Radine that they had removed the former Duke Gelhart from his position.

*I guess it's still difficult for him on a sentimental level.*

That might have been one of the main reasons he stayed holed up in his territory for years.

*One might think he's too soft. Surprising, considering how he looks.*

Ryoma pitied Viscount McMaster as the man struggled in anguish. Viscount McMaster wore an eye patch over his right eye and had a closely shaved head. He was built like a battle-hardened soldier, making him look even more intimidating, like the leader of a band of pirates or bandits. But that led people

to misunderstand the kind of person he was.

The viscount was a compassionate person with a good personality to boot, which Count Zeleph's report supported. His territory was relatively safe, and it seemed he had the trust of the civilians living there, meaning there were no issues regarding his ability and personality.

At the same time, he was prone to letting good opportunities pass him by. If Viscount McMaster were on the battlefield and faced a foreign opponent, he wouldn't go easy on them. But when faced with someone from the same country as himself, he struggled to get over that notion of being comrades.

"Is there no other way?" pleaded Viscount McMaster.

"Unfortunately, no. There isn't," responded Ryoma, dashing Viscount McMaster's hopes in one fell swoop. Ryoma knew it was the lesser evil to not give him any false hopes.

"This country has too many nobles to begin with. As a result, it's hard to run the nation properly. That, and the years of bad management by the previous rulers."

Helena nodded in response to Ryoma's words. The Kingdom of Rhoadseria was large enough but had limited means of communication. Exerting the government's direct influence throughout the land was hard. Thus, having some nobles in control of their territory wasn't such a bad idea.

Nobles wouldn't be able to manage their territories if they didn't have some autonomy. Based on the current threat of monsters, they would also need their own militaries. That was only beneficial if they were using those forces appropriately, though.

About one thousand nobles resided in Rhoadseria, which Ryoma thought was too many.

*I suppose that's what happens when you thoughtlessly give out high ranks to people...*

It was normal to grant someone a high rank based on their outstanding deeds. The issue was that those people's descendants would proceed to live as nobles even though they had no particular talent. For instance, a section

manager's child might join a company and assume that same position or the head of a company's child could follow in their parent's footsteps.

Naturally, the number of nobles would grow when you gave titles to those who produced results. But it also meant that the nobles who had their autonomy increased would lead to the crown losing its control and authority. That was a horrible move for all aspects of government—military, administration, and diplomacy. If a road needed to be maintained, the administration would first have to negotiate with the noble who owned the territory the road passed through.

Even the queen couldn't start working on something like that without first consulting the nobles. All that trouble came about when nobles received autonomy. Of course, it would be fine if the noble in question gave the go-ahead. But there wouldn't be many nobles who would be happy having strangers tromp through their gardens; instead they would surely complain.

Some nobles would be sensible about it and cooperate, but a complaint from a single house would put an immediate stop to the plan if the road were to pass through several nobles' territories. It wouldn't be as simple as excluding that noble house.

All of these negotiations would force the kingdom to deal with the faction the noble house belonged to and the other noble houses in that faction.

*Developing roads in this kingdom is essential for information to spread throughout the country and to ensure the smooth transport of goods. This country ought to open up more roads, but there are too many hurdles.*

Roads were like veins in the human body, which transported blood to every corner of the body. The kingdom had its more important roads already established, similar to how arteries connected to the more vital body parts like the heart and brain. The royal capital of Pireas and Heraklion in the south were well-connected. But just as the heart and brain required more than blood, the royal capital and Heraklion needed more than roads to function.

Even if blood was getting to the heart, the brain, and other important organs, the skin received none. However, the queen had not even built such important roads within the kingdom. Because of this, there were many inefficient routes

due to the constant obstacles when planning them. For example, a road cutting through a few kilometers of forest would suffice. But failure of negotiations meant the road would end up going around the edges of the forest, creating a huge detour.

*There is only one reason for such selfishness. The nobles are strong, and they're well aware of that.*

To go against the queen's orders would mean the end of that noble house. It could even lead to members of the family being executed or sold as slaves. If they miraculously received light punishment, another noble house would absorb them. Either way, it would spell the end for them as a noble family.

Openly objecting to the queen's orders was an incredible risk that required the person to be ready for the punishments that might follow. That was a heavy price to pay for a short-term investment or simple selfish desires.

*That's why they all have private militaries under the guise of "self-defense," and why they form cliques through convoluted marriages. It's all to compete with the authority of the crown.*

Furio Gelhart, who had headed the biggest of the noble factions, had allied with both large and small factions. They aimed to protect nobles' rights and ensure the country had good management—all in all, rather lofty goals.

"Can't we just try to persuade the nobles? They should know that the country won't last long like this. Maybe we can reach a common ground with them. Wouldn't that be better?" said Viscount McMaster.

However, Ryoma responded with a cold smirk and replied, "Common ground, huh? Would that even be possible, considering no one has yet to manage it? Do you really think Queen Lupis didn't try to find that common ground back when the last civil war ended and she became ruler?"

Viscount McMaster averted his gaze.

"Well, I..."

Ryoma carried on speaking, guiding Viscount McMaster to the inevitable truth.

“This country doesn’t have much time left. We don’t have the luxury of looking for more reasonable methods. All that’s left is to either stand silent and watch your country die or do whatever you can to survive, regardless of how it looks from the outside. And well, I don’t mean to be rude, but...”

Ryoma paused momentarily before looking Viscount McMaster directly in the eyes, where he could see Viscount McMaster’s dormant warrior pride.

“If you don’t choose to survive, it would mean you removed Queen Lupis at the cost of your pride and honor for nothing. Won’t that dishonor the McMaster name?”

Ryoma’s icy words cut like a blade. Yet it was the truth, so he softened his expression and smiled.

“I do think you are overthinking things, Your Excellency. If this were a battlefield, I believe you could make such a difficult decision in order to win. This is similar to that... And since we believe you will be able to make that decision, that is why everyone who cares about this country has placed their hope in you,” added Ryoma with sincerity. Viscount McMaster kept his head down as he nodded ever so slightly.

†

The disheartened Viscount McMaster left the room, leaving Helena, Ryoma and the Malfist twins. In a sense, it was somewhat rude for one of the parties who had called Ryoma for this important conversation to leave the room. Still, Helena and Ryoma had seemingly expected it since they wore calm expressions.

“Sorry about that. You had to play the bad guy in that,” apologized Helena as she enjoyed the scent of the tea that Laura had freshly brewed.





Although she apologized, the interaction wasn't that big of a deal. Fortunately, Ryoma didn't appear too bothered by it. He reached out for a cookie on the table and put it straight into his mouth. The cookie's sweetness invaded his taste buds, which he followed with a sip of tea. The full-bodied flavor of the tea, combined with the rich tart flavor of the cookie, washed over the insides of his mouth.

The atmosphere resembled an evening tea party, with no remnants of the tense atmosphere from when Viscount McMaster was present. Such a view was a good representation of Helena and Ryoma's trust in one another.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I had a feeling it would end up this way, knowing Viscount McMaster's personality. As long as me playing the bad guy got through to him in some way, I'm satisfied," answered Ryoma.

Of course, Helena still had a way to scold Ryoma. But she wanted to avoid saying such scathing words toward Ryoma, who would become her ally in supporting the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

Instead, Ryoma, who planned to distance himself from the kingdom, had volunteered to play the thankless role of the bad guy. He looked over at Helena with a probing gaze.

"However, he must have been quite pressured by Count Romaine. I've never seen the usually bold Viscount McMaster like that before. It was a little surprising," noted Ryoma.

"Well, it's not only him they've been pressuring, but his relatives too. I'm not that surprised, to be honest. Even though Mario Romaine was guilty, I don't see them being okay with what I did."

