



Only
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Villainous
Lord

Wields
the
Power
to
Level
UP

Waruiotoko
illust. raken



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**“Our defeat is
an impossibility!
Trample them
underfoot with
the full might
of our forces!”**

Cassia de Naruya

"I wish that I could congratulate you on a battle well fought, but I really can't. You lost the castle."

"Who the hell are you?! A Naruyan dog here to laugh at me?"

"Hardly. My name is Erhin Eintorian, and I'm here to help you."

Adonia Grebadia

Erhin Eintorian





**"I love fun
stuff like
that. I hate
anything
that's a
pain."**

**Medelian
Valdesca**

CHARACTERS

New Eintorian Kingdom

Erhin Eintorian

Protagonist of the story. After playing a game, he suddenly finds himself reborn as the villainous lord who dies in that game's prologue. He uses his knowledge of the game and access to its systems in his quest to conquer the world.

Jint

Erhin's right-hand man and a powerful solo commander. Originally a rank-and-file soldier of Naruya, but after Erhin saves him and his lover Mirinae, he pledges loyalty to his new benefactor.

Erheet Demacine

The strongest commander from the former Runan Kingdom. He's also known as the Fiendish Spear.

Fihatori Delhina

Originally a subordinate of Duke Ronan of the Runan Kingdom. Erhin's ambition wins him over, and he chooses to serve a new master.

Serena Dofrey

Former queen of the Luaranz Kingdom. Saved from a coup d'état by Erhin, she and her people join him after the fall of her kingdom.

Mirinae

Jint's lover. She's currently studying to become a researcher.

Heina Berhin

Formerly the head advisor of the Royal Runanese Army, she falls from grace after losing out to Erhin. When Runan collapses, she takes advantage of the situation and enacts revenge on Duke Ronan for killing her father.

Hadin Meruya

The commander of the former Eintorian Army and a passionate man with a high degree of loyalty.

Bente

A hundredman from the former Eintorian Army. He's highly skilled but also a bit of a joker.

Gram

A researcher from the former Runan Kingdom. Following the fall of Runan, he joins Eintorian as a refugee and becomes one of Erhin's retainers.

Celly

Gram's daughter. She shares her father's high Intelligence. Harbors feelings for Frann Valdesca.

Vintora

Formerly a central figure in the villages around the capital of Luaranz. Popular with the farmers, he has a wealth of knowledge about agriculture.

Bertalman

Chief of the mountainfolk. He leads his people to join Erhin in order to repay a debt they owe to his Eintorian ancestors.

Rozern Kingdom

Euracia Rozern

The first princess of the Rozern Kingdom. She has high scores in both Martial and Charisma. Harbors feelings for Erhin.

Naruya Kingdom

Cassia de Naruya

The King of Naruya. He's one of only a handful of S-class commanders on the continent.

Frann Valdesca

Chief of staff for the Royal Naruyan Army. Master of mana circles and Erhin's rival.

Medelian Valdesca

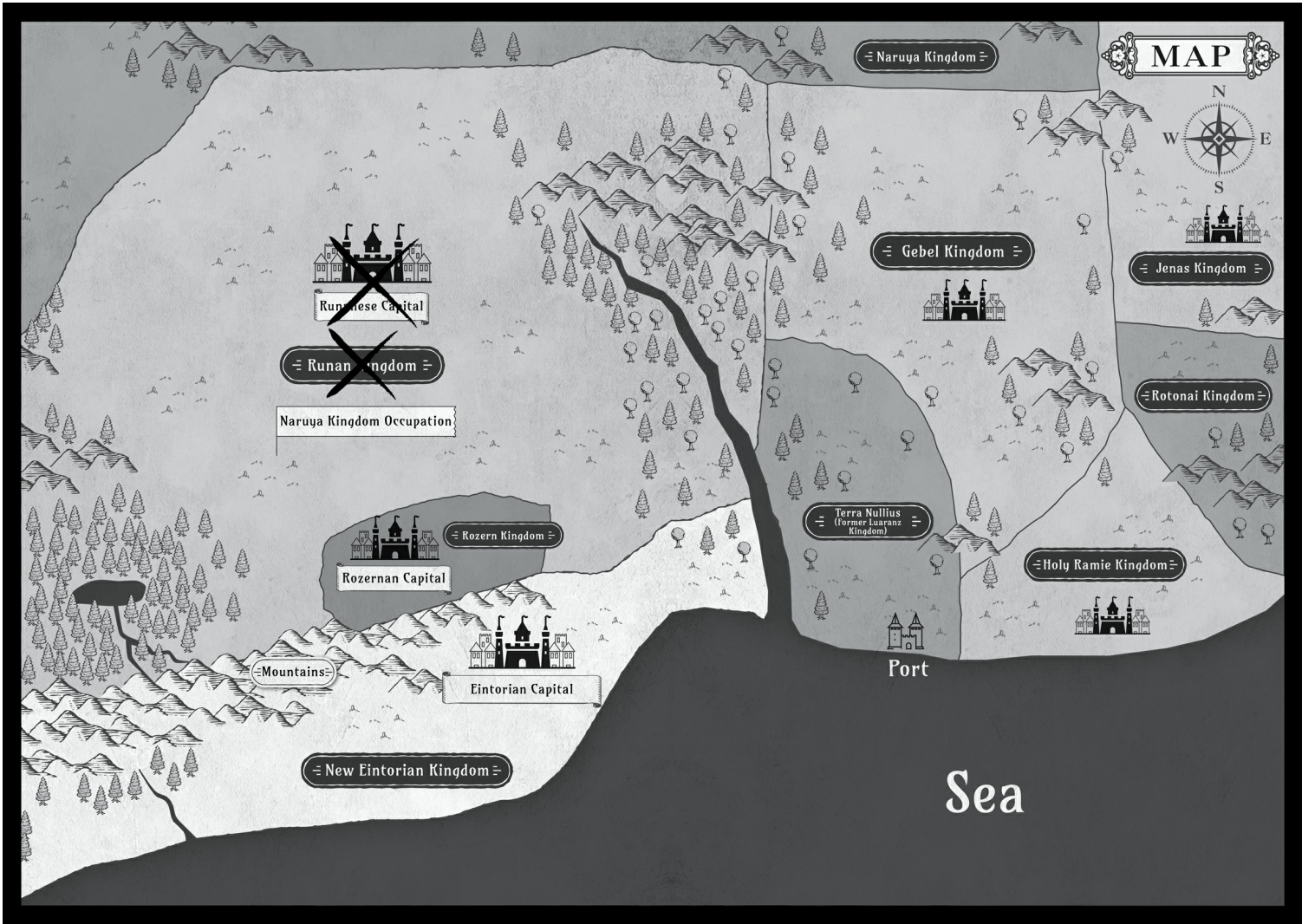
The first-ranked member of Naruya's Ten Commanders. She loves fighting powerful opponents and wants a rematch with Erhin after he defeats her.

Istin

The third-ranked member of Naruya's Ten Commanders. This taciturn man never speaks a word.

Lucana

The seventh-ranked member of Naruya's Ten Commanders and Istin's second-in-command. She also serves as Istin's interpreter.





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Chapter 1: Beginning of the Kingdom

It had been about a week since I'd announced the founding of the New Eintorian Kingdom, and I was now stressing over something very important: what statuses, positions, and ranks should I give to my subordinates?

Their treatment and job titles couldn't remain the same. Up until now, they'd all either had no noble titles or been provisionally continuing to use whatever title they'd had under the Runan Kingdom. However, now that I had become king, my retainers couldn't just remain as they'd been.

At the same time, I couldn't make *everyone* a duke. I had founded the kingdom, but that wasn't the finish line. I needed to keep on expanding it. And to do that, just fighting wars wasn't going to be enough. I needed to pay attention to internal politics as well.

The subordinates who had followed me all this time possessed loyalty beyond question, but having a clear goal in the form of titles would help motivate them.

Maybe it would be fairest to have them all start on even footing as counts? Sure, I'll make all of them landless counts. I also need a second-in-command who can unite all of my key retainers.

Erheet fit the bill perfectly.

If I were looking strictly at ability scores, then Fihatori would've also been a candidate. He likely had a greater aptitude for domestic politics than Erheet did. But he was still young. Erheet was the only one among my retainers whom the others would recognize without question. They wouldn't follow someone who lacked his level of accumulated experience and achievements.

In that case, Erheet can be a duke. That'll make him the only person in the New Eintorian Kingdom with the title of duke, but he'll be one in name only for a while longer.

Normally, dukes were really high-ranking nobles with domains of their own and counts as their retainers, but I didn't have a large enough domain to start

handing out territory to my retainers just yet. For now, the title would have to remain honorary.

Obviously, once the country expanded, they'd all get their own domains. We were going to keep on gobbling up more and more land. That was the only way to clear the game, so it needed to be done.

The only one I couldn't give a title to was Euracia. Although she had been following me since the fall of the Runan Kingdom, she was still a princess of Rozern. If I gave her a title when Rozern still hadn't fallen, they'd think I was treating them like a vassal state, and it would cause a diplomatic incident.

In the time of the Ancient Eintorian Kingdom, the Rozerns had been a ducal house. So, from a historical perspective, you could say she was already a duchess of my kingdom. Regardless, at the present juncture, I couldn't just go around openly calling her one of my vassals.

I also couldn't give Gram or Celly titles. They simply hadn't accomplished anything. Not yet, at least.

With all of that said, I had made up my mind about title assignments for the retainers of the New Eintorian Kingdom.

The next thing to settle on was what jobs to give them.

Currently, the New Eintorian Kingdom had three domains, including the royal capital Brinhill. But because we had taken in refugees, our population had outgrown our land, so I planned to expand into the vacant territory to the east soon.

Yes, into the lands of the former Brijit Kingdom, which I had destroyed.

Because this land currently belonged to no one, I could just send someone with an army to claim it once things settled down.

In addition to the issue of overpopulation within the kingdom, there was a mountain of other things to take care of. These included mitigating a food shortage, developing our farmland, and improving our finances.

I'll give each of my retainers a job to help tackle all of the problems we're now

facing.

I opened up the system.

You are now the king of a nation. Congratulations.

Kingdom Mode has been added.

A strange message popped up. This one had never appeared in the game.

No, maybe it came up during my fourth playthrough...?

I had recently started to notice that my memories of clearing the game back in the real world weren't perfect. The gameplay experience just wasn't in my mind anymore. It was like someone had put a lid on my memory, and recalling anything from back then was like searching through written records.

Looks like this Kingdom Mode is one of those things I forgot.

Anyway, I tried opening up Kingdom Mode in the system.

The change was immediately apparent.

The ability scores I'd been seeing for everyone up until this point were now broken down into more detail, and this mode also added new entries.

Politics and Charisma.

These were clearly stats for internal politics. Up until now, I'd only been able to estimate Politics using Intelligence, and Charisma using Command. However, now that these values were visible, I could make more accurate decisions about aptitude when assigning positions to my people.

Currently, the stat I was most interested in exploring was Euracia's Charisma score. She had a Command score of 97 with the treasure bracelet Rinkitsu equipped. However, this was an item that raised her Charisma, not Command directly.

That meant her Charisma score had to be over 97.

Euracia

Charisma: 99(+2)

Knew it. Euracia's got a score of 101, putting her in S-class.

In her case, that high Charisma paired with her high Martial was what gave her a high Command score.

Anyway, I'll look over all of this later. I need to find out what else Kingdom Mode can do.

With that thought in mind, I looked through the system until I came across another entry that caught my attention.

It was a mode called Manipulate Information.

I pushed the button, and a message appeared.

Will you send a Spy to Manipulate Information in an enemy Castle?

This definitely existed in the game too.

Since it hadn't come up before now, I'd just assumed it had been removed, but apparently, it was exclusive to Kingdom Mode.

Manipulate Information could be used to spread misinformation in the enemy castle. This fake intel could lower Morale or influence the enemy lord to act in a desired manner.

The Intel skill is required to use Manipulate Information.

Intel is a skill that can be gained by building an education center.

Building an education center requires the Education skill.

Why's it so complicated? In the game, I could just leave it to a character who was good at being sneaky.

Here in reality, Intel was a specialized skill that only literal spies had any use for. To raise those spies, I needed an education center. And of course, before the center could operate, it needed to be staffed with someone who could educate people.

I can build the education center, but do I have anybody who can run it?

I wanted the facility up and operational as soon as possible.

Manipulate Information was a fairly powerful skill, and because of that, it had been hard to use, even in the game. No doubt it would be even tougher in reality.

But the Intel skill was incredibly useful in and of itself. It wasn't only used for Manipulate Information. Intel could also be used to send agents into another country and gather information. And the more spies I had access to, the more information I could gather.

Since I was going to continue launching wars of conquest, the ability to learn what was going on in enemy territory would be incredibly important.

Just for testing purposes, I think I'll take a look at Brinhill's domain information.

Brinhill

Population: 1,220,000

Opinion: 99

Manpower: 52,000

For starters, there's the basic information. Now, if I look at the details for Manpower, it should show information on Morale and Training.

This was all info I'd had access to before Kingdom Mode, but now, I could see more detailed info too.

Brinhill Castle Walls

Wall Endurance: 91

East Gate Endurance: 88

West Gate Endurance: 82

South Gate Endurance: 98

North Gate Endurance: 90

It even gave me stuff like this.

In war, this was the most important, core type of information, but obviously, the system wasn't going to display this much detail for the domains in other countries. I'd have to go to those places if I wanted to check that information.

Still, if I raised spies at the education center and sent them to infiltrate enemy territory, the system *would* let me learn these things from a distance. And the ranks of the spies I raised in the education center would change the depth of information they could gather.

If the spy had a B-rank Intel skill, they would only be able to gather basic information. However, the higher their rank, the more important the information they could gain access to. I'd definitely have to focus on educating them.

And if I raise spies, I'll be able to use Manipulate Information.

Manipulate Information could lower Opinion. In hostile countries where the lord was unpopular and Opinion was already low, a little manipulation could really tank an enemy's Opinion score. And when Opinion dropped below 10, it would cause an uprising like the one I'd experienced in Luaranz. It would be incredibly easy to occupy a domain after that.

On the other hand, if the spy's rank was low, or if there was someone with a high Intelligence score on the other side, Manipulate Information's success rate fell.

Furthermore, whether they used Intel or Manipulate Information, there was an increased risk of discovery with a low-rank spy. That was why I wanted to set

up a system for raising high-rank spies as soon as possible.

In order to use the system effectively, I needed to assign the right personnel to the right places. To do that, I pulled up the full status list for all of them.

Hadin Meruya: Martial 60/Intelligence 57/Command 70 + Politics 75 + Charisma 65

Bente: Martial 49/Intelligence 38/Command 82 + Politics 21 + Charisma 52

Jint: Martial 93(+2)/Intelligence 41/Command 52 + Politics 2 + Charisma 61

Yusen: Martial 82/Intelligence 60/Command 90(+2) + Politics 71 + Charisma 88

Gibun: Martial 70/Intelligence 34/Command 76 + Politics 14 + Charisma 67

Mirinae: Martial 5/Intelligence 74/Command 10 + Politics 56 + Charisma 80

Euracia Rozern: Martial 87(+3)/Intelligence 57/Command 95(+2) + Politics 42 + Charisma 99(+2)

Erheet Demacine: Martial 96/Intelligence 70/Command 92 + Politics 54 + Charisma 90

Fihatori Delhina: Martial 81/Intelligence 85/Command 89 + Politics 94 + Charisma 85

Ganid Voltaire: Martial 30/Intelligence 60/Command 61 + Politics 43 + Charisma 55

Bertalman: Martial 80/Intelligence 50/Command 78 + Politics 43 + Charisma 45

Serena Dofrey: Martial 2/Intelligence 77/Command 72 + Politics 89 + Charisma 95

Gram: Martial 45/Intelligence 81/Command 70 + Politics 95

+ Charisma 75

Celly: Martial 11/Intelligence 62/Command 50 + Politics 75 + Charisma 76

Vintora: Martial 23/Intelligence 68/Command 88 + Politics 87 + Charisma 81

Heina Berhin: Martial 60/Intelligence 81/Command 55 + Politics 76 + Charisma 68

I looked over all of them. Their Politics and Charisma scores, which I had needed to use Command to estimate before now, were about what I expected them to be.

For example, Jint only has a 2 in Politics. It sounds obvious now that I say it, but that really fits him to a T.

Erheet was popular, so his Charisma was high, but his Politics wasn't that impressive. That was probably because he was such an honest man, both for better and for worse. He wasn't made for politicking.

Meanwhile, the practical Fihatori, who'd betrayed Ronan, had a high Politics score, which was just as I'd expected. Well, Fihatori was solid across the board. There was a high probability that he would be one of the most important people in the Eintorian Kingdom in the future.

Serena secretly had a pretty high Politics score too... Okay, maybe not so secretly? After all, she was using her political marriage to maintain the balance of power between the different factions in Luaranz.

Gram really was specialized for internal affairs. That was clear just looking at the numbers.

In that case, he might be a good pick for the education center. He'd already been recognized for his ability as a scholar in the Runan Kingdom, and this showed in his Intelligence and Politics scores. Of course, his Education skill must have been high too.

From what Erheet had told me, Gram was a master of many practical

subjects, including military science and agriculture. He wouldn't just be useful in intelligence gathering, but also in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and any number of other areas. But for now, I wanted his Intel.

So, I decided to call in Gram.

*

"You called, Your Majesty?!"

"How's Brinhill been suiting you?"

"I'm grateful that you've loaned me a place that's even larger than what I had in Runan! And my daughter...is happy too."

Gram had started out so cheerful, but his expression darkened a little when he mentioned Celly.

Well, that was to be expected. She was depressed over the sudden departure of Valdesca and constantly sighing. *I always knew she must've had a crush on him. That's a private matter, though, so there's not much I can do about it.*

"Don't let it worry you too much," I told him. "She'll calm down soon enough."

"You...were aware of it, then, sire?"

"Vaguely. She was always hanging around Valdesca, after all."

"O-Oh, I see. I don't know what to say. To think she'd be in love with an enemy." Gram hung his head, looking depressed.

"Let's not dwell on the matter. I've called you in today for something more important. I have a job for you."

"Do you really? I was just starting to feel bad about fooling around all the time," he said jokingly, his expression brightening just a little. "I, Gram, will humbly endeavor to do my best! Now, what sort of work did you have in mind for me?"

"I was thinking of building an education center."

"An education center?"

"Not just any education center. An academy for intelligence operatives. In a

time of turbulence like this, information is the most important asset, wouldn't you agree?"

"Well put!" Gram nodded repeatedly. "Information is the foundation of warfare. It's no exaggeration to say that the fight's only begun once you know the enemy inside and out!"

"I've heard you're versed in military science. How are you at this aspect of it?"

"I can't claim that it's one of my specialties, but with some time to research, I'm confident I can achieve the results you're hoping for!"

"It's in your hands, then. And of course, I'll offer you all the support you need, both in terms of finances and personnel."

"Do you really mean it?! I-If you'll do that, then I'll definitely get you results! I swear on my life!"

Gram was exceedingly pleased with his new job.

*

So, on that note, Gram was put in charge of Intel. His job title would be something like "first director of the education center." I'd be putting him to work training people, not only in Intel but in all types of abilities.

The next problem to solve is agriculture.

Mirinae was already doing research, but since she was working on the project all by herself, things hadn't improved all that much. Even though she was a former farmer, it wasn't like she had a wealth of specialist knowledge. She also lacked experience with actually conducting research, so there were limits to how far Intelligence could take her on its own.

Come to think of it, I could use Kingdom Mode to view the Agriculture values for the country as a whole and each of its domains.

New Eintorian Kingdom

Agriculture: 55

Agriculture was tied to provisions, so it was every bit as important as Intel. As such, I needed to assign some more personnel to the task.

If I could raise our Agriculture score, then next year's harvest would be larger, even if we used the same fields. Honestly, if our score didn't increase by then, it would probably put pressure on both our food stores and our finances.

The one-year tax exemption period was coming to a close, but I couldn't just suddenly hike taxes at year's end. Even if I did, without sales or a harvest, there would be nothing to take from the people. First, I needed to increase the harvest and help the people achieve a stable lifestyle. This would also give the kingdom a wealth of provisions.

Mirinae was on good terms with Euracia, so I was having the latter help out with research, but...frankly, Euracia wasn't cut out for it. Her abilities were more attuned to war, which was the furthest thing from farming. Besides, she was a princess. She'd probably never tilled a field in her life.

If I wanted results, I'd be better off choosing Vintora instead. In fact, he was just the man for the job.

As the former mayor of the largest village outside Luaranz's capital, he was a specialist among specialists when it came to managing farmland. He was also highly regarded, so I could expect him to be able to communicate well with the farmers.

That's why I chose Vintora as Mirinae's partner. Euracia seemed a little dissatisfied when I broke the news, but when I looked behind her, I could see that Mirinae looked a little relieved. She must have been through troubles I couldn't possibly imagine...

After that, I called in Serena. I had something for her to do too.

"Serena, I wanted to talk to you about the people we brought from the Dofrey Domain."

"What about them? They haven't caused you any problems, have they...?"

I'd cut to the chase far too quickly, and my words had brought a worried look to Serena's face.

“No, it’s not like that,” I clarified. “I’ve just been too busy to talk to you about them before now. I was thinking I’d like to have a meal with them.”

“Really? Everyone will be delighted, I’m sure. And even if they aren’t... Well, our country used to be hostile to yours, so some of them have been worrying that they’d be mistreated.”

I’d never do that. After all, I needed them to crew the grand fleet I had brought back with us from Luaranz. There had just been no time to talk to them properly, so I hadn’t been able to learn about their abilities and personalities yet. And from their perspective, they probably saw me as a mystery man who’d come out of nowhere.

I needed to arrange an opportunity for us to sit down together sometime soon.

*

“Celly! Celly!”

“Ungh... What is it, dad...?”

Celly was buried under the covers. She spent her days cursing Valdesca over and over, while at the same time being tormented again and again by memories of him.

“Get up now! How long are you going to lie there? Come on, His Majesty’s given me a job!”

“Hmm...?” Celly mumbled sleepily. “What kind of job?” she poked her head out from under the covers to look at Gram.

“What kind? It’s a job! I have to go there right now, so you’re coming along too! We’re going to be busy from now on!”

Gram started forcefully dragging her out of bed, and Celly hurriedly protested the treatment. “H-Hold on... Dad! Okay! I get it, so let go! I can’t go out dressed like this!”

“I-I guess you’ve got a point.” Finally coming to his senses, Gram reached out and touched Celly’s messy hair.

Sometime later, the father and daughter had changed into formal attire and

were headed for one corner of Brinhill's central plaza.

"Excuse me, but would you happen to be Lord Gram?"

"Yes, I am."

When Gram and Celly arrived at the designated location, a robed man appeared. His appearance was rather distinctive. His face was far too beautiful.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Vinay Shanes. I've been ordered to show you around. Now, please, come this way!"

The man who introduced himself as Vinay took the lead. Gram and Celly followed behind.

"Erm, Sir Vinay, was it?" asked Gram. "Who exactly are you...?"

"Aah, I was a scholar in Brinhill. Much like yourself, Lord Gram. Mana circles were the major focus of my studies. However, after the brilliant defeat the Brijit Kingdom suffered in the war, the country was ruined, and I was out of a job. Hah hah hah!" Vinay let out a refreshing laugh. "I was at a loss for what to do, but then, who should take me in but His Majesty himself! Now, obviously, mana circles are primarily a tool of war, so I've also dabbled in tactics and strategy. But, well, the circles I can use myself aren't so powerful. They do such things as emitting light or changing a person's hair color... Ah, we've arrived! Here it is!"

Vinay smiled broadly and pointed to a domed building made out of marble.

"Hee hee," he continued, "this building is the New Eintorian Kingdom Intel Education Center! It was previously the Great Library of Brijit, but we've remodeled it. Lord Gram, I'm told that His Majesty will be giving you the entire building!"

Gram's jaw dropped. Beside him, Celly let out a squeal of delight.

Erhin had said he'd do everything to support them, but Gram had never expected to be given a facility of this size.

When they went inside, the support staff were lined up and waiting to meet him. This had previously been a library, so it had a wealth of documents and offices.

“Starting today, we, the staff of the Intel Education Center, are at your disposal. In short, you have command of this entire building! I envy you... I only have a tiny office myself, you see.”

Vinay gave a sad sniffle and pointed out the window to a small, detached building.

Gram was confused by this whole situation. “I-Is that right?”

“D-Dad! Are all of these people working for you?” Celly’s shocked eyes looked ready to jump out of her head.

Gram was already incredibly grateful to Erhin for how well he’d treated him and his daughter. If the king was going to give him such an important task, then he’d have to make sure he lived up to expectations.

He hadn’t anticipated this kind of support. It did put a lot of pressure on him, but that only fired up his academic spirit even more. Though he’d been funded by nobles in Runan, this was on an entirely different level. The occasional donations he’d received from Erheet had been the largest, but Erheet hadn’t owned a particularly wealthy domain, so he hadn’t been able to offer a lot of support.

“All right...”

Gram cleared his throat and slapped his cheeks to get himself into the right headspace.

Then, he gave his first directions to his new subordinates.

*

Duke Plenett of the Gebel Kingdom was awfully upset.

This was because of the failure in South Runan the other day. Heina had suckered him into sending troops, and they’d returned with massive losses.

Worse than the defeat of his troops, however, was the death of his valued retainer Ruteca. It was an immeasurable loss.

“Damn that conniving wench, and damn Eintorian... I swear they’ll pay for this!” Duke Plenett slammed an enraged fist down on his desk.

Despite his fury, he had not lost sight of the situation. He hadn't been completely deceived, so it was shameful to complain about how Heina had tricked him. In launching a surprise attack on South Runan, he had let his ambition get the better of him. That was simply a fact.

Besides, Heina hadn't plotted out the whole thing alone. She'd had the backing of the recently founded New Eintorian Kingdom. That meant Heina had been working on Erhin's orders from the time she'd first approached him. Unable to see through her facade, he'd been talked into destroying Ronan and his South Runan Kingdom, only to then be forced into retreat by the New Eintorian Kingdom.

Refounding the Ancient Kingdom? What a laugh that was.

The more he heard, the more enraged he got.

What made it worse was that the land they'd chosen for their domain was absolutely perfect.

Duke Plenett would have liked to raise troops and avenge this humiliation immediately, but as he looked into it, he found that there were several reasons why he couldn't.

First of all, north of the Gebel Kingdom, the Naruya Kingdom was currently engaged in an invasion of the Herald Kingdom. His information indicated that the Herald Kingdom would soon be forced into surrender. If he dispatched his forces to invade Eintorian now, Naruya might well decide to keep on going and send their troops from Herald to Gebel.

Additionally, to the south of Gebel was the Holy Ramie Kingdom. He was already at odds with them over the former territories of the Luaranz Kingdom.

That meant if he started an invasion, there was a high probability they would seek to undermine it, and this would further expose the homeland to danger.

In this situation, it was unrealistic to contemplate an immediate invasion of Eintorian.

Duke Plenett let out a deep sigh to vent his frustration. He was a man of great and violent emotion, but he could also think rationally.

“Your Highness. It’s not as though we have no means at our disposal.”

The one who spoke up now was the very same man who had delivered this report. He’d also offered some advice: “Now is the time to control our anger.”

This man was Duke Plenett’s secretary, Garint. He was a sharp advisor and a gatherer of information.

“What means do we have?” asked Plenett. “Did you not just tell me yourself that now is the time for us to restrain our anger?!”

“I did, yes. However, as I thought about it, a brilliant plan occurred to me.”

“A brilliant plan? Well, what is it? Stop making a big deal of it and just tell me already!” Duke Plenett urged his advisor on with a mix of anger and joy. The anticipation was killing him.

“Soon, the Naruya Kingdom will have fully occupied the Herald Kingdom. When that happens, they will share a border with us.”

“Yes! That is His Majesty’s greatest concern! Honestly, nothing seems to be going right! Nothing! It’s giving me an awful headache! Just awful!”

Duke Plenett stamped his feet, showing off his frustration.

Garint calmly continued on. “I believe we would be able to solve all of these issues through an alliance with the Holy Ramie Kingdom, Your Highness.”

“Work with Ramie?! Impossible! I believe they already offered the Naruyans an alliance and were rebuffed. How could we align ourselves with a nation that lacks even a shred of pride?”

“Their offer simply demonstrates that they view the Naruya Kingdom as a threat. All the more reason they won’t be able to refuse *our* offer of an alliance.”

“What do you mean they can’t refuse? I might see your point if it was any other nation, but we’re currently struggling with them over the lands of Luaranz.”

Strike an alliance with an enemy? Duke Plenett thought the idea was preposterous.

Garint, however, remained confident.

“Let us suppose for a moment that our Gebel Kingdom falls to Naruya. The Ramie Kingdom would then share a border with Naruya, yes?”

“That’s correct.”

“That would make them next on the chopping block. If they have already proposed an alliance with Naruya, then that is tantamount to a declaration that the Ramie Kingdom cannot oppose Naruya alone. That is why they would form an alliance with us. We can oppose Naruya together. And of the two of us, we will be the first target of Naruyan aggression. The Holy Ramie Kingdom will send reinforcements in the hopes of ending the conflict on our territory. Because if they hold out on us, they only put their own necks in danger.”

The duke didn’t like what he was hearing, but he understood it. Ultimately, it boiled down to the Holy Ramie Kingdom using the Gebel Kingdom to fight their enemies on someone else’s territory. Still, having reinforcements would bolster his confidence. They would be a great asset in the war against Naruya.

“Hmm... I’d like something I can be a little more confident in. You’re certain that they would agree to this alliance of yours, right?”

“Well, you see...the key to this strategy is to let them have all of Luaranz.”

“Wh-What did you say?” Duke Plenett sputtered. “What is this sleep-addled nonsense you’re spouting? You want us to pass up the Luaranzine territories that fell into our hands, all in order to gain an alliance?”

Duke Plenett was even more upset after hearing this, but...

“If the Ramie Kingdom can get their hands on Luaranz for free, I am sure they’ll get greedy for more. The more there is to gain, the more they will want.” Garint calmly pointed to Eintorian on the map. “The first condition of the alliance is that they send reinforcements to the Gebel Kingdom. The second condition, that we will give them Luaranz, is a carrot we are dangling in front of them. And the final condition is that they destroy the New Eintorian Kingdom in exchange. Of course, they will be free to do as they please with the conquered territory.”

“Hm? So in short, you’re saying that you want us to have the Ramie Kingdom

put down Eintorian?”

“Indeed. If we were to send our own troops, it would exhaust the power of our nation. Eintorian will not be a particularly easy foe.”

“Basically, what you’re saying is that if Ramie does well, they’ll have destroyed the source of our anxiety for us, and we’ll have gotten our revenge. But even if they fail, it will weaken them, so it’s not an issue. We will come out ahead either way.”

“Precisely, Your Highness.”

Plenett nodded. It was a reasonably good plan.

“That will give us the freedom to prepare for war with Naruya, yes? But more than that, if we can weaken the Ramie Kingdom in the process, it will be exceedingly simple to retake Luaranz from them once the Naruyans have been repelled.”

“Yes, Your Highness. We will be able to focus entirely on the crisis before us while disrupting Eintorian, the threat to our rear. The Ramie Kingdom was slow to act, so they must be frustrated that we were able to seize most of Luaranz before they could. I’ll go in person to secure the alliance!”

“Very well. I will inform His Majesty of our intentions,” said Duke Plenett. “Oh, and bring Adonia to me at once! Now isn’t the time to be playing around. If you mention that the king of Naruya and his men are all elite warriors, you should be able to get that battle-crazed fool to come here!”

After shouting this, Duke Plenett hurried to the palace.

*

The port of Brinhill was the largest in the former territory of the Brijit Kingdom, but it was still a far cry from Luaranz.

Without proper port facilities, I couldn’t make use of the grand fleet. To that end, I’d invested some amount of funds in expanding the port.

As this work was ongoing, I met with the people from the Dofrey Domain. They were exceptionally pleased that I was holding a banquet for them.

“Thank you for the invitation, Your Majesty!”

Now that I had a fleet, I needed sailors. There was a lot of work for them to do. That was why I went out of my way to come talk to them.

Serena enthusiastically introduced me. These people were your stereotypical sailors, so almost all of them had a healthy tan.

The people from the Dofrey Domain came from various backgrounds. Among them were nobles, rank-and-file soldiers, and even commoners. All had been members of the navy, and many had also worked on fishing ships. Because of this, these people would become the core of Eintorian's fleet going forward.

There was just one problem.

Even if I appointed Yusen or Fihatori as their commander-in-chief, I also needed someone who could actually command the fleet on the battlefield. Naval battles were outside Yusen and Fihatori's field of expertise. And when it came to the ships themselves, the two of them were even more lost.

That's why I'd had Serena invite a number of potential candidates who might be able to act as second-in-command.

"Sire, this is Gugen. He was one of my father's most trusted men. He has a long service record with the First Fleet, so he'd be a first-rate commander for both naval battles and the general running of the fleet!"

"The name is Gugen, Your Majesty! I may be flattering myself, but I'm confident in my ability to operate a fleet!"

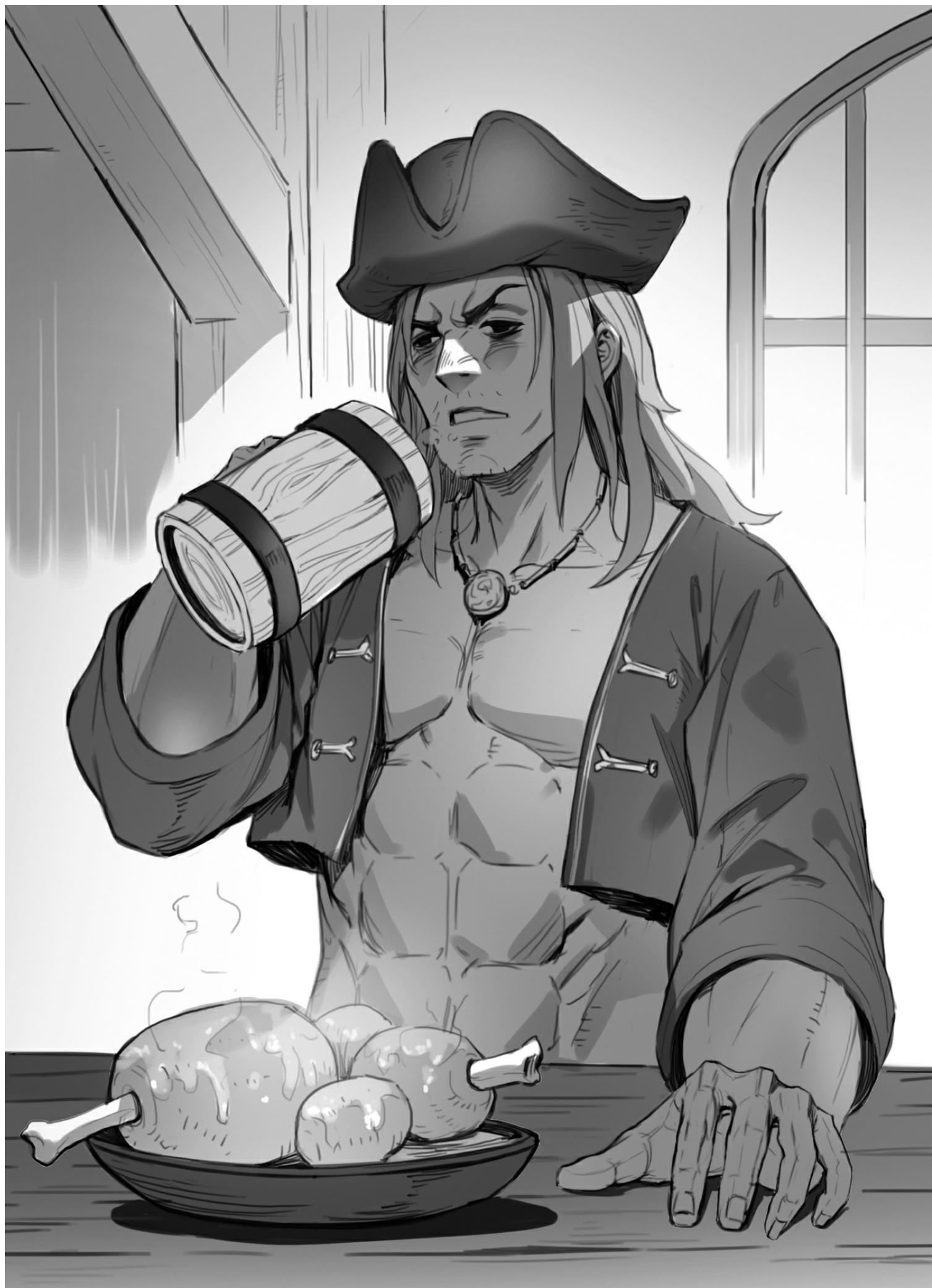
This Gugen fellow bent ninety degrees as he bowed to me. He had been a viscount in the Dofrey Domain, and his ability scores weren't bad either.

However, all of the other Dofreyan lesser nobles who were introduced had broadly comparable stats. That made it a headache to pick out a second-in-command to help run the fleet. Experience alone wasn't enough. They needed to have the personality for it too.

"Over there is Hoffman. Jeez, I told him to come and say hello, so why is he sitting alone in the corner again?!"

The man Serena pointed to had ability scores that were about the same as Gugen's. He was also a viscount. But he looked incredibly grumpy. Apparently,

he didn't like the banquet.



Who was the most suitable?

Ultimately, I wasn't able to choose a second-in-command that day, and I decided to focus on just enjoying the banquet.

The day after, I called Serena in to talk about it again.

However...

"You don't know who to suggest either?" I asked.

"I don't... I only lived in the domain when I was a little girl. After that, I went to the capital with my father. He spoke of his men from time to time, of course, and I've met them on occasion, but there's a lot I don't know when it comes to their level of ability and their personalities."

"Hmm... Well, we can take advantage of that lack of familiarity. I'm sure a lot of these guys will want to be second-in-command of the fleet. I'll spread a rumor that says you're giving me a recommendation for the position. The gossip will suggest that the man you push is the one I'll choose."

"Me?"

I explained the reason to her.

A week after spreading the rumor, I called Serena again. She came to me in tears.

"Your Majesty! It's awful... The retainers all keep following me around, and some even begged me to choose them. And those weren't even the worst of them! Some sold family heirlooms so they could pay bribes to me! I don't know what's gotten into them...!"

Serena shook her head in dismay.

However, this was the entire point of the rumor. I wouldn't be giving the post to guys like that.

"Was there anyone who didn't say anything?"

"Just one... Viscount Hoffman."

"Huh. You mean the man who attended the banquet and then just sat in the

corner looking like he didn't want to be there?"

"Yes, that's him."

"Where is he now?"

"He should be at the port. He's often there helping with the expansion."

"Okay, I guess I'll go meet him in person. I'm curious about what had him looking like that."

And so, Serena and I visited Hoffman together.

I asked one of the soldiers at the port to call him for me, but for some reason, the soldier came back by himself. When Serena asked why, the man got very quiet.

"His Majesty came in person to see him, so...where is he?" she asked.

"Well, you see... He's on a ship."

"What about that is preventing him from responding to a summons? Go call him again!"

"Ah, no, it's fine," I interjected. "There's no point in waiting. I'll try going to him."

By now, I was really curious, so Serena and I made our way toward one of the ships that was docked in port.

Hoffman was there, naked from the waist up and fully absorbed in what he was doing.

"Is that task more important than meeting me?"

"Y-Your Majesty!"

When I called out to him from behind, Hoffman jumped up into the air and turned to face me. He then started to grovel. "I'm sorry I couldn't respond to your summons!"

It looked like he recognized me as king, at least. I'd thought that maybe, since he'd come from Luaranz, he was dissatisfied with the idea of me being king, but apparently not.

“I would have liked to come to you immediately, but I simply couldn’t step away!”

I looked down at his hands and saw that he seemed to be carrying a set of tools used to repair ships.

“I will gladly accept whatever punishment you feel is appropriate for disobeying orders!” he continued. “But please, let it wait until I’ve fully repaired this ship. I cannot leave the ship I was entrusted by Your Majesty in this incomplete state! Especially when the soldiers here are so ignorant of how to care for her! If they try to work on her themselves, they’re likely to ruin her, not fix her... Oh, no, I’ve said too much. Please, forgive me.”

“I’m not here to punish you, so keep on working. I just wanted to come see your work for myself.”

He had taken this job and was fully prepared to lay down his life for it, so there was no way that he could bring himself to stop. Especially not when the job had come from me.

“O-Oh, I see. I’ll get back to work, then. Also, about the banquet the other day... I just wanted to say that if you call me to events like that, it means I have less time to work on this ship.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Then when I have further instructions for you, I’ll come here.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that! But if you’re offering, I suppose it *would* make it easier to explain things about the ship...”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the way Hoffman trailed off, mumbling to himself. Despite his viscount title, he might’ve been more of a shipwright.

“That’s enough. You can get back to work now.”

With that said, I disembarked.

If there was one descriptor that he made me think of, it was “single-minded.”

That night, his work done, Hoffman returned home. The first thing out of his wife’s mouth was, “Listen here, you! I’m told His Majesty came to see you, but

you ignored him to focus on your work. Is that true?”

“How did you know?”

“Haah, how did I know...? You’re hopeless.” Hoffman’s wife slapped him on the back. “People are falling over themselves to lick his boots right now, so what in the world do you think you’re doing, obsessing over your job like this?”

“What, would you rather I let the ship sink?” Hoffman asked earnestly, shaking his head. His wife slumped to the floor.

“We’re finished... Finished. Even if he didn’t punish you then and there, he could still have you beheaded later! And even if it doesn’t come to that, you could be demoted. How will we live then? Ooh... The Dofrey Domain was destroyed...and now we could lose everything after coming here!”

“Well...”

There wasn’t anything Hoffman could say in response. The words just didn’t come to him.

He was this way by nature—earnestly focused on his own work. He was an awkward man, but one highly regarded for his work ethic. He didn’t know how to butter people up, so he’d often been disliked by his superiors in the armed forces of Luaranz.

“Is that really what will happen? His Majesty had an odd look on his face.”

“Haah, have you finally realized the mess we’re in?” Hoffman’s wife shook her head.

“Ah, it’ll work out somehow! Always has before now.”

“It’s *never* worked out before! I hear that everyone else has been to see Lady Serena already! They say she’ll be choosing the second-in-command of the fleet, and everyone lost their minds trying to get her recommendation... Yet here you are, not kissing up to her, and on top of that, ignoring royal commands!”

As Hoffman stared at his wife, not sure what he could say in response, there was a knock at the door. They exchanged looks of surprise. They knew all too well why someone might be calling on them.

“Are you home? I’ve come with a message from His Majesty.”

Hearing the voice outside, they both went pale, thinking the inevitable was upon their doorstep.

“Aah... So this is what it’s come to,” moaned Hoffman’s wife. “What are you doing? Hurry up and run! You may not be much, but you’re still my husband. I don’t want to have to watch you die. I’ll check whether they’re here for your head or just to dismiss you from your post!”

“Hey, who are you telling to run?! I’ve fixed all of the ships I was entrusted with, so if it’s time for me to die, then so be it!”

Hoffman’s wife wouldn’t hear of it. “How am I supposed to live on without you? You’re going to let yourself die just because I gave you an earful over it? Don’t be silly...”

As they were arguing, the door opened. They were still grappling with one another as they looked outside.

“Mr. Hoffman?”

It was Gram. Celly was standing beside him.

The husband and wife had been expecting a soldier, and they didn’t know what to make of the pair on their doorstep.

“That’s me... Who’re you?” Hoffman managed to say.

“I’m a scholar by the name of Gram,” he said with a smile. “His Majesty told me about you. I’m informed that you have a knowledge of fleet tactics.”

“Huh? What’s the matter, you two?”

Celly cocked her head to the side, staring oddly at the way Hoffman and his wife were holding each other.

The couple matched her stare with expressions of utter confusion.

*

“You met with all the candidates?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

I'd asked Gram to interview all of the potential second-in-commands of the fleet. The goal was to have him evaluate how much they knew about fleet tactics.

During his time in the Runan Kingdom, Gram had compiled a record of all the tactics used in the key fleet battles that had occurred in the past. He was the most versed in the theory, which made a conversation with him an accurate way to gauge their abilities.

"They're all veterans who've seen actual combat, so they had a lot more practical knowledge than a mere theorist like myself."

"So they have a high-average level of ability. Did anyone stand out to you?"

"If I'm being frank...no one stood head and shoulders above the rest. Not as far as I could see, at least."

This was probably an accurate assessment. They all had similar ability scores, so naturally, their knowledge and depth of experience weren't that different either.

There was no brilliant commander readily apparent, and yet I still needed to pick somebody I could entrust the fleet to. This was a headache all on its own.

But if their stats and general impressions were more or less the same, I figured I should go with my gut and pick Hoffman for the time being. If nothing else, I could see that he was the most committed to his duties, and he certainly had a strong attachment to the fleet.

I was especially pleased that he hadn't resorted to bribery. There was basically no chance that he'd betray me out of a desire for money or ambition.

As such, I made Hoffman second-in-command. The grand fleet was now his to control.

*

In a gloomy forest...

"Why are there so many trees here?! It makes it hard to walk! Swegg! Rollins!"

Medelian Valdesca complained loudly and used the two swords hovering in

the air to cut down any tree that blocked her path. But the forest still stretched on in front of her.

“Aaaaaagh! I can’t take any more of this. What is this place?! Where even am I?!”

Why was she all alone in a place like this? Well, it had to do with her being hopelessly lost. She’d headed in the rough direction she thought she should be going, and had trotted off into the forest, only to get to the point where she couldn’t even find her way back to where she’d come from.

However, her pride refused to admit it, and this hubris was leading her to tread yet deeper into the woods.

Craaaaaash!



Cutting a path willy-nilly with her treasured swords, Medelian had been wandering all day and was thoroughly exhausted.

“This is all *his* fault,” she complained, sitting down in the middle of the mountain path.

Medelian was currently on the run from her brother, Frann Valdesca. Somehow, as she’d darted around, disobeying his orders to join in the war against the Herald Kingdom, she had ended up near Eintorian.

“The problem is that there’re no signs anywhere... There’s no way I *wouldn’t* get lost! Aaah, and here I was, trying to go to the Herald Kingdom like I’m supposed to!” Medelian griped, as if she expected someone to overhear. This hushed mountain path was starting to creep her out, and because it was so quiet, she felt she had to say something to stay calm.

You might wonder how she could’ve mistaken the road to Eintorian for the road to the Herald Kingdom, but she wasn’t the sort to pay attention to such minor details. She also felt a strong need to exact revenge against Erhin Eintorian for the thrashing he’d given her last time.

For that reason, she got to her feet and glared at the trees once more.

Chapter 2: War of Defense

Six months had passed since I'd declared the founding of my nation.

Because I'd immediately set to work on internal matters, we had already begun to stabilize in many ways. However, there was now another new and pressing concern.

Yes, it was money. I'd been spending like a drunken sailor, so that was to be expected.

The starting bonus I'd received in the form of gold bars was beginning to run out—I was going to have to find new sources of funds and be responsible with the country's management.

If the nation was in the red, that burden would fall on the people. I'd gone to a lot of trouble to raise their Opinion by exempting them from taxes, and if I placed heavy taxes on them now, that would lower it in no time. Low Opinion meant a greater chance of rebellions and coups, and it would decrease the Morale of my soldiers.

I needed to get us back in the black or this nation was headed for ruin.

My remaining gold was just enough to carry me through to the end of the tax exemption period when I could start collecting taxes properly. At that point, there would still be a tiny amount of money remaining, but I wanted to keep that as an insurance policy, just in case.

As things stood right now, if the nation had any sudden, unexpected expenses, I had no doubt that we would go bust.

For that very reason, the first year of taxes was going to be important. The nation had enough citizens and workers. There was just nowhere for them *to* work. We urgently needed to develop new farmland and increase the efficiency of our agricultural industry.

Thankfully, the tag team of Vintora and Mirinae was hard at work improving that situation. The combination of his practical experience and her high

Intelligence contributed greatly to their success. Also, thanks to the farmers' high regard for Vintora, the efficiency of our agricultural sector was growing fast.

The higher our score, the more we could harvest. Currently, our Agriculture had gone up all the way up to 85. This was the most important thing for the treasury. If I was going to get us into the black while maintaining a low tax rate, then I needed to massively raise the size of our harvests.

That said, without opening new land to farming, increasing our overall efficiency with our current land could only do so much.

For that reason, I intended to expand my domain.

In between Eintorian's capital Brinhill and the former territory of Luaranz, there were ten distinct domains that had previously belonged to the former Brijit Kingdom. My current objective was to bring all of them under my sway.

I planned to install Erheet, Voltaire, and the other former Runanese nobles as my magistrates for now. Later on, I would distribute the domains to other nobles based on their accomplishments.

Deployment

Fihatori

Infantry: 15,000 *Morale: 92* Training: 95

Yusen

Infantry: 15,000 *Morale: 92* Training: 95

I gave each of them fifteen thousand troops and orders to occupy five locations. The minute details of positioning were left up to them, but the idea was they would have around three thousand men per domain.

It wasn't hard to make unoccupied territories submit, so Fihatori and Yusen accomplished their mission in short order. With this, Eintorian now controlled thirteen domains, which made it roughly the same size as the former Brijit. The most important of these domains were on the east side: Beland and Kinburg.

They bordered the former Luaranz.

Currently, the mountains north of Eintorian served as our border with the former Runan, and we bordered Rozern at the eastern end of those mountains. To the south was the sea. West of Bertaquin there were more mountains, and beyond them, also the sea. Lastly, there was the former domain of Luaranz to the east, directly adjacent to Beland and Kinburg.

Technically, there was a river separating the former Brijit from the former Luaranz, but it narrowed the farther north you went, which allowed for the passage of troops.

The Holy Ramie Kingdom was keeping the Gebel Kingdom in check inside the Luaranz Region, and with the Naruya Kingdom starting a war of aggression to the north, none of them were in a position to mess with us.

Thanks to that, I'd been able to establish the New Eintorian Kingdom and spend a full six months building the power of our nation, all without facing any particular danger.

*

I was visiting the Beland Domain, which bordered the former Luaranz Region.

The New Eintorian Kingdom's population currently stood at 3,240,000.

We'd annexed ten new domains and had added all of those people to our population. At least, all who hadn't fled their homes due to the chaos of war. That, of course, meant a slight decrease in Opinion, and even with this amount of people, I couldn't say that we had a *large* population for a nation of thirteen domains.

Even so, our population *had* increased—that was a fact. I had also drafted soldiers gradually over the six-month period and raised our Manpower, which currently stood at one hundred and twenty thousand troops.

I needed to garrison some men in each domain to keep the peace and prepare, just in case anything happened, so I organized seventy thousand of them into my defense forces.

First, I stationed twenty thousand in the standing army at Brinhill. That

number included the mountainfolk defenders from the western mountains. There were also twenty thousand men in Bertaquin who were in training. Because the area was deep in the mountains and was practically unassailable, there was no need for a garrison force there. The other thirty thousand defenders were distributed throughout the other eleven domains. This left me with fifty thousand troops that I could manipulate freely, which generally meant that I would use them to attack other nations.

The breakdown by troop type was as follows: First, there were thirty thousand infantry. Next, there were ten thousand iron cavalry. And finally, the ten thousand lancers newly trained by Erheet. It was an elite force and the pride of Eintorian.

Out of that force, the ten thousand iron cavalry were currently stationed with me in Beland. I planned to deploy them here, and also in Kinburg.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty!”

As I was on my way toward the border checkpoint where Fihatori had set up his camp, a soldier bearing the mark of his unit rushed over to me. He looked rather desperate.

“What’s wrong? Is there a problem?” Bente shouted. The soldier who’d run over was wheezing and out of breath. Instead of answering immediately, he just bowed down before me, too overwhelmed to answer.

He caught his breath after a moment and exclaimed, “Sire, I come bearing an urgent message!”

“What’s happened?!”

“The armies of the Holy Ramie Kingdom are on the march. They’re coming toward Eintorian!”

*

The Holy Ramie Kingdom worshipped a god known as Ramie, and its people called themselves the Children of God. It was a special nation, different from others in the game.

The country’s defining feature was that they had access to a unique troop

type, the priest. The priests' devotion to God allowed them to use mana in the form of divine power. It gave them an instant healing ability that was a pain in the butt to deal with.

As you might expect from a nation that called themselves a "holy kingdom," pretty much every one of their units included a priest. So, even if soldiers took heavy injuries, the priests could heal them on the spot and quickly get them back in the battle.

In short, the Holy Ramie Kingdom could sustain a war effort for much longer than other nations. And because of the existence of these priests, the Holy Ramie Kingdom had immediately accepted the Gebel Kingdom's proposal for an alliance.

Since the territory of Luaranz had been ceded to them by Gebel, the Holy Ramie Kingdom was now in the best position to attack Eintorian without the need for crossing the mountains, and the king of Ramie felt sufficiently threatened by Erhin to do so. Furthermore, the new alliance had freed him of the need to keep Gebel in check. He could attack Eintorian using the forces he had already been using to occupy Luaranz, so this attack didn't put any greater burden on his military.

But most important of all, if he was able to successfully occupy Brijit, the majority of the southern half of the continent would belong to the Ramie Kingdom. With that much power, he could even fend off the powerful Naruya Kingdom.

These were the motivating factors that had led the Holy Ramie Kingdom to begin its westward advance.

"What do you think of Eintorian, High Priest?"

The commanders-in-chief of the Holy Ramie Kingdom's military were called "high priests." Their military was subservient to the Ramie Church in which the four high priests held supreme authority.

One of the high priests had accompanied their reinforcements to the Gebel Kingdom, while the other three had joined up with the forces invading Eintorian.

The highest-ranking of them, High Priest Hamuni, was speaking with Garint, who had used the alliance as a justification to come watch the Ramie Kingdom's invasion.

"We don't have much information on that country at the moment," said Hamuni. "Rumors say that their sovereign, Erhin Eintorian, is rather sharp. If anything, I'd like to hear your opinion."

Garint was participating in this war on behalf of Duke Plenett, and he was making a point of being obsequiously polite around this high priest, who possessed incredible divine power. Gebel's alliance with Ramie was Garint's accomplishment, and his orders from the duke were to ensure that the war dragged on without a decisive victor, exhausting both sides. That was the best possible outcome for the Gebel Kingdom.

"I see it much as you do," Garint answered, shaking his head. "We won't know anything until we face them head-on."

Obviously, he had done a detailed investigation into Erhin. There was no way he would have set this up without that kind of knowledge. But he couldn't risk giving the Ramie Kingdom advice that they might then use to win a crushing victory, so he played dumb and lied.

Just how far had High Priest Hamuni seen through his deception? Garint was worried he'd get suspicious, but the high priest merely murmured, "I see."

*

"The Ramie Kingdom is attacking?"

"Th-That's right, sire. That's what our spies in Ramie reported!"

The soldier pulled a secret letter out of his pocket. This missive explained that the Holy Ramie Kingdom and the Gebel Kingdom had formed an alliance and that it had happened three whole months ago.

The education center that Gram was running for me had successfully trained some spies, but they only had an Intel skill of 55. Despite his breadth of knowledge, Gram was not a specialist in intel gathering. It seemed that, as things stood, 55 was the upper limit for us. That met the bare minimum, so I had been sending my spies to all of the enemy countries to see what would

happen. This info had been uncovered by one of them.

However, it seemed that there was another drawback to only having an Intel skill of 55—it took them a considerable amount of time to send information back home.

That wasn't a fatal flaw, but if I was being completely honest, I would have liked to know about Ramie's plans just a little sooner.

The Droy Company, which I'd previously acquired, would have been perfect for Intel, but now that the Runan Domain was under Naruya Kingdom occupation, I wasn't able to use them right away.

Regardless, this enemy alliance had caught me off guard.

Sure, in the game, the Gebel Kingdom and the Holy Ramie Kingdom worked together to fight against Naruya. But the timing was different, so this development was probably the result of me changing the game's history.

Anyway, I'd already anticipated that one of them would attack me. It was the entire reason I'd gathered troops in Beland and Kinburg.

I scanned the message once more, thinking about the implications of this alliance. It definitely didn't look like a fair deal to me, so I tried asking Jint for his opinion.

"This says that the Gebel Kingdom requested reinforcements in exchange for giving up on all of the land in Luaranz, but...what do you think?"

Jint shook his head with a dubious look on his face, almost like he couldn't figure out why I would ask him.

Yeah, that's a fair response. My bad.

I tried asking Bente and got similar results, at which point I gave up on getting anyone else's opinion. It turned out that my right-and left-hand men didn't have heads for anything besides fighting.

Anyway, there was no way that the Gebel Kingdom would really give up Luaranz in exchange for some paltry reinforcements.

Is Duke Plenett just that desperate to ruin me? Maybe he's trying to get us to destroy each other.

“Good work,” I told the messenger. “I’ll go ask for the rest of the details in person!”

“Thank you, sire!”

I’m the grateful one.

I had that soldier come with us and quickly sent my troops marching to the border checkpoint where Fihatori was garrisoned. The gatehouse there only had an Endurance of 61, so I’d asked him to repair it, but there was no need for that anymore.

“Your Majesty! You’re here!” Fihatori ran out to greet me. “We received info that the Ramie Kingdom is attacking!”

“I just heard from your messenger. I’ll hold a meeting tonight, so call Erheet for me. And don’t panic. Keep the men’s spirits up!”

“Yes, sire!”

*

Night came soon after, and the strategy meeting with it.

On such short notice, I had only been able to gather Erheet and Fihatori. They were quick to respond because I had garrisoned the two of them along the border in advance. It was only by coincidence that I was here at the border for an inspection.

There wasn’t time to gather all my other commanders. If I needed them to do anything, I would have to urgently call the necessary personnel and send out orders.

“Fihatori. When do we expect the enemy to arrive?”

I’d been given a rough outline of the situation, but Erheet and his retainers still had no clue what was going on, so I had Fihatori brief everyone.

“The most recent report states that they’ve set out from Ertendo in Luaranz. Considering the marching speed of a common infantryman, I would expect them to arrive in two days.”

If the infantry will take two days, then they’re close. The cavalry could be here

in less than a day.

Obviously, I didn't expect them to send the cavalry ahead on their own, but it was important to consider the fastest timeline for their arrival.

It was fortunate indeed that we knew they were coming. In a lot of cases, there was just no way to tell that an invasion was coming until it was closing in on the border.

Even with an Intel skill of only 55, our spies had done good work, so the investment had been more than worth it.

After Fihatori finished going over the other key details, Erheet's expression darkened.

"The Holy Ramie Kingdom is...an exceptionally odd country, isn't it?" he asked. "I've heard that they use a mysterious mana there."

"That's right," I replied. "Which is why we need a detailed strategy."

The Holy Ramie Kingdom used a kind of mana called divine power. They showed up in the game, so I knew all about it. In game terms, their army had healers. They were a real pain in the butt. But obviously, there were limits to what they could do. If they'd possessed infinite healing capabilities, then the Ramie Kingdom would've already taken over the entire continent.

"The enemy will most likely go after Beland," I said, pointing to the map. Fihatori's and Erheet's eyes followed my finger.

Though both Beland and Kinburg bordered the former Luaranz territory, there was a river running between here and there. If they were going to invade us, then they would have to go through Beland where the river was shallower.

The Kinburg Domain was on the sea. Up until about the middle of the territory, the river was incredibly deep. It got shallower around where the Kinburg Domain met the Beland Domain. Because of that, it wasn't unthinkable that they might invade that part of Kinburg.

Still, it would be easier to attack the Beland Domain. The water was incredibly shallow, so it was far easier to cross the river, especially with an army of a hundred thousand men and not just a detached force.

Yes, they're likely coming for Beland. That said, the intelligence we've gotten our hands on didn't include details about how many troops are coming, so I can't make an accurate prediction. I'm probably going to have to confirm it using the system once they show up.

"Fihatori."

"Yes?"

"Is there any need to meet the invaders head-on?" I asked.

"What else would you have us do?"

"We should strike before they can." The troops I'd brought with me included some of Eintorian's finest, and the enemy didn't know about Erheet's lancers yet. "Although... Hmm. It's a problem that we don't have our logistics set up yet. Especially if we try to advance."

I had just recalled an event from the game that triggered if the Gebel Kingdom and the Holy Ramie Kingdom successfully established an alliance. That was something that only I knew about for the moment.

If I can take advantage of the event, then I might be able to rapidly turn things around. This war came suddenly, but I've been training my fleet for just such an occasion. Instead of getting flustered, I should probably see this as a good opportunity to try out some things.

I told my subordinates about the plan I'd come up with, and we spent time further refining it.

*

Under the cover of darkness, I headed toward the enemy force alone.

My goal was to get close enough to use the system to check their Manpower.

I found a suitably high hill along the way and climbed it. This gave me a vantage point from which I could see the enemy far off in the distance.

Holy Ramie Kingdom Army

Manpower: 105,000 men

Troop Types: 65,000 Infantry 20,000 Cavalry 20,000 Archers

Morale: 93

Training: 85

It's not a bad army, I thought.

That high Morale probably came from their devotion to the god Ramie, and I suspected that about five thousand of their infantry were dedicated to logistics.

Their forces seemed reasonably prepared, and they were coming at us with a fairly straightforward attack. They would probably cross the river to attack Beland like I had predicted.

We would be facing them tomorrow.

I let out a sigh as I looked at the well-trained enemy force.

*

The next day, a large force from the Holy Ramie Kingdom crossed the border and encamped there. They planned to first establish a bridgehead with stable supply routes, then move to occupy both Beland and Kinburg.

"We must minimize the risk to our rear, High Priest! The invasion should only advance once Beland and Kinburg are definitely occupied. And since we can only bring in supplies through Beland, where the waters are shallow, this will be an important base of operations for us."

"Yes, that stands to reason." The high priest nodded after listening to his advisors. "I'll do as you've all suggested. We act under the protection of our god Ramie! Surely we will achieve the greatest possible success!"

Though he held the highest authority, the high priest was an amateur at war. He was well aware of that, though, so he left the strategy completely up to his advisors. In his view, his role was to give the men Ramie's blessing and increase their morale by performing miracles.

More than anything, he believed that all things would ultimately submit to Ramie. No matter what might happen, their victory was unshakable.

As he offered a prayer to Ramie, the high priest asked, “Then what will we do once the base is established?”

The advisors explained the plan to him. “We will arrange our troops in a pyramid formation and occupy Beland first. The pyramid will charge all the way to Beland Castle, and then at that point, we will switch over to siege tactics.”

“I see. Then make it so. Ah, yes—” The high priest turned to Garint, deciding to consult him as a courtesy. “Do you have any thoughts, Special Emissary?”

The pyramid formation his advisors were talking about would be performed with units of roughly ten thousand men. Each unit would form its own pyramid and charge. These triangular formations would place cavalry in the front with the infantry following behind, and if there was any sort of surprise attack while their units were advancing on Beland and Kinburg, the tip of the triangle could turn to face the threat.

It was an excellent formation, blessed with both speed and stability.

“Your men have proposed a solid plan. You shouldn’t have any problem.” Though he said this, Garint was curious about how Eintorian would respond. “The enemy has only a hundred and twenty thousand troops in total. They can maybe send sixty thousand to the border immediately. I’m interested to see where they’ll mass their forces for the decisive battle.”

“Even if they came with all hundred and twenty thousand, we would still have no cause for concern,” the high priest responded, shaking his head.

All would be as Ramie willed it.

This view could be seen as optimistic, but it was also a show of total confidence in the priests’ ability to heal with divine power.

Though Garint nodded along with the high priest, he was actually thinking about something else.

He hadn’t passed the information about Eintorian’s fleet to Ramie. He needed both sides to fight until they collapsed.

Gebel held the initiative here, not Ramie or Eintorian. After all, he who controls the information controls the war.

Garint clenched his hand into a fist where the high priest couldn't see.

*

"We'll target the enemy's supplies. I want to keep our expenditures to a minimum this time."

Fihatori and Erheet simultaneously perked up. "Intriguing!"

"As for how we'll do that... Bente!"

"Yes, sire!"

"Take twenty thousand troops with you to the port at once," I commanded. "I sent a messenger to inform Yusen yesterday. You will join up with Yusen as soon as the fleet arrives, then head to Luaranz together. Yusen will take command of the fleet, with Hoffman as his second-in-command. The enemy controls the territory of Luaranz, but now that they've sent their troops here, the area should only be lightly defended. So, Bente, circle around behind the enemy by sea and cut their supply lines. As soon as that's accomplished, return to Beland. We'll catch the enemy in a pincer movement with their supplies cut off."

Basically, I was telling him to attack the enemy base from behind.

"If, by some chance, they happen to have learned about our fleet, they might have stationed an army in the port. Force your way through. Another plan will be coming after this."

"Understood, sire!"

"As for us, once we've drawn in the front of the enemy's pyramid formation and destroyed it, we'll seize some of their uniforms."

Once the fleet dropped Bente off, I planned for them to return to Brinhill and pick up twenty thousand of the defenders there. Those twenty thousand would head for the eastern side of the Holy Ramie Kingdom where there was a border with the Rotonai Kingdom. In this season, if they traveled with the wind, they would arrive in no time. The idea was for them to go ashore in secret.

My men would be disguised in the uniforms of the Holy Ramie Kingdom. They would make it look like a Ramien invasion and then immediately pull back to

the ships, allowing us to cause chaos for the enemy without exhausting our own forces.

If either Bente's attack from the rear or Yusen's deception were successful, the Holy Ramie Kingdom would suffer a major blow.

At which point, we'd turn our attention to the Gebel Kingdom.

The Naruya Kingdom had already destroyed the Herald Kingdom, so it wouldn't be long before they began marching on the Gebel Kingdom.

I might not know what else is going on, but that much is certain. The problem's going to be how the Gebel Kingdom reacts.

I knew that the Gebel Kingdom had pushed the Holy Ramie Kingdom into invading us. But that was information I had gained strictly through my spies, so we weren't in an open state of war with the Gebel Kingdom.

Sure, there were still harsh feelings over South Runan. But with the Naruyans invading and the Ramiens proving useless, Gebel could potentially send a request to Eintorian for aid.

If things went the way I was thinking, then I might be able to retake the territory of Runan once more. I doubted it would all go exactly as I wanted, but that was the ideal outcome, at least.

And if things didn't go as I hoped, I'd just have to adjust on the fly.

*

Let's review the situation on the continent.

First, there was the Naruya Kingdom in the north.

Their mainland consisted of thirty-five domains, with another fifteen domains subjugated in the Runan area. Once they pulled back for a time to subjugate the twenty-five domains that had made up the Herald Kingdom, they would be the largest power on the continent with a total of seventy-five domains.

The Gebel Kingdom was in the middle of the continent, and they possessed a total of thirty-four domains.

The Holy Ramie Kingdom was to the south of the Gebel Kingdom—they

controlled twenty-six domains.

The Rozern Kingdom, a minor nation west of the Gebel Kingdom and north of the New Eintorian Kingdom, had a total of seven domains.

The New Eintorian Kingdom presently had thirteen domains.

That was more or less the present situation on the continent.

However, there were also two other countries in the south of the continent that had barely been relevant before now.

First was the Rotonai Kingdom. They were located to the east of the Holy Ramie Kingdom, and they possessed a total of thirty domains.

Finally, to the north of the Rotonai Kingdom (and therefore to the east of the Naruya Kingdom) was a major nation known as the Jenas Kingdom. The original protagonist of this game was of Jenasi origin. With fifty-eight domains, Jenas had been the largest on the continent up until Naruya had occupied Runan and Herald.

Now that the gold I received as a bonus is running out, it's vitally important that I get my hands on the fertile lands of the former territories of Runan.

While it hadn't been my original plan, I was thinking I'd use this incident to throw down the gauntlet and challenge all the other nations of the continent.

The situation is unstable. Things have already diverged massively from the history of the game. I now need to expand my domain using only my own power.

If there was one thing I had on my side, it was that the backstories of people who played major roles in the game remained unchanged.

I had scanned the key individuals from the top of Beland's wall, and I'd found one person who was worth keeping an eye on. That individual was *not* the high priest who released a white light that healed fallen soldiers.

It was the man standing next to him, Garint. He was a Gebelian.

I wasn't looking to recruit him. No, the goal was to *use* him. So, for the time being, the plan was to defend and then retreat.

Once the Ramien Army advanced, they began using traditional siege tactics.

I played it by the book too.

“Loose your arrows!”

My archers on the walls rained arrows down upon them. Because the enemy chose a formation that prioritized speed, they had no shield bearers up front, so they couldn't defend themselves against the barrage. But in a sense, the first unit that charged was meant to be sacrificed. By the time the enemy's third rank charged, our archers had run out of arrows.

Now that we had achieved some initial success, the siege battle began.

“Let's hold out as long as we can!” I called out. “Make it look like we're fighting our hardest!”

My current forces were made up of ten thousand trained infantry and twenty thousand cavalry. This wasn't a distribution that lent itself to fighting on the defense, but I couldn't load cavalymen onto the ships, so I'd had no choice but to send the infantry.

Obviously, our defensive lines gradually got pushed back.

We looked for the right moment, just before we were fully surrounded, then began the retreat from Beland Castle.

*

The Holy Ramie Kingdom was drunk on victory. The men knelt down as the high priest offered a prayer to the god Ramie.

“By the way, the Eintorian Army had fewer troops than we thought. Does that mean they're withdrawing in order to join up with reinforcements?”

“That seems most likely. We'll need to grind down the enemy's numbers as much as possible before their reinforcements arrive!”

This was bothering the Ramie Kingdom's advisors. Though they had won, they weren't able to decrease the enemy's numbers.

“Well, I'm sure it's fine. Our victory is unshakable either way! Now, begin

marching toward our next objective!”

The men cheered at the high priest’s words.

The Eintorian Army refused to yield. They put up a fight at the next fortress too, but the longer the fighting drew on, the more their lack of numbers hurt them. Ultimately, they were forced to retreat without offering any real resistance.

They appeared to be running terrified before the forces of the Holy Ramie Kingdom.

This only added to Garint’s suspicions. Thus far, there was no way that their army had faced any more than forty thousand Eintorian men. There were no reports of approaching reinforcements either. That meant there were more troops hiding somewhere.

I guess that means they’re using the fleet they stole from Luaranz. If so, maybe we’re in for an intense battle from here on?

Well, I’m in real trouble if that doesn’t happen. If the Ramie Kingdom keeps on winning these one-sided victories, that’s just not good for the Gebel Kingdom’s interests. But even if Eintorian does use the fleet to get behind the Ramie Kingdom while their guard is down, how do they plan to deal with the eighty thousand Ramien troops coming at them head-on with all the momentum of victory? It doesn’t look like a winning plan to me.

Ultimately, Garint was unable to fathom Erhin’s strategy.

*

We kept pulling back, handing over another four domains to the enemy. That brought the Holy Royal Ramien Army deep inside Eintorian.

“The enemy’s momentum seems to keep on building,” observed Erheet.

I nodded. “I’ll bet. They’re so drunk on victory that they don’t realize they’re the only ones being worn down.”

“You’re so right!” Fihatori agreed.

We had held out for a day before withdrawing, then we’d dug in and resisted before withdrawing again, so the time was drawing near.

The time for our counterattack.

I'd even prepared a bomb to signal the start of the counterattack. I called the chief of the mountainfolk, Bertalman, to talk about it.

"Well, are you making good progress leading her in?" I asked.

"Yes! Our maze is perfect!" Bertalman asserted confidently. "The woman is strong, but no match for us in the mountains! The forest is on our side."

The woman in question was none other than Medelian Valdesca.

I planned to use her by throwing her against the Ramiens.

Whenever our enemy finished a siege battle, they always pursued us using a pyramid formation. The pyramid formation was able to charge without losing its momentum, so they could use it to fight a pursuit battle with power and mobility. If we ran infantry into the tip of the pyramid formation, we would get taken out, and if we confronted it with cavalry, then it would be a contest of strength.

In short, either way, we'd take casualties.

The enemy's Morale kept rising, and their Training was high. So it was inadvisable to face them head-on. I wanted to keep troop losses to an absolute minimum in this war because my real objective was in the war to come *after* this one. However, there wasn't enough time to raise new troops.

Things were going the way I wanted them to, at least.

The twenty thousand men stationed at the Holy Ramie Kingdom's supply base in Beland had been worn down considerably because many had been pulled into the main Ramien fighting force. Our repeated defeats and withdrawals had increased the enemy's momentum, requiring them to pull more soldiers from their base.

The Ramiens had occupied all the castles along the way here, so they thought they'd eliminated the threat of a pincer attack. But that was only true for attacks from *inside* Eintorian. I was sure they'd never dreamed that we would strike their rear unit in Luaranz.

The twenty thousand men I'd sent with the fleet were commanded by Bente

and Jint. With Bente's Command and Jint's Martial, their success was more or less guaranteed. And with the enemy's supply lines through Luaranz severed, an attack on the base in Beland would leave the main force isolated.

Fighting a defensive war was effective when it came to fending off an enemy, but it provided no way to wipe them out in one go. For that reason, I'd needed to come up with another idea for how to beat the Ramiens.

One method was to use the bomb currently in the mountains.

As for Medelian, she had shown up around two weeks ago.

When I'd heard from the mountainfolk that she had suddenly appeared in the mountain maze, my immediate reaction had been one of horror. I never would have expected her presence to be such a stroke of good fortune.

"It's about time to get started. Do it like we planned, Bertalman."

"Understood!"

Medelian apparently held a major grudge over having lost to me. And yeah, given how prideful she was, I'd always figured it was a possibility that she would come to Eintorian alone looking for a rematch.

She'd also been wandering the mountainside for two weeks, so her rage had to be reaching its peak right about now. Obviously, I'd had the mountainfolk lead her toward places where she could get food and water so that she wouldn't be weakened by starvation.

Currently, she'd been left in a maze. In the worst case, if she really got sick of it, she could probably teleport home using a tool.

Her problem was that she'd chosen to travel in a straight line all the way from the Naruyan capital to Brinhill. If she could've made it over the mountains, then it would have indeed been the fastest route. At least, it would've been if there were no mountainfolk in the mountains north of Brinhill.

I myself had crossed these mountains to attack Brinhill, so I'd made sure we were prepared against anyone else trying to do the same. I wasn't sure whether I could get out of the mountainfolk's maze. It was just that complicated, and the mountainfolk using their techniques to lead her around inside only made it

harder to escape.

But I was about to have Bertalman release her from the mountains.

Once she escaped, she would immediately run into the forces of the Holy Ramie Kingdom.

If I could just deploy Medelian in the center of the enemy forces, she'd probably wipe them out on her own. Then, once the enemy was forced to retreat, it would finally be our turn to take action.

"My secret letter will be reaching Valdesca soon, right?" I asked.

Fihatori counted the days, then answered with a nod. "Yes. It should have arrived."

I was more or less certain that Medelian had violated orders to come here. Having her wipe out the enemy was all well and good, but if my own allies got mixed up in a fight with her, it would defeat the purpose. So, I'd sent a secret missive to her brother to have him come pick her up.

When the Ramiens started to retreat, I'd show myself in front of her and then lead her into the forest once again. Keeping up the ruse that I was fleeing, I'd draw her into the mountainfolk's maze and then have her leave the mountains on the north side, in the direction of Runan.

Once she was there, she'd be picked up by soldiers sent by Valdesca.

Naruya probably needed her strength too. She was ranked first among their Ten Commanders. They couldn't just let her wander around wherever she pleased.

As a backup plan, I also spent some of the four thousand points I'd gained in the previous battles to raise my Martial score. That brought me up to a Martial of 70, which meant I'd have a Martial of 100 when using Daitoren.

Her Martial was 105 when she used all her swords, so with my increased score, True Crush would be able to handle her.

Everything was now ready.

"You've all done well to endure this long. With this plan, we're going on the counterattack! Take out the frustration you've been feeling all this time on the

enemy!”

“Yes, sire!”

Fihatori and Erheet led the men in a war cry.

*

Medelian was out of the mountains for the first time in two weeks.

As she was chasing the shadowy figures who appeared from time to time, she finally found her way out of the maze.

“Aghhhhh! I’m mad! Sooo mad!”

How could they move from tree to tree and forest to forest so quickly? When she’d first seen one of the mountainfolk up in the branches, she’d just been speechless. With anger, that is.

They’d run when it had seemed like she would beat them, then appeared when it had seemed like they’d fled. And once they appeared, off they would run once again.

She hadn’t used a tool to return home after getting lost in the maze. This was largely due to her pride, which had stopped her from returning without anything to show for her journey. However, her anger at these impertinent mountainfolk wouldn’t let her leave either.

“#)@\$!”

The way they yammered on in their nonsense language as they ran away... This *especially* rubbed her the wrong way.

Still, the fact she was finally out of the mountains helped to cool her head.

It irked her that she hadn’t been able to beat them, but there was a simple joy in knowing that she was free of that creepy place with its seemingly endless forests.

However, not long after, she was confronted with a new problem.

Where was this?

She’d been lost in the mountains, but she was still lost *outside* of them. Medelian had no sense of direction.

On top of that, there was nothing around that could help her find her bearings. Look around as she might, there was only an endless expanse of foothills. It wasn't even clear if she'd come out on the Eintorian side.

That was when Medelian spotted something. There was smoke rising in the distance.

Maybe there was a village. If so, they could tell her where she was.

Medelian hurried toward the smoke. When she considered that it might be a village, she got very hungry. But of course she would be famished, given what she'd been eating.

She had discovered a new appreciation for her survival skills. She'd chomped down on unfamiliar fruits and spat them out when they'd tasted awful. She'd injured the inside of her mouth with thorns. But despite this, she'd continued on, chewing and swallowing without hesitation.

She'd been thrilled when wild beasts had found and attacked her. What could be more delightful than meat walking up to her all on its own?

Still, she was sick of tasteless meals. She wanted something tasty to eat.

Medelian ran like she was possessed.

However, when she arrived, she saw not the cooking fires of a village, but some sort of signal fire. Disappointment and rage welled up inside her.

And at that point, she saw more smoke rising up ahead.

Medelian burst out laughing.

"Oh, I see! That's how it is! Just how much of a fool does he think he can make of me? Fine, I'll do it! I'll give them all the beating of a lifetime!"

*

The advisors of the Ramie Kingdom's army were pushing their troops forward with determination. This time, they would do real damage to the Eintorian forces.

Even as they dutifully marched onward, they didn't break formation. The fundamentals were important.

Garint appreciated that about them. None of the advisors here were famous, but they knew how to stick their heads together and reliably achieve success. Because their ranks were equal, none of them stood above the others. They couldn't get fixated on their own strategies, and that had worked out in the Ramie Kingdom's favor.

If the army was in too much of a rush and broke formation, or if they sent the cavalry charging ahead, that would give the enemy an opening.

An army that is faithful to the fundamentals is always frightening.

That was Garint's assessment of the Holy Ramie Kingdom's forces, but he still harbored some suspicions about the Eintorian Army, which continued to run away.

It was clear that they were up to something. He just didn't know what.

Regardless, no simple plan was going to shatter the Ramien Army.

Garint couldn't see this ending in anything other than a Ramien victory.

*

Following the signal fires until she came to the plains, Medelian was flabbergasted by what she saw in front of her.

"Why are there so many people?"

Medelian was staring at an army of tens of thousands.

Given that she was being lured here, she'd expected *someone* to show up, but not tens of thousands of someones.

Medelian instinctively checked the color of their uniforms and their coat of arms. It'd be bad for her if these were her brother's men. Not even Medelian could kill her own allies. She'd just have to run.

But fortunately, they weren't wearing Naruyan uniforms. She'd never seen uniforms of this color before.

Medelian let out a sigh of relief. If there was one thing in this world she was afraid of, it was her own brother, Frann Valdesca.

She remembered him viciously scolding her when she was young. He'd been

really scary back then.

But if these guys weren't the Naruyan Army, then it was fine. She stood to block the path of the onrushing soldiers, figuring that she could always look for the way to Brinhill after she'd beaten them.

Once they got closer, she could see their banners clearly.

The moment she saw the royal flag, Medelian cocked her head to the side. She knew that coat of arms. It belonged to the Holy Ramie Kingdom. Their country was pretty far to the east.

No matter where this place was, she was pretty sure she couldn't have wandered into the Holy Ramie Kingdom.

"Well then...why's this big army here?"

As Medelian was considering that question, the first cavalrymen raced past her and kept on going. There was a cacophony of hoofbeats as the larger force behind them passed by too.

Medelian was mad that they had ignored her.

"Hold on! How dare you ignore me?! Stop! Stop! I told you to stop!"

A number of cavalrymen rode toward her, swinging their swords. They didn't slow down—they meant to kill her and keep on advancing.

But...

The cavalrymen who attacked Medelian were slashed. They fell to the ground.

This was the point when the unit as a whole recognized her as an enemy.

"You'd face us all on your own?! How dare you take us so lightly!"

"You're the ones taking me lightly!" With a nasal laugh, Medelian chopped up all the cavalrymen who came at her. However, she clearly couldn't take on these numbers without using her skill.

As more men than she could count began to surround her, Medelian unleashed the swords that she was carrying.

"Swegg, Rollins!"

Two swords floated into the air.

This was Medelian at her best.

The flying swords scattered her opponents with ease.

But corpses weren't the only things that piled up. Their weapons did too. Medelian turned these fangs against the Ramien Army.

"All of you dieeeee!"

Her skill allowed her to freely control weapons within a certain range. Her enemies' fallen weapons floated up into the air and then rained down on her foes. The weapons of the men she struck down joined in her next attack, meaning that the more she killed, the wider her attack radius became.

"Huff... Huff..."

Medelian stood in one place, unleashing her mana, until the entire first line of the Ramien Army was completely demolished.

But that wasn't the end of it. There were too many soldiers, so they kept on surrounding her.

"Augh! I'm hungry...!"

She was weakened by hunger and overusing her mana. Too tired to want to keep on fighting, Medelian unleashed her swords so that she could break out of the encirclement.

"Swegg, Rollins."

She even used the last of her swords.

"Valdesca!"

As all her swords worked together, a flash of white light shone down from the sky and struck the enemy directly.

Kaboom!

Medelian turned her back as she heard mana exploding. Then, she mounted a horse that had lost its master.

Even after everything she'd done to them, the soldiers wouldn't stop coming.

This wasn't a defeat. She was just hungry, and there were too many of them. Way too many. Really, what choice did she have but to leave?

Medelian made excuses to herself as she turned her back on the enemy. That was what her pride demanded of her.

*

"Now's the time, Erheet! Divide the enemy's vanguard with your lancers!"

"Understood! Men, the moment has come to show the fruits of our training! Everybody follow me!"

Once Erhin confirmed that Medelian had collided with the Ramien Army, he had one segment of his forces execute a sudden turn.

That segment was Eintorian's newly established lancers.

Erheet and all of his retainers were masters of the spear, and he had directly petitioned Erhin for permission to create the unit.

Ten thousand lancers charged into the center of the Ramien Army.

Polearms had an advantage because of their long reach. Obviously, it was beneficial to be able to attack safely from a distance.

However, it was incredibly difficult to control a spear on horseback.

Erheet had personally selected soldiers with an aptitude for the spear, and then he'd gone to the effort of molding them into this elite unit. With their mobility and reach, they split the Ramien forces in a flash.

"Yeaaaaah!"

The Ramien Army's momentum was not to be underestimated, but the lancers' own momentum overwhelmed it.

*

"They turned around ten thousand of their men? Are you telling me that they deliberately came to us to be defeated?"

The heads of the Ramien Army, the high priest and his advisors, were questioning the news.

“It’s terrible!”

At that very moment, an urgent report came in about the battle that had broken out on the front lines.

“High Priest! Something awful has happened. The first row of the pyramid has collapsed. The frontline cavalry suffered serious casualties, and then the enemy horsemen broke our formation...”

“What is this nonsense? There are only ten thousand of them!”

The high priest turned to his advisors after hearing the report. They all came to the same conclusion: “If the enemy is attacking, we have the advantage. We need only to envelop the enemy and defeat them one by one!”

It all sounded so very obvious.

But then, another messenger rushed over.

“I have an urgent report! We can’t overwhelm the enemy cavalry that split our formation. They’re actually pushing us back!”

*

Medelian’s power truly was incredible.

The enemy’s pyramid formation utterly melted before her might. She wasn’t the first among the Ten Commanders of Naruya for nothing.

The enemy’s forces had been gutted by her onslaught—combine those losses with the men that had fallen during the pursuit battles, and it meant that Ramie’s numbers were down from a hundred thousand to seventy thousand. At the same time, the mightiest warrior in Eintorian, Erheet, had flanked the enemy from the side with his lancers, splitting their formation.

Erheet’s lancers were having an incredible effect due to troop type efficiencies.

Royal Eintorian Army Lancers: 10,000

Royal Ramien Army Infantry: 20,000

Terrain Type: Plains

Troop Type Advantage: Lancers – Attack Power Up 70%

Commander Ability: Erheet – Command 97 – Attack Power Up 50%

Thanks to Medelian's actions, the lancers were easily able to reach the enemy infantry in the rear of the formation. When the lancers faced infantry, the efficiency of their attack rose by seventy percent. That was how they were able to dominate an infantry unit that had twice as many soldiers. Furthermore, during a surprise charge like this, it was normal to keep going until they exited through to the other side of the enemy formation.

That wasn't what Erheet's lancers did, though.

Under his command, they thrust through the enemy at a ferocious pace, then turned around and stopped in front of the enemy battle lines. They stood there like a dam blocking the flow of a river.

At the center of it all was Erheet.

His powerful Command effect had raised the efficiency of the attack another fifty percent. He also used his mana skill to mow down his enemies without restraint.

Thanks to all of this, the roughly twenty thousand enemies at the front were completely separated from the fifty thousand at the rear.

It wasn't long before the enemy lost all momentum.

*

With Erheet and his lancers holding strong, I had all of my forces to charge the front line of the Royal Ramien Army. Of course, "all of my forces" still only amounted to twenty thousand men—iron cavalry and infantry included.

The enemy army's front lines had been sundered from their rear forces, and Medelian's attack had decimated their numbers. These events had been critical to the battle because they'd left the enemy in a state of Confusion. Now, the Ramiens were unable to decide whether they should advance, fight where they stood, or withdraw.

Royal Ramien Army Front Line: 20,000

Battle Effect: Confusion – Attack Power Down 50%

Morale: 50

The Morale of the Royal Ramien Army's frontline unit had fallen to 50. That meant their momentum had been totally blunted.

My own forces had been frustrated by having to hold back their real potential and engage in a series of false retreats, but their momentum was only building with this charge.

"Charge!"

"Aaaaaaaahhh!"

The attack led by Fihatori and myself threw the enemy unit into further disarray. That was because, at the moment, the Royal Ramien Army had no unified command structure. So in some units, it went like this...

"Sh-Should we withdraw? Our losses are staggering!"

"We have no orders! Maintain position!"

And in others—

"Pull back!"

—their thousandmen ordered reckless retreats.

The battlefield descended into chaos.

"I finally found you!"

"You made it, Medelian!"

In the midst of that chaos, the bomb appeared once more. There was Medelian, arms crossed, with a big grin on her face. But she was clearly pissed.

I had confirmed that she'd pulled out on horseback, but apparently, she'd charged right back in once she'd figured out that we were the Eintorian Army.

This is the best result we could hope for.

If she'd gone and run off somewhere else because she couldn't find me, *that* would've been an emergency situation. No matter what havoc she unleashed on my armies or my domain, no one could do anything in the face of her power.

I had to act as a decoy and lead her away.

"Fihatori, continue the advance!" I commanded. "When the enemy starts to collapse, pull out! Have the infantry withdraw first and then reorganize the troops. I leave the rest to you!"

Once Fihatori had his orders, I sent my horse racing toward the Royal Ramien Army.

"Erhin Eintorian! I've got something to say to— Hey, hold on! Where are you going? Wait! I said waiiiiiit!"

Medelian's face was a mask of anger as she chased me down.

"Why won't you stooooooooop?!"

"As if anyone would stop when you're chasing them!"

"Huuuuuhhh?!"

The countless weapons she had floating in the air rained down on me. I kept on running using 30 Second Invincibility.

"Y-Your Majesty?" Erheet called out in confusion as I galloped past him.

"Clear a path! And don't stop the woman behind me! That's an order!"

It's clearly lunacy for the king of a nation to be doing this. But I'm putting my life on the line here.

"Out of my way!" Medelian yelled. "I don't have time for you small fry!"

She rushed heedlessly after me. I was untouched thanks to my 30 Second Invincibility, but her rain of weapons did cut down my enemies, clearing an easy path for me.

Finally, we ended up right in the middle of the rear group of the Royal Ramien Army. In short, we were surrounded by fifty thousand soldiers.

"Wh-Who the devil are you people?! Attack! Attack!"

The Ramiens immediately charged the two of us.

“Don’t interfere!” Medelian roared. “You’re seriously getting on my nerves! Hey, I’ve got something to say to— Aaaaaughhh! I’m so hungry I could die here!”

As she became more wild, the ring of soldiers surrounding us got thicker and thicker. I mowed them down with Daitoren, and she did likewise with her weapons, but there were fifty thousand of them, so they weren’t going to run out of men anytime soon.

Then, suddenly, there was a powerful flash of white light in the area around the fallen soldiers. They rose to their feet once more.

This was the power of a high priest, the pride of the Holy Ramie Kingdom.

However, at the same time, it provided an opportunity. That bright flash allowed me to pinpoint the enemy commander, the one who they called a high priest.

I wasn’t about to pass up this chance. I cut my way through the enemy forces, heading toward that light.

As I drew near, I spotted a man in white robes surrounded by bodyguards. These bodyguards were all A-class commanders. There was no doubt that they were strong...but they were no match for me.

When I was using Daitoren, my Martial was 100—S-class!

“H-High Priest! It’s an enemy commander! He’s coming! Please, run...!”

“High Priest!”

“Your head is mine!” I declared as I slashed through A-class commanders, closing in on the high priest.

I galloped past the high priest, and in one smooth motion, lopped off his head.

“High Priest! High Priest!” I could hear them shouting. The shock of losing their spiritual support was going to throw the enemy into even greater disarray.

I raced on without letting my speed drop, then turned my horse in a direction

that would take me out of the enemy forces.

Behind me...

Boom!

I could hear the explosions.

It seemed Medelian was keeping up with me just fine. She was at a comfortable distance, so I could lead her where I wanted. I just had to hope she'd follow me all the way to the mountains.

*

It happened just after Erhin killed the high priest.

Erheet had watched Medelian go, and then he'd carried out the plan that Erhin had given him. He remained at the rear, blocking the enemy.

Obviously, as a warrior, he'd wanted to fight Medelian himself. She was the top-ranked member of Naruya's Ten Commanders. That would have made any warrior's blood boil. It had been frustrating to simply make way and let her pass.

But the war, and his country, came first. Erheet understood that.

Soon, the enemy's rear group of forty thousand men started falling into disarray.

"Something must have happened to the enemy commander!" Erheet declared. "His Majesty has succeeded! In that case, we charge! We'll thoroughly tear apart the enemy's formation and then withdraw!"

"Yes sir!"

Erheet's retainers enthusiastically began the charge. The lancers had been acting as a sort of bulwark until now, but the unit's specialty was actually offense.

They were able to open a path in front of them with minimal resistance. And once they were in, they wreaked havoc on the enemy's main camp.

"We are the pride of Eintorian!"

This would go down in history as the brilliant beginning of Erheet's lancers.



*

One man was speechless as he gazed at Erheet's performance.

He was the sole objective observer of this war—the advisor from the Gebel Kingdom, Garint.

This conflict had started with the Ramiens at an overwhelming advantage. However, their pyramid formation had been broken in a manner that Garint couldn't understand, and then these powerful lancers had turned the tables completely.

The lancers were a menace. It was plain to see how strong they were. But at the same time, there were elements of this battle that confused him. For example, the S-class commanders who'd executed that incredible charge.

Did Eintorian really have two such people? Garint couldn't suppress the shudder that racked his body.

Lancers, along with two S-class commanders.

Garint had always known that the New Eintorian Kingdom was not to be underestimated. But now he'd seen it for himself.

He'd hoped to make Ramie and Eintorian fight until they both collapsed, but given the way this was unfolding, he finally realized how reckless the idea had been. He hadn't even given all the information he possessed to the Ramiens. After all, they'd held the advantage until now. Unfortunately, that lack of information might have already become a fatal injury.

The Gebel Kingdom knew that the Eintorian Army had far more troops than Garint had seen deployed in this battle. This had to have some connection to the vanished fleet.

"No, but..."

It was too late for him to tell the Ramiens. But would the war have gone all that differently if he had?

Not really.

That was Garint's conclusion.

And for that reason, he decided it was time to get out and return to the Gebel Kingdom.

*

Despite still having thirty thousand men left, the Royal Ramien Army began to withdraw once the high priest was killed.

Two S-class commanders. It was beyond their wildest imagination. They wouldn't have believed that Eintorian had even *one*! In addition, they had no way of knowing that Medelian wasn't on Eintorian's side, so the Ramiens could only conclude that she was.

Once they realized that the momentum they'd been allowed to build had actually been a trap, they were knocked down into an abyss of despondency.

Even as they withdrew, the advisors of the Ramien Army looked panicked. For some reason, their supplies hadn't arrived in time. That was an even bigger issue than losing the battle.

Ultimately, they pulled back all the way to the supply base in Beland. The idea was to at least solidify their occupation of that territory as they waited for further instructions from the homeland.

However, it was not easy to retreat that far.

The massive defeat had raised the risk they might be trapped in any castle they entered. As a result, they couldn't pause to catch their breath along the way. They just absorbed the smaller forces they had left in each of the castles, then retreated alongside them.

"I-It's the enemy! The enemy is raiding us! Defend yourselves!"

Even as they retreated, the enemy lancers kept showing up, charging into their lines, and then leaving again.

"Damn it... Pick up the pace! We'll march night and day until we reach Beland!"

Despite their haste, they ultimately suffered a total of four raids by the lancers.

"Advisor, we're almost at Beland Castle!"

Seeing the banners of the Royal Ramien Army flying over the castle, they somehow managed to drag their exhausted bodies up to the gates.

Those gates did not open for them.

Just as the soldiers were feeling relieved that they could finally rest, archers who had been hiding atop the walls started firing.

“It’s the enemy!”

“Aaaaaaahhh!”

The Ramiens had been ready to enter the castle, so when the sneak attack came, they hadn’t been prepared to defend themselves. The hail of arrows caused massive casualties.

Then, even more archers swarmed to the top of the walls.

“How are they in Beland Castle...? What happened to the troops we left here?!”

The advisors shuddered at the incomprehensible situation they’d found themselves in.

The Eintorian Army’s main force had been their cavalry. They didn’t have that many infantrymen. So how had they been able to get here first, *and* occupy a castle held by ten thousand men?

It was impossible.

“Advisor, b-behind us... It’s those lancers!”

The advisors were shocked. At this rate, they would be wiped out by an attack from the rear.

“Go around the castle at once and retreat! Luaranz! Retreat into Luaranz!”

They shouted for everyone to pull back, but as they fled down the road around the castle, the Ramien army found their path blocked by Jint and Bente.

“Attack! Attack! Don’t let the enemy get away!” Bente shouted, sending his men charging in.

Jint led the way. Lancers charged at the rear, archers perched atop the castle walls, and Jint’s infantry marched along the road around the castle.

Jint started cutting down the Ramiens.

Garint, who had long since left the Royal Ramien Army and was watching the carnage unfold from a distance, let out a deep sigh. He'd wanted both armies to fall, but this had turned out to be a great victory for Eintorian. The scariest part was that Eintorian had taken practically no damage throughout this entire series of events.

Well, it still wasn't the worst possible outcome. He'd managed to expend the Royal Ramien Army's forces, and the Royal Gebel Army had already been called in to reinforce them.

There was nothing more to be seen here.

With that decided, Garint returned to the Gebel Kingdom.

*

The grand fleet under the command of Hoffman, the newly appointed second-in-command of the Eintorian Navy, had been underway for days.

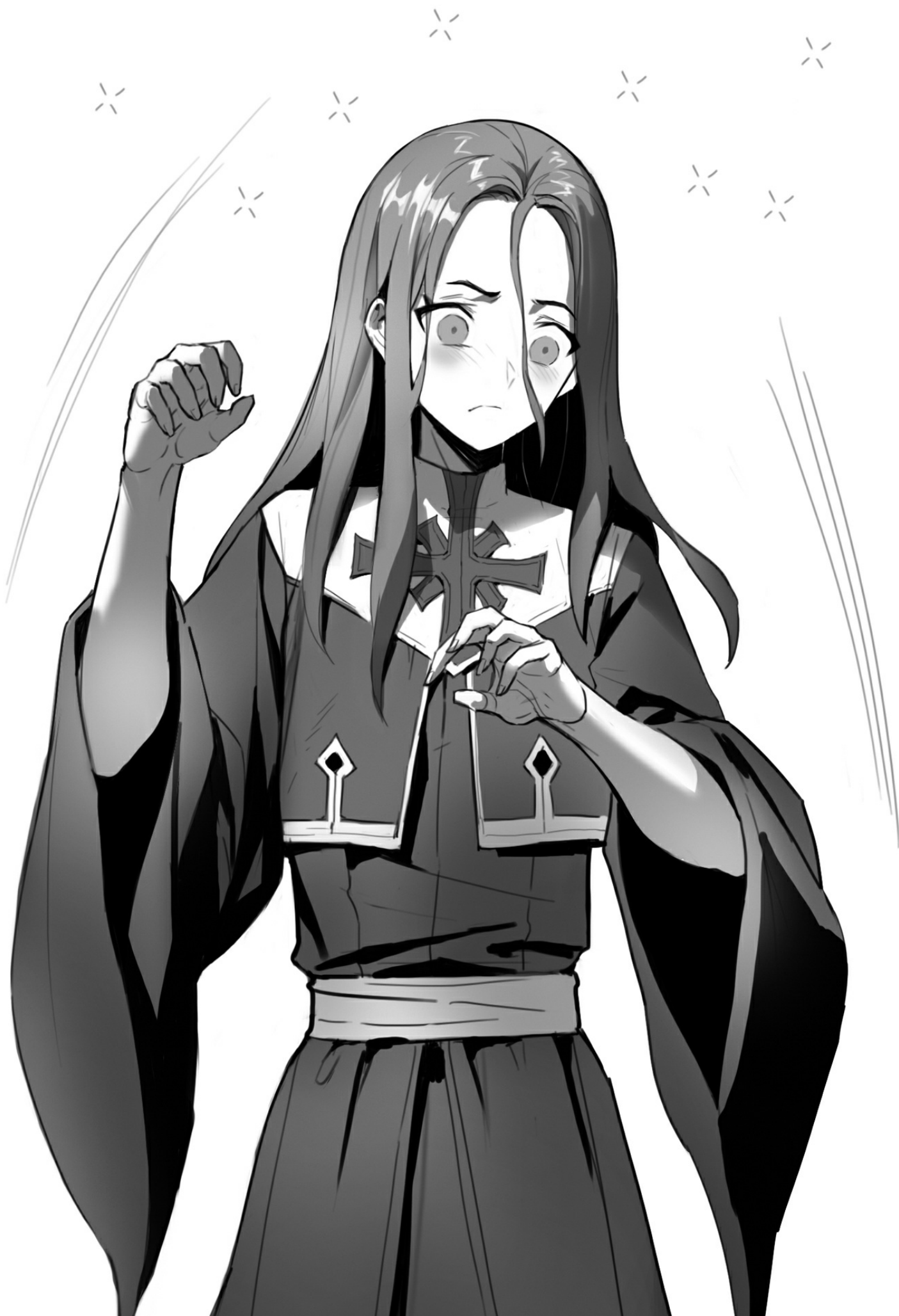
They had first dropped off Bente and Jint in Luaranz. After that, they had made a swift return to Brinhill to load up the twenty thousand defenders who would take part in the second phase of the battle.

It was an incredibly important operation.

Yusen's men changed into some Royal Ramien Army uniforms that had been taken after the massive victory and then quickly boarded the fleet.

This operation was to be handled by Yusen and Gibun, with Heina and Vinay serving as advisors.

"I really have to dress like this?" Vinay looked down at the uniform in dissatisfaction. He was wearing a holy vestment from the Royal Ramien Army.



“You’re going to be central to this operation,” Yusen explained in an attempt to console Vinay.

“Central?! I’m not the kind of person who stands on the front lines!” Though Vinay complained emphatically, he didn’t really have a choice.

“Ah hah hah hah! You look great in it! What’s the fuss!” Gibun slapped Vinay on the back.

Obviously, this was no comfort at all. Vinay was feeling dispirited, but that had no effect on the plan.

The fleet mercilessly set sail.

“Is the wind steady?” asked Yusen.

“Yes, Commander,” Hoffman answered with a nod. “The winds blow due west this time of year!”

And so the fleet sailed past Luaranz, entering the territory of the Ramie Kingdom. The destination of these twenty thousand men was the Rotonai Kingdom.

“Isn’t it about time you prepared a mana circle?”

Yusen placed a hand on Vinay’s shoulder as they gazed toward enemy territory. This was the whole reason they’d brought the scholar into battle with them. Vinay had spent many long years studying mana. Naturally, he was aware of the Ramien system of spells known as divine power.

If he were to put up a circle using a similar kind of mana, the Rotonai forces would obviously mistake them for the Royal Ramien Army. That was Erhin’s plan.

Of course, there were no soldiers in need of healing here, so Vinay prepared a different circle instead.

One of the circles Vinay knew emitted a bright flash of light. It was no use as anything more than a distraction, but it closely resembled the flash given off by the high priests’ divine power. It used the same mana, so it only stood to reason that it would look similar.

*

I had been running from Medelian for the past five hours.

During that time, I had gotten a feel for the range of her skill, so I'd taken to riding my horse *just* outside of it. However, because I'd summoned Daitoren to fight the Ramiens, it was going to take time before I could use it again.

Despite the dogged tenacity she showed in pursuing me, her stamina was starting to falter. Whenever I saw her stop her horse and stare hatefully at me, I took the opportunity to rest too.

It's about time, though.

I moved close to the forest and made sure she could see me dismount. Medelian gradually closed in.

She stopped in front of me, jumped down from her horse, and the first thing out of her mouth was, "I told you to stop, so why didn't you? Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! You piss me off so muuuuuuch! Aaaaaagh! I'm so mad!"

Her entire body shook as she balled her hands into fists and started swinging with reckless abandon.

"I could've practically *died* of hunger and from overusing my power, but you just kept running! Seriously, what are you trying to do here? Do you *want* me to kill you?"

"What, so you *weren't* coming to kill me?" I asked. "I kept running away because I was pretty sure that was your intent."

For some reason, my words only angered her more.

"You, you...! Arghhhhhh!" She started trying to tear out her hair.

What does she even want to do...?

"I'll kill you. You are so dead. You're already in range too, so running's not going to save you. I'm not just saying it—I'm gonna *murder* you for real now."

Man, she's pissed.

"You're gonna murder me 'for real'? Don't tell me you had something else in mind when you chased after me..."

That got her shouting again. “Aaaahhh! Shut up! Shut up!” Swegg and Rollins simultaneously flew up into the air.

Suddenly, I had an idea. I tossed a waterskin at Medelian.

She caught it reflexively. “What’s this supposed to be?”

“Water. Have a drink and calm down. You’ve gotta be exhausted, right? Don’t worry, it’s not poisoned.”

Not that I’d know, but she’s gotta be pretty parched.

“It wouldn’t matter even if it *was*. My mana would beat your lousy poison. Hmph!”

Having said this, she immediately opened the lid and tried to take a drink.

But no water came out.

Not even a drop.

She shook the waterskin over and over, but it was dry.

“Youuuuuu!!!”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up! It was a simple mistake! I didn’t mean to do it, honest.”

I’d apparently given her the waterskin that I’d just finished drinking myself. No wonder it had felt so light. I hurriedly found the right one and tossed it to her.

Medelian accepted the new waterskin with silent fury. There was a slight sloshing sound when she shook it, so she trusted that this one did indeed have water inside. But her pride seemed to get in the way. She looked back and forth between me and the waterskin.

Thirst won out in the end.

She emptied the waterskin with big gulps, only moving her lips away once it was drained to the last drop.

“Thanks...” Medelian said coolly after wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

“Heh...” I suppressed a laugh. “No problem.”

I'd assumed she was the type of battle maniac who just charged in blindly, but maybe there's a good amount of room for dialogue?

For just a moment, I imagined the Valdesca siblings working alongside me, impossible as it might have seemed. Surely it was nothing more than a far-fetched dream. But it was an appealing dream nonetheless.

Grumble!

That massive delusion was wiped away by the sound of a rumbling stomach. I looked over to see Medelian bent double and holding her belly.

“Urghhhhhh.”

“Pfft!” I finally burst out laughing.

Honestly, if she were a normal girl, I might have even thought it was cute. I quickly got myself under control, though. She was an S-class warrior. No matter how adorable she might've appeared, her strength was monstrous.

Ahem. I cleared my throat. “So, what *did* you come after me for?”

Medelian glared up at me as she answered, “To fight.”

“If you're here to fight, then you're here to kill me, aren't you?”

“It might turn out that way if you're weak! But then it'll have been your weakness that killed you. Not me. If you lose, it means you just don't have what it takes!”

“‘What it takes’? To do what, exactly? You came all the way out here...”

“Well... What it takes to play with me!”

“Come again?” I couldn't help but be exasperated. What was she even saying? “You're not making any— You know what, forget it. Just eat this.”

I was so done with her that I didn't even want to fight. Shaking my head, I tossed her a leather pouch, punctuating the gesture with a disdainful click of my tongue.

“I don't need any more water!”

“It's dried meat. At least look at it first!”

“Dried meat? Seriously? Oooh!”

Medelian opened the leather pouch and began stuffing its contents into her little mouth.

She’s way too delighted.

But her face quickly went pale, and she looked at me with desperation.

“Y-You don’t have any more water, do you...? I got some caught in my throat!”

I was speechless. I kindly gave her some more, which she gulped down with a look of satisfaction.

“Hee hee. Okay, I’m all full. Now I can fight!”

“Now listen, you... Shouldn’t you be in Herald or something? You’re one of the Ten Commanders, but that doesn’t mean they’ll just let you off the hook if you disobey orders.”

“W-Well, His Majesty and my brother might give me an earful! But whatever, I can’t avoid that. I’ve got more important things to do!”

“Like fighting me...?”

“Exactly! It won’t be like last time. I’m gonna go all out from the start!”

At that very moment, I sensed an intense bloodlust radiating from her. She’d seemed somewhat defanged up until a moment ago, but she was still a ferocious beast.

Medelian drew Swegg and Rollins—that alone boosted her Martial score to 102—and then lunged at me.

I immediately answered her with Daitoren.

My blade clashed with hers.

Shiiiiing!

An ear-piercing shriek of metal on metal rang out with every impact.

It was 100 against 102. As things stood, she was stronger than me. But that was actually more convenient when it came to leading her where I wanted. I

could retreat without having to put on a bad act of losing.

It wasn't *that* easy, though.

"Valdesca!"

True to her promise to go all out, Medelian called her mightiest sword. Swegg granted her a +1 to Martial, and Rollins gave her a +2. Those were both solid numbers, but they had nothing on Valdesca's +5. I should have expected no less from a weapon bearing the family name.

I had forcefully neutralized Swegg and Rollins using True Crush the last time we'd fought, so 104 Martial had been her highest score back then, but now she was using all three simultaneously. That boosted her Martial to a score of 107.

Her skill let her use all three swords freely. The fact that she could attack from three directions at once was enough trouble on its own.

It's impossible to face a Martial of 107 with a Martial of 100. The Attack command won't be able to fend off all of her blows.

Knowing this, I used 30 Second Invincibility to get on my horse and flee, setting my mount galloping toward the mountains.

"What? You're just going to run again?"

She looked blatantly disappointed. I felt the incredible bloodlust from earlier ebb away.

Because I wasn't fleeing at a distance like before, I was in range of her attacks the whole time. I wouldn't have been able to stop them all without 30 Second Invincibility.

I did manage to lead her into the mountains, though.

Well, I didn't want to resort to this, but if my reluctance is going to get me killed, then what's the point?

With that thought in mind, I opened up the system.

Okay, my current Martial with Daitoren is 100. But if I raise my base Martial to 73, it'll give me a total of 103. If I use True Crush on top of that, then that lets me temporarily beat her with a score of 108. I just barely have enough points,

though.

Raising Martial from 67 to 70 had cost me 300 points per Martial point, for a total of 900. However, from 70 onward, it cost 700 points per point of Martial. That meant I'd need to spend 2100 total points to raise Martial from 70 to 73. I'd also used 30 Second Invincibility five times at a cost of 200 points each.

That uses up all of the 4000 points from earlier...

Regardless, if I used True Crush to get a higher score than her, I could get through this.

I hid for a moment and raised my Martial to 73. Just as I finished leveling up, I heard Medelian's footsteps behind me.

Whoosh.

Her blades felled the trees all around me. I rolled out of the way just in the nick of time.

"Ooh, so that's where you were hiding," she taunted.

"I wasn't hiding. I was waiting for this moment!"

I faced her with an inscrutable expression on my face as I used True Crush. Remembering what'd happened last time, Medelian met Daitoren with Valdesca and Rollins in her hands.

"Ooh...! Now we're talking!"

She looked absolutely delighted, like a child who'd just found a playmate.

The three swords sent sparks flying as they struggled against each other.

True Crush had the awesome effect of neutralizing mana skills, but that part of it only activated once it made contact. By sending Swegg up into the air, she could take True Crush while still receiving its stat boost.

She's not the top member of the Ten Commanders for nothing.

If it'd been 107 against 107, there would have been a blast wave like last time. But right now, my True Crush was just one point higher.

The result: Daitoren began slowly pushing her swords back.

For some reason, Medelian started laughing. Like a total goof.

“Wah hah hah hah hah hah hah!”

With True Crush overwhelming her, she looked at me and said, “I knew you were worth paying attention to! I won’t lose next time! See you soon!”

Then, just as Daitoren was about to touch her, she vanished without a trace.

She must have used a tool. Those things return the user home, so I guess she’s in Naruya now.

Well, it’ll do, I guess.

I had been planning to get her lost in the mountain maze and then let her out on the Runan side, but this was faster. Once he found out she was back home, Valdesca probably wouldn’t send soldiers in my direction.

*

“Did you retrieve all of the Ramien Army’s supplies?”

“Yes, Your Majesty! We took everything they had along the supply lines from Luaranz, as well as what was at the base in Beland!”

Reports indicated that the Ramiens had supplied enough to feed a hundred thousand soldiers for about a month. It was fair to call this a massive win.

Of course, the end goal isn’t just to defeat the Ramien Army. The situation on the continent is only going to get harsher from here on.

I planned to use this chance to showcase just how horrifying the Eintorian Army could be.

It would be desirable to create a situation where they fear the New Eintorian Kingdom just like they fear the Naruya Kingdom, but at the same time, I want them to fall over one another to seek our aid. That’s why I’m going to intervene in the war between Naruya and Gebel.

To that end, I had deliberately let one of the sparks of that conflict return home alive: the man called Garint who was an advisor in the Gebel Kingdom.

*

“A high priest is dead, and our expeditionary force was wiped out? Oh, Ramie!

How could this be?”

The King of Ramie had just been informed of the disaster. One of the high priests was away in the Gebel Kingdom, but the remaining two high priests shared a look of anguish.

“This is but a small scratch to the powerful blessings of Ramie. Let us reassemble the army and attack at once. All is as Ramie wills it to be!” one high priest declared, and the other concurred.

If the army of their god was defeated, it would have a devastating effect on the people’s faith. They couldn’t allow this defeat to stand.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty!”

At that moment, an urgent message arrived. It had come from the border with Rotonai.

“What is it now?” the king asked, clutching his head.

The priest bearing the message shouted, “A great army from Rotonai is invading Ramie proper!”

Both high priests looked at the man in surprise. “What in the world do you mean?!”

“They sent a letter saying, ‘We accept your declaration of war. Justice is with us.’ It just keeps repeating that they are responding to an unprovoked attack by the Ramien Army.”

None of this made any sense to the Ramiens, but...

Rotonai knew that the Holy Ramie Kingdom was stretched thin after they’d dispatched troops to Eintorian, Luaranz, and even the Gebel Kingdom. Thus, they were going to take the excuse to invade, regardless of whether the attack was a Ramien provocation or not.

Never let weakened prey escape.

Such was the way of a world at war.

*

A few days after we beat off the Ramien Army, word came that war had

broken out between Rotonai and Ramie.

“Your Majesty, the Ramie Kingdom is shaken, just as you anticipated. Though they are closely matched in terms of war potential, Rotonai has the upper hand.”

Yeah, I'll bet.

Rotonai had the stronger momentum, but Ramie still had its powerful high priests. It sounded like there was an intense contest of strength unfolding along the border.

These chaotic times had been unleashed by the Naruya Kingdom's wars of conquest.

The other kingdoms had realized that they would be nothing but victims if they sat still. So, they'd begun launching wars of their own in order to amass more territory and more supplies, which in turn had allowed them to support more troops.

“Meanwhile, we in Eintorian will harden our defenses. Until the time comes, that is.”

We were preparing to intervene in the war between the Naruya Kingdom and the Gebel Kingdom. Our own defense had to be perfect, otherwise we wouldn't have the freedom to reinforce other nations.

From what we're hearing, Naruya finished destroying Herald the other day. I'm sure that Medelian played a big part in that.

It would take the Naruyans some time, though. They would need at least two or three months to replenish their forces. I planned to use that period to prepare my forces too.

I turned to Gram, who was heading a research team tasked with developing new equipment.

“Gram.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Has there been any progress on development?”

“Yes. You’ve given us plenty of funding, so our research is going smoothly!”

“Good. Fihatori, I want you to work with Gram to oversee our preparations. Also, repair the fortress walls and gates at all of our strategic passes.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Gram and Fihatori both responded.

“Hoffman, you have to seize control of the seas. No one can be allowed to violate our territorial waters. If there are any provocations, work hand in glove with the land forces to respond.”

“Got it. I’m ready to die for our waters!”

The mountainfolk would defend the mountains. The newly developed traps would be of use to them.

Beland and Kinburg would also need defenses. In particular, I planned to prepare a number of surprises along the road into Eintorian that went through Beland. That would give pause to anyone invading my territory. With the seas locked down on top of that, our nation’s defense would be perfect.

“As for the rest of you, stick to the fundamentals. Continue to focus on training our troops! Understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Chapter 3: How to Take Advantage of an Alliance

After they had completely subjugated the Herald Kingdom and made it part of their own territory, the Royal Naruyan Army took three months to reconstitute and gather another grand army of two hundred thousand men.

Before them stood their young monarch, King Cassia, with Frann Valdesca and the Ten Commanders awaiting his command.

“Our forces will now advance into the Gebel Kingdom! The chief of staff for our entire army will be Duke Frann Valdesca!”

Valdesca bowed his head deeply at this proclamation. With full command over the entire army, that made him second only to Cassia himself.

There had been rumors among the nobility that Valdesca was “finished” after his loss to Eintorian. However, in this most recent attack on Herald, he had foreseen every move the enemy would make, and he’d taken absolute control of the battlefield. This had won him an overwhelming victory, along with renewed recognition of his talents.

“Furthermore, we will deploy all but three of the Ten Commanders! Our defeat is an impossibility! Trample them underfoot with the full might of our forces!”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

The crowd erupted into ear-shattering applause.

*

As soon as Medelian got home, she was dragged off to the new border with the Gebel Kingdom in former Herald territory. She had been unable to defy her brother’s warning that, “If you don’t come immediately, then I really will throw you out of the house.”

Her brother had raised her after they’d lost their parents at a young age. That made him both a brother and a father to her. She didn’t want to slight him. But

Medelian still wanted to prioritize her own feelings.

There was one issue with the way Valdesca had raised her—he had coddled her far too much.

On arriving at the battlefield, Medelian was immediately appointed commanding officer of the vanguard unit in the First Army of the Royal Naruyan Army.

The vanguards had an important role. They would be the first to go into the Gebel Kingdom and secure a route of advancement for their allies. It was a mission reserved for the strongest commander.

“Hey, bro, do I *really* have to? I’ve got other stuff I wanna do!”

However, Medelian was less than enthused by the current conflict. She’d found something far more interesting than this boring war. So, after the king had assigned her to the vanguard, Medelian had gone to visit her brother every single day. During these daily chats, she would walk around and around him in circles, complaining all the while.

“Don’t ignore me!” she exclaimed. “Your adorable little sister’s talking to you!”

Valdesca sighed. This was the umpteenth time he was having to endure this exchange.

Obviously, their conversation was nothing like a discussion between the chief of staff and the commanding officer of the First Army’s vanguards should have been. By appealing to the fact that she was his adorable little sister, Medelian had already dragged this from an official complaint into the realm of a personal one.

Faced with this behavior, Valdesca slammed his head onto the table in front of him.

“Medelian! What do you even want to do?”

Valdesca was the type to maintain a polite tone with everyone, regardless of whether they were above or below him in the hierarchy. However, he didn’t do that with Medelian, who remained the only other member of his family. He

knew his sister was strange in a lot of ways. Having raised her himself, how could he possibly *not* know? The girl was prone to acting in unpredictable ways.

Even so, her behavior over the last few months had been erratic.

“There’s someone I’ve gotta challenge! I want a rematch with the first guy to ever beat me!”

“I think there’s someone else who beat you before that...” Valdesca noted.

Medelian scowled in response. “His Majesty doesn’t count! I mean, we were kids then anyway. Ever since he was little, he’d always hit me and hit me and hit me...” Medelian shook her head with frustration as she recalled her bouts with the current ruler, King Cassia. “Anyway, he doesn’t count! His Majesty’s not even my type! I’d rather not see him at all...”

Medelian shuddered as if recalling some childhood trauma.

“Wait... Not your type? Why does that even come into this?”

“N-No, it’s not like that!” Medelian shouted, shaking her head. She covered her mouth and looked toward the mountains.

The clever Valdesca sighed and continued to press her. “Out with it, Medelian! What’s it ‘not like’?”

Medelian quickly corrected herself. “That bit about not being my type was a mistake... This is really about revenge! Yeah, revenge!”

This reasoning gave Valdesca such a headache. He knew exactly who she wanted to take “revenge” on.

Erhin Eintorian. The man was his greatest rival as well. He’d even gotten a letter from Erhin urging him to “Hurry up and take her home.”

How was it that she could talk about her type in the same breath as revenge? Valdesca was completely ignorant when it came to the relations between men and women, so her behavior was utterly incomprehensible to him.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but let me say just one thing. Save your selfish behavior for *after* we’ve occupied the Gebel Kingdom. If you get it done quickly, you should have some free time afterward.”

“You mean it? Okay! Now I’m motivated! Time to go smack them down. I’ll go all out from the start!”

Medelian raced off. It concerned Valdesca a little just how quickly she darted away.

After all...

He thought that Eintorian might intervene in this war.

*

“Your Majesty! The Royal Naruyan Army is closing in on our border!”

Duke Plenett of the Gebel Kingdom announced this with a tense look as he bowed before his king.

After taking a moment to digest this news, the monarch responded, “I understand. We’ve done much to prepare. You must drive them off at all costs!”

“I’ll do it, even if it costs me my life!”

After making this bold declaration in front of the king, Duke Plenett left the castle. He then gathered all of his retainers to give them urgent commands.

Duke Plenett felt just as the king did about the situation.

Naruya’s impending invasion had been obvious, and so he had done his utmost to prepare. He had three hundred thousand men on the border, and that was only counting Gebelian soldiers. At this time, they were aware of two hundred thousand on the Naruyan side.

His preparations were ironclad.

He also had fifty thousand reinforcements from Ramie. Obviously, it was an issue that those reinforcements were going to be reading the winds and preparing to go home as soon as they could. The Ramie Kingdom would soon need them since they had just received a declaration of war from the Rotonai Kingdom.

However, if Gebel was defeated, the Ramie Kingdom would be exposed to an attack not only from Rotonai, but from Naruya as well. They also had to be wary

of an attack from the New Eintorian Kingdom, and so the Ramie Kingdom found it difficult to withdraw their reinforcements.

Their orders to the reinforcements in Gebel were to maintain their manpower as much as possible while keeping abreast of the situation.

Obviously, Duke Plenett's right-hand man Garint was well aware of those orders. The Gebel Kingdom also wanted to conserve their forces, so they were looking for a way to deploy the Ramiens to the front lines.

"Bring *him* to me at once! Find everyone in the capital that we can mobilize! I don't care what force you have to pull from. Take even the Royal Guard!"

The "him" in question was Duke Plenett's son Adonia. He was called a prodigy for his high degree of talent with mana, and he now stood among the ranks of the S-class commanders as the pride of the Gebel Kingdom.

However, his current whereabouts were unknown.

No one could discount his abilities, but he was always taking advantage of that reputation to fool around with women. He'd recently disappeared with the one he was currently seeing.

Duke Plenett had sent men all over in search of his son.

"Why don't we appeal to the neighboring countries for support?"

Seeing the state of things, Garint hazarded this suggestion, but Duke Plenett shook his head. As far as he was concerned, Gebel was thoroughly prepared, and Eintorian was about the only country they could go to for help now.

*

Naruya's elite forces were nearing the border with the Gebel Kingdom.

This massive army of two hundred thousand men crossed the former territory of the Herald Kingdom and attacked all at once.

The Royal Naruyan Army was planning to break through by focusing on a single point. There was a strategic pass along the sole road leading into the Gebel Kingdom from the former Herald Kingdom. The gateway here had protected Gebel all this time. If the enemy were to try to invade without going through this strategic pass, they would be forced to climb over the mountains

or take the long way around.

This meant that a grand army could only invade by breaking through this checkpoint.

The gateway stood on a road through a steep valley, looking incredibly impressive. The walls had to be twice as high as ordinary fortress walls.

If the Naruyans couldn't break through here, their supply lines would be stretched. It was inefficient to resupply their forces over the mountains, and all too unreliable. They *had* to smash through this barrier.

The vast sea of Naruyan soldiers appeared in front of the gateway.

"Two hundred thousand men, huh?"

The Gebel Kingdom commander who was defending the gate stood on the walls of the checkpoint, looking out over the Royal Naruyan Army. He gripped the hilt of his sword. "If our scouts' reports are accurate, there should be no doubt about that number."

The Herald Kingdom had attempted to storm these gates many times in the past, but the Gebel Kingdom had never lost. Not at any time in the past century, at least.

"We'll still be fine!" shouted his second-in-command. "Our allies are camped nearby, and they will be joining us soon. Then we'll have even *more* than two hundred thousand! We can definitely defend the gates!"

The Gebel Kingdom had been preparing for this war, so they had two groups of forces ready to go. The first, consisting of a hundred thousand men, was posted at the gateway itself. Another hundred and fifty thousand had been stationed in the surrounding area, and these troops could join the gateway forces at any time.

The hundred and fifty thousand men were positioned so that they could respond no matter what invasion route the enemy chose. It would also take them less than a day to reach the gateway.

If the whole army had been deployed to the gateway, that would have caused a different issue. The enemy could have given up on resupplying and then taken

the long way around to flank them. The reinforcement troops were deployed as they were to eliminate as many strategic avenues for the Naruyans as possible.

Normally, overwhelming a gateway with walls this high would require the attacker to have five times as many troops as the defender. And, taking the scale of the checkpoint into consideration, the defenders could likely hold out for at least a month. That was why the Gebel Kingdom saw this as the best battlefield for them.

How much could they whittle down their opponents without exhausting themselves? The Gebel Kingdom saw that factor as the key to this battle.

*

Someone walked up to the gates.

It was a man with a slender body, long hair, and a long coat. He wasn't dressed for the battlefield. Behind him was a woman carrying a number of swords.

Gebel's defending commander thought that the man must be a messenger, here either to declare war or demand surrender. This man and woman hadn't come with troops. It was just the two of them.

However, the man who appeared in front of the gates—Frann Valdesca, the chief of staff for Naruya's entire military—was planning something the defending commander never would have imagined.

That these two had appeared here together, without any soldiers, was proof of that.

Accompanying him was none other than Medelian. With this trusty bodyguard at his back, Valdesca began drawing a massive mana circle in front of the gates.

The defending commander, who had initially taken him to be nothing more than a messenger here to warn them to surrender, panicked when he saw what Valdesca was doing.

“Fire your arrows! Stop him! Immediately!”

The Gebel Kingdom knew about the mana circles that the House of Valdesca

used. They fired a volley of arrows in an attempt to stop him from activating one.

“Hmph, is that all you’ve got?!”

Medelian stepped forward to stand in front of Valdesca. Glaring into the hail of projectiles, she unleashed her weapons.

Three swords flew up into the air.

“Wh-What is that woman?! Stop them at once! There’re only two of them!”

“Don’t you dare think your pathetic arrows can kill me!” Medelian shouted as she easily defended herself against the volley.

Meanwhile, Valdesca was quickly creating the circle and pouring his mana into it.

At this point, the third-ranked among the Ten Commanders, Istin, and his second-in-command, Lucana, arrived. They were leading Naruya’s Second Army.

Suddenly, light stretched up into the air as the seal inside the circle activated.

This mana circle had the ability to lock down an area. This meant that the Gebelian reinforcements wouldn’t be able to come inside the sealing circle to join the troops defending the gatehouse.

The Gebelian commander gazed up at the skies, despair written on his face.

*

The war situation changed rapidly when the enemy broke through the Gebel Kingdom’s gateway in less than a day.

Duke Plenett had considered the battle at the gateway to be the key to this entire war, but he’d never expected the seal Valdesca had used. Now, all of Gebel’s plans had been completely upended.

“The Gebel Kingdom must be getting pretty desperate now,” I remarked after hearing the latest report.

“You’re probably right,” Euracia agreed.

We were near the battlefield in the Gebel Kingdom. Not in any official capacity, of course. This was purely an informal visit.

We had come to assess the situation, and if possible, intervene.

Soon after the fall of the strategic pass, the Royal Naruyan Army split into three units.

The Second Army and Third Army broke off to the sides to occupy the domains in their respective directions. Meanwhile, in the center, the king personally led the First Army against the main force of the Royal Gebelian Army, which was a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers strong.

At the vanguard of the First Army was Medelian. She was a dominating presence on the battlefield. Could there have been a more suitable vanguard captain?

Medelian surged through enemy lines, crushing foes underfoot and then moving on to the next targets. King Cassia of Naruya followed behind her.

Fighting Naruya on the plains would be a stupid plan. The Royal Gebelian Army quickly realized this and began a temporary retreat, pulling all of their manpower back to the rear.

The Naruyans took three domains in the blink of an eye. However, because Valdesca couldn't use his Circle of Sealing multiple times in such a short period, he instead massed his forces to attack their next target, the Hertana Domain.

Obviously, the Gebel Kingdom also gathered their forces, intending to fight their hardest to defend Hertana in a siege battle, but this too ended in their defeat.

The Gebel Kingdom was starting to grow very concerned by the way that Naruya was pushing them back. They had already lost four domains, and the momentum was completely against them.

"As for us... Let's go to the Jeiran Domain," I said. "There's something we need to do there."

Our ultimate goal was for the Gebel Kingdom to make a request for support from Eintorian. But there was something else I definitely needed to do.

Although the path of history had changed considerably, there were still aspects of the game's plot that remained relevant. My ability to take advantage

of that knowledge would influence the course of this war.

*

“Where is Adonia?! Haven’t you found him yet?!”

The defeat at the gateway came as a shock to Duke Plenett. The very idea that the once unbreachable gates of the border could fall in a single day seemed absurd.

“W-Well, you see...we suspect that your opposition to his latest romantic partner has pushed the two of them to disappear completely...”

Duke Plenett turned wrathfully toward the retainer who’d just told him what all the others had been too afraid to say.

“What kind of nonsense are you spewing when our nation is hanging by a thread?! How dare all of you...!”

The retainers all got down on their knees before their enraged lord. “We’re sorry! We’ll keep looking! He must be somewhere within the country!”

It was true that the most important thing right now was finding Adonia. If he’d just been there from the beginning, then surely their battle lines wouldn’t have crumbled so easily.

“Your Highness! Bad news! The Ramien reinforcements we sent to the front lines in the Jeiran Domain have suddenly retreated!”

Like rubbing salt into a wound, the thing Duke Plenett had feared most of all was now happening. The reinforcements had been biding their time, and they’d finally chosen to act. With the battle lines under pressure, the Ramien unit had decided to return home before they lost troops.

“Damn them... Damn them all...!”

Duke Plenett’s anger overwhelmed him. He shook with wordless rage until he passed out.

*

“Messengers headed to Jeiran Castle? I’ll have to kill them,” the man murmured as he looked at the advancing unit.

He'd already slain one smaller unit, and now he rode on one of their horses. He hadn't meant to show himself like this—the man had never intended to see his father again. But the situation had changed. His country was on the verge of collapse, and he needed to act.

Especially if the domain where he was hiding was going to be trampled by the enemy.

“This is shit.”

Defending the nation would protect his family. Such was the logic of a world consumed by war. He'd been avoiding his father by living life as a simple villager. His wife had already borne him a son.

He needed to protect them.

“This is utter shit!”

His father had dismissed his earnest feelings as a mere dalliance. He'd said that his son's love was nothing more than fooling around with a commoner. The longer the dispute had gone on, the more the man had wanted to cast aside his position and his country to be with her.

But that couldn't happen. He was Adonia of the Gebel Kingdom. And while he had been able to abandon his social status, he would never be able to give up his country.

If this domain fell into enemy hands, it was possible that many of its villages would be trampled. Naruya might not carry out massacres immediately, but there was no guarantee that they wouldn't change their mind at some point. War always crushed innocent lives like so many cockroaches.

Leaving his wife and child at home, Adonia had galloped off on horseback.

When he eventually reached Jeiran Castle, he saw Naruyan banners. The Second Army was about to assault the castle.

“You're in the way! Move it!”

Adonia charged at Naruya's Second Army alone.

“Wh-Who are you?! A Gebelian spy?!”

The Naruyans naturally assumed that Adonia was performing some sort of espionage, so they tried to kill him. However, he deflected all of their attacks, and their arrows did not reach his back. Adonia mowed down his enemies like he was batting away flies as he continued his headlong rush toward Jeiran Castle.

He arrived as the Naruyan Army's vanguard was assaulting the castle gate.

Istin was the commander-in-chief of the Second Army, and Lucana served as his second-in-command. The defense of Jeiran Castle's gates was falling apart before a force led by the third highest-ranked member of the Ten Commanders.

"Has this country fallen so low that we can be beaten by the enemy's *Second* Army?" Adonia shouted at his allies. "You gutless cowards!"

Without another word, he raced into battle.

*

Of course, the Naruyans weren't going to let Adonia pass by them unscathed.

"Hey, you there! Who are you?"

Lucana stopped Adonia as he wove his way through the Naruyan Army. Breaking through their forces all alone, from the rear, wasn't something that any ordinary soldier could have done. And since it was clear that Adonia was an enemy, she obviously couldn't let him go.

So, Lucana took direct action.

She was an A-class commander, ranked seventh among the Ten Commanders. She never even considered she might lose.

But the moment she parried Adonia's blade, she was thrown from her horse.

His attack had been filled with mana.

She instantly braced herself for the fall, but with the power of his mana pressing down on her, she couldn't rise again immediately. Adonia continued on past her. She survived only because he was solely focused on getting to the castle.

Once Lucana went down, even more soldiers swarmed Adonia.

“Get lost!”

Adonia stopped, then unleashed a spinning attack with his sword. The powerful mana it emitted formed a fiery whirlwind, assaulting the soldiers. As the men burned in his firestorm, he easily burst through their encirclement.



Of course, even *Adonia* felt threatened when he was isolated in the middle of tens of thousands of enemies. However, because this was a siege battle, and the vast majority of them were focused on taking the castle, only so many of them could afford to turn and fight Adonia.

The soldiers around Adonia were reduced to ash, and he kept on galloping ahead. When he reached the gates, he dismounted from his horse, killed some soldiers climbing a siege ladder, and then climbed the walls himself. He also cut down the Naruyan forces fighting on top of the wall.

That was when Lord Jeiran noticed him.

Adonia was dressed like a farmer, so it was hard to identify who he was. Because this was a battle, the lord had to remain wary of an unknown man's intentions.

With all of the Naruyan soldiers on top of the wall slain thanks to Adonia, and Lucana injured, the enemy force temporarily withdrew. Lord Jeiran watched them go and then turned to Adonia, who was now surrounded by Gebelian soldiers.

"Who goes there?!" yelled Lord Jeiran.

Adonia was exasperated.

"You guys're useless!" he shouted, making Lord Jeiran jump a little. "Can't you even tell friend from foe?"

The man was certainly talented. That was precisely why the lord assumed that he couldn't be of common birth.

"If you are our ally, then identify yourself! What unit are you attached to?" Lord Jeiran demanded, following the usual protocol.

"I'm not attached to any unit... But I am Gebelian!"

Of course, Adonia had no intention of identifying himself. It mattered little, however, as he was already famous in the capital. Lord Jeiran may not have recognized him, but one of the lord's retainers took a good long look at Adonia's face.

Lord Jeiran rarely traveled to the capital, so he had only met Duke Plenett a

few times. He was also not a member of Duke Plenett's faction, so he wasn't called to the capital more often than he went on his own. Also, when Lord Jeiran paid taxes to the government, he always sent a retainer to act in his stead.

That very same retainer was staring at Adonia with his head cocked to the side. After a moment, he whispered in his lord's ear.

"I've seen that man before, my lord...in the house of Duke Plenett. He resembles the duke's son, Adonia."

"What?"

Lord Jeiran stared at his retainer in surprise. Then, he looked at Adonia once again.

"Now that you mention it, there were orders to search for him, weren't there?"

"Yes, that's right. There were! I'm sure of it now. With that talent, who else could he be?!"

After his retainer said this, Lord Jeiran rushed toward Adonia.

"Lower your weapons at once! Lower them, I say! Just who do you think you've been pointing them at?!" Lord Jeiran shouted at his men, even though he was the one who had given the order to surround Adonia.

The soldiers lowered their weapons with looks of exasperation.

"Where have you been all this time, Your Excellency?!"

Formally, Adonia held the rank of count. It was his father, Duke Plenett, who held the rank of duke. As the eldest son, he would immediately assume the title if his father died.

However, that was a world that Adonia had already walked away from.

"Everyone, on your knees! You're in the presence of a future duke!" Lord Jeiran shouted in an ostentatious fashion. There wasn't a person in the Gebel Kingdom who didn't know the Ducal House of Plenett, so the soldiers knelt down in surprise.

“That’s not important now!” Adonia snapped at the lord. “What happened to the kingdom’s pride?! Why are you losing so pitifully?!”

“Well...”

Jeiran couldn’t bring himself to say, “Because you didn’t show up.” Adonia was here now, and that was all that mattered.

“Attaaaaaack!”

“Kiiiiiiiii!”

That was when the Naruyan forces whose battle lines Adonia had broken finished regrouping and resumed the attack.

“Fine...” Adonia drew his sword and shouted, “Everyone, on your feet! I’ll lead our forces!”

*

Adonia Grebadia primarily wielded fire elemental mana with his sword. His mana was S-class too.

Obviously, he was able to use the element because he was S-class. It would have been impossible otherwise. A-class characters could only use their own personal skills. However, S-class characters had an element in addition to their skills, which made their mana that much more powerful.

With each swing of his sword, enemy soldiers fell as though they had been struck by a flaming cannon.

The commander of the Second Army, Istin, was a careful man. He’d never assumed that this war would end easily.

There were some among the Ten Commanders who were only there because of their incredible martial abilities. Medelian, for instance. Istin, on the other hand, had excellent scores in both Martial and Command, making him an ideal commanding officer.

The problem was that he was far too *quiet*. It was only with Lucana at his side that he could adequately communicate with his men. Without her, his forces would remain perfectly coordinated, but he wouldn’t be able to give complex commands.

The Second Army required both Istin *and* Lucana to function.

“Divide the army! Ten thousand of you, follow the commander. The remaining forty thousand, come with me to take the castle! These are the commander’s orders. Hurry up!” Lucana shouted, communicating on Istin’s behalf. The soldiers who had been taking on Adonia swiftly began to divide themselves into two groups.

“Basically...the ten thousand who go with you will be stalling that man who uses fire mana while we storm the gates, correct?” Lucana asked.

Istin nodded silently, and Lucana gave more orders.

The gates of Jeiran Castle were already practically broken. However, Adonia had suddenly arrived and yanked the Gebelian forces back onto their feet.

To counter this, Istin had switched to a strategy using two separate forces. His men surrounded Adonia while Istin came face-to-face with the man. Of course, after their first encounter, Istin was already aware that Adonia was his equal, and perhaps more than that. But now wasn’t the time for pride.

Istin had shown such great respect for Erheet because the man thought about what was best for his country and his own soldiers before himself.

Adonia pointed his sword at Istin. “You... You’re Istin of the Ten Commanders, aren’t you?”

Istin nodded, then swung his spear. Adonia deflected it, of course. But Istin used that moment to back away. Once he did, soldiers carrying shields rushed in to block Adonia.

“You small fry! Don’t get in my way!”

Adonia’s powerful mana took down hundreds of soldiers all at once. After the attack, Istin used his skill again, and once he’d bought some more time, he had the shield bearers stop Adonia again.

His ten thousand men were slowly ground down. But Adonia was being pulled away from the gates without noticing it.

After a while, Istin’s mana ran out, leaving him unable to use his skill to buy time. By now his ten thousand men had been reduced to two thousand.

And then, suddenly...

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

The gates opened, and forty thousand Naruyan men poured into Jeiran Castle all at once.

“Defend the commander!”

Istin’s men threw their own safety to the wind in order to stop Adonia, while Lucana surged around him and into the castle.

It took no time at all for the forty thousand Naruyan soldiers to overwhelm the slightly over ten thousand Gebelian defenders. The only way it would’ve been a fair fight was if the reinforcements from the Holy Ramie Kingdom had actually turned up.

“Damn it! This is shiiiiit!”

Realizing that the fall of the castle was now inevitable, Adonia began attacking Naruyan soldiers at random, intent on inflicting as many casualties as he could. He’d been able to fight an even battle against ten thousand men because he was one of the five S-class commanders on the continent. But any more than that was untenable.

And so, Jeiran Castle fell to the Royal Naruyan Army, and Adonia was forced to make a temporary retreat.

Having secured the castle, the Naruyan forces weren’t foolish enough to pursue him.

Adonia shouted angrily as he sprinted across the plains. Then, when he ran out of breath and stopped to sit down, a man appeared before him.

*

Adonia Grebadia was the eldest son of Plenett Grebadia and also one of only five S-class commanders on the continent.

Adonia Grebadia

Age: 24

Martial: 109

Intelligence: 61

Command: 84

An S-class commander is worth a thousand—no, ten thousand soldiers.

That was the kind of man sitting in front of me now, laid low by his recent defeat.

“I wish that I could congratulate you on a battle well fought, but I really can’t. You lost the castle.”

“Who the hell are you?!” yelled Adonia. “A Naruyan dog here to laugh at me?”

“Hey now, I’m no one’s dog. And if I was, I’d have killed you, not stopped to chat.” I shook my head. “I’ve got nothing to do with Naruya. I just came to offer you a word of advice, Adonia Grebadia.”

“Advice?” Adonia gave me a distrustful look.

“Yeah, that’s right. Strong as you are, there are limits to what you can accomplish alone. I know you may hate your father, but without a powerful unit at your command and a capable strategist, you’ll fail to protect the things you could have.”

Adonia rose to his feet, glaring at me. “How do you know about that?! Don’t tell me that father sent you!”

“Nah. I’m just here to offer some advice. Go back to your father. If you want to defend your country, that is.”

Adonia shook his head.

“You call that advice? Don’t make me laugh. Besides, I hear the enemy has an advisor called Valdesca. Garint probably can’t beat that guy. Our battle lines are constantly being pushed back. What’s going to change just because I decide to join in?”

“Well, why’d you come to Jeiran Castle, then?”

“I have family in Jeiran. If this place gets taken, Naruyan occupation will put them in danger. I’m going to take my family and run.”

“And abandon your country?” I asked.

“That’s not—!”

“If you’re there, the situation will change. I guarantee it.”

“That’s big talk, but who even are you?”

“Erhin Eintorian. That’s my name.”

“Huh?” Adonia looked incredibly surprised. “Eintorian...? That’s the name of the king who just started a new kingdom. What would he be doing here? You’re talking bullshit!”

“I came hoping to meet you,” I answered. “You’re absolutely essential to the defense of the Gebel Kingdom. Take your family and go back to your father’s place for now. He’d do well to stay away from the fighting for a while. You might do fine fleeing to another country, but what about your wife and child? Think about it carefully.”

Having said my piece, I turned to go.

Adonia remained silent. He was dumbstruck by what had just happened.

*

Ultimately, Adonia did as I told him to and returned to the capital with his family.

Duke Plenett would likely accept Adonia’s wife and son, if only to keep him around. Though, the duke could go back on that decision once the war was over. He would probably tell Adonia to keep his current wife as a mistress and take another woman as his real wife.

It doesn’t matter to me if their discord resumes once the war ends.

Obviously, Adonia joining up with the Royal Gebelian Army was not enough to cause any immediate change. Like Adonia had said, Garint wasn’t up to the task of beating Valdesca.

On top of that, Naruya had Cassia. He and Adonia hadn’t fought directly, but

his presence was part of the reason the Gebel Kingdom's battle lines were collapsing, and also why they'd been pushed back as far as the capital.

Gebel's only remaining domains were the three surrounding the capital: Midrett, Heberett, and Eugena.

Even the Gebel Kingdom had to understand how dire their predicament was.

These were the circumstances under which I visited Adonia's war camp in the Heberett Domain.

"It's *you*..." Adonia murmured. "Ahem, Sir Erhin. You certainly do get around, don't you?"

"I was right, wasn't I? You were better off returning home, if only temporarily."

"You were, but...I couldn't change the situation! If the capital falls, then I'll lose my family and my country! I should have run away—"

"No you shouldn't have," I said, cutting him off. "Because I'm here now to tell you how to change the situation."

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

"Request support from Eintorian. If our forces join yours, we can beat Naruya."

"Request support...from *Eintorian*?" Adonia repeated incredulously. It sounded like he thought this was an absurd suggestion.

"That's right," I insisted. "We've already prepared to dispatch reinforcements."

"Even I've heard that you beat Naruya twice. But even if you're telling the truth, why would you do it? I can't understand why you'd make us this offer right now!"

"Well, of course, there's something in it for us too." Indeed, we stood to gain an incredible amount. "It would be in our interest for Naruya to lose troops here in Gebel. If you can break Naruya's momentum, it will be easier for us to take back the former territory of Runan."

“Oh, I see... Well, that makes sense,” Adonia said with a nod of understanding.

“Gebel won’t owe us anything for the reinforcements. Our goal is to drive out the Naruyans. But I’m only going to provide the troops. I’ll request you to supply them with provisions. Of course, there’s been strife between your father and us, so I don’t know if he’ll actually make the request for assistance.”

“Yeah, that would be the problem...” Adonia scratched his head, possibly because he knew what had happened.

“That’s why you need to persuade him,” I insisted. “Garint will probably help you out with that. With your battle lines being constantly pushed back, he’ll have no choice but to listen to the two of you. If you can convince him, then next, I’ll tell you how to hold the line until my forces arrive.”

Adonia peered at me closely.

“Assuming that’s all true, the problem is that I can’t be certain whether you’re the real Erhin Eintorian.”

That was an important point. I could look up people’s names using the system, but Adonia had never seen me before.

“I’ve called Garint here for a strategy meeting,” Adonia continued. “He told me he met you before on the battlefield.”

As soon as he said that, the flap of Adonia’s tent was drawn back, and a man entered.

“What’s the King of Eintorian doing here?” asked Garint, who’d coincidentally stopped by the tent because he had business with Adonia. He looked absolutely shocked to see me.

Adonia nodded slowly.

Garint backed away involuntarily. Apparently, the way I’d taken out the Royal Ramien Army had left an impact on him. That effect had been further enhanced thanks to Medelian.

“Wh-What are you doing here...? N-No, it is an honor to see you!”

Garint meekly bowed his head. I wasn’t their king, but he paid me the

appropriate respect.

Adonia began laughing in disbelief.

“Ah hah hah hah hah! So, you *are* the King of Eintorian, then? Really?”

*

“I can’t believe this... Was the difference in strength truly this great?!” Duke Plenett shouted, a look of bewilderment plastered on his face.

If this continued, the country would collapse.

The Gebel Kingdom wasn’t like Runan. Their army wasn’t rotten and corrupt. He’d maintained a proper fighting force. And yet, look at what had happened.

“Damn it! Don’t just stand there in silence! Come up with a plan! Any plan!”

But the heads of the Royal Gebelian Army couldn’t say anything. No matter what plan they brought to the table, Valdesca would most certainly unravel it.

Duke Plenett could only clutch his head. If the battle lines were pushed back any farther, the enemy would enter the capital. That had to be prevented at all costs.

That’s when Adonia called him aside. The dispute between them was still unresolved, but this situation was far too serious for petty squabbling.

“It’s not too late to call for reinforcements, father!”

“Reinforcements?” Duke Plenett’s hands shook as he spoke. “Where are we going to get those when the Ramiens have already fled?! I’ve already asked the smaller nearby nations for assistance, but none have responded. They all act as if we’ve already fallen!”

“There’s one last nation you haven’t spoken to yet, isn’t there?”

Duke Plenett immediately asked, “Which one?”

“Eintorian, father.”

“*Eintorian?* Eintorian, he says... Why would we turn to *that* country?!”

“Father! They’re the only ones left at this point.”

Duke Plenett shook his head. “Not them... Never them! They are our

enemies! We can't turn to enemies for help!"

"Your Highness, it's true that they are interested in this war," Garint added helpfully. "Eintorian and Naruya are bitter rivals. If we provide the supplies, they will send reinforcements. The most important thing is that they also want to defeat Naruya."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Eintorian are seeking to reclaim the former domains of Runan," Garint explained.

"Still, we can't go begging to them, and even offer supplies!" the duke exclaimed. "It would be another thing if they were pleading with us to let them help!"

"Well, Your Highness... They will have other opportunities even if they don't take part in this war. They can also form an alliance with Ramie when Naruya invades there."

"Would you shut up?!" Duke Plenett shook his head, glaring at Garint.

But Gebel continued losing the next day too. Now that the situation had deteriorated this far, Duke Plenett was left with no other choice but to call in Eintorian. He'd accepted that he couldn't afford to be too prideful.

He summoned Garint late at night.

"You're certain you can bring them into this?"

"Yes," replied Garint. "Eintorian will definitely come. The capital must be defended at all costs. If we can just hold the capital until Eintorian arrives, the situation will change!"

The duke was silent.

"Now is not the time to dwell on past grievances. We need to drive out the Naruyans first, Your Highness!"

Having seen the strength of Eintorian with his own eyes, Garint was thinking that Eintorian might be the only nation that could make a breakthrough and turn things in a more favorable direction.

“Call them at once!” ordered Duke Plenett. “No, send a request. They can have supplies if they want them!”

If this was the only straw he had left to cling to, then cling to it he would. It was better than losing everything without trying anything.

*

“The envoy has set out for Eintorian,” said Adonia. “He should arrive sometime tomorrow.”

“That sounds about right,” I agreed with a nod.

The time has come.

Time for New Eintorian to unveil its greatness to the entire continent.

“Now let me tell you how to hold the line until my soldiers arrive,” I said. “This is where the real war begins. Adonia, I’m about to show you just how strong a man like you can be when paired with a proper strategist.”

*

The war to occupy the Gebel Kingdom now focused on an intense back-and-forth struggle over the three domains in front of the capital. If the line broke there, the enemy would reach the capital in no time. The Gebelians would hold it for as long as they drew breath, but the situation was overwhelmingly in Naruya’s favor.

Valdesca was commanding the Naruyan Army.

“We have trouble, sir!” announced one of Naruya’s staff officers.

The war was going exceptionally well from the Naruyans’ perspective. There had been hardly any unknown variables that would have resulted in unpredictable outcomes, so Valdesca was surprised to hear of trouble.

He turned to face his advisor. “Calm down. What will the men think if a staff officer blows things out of proportion?”

The chief of staff had many staff officers serving under him. This staff officer, who came from the house of a count, looked around to see who might have overheard his outburst.

“I-I’m terribly sorry!”

“It’s fine. Now settle down and tell me about it. What is this trouble we’re facing?”

When Valdesca asked this, the man quickly forgot how “sorry” he was and went right back to panicking.

“They’ve attacked our supply unit. Just this morning, the main supply unit was en route to the front lines when reports came in that they had been wiped out in an ambush! Wiped out, sir!”

“What do you mean? I need details. The Gebel Kingdom shouldn’t have any spare troops they can use to attack us from behind. But more than that, how would they even know what route our supply unit would be taking?”

“We are not entirely sure yet. We have been making use of multiple supply routes, so the other units are still intact, but...”

Broadly speaking, Naruya was currently using three supply routes. The stockpile of supplies was located at the rear base in Remenett Castle, and there were over fifty thousand troops stationed there. The supplies then had to be sent from there to the front lines, but that was a rather short distance to travel, so it should have been difficult for the enemy to intercept them. That is, assuming the scouts remained attentive.

“Sir, this is bad! They’ve taken out the other supply units!”

Valdesca’s expression grew dubious as the reports came in one after another.

“What kind of force could possibly be attacking our supplies?”

“Actually...it wasn’t a whole force. It was just one man...”

The aide-de-camp who had delivered this most recent report could hardly believe the words coming out of his own mouth, and it showed in his eyes. He was passing the information along because that was what the report said, but the idea that just one man might have done this seemed absurd.

However, for Valdesca, this explained everything. If the enemy had moved around a force large enough to destroy their supply lines, Naruya would have noticed. He just couldn’t imagine all of his scouts missing it—his forces weren’t

that incompetent. Therefore, the Gebel Kingdom *couldn't* have sent a detachment to attack the supplies.

A single man, on the other hand? That was possible.

Valdesca's brow furrowed as he approached the map. The other staff officers automatically gathered around.

"There is only one man who could cut our supply lines all on his own. It must be Adonia Grebadia. We should at least check. Bring in a prisoner who knows Adonia's face."

"Yes, sir!"

"Ah, hold on a moment," said Valdesca. "I believe that Istin and Lucana encountered him before, correct?" He took a beat to ponder this, but ultimately, he was hesitant to call the two of them. If they came here, their part of the front line would be pushed back. "No, never mind. Just bring the prisoner for now."

"Yes, sir!"

Once he confirmed what Adonia looked like with one of the prisoners, he was certain that Adonia was the one targeting their supply lines. However, knowing and being able to stop him were two different things.

A few days after the first report, there were definite signs of fracture. Supplies had failed to reach the front lines, and that was having an effect on the soldiers.

The army couldn't store all of their supplies on the front lines. It would massively impact their mobility. The most common solution to this was to amass supplies inside the safety of a castle they had captured. But because the supply units headed to the front lines were being continuously attacked, there was a negative impact on the troops, and Naruya ended up having to temporarily halt their attacks.

Not eating was terrible for morale. Obviously, the troops had less energy when they were hungry, but there was a psychological effect on them too. After all, it was said that ninety percent of warfare was logistics.

Supply units were weaker than assault units. If an S-class commander was

attacking them, then of course there would be mass casualties.

But as the losses piled up, that in turn made the next target more obvious.

Valdesca gathered his staff officers to tell them what they were going to do about it.

“Call the Ten Commanders. We need to lay a trap!”

While cutting their supply lines might have blunted the Naruyan troops’ momentum and forced things into a stalemate, all Adonia had managed to do was buy time.

If anything, this plan of his was a blunder. Attacking the supply units was a brilliant move by itself, but if Adonia himself was the one doing it...

“If the supply units are being attacked, then that means Adonia is not at Heberett Castle,” Valdesca reasoned. “There are two rabbits before us, and we shall chase both. I will pursue Adonia with the Ten Commanders. While we are doing that, our forces will occupy the Heberett Domain, which Adonia was guarding. The castle was only holding because Adonia was there. It should fall in no time. Does everyone understand?”

“Yes, sir!”

During this strategy meeting, an urgent message arrived from the king.

“Sir! His Majesty! His Majesty is coming! He says to stop the advance so we can take on Adonia!”

“Aah... His Majesty has always been rather interested in the Gebel Kingdom’s S-class commander.”

Valdesca furrowed his brow. He’d been making a point of *not* letting the king meet Adonia.

When Cassia had heard the initial rumors about Adonia, he’d insisted, “I’m going to take him on.” Valdesca had only *just* managed to convince Cassia to attack the capital instead, but the king had changed his mind, and now he once again wanted to battle Adonia.

Valdesca didn’t have any fears of Cassia losing in a fight. However, he couldn’t risk some unknown variable appearing on the battlefield. Up until now, the king

had been leading the unit attacking the enemy capital. Although, even *they* were being affected by the supply shortage.

The plan had been for them to conquer the three domains, forcing Gebel to divide their attention while Cassia launched a direct assault on the capital. However, once the king heard that someone was single-handedly taking out their supply units, his personality would never let him stay quiet about it.

“We’ll have to catch Adonia before then...”

If Cassia arrived and ordered them all to stand back so he could face Adonia personally, they wouldn’t be able to use any kind of trap. As such, it was of paramount importance that they execute Valdesca’s plan as soon as possible.

Obviously, all of this caused a decisive delay in their offensive, and the front lines bogged down.

*

“So you want us to trade places now?” asked Adonia. He’d been attacking the supply routes I’d investigated, and to great effect.

Valdesca’s no idiot. If Adonia keeps on going, he’ll actually be in more danger.

“That’s right. You head back to Heberett. There’s a possibility that the entire enemy force will head there, so you go and stop them with all your might. If you can hold out...if you can buy enough time, then the Eintorian Army should be arriving shortly.”

“And what will you be doing, King Erhin?”

“Taking your place and pretending to be you to attract attention. We just need to draw things out. Valdesca doesn’t yet know that I’m secretly involved.”

“So Valdesca will throw everything at you, thinking he’s taking me on...but I’ll be at Heberett, and when his men attack, I go on the counterattack! Hah hah hah!”

For some reason, Adonia burst into a strange laugh.

“No matter how I look at it, you’re clearly more of a danger than Naruya!” he declared. “You give me goose bumps. You’ve got us all dancing to your tune. I couldn’t help but laugh. This alliance of ours is obviously just temporary. In the

end, I'm sure you're going to be Gebel's enemy too."

Adonia didn't take his eyes off of me.

"Well, I'm not going to disagree," I said. "That will likely be the case... But let's focus on the present. We can think about that *after* saving Gebel, all right? We each have clearly defined goals, after all. Or were you hoping to take my head here and now?"

Adonia shook his head. "It looks like I'll have to play along. But...I'm sure I'll come to rue the day I invited you into this country."

After he said that, Adonia laughed again.

*

"You ordered the supply unit to travel along this road, right?" asked Valdesca. "You made absolutely sure of it?"

Valdesca's aide-de-camp nodded. "There won't be any issue. I've confirmed it repeatedly."

"Then I want you to continue observing."

"Yes, sir!"

Having given the man his orders, Valdesca turned to Istin. Istin nodded without a word. With Lucana wounded, Istin had to come alone. Communicating with the taciturn commander was a little difficult, but Istin had yet to misunderstand one of Valdesca's commands.

He wasn't a problem. The real issue was—

"What about me, bro?"

"*You* will be staying by my side for now."

"Whaaa, that's *boring*! I wanna fight too!"

—his restless little sister. Valdesca pressed a hand against his forehead. However, if he was going to stop Adonia, he needed both Medelian and Istin.

Valdesca was chasing after the supply unit.

He couldn't bring a whole fighting force with him. It would've been too

obvious. If the enemy noticed them and didn't attack the supply unit, that would be a problem. For that reason, he'd chosen to take a small but elite squad including Istin, one of his aides-de-camp, and Medelian.

Obviously, in a head-to-head battle, Adonia probably still held the upper hand, even with Istin and Medelian around.

How would Istin and Medelian fare in a battle against Cassia? They would put up a good fight, but they couldn't win. Valdesca joining the fray wouldn't change the result unless there was one more condition in play.

Generally speaking, an S-class commander couldn't be beaten using traps. That was why Adonia was able to run around attacking the supply units without worrying about such things. However, if the trap was a *mana circle*, that changed things.

If the supply unit they were following was ambushed, Valdesca intended to send in Istin and Medelian as a distraction while he used the Circle of Sealing.

He had used the same tactic while taking Gebel's strategic pass, but by limiting the area that the circle covered, he could pour even more mana into it. No one would be able to leave the circle until he dispelled it or ran out of mana.

He meant to contain Adonia, not kill him.

The Gebel Kingdom was no match for his forces without Adonia.

Obviously, Valdesca couldn't use the Circle of Sealing over and over. This would probably be the last time he could use it during this war.

But that was no issue. Not even if it was Erhin Eintorian who showed up instead. Erhin no doubt had some strange ability that would allow him to dispel the Circle of Sealing anyway, so Valdesca saw no point conserving it for a fight against him.

"They're being attacked, sir!"

Finally, someone took the bait. Valdesca looked at Istin and Medelian. After exchanging glances, they rushed off in the direction of the supply unit.

*

There was no need to reveal my identity, so I put on Adonia's clothes and

donned a mask to attack the supply unit.

No traps had been prepared on any of the supply units I had wiped out yesterday. But that was actually good for me. The longer it took for Valdesca to show up, the more time I'd be able to buy.

I'm only keeping up this charade until he appears.

The unit coming from Eintorian would arrive soon. The Gebel Kingdom was going to supply them, so they didn't have to bring their own supply units, and that meant they could march faster than normal. In fact, I had already bought enough time for them to arrive.

However, I maintained this ruse because keeping Valdesca away from the front lines was advantageous to me.

Valdesca will be assuming that Adonia is still out here, so he will have sent troops to attack Heberett in Adonia's absence. And if Valdesca's here, then Adonia should be able to take out a good chunk of the Naruyan troops advancing on Heberett Castle.

Without their brain, Valdesca, or their heart, Cassia, the Royal Naruyan Army is just an army like any other. Adonia should be able to turn the situation to his advantage.

I repeatedly used the Attack command to wipe out the supply unit.

"It's an ambush!"

"There's the enemy! Kill him!"

The supply unit soldiers started coordinating closely with one another, but they were still just a supply unit and therefore no threat to me.

However, it looked like the enemy had run out of patience. I could see Valdesca, Medelian, and Istin coming my way.

All right, time to run.

*

"There he is, sir!"

"I see him! Begin the plan!" Valdesca nodded, glancing at Medelian and Istin.

He then dismounted his horse to begin preparing the mana circle.

“Huh?” his subordinates uttered in surprise. Valdesca hurriedly got back on his horse.

They were taken aback—the person they assumed was Adonia had suddenly started to run away.

Istin gave Valdesca a look that asked, “Do we chase him?”

“We chase him!” Valdesca ordered with a nod. Istin and Medelian took off after the fleeing enemy.

“By the way, does Adonia always wear a mask?” Valdesca asked his aide-de-camp. It seemed suspicious because if Adonia did indeed wear a mask, they wouldn’t have been able to get a description of his appearance.

“No, we’ve received no reports indicating that.”

That was not what Valdesca had been hoping to hear. He had a bad feeling about this. Cold sweat ran down his back.

“Recall Istin and Medelian at once! Hurry!”

The man was wearing a mask when there was no need for him to. He’d also run away at the first sight of them. If he’d fled that quickly, that meant he knew who they were. And he obviously knew them well enough that he could be certain of their identities at a distance.

I have a very bad feeling about this.

“Sir?”

“Something is wrong! Please, hurry!” Valdesca urged.

“U-Understood!”

The aide-de-camp that Valdesca had brought along mounted his horse and rushed off.

“Get the supply unit back in formation and proceed to the front on schedule. We have a supply shortage on the front lines.”

“Ah, understood. We’ll do that, sir!”

Once he'd given the supply unit their orders, Valdesca went to follow his aide-de-camp. He needed to join up with the others again before doing anything else.

It's beyond suspicious that he's wearing a mask. It couldn't be, but...is Adonia trying to get us to chase him? Despite being the Gebel Kingdom's one and only S-class commander...?

Valdesca scratched his head, feeling suddenly doubtful.

If that masked man wasn't Adonia, then who the hell was he? The Gebel Kingdom didn't have anyone else who could single-handedly wipe out a supply unit. That limited the possibilities for the man's identity.

And as far as Valdesca knew, there was only one man who would execute a plan like this.

What if he's already intervening in the war?

Valdesca hadn't expected this war to be easy. He'd anticipated an Eintorian intervention all along.

But I didn't expect it to be happening already...

"Damn!"

That was when Valdesca realized something. If Adonia wasn't here, then where was he? If even the king was headed this way, then the members of the Ten Commanders who were headed to Heberett Castle were in danger.

This place wasn't important right now.

Valdesca changed course on his own.

He needed to send a message to the force attacking Heberett Castle.

*

As they chased after the enemy, Medelian cocked her head to the side. She felt like she'd seen this back turned to her and running away once before. The memories of the hours she'd spent chasing him came back to her. Even disguised as he was, she'd never mistake him for anyone else. Medelian was certain of it.

“Istin, stop!” she shouted, pulling back on the reins of her horse. “You go and protect my brother. This guy’s too far away for the Circle of Sealing anyway. I’ll join back up with you after I see where he flees to, so you go on ahead.”

Istin blinked dubiously at this.

It was true that Valdesca was alone. But that didn’t seem like any reason to disobey his orders to pursue. Military law was incredibly harsh, and breaking it without good reason was out of the question.

Medelian got angry at the man’s hesitation. “Hey, Istin! Are you refusing my orders?!”

But that’s when Valdesca’s aides-de-camp arrived. “Lady Medelian! Lord Istin! You have orders to pull back at once!”

Once he heard that, Istin finally turned his horse around. However, Medelian shook her head.

“I don’t mind pulling back, but let my brother know I’m going to find out where this guy’s fleeing to first. You can all head back before me!” Medelian turned her horse, a look of satisfaction on her face.

“Please wait, Lady Medelian!”

She ignored the aide-de-camp calling after her.

She was going to have to pursue the trail of her enemy using only the hoofprints he’d left behind.

*

I couldn’t run north forever. The question of whether to attack the supply unit again or to head back still remained, but...

“This is good enough,” I concluded. As much as I might have liked to attack the supply unit again, that could have proven more trouble than it was worth. I’d bought enough time, so it was a good opportunity to head home.

I turned my horse, meaning to take the long route around using the road opposite the one that I had fought on earlier.

Besides...Valdesca probably caught on since I ran so quickly. He’ll be rushing to

Heberett Castle around now. He's got to be in a hurry too, so we won't run into each other...right?

As I was thinking that, an awfully familiar woman appeared in front of me.

"I knew it!"

Knew what?

"It was *you* after all!"

"Who are you? I don't think I know."

Since I had the mask on still, I tried to feign ignorance. Medelian covered her mouth as she burst out laughing.

"That's just adorable!"

"What do you mean...?"

I didn't have the heart to try to keep on pretending. Still, calling an enemy *adorable*? I had no idea what she was thinking.

"It's adorable! You can't disguise your voice, but you still think you can go on claiming it's not you just because you've got a mask on!"

I took off the mask out of exasperation. "We've only met a couple of times, and you already know my voice?"

Medelian scowled. "And you *don't* know mine?"

"No, I remember you. You're pretty unusual..."

"Sure am! Hee hee. Well, as long as we both remember, it's all good!"

What's so good about it?

I was worried I might have to fight her again, but that wasn't the vibe she was giving off right now. If I'd had to, I could've driven her off. I'd already proven that I could beat her, and since I hadn't used Daitoren yet, its time limit wasn't an issue.

"So tell me. What're you doing here?" she asked.

"You'll probably figure it out soon enough. If you don't want to fight, I'd appreciate it if you could let me go."

“Why? I don’t wanna.” Medelian shook her head with a look of annoyance.

“You don’t wanna... So, what? We’re fighting again?”

“Oh, I do wanna fight! But not right now.” She shook her head again.

“Because if I lose, I’ll get sent flying back home.”

Well, if you don’t want to pretend we never met, and you don’t want to fight, then where does that leave us?

“Okay, so what do we do?” I asked.

“I’m gonna follow you!”

“Erm, Medelian? I’m probably going to end up fighting Naruya. You’re not planning to betray them, are you?” I asked with a shrug.

Medelian suddenly got all cheerful again. “You’re going to fight us?”

“That’s right. It’s what I’m here for.”

“You mean it? We’re really gonna fight?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Hee hee, great! In that case, it’s all good then. I won’t follow you.”

Sure changes her opinion fast, doesn’t she?

“I’ll see you on the battlefield, then?” she asked.

“In all likelihood, yeah, but— Hey, wait.”

“Okay, I’ll go obey my brother’s orders now. Because I may end up disobeying him later!”

With that nonsensical comment, Medelian turned her horse and rode off. The sword on her back hadn’t floated into the air once the whole time.

“What was that about...?”

I didn’t understand the situation. It’d left me with a headache.

Valdesca was incredibly dangerous, but at least I could predict him somewhat. Medelian, though? She was beyond my comprehension.

Well, let’s just forget about her for now. As long as she has one of those

accursed tools the members of the House of Valdesca like to carry around, there's no point in fighting her.

Trying to understand what cannot be understood is a waste of time.

*

“Your Highness! We’ve received word that the Eintorian Army is heading this way!”

After hearing Garint’s report, Duke Plenett went up onto the walls around the capital. It was true that he needed a mighty army, but...

Too powerful an army would actually be a source of worry for him, so he wouldn’t be at ease until he had seen the Eintorian reinforcements for himself.

“Those are the lancers you spoke of?”

“Yes, Your Highness... They’re incredibly dangerous, but they should make for reliable allies. That man riding at the front is Erheet Demacine. His martial abilities are no match for your son’s, but his ability to command troops is among the best on the continent.”

Even Eintorian’s rank-and-file soldiers were on another level, and they had better equipment too. The soldiers of the Gebel Kingdom gulped when they saw them...while at the same time, thanking their lucky stars that they had come as reinforcements.

*

“I’m hooome...?”

Medelian quietly slunk into Valdesca’s command tent, trying to gauge his reaction as she did.

Of course, Valdesca barked at her for disobeying his orders.

“Medelian!”

“It’s not like that! I didn’t violate your orders! It’s just...the guy was way too suspicious, so I wanted to keep going a little longer to find out who he was!”

Hearing these excuses, Valdesca slapped his forehead and let out a long sigh.
“And? Was your pursuit a success?”

“Uh, yeah... In a way!”

By contrast, Medelian was a bundle of positivity. She was so cheerful that it was easy for him to figure out why.

“Based on your reaction, it was *him*, like I thought,” Valdesca said with certainty.

Medelian was quick to nod. “Yep! This war’s going to get fun. *And* it means I don’t have to go to Eintorian again!”

Valdesca’s shoulders slumped. He had no idea what was going on in Medelian’s head.

It doesn’t seem like she wants to join him. Don’t tell me she’s in love...?

At this point, even Valdesca was starting to think that his little sister might be feeling sweet for his rival. After all, Medelian was delighted that Erhin had shown up on the opposing side. Even if the war weren’t a factor, he’d be worried because she was his little sister. The mystery of what Medelian wanted from Erhin was only growing larger.

Wham!

Valdesca slammed his forehead into his desk.

“W-Well, I’ll be going now!”

When she saw that, Medelian vanished, leaving Valdesca to tear his hair out. He had bigger problems to think about right now. He could worry about her later.

The real issue was that he was facing Eintorian yet again.

But this time, the full might of Naruya was on the field. Valdesca even had both of his trump cards, Medelian and Cassia.

This is the one fight I can’t lose.

There was another loud thud as Valdesca slammed his head into the desk again to clear his mind.

*

Adonia had been unusually effective in cutting off the enemy’s supplies.

However, now that Naruya had a means of neutralizing him, that kind of strategy was no longer available.

As a result, the plan had to be completely reformulated.

The problem was that I couldn't appear openly. This wasn't a war of conquest. It was strictly us responding to a request for aid from a neighboring country. There were all sorts of problems with a king like me showing up in person.

So, for public purposes, the leader of the reinforcements was Erheet.

He had Heina supporting him as an advisor. That personnel selection was sure to raise Duke Plenett's blood pressure, which was exactly why I'd chosen her.

Instead of heading to the front, I joined up with the rear unit led by Yusen before entering the Gebelian capital.

The number of reinforcements we had dispatched to participate in this war was sixty thousand. During this period, Fihatori had been tasked with defending the homeland. He was the perfect man to have in place in case something happened while I was away.

All of my other commanders were here: Erheet, Jint, Heina, Yusen, and Gibun.

I split my forces into two armies. The First Army was led by Erheet and the Second by Yusen.

Our reinforcements weren't able to enter the capital, so we camped outside while the key members went to the palace for an audience with King Gebel.

That left only Jint with me.

Euracia had traveled to the Gebel Kingdom with me, but we'd split up after I'd assigned her another task. I unfurled a map with Jint, our representative quiet guy, standing beside me.

This may have been obvious, but the Royal Gebelian Army's situation was not good. They'd had a massive force of three hundred thousand men, but half of it was now gone. Combined with my forces, that brought us to two hundred and ten thousand troops. We had the Royal Naruyan Army outnumbered, at least.

Although, if Gebel's defenses kept breaking and they kept on losing siege battles, the issue wasn't with the soldiers, but with their commanders.

That was how the Gebelian front line had been pushed back so far that we were facing the Naruyans across the three domains in front of the capital: Midrett, Heberett, and Eugena. Those three domains were now effectively the front line.

The Royal Naruyan Army had divided their forces into armies of roughly sixty thousand troops each, and they had been attacking all of them simultaneously.

Between our disruptive attacks on their supply units and my own forces arriving, the Naruyan Army had been forced to stop pressing the attack. We were now at a lull in the fighting.

They're going to have to change tactics now too.

I had been able to suggest our earlier strategy thanks to Adonia. While he was attacking the supply units, the Naruyan king, Cassia, hadn't been on the front line.

The king hadn't been with Valdesca and the members of the Ten Commanders who came up from the rear. He also hadn't been fighting to take any of the three domains. By extension, that meant he'd been pursuing another mission.

Could he have been taking some circuitous route to launch a surprise attack on the capital? If not for Eintorian joining the war and Adonia's attacks on the supply units, that plan would have undoubtedly ended in success.

But things are different now.

King Cassia of Naruya has probably pulled back to his own camp. That means we have to assume he'll be coming at us with a different plan.

Knowing that, I went around to each of the front lines, confirming the composition of the enemy's forces using the system. I was trying to predict Naruya's next move so I could counter it.

"Jint, place this on Midrett Castle."

I tossed a tiny wooden horse to Jint. It had "Royal Naruyan Army Second Army" written on it. Jint did as I asked and placed the horse where Midrett Castle was on the map.

Istin was the commander of the Second Army. After taking Jeiran, he had immediately advanced toward Midrett.

“This one goes on Heberett.”

The Third Army was led by a commander named Bleicke who had risen to become the third-ranked member of the Ten Commanders after the last guy had died in the previous war.

“And this one goes on Eugena Castle.”

That left the Fourth Army, led by Maruand, the fourth-ranked member of the Ten Commanders. He was an A-class commander.

The ninth-and tenth-ranked members of the Ten Commanders were only on the upper end of B-class, but Medelian was capable of using abilities that effectively put her in S-class.

Looking at the Royal Gebelian Army as a whole, they had one S-class commander in Adonia, as well as four A-class commanders who were known as the Four Generals. Well, there were only three now, since I had killed Rutecca in South Runan.

Altogether, Gebel didn't have enough commanders to fight Naruya.

The Second, Third, and Fourth Armies were under the direct command of Valdesca and were fighting on the front lines.

The problem is the First Army.

Their vanguard captain was Medelian, and their commander was the commander-in-chief, King Cassia of Naruya himself.

Now that the First Army had rejoined the front line, Naruya currently had a total manpower of one hundred and eighty-seven thousand. Just looking at that number, combined with the level of the commanders that had been deployed... Well, it was clear that this war would have the attention of the entire continent.

It was the hundred and eighty-seven thousand strong Royal Naruyan Army against the two hundred and ten thousand strong Gebel-Eintorian Alliance. But with the numbers so close, it wasn't troop counts that mattered.

It was how well each side could use them.

“Oh, right, Jint,” I said, suddenly remembering something. “That kid you’re training, Damon. Has he gotten to the point where you think he’d be of any use?”

“If you want him...he fights well.”

During the last war, I had uncovered a young diamond in the rough, Damon. He was currently being trained by Jint, and I’d had him participate in this war as one of Jint’s subordinates. If he proved himself useful, I meant to assign him a relatively important mission.

*

“You’re saying *those* are the lancers who drove off the Ramiens?”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Duke Yohanett, a member of the Gebelian royal family, smiled as he observed the Eintorian forces. He could see their strength—it was no wonder that they’d been able to drive off the Royal Ramien Army.

“To think Plenett would suddenly request Eintorian’s assistance when he had been so averse to the idea before. Things have certainly gotten interesting.”

“Well, since their aid has prevented our lines from falling back any farther, isn’t it for the best that he did?” suggested Yohanett’s retainer.

“Yes, you do have a point there,” Duke Yohanett agreed, nodding.

Duke Plenett currently held all of the authority, so any failure on his part would be to Duke Yohanett’s advantage. However, if Plenett’s mistake led to the fall of the nation, that would be a problem.

Duke Yohanett would have to cooperate for now.

“Still, I have my doubts. Regardless of how elite these lancers are, will their arrival really have a dramatic effect on the situation? Duke Plenett’s pride and joy, Adonia, joined the war effort, but conditions haven’t changed in the slightest.”

“Well...we’re likely better off with Eintorian than without them,” said the retainer. “If they act as shields for our men, then that’s good enough.”

Yohanett nodded once more. “Well, I suppose so... It’s better to have them, yes. Still, it amuses me to no end. Just having to call for Eintorian’s aid is already a defeat for Duke Plenett. Because, despite crowing about how well prepared we were for this war, it’s been nothing but one loss after another. If he can’t win this, I’m sure I’ll be able to have him removed from power...”

“I spoke with Garint. He said that with Adonia by our side—as well as Eintorian, who have already bested the Naruyans once—we should be more than capable of turning this around.”

“It’s Plenett I have a problem with!” Duke Yohanett exclaimed. “He’ll be joining up with the Eintorian Army and leading them on the front lines, right?”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“How shameless. The man’s already failed as a commander. Isn’t it about time that he takes responsibility for his actions and allows someone else to take over? If we’re so certain of victory, then ideally, I’d want to call him to account for his failures. I would prefer to keep him tied down in the capital while someone from *our* house distinguishes themselves in his place...”

This was Duke Yohanett’s greatest problem: Plenett had been given a position that matched his abilities.

Yohanett wouldn’t deny that. A loudmouth like himself could only talk big, but his fellow duke did, in fact, have actual talent. Would Yohanett be able to do what Plenett couldn’t? Certainly not. Duke Yohanett knew himself too well to think otherwise. It was what frustrated him so much about this situation.

As he was fuming about it, his head chamberlain approached. “Your Highness, a guest from the Eintorian Army has come to visit. They say they wish to see you. What shall we do about it?”

“From Eintorian?” Duke Yohanett looked at the retainer he had been talking to before. The man shook his head, having no idea who this unexpected guest could be.

The head chamberlain observed their reactions, then asked, “Would you like me to chase them off?”

Yohanett weighed his options for a moment before shaking his head. “Chase

them off? Hold on, we can't go mistreating the reinforcements. I'll have to at least meet with them."

With this order, the head chamberlain nodded and left the room. He soon returned with the guest—a graceful woman with her hair cut short.

"Greetings, Your Highness. My name is Heina."



The world of politics was merciless, and at the end of the day, the winner was the winner, regardless of what methods they used to get there. That was why Erhin had sent Heina Berhin to do political maneuvering. She was the most adept politician among his followers.

“Heina, you say?”

“Yes, I am Heina Berhin.”

Duke Yohanett searched his memories, trying to remember where he’d heard of her before. He wasn’t the type to remember the names of those who were beneath him in rank, but he did recognize hers for some reason. This signified that she was somehow special.

Duke Yohanett, who was well aware of the prejudices of his memory, took another look at Heina. But her face was unfamiliar. Of that, he was certain. He glanced at his retainer. The man looked as if he’d already figured something out.

Fortunately, the retainer had a better memory than his master. He approached Yohanett and whispered, “Your Highness, she is the one who pulled the wool over Duke Plenett’s eyes during the South Runan incident...”

Upon hearing this, Duke Yohanett clapped his hands with glee and welcomed Heina with an unusual enthusiasm.

“You’re the schemer who fooled Duke Plenett, aren’t you?” Duke Yohanett asked with a big smile. “I only wish we could have met sooner. You must be the first to have ever humiliated him so utterly!”

“I am honored by your kind words,” Heina replied, her own smile much cooler. It was an expression that revealed nothing of the feeling that lay beneath it. “Now then, I have a favor to ask of you. It involves Duke Plenett...”

Those words were enough to tell Duke Yohanett all he needed to know about her.

Heina Berhin had come bearing the good fortune he had long been waiting for.

“We’ll use Eintorian’s forces as much as we possibly can. Send the Eintorian Army to the front lines of every battlefield!”

This was the policy Duke Plenett had taken as commander of the combined forces.

“Father, shouldn’t we confer with Eintorian before deciding on our strategy?” Adonia suggested.

“We’re providing the supplies, so it’s only natural that they follow our plans,” Duke Plenett countered. “What is the problem with putting Eintorian’s troops at the front like Garint’s strategy suggests? If you care one whit for that miserable lowborn concubine of yours, you’ll shut your mouth and do as you’re told!”

Duke Plenett had been forced to swallow his pride and call for reinforcements from Eintorian, a nation he strongly disliked. As such, he was feeling even more stubborn than usual. A full sixty thousand Eintorian men had come to Gebel’s aid, and he intended to take as much advantage of them as he could by positioning them as sacrificial pawns.

“Father!”

Adonia opposed Duke Plenett’s approach. He felt it was important to consult Eintorian about their strategy. When the duke brought up his wife and son again, he exploded with anger.

He’d thought his father had finally accepted them, but now he was calling her a *concubine*. Adonia had never once thought of his wife that way. She was a commoner, but that fact was unimportant to him. She was the only woman for him, now and forever.

“Well, let’s set that matter aside for now. We can discuss it once the war ends,” said Duke Plenett. “There’s been a lull in the fighting on the front lines, so we’ll try a night raid.”

“A night raid?” asked Adonia.

“I mean to use Eintorian’s lancers for it. They’re supposed to be strong on the plains, right?”

This was yet another plan that threw away soldiers without considering the big picture. These sorts of strategies had enabled their enemy to push back the front lines quite far. Even with the addition of sixty thousand more troops, would anything change as long as Gebel continued doing things the same way?

This wasn't the time for meaningless battles of attrition. In order to change the situation, they needed a new strategy with a clear view of what victory looked like.

"Father, it's time to change how you think. Eintorian has an excellent advisor. Why not hold a meeting with him and see what he has to say?"

"A meeting, huh? If he has good ideas, I'll listen. But shouldn't he show us what he's capable of first?"

Suddenly, Adonia realized the point of all this: Duke Plenett was executing the night raid to facilitate an Eintorian defeat. The hope was that the experience of losing would make them more obedient.

Adonia balled his hands into fists.

The duke was always like this. He had used his son's considerable martial prowess purely as a tool to build up the House of Plenett. And if he was willing to use his own son that way, then there was no chance that he would ever truly rely on the Eintorian Army.

Erhin's plan was the only thing that'd kept the front lines from being pushed all the way back to the capital before the Eintorian forces could arrive. His strategy had also allowed Adonia to score Gebel's first victory in a while against the defenseless Naruyan charge toward Heberett Castle. The Naruyans had been quick to retreat, but it had been a long time since Adonia experienced such a satisfying win.

That was why Adonia was completely in favor of Erhin's assertion that strategy was paramount. The way things stood, not only was Duke Plenett no longer needed, but his presence was actively harmful to the Gebel Kingdom.

"Hey, step aside!"

Suddenly, there was a commotion. Their eyes naturally turned toward the outside of the camp.

Soon, a man entered the stables.

“Duke Yohanett?”

Adonia regarded this unexpected visitor with suspicion, while Duke Plenett’s brow furrowed with the sort of contempt reserved for cockroaches.

“Where do you think you are? You have no place here. Get out at once!” Duke Plenett demanded in an intimidating tone.

Yohanett simply smiled and then opened the letter he was carrying.

“Your Highness, Duke Plenett. His Majesty wishes to speak with you, so it seems you’ll be needing to return to the capital. I have here a royal decree that appoints me as interim commander until your return.”

The laughter in Yohanett’s voice caused Duke Plenett to stand up and roar, “What nonsense is this?! His Majesty would never issue such an order in the middle of a war!”

“You intend to defy his command, then?”

“Shut up. Adonia, get rid of him for me!” Plenett shouted.

However, Adonia merely shook his head. “This is a valid order. It cannot be ignored.”

Duke Plenett snatched the letter out of Adonia’s hands. His expression filled with despair as he read it.

*

When Cassia returned to the Naruyan Army camp, all of his men were there, bowing down as they welcomed him.

But the king was not in a good mood.

Going somewhere and having nothing to show for it was a waste of his time, and he hated that more than anything. So, having just finished wasting his time, his anger was at its peak. And yet...it had been his *own* decision to take troops and ride off to defeat Adonia. He couldn’t blame Valdesca for this one.

“What is the plan?” he asked Valdesca, keeping his words short out of frustration.

Valdesca went on to explain their current policy. It was the ultimate strategy, born as the result of much difficulty on his part.

“Sire, the Ramie Kingdom once asked us for an alliance.”

“Did they?”

Cassia’s response was curt and disinterested, but Valdesca was used to that and just continued on.

“The Ramiens formed an alliance with the Gebel Kingdom, but the reinforcements they sent have since returned home. I would say that means their alliance has already been dissolved.”

The king didn’t even respond. He looked completely uninterested.

The nearby retainers were overcome with fear, and they all glanced at Valdesca.

“I intend to make use of those reinforcements,” Valdesca continued. “We will provoke the returning Ramien Army to attack the Gebelian Army from behind. What do you think of that?”

“You mean to enter an alliance with the Ramie Kingdom?” asked Cassia.

“Hardly. Naruya does not make alliances. I have no intention of violating that principle. The idea is to put them in a position where they have no choice *but* to attack.”

“Oh?” Cassia finally showed a mote of interest.

“I would also like to have you lead a detachment of twenty thousand men and strike at the heart of the enemy once again. We must thrust all the way through them with such overwhelming force that no one can defend against us.”

“You’re sending me to face death?” Cassia forgot his earlier frustration and laughed out loud. “Hah hah hah hah hah! This is finally starting to sound fun. Give me all the details.”

What kind of man would come up with a plan that sent his own king onto the field of death?



*

The Eintorian forces had settled in at the barracks of Heberett Castle. There was currently a lull in the fighting, so we were focusing on preparing ourselves.

First, we had to decide who would be in command on the battlefield. This was the most important issue at hand. I couldn't stand front and center personally, so I needed a puppet commander from the Royal Gebelian Army.

This war had the attention of the entire continent. It was an important conflict that would decide who held sway in the south. Depending on the outcome, any of them could fall prey to Naruya next.

The New Eintorian Kingdom needed to make a name for itself here. We were a new nation with a powerful military—the true successors of the Ancient Kingdom!

For that, I needed a commander who would listen closely. I'd only be able to seize victory if the Royal Gebelian Army came under my command too.

The greatest barrier to my plans had been Duke Plenett. There was bad blood between us, sure, but even if there hadn't been, he still wasn't the type to do as I said. I could provide the best strategy ever, and he'd dismiss it with a laugh. Then, he'd just push forward with his own idea.

His methods would only lead to our utter defeat. And so, I immediately took steps to deal with the problem.

"Sire, it looks like Duke Plenett's gone back to the capital!" came the report from Yusen.

"And Adonia?" I asked.

"He didn't really do anything to stop it. He seems to have decided to act as the duke's representative in his absence."

So far, things were going according to plan.

You could say that it was thanks to Heina playing her part well. But also, Duke Yohanett's ambitions were in line with my desired outcome.

"This way, Your Highness." Heina led Duke Yohanett into my tent.

“You’re the Eintorian advisor, then?” Yohanett asked me.

I nodded, rising as Heina introduced me.

Adonia’s the only one who needs to know who I really am.

It’s actually better if word spreads that my armies are strong with or without me leading them. That way, no one will be able to attack the country recklessly in my absence because they’ll come to fear the Eintorian Army itself.

Maybe there will be rumors that I was acting behind the scenes all along...but that’s well within the range of acceptable outcomes.

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Highness, Duke Yohanett,” I said.

“Adonia here highly recommended you and vouched for your talents. You were the one who created the lull in the fighting that allowed time for the Eintorian Army to arrive. This led Adonia to victory at Heberett Castle, yes?”

“Yes. Although I am, of course, only carrying out His Majesty’s strategy on his behalf.”

I turned toward Eintorian and placed my fist over my heart. It was meant to be a salute to His Majesty, Erhin Eintorian. Farcical as it seemed from my perspective, it was important to posture like this.

“Anyway, I am sure that if Eintorian works with us, you will definitely be able to win this battle.” Duke Yohanett gave a smile and a nod. “I value my own life more than anything, so I won’t be going out onto the battlefield myself. As long as you can win, I won’t tell you how you ought to go about doing it. If you can position me as the commander who won this war, then I will give you all of the support I can.”

When he’s this open about it, I almost have to like the guy.

Duke Yohanett must’ve had a talent for identifying whose coattails he ought to ride.

“Please do,” I said. “While you rest in the rear, we will work with Lord Adonia to deliver victory. The accolades will, of course, go to you as the commander.”

“Brilliant! I see you’re a man who understands these things. That’s the most important thing between us! And I hope, like Miss Heina was saying...if we

should happen to lose, Eintorian will take all of the responsibility, yes?”

“It will be just as I told you, Your Highness,” Heina answered on my behalf.

“Good! Then let me watch what you can do! Ah, but not from the front lines. I’ll pull back a little and wait for you to deliver news of our victory! Hah hah hah!”

As Duke Yohanett departed with a hearty laugh, Yusen gave me a questioning look.

“Why was Duke Plenett removed as commander?”

“Because he wasn’t up to the task,” I replied.

“Yes, and as we suspected, the king viewed Duke Plenett as a threat,” Heina added. “With only a little prodding, he quickly joined hands with Duke Yohanett and agreed to this plan.”

One of the biggest fears of a king was that his close associates would amass too much authority for themselves. Even greater was the fear of rebellion.

Of course, Duke Yohanett won’t be getting the credit for this war either.

All of that needs to go to Eintorian.

*

Even after Duke Plenett was forced to leave for the capital, the stalemate continued for several more days. After all, his removal didn’t change the fact that this was a siege battle, and therefore, we couldn’t rush out to meet the enemy recklessly.

The focal point of the front lines was Heberett, which was especially crowded. But that was only to be expected. There were a lot of forces massed there, between the existing Gebelian defenders and the Eintorian reinforcements.

Castle Heberett had been transformed into a fortress. The same went for Midrett Castle and Eugena Castle, of course. Currently, I had Erheet and Jint at Midrett Castle, while Yusen and Gibun were at Eugena Castle. I had also reassigned the Royal Gebelian Army to retainers recommended by Adonia and redeployed them to each of the castles.

Naturally, Adonia and I assumed direct command of Heberett Castle ourselves. Knowing Valdesca, it was plain to see that he'd execute some sort of scheme here. After all, it would take *months* to fight a traditional siege battle, and time was against Naruya. That was the biggest advantage of a siege battle. We only had to defend ourselves to win.

That's why he'll constantly be trying to catch us by surprise. And it won't be with just one or two plans either. I expect him to challenge us with a whole series of different strategies.

Our objective is to efficiently fend them off...but just defending doesn't feel that impressive, huh?

For that reason, I chose to prepare my troops and wait.

How would the enemy come at us? That was the critical question.

However, Naruya continued to stay put. It was Yohanett who came instead.

"Are the Naruyans still keeping quiet?"

He'd set up his camp as commander-in-chief of the combined forces far to the rear of the fighting, but for some reason, he had still come to visit the front lines.

"Well, the wait is to our advantage, so I suppose it doesn't matter," he remarked. "Make sure you defend this place properly. I'll leave my retainers here with you, so use them as you see fit!"

I had tensed up for a moment, worrying that he'd grown impatient at the lack of enemy attacks. I'd feared he would say something like, "They're scared! Why don't you go out there and attack them instead?" but apparently not. Fortunately, Yohanett stood by his earlier statement that he wouldn't tell us what to do—he'd come only to check on the situation before disappearing again.

The problem occurred that night when Naruya launched a raid.

"They're finally here! And at night too!" Adonia exclaimed after hearing the report and rushing to rouse me from my sleep.

I rose, got ready, and hurried outside. That was when Heina ran up to us.

“Your Majesty! It’s the enemy!”

“I’ve already heard. It’s about time they showed up.”

I was getting sick of waiting.

“Your Excellency! Your Excellency!”

Not long after we headed outside, Adonia’s retainer rushed over to us.

“Why the fuss? We already know the Naruyans are attacking! We’re going there now!”

“That’s not it, Your Excellency! It’s treachery! Our allies have betrayed us!” the man shouted, spittle flying everywhere. Heina and I looked at one another.

As we did, Adonia seized his retainer by the front of his shirt.

“Betrayed us? What are you talking about?”

“Duke Yohanett’s men suddenly opened the north gates! And now...the Naruyans are flooding through...”

“So, you’re saying that *Duke Yohanett* betrayed us?”

“That’s how it seems!”

Adonia turned to look at me, his brow furrowed in disbelief.

“Let’s head to the north gate for now,” I suggested.

Adonia nodded and we ran there swiftly. The Naruyans were indeed pouring through them. At the front of their forces was Yohanett’s retainer, leading the way—a blatant betrayal.

Seeing this, Adonia’s face turned bright red. “What have you done?!” he shouted.

“Your Excellency, Gebel’s fortunes are already on the decline,” replied Yohanett’s retainer. “It’s absolute folly to think that joining with Eintorian will protect us!”

“How does that justify abandoning your pride as a Gebelian to become the dog of another nation?!”

Adonia attacked the man, his face incandescent with rage.

Duke Yohanett had turned on us.

Every country had its treasonous snakes, and playing your enemies against one another was a time-honored tradition. So we had tried to use Duke Yohanett to defeat Duke Plenett, only to in turn have him used against us this way.

“Defend His Excellency!”

As Adonia threw himself into battle, his retainers all raced forward to confront Duke Yohanett’s retainer and his men.

That was how the Naruyan cavalry, who burst through the gate after them, were able to break up our formation.

Naruyan First Army

Morale: 98

Training: 99

The Naruyan soldiers in this attack were elites.

The First Army. That’s the unit led by the King of Naruya.

They were taking into account the fact that Adonia was at Heberett Castle. Valdesca had seemingly been trying to keep the King of Naruya from encountering Adonia before now, but he must have changed his policy.

That could only mean one thing: Valdesca had a concrete vision of how this operation was going to bring them to victory.

*

Several days before the night raid, Mutege, the ninth-ranked member of the Ten Commanders of Naruya, received secret orders from Valdesca to make contact with Duke Yohanett.

“You’re offering to make me lord over all of Gebel?”

“Yes, you will become the Duke of Gebel after this war,” Mutege replied. “His Majesty never forms alliances, but he does value obedience. He is generous to

those who submit of their own accord.”

“H-He is? And he has such authority...”

Gebel had continued to lose, even after Adonia had joined the war, and this was in large part due to the authority of the King of Naruya.

That was what Yohanett believed, and it was why he was so quick to nod.

“Besides, do you even believe Gebel can endure this?” Mutege asked. “Think about where the lines of battle currently are. It pains me to suggest this, but could it be that due to the actions of Duke Plenett’s faction, you’ve never been given the power you ought to hold? Although you’ll have to submit to His Majesty, at least within Gebel, you’ll be able to rule like a king. Heh heh.” Mutege chuckled as he offered this shady deal to Yohanett.

Power and his own survival were the two things the duke wanted most. If he could have them both, then it mattered little to Yohanett whether he served the King of Gebel or the King of Naruya.

“Hmm, this is quite a weighty proposition,” said Duke Yohanett. “Could you give me some time to consider?”

“Not long. I will return tomorrow.”

There was a reason Valdesca had sent Mutege. Valdesca had always foreseen an Eintorian intervention, and he’d considered a number of ways that he might outwit Erhin. Valdesca also would’ve never overlooked the relationship between Plenett and Yohanett or the one between Yohanett and Eintorian. And based on the information he’d gathered, Yohanett was a classic example of a fair-weather ally.

That made him the easiest to crack open and exploit.

“Aah, Your Highness,” said Mutege. “There is one thing I forgot to tell you. Even with Duke Plenett driven off, it is his son Adonia whose deeds will stand out. So even if you become the commander-in-chief of the Gebelian forces, it is questionable whether you will be able to take credit for your achievements...”

Mutege did not come right out and say it. He also left it to the end, as per Valdesca’s instructions.

Yohanett mentally cursed the man.

I'm already well aware of that. Don't think you're so clever!

However, the proposal was still alluring. As soon as Mutege left, Yohanett immediately consulted one of his closest associates.

"Who do you think will win?"

"Your Highness, the lancers from Eintorian may appear powerful at first glance, but that image is ultimately a false one."

"It is?"

"Eintorian has won two victories against Naruya, but never in a total war, with the Ten Commanders, the King of Naruya, and Frann Valdesca all in play. What's more, Eintorian's king, the one who has fought Naruya, is not participating this time. I can't see a mere sixty thousand reinforcements turning the tide. It's clear as day to me. Naruya's army is the mightiest on this continent."

"That all sounds very reasonable," Yohanett agreed with a nod. The scales suddenly started to tilt toward Naruya. This was a gamble, and he absolutely *had* to pick the winning horse.

However, no matter how many times he thought about it, it seemed he had far more to gain from a Naruyan victory. That outcome was already the more likely one anyway. It was obviously better to side with them.

He'd already heard that Herald was now ruled by a noble who had surrendered. That only made the offer on the table more appealing...

Far more appealing than the proposal Eintorian had brought to him.

*

It was a few hours before Mutege made contact with Duke Yohanett, on the same day that Heina had made contact with him in the capital.

She didn't think that Duke Yohanett was trustworthy. He was a small man, always ready to switch sides—the type she hated most. Whenever she met a man like him, some sense inside of her acted up, and she naturally got goose bumps.

This time, that sense once again proved accurate.

However, they still needed to prevent Duke Plenett from interfering, so she went ahead with persuading Duke Yohanett as planned. With a man like him who was only focused on his own self-interest, all she had to do was dangle some bait and he'd quickly take it. That had made it simple to get Duke Plenett recalled.

If she had Adonia help fabricate evidence that Duke Plenett was planning in secret, Duke Yohanett would *have* to go for their proposal. That was what Heina was thinking as she left his mansion.

"I'm sorry for the wait. Please, come this way."

On her way out, she passed the head chamberlain. He was leading in a man who was dressed like a member of the nobility.

Taken on its own, this wasn't anything out of the ordinary. But something about it struck Heina as incredibly unusual. The head chamberlain was acting as if it were the man's first visit. There was a certain tension in the air too.

No... Is it fear?

If this noble was affiliated with the duke, he should have been to the mansion dozens of times before now, so the treatment he was receiving was strange. Also, the dukes were incredibly prideful men. They didn't let just anybody in to see them. Yet here was a noble visiting him for the first time in the middle of a war.

Suddenly, another man flashed through her mind: Duke Ronan.

Having endured humiliation so many times just to curry favor with Duke Ronan, this scene felt all the more off to her. However, there wasn't anything she could do about it right away.

Heina saddled up and rode off to join Erhin as soon as she could.

"Your Majesty, I witnessed something strange."

"Something strange?" Erhin repeated. Heina relayed her observations: a noble was visiting Duke Yohanett for the first time during a war, and the head chamberlain seemed unusually frightened.

There must have been some reason for the visit, just as there had been for Heina's. And if he was visiting Duke Yohanett, then...

Erhin immediately went with Heina, who had a pass that would let them through the gates, and they hid outside Duke Yohanett's mansion.

The goal was to get a look at this noble for himself.

Eventually, a man who looked like a noble stepped out of the mansion.

Erhin immediately activated the system.

Mutega Ramey

Age: 26

Martial: 89

Intelligence: 65

Command: 71

Instantly, he uncovered the name of the suspicious man Heina had witnessed. Erhin could only laugh at what he learned.

He already knew that name.

He'd had the Droy Company infiltrate Naruya in order to thoroughly investigate each of the Ten Commanders, and Mutega Ramey was one of them.

That meant Naruya had also made contact with Duke Yohanett.

*

The day after that secret meeting with Mutega, Duke Yohanett made his appearance at Heberett, confirming his betrayal.

As a result, the Eintorian Army prepared for battle. The way he'd come and gone was suspicious enough on its own, but on top of that, he'd left his retainers behind. Of course, I only realized how dodgy this situation was because I already knew that Yohanett had been meeting with Naruya in secret.

If I hadn't known, Valdesca would have beat me for sure.

I was going to have to chalk this one up to good luck on my part.

Sending the Droy Company to uncover the names of the Ten Commanders had also proved incredibly useful, since the system didn't display affiliations outside combat.

As a result of all this, we were able to swiftly respond to the Naruyans coming through the opened gates. Obviously, it would have been possible to defeat Yohanett's retainers before this moment, revealing his betrayal. However, that could have backfired on us—it was entirely possible that we would've been treated as traitors for attacking them. Or, alternatively, Yohanett might have discarded his retainers like a lizard dropping its tail and then tried to talk his way out of it.

That was why we'd quietly waited for the betrayal.

Once I dealt with Yohanett, the forces of the Gebel Kingdom would be completely under my control. For the duration of this war, at least. I also benefited from them opening the gates and letting the Royal Naruyan Army in.

For those two reasons, I sat back and let Yohanett's plan proceed.

"All units, intercept the enemy!"

On Heina's command, thirty thousand Eintorian troops rushed the Naruyan First Army. Ten thousand lancers and five thousand shield bearers stopped the Naruyan cavalry, and the remaining fifteen thousand infantry supported them in that task.

Only the Eintorian troops had been told to prepare for this. Although Adonia was trustworthy, we couldn't know whether any of the people serving under him were in cahoots with Yohanett.

Who can be trusted, and who can't? That will all be laid bare tonight.

I rushed to the front of the gates and began leading our defense. Meanwhile, the Naruyan cavalry was pouring in because the gates were open.

This is the First Army, which should mean the King of Naruya is here. He would want to lead his elite forces personally.

But Valdesca would never allow his king to stand in the vanguard. I couldn't

be sure of that, of course, but I knew that Valdesca wouldn't plan anything that could result in his king being isolated.

What if King Cassia does come in? I'll have to fight him with Adonia at my side.

If we could close the gates and kill the king of Naruya...that would bring their momentum to a full stop!

I looked around just to be sure, but King Cassia was nowhere to be seen...yet.

There was another person in his place.

The vanguard of the First Army was pouring in right now, and their vanguard captain had just made her appearance. I didn't need the system to tell me who she was.

It was the first ranked of the Ten Commanders, Medelian.

But she didn't fight the way she usually did. Instead of using her powerful area-of-effect skill that made the swords of the fallen float into the air and strike her opponents, she was just looking around.

Our eyes met. Instantly, she ran toward me.

Adonia had been cutting down the enemy cavalry one after another, but once he spotted her, he started heading in my direction too.

"I'll handle her!" he declared.

"No, dealing with the cavalry is more important right now. Join up with Heina and follow her commands!" I shouted back. I turned and headed toward Medelian myself.

Cassia's waiting somewhere behind her. I don't know if it's a smart move to summon Daitoren at this point.

Despite my uncertainty, I needed to confront her.

"We meet again," I said.

I expected her to say, "Finally, we can fight!" and come at me, but for some reason, she pointed behind me without drawing her sword.

"Shut up and come with me!"

Shut up and come with you?

That line sounded like something a thug might say before dragging a person into an alleyway to rob them. But after shouting it at me, Medelian ran off in the direction she'd been pointing. Basically, into Heberett Castle.

She's the enemy's vanguard captain. Her job is to break past my lancers and shield bearers, but she isn't even looking at the soldiers.

She acted like a total battle maniac before. But now...why doesn't she seem interested in fighting?

I debated what to do for a while, but it was actually advantageous to get her off this battlefield. After all, if she used her skill, our battle lines would definitely collapse.

That was why I decided to follow her, even though she could be leading me into a trap.

Is she trying to lure me away from the battlefield?

No, that can't be it. Not having someone like her, who can use wide area attacks, is actually a bigger loss for Naruya.

Whatever the case, I'll have to brave the danger if I want to find out what she's really thinking.

I had already given Heina all of her orders, so I followed Medelian.

She was waiting for me in the shadow of one of the buildings in town. No one else was around. The moment she saw me, she dismounted from her horse and beckoned for me to come with her. I slid off my own horse and followed her.

Leaving her horse behind, she led me into a gap between the buildings. We ended up in a back alleyway that would shield us from any prying eyes.

"You're acting weird again... What are you even thinking?" I asked. "Don't tell me Valdesca put you up to whatever it is you're doing here."

Medelian responded by grabbing my arm and pulling my face closer to hers. Then, she whispered into my ear.

"This has nothing to do with my brother. Ugh, that's not the problem! You do

know that stupid duke from the Gebel Kingdom betrayed you, right? That's why the gates opened!"

Um, if you're going to whisper, at least do it quietly. My ears hurt.

"What, Medelian? You're reporting him to me? Are you planning to turn against Naruya?"

What she had told me was definitely a secret, the kind of thing that ought to be reserved for a clandestine meeting like this. She couldn't let Naruya's soldiers overhear.

"Aaaugh! You dummy! Why are you so unfazed? The gates are open, and the castle's about to fall. I'll help you, so run away right now. My brother's laid layers and layers of traps, so if you stay, you'll get wiped out!"

Medelian sounded genuinely concerned for me.

She wants me to run.

I couldn't understand what was happening. Why would she try to save me? She was even going so far as to act as an informant.

From Naruya's perspective, this was a grave act of treason. Of course, I already knew everything that she'd told me.

It seemed bizarre to hear my enemy—the first-ranked member of the Ten Commanders and a daughter of the esteemed House of Valdesca—talking like this.

"You're going to help *me*? Your enemy?"

"That's what I said! Have you even been listening?"

"Why?"

"Why...? Augh! Are you *trying* to get yourself killed here? I know you're strong and all, but His Majesty's stronger. You don't stand a chance against him!"

I finally understood.

She's genuinely trying to save me.

This isn't Valdesca putting her up to it. She's acting all on her own here.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this, but whatever. I appreciate your kindness. But I don’t need to run away.”

“You must have lost your mind to be saying that. Are you running a fever?” Medelian pressed her hand to my forehead, a look of utter bewilderment on her face. She then cocked her head to the side. “You don’t seem overheated... So you’re saying this with a clear head? If you are, then you’re a real idiot!”



She gave me another look of heartfelt concern.

This woman's getting weirdly close, sticking her hand on my forehead like this. Under these circumstances, who would think that we were enemies? We look more like lovers right now.

If anyone sees this, won't I be branded as a traitor...?

"Hold on, you don't understand the situation," I said. "I already knew they were going to betray us."

"Huh...? You're lying!"

"I'm serious. I've taken every countermeasure, so I promise I won't die. Just watch. You'll see for yourself whether I'm lying or not."

I peeled Medelian off me and left her there, then headed for my horse.

"Hey, hold on!" she called after me, but now that I knew what she was up to, I didn't need to hang around any longer.

"I appreciate the warning. But we're going to win."

Medelian just glared at me until my horse galloped away.

I immediately returned to the battlefield and went to Heina for a sitrep.

"Your Majesty! Where were you?!"

"I'll explain later. What's the situation?"

"Around ten thousand soldiers have come through the gates."

"That's about right, then. Let's get up on the walls immediately."

"Yes, sire!"

Ten thousand men in the vanguard, huh? The king will be in the main force that's waiting behind them.

If we were to let too many of them inside, things would get out of hand. I decided to take this vanguard force as a gift from Yohanett. Thanks to how shifty he was, we had been able to thoroughly prepare for them.

Adonia was leading the Eintorian forces and killing cavalrymen by the thousands. So, with the enemy bogged down inside the walls, I looked outside

the castle.

For the moment, I couldn't spot the King of Naruya out there in the darkness.

According to what Medelian had just told me, there were other plans in motion, which was all the more reason to end this battle quickly so we could prepare for the next.

"Now, Heina!"

"Yes, sire!"

When I gave the signal, soldiers ran up onto the walls carrying barrels of oil. They quickly overturned them and let the oil pour down outside the north gates. At the same time, my archers let loose the flaming arrows they had prepared.

Fire met oil, and then...

Bwoosh!

In no time, the highly flammable oil created a wall of flames in front of the north gates.

"Gwaaaaaagh!"

Doused in oil and shot with flaming arrows, the Naruyan cavalry trying to enter through the north gate quickly found themselves ablaze. The wall of fire rising up from the ground forced the cavalry unit to back away, at least temporarily.

"Take aim, archers. Focus your fire in front of the north gates!"

With Heina's second command, arrows began raining down. All of this was obviously to buy time for us to close the gates.

I immediately descended into the castle and shouted, "Adonia! Go with your men to close the gates! Once they're secure, we'll surround and eliminate the enemies inside!"

"I'm on it!"

It didn't seem like Adonia had a good grasp of the situation, but he had picked up on the fact that he ought to close the gates. He quickly broke past his foes

and sprinted toward them. Meanwhile, our infantry began surrounding the enemy cavalry. The shield bearers stood in front of the enemy, blocking their way, while the lancers thrust their spears through the gaps in the shields—this was the most effective tactic against attacking cavalry.

Ultimately, we were able to surround and eliminate ten thousand of the enemy's troops almost instantly.

The Gebelian Royal Army, who had been delayed in their arrival, soon began to join up with us. Silence fell over the battlefield.

"Arrest Yohanett's retainers and their men at once!" Adonia ordered the Gebelian troops.

The Eintorian Army let out a victorious shout. "Yeaaaaaaaah!"

This was still just the first of many battles to come, but nonetheless, the Eintorian Army had fended off a surprise attack from Naruya's ten-thousand-man vanguard force while taking hardly any losses.

That was the most important thing.

Of course, there was no time to bask in the afterglow of victory.

"Urgh... How dare you."

Medelian suddenly emerged with her cheeks puffed up in annoyance. As she dismounted, soldiers surrounded her on all sides, swords ready.

"I don't think you get to say that when *you're* the ones who attacked *us*," I pointed out. "What now? Do you want to try and solo my whole army?"

She glared at me across the wall of soldiers around her, which was two or three men deep.

Then, raising her hands, she said, "I surrender."

Chapter 4: Shooting Star, Goddess, and Battle Fiend

"You surrender?"

"That's right. Have you got holes in your ears or something?"

Uh, ears are supposed to have holes.

I'd asked her to repeat herself because I couldn't *believe* my ears. It was simply unfathomable.

And yet, for some reason, Medelian thrust her chest out proudly as she nodded.

"Who is she?" asked Adonia, who had returned from mopping up the rest of the enemy.

Of course he'd want to know that.

She was armed to the teeth, and yet she'd surrendered without a fight. How could he be anything but suspicious?

On top of that, it was plain for anyone to see that Medelian wasn't one of Naruya's rank and file. She had the sort of customized armor that only a noble could wear, and the swords she carried were as gaudy as could be.

"One of the Ten Commanders," I answered.

"Then wouldn't it be better to kill her?"

It was a reasonable thing for Adonia to ask, but he wouldn't have an easy time killing her. Besides, quietly taking her prisoner would result in fewer casualties.

Ultimately, after agonizing over what to do, I gave the orders.

"Just tie her up for now and throw her in the prison. I've got questions. I'll interrogate her personally later."

I don't know what to say.

I couldn't figure out her true intentions. It hadn't made sense when she'd wanted to run away together either, but surrendering like this when she didn't

have to was even more incomprehensible.

What exactly is she thinking? Is this another one of Valdesca's strategies?

No, it doesn't feel like it.

She was the one element that felt completely foreign to me on this battlefield.

"Hold on! Don't touch me. I may be surrendering, but I won't be disarmed. And I don't want you tying me up either!"

Now she was talking utter nonsense. In what world did a prisoner have the right to dictate terms like this?

But it seemed she was serious. She was entirely capable of fleeing in this situation.

"If you come near me, I'll kill you all!" she spat, threatening the soldiers.

For their sake, I shouted, "Everyone, stop!"

This had to be handled delicately, or she could potentially wipe out my men.

There's no point in accepting her surrender if we take losses anyway.

"Sire?" questioned Adonia. He'd recently begun addressing me that way.

"What is the meaning of this? Why would you let her go free?!"

He probably can't comprehend it. I can relate to that. Maybe I should double-team her with Adonia? If we both attack her at the same time, she'll probably go home. I'm starting to feel that might even be for the best.

On the other hand, I didn't know why she had surrendered, and I wanted to uncover whatever secret plan might lie behind that decision.

But what if there is no plan?

Even if there wasn't a strategy involved, I was still curious why she was doing this. Especially because, like Valdesca, I wanted to make her my subordinate someday.

"Adonia, we have bigger concerns right now. Go hunt down Yohanett's retainers inside the castle. We're going to go and seize Yohanett soon too, so you prepare for that. I'll deal with her."

Adonia considered this and seemed to conclude that dealing with Yohanett's retainers was the more urgent matter. "Understood," he said before rushing to carry out my commands.

Once he was gone, I turned to Medelian once again.

"Yeesh, you *said* you'd surrender. If you don't want us to touch you or tie you up, then what are we supposed to do?"

This got a smile out of her. She pranced over to me and extended both her hands.

"It's fine if *you* tie me up. Also, I don't like prisons, so take me to your room instead. Those are my conditions!"

"Huh? What kind of conditions are those?! Does any prisoner get that kind of treatment?"

"One does! And she's right here in front of you."

Talking to Medelian always threw me off-balance.

"Damn it... So, is there any point binding you when you can use your swords freely, even with your hands tied?"

"Nothing in this world can hold me captive! But I'm offering you that honor. You're not going to tell me you don't want it, are you?"

"Is it a matter of whether I want it? If you're just screwing around, I'll hand you back to Valdesca. Or...do you want to fight right here? I bet you'd have a hard time against both me and Adonia."

"Adonia...? Oooh, that guy from earlier? I feel like my brother said to be careful of him. But he doesn't interest me. More importantly! Not having me fighting against you is a pretty big advantage, don't you think? If I fight for real, I'll be a real menace to you and your troops, right? But if you tie me up, I'll kill less of your men."

"You're right about that..."

I was gradually getting sick of talking about it, so I gave up and just bound her arms.

“Huh? You really tied me up!”

Is that something to squeal with glee about?

The problem is...I have to go capture Yohanett now. Should I put her in my room, like she suggested? Not a chance. Throwing her in prison is just as impossible. There's no telling what she might do if I leave her alone.

“All right, prisoner, come with me for now. We've got a traitor to take care of.”

“Really?! Sounds fun!”

Medelian's eyes sparkled all the brighter now that her hands were tied.

*

“Hah hah hah hah! This kingdom will be mine. Has word of our victory come in yet?”

In the camp erected behind Heberett Castle, Yohanett was laughing loudly while he drank himself silly.

It wasn't the Gebel Kingdom's victory he was waiting for, of course. No, it was word that Heberett Castle had fallen to the Royal Naruyan Army.

However...

“You won't be receiving any such report, Yohanett!”

Adonia stormed into the commander's tent at Heberett, killing the members of the Royal Guard who stood in his way.

I had ultimately brought Medelian along with me and gone with Adonia to launch a surprise attack on the camp.

“Uh, Adonia? What are you doing here?!”

Yohanett blinked in confusion as he dropped the goblet he had been holding and collapsed into his chair.

“I have no words for traitorous scum! If I had my way, I'd kill you right here...but I'm not impulsive like you are. I'll escort you back to the capital, and His Majesty can decide what to do with you!”

Adonia was suppressing his anger, but somehow, that actually provoked Yohanett more.

“Hmph, looks like you got lucky in fending off Naruya. But it won’t do you any good! We can’t beat the Naruyans! Eintorian? Don’t make me laugh! How far can you trust that advisor from Eintorian?! I have Naruya’s backing! They’ll save me, I’m sure of it!”

Not if you get decapitated first. What does he think he’s saying?

This is why I hate guys like him the most.

As I stood there, too appalled for words, a red bullet shot past me—Medelian. Even though I didn’t care about the insult, she’d launched herself at him with a flying kick.

Wham!

Her hands were bound, but her body soared gracefully through the air, twisted, and then she stuck the landing.

She followed up by kicking the fallen Yohanett some more.

“Who do you think you’re pointing your stubby little finger at?! I’m the only one who gets to disrespect him like that, you pig!”

Wham! Bam! Thump, thump, thump, thump!

For some reason, Medelian was *pissed*. It gave me goose bumps seeing her like that.

Adonia was just standing there, similarly awestruck. However, if I let her keep whaling on Yohanett, she was going to kill him, so I seized her by the arms.

“Whoa, whoa, calm down. We’re taking this guy back to the Gebelian capital.”

“Hmph! I hate his type! They’re the worst. And hold on, didn’t he betray you? That’s why my brother... Ah!”

Medelian stopped herself and covered her mouth.

“Well, um... You know how it is. Heh heh.”

It was like she’d almost leaked some vital information but had stopped herself just in time. Noticing the suspicious look I was giving her, Medelian quickly

turned away. She gave Yohanett another kick for good measure.

“Ugh! This is *your* fault!”

“Hold on, we get it already, so stop that,” I told her. “Anyway, why are you so mad about what he said when you’re on Naruya’s side?”

“He said something?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Ooh, yeah, he did, didn’t he? Hmph, it looks like you *do* get it. But that’s not so important anymore!”

Medelian’s hair was a mess after she’d repeatedly kicked Yohanett. It was sticking to her cheek.

Adonia looked back and forth between Medelian and me. He clearly found our relationship suspicious.

But that was the thing... So did I.

What’s with her anyway?

“Adonia! We’re done here, so take Yohanett to the capital immediately. And tell King Gebel to give you command of the whole army. You do that, and I guarantee we’ll win. You’re the only one the king can trust now. He’ll leave everything to you, at least until the war ends.”

“Got it. I’ll be right back!”

Adonia nodded, then dragged Yohanett away.

It was good that we could seize control of the Royal Gebelian Army. If Adonia was made commander-in-chief, then I had Gebel in my palm. After all, he trusted me and would do as I said. That would take care of all our problems. For now, at least.

“You’re dragging him away?! I’m not done hurting him yet!” Medelian complained.

“I think you’ve done enough...”

Our other enemy, who was staying with me, was still angry at Yohanett for some reason.

*

“So he knew about the betrayal?”

Wham!

Valdesca bashed his head against the table. His hands were shaking.

Eintorian had been trying to use Yohanett. There was bad blood between him and Duke Plenett, so it was predictable that they would use him to try to remove Plenett after the reinforcements arrived. Valdesca thought he'd been able to get a step ahead this time.

He thought he'd be able to catch Erhin off guard after Yohanett replaced Plenett.

Wham!

After striking his head again, Valdesca bit his lip and tried to calm down.

In war, it didn't matter how many times he lost. If he won just once at the end and took all the spoils, then he was still the victor.

He'd already given up on protecting his pride. He just had to win. As long as he ultimately triumphed, it didn't matter.

Besides, this strategy hadn't been all that important.

Valdesca called in Mutege, the one he had sent to convince Yohanett.

“There are still other seeds of discord in the enemy camp,” said Valdesca. “Restoring Duke Plenett to his position will be most effective. He was stripped of his command without being suspected of anything concrete. If he becomes commander-in-chief again, the friction between the Eintorian Army and Royal Gebelian Army will build to critical levels. They won't be able to coordinate closely after that.”

Valdesca was prepared to use any means necessary, no matter how underhanded, to win.

“You are to return to the Gebelian capital at once and spread rumors that the commander of the Eintorian forces is Erhin Eintorian himself. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

Of course, this was still only one of the means at Valdesca's disposal.

Another plan had gone into motion at the same time as Yohanett's betrayal.

*

After dismantling the camp Yohanett had been using, I ended up taking the road back to Heberett Castle with just Medelian.

At some point, she had undone the ropes binding her arms. They must have come loose during the earlier scuffle, and frankly, I didn't see any point in tying her back up again.

Halfway back to Heberett Castle, Medelian pointed to the sky. It had only been a few hours since Yohanett's nighttime insurrection, and the stars still twinkled above us.

"Huh? Look over there! A falling star!"

The skies of this world were so clear that countless stars were visible at night. It had been a while since I'd come to this world, so I was no longer moved by how magnificent these starry skies were compared to those of the modern world I'd been born into.

However, this was my first time seeing a shooting star.

"Hey, you're right," I murmured.

"It's pretty!" Medelian exclaimed.

"Yeah, it's pretty."

"And what am I?"

"Pretty."

Wait, hold on.

The word slipped out before I had time to think.

"You mean it?" she asked. "Ah hah hah hah hah! I'd expect no less from the man I chose! My brother and His Majesty have never called me that!"

"Uh..."

She was so busy running around with a giddy smile that I lost the chance to

explain myself.

But how can I take it back when she looks so happy? Besides, it doesn't seem like she's lying. What kind of environment did she grow up in? Well...knowing Valdesca, he's not the type to compliment someone on their appearance. And Medelian herself probably wasn't interested in anything but fighting.

Still, with her catlike eyes and red hair, it was fair to say that she was a pretty girl. She didn't have the noble beauty of Euracia or Serena. No, hers was more wild.

"I didn't really mean to say that earlier..."

"I know that, obviously! But it's too bad! Because we're enemies! Hee hee!"

What do you mean, 'too bad'? I don't know what you think you know, but you're definitely wrong. Please, if we're enemies, act like an enemy.

Her attitude toward me during this situation hadn't been hostile at all. Back at Heberett Castle, she'd led me into an alley, and from the moment she'd laid a hand on my forehead, she'd been getting awfully close to me—too close. The more this went on, the less keen I was about bringing this source of headaches back to Heberett Castle with me.

She had also gotten genuinely angry and kicked Yohanett when he'd insulted me. Honestly, it felt less like she was an enemy and more like she and I had an incredibly close relationship. But she was undeniably one of Naruya's Ten Commanders...and a daughter of the House of Valdesca.

"Hey, Medelian," I said to the giggling girl.

"Yeah? What?" Medelian stood in front of me, peering at me with slightly upturned eyes. She smiled.

No, seriously, what is going on? Why's she acting so charming?

"Let's sit down for a while. I think we need to talk."

"Talk? Fine with me. We're enemies, but I'll allow you that much."

We were crossing a hill at the moment, so I sat down on the hillside, and she sat down right next to me—so close that we were touching.

Hah hah, what a laugh. How can she say, "We're enemies," when she's getting this close to me?

As things stood, I'd been thinking about how to win her over to my side. But the total lack of any distance between us was making me start to hallucinate. Had we been this close all along?

"Just one question. What's your goal?" I asked. "Even if I concede that you came to Heberett Castle to help me, what reason did you have to surrender after that? You could have gotten away, right? I'm sure there's something behind your decision."

I thought it was a pretty serious question, but Medelian just looked shocked.

"Huh? Well, it's because... AUGH! I don't want to talk about that! It's boring!" she shouted.

She grabbed my face with both hands and stared into my eyes as she continued.

"What if I was suddenly like, 'I'm gonna kill you!' and attacked you right here? Now that'd be hilarious! I love fun stuff like that. It makes things unpredictable. I hate anything that's a pain."

She suddenly got on top of me and pressed her body close to mine.

"Hee hee!" she giggled.

Medelian's proximity was messing with my mind. She smelled nice, and her strangely pleasant fragrance teased my nostrils. It felt ticklish somehow.

I decided that just sitting here and letting her do as she pleased wasn't going to solve anything, so I grabbed her by both arms and flipped her so she was on the bottom.

"And what if I killed you here while you're so defenseless?" I murmured.

Medelian stared up at me. The world was silent as our eyes met. For a while, she simply blinked. Then, finally, she opened her mouth.

"You say that, but you didn't kill me. Just like you didn't back then. Besides...even now, I could ram a sword through your back in an instant. Maybe you're the one who's too unguarded?"

So she likes the thrill... Is that it?

What the hell is going on? I've never dealt with anyone like her before.

"I give up... You win."

I got off her, at a loss for words. But then she grabbed me by the arm and said something totally off the wall.

"Whatever, I'm tired!"

"Huh?"

"It's because you tossed me on my back. I'm gonna sleep, so you'd better protect me while I'm passed out!"

After saying this, she actually closed her eyes.

Could she be any more capricious?

"You want me, an *enemy*, to protect you? From other enemies? Hey... Wait just a minute."

"Zzz!"

"Zzz"? *You're just saying the sound out loud!*

"Oh, fine... I'll do it."

Heberett Castle was plainly visible at the bottom of the hill. It was nothing if not peaceful down there.

The Naruyan forces had lost ten thousand men when their plan to use Yohanett as a traitor failed. This had caused them to pull back from Heberett completely.

Whatever, I guess. I'll go along with her whims for now.

There were things that I wanted to think about by myself anyway, so I decided to kill some time.

The most fun thing to do in war is to boldly outwit your opponent. Like what Valdesca tried to do to me here. What's he thinking? He must know I saw through the betrayal by now.

Is he frustrated? I'll bet. But he couldn't have expected one little trick like this

to decide the entire contest.

Which means...

I looked next to me, at Medelian. She'd been pretending to sleep at first, but she'd dozed off for real at some point.

"Zzz..."

What a happy look on her face. Even a ferocious beast can look cute when it's sleeping.

I couldn't help but murmur, "If only she could always be like this..."

*

The reinforcements that Ramie had dispatched to the Gebel Kingdom had only just made it back to their own border when a man approached them.

He was an envoy from Naruya.

This messenger bore a secret missive, one containing a request for military support.

"So Naruya is offering us an alliance...?"

"It's not an alliance."

The high priest cocked his head to the side at this statement. The envoy was calling on them to fight but was insisting it wasn't an alliance. What in the world was going on?

"The Ramie Kingdom is fated to fall, even without us ever moving against you. Surely, you are not so audacious as to think that you can fight us whilst already embroiled in conflicts with the Rotonai Kingdom and the Eintorian Kingdom? Well... It's only a matter of time," the Naruyan envoy explained with a sneer.

The Ramien high priest's face flashed red. He was so angry that he was about to lose control of himself.

He'd thought that a call for nations to fight together would naturally entail an alliance. Yet this was no offer of alliance. It was a threat, and nothing more.

"Who do you think we are?! Have you no fear of Lord Ramie's wrath?!" the high priest demanded threateningly, but the envoy simply smiled.

“I see. Then you wish to go to war with us, High Priest.”

The envoy rose to his feet and turned to go without hesitation.

“Ah... N-No, hold on a moment!” the high priest hurriedly called after the envoy.

As much as it galled him to admit it, the Naruyans were right. In fact, they could only formulate this threat because of how right they were. If Naruya were to occupy the Gebel Kingdom and then roll straight across the Ramien border, then the Holy Ramie Kingdom would be in an incredibly dire situation.

Even so, Naruya had offered nothing in return for Ramie’s assistance. The Ramiens would be used up and then discarded.

The high priest could see one advantage: Ramie would have the chance to rebuild their army while Naruya was preoccupied with fighting the Rotonai Kingdom or Eintorian Kingdom.

If Ramie refused this offer, there would no doubt be risks for Naruya. After all, they would need to face the Royal Ramien Army while engaged with the combined forces of Gebel and Eintorian. However, being able to pull off that sort of thing was what had made Naruya a great power.

The Ramiens’ pride was thoroughly crushed. The high priest lamented that, although this offer was something he normally wouldn’t have even entertained, his position demanded he treat the Naruyan envoy cordially.

“This is all because we lost to Eintorian,” the high priest grumbled to himself without meaning to.

Not one to miss such a thing, the envoy grinned broadly.

“Yes. That’s precisely it.”

“Huh?”

“I offer an opportunity to strike Eintorian—the nation that has wronged you. In short, you would be sending reinforcements to take revenge.”

Once the envoy had delivered the message Valdesca had sent him to convey, the high priest had no choice but to nod in agreement.

“Take our fastest horse and go to the capital. Immediately!”

Ultimately, the Ramien reinforcements decided to wait on the Gebelian border without ever returning to their own capital. The Ramien king summoned all of the high priests, with the exception of the one killed in Eintorian, for a strategy meeting where they accepted the Naruyan proposal.

Or rather, where they were *forced* to accept it. No other option ever existed.

Several days later, after resupplying in the surrounding domains, the Royal Ramien Army crossed the border into the Gebel Kingdom once more. The soldiers had tears in their eyes.

This time, they came not as reinforcements, but as enemies.

Obviously, they did this without a word to Gebel.

They were greeted at the border by the Naruyan emissary, and the emissary told them Valdesca’s strategy.

*

“Nghhh!”

It was nearly dawn when Medelian awoke, yawning after a roughly three-hour nap.

“That was a good sleep. I haven’t been able to catch a wink lately, so... Huh?”

After glancing around, she spotted me next to her. Her face lit up with glee.

“Ooh, you were actually protecting me?”

“Well, actually...”

I couldn’t leave her alone, so I’d kept watch over her all night. But it wasn’t to protect her. It was because I had to monitor her.

Incidentally, multiple wild beasts had appeared in the night to attack us. I had gotten ready to fight them, for lack of other options, but Medelian must have sensed their murderous intent or something. Each time she’d risen unsteadily to her feet and immediately launched a sword that killed the offending creature.

The dead bodies still lay nearby. Apparently, that was what made her think I’d

protected her. Did she not remember slaying them at all?

When I explained this to her, she brought a hand to her mouth before bursting out laughing. I'd seen her do the same thing before.

"No need to be embarrassed. Gosh, you're so cute! You should puff up your chest and be proud of what you did!" she said, sticking her own chest out.

Guess she doesn't think she's too good to have someone else protect her.

"So, do you think these guys are edible? I'm hungry," Medelian said. She rubbed her belly as she approached the wild beast carcasses. Then, she drew a sword and started butchering. She gutted the beasts, cutting them into pieces that would be easier to eat.

"What are you waiting for? Get a fire started. A fire!" she ordered, looking at me with exasperation.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll do it."

In the end, I did as she said and helped her prepare. We sat around the campfire, cooking and eating the meat.

Once she'd had her fill, Medelian lay down again.

"Aah, I had a good sleep, and I'm full of food. I don't want to do anything now."

Having declared that she was going on strike, Medelian stared into the sky for a while. She soon pointed up at the stars.

"There sure are a lot of falling stars today! Did a whole lot of people die?"

"Why would you ask that?" *What do falling stars have to do with people dying?* "Ooh... Is that the thing where the souls of the dead become stars in the sky?"

"That's right. Isn't it obvious? Shooting stars are pretty, but if you think of them as that last flash before a person's life slips away, don't they feel even prettier?"

I shook my head.

"Death, huh? People in my homeland don't think of it that way."

“Huh? Your homeland? So it’s different in Eintorian?”

“For us, they have nothing to do with death. But...we do have a belief about them. If you make a wish on a shooting star before it vanishes, it will come true.”

I don’t believe it myself, but it’s a lot more romantic than that death stuff.

“As the star falls, its sparkling light lends great power to people’s wishes.”

“Wow,” Medelian said, impressed. “People sure think differently in Eintorian.”

“The tail of a star is filled with hope. Isn’t it more romantic to think that? If your wish comes true, then great. And if it doesn’t, well, it doesn’t.”

“Are there people who’ve actually had their wishes granted?”

“Yeah. There are.”

I don’t know of any examples, and if wishes did come true, it was probably the result of people’s own hard work...but I’ll just say that it’s happened anyway.

“Okay, I’ll make a wish too, then! It’s gonna be *big*, so I’ll save it for when there’s a really big shooting star.”

Even though she’d treated this belief as strange, she seemed to like it.

“So, how do I do this?” she asked, peering up at the sky.

“Okay, here’s how it works. You put your hands together.”

“L-Like this?” Medelian asked as she interlocked her fingers. She looked at me, eyes sparkling.

“Yeah. Look at the star with your hands together, and make a wish in your heart. Yeah, that’s the way to do it... It might work even better if you raised one leg.”

“One leg?”

“Yeah. Support your body with just one leg and then slowly fall over.”

“Huh? Wha?!”

Just like that, Medelian fell over, hands still joined, and rolled all the way to

the bottom of the hill. I was just having a little fun with her. I hadn't expected her to actually do it.

Shortly after that, Medelian came back with her hair full of grass and proceeded to energetically shout at me.

"Wh-Why you...!"

"The more you roll, the more likely your wish is to be granted," I explained. "I'm serious, you know? Don't get mad. How many times did you roll?"

"Wait, really? Umm, err, five times?"

"Pft! Ah hah hah hah hah hah hah!"

The way she was counting the number on her fingers was so far from the image she gave off on the battlefield that I couldn't help but laugh.

Medelian bit her lip as she kicked me. "Grrrr! You tricked me! When I was playing along to be nice too! You really are a bad guy!"

"Sorry, but it was all true up to the part where you wove your fingers together. If you make the wish at that point, it might come true. That's the truth."

"It is...? Well, whatever. I'll try it some other time."

"So, what was this big wish of yours anyway?" I asked, suddenly curious, but Medelian just stuck her tongue out.

"It's a secret!" She turned her back to me before adding, "Thanks. This helped to solidify how I feel. I'm going home now."

"Huh?"

"To tell you the truth, I have things to do...even if I don't really like my orders. So, bye-bye for now! Hee hee!"

Medelian took off with a smile on her face.

I'd been planning for us to part ways here anyway. Forcefully, if she wouldn't listen to reason.

And yet, she moved first and left of her own accord. Honestly, she'd remained incomprehensible to me from beginning to end.

*

Having made it back to Heberett Castle, I waited for Adonia to return before carrying out my next strategy. My greatest concern had been that the Royal Gebelian Army would slip from my control, but with them totally under Adonia's command, I no longer needed to worry about that.

"I'll be leaving the castle as part of the next operation. Adonia, I leave it to you to hold the battle line here. You can use my Eintorian troops as you see fit too."

"Why so suddenly? What's going on?"

Adonia looked surprised since I was letting him control my troops too.

"Duke Plenett and Duke Yohanett both had the potential to wreck the plan, but now that we've taken them out of the picture, we need to make moves of our own. We can't just stay on the defensive forever. Things won't improve that way."

"Then...do you have a strategy that will turn our fortune around?"

"Of course. Right now, the Eintorian Army and the Royal Gebelian Army are at Heberett because it's the most important front. Isn't that right?"

Adonia nodded. "It is, yes."

"Well, that's the thing. Naruya thinks so too. So I'm going to outwit them."

I gave Adonia a rough outline of my plan.

Once he'd heard it, he was dumbfounded.

This was a strategy I could never have carried out without him. But with a powerful warrior and commander like Erheet to stay by Adonia's side and work with him, I could feel comfortable trusting them to handle things here.

So, once I had persuaded Adonia, I called Jint. We would be going in a small unit without soldiers.

If a large force went on the move, we risked the enemy noticing, but having me and Jint quietly slip away wouldn't be so hard to pull off.

We were heading for an area already held by Naruya.

I looked at the system and noted that the enemy had positioned all of their troops toward the front. We were facing the enemy's main force at Heberett Castle.

One unit that had vanished—the one belonging to their king. At this stage of the game, not even I could read every move Valdesca was making. Still...

He's probably heading for the Gebelian capital.

Which means...I need to use alternative methods to neutralize his plans to the highest degree possible.

I planned to target a castle inside occupied territory. It was where Naruya had their supply base too. With supplies cut off, Naruya's situation would become more and more difficult.

Adonia's raids hadn't gone after their bases. He'd only targeted the supply units as they were on the move. However, defeating the units again would be inefficient, and we couldn't expect that plan to achieve any great effect.

Obviously, Jint and I couldn't assault a castle alone. But I had a plan. Without assaulting the supply units, we would take all of the castles in the rear, complicating the enemy's retreat.

That was what I was looking to do here.

*

After leaving Heina and Erheet in command of the Eintorian Army, we departed Heberett Castle. Soon, we arrived behind the Royal Naruyan Army. We gazed at our first target, Bazarett Castle, which was in the former territory of the Gebel Kingdom.

"We're attacking with just the three of us?" Jint asked. It was an uncharacteristic question for him. His protégé, Damon, had also come with us, and he had a tense look on his face.

This is his first battle. I don't blame him for being nervous.

"What's wrong? Are you scared?" I asked with a smile, but Damon shook his head.

"Hardly! This is what Jint's been training me for!"

He's got the right attitude, at least. Now we just have to see if he's actually of any use.

"Well, we won't be doing this with just the three of us. I'm not *that* reckless. If I were, I wouldn't have had Jint bring you along—he and I have a monopoly on that sort of crazy stunt."

Jint was with me when we'd opened the gates of Lynon Castle together and when we'd attacked an enemy castle in Rozern to burn their supplies. Those had both been reckless ideas, but I'd been able to pull them off thanks to Jint.

"I'm just going to follow orders. No matter how ridiculous they sound."

It was good of Jint to say that, but I shook my head. It was absolutely impossible for us to take every castle in the enemy's rear with just two men.

Still, I couldn't afford to lose any more Eintorian troops. I'd already brought in every soldier that I could spare. The rest needed to stay and defend the homeland.

Our enemies aren't idiots. If I devote too much of my strength toward beating the Naruyan Army, they'll target our undefended home front instead. It risks tempting other hyenas too. That would defeat the entire purpose.

However, there was one group from which we could borrow strength.

"O-Over there... It's the enemy!" Damon shouted, trembling as he looked off into the distance.

I just laughed out loud.

"Those aren't enemies."

They were allies who'd taken the long way here through Runan. Because Runan was currently under Naruyan control, Naruya was likely aware of the existence of this force. There was no avoiding that.

Still, if the Naruyans wanted to wipe out our allies, they needed to first get the message out and then get ready. On the other hand, we could team up with these allies immediately. Obviously, we were going to be faster.

It's a race against time. Will we be able to destroy the supply bases before King Cassia of Naruya breaks through the front lines using Valdesca's plan?

Well, I trust her more than anyone as a commander. And I trust the soldiers too. They respect her so much that they would throw their lives away at her command.

The commander of the force that had just appeared raced boldly forward on her horse, her golden locks streaming behind her.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting. The Royal Rozernan Cavalry are here to render assistance to Eintorian.”

It was Euracia Rozern—my goddess of victory.

*

Royal Rozernan Army

Cavalry: 30,000

Morale: 100

Training: 75

The Royal Rozernan Army had improved their Training considerably.

They’d clearly been putting effort into developing their military since the war with Brijit. Their Morale had always been unusually high, but with Euracia’s high Command applied on top of that, it was little wonder that they had a Morale of 100.

Having arrived at the designated meeting point, Euracia dismounted and ran over to me.

“Did we make it in time?”

“Yeah, no problem there. We just arrived ourselves. Sorry to bring you all the way out here, by the way.”

“It’s fine. My brother and the Rozernan nobility were in favor of sending troops this time. Hence the size of the force you see here... Hm?”

Suddenly, Euracia stared at me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You have...a strange smell on you,” she said, bringing her face a little closer.

Strange smell?



“Jint, do you smell anything?”

“Nope, not a thing,” Jint responded instantly.

He wasn’t the type to lie about something like this, but I looked to Damon, who was beside him, for confirmation.

“I don’t smell anything either...?”

Damon also vouched for my innocence. But seriously, what did she think I smelled of?

“It’s a loathsome smell...”

Euracia’s brow furrowed, and she circled me. She sniffed in front, then sniffed again behind.

Um, are you a dog? A detection dog?

Euracia looked at me almost like she was a detective searching for a culprit.

“How curious! I smell a woman! One I don’t know.”

Huh? A woman?

Euracia’s eyes were filled with suspicion.

What does she mean, a woman?

Suddenly, Medelian came to mind. It was true that I’d gotten awfully close to her, but surely the scent had faded by now. It had been *days* since then. How could it linger like that? It seemed impossible.

“That can’t be right,” I said. “I did meet an enemy, though. Uh, anyway, that’s not important now. Let’s set it aside and move along. We don’t have time.”

Yeah, the surprise attack came first. I knew that if I let this go on, it was definitely going to be a headache. I took Euracia’s hand and led her in front of the Rozernan forces.

“Hey, hold on just a moment!” she protested.

“Hurry it up. Get on your horse. Come on, let’s go!”

I forced Euracia, who was looking at me with suspicion, to mount her horse, and then we set off again with her troops.

The Rozernan Army advanced at our command. With their Training score of over 70, they were able to do it in a somewhat orderly fashion.

Soon enough, thirty thousand Rozernan troops had arrived in front of Bazarett Castle.

Rozern had sent these men to us for two simple reasons. Partially, they wanted to repay their debt to me, but more importantly, once the Gebel Kingdom was taken by Naruya, Rozern would inevitably be their next target.

They now had a border with the former territory of Runan. Though Runan was under Naruyan occupation, its lands were vast enough that Naruya didn't have full control of them yet.

Knowing these things, I'd developed my read on the situation. While there had been a risk of discovery, I knew that the Rozernan Army would be able to make it here without suffering any delays.

Unlike the Gebel Kingdom or Ramie Kingdom, Rozern had a fundamentally trusting relationship with me. The fact that Euracia was my ally had probably been a decisive factor too. She still held great influence in Rozern. That had helped her persuade them that driving off the Naruyans was in the long-term interest of Rozern.

The supply bases would be somewhere to the rear. Obviously, the enemy would be changing their locations regularly out of wariness against any surprise attack. This meant that our primary objective was to take as many castles in the rear as we could.

We would start by attacking Bazarett Castle, which wasn't prepared for us in the slightest.

"Attack!"

Valdesca was probably aware the Rozernan Army had joined the war now, and he'd be moving to do something about it, but he couldn't have had time to prepare just yet.

Of course, the troops at Bazarett Castle were panicked by the sudden attack.

The Rozernan forces charged in with a roaring battle cry that was a testament

to their high Morale!

Morale Bonus: Attack Power temporarily increased by 20%

Because our Morale had reached 100, it increased the efficiency with which our troops fought.

Their loud battle cries stripped the enemy of their will to fight, and since the enemy hadn't even had time to prepare archers, the Rozernan forces were able to start climbing ladders and get up onto the walls.

"Yeaaaah!"

Naruyan Force at Bazarett Castle: 6,871 men

Royal Rozernan Army: 30,000 men

The Naruyan force camped at Bazarett Castle has a Training of 92 and a Morale of around 85.

They seemed a little complacent, perhaps because they'd been positioned toward the rear and the war had been going well for Naruya. Regardless, their Morale score had fallen compared to the Naruyan forces fighting on the front lines. Now that they found themselves under attack, it threw them into a state of confusion.

Confusion: Enemy Morale fell by 10

Their Morale had dropped to 75.

The slow response of the defenders at Bazarett Castle meant that Rozern's soldiers were already making it up onto the walls one after another.

Jint looked like he was itching to do something.

"You're up, Jint. Climb the walls and pry those gates open."

I'd checked with the system, so I already knew that the commander of Bazarett Castle was nothing special. He had a Martial of 75, which was strong, but not enough to make him one of the Ten Commanders, and it was no match for Jint's.

"I'll smash them!"

Jint raced toward Bazarett Castle with a look of glee on his face.

*

Jint began climbing the ladder. Once he surged into battle, the soldiers already clinging to the ladders picked up their pace. There were already a good number of them on the walls, so Jint was able to make the climb without any real trouble.

Still, he had to hand it to the Naruyans.

Although they had fallen into a state of confusion at first, they'd quickly reorganized their battle lines and prepared some archers. Arrows rained down on the ladder, but they were obviously no threat to Jint.

Things got a bit dicey when the Naruyans started pouring boiling oil, but the moment Jint detected this plan, he jumped to another ladder and avoided being scalded.

Nice work, Naruya. They don't call you "the strongest army on the continent" for nothing.

This was a supply base, and their Morale was lower, and yet they were still managing to put up an effective defense.

However, their fierce resistance only fed Jint's fighting spirit more. He was always thirsty for battle because he felt that no matter how much he fought, it would never be enough to repay the debt he owed Erhin.

He hadn't been getting as many solo missions lately, so he was especially fired up about this one.

Just distinguishing himself wasn't enough. He had to do it in a way that was useful to Erhin, which meant that he needed to take this place as soon as possible. Jint had never been a particularly deep thinker, but even he

understood the basic goal of this operation.

As the arrows gradually got more accurate, the boiling oil poured down more frequently, and the defense became more organized, Jint finally reached the top of the wall.

Jint drew his Nameless Sword, and powerful mana spread out around him. He danced wildly, beginning to mow down the Naruyan forces all by himself. Each swing of the blade sent blood flying. The blood dripped down the walls, making them glisten with ruby redness.

Naruyan soldiers gathered, attempting to stop Jint, but he knocked them all away. Thanks to him, the majority of the Rozernan forces were able to get up on top of the walls and start fighting. This also meant that Jint had more soldiers to help him.

Obviously, the commander of Bazarett Castle wasn't going to just sit back and watch. "Kill that enemy commander!" he shouted. "If we let him survive, more of the enemy will make it up onto the walls!"

However, the moment he yelled out, the commander let Jint know exactly where he was.

Jint charged toward the commander's position, moving with incredible speed. His blade was as swift as Ganeif of Brijit's.

Jint launched into a series of attacks: he slashed through one man's chest, decapitated another, jumped into the air and skewered a man through the throat, and then used the recoil to free his sword and tear his next victim open at the waist.

Jint chased the fleeing enemy commander into the castle, and the Rozernan soldiers followed behind him.

With an A-class commander showing off such incredible power, the Rozernans were able to fight the Naruyans on even terms. The knowledge that such a powerful warrior was on their side helped them to overcome the gap in Training and lent them great strength. Of course, their Morale, which Euracia had raised up to 100, played a big role in that too.

Jint slashed with reckless abandon until he finally managed to catch up to the

fleeing commander.

“Aaaah! How did this guy get here?! Shoot him! If you come any closer, you’re dead!”

The Naruyan archers let their arrows fly without a care for whether they hit friend or foe. The infantry immediately moved to block Jint once more. They were protecting the castle gates so that he couldn’t open them.

The Naruyan soldiers were now showing their grit. No other military could have put up such a solid defense under these circumstances.

But they were powerless before Jint.

He chased the commander toward the gates, then sprang at the infantrymen who were guarding them.

“All of you, out of the way!”

Jint activated his skill. When triggered with the Nameless Sword, it caused many earthen swords to shoot up from the ground into the air.

The ground rumbled for some time, and then the earthen swords started impaling Naruyan soldiers.

“Aaaaaah!”

“Gyaaaaah!”

“My leg... Aah!”

Jint’s skill skewered the men who had dared to face him.

With the enemies’ legs stuck, he bounded past them toward the gates.

Jint began cutting the enemies down with swift strikes. Finally, he spotted their commander. He killed an enemy, then used the man’s body as a springboard, slashing the enemy commander’s neck as he landed in the middle of another group of infantry.

“I am Jint of the Eintorian Army!”



He looked like a battle fiend.

Jint's Martial increased by +1

Young as he was, fighting was a source of great experience for him, and it led to growth. Even if he wasn't aware of it himself, his rising Martial made Jint's swordsmanship even faster.

The enemy's battle lines completely collapsed, and he was able to join up with the Rozernan forces who had come down from the walls. Together, they finally managed to create an open space in front of the gates.

Jint got the gates open, just like Erhin wanted.

(To be continued in volume 6)

Afterword

Thank you for buying the fifth volume of *Only the Villainous Lord Wields the Power to Level Up!* This is the author, Waruiotoko.

There was a bit of a gap in releases after the fourth volume, and I'm very sorry to all of the readers who I've kept waiting. Still, I'm really glad that I was able to get this volume published.

Now then, as of this volume, Erhin's nation, the New Eintorian Kingdom, is up and running!

The plan from here on out centers around a white-knuckle battle of great nation vs. great nation. The story has gotten a bit more complicated, but because of that, I think I'll be able to fill it with lots of interesting stuff!

What's more, Medelian's suddenly shot to the front of the heroine race! I'm sure the illustrations will show everyone how cute she is. I couldn't be more grateful to raken for drawing them. If the serious and loyal Euracia is a dog-type heroine, then the capricious and clingy Medelian is a cat-type heroine. Of course, Serena won't be taking this lying down.

The romantic developments around Erhin are going to pick up even more in the next volume! I really want you to look forward to it!

Also, the manga adaptation in Gangan Online and Manga UP is going strong too! Euracia's finally shown up in that version. Seeing her back at the point where she mistakes Erhin for a villainous lord is a bit of a trip down memory lane. The first collected volume of the manga is available now, so please support both the manga and the original work if you'd like!

Now then, everyone. The threat of the coronavirus has yet to pass, and things are only getting worse out there in the real world. But even so, I want to do my best precisely because of the trying times we live in.

See you in the next volume!

Waruiotoko



Only
the
**Villainous
Lord**

Wields
the
Power
to
**Level
UP**

Waruiotoko
illust. raken



**“Our defeat is
an impossibility!
Trample them
underfoot with
the full might
of our forces!”**

Cassia de Naruya

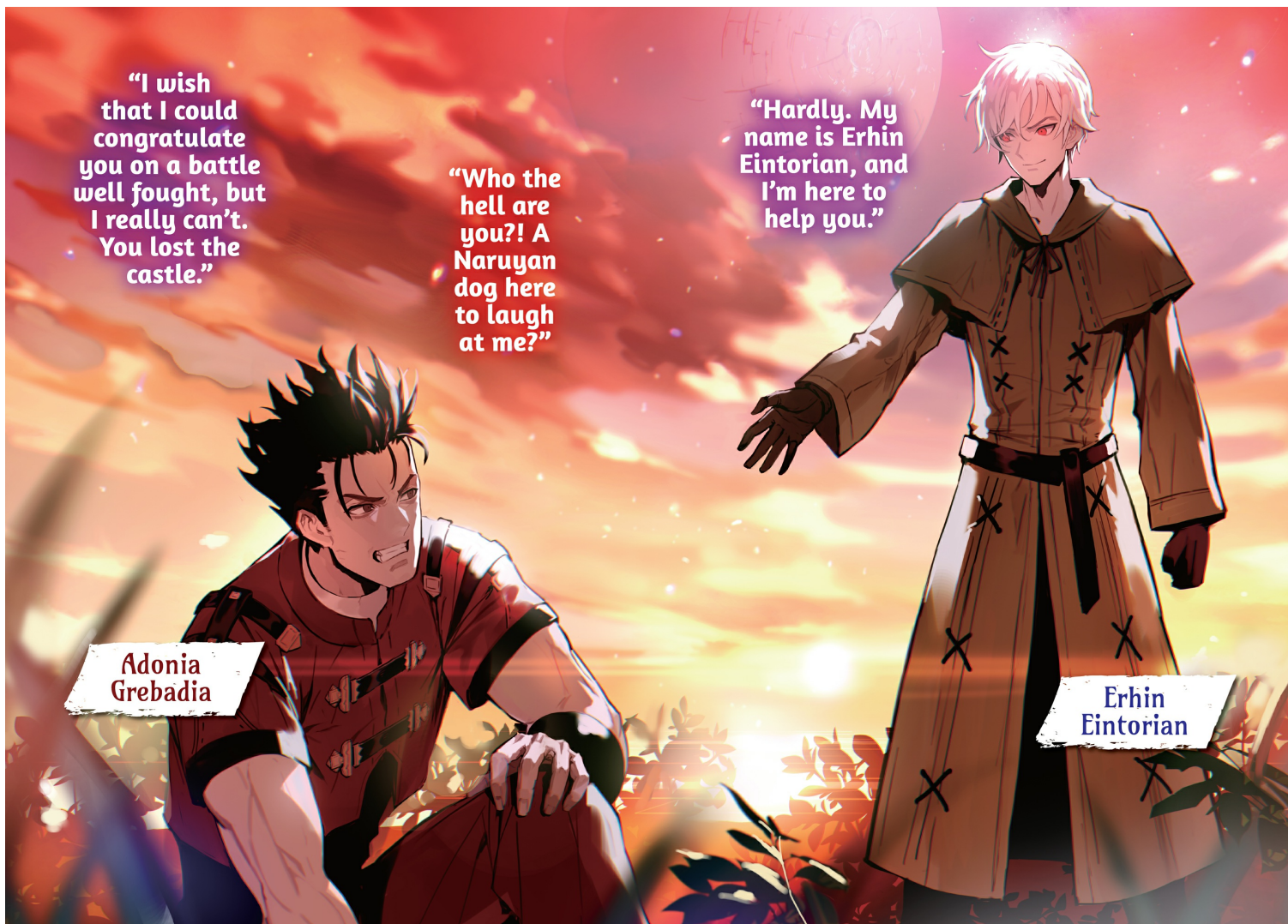
"I wish that I could congratulate you on a battle well fought, but I really can't. You lost the castle."

"Who the hell are you?! A Naruyan dog here to laugh at me?"

"Hardly. My name is Erhin Eintorian, and I'm here to help you."

Adonia Grebadia

Erhin Eintorian





“I love fun
stuff like
that. I hate
anything
that’s a
pain.”

Medelian
Valdesca



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Only the Villainous Lord Wields the Power to Level Up: Volume 5

by Waruiotoko

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