

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**



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**“What on
earth has
happened?”**

**“The reconnaissance
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WAR**



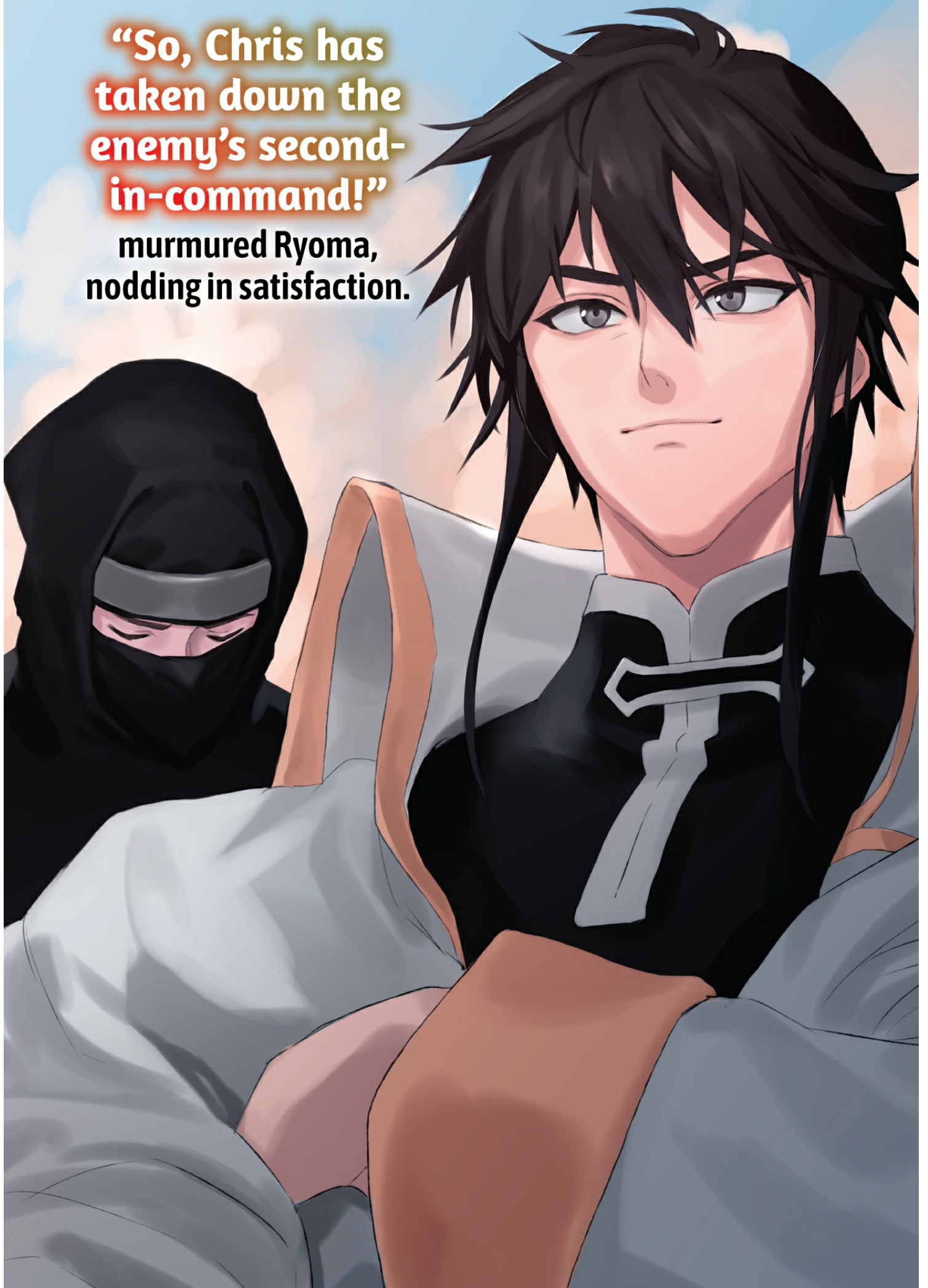
At Rahizya's words, Harisha's face flushed red with anger.

"Don't be ridiculous! My father's illness has been taken advantage of!"

"My lady, please don't be selfish. We have entered into a contract with the Kingdom of Tarja."

**“So, Chris has
taken down the
enemy’s second-
in-command!”**

**murmured Ryoma,
nodding in satisfaction.**



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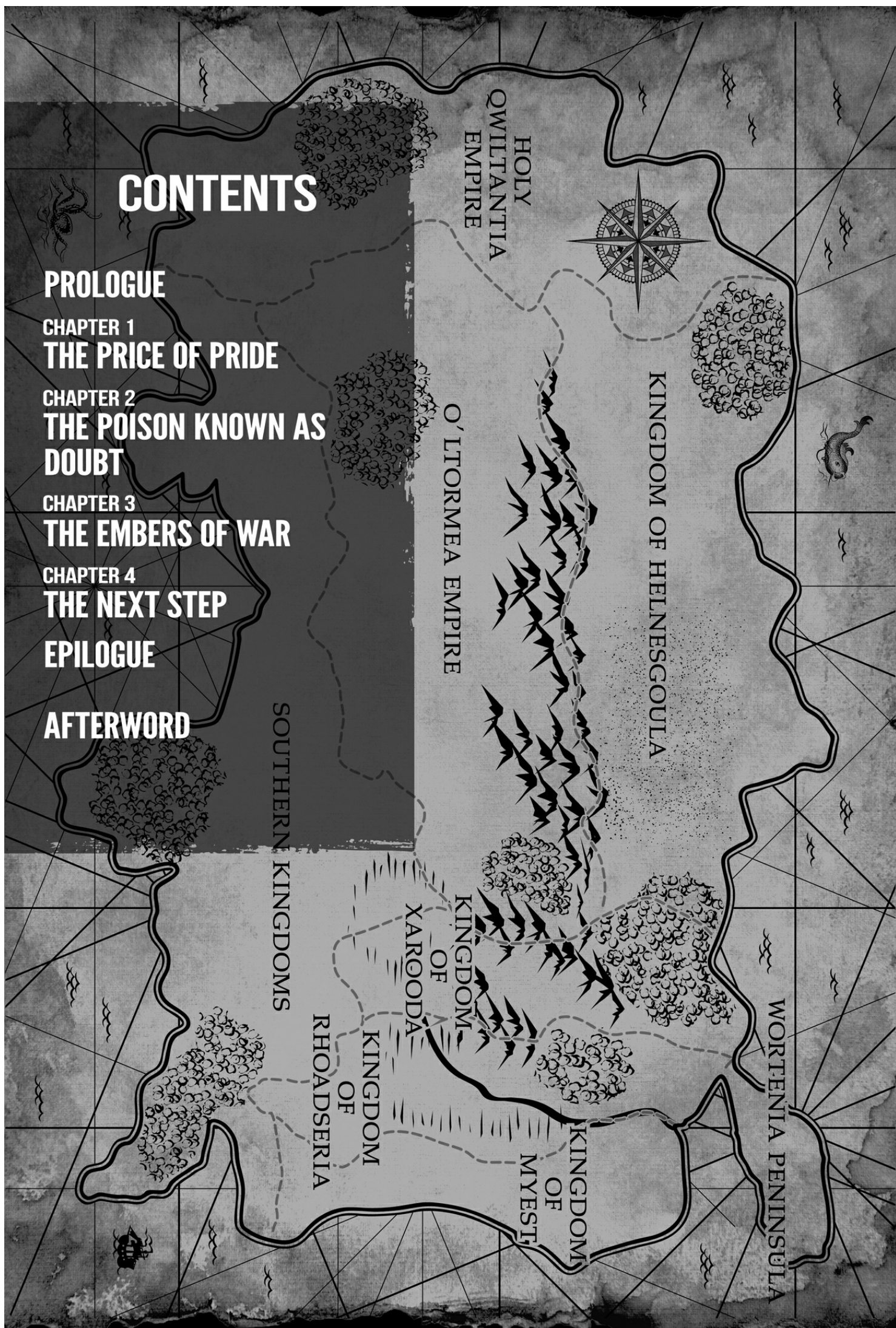


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Prologue

The Kingdom of Myest was one of the countries in the eastern part of the western continent. It was also the home of Pherzaad, one of the biggest trading cities within the continent that dealt primarily with the central and southern nations. Meanwhile, the capital of Myest, Endesia, boasted of its strong financial power through its scale and tenacity. The streets were always constantly bustling with traveling merchants and visitors.

The destinations of the travelers, as well as the secrets they held close to their hearts, varied from one person to the other. Some merchants formed caravans, their hearts filled with hopes and calculated plans as they looked for good deals. Certain adventurers and mercenaries traveled the continent looking for their latest prey. Among them were prisoners running from their crimes and former nobles who had lost everything they owned due to political power struggles. However, it was undeniable that there was an exception to everything, as per the rules of the world.

That day, the Kingdom of Myest's army, having swelled to over one hundred and fifty thousand soldiers, advanced south along the roads toward the fortress city of Jermuk. It was just past midday, and the sun radiated warmth across the land. A calm gust of wind scattered vivid green leaves that covered the stone-paved road, creating a picturesque scene. However, a massive army was advancing, kicking up clouds of dust. The peaceful atmosphere completely vanished, and the sight of the marching army accompanied by countless military flags stirred the soul.

The man leading the army was one of the three most respected generals within the Kingdom of Myest, and the one referred to as the strongest: Alexis Duran. That said, he wasn't without his worries as a person leading such a grand army.

Our numbers have grown more than originally planned, which is good, but what am I to do now?

Such thoughts crossed Alexis Duran's mind. When they left Endesia, they had about one hundred thirty thousand troops. Due to the influence of the nobles who owned the southern territories within Myest, their army had swelled to more than one hundred and fifty thousand men. Usually, having such an influx of soldiers wouldn't be a bad thing, though if General Duran had made a slight miscalculation, it wasn't good either. Having the soldiers' numbers rise from one hundred thirty thousand soldiers to one hundred fifty thousand meant that the ration consumption they had planned for was now closer to 1.2 times the original estimate. Plus, there was always the possibility that even more reinforcements might appear.

Since the southern nobles are all joining the campaign, I can see our numbers growing, but I can't see them reducing at all.

Of course, General Duran had accounted for the possibility of unexpected developments when procuring supplies, so it was unlikely that anything would go wrong immediately.

But even so, it's not an issue I can simply overlook.

Regardless of how it was done, General Duran would need to procure more supplies by buying them from merchants or having them sent from the military reserves within the royal capital.

Not to mention that every time the nobles join in our march, they always seek to meet with me directly, mused General Duran, understanding the nobles' intentions. After all, there is no one else they can depend on other than me... The death of King Phillip, which resulted from the recent attack on the royal capital of Endesia, and the appointment of Owen Spiegel, the king's half brother and former chancellor, as the new king—it all must have come as a complete shock to many living in the Kingdom of Myest.

Every time the nobles joined the army, General Duran had to meet with them and express his gratitude, which slowed down the army's progress on their march.

Regardless, the nobles joining the army did so to show allegiance to the newly appointed King Owen. If they are helping to maintain the troops' morale, I have to treat them with care.

General Duran's presence was an emotional pillar to those still reeling from King Phillip's death and Owen Spiegel's appointment. The name Alexis Duran had that much power to it. But while he had a notable reputation, it still had its limits.

Considering everything that happened right after the king was assassinated, the soldiers' morale has been higher than expected... However, there is no doubt that the soldiers probably harbor some unease.

The soldiers Duran was leading were originally headed to the fortress city of Jermuk to assist in the siege and fight against the Brittantia-Tarja alliance. Although a rumor circulated that the northern Myest nobles had colluded with the southern kingdoms to facilitate the recent attack on Endesia, few people actually believed it. No one had denied the rumors, but there was a sense of suspicion among the populace.

After all, there were hardly any reasons for the northern nobles to attack Phillip.

That was not to say that the northern nobles *didn't* have plans to assassinate Phillip, seeing as he was tightening his grip on the nobles. The nobles held more influence than the royal family and Phillip had wanted to increase the royal family's control within the country.

Most nobles desired to have autonomy over the regions they owned. It made sense they considered it a natural right and duty of the nobles. But from the point of view of the state, it was nothing other than the height of inefficiency.

Phillip implemented numerous measures to limit the nobles' authority, meaning the idea of the northern nobles orchestrating an assassination of Phillip wasn't such a far-fetched idea.

However, it's also true that the idea lacks some degree of persuasiveness.

After all, that applied to the nobles within the nation. The soldiers understood those various points of doubt and also went along with it. This was likely due to the fame and power of Alexis Duran, as well as the presence of the nobles.

The nobles' participation in this plan visibly demonstrates the righteousness of it, thought General Duran. It had gone exactly how he had planned. Even that

has its limits, though, so urgent action is needed.

Although their loyal service made it appear that the flames had been extinguished, the fire of doubt still burned within the soldiers' hearts. The longer it smoldered, the more likely it was to develop into a roaring inferno.

I need to rid them of their doubts... And to do that, we need to present them with a scapegoat they will accept.

The problem was, who would act as that scapegoat?

Right now, the two suitable candidates I can think of are Ryoma Mikoshiba and Ecclesia Marinelle. Cassandra Hellner, who had made no attempt to leave Pherzaad, is also an option.

Of course, they weren't the ones behind the king's death at all. The one who orchestrated the series of plots was Tomohiro Kusuda, acting under the orders of Akitake Sudou. Since Sudou was merely acting in the interest of the Organization, if they were to question who ultimately bore the responsibility, it would fall to someone among the elders, who were the effective rulers of the Organization.

The one who had actually killed Phillip in order to usurp the throne was Owen Spiegel, although Alexis Duran had spurred him on in the first place and set events in motion. Attempts to blame either Ryoma Mikoshiba or Ecclesia Marinelle would fail. However, it would take a thorough investigation to uncover that reality. In cases like this, sometimes the truth wasn't that important.

Of course, we need to weave a plausible story.

In summary, General Duran needed to come up with a cover story that would convince the people living within the Kingdom of Myest. He had already thought up another possibility.

Well, this is only if Owen Spiegel takes the throne from the former King Phillip. The future isn't set in stone.

The other option was turning the plan completely around. If push came to shove, General Duran wouldn't hesitate to choose that option.

However, if I do choose that, it would invite a lot of misfortune in his direction...

General Duran felt no sense of obligation or attachment strong enough to make him want to wholeheartedly support Owen. If the current situation threatened the interests of the Organization, General Duran would not hesitate to pin Owen as the mastermind behind the king's assassination and cast him out. To Alexis Duran, the new king was nothing more than a pawn. The preparations for everything were already in place, all based on intricate calculations. He was a man well-versed in planning and strategy.

In the past one hundred to two hundred battles that Alexis had claimed victory in, over half of them could be credited to his strategies. It was more accurate to describe him as someone who sat behind the front lines controlling the tide of battle rather than a ferocious general, swinging his spear on the battlefield and accumulating his victories that way. However, even a general like him sometimes faced unforeseen situations.

The soldiers' march suddenly stopped.

Huh? Did something happen on the front line? General Duran slightly cocked his head in confusion before turning to the person closest to him. He then asked, "What's happened? The march has stopped. Did something happen?"

"I'm not quite sure... Please wait a moment. We're trying to figure out what happened," said Dennis, who ran toward the front line.

Alexis Duran knew sending a subordinate to investigate would be quicker than going himself. As he watched Dennis run, he began to ponder what could have caused them to stop.

I don't think we're under attack... If we were, I'd hear the shouts and clash of swords, but it's too quiet for that. Plus, we're in an unsuitable location for an ambush. I can't imagine any enemies would attack us here.

While General Duran couldn't entirely discount the possibility of thieves or monsters attacking, there were no thieves—or monsters—stupid enough to attack such a large army. Outside of that, there weren't any other obvious reasons for the march to suddenly come to a stop.

Unless...

Several possibilities crossed Duran's mind, only to then fade away. The most likely explanation was that a carriage had broken down, or maybe a pregnant woman had gone into labor.

But if that were the case, we'd have plenty of ways to deal with it.

If an axle or wheel had broken on the carriage, one of the military engineers or blacksmiths would be able to fix it, and the soldiers could move the carriage to the side of the road. If a woman were pregnant or ill, General Duran would have someone ride a horse to town and fetch a doctor or arrange for someone to take her to a doctor. An urgent situation would require the doctors who were part of the army to see them. Regardless of how they handled it, the situation would be settled easily. Depending on the personality of the commanding officer of the leading unit, they might simply ignore someone crying before them and carry on marching.

A noble might pose an issue, but the only people who could stop a marching army would be either a commoner or a nomadic adventurer. Depending on the circumstance, the person holding them up might face punishment, and no one would criticize such a decision.

Such an incident in the modern world would become a huge scandal... I remember someone saying they now use something called social networking services.

It had been around a half-century since Alexis Duran was summoned to Earth from Rearth. As the saying goes, "Ten years feels like a lifetime." The Rearth that Duran once lived on now existed only in memory and history. However, that didn't mean he lacked any knowledge of the present.

I have lots of opportunities to hear about it from the people who join the Organization.

There was no lack of people being summoned from Rearth to Earth. The catalysts required for the rituals had become more difficult to obtain in recent years, so the frequency of summonings had decreased, but only slightly. The decrease was purely due to practical factors and didn't indicate a ban on or a decline of interest in the use of the summoning rituals.

According to an estimate by the Organization, which may or may not have been reliable, more than a thousand people from Rearth were summoned to this hell each year.

In addition, some unlucky individuals find themselves trapped in naturally occurring distortions of space-time and end up in this world.

Most of these people either ended up in the belly of some monster or perished on the battlefield as slave soldiers. Still, the Organization protected some of them based on their abilities or luck. Through them, the Organization gathered information about the current state of Rearth.

Though it may be heartless...

On a personal level, Alexis Duran did not approve of the current state of this world. While his sense of human rights may not have been as advanced as in modern society, he wasn't entirely devoid of the concept before being summoned to this world.

The strong exploited and oppressed the weak. That was just the reality of this world. If you didn't like it, your only choice was to become stronger.

Moreover, the commoners understand the social hierarchy all too well, Alexis pondered. For that reason, they usually wouldn't seek help unless it was an extreme emergency and instead just flee from the situation. In any case, there's no reason to stop the army's march over such trivial matters.

There were countless ways to deal with obstacles, such as changing course to avoid them or physically removing them.

As long as we're not in a narrow, cliff-lined area, there's no reason we can't go off the main road.

Sticking to the road, protected by thaumaturgical barriers, was generally safer and a basic rule of travel in this world. But circumstances could change. With these thoughts occupying his mind, General Duran spent a few minutes in contemplation.

"Your Excellency, may I have a moment?" a voice called out. General Duran shifted his gaze to Dennis, who had returned from checking on the situation, waiting atop his horse.

It seemed Dennis had ridden up to the front line to investigate. His horse was breathing heavily, a sign of pushing itself to the limit. And judging from Dennis's expression, the situation wasn't good.

Has something happened that this man is unable to handle?

Noticing the confusion on Dennis's face, General Duran felt puzzled. If it had been anything he had anticipated, Dennis should have handled it on his own. General Duran had only ordered a situation report, after all.

Even so, no one among Duran's closest aides was so incompetent that they'd be unable to decide on moving a carriage or rendering aid to a pregnant woman or a critically ill person without explicit orders.

That's the sort of thing that should be handled with flexibility.

If anyone among his aides were to display such rigid thinking, General Duran would have no choice but to order their execution. Of course, he would likely dismiss such incompetence with a bitter smile if Dennis were a regular soldier. But things were different when it came to his inner circle.

As close aides to Duran—the man responsible for an entire nation's military—assisting the busy general was their main duty. If Alexis Duran had to make every decision, there would be no point in having aides.

Serving as Alexis Duran's aide was a highly honorable position. However, at the same time, it demanded responsibility, capability, and determination beyond mere honor. And those who surrounded Duran were fully aware of his nature.

So, what on earth has happened?

General Duran's heart grew restless. He honestly didn't want to hear the report. But under the circumstances, not listening to Dennis's report wasn't an option.

"Very well... So, what is it?" General Duran asked.

Dennis hesitated before saying, "Yes, Your Excellency. The reconnaissance team reported that a large group of people is moving north toward the capital."

Duran thought for a moment after hearing the report, then gave a small nod.

“I see... A group moving north at this time would likely be our countrymen.”

“Yes, most likely, it’s the residents of Jermuk and the surrounding areas,” Dennis replied.

Hearing this, Duran clicked his tongue sharply. Of course, the possibility of refugees from other countries couldn’t be ruled out. Bandits and monsters frequently destroyed villages and towns. But given the timing, it was most natural to assume that the people fleeing were from the Jermuk region.

That Bruno Accordo... I told him not to plunder or burn unnecessarily because it would complicate things later, but he must’ve ignored me. Or maybe it was Raul Giordano?

There were already some agreements with Bruno and the forces of the allied army regarding postwar arrangements. The kingdoms of Myest, Britannia, and Tarja were all but certain to form a coalition. Thus, General Duran had ordered Bruno, the commander of the allied army, to refrain from unnecessary plunder or destruction.

Of course, I never expected him to fully avoid it, but... From Dennis’s tone, it sounds like there aren’t just a few hundred or even a thousand. More like several thousands.

General Duran could understand why the army would stop its march if such a large number of refugees appeared in their path.

“And what’s the number? Twenty or thirty thousand? Surely not more than fifty thousand?” asked General Duran, proposing what seemed to be a reasonable estimate.

The Jermuk region had around thirty villages and towns. Together with the city of Jermuk, the population of the area exceeded three hundred thousand. But south of Jermuk, there were no major urban centers, just a few villages of several hundred to a thousand people each. Even if all those villages had been plundered, the number of refugees would likely not exceed five thousand.

In most cases, it was hard to imagine the entire population of a village fleeing unless their homes were completely destroyed, their food taken, or the inhabitants massacred. Most would choose to stay behind and rebuild their

homes.

Most people in this world are reluctant to leave their homeland... The same distrust of immigrants and refugees applies here too. Even if they decide to leave temporarily, they'd most likely head to Jermuk, the nearest fortified city.

Jermuk could accommodate a large number of people, and its high walls would offer psychological comfort. Once the war was over, they could quickly return to their villages and begin rebuilding.

Even though Archduke Mikoshiba's army had entered Jermuk as reinforcements for the Kingdom of Myest, the residents naturally felt uneasy about the future of the war. This was especially true considering that King Phillip had recently passed away, and a new king had just ascended to the throne.

Given the situation, it's understandable that more people would want to flee to the capital, pondered General Duran, finding the scout's report of tens of thousands of refugees heading toward the capital reasonable. *Though tens of thousands might be a bit exaggerated...*

While General Duran had asked Dennis if there were tens of thousands, he expected the number to be closer to around ten thousand. That was the figure he arrived at based on his experience. However, his estimate was completely inaccurate and far worse than anticipated.

"No, it's not *tens* of thousands... While we don't have an exact count, the scouts reported that the road was filled with people as far as the eye could see. After confirming several times, they estimated it to be over two hundred thousand, possibly as many as three hundred thousand."

Upon hearing those words, Duran shouted involuntarily, "Impossible! Over three hundred thousand?!" Even for the battle-hardened Alexis Duran, this was an unimaginable number. *Three hundred thousand? That's impossible. Even if they were fleeing from raiders and plunderers, that's an absurd estimate.*

If the oncoming crowd were tens of thousands, it would still be understandable. It would be a bit of a stretch from his prediction of around ten thousand, though human error in visual estimation could explain that discrepancy. However, no one would mistake ten thousand people for three

hundred thousand.

That's too big a gap to be a mistake or misjudgment... Could the scouts be lying? Or have we fallen for some sort of ruse?

As General Duran faced this unexpected development, his sharp mind began to consider and dismiss various possibilities.

But what bothers me is that number of three hundred thousand. If the scouts' report is accurate, the only possible explanation would be that the entire population of Jermuk and all the surrounding region has taken flight. But could that even be possible? And if it is, why? Why would they do such a thing?

To General Duran's knowledge, the fortress city of Jermuk wasn't on the verge of falling. After all, Archduke Mikoshiba's forces had driven away the enemies surrounding the city and entered it.

The general consensus was that the situation was either balanced or slightly in favor of the defending forces, and Duran shared that view. Hans Randall recently sent a secret letter via carrier pigeon, declaring that Archduke Mikoshiba's forces had decisively defeated the allied army outside the city.

Naturally, General Duran had prepared for the possibility that Hans's letter might be false or misleading, but no new reports had suggested that Jermuk had fallen. If such an important strategic point had fallen to the enemy, they would have received word by now.

