



Only  
the  
**Villainous**  
**Lord**

IV

Wields  
the  
**Power**  
**to**  
**Level**  
**UP**

Waruiotoko  
illust. raken

# **ONLY THE VILLAINOUS LORD WIELDS THE POWER TO LEVEL UP**

**-Ore dake Level ga Agaru Sekai de Akutoku Ryoushu ni Natteita-**

**- VOLUME 4 -**

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**[ J-NOVEL CLUB ]**

Serena  
Dofrey



**“Please, save  
my father and the  
king! I beg of you!  
I’ll do anything  
that I can in  
return...!”**



Erhin  
Eintorian



The sound of steel on steel rang in my ears.  
I'd already beheaded  
Ruteca by mashing the  
Attack command. His  
head sailed through the  
air, hit the floor, and  
rolled to a stop.





**"If you and I  
work together,  
there's no way  
we could ever  
lose, right?"**

Frann  
Valdesca



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# CHAPTER 1

## NEW DOMAIN, NEW ENEMIES

On the southwest edge of the former territory of Brijit was the Bertaquin Domain. With mountains to the north, and the sea to the south, the area was a natural fortress, but the trade-off was that the region consisted mostly of mountains. Because of the expanse of ranges, it only had half the land that the Eintorian Domain did for cultivating and inhabiting.

With so little usable land, we would have to do slash-and-burn farming on the mountains to use them for agriculture. That would give us more room to work with.

I had chosen to restart from the west side of Brijit, including Bertaquin; the neighboring domain, Ryhein; and the former capital of Brijit, Brinhill. At the moment, it was impossible to rule over any more than that. Even setting aside the issue of our insufficient population, I had a shortage of capable administrators.

It took a lot of people to maintain just one city. If I let just anyone have the job, then they'd only make things worse. If that led to a drop in popular opinion, degrading the strength of my nation, then I'd be ruined. That's why I'd given up on the territories east of the Brijitian capital currently occupied by Runanese forces. I planned to get myself set up first, then take over the rest of Brijit later.

"As you were saying, Your Excellency, after the Naruyan invasion began, our forces in the southeast of Brijit headed back home to Runan. When that happened, I remained in Bertaquin as you ordered, before occupying Brinhill and Ryhein."

Of the forces led by Fihatori, some twenty thousand men had retreated to Runan. They would likely join up with Ronan, who'd made his escape to southern Runan. Well, I'd left one more ember of strife with the man. If that ember didn't do its job, I'd find another way, but for now, I intended to sit back and watch things burn.

That ember had a name—former advisor to the Runanese Army, Heina Berhin.

She had been seeking power in order to avenge her father's death. At one point, she even sent assassins after me over a misplaced grudge, but I'd made her see that Ronan

was the root cause of everything. Knowing her, she wouldn't spare any effort to save the dying Runan, and would instead work to take revenge on Ronan.

"What happened to the people of southwestern Brijit?"

"They were originally citizens of Brijit, so... while I did recommend that they come join us in the west, I was unsuccessful."

"Well, I can't blame you for that. If anyone in the Ryhein or Brinhill Domain wants to leave, don't stop them. If we restrict the people now, it could have a devastating effect on public sentiment."

"Understood, Your Excellency!"

To the people of Brijit, I was still no more than an enemy. An invader. But I didn't need to go out of my way to win them over. If I just ruled well, they would come rushing to me of their own accord.

*For now, I'll focus all of my power in one place. This is where things truly begin.*

There was a load of things to be done, but I decided my first order of business would be to investigate all the checkpoints between Brinhill, the old capital of Brijit, and the east of the country.

I had to be cautious of the east.

The roads eastbound were open now, but they weren't all through valleys; some small mountains dotted the route too. Those mountainous areas had strategic checkpoints meant to thwart any enemy attack on Brinhill.

"This way, Your Excellency."

However, the checkpoint Fihatori brought me to was in an even sorrier state than I'd anticipated.

Brinhill Checkpoint

Durability: 50

"There are a number of checkpoints east of this one, but they're generally not in very good condition either. The country stretches a long way from east to west, and the mountain stopped most of their enemies, so I suspect they became lax in maintaining them."

In the end, I had to pay for repairs.

While I'd been able to bring all the gold that was once hidden beneath Eintorian with me, there were still limits to how much funding I had. Fresh gold wasn't going to come pouring in on its own. If I grew overdependent on that gold, I was in for big trouble later, especially since, as I was currently forced into a zero-taxation policy, my treasury was only dwindling.

Still, I couldn't leave what might be the critical border of my realm undefended.

"Release whatever food we can afford to from the storehouses at Brijit's palace and use it to round up some labor. We're going to need to not only repair but also start some new construction, after all."

"Understood, Your Excellency!"

*There's no other faction that would invade this region anytime soon, but as they say, a stitch in time saves nine. I plan to deal with our finances through trade and commerce in the future, so that's going to have to make up for it. The important thing for now is to focus on these gatehouses at strategic passes that will protect us.*

After prioritizing them, I moved on to distributing the population.

To confront the King of Naruya, who'd invaded Runan and killed the king, and to unify the continent, I was going to announce the foundation of the New Eintorian Kingdom.

Obviously, the capital would be here in Brinhill. It wasn't a bad pick. After all, as the former capital of the Brijit Kingdom, it had a reasonably good castle.

Eintorian Domain

Total Population: 1,050,000

I hadn't proclaimed the foundation of the state just yet, so the system still showed the three regions of the Eintorian Domain and their total population.

The original Eintorian region had a population of twenty-five thousand.

That was a lot for a mere count's lands, but then again, I had actively been encouraging people to settle down in my domain.

The existing populations of Brinhill, Ryhein, and Bertaquin came to another fifty thousand. When you consider that Brinhill was once the capital of a sovereign country, that number was actually on the low end. Granted, that was because the war I had fought here before had caused an outflow of people to other regions.

The rest of our population was made up of the refugees who'd followed me here from other regions of Runan.

The existing residents of Brijit's most important stat was their Opinion, and currently sat at a measly 43. But the people I had brought here in advance from the Eintorian Domain, the ones who were already loyal only to me, boasted a high 92. As for the refugees I led here after smashing the Naruyan Army, their sentiment toward me sat at a reasonably stable 85.

Still, when you looked at the entire population, their average Opinion score came to 66. Not a very good number at all. Such a score wouldn't cause an immediate explosion of discontent with disastrous results, but it was also going to be hard to raise it. If I pursued policies that favored the former Brijitians, then I would probably face strong pushback from the rest of my people. That'd defeat the entire purpose of doing it.

I had to wait for the Brijitians' opinion of me to slowly rise on its own.

I divided the population so that there were sixty thousand people in Brinhill, thirty thousand in Ryhein, and fifteen thousand in Bertaquin, based on the relative size of each territory. Now the issue was who I should make lord of each region. To be perfectly honest, I sorely lacked the number of qualified personnel needed to govern them.

Hadin Meruya

Martial: 60

Intelligence: 57

Command: 70

Bente

Martial: 49

Intelligence: 38

Command: 82

Jint

Martial: 93(+2)

Intelligence: 41

Command: 52

Yusen

Martial 82

Intelligence 60

Command 90(+2)

Gibun

Martial: 70

Intelligence: 34

Command: 76

Mirinae

Martial: 5

Intelligence: 74

Command: 10

Euracia Rozern

Martial: 87(+3)

Intelligence: 57

Command: 95(+2)

Erheet Demacine

Martial: 96

Intelligence: 70

Command: 92

Fihatori Delhina

Martial: 81

Intelligence: 85

Command: 89

Ganid Voltaire

Martial: 30

Intelligence: 60

Command: 61

Bertalman

Martial: 80

Intelligence: 50

Command: 78

Erheet hadn't fully become one of my retainers just yet, but he was still doing good work for me as a sort of assistant. I was hoping he'd become my retainer in the future, but I felt no need to rush it. I planned to wait until he came to me to speak about it himself.

He probably had a lot to think about.

One positive development so far was that all of Erheet's retainers were now firmly

opposed to Duke Ronan. They knew what kind of country Runan had been better than anyone, so they weren't going to talk about trying to restore it. So long as Erheet didn't aspire to become king of a nation of his own, he'd officially become my retainer in due time.

Also, Count Voltaire ended up sticking around. He didn't seem to plan on going anywhere, seeing as he constantly kissed up to me. He was timid and had low ability scores, but that in turn meant he didn't have the guts to betray me, which made him a safe choice in that regard.

But as far as Erheet's retainers, Voltaire's retainers, and the retainers of those Runanese lords who chose to accompany me went, none of them had ability scores high enough to be worth taking note of. I could let them manage the administration of the regions I had for now, but I'd eventually run up against the limits of what they could each accomplish. Erheet's retainers in particular were specialized toward the military, so I intended to make him the head of my armed forces eventually.

For now, I needed to manage each region of my domain up until the wars of conquest formally began.

To that end, I put Yusen in charge of Bertaquin, since he'd already made contact with the mountain folk and learned various things about the area, and put Hadin in charge of Ryhein.

*They're the two I trust most.*

When it came to pure ability, Fihatori was superior in some ways, but he already had a lot of tasks on his plate.

As for Mirinae, her Intelligence score had begun rising as she studied, but I planned to put her in charge of government affairs when the time came.

Lord of Bertaquin

Yusen

The Opinion of Bertaquin has increased by 5.

When I assigned Yusen as Lord of Bertaquin, there was a surprising change. Did that happen because of his high Command, or because of what Yusen had already done in the Bertaquin Domain?

Maybe it was both.

Either way, Yusen was a talented guy—a fact further demonstrated by the absence of any similar change when I assigned Hadin to Ryhein.

\*

I headed to Ryhein Domain. My goal was to raise the people's opinion of me there ahead of encouraging agricultural development and the fishing industry.

The Ryhein Domain was larger than the Bertaquin Domain. Of course, in terms of overall importance, the iron in Bertaquin was going to be massively more vital to my cause. There was no way to carry out the expansions to the military I needed to prepare for war without first activating the Bertaquin Domain's mining industry. But the Ryhein Domain had more flat land than the other territories, as well as a number of fishing ports.

Ryhein

Population: 325,031

Opinion: 74

The low opinions of the former Brijitians had mixed with those of the new settlers for a combined score of 74. While the new settlers had already been told about my tax policy, the native Ryheinites hadn't heard about it yet.

And so I went there myself.

As far as they were concerned, I was just an invader, and the settlers' enemies who

came to steal their land and jobs. I needed to make them see it wasn't like that. I was their new ruler, and these people, their comrades. That meant I needed to make a personal visit as soon as possible.

"I am sure you must all be bewildered to see so many new residents. But have no fear! I won't do anything to harm your current lifestyle. In fact, I promise you a better future!"

I gave speeches at the different villages as I toured the area. My tax policy had a great effect, of course. Being exempted from taxes for a whole year meant a significant amount to the people, and it was really nothing to sneeze at. My tax strategy helped lower the discontent among the former Brijitians, raising the Opinion score to 85.

That only left Brinhill.

Brinhill

Population: 624,501

Opinion: 54

This was the territory with the lowest Opinion. Not that there was any helping that, considering that the vast majority of the people were former Brijitians. More than anything, they were afraid of being displaced by settlers. Of course, I had no intention of doing that to them.

In both the Brinhill and Ryhein Domains, the land I was giving the settlers was undeveloped.

This did nothing to harm the existing residents of the domain, and I was even making life easier for them by exempting them from taxes for a year. I planned to conscript them to fight in later wars, so I needed to rule benevolently now in order to improve popular sentiment as much as possible.

"...and that's why, through my tax policy, I intend to help the existing residents and the settlers come together!"

Obviously, no one objected to a tax exemption.

The Opinion of Bertaquin has increased from 54 to 76.

A bonus effect has increased Opinion from 76 to 91.

For some reason, an unusual bonus effect raised the Opinion score of the Brinhill Domain even further. That didn't happen in Ryhein. I pulled up the system, trying to figure out what it was. Bonuses didn't just happen without some sort of cause.

"Is something the matter?" Euracia asked innocently, tilting her head to the side. She had become a lot more expressive recently. "If you stare so hard, your eyes are going to fall right out of your head. Would you mind if I keep them if they do?"

Now she was saying horrifying things and making strange requests.

"Uh, I just had something on my mind."

There was only one thing that made Ryhein and Brinhill different: the presence of Euracia. Her Command score of 97 shouldn't have had this much of an effect on its own. Euracia's high Charisma had also gone up along with her Command, so perhaps that was what was responsible for this kind of Opinion bonus. If I were to put a score on her Charisma, it was probably close to 100.

That's why just having her at my side when giving speeches could make the people's Opinion rise by a whole 15 points.

It was one hell of an effect.

*Maybe I should bring Euracia with me on another speech tour in Ryhein?*

It was certainly worth giving it a try.

\*

"Ohhhhh! So this is Bertaquin Castle, huh!" Gibun cried out in delight when he saw the

lord's castle in Bertaquin.

"This is going to be ours? Whew, I sure have moved up in the world! Nice work, Gibun! I always knew it was important to have connections. If I'd been in another unit and never met His Excellency, I might already have died in the war with Naruya," Gibun murmured, patting himself on the head.

Of course, Gibun's advancement wasn't solely down to luck. His abilities were a part of it too. If Yusen and Gibun hadn't been there during the battle at Lynon Castle, there was a good possibility that Erhin wouldn't have been able to coordinate things so well.

"Anyway, the important thing is what comes after this. Go to the mountain folk's headquarters and fetch Bertalman right away. His Excellency has summoned him."

Yusen chided Gibun for getting so giddy, but on closer inspection the corners of his own lips were upturned too.

"Sure, sure, I'll get right on it."

The mountain folk patrolled the peaks under the command of Bertalman. Because most of the domain was rocky terrain, it would be incredibly difficult for any unit to traverse the ranges without their help.

That's why Erhin meant to expand the scale of their activity to Brinhill.

"What will you be doing, Captain Yusen?"

"I need to focus on developing the farmland in this domain. I also have orders to encourage the fishermen and grow the port towns. I'll need to increase the number of privately owned fishing ships too."

The people of this domain were more amicable to their new rulers thanks to Yusen's efforts, so the area didn't merit any special concern.

\*

"Mirinae."

"Yes, my lord!"

“Why did you bring him along? Jint, you don’t trust me calling her?”

“That’s right. I told him to stay in the house...” Mirinae said, still holding Jint’s hand.

*Uh, that’s not really something you should say while holding hands.*

“It’s not that I’m tagging along. I just had business in the palace too.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I didn’t call you here.”

“What? What do you mean you didn’t call me?”

*Now he’s just talking nonsense.*

“See! I told you he wasn’t calling you! It was just me! Get away from me!”

*Save the arguments for after you stop holding hands so tightly. No, wait. Are they going out of their way to flaunt how close they are? Well, whatever.*

I was always having Jint come along with me, so I could understand it was important for them to be together when it was peaceful like this.

In fact, this was the perfect time for it.



That's why I hadn't given Jint another assignment. Well, not that I could count on Jint to do anything that didn't involve fighting.

"Oh, forget it. It's not like I'm telling you to go home."

I'd summoned Mirinae to try giving her a job. She'd always been very smart, but her passion for her studies had caused her Intelligence score to rise considerably.

Looking at the system's domain management screen, Brinhill currently had a score of 46 for Agriculture. That number represented production efficiency, basically meaning the domain was only at 46 percent of its potential output.

The Brijitian king's almost total disinterest in domestic policy was probably to blame for that. For now, I needed to boost the territory's Agriculture score. I didn't need it to be 100, but if we were only harvesting 46 percent of what we could be, then people were going to starve.

Brinhill

Opinion: 91

Agriculture: 46

Fishing: 52

Forestry: 45

Despite the significant area the region covered, the numbers weren't very good. I needed these scores raised as high as they could be by a year from now, when the tax exemption policy ended.

*So I'll start with Agriculture.*

Fishing and forestry both required someone more knowledgeable in that field.

"There are a lot of books on agriculture. Mirinae, you have farming experience, right?

You must know more about it than someone who used to be a nobleman or a soldier. Could you meet with the farmers, hear what they have to say, and then carry out agricultural reforms based on the books in the palace library?"

"Me? You'd trust me with such an important job...?" Mirinae asked, her eyes wide with surprise as they went from me, to Jint, and then back to me again.

"Euracia, how would you feel about helping Mirinae with her task?"

Just having her around would probably give some kind of bonus like she had before. The way that her Charisma gave boosts to internal administration just by having her around made it feel like cheating to have her.

*Obviously, I'm not expecting too much. But with Mirinae's smarts, I'm sure she can come up with something. She's got the highest Intelligence next to Fihatori.*

"Very well," Euracia said, quickly nodding. "I'm always for anything that helps the people. It's a pleasure to work with you, Mirinae."

"You want me to work with the princess?!" Mirinae jumped into the air in shock.

When Euracia cast a dubious glance in her direction, Mirinae started trembling.

"Um... Someone like me... shouldn't be working with a princess..."

"Have some confidence, Mirinae. That's an order. As is the job I just gave you."

It was something that she needed to do to build her self-confidence. I needed her to be more audacious, like Jint.

On second thought, maybe "like Jint" was taking it a bit too far?

\*

*Public opinion, policy, and agricultural reforms are all looking good. But in the end, military power is going to be the most important thing. These are troubled times we live in. I'm going to need to prepare a military not just so that I can unify the continent, but for defense as well.*

Having not yet announced the foundation of a new country, the Runanese forces that

I'd brought with me and my own forces that I'd raised in Eintorian were both referred to as the Eintorian Domain Army in the system.

They numbered roughly sixty-two thousand men.

The existing Eintorian Domain Army had been twenty-two thousand men, and their Morale was obviously sky-high. On average, they had a high degree of Training too. Honestly, they were fine as is, as long as I could maintain the status quo.

As for the Runanese troops led by Fihatori, they had an incredible Morale of 98. That wasn't far from the Eintorian Domain Army, which had just tasted victory.

"Fihatori, I wanted to talk about the unit you've been leading. Why is their morale so high when they haven't fought in any major battles?"

They had a Training of 72, but a Morale of 98. I didn't understand what could have caused that.

"Oh, the reason's as plain as day. These men have been following you since your defense of Rozern."

While, yes, that was true, was he suggesting that it was enough, on its own, to explain them maintaining such a high morale?

"They're thrilled to be able to fight under you again, Your Excellency. Because they know that, with you in command, they're unlikely to lose, and the odds of them dying are much lower."

He certainly had a point there.