"It's a matter of noble pride. I have to say Mario had some nerve choosing to complain even though he was fighting a losing war." Ryoma shrugged in response. In reality, pride meant nothing in a situation like this. A wise man would focus on gaining Ryoma's favor. They would have normally avoided making an enemy out of him. Or Viscount Romaine would see his idiot son's death as a problem and avoid provoking more ire toward his remaining relatives.

Helena shook her head.

“While that is a possibility... Personally, I think it was a strategic first move from them. They’re testing Her Majesty Radine’s ability and readiness. That, or they are trying to gauge the relationship between you and Her Majesty.”

Ryoma frowned. While he didn’t mean to look down on them, it seemed he had underestimated the ability of this country’s noblemen.

“I see... That is a possibility. But is there even anyone who has thought that far ahead? I doubt anyone has brought in allies from a different country, considering the situation now...”

The Igasaki clan meticulously patrolled the royal capital, leaving no stone unturned. Not even an ant would make it into the city. One couldn’t imagine that someone from another country was skilled enough to slip past them and arrange a plot with the nobles. The culprits had to be nobles who were currently in the kingdom.

“I personally think Charlotte Halcyon or Bettina Eisenbach are behind it, but Diana Hamilton might be involved too,” responded Helena.

Ryoma scratched his chin as he thought, then commented, “I see... All highly talented, renowned women.”

“Yes, all of them are to become the heads of their families too. I imagine they all wish to buy the favor of Ryoma Mikoshiba, one of the most influential men in the country.”

“Are you saying they deliberately instigated something with Viscount Romaine and those related to him to make our cause that bit easier?”

“Precisely. By doing so, they’ll make you realize just how talented they are...”

“I see... Yeah. That checks out.”

Charlotte and the other women mentioned were all exceptional ladies who had all withstood the internal battles within the royal court for many years. Being women, they had never stood on a battlefield; instead, they played their hand in many schemes for the benefit of their own families. Snakes riddled the royal court, so that was certainly an impressive feat.

At the very least, their ability to steer political struggles highly impressed even Helena.

“Well, if they really are working behind the shadows, I wonder when they’ll finally reach out to us.”

“I do wonder. It would be better for them to directly approach rather than wait for us to awkwardly raise the subject.”

In the event that Ryoma was to invite them to a conversation, it might make the Mikoshiba barony come across as *cheap*.

Helena continued, “By the way, how are things looking? How many nobles do you plan to get rid of?”

“Well, I’m waiting to see how things go. Ideally, about one-third. If I successfully reduce the aristocracy by that much, there’ll no doubt be some impact on national politics. So I’m thinking I’ll do it little by little. I’ll start by removing around one hundred houses, fine-tuning it as I go along.”

“One-third... You’re really going for it, huh?” remarked Helena, smiling wryly.

“In an ideal world, yeah... I don’t think I’ll be able to reach that number, though. There may be some noble houses who have a change of heart and may become useful pieces.”

That was why Ryoma had made an example of Viscount Romaine.

“I guess this is what you would call punishing one crime to make an example for others in Rearth, right?”

“Or a justified killing. Killing one to save many,” stated Ryoma.

“Noted. By killing Viscount Romaine, you’re saving the lives of the other nobles. Either way, both apply to the current situation.”

The reality was that there was an issue with the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s system. Strengthening the crown to combat the nobles’ tyranny was a natural response. In a way, it would have been easier to wipe out all the nobles rather than cherry-picking certain houses. The plan resembled demolishing an old, dilapidated house and building a new one in its place to your liking.

“That said, if I remove too many nobles, it would disrupt the nation. So, it’s

going to be difficult.”

Although there were a lot of dimwitted, despicable nobles, many had received an education. If Ryoma were to dispose of them all, that would leave only the uneducated civilians. Running a country like that would be impossible.

*It'd probably take around one hundred years to educate commoners and have them participate in national politics.*

Until then, there was no other option than to use the nobles despite all the problems they caused. Thus, Ryoma would train them to be useful since he could not eliminate them.

*That's why the nobles must change their way of thinking.*

Hence, the example Ryoma had made of Viscount Romaine. He needed to continue punishing him an absurd amount. If he didn't, killing Mario would no longer be justified.

“Well, haste makes waste, as the saying goes.”

“Considering the circumstances, you're in quite a hurry,” said Helena, laughing. Ryoma knew he couldn't argue with that, so he shrugged his shoulders in defeat. “Well, what do you plan to do now?”

“Since you said I'm in a hurry to live, I think I'll head back to the Wortenia Peninsula and continue the developments there. I've been working nonstop here,” Ryoma lightly shot back at Helena.

He much preferred developing his territory as opposed to expanding it. Plus, he wasn't one for a strong work ethic. Ever since he was summoned to this world, he had been constantly fighting and had grown tired of it. He really just wanted some time to rest.

“As I thought... I thought that was the case. Many approached you with different positions, yet you turned them all down.”

“Sorry about that. Though, I do have a lot of matters to attend to. I doubt I'll be able to hide away in my territory and just relax...”

“But you'll lend us your help, right?”

Ryoma smirked and reckoned, “I do hope you don't rely on me too much

but... If it's someone worthy of supporting Her Majesty Radine, I will do my best to help."

Radine Rhoadserians, by a strange twist of fate, now sat on the throne as the queen. While the decision to have her take the crown arose from an exchange of various people's thoughts, including those of Helena and Viscount McMaster, it was Ryoma Mikoshiba who made the final decision. He nominated Viscount McMaster as prime minister, supporting Queen Radine from the shadows.

After all, Ryoma had no interest in taking an official role in the Rhoadserian kingdom. But if the day were to come when Queen Radine would bare her teeth at Ryoma Mikoshiba or—like Queen Lupis—fail to be a good politician, he would not be afraid to get involved.

Helena was fully aware of that and shrugged her shoulders as she nodded slightly.

"That's fine, but I want you to see for yourself. I think you'll be rather surprised," said Helena before drinking her slightly cold tea. She imagined the results of a discussion Ryoma and Queen Radine would have several days later. Ryoma could only lightly nod in response.

## Chapter 4: Fog of War

A few days had passed since Ryoma's chat with Helena and Viscount McMaster. Not a single cloud appeared in the sky that day. The temperature was at a comfortable twenty to twenty-seven degrees Celsius. Many flowers bloomed and basked in the sunlight in a corner of the royal castle at the center of Pireas. Soldiers led Ryoma Mikoshiba along a stone path that passed through the gardens. Their destination was a pavilion at the end of the path, a structure with white walls that looked even more expensive than the ground it stood on. It was the perfect spot to enjoy tea among the flowers.

"This way," said a guard as he nodded toward his coworkers, who stood at both sides of the staircase leading to the entrance of the pavilion. "His Excellency Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba has arrived."

Silhouettes appeared in the entryway of the pavilion. They included Helena, Viscount McMaster, and the new leader of the kingdom, Radine Rhoadserians.

"Thank you. Please, if we may have the room. I will ring the bell if I need anything."

The soldiers all bowed before leaving the area. Ryoma wondered if they had chosen to meet in the pavilion to avoid the guards overhearing anything.

"Long time no see, Your Majesty Radine," said Ryoma, starting with the appropriate greeting. Although she was the youngest here by far, she outranked everyone. Ryoma remembered to show respect to the queen, to which Radine responded in kind and greeted him back. Usually, she would give her hand and Ryoma would kiss it. But she had no intention of doing so because she wasn't fond of such gestures, which emphasized their hierarchy.

"Thank you for making some time to meet me today, Baron Mikoshiba," remarked Radine, lowering her head. It was unusual for the ruler of a country to call a noble, a baron no less, "lord." Though, it felt natural considering their power dynamic. If anything, Radine did not want to speak to him as a ruler. Behavior like this would have been unthinkable for Lupis, who had received

royal training and held great pride in her status as queen.