Even if there had been some mistake or confusion in the report, it was hard to imagine that Jermuk had fallen.

So why would the people leave their fortified city, with its high walls and solid defenses?

It was unthinkable.

If anyone had reason to flee, it would have been the enemy soldiers, not the residents of Jermuk. After all, Archduke Mikoshiba had amassed enough forces to defeat the allied forces and free the fortress city.

And if Hans Randall's letter was to be believed, there was no reason for three hundred thousand people to abandon their city and head for the capital.



General Duran, who led over one hundred fifty thousand troops of the Kingdom of Myest, marched south along the highway toward Jermuk. The consequences of encountering another force of equal or greater size were obvious.

It would lead to chaos... But what should we do? thought Alexis Duran. Even his sharp mind couldn't immediately find a solution. *Should we move our forces off the road into the surrounding fields? It's not impossible, given the area is mostly grassland, but...*

At first glance, that seemed like a reasonable option. However, General Duran quickly dismissed the idea.

Our formation consists of ranks of fifteen men, and already stretches across the road and into the fields on each side. Assuming a space of about 1.5 meters between ranks, the length of the entire column would be roughly fifteen kilometers. If the distance between them grows, it would stretch even further. Even if I send a messenger now, I doubt we'd have time to react, and this would only create more confusion.

The Kingdom of Myest's army had formed a long column, with Duran positioned near the front but not at the head. Although his distance calculation had assumed a 1.5-meter gap between ranks of infantry, the army did not consist solely of infantry.

There were also cavalry and engineers. The fifteen-kilometer estimate was just the minimum distance, though it could stretch to nearly twenty kilometers. Above all, the logistics units occupied the rear, transporting food and equipment in a long train of wagons.

The infantry and cavalry might be able to divert off the road, but the logistics wagons? It's impossible for them to move through the grasslands... Considering that, moving aside is out of the question.

That left only one option.

We'll have to send troops ahead quickly and halt the refugees, then guide them off the road onto the plains and let our army pass by.

It was like trying to navigate a single-lane mountain road, where one side had

to pull over to let the other pass. But unlike vehicles that could simply stop and go, coordinating the movements of large groups took immense time and effort.

It will take more than a day or two. They're just a disorganized mob—no real order among them.

As commander of the Kingdom of Myest's forces, General Duran had to consider the welfare of the refugees. He had to manage the situation until someone else could take over the responsibility.

Even if we set up camps for them near the capital, it will take time to organize everything... A week, maybe ten days, thought General Duran, realizing that Kusuda's scheme had been thwarted.

That night, inside a tent set up on the grasslands, Alexis Duran was lost in thought. This was not the initially planned campsite. The original site was several dozen kilometers further south, but the report from the scouts earlier that day had made General Duran change plans suddenly.

Despite the trouble it caused, General Duran felt relieved. The situation seemed under control, and the change had led to a satisfactory outcome. He praised his subordinate for the decision to halt the march.

Casualties would have occurred if he hadn't ordered that halt after hearing the scout's report. Though some might criticize him for acting on his own, he's offered to take responsibility, and we should commend his flexibility in situations like this.

Indeed, rewarding merit and punishing wrongdoings was essential for maintaining discipline in the military. Acting independently could be seen as a breach of discipline, though.

But every action has two sides.

Upholding military discipline was necessary, but becoming too rigid and causing needless harm was counterproductive. Ultimately, it boiled down to balance and the capacity of those in charge to make decisions. Without intervention, hundreds of thousands of people could have been reduced to a disorganized mob.

The refugees would likely have reacted in four ways, mused Alexis Duran. He believed some refugees would have tried to advance while others would have steered to the side, retreated, or remained stationary. There was no one to command the whole group.

This would have led to chaos, making a disaster inevitable. Whether by accident or malice, there was a high likelihood of someone being trampled if they fell because a disorganized crowd was impossible to control.

And worse, if things had gone badly, Myest's army could have ended up killing our own citizens, he thought. An arrogant, self-serving commander might have ordered their army to march forward, even if it meant crushing the refugees. Of course, there are times when civilian sacrifices are necessary for military strategy or tactics.

The key was how to handle the aftermath. People would only accept a ruthless decision if they were given sufficient reason or benefit to justify it. Failure to explain it would cause unrest among the citizens and lower the soldiers' morale.

This disaster had been avoided.

Even though his actions were close to overstepping, his judgment was correct, reckoned General Duran, as it wouldn't be unreasonable for him to be more lenient toward such a subordinate. However, promoting or rewarding him might be difficult. I could bring him into my inner circle and make it look like a punishment to others.

Finally, General Duran began to see a path forward. He reached for the glass on the table, and the golden liquid slid smoothly down his throat.

Using the residents of Jermuk to delay us... Hmph.

The idea was common, but pulling it off was no easy feat.

After all, the Kingdom of Helnesgoula led a four-nation coalition that included the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and the Kingdom of Myest as allies. Therefore, Archduke Mikoshiba's and Myest's armies were technically allies as well.

Despite this, Ryoma Mikoshiba had rejected having the Myest Kingdom assist Jermuk. This meant he had seen through General Duran's intentions.

Mikoshiba even ordered the residents to take all their belongings with them when they evacuated, which is interesting.

People needed money to live in society—for food, clothes, and shelter. If they didn't have money, they would have to be entirely self-sufficient to survive. Evacuees would naturally want to take their belongings with them.

However, most military commanders wouldn't allow residents to take all their possessions with them. By allowing this, Ryoma Mikoshiba would be praised as a benevolent leader.

When I heard from the residents, they all spoke highly of Mikoshiba. Taking away all their possessions would slow the refugees down.

Yet Ryoma's decision to let the people take their belongings wasn't out of kindness. General Duran had seen through the archduke's strategy.

Ryoma Mikoshiba...

A smile crept across Duran's face.

Mr. Sudou's letter mentioned him, and he is an interesting man. I can understand why Mr. Kusuda has mixed feelings about him.

As a leader, it might have been an inappropriate sentiment. But as a fellow strategist, General Duran couldn't help but admire the cunning man who had outmaneuvered him.

"I'd like to meet him one day...if he survives his battle with the coalition forces under the fierce General Bruno Accordo," said General Duran. Just because his army wouldn't reach Jermuk in time didn't mean Ryoma Mikoshiba would gain the upper hand. General Duran laughed aloud, relishing the presence of a worthy adversary after so long.

Chapter 1: The Price of Pride

A few hours before the elephant corps was ensnared by the trap laid by Ryoma Mikoshiba and met their doom, preparations were underway.

Lubua Plains stretched south of Jermuk, dotted with small hills and forests that served as the setting for numerous clashes between the Kingdom of Myest and the Kingdom of Brittania over the years. Countless soldiers from both nations lay buried in this land, which one might have aptly referred to as a place of bloody corpses.

On the northern hills of these plains, soldiers from Brittania and Tarja had gathered, preparing for the upcoming battle. Rows of fieldworks had been erected, and countless flags fluttered in the wind.

The encampment resembled a fortress. Tents were everywhere, with soldiers and horses moving back and forth. For them, Ryoma Mikoshiba's surprise attack that had broken the siege of the fortress city of Jermuk was nothing but humiliating. After all, they had victory in their grasp—ninety percent of the battle was theirs—only to have it overturned in an instant. It was natural for them to burn with the desire for revenge. They all shared this fervor, from the supreme commander of the allied forces, Bruno Accordo, to the lowest-ranked soldier on the front lines.

Having joined forces with reinforcements from their homeland, their army had grown significantly larger than that of the enemy. Their morale burned so intensely that it seemed ready to set the skies ablaze. However, one section of the camp differed from the chaotic furor of the rest. The soldiers there didn't lack motivation, nor did they have low morale. In fact, their fighting spirit might have surpassed that of the rest of the allied forces.

The difference lay in their goals. Where the others burned with fiery passion, these radiated an icy coldness, or a steellike ruthlessness. Even their appearance distinguished them from the rest. While most Brittania and Tarja soldiers were clad in metal armor, a common sight in the many countries of the

western continent, this group of warriors seemed more lightly equipped. Leather armor protected their torsos, leaving their arms bare from the elbows down, and their legs were only lightly guarded with shin protectors. Their attire favored being agile and unencumbered. Moreover, their armor and its design varied widely among individuals.

Some wore lavish, ornate pieces adorned with gold and silver, while others donned simpler attire. They resembled mercenaries more than soldiers from a formal army. This indicated that their combat style prioritized mobility and individual skill over the collective formations typical of large units. Another distinguishing feature was their weapons. Instead of the double-edged longswords commonly used in the western continent, they wielded curved, single-edged swords. These swords were not Japanese katana or Chinese *liuyedao* but something distinct.

The blades were slender and sharp, designed primarily for slashing enemies. However, the cross-shaped hilt, the knuckle guards on the handle, and the double-edged tip suggested their weapons were similar to the *talwar*, a sword used in India. In any case, their equipment was unusual for this part of the western continent. The cloth wrapped around their heads and mouths was even more striking than their swords and armor. Red or white turbans covered their heads. These were not the simple head wraps commonly associated with Sikh followers from India, which covered only the head. Instead, their style resembled that of Arab tribes, where the cloth also covered the mouth and concealed their expressions.

This appearance was both foreign and unsettling to the many inhabitants of the western continent. And it was this unfamiliarity that bred contempt and disdain.



Many of Brittania's and Tarja's soldiers despised and underestimated these warriors, viewing them as barbarians. Just looking at their simple armor, they may have seemed like poorly equipped soldiers from a destitute nation, hastily gathered just to pad the army's numbers. However, such opinions would soon vanish when one encountered them up close and met their gaze. The sharpness in their eyes, visible through the slit in the cloth covering their faces, and the tense aura radiating from their entire being set them apart from ordinary people.

That presence was a testament to the fact that they were battle-hardened warriors who had survived countless life-or-death encounters. Once someone saw their rugged physiques, those who dared to dismiss them as mere scum would regret their shallow judgment. In reality, they had surpassed the limitations of the human race.

"All right, let us pass. Ayun, it may be a burden, but keep a close watch on the surroundings for a while," said a man as he lightly patted the shoulder of a soldier wearing a turban with feather decorations.

The man stood about two meters tall and had a muscular, well-built frame. His arms were as thick as a woman's thighs, and he appeared to be around thirty years old. It was an age where the balance of mind, body, and technique came into perfect harmony, approaching the peak of a warrior's prowess.

Indeed, his skills as a warrior were exceptional. Even more than that, the man exuded a certain dignity and presence that naturally befitted a leader, which made sense considering the man stood second only to the chief's daughter in this group.

"Yes, Lord Rahizya... Even if I must give my life, I will not allow a single dog near this tent. Please rest assured."

Upon hearing these words, the man called Rahizya nodded deeply, sensing Ayun's firm resolve in his expression and tone. Ayun would fulfill his duty, even at the cost of his life. This resolve was palpable not only from Ayun but also from the soldiers standing behind him.

These are reliable men. I hope I can reward their dedication, thought Rahizya.

Rewarding the efforts of subordinates was the duty and obligation of a leader. It remained the same whether in modern corporate life or among the nobles of this world.

It was a necessary action for maintaining any group, though wanting to reward them and doing so were two different things. This scenario resembled how a company president would like to raise salaries and bonuses but could not do so without sufficient profits.

In short, you couldn't give what you didn't have. Moreover, Rahizya had his own personal limitations.

After all, I'm just a fox borrowing the authority of my father. It's frustrating, but...

In such circumstances, favoring those loyal to him would be difficult. While possible in theory, Rahizya knew favoritism would invite backlash and resentment. Some members of the troop followed Rahizya, but just as many harbored hostility toward him.

Actually, saying "just as many" might be a bit of an understatement.

Only about twenty or thirty percent of the tribe had openly declared their opposition to Rahizya. But even those who weren't openly opposing him bore dissatisfaction and resentment in their hearts. These people outwardly pretended to obey orders, but inwardly, they waited eagerly for Rahizya to make a mistake. If one counted these potential adversaries, their numbers might well have exceeded seventy percent of the tribe. Rahizya had worked hard to pacify these opponents, sometimes using force to keep them in line. He wasn't pleased with the current situation.

It's a fact that the tribe has been fractured.

Despite Rahizya's understanding, he wasn't willing to give up on the path he had chosen. While he knew that persuading everyone with words would be ideal, he also knew that achieving such an ideal would take time.

But we don't have that kind of time, mused Rahizya as images of his homeland flashed through his mind.

He knew many of his people would starve if he gave up. Nonetheless,

avoiding conflict wasn't an option for him either.

I must press forward even if there is no other path and it's thorny. If it means protecting the future of the children and the tribe, I'd make a deal with the devil... Even if it costs me my soul. That's why we cannot let anyone know about the internal strife in the tribe. Should anyone find out, there's no doubt they'll turn their forces against us.

Rahizya was in a precarious situation, teetering on the edge of disaster. While the nations of Brittania and Tarja had temporarily allied with these "outsiders," their relationship was fragile. Though they seemed friendly on the surface, both nations saw the outsiders as potential enemies. Letting them learn about the tribe's divisions would be catastrophic.

We are, quite literally, like a disease festering within the southern kingdoms.

The nations of the south saw the outsiders as a threat to their very existence. If they saw an opportunity to eliminate this threat, they would strike, no matter the cost. The existence of the outsiders had always been met with disgust, hatred, and fear from the people of the southern kingdoms.

As outsiders who have been persecuted by them, we feel the same way. Given the historical animosity between us, it's no surprise.

Both sides were trapped in a cycle of hatred. Neither were purely good or evil, but rather a mix of both. No matter how long they stalled or deviated from the path, one outcome was inevitable.

The day when this would be settled, once and for all, was fast approaching. It was a decision that even the gods could not avoid.

Although we may be unable to avoid it, we can at least choose the day to cross swords.

For that reason, information control was essential to ensure that no unfavorable intelligence leaked to the enemy. That said, exerting such control was exceedingly difficult. It was truly a case of "easier said than done." One had to appreciate having people like Ayun, who understood the difficult position Rahizya was in and cooperated sincerely. When considering who they'd meet for the upcoming grim talks, their help became even more invaluable.

“Yes, it’s a burden for you all, but don’t let your guard down. Many close to the chieftain are already dissatisfied with this war. In such circumstances, the last thing we want is for those lowlifes to see us faltering.” After spitting out those words, Rahizya pushed through the entrance of the tent. There, a woman was waiting to meet him.

In a word, she was beautiful. With bronze skin, a warrior’s toned yet feminine body, lustrous black hair that flowed from her head like a gift from the heavens, and sharp, almond-shaped eyes, she would undoubtedly draw attention.

Yet few would find her beautiful now. Of course, it wasn’t that her perfectly sculpted face had changed. The intimidating aura she radiated overshadowed any sense of beauty. Fury filled her eyes, and her body trembled uncontrollably with rage. Most people who saw her in that state would shrink back in fear. Moreover, the sharp fangs visible between her peachlike lips made her look even more terrifying, like a demon incarnate.

And rightly so, because she wasn’t human. She was a type of demi-human known as an oni, specifically a race referred to as yaksha. On top of that, her anger and disgust toward Rahizya distorted her face further. Her otherwise divine beauty only made her appear more frightening. Her name was Harisha. She was the commander leading a contingent of outcasts who had joined the war. Harisha was about to engage in a fierce verbal battle with Rahizya in the center tent, which was heavily guarded by warriors.

“Are you really going to cooperate with those people? Do you really believe that’s the path our proud tribe should take?” Harisha’s words, filled with rejection, came forth as if she were spitting blood. “Why must our proud Manibhadra tribe lend its strength to the filthy Kingdom of Tarja? We are nothing like the greedy fools who live in that city of stone!”

Harisha’s honest thoughts showed the cry of her soul as both the chieftain’s daughter and the commander of the warriors sent to the allied army as reinforcements. Truthfully, she had no desire to participate in this war. As the daughter of the tribe’s chieftain, she couldn’t accept forcing her people into a conflict that had no connection to the morality or justice she knew.

Yet Harisha’s words fell on deaf ears when it came to Rahizya, the deputy

commander sent by the tribe's elders. Or rather, Rahizya deliberately ignored her feelings, even though he understood them.

"My lady, please don't be selfish. We have entered into a contract with the Kingdom of Tarja. That is the consensus of the Manibhadra tribe. Even you, the chieftain's daughter, must obey this decision."

At Rahizya's words, Harisha's face flushed red with anger.

"Don't be ridiculous! Consensus? What consensus? My father's illness has been taken advantage of! The only reason this decision was made is because your father, Druv, used his condition to manipulate the elders! If my father were well, do you think he would ever have accepted such a thing? Do you even understand what those cowards from that stone city have done to our tribe?" Harisha declared.

Her words reflected a sentiment shared not just by the Manibhadra tribe but by many of the tribes collectively known as the "outcasts."

But even after facing such accusations, Rahizya showed no signs of fear or shame. In fact, a cold smile crept across his face. His appearance revealed a man fed up with the lofty ideals of a girl who knew nothing of politics. In truth, this was a conversation they had had many times since leaving their village in the Kingdom of Tarja's territory. The content and outcome were the same each time, so Rahizya had grown weary.

Rahizya had tolerated Harisha's outbursts because she was the chieftain's daughter and barely sixteen years old. But his patience was wearing thin. Finally, Rahizya unsheathed the blade of logic he had kept hidden.

"So, do you intend to break the contract with Tarja?"

His voice had an air of irritation, but his words carried enough reason to brook no argument. Harisha, momentarily taken aback, fell silent. As she struggled to respond, Rahizya continued his sharp verbal assault.

It was indeed the violence of logic.

"But we've already distributed the food and supplies we received as payment to the tribe. We'd have to take them back by force from the people's homes to return them now. But doing so would risk causing deaths from starvation,

particularly among the women and children. Are you willing to go that far to break this contract?”

Faced with this question, Harisha was lost for words. Rahizya looked at her with a cold smile. He could at least understand her if she were the kind of person willing to sacrifice her people to uphold their pride and history. Likewise, if she prioritized survival by casting aside that pride, that too would be a path worth considering.

But this girl lacks the resolve to do either, and we no longer have the luxury of time to choose the “right” path that would satisfy everyone.

The people left behind in their village were fighting a very real battle against hunger. The Manibhadra tribe, like many of the other yaksha tribes, lived deep within the forests of the southern kingdoms, relying primarily on hunting and gathering. However, widespread deforestation had made it increasingly difficult to sustain themselves through hunting alone in recent years.

The southern region is the largest and most contested region in the western continent, with over a dozen nations fighting for control. Whether it’s Tarja or Brittania, bolstering national strength is a top priority.

In that fierce struggle for survival, a nation’s rulers would want to adopt policies to increase their population. More people meant greater military and economic strength.

But to support a larger population, securing enough food is essential. And the most efficient way to do that is through agriculture.

Unlike fishing or hunting, farming provided a stable and abundant food supply. To increase a nation’s population, improving agricultural productivity was a necessary step. Of course, such measures also came with challenges. Improving productivity required the development of better tools, crop varieties, and more.

Among the many factors to consider, securing arable land is the biggest challenge for both countries.

There were two main ways to increase farmland: seize land suited for agriculture or clear unsuitable land through hard work.

Cultivating suitable agricultural land oneself isn't entirely out of the question. But most of this land has already been developed or is inaccessible for various reasons.

One could imagine that the land might be located in conflict zones with other nations or controlled by high-ranking dangerous beasts, often referred to as “named” creatures. In both cases, resolving the issue would take considerable time and effort.

That's why they chose to clear the forested areas within their own territory.

They likely wanted to increase their national power as much as possible before attacking other countries. Selling the felled trees as lumber or charcoal could also have a positive economic impact, so it wasn't a bad choice.

At least, it was the best possible option for Brittania and Tarja.

But that also means the forests in the southern part of the continent are shrinking.

As a result, the game available for hunting had significantly decreased. This year, the impact had been severe and had become a major problem for the Manibhadra and all the other tribes living in the forests of the southern region, often referred to as the “people beyond civilization.”

Disputes over hunting grounds with other tribes had become more frequent, resulting in injuries and fatalities. Amid this crisis, Rahizya's father, Druv, and one of the elders of the Manibhadra tribe brought the proposal of a mercenary contract with the Kingdom of Tarja. Most of the tribe members agreed with Druv's suggestion.

In truth, when faced with the kind of hunger that disrupted daily life, pride in one's tribe became a secondary concern.

“Well, I...”

Harisha's face was filled with torment because her position weakened when forced to argue with reason. In fact, the mercenary contract with Tarja was an efficient and effective solution to the problems facing the Manibhadra tribe. This was something even Harisha, as well as the entire tribe, recognized. The only issue was that it severely damaged their pride as a tribe. But that was a

real problem, so Harisha stood firm in her beliefs and spoke out against Rahizya.

“But not everyone in the Manibhadra tribe agreed with that proposal.”

Some people placed the highest importance on the tribe’s traditions and pride. Harisha was the prime example of such individuals. The question wasn’t about who was right. It was about what choice to make—whether to value the tribe’s pride or pursue practical benefits.

Rahizya pressed Harisha even further, though. “Milady, can’t you see reason? To be honest, the so-called pride of the tribe that you so loudly proclaim is nothing more than a useless relic for us now. No, perhaps it’s even more accurate to call it a hindrance.”

At this point, it seemed that Rahizya had given up on hiding his true feelings. He had long suppressed these words, forcing himself to endure, but could no longer hide them.

“What did you say?! Are you telling me to forget the history and traditions that our tribe has woven for generations? To bow down to a weaker race with bodies inferior to ours?”

Harisha’s roar came in response to having the pride and tradition of her people, who had lived in the forests of the southern continent for hundreds of years, declared worthless.

Still, Rahizya snorted and sneered at her. The Manibhadra tribe, like other races referred to as “yakshas,” were naturally born with powerful bodies and life force comparable to that of elves. In addition, they had much greater reproductive capabilities than the elves. As a species, their basic physical traits were overwhelmingly superior to humans. But just because a race was physically superior didn’t mean it would always emerge victorious in the survival of the fittest.

No, the fact that the human race was the dominant power in the western continent proved that Harisha’s words were nothing more than the howls of a loser.

Why can’t she understand such a simple truth...

Of course, in battle, the yaksha were strong. Even Rahizya couldn’t deny that.

We yakshas' physical superiority over humans gives us a considerable advantage in the wars of this world, where hand-to-hand combat is the norm. It's also true that, as beings, the yakshas are stronger than humans.

Moreover, the yaksha possessed the ability to control and command monsters. This technique, known as *beast taming*, was unique to the yaksha and unavailable to other races like humans or elves. The combat power gained from commanding these creatures was overwhelming.

On this note, Harisha struggled with the war elephant unit she led. In this world, it was an irreplaceable military asset. The massive creatures known as “four-tusked elephants” had tremendous destructive power, making them a biological weapon, and a trump card for maintaining the independence of those living in the untamed lands. Whether Harisha’s war elephants joined the battle could be a decisive factor in determining its outcome. On the plains, the sheer power of the war elephants to break through enemy lines would be enough to sway the results of any conflict. That was why the participation of Harisha’s war elephant unit had been included in the contract in the current war.

Because of this, some individuals, like milady, mistakenly believe that we yakshas are superior to humans.

To Rahizya, this was nothing more than a great misunderstanding. As a race, the yaksha didn’t necessarily have an absolute advantage in this world. Of course, they had their strengths.

We were born with muscles far stronger than those of the human race. In this world, physical strength is undeniably the most reliable weapon, and there's little debate about that.

Few would dispute that assessment. Even the humans, who had long looked down upon the yakshas as savages, understood this well.

Above all, we have that.

Although it came at the cost of one’s life, that secret technique granted them godlike power. This was undeniably a special ability that only the yaksha race possessed. The problem, however, was the misconception that this superiority was absolute and unchanging.

We oni races, including the yakshas, are undoubtedly powerful. But can we say we've secured an absolute advantage? Not when this world has techniques like thaumaturgy, which allows the weak to fight against the strong.

As long as thaumaturgy existed, physical toughness and combat prowess weren't enough to ensure victory. While the soldiers of the Manibhadra tribe were undoubtedly a vital asset to the allied forces in the current war, they couldn't be considered the main force. The fundamental reason for this was the yaksha's numerical disadvantage compared to the human race. In truth, the yaksha were losing in the struggle for survival, which meant they were weaker than the humans.

We are labeled as "savages" and forced to live in the forests because we are weak. When faced with that reality, what use is tribal pride?