"Of course... There's another, larger reason for it. These men crossed the mountains with you and gained victory. You kept your promise to them then, and convinced them you were different from the other lords. I hear some of the men stayed up all night, crying for joy, after they were able to send the reward money back to their families."

While this was something I had deliberately engineered, it had only worked out this way because Fihatori communicated things to them in such a way that it was thanks to me, and not the King of Runan. As I started to think in earnest about a plan for how to train my army, Erheet approached from behind Fihatori.

"Is Erhin here?"

"Can I help you, Your Excellency?"

We really needed to do something about styles of address soon. Just how many excellencies did we have walking around here? But it was best to save the proclamation of a new country for when public sentiment had moved more in my favor.

It would seem more justified if, rather than just declare "I'm going to be king!" I seemed to be doing it at the urging of those around me.

Obviously, I had a legitimate claim as a descendant of the Eintorians. Anyway, I decided to take a wait and see approach for a little longer.

"I had a proposal to make. Would you consider training lancers? If you would, then I am prepared to spend my life training and managing them for you!"

"Lancers, you say?"

"That's right. I proposed the idea several times in Runan, but was always rebuffed because we lacked iron and they wouldn't give me the budget for it."

*Yeah, I can't see that king ever approving a costly proposal. Lancers, huh?*

This might have seemed obvious, but lancers were cavalrymen who fought using lances. It was a somewhat rare troop type in this world for various reasons. The first of which being they were hard to train. It took a lot of talent to be able to control a lance freely while in an unstable position like on the back of a horse. Also, lancers needed a lot of iron. Their job was to charge into the enemy's formations with their lances. That required sturdy lances and armor in case they got surrounded.

But it was also true that if we could train a large number of them, they'd be a force to be reckoned with. They were a charging unit with long reach and superior mobility. That on its own was already enough to make them scary. Range dominated the battlefield. So long as it didn't devolve into one-on-one combat, the soldier with the longer weapon had an overwhelming advantage.

If I combined them with my existing iron cavalry, then I could trample over my enemies with that overwhelming destructive power. I had an iron mine now, and

Erheet's skills with a spear had earned him the nickname The Fiendish Spear.

With someone as suited to teaching spear techniques as Erheet, and the iron to construct the equipment needed for him to arm his new recruits with, there was no reason not to go for it.

*"I ought to be asking you if you'd do it for me, Your Excellency. I will do everything within my power to help. Please lend us your strength!"*

"You mean it?! Good! Then I'll begin preparing at once!" Erheet sounded like a giddy child.

After that, Fihatori, Erheet, and I had a meeting about military preparations.

\*

Just as I was getting things on the rails internally, an incident broke out.

The mountains protected us to the north, but the coast was wide open. It was true that the sea had stopped an invasion, and that was why I had chosen this territory, but if any nation in the vicinity had a war fleet, that changed things.

"So, one issue I have with Brijit," I said to Fihatori.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Why did they only have a grand total of four warships?"

"There is a reason for that. I believe that, under the king two reigns before the last King of Brijit, they lost a major naval battle against the Luaranz Kingdom. From what I've been told, they lost all control of the sea after that, and they had no means of fighting back. The Luaranz Kingdom has been famous for their formidable navy ever since the time when the Eintorian Kingdom still reigned supreme. In the time of the Ancient Kingdom, Luaranz had a massive port and a grand fleet, which they used to expand across the continent. It was the House of Luaranz from the Ancient Kingdom that built that great fleet, and who founded the country, so they had been a naval power for generations."

*Oh, yeah, that's right. There's a coastal port city called Luaranz. It's a naval country.*

The kings of Brijit must have decided that, rather than half-heartedly build a new fleet only to get it crushed by Luaranz, they were better off focusing on their land forces.

“That only makes the problem worse. Look at this,” I said, pointing at a map.

The sea routes from the Luaranz Kingdom to the Brinhill Domain, Ryhein Domain, and Bertaquin Domain were far too close.

*If the Luaranz Kingdom attacks us by sea, we’re in trouble.*

There were mountains to the north, and we could defend the west side with the army, but we were completely exposed to an attack from the sea. Especially if the Luaranz Kingdom were to ally themselves with another country and attack on two fronts. That could be fatal to us.

*At the very least, I don’t want this area to end up getting turned into a battlefield when we’re going to be spending more than a year recovering.*

If my domain got invaded before I could attack anywhere else, then that would make it impossible to unify the continent.

*Besides, who wants to live on the coast when they don’t know when enemies might attack it?*

“That’s certainly an issue, but... There is a reason the Luaranz Kingdom hasn’t made a move, even after all this chaos.”

“Why is that?”

“King Luaranz is old, so he is avoiding war. He also lacks a successor, and the factional strife between different nobles vying for the throne is growing more intense.”

*I see. They’re all desperate to seize power.*

“So there’s little chance of them starting a war, then. Is that it?”

“It is as you have surmised,” Fihatori said with a nod, but I remained wary of the Luaranz Kingdom.

That’s because, while I didn’t remember the succession crisis, I did clearly remember

an important character from the game was in Luaranz.

*There's going to be a coup d'état there soon.*

The usurper would then immediately go on to start a war of conquest, and accomplish a whole lot with their superior abilities and grand fleet. Later, they would grow to become one of the people vying for supremacy on this continent.

The coup d'état took place after the fall of Runan. If it hadn't happened yet, then that meant it would soon.

"Excellent. So, what do you think of making the Luaranz Kingdom's grand fleet our own?"

"The grand fleet?" Fihatori looked at me as if he didn't understand what I was saying.

What I was saying had to sound like a total non sequitur when I'd been worried about them invading just a moment ago, so it was a perfectly natural reaction.

"I'm just asking what you'd think about getting our hands on their fleet. The mountains keep our enemies at bay, but they also make it hard to head outside ourselves. But with a fleet, we could invade anywhere on the continent easily."

"I suppose we could. It is true that a fleet would be a considerable addition to our war power"

"Send a messenger to Luaranz. Tell them we want to send a delegation to request an alliance."

Of course, I would never form an alliance that didn't benefit me. The alliance was only a pretext. How to fully remove the threat to our exposed south—that was the real issue at hand.

If I could build an army of around a hundred and fifty thousand men, with popular opinion and our agricultural base stable, then I would finally be ready to declare the foundation of my country and head out into the continent at large. There was no way to train that many men while I was in a situation where it was impossible to know when an enemy might strike. I had to increase my population to be able to raise that many troops.

And the solution to that population issue was actually in Luaranz too.

\*

Mirinae busily rushed around, talking to farmers who had worked the fields of the Brinhill region for generations. She scoured through every book she could get her hands on, approaching the task she had been given with total seriousness. Euracia followed her around as she worked, and the effects of her Charisma made the farmers considerably more cooperative.

On top of this, Euracia also had been given some work training the military, so she had loads of things to do.

I visited Euracia and told her, "I'm going to the Luaranz Kingdom."

"The Luaranz Kingdom? Why?"

"To protect our backs... you might say."

"I don't really understand, but I'll get ready."

Euracia planned to come with me as if that were the obvious thing to do.

But this time, I couldn't let her.

Right now, the internal situation in Brinhill was completely reliant on her. Our military training would be more effective with her here too. On top of that, I couldn't exactly take someone who stood out so much when I was trying to keep a low profile. Euracia stuck out by her very nature, so she was a poor fit for an infiltration.

"I'll go by myself. In the meantime, you take care of training the army and managing the domain. I'd be in real trouble without you here."

"..."

Euracia puffed her cheeks up at this. She was not amused. It was scary seeing those pretty, golden eyebrows of hers arch like that.

# CHAPTER 2

## THE NAVAL STATE, LUARANZ

The port in Luaranz was just as massive as I would have expected. If I were to say it felt like looking at the Suez Canal, I'd be exaggerating a little, but all of those military ships moored here, filling every slip to the brim, were still a magnificent sight to behold.

I had so much to gain here in Luaranz. It would cost a fortune and take ages to build a fleet of this scale from scratch, and I wasn't even sure if it'd be finished before I unified the continent. The more I looked at the ships, the more I wanted them, but all I could do right now was stare enviously. All this staring was only making my mouth water. I turned back and headed toward Luaranz's palace.

For now, my goal was an alliance.

Of course, that was never going to happen. The request was just a facade meant to justify my visit. Anyway, having already sent an envoy ahead of me to get a response, I headed to the palace, where I had been granted an audience.

The King of Luaranz was just as old as I'd heard. The game's backstory said that, because he never sired an heir, a conflict had broken out between competing noble factions, and so that magnificent fleet sat rotting away, unused.

The white-haired King of Luaranz stared at me. He was a mediocre king. His authority wasn't particularly strong, but it wasn't as though his power had been completely stripped away by the nobility. If anything, this in-between state of affairs frustrated his retainers.

King Luaranz's eyes hovered over me idly for a while before he spoke.

"You are the Eintorian ambassador?"

"Yes, indeed."

At this point, one of the close associates of the king glared at me.

"Eintorian, huh...? It seems His Majesty permitted your visit because of your connection with the Ancient Kingdom, but you're nothing but a frontier count! Occupying Brijit doesn't make you a real state, so what possessed you to think you had any right to request an audience with His Majesty?! And how dare Erhin Eintorian send an ambassador instead of coming here himself!"

Word that I was the one who broke Naruya's massive army of a hundred and sixty thousand men ought to have spread here already, but I could understand why he would want to emphasize the other details as a way of establishing diplomatic superiority.

I obviously wasn't *happy* about it, but I didn't let that show on my face.

Because right now, I was here not as Erhin Eintorian, but as his retainer, Hadin Meruya.

Also, the alliance didn't even really matter.

It was okay if they wanted to brush me off or even insult me, because my initial goal was just to get inside the castle.

Kashak Lechin

Age: 34

Martial: 92

Intelligence: 81

Command: 90

As for my second objective, it was this nobleman who was currently running his mouth in an attempt to humiliate me: Kashak Lechin.

*He's got good stats. Two of his scores are over 90.*

Yes, I knew who he was.

He was the one who would, in the game's future, launch a coup, seize Luaranz, and then throw his name into the hat as one of those who were going to try to unify the continent.

If his coup succeeded, he'd invade Brinhill too. He was the type to get fired up after hearing the rumors about me.

I was confident I could beat him, but I didn't want us to get exhausted by war when we were supposed to be building our strength. And so I'd come here to preemptively eliminate him. To that end, I'd hidden my identity.

"U-Um..."

I backed away, acting as though I was overwhelmed by Kashak and didn't know how to react.

"I-I'm here to propose an alliance!"

"Did you say an alliance? With the people who fled to Brijit because they couldn't defend their own country? Don't be absurd!"

Kashak raised his voice in anger.

His shout made me fall on my backside, and I looked around anxiously. What a sorry sight I must have made.

"There's no need to be so harsh, Count Kashak. Erhin Eintorian wasn't able to save Runan because the king had already sent him to Rozern. It's nothing short of extraordinary that he was able to defend the people, defeat Naruya's army, and settle in Brijit in that situation."



Surprisingly, one of the nobles was supportive of me. Everything he said was true, but what surprised me was that he knew so many details.

Calling up the system, I learned he was Count Dofrey. By all indications, he had a positive inclination toward us, but since he wasn't a famous character in the game, I couldn't be sure how he really felt.

"However, if they cannot even defend themselves, wouldn't you agree it's ridiculous to think that they have anything to offer us in a military alliance? If anything, I can only say that it looks to me as though they want the alliance as a safety measure, and after that they want to develop and regain the former territory of Runan. They only mean to use Luaranz, Your Majesty."

Kashak was on the money about everything, except for the fact that I wasn't even serious about forming the alliance. All of the nobles but Dofrey nodded in agreement.

The king may have felt the same way, because he shook his head in dismay before speaking.

"Ambassador, it is entirely thanks to the Ancient Eintorian Kingdom that my nation, Luaranz, has such a powerful navy. For that reason, with respect to the Eintorian name, I will confer with my nobles once more. You are dismissed for now. You will be provided with a place to stay in the palace while you wait."

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Count Kashak Lechin was the most influential young commander in the Luaranz Kingdom. He was highly ambitious, though he never let it show. Under him, this country could be born anew, better and stronger.

The current king was old and timid. He had no concept of expanding the nation's power through war. All he wanted to do was maintain the status quo. That was why the nobles were able to lead him by the nose, and he was hesitant to act in these wonderfully chaotic times.

No amount of reasoning would convince the king that they had to act now, or they would be eliminated by someone else who did. It wasn't just the king. The counts, obsessing over the succession issue, were the same.

Kashak saw them as nothing but a pack of incompetent fools, slowly eating away at

the country. The continent was only growing more chaotic. These were times when they had to act or face nothing but ruin.

If the center of power in this country weren't occupied by a cowardly king and infighting nobles, they could have sent out the fleet during the war between Rozern and Brijit to sweep in once both sides were weakened. If that had happened, a significant portion of Brijit's territory would be theirs by now.

That was their first opportunity. Now, with the fall of Runan, a second had arrived, and yet all anyone did was watch!

Kashak couldn't bear it any longer.

That king couldn't even take a firm stance against that pathetic envoy from a mere lord. Kashak had to go through with the coup that he'd been planning for a decade. Now was the time. Things couldn't be drawn out any longer.

*It's our last chance. Now, while Naruya's lost their grand army!*

Kashak was confident. He strongly believed in his own ambitions. It didn't matter if he was up against Eintorian, which had fought Naruya, or even if he was up against Naruya itself. He believed he could win.

"I'm going to change this country! The king's lived for long enough. I'll kill him, install a puppet, and then I'll be the one to change things! I'll remove anyone who gets in my way too."

Kashak spoke of the secret ambition he had harbored these past ten years in front of his loyal right-hand man, Nerchin.

"Your Excellency! We're all prepared! Once those two old fogies defending the king are removed, Luaranz will be ours!"

Kashak nodded, agreeing with Nerchin. The two old men who defended Luaranz were Commander Chesedin of the First Fleet and Captain Shark of the Royal Guard.

Ever since he was a young boy, Kashak hadn't been able to stand either of them.

"We'll take out both of the geezers at once. Once they're dealt with, we will quickly seize the palace and replace the king! It all needs to be done swiftly. At the end of the

day, history belongs to the victor. If the monarch is replaced, we'll become the good guys, and those who oppose us will all be remembered as traitorous rebels."

"Yes, Your Excellency!"

"There's no room for complacency. Success comes to those who are cautious."

Kashak ordered Nerchin to act with special care. Kashak wasn't someone prone to missing vital information. But now that he had confirmed the details of the mission, he was certain of it.

He couldn't fail.

The plan was perfect.

No matter how he thought about it, there wasn't a single thing that wasn't as he expected it to be.

\*

Duke Chesedin Ramel was the commander of the Luaranz Kingdom's First Fleet. It was this First Fleet that gave other nations pause when they thought about attacking Luaranz. Luaranz was surrounded by a massive canal.

Having learned not just techniques for fighting at sea but also on the canal, Chesedin was a fairly important figure inside Luaranz. Also, while they were called the Navy, they could do more than just fight at sea. If anything, they did most of their fighting during landing operations. If Chesedin were left alone, the coup would need to fight the invincible First Fleet.

Still, if they could just get rid of Chesedin, it wouldn't be hard to seize control of the First Fleet after that.

Kashak had a man at the center of power inside the First Fleet. Once the old man was eliminated, it was just a matter of having that guy assume command. Currently, Chesedin was on his way to the palace for the retirement ceremony for Captain Shark of the Royal Guard, which was to be held soon.

Kashak, who was with his trusted retainer Nerchin and a number of soldiers, called after Chesedin.

“Duke! I have something to speak to you about.”

“I have a prior engagement. Let’s talk later.”

“It’s an urgent report regarding the Naruya Kingdom. I want to meet with you and His Highness together.”

“An urgent report, you say? I had heard that the Naruya Kingdom had lost that grand army of theirs.”

“They still have the unit that was led by their king. The information suggests that the fires of war could spread all the way here to Luaranz...”

“Oh, it’s that bad, is it?”

After hearing all of this, he had no choice but to go with Kashak. Even after losing that massive army, Naruya was still Naruya. If the strongest country on the continent was coming to attack them, then he couldn’t ignore that.

Incidentally, at this point in time, Chesedin’s friend Shark was not in the barracks. This was on account of his already having been cut down by Kashak’s blade.

Kashak called out to the soldiers who were on standby, and one of the lieutenants came forward.

“This is the spy we had infiltrating Naruya. He just got back with an important report.”

Seeing the grave look on the man’s face, Chesedin could only nod. Ultimately, he followed Kashak, never dreaming of the ambitions the other man harbored.

“What happened?”

“I’ll go into the details in front of His Majesty.”

Once Kashak said that, there was nothing more he could ask. When they entered the palace, they were all disarmed according to the usual procedure. Kashak, of course, as well as his men, and then Chesedin and his trusted retainer who followed behind them silently.

Once they were all disarmed, Kashak took the lead. The palace was the largest, most

majestic building in the Luaranz Kingdom.

The golden interior decorations caught and reflected the light, only adding to its splendor. Kashak stopped in front of the bedroom of the queen. The eighty-year-old monarch had welcomed a new queen who was only twenty-two years of age. The king had long since lost the ability to sire children, but he loved his queen dearly and still stayed in her room.

When Kashak stood before the bedchamber door, the soldiers of the Royal Guard crossed their spears in front of it, blocking his way.

"We bear urgent news for His Majesty. Open the door," Kashak said, glaring at their spears, but the soldiers objected.

Perhaps hearing the argument, the head chamberlain appeared.

"His Majesty is declining all visitors at the moment."

Kashak furrowed his brow at the head chamberlain's stubborn refusal.

"It has to do with the Naruya Kingdom. Pass that along. We may be invaded."

They didn't share a border with the Naruya Kingdom, but everyone had still heard rumors about the largest nation on the continent. The head chamberlain blanched.

"Is that true?!"

At Kashak's firm nod, the head chamberlain hurried inside the room.

It wasn't long after that.

"Please, enter."

The head chamberlain urgently waved Kashak and Chesedin inside. As he did, Kashak signaled Nerchin with his eyes so that Chesedin wouldn't notice.

Long had they waited for this day.

The plan was a decade in the works.

Obviously, a coup d'état was the last resort for Kashak. That's why it took him ten years to come to this point.

Today was the day he would seize the power to pursue the ideals he'd long dreamed about.

Kashak followed the head chamberlain thinking that even the clear, blue sky seemed to be blessing him.

Chesedin followed behind.