*It's not a bad thing, though, thought Ryoma.*

Ryoma was having an unofficial meeting with the queen, after all. If it were official, he would have come dressed in clothes appropriate for a noble. However, he had purposely come dressed in everyday clothes. He wasn't unkempt, but he did not wear the attire one would expect of a noble. Although he understood that outlook, he had come dressed that way for a reason—it was to measure Radine Rhoadserians's ability. Due to their power dynamic, he had assumed she wouldn't have any comments to make about it. But he had prepared for even a slight look of disapproval.

*In any case, it seems she's better than I expected.*

As Radine, a woman of a higher status, had been courteous with Ryoma, a man who didn't care much for hierarchies and status, he couldn't help but recognize her sincerity. They weren't in a public area, so her authority as queen would not be damaged. But would she be able to behave modestly in front of a man with the rank of baron? In other words, it was a matter of her honor and pride as a ruler of the country. The only way to answer that depended on how Radine responded to the negotiations that were about to begin. If Ryoma were to take it at face value, she would end up seeing him as an “easy” man.

*She referred to me as a “lord” so easily. Impressive for such a young queen.*

Although no one was around to see, she could have easily treated Ryoma as a lowly vassal.

“Your Majesty, please do not be so polite,” answered Ryoma. Radine cocked her head in confusion.

“Okay... Then may I call you Sir Mikoshiba?”

That response was from a person who had quickly understood her place. Or rather, she was aware of that all along and had intentionally referred to Ryoma as “sir.” Ryoma's proof of that was Helena and Viscount McMaster showing no reaction, and he suspected they had implanted that idea into her head. But judging from their proud looks, Radine had thought of it herself.

*I see now... This is what Helena meant the other day.*

While Ryoma didn't think Radine was that foolish, she had surpassed his expectations. He was glad to have made that mistake.

*Not only is she young, but unlike Lupis, she hasn't had any royal training.*

A ruler's pride and self-respect were paramount. Due to that, a ruler was aware of their duties and the role they played. But that kind of education sometimes did more harm than good.

Even the combination of holding authority and desiring to be the center of attention was enough to corrupt a person's heart. Radine, for either good or bad, hadn't received such education. Her commoner upbringing had given her street smarts. She also had an unusual sense of modesty and politeness for a ruler. That could have been interpreted as her being subservient, but it also protected her from any unnecessary strife or backlash.

"Please, take a seat. We don't need to stay standing," Radine told Ryoma.

"Excuse me," said Ryoma, nodding and sitting on one of the four chairs surrounding a round table. "Your Majesty. What is it you would like to talk about?"

"I would like to discuss your reward and what will happen from here on out."

"A reward...?" Ryoma tilted his head a little.

Only those who had achieved something received a reward. While Ryoma had won in the previous war, he wasn't entirely satisfied with getting an award from Radine. As the victor, he could take the throne from Radine if he so wanted. But Ryoma put his doubts to one side as Radine continued.

"Yes. You rescued this nation from the claws of the tyrant, former Queen Lupis Rhoadserians, and created an opportunity for a new ruler of this land. As Queen of Rhoadseria, I wish to bestow upon you a new title."

Ryoma smiled wryly, realizing the real intention behind this gesture.

"I see... I saved you from her tyranny, huh?" It wasn't a question of whether that was the appropriate phrasing at this point in time. What mattered was Radine Rhoadserians's position and how she would treat Ryoma Mikoshiba.

*Realistically, everything began with a feud between Lupis and me. And Lupis*



*viewed me as an enemy. Plenty of people living here should be well aware of that fact. If that became public, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria would lose power.*

Had Lupis won in the end, they would have still had something to show off, at least. But she and her nobles had faced a crushing defeat and could not keep up a good front.

In order to twist a truth that everyone was already aware of, they would need an overwhelming amount of power—one that the loser of a war didn't have.

*Which means, there's only one option. Accept the truth and dismiss Lupis as something evil.*

It might not have been entirely true that Lupis Rhoadserians was a tyrant, but it wasn't also a baseless rumor. Ryoma couldn't deny that Lupis's actions were born out of love for her people and the country. The extreme taxation resulted from the royals before her drying up the national treasury, spending the funds on pleasure. It was an unavoidable, yet temporary, measure. A last resort.

However, Lupis's good intentions weren't clear to the civilians, who had to pay the tax. Results were everything in politics. No matter how much one had good intentions, it meant nothing if they didn't produce results.

The higher the ideals someone held, the more guilty they would feel when they couldn't make them a reality. Lupis showed them dreams that, even though they couldn't come true, nonetheless incited the people to sacrifice for them.

*That's why if the truth about Lupis had been made public, it would have interfered with our plans.*

It wasn't a lie—simply a difference in interpretation—for which the outcome could be good or evil. Good examples have been present throughout history. Something that had been legal in the past could change with the times and people, and those who were once heroes could get denounced as butchers and criminals.

*Well, it was a realistic point of compromise.*

As long as that was the case, Ryoma had no other choice but to go along with the plan.

“In that case, then I would be willing to accept your reward. What kind of reward did you have in mind?”

“I am considering giving you the fortress territory of Epirus and promoting you to the rank of archduke.”

Ryoma went pale.

“A promotion...to archduke? That’s too much,” he said, covering his face as he dived deep into his thoughts. *I see... Archduke...*

Archduke was a title often given to influential members of the royal family, excluding the king. The same went for the role of duke, which was a level below archduke.

As the highest title a noble could receive, being an archduke was almost like having one’s own independent country. It certainly wasn’t a role that one would give to a baron of questionable origin.

*Lupis would be furious if she heard about this.*

Not only that, there would be a lot of furious nobles. In essence, the upstart they had all looked down upon with disdain was receiving the highest title a noble could want.

That was a surprising turn of events. The decision itself wasn’t so gratuitous that it would burden the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. As for the territory, it was an area Ryoma already controlled. It was only natural that the losers of a war lost territory. Any nobles who might have complained about that had already died in said war, and Ryoma couldn’t imagine much pushback. Becoming an archduke wouldn’t actually change Ryoma’s level of political influence.

Ryoma didn’t want to get any more involved in Rhoadserian politics—the title of archduke was closer to an honorary court rank. As he didn’t seek an official position within the kingdom, giving him the role of archduke was easier.

Even though his duchy would practically be an independent country, it was technically still a part of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. The boundaries between them were somewhat blurry. Basically, it varied based on the situation. Ryoma would get his independence, and Rhoadseria could keep some of their dignity.

*She really put some thought into this. I assume her giving me the title of archduke is also giving her more options for the future.*

Archduke was a title given to those in the royal family, apart from the monarch. They were also considered as potential marriage partners for royalty.

He could have been making huge logical leaps, but Radine Rhoadserians was a young unmarried woman, and with Lupis out of the picture, she was also the only remaining Rhoadserian royal.

But that did not mean the Rhoadserians line was in danger of getting wiped out. Some high-ranking nobles would be next in line, and there were numerous alternatives. It would make sense that if they wished to protect the bloodline, someone from the country would have preference.

*That would mean she couldn't be single all her life. She would need to take a high-ranking noble or a ruler of a nearby country as a husband.*

The problem was that Ryoma was one of those possible candidates.

Regardless of the truth of the situation, it was still unknown how the people of the country would react to a bachelor hailed as the savior of the kingdom. He had also become one of the highest-ranking figures within the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. But there was a huge difference between the possibility of being picked as a candidate versus *actually* being a candidate.

People could consider themselves self-conscious when thinking about such things. However, Ryoma couldn't help but think about that possibility. It felt almost as if she was trying to remove any obstacles. That said, Ryoma found it frustrating he had no grounds to reject the proposal.

*I wonder who put this into her head, though.*

Ryoma looked over at Radine again. She wore a pleasant smile.

He stared at her intently as if he was looking right through her. But Radine didn't flinch in response to his sharp gaze. The two of them spent some time looking at one another. Eventually, Ryoma looked away, sighing deeply.

"All right... I accept."

Radine laughed cheerfully and replied, "Thank you. Now everything can go

ahead smoothly.”

“Oh?”

“Now that Mario Romaine was in fact rude to an archduke, he has no defense for his actions. If Viscount Romaine and his close relatives try to protest your actions, they will be liable for punishment. The timeline is a little off, so we might have to make some corrections. But I feel if we both get our statements right, we can pull it off.”

Ryoma laughed loudly, noting it was a brilliant move that would solve a lot of their problems. It wasn’t unheard of for nobles to pay for being rude with their lives. If Ryoma became an archduke, a viscount family wasn’t comparable to that title. Viscount Romaine and his associates would not get away with ignoring what his son had done to such a high-ranking noble. Because of the many risks, the House of Lords wouldn’t side with Viscount Romaine either.

*It would be different if the House of Lords were to put their status and lives on the line, but... They wouldn’t go that far. It also means that Viscount McMaster has one less thing to worry about. Two birds with one stone.*

Radine’s ability to solve domestic problems in one fell swoop by granting Ryoma Mikoshiba the role of archduke was nothing short of brilliant.

“I see. Never knew that you were such a skilled tactician, Your Majesty,” stated Ryoma honestly. If this young, delicate lady had come up with this plan, she was either a rare, cunning vixen, or an incredibly talented tactician.

*Or maybe she was a talented strategist like Mori Motonari or Amago Tsunehisa?*

Both were famous names from the Warring States period in Japan, known for their resourcefulness. However, Radine shook her head.

“No, I didn’t think of it. Charlotte and her friend understood your intentions and devised the plan.”



“Oh, the famous, talented Charlotte Halcyon and a friend of hers? I see now. Are the two of them close with you, Your Majesty?” asked Ryoma.

“Yes. They’ve been supporting me along with Helena and Viscount McMaster.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. I’m happy that you have people around you whom you can trust.”

“Yes, thank you. I also think I’m very blessed to be in such a situation,” said Radine, looking at Helena and Viscount McMaster.

“That’s very gracious of you, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you.”

Helena and Viscount McMaster shared words of gratitude. Radine lightly nodded in response.

“Well, now that we’ve dealt with Viscount Romaine, there is one more thing I would like to ask of you, Baron Mikoshiba. May I?” inquired Radine, hesitating.

“If it’s something I can answer, then by all means.” replied Ryoma, choosing his words carefully. The queen was asking something from him. He had to say something, so that was the best response he could come up with. He also didn’t want to promise anything, especially as he was unaware of the question she was about to ask.

Either knowingly or unknowingly, Radine nodded deeply before suddenly beginning her question.

“It’s regarding the life or death of the escapee, Lupis Rhoadserians. I understand she escaped the royal capital heading south, but I could not track her movements. Aside from her personal retainer, the knight Meltina Lecter, every one of her escorts fled in different directions. Do you happen to have any additional information on her whereabouts?”

Such was a natural suspicion to have, followed by a logical question. Radine believed she had stolen the throne from Lupis. Moreover, Lupis viewed Radine as an enemy on the same level as Ryoma Mikoshiba. If he was a traitor who rebelled against the throne, Radine was a usurper. Lupis held an unmovable

grudge; from her point of view, Radine would carry this sin for the rest of her life.

It made sense that Lupis's life or death was more important than all else to Radine. That applied to Helena and Viscount McMaster too. Lupis held a considerable amount of disdain for both, yet not as much as she did toward Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Radine, Helena, and Viscount McMaster all shot anxious and nervous looks toward Ryoma. The three of them already knew what his answer would be.

So, Ryoma decided to tell them the truth.

"Unfortunately, Lupis's status has yet to be confirmed. Her retainer, Meltina Lecter, was slain, however..."

"Yet to be confirmed?" Helena tilted her head in confusion at Ryoma's indecisive response.

"Yes. Meltina gave her life so that Lupis could escape. The Igasaki clan shot several poison-coated shurikens at Lupis. I doubt she is still alive, but it seems she fell into the River Thebes. There is no more information," elaborated Ryoma.

By all means, Lupis Rhoadserians's chances of survival were close to zero, all things considered. According to the report from the Igasaki clan, poison-coated shurikens had cut her several times, then she was exposed to the chilly waters of the River Thebes. Considering how many smaller rivers branched off the main river, it wasn't strange that the Igasaki clan couldn't find her remains.

"I see, they weren't able to find the body... That's understandable. If it ended up in the River Thebes, it'd be difficult to look for it," responded Helena, frowning. It was hard to work out what she really thought about the matter. Judging from their expressions, Viscount McMaster and Queen Radine felt similarly to Helena.

*Lupis was once a person they had sworn loyalty to, after all.*

Nevertheless, the three had decided against blaming Ryoma because they understood the necessity of the situation. They knew it would only become a source of trouble for them if she were still alive. But that didn't mean they

wished her dead.

It could have been said they were all rather equivocal about the situation, but that was just how the human psyche worked.

*The same goes for me, I guess.*

Ryoma didn't care if Lupis was dead or alive. If she were dead, he wouldn't have to worry about the future. Based on her personality, if enemies had rescued her, it wouldn't be long before she planned her revenge against Ryoma. She'd then run right into it, disregarding the consequences. Her actions would eventually reveal their unknown enemy, thus helping him.

*Though I don't think I should mention that she was used as live bait to coax out my enemies.*

There were a lot of truths in the world that were better left unsaid. Politics, after all, felt like walking a tightrope, balancing the small gap between reality and a more idealistic possibility. No real reason existed to destroy someone's fantasy and thrust an unnecessary truth at them. That would only serve to make more enemies.

*As long as Radine and the others don't know the truth, it'll make it a lot easier for us to anticipate and outsmart our enemies when Sudou finally makes his move.*

The Igasaki clan had in fact confirmed that Akitate Sudou had retrieved Lupis's body from the river. While that wasn't proof that she was alive, it meant a better chance for her survival because the river hadn't swept her away and she hadn't been left untreated for a long time.

But there was no reason to tell Helena that. It was best not to create any more unease when the situation wasn't one hundred percent clear.

"Well, I suppose there is no way to confirm her status... However, I assume Meltina was dealt with?" Helena asked further.

"Correct. The Igasaki clan brought back her head."

"I see..." mumbled Helena. Ryoma noticed something about her response.

"Is there a problem with that?"



Meltina's death went as exactly as planned. She was a faithful, loyal knight, who would not leave Lupis's side or surrender. Obviously, she would act as a shield when the former queen's life was in danger. There was no way they would have caught her alive.

"No, it's just that... House Vanash and House Lecter are now extinct due to this," said Viscount McMaster. Ryoma realized that something was bothering them.

"I see now... There is no one left to mourn them."

It would be simple enough to hold a burial. Workers would dig a grave in the cemetery and erect a tombstone. But Mikhail and Meltina were Lupis's retainers, and had played a major part in many political measures. One could say that they were the true masterminds behind the Kingdom of Rhoadseria these past few years. When Queen Lupis rule was said to be evil, Mikhail and Meltina received the blame. Tyranny caused by her aides failing her. No matter the reality of the situation, that was how her reign would be known.

Especially with no family to tend their graves, it was easy to imagine how they would end up.

*People would destroy their graves, leaving their bodies to the elements, or as dog food. Something like that, at least.*

It was cruel.

Mikhail and Meltina would be the target of citizens who suffered through Lupis's tyranny. They had been untouchable when strong; those with power were oppressive, self-righteous, and domineering over those weaker than them. Both could use their power to manipulate. That was just how the world worked.

Should those in power fall even once, then the people will come to collect the debts of their sins. It didn't only apply to the living—even in death, they would seek their payment.

*Too bad people can't make themselves bankrupt on grudges.*

That said, Mikhail and Meltina weren't inherently bad people. They might have been foolish, but they were loyal retainers who had given their all to Lupis

Rhoadserians during her reign. It wouldn't be strange to wish them a peaceful death. The same went for Ryoma Mikoshiba, who had taken their lives with his own hands.

*If asked if I liked or disliked them, I'd say I disliked them. Make no mistake. I didn't get along with them. But that doesn't mean I feel bitter toward them.*

It was a given that they would come to blows, unable to give up their pride or ideals. If they hadn't gotten off on the wrong foot, there might have been a future where they worked together for the sake of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. At the very least, Ryoma had no desire to desecrate their corpses.

"It's fine. Could you please hand over Meltina's body so that I can bury them together?" asked Ryoma.

"Are you sure?" replied Helena with a look of relief and guilt. Ryoma had pulled the short stick, first with what happened with Viscount Romaine's family, and now this. Viscount McMaster and Radine wore the same expressions.

*That's very charitable of them. I'd say they're a little too soft for politicians.*

Any other politician wouldn't have cared what became of Mikhail and Meltina's remains. They would have probably taken the initiative and thrown their remains to the masses. Doing so meant the civilians would vent their ire out that way. In the end, the kingdom was in a transition period. Soothing civil complaints would give them some time to solidify the new system.

Looking at the topic from that angle, it made sense. Mikhail Vanash and Meltina Lecter played a significant role in politics before, and their negative reputation made them the perfect scapegoats. They were the perfect people to push all the responsibility onto, especially since the dead couldn't defend themselves.

But Helena and the others hadn't opted for the easy way out.

*Well, it's not all bad. It all went according to plan for Helena and is a happy mistake for the other two.*

That might have been where they failed as politicians but were successful as human beings. Ryoma felt that was more important than anything else. Nothing was more dangerous than leaving a country under the rule of someone he

couldn't trust.

"We'll have to pick a place for the burial, but we'll make it somewhere with a good view. It'll be a proper ceremony, so please don't worry," said Ryoma, showing he would take on the responsibility of the burial. He was thankful that the three people undertaking control of the kingdom had far exceeded his expectations. He believed that together they could make the Kingdom of Rhoadseria's future bright, and his friends and followers alike could enjoy a life of peace and safety.

Ryoma's wish would soon face destruction at the hands of O'ltormea, who had once more begun their invasion of the Kingdom of Xarooda.

The military state of the O'ltormea Empire was the dominant power in the central part of the western continent. It aspired to conquer the whole continent under the leadership of the Lion Emperor, Lionel Eisenheit. They had gathered their forces on the disgraced Notis Plain, near the border, to achieve their long-standing wish of fighting the Kingdom of Xarooda. Not only did they have forces from the eastern part of O'ltormea, but they also had soldiers from every part of the nation, boasting elite forces. The empire's army was around one hundred thousand men strong.

The army was nearly four times larger than the one they had the last time they invaded Xarooda. Not to mention, this was just the advance guard for the invasion. A secret spy, working behind the O'ltormean lines, had brought information to Xarooda that they were gathering an even bigger main army to follow this.

*That puts their numbers at around two hundred to three hundred thousand when considering the main force.*

Joshua Belares sighed as he perused the report the spy had handed him in a room in the castle in the royal capital of Xarooda, Peripheria. Anguish filled his face.

Such behavior was unexpected of the man who followed in his father's footsteps, taking on the role of commanding officer. His father, Xarooda's Guardian Deity, had perished in the previous war. Hesitation would spread

through the ranks if the commanding officer showed an inch of it. For all that he was a commander, he was also human. Anyone else reading that report would no doubt want to sigh too.

*This isn't good. I'll try to cheer myself up.*

Joshua opened his desk's drawer, taking out a tobacco container that he regularly used. He opened it up, took a cigar from it, bit off the end, and made a filter for the cigar. Then, he lit the end of the cigar using verbal thaumaturgy.

The characteristic smell and taste of the cigar filled both his mouth and nostrils. Purple smoke eventually left his mouth, rising through the air. He felt more relaxed. His anxiety and hesitation had disappeared as he returned to his usual confident expression. That wasn't to say he was entirely free of his unease. The O'ltormea Empire's movements documented in the report still occupied his mind.

*Being able to deploy an army of this size while being surrounded by enemies in all directions... The empire is living up to their reputation.*

It was the largest army the war-torn western continent had seen. Plus, it wasn't an army put together by conscripting citizens. The entire force comprised *real* troops—soldiers and knights with experience in war. They had seen many battlefields and were highly trained. Even the soldiers who were not well-versed in martial thaumaturgy were still an immeasurable threat.

Xarooda, not as powerful as the Holy Qwiltantia Empire of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, would find it difficult to avoid being invaded by such an army. But the Kingdom of Xarooda had anticipated the arrival of this day. The ceasefire from the last war was still in effect. Although the O'ltormea Empire was gathering troops on the Notis Plains, they had yet to cross the border or declare war.

*Well, there's no way anyone would gather an army of that size for a simple military exercise.*

The army consumed large amounts of rations daily, making it hard to imagine they would use up so many supplies just for a military exercise. Joshua believed that O'ltormea would end the ceasefire and invade once they had finished gathering their armies. That would bring a wave of war, and the empire's

significant military force would sweep away everything.

*It's not like we've been idly standing by, though. We have prepared ourselves ahead of this second invasion.*

They had entered into a four-country alliance, spearheaded by the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, all to prepare for this day. Even so, thinking about the difference in military strength, it wouldn't be an easy battle. Despite being in an alliance, the allies wouldn't dispatch reinforcements to Xarooda in a timely manner. If they were to send out requests for reinforcement to the other countries, it would take a few months before they arrived. Xarooda had to take on O'ltormea with what they had.

*The enemy has more forces than last time. Besides, elite forces from the west, north, and south accompany them this time. I heard a story that Lady Helena and Lady Ecclesia had exploited the lack of coordination among the enemy forces, setting a trap that led to their annihilation. It'd be hard to use the same strategy, seeing that the enemy doesn't expect this to be quick.*

It made sense that he'd use the same method if possible. But the opponent had also been plotting their way to victory. It wouldn't work. While Joshua hoped to win by the same means, the opponent would aim to avoid the same mistakes.

*At least, there's no way she'd make that same mistake again.*

What Joshua found troubling was how slow the O'ltormea forces were. In terms of utilizing the army, it was a lousy move.

War valued speed—a notion mentioned in Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. It was common knowledge that advancing faster than your enemy was advantageous.

Of course, Joshua was from Earth. There was no way he would know about Rearth's *Art of War*. Instead, he had learned from his experiences in actual war. It made sense that he had reached the same conclusion from his own experiences. However, taking one's time wasn't always a bad thing in war, which was interesting. The reverse of that was true.

*Last time O'ltormea invaded, they focused too much on speed. Even though it is important to mobilize soldiers quickly, there is no denying they were not fully*

*prepared.*

There was meaning in striking when the iron was hot and attacking the enemy when they were defenseless, making quick work of them. On the contrary, one couldn't win a battle if they only focused on speed and lacked the strength to break through the enemy's defenses.

In that sense, their last defeat was because the O'ltormea Empire could not keep up its momentum after defeating Joshua's father, Arios Belares. Thus, they couldn't take over the capital of Xarooda, Peripheria.

Their focus on speed was fatal. They neglected to prepare siege weapons, as doing so would have taken too much time.

*This is just my opinion looking back, of course.*

In reality, he could imagine Peripheria falling according to Shardina Eisenheit's plans if Xarooda hadn't had a few lucky breaks. But the O'ltormean had changed their plans this time and had made different choices based on their past mistakes.

"If we were to be invaded by such a huge power, there would be nothing we can do. Does that mean we're readying ourselves for all-out war?"

The O'ltormea Empire should have understood that the Kingdom of Xarooda was in an alliance with four other nations headed by the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. Simply put, reinforcements from Myest, Rhoadseria, and Helnesgoula would arrive as time passed. They appeared ready to take on the whole alliance and anticipated doing so.

*However, would she pick such tactics?* An image of Shardina Eisenheit appeared in the back of his mind.

It was understandable that Shardina would want to reduce the damage done to the invading forces in Xarooda.

*If they conquer us and we're left defenseless, they could very well face an attack from the Holy Qwiltantia Empire to the west or from Helnesgoula to the north,* mused Joshua, confronting issues he had no answer to. *Am I missing something?*

Naturally, there was no clear reason for any of it. An irritation consumed Joshua, which he couldn't shake off. It was a hunch he couldn't get rid of. His hunch would, unfortunately, become true.

A few days later, when Joshua was in a locked room in Fort Ushas working hard on a plan to repel the invading forces, he received an urgent report from Peripheria.

"His Majesty collapsed?!" Joshua's enraged voice echoed around the room. Although intimidated by Joshua's furious look, the messenger continued to fulfill his duty.

"Yes. Last night, while having his evening meal, His Majesty suddenly began to cough violently, subsequently losing consciousness. According to the court physician, this past week has taken its toll on him."

"That's ridiculous... How could this happen... Why?! Why now?!"

The messenger continued his report, "As a result, commander of the Imperial Guard, Lord Henschel, has taken charge of containing the nobles' unrest. However, he requests that you return to the royal capital at once."

Joshua clicked his tongue in response.

*Unrest among the nobles? Just who... Just who started that? Is it that bastard, Count Schwarzheim? Or was it Duke Lautringde?*





The faces of the traitorous nobles rose in the back of his head before disappearing. Although he had no conclusive evidence, those were the kind of scumbags who would sell out their own country to the enemy if it meant they could benefit from it. They felt absolutely zero guilt about doing so and were treacherous beasts who deserved to be put down.

*Shit! O'ltormea is about to act, and now we're faced with this! Just as I thought. No matter what His Majesty said, they should have been put to death, even if they trumped the charges!*

He had regrets he could no longer repent of. Joshua couldn't do anything about it, especially if King Julianus I did not approve. Joshua had served the king for that reason. Yet he still found it incredibly irritating, no matter how sound an argument it was.

Joshua had already begun to think about how to act next.

*What should I do? I'm still in the middle of preparing the defenses. If O'ltormea were to attack now... But if I stay here at Fort Ushas, the royal capital will fall into the hands of the nobles. This country may very well perish before the reinforcements even arrive. I hope Lord Grahart and Lord Ausan can keep the nobles at bay. Otherwise, they won't ask me to come back. But I have to go back... I wonder if O'ltormea will do us the favor of not attacking?*

It was a gamble. A disadvantageous one, at that.

With Julianus I becoming ill and the nobles causing issues in the royal capital, it was natural for Joshua to think these problems were connected to the looming O'ltormean invasion.

If Joshua was to return, then the troops from O'ltormea would march on Xarooda, as if they had been waiting for him to leave. Even though he was well aware of that, he could only do one thing.

"All right... I'll head back immediately," said Joshua, raising both fists above his head and slamming them down on the desk. As a result of the blow, the sturdy desk collapsed. Blood dripped from his fists, and his mouth filled with the taste of iron as he bit down hard.

Around the same time, in a pavilion erected on the Notis Plains, Shardina Eisenheit poured alcohol into a long, thin champagne glass. Light golden sparkling wine filled the glass, with bubbles rising to the top before disappearing. Shardina smiled at the special wine she had kept for this day.

“I guess now is a good time for it?”

Seria Norberg silently nodded in response to Shardina’s question and responded, “Yes. Everything is proceeding as planned. I believe Joshua, who is currently at Fort Ushas, just received the report.”

“I see... Not long now,” added Shardina, lifting her glass high and drinking it all in one gulp. It was as if she was trying to drink the entire Kingdom of Xarooda at once. Seria then finished her drink too. They vowed to take the heads of their enemies who had killed their beloved and respected grandfathers.

When the morning sun shone down on the land, the one hundred thousand soldiers gathered on the plains began a thunderous march toward the Kingdom of Xarooda. They headed toward the Lion Emperor’s dream of continental domination.

# Epilogue

A man looked out from a window in a luxurious room within a certain mansion.

*Not a cloud in the sky. It's refreshing. I wish the world could be as clear as this night sky.*

A pale, full moon sat high in the sky, surrounded by the bright light emitted by the sparkling stars. It was like a natural planetarium. Perhaps it was a museum of perfect harmony created by an absolute figure, like a god.

Either way, human hands couldn't replicate that beauty. As a cardinal of the Church of Meneos, it was an example of the world their god had instructed them to build and something they strove for.

*I wonder if the light of the heavens, where our God of Light Meneos sits, is as beautiful?*

A world made of stars stretched out before him. But the man felt a pain which contradicted the surrounding beauty. It felt as if he saw how impossible his religion's ideals were. The man involuntarily raised his hand toward the moon, almost pleading with his god. The glass window blocked the path of his hand, causing the man to smile wryly.

*I've acted a bit rashly as a servant of Meneos.*

Just as the sun was said to be an incarnation of the God of Light, in this world, the moon symbolized Vishmarela, the God of Darkness. The Church of Meneos taught that Vishmarela hated the world Meneos had created and was planning its destruction.

*The usual story.*

A religious order often created an evil version of their god, which they then confronted to demonstrate why their teachings were correct. Naturally, as a cardinal, the man had told that story many times to believers. However, if asked if he believed in it, the man would shake his head.

In reality, the man had a lot of authority within the Church of Meneos as a cardinal, overseeing a large congregation of believers. That did not mean he blindly believed in the church's teachings.

Or rather, it would be more accurate to say he could no longer believe in it.

*Ever since I learned about the existence of the other world...*

A world different from the Earth he knew.

The world called Rearth had a form of knowledge recognized as science—something this world had no way of understanding. His life changed when he read a document from Rearth written about a subject of study known as astronomy.

*What was his name again, Galileo? If I had as much courage as he, would I have been able to change something?*

Galileo Galilei was a target of the Inquisition and lost his position within the church. It was easy to scoff at it, regarding him as a fool unaware of the times. But his achievements had left their mark hundred years into the future, giving meaning to his sacrifices. Although the man yearned for it, he didn't have the courage to walk the same path as Galileo.

Accounting for his position and the lives of so many people, his simplistic sense of justice held no meaning.

*It's almost time. I should get started.*

The hand of a clock nearby on the wall was pointing to midnight. The man couldn't be late because he was to meet his boss, the pope. He stepped into a magic circle in the center of the room, controlling his breathing as his chakras silently activated.

"O torrent of power flowing through this earth, guide my will to his domain." Judging from his shortened chant, the man was a high-level user of verbal thaumaturgy, as expected of one in his role. The man's will entered the current coursing through the earth as he teleported several thousand kilometers.

"Right on time... Punctual as ever, Cardinal Roland."

Laughter echoed around the pope's audience room in the holy city of

Menestia. Cardinal Roland's consciousness, which had taken form, knelt before the pope, swearing allegiance.

"Your Holiness, it is a pleasure to be in your presence and to hold an audience with you," Cardinal Roland greeted his superior, in the manner customary when one had an audience with the pope.

Yet the pope waved his hand as if Cardinal Roland was a nuisance and interrupted him.

"That's enough. Mirroring thaumaturgy is reliant on the position of the stars. There is no need to waste more time with empty formalities."

Cardinal Roland nodded slightly and stood back up.

"I'm aware of the gist of the discussion. I have eyes and ears, after all. However, I would like to hear your opinion, Cardinal Roland, as someone responsible for the area."

"Thank you, Your Holiness."

The pope laughed and said, "So formal... I trust in your loyalty and ability, Cardinal Roland. Otherwise, I would not have made you travel to the opposite side of the continent."

Transmitting information across the large continent was always an issue for politicians and had limitations. Plenty of countries used horses to deliver information. People often sent letters via birds and even used smoke signals.

Talented verbal thaumaturgists could use the ley lines throughout the earth to transmit their will and communicate over great distances. Although, it was not as useful as calling on the telephone or sending an email like in modern society. Using horses to send information wasn't great for confidentiality since the person delivering the message changed often. If goods were transported from outside the country, they would have to pass through the guild for inspection.

Meanwhile, sending letters with birds always held the possibility of monsters attacking them. The method was functional for short distances but not reliable for long distances.

Smoke signals needed specific positions at specific intervals, making them ideal for domestic communication. All methods of communication took a lot of time, unlike phones and emails. If there was an issue with something, it was impossible to say, “Oh, please wait a moment.” That included making a call to their boss. One had to cross the extensive western continent to reach the holy city of Menestia from the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. It would take several months to report information without a high-level thaumaturgist capable of transmitting information over long distances.

That was assuming one didn’t end up stranded in a strange place. Highways being closed due to rain or monsters appearing meant one would have to make a detour, which was a very common occurrence on Earth. In addition to that, his next task concerned the Organization, a society working in secret in the western continent. Considering all this, it was easy to imagine why the pope trusted Cardinal Roland.

“I am deeply honored,” stated Cardinal Roland, bowing his head deeply.

“Well, as we are on limited time, let’s get on to the main topic. So, how is the man in question?”

“He is incredibly competent. The people summoned from Rearth who survive are all incredibly talented. But this man is a cut above the rest...”

“Hm... Well, that was to be expected...” agreed the pope, delighted. Most of the humans summoned from Rearth held an incredible amount of knowledge. Not much difference existed between those summoned from developing countries, and other more developed areas.

Even if the people from Rearth couldn’t read, having experienced civilization in a modern society meant that they knew the civilians of this world couldn’t compare. Conversely, it was difficult for those summoned from Rearth to survive here on Earth. Unless they had specifically learned some survival abilities, most of them couldn’t even start a fire. There were two ways people from Rearth would end up here.

First, they could be summoned as a war slave by a verbal thaumaturgist in some country somewhere. Second, sometimes Earth and Rearth were connected by a natural phenomenon, leading to the person from Rearth getting

accidentally caught up in a hole in time and space.

No matter the situation, the chances of them surviving weren't high. The person who summoned them would carve a magic symbol into them to ensure that they remained obedient and served them as a slave when they arrived. Men would be sent to the battlefield, whereas women would meet a worse fate based on their appearance and age. At any rate, the majority of them would have mental breakdowns or lose their lives.

Still, being transported through a hole in time and space wasn't any better.

To begin with, the hole in time and space wasn't always at ground level. Should one open up in the sky, one would fall straight to the ground and be flattened. Or if it opened somewhere over the ocean, unless there was land nearby or a passing ship, one would become food for the sea monsters.

The same applied if the hole opened underground.

Furthermore, those who came to Earth through those means didn't have the automatic language translation perk. Earth wasn't very welcoming to strangers they couldn't communicate with. Unless they got incredibly lucky, they would either be sold as slaves or have all their possessions stolen and get killed. As a result, only those who could survive such a harsh introduction to the world could survive. It was only natural that people from Rearth were strong. The strong, wise, and lucky were the only ones who would survive. As far as Cardinal Roland knew, no other humans had adapted to this world as well as Ryoma Mikoshiba had.

"I see... What about his involvement with the Organization?"

Cardinal Roland shook his head in response to the pope's question. "No conclusive evidence yet. However, based on the Rhoadserian war, I believe the possibility of Ryoma Mikoshiba working with the Organization is low."

"Hmm... Why do you think that?"

"If he were a member of the Organization, I don't believe he would have just been satisfied with banishing us to the Kingdom of Tarja. If they had only superficially accepted the retreat, a few offshoots from the Organization would have planned some surprise attacks. Moreover, they likely wouldn't have let

Rodney Mackenna and Menea Norberg stay behind as negotiators. Of course, they could be pretending they accepted those two and have laid a trap. But they should also know we would prepare for such things. He didn't seem like the man to resort to such simple tactics."

The pope deeply nodded in response.

"I see... If it is true that the Organization is composed of people from Rearth, the hatred they harbor would be immeasurable. There is no real reason to continue our retreat."

On the surface, the Church of Meneos had little information on the Organization. But it was half true, and half a lie.

The Church did not know the scale of the Organization or the names of the members. They could assume it had people summoned to Earth or who had wandered here somehow.

*If that weren't the case, there would be too many inconsistencies.*

Whether that went for the whole of the Organization or just a small part, Cardinal Roland didn't know. Regardless, he was very much confident in his conjecture. It was safe to say that the Church of Meneos was the otherworlders' sworn enemy.

*It makes sense, considering our crimes.*

It was the Church of Meneos that first proposed summoning otherworlders to use them as slaves. That was an inconvenient truth which only part of the church's senior members were privy to. Such knowledge could never become public—the Church of Meneos spoke of peace, kinship, and justice, even if it was imperfect.

And if they chose to conceal that for fear of resentment, they had no other option than saying they knew nothing more about the Organization.

It was like a victim having a scar on his shin. When asked by the police if he knew what happened to him, he would respond saying he had no idea what happened.

Silence filled the room.



The pope spoke up. “Fair enough. Cardinal Roland, continue with gathering information about that man. Even if he is not a part of the Organization, we can’t dismiss the idea that they have somehow gotten involved with him. I will leave Rodney and the others to you, so make sure to put them to good use. I’m sure the two of them will do good work.”

Cardinal Roland had prepared himself for the pope to scold him. He nodded deeply in response. “Thank you, Your Holiness.”

The pope, seeing Cardinal Roland like that, then continued joyously. “Also, it seems O’ltormea is planning to invade Xarooda. Brittantia is planning an invasion of Myest too. It seems both will be erupting into war in the near future... Nay, maybe it has already begun.”

“What... Is that true?” asked Cardinal Roland, his voice panicked. Realizing his mistake, he bowed his head. The pope was both the leader of the Church, and an agent of their god. Doubting his words was foolish and impolite. “My apologies, Your Holiness... What does the Holy Empire plan to do?”

If the O’ltormea Empire was pouring resources into the Kingdom of Xarooda, their western border would be undermanned. That scenario was a possible once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the Holy Qwiltantia Empire. They would surely request reinforcements from the Church of Meneos. But the pope shook his head at Cardinal Roland’s question.

“We have already begun to mobilize the Temple Knights. However... They are not acting as reinforcements for the Holy Qwiltantia Empire.”

Cardinal Roland frowned.

“Then does that mean...they’re headed east? But it would take the Temple Knights quite some time to get there.” A military unit could cover around twenty-five to thirty kilometers in a day. If pushed, they could probably clear around forty kilometers. But they would be exhausted the next day, meaning they would have to move much slower. Plus, the Temple Knights were a larger force than Cardinal Roland’s scouting team. It would take months for such a large battalion to reach the eastern side of the continent from the holy city of Menestia. Even then, that was being generous with the calculations. The paths would be unpaved, and safety questions might arise because monsters could

attack or landslides could halt progress depending on the weather. It was also unknown how many of the southern kingdoms would allow them passage. No matter how strong the influence of the Church of Meneos was in the southern kingdoms, most would not easily allow passage of such a large military force.

At least, it would be far more difficult for them than it had been for Cardinal Roland when he headed to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

*They could follow the sea until they reached the Kingdom of Brittantia to avoid going through the southern kingdoms. But it wouldn't be as safe as going by land.*

As they were a religious organization without access to a navy, they would either have to enter into a deal with merchants and borrow their ships or resort to commandeering ships, using their holy name as a shield. Depending on the situation, they might need to wait at the port for the wind. Travel by sea might take just as long as it would if they went by land. Seeing that the Temple Knights hadn't become used to the sea, they could end up ill, which was yet another reason sea travel wasn't an easy solution. Most knights hadn't even seen the sea with their own eyes.

When Cardinal Roland asked if the pope had any secret plans, the man simply smiled.

"Well, Cardinal Roland... I would like you to continue observing that man. Keep working hard at your role. If we need anything, I will be in touch," said the pope, breaking into laughter. Cardinal Roland bowed his head, locking away the many doubts and questions that crossed his mind. He had no other option.

"Your Holiness... Are you sure about that?" An old voice echoed out after Cardinal Roland's projection had disappeared and silence returned to the audience room. Even though it was a hoarse voice, it strangely rang well into the ears of the listener. The pope, unfazed by the sudden voice, responded calmly. That showed he knew of the old man's presence within the darkness.

"Yes. While our influence in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria has declined, our fellow countrymen weren't devout believers in our god. As there is no need to question Cardinal Roland's devotion, we should let him proceed with his plan. Although we didn't blame him for anything, I'm sure he now understands his

position...and will be even more desperate next time.”

“I see... Please forgive me for my needless remark,” responded the voice from the darkness.

“No need to apologize. I understand your doubts,” said the pope, picking up the bottle of alcohol next to him before pouring the red liquid into a glass. His drink was red, the color of a god’s blood.

“By the way, have you worked out how to use the Dimension Gate?”

The old man was unsure how to respond to the pope’s question. The Dimension Gate was one of the most secret and difficult-to-master forms of thaumaturgy that used the ley lines. After all, it was a means of transport that ignored the concept of distance, warping time and space by temporarily connecting two destinations. While the method resembled teleportation magic, it differed in how the user could transport someone else, not just themselves.

Also, the greatest advantage it had was the option of keeping the connection open for a fixed period in exchange for a large amount of prana. If one could master this, they would be able to move military forces in an instant. Even a child could understand the benefit to being able to move a large-scale unit anywhere they liked, anytime they wanted. Although, it would be difficult to use such a powerful form of thaumaturgy. A person would need to fulfill some requirements first. The most important of those was the condition of the ley lines and the positioning of the stars. In a way, using Dimension Gate would challenge the natural order of things. Because of that, previous popes had spent a lot of money trying to solve this problem.

The old man eventually shook his head in response to the pope’s question. He had devoted his heart and soul to solving the problem and had yet to reach a solution.

“My sincerest apologies, Your Holiness. I have tried everything at my disposal, but the conditions of the ley lines change too much from day to day. And if the position of the stars is also affected, I cannot tell you anything for sure at this time.”

The pope snorted in displeasure. However, it seemed he didn’t blame the old man.

“I see... Should we learn how to use it, our order could easily take control of the continent. Our lord Meneos, the God of Light, is also the God of Creation. If only he would give his followers a bit more flexibility...”

Such words could seem like they ridiculed the God of Light, Meneos. But the will of a god was unknown to humans, who just believed in the Church’s teachings. If the Inquisition were to hear such slander, it wouldn’t be unusual for it to result in punishment by burning. In lands like the continent’s eastern region, leniency might exist since the Church of Meneos had a weaker influence. But lives were at risk in places like the holy city of Menestia and the Holy Qwiltantia Empire—regardless of a person’s status, be it a noble or commoner. Not even royalty would get away with such slander. They might avoid execution, but they would lose their royal rights and find themselves locked up in an empty mansion somewhere.

At the very least, they were not words a sane person would ever utter.

The person who had uttered them, however, was in control of the Inquisition. Even if they were in the same room and heard what the pope said, they wouldn’t find fault with it. While the old man was fully aware of this, he couldn’t help but say something about it. The old man held the title of chief cardinal, a particularly trustworthy position among the twelve cardinals who aided the pope. Despite his position as a cardinal being to advise and aid the pope, he couldn’t ignore such blasphemous words.

“Your Holiness... Perhaps you jest too much.” The old man could only gently rebuke the pope’s joke, unable to admonish him further, demonstrating the clear power dynamic between the two. The old man saw the pope as Meneos’ incarnation, on the same level as a god. A ruthless and cruel god.

No matter their position, not even a cardinal could escape death if he directed his anger at them. Thus, it seemed the old man’s carefulness had succeeded.

“True... I misspoke. Although I want to cover the land in his lord’s light, I got too ahead of myself. Let’s dismiss it as an off-the-cuff remark,” declared the pope.

The old man bowed his head and stated, “Please do not worry. It is all caused by my incompetence. I deeply apologize for troubling you, Your Holiness.” They

had suddenly switched sides. The old man had no other choice of answer, seeing as the pope had apologized to him.

The old man's slow work was the root cause of all this. However, the pope had no intention of blaming him.

"We are trying to use a power that is beyond our understanding... There is no wonder that progress is slow. Do not worry about it. Just keep on working at it," continued the pope, gulping his drink. "It will be interesting to see who brings about god's grace..."

The pope noticed the old man's expression, then laughed loudly. It was a laugh filled with joy and delight, but it also contained the arrogance of a fanatic, a man acting as god's agent. In a way, it resembled the laughter of a beast waiting for its feast of blood. The old man bowed his head again and disappeared from the audience room as if running away from the beast's laugh.

A new wind of war was about to sweep over the western continent as the Church of Meneos, the Organization, and several countries' intentions all intertwined. That war would give Ryoma Mikoshiba another opportunity to rise to greater heights. As an ungodly man, he was yet to know of the fateful encounter waiting ahead.

## Afterword

Although I doubt there are any, to those picking up *Record of Wortenia War* for the first time, it's nice to meet you. For those who have been here since volume one, long time no see. I'm the author, Ryota Hori.

Fall is getting colder, and I find myself wanting to wear coats more. How are you all doing?

Last month, I caught a cold. I was in a panic and thought I had finally caught COVID. But after a few days, my temperature and cough weren't that bad, and I'm feeling all right now. Please make sure to look after yourselves, everyone.

The COVID pandemic seems to have passed, but then again, it still feels like it's here, creating a bit of a strange situation. I'm slowly getting back to my usual life. I have a renewed determination to visit my favorite restaurants often to collect information so they don't go out of business. However, a year has passed by quickly, and we are already on the last publication of this year, volume twenty-three. As an author, I'm very relieved I've been able to write this year and keep up with the current publishing pace. Until now, we've been spelling out the volume numbers in English. I wonder if it is a good time to start writing them as numerals.

Putting that thought aside, now for the usual highlights.

I guess the highlight of this issue is *moving forward*. Ryoma can now breathe a sigh of relief now that his war with Queen Lupis is over. Though to construct a new system within the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, there is still a lot for him to do. But if the main character finally has peace, then the author loses his only means of bread and butter. So, I'd like Ryoma to give up on the idea of peace, accepting it as his fate, being a character I made up.

Ryoma will continue to climb the ranks, so let's hope he continues doing well.

In addition, Sudou and the Church of Meneos have started to make their moves—as well as a large country we haven't heard from in a while. Please look

forward to the next volume, which I plan to use to send shivers throughout the western continent.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all of those involved in publishing this book and the readers for picking this up. I'll continue to do my best, so please look forward to the continuation of *Record of Wortenia War*.















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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 23

by Ryota Hori

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