While Rahizya didn't dismiss Harisha's words as mere nonsense or delusions, he did think her ideals were out of place for their current situation.

Being weak is not a sin. But accepting our weakness and envying the strong is wrong, thought Rahizya, knowing that one who took pride in their yaksha life wouldn't brag. Pride is one of the most hollow and shallow things. One's way of life is their true pride, and that's not something to be spoken of.

Because Rahizya understood this, he refused to bend his beliefs.

"I'm not saying we should submit. But there's no realistic alternative. Would you prefer to break the contract and refuse to return the money like some scoundrel? Even if humans are contemptible, would your so-called pride accept that?" said Rahizya.

"Of course I don't think this is acceptable. I understand what you're trying to say, but there's a line I can't cross. If we lose our tribe's pride and bow to the people of the stone cities, this won't just be a problem for the Manibhadra tribe. All the yakshas living in the southern forests could end up submitting to that cowardly, foolish human race. Are you willing to accept that? Is that truly what's best for us?"

"That's clearly not ideal. But do you have another solution? Please tell me if there's a way to keep our people from starving while preserving our pride! I'd gladly follow it."

Rahizya's emotional outburst was rare for someone so composed. It was clear to everyone, including Rahizya, that if they could save their people from hunger without losing their pride, that would be the best path.

But such a dreamlike solution doesn't exist... If it does, then we must prioritize life over pride.

Whether this priority was correct was uncertain, but it was Rahizya's belief. That was why he sought power within the tribe alongside his father, Druv, even if it meant being labeled power-hungry.

All of it is to suppress the blind chieftain and his followers... Rahizya's gentleness and consideration sometimes made him question whether he was truly doing the right thing. If the young conqueror of Wortenia were here, he would have purged them and their families without hesitation.

Rahizya had heard countless rumors about the young leader commanding the enemy forces in the current conflict. Of course, he wasn't sure how many of those rumors were true.

Even if the rumors had only been half true, it was the nature and the dream of those in power to imagine how much easier things would be if they could eliminate all constraints without hesitation.

Contemplating a reckless move that would halve the strength of the Manibhadra tribe was a pointless fantasy that only those in leadership positions experienced. This was something that didn't change, whether they were yakshas or any other race, as long as they formed a group.

Thus, Harisha and the others had to understand Rahizya's considerations. They also bore the heavy responsibility of deciding the path the tribe must follow.

"Milady... What you are saying is nothing more than an idealistic fantasy. Please choose your words carefully while keeping a firm grip on reality. I hope you understand that your words and actions will determine the fate of our tribe."

These words were the honest feelings that Rahizya had long kept hidden. He would no longer need to play the hated role if they chose a more realistic

course. In response to Rahizya's words, Harisha bit her lip and hung her head low. Her fists were clenched tightly, and her shoulders trembled with a mix of anger and humiliation.

Did I go too far in my emotional outburst?

No matter how much one regretted their words, they could not take them back. Even so, a half-hearted apology or consolation would only make things worse; that much was clear. If Rahizya were to say something like that, the stubborn Harisha would reject him even more.

It's probably best to give her some time.

With that thought in mind, Rahizya gave a slight bow to Harisha and turned to leave. But his consideration did not reach Harisha.

"Wait!"

Her shout stopped Rahizya in his tracks.

"Do you need something else?" he asked.

Harisha's body trembled angrily as she shouted, "Tell General Accordo that the war elephant unit under my command will lead the vanguard."

Rahizya tilted his head at her words. "They will indeed see that as a most welcome proposal, but are you sure about this?"

To fully utilize the war elephant division, the best time to strike would be right at the start of the battle when the enemy was still forming ranks. If the creatures joined the battle after it had descended into chaos, they would surely end up trampling friend and foe alike. However, Rahizya had not expected the normally reluctant Harisha to volunteer to take the vanguard in this battle.

That was why he had arranged with Bruno Accordo, the commander of the allied forces, to hold the elephants in reserve as a decisive force to sway the outcome when the battle neared its conclusion.



Harisha's request to lead the charge was certainly unexpected. But Rahizya's sharp intellect immediately perceived her intent.

So, she intends to showcase our strength to the allied forces.

A simple idea, but effective nonetheless.

It's not a bad plan. If Lady Harisha takes charge of the vanguard, the allied forces will hold us in higher regard.

Thus far, the war elephant unit had waited in reserve at the rear. Despite the unit's tactical role as a backup force, the allied soldiers viewed them as a mop-up squad meant to finish off a retreating enemy. The allied soldiers fighting on the front lines would stare daggers at the war elephants, seeing them as merely stealing their glory.

But that dynamic would change if the war elephant unit led the charge. At the very least, no one would dare call them freeloaders anymore.

"Understood. I'll inform Generals Accordo and Raul of your words. I'm sure they will agree readily," said Rahizya, nodding at Harisha's suggestion.

Tactically, having the war elephants in the vanguard was the right choice; Bruno and the others would not likely refuse Harisha's proposal.

"Also, I'll be stationed at General Giordano's headquarters. If anything happens, please send a messenger."

Harisha gave a small nod in response. "Yes...understood. You may watch from the rear as my elephants and I crush the enemy."

With those words, Harisha cast a cold smile at Rahizya.

"Indeed, I look forward to it."

Rahizya bowed deeply and began walking toward the headquarters where Bruno and the others were stationed, a certainty of victory etched on his back. For him, no force could rival the war elephants led by Harisha—a belief she shared. But just hours later, both Harisha and Rahizya would come to deeply regret their decision.

It was a scene of pure hell for everyone fighting on that battlefield. A thick mass of black clouds covered a corner of the sky. Bright white light burst through them, resembling the wrath of a god. Suddenly, that light struck the earth like a divine hammer. From the heavens came the roar of thunder, the power and authority of the supreme god, the ruler of light and law. To those unfamiliar with science, it was nothing short of terrifying.

In this world, people perceived lightning as the anger of Meneos, the god of light and law, ruler of the sky. Soldiers who believed divine wrath was raining down upon them would find it impossible to maintain their composure. The soldiers who felt they had divine protection might charge into the fray, but those who believed they were being punished by the gods would lose morale and try to flee.

Even then, the allied forces might have found a way to rally their troops after the lightning strike. Being somewhat educated, the commanders understood thaumaturgy and likely tried to calm their soldiers by explaining it was a thaumaturgical attack. But when pillars of fire erupted from the earth, followed by an explosion like a dragon's roar, it shattered any hopes they had of rallying their troops. The overwhelming power they witnessed struck fear into everyone's hearts, binding them with terror.

But those were the fortunate ones. Ryoma's Mikoshiba's death trap killed most of the soldiers before they could even feel fear. A handful survived, while most perished. What separated them could only be called fate, or perhaps luck. And now, the goddess of fate was descending upon Harisha, ready to decide her fate.

The ground cracked beneath her feet, and an explosion threw her into the air. Her turban unraveled from the impact, revealing her hidden black hair and two horns. Normally, the blast would have scorched Harisha's body or ruptured her internal organs, similar to the fate of many soldiers who had already met their end. Either way, death would have been inescapable. However, Harisha had been commanding from the rear of the assault unit and was far enough from the epicenter of the blast to partially mitigate its effects. Thanks to the giant beast she rode shielding her from the worst, her soul was allowed to remain in this world for now.

Even so, this was merely a delay of the inevitable. Unless the goddess of fate showed her mercy, her destiny was death, and it was only a question of when. If she wanted to escape this fate, she would need more than a smile from the goddess—a radiant blessing akin to a blooming flower.

But Harisha didn't consider herself special enough to expect such divine favor.

So... I'm going to die, aren't I?

Strangely, Harisha felt no fear of death because another emotion, far stronger, filled her heart. It was anger and frustration toward the tribal elders who had abandoned their pride as noble yaksha and forced their tribe to participate in this war. She felt regret for not stopping their foolish decision.

In the end, it was all a mistake... Our tribe never should have joined this stone city's war...

But at the same time, Harisha couldn't help but feel contradictory thoughts. In her mind, images of the heated arguments that had taken place under the tent hours earlier flickered like a slideshow.

Was I wrong? If I had made an effort to reach a compromise with Rahizya and the others... Maybe...

Countless possibilities surfaced in Harisha's mind before fading away. But in the end, they were all hypothetical—lamentations over an unchangeable past. Still, faced with death, something inside Harisha had changed from just a few hours ago. As her consciousness faded, her vision blurred with tears of regret. Deep darkness finally swallowed Harisha's awareness.

Even with the annihilation of Harisha's war elephant unit by Ryoma Mikoshiba's tactics, the battle on Lubua Plains was far from over.

The real fight was only just beginning.



The general leading the charging heavy cavalry was a highly skilled warrior. Who could he be?

Each time the tip of his spear gleamed, a spray of blood filled the air, and screams of agony echoed across the battlefield.

The overwhelming violence shattered the spirits of the allied troops, who had only just been rallied, grinding their morale into dust.

The cavalry was like a herd of raging bulls. Without so much as a sideways glance, they charged relentlessly forward, mowing down the soldiers in the center ranks.

“This is bad! They’re targeting Lord Raul...!”

“Protect him! Stop them at all costs!”

Raul was on horseback in a daze, unable to even think of directing his troops, but he snapped back to awareness at the sound of his lieutenant’s desperate cry. In that instant, the flame of resolve reignited within his heart.

What am I doing? This is a battlefield! Pull yourself together!

Such thoughts flashed through Raul’s mind, but he had no time to reflect on his behavior.

“Infantry! Ready your spears! Stop that cavalry, no matter what it takes!”

It was the right command, but it had come a moment too late. And more than anything, that order created a gap in the collective focus of the central forces. They should have been dealing with the enemy attacking from the right.

But for Raul, this was an entirely natural reaction. Without thinking, Raul unconsciously assumed:

“There’s no way the enemy will attack from the left flank.”

Even though there was no guarantee Raul would think such a thing, the general leading the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy’s cavalry took full advantage of this blind spot in Raul’s thinking.

A new group of cavalry appeared and charged at full speed, like a sudden gust of wind, straight toward the left flank of the formation.

“Urgent report! The enemy is attacking from our left flank!”

The messenger’s cry echoed throughout the main camp of the central army.

“Impossible! The left flank?!”

“What were the scouts doing?!”

This cavalry unit easily scattered the soldiers around them and tore through the central ranks.

“Advance! The enemy’s formation is in disarray after falling prey to Viscount Orglen’s charge! This is our chance!”

With that shout, Chris Morgan raised his spear and surged toward the enemy lines. The cavalry following closely behind Chris was no less elite than the earlier heavy cavalry. Above them flew the banner of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, adorned with a two-headed serpent coiled around a sword. Their equipment was uniformly black, lacquered plate armor. To an outside observer, the two groups were nearly identical in appearance.

However, there was a decisive difference between the two forces. The first difference lay in the speed of their horses. Of course, the heavy cavalry that had initially charged in was by no means slow. In fact, they were actually quite fast. After all, despite wearing thick plate armor, their speed was comparable to that of light cavalry. But the cavalry now charging into the left flank of the central army was even faster. Their speed could only be described as a swift wind or a thunderbolt.

This extraordinary, almost unbelievable velocity was achieved by enchantments on their armor. The dark elven enchanters had imbued their armor with two spells: one for acceleration and one for weight reduction, granting this heavy cavalry a speed that surpassed even that of light cavalry.

And there was another decisive difference between the two forces. That was their tactical objective, or in simple terms, it was the difference in their roles.

Amazing... To think they could actually reach this speed... But if they can move this fast...we can do this!

As he thought this, Chris sliced through the enemy lines with precision. His

role in this battle was clear: to break deep into the enemy's formation and take down Raul Giordano, the vice commander of the allied forces.

"They're aiming to pierce straight into the main camp!"

"Impossible! Are they serious?!"

"Reform the ranks!"

"It's no use! We won't make it in time!"

Shouts and screams of desperation erupted from all sides. Amid the chaos, the cavalry charged forward as if they were running through an empty field. They paid no attention to the common soldiers in their path, their eyes fixed solely on the target ahead as they urged their horses onward. Even when one of their comrades was unlucky enough to be struck by an enemy spear and fell from their horse, they made no move to help. The sheer intensity of their determination struck fear into the soldiers of the central army, who instinctively understood what their enemy was aiming for. The distance between Raul and the heavy cavalry led by Chris narrowed rapidly, shrinking at a pace that seemed almost surreal.

It was, indeed, like a charge across an open, unchallenged plain. And finally, Chris, leading at the front of the cavalry, aimed his spear directly at Raul and lunged.

"Lord Raul! The enemy is attacking from the left flank as well! Please, give us your orders!"

Damn it! My breathing won't catch up!

In principle, body reinforcement through martial arts techniques did not require incantations. That is one of the reasons why martial arts techniques are considered superior to spell-based arts, which do rely on them. However, while it is true that no incantation is needed for activation, this does not mean that the user can activate their technique instantaneously at will. Martial arts techniques may not have required incantations, but they did demand specific breathing patterns to execute.

Of course, performing a specialized breathing technique didn't require one to sit in lotus position and practice energy control and breath regulation like in

Daoism or yoga. To activate martial arts techniques, one must circulate vital energy through the body and rotate their chakras, a process that typically takes about five to ten seconds. The time needed varies depending on the practitioner's skill level.

For a true master of martial arts techniques, a single breath is enough to circulate vital energy through their body and rotate their chakras. And Raul Giordano was one such master. But this breathing required focused concentration to execute. In Raul's current state, maintaining the focus needed for that one critical breath was nearly impossible.

Damn it... Without reinforcing my body with martial arts techniques, I won't be able to block this strike...

It was a divine spear strike—one Raul, a seasoned warrior who had survived countless battlefields, had only encountered a handful of times in his life. The thrust was heavy yet honed to perfection, stripped of all unnecessary movements. Even if he were in top form, fully prepared, and at his peak, it was uncertain whether he could have reliably defended against such a sharp and deadly attack.

Now, Raul had only just recovered mentally from the shock of the earlier explosion. He hadn't been able to reinforce his body with martial arts techniques, nor was his fighting spirit fully rekindled. In this state, Raul was unable to dodge or block the spear.

However, it seemed that Raul was under the protection of the god of war.

"Lord Raul! Look out!"

One of his nearby bodyguards threw himself between Raul and the spear. The collision of horse against horse sent Raul tumbling to the ground. Under normal circumstances, such a reckless act could have warranted execution. After all, falling from a horse could easily kill a rider. Yet, for a bodyguard, this was the natural move to make.

If it meant avoiding certain death, even falling from a horse was an acceptable risk. It was this decisive, self-sacrificial move that saved Raul's life. But the price for his salvation was the bodyguard's own life.

“What a nuisance!”

With this cold, merciless mutter, the spear thrust forward, piercing the soldier’s abdomen. The impact sent the soldier crashing from his horse.

Without hesitation, Chris raised his spear high and brought it down in a merciless finishing blow, targeting the soldier’s head. Amid the clash of metal, there was a sickening sound like a watermelon being smashed. The brave bodyguard’s body crumpled to the ground.

At that moment, the heavy cavalry following in Chris’s wake began pouring into the central army’s main camp in waves.

“Protect Lord Chris!”

“Keep the enemy soldiers away!”

The cavalry mercilessly cut down the soldiers who remained near Raul, one after another. It seemed that the god of war who had been protecting Raul had run out of blessings. At that moment, the tide of battle was decided.

“I take it you are the famed Fiery Tempest of the Kingdom of Tarja?”

Raul nodded quietly. On his face was the resolve of a man who had come to terms with his impending end.

“Ah... In that case, might I have the honor of knowing your name? I wish to know the name of the man who has come all this way to claim my head.”

“I am Chris Morgan, a vassal of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy,” came the reply.

At this, Raul tilted his head slightly. His face showed a hint of puzzlement, likely because he had no recollection of hearing Chris’s name before. However, the look of confusion quickly vanished from Raul’s expression.



Fame meant nothing. While possessing a reputation for martial prowess was fine, that reputation was ultimately based on past accomplishments and offered no guarantee of future outcomes.

What truly mattered was whether Chris Morgan, the man standing here, possessed the strength to defeat Raul Giordano, the renowned warrior known throughout the land as the Fiery Tempest.

“Impressive. Few among the younger warriors are as skilled as yourself. Your spear strike earlier was a masterful blow, without a doubt. I, too, once took pride in my skill with the spear and had hoped we might cross spears one-on-one. Perhaps that hope is merely wishful thinking now,” said Raul as he sighed, glancing around them.

The Mikoshiba army soldiers had already taken control of the battlefield and surrounded them. Allied soldiers still showed signs of resistance, but there was no chance Raul could survive until reinforcements arrived. Under such circumstances, Chris had no reason to accept a duel with Raul. To do so would be to throw away a certain victory—a folly beyond measure.

Fighting “honorably” was but a fantasy.

On the battlefield, the absolute truth and law were simple: one must kill a weakened enemy without mercy. One *could* break this law in the name of warrior pride. However, doing so demanded a readiness to pay a heavy price—not only personally, but from one’s lord, comrades, and even one’s family. Furthermore, this battle on Lubua Plains directly affected the very survival of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy. No matter how deeply Chris revered warrior pride, he could not cling to it here. This understanding led Raul to call his desire a foolish wish. Yet, in response to Raul’s words, Chris gave an unexpected reply.

“No... I must also insist on this request. A spear match with the famed Raul, the Fiery Tempest, would be the honor of a lifetime as a warrior.”

Raul’s eyes widened in astonishment at Chris’s words. He had never imagined that Chris would accept the duel. Soon, Raul’s fierce warrior instinct stirred and a sharp, cold glimmer returned to his eyes.

“I see... Then, I shall graciously accept your offer.”

With those words, Chris swiftly dismounted his horse, positioning his spear horizontally at his waist. Its tip pointed squarely at Raul's stomach. That spear was the very embodiment of a weapon forged to its utmost limit, a testament to the unity of Chris Morgan and the weapon he wielded. Raul sighed deeply in response.

"An impeccable stance... I understand now. I had glimpsed the terrifying precision of your thrust earlier, but to think it would be so profound. I see why you chose to accept my challenge."

There was no resentment in his voice nor any trace of sarcasm. A warrior of Raul's caliber could gauge his opponent's strength from their stance alone. With this insight, he quietly readied his beloved spear, fully aware of the outcome awaiting him.

"Then..."

"Yes..."

Chris and Raul nodded briefly at each other, which served as their signal. They moved almost simultaneously. At least, it appeared like that in the tense eyes of the vigilant soldiers of the Mikoshiba army. It was a duel between two warriors whose spear skills had been honed to their peak. But even the finest warrior has a moment where the balance shifts. At some imperceptible instant, Chris's spear struck with blinding speed, piercing through Raul Giordano's throat. None of the onlookers caught that instant, yet the result was undeniable. The strength drained from Raul's body, and he collapsed on to the ground. As the scene registered in the minds of the soldiers, thunderous shouts erupted from around them.

This signaled that the battle on Lubua Plains had reached its final phase.

Chapter 2: The Poison Known as Doubt

“My lord! The heavy cavalry led by Viscount Orglen launched the initial assault according to plan. Sir Morgan then charged the enemy’s main camp and took down Raul Giordano!”

When Ryoma heard the report from the Igasaki shinobi, who had confirmed the information via Wezalié’s Whisper, his face lit up with a smile. This was the best possible news for the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy Army, which was outnumbered. The defeat of Raul, the commander of the enemy’s central division, would further weaken the already waning morale of the enemy troops following the explosion.

“So, Chris has taken down the enemy’s second-in-command! And Viscount Orglen did well too. It seems he fulfilled his role as decoy admirably,” murmured Ryoma, nodding in satisfaction. These successes proved that his strategy was proceeding smoothly. “Have the others already received this information?”

“Yes, sir! Lady Ecclesia has already been informed through the Wezalié’s Whisper,” said the shinobi.

“Good! In that case, spread the word that Chris Morgan has slain Raul Giordano. We’ll shake the resolve of the allied soldiers with this news!”

With a slight nod, the shinobi activated Wezalié’s Whisper again and relayed Ryoma’s order to the communication team in a secure area at the rear. Ryoma nodded approvingly as he watched.

Being able to transmit orders with such precision, according to the situation, is a huge advantage.

Normally, mounted couriers would race to deliver messages. That was the common practice in this world’s wars. However, having couriers constantly moving across the battlefield was highly dangerous, as interceptions could prevent orders from reaching allied units.

Messengers were typically well-trained knights or warriors, and multiple couriers were often dispatched with the same message to mitigate the risk. But these issues vanished with a communication device like Wezalié's Whisper. In that sense, it was only natural that Nelcius and the dark elf thaumaturgists, who developed the device at Ryoma's request, took pride in their creation.

Though, there's still room for improvement. Communication only works between paired devices, which limits us... We're managing by relaying information through communication hubs, but it will eventually need to be upgraded.

Indeed, although Wezalié's Whisper was an extraordinary tool by this world's standards, since Ryoma was accustomed to the convenience of modern technology, it still felt somewhat cumbersome. The fact that only paired devices could communicate with each other ensured security but, as with this battle, required additional setup to transmit orders effectively across the field. Nonetheless, that minor issue would be addressed later because Ryoma was focused on strategies to secure victory in this war.

"So, when can we expect Laura and the others to arrive?" asked Ryoma.

"They've already departed Jermuk. Due to the blast zone, they'll need to take a detour, so their arrival will take some time," confirmed the shinobi.

Ryoma considered the situation. *Is a detour necessary? The crater formed by the Fire Drake's Breath must be quite deep.*

Without a survey, they couldn't know the precise dimensions of the crater. Given the explosion, crossing directly through the blast zone would be reckless.

The real issue is how much of the enemy's forces remain.

Originally, the allied forces on Lubua Plains exceeded one hundred thousand troops. The vanguard of five thousand war elephants had been annihilated, and Raul's central division had likely suffered significant damage. Yet the allied forces still had their rear guard, led by Supreme Commander Accordo, and reinforcement units from their home base on standby. Even excluding the reinforcements, combining Bruno's unscathed rear guard with the remaining troops from the central force meant they were likely still facing over fifty thousand troops.

Of course, this is a rough estimate, but it shouldn't be too far off, thought Ryoma. Based on this, the arrival of Laura and her troops was vital to his own army of forty thousand men. I've entrusted the Malfist sisters with five thousand soldiers for protection... Whether their unit joins ours could significantly alter the course of the battle.

Considering the difference in troop numbers, leaving the five thousand soldiers stationed with the Malfist sisters unused felt wasteful. As such, waiting for the twins to regroup before launching an assault would be wiser. Over time, the morale of the allied soldiers might recover from the blow they had been dealt. Of course, Ryoma knew that wouldn't actually be the case.

Reality isn't a strategy game where the "encourage" command instantly replenishes a unit's morale bar.

Yet, reality often defied expectations. Launching an immediate attack might be the best option.

I'd usually wait for everyone to regroup before launching a full-scale attack. But that would take too long. If only those two were here to support me directly...

Under normal circumstances, the Malfist sisters would never leave Ryoma's side during a major battle like this. As both protectors and commanders, the sisters' extraordinary skills made them invaluable in critical situations. However, today Ryoma had needed to send those trump cards elsewhere.

Did I make a mistake by entrusting this to others? Ryoma mused briefly before immediately dismissing the thought. *That was not an option. This strategy requires perfect timing and the precise activation of the joint spell. There's no one better suited for this than those two.*

It all came down to prioritizing the elimination of the war elephants, which possessed overwhelming combat power. The sheer size of those beasts alone was staggering.

A conventional army would be helpless against those beasts. They'd simply be trampled without a chance to resist.

A war elephant's very presence radiated a sense of dread, paralyzing soldiers

before they even attempted to fight. Except for the elite, most would drop their weapons and flee. In the worst cases, they'd freeze on the spot, only to be crushed mercilessly. But the archduke's army was an exception.

Our heavy infantry, clad in armor reinforced with enchantments, would at least hold their ground for a while...

Ryoma had invested plenty of time and resources in training his army to this standard. The Wortenia Peninsula, their home base, was populated by creatures even larger than those elephants, so his troops were not easily intimidated.

At least they wouldn't simply flee. But that only applied to beasts that acted on instinct alone. A memory of nearly a hundred elephants, controlled and directed by human handlers, posed a completely different challenge.

In many ways, I had to consider more than just eliminating these war elephants. Winning efficiently is key.

Charging head-on without any tactics would risk heavy casualties even if they managed to win. Ryoma had various strategies to minimize these losses, but entirely avoiding casualties would be nearly impossible.

And those casualties would impact the course of the battle after eliminating the elephants.

The war elephant corps functioned as a trump card and a sacrificial pawn for the allied army.

From what Lady Ecclesia told me, the southern region fears and despises those outside the kingdoms. They seem to endure severe discrimination, thought Ryoma. While the reason for their alliance remained unclear, Ryoma understood that deep-seated prejudice could not be easily erased. No matter how it appears on the surface, I doubt the allied generals truly view those who live outside of the kingdoms as allies.

The gap in formation between the war elephants and the following troops suggested as much. With a force of over one hundred thousand, there was no need to keep such a large reserve at the rear. If Ryoma were commanding the allied forces, he would have placed more troops near the front line as a

contingency. Yet Bruno Accordo, the commander of the allied army, chose not to do that.

Accordo left a large gap between the war elephants and the central forces... If our front line were broken, they couldn't pursue efficiently.

This distance also left the central forces safe from the explosion caused by the Fire Drake's Breath that Ryoma had unleashed. The conclusion was clear: Bruno wanted to conserve his army's strength.

They're hoping for a mutually destructive clash between us and the outsiders, thought Ryoma. Bruno's plan to pit enemy against enemy had been thwarted, and Ryoma considered this a significant victory. *Of course, it was a gamble.*

Ryoma was confident in his plan's success because he had prepared extensively. But he also understood that luck would always play a role in the final outcome, no matter how well-prepared he was.

While I prepared for all possible contingencies, there was no guarantee that things would unfold as planned.

Once Ryoma's army absorbed the initial charge of the elephants with a horizontal formation, his army shifted to a V-shaped formation to guide the war elephants toward a trap rigged with Fire Drake's Breath buried in the ground. A single misstep could have resulted in the elephants overrunning the front line, making this risky. The Malfist sisters had coordinated their spells to ignite the Fire Drake's Breath at the perfect moment, obliterating the war elephants. Any delay would have rendered eliminating the elephants impossible.

Because of this, I needed Laura and the others in a location with good visibility to execute the spell at just the right time.

After much consideration, the city walls of the fortress city of Jermuk were chosen as their vantage point. That decision came with a cost. It tied two officers capable of leading their own units to that position. Yet, complaining was pointless at this stage.

I had anticipated this turn of events from the start. Rather than risk changing strategies now, I should let them continue in their role as a mobile strike force.

Ryoma's only option was to secure victory with the cards he currently held.

The battle proceeded according to his plan, and there was no need to disrupt that flow.

“All right... We’ll rendezvous with Lady Ecclesia and take down their central forces. Then, without waiting for Laura and the others, we’ll wipe out the rear forces!”

With that, Ryoma advanced his forces toward the rendezvous point with Ecclesia. He suspected that Chris had utterly crushed the enemy’s fighting spirit after destroying the war elephants and killing Raul Giordano. The next steps would be to eliminate the central forces, then ride that momentum to target Bruno Accordo’s command base. That would checkmate the allied forces. A cold smile crept onto Ryoma’s face as he spurred his horse forward.

In war, eliminating the enemy commander offered a distinct advantage. While this was common knowledge, the opportunity to take down a commander in battle was rare due to their constant protection.

War is ultimately a battle of wills.

Weapons and fortresses had their place, but the will to fight was essential. Striking fear in the enemy’s heart was Ryoma’s ultimate goal. The obliteration of the war elephants wasn’t done just for the sake of it. Rather, it was about instilling terror in the enemy.

Anyone can kill if they have the absolute will to do so.

Killing wasn’t just about being physically strong like Ryoma; anyone determined enough could achieve it. The choice to act—or not—reflected one’s values. Few chose violence willingly.

War is a choice. And the key to victory lies in breaking the enemy’s will to fight.

People went to war believing they had something to gain. To win, it was vital to make the enemy believe they had nothing to gain by fighting.

Defeating Raul Giordano at this juncture may seem too fortunate, but his death has certainly tilted the scales in our favor.

For a brief moment, Ryoma smiled—a self-serving and somewhat dark display

that might seem unfitting. However, the smile faded quickly as he realized the implications of celebrating a rival's death. Even if he didn't intend to show it, Ryoma knew that Raul's death meant life for his own troops.

War, after all, was a zero-sum game.

Ryoma understood that expressing such sentiments openly could damage his reputation. At the same time, he couldn't deny his satisfaction with the outcome. Even when someone spoke the truth, it could still sound annoying to others.

Expressing joy when happy also depended on the time and place. Honesty with one's feelings was not always the best course of action. From there, it was only a matter of how one chose to act based on this understanding.

That said, Chris and Leonard are competent... Taking those two under my command was indeed the right choice. They've done excellent work. While I wasn't entirely surprised by Chris since we've clashed before, Leonard's strength was only rumored. But after breaking the encirclement at Jermuk, he's proven himself twice in a row. As expected from someone Lady Helena personally vouched for.

Chris Morgan had previously served as Helena's adjutant. Although not yet a hardened veteran, he had some battlefield experience. Most importantly, Chris and Ryoma had already fought together, each understanding the other's prowess as warriors. In that sense, there was little to worry about with Chris's abilities.

On the other hand, Viscount Leonard Orglen had a unique personality.

He was a cousin of Diggle McMaster, who currently served as prime minister of Rhoadseria. Unlike the famously martial McMaster, Leonard was more renowned as a man of culture. In fact, he was so talented that he had once taught Lupis the arts.

Leonard was a refined individual who loved wine, women, and the art of poetry and music. His experience leading troops likely didn't go beyond occasional skirmishes against local bandits or monsters in his territory. In the Kingdom of Rhoadseria's high society, he was a popular figure—a dashing and notorious man of many lovers. In contrast to his cousin Diggle, who remained

loyal to his wife and didn't keep a concubine, Leonard seemed frivolous. He appeared like a slightly reckless middle-aged man, which gave him the reputation for being cultured yet shallow. As a politician, his reputation was low compared to the reserved Prime Minister McMaster.

Though rumored to have great martial skill at court, Leonard lacks much battlefield experience.

Still, Leonard didn't impose heavy taxes on his people. He had the resolve and competence to lead troops against bandits or monsters when needed. Perhaps Leonard Orglen's knack for handling things flawlessly stirred some resentment among others.

People likely see him as a man overly absorbed in the arts, for better or worse, mused Ryoma. Given all this, it was understandable that Ryoma harbored doubt toward Leonard Orglen, even if Helena vouched for him. That's why I'm so pleased that he proved his capability through this campaign.

He may have been somewhat inferior to Robert or Signus, but that was only because those two were extraordinary. Chris and Leonard possessed rare strength that even the great powers watched cautiously. This made them valuable assets to House Mikoshiba.

Still, some concerns remained.

Leonard Orglen serves me as a retainer, but his heart still belongs to Rhoadseria, thought Ryoma, knowing that Leonard's heart was filled with loyalty and love for his homeland. He also understood that Leonard saw serving him as a way to protect Rhoadseria indirectly. I don't suspect he'd betray me, but I must handle him carefully.

Betrayal could stem from two types of motivation: ambition or the need to protect something dear.

The type driven by ambition was hard to prevent. No amount of wealth or land would satisfy such desires. Like pouring water into a bucket with holes, ambition knew no bounds. However, Viscount Leonard Orglen wasn't one to commit betrayal out of selfish ambition.

If he ever betrays House Mikoshiba, it would be because I treated Radine, the

last of Rhoadseria's royal bloodline, cruelly.

This was an unconfirmed suspicion, and Leonard would likely evade if questioned. Still, Ryoma had a vague certainty that his intuition was correct.

Well, I have no intention of treating Lady Radine cruelly, so it shouldn't be an issue.

Had it been the ungrateful Lupis Rhoadserians, Ryoma might have resorted to any ruthless means without hesitation. But he couldn't take such measures with Radine, who trusted him completely. After all, it was his decision to place Radine on the throne. Ryoma Mikoshiba's core belief was to repay kindness with kindness and respond to hostility with hostility.

Ryoma's Mikoshiba unique perspective on loyalty and enmity shaped his essence. This had little to do with the conventional notion of good and evil. In a way, it was his personal creed—a guiding principle in his way of life. To some, it might have seemed overly self-centered or even arrogant. Yet precisely because of this conviction, Ryoma would never compromise on his principles. Even if the day when he brought down the Kingdom of Rhoadseria came, it would not be through violent conquest but through a relatively peaceful approach. Viscount Orglen would remain loyal to Ryoma if he didn't betray his beliefs.

He understands that this path would ultimately yield the best outcome for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, thought Ryoma.

For Ryoma, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria was little more than a burdensome nuisance. The kingdom was in disarray, with its lands beginning to decay due to the nobles' unchecked power and the disastrous effects of Lupis Rhoadserians's reckless attempts at centralization. Only the struggling people remained. Removing these obstacles and restoring the nation to a viable state would take considerable time.

This is a task that can't be accomplished overnight.

It might have been faster and more reliable to raze it to the ground and rebuild instead of expending such effort to restore the kingdom. The ideal solution would be to swiftly dismantle the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and establish Ryoma Mikoshiba's own nation in its place. Ever since he took control of the Wortenia Peninsula, most of his followers had envisioned this as their future.

Even Lione and Boltz had asked him directly when he planned to establish his kingdom. But Ryoma had responded to such expectations from those around him with silence. Of course, he didn't lack the desire to build a new nation with himself as king. In truth, this ambition had been his secret goal from the start, and he had prepared carefully for it.

But that doesn't mean it's a good idea to immediately conquer the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and claim it as the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's territory.

After Ryoma's victory over Lupis Rhoadserians, he supported Queen Radine, appointed Helena Steiner and Diggle McMaster as chief ministers, and took other steps to ensure the Kingdom of Rhoadseria's continued existence. The reason was simple. It was because Ryoma Mikoshiba lacked the power to fully control the nation.

While temporary occupation might be possible, maintaining permanent control would be far too challenging under the present conditions.

If his only intention were to exploit the kingdom's resources and abandon it once drained, similar to a scorched-earth strategy, the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's current military strength would suffice. However, permanent control was an entirely different matter. Many citizens may indeed harbor resentment or hostility toward the Kingdom of Rhoadseria after years of oppressive rule by the nobles. Few would quietly accept the sudden takeover of their homeland by a young upstart. Even without swords or spears, they'd resist the oppressor with their farming tools. Only a select few in the nobility would willingly accept Ryoma Mikoshiba's rule. Those nobles, like Count Bergstone or Count Zeleph, had the foresight and open-mindedness to accept the young conqueror. While Ryoma was lost in thought, he and the cavalry unit he commanded arrived at the rendezvous point to meet up with Ecclesia and her detachment.

Ecclesia Marinelle, the general of the Kingdom of Myest also known as the Whirlwind, led a detachment approaching from the right, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

She tilted her head slightly as she spoke, displaying a gentle, charming smile—hardly the expression of a warrior on her way to battle. To Ecclesia, the

outcome of this fight was already decided. And Ryoma felt the same way. The only task left was to seal their victory.

“No, I’d say your timing is perfect,” Ryoma replied, shifting his gaze forward.

The wind carried the sounds of clashing swords and the screams of allied soldiers. Judging from the sight of the fallen banners that the coalition army had once raised, their central forces were beginning to crumble, losing unit cohesion. Most likely, the enemy soldiers had already begun fleeing the battlefield, desperately seeking any possible escape.

“Yes, you all have worked quite hard, so I should do my part as well. After all, I’ll soon serve under Lord Mikoshiha as a guest general. Don’t you agree?” said Ecclesia as she winked playfully.



In response, Ryoma grinned. “Well then, I suppose I’ll have to work hard enough not to be outdone by you, Ecclesia.”

Ryoma quietly drew his beloved sword from his waist, and the Muldahara Chakra at the base of his spine began to spin. With each breath, prana surged through Ryoma’s body. This process closely resembled the Small Circulation technique in Taoist practices. As prana filled Ryoma, the flow activated each of his chakras, one by one. Finally, the sixth chakra—Ajna, located between his eyebrows—began to spin as a supernatural power filled his body. Ryoma then raised his sword Kikoku high toward the sky. At that moment, a beastly roar erupted from the more than twenty thousand soldiers standing behind him, shaking Lubua Plains. The soldiers began to advance, the pounding of their horses’ hooves echoing as they moved forward to crush the enemy before them, following the command of their young sovereign. Yet the target of their blades remained unaware of the coming onslaught.

“Raul... Raul Giordano was killed by a knight of the Mikoshiba duchy? This must be some kind of mistake!” bellowed Bruno Accordo, commander of the Kingdom of Brittania’s esteemed Gryphon Knights and the leader of the campaign against Myest, upon hearing the unexpected news brought by the messenger. His fury would have intimidated an ordinary soldier to the point that they wouldn’t have been able to respond coherently.

People had seemingly scattered like spiders, fleeing Bruno Accordo’s oppressive presence as he passed through the territories of the Kingdom of Brittania. Bruno, known as the Man-Eating Bear, was a towering, bearded man nearly 190 centimeters tall and weighed around 150 kilograms. His sheer mass alone instilled fear in those who saw him. Despite his intimidating presence, his face was well-formed beneath the beard, if not handsome. Perhaps he could create a less frightening impression if he shaved and softened his expression with a gentle smile.

But such efforts would be futile. The fact that he had survived countless battlefields and taken myriad lives left an indelible mark on his body, infusing it with an aura that radiated a tangible pressure. Even without intending to, he intimidated those around him. Usually, Bruno consciously kept his voice low,

aware of the effect his presence had on others. He had no such luxury this time.

Even with Bruno's thunderous outburst, the messenger remained unfazed, determined to carry out his duty. Perhaps his mind simply hadn't caught up to the whirlwind of changing events.

"There's no mistake. The one who defeated Lord Raul was a knight named Chris Morgan!"

"Impossible... Are you telling me that Raul, feared as the Fiery Tempest and dreaded by neighboring kingdoms, has truly been slain?"

Bruno glared at the sky in disbelief.

The region known as the southern kingdoms was the western continent's largest conflict zone, plagued by endless wars. Even the Kingdom of Tarja and the Brittania Kingdom had repeatedly clashed over their shared border. Though they had temporarily allied to attack the fortress city of Jermuk through a third-party mediator, the fact remained that they were natural enemies.

For this reason, Bruno was perhaps more familiar than anyone with the strength of Tarja's renowned general, Raul Giordano.

He may be overly aggressive at times... But as a military commander and warrior, he's a man of exceptional skill, thought Bruno.

In the entire Brittania Kingdom, Bruno was likely the only one who could face Raul Giordano head-on. Such was the level of Raul's skill. And yet, he had fallen so easily.

This... This could be disastrous. The soldiers' morale will be utterly crushed.

If morale shattered, there would be no recovering from this battle.

The thought of defeat crept into Bruno's mind—a rare feeling for the Man-Eating Bear. If others could see into his mind, they would undoubtedly be shocked.

Even when forced into a hopeless situation, Bruno Accordo, the fierce general of the populace's imagination, would rally his soldiers with intense resolve, encouraging them to fight to the end and turn the tide. But that was merely a projection, a myth crafted by those around him. Or it was more accurate to say

it was an illusion that Bruno had carefully cultivated. Despite his fearsome reputation, the true essence of Bruno Accordo was more that of a strategist—a man who valued clever tactics over brute strength. Otherwise, he would never have devised a plan to lure the enemy forces into the fortress city of Jermuk to annihilate them. In truth, he was as sharp-minded and cunning as he was physically imposing and skilled as a warrior. But precisely because of this, Bruno could clearly see the grim trajectory of the battle.

What should I do? Is it time to withdraw after all?

Bruno would not have been as shaken if a stray arrow had killed Raul or if enemy soldiers had isolated and surrounded him in the chaos of battle. Such an outcome would fall under the realm of chance, unrelated to one's actual abilities.

Of course, luck is part of one's skill. If one digs deep enough into concepts like fate or destiny, there's always a clear reason behind them. Yet when confronted with these terms, most people believe they lost due to something beyond their control rather than their own efforts and abilities.

This may have been a form of escapism. Based on Bruno's long experience on the battlefield, he understood that this ability to rationalize was crucial for a person to maintain their psychological balance. If Raul's death had been the result of mere chance, there would be little problem. In that case, the soldiers could simply mourn his misfortune as an unlucky fate that took him from them. The implications changed drastically if it came about from a duel in which he was defeated. No matter how one tried to explain it, the soldiers would interpret this outcome as the defeat of the formidable General Raul Giordano.

Even in duels, elements of chance are always at play.

The slightest thing—a gust of wind, the roar of surrounding soldiers—could impact the outcome. In that sense, random factors like fate or destiny were always involved to some degree. But just because that was the truth didn't mean everyone would accept it. People believed what they wanted to believe. For soldiers risking their lives on the battlefield, their general was a symbol and an invincible champion. A champion's defeat in a duel only confirmed their belief that the enemy was stronger. The more loyal they were to Raul Giordano,

the more devastating the blow. This realization would surely dampen their fighting spirit, and they would have experienced a much greater shock if an unknown knight had defeated him. As it was, the destruction of their war elephant unit had already left a significant impact on the allied troops. Under these circumstances, Raul's death was a severe blow.

"Who in the world is this Chris Morgan? I've never heard of such a skilled warrior in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Could he be a wandering fighter from another land?" said Bruno.

No matter how much Bruno doubted the messenger's report, the fact remained: Raul Giordano had been slain by Chris Morgan.

"In the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, only Helena Steiner was known as a commander of any renown across the nations." These words escaped Bruno's lips, reflecting a natural suspicion. But no one around him could answer this question. Everyone remained silent, their heads bowed. *What's going on? I should have known about every notable warrior in Archduke Mikoshiba's forces and the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.*

Bruno had done his research on both the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy. Given the geographic proximity of Rhoadseria to the Kingdom of Myest, it was the nation most likely to send reinforcements to Myest's aid. Considering Rhoadseria's recent political landscape, the Mikoshiba forces would surely be the primary players in any expeditionary army.

That's why I gathered intelligence on the commanders serving under Archduke Mikoshiba. A general needs to know the enemy's strength to devise strategies.

This was simply the responsibility of any commander.

Bruno had identified the two renowned warriors known as the Twin Blades, Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria, as well as the famed mercenary Lione, nicknamed the Crimson Lioness. However, this was no easy task, since it entailed more than merely learning their names. He needed information about their battle histories and skill levels to determine the appropriate level of caution. Only a well-established espionage network could provide such intelligence despite Earth's limited ability to disseminate information. It took time, effort, and, most importantly, money. The considerable distance added to

the challenge because the Kingdom of Brittania was in the continent's southeast, while the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's stronghold, the Wortenia Peninsula, was in the northeast. This geographic separation posed a major barrier to obtaining reliable intelligence.

Despite overcoming all these obstacles to gather information, the name Chris Morgan had never come up.

An unknown warrior with enough skill to defeat Raul? Absurd... Could a warrior of such caliber truly go unnoticed?

But it was no surprise that Bruno lacked information on Chris, as very few even in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria knew his name. If someone did know of Chris, it would only be through his role as Helena Steiner's adjutant. Almost no one realized that Chris was skilled enough to rival warriors like Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria. This obscurity stemmed from Chris's past, or more precisely, from his grandfather Frank Morgan's lengthy service as Helena's close aide. This was undoubtedly a source of pride for the Morgan family—a legacy of being trusted by a hero revered as the Ivory Goddess of War. But what some saw as honor, others perceived with resentment. Those who looked down on Helena as a commoner upstart could only view Frank Morgan's legacy as a mark of unforgivable allegiance. General Hodram Albrecht, the leader of the then-dominant knights' faction, despised Chris Morgan, leaving Chris to endure years of misfortune until Helena returned to active duty. Naturally, he had no opportunities to prove himself in battle.

This explained why Chris's name was unknown abroad. But few people understood this backstory. If Bruno had specifically ordered an investigation into Chris Morgan, perhaps things would have been different, but when focusing on prominent warriors in the Mikoshiba forces, Chris's name reasonably never came up.

Why... Why has it come to this?

In warfare, countless turning points exist. Bruno Accordo had built his record of victories on a principle of selecting the right paths through these turning points.

Where did I make the wrong choice?

Yet no one could answer his question. In fact, Bruno Accordo no longer had the time to search for an answer. Flying the crest of the twin-headed serpent adorned with scales of gold and silver, a unit that had annihilated the central division was now charging toward Bruno's headquarters, thirsting for fresh blood. The advance was now like a black wave crashing forward. These soldiers had crept up, and by the time anyone noticed, they were already upon them and far too close to defend against.

"What are you doing? We're under attack!"

"Infantry, raise your shields! Block the cavalry charge!"

Desperate cries echoed everywhere. But no matter how ready the troops might have been, there was no way the soldiers—already shaken by the tragic news of Raul's death—could withstand this onslaught. A massive man in black armor led the charge. Riding a giant jet-black stallion, he and his mount seemed almost as one, cutting a path to the headquarters like a whirlwind.

"Kikoku, show them your power!"

With this shout, he drew a katana that exuded an ominous aura from its sheath. A blade wind suddenly swirled around him, cutting down the confused soldiers before they could grasp the situation. The eerie, resentful sound it emitted was like a cursed wail. Just hearing it would leave the faint of heart paralyzed with fear. Steel mercilessly slashed down on those frozen in place.

It was a scene straight out of hell, fitting the name Kikoku—"The Wailing Demon."

"My arm! My arm!"

"What... What is happening to my body?"

"Hold on! Don't die on me!"

Screams and cries of terror echoed across the Lubua Plain. Severed limbs were scattered on the ground, staining the earth a dark, bloody red.



The dark-armored demons continued to charge forward, raising fierce war cries as they surged over the battlefield that was now stained black with blood. Any person of sound mind would surely turn away from the horror, and some with weaker spirits might even faint on the spot. Yet those responsible for this carnage showed neither joy in killing their enemies nor pity for the wounded soldiers writhing in pain. All that remained within them was a steely, coldhearted resolve to kill. To Ryoma Mikoshiba, the leader of these demons, the enemy soldiers screaming around him were as worthless as stones on the roadside. He viewed them as nothing more than weeds obstructing a hunter's path, easily removed without a second thought. His mind focused solely on finding and hunting his prey. The coalition forces did not merely stand idle and watch the march of this dark army, but any resistance they put up was ultimately in vain. Then the critical moment arrived. The bloodstained blade of the katana named Kikoku swung toward Bruno Accordo, whistling through the air.

This is bad!

Bruno's mind went blank. All he could see was the deadly glimmer of the blade coming at him. But his battle instincts took over, moving his body on its own. Without thinking, he raised his beloved war hammer above his head to block the attack. The harsh clang of metal echoed across the battlefield as a sharp pain jolted through Bruno's right arm. Kikoku's deadly edge cleanly sliced off the head of his weapon.

The pain snapped Bruno back to reality.

"Damn... Blocked it, did you?"

Ryoma clicked his tongue in irritation and swung his sword at Bruno again. This time, Bruno was not content to stay on the defensive. He discarded the broken war hammer, drew his sword, and braced himself to counter.

"MIKOSHIBAAAA!"

Bruno roared with rage as the two warriors clashed, a shower of red sparks erupting between them. His hatred for Ryoma burned fierce; this was his chance to settle a deep-seated grudge. But their duel was abruptly interrupted. The coalition soldiers, though shaken, mustered enough courage to throw

themselves between the two combatants, forming a human shield around Bruno.

“Fall back, sir!”

“Lord Bruno, this way!”

“Send a message to the rear! Have them come to support us!”

“Surround the enemy and cut them down!”

Among the shouted orders, the soldiers dragged Bruno’s massive frame back into the safety of their ranks. With their leader under attack and his life in peril, the soldiers had rallied, like rebooting a frozen machine by restarting it. This scene also demonstrated the unwavering loyalty that Bruno Accordo inspired among the coalition troops.

Seeing the coalition forces rallying, Ryoma Mikoshiba quickly decided to retreat.

“This is enough for now,” muttered Ryoma reluctantly.

Instead of focusing on the image of Bruno surrounded by soldiers, Ryoma’s mind painted an entirely different picture.

“I see... As expected of Bruno Accordo, renowned as the mightiest general of the Kingdom of Brittania! Remarkably, you were able to fend off our charge—a strategy worthy of the title Man-Eating Bear! Out of respect for your tactics, I shall withdraw for now.”

Those words were clearly detached from the truth.

Bruno’s command had not repelled Ryoma’s charge with any extraordinary brilliance. But such facts were irrelevant. The one who controlled this battlefield was none other than Ryoma Mikoshiba. Even the whitest object would be painted as black when the ruler declared it.

“Well then, until we meet again! I look forward to seeing you on the battlefield!”

With that triumphant proclamation, Ryoma spurred his horse westward. The black-clad demons, who had accompanied his charge on the main camp, trailed him like shadows. Their flawless formation left the allied soldiers frozen, unable

to give chase.

None attempted to stop the retreat of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's army. They instinctively understood that any rash action would result in their lives being mercilessly snuffed out.

While Ryoma could still kill Bruno if willing to accept casualties, doing so wouldn't be worth the losses. For now, he calculated it was wiser to withdraw than to risk unnecessary sacrifices. This decision brought a satisfied nod from his companion, Ecclesia, who rode up alongside him.

"So, leaving General Accordo alive will make driving a wedge between Brittania and Tarja easier? No, it's more accurate to say that you've injected them with a deadly poison." Looking up at the twin-headed snake crest that symbolized Mikoshiba's army, she continued, "I see. Letting General Accordo live today might benefit us in the long run."

"Indeed," Ryoma replied with a slight smirk. "When Raul Giordano dies but Bruno Accordo survives, it will surely leave a deep rift between Brittania and Tarja. Although I could have taken his head here, leaving him alive creates a more valuable result—a poison of distrust that will only spread over time."

That poison would seep into the very fabric of the kingdoms, a more valuable victory than claiming Bruno's head.

"As you left, you even were shouting praise in his direction," Ecclesia noted. "You really are terrifying, Lord Ryoma... To have calculated so far ahead in that brief instant."

Ryoma merely chuckled. "Well, let him take it as a compliment."

As Ryoma and his forces pulled back, Ecclesia asked, "What will you do next? I understand we'll withdraw to Rhoadseria for now, but..."

"Yes," said Ryoma, nodding. "But first, we'll head to the fortress city of Heraklion. Bringing the entire army to the capital of Pireas might complicate future operations."

"So, Heraklion, the key stronghold of southern Rhoadseria?"

With a thoughtful expression, Ryoma added, "Given the political turmoil in

the Kingdom of Myest and the possibility of betrayal from one of their famed three generals, Alexis Duran, I must reconsider our plans.”

Even a man of Ryoma’s considerable foresight couldn’t have predicted all the complex turns of recent events. Ecclesia nodded in agreement. She, too, found it hard to believe that her former colleague and hero of the Kingdom of Myest had betrayed their cause.

For now, what I need most is time to think.

As Ryoma pondered this, he noticed a group kicking up dust in the distance, drawing closer with the flag of House Mikoshiba raised high. His face softened with a smile.

“Finally, they’ve joined us,” he said.

The five thousand troops he had assigned to the Malfist sisters before parting ways at Jermuk had arrived.

This signaled the end of the campaign that had begun as a mission to aid the Kingdom of Myest. But little did Ryoma know that among the approaching soldiers were unexpected guests whose presence would soon bring another twist to his plans.

Chapter 3: The Embers of War

Dawn rose over Lubua Plains, stretching south of the Kingdom of Myest.

It had already been seven days since the forces of Lord Mikoshiba had retreated from this battlefield, and today marked the eighth sunrise that stained the eastern sky red.

“Morning already... I’ve pulled another all-nighter, it seems.”

Noticing the light spilling in from the entrance of his tent, Bruno Accordo halted the movement of the quill in his hand. He had been deeply focused on his paperwork.

Two of the three candles on his desk had burned to nearly a third of their original height, while the last had already burned out completely, leaving only a charred wick. He would usually instruct his attendant to replace the candles, but Bruno had been so engrossed that he hadn’t even noticed.

His dedication to his work must have been formidable.

Just then, his vision blurred briefly—a common symptom in today’s digital world due to eye strain or fatigue. Closing his eyes, Bruno massaged the area around the bridge of his nose.

It’s probably from straining my eyes to read by the faint candlelight all night, thought Bruno.

When he saw the morning light, his body finally acknowledged that he had been up all night. The human body still held many mysteries and secrets. Even in Rearth’s age of advanced science, researchers still hadn’t fully unraveled its workings.

Among these mysteries was the body’s ability to function beyond its limits without the individual consciously realizing their exhaustion. It resembled the natural phenomenon known as “hysterical strength.” Stories circulated about elderly people carrying heavy household items they normally couldn’t lift when escaping a burning house.

In such extreme circumstances, a person's survival instincts could override physical limitations.

Such extreme cases were rare, but even without reaching that level, people could sometimes exceed their usual limits, producing extraordinary results through intense focus. This could happen in artistic creation, professional work, athletic competition, and even during paperwork like Bruno's.

This is commonly known as entering the "zone."

The heightened focus and reduced sense of fatigue from being in the "zone" was generally considered a good thing. In that state, people often achieved results beyond expectations. However, everything had its pros and cons. The law of nature stated that the greater the reward, the steeper the price. When someone snapped out of the zone, the body often reacted by showing the strain it had been under.

Perhaps that was why Bruno's vision blurred momentarily. Yet, despite working to his limits, his tasks showed no signs of ending. Two towering piles of paperwork still sat on his desk.

"Well, I suppose I should take a break," Bruno muttered.

Rising from his chair, he stretched his arms overhead, wincing slightly as a twinge of pain ran through his right arm. It was a lingering ache from the injury he had sustained when he blocked an attack from Ryoma Mikoshiba during the recent battle.

The wound was shallow, though. Bruno rubbed the area as if to check. A rare elixir used in his treatment had already healed the wound, leaving only a faint red line. *In a few more days, even that will disappear.*

In other words, he had fully recovered. That elixir, reserved for only the most critical injuries, had worked wonders.

Perhaps they went a bit overboard...

Honestly, Bruno thought it was wasteful to use such a precious remedy for a relatively minor wound. The injury hadn't been superficial enough that a quick patch-up would not suffice, but in the past, Bruno had sustained life-threatening injuries that only received rough stitching on the battlefield.

Compared to those experiences, this injury was trivial.

With that elixir, a severely wounded soldier could have been saved.

Under normal circumstances, Bruno wouldn't dwell on it. But just seven days ago, this place had been a battlefield soaked in blood and resounding with the cries of the wounded. Countless soldiers must have been clamoring for that precious remedy. Knowing their pain and sorrow, it was only natural that Bruno felt some remorse.

To Bruno, his soldiers were not only essential pieces for achieving victory; they were comrades who shared life and death with him. Such a perspective was unusual on Earth, which was typically marked by strict hierarchies. In many nations, like the Kingdom of Brittania, most generals came from noble or royal backgrounds. Raised to rule, they normally didn't concern themselves with the lives of common soldiers, nor could they afford to. Most such elites would readily demand precious elixirs for even minor wounds.

But that's not how one earns the loyalty of soldiers.

Whether it was right or wrong, Bruno didn't know. But at the very least, this was who he was—the fierce general known as the Man-Eating Bear. Still, it was merely his personal viewpoint. Bruno's insistence on receiving the same treatment as his soldiers likely appeared as sheer obstinacy to those around him.

No matter how much Bruno protested that he didn't need special treatment, that didn't settle the issue. He might dislike being set apart, but someone else would have to bear the responsibility if something happened to him. There was a reason behind the special treatment.

Now that Raul is dead, I can understand why they insist.

With Raul Giordano—the allied army's deputy commander—now dead, Bruno was the only one left capable of leading the troops. If something happened to him, the army would be without a commander.

In fact, the mountain of paperwork piled in front of Bruno all stemmed from Raul's death. Tasks that his deputy should have handled had now fallen to Bruno, nearly doubling his workload. Given the circumstances, Bruno Accordo

was irreplaceable to this army. And so he conceded that the doctors' decision to provide him with the best possible treatment was justified despite seeming excessive.

A lingering issue remained: the occasional pain in his arm.

Whenever I move my arm, a sharp pain sometimes flares up. And it feels like the wound isn't healing as well as it should.

On the surface, his injury seemed nearly healed. Despite this, Bruno couldn't shake an odd discomfort in his right arm. He could think of only one reason for it.

That man... He called it Kikoku. It must be a thaumaturgical sword imbued with some kind of thaumaturgy.

During their last encounter, Ryoma Mikoshiba's blade had demonstrated extraordinary sharpness, slicing right through Bruno's trusty war hammer, a heavy weapon made of solid steel. The blade cut through the haft and managed to slash Bruno's right arm, which was protected by a gauntlet. Whether Ryoma's skill or the sword's supernatural sharpness did this, the strike was deeply unsettling.

The doctors had ruled out poison as the source of his pain, but that only intensified Bruno's underlying fear.

It's a shame I lost my beloved war hammer, but at least my arm wasn't severed, thought Bruno, seeing the shattered remnants of his war hammer in his memory. It was an unusually sentimental feeling, but it was understandable. That war hammer had accompanied him on countless battlefields since his first campaign, serving as more than just a weapon; it was a part of him. The term "partner" didn't even do it justice; it was closer to a "half of himself."

If someone were to ask whether he valued it more than his wife back in the Kingdom of Brittania, he might hesitate to respond. Of course, Bruno wasn't foolish enough to reveal this to his wife; he knew well enough to murmur "Of course you're more important, darling," when the occasion called for it. But if pressed for his true feelings, even he would have difficulty giving a clear answer.

Losing such a cherished part of himself was undeniably a devastating blow. However, Bruno couldn't afford to linger on such sentiment. Despite the lingering pain, the proper treatment of the wound had officially healed him. As the commander of the allied forces, he had a duty to fulfill his responsibilities.

I don't have much time before I meet with that man... The thought drove Bruno onward, a sense of urgency pressing him forward.

After all, the fate of the Kingdom of Brittania and the Kingdom of Tarja rested heavily on Bruno's shoulders. With such a burden, a bit of pain was nothing. Right now, only one thing mattered to Bruno: fulfilling his duty to the utmost. The leaders who supported him also shared this feeling. That said, only the upper ranks, including Bruno, were responsible for ensuring the mission's success. Most of the soldiers in the coalition army were currently resting in their assigned tents.

Now that Archduke Mikoshiba's army has retreated from Lubua Plains, resting is the most important task for the soldiers. If it helps them regain even a bit of morale...

Looking around the coalition's main encampment in the middle of Lubua Plains, a relaxed atmosphere started settling in. It had been seven days since Archduke Mikoshiba's army retreated, and Bruno had granted the soldiers permission to drink under the guise of celebrating victory. In some ways, it couldn't be helped. Soldiers who had survived such a grueling battlefield would crave either alcohol or women. The minds of the troops must have reached their limits after the fierce battle with Archduke Mikoshiba's forces.

The coalition's trump card—the force from beyond the borders—was utterly crushed as if cursed by the wrath of the gods, without ever crossing swords with the enemy. And then Raul Giordano's defeat in the duel with the unknown knight, Chris Morgan, also shocked our troops immensely.

In fact, Bruno wouldn't have been surprised if the coalition soldiers had thrown down their weapons and fled. Honestly, he was deeply grateful they held their ground on the battlefield.

I was lucky to survive Mikoshiba's assault on the main camp. The courage of the soldiers who protected me was crucial...

Whether it was by chance or fate, Bruno didn't know. Even after the devastating news of the defeat of the outland warriors and Raul's death, the soldiers did not give up their will to fight. And to honor such loyalty and devotion, Bruno would gladly keep the barrels flowing. He would even provide them with women if possible, despite it being against military regulations.

Such indulgences are necessary to maintain the soldiers' morale.

Moreover, Bruno did not grant permission recklessly.

Archduke Mikoshiba's forces had been confirmed to have abandoned the fortress city of Jermuk and withdrawn from Lubua Plains. Certainty of the enemy's absence allowed the supreme commander to slightly bend military regulation. That said, Bruno understood that this was not an ideal decision. Even if it was highly unlikely, it was still possible Archduke Mikoshiba's forces might launch a surprise attack.

That man's strategies always catch us off guard.

Because of Ryoma, the coalition's war elephants were decimated without ever showing their true potential. Considering that, it wouldn't be surprising if he staged a withdrawal only to return for a surprise attack. Of course, no one understood better than Bruno how unlikely that was.

If Mikoshiba withdrew and moved toward Rhoadseria, it's likely because he's wary of the man advancing south from the north.

Otherwise, Ryoma Mikoshiba wouldn't have needed to withdraw his forces after successfully cornering Bruno. Mikoshiba wouldn't make that choice unless he was sure that taking down Bruno wouldn't end the war.

Thus, the chances of Archduke Mikoshiba's forces returning to Lubua Plains are extremely low.

There was no reason to launch a surprise attack on the coalition, but there was no absolute certainty that it wouldn't happen.

The very reasons I find it unlikely might be why he would choose that strategy, thought Bruno, unable to shake that lingering fear of having Ryoma Mikoshiba as an enemy. Since our scouts are keeping watch all around, a surprise attack is unlikely.

No matter how much he thought, he could find no clear answer. It all came down to balancing the risks and deciding how much he could bear to lift the morale of the coalition soldiers at their lowest. For now, Bruno had chosen to allow the risk of drinking, weighing it against the lower risk of a surprise attack.

“Offering them drinks isn’t likely to make much difference,” Bruno said aloud.

The morale of soldiers, once dropped, would not recover easily. Though alcohol may lift their spirits now, it was uncertain how well they’d actually fight when the battle came. It was like trying to douse a fire with a single drop of water, an image which caused Bruno to laugh self-mockingly.

“Even so, it’s better than doing nothing.”

Mikoshiba’s retreat was an unexpected blessing to the soldiers of the allied forces. Given the grim state of the battlefield, it was hard to truly believe they’d won. However, in whatever form it took, the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy’s forces had indeed abandoned their initial goal of defending the fortress city of Jermuk, and instead fallen back toward the Kingdom of Rhoadseria to the west. Even if this was a tactical withdrawal, the fact remained that the enemy retreated.

“And that fact is not insignificant.”

With that thought, the allied forces could almost claim victory. It might have been a case of “those who assert it, win,” but such was the nature of warfare. In reality, wars that ended with a clear victory or defeat were rare. The soldiers of the allied forces understood “victory” was an illusion.

“Most of them might lack formal education, but they’re not fools.”

While many of the soldiers came from the commoner class and likely lacked scholarly knowledge, they possessed survival instincts. They excelled at reading the atmosphere and grasping situations intuitively. Underestimating their perceptiveness would be foolish. They surely recognized that they were simply choosing to believe Bruno’s words.

“But for the soldiers, that’s enough...”

Like the expression “a convenient lie,” it was crucial to maintain their fighting spirit. If the truth would drain their will to fight, it would be more meaningful to show them a false dream to inspire them. Such a lie that could keep them

motivated was a strategic deception.

“This situation is dangerous enough as it is.”

All this was for the sake of what lay ahead. Bruno still had one critical task to complete before returning to his homeland—a duty that would determine the fate of the Kingdom of Brittania and the Kingdom of Tarja. As the allied forces’ Supreme Commander, Bruno wanted his soldiers’ morale as high as possible. Soldiers lacking morale and fighting spirit would be useless in a crisis.

“Of course, the preliminary discussions are complete. All that remains is to sign the formal agreement, but I can’t afford to be complacent. After all, Alexis Duran is the opponent.”

In the southern kingdoms, the name Alexis Duran carried special weight. A formidable general of the rival Myest Kingdom, he was both feared and respected. To Bruno, Duran was like a legend, a figure who’d made his name on the battlefield since Bruno was but a squire.

“For someone like me to measure up to him...”

Though Bruno was a knight of great repute—the commander of the Brittannian Royal Griffin Knights and the leader of the allied forces—his fame paled in comparison to General Duran’s. They were not in the same league, yet Bruno had no choice but to face him.

“This agreement was arranged by General Duran and our country’s prime minister, and was endorsed under the king’s name.”

Of course, Bruno harbored some doubts.

“The Kingdom of Myest had previously formed an alliance of four nations led by Helnesgoula. Why bring this offer to us and Tarja instead?”

Until that question was answered, Bruno couldn’t fully support the alliance. Yet, with the king’s orders, Bruno had no choice but to comply. As a high-ranking military officer in the Kingdom of Brittania, opposing the king’s decision required extreme resolve. This was why Bruno took every precaution he could, even if he was marching into a losing battle.

“General Accordo, the flag of the Kingdom of Myest has been sighted to the

north!”

At these words, Bruno’s expression tightened. This was the arrival of his awaited guest, marking the start of a diplomatic battle.

“Understood. Prepare the welcome!”

With that, Bruno ordered his attendant to fetch a change of clothes. As the commander of the allied forces and the head of Brittania’s Griffin Knights, Bruno wouldn’t normally be expected to personally welcome Alexis Duran. But General Duran was the mastermind behind this entire campaign. Moreover, the Kingdom of Myest would soon join Brittania and Tarja in a new alliance, where it would assume leadership. Thus, Bruno would greet this representative of Myest.

If only Raul were here...

Raul Giordano, a general of Tarja, was both a potential rival and an ally from this campaign. Though they hadn’t known each other long, Bruno felt he could call the man a comrade. With someone like Raul beside him, Bruno would feel assured as he prepared for the daunting negotiations.

But that’s a meaningless wish now, isn’t it?

A skilled comrade meant nothing if they were no longer alive. With this thought, Bruno quickly changed his clothes and checked his appearance. He then stepped out of his tent, heading to a new battlefield.

The sky had already darkened, enveloping the area in the veil of night. From the forest came the hoot of an owl. Having entered the fortress city of Jermuk, Alexis Duran sipped from a glass, savoring the chilled amber liquid within.

“Well, it’s finally over...”

With a soft sigh, General Duran reflected on his earlier meeting with Bruno Accordo. Key negotiations had been settled, and the Kingdom of Myest had formally allied with Brittania and Tarja—a result that met his standards. In that sense, the bottle before him was indeed a drink of victory. Yet, not everything had gone as planned. Much of it hadn’t.

“In that case, perhaps it’s more of a bitter drink than a triumphant one.”

A smirk crept across General Duran’s face. Once more, he raised his glass and swallowed the drink that burned down his throat. General Duran’s original plan was to intercept Mikoshiba’s forces, cutting off their escape and forcing a confrontation. But in the end, Mikoshiba’s army had withdrawn before the Kingdom of Myest’s forces could reach Lubua Plains. And they had retreated with minimal losses.

“Who would’ve expected them to repel those barbarian war elephants with such a method?”

It wouldn’t have been so unexpected if it had been a long-distance thaumaturgy attack. At least Duran wouldn’t have dwelled on it.

But even General Duran could not have imagined burying something akin to gunpowder and the detonation thereof.

Then again, Ryoma Mikoshiba is a modern person summoned from Earth. It’s not surprising that he could conceive of something like a land mine... Is it? thought General Duran.

Of course, not many modern individuals summoned from Rearth would come up with the idea of using land mines to blow up enemy troops. Even if one knew of the existence of a weapon like a land mine, the vast majority would never consider using such a tool in warfare. Knowing of a tool’s existence alone was meaningless; the ability to imagine how that tool could be used was crucial. It was similar to asking whether people fully used all the features on their smartphones. One wouldn’t use a convenient function if they couldn’t envision how to do so.

But what’s even more terrifying is the fact that Ryoma Mikoshiba possesses the means to realize such ideas.

The spark of inspiration was indeed crucial, but it held no value on its own. What mattered was whether one could bring that inspiration to fruition. People may have imagined time machines in their minds, but creating one was an entirely different issue.

Despite science and technology being barely recognized in this world, Ryoma

Mikoshiba created something akin to gunpowder and utilized it effectively on the battlefield.

The Organization could even perceive this development as threatening the balance of power. It suggested that the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy possessed a level of technological capability comparable to that of the Organization. For that reason alone, General Duran deemed Ryoma Mikoshiba a person worth keeping a wary eye on.

But that wasn't the only issue.

To think he penetrated the main camp, landed a blow on Bruno, and retreated without taking his head... When General Duran heard this report, he couldn't help but grimace. Of course, it could simply have been a matter of timing, forcing him to prioritize retreat. But if Ryoma Mikoshiba's actions were calculated, he is undeniably a formidable strategist.

For Bruno Accordo, Raul's death would have been a major disaster. Naturally, the responsibility for Raul's defeat and death in his duel with Chris Morgan was with him. After all, Raul was a fierce general feared as the Fiery Tempest. His skills and abilities determined his survival on the battlefield, making his death no one else's fault. This was the undeniable truth and responsibility that came with the extreme conditions of war. Every warrior understood and accepted this as a matter of course. All of the soldiers in this battle knew this, including General Duran. From a national perspective, it would be difficult to acknowledge Raul Giordano's death as anything but his own responsibility.

The real issue is that while Bruno is a general of the Kingdom of Brittania, Raul was a general of the Kingdom of Tarja.

Indeed, the Kingdom of Brittania and the Kingdom of Tarja were set to form an alliance under the new King Owen. This implied cooperations between the two nations, but that didn't mean their historical grievances could be completely erased.

Since the two countries have a lengthy history of conflict, the accumulated hatred and hostility cannot be resolved overnight.

On the surface, they would shake hands and feign friendship. But both nations had joined the three-nation alliance for strategic reasons, and behind

the scenes, both nations would watch for opportunities to weaken the other's strength.

The human heart is not so easily divided into neat compartments.

People forgot favors quickly, but grudges lingered stubbornly. Nations were no different.

Even putting aside the historical context, the Kingdom of Tarja would undoubtedly seek to hinder the Kingdom of Brittania whenever possible.

One of their representative generals had fallen in battle, which would certainly weaken the military power of the Kingdom of Tarja. Faced with this reality, wouldn't the rulers of the Kingdom of Tarja demand accountability from the Kingdom of Brittania?

It wouldn't be surprising if they went so far as to claim that Bruno deliberately orchestrated Raul's death in battle.

Bruno's defense would hardly carry much weight if that were to happen. If he were to admit responsibility for Raul's death, they would publicly denounce him for it. Conversely, the public would accuse him of being irresponsible despite his role as the supreme commander should he deny responsibility. Essentially, the Kingdom of Tarja wasn't interested in uncovering the truth. Their real aim was to pin the blame for Raul's death on Bruno and the Kingdom of Brittania to gain leverage in future negotiations.

What's more, from the outset, the very fact that Raul Giordano was killed makes it difficult for Bruno to justify himself.

The coalition army Bruno led boasted a total force exceeding one hundred thousand. If Archduke Mikoshiba's forces, numbering only forty thousand, killed their deputy commander, Bruno would find it difficult to counter the accusation that he intentionally conspired against Raul. If Bruno tried to defend himself unreasonably, it would only cast doubt on his overall competence as a commander.

The real question is how Brittania will respond to such a maneuver from Tarja. They will likely accept Tarja's demands and abandon Bruno, or they will provide compensation to Tarja to protect Bruno.

Their chosen path would depend on the intentions of the king of Brittania and his advisors. Regardless of the choice, the outcome remained the same.

If they choose the former, they will lose a general who represents their nation; if they choose the latter, they will weaken their national power.

As a result, the mutual animosity and hatred between the Kingdom of Brittania and the Kingdom of Tarja would deepen. This was a direct consequence of the fact that Ryoma Mikoshiba did not kill Bruno.

Had Bruno been defeated by Ryoma Mikoshiba, both countries might have united against the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, possibly even cooperating.

One could only describe it as a masterstroke of cunning strategy. Even understanding this, General Duran showed a faint smile.

“Well, it doesn’t matter... I’ve fulfilled the role assigned to me. The rest is up to that person’s judgment,” he muttered softly, reaching for his glass and drinking it in one gulp.

Two days had passed since Alexis Duran and Bruno Accordo met on Lubua Plains. That day, Radine Rhoadserians, queen of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, began her morning as usual. However, a visitor arrived around noon and completely upended that ordinary morning. Helena Steiner handed Radine a letter while she was reviewing the usual reports from her bureaucrats in her study. When she finished reading the letter, Radine felt the world had turned dark, and she struggled to breathe. The contents of the letter were so shocking that she could hardly process them.

Clutching her chest, Radine took a deep breath to steady herself, followed by several more deep breaths. If she hadn’t done so, her breathing might have genuinely stopped. Helena watched her with a look of concern.

It’s no surprise... For Her Majesty, the thought of that person withdrawing their army would have been unimaginable, right?

Despite Radine being a young queen who had been swept onto the throne of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria by a twist of fate, she demonstrated remarkable resilience. After calming her breathing, Radine turned her gaze back to the

letter she had just read to review its contents a second time. She likely did so to ensure that she had not misread or misunderstood anything. After confirming that she was correct, she looked at the ceiling and let out a deep sigh. She was clearly trying her best to maintain her composure. Unfortunately, her efforts seemed to yield little success. Her face remained stiff and tense, and her slender shoulders quivered slightly. Was it a primal fear that caused this reaction?

“So, you are saying that Archduke Mikoshiba has withdrawn from the Myest Kingdom? That he was defeated in battle?” Radine slowly asked Helena, who stood before her.



The tremor in her voice was unmistakable; it was not a figment of Helena's imagination. In response to Radine's question, Helena shook her head slowly.

"No... According to the report, their forces suffered hardly any losses. While they clearly withdrew, I don't believe it can be said that they were defeated in battle."

This wasn't a lie meant to comfort Radine. Even if the army had successfully carried out the withdrawal and survived, the mere word *retreat* could give the impression of defeat. But from a strategic standpoint, it was not uncommon to decide on a retreat to minimize losses.

Especially in a situation like this, where it was a retreat in good order...

According to the letter, Mikoshiba's army had suffered virtually no casualties. Moreover, they had achieved the notable feat of eliminating Raul Giordano, the enemy's deputy commander. Despite their eventual withdrawal to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, this alone did not mean that Mikoshiba's forces had been defeated.

At the very least, withdrawing while still in a state capable of continuing the war cannot be called a defeat, the seasoned general thought. Regardless of that reality, most people inevitably equate the word retreat with defeat.

Ryoma Mikoshiba was the savior of the nation, undefeated in every battle. No one in the royal castle had imagined that he, who carried such a reputation, would retreat from the Kingdom of Myest. This included Helena, Radine, and even Prime Minister McMaster. Everyone had been sure of Ryoma's victory until the Igasaki messengers delivered the letter to Helena. This was true even for the nobles who despised Ryoma. Though they openly wished for his defeat, none genuinely believed it would happen. Such was the dramatic impact of the victories Ryoma had accumulated, achievements so significant that even his detractors begrudgingly acknowledged them.

As a veteran of countless battles, Helena deeply understood that the idea of being *undefeated* was an illusion.

No matter how much someone is praised as a war god or a military genius, they're still only human...

Arios Belares, one of Helena's contemporaries who was once hailed as a Guardian Deity, met a heroic death during the O'ltormea Empire's invasion of Xarooda a few years prior. Even Helena, known as the Ivory Goddess of War, bore the reputation of being undefeated. Yet, among her over one hundred battles, there were engagements that were...questionable. Of course, Helena had never pretended a loss was a victory. Still, there were battles with ambiguous outcomes that even she could not confidently call victories. Of course, Helena had no intention of openly discussing such inconvenient truths.

It would have been difficult to deny the influence of the word *undefeated*, given the weight it carried. While Helena could not claim to have always won, it was true that she had never been defeated. At the very least, there had never been a time when she had lost most of her forces and barely escaped the battlefield with her life.

After all, it's rare for battles to have such a clear outcome in the first place.

Defeating the enemy commander and securing a decisive victory was not something that happened often. Most battles ended in stalemates, with armies withdrawing due to supply issues rather than direct combat results. After Radine heard Helena's explanation, she nodded slightly. The trembling that had consumed her earlier had stopped, indicating that she had accepted Helena's reasoning.

"So, Archduke Mikoshiba chose to retreat of his own accord... I see. Considering the minimal losses, it's difficult to call it a defeat. Still, with King Phillip's death and the uncertainty of whether King Owen will maintain the four-nation alliance..." murmured Radine.

Helena gave her a gentle smile—the kind a mother might show while watching her child grow.

I thought she'd be more shaken, but she's calmer than I expected. And her analysis of the situation is quite accurate. I don't think she's had any formal military education, though.

Radine was an illegitimate child of the late King Pharst II and was born to a commoner. Until Furio Gelhart used her as a counterbalance to Lupis during Rhoadseria's civil war, she had lived as a commoner and received no training as

royalty. Unlike Lupis, she had no knowledge of military matters.

But this woman understands her own limitations.

That self-awareness made Radine willing to listen to others and caused her to try to grasp the content of their advice. It was a quality befitting a ruler of a nation. Unaware of Helena's inner reflections, Radine hesitated before speaking.

"So... What should I do? Should I send reinforcements to Archduke Mikoshiba? That seems like the right course of action."

Given the possibility that at least the southern half of the Kingdom of Myest might have defected, swift measures were necessary. It was a natural question, but Helena shook her head in response.

"No, I believe that would be premature. At the very least, it would be better to hear Ryoma's thoughts first."

Radine tilted her head slightly at Helena's reply, then voiced her tentative opinion. "I see... So, you believe he does not intend to launch another expedition into the Kingdom of Myest."

"Yes. At this stage, the situation in the Kingdom of Myest is too uncertain. Launching another expedition now would further delay the original goal of aiding the Kingdom of Xarooda. With King Julianus bedridden, that would be a risky gamble. Of course, we will likely have to dispatch troops to Myest eventually. But for now, I believe he will focus on getting the Kingdom of Helnesgoula to mobilize troops until the Myest's situation becomes clearer."

Helena wasn't entirely sure, but she understood that the stance of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula would be a critical factor in determining the outcome of the war in Myest.

Once Radine heard Helena's explanation, she nodded deeply and said, "I understand... Then I will draft a letter recognizing Archduke Mikoshiba as my plenipotentiary. It will make it easier for him to act as he sees fit."

Helena's eyes widened slightly at Radine's unexpected words, a rare reaction for her.

Is this a spur-of-the-moment decision? Or did she say it with conviction?

For Ryoma Mikoshiba, the unwavering support of Queen Radine carried immense significance and value as he decided to withdraw from Lubua Plains. Radine's affirmation of Ryoma's judgment as correct and her expression of continued trust in him were undeniable proof of her faith. This would undoubtedly act as a powerful form of support for him. In such an unpredictable situation, nothing would hinder him more than having his options constrained by interference from third parties.

This will also silence the nobles who would otherwise clamor to frame his retreat as a defeat.

The support of the queen carried a lot of weight. From that perspective, Radine's decision was nothing short of remarkable.

However, from the viewpoint of maintaining her position on the throne, it's nothing but a misstep.

Ordinarily, one would wait for a clearer understanding of the situation before making such a move. At the very least, Lupis Rhoadserians would never have made this decision.

No... If Lupis were queen, she would likely have considered dismissing him. She certainly wouldn't have taken steps to defend him.

That approach would have been less risky and, above all, far easier.

"Are you sure about this? If word of this leaks to the nobles, it could provoke considerable backlash," Helena said, directing a piercing gaze at Radine as if peering into her soul.

Her eyes seemed to ask whether Radine was truly prepared to stake her fate on Ryoma Mikoshiba. But in response to Helena's probing question, Radine smiled serenely.

"For someone like me, who doesn't know how to fight on the battlefield, this is all I can do."

When Helena heard this, she gave a small nod. It was the utmost sincerity and resolve that a powerless queen could muster in the current circumstances.

Radine had seemingly resolved to entrust the fate of Rhoadseria and her life to Ryoma Mikoshiba, proving she possessed the qualities befitting a ruler of a nation.

How ironic... This girl possesses something Lupis, who was trained as royalty, never had. “I understand. I’ll speak with Prime Minister McMaster myself,” Helena said.

“Yes, please do,” Radine replied, nodding slightly.

In response, Helena bowed deeply to Radine as a gesture of profound respect toward the true sovereign of this nation.

Chapter 4: The Next Step

The pale light of the full moon streamed through the window, glowing steadily and acting as a guiding light in this cruel world. But no matter how magnificent the full moon was, its illumination had limits. While it could guide a traveler through the darkness of night, it seemed incapable of providing direction to a man lost on the path of his own life—such as the young man who resided in this room. Ryoma Mikoshiba was the pitiful name belonging to a young conqueror searching for the road he must walk. The only sound within the room was his measured breathing while he sat cross-legged on the mat in the center of the training chamber and meditated. A candle flickered with an eerie, unstable light before him. Maintaining a steady rhythm with his breaths, Ryoma drifted through the sea of his thoughts, which resembled what the sages called “regulating one’s breath.” However, Ryoma sought neither enlightenment nor transcendence since he did not participate in spiritual training. His purpose was more pragmatic: to analyze and reflect on the recent battle and to devise the next move to break through the current impasse. Ryoma also understood well how challenging it would be to find that next step.

But I have no choice but to find it, thought Ryoma.

This resolve arose from his desperate need to suppress the anger and regret deep within his chest and uncover a way forward.

Ryoma did not need allies or vassals to consult with but silence to allow his thoughts to flow freely. He had even stationed his most trusted companions, the Malfist twins, outside the training chamber. Only his beloved sword, Kikoku, stood silently by his side in this solitude as though watching over him. Kikoku could do nothing but wait in silence for its master to find his path. Ten days had passed since the Battle of Lubua Plains. They were in the fortress city of Heraklion, the central hub of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s southern region. As one of the kingdom’s key granaries, this southern expanse was a crucial line of defense. Even among the fortress cities of Rhoadseria, Heraklion was one of the largest, and was capable of accommodating Mikoshiba’s army of over forty

thousand soldiers within its walls. But Ryoma saw Heraklion as more than just a strategic stronghold—it was a place tied deeply to his past.

This was once the seat of the Viscount Gelhart. Now it's a royal domain, and I'm the one who caused that. How ironic... To think I'd return to this castle under such circumstances, thought Ryoma. After retreating west from Lubua Plains, Heraklion was the only base near the border large enough to house an army of over forty thousand soldiers. *Still, it's fortunate this place has remained under direct royal control.*

The status of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy within Rhoadseria was delicate.

While House Mikoshiba held their title from the Rhoadserians royal house, Ryoma had overthrown Queen Lupis Rhoadserians and installed the current ruler, Radine Rhoadserians, on the throne. Though technically a vassal of the kingdom, his influence far surpassed that of the reigning monarch. Of course, Ryoma had no intention of abusing his power for personal gain, unlike the late Viscount Gelhart. Indeed, perhaps no noble had done more for Rhoadseria than Ryoma. For the sake of the four-nation alliance, the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy had taken sole responsibility for aiding the Kingdom of Myest—a burden that the entire nation should have shared.

Given Rhoadseria's unstable political situation, Ryoma knew this was the best course of action.

With Helena unavailable, there really isn't another option.

The kingdom had capable warriors, but few could act as leaders. Even fewer could bear the responsibility of safeguarding the nation's survival. Other than Helena, only Ryoma could fulfill that role. That was why he had taken his personal army, the forces of Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, to aid the Kingdom of Myest. A noble this devoted to Rhoadseria's cause was unparalleled, making him a true hero of salvation and a paragon of loyalty. Yet, to most of the kingdom's aristocrats, Ryoma Mikoshiba was no loyal vassal but a treacherous usurper. At best, they considered him an upstart who did not know his place. Many harbored deep resentment, especially those whose vested interests had been upended by his actions. For such people, the sudden arrival of Ryoma and his army at Heraklion would prompt suspicion and hostility.

They're unlikely to outright oppose me. But welcoming me with open arms? That's a different matter.

Rather than outright confrontation, another noble would likely make excuses—claiming the need to prepare or await orders from the capital—to delay allowing Ryoma's forces to garrison there. Many nobles felt that demanding Ryoma follow formal protocols was a fitting way to inconvenience a despised enemy.

If that had happened, I'd have had no choice but to ask Helena or Queen Radine for written authorization, thought Ryoma, wanting to avoid that at all costs. *After all, the retreat from Lubua Plains was a grueling march. I want to let my troops rest within the safety of the city walls.*

Most soldiers were still sleeping in tents erected on the training grounds. Even a fortress as large as Heraklion could not provide rooms for forty thousand soldiers. In that sense, there was little difference between being within Heraklion's castle walls or stationed on its outskirts.

But from the perspective of the soldiers, the distinction was significant.

Just the thought of being protected by sturdy walls brings a sense of relief.

This retreat had been anything but typical. Instead, it was a murky, unresolved situation that had been neither a defeat nor a victory. The soldiers of the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy were elite troops who showed little outward distress. Still, it was likely that many emotions were churning beneath their disciplined exteriors. In such circumstances, securing warm meals and safe sleeping arrangements was crucial. Heraklion's status as a royal domain allowed the army to bypass unnecessary complications.

If this had been a noble's territory, it would have caused endless trouble.

Indeed, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that Queen Lupis might have granted Heraklion as a reward to secure the loyalty of one of her vassals.

Such an outcome would have been more likely. Being granted stewardship of a fortress city like Heraklion would have elevated the recipient to the highest ranks of the nobility. It would also have been a public declaration that the recipient was among Queen Lupis Rhoadserians's most trusted subjects. If Lupis

had dangled the prospect of controlling Heraklion before them, most nobles would have wagged their tails like eager dogs, desperate to curry favor with her.

For Lupis, whose position had remained precarious despite suppressing the aristocratic rebellion and seizing the throne, such a temptation must have been sweet.

In the end, Lupis chose to keep Heraklion as a royal domain.

Meltina likely persuaded her. She must have opposed granting such a powerful asset to the nobles after having worked so hard to strip them of their strength.

At the time, Mikhail Vanash had been under house arrest and unable to provide counsel. This left only Meltina Lecter, Lupis's other trusted confidant, to influence her decision.

For such a muscle-brained woman, it wasn't a bad call.

Of course, this decision wasn't exactly praiseworthy as a brilliant move. It wasn't a perfect score, but it was at least above average—passable if one were grading it like an exam.

The problem is that Heraklion is far from Pireas, which makes the royal authority hard to enforce.

Lupis and her court would have found it challenging to closely monitor Heraklion's governance, regardless of who gained control over it. Without oversight, there was a risk of breeding another Furio Gelhart.

Even from that perspective, keeping Heraklion as a royal domain wasn't necessarily the wrong choice.

But such correctness is meaningless if it's only theoretical. Whether a noble receives it as a reward or the queen maintains it as a royal domain, the real concern is its governance. What matters is who is sent to manage Heraklion as a royal domain and how they handle the task.

Making Heraklion a royal domain meant that Lupis had to dispatch someone to oversee it in her stead. She would have had to leave Pireas and govern

Heraklion personally to avoid that outcome, but that prospect was utterly impossible.

Inevitably, she would have to delegate the administration to someone she could trust, he realized. However, selecting the right person for such a role was no simple task. Someone like Lupis Rhoadserians only trusted Mikhail Vanash and Meltina Lecter.

This was hardly surprising since the pair were her most loyal retainers, who had stood by her through thick and thin. If Lupis had merely counted on their loyalty, there would have been no issue. What complicated matters significantly was that she trusted no one else.

She took care to conceal this from those around her, but...

People in her position were expected to exercise that level of discretion. When a leader showed favoritism, it inevitably distorted the organization and led to dysfunction. Lupis surely understood this. Yet understanding didn't always equate to control over one's feelings. Actions often spoke louder than words, betraying far more than intended. In fact, Lupis's approach to managing Heraklion revealed much about her mindset.

The administrator Lupis dispatched from the capital made an effort, although maintaining the status quo was beyond him. When every decision requires a messenger to run all the way to the capital for approval, it's no wonder it failed.

From Lupis's perspective, this might have seemed logical at the time. This had happened right after the civil war, during a period of great uncertainty. A ruler would naturally want to tighten control over a city as far from the capital as Heraklion in order to prevent any unsanctioned governance.

But her methods were woefully inadequate...

The need for approval from superiors for every single action caused the city to stagnate. This was not Japan, where one could simply pick up a phone to seek guidance. In this world, with limited means of communication, such micromanagement was crippling. As a result, Heraklion's prosperity had begun to wane.

On top of that, many nobles in the surrounding region had aligned with the

aristocratic faction. It was absurd to think they would follow Lupis's orders. When dealing with a governor who constantly sought approval from the capital, they naturally viewed him as weak and dismissed him entirely.

Crop yields had steadily declined year after year, and lawlessness around Heraklion rose. Ryoma immediately thought about Emidio, whom he had met upon entering Heraklion. A brilliant official of common birth, Emidio served the royal court as an administrator.

Emidio's talent and lack of any noble affiliations made Lupis appoint him as Heraklion's governor, though it was a thankless role.

He seems sincere... Despite the advance notice, his ability to accommodate an army of forty thousand in just a few days speaks to his competence. There's no doubt about his sharp mind.

Despite Emidio's faint traces of timidity, he was undoubtedly a capable administrator. No matter how tirelessly such a talented individual like him worked to the bone, his efforts were destined to bear no fruit.

Naturally... No matter how sincere one's efforts, a fundamentally flawed approach will not yield any results.

Most people believed that hard work would always be rewarded. And when their efforts failed to produce results, they quickly dismissed the effort as meaningless.

But that's a grave misunderstanding.

Effort was an indispensable sacrifice for achieving results. But why did effort sometimes go unrewarded? It was simply because the direction of that effort was misguided. Working blindly without strategy or focus was not enough. This resembled a student aiming to excel in math but endlessly poring over literature textbooks instead, or someone aspiring to become a baseball player yet spending their days practicing soccer dribbling. Of course, such absurdities were rare. If they did occur, parents or friends would surely step in to correct them, as the mistake would be obvious to anyone. However, in some cases, the correct direction for effort was not so clear. Even when one recognized their mistake, circumstances prevented them from correcting their course.

Such was precisely the state of Heraklion now.

Someone as competent as Emidio surely understood that under the current conditions, governing Heraklion effectively was impossible.

Precisely because of his abilities, he managed to keep things afloat through sheer effort and dedication, blinding himself to the reality that his actions were worsening the situation. He probably realized this path could only lead to ruin.

It's unfortunate for a patriot like him... But for me, it was fortunate that Emidio was Heraklion's governor.

Due to Emidio's circumstances, Ryoma's army was able to enter Heraklion without resistance and secure much-needed rest. Being the governor of Heraklion might have been an unbearable burden for Emidio, but it gave Ryoma an opportunity. Perhaps it was fate, like a braided rope of misfortune and blessing entwined. With these thoughts in mind, Ryoma delved deeper into the plans for his next moves. The Battle of Lubua Plains was only a prelude.

For now, minimizing our losses was a good outcome. It must have been an unexpected result for the enemy too.

Detecting Alexis Duran's treachery and withdrawing from the front lines before the Kingdom of Myest's army could reach the fortress city of Jermuk had been a bold and decisive move.

On top of that, Ryoma's forces had dealt a significant blow to the combined armies of Brittania and Tarja. After all, they had slain the coalition's vice commander, Raul Giordano, and come within a hairbreadth of taking the head of the supreme commander, Bruno Accordo.

Though Ryoma and his forces had ultimately failed to kill Bruno, the damage to his reputation and prestige was undeniable and a major strategic success. This outcome must have been deeply unsatisfactory for whoever had orchestrated this scheme.

In that sense, my early decision to withdraw was undoubtedly correct.

The king of the Kingdom of Myest, Phillip, had unexpectedly died. While the details of his death remained unclear, the sudden assault on the capital and the king's demise were no ordinary matters. Moreover, his successor was his half

brother, Owen Spiegel, a skilled chancellor. That alone cast enough doubt to make treating Myest as an ally far too risky without understanding the truth behind these events.

Regardless of Alexis Duran's role in this conspiracy, it's certain he's allied with the new king, Owen Spiegel. We might have been annihilated if I'd stubbornly pursued a strategy of supporting the Kingdom of Myest.

Had that happened, the outcome would have been disastrous. If Ryoma had fallen, everything would have ended. Even if he had survived, heavy losses to his forces would have left him unable to plan his next steps. This would have made it impossible to aid Myest and defend Xarooda from the ongoing O'ltormea Empire invasion.

Such a scenario would have been the worst-case outcome for Rhoadseria, Xarooda, and Helnesgoula.

Only Ryoma's keen strategic mind and his refusal to cling to the hope of victory at the cost of a well-timed retreat had averted that disaster. This was unmistakable proof of his qualities as a masterful commander. Anyone with battlefield experience or a basic understanding of tactics and military strategy would have recognized the wisdom of Ryoma's decision. But the world often twisted truths to suit its narratives. Particularly, the ignorant masses, who praised the achievements of heroes, swiftly turned against them when their fortunes changed. This would have been the perfect opportunity for nobles who despised Ryoma to attack his reputation. Fortunately, this particular threat had been avoided.

At worst, I thought they might strip me of command of the expeditionary force. But judging by the letters from Helena and the others, the sentiment in the capital seems more favorable toward me than I expected, thought Ryoma. Letters of commendation had already arrived from Queen Radine Rhoadserians and Helena Steiner, expressing their continued trust and authorizing Ryoma to maintain full command. This clearly indicated that Radine had no intention of altering her initial policy. *She's far more composed than I'd anticipated. If Lupis were the ruler, she would've likely called me back to the capital to demand an explanation.*

Had that been the case, she might have jeopardized the opportunity to launch the next move, even if it cost the kingdom dearly. Times of crisis revealed a leader's true nature. In situations like this, most rulers would instinctively place all blame on the general in charge of the army. But Radine Rhoadserians was different. Far from seeking explanations, she maintained unwavering trust in Ryoma.

No doubt Helena and Prime Minister McMaster advised her, but it's still impressive that she followed their counsel... It's a pleasant surprise, to say the least. Ryoma considered how this demonstrated the difference in leadership qualities between her and others. *And it's a relief that even the nobles' reactions haven't been negative.*

Reports from Charlotte, who monitored the nobility within Rhoadseria, confirmed that the aristocracy showed no signs of unrest or opposition to Ryoma's decisions.

While taking Charlotte's reports at face value is dangerous, Count Zeleph has sent similar assessments. So I can be about ninety percent certain there's no trouble brewing.

At least for now, no nobles in Rhoadseria seemed inclined to challenge Ryoma's capabilities or exploit the situation to undermine Queen Radine's rule.

Well, I've already intimidated them plenty... Is there no one left with the backbone to defy me now?

Many, including Viscount Gelhart, had been sent on their final journey by Ryoma's hand. At this point, no one was foolish enough to underestimate Ryoma or rise against the Rhoadserian throne simply because the tides of war had briefly turned against him.

Calling it a disadvantage might have been overly self-deprecating. At the very least, the enemy's tactical objectives had been thwarted. However, this explanation only held up because Archduke Mikoshiba's army had retreated to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria without sustaining major losses.

Certainly, the four-kingdom alliance had become practically defunct due to the Kingdom of Myest's division. Given the course of this war, it's highly likely that their true aim was my head. From that perspective, thwarting their goals could

be seen as an achievement.

Of course, whether this analysis was accurate was beyond Ryoma's knowledge at the moment. If viewed critically, believing someone instigated an international conflict just to target his life might seem narcissistic. However, when considering Bruno Accordo's refusal to move while besieging the fortress city of Jermuk, the upheaval within the Kingdom of Myest, and the sudden return of Alexis Duran to active duty, it was hard to believe this was merely a ploy to divide the nation.

It makes more sense to see this as a plot specifically targeting my life.

This might not have been a clear victory from that perspective, but calling it a draw wouldn't have been an exaggeration either. If Ryoma's hypothesis was correct, then the enemy had only partially achieved their strategic objectives. Given the elaborate scheme involving Alexis Duran's return from retirement had been foiled with almost no casualties, one might even call this Ryoma's victory. At the very least, there was room to interpret it as such, and Ryoma was not blind to this reasoning.

Many justifications must be made, and it's not necessarily wrong to interpret events this way.

This narrative was worth presenting to those around him. Regardless of the reality, the reputation of being a hero of salvation and an undefeated master tactician held significant value.

But no matter how I sugarcoat it, the fact remains that I fell into the enemy's trap and was nearly killed. Although I safely withdrew from the Battle of Lubua Plain and brought the situation to something of a draw, I lost strategically.

This truth weighed heavily on Ryoma's mind. A metallic, rusty taste spread through his mouth as he became acutely aware of it. He had tasted defeat for the first time since being summoned to this world. Tactically, the outcome might have been a draw or even a slight advantage, but while the enemy's plans had been disrupted, it was undoubtedly a loss for Ryoma from a strategic perspective.

Ryoma's ultimate goal was to save the Kingdom of Xarooda, which was threatened by the O'ltormea Empire. The deployment of reinforcements to the

Kingdom of Myest, attacked by the allied forces of Brittania and Tarja, was merely a stepping stone for the larger goal of aiding Xarooda. To stumble at this preliminary stage was an undeniable failure. No matter how much Ryoma rationalized it, he couldn't escape that reality. What he needed most now was to determine the cause of this defeat.

Ultimately, the biggest reason was that I couldn't take the initiative.

Though others often called Ryoma a war god or a military genius, he had a much lower opinion of his abilities. His undefeated record stemmed from the advantage of having access to a certain level of knowledge while living in Japan. This had allowed him to acquire various insights into politics and military strategy. In extreme terms, it was simply a matter of knowing the correct answers beforehand. Certainly, selecting the right course of action from the vast array of decisions made by historical heroes to suit specific situations reflected Ryoma's talent. But his undefeated streak wasn't solely the result of his abilities. Above all, there was a secret to Ryoma's consistent victories.

It was because I always struck first, catching my enemies off guard.

This involved launching an attack when the opponent was unprepared. On the surface, it might seem cowardly, but the element of surprise was often the deciding factor in victory in actual combat. One could argue that battles rarely, if ever, were won without catching the enemy off guard. This principle applied equally to street fights and wars between nations, although striking first required thorough preparation.

Recognizing this, Ryoma had always prioritized and executed strategies that allowed him to surprise his enemies and take the initiative. This was how he had risen from an unknown mercenary to the rank of archduke.

But this time, I fell behind.

While Ryoma had anticipated an invasion of Xarooda by the O'ltormea Empire, he hadn't expected it to happen at this particular moment, let alone that Brittania and Tarja would attack Myest in unison. Either way, it was perhaps inevitable to some extent. While the flow of information about Rhoadseria was manageable, acquiring intelligence about neighboring countries like Myest or Xarooda was far more challenging. Even when such information

was obtained, Ryoma had to endure an unavoidable time lag before receiving it.

No matter how diligent the Igasaki clan or Simone Christof were in gathering intelligence, there were physical limitations.

The biggest blow was having half of the Kingdom of Myest turn against us.

If the Kingdom of Myest, which controlled the seas off the eastern coast of the western continent, had been an ally, Ryoma could have focused solely on Xarooda's situation. Even if Brittania and Tarja had formed an alliance with Myest, there would have been options, like sheltering Julianus and establishing a Xaroodian government-in-exile within Rhoadseria. However, Ryoma wished to avoid that worst-case scenario.

Establishing a government-in-exile would mean we'll need a significant amount of time to liberate Xarooda from O'ltormea's occupation.

Meanwhile, Archduke Mikoshiba's family would bear the economic and military burden of supporting the government-in-exile until Julianus and his people could return home. Even with the family's immense financial strength, such a responsibility would be no small weight to bear. While taking Julianus out of Xarooda might have been a last resort, merely having the option available was crucial for strategic planning.

Options provided a psychological advantage. But the situation had drastically shifted when the southern half of the Kingdom of Myest allied with the enemy.

It's like losing a corner square in a game of Reversi, flipping the entire board, thought Ryoma, forming an involuntary smirk. On a map of the western continent, the Kingdom of Myest was indeed in a corner position. Losing it to the enemy had completely altered the balance of power. *The only saving grace is that unlike Reversi, it's possible to reclaim lost ground.*

From this perspective, the situation was slightly better than in Reversi, where a captured corner was irrevocable. At least there was still a chance to turn things around.

The question is, how to proceed from here?

However, Ryoma had already arrived at the answer. The O'ltormea Empire already held greater national strength. On top of that, the Kingdom of Myest

had lost the southern half of its territory and was on the brink of descending into civil war. In such circumstances, maintaining a defensive stance until the Kingdom of Helnesgoula took action would lead nowhere.

I cannot afford to fall back into defense. The sheer force of their numbers will eventually crush us if I retreat. In that case, I have no choice but to take the offensive, even if it means risking everything!

Just then, Ryoma's half-closed eyes shot open wide. His resolve was evident. And his beloved sword responded to that determination with a cry of joy, seemingly anticipating its blade being stained with blood once again.

The following day, Ryoma summoned the Malfist sisters and key officials who supported the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy, including the guest commanders Ecclesia, Chris, and Leonard, to his office. This meeting was to discuss concrete measures for their future strategy. The lavish room, which had once served as the office of Duke Gelhart, the former ruler of this fortress city of Heraklion, featured a large ebony table at its center. Spread across the table was an expansive map depicting the eastern to southeastern regions of the western continent.

Ryoma Mikoshiba spoke of his resolve and took a deep breath. Then, he cast a gaze on the individuals gathered in the room and said, "As I explained earlier, the general direction has been decided. The issue now is how we should proceed... I want to hear your candid opinions."

By now, everyone present was fully aware that taking the offensive was their only viable path forward. And yet, no one in the room objected to Ryoma's plan. This was not out of blind obedience to their lord.

After all, everyone present in the room was a commander with exceptional strategic insight and situational analysis skills. They analyzed the same information, so their conclusions were unlikely to differ. Thus, even when asked for concrete measures, no brilliant ideas came to mind immediately. A heavy silence filled the room. Amid this tension, Chris finally spoke up.

"This time, we withdrew our forces to Heraklion. However, it's undeniable that we inflicted significant losses on the allied forces. If we replenish our

supplies here, wouldn't launching another expedition into the Kingdom of Myest be possible?"

Yet, Leonard shook his head in response to Chris's suggestion. "As you say, Chris, it's possible in terms of feasibility. Whether we should launch another expedition is another matter entirely. At the very least, we should not act immediately."

"Is that because the situation within the Kingdom of Myest remains unclear?"

"Yes. As Lady Ecclesia suggested, Myest's intentions are still uncertain. Launching another expedition under these circumstances would be far too dangerous."

At those words, Ecclesia responded, "Indeed... Even though Uncle Phillip has been killed and Prime Minister Spiegel has taken the throne as the new king, their subsequent actions remain unclear."

Leonard continued, "Exactly... According to reports from the Igasaki spies, the allied forces have entered Jermuk. Based on that and as His Excellency predicted, it seems almost certain that Alexis Duran had been colluding with the allied forces from the beginning. However, what's puzzling is the lack of any movement from General Duran since then. After returning to Endesia, he has made no visible moves. Normally, one would expect him to mobilize his forces to unify the Kingdom of Myest, but..."

"True... He may be wary of Lady Cassandra in Pherzaad, but it is certainly unsettling," Ecclesia remarked.

"The nobles around Endesia seem to revere General Duran and have pledged loyalty to King Owen. I can't imagine the northern nobles, branded as traitors in the king's assassination, will remain silent. We should send a letter to Cassandra Hellner, as you suggested, Lady Ecclesia, and confirm the situation before taking any action."

"You're right. Until then, we shouldn't direct our forces toward the Kingdom of Myest." Ecclesia nodded at Leonard.

Ultimately, the Kingdom of Myest's current state wasn't as clear-cut as a game of Reversi, where black and white pieces were clearly defined. In essence,

it was impossible to determine who was an ally and who was an enemy.

Launching another expedition into the Kingdom of Myest under such uncertain conditions would be fraught with danger. As Ryoma listened to the exchange between the two, he nodded inwardly but also contemplated another potential risk.

“You’re both correct,” Ryoma said. “However, assuming that only allies and enemies exist could be a dangerous oversimplification.”

Everyone in the room showed expressions of surprise. But soon, they grasped the possibility Ryoma had pointed out, and their faces grew tense.

What’s truly frightening is the possibility of a third faction reaping the rewards.

To put it bluntly, on a board that was supposed to have only black and white stones, yellow or red ones could suddenly appear without anyone noticing. Even more unexpectedly, black stones could transform into white stones.

Unlike a game, reality is complex and unpredictable. The moment you let your guard down and show your back to someone you think is an ally, they might drive a knife straight into your side.

One could not neatly divide sides into allies and enemies, nor could one assume the relationship between allies and enemies would remain fixed forever. Depending on the circumstances, allies could become enemies, and enemies could become allies.

“To avoid such a situation, we’ll need to focus even more on gathering intelligence from within the Kingdom of Myest... But the question is, can we manage it? If we proceed, I imagine the Igasaki clan or the Christof Trading Company would be the ones to act, but wouldn’t that overburden them?” said Laura, tilting her head slightly in concern.

The Malfist sisters, who followed Ryoma like his very own shadow, often interacted with the Igasaki clan. Knowing the precision of the information they gathered, Laura questioned whether it was realistic to increase their workload further.

Her concern was valid. Even Ryoma shared her apprehension on this matter.

Relying solely on the Igasaki clan or the Christof Trading Company would be difficult. At their current size, it's simply unfeasible.

Neither the Igasaki clan nor Simone would admit defeat. Both were bound by extraordinary loyalty and devotion to Ryoma Mikoshiha.

Given the dire situation the Mikoshiha Grand Duchy currently faced, they would strive to fulfill their lord's orders, no matter the sacrifices required of them. While such dedication was admirable, it was not without complications.

This loyalty was, in principle, something to be celebrated.

After all, when retainers devoted themselves to their liege's cause, there was no reason to reject or criticize their efforts—only to praise them.

However, allowing them to push themselves to such extremes will inevitably lead to collapse in the future. And when that happens, it will surely affect the intelligence network we've already built.

Should Ryoma order it, they would carry out the mission, even at the expense of their own well-being.

Ryoma and his forces worked recklessly without reflecting on their own capacity to handle things. If this behavior were temporary, it could serve as a useful response in times of emergency. However, given that this situation required prolonged efforts, relying solely on willpower could instead worsen the circumstances. Though the idea of relying on willpower wasn't inherently wrong, there was no way to resolve everything solely through determination.

As a countermeasure, we could ask Nelcius and his team to develop a long-range communication tool like Wezalié's Whisper or work on expanding the information network.

Still, neither of those options offered an immediate solution. Perhaps they could be resolved in a few years, but they were not measures that could address the problems Ryoma was currently facing.

"In that case, we have no choice but to manage with the resources at hand... Now, what to do?" said Ryoma, crossing his arms and gazing upward. His words drew the attention of those around him. At the current stage, a few potential options could be considered. The issue was that each one seemed like a

compromise—neither short enough for a sash nor long enough for a full wrap. *One option would be to follow Leonard’s suggestion and refrain from moving the troops until the situation becomes clearer.*

Without a well-established information network, delaying action while waiting to assess the situation could lead to irreversible damage.

Should we aim to remove General Duran and actively intervene to unify the Kingdom of Myest? Although Cassandra Hellner’s presence in Pherzaad is a concern, we could justify our actions by rallying behind Lady Ecclesia, who bears the royal bloodline. We might even win over the northern nobles to our side.

If that were to happen, they could confront Alexis Duran, who controlled the southern Kingdom of Myest, on equal or superior footing. At the very least, Ryoma would gain the initiative, but he quickly dismissed that idea.

Choosing that course would undoubtedly worsen the situation in Myest in the short term... It could take years to resolve.

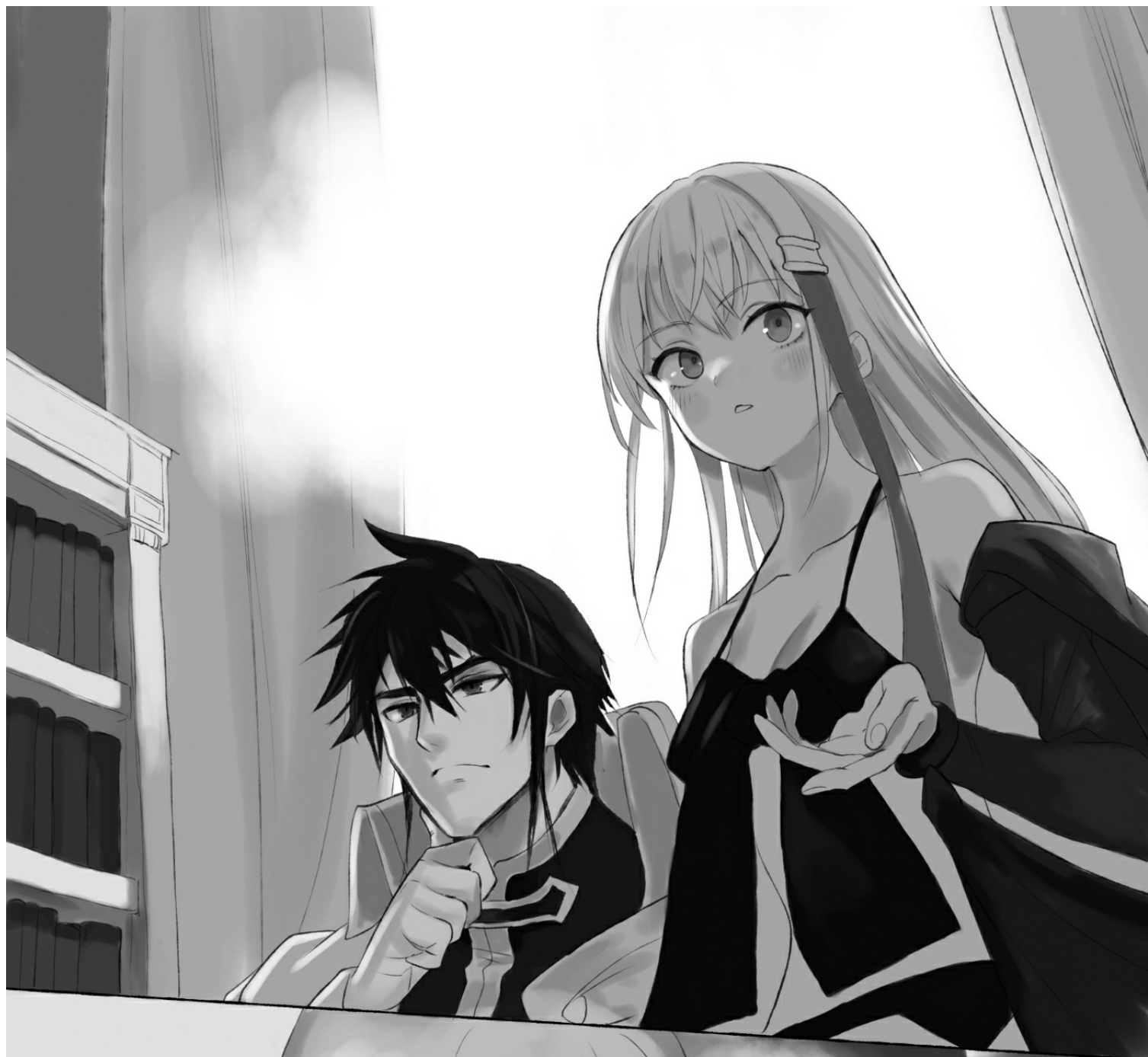
The problem with confronting Alexis Duran was that it would further delay providing substantial relief to the Kingdom of Xarooda, whose king—the linchpin of the nation—lay bedridden and unable to command from the front. Lione and her forces’ valiant efforts left the battlefield in better shape than expected. Yet it remained uncertain how long they could hold out.

There was even a risk of the Xarooda nobility defecting en masse to the O’ltormea Empire. The gravity of the situation, with a foreign invasion threatening the nation’s survival while the king could not lead, was enormous.

“Wouldn’t it be better to return to our original objective and focus on providing aid to the Kingdom of Xarooda? It has already been several months since the O’ltormea Empire resumed its invasion. Although Lione’s efforts have kept the front lines in a stalemate, there’s no telling how long that will last. If possible, wouldn’t it be best for you, Lord Ryoma, to lead the army to Xarooda?” said Sara, who had been quietly observing the proceedings since the meeting began.

Ecclesia couldn’t help but frown, as Sara’s suggestion likely sounded like abandoning her homeland, the Kingdom of Myest. However, Ecclesia was not so foolish as to voice such concerns openly. In truth, Sara’s proposal was the most

logical way to break the current stalemate.



However, there was still a significant problem with choosing that option.

“Certainly, the primary objective is to repel the invasion by the O’ltormea Empire. In that sense, going to the Kingdom of Xarooda as reinforcements would be the best solution. But if I choose that now, there’s a risk of being struck from behind by General Duran. Realistically, it’s a tough call,” Ryoma said, frowning. As long as Helena Steiner remained in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, it was hard to imagine their territory being easily overrun. *However, the enemy is Alexis Duran, a legendary figure reputed to be the strongest among the Kingdom of Myest’s three generals.*

Even if Helena, known as the Ivory Goddess of War, were to counterattack, there was no guarantee that Rhoadseria’s defensive line wouldn’t be breached. That said, this was merely a possibility. For Duran to strike Ryoma’s rear while he headed to Xarooda, he would need to abandon the unification of Myest and invade Rhoadseria—a strategic move that seemed unlikely.

“Well, the possibility is almost negligible. Considering the Kingdom of Myest’s interests, it would be a poor move. It would unnecessarily expand his front lines and create an outright hostile relationship with the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.”

“That’s true. I share the same opinion,” Ecclesia responded, nodding slightly along with the others.

That’s right. It’s unlikely from a common-sense perspective. But...

As long as Alexis Duran’s true intentions remained unclear, one couldn’t completely dismiss the possibility. From what Ryoma could tell, General Duran wasn’t an overly ambitious man who sought power beyond necessity. Based on the intelligence Ryoma had previously gathered, that was the conclusion he reached. General Duran’s desire for promotion or power likely wasn’t the sole driving force behind the recent upheaval in the Kingdom of Myest. If that were the case, General Duran’s actions might not align with the interests of Myest or its new king, Owen. This misalignment would pose a major obstacle in formulating future countermeasures.

“In that case, should we proceed as planned and have Lady Lione withdraw alongside Rhoadseria with His Majesty Julianus to reduce the battle lines?” This proposal from Laura referred to a contingency plan Ryoma had shared with

Lione before sending her to the Kingdom of Xarooda.

However, Ryoma shook his head at her suggestion. “No. That plan was only valid if the Kingdom of Myest were an ally. If Lione and the others retreat from Xarooda now, O’ltormea might press on from Xarooda and invade Rhoadseria.”

If that happened, enemy nations would surround the Kingdom of Rhoadseria from the east, west, and south like a rat in a trap. Recovering from such a dire situation would be extremely difficult.

“In that case, how about dispatching reinforcements to the Kingdom of Xarooda and holding a defensive stance until Helnesgoula can move?” Chris suggested hesitantly.

But Ryoma shook his head again. “That’s not a bad idea. However, the timing of Helnesgoula’s intervention is far too uncertain to rely on.”

When Ecclesia heard this, she asked, “It was mentioned that sandstorms and soaring commodity prices are making it difficult to procure supplies, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, the letter we received recently stated as much.”

“Is that true?”

Her question carried an implicit distrust of Queen Grindiana Helnescharles of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. She naturally harbored such doubts. As the leader of the four-kingdom alliance, Helnesgoula had shown no signs of dispatching troops to Xarooda.

I’ve heard the reasons...

Ryoma recalled the apology letter from the Kingdom of Helnesgoula that had arrived before his expedition to Myest. The reasons were twofold. First was the weather issue: for two months, the central region of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, encompassing nearly one-tenth of its territory, had been experiencing a season of frequent sandstorms in the Dorsch Desert. The second reason was the extraordinary rise in food prices within Helnesgoula. While price hikes during the sandstorm season were routine, this year’s increase was reportedly unprecedented. The reasoning for delaying deployment to Xarooda was sound.

The Dorsch Desert experiences frequent sandstorms during this season, and rising prices for goods are natural.

Having once traveled to the harsh environment of Helnesgoula while seeking a way back to Earth, Ryoma fully understood the difficulties posed by the desert.

Even when it wasn't sandstorm season, it was incredibly harsh. Marching an army through that during a season of storms would be madness.

While Helnesgoula's troops were likely accustomed to desert conditions, leading a large force through frequent storms would still be foolhardy. Furthermore, rescuing Xarooda from the O'ltormea invasion would require at least one hundred thousand troops, a force that couldn't endure such a journey. Transporting this force by sea wasn't practical either. Considering the shortage of food supplies, Helnesgoula's inability to act was understandable.

Yet, Ryoma couldn't shake the doubts about the authenticity of the situation. Even if Queen Grindiana wasn't outright lying, the timing of these events seemed too convenient to be natural.

Someone is orchestrating this. It's too perfectly timed with O'ltormea's invasion of Xarooda.

If someone had engineered these circumstances, they likely wouldn't sit idly by once Helnesgoula attempted to act. Further interference seemed inevitable.

"Frankly, Ecclesia's doubts are entirely valid. I'm not without my own suspicions. But regardless of the truth, it's certain that the Kingdom of Helnesgoula won't be able to intervene immediately."

The key role Helnesgoula's military could play in turning the tide of war remained unchanged. However, it was better to formulate plans on the assumption that they wouldn't intervene, at least until there was a more definite timeline for when they would act.

"Indeed, we shouldn't count on Helnesgoula's troops. But in that case..."

"Our usable cards are down to those two," Ryoma replied, nodding deeply at Ecclesia's remark. One was a card Ryoma had prepared. The other was a fortuitous asset that had fallen into their hands by chance.

Both could potentially break the current stalemate if used effectively. However, they were also cards that were difficult to play. Sensing Ryoma's inner turmoil, Leonard spoke up.

"In that case, the priority should be Bruno Accordo, right?"

At those words, Ryoma gave a small nod. Despite a few considerations that needed to be addressed, this option allowed for a clearer strategy compared to the other card in hand.

After all, Accordo's options are limited, Ryoma thought.

Ryoma hadn't originally planned to set a scheme in motion against General Accordo. At the very least, that plan would have never crossed his mind if Chris hadn't defeated Raul Giordano. Given the current circumstances, Ryoma's decision to spare Bruno rather than killing him could only be described as a stroke of divine inspiration.

I agonized over whether to let him go or kill him, but sparing him turned out to be the right choice. If I use the seeds of doubt I planted back then wisely, I can disrupt our enemies' unity.

To defeat an enemy, surpassing their strength is essential. Most people would think about strengthening their own forces to achieve this, whether in sports or in the workplace. But that didn't mean there were no other options.

If I can't surpass their strength, I can weaken it.

Deceiving and undermining the enemy, commonly known as scheming, was necessary. Such actions wouldn't go unpunished in sports or workplace contexts, and depending on the method, could lead to criminal charges. Even if the act didn't result in legal consequences, being ostracized was almost guaranteed. Even in the best-case scenario, one could be certain it wouldn't be taken kindly. But in the extreme circumstances of war, the rules changed. When the survival of a nation was at stake, refraining from such methods was the real mistake. If the enemy had vulnerabilities, failing to exploit them would be a greater issue. Whether the seeds Ryoma planted would bloom as he expected remained a gamble.

However, if the seeds sprouted and caused doubt to blossom in the hearts of

Bruno and those around him, it could drive a wedge between Brittania and Tarja. This would significantly reduce both nations' military power.

Should that happen, General Duran will lose the support of Brittania and Tarja's combined forces. Depending on the situation, he might even have to deploy Myest's troops to both nations.

Inevitably, it would take Alexis Duran longer to gain complete control over the Kingdom of Myest if he also had to occupy the other two kingdoms at the same time. Even for General Duran, such a development was unlikely to be favorable, making Bruno's value evident.

But if that's the case, someone will need to water the seeds I planted. The question is, who should I assign to do it?

The seeds of doubt, being metaphorical, didn't grow like actual plants. But leaving them unattended wouldn't let them flourish either, as they needed nourishment and environmental adjustments. The real problem was deciding who would nurture the seeds of doubt planted regarding Bruno within the Kingdom of Brittania until they bloomed.

Now, who should I entrust with this?

Names of potential candidates flashed through Ryoma's mind, appearing and disappearing. For this kind of work, the first name that came to mind was always the Igasaki clan.

"But Gennou and Sakuya can't be moved. If I absolutely must rely on the Igasaki clan, it would mean sending Ryusai or Jinnai undercover, but that's not feasible," Ryoma said aloud, dismissing the idea.

The Igasaki clan was already burdened with numerous tasks. While they would never refuse an order from Ryoma, it was evident they were operating at full capacity. As he voiced his thoughts, Laura nodded in agreement. Seated beside Laura, Sara also nodded, indicating she shared her elder sister's opinion.

"I think so too. Besides, this time, we need someone to infiltrate the Brittannian royal court and spread rumors. Even for the skilled members of the Igasaki clan, preparing for that would take time."

"That's true... It won't be easy to arrange quickly."

For the skilled operatives of the Igasaki clan, infiltrating the royal court of Brittania and spreading rumors would not have been a difficult task. If the question was simply whether it was possible, the answer would be a resounding yes. However, accomplishing such a task would undoubtedly require years of preparation. Ryoma did not have the luxury of time to dedicate to such preparations.

At the very least, I'd like to see results within six months.

This constraint, however, left him without a suitable candidate. When considering other options, the Christof Company came to mind.

Simone is well-connected... She might even have ties in the southern kingdoms...

Even so, achieving results within the limited time frame required relying on someone with strong connections to the Brittannian royal court. Just then, the faces of Rodney Mackenna and Menea Norberg appeared in Ryoma's mind.

"Now that I think about it, weren't those two originally nobles from the Kingdom of Tarja?" murmured Ryoma.

Upon hearing this, the Malfist sisters exchanged surprised glances. They realized who Ryoma was referring to when they heard of their origin in the Kingdom of Tarja.

"Lord Mackenna and Lady Norberg?"

"I see... Rather than attacking Brittania directly, you aim to approach from Tarja, a potential enemy state. That could indeed be effective."

Ryoma nodded in response to their observations. Of course, directly scheming within Brittania's royal court would have been ideal. But when attacking the heart of the enemy was too difficult, it was sometimes necessary to start with the outer defenses. Naturally, at this point they couldn't guarantee Mackenna and Norberg would cooperate, since the two were members of the Church of Meneos. However, Ryoma was confident they wouldn't refuse his request.

If I offer them the information about the Organization that I got from my grandfather, there should be room for negotiation, thought Ryoma. He had learned some details about the two from his grandfather Koichiro and Asuka.

Ryoma also had a good understanding of the deep-seated desires hidden in their hearts. *In that case, having Asuka approach them first would be better than talking to them personally.*

Frankly, Ryoma felt conflicted about involving Asuka. But in this situation, he couldn't afford to hold back. If involving her increased the odds of success, Ryoma had no choice but to proceed. Left with no other option, Ryoma had no choice but to take risks and pursue greater rewards.

"Then, the remaining issue is...those two?" asked Sara.

Ryoma nodded slightly. The two in question were a girl from the border tribes and the man who loyally followed and protected her. He knew them as Harisha and Rahizya, respectively.

Harisha is the daughter of a tribal chief, and Rahizya is the son of a tribal elder. Both of them are significant figures among the border tribes. If I remember correctly, their tribe was called the Manibhadra. Wasn't that another name for the Hōken Yaksha, one of the Eight Great Yaksha Generals and followers of Bishamonten? Does their self-identification as yakshas imply some connection to Earth? Ryoma considered the border tribes to be humans like himself. But based on Rahizya's words, they were not human at all. *They are probably better classified as demi-humans, like Nelcius and the dark elves.*

Whether they were a kind of oni, as they claimed, or demi-humans didn't make much difference to Ryoma. What mattered was how to handle these individuals, who were clearly significant figures within the Manibhadra tribe.

Killing them would be a terrible move, especially after going to the trouble of capturing them.

Laura and her group had risked a lot during the retreat to take these valuable prisoners. Ryoma couldn't waste such a critical asset. Besides, Harisha was still comatose. Executing someone in her condition without ever giving her a chance to speak would leave a bitter aftertaste and scuttle efforts to negotiate with the border tribes and extract concessions. Merely releasing them in exchange for a ransom felt far too wasteful.

The best outcome would be to forge an alliance with them.

Achieving such an alliance would expand the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy's influence to the southern regions of the western continent. Moreover, there would be significant economic advantages.

According to Rahizya, the Manibhadra tribe inhabits the forested borderlands between the Kingdom of Brittania and the Kingdom of Tarja. There are also other tribes of the border people living along the southern coastal areas of the western continent. The Manibhadra could act as our intermediaries for negotiations with these other tribes.

If the Manibhadra tribe could serve as a gateway to establish connections with other border tribes, the Mikoshiba family stood to gain immense wealth. Setting aside the economic benefits, the Manibhadra tribe held immense strategic value.

Those war elephants of theirs are extremely impressive. While our strategy worked this time, sparing us any damage, a direct confrontation with them would result in more than minor casualties. And if Rahizya's claims are true, the yaksha warriors are formidable fighters.

Such a force was exactly the kind of military asset Ryoma desperately wanted to acquire.

Even if we form an alliance, how could we deploy them effectively? he thought. Sending these border tribespeople, who lived in the southern part of the western continent, to the Kingdom of Xarooda was hardly feasible. *Overland travel would take far too long, and worse, the enemy would become aware of our intentions.*

This reality left sea transport as the one of the only realistic options for deploying the Manibhadra tribe. However, there were clear limitations to maritime transport.

We could try gathering ships from the trading city of Pherzaad and transport them all at once. But considering that the southern half of the Kingdom of Myest is under the influence of King Owen and General Duran, it's not a realistic strategy.

With General Duran's intentions still unclear, treating him as an enemy seemed the safest course of action. In doing so, logistical issues like the lack of

ports made the large-scale transport of troops nearly impossible. In practical terms, Ryoma could only move small units. Strategically, that held little significance. Suddenly, a possibility surfaced in Ryoma's mind, an idea so audacious that it bordered on absurdity. Yet, as the thought took shape, it began to feel less outlandish and more like a viable strategy. Ryoma then opened his mouth to speak because he believed this plan could carve a path for himself and his people into the future.

Epilogue

The port town of Birmingham in the Kingdom of Brittania was close to the border with the Kingdom of Tarja. Among the ports scattered along the Brittanian coastline, it was one of the foremost fishing hubs and was a supply station for maritime trade in the southern region of the western continent, making it a vital economic pillar of the kingdom. Naturally, Birmingham boasted one of the highest populations in the southern territories. The location was also known for the intense battles fought over it. For Brittania, the town was strategically significant both economically and militarily.

In the bustling streets, sailors from trading ships roamed, seeking solace in alcohol and women. From time to time, the off-key singing of drunken men and the coquettish laughter of barmaids echoed through the air. In contrast to this lively atmosphere, an inconspicuous inn stood quietly in a back alley of Birmingham. Few ventured to visit this dilapidated establishment, but there were always those with peculiar tastes. One man, in particular, ascended the creaky wooden stairs of the run-down inn. Each step he took elicited a loud protest from the worn wooden stairs. One might generously describe them as “well used,” but most would likely call them old and rickety; they were on the verge of splintering with every step. The man was Kusuda Tomohiro, and fate had somehow summoned this police officer to this world. Now, he worked covertly as a member of the Organization operating in the western continent.

Despite Kusuda deploying a trump card known as Alexis Duran, secretly nurtured by the Organization, he had failed to accomplish his ultimate mission of eliminating Ryoma Mikoshiba. Kusuda was now disgraced. His destination was a room on the third floor, where Akitake Sudou, a senior member of the Organization, awaited him. His footsteps grew heavier with each step.

“Still, this level of disguise is quite meticulous,” Kusuda muttered. The only response to the unremarkable comment was the creaking of the staircase beneath him. *Or perhaps it's less of a disguise and more a case of just acquiring an already decrepit inn?*

Kusuda lightly ran a finger along the banister, pulling it back to inspect the white dust clinging to it.

But if they don't even bother to clean, no one's likely to come here.

The Organization had prepared several bases in Birmingham, including The Sea Dragon's Rest. Although the name evoked strength and valor, the inn itself was anything but. Nestled in a remote alley where even locals rarely trod, the inn offered no distinguishing features like a tavern or a brothel. Its most notable trait was its sheer lack of redeeming qualities.

Its deficiencies are endless.

In its grimy state, the inn ranked several notches below its competitors on the main street. The only apparent merits were its low fees and the consistent availability of rooms. Yet these traits held little appeal for most visitors to Birmingham.

Merchants, their hired guards, or sailors from trading ships are the typical guests at inns in this port town.

Most visitors carried substantial sums of money from completed transactions or freshly received wages. Sailors, in particular, rarely had opportunities to spend their earnings while at sea.

After all, there's little to spend on when you're living aboard a ship. That much is obvious.

Regular crew members rarely enjoyed private quarters. They typically slept in hammocks strung in the hold or wedged their bodies into gaps between cargo. Privacy was a luxury unheard of in such conditions.

This world's currency is also coin-based, which adds to the trouble. Unlike paper bills, coins are bulky.

Carrying around months' worth of wages while working aboard a swaying ship wasn't practical. Should a sailor fall overboard, the weight of the coins would certainly seal their fate. Hence, sailors typically received their wages upon reaching port, allowing the ship's owner to settle payments with the proceeds from selling goods. This arrangement was both logical and practical. Recognizing the sailors' circumstances, Birmingham's residents eagerly awaited

the arrival of trading ships. They prepared tirelessly to welcome the seafarers, offering temptations ranging from alcohol, warm meals, and gambling to the comfort of soft, warm beds.

For sailors who had endured the grueling hardships of sea life, these indulgences were irresistible. And so, it was unthinkable for such men to willingly lodge in a shabby, desolate inn like The Sea Dragon's Rest.

This world's voyages are said to be especially grueling.

Hard biscuits, salted meat, and bean soup were the only foods available on ships, unlike the luxurious cruises of modern society. Occasionally, pickled cabbage made an appearance. Such monotonous meals could last weeks or even months for intercontinental traders.

Of course, knowing how to prevent scurvy makes it somewhat better than Europe's Age of Discovery. Still, I wouldn't want to live like that.

The twentieth century had unveiled the mystery of scurvy; but centuries earlier, sailors had only a vague understanding that fresh produce prevented the disease. In comparison, sailors in this world possessed slightly more advanced knowledge.

Why am I even thinking about this? Kusuda questioned himself as he climbed, realizing he had no reason to care about the inn's success or the economic prosperity of Birmingham. Still, such idle thoughts distracted him from the reality of his situation. Like an office worker headed to their manager to report a major blunder, Kusuda sought escape in trivial musings to keep himself from bolting. Another loud groan from the stairs interrupted his reflection, startling him. *This staircase is practically an entire haunted house on its own. But then again, they clearly aren't trying to attract customers.*

At last, he reached the door of the corner room on the third floor and hesitated for a moment. Summoning his resolve, he lightly knocked.

"Come in. It's unlocked," replied a calm voice from inside.

Taking a deep breath, Kusuda opened the door.

"Excuse me," Kusuda said, stepping inside as he was immediately struck by the opulence of the room. *What the...?*

The contrast between the inn's decrepit exterior and this resplendent chamber was staggering. Plush red carpets, possibly Persian, covered the floor, while a chandelier hung from the ceiling, and velvet curtains adorned the windows.

It's like stepping into a royal office. How much money went into this? Kusuda could scarcely believe the sheer luxury. Despite the grandeur, the decor felt harmonious rather than ostentatious.

"Ah, Kusuda," said Akitake Sudou, breaking Kusuda's reverie. Sudou, seated leisurely on a sofa by the window, gestured warmly. "Come, sit. Let's wet our throats a bit before we get to your report."

Kusuda hesitated.

The man seems calm, perhaps even cheerful. But that makes it all the more unnerving.

Suppressing his anxiety, Kusuda took a seat across from his superior. The weight of the impending conversation hung heavy in the air.



Sudou cast a probing glance at Kusuda, akin to a cat toying with a mouse. Caught by that gaze, Kusuda involuntarily gulped. He must have felt, in his very skin, that he had reached a crossroads that could literally determine his life or death. A heavy, oppressive silence filled the room. When Sudou let out a cheerful laugh, that atmosphere dispersed like mist.

“And as for the evaluation results, which I’m sure are your biggest concern... Well, I believe the outcome is more than sufficient to pass.”

Kusuda sighed and slumped his shoulders at those unexpected words.

“Sufficient to pass, you say...”

It was hard to tell whether he was relieved that his life had been spared or lamenting that he only managed to achieve a passing score.

In response to Kusuda’s reaction, Sudou nodded as if pleased and said, “Even though you were once a police officer, Kusuda, you have practically no experience with nationwide strategies or schemes. Despite that, you successfully separated the Kingdom of Myest from the four-kingdom alliance, clearly achieving the strategic goal. In fact Duran’s report highly commends you. Things didn’t go exactly as we had planned, so I can’t say you earned a perfect score. But we were able to confirm a few of their hidden cards, and overall, the outcome was either breaking even or being slightly profitable.”

Upon hearing those words, Kusuda’s face twisted in discomfort. It was a relief that his abilities weren’t being judged solely on the outcome of his schemes, but Kusuda’s pride wouldn’t allow him to simply take advantage of that fact.

And besides, Sudou’s evaluation is accurate...

Kusuda understood the reason for the lack of a perfect score better than anyone else.

“Yes, I never expected Ryoma Mikoshiba to abandon the defense of Jermuk so quickly and retreat from the Kingdom of Myest’s territory. What’s more, he used the pretext of evacuating Jermuk’s residents to slow down General Duran’s march toward it... I had considered the possibility that Ryoma Mikoshiba would see through our intentions and retreat, but I never imagined he would so decisively abandon the rescue of Myest.”

“From Mikoshiba’s perspective, it’s natural. He couldn’t afford to fall before sending reinforcements to the Kingdom of Xarooda, so it’s only to be expected, I suppose...” responded Sudou.

Kusuda nodded deeply.

In truth, Kusuda honestly wanted to ask Ryoma Mikoshiba what reasoning had allowed him to recognize General Duran as an enemy. Sudou seemingly shared the same thought.

“Ryoma Mikoshiba’s ability to make quick decisions and take bold actions is almost abnormal. Is it talent or something from his education? Either way, I’ve had my fair share of trouble with him myself.”

Kusuda said, “His grandfather, Koichiro Mikoshiba, is no ordinary man either...”

“Yes. You may not know this, but Koichiro Mikoshiba was a hero who made tremendous contributions to the Organization and is well-known to the current elders. He shouldn’t have been able to return to Rearth after escaping, but somehow, he did. He’s one of those lucky individuals. Given that he was summoned back to this world, maybe ‘lucky’ isn’t the right word.”

“That’s true. I don’t know the details, as I only heard a little about it at the time... But I wouldn’t be surprised. When Tachibana and I were summoned to the Kingdom of Beldzevia with Asuka Kiryu, I witnessed that old man’s greatness firsthand. To think someone was raised by such a monster...”

“Like father, like son. I suppose the grandson of a monster would also be a monster,” said Sudou.

Kusuda nodded deeply.

No matter how dangerous Misha Fontaine, the assistant court thaumaturgist of the Kingdom of Beldzevia, had been in her attempts to harm Asuka Kiryu, the act of severing a person’s arm without hesitation was far from something a normal person would do. In modern society, very few people could attack others without hesitation to such an extreme. This behavior was not because of the so-called peace bubble and criticism aimed at Japanese people or their inability to cope with such situations. When faced with the extraordinary

situation of being summoned to another world, how many people could make the best decision and act on it in the shortest amount of time?

But it seems that his grandson did something similar in the O'ltormea Empire. Kusuda had heard about this after joining the Organization. With the limited means of communication in this world, it would be difficult to judge how accurate the information was. Even if the more impressive stories were taken with a grain of salt, the fact remained that grandfather and grandson were extraordinary individuals. *Are they madmen or heroes? Either way, they aren't ordinary people.*

At this point, Kusuda had no idea which category Ryoma Mikoshiiba belonged to. The answer would arrive on the day of history's judgment. Kusuda was forced to acknowledge this, though it rankled his pride to do so.

That said, I can't imagine myself doing what that man did. At least, it's clear that my power didn't allow me to escape from the Kingdom of Beldzevia.

Kusuda's rigorous training as a police officer included techniques like judo and kendo, which were necessary to fight criminals. In that sense, he could resist more effectively than a complete amateur who knew nothing of combat. The judo and subdual techniques that a police officer learned were martial arts, but their primary purpose is to restrain criminals, not to kill or maim enemies. A strike might accidentally hit vital areas like the eyes or the groin, but officers wouldn't intentionally aim for those parts of the body. When they applied joint locks, they didn't go so far as to break bones. Law-abiding citizens and human rights lawyers would subject a police officer to harsh criticism if they were to kill or maim a criminal.

A police officer must apprehend a rebellious and dangerous criminal as safely as possible, even if it means putting their own life in danger.

This was the common sense and justice that everyone believed in within modern society. In order to achieve that ideal, officers must take on unnecessary risks. Some individuals thought they could disregard public servants' human rights. This idea had undoubtedly permeated into the core of the people who held such public service positions, like police officers. Due to the nature of Kusuda's profession, he tried to subdue the soldiers of the

Kingdom of Beldzevia without harming them when summoned to this world.

Upon reflection, it was nothing but foolishness.

Violence wasn't a cure-all, and one should avoid using it if possible, but there were situations in which violence was the only solution. In avoiding the use of violence, one could put themselves or their friends in danger. Most people either turned a blind eye to this fact or refrained from voicing it due to fear of opposition, even if they understood it. But Koichiro Mikoshiba and his grandson were different.

They choose the actions they believe are necessary without hesitation, even if those actions go against ethics or morals, thought Kusuda. This undeniable fact forced him to realize that those two were fundamentally different from him. *I don't want to believe it's just a difference in talent or capability.*

The difference was understandable with Koichiro, but Ryoma was younger than Kusuda. Although he understood that looking down on a younger person was a petty matter of pride and ego, it was undeniably difficult to admit that a younger man had accomplished something that he himself could not. Kusuda knew that even if he were in the same position as Ryoma, he would not have been able to overcome such dire straits in the same way. He refused to accept this despite understanding the matter logically, which was the troubling nature of being human.

Well, I can only do my best with what I have.

Kusuda knew he lacked the dragonlike claws or tigerlike fangs to mercilessly strike down enemies as Ryoma Mikoshiba had. But he also had his own irreplaceable weapon, which he wondered when to use. So, he asked Sudou about his role going forward.

"By the way... Since I passed the test, may I confirm my next steps? Should I continue monitoring and obstructing the Mikoshiba Grand Duchy?" asked Kusuda.

Sudou, likely sensing Kusuda's conflicted feelings, nodded and smiled.

"Yes, that's the plan. I arranged for you to meet with General Duran to prepare for this. With the recent developments, he has returned to the public

stage, which will inevitably restrict his actions. I would like you to assist in managing that situation. Knowing Ryoma Mikoshiba, he will likely make his next move very soon.”

Because Kusuda anticipated this answer, he voiced his current expectations.

“I see. There are two likely outcomes: either he collaborates with Cassandra Hellner through Ecclesia Marinelle to seize control of the Kingdom of Myest, or he abandons it and moves to reinforce the Kingdom of Xarooda... Right?”

Sudou nodded with satisfaction as though Kusuda’s assessment matched his own.

“Indeed... Logically speaking, those are the only two viable options. Of course, if the Kingdom of Helnesgoula were to take action, Mikoshiba’s choices would expand. Unfortunately, it’s almost impossible for that nation to dispatch reinforcements to another country at the moment,” said Sudou, grinning with a hint of malice.

Kusuda cast a probing glance at him. “I heard that the reason Helnesgoula hasn’t shown any movement is because the Organization has been buying up food supplies, making logistics untenable. Kikukawa managed a trading company tied to the Organization and bought a significant amount of food, yes?”

The Kingdom of Helnesgoula, which held the largest military force among the four-kingdom alliance, had not taken any action since the O’ltormea Empire invaded the Kingdom of Xarooda again.

The main reason was simple: it could not secure sufficient food supplies. Despite this world’s unique logic and laws, the need to ensure food and armaments for army mobilization persisted.

“Yes, Helnesgoula has never been particularly strong in agriculture. While it hasn’t starved its citizens, sending a large-scale expeditionary force to another country requires preparation. They can defend their own territory without issue, but sending significant reinforcements abroad is impossible.”

One could say the military was like a massive, insatiable money-eating monster that constantly consumed food and weapons.

And if it couldn't be fed properly, that enormous monster would soon starve, leaving it incapable of functioning.

During World War II, the Japanese military had failed to secure proper logistics, leading to the starvation and death of many soldiers. This was a simple enough concept for even Kusuda, who wasn't knowledgeable about military affairs, to grasp.

Kusuda replied, "The vast Dorsch Desert occupies nearly one-tenth of that nation's central territory. Right now, it's the season when sandstorms are more likely to occur. Dispatching a force large enough to counter the O'ltormea Empire's army to the Kingdom of Xarooda would be physically challenging, to say the least."

In war, success depended on three factors: timing, terrain, and unity. However, the Kingdom of Helnesgoula currently lacked the element of timing. The First Princess of O'ltormea, Shardina Eisenheit, had received this information, which was especially valuable to her since she had been forced to retreat during the previous invasion of Xarooda. It presented her with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. That was precisely why the O'ltormea Empire decided to break its armistice with the Kingdom of Xarooda and launch an invasion. Every decision had been based on the understanding that the Kingdom of Helnesgoula would be unable to act.

At this very moment, the fate of the western continent's political landscape rested in the hands of an unremarkable middle-aged man.

"So, all of this was part of your plan. What a terrifying person," said Kusuda. To him, Akitake Sudou was nothing short of an eerie and intimidating figure. *Who is this man?* Even though the question stirred uneasily within Kusuda's heart, Sudou was his savior. *I know he's a high-ranking member of the Organization. The elders trust him deeply, and he wields considerable authority within the group.*

Without such trust and authority, it would be impossible for him to maneuver so freely. After all, his schemes were significant enough to rewrite the power balance of the western continent. Unless he had unwavering support from the upper echelons, his plans wouldn't have even been considered, let alone

implemented. But Akitake Sudou was more than that. Sudou had infiltrated the upper ranks of the O’ltormea Empire and even served as an aide to Shardina Eisenheit. That level of achievement was beyond the reach of someone summoned to this world just yesterday or today. No matter how capable one might be, it would require a significant amount of time to earn a position such as aide to a princess. Even if someone could secure the role, gaining her trust would not come easily.

Beyond that, there’s the story about how he once infiltrated the royal court of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. He’s also said to have been acquainted with Alexis Duran, who had spent decades undercover in Myest. Yet some of his remarks suggest he also possesses considerable knowledge about modern Japan. The timeline doesn’t add up...

Of course, Sudou might have merely heard such information from other summoned individuals. Perhaps due to his experience as a police officer, Kusuda was a man with sharp observational skills. From his perspective, Sudou’s knowledge seemed far too detailed to be something he had only heard secondhand. Yet when Kusuda voiced this thought, Sudou simply shook his head.

“Oh, it’s not as impressive as you’re imagining. Besides, while things have gone according to plan so far, there are still uncertainties.”

“Are you referring to Ryoma Mikoshiba?” asked Kusuda.

“Yes, him. Knowing him, there’s always the possibility he’ll devise a strategy that catches us by surprise. It’s best not to let our guard down.”

Kusuda found Sudou’s tone odd, prompting him to say, “It almost sounds like you’re *hoping* for something unexpected from him.”

In response, Sudou shrugged casually.

“Well, there’s some history between us. From the Organization’s standpoint, it would be better if he exited the stage sooner rather than later. Personally, I can’t help but be intrigued by his actions. There’s so little in this world in the way of entertainment or amusement, wouldn’t you agree?”

With that, Sudou poured the remaining Screaming Eagle wine from the

decanter into his and Kusuda's empty glasses.

"Well then, let's end on a toast to your future success, Kusuda."

He raised his glass lightly, inviting Kusuda to do the same.

"Thank you."

The two drank from their glasses in one go as if savoring the beginning of a new chapter. Perhaps it was the confidence of those who held an overwhelming advantage. But what they didn't know was that at that very moment, Ryoma Mikoshiba had already begun taking action to overcome the challenges ahead.

Afterword

I welcome those of you who are picking up *Record of Wortenia War* for the first time, though I imagine there aren't many of you. And it's been a while for readers who have been following along since the first volume. I'm Ryota Hori, the author. I've somehow managed to deliver the twenty-seventh volume. That said, this time, the writing process turned out to be quite a struggle. The previous volume's release was delayed due to various circumstances, potentially disrupting my writing schedule and pace. No matter how much I wrote, the manuscript just wouldn't come to an end...

In my nine years as an author, this was the first time I faced such a difficult challenge. As a result, I kept you all—the readers who were eagerly awaiting the continuation of the story—waiting far longer than I should have. I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize to all of you. I am truly sorry. Well, that's enough of my grumbling and self-reflection. Let's move on to the usual highlights.

For this volume, the enigmatic people known as *those beyond the borders* finally enter the story. To be precise, they aren't exactly human. Who or what exactly are these *people beyond the borders*? For that answer, I hope you'll enjoy reading the main story. In addition, this volume showcases the actions of figures such as Bruno, the general of Brittania; Alexis Duran, the Organization's infiltrator; and Akitake Sudou, the man orchestrating everything from the shadows. There's plenty to look forward to, so I hope you enjoy it!

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who helped make this book a reality and to all the readers who picked it up. If everything goes as planned, volume 28 should be released this August, and I hope to see you again then. I'll continue to do my best, so please keep supporting *Record of Wortenia War* in the future. Thank you!











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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 27

by Ryota Hori

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