Only high nobles were able to meet the king. Of course, Kashak's men and Chesedin's trusted retainer were not welcome to come in with them. This had been Kashak's aim: to pull Chesedin away from his trusted retainer. That retainer was the reason he hadn't been able to assassinate Chesedin the way he had Shark. The man was a warrior boasting great martial prowess who had protected Chesedin for many long years.

That's why the assassination of Chesedin proved such a headache.

He absolutely could not allow a situation where the assassination failed and then that retainer was able to bring Chesedin back to the fleet.

That's why he sought a better way, a method of separating the two.

This was the moment.

Kashak walked forward with satisfaction, having skillfully maneuvered Chesedin into meeting the king with him alone.

But time seemed to slow to a crawl as they headed to meet the king.

The tension seemed to place greater gravity on every single moment.

Finally, the king came into view.

He sat beside his queen, allowing her to feed him fruit.

"What is this about Naruya? We don't even share a border..." the king asked before being interrupted by a harsh coughing fit.

It was clear that the king already wasn't long for this world, but Kashak had waited a decade already.

The king had lived a long life despite his chronic condition. Thanks to that, the opportunities were becoming fewer. Hiding his hateful glare, Kashak looked at the king and at Chesedin.

"Wait, who are you...?"

Here Kashak scowled again. There was another person here, in addition to the king and queen. One who he had not been expecting, but he quickly looked away.

It was the ambassador from Eintorian.

The man had acted shamefully in the audience chamber earlier. It was wrong to show such weakness in a foreign court. If his legs gave out from under him just because Kashak acted intimidating, then the man was a weakling, neither a help nor a hindrance to anyone here.

That's why Kashak ignored him and spoke to the king.

"Your Majesty, we've received a report that the Naruya Kingdom has set their eyes on Luaranz," he reported, kneeling down before his monarch. Sweat dripped down onto the top of his hands.

Hearing this false report, the king hacked up the piece of fruit the queen had been feeding him, then fell into another coughing fit.

"Wh-What does that mean? How could the Naruya Kingdom do that?!"

The king meant to ask how that could be possible when the Naruya Kingdom didn't even share a border with them.

Obviously, Chesedin looked at Kashak with the same doubt.

"Is it true?! How do they mean to do it?!"

Kashak answered their questions with a look of utter seriousness.

"It is true."

At that moment, shocked looks came to Chesedin's and the king's faces at the sudden sound of weapons colliding.

Then there was a metallic sound and a scream.

*"What do you people think you're—gyarrrgh!"*

The scream belonged to Chesedin's trusted retainer.

That was the signal.

Kashak swiftly went for the flexible sword hidden in his belt.

Then, with blade in hand, he declared, "I'm sorry, Duke. I do this for the new era."

Chesedin, who had been looking outside the bedchamber to see what was amiss, turned as he heard Kashak's words.

No, he *tried* to turn.

Kashak never gave him the chance.

The sword swung down toward Chesedin's back, still straight and broad despite his advanced age.

"Duke!"

The queen was the first to notice, and she threw her fruit as she shouted. But Kashak's sword was faster. Chesedin fell and crumpled as he turned to face him. The powerful blow ensured the old man would never rise again.

Trembling at the sight, the king shouted, "Kashak, you cur!!! What is the meaning of this?!"

At the same time, the queen shouted toward the outside, "Guards! Come in here and defend His Majesty at once!"

But Kashak just smiled. No guards entered. In fact, it was Kashak's own men who came in.

"Your Excellency, the Royal Guard will be here soon!" Nerchin whispered in Kashak's ear.

It was a race against time. They just had to finish up before the guards arrived.

Once the king died, it was all over. Kashak immediately pointed his sword toward the king.

"You mustn't!" Queen Serena put herself in between them. "Turning your sword against the king? Can you still call yourself a proud noble of Luaranz?!"

"Your Highness, we don't need a king who's ruining the country."

As he looked into Serena's wide eyes, staring back at him, Kashak cocked his head to the side. For a young woman, only twenty-two years old, she was displaying an admirable strength of heart. Still, he couldn't leave her alive.

He liked her moxie, but everyone in his way had to die now.

"Eliminate the ambassador! He's a witness! I'll finish the king and queen!"

With his orders given, Kashak swung his blade down at Serena.

\*

Shortly before Kashak's surprise attack, the young queen Serena tended to her king.

"Are you tired, Your Majesty? Let me give you a massage."

"Oh, could you do that for me?"

"How is that?" Serena asked as she rubbed the king's aged shoulders.

"It feels good. But stop for now, and sit down beside me, would you? The nobles' squabbling just leaves me with a headache... I'm only happy when I can see your smiling face. Ho ho ho."

"You really know what to say to make me happy," Serena replied with a grin.

The reason she had been made queen was because her father, Dofrey, was in the

neutral faction. Because the nobles of Luaranz were divided into two bitterly feuding factions over the succession of the throne, neither could afford to let the other get one of their people made queen.

It was well known that the king couldn't sire offspring at this point, but they still couldn't just wait for him to die. Someone had to become queen on the remote possibility that it might happen. However, if the queen came from one faction, that would place the opposing faction at a disadvantage. That's why the daughter of Dofrey, who was neutral and wielded no influence, was chosen to be queen.

That was Serena, chosen irrespective of her own will, or even the will of her father, Dofrey. Obviously, the king's own desire played into it. Serena was breathtakingly gorgeous.

"Ho ho ho, what a beautiful face you have."

At that point, the head chamberlain appeared.

"Your Majesty! The nobles have all gathered!"

The king looked at him with annoyance.

"Your Majesty, there are important matters to be decided today, so I do ask that you attend," added one of the nobles who had come to collect the king.

"Damn the nobility! Troubling an old man like this."

Left with no other choice, the king left the queen's room with a less-than-enthusiastic look on his face.

Sometime later, another man came to visit—her own father, Count Dofrey.

"Father, I've been waiting for you," Serena said, her face lighting up. Once she had led Dofrey to the table, she turned to the maid. "Bring us tea," she ordered.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Once the servants had left, Serena looked at Dofrey with a face like she had been waiting for ages.

"You called for me, Your Highness?" Dofrey asked and Serena nodded.

"I hear an ambassador has come from Eintorian."

Dofrey stared at his daughter. She had loved hearing about what was going on in the world around her ever since she was a young girl. She took an interest in everything from rumors, to life, to romance, to war, to any topic really. And out of all of those topics, Eintorian had her especially interested lately. People said that they'd defeated the Naruya Kingdom and Brijit Kingdom, after all! Whenever word of Eintorian came around, she paid rapt attention, her eyes sparkling like she was a little kid.

"Rumors about Eintorian are even more important to you than I am, Your Highness?" Dofrey asked with a sardonic smile, but Serena shook her head.

"Perish the thought! Of course you come first, father! But the rumors are all so fascinating, I couldn't help myself... That's all."

Or so Serena claimed, but Dofrey was smiling inside. She wasn't just a little interested; she was completely enthralled. She must have been so bored, shut away in the palace like this. The young lord from Eintorian was a free spirit, winning victories across the continent, so perhaps she found satisfaction in living vicariously through the stories about him.

"What is the ambassador here for? And what was his name?"

Dofrey smiled at the curiosity on his daughter's face.

"It was a man by the name of Hadin," he told her. "I am told he is a retainer of Count Eintorian with the rank of baron. He came to offer us an alliance, but... I'm sure it won't be that simple. Kashak seems to think there's nothing in it for us."

"No! If we join hands with him, he will be a great strength to us. Have the other nobles not heard those rumors about him?"

"I suspect the larger issue is the small size of his faction. Nobles like to compare numbers, after all. Even if he did beat Naruya, there is no way they could forge an alliance of equals with a minor power. They must assume his victory was just luck."

"But... even at his current size, I'm sure he'll grow quickly. If anything, I'm sure he's building up his strength now for an even greater challenge!" Serena shouted in

frustration. There was passion in her voice.

"I feel the same way. I am sure Count Eintorian purposefully chose the former territory of Brijit after looking at the situation on the continent. It's a fact that he defeated Naruya for a second time in the process. The same Naruya everyone is so afraid of."

There was his plan which saw through Naruya's surprise attack and forced them out of the country in the first war, the strategy he used to defeat and turn the tables on Brijit after they invaded Rozern, and then his recent battle where he led a massive army into a mana circle and then routed them.

Was there another man in history like him? He was like the living incarnation of the first Eintorian king who founded the Ancient Kingdom, at least in Dofrey's opinion.

And he'd also sent people to Eintorian in order to gather information for his obsessed daughter here.

"If we can't form an alliance... That'd be such a shame."

Seeing his daughter so dejected, Dofrey considered for a moment, and then opened his mouth.

"Would you like to meet the Eintorian ambassador yourself? If all you do is talk, I don't see the harm in that. I am sure he can tell you much more than I could."

"D-Do you mean it?! Then I'll talk to His Majesty. If we speak to him together, maybe that will change something. He might even change his mind about the alliance..."

Seeing Serena's bright smile, Dofrey smiled on the inside. His daughter was like a bird in a cage.

It always pained him, but seeing her so happy, Dofrey resolved to do whatever it took to make the meeting happen.

He didn't expect that it would change anything, but making his daughter happy was a worthwhile endeavor all on its own.

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Kashak's sword swung down. Serena shut her eyes tight against the flash of the blade.

She knew this was the end for her, but it was still depressing.

*So dying like this is my fate*, she thought, giving up all hope, but then...

Something happened. The ambassador who had been standing beside her suddenly struck the blade aside. Obviously, Kashak and his subordinates were surprised by this.

When had he drawn his sword? No, he shouldn't have even been able to bring it here in the first place.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

Neither Kashak nor Serena could mask their confusion. But his sword had saved Queen Serena. Instinctively, Kashak's men rushed Erhin.

But they were no more than fodder. Kashak's men all fell to Erhin's sword.

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"Look out behind you!" Serena shouted at Erhin's back as he cut down his enemies with Daitoren.

She backed away, keeping the king behind her to protect him. But the monarch's blood pressure must have shot through the roof or something, because he'd collapsed with his face a bright shade of red. He looked like he wouldn't even be able to get up on his own.

Serena supported the king, trying to drag him to his feet. "Let's hurry and escape, sire," she urged.

"Y-Yes, that makes sense. Let's leave this place at once." The king accepted Serena's suggestion with a nod.

But Erhin stepped in front of them, blocking their exit, and said, "That won't be necessary, Your Majesty. This is the palace. Where else would you go?"

He didn't even pay any mind to Kashak, who was behind him.

"The Eintorian ambassador, Hadin, was it? You're not going to tell me you were acting all this time, were you?"

Kashak was a little bewildered that Erhin had slain Nerchin with a single blow. In no small part because he wasn't convinced that he could have done it himself.

With a sour look on his face, Kashak leveled his blade at Erhin. Erhin didn't even plan to talk to the guy.

"You don't need to know. I'm putting you down here and now."

When Erhin needed someone dead, he got right to it. Erhin swung Daitoren again. Kashak quickly parried with his own sword and stopped it. Well, he *tried* to stop it, but Daitoren's follow-up attack was faster and sharper. With a Martial score of 92, Kashak was A-class and could therefore use mana, but he was as hapless as a newborn babe in the face of Erhin's Daitoren.

The battle was decided before it had begun.

In no time, Daitoren traced a graceful arc through Kashak's neck, and his severed head plummeted to the ground.

"You're not hurt at all, are you?" Erhin asked, shifting his gaze from the rolling head to the king and Serena.

The King of Luaranz looked at Erhin as he nodded. Serena helped the king into a chair.

"Ambassador of Eintorian, I am in your debt!"

"It's still too early to let our guards down. There must be other insurrectionists still about. This isn't the kind of plan you come up with overnight."

"Wh-What?!" the king shouted before falling into an awful coughing fit due to his surprise.

"Sire!"

"Have no fear. I'll take out any enemies that come."

Erhin calmly picked up Kashak's head and carried it out of the room. As he suspected, the palace was in a state of chaos. Kashak's agents among the guards had opened the palace gates, and his soldiers who had rushed inside were fighting an intense battle with the Royal Guard.

If Kashak had been able to kill the king and Chesedin, then led those men himself, he'd have overcome the numerical disadvantage, and the coup would have succeeded, just as it had in the original history.

But Kashak was dead.

Erhin threw Kashak's head on the ground in front of the rebel forces and shouted, "I've taken the head of the rebel leader. Royal guards, execute these traitors at once!"

The rebels all froze when they saw Kashak's head.

Although the royal guards were confused when Erhin showed up and started giving orders, they went after the traitors regardless. Erhin silently laughed to himself as he watched.

*I knew about the coup in advance, but I never would have expected it to happen on the day I arrived. Being called in to see the queen was a surprise too. I was considering inciting Kashak to act, if that was what it took, but he went and made things a whole lot faster for me.*

*Luaranz has A-class commanders, but no S-class ones, and their king is mediocre, so there's no one here I felt any need to go out of my way to keep alive. It was lucky that I managed to both eliminate a future threat, and also win the king's trust at the same time.*

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On hearing about the insurrection, Dofrey rushed to the palace so fast that he was wheezing for breath when he arrived. The sweat pouring off of him spoke to how desperately he'd run.

The king had passed out from shock, and Serena, who was looking after him, welcomed Dofrey when he arrived.

"Serena! Are you okay?!"

Dofrey was so beside himself with worry that he called his daughter by name. Serena, however, responded with a composed nod.

"I'm fine."

“I was so shocked when I heard... Are you unharmed?”

“Yes. You don’t need to worry.”

“Well, that’s good, then.” Dofrey let out a sigh of relief as he sat in a nearby chair. “Still, I never would have thought Kashak would be a traitor...”

“Yes. It caught me by surprise too. But the ambassador from Eintorian saved us in our moment of peril.”

Sitting next to Dofrey, Serena began telling him about that tense moment. The more she said about it, the paler he got.

“If it weren’t for the ambassador, I’d have never seen my daughter again...”

“Oh, father. I’m still alive and well, as you can see.”

“Hah hah hah,” Dofrey let out a relieved laugh, shaking his head. “Still, I’m glad. Just so glad...”

“Who *is* that man, by the way? This happened before I had the chance to speak to him all that much...”

“You said he killed Kashak, right?”

“Yes. It was over in an instant,” Serena explained calmly as she recalled that moment.

Dofrey was struck by how courageous his daughter was. She remembered everything that had happened in such a tense moment. Any ordinary girl would have been out of her mind with surprise in that situation.

“He was that incredible, was he? I had been thinking he seemed awfully timid for an Eintorian ambassador... It seems I should make a point of meeting him again.”

“Father, that man saved Luaranz.”

“You’re right. He did. What was your take on him? I’d like to hear your opinion.”

Serena needed no time whatsoever to come up with an answer. She already had one.

“He was a big man.”

“Big... in what way?”

This wasn’t what Dofrey expected to hear. He cocked his head to the side questioningly. Serena smiled at him once more.

“I don’t mean physically,” she said, waving her hand to dismiss the idea, before returning to a more serious expression. “It wasn’t over when he cut down the enemy. He immediately moved on to handling the next situation. In no time, he had assumed control of the Royal Guard, and they could do nothing but obey him. Thanks to that, the remaining traitors were quickly subjugated.”

“I see...”

Dofrey had never seen his daughter lavish such praise on anyone before.

“Father, I have no intention of interfering in state matters. I know that I’m in a position where I really shouldn’t. But... at the very least, we must repay this debt of gratitude, or we will bring shame to Luaranz. And I am certain we will lose nothing by forming an alliance with them. Please, try to convince the other nobles once more!”

“Well... I’ll do everything I can.”

Dofrey nodded, but he couldn’t be sure the other nobles would listen to him.

For them, an alliance they couldn’t see the merits of was far less important than getting their preferred candidate on the throne.

“Oh, and I’d very much like to see him again myself. I have a lot I’d like to ask him, father.”

Serena looked at Dofrey with adoring eyes once more. Obviously, the count couldn’t possibly refuse her request. And so, after leaving her room, he realized he’d been treating her not as the queen, but as his daughter, and he gave himself a light slap across the face.

\*

“If we must thank him, a reward should suffice... Alliances are a matter of state, Your

Majesty!"

"I agree entirely!"

The council was reconvened, and there the Luaranzine nobles pushed back strongly against an alliance.

*Yeah, I more or less expected this.*

Alliances between nations weren't just about being friends. They only worked if the two parties were either somewhat equal, or had something to gain from the other, not unlike the former relationship between Runan and Rozern. But I had no intention whatsoever of serving Luaranz.

"Could you try and explain what we gain from an alliance with Eintorian?" Count Dofrey asked me in the middle of deliberations. He was oddly favorable toward me for some reason.

Dofrey was the one who'd arranged for me to meet the king and queen too. He was probably telling me to persuade the nobles gathered here.

"Our intelligence informs us that the Holy Ramie Kingdom has begun deploying their forces along the border with Luaranz. They've likely been incited by Naruya into starting a war. But if that happens, Eintorian's military will be able to help. We have expert soldiers who fought against both Naruya and Brijit, one after the other."

This was no lie. It was a little further in the future, but the Ramie Kingdom, which bordered Luaranz, was keeping an eye open for opportunities to expand.

However, the nobles seemed to take offense at what I was telling them.

"The Ramie Kingdom are our allies. You're making absurd claims with nothing to back them up. And even if that *did* happen, Luaranz has the mightiest navy on the continent. As if we'd ever need your help!" one of them shouted, showing his confidence in the fleet. However, things were different now that they no longer had a talented commander.

With the death of Chesedin, the fleet would soon fall into the hands of someone totally inept.

“Ambassador,” the king said after a coughing fit. “I cannot simply ignore what you’ve said. The Ramie Kingdom had long been a friend to me. I cannot imagine they would ever attack us.”

“There’s more. The Naruya Kingdom is prepared to attack at any moment. You may not share a border with them yet, but that should be no cause for you to rest on your laurels.”

The Naruya Kingdom did not have a well-developed navy. This had made the Luaranz Kingdom think they were totally safe, but it was absurd for them to feel that way. There wasn’t a country in this world that Naruya wasn’t out to get.

“Enough. You’re just making baseless claims to spread confusion. We’ve heard enough. Now, it is a fact that you prevented the rebellion, so let me give you one last chance. Pledge your service to Luaranz. If you pay us tribute and become our vassal, I suppose we can let you go.” The head of the nobility, Duke Zeyda, was of course talking nonsense.

“That won’t do. This needs to be an alliance between equals.”

“Then leave this place at once!”

With Zeyda having come to this decision, the other nobles soon followed suit. There was nothing more for me to say. The promises of any alliance would only be surface-level, able to be broken through betrayal at any point anyway.

Besides, I still had more important things to do.

“If that’s what my lords say, then...” The king began before being interrupted by a coughing fit. “Ambassador, I’m sorry, but you will have to return home to your own country. I will repay the debt of gratitude I owe to you for saving my life in gold...!”

Ultimately, the king gave in to the nobles.

\*

“Bro died?”

“Yes... It was a terrible end he met, Master Lushak!”

"Heh heh, I see. Bro died, huh?"

In Kashak's domain, Kashak's younger brother Lushak laughed in front of the bereaved retainers. He had meant to keep the laugh to himself, but it came out on its own.

"Master Lushak?"

Lushak's expression changed when he saw the retainers' reaction.

"Oh, I'll avenge him, of course. After they killed my bro like that. I'm not letting the king and the nobles get away with this!"

That's what he said, but Lushak wanted to squeal with glee at the fact he was going to inherit all the influence his brother had built up.

"You said my bro's agents in the capital and the palace are still alive, right?"

"Yes. If it weren't for the Eintorian ambassador's intervention, they all would have risen up to defend His Excellency!"

*Thump!*

Lushak kicked the retainer as he was still speaking, then he roared, "Shut up! The only Excellency here now is me! You got that? You're to call him His *Former* Excellency! Don't forget the Former!"

"I-I'm terribly sorry," the retainer apologized as he got to his feet. Lushak snorted.

"Well, whatever. It sounds like bro's old friend Count Lexeman is willing to help us, which makes things simple. The Royal Guard will be no issue once bro's agents among the palace guards open up the gates for us!"

Kashak had spent a decade carefully preparing this plan. He hadn't factored his own death into the equation, but it wasn't so frail that a single failure would scrap the whole thing.

"We'll rush into the palace. This is the start of my blood feud against the House of Luaranz for trying to hold me jointly responsible for the rebellion!"

It would obviously only be a matter of time before the family of the coup mastermind were arrested. Lushak didn't have any intention of letting go of the power that had finally slipped into his hands, and so he led all his men in an attack on the capital.



It happened swiftly, under cover of night.

\*

Lushak Rebel Army

Manpower: 22,000

Morale: 90 + 10 (Indignation)

Training: 88

Lushak's rebel forces advanced on the royal capital. With the help of Kashak's collaborators, the gates were thrown open for them with ease.

"For Lord Kashak!"

What Kashak had built up over a decade proved surprisingly resilient. The +10 indignation bonus that was applied to the Lushak Rebel Army spoke to that. The soldiers were as good as might be expected, having been trained by Kashak, and they occupied the capital in short order. If I hadn't managed to kill Kashak, there's no telling when these guys might have invaded Eintorian.

"Kill them all! Every one of the king's men must die!"

Lushak rampaged around the capital, spouting clichéd lines.

Luaranz Royal Capital Defense Force

Manpower: 20,000

Morale: 70

Training: 80

The Royal Capital Defense Force had started with thirty thousand men, but nearly ten thousand of them had turned coat at Lushak's call.

These were Kashak's infiltrators.

Thanks to them, the scales quickly tilted in the rebellion's favor. The vast majority of the guards who were meant to defend this coastal city against attacks from the sea were naval troops.

That ended up working against them.

Fire spread through the capital. However, the marines had yet to reach the palace. Well, that was to be expected. The capable commander of the fleet, Chesedin, had been assassinated by Kashak. The old general, Shark, who had been the king's emotional support, and the defender of this nation for many long years, had also been killed by Kashak.

How were they supposed to stop the rebels now? The capital was aflame here, there, and everywhere. In short, the rebellion was fated to succeed even if Kashak died. Lushak Lechin was no big deal himself. He was a brute, and if I recall, in the game, Kashak had him executed for his excesses after seizing power. If a guy like that came to power, Luaranz would be a mess.

I was grateful to see the incompetent Lushak seize the nation. After this, I would defeat his regime in order to get my hands on the fleet. I couldn't move my own forces now, but Naruya couldn't attack them either.

So, if I led them to destroy themselves, I could get the biggest return for the least risk.

That was my plan.

\*

"This way, Your Majesty!"

When he received word that Lushak had barged into the palace, the king began making his escape through a secret passage along with his royal guard and the chamberlains. This was a hidden tunnel, like the one in Eintorian, that could accommodate a thousand people.

Dofrey, who had been worried for his daughter, Queen Serena, and rushed to her side was with them too.

The influential nobles, seeing that the palace was sure to become a sea of flame, stayed away, quickly fleeing the capital.

That was the fastest way to get back to their own domains in this situation.

Still, what good were nobles who wouldn't fight to defend king and country? They pulled out of the capital because they thought Lushak would kill them if they remained, but Lushak wasn't about to let them leave. No matter what they did, the nobles' lives were hanging by a thread. Only the king knew about the secret passage. Ultimately, Dofrey had made the right decision in staying with him.

After some time, the group came to a massive iron door.

"What do you suppose that gate is, sire?"

"I don't know either. I've heard this place was built in the time of the Ancient Kingdom, but as for how to open it, I don't know..." the king said, coughing as he finished.

"Could that be a mana circle in the very center of it?" Serena asked, having seen the mana circle in a book, and Dofrey nodded.

"It would appear to be, yes. But this isn't the time for us to worry about a gate we cannot open, Your Highness."

"He's right, Serena. The secret passage built by the former King of Luaranz is next to the gate. Let's hurry on ahead."

On the king's order, they all forgot about the gate and resumed walking.

"Are you all right, father?"

Serena held Dofrey's hand. Dofrey nodded in response.

He couldn't show weakness while his daughter was still okay.

"I'm fine."

The king and Serena's entourage took a long time making their way out of the secret passage. The king walked with an unsteady gait due to his old age, and the passage could be awfully steep in places, so it wasn't easy to get out. However, because the secret passage was, well, secret, there was no sign of them being pursued as of yet.

That was one spot of good luck in the middle of all their misfortune.

At the end of their long path, they finally exited the passage. It led outside the capital, which also meant they were now outside the high walls that encircled the city.

"Let me take you to my domain for now, sire. First, we'll withdraw to a safe place, and then we'll work with the other domains to retake the capital."

"Y-Yes. Let's do that. I don't care what we do now so long as I can rest."

"Yes, sire!"

But the aged king was in no condition to ride a horse. They had to walk on foot, pulling the horses behind.

Just as Dofrey was thinking they were in trouble, their pursuers caught up to them. Having noticed the king must have fled due to his absence from the castle, Lushak's rebel forces began combing the area around the capital.

The royal guards went pale as soon as they saw the rebels.

They didn't stand a chance with these numbers.

"Capture the king! His Excellency Lushak has promised a big reward to whoever catches him! Kill the rest! Kill, and kill, and kill, and then capture him!"

As the rebel army tore into the king's line, the royal guards and Serena's maids were killed in no time. They were cut down as they ran, or once they tripped and fell. Somehow the king, Dofrey, Serena, and a number of servants were able to escape into the forest, but they wouldn't make it much farther.

The blood drained from Dofrey's face.

"We should flee in different directions, sire. It's you that they're after."

"I don't care how we do it," said the king. "I can't die yet...! Come up with some plan!"

"Change into the head chamberlain's clothes," suggested Serena, leaning forward as she spoke. "If His Majesty dresses as the head chamberlain, and vice versa, the vast majority of the rebels are from domains outside the capital. My presence beside the double should be enough to trick them."

Serena's beautiful face was known widely throughout Luaranz. She stuck out like a sore thumb. If there was someone dressed like the king standing beside the queen, then it was natural to assume he was the king. Obviously, this didn't solve the fundamental issue.

Because the rebels were so numerous, splitting up to flee might mean that both parties were still caught.

But it wasn't as if they had any other option.

The rebels, blinded by the bounty on the king, would hopefully all chase after the fake, buying the real one some time.

"You would do that, Serena? But..."

"We haven't the time for this, sire...!"

The king agonized over it a little.

He loved his queen, but his own life came before anything else.

"I suppose it must be done... All I can do now is rely on what you've offered to do for me. I will reward you handsomely once I regain the throne...!"

The king nodded and made promises he couldn't keep as he accepted Serena's proposal.

"Find the king!"

Still, because there were a thousand royal guards, the group was able to split up while the men were putting up a strong resistance in the rear.

"Your Highness, this is putting your own life at risk," Dofrey shouted after his daughter,

feeling the blood pumping inside of him.

“As queen, it is only right that I should protect my husband, the king.”

“The king is saying he’ll sacrifice you! Why are you acting so loyal to him...? I know that you haven’t been together as man and woman, and that you have no feelings for him! How can you call him your husband when you’ve never spent a single night together?!”

“You may have a point, but I am still queen!”

Dofrey was overcome by despair.

The way things were going, he was going to lose the country he loved, and yet right now, at this very moment, there was something even more important—something which he absolutely did not want to give up on.

And so, he took Serena by the arm.

“Father?”

“Serena! Hurry and flee!”

“You cur! Have you any idea what you’re saying?!” the king roared, red in the face. However, Dofrey silenced him with a glare.

“I cannot,” Serena protested. “No matter how I came to the position, I am queen.”

“It was a mistake for you to marry His Majesty in the first place! Damn it! The moment the nobles started trying to use you, I should have taken you and fled to another country...!” Dofrey’s regret was palpable.

“Even so!”

“Enough. I want you to live in freedom, even if you’re the only one who can, Serena. Out in the world you’ve dreamed of since you were a child! I should have done this a long time ago.”

“Father...!”

Dofrey took one last look at his daughter, searing her image into his memory.

“I’m sorry.”

He loved her more than anything. And so, with that final word...

“Fa... ther...”

He delivered a powerful, barehanded chop to the back of her neck, knocking her unconscious.

Count Dofrey was a commander too.

“Take my daughter and run! Hurry!” he shouted, entrusting her to the two retainers who’d come with him.

These were men who had served Dofrey since Serena was a little girl.

“But Your Excellency...!”

“Hurry and go! If you hesitate, you won’t be able to escape. This is my last request. Think about what you’d do in my position. Could you abandon your daughter? Take her, and return to the domain where your families are waiting! This is my final order as your lord!”

“...”

Seeing his will was firm, the two retainers looked at one another.

“You go! I’ll serve His Excellency to the bitter end!”

“No, I’ll be the one to stay!”

“We don’t have time for this. Go already! The rebels are almost upon us!”

In this tense situation, one of them had to agree. As they thought back and remembered their own families, they had no choice but to accept Dofrey’s proposal.

“I’m a commander myself. I’ll fight the rebels to buy time. You run away while I do!”

Dofrey drew his sword and faced down the rebel army, intending to risk his life to buy time for them to escape.

He knew he couldn't hold out for long, of course.

But it was the only way.

\*

The fall of Luaranz was brought on by a succession crisis due to the lack of an heir. In short, it'd caused factional strife. If the two factions had been warring over different visions of the country's future, then that would be one thing, but there was no helping people whose only concern was padding their own pockets.

So it only made sense that a faction of people appeared who also despised the existing nobility like Kashak did. Now, would Lushak, the guy who'd replaced him, be as tyrannical as I was expecting him to be? I needed to see that for myself, so I planned to remain near the capital for the time being.

As I did, I noticed rebel forces gathering outside the city.

"What have the people done to deserve this?! Please, stop this senseless slaughter!"

I heard a voice I recognized from up ahead—Queen Serena. I had only met her once, but she was unforgettable. Although they differed in many ways, she was every bit as beautiful as Euracia. But more than her pretty face, what had stuck with me about her was the courage she'd shown, not even hesitating to put herself in harm's way to protect the king.

Even Kashak had shown respect for her.

*I'm not entirely sure why the Queen of Luaranz is alone, surrounded by the rebel army.*

"What's she going on about?"

The rebel soldiers ignored her, of course.

"You people..."

Serena cast a powerful glare at the soldiers, with an attitude that said, *Kill me if you*

*want.*

But she had missed one very important detail. The soldiers didn't plan to *just* kill her.

"I've never seen a woman look so hot."

"Look at them fancy clothes. I'll bet she's a real fine lady."

"Hey, quit drooling like that! It's gross."

The rebels licked Serena's body all over with their eyes.

In order to keep morale high, it was normal to allow soldiers to plunder, pillage, and kill to their hearts' content. This was even more so the case with Lushak in charge. As one of the men reached for Serena's shoulder with a depraved grin on his face, she clenched her eyes tight in fear.

That's when I surprised them from behind. I wouldn't even need to use Daitoren against these pissants; that's just how much I'd leveled up.

*If anything happens, I can use 30 Second Invincibility.*

I lopped the arm off of the man reaching for Serena, then decapitated him on the backswing. His surprised companions held up their pikes and prepared for battle, but I pounded the Attack command until they were eliminated.

"Aaaaaaaargh!!!"

Serena Dofrey

Age: 22

Martial: 2

Intelligence: 77

Command: 72

Looking at her Command score, she was likely similar to Euracia, in that charming people with her high Charisma was her strength. Her face was just as attractive as Euracia's, so her low Martial probably was the only reason her score wasn't quite as high. Euracia was the type who stood on the battlefield personally, which worked well in tandem with her high Charisma score to make soldiers obey her. Serena's Command score was probably different from the kind of Command needed on the battlefield.

Hearing the sudden screams of the soldiers, Serena's eyes slowly opened as she took in the situation. As a result, she cracked her eyes open just a sliver and met my gaze.

"What are you doing here, Your Highness?! And all by yourself!"

Noticing me, she reacted with a hundred times my own surprise, covering her mouth with shock.

"Wh-Why, you're Lord Hadin, are you not?!"

Oh, yeah, that's right. I was using Hadin's name here. Anyway, now that she noticed me, she suddenly took my hand.

"Please, save His Majesty and my father! I beg of you! I'll do anything that I can in return...!"

Her fingers gripped me with a strength I'd never have imagined from that slender body of hers.

"Before that, what are you doing here alone?"

"Well... My father helped me to get away. He said that I should survive, even if I was the only one who could. But I could never abandon my father just to save myself. I wanted to help him somehow, but the head chamberlain, who stayed by my side during my escape, was spotted by the enemy."

*Her father's Count Dofrey, right? Well, if the only guy who showed a favorable attitude toward me is in trouble, I'd better save him, then.*

"We should mount up for now. By the way, do you know how to ride a horse?"

“Yes! I can ride! I learned how to as a young girl!”

*I guess that's to be expected for a noble.*

After pulling herself up into the saddle of one of the dead rebels' horses by herself, she turned to look at me. I could see from her expression that she wanted to make haste. I had a pretty powerful card in my hands now—the queen. I just had to play her right to use Lushak's rebellion to Eintorian's advantage.

And so I rode back toward the capital with Serena.

\*

“It's over there! That's where my father sent me off...”

Serena drove her horse even faster, anxiety for her father's welfare hastening her pace. Obviously, there was no avoiding an encounter with the rebels.

“Eek!”

They attacked me and Serena like it came second nature to them. Each time they did, I used the Attack command before they could so much as get close to her. There were limits to even my abilities, though. I hurriedly broke the lance of a cavalryman who was attacking her. If I was willing to use Daitoren, I could make it so nobody could get anywhere near her, but there was no telling what might happen, or when, on a battlefield like this. I couldn't waste my ace in the hole on some random grunts.

“It's going to be hard to protect you, riding alongside you like this. Please ride with me on my horse, Lady Serena.”

“V-Very well.”

And so she slid from her own saddle into mine, her body pressing against me from behind. After riding together for more than half an hour, we witnessed a horrific battlefield. Dofrey had collapsed in front of many rebel corpses, the fight long over at this point.

“Father!”

Serena leaped down from the horse to rush to his side.

A spear stuck straight up where it had pierced Dofrey's chest.

"Fatheeeeer!" Serena wailed.

When she did, the remaining rebels pounced on us. I took care of them. As I blindly cut down rebels left and right, someone who appeared to be a commander finally showed his face.

Lecter Gesman

Age: 34

Martial: 84

Intelligence: 20

Command: 78

His Martial score surprised me. It must have been higher than Lushak's.

*So, someone actually capable came to the front in order to capture the king himself, huh?*

"Who're you?!" the man asked with a suspicious look at me.

"So you're Lecter Gesman, eh?"

Kashak had a right-hand man—a close friend who, in the game, led the Luaranz Kingdom together with him until it was destroyed by the Naruya Kingdom.

"You know me? Who are you? You don't look like a Luaranzine noble," Gesman said, eyeing my aristocratic garb.

I didn't answer him.

I needed this rebellion to run wild, with Lushak calling all the shots, which meant it'd be a problem if someone was around to rein him in. The unfortunate thing was that he

had a Martial score of 84, while mine was currently only 82.

*I have points in reserve, so I could just raise my Martial. But is there any need to?*

Using Daitoren on a guy with a Martial of 84 was overkill, but I wanted to conserve my points in case of emergency.

I summoned Daitoren and used the Attack command.

“Wh-What...?!”

He died with a look of confusion on his face, just like Kashak. I used that momentum to take out the rest of the enemies in the area.

Once I was done, I rushed to Dofrey’s side. He was still breathing.

“You shouldn’t have come back, Serena...”

Though he said this, Dofrey’s lips twitched upward into a pained smile.

“And you, Ambassador... I’m glad to see you’re well...”

“Yeah.”

When he saw me, Dofrey’s smile grew even as he coughed up blood.

“I know I will be imposing on you with this request, but... would you look after my daughter for me? I’d like you to take her to Eintorian... I want her to live on... Even if that means abandoning her country.”

“Father... Father!”

Serena desperately tried to stem the flow of blood from Dofrey’s wound with her own hands, to no avail. The blood spilled from between her fingers.

“Serena...” Dofrey let out a bloody cough as his gaze shifted to Serena.

“Father...!”

“Serena, I’m sorry I couldn’t do this for you sooner. May you be happy... for the rest of

your days..."

"Don't say another word, father. I don't want it to be like this... No...!"

Dofrey reached out a hand toward his blood-soaked daughter, but his arm fell away, and he was unable to say another word.

"Father!!!" Serena screamed again.

But there were no tears in her eyes. She just screamed on and on, half-crazed. Her psyche couldn't take any more of this. I practically yanked her to her feet, then threw Dofrey's corpse over my shoulder.

"We can't leave a hero of the nation to get trampled under the horses' hooves. Let's give him a proper burial."

Serena followed me, mutely holding her father's arm.

\*

Serena spent a long time just hugging Dofrey's grave marker before, finally, she opened her mouth to speak to me. If she was talking, that meant she'd recovered at least somewhat, thankfully.

"Thank you, Lord Hadin."

"No, I only did what anyone ought to."

"By the way..." she trailed off as she eyed me in an odd way.

"What is it?" I asked her.

"Have you no intention of revealing your real name?"



For some reason, she said that with utter certainty.

"What makes you think I'm not Hadin?"

"I know you aren't."

"And you know this how?"

"Lord Hadin is more of a bureaucratic type, and also... he's much older than you are."

"I see..."

*How'd she know that?*

Up until Fihatori joined up with us, Baron Hadin Meruya was the only noble among my retainers, so he was a little more widely known than the rest of them. Even so, I wouldn't have expected anyone here to know such a small detail about him as his age, not this far from home.

"You see, I... I've admired Eintorian for a long time now. Not being able to leave the palace, I always pestered my father for tales from the world outside... In the stories he told me, I heard about Lord Erhin Eintorian's escapades over and over again. It made me feel like I was out there myself, wandering the great expanse. I've always dreamed about it, you know. I even badgered my father into sending people to Eintorian in order to bring back more stories, so... I know a lot about it."

I looked at her with some surprise.

It was true that Erhin was now famous across the continent. I'd definitely made a name for myself when I destroyed Brijit. So her knowing who I was didn't surprise me, but I didn't expect this level of knowledge. Of course, even if they sent people, she still only knew what I'd made public.

"So that's how it was."

"Yes. I even pestered my father to introduce me to the ambassador, hoping to learn more details about Eintorian. I also told him that, if possible... I wanted us to form an alliance..."

*So that's what that was about, huh?*

I had been a little suspicious of why Count Dofrey was trying to help me, but her story explained it.

“For me, shut away in the palace, the tales of Eintorian were always so very fresh and interesting. So, I know that you’re...”

“Who do you think I am?”

Serena looked a little troubled when I asked her that.

“You don’t fit my mental image of Lord Yusen or Lord Erheet... And then there’s your hair color... But you can’t be...”

“Well, gray hair is the mark of the House of Eintorian, after all.”

There was no need to keep it a secret any longer. Still, even once she’d figured it out, Serena just stared at me, blinking vacantly, still unable to believe it was true.

“Your Highness?” I said, waving one hand in front of her eyes, and she finally spoke in a quivering voice.

“Lord Erhin... Well, I had been thinking you looked like how I imagined you to, but... Why are you, the Lord of Eintorian, here? I can’t believe it!”

“I came because I felt the job of ambassador was just that important. Is that a problem somehow?”

“It’s Lord Erhin... In the flesh! Oh, whatever will I do! What should I do...?! ”

She started stammering and losing her composure.

“Perhaps you should calm down a little before we talk... Take a deep breath.”

I placed my hands on her trembling shoulders. When I did, she gave me a firm nod, and then took a deep breath.

“Whew... But it’s just not possible!”

“I’m not what you imagined?”

"No, that's not it! You're spot-on. Father will be thrilled. He's always so happy when he talks about Eintorian. He was the first to tell me the stories too..."

As she started to recall these memories of her father, she closed her mouth. Her eyes wandered back to the grave marker, and it came back to her that he was gone now. After that, she stayed sitting in front of the grave for a long while.

\*

Two weeks passed after Lushak's uprising. His men completely occupied the royal capital, but Lushak didn't take the throne himself. Instead, he placed a young royal on the throne who he could easily control. Then, once he had taken all of the real power, he had himself made a duke. At this point, Lushak's rebel forces were now the Royal Army.

There was a simple reason he hadn't taken the throne himself: many of Kashak's close associates were still around, so someone must have warned him against it. They had only taken the capital, not all of Luaranz. Obviously, they had captured the influential nobles... that is to say, the duke and all the others who had tried to escape.

That meant all the nobles who served under the duke were his hostages too.

By putting someone—anyone, really—from the House of Luaranz on the throne to continue the Luaranz Dynasty, he could at least keep up the appearance of this being the Luaranz Kingdom. Anyone who pushed back against it would become a traitor. If he could gain this much power even without sitting on the throne, then Lushak would have no choice but to accept it.

But it wasn't as if the nobles out in the countryside had accepted Lushak. If the central government he held, even with the sparks of discontent flying about, were to vanish, domains all around the country would rise up against his authority.

Lushak managed to hold the capital and keep up the appearance of them being one country, but without him, Luaranz would probably fracture. If *that* happened, other countries in the vicinity wouldn't leave them alone. They wouldn't miss the chance to pick off and subjugate the domains of Luaranz individually as they squabbled among themselves. It would turn into a free-for-all, each of their neighbors competing to occupy the most land, and that, in turn, would mean fewer eyes on Eintorian.

Once my back was secure, I could feel safe taking on Naruya and Southern Runan.

We stood on a hill overlooking the gates of the royal capital, where the head of the former king still hung on display. Fortunately, Serena had a stout heart, and recovered over the past two weeks. Her familiarity with the local area was a great help to me.

“What do you plan to do now?”

“Defeat Lushak.”

“Count Lushak...?”

“He’s Duke Lushak now, though.”

“Is that truly possible? If you can defeat Lushak... can avenge my father, then I’ll do anything I can to help!”

“I won’t be doing it so you can get revenge. I’m doing it for Eintorian.”

“All the same!”

“All right, Your Highness. Please, raise your head.”

As I helped her to her feet, Serena seemed to think about something, before opening her mouth once more with a look of resolution.

“Lord Erhin, please don’t call me Your Highness. His Majesty has passed away, and I am a fugitive, no longer a queen. I am just a frail woman who couldn’t save her husband or her own father...”

“You have a point... If you’ll resolve to do just one thing, Your Highness, then I’ll do that.”

“What is that? I’ll... do anything. I am at your service.”

Dimples formed in Serena’s cheeks as she smiled.

“Please, join Eintorian.”

“M-Me...? But I have no talent. Why would you take in someone like me?!”

Her high base Charisma value was more than enough to justify keeping her around for use in internal politics. Charisma was a hidden value not displayed by the system, but if it was high enough, it let the person conscript troops and raise taxes without the people's Opinion going down. It also had an effect on development and agriculture. Having another person like that would be a considerable bonus for Eintorian.

"Perhaps I shouldn't say this myself, but... I became queen, not for any talent I possess, but because of my pretty face and family name. All I did was help my father to carry out policies he wanted, so it's not as though I accomplished anything myself."

"Are you so sure about that? I think that some of the things that you just mentioned count as talents."

When I said that, Serena stared at me vacantly, unable to speak. Several seconds later, she continued.

"W-Well... I don't know if I agree about me being talented, but... whether it's as a member of Eintorian or not, I will obey you, Lord Erhin. My dream was to travel the world freely. Right now, at this very moment, that dream has come true. Because I'm stepping out into the wider world at your side. I'm very excited about it. I could shout out loud, 'I'm free!'"

"Well, if that's how you feel... I'll treat you as my subordinate from now on. Is that all right?"

"Yes, of course!"

She gave me a big nod. It seemed a little exaggerated.

"If you're that ready for it, then here are my first orders for you."

Serena stood up straight and looked at me. A moment of silence passed between us.

"Go ahead and cry."

When I gave her that order after a dramatic pause, she looked surprised.

"I'm the only one here right now. This is the perfect place for it, with a clear view of both your father's grave and the royal palace. You should let it all out."

After a pause, she said, "Yes, I suppose you're right."

She hadn't cried at her father's death, desperately forcing down the emotions that had welled up inside of her. She'd endured that sadness all this time. At first, it had even looked as though she hadn't accepted his demise. Later, she'd hugged his grave marker, acknowledging he was no more, but seemed to have missed her chance for tears, and I'd seen her holding them back on several occasions.

But she couldn't do that forever.

Nodding at what I'd said, she looked around the area.

Then she let out a wail. She cried out the name of the father who had loved her more than anyone in the world, and then ultimately broke down into tears.

As the first drops overflowed from behind the reservoir of her emotions, she cried loud and hard.

But I had no intention of stopping her.

*She can cry all she wants right now.*

# CHAPTER 3

## TOGETHER WITH THE PEOPLE

Irritating as it was, if I was going to defeat Luaranz without using manpower, then I had to take my time. Ultimately, the fastest way to take down a puppet regime was to bring the populace's discontent to the point of bursting. It was even easier when you had a justification for it, which, conveniently, I did: the existence of a queen who could claim to be carrying on the will of the late King Luaranz.

Lushak was running wild, just as I'd hoped he would. The guy was the absolute worst kind of human being. In less than two weeks, he'd already started oppressing the people who lived around the capital. Dozens of nearby villages disappeared, one after another.

Puppet regimes had an inherently weak claim to legitimacy, and the only counter to that was a high popular opinion. A state that turned its back on public sentiment couldn't hope to continue functioning properly.

In the game, if Opinion dropped below 10, there would be rioting, and rebellion would break out. So if I could lower Opinion to that point, then in this world, which could be viewed as an extension of the game, a revolution was guaranteed to occur.

If I could manipulate the sporadic rebellions, then it was more than possible I would be able to drive out Lushak and create a vacuum of power. Then I could take advantage of the public sentiment created by that anger in order to gather the people and bring them back to Eintorian, killing two birds with one stone. This was also a chance for me to boost Eintorian's population, which currently sat at one million fifty thousand.

Ryhein was fairly spacious, so there was still plenty of room for more. The larger the population, the higher the cost, but it meant I could raise even more troops. Manpower was going to be indispensable for Eintorian going forward. Absolute monsters abounded in Naruya. I couldn't rely on using points forever, so I needed troops that could fight them on even footing.

*Since my plan is to get the Luaranzine people to move to Brijit, no matter how things play out, this place is going to be a battlefield. With the justification of overthrowing the*

*puppet regime, I'll explain the grim realities of war, and persuade people that I can guarantee them a stable life.*

*It's all pretty self-serving, but hey, what choice do I have? I need Opinion and Population. This is all part of clearing the game, which is the only way I can protect my own life. Frankly, my own survival comes first and foremost. I'm not from this world, and I don't have justice on my side, or any kind of real justification—only the will to beat the game.*

*Regardless, it should be simple to manipulate public sentiment so that a rebellion breaks out.*

Originally, the royal capital of Luaranz had an Opinion score of 70, meaning that it was fairly stable. Thanks to their mediocre king, there wasn't much going on aside from infighting between the nobles, so the number had hovered at 70 without intervention.

And yet, in just two weeks, Lushak had caused it to plunge all the way down to 30. All I needed was to lower it another 20. Right now, things weren't shaken up enough for a revolt to break out. There were just murmurs of discontent here and there.

In order to foment a rebellion and make it strong, I had a number of things I needed to do. First of all, infiltrating them so that, once the puppet regime was defeated, I could convince the people to become *my* people was the most important goal. Without an army of my own here, I was going to have to use the will of the people to overthrow the regime. Besides, I was confident that if I stood at the vanguard, I could ensure the insurrection ended in success, not failure.

It wasn't as if I couldn't liquidate Lushak on my own, because I could fight for at least half an hour without anyone being able to get in my way. But that wouldn't bring the people's hearts over to me, nor would it give them any reason to obey. If I was going to get foreigners to submit to me, I'd have to give them a damn good reason to.

Population was power, and a high population was tied to popular opinion, so I decided to infiltrate the largest village in the area.

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“You’re going to infiltrate a village?”

“Correct. And to do that... I want us to pretend to be a husband and wife who lost everything to the war.”

“Husband and wife?!” Serena looked pretty shocked.

“You don’t like the idea?”

“No, it’s not that... But I’m a married woman, after all...”

“We’re not getting married for real. You just have to play the part.”

“Yes, I know that, but... Okay.”

“All right, first things first... No, wait.”

A smoke signal rose in the distance. I raised two pillars of smoke in response.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s a signal. I’m calling people from Eintorian.”

“I see! I’ll be able to meet other people from Eintorian, then! I’m already nervous!”

The face of the self-proclaimed Eintorian scrunches up in anticipation.

“There’s no need to be so tense.”

“Who’s coming?”

I shrugged my shoulders. There was someone perfect for infiltrating a village like this. I didn’t know what village life was like in this world, but of my retainers, Jint was the most familiar with it. Not that calling just Jint would help that much. That’s why I had Mirinae come with him.

She was perfect for this mission.

I’d told them where I was with my smoke signals, so they’d be arriving shortly. Serena looked off into the distance, tense with anticipation. Not long after, the sound of hoofbeats heralded the arrival of the pair we were waiting for.

“My lord! Come on, Jint, hurry up and dismount!”

Mirinae and Jint greeted us the moment they saw me. Jint wasn’t the type to pay the

proper respects, but when Mirinae was with him he'd bow his head, if only to spare himself her nagging.

"I'm glad you made it."

I was going to need Jint when I eliminated Lushak, which was why I had summoned the two of them here. Mirinae spotted Serena, standing behind me demurely, and cocked her head to the side questioningly.

"Who is this with you, my lord?"

"A new retainer. Her name's Serena Dofrey"

"Ah! I didn't realize she was nobility"

When Mirinae heard me refer to Serena by her full name, she got very tense and closed her mouth.

"I may have once been a noble, but now I am no more than a fugitive without any redeeming qualities. Still, it is an honor to meet *the* Jint and Mirinae! I've heard so many stories. You're both truly wonderful!"

She even knew Mirinae?

"Mirinae, how many times do I have to tell you this? You and Jint are practically nobility yourselves. I'll be able to give you noble titles once we declare the founding of our country, so start acting the part now."

"I'm, um... really struggling with that, my lord," Mirinae said, awkwardly scratching her head.

"You oughta be able to do it. Nobles ain't such a big deal," grumbled Jint. Mirinae stomped on his foot as if that were the natural response.

"Anyways, it's like I said," I continued. "I want you to help me go undercover in a village for a while."

"Eliu Village?" Serena asked, sounding as if she knew the place.

"You're familiar with it?"

"Yes. The mayor is quite famous. He met my father on a number of occasions. Fortunately, I've never met him myself, so he won't recognize me."

Well, even if she didn't get found out, that conspicuously beautiful face of hers was going to be a problem. I had an idea for what to do about that.

Even though we wouldn't be entering an unruly mob but a village of generally good people, we still needed to act as though we'd fled in the chaos of war.

"First of all, Serena, we'll cover your face in soot. Everyone, do the same. It needs to look like we've had a hard time on the way here."

"Got it!" Mirinae said with alacrity. She and Jint got to helping each other with their disguises, and I applied the soot to Serena's face.

"Eek...! Hey, that tickles!"

*Don't say it in that bewitching voice.*

I had gotten used to being around pretty faces at least to some degree thanks to Euracia, but they still each had their own appeals.

"Well, that should do."

"So, now I just pretend to be your wife?"

"That's right."

"You know... I'm quite the actress, actually. And especially good at seduction," Serena told me with a broad smile.

"Yeah, that's a lie..."

Serena gave me a look like I'd just suddenly slapped her.

"How could you tell...?"

"It was kinda obvious."

"That's a tad frustrating."

*I don't think it's anything to get frustrated about.*

"We're all ready over here, my lord!"

Anyway, with our preparations complete, we entered Eliu. From the entrance to the village, we could see people working in the fields. Their gazes turned toward us, the sudden interlopers. With all the rumors circling after multiple villages had vanished, the looks they gave us were not kindly ones. Immediately, one of the men of the village came over to us. His wariness was readily apparent as he said, "State your business here in the village."

"We're looking for a place that will take in refugees... Our village was razed to the ground in all this recent chaos."

"You've lost your homes?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm. Well, sorry, but we've already taken in a lot of refugees. We can't handle any more of you. Try somewhere else."

Serena's brow twitched. She'd heard that we absolutely needed to infiltrate a village near the capital in order to foment a rebellion, so she was probably getting worried. The man from the village shooed us away.

Two weeks ago, most of the villages surrounding the capital had been destroyed, and many of the dispossessed residents had drifted elsewhere. That meant the surviving villages were also having a hard time, and with only so much arable land to go around, this sort of reaction was inevitable.

I would have expected the same anywhere near the capital. With a look of desperation, I approached the man again.

"We'll pay you for your hospitality. Will this be enough? It's all we have..."

The man's eyes went wide, but at just that moment, there was a sharp voice from behind him.

"What are you lot doing?!"

The man standing in front of the group jumped a little, and the men standing behind him slumped their shoulders.

“M-Mayor!”

The men made way as a white-haired man walked over and looked us up and down.

Though his hair had grayed, the man was still only in his fifties, not an old man yet, and possessed a certain charisma. No sooner had the mayor, who introduced himself as Vintora, appeared as he whacked the villagers upside the head with his cane. He didn't seem to have any trouble walking, so it was possible that he only carried that cane as a beating stick.

This was probably the infamous mayor that Serena had mentioned.

“We're all human. Everyone's got struggles, don't they? Who do you think you are to drive them off?” Vintora scolded the men before looking at us once more. “Good of you to come. We saw a lot of refugees a little while back. Where do you all hail from?”

“The soldiers from the capital wiped out a village recently. We're from there... We were traveling to another city to trade, and when we returned, our homes...”

“Your village was gone?”

“I think... it had something to do with the rebel army...”

When I started to talk about the rebellion, the mayor hurriedly covered my mouth.

“If you don't want to die, you should keep your mouth shut about that.”

“Ah! I'm sorry!”

We were dealing with the kind of guys who could massacre a village and then cover it up, but clearly word was getting around.

“Well, fortunately, there's a mountain between our village and the capital, and we're able to do slash-and-burn farming... We can make the food situation work out somehow. The villagers aren't heartless. They're just wary of newcomers. If anything, we could use more hands to prepare the fields. Don't you worry.”

With that said, Vintora turned to look at the men. Perhaps the mayor's word was law here, because they just scratched their heads, unable to talk back to him.

"Put that money away," he said to us. "Save it for when you need it later."

Planting his cane on the ground, Vintora began giving orders to the men of the village.

"Show them around. Have them work on cultivating the fields, and then see what we can do about arranging a living situation for them."

"Y-Yes, sir..."

After hearing their response, the mayor smiled before disappearing into the village. The first man to talk to us watched until he was out of sight, then approached me again.

In a conspiratorial tone, he whispered, "Hey, to celebrate the occasion, would you consider giving me a small amount of money anyways?"

"Come again?"

"Nah, forget about it. Ha ha. I'm Merol. Come with me."

"Okay."

Serena and I followed him. Jint was giving the men from the village a death glare, but Mirinae put a stop to that. Yeah, it was definitely the right call to have her come with him.

We proceeded through the village until we came to a wooden building that appeared to be a warehouse of some sort.

"We've been having the others who came here stay in this place, at least temporarily. We'll build you houses once there's time. For now, though, men stay here, and women in that building over there."

There was a lumber pile in the direction he was pointing. It had a roof and walls, so it was better than roughing it, but that was all. Still, thanks to the mayor, the men really did do a lot for us.

*Well, the villagers don't seem like a bad bunch either. There are probably some places*

*that would have run us off. I'd say we made the right choice in coming here.*

"There's no one here now. They've all gone off to work. Come with me. I'll introduce you. Oh, and you two, head off to the fields."

Jint and I went with Merol, while Mirinae and Serena went to the fields.

"It looks like we're going over there, Serena."

Although she had been a little hesitant to talk to a noble, at my urging, Mirinae was doing her best to be someone Serena could rely on.

We quietly followed behind Merol until we came to a rocky mountain behind the village.

There were a little over ten men here, digging up rocks, big and small, to prepare the area for cultivation.

\*

"This is how we work with the newcomers, helping them to cultivate the land so that they'll have their own fields. Hey, Gordun!"

"Hey!"

The man called Gordun laid down the stone he was carrying and came over to Merol. Then, noticing us, he cocked his head to the side.

"They're our first new friends in a while. Mayor Vintora let them in. They'll be working with you."

"Gotcha."

Gordun seemed to accept it easily enough. He wasn't going to object. I'd been worried that we were going to get the outsider treatment, but it looked like that wasn't going to be an issue.

"Was everyone here accepted by Mayor Vintora?" I asked, and the men, who showed obvious signs of respect at the mention of the mayor's name, vigorously nodded. They then went on to explain it to me.

"I was hurt bad when I ran away, but Vintora treated me," the man next to Gordun said with a cheerful smile. "Everyone here is really nice. I was lucky to end up in a village like this one. It's more or less the same story for the others too. We all want to repay them somehow."

They seemed like good folks, generally.

"Thanks. I'm Erh, and this is Jint," I said, shortening Erhin to make a fake name for myself.

Jint nodded curtly.

We started helping the villagers after that. It was the first time I'd done such sweaty work in ages, so it was pretty hard on me. I'd thought I was getting stronger, but I guess that was different from the stamina I needed for this kind of intense manual labor. Still, I gritted my teeth and bore with it. I needed to blend in for now.

"Put your back into it, pal. You're built stronger than me, so I don't see what the problem is!"

Gordun teased me, but at the same time he constantly heaped praise on Jint.

"Your little brother's no slouch. Ha ha! He's a real good worker!"

The men stared at Jint with their jaws hanging open as he carried two huge rocks at the same time. I couldn't help but do the same. One of his strong points was that he wasn't just fast; he was *strong*. Maybe I should've told him to hold back a little? He was making me look bad by comparison.

Well, it was too late now.

In the lodging house, Gordun gave me the newcomer treatment, assigning me the bed at the very end. Jint, meanwhile, was given a much nicer one in recognition of the hard work he'd put in that day. Jint was visibly unsure what to do about this. I waved my hand, telling him it was fine.

For some time after that, I ended up getting teased for being a weakling who couldn't do his job properly.

It frustrated me, but there was no point in showing off my power here. I was just going

to have to suffer the cold draft that blew on my corner bed in silence.

That's how our first few days in the village went.

"Hey, mister! Is this right?"

If there was one thing that changed, it was that I was put in charge of educating the village children.

But here too, since I was always just reading the automatic translations of their writing system, it was Serena who had to teach them to write. That was something the mayor had asked Serena to do each morning after he found out she could read and write. There was no harm in making ourselves useful, so we instantly agreed.

In fact, Serena seemed pleased about it. On top of that, she also had a knowledge of herbs. She'd apparently been studying medicine. That was something she had in common with Vintora, so the two often chatted about it together. I ended up helping Serena as she taught the children, which freed me from hard manual labor.

"Yeah, that's right. You've got them all correct."

I patted the kid on the head, doing my best impression of a kind smile.

Once the lesson was over, the children all picked up large baskets.

"Where are all of you going?"

"We forage for vegetables and herbs in the mountains until we're old enough to work in the fields!" answered the snot-nosed little kid next to me.

"We're not just playing around," said the boy from before, puffing himself up with pride.

It seemed that, while the people's attitudes were cheerful, the situation the village found itself in was not so bright. The people worked from dawn to dusk. Merol had mentioned quotas on the first day, and that probably had something to do with it. Perhaps Lushak had set quotas for how much produce each village needed to provide him.

His demands were bound to only get more unreasonable from here.

That was what I wanted.

The more unreasonable he became, the further the people's opinion of him would drop, and soon the opportunity for a rebellion would arise. The more I worked alongside them, the more I'd be able to sense it. So it was important to work by their sides, eat the same things, and share in their burdens.

When I finished my teaching job and went to the center of the village, I found the mayor and villagers dividing the produce.

"It's quite the harvest," I remarked innocently, but the mayor just sighed.

"I can't say that it is. We won't meet our quota with this."

"Even with all this?! What is the king thinking?!"

"We've been warned they'll destroy the village if we don't obey them. We've had a better harvest than usual this year, so we'll still meet the quota somehow. Anyways, I've told you to watch your mouth about that kind of thing!"

When the mayor nodded, so did the rest of the villagers. But he still looked worried. It wasn't time for me to make my move yet, so I just nodded too, then headed back to the rocky mountain to help prepare new fields. As I approached the untamed lands, I heard the mountain rumbling.

It was a dull sound.

I rushed toward it and found a tragedy unfolding. There were rocks rolling down the mountain—a landslide.

The people who noticed it fled in a panic, but one man who had been absorbed in his work didn't realize what was happening and got trapped under a huge boulder.

"Mandel!" Gordun shouted, rushing over.

"Urgh..." The man's face twisted with pain.

Gordun tried to save him on his own, but it was no good. Me, Jint, and some other men

joined him in trying to shift the boulder, but it wouldn't budge an inch.

*What made such a huge rock come rolling down? Not even Jint can move this thing.*

Villagers who noticed the situation gathered around, working together to try to do something about it, but the rock remained unbudging.

The villagers shook their heads. The mayor did too with a sad look on his face.

"This is awful. It's not as though we can just cut his legs off..."

"Help him, please!" cried Gordun. "He's my friend! We came all the way here together. We were finally getting settled in here at this village too. Why did this have to happen...?"

"I get how you must feel, but..." Merol and the other villagers' faces twisted with frustration.

"I have an idea," I said, causing dozens of eyes to turn toward me.

Gordun, who was on the ground, weeping, clutched at my arm.

"Is there something we can do? Please, save him! I'm counting on you!"

The mayor looked at me with surprise as well.

"What are you suggesting we do?"

"We tie a rope around the boulder, and use a pulley to lift it," I said, explaining how a pulley system worked.

"I'm not sure I understand, but you're saying that will do it?"

"Yes. Please, lend me your strength, everyone."

When I said that, the villagers began murmuring among themselves as they decided it was worth a try. Thanks to that, I had enough people to do it.

The sky darkened, and work continued until the sun had long since set. Under the moonlight, our labor came to its conclusion.

The rock moved.

"Yaaaaaaaaah!"

Cheers went up all around.

I hadn't been that confident we could pull it off, so I was pretty satisfied with the result. The day I saved Gordun's friend, the way the young men of the village treated me changed. The mayor worked diligently to treat Mandel's legs. He'd likely never walk again, but he'd survive, at least.

While I hadn't planned for this, I was slowly starting to fit in here.

Another day went by, and another opportunity for me to act came.

One of the children who had gone out to collect herbs came running back into the village, tears in his eyes. He said a beast had appeared.

I rushed to the scene and saved the children who had climbed up into a tree to get away from the animal. After that, I was completely excused from manual labor, and instead helped Vintora with his work. His job mostly consisted of treating the sick, so I wrote simple prescriptions for them.

This let me make my presence known to the villagers.

The more time passed, the more people saw me as a sort of vice mayor.

"Thank you for your hard work. With more children being born, I'll have to work even harder!"

Vintora never failed to encourage the villagers who were straining under the heavy workload. I could see why they trusted him so much.

"You can slay beasts, and read and write, yet I can't see you as truly being husband and wife... Be honest with me. Let's not keep secrets anymore."

I was a little surprised when the mayor suddenly hit me with this while we were walking around the village together.

Okay, I'd stood out a little too much, so maybe this was unavoidable.

"Okay... Could you come with me?"

I was going to have to give Vintora a story that would convince him. In my time here, I'd learned that he had a lot of sway with the nearby villages due to his personality. That's probably what Serena was talking about when she'd said that he was famous. I went to the lodging house and called Serena. After that, we explained some things to him. We couldn't tell the truth yet, so there were some lies mixed in.

Okay, no, it was mostly lies.

"So, what you're telling me is... this young noblewoman... fled here with a commoner like yourself?"

"Yes. The two who came with us are her bodyguard and servant."

When I explained this, Vintora looked at Serena's face and nodded, as if he was convinced.

"I was sure there was something about you... So you really were a noble, huh? I'll keep it a secret, of course. I can see your commitment in how hard you work. Besides, you're not the only ones with an unusual background. Gordun used to be a mountain bandit. Did you know that?"

"Huh?"

That was a slightly surprising revelation.

I had assumed from his brusque attitude and large, muscular body that Gordun was a deserter, but I never would've guessed he was a bandit. Well, not that it mattered. Like Vintora said, looking at how hard the man worked, I could see he'd turned over a new leaf.

"That's quite a decision. Accepting a bandit into your village."

"The country is falling apart. Life is hard no matter where you go. I'm sure many people have had no choice but to turn to banditry. When you get to my age, you can tell those who have bad intentions from those who don't."

The white-haired Vintora smiled. This was probably why Gordun felt so indebted to Vintora. The more I learned about him, the more I liked the guy.

"Thank you for telling me. Now I need to have lunch and get back to work."

Vintora waved to us before heading back to his house while we returned to the lodging house.

And so, another day passed. It had been more than a month at this point, yet the opportunity I was waiting for had yet to present itself. Still, the days I'd spent here weren't in vain.

Because, from what Vintora told me, the tax collector would be coming two days from now.

\*

"How are you finding the work here, Serena? Hard to get used to, right? I'm sure you've never worked in the fields before..."

"Yes, you're right. It's embarrassing... But I'm getting used to it now, so I'll be fine."

Serena was grateful for all the care Mirinae showed her. To think she'd be shown such compassion by one of the people of Eintorian she'd admired all this time.

"You really are amazing, Mirinae. I don't know all the details of what you've been through, but it must have been difficult. I hear that Jint rescued you, and Erhin brought you together in Eintorian? The love between the two of you really is wonderful. I know it must have been hard sometimes, of course, but... That's part of why I respect you so much."

"It's all thanks to our lord. Heh heh!"

Mirinae twisted around bashfully. The two of them had been awkward with each other at first, but after bonding over their shared experience of going through hard times, they were as close as sisters.

"Lord Erhin tells me you had it rough too, Serena..."

"I wouldn't say that..."

“But let’s not dwell on it! There’s no time to waste on such gloomy topics!”

Mirinae also had emotional baggage, but she always tried her best to maintain a sunny disposition.

“You’re right. Let’s change the topic. Your sewing is really wonderful, you know that? How can you be so fast and neat? Did you see how surprised the other women in the village looked when they saw your work?”

“Well... I made my living as a seamstress at one point. I wanted to be able to treat Jint to something nice to eat when he came back from the war...”

“Oh, so that’s why.”

“Yes...!”

Even though Serena had lost her parents, she had lived a privileged life up until recently, so the more she heard about Mirinae’s story, the more she came to feel her own pains were not so great. She also took an active interest in hearing about Eintorian.

“Would you mind if I ask one more thing?”

“Go on! Feel free to ask anything.”

“Anything... huh?”

There was one thing Serena had always wanted to ask, but she was still a little bit hesitant to. Especially because she could never ask Erhin himself. But she worked up the nerve.

“Uh, so Euracia of Rozern... What’s she like?”

“Huh? The princess? Well...”

Mirinae started to say something, then suddenly stopped. Then she stared at Serena.

“I want to have your back, Serena, but... I have to support Lady Euracia too, so... I can’t side with either of you!” She let out a heavy sigh and paused again. “I’m sorry!”

Mirinae backed away a little, as if she'd realized something. Serena hurriedly tried to correct her.

"No, it's not like that! It's not... I just wanted to know."

"About your romantic rival, right? Hee hee!"

"Not at all. I could never..."

Serena shook her head vigorously.

"Why not? You have grace, and you're more than pretty enough. Although Lady Euracia is no less beautiful. But the princess is a bit of an oddball."

"An oddball?"

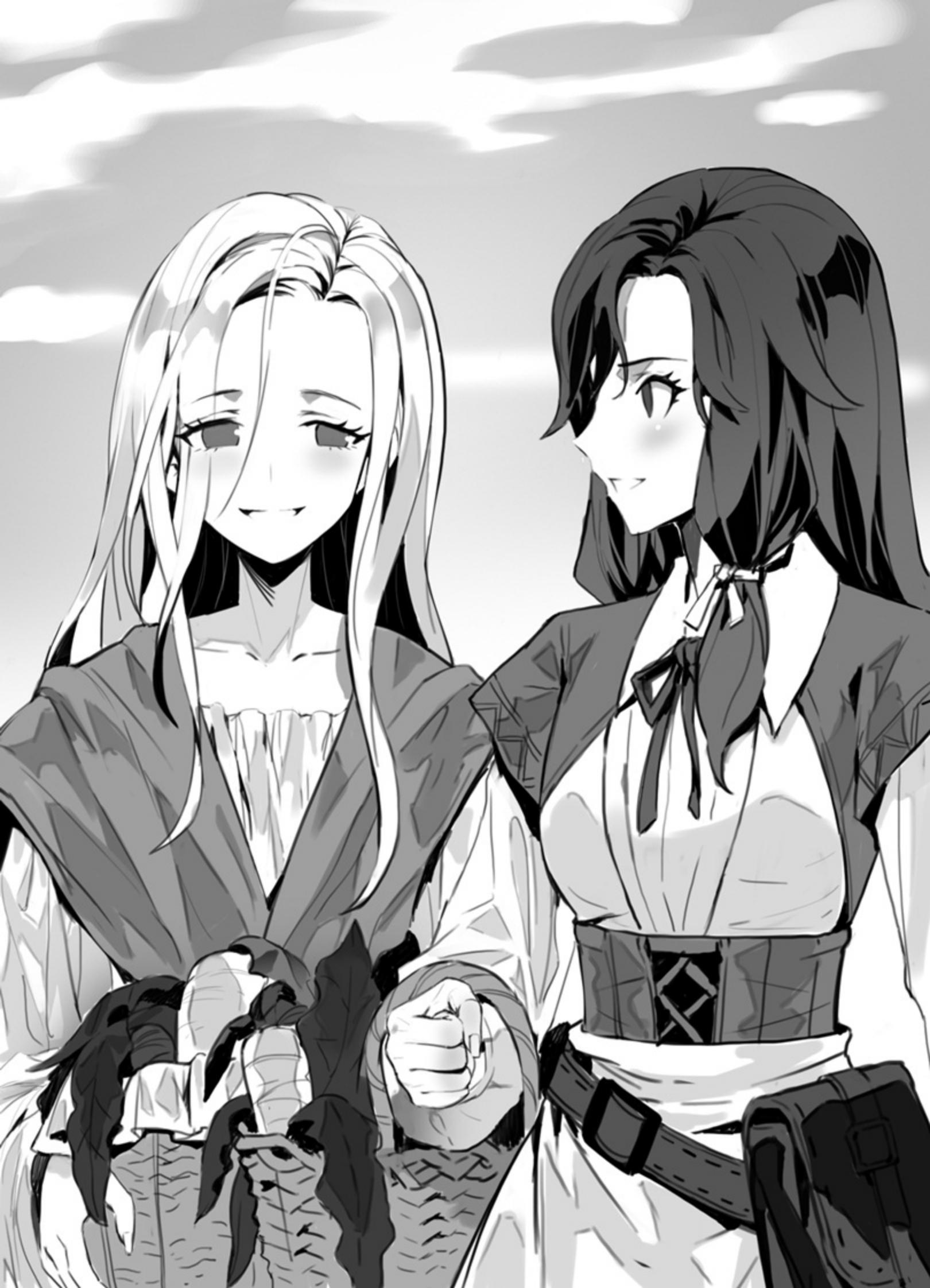
"Yeah. She pretty much only talks to our lord. And even then, her responses are brief... It's hard to tell what she's thinking most of the time. But when she gets into a fight, she's incredible!"

"I see..."

*She's just like I heard,* thought Serena.

"Well, I look forward to meeting her in Eintorian."

"Don't worry, Serena. I'll be sure to show you around to all sorts of places when we get there. Just watch yourself when you pick a fight with the princess, okay?"



Mirinae cheerfully slapped Serena on the back.

\*

“Serena.”

“Yes.”

The sun had gone down after another day’s work, and, remembering something, I called Serena.

“The First Fleet was manned by a unit that was centered around Chesedin and his retainers, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Our fleet was the mightiest because of them.”

“The members of his house would all have been in the capital, so I’ll bet that Lushak’s purged them all, retainers included.”

“It’s such a shame to have lost him...”

“Is there anyone outside of Chesedin’s house who you think could do a good job of controlling the fleet?”

Yeah. That was my greatest concern. I didn’t have a detailed picture of Luaranz.

In the game, Kashak and Lecter were just about the only named commanders of note.

“There are some, yes. Most domains are on the sea, or along canals, so it is tradition for our nobility and soldiers to train for the navy. Many of the people in my own domain will have trained under Chesedin.”

“Is that right?”

Well, if the Dofreys’ domain was on the sea or a canal, then that only made sense, I guess.

\*

At last, the day came to execute my plan.

There were soldiers coming to collect taxes, and the village was abuzz with activity from early in the morning. Lushak was no doubt itching to use the supreme power that had fallen into his hands for the first time. This was something like a game to him. Looking at his massacres and general policies, it was easy to tell.

Opinions of him were abysmal as a result. Almost as if he were going out of his way to prove what I just said, the tax collector arrived in a gaudy carriage.

“Hmm, so this is the last village, then?”

The man embodied arrogance as he stepped down from the carriage. As soon as he had disembarked, one of his lackeys who was carrying a chair set it down on the ground for him. The man sat down with a look of satisfaction, crossing his legs.

Manshak Lechin

Age: 23

Martial: 23

Intelligence: 10

Command: 40

He had piss-poor stats, honestly. People only obeyed him out of fear due to the ongoing tyranny, which had to have been the only reason his Command was as high as 40. Going by his name, there was no doubt this guy was a relative of Lushak's.

“I am Manshak, the son of Duke Lushak!” Predictably, in a show of arrogance, the man announced himself with a voice of feigned grandeur.

Once he did, his assistant, who was standing beside him, loudly barked, “What's taking you?! Get down and grovel already!”

*The duke's son who enjoys playing with his power, huh? Well, the issue is that the duke has no legitimacy.*

For the moment, I chose to bow down to him. Despite looking exasperated, I could spot some of the villagers also beginning to get down on their hands and knees.

Beside me, I heard Gordun mutter, "What a scoundrel."

"You said it," I agreed with him.

At just that moment, Manshak asked Vintora, "Have you met your quota?"

"Of course we have. The whole village pulled together to manage it somehow. The goods are over there..." Vintora began to explain, but Manshak stopped him as if it was too much of a bother to listen.

"Fine, whatever. I'll take the stuff, but... Ohh! That's right. I'm going to be entertaining a foreign dignitary! Sorry, but the original quota isn't nearly going to be enough, you know."

"I-If you do that, then work as hard as we might, there won't be enough left for us to eat our— Gah...!"

Before Vintora could even finish, Manshak sent him flying with a kick and then flew into a rage.

"All I see around here is fields, and you're saying you don't have enough to eat? Drop the bullshit and bring out the stuff you've got hidden away!"

The soldiers began walking toward the warehouse. Kicking Merol as he clung to them and begged them to stop, the soldiers opened the door, and began seizing the meager amount left behind for the villagers' one meal per day.

There were angry whispers and clenched fists, but none of the villagers could oppose them.

One of them, Gordun, couldn't tolerate this, and suddenly rose to his feet.

Before anyone could stop him, he ran up to Manshak and shouted, with his eyes bugging out, "If you take the crops that we grow as taxes, and then even seize what little we have left for ourselves, how are we supposed to survive?!"

"What was that?"

With a simple gesture from Manshak, his assistant sent Gordun flying with a solid punch, then proceeded to administer a one-sided beatdown.

He left him almost on the verge of death.

Manshak looked at Gordun, lying there exhausted, and the corners of his mouth turned up as he presented a change of subject.

“This village is terrible. We’re not done here yet. There’s one more thing. Round up all of the womenfolk. All of them, from the youngest child to the married women!”

“Why do you want to see the women...?” Vintora asked, his expression pained, but he already knew why. That was the reason he looked so tormented.

Manshak didn’t answer him, though. He simply raised his voice.

“Just do it! Or do you want your village razed to the ground?”

With a wave of his hand, twenty-five soldiers unsheathed their blades. Shocked by this, the women of the village began coming forward one or two at a time. Irritated at how long it was taking, the soldiers began roaming around the village, pulling every last child out of hiding.

Having predicted this, I’d asked Serena and Mirinae to leave the village in advance. There’d be trouble if either of them got caught. The moment anyone laid a hand on Mirinae, Jint would probably go berserk on them. Obviously, I had no intention of just abandoning the rest of the villagers, but the process was important here.

“Hmm, we’ve got some lookers here, unlike the last village. We’ll be taking you, you, and that kid over there to the castle. Heh heh!”

Manshak pointed to his victims with a malicious grin. Even having seen this coming, I had trouble holding back my laughter at what an absolute cliché this guy was. Once Manshak had finished choosing his women, he rose from his chair as if to say his job here was done. Vintora rose too, as if a fire had been lit inside him.

“Lord Manshak, we will give you all the crops you would like, but, please, I beg you to spare our women!”

As Vintora made his impassioned plea, the rest of the villagers glared resentfully at

Manshak.

“Yeesh, this village is a lost cause. You’re too defiant. Oh, I see. It’s *your* fault, huh?”

Upset with the attitude he was getting, Manshak gripped his sword and swung at Vintora. The blade slashed downwards across Vintora’s chest, splattering the ground with fresh blood. That single blow brought him to the ground.

“Mayor!!!”

The villagers all shouted, their faces full of shock, but Manshak planted his boot on Vintora’s writhing form and went on.



“You uppity peasants. Get on your knees already. Do you want your village burned?”

“Hey, you!”

Seeing Vintora go down, Gordun flew into a rage. However, it only got him another kick from the soldiers.

The soldiers all started swinging their blades menacingly, advancing on the villagers with no mercy in their eyes.

That’s the exact moment it happened—the Opinion of Eliu Village plummeted to a measly score of 3.

The time had come.

As if to prove it, the villagers all ran at once to their homes to fetch farming implements. I saw them arm themselves with spades, scythes, and even clubs. Merol led the way. Even Gordun, who’d been sent flying by that last kick, reemerged with a knife he’d been hiding in the lodging house.

All eyes focused on Manshak, who still had his foot on Vintora, with stares of rage.

The mayor had been their emotional pillar, supporting them through many trials and tribulations. He’d reassured them that, if they could just meet this quota, things were bound to be all right. Once they saw Vintora fall, the villagers completely snapped.

“Everyone! Avenge the mayor!”

The villagers rose up in indignation. But as things stood, it would only end in them being massacred by Manshak.

“Eeeeeek!”

Women screamed as Manshak’s men charged. Anyway, this was a situation that was brought about not through my incitement, but the villagers’ own actions. I had to join the fray. I couldn’t allow there to be any more casualties.

Jint was off protecting Serena and Mirinae, so it fell to me to act. I could say one thing for sure, I’d been successful in getting their Opinion score lowered.

I'd have preferred Vintora not get hurt in the process, though...

While this was happening, Manshak started feeling up one of the girls who had been brought to him, a lascivious smile on his face.

"How do you like this? I'll keep you for four years before I kill you, you lucky girl. Bah hah hah! But it's death for the rest of you uppity peasants. Burn their village to the ground!"

Manshak gave his orders, cackling all the while.

I walked out in front of him.

"Who're you?!"

The soldiers rushed to stop me, but I obviously cut them down with a single swing of my blade.

Seemingly a little surprised by what just happened, Manshak let out a confused, "Whuh?"

The look on his face was priceless.

"You imbecile," I said with a smirk.

Manshak gave me a look of exasperation and shouted, "Kill this guy first! I want him torn to pieces! Who the hell does he think I am?!"

It seemed Manshak was not open to talking this over. Well, not that I was either. The soldiers who'd been attacking the villagers all turned to focus on me, and the villagers naturally ended up watching too.

"You took this too far when you harmed the mayor. That's justification enough to kill you all on its own."

When they heard me, the villagers started shouting too.

"Yeah, he's right!"

"How dare you hurt our mayor!"

"He was the only one who'd take in a guy like me. All the other villages turned me away."

Gordun sympathized with what I had been saying and glared at Manshak. Manshak, however, just snorted derisively.

"Hey, you losers! What do you think you're... Wait, whuh?"

Manshak couldn't believe what he was seeing. The soldiers I attacked died instantaneously. While he was still dumbstruck, I planted a kick on him that sent him tumbling.

Teeth flew through the air as Manshak went down with his chair.

I gestured for the girl he'd been molesting to run, then went back to taking down the rest of his soldiers.

"Out of the way!!!"

The soldiers were currently heading to attack the villagers who had armed themselves with farm tools. The groups hadn't collided yet, but Gordun was already fighting by himself. I didn't particularly need to buy time, so I just decapitated the soldiers who were fighting with him.

In no time, there were twenty-five dead soldiers, and Manshak was left alone, laid out on the ground by my kick.

"Well, since it's come to this... You're gonna have to die now."

"What the hell *are* you?!"

Manshak looked at me like he was seeing a monster. He tried to crawl away, blood gushing from his mouth where I had kicked him, but he didn't get far. I decapitated him completely with a single swing for dramatic effect.

Then, after flicking the blood from my sword, I rushed over to the fallen mayor's side. Fortunately, the wound wasn't lethal, probably thanks to Manshak's pitiful Martial score of 23.

"The mayor's still breathing! Merol, bring Serena here at once!"

Merol ran off to do as I'd said.

When he eventually returned, Serena began checking Vintora's condition.

"He can survive this injury! I'll need some herbs to treat it, of course."

That was good news. When Serena nodded at me, the villagers all put their hands together and breathed a sigh of relief.

I left Vintora to Serena and called Gordun and Merol.

"Merol, even if the mayor was almost dead, what good could have come from you getting aggressive with them? If you or the other villagers had died, it'd all be for nothing."

"W-Well..." Merol, who had kicked off the struggle, mumbled.

"Before that, who even *are* you? How are you so strong?!" Merol demanded. He wasn't so much angry as surprised.

"What does it matter right now?! Save it for when the mayor wakes up!"

Thankfully, with Serena's help, Vintora survived. However, due to the depth of the wound, he wasn't regaining consciousness. The village was now faced with a major issue, and everyone gathered in the warehouse.

"I understand how you must have felt, but you could have gotten everyone killed."

I wish he'd held back. While I'd managed to take advantage of the situation, the truth was that this wasn't how I'd wanted things to play out. The plan had been for them to suffer this outrage, and then I'd use their mounting indignation to launch a big revolution all at once. In all honesty, my predictions this time had been a bit naive.

There was no way the world would go as I'd planned.

"They didn't just take our food; they wanted our women too... Even the children were being taken away... When I saw him step on the mayor on top of all that, I couldn't take it anymore," Merol argued.

"Yeah, he's right," Gordun agreed. "You said it too. That guy messed up when he laid a

hand on our mayor!"

I shook my head. "I'm not blaming you for what you did. The question is what we'll do now. Just wait for death?"

"No... But assuming we run, where can we even go?"

"Well..."

The villagers looked at one another, murmuring indistinctly. It seemed to have dawned on them that their situation was hopeless.

I sent Jint out to investigate later, and he found that three nearby villages had been completely razed to the ground. Probably Manshak's handiwork before he came here, if I had to guess.

That meant that his barbarism hadn't only affected this village, but it also had spurred resentment elsewhere. The apple didn't fall far from the tree. Thanks to him, I was going to have a much easier time finding sympathizers. Eliu Village had an Opinion of 3, while the kingdom as a whole was at 8.

The way that Manshak had been using his job as tax collector as an excuse to burn villages rapidly lowered it. He'd also been laying his hands on women and even young children, so that was only to be expected. All of this anger would inevitably turn toward Lushak.

"We buried Manshak and his men, but people will come searching soon. They'll turn all the nearby villages upside down looking for them. It's only a matter of time before they figure out who did it."

"You can read, and you're probably the cleverest guy in this village. Do you have any ideas? And on top of that... you're damn tough. How in the world did you end up drifting here?"

"Yeah, see, I told the mayor about it... but, well, there are circumstances."

At this point, I turned from Merol to Gordun.

"Gordun, how happy were you when the mayor made it so you could live an ordinary life as a farmer? What changed from your time as a mountain bandit? Assuming you

had been able to sell and eat these crops, without having them stolen, that is.”

“Huh? How do you know about that?”

Gordun reacted to the words “mountain bandit” with surprise. But I continued on.

“Even if you used to be a bandit or a deserter, you’re a member of this village now. We’re all facing the same crisis here.”

“Yeah, that’s right...”

I looked around at the villagers. They all nodded. I could probably take that as them agreeing with what I said. Having just come through a life-or-death experience together, the village was united, and where anyone had originally come from wasn’t important. The sense of camaraderie that had taken root between them transcended all of that.

“I appreciate the sentiment. You’re right. It felt incomparably more fulfilling than being a bandit ever was. If only that piece of shit had never shown up here!”

“I know, right?” I agreed with Gordun, then paused for a moment.

The villagers stared at me earnestly, like children waiting for a parent to tell them something.

“We can’t let them run roughshod over us forever. So that’s why all of us are going to run the rebels out of the capital.”

An excited buzz ran through the crowd. It was just too extreme of a thing to say.

Speaking up for the rest, Merol said, “That sounds rash. Even if we could pull it off, more soldiers would come. We’d just be condemning ourselves to death.”

Hearing the sigh in Merol’s tone, I shook my head.

“And so we stay here doing nothing and wait for death? Shouldn’t we at least try? Is it better to let them rob us and starve us to death, or to fight back and be violently suppressed? We may be just as dead in the end, but wouldn’t you feel better about it if we could at least kill those fat bureaucrats who’ve been feasting on the crops we grow by the sweat of our brows first?”

When I finished speaking, the villagers looked at one another. The reality that they were going to die either way as things stood helped them find the resolve to act. There was no backing down for them now that they'd slain the son of the rebel army's leader.

"He's right!"

"Yeah! He is! We can't just keep taking this lying down. Since it's come to this, I say we take this as far as we can before we die!"

Excited murmurs spread through the warehouse. Sensing that things were going my way, I spoke again.

"But know that death isn't an inevitability here. We won't be the only ones fighting. I mean to round up people from the nearby villages. If I can manage that, we'll be an army in our own right. From there, it's a matter of fighting smart."

"Will the nearby villages help?"

"They've been suffering all the same things that this village has, only without someone to lead them. If all they have to look forward to is being robbed until they die, I expect volunteers from those villages will stand with us. It will make success far more likely."

Once I said this, Gordun stepped forward.

"He's right. Let's give it a shot. We'll show them what we're really capable of!"

\*

Serena came back after tending to Vintora.

"Thank you for doing that, Serena."

"The mayor is a very good person, so it's only natural that we would try to help him. Still, the tyranny the people here have experienced is just awful. I can't believe the rebels would do such outrageous things..."

Serena shook with contempt. "Will you be joining the villagers in their fight against Lushak, Erhin?" she asked.

"That's the plan. I can't bring my own forces here, after all. Ultimately, if I'm going to

defeat Lushak on my own, I need to use the people to do it."

"I can't say I understand it very well. But I am hoping for your victory." Having said this, she pushed something wrapped in cloth toward me.

"I've heard that you will be traveling around to other villages to recruit volunteers."

"Yes, and what's this?"

"Something I expect will help with that. The Luaranz Kingdom is no longer the Luaranz we knew. It is run by a band of brigands without any legitimacy."

As Serena unwrapped the cloth, the room shone with gold. The royal seal. That's what lay within the bundle—the symbol of royal power in Luaranz.

"This is a sign of true legitimacy, left to me by the last king of Luaranz. Please, use it. And, as the last queen, you are welcome to use me as you see fit. I will make any statement you require. Without this seal, the current army are no more than brigands. If their illegitimate king continues with his tyranny, then we must protect the people, even if that means destroying the palace. That's what I plan to claim the last king said."

"Even if this means that the Luaranz Kingdom vanishes completely?"

Yeah, that was my true goal here. After she'd said so much, I had no intention of keeping my objectives cloaked behind the claim I was doing it for the Luaranzine people.

"I am fine with that, so long as I can have my revenge. Besides, after what Lushak's done to it, this country can't be called Luaranz any longer. Everyone knows that. It's a country that no longer exists. I am your subordinate now, Erhin... I will simply do as you tell me to."

*She'd go that far?*

"I'll ask, just to be sure, but there's no way it's a fake, right?"

"None. The royal seal of Luaranz was made from an unusual metal. It can't be imitated. It is one of a kind."

"Okay, I'll gladly use it, then."

Serena nodded quietly when I said that.

"Thank you. I'm sure my father would have been happy to hear that."

\*

At first, it was a feeling of admiration. She was sure that was all it was. The stories made her heart dance more than any others on the continent. She'd admired the man in the stories, but he was an incredibly mysterious individual. Serena had spent all this time suppressing her true self. There was always a falseness to the expression on her face.

Her smiles were lies.

She'd had to live that way.

Her genuine smiles were lost the moment she became queen on behalf of the Dofrey family.

But still she smiled, because her bright smiles caused the king, her maidservants, and all of the nobles to show her affection. If that's what she had to do to make a positive impression, then that was how she would have to live. The only joy she had was listening to stories of the outside world. But she never smiled when she did.

When hearing a story that made her heart race, it made her think of her own circumstances, and she just couldn't.

That's why, when Erhin told Serena to cry, her mind went blank for a moment.

It was the first time anyone had been able to see through to how she really felt.

"I'm no one special."

She was worthless, born into a family with no power. It had seemed obvious to her that no one would ever try to understand how a person like her truly felt. She was a victim of the power struggles between the nobility, leading an existence inferior even to that of a caged bird.

That's what she had thought, and so she was grateful to Erhin for seeing how she felt.

All it took was those few brief words from him, and she broke down into tears. Never in her life had she bawled like that in front of another person.

In the time since then, Erhin had seen through her lies multiple times.

When he told her he wanted her to pretend to be his wife, she'd been mysteriously excited by the idea, and let out her first genuine smile in a long time. It was the first since she'd entered the palace. Obviously, she'd continued with her fake smiles even after that, but he quickly saw through them. It had dumbfounded her so much that she asked a question that she really probably shouldn't have.

"How can you tell the difference?"

It just sounded so silly. There was someone who recognized her for who she was, and that person was someone she admired too.

How could she not be happy about that?

But old habits died hard.

Even though, now that she was free, and at the side of the man she idolized, she could have openly shown her true self, there was a part of her that habitually put on a fake smile, even with the villagers. A calculated smile, meant to elicit positive reactions.

When Erhin saw it, he'd said, "Don't you think it's time you lived your own life? I know you need to keep up this lie that we're married inside the village, but when you're away from the village I would hope you could be yourself, as you truly are. It's okay to frown at things you don't like."

Hearing that put Serena at ease in many ways. That's why, without thinking, she'd offered him the royal seal. Her father had told her to dispose of it, so it never fell into Lushak's hands. But she wanted to be of use. And so she didn't hesitate. He was very happy about it, giving her a fond pat on the head. She wished he'd do it more often, and the thought surprised her.

That day, when she left the room after giving him the royal seal, she realized a lot of things.

The way her heart raced was no lie.

“Father, what should I do?”

She mustn’t wish for things that were not to be.

But even as she thought that, the hand that Serena held over her chest clenched tight.

\*

Things got busy after the day I temporarily took on the role of mayor. After Vintora fell, I worked with the villagers, who’d come to see me as a sort of deputy mayor, and tried to bring everyone together. Once Vintora was back in action, I planned to gather people from the nearby villages. It was still going to be some time before then, but that time was incredibly important. I had a boatload of things to do other than rallying the nearby villages.

“Jint, you go for me.”

“I’m on it.”

I sent Jint with a letter for Fihatori. Even if I couldn’t use Eintorian’s military forces, that didn’t mean I couldn’t engage in a diplomatic war. With those preparations made, I traveled around to nearby villages. I needed to be fully aware of the situation there. Fortunately, Merol’s friend Barild was in frequent contact with the neighboring villages, so traveling to them wasn’t a major issue.

When I arrived in the nearby village of Mesequin, I could feel something brutal in the air. The village wasn’t burning, which meant that they had accepted Manshak’s unreasonable demands. It was little wonder things felt unpleasant.

“Those bastards hurt our mayor...”

When I explained Lushak’s barbarity, the mayor of Mesequin, a friend of Vintora’s by the name of Gadoro, looked aghast.

“They really tried to kill him too?!” he asked, his expression pained.

“It’s the truth. If we had been any slower in treating him, he might not have made it.”

“Grr...!”

Gadoro slammed his hands down on the table, anger readily apparent. His own losses the other day must have been bad too. I cut straight to the chase.

“Can we really leave things like this, Mayor Gadoro?!”

“It’s all we can do. This is the largest village in the area. We have a lot of strong men, but many of the people who were displaced by the chaos of the war will have settled in the capital, and they’ll mobilize all of them. We would have liked to resist, but it’s hopeless. There’s nothing we can do.”

“That’s why we all have to band together,” I said, producing a detailed map of the surrounding villages from my pocket. “There are hundreds of tiny villages in the area around the capital. If we all work together against the rebel army, even more people might flock to our side. We’re all suffering under their tyranny. We’ll be fighting for our own sakes, not because we were conscripted. It may be hard now, but it’s to bring peace in the future. If we gather people from throughout the capital region, we can easily muster a force in the tens of thousands.”

As the biggest city in the country, Luaranz had the most villages surrounding it, and the largest. That meant that once the people’s anger boiled over, their manpower would be immense. Every city had a Manpower commensurate with its population. When I laid out the numbers for him, Gadoro stared at me as if in a daze. He quickly recovered however, shooting me a look of disagreement.

“You’re talking about storming the castle with just the villages in this area, aren’t you?”

“I’ve heard you’re the eldest around here. Please, lead the people. We all have to fight together and break this chain of misery. Will you wait and starve, or fight for freedom from oppression? With the second option, only once you’re prepared to die can you see the path to survive. We never know what will happen until we try.”

“Hmm...”

Gadoro blinked more times than I could count. But think as he might, he couldn’t bring himself to do it, and shook his head once more.

“If we subsist on grass roots, we can avoid starving. But as things stand, we’d be marching to our deaths. It’s far too reckless. And you don’t have anyone who could lead that many people, do you? I am the eldest around here, as you’ve noted, but that’s all that I am. I know nothing of the way of war.”

Yeah. Everyone was angry. Many had seen their wives or daughters taken away, so of course they were. But they all thought they'd be dying in vain.

"I'll come back with an answer for you about that once Mayor Vintora awakens. We do stand a chance of winning, at least."

That was the answer I gave as I went around the villages.

\*

Mayor Vintora of Eliu Village.

Vintora

Age: 56

Martial: 23

Intelligence: 68

Command: 88

He was a unique individual with a great knowledge of medicine. His Command score was also fairly high, so there was no reason not to hire him. He had a useful skill, and a good personality. There wasn't a single drawback to having him among my personnel. It was only natural I'd want him.

I was going to have more domains in the future, and entrusting one of them to him would be ideal. He was just the kind of person I needed, and so I had to have him. Looking at his Command score, part of it was that he lacked experience fighting in a war, so given his personal virtues, it would definitely grow to above 90 once he had that.

I had learned how much the other mayors respected Vintora when I traveled around the nearby villages. Overall Opinion currently sat at 8, and would only drop lower in this situation. It had come to the point where, once the fire was started, an uprising

would occur in no time. If I could just arrange for it to be organized, not just spontaneous, then I'd easily be able to defeat Lushak and the rebel army.

They had no just cause, after all.

Obviously, this plan hinged on Vintora, so I had to prepare for it while I waited for him to awaken.

Today, after a week had passed, he finally regained consciousness. In preparation for future developments, I decided to reveal my true identity to him. It was necessary in order to not just use him, but win his heart over to my side as well.

“I see... The villagers did that for me...”

Vintora sighed as he saw there was no turning back.

“The important thing is what we do from here on. But first there’s something I need to tell you.”

Vintora looked suspiciously from me to Serena, then back again.

When Serena offered him a chair, as he wasn’t fully recovered, the mayor nodded and sat down.

He’d already been told she was a noblewoman, so he felt awkward accepting her kindness.

“So, uh, it’s about who she is...” I began, looking at Serena.

“Hm? What about Miss Serena?” Vintora asked, his expression dubious as ever.

“I told you she was a noblewoman before.”

“Yes, you did. I’ve tried my best not to betray that fact, but I can’t help but feel intimidated by her.”

“Well, what I told you was no lie, but there’s one more fact that I’ve been keeping hidden about her identity.”

“And what is that?” Vintora looked at me with suspicion.

His strong doubt made him frown, raising his white eyebrows.

"Her true identity is Serena Dofrey, the last queen of Luaranz."

Vintora's pupils widened.

"No, how can that..."

Vintora's and Serena's eyes met, and Vintora quickly cast his gaze to the ground. Then, gulping, he quickly bowed down before her.

"I have been incredibly rude to you, without ever realizing!"

"Please, stop that. You needn't do this when you're not well."

"No, I must do it. I cannot be so rude in front of my queen!"

Vintora shook his head vigorously as he stubbornly refused to rise.

"I was unable to protect His Majesty. I am not the kind of person you should bow your head to."

"No... Lushak is the one to blame for that. You are without sin, Your Highness!"

"Would you please just stand up?" I said. "You're derailing the conversation."

"Well..."

At my and Serena's urging, Vintora finally got up.

"I'm sorry for keeping it from you. But I thought it was about time we tell you the truth."

"Wh-What in the world is happening? Don't tell me... You sneaked in to save the queen when she was being targeted by the rebel army?"

"That's right."

Well, it was half right. Or at least partially correct. Maybe twenty percent?

"Here is the proof," Serena said, pulling out the royal seal for Vintora to see. His eyes fixated on its golden gleam. "The current national army are brutes. They treat the people like insects, not human beings. At this rate, the villages around the capital will all lie ruined and deserted. All justice and legitimacy currently lie with me. While I hold this royal seal, the so-called 'Royal Army' are no more than traitors and brigands, falsely assuming the name of Luaranz!"

"It is just as you say, but..."

"Will you not fight alongside me? Together, we may yet drive out the atrocious Royal Army!"

"Of course we will. There's already no turning back for Eliu Village. No, even if that weren't the case, there would be no shortage of villagers willing to rise up for their queen!"

Vintora had finally gotten to his feet, but bowed down again after he finished saying that.

"The villages surrounding the castle have always received your grace before now. The people are still grateful that, one year ago, when we had a bad harvest, you persuaded His Majesty to lower our taxes. And given Lushak's tyranny... The people will rise up, even if it leads to their own destruction!"

That was only natural. They had an Opinion of just 8, so it was only a matter of time before there was an uprising. If I poured a little oil on it and started a fire, then the flames would burn even hotter.

"If this battle was one that led to your own destruction, I wouldn't be showing you the royal seal to persuade you. I believe there is a chance of victory, Mayor," Serena said as she walked closer to me, then took hold of my arm.

There was a certain modesty in the way she looked up at me.

"Are you aware of who this person is?"

"Your servant, perhaps? No, come to think of it... He's also proven himself superb in a variety of ways. Are you a noble too?!" Vintora asked with a look of surprise.

"This gentleman is Erhin Eintorian, the Lord of Eintorian," Serena told him. "He fought

the Naruyans to defend Runan and Rozern. Although he was out of the country on the king's orders and couldn't stop the Naruyans' second invasion, he heroically returned to defeat them again and defend the people of Runan!"

Not even Vintora knew what to say about this revelation.

\*

From that day forward, Vintora went about passionately persuading the nearby villages to rise up.

It wasn't an easy argument to make, so I left him to it while I focused on training our own villagers in combat. Because we couldn't immediately get our hands on any weapons, I started their training with bamboo spears, which served as a good stand-in for the time being. Gordun and his buddies, who had some previous combat experience, were a great help, and they, along with Merol and Gadoro, proved especially talented.

The people of other nearby villages also came to learn from me. This was exactly why I had gone around, showing off what I could do. No one outside of the most important people knew my true identity, so I'd had to demonstrate my abilities to ease their hesitation of fighting back.

"Yaaah!"

That day, there was a boy who'd joined us. I liked the vigor with which he held the bamboo spear in both hands, how he pushed grown men aside with it, and the look of anger in his eyes.

"You, there. What's your name?"

"Commander! My name is Damon, sir!"

"Damon, why did you take up that spear?"

At some point, the villagers had started calling me "commander" because Vintora argued that my deep knowledge of strategy I had from my time in the military made me the best fit for the role. The rest of them agreed with him as the elder of the village, and that was that.

*The story's changed from me being the Lord of Eintorian to just a guy who happened to be in charge of military strategy, though.*

"Because they killed my parents," the boy answered. "I will never, ever forgive them!"

I shuddered at the hatred this child held. Though I'd checked the various village mayors' ability scores in my search for talent, I hadn't even thought to look at kids like him. Stricken with curiosity, I decided to scan this kid.

Damon

Age: 17

Martial: 72

Intelligence: 56

Popularity: 51

And I was shocked.

*A Martial of 72 at just seventeen? Jint would've had a Martial of over 80 when he was in his teens, so this kid's similar in a way, isn't he? Looks like I've found a diamond in the rough.*

Great change happened during one's youth. If he was seventeen now, then his abilities would bloom as he turned eighteen, and again at nineteen, and so on and so forth. Having so many people gathered here gave me the opportunity to make rare finds like him. It was a lot of fun searching for personnel this way.

Gordun and Merol weren't exactly superb, but they were still more than worth recruiting. But in Damon's case, he had the potential to grow into one of the pillars that would support Eintorian's quest for power in the future.

I called for Jint, who had just returned from Eintorian.

"I want you to fight this kid," I told him. "But you take him on barehanded." Then I turned to the boy. "Damon, would you mind fighting this man here? I swear I'll make it so that you can avenge your parents."

Damon looked at Jint for just a moment before he nodded. He wasn't cowed by his opponent being an adult. Damon brimmed with confidence borne of going undefeated by the other villagers as he closed the distance between him and Jint. Jint easily kicked aside his bamboo spear, though, and the boy faltered for a moment.

I would have lost all hope for the kid if he let that beat him. But despite his hesitation, Damon quickly recovered, and went on with a flurry of blow after blow against his opponent. He turned the point of the bamboo spear upward and aimed for Jint's head. Jint dodged, but the boy followed up on the backswing with elegance, never wasting an inch of movement. The saying went that the best defense was a good offense, and he seemed determined to prove it with his unrelenting assault.

The kid started to panic when Jint handled all his attacks. I waited for the right moment to give Jint the signal. Once I did, Jint sent the spear flying away with a roundhouse kick.

I immediately called for a halt to the fight. "That's enough!"

*I'm pretty satisfied with his abilities.*

"You did well, Damon. Don't let this loss get you down. He's even stronger than I am."

Damon had already lost to me once in training. The boy looked at Jint with utter surprise and no small amount of awe in his gaze.

*I'm sure Jint can make something of him.*

I liked the look in Damon's eyes. If he wasn't intimidated by a man who was stronger than him but instead felt a sense of admiration, then there was a good chance he'd continue to grow.

"But you're more than strong enough. I'm impressed you could keep Jint on the ropes like that. I'll make sure you're able to do big things in this uprising. Get revenge for your parents."

"Thank you!" the boy's voice resounded with cheer.

"Okay, you can go back to training now," I said before whispering to Jint. "How was he?"

"Great. Better than I thought."

I smiled with wry amusement at how impressed Jint seemed. He looked like an old man seeing a promising youngster.

\*

Finally, the day of the uprising came. I didn't plan to let this training go on indefinitely. We needed to catch the enemy by surprise. If the villagers could take on the soldiers, then that left Jint and me freer to act than I had anticipated.

"Yaaaaah!"

A battle cry rang through the air as the villagers charged toward rebel-occupied Luaranz. We had a simple plan: we would storm the open gates of the capital, as the common folk came and went freely about their business.

Our ranks had swelled to a hundred thousand with villagers from the surrounding area I'd managed to recruit to our cause. Eintorian's population had started at two hundred and twenty thousand. This being the capital of Luaranz, the population of the city and its surrounding villages nearly reached double that, just shy of four hundred thousand. With all of the commoners who could fight taking part in the charge, their battle cries reached an incredible volume.

Obviously, their Training level sat at a mere 30; pretty awful, honestly. But still, my hurried training had raised it from the 10 it was at before. Their Morale, meanwhile, soared to 90.

"Huh? What?!"

Due to the surprise nature of the attack, despite Lushak trying to have the rebels he'd led here from his own domain and then made the capital's garrison force stop them, they couldn't close the gates. The villagers had already taken the gatehouse, and I'd sent Jint over to the south gate, so the defenders there likely died before they could even so much as shout.

I stood at the vanguard, with Damon at my side like I'd promised him. The boy fought

the rebels with firm resolve. Since this was his first time in a real battle, I had thought he'd be afraid to kill people, but no, there was no sign of that. His anger over his parents' deaths was far stronger than any fear he might have felt. I just went around dispatching soldier after soldier, even going out of my way to use Daitoren, showing off flashy mana effects as I did.

Dozens of rank-and-file soldiers fell with every press of the Attack button thanks to my powerful S-rank attacks. There wasn't a soul in this country who could stand up to me when I had Daitoren equipped.

"Wh-Whoa..."

Damon and the other villagers who came with me were awed by my power. We smashed the gates to the palace and forced our way inside.

"Yaaaaah!"

As the enraged people surged toward them, the palace defenders began retreating. Well, most of them were just terrified of the way I was going wild at the front of the mob.

Meanwhile, Lushak was out by the castle's pond, engaged in a debauched scene of gluttony and fornication with the women he'd captured. He called himself a duke, but he treated the castle like it was his own property. Utterly appalling.

"Your Excellency, the people! The people are rushing into the palace!"

"Quit talking nonsense. You people need to get out there and find Manshak. I told you to bring him back, even if you have to burn a village to the ground!"

"I'm terribly sorry, but the situation... the situation is..."

Looking at how things were shaping up outside, the soldier stammered the same words repeatedly, but he was too incoherent for Lushak to understand.

Lushak scowled.

"Hey, you louts!"

At this point, Lushak heard the battle cries. And they were really close too.

“Yeahhhhhh!”

Finally, Lushak clued in to the fact his soldier was telling the truth.

“Defend me at once. What were you people doing that let things get this out of hand?!” he shouted angrily at the royal guard.

Seeing us, Lushak got a sour look on his face and started preparing to flee. The women he’d captured were still with him.

“Father!”

“Brother?”

“Darling!”

*A touching reunion, huh? This'll push their anger to the max. There isn't a man alive who wouldn't seethe with rage after seeing his daughter or wife toyed with like this.*

“Kill him!”

“Kill hiiiiim!”

“Stay back. Get any closer, and the women all die!” Lushak shouted as he tried to flee, but his back was to the wall. His luck had run out when he decided to fool around by the pond where there was no route he could use to escape us. This Lushak guy, in all honesty, was of no interest to me. He was no Kashak.

“Who the hell are you people?! And men, how dare you let these peasants in here?!”

“Shut your trap, scumbag!” I shouted as I kicked Lushak in the face, smashing his teeth as badly as his son’s, and sending him rolling across the ground.

The man had pulled off a successful rebellion based on what he’d inherited from Kashak, but not knowing how to use it, he’d just lost everything in an instant. I handed him over to the enraged people, who quickly beat him to death.

We took Lushak’s head to the garrison.

When we arrived, the peasant army led by Jint was fighting Lushak’s men there.

"Lushak is dead. All you're doing right now is turning your blades on your fellow countrymen. Aren't you people of this land too? Throw down your weapons, and we'll let you live!"

With that, people began surrendering here and there. Honestly, many of the soldiers had been just as fed up with Lushak's tyranny. Ultimately, the problem had been Lushak, the evil leader of the rebellion.

"Lord Erhin! Outside... They're gathering outside!" Vintora shouted, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth.

"What are you talking about?"

*Has another enemy shown up?*

"From the other villages. The people are gathering from all over!"

Hearing this, I climbed up on top of the gates. Phones didn't exist in this world, nor anything even close, so people shouldn't have known what had happened yet, but here they were, showing up late to join the fray. At first, the uprising had just been Eliu Village and the other neighboring villages that Vintora was close with. Obviously, many villages had shown reluctance. But the number of villagers gathered outside was only growing. This rebellion had started with fifty thousand, but looking at that crowd, there were likely over two hundred thousand people now.

"Lushak is dead, and the soldiers of Luaranz have surrendered! The battle is over!" I shouted, holding up the tyrant's head for them all to see.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" the crowd cheered.

*Well, what's really important is that rumors will spread after this. That's why I used Daitoren and made a deliberate show of my power. Those who were watching me up close will talk about it, and it's important that those rumors spread and help to plant the impression that those who serve under me will be safe.*

And so, the capital of Luaranz was conquered by the peasants. The former nobles, namely the ones who'd surrendered to Lushak, had all run away back to their own domains. On top of that, Lushak left behind a puppet king when he died, so there really was nothing left of his regime. The young king fled together with a group of nobles who'd wanted to gain power and influence, but Lushak was the one I was after, so I

had no plans to pursue them. They'd ruin themselves in time even without my involvement.

"Lord Erhin, what do you plan to do now? Will you rebuild this country alongside Her Highness, the queen?" Mayor Vintora asked me inside the castle.

But I shook my head. "The people aren't properly trained..." I said. "In the end, they're just farmers. And in the present political climate, a country as divided as this one is just food for other nations. For the foreseeable future, Luaranz is going to become a battleground for other countries aiming to take its land."

*Yeah. All the other countries will start looking to invade Luaranz soon. With effectively no government, the domains of Luaranz will be unable to band together, and they'll be picked off one after another.*

"Then what would you have us do now...?"

"How about leaving?"

"This place is our livelihood, and you're telling us to leave it?" Vintora asked, looking troubled.

"There's not much else you can do. Sorry, but battles are going to rage across this entire country in time. If you stay here in the middle of it, you're throwing your lives away for nothing."

"But... where will we go...? This is our homeland... That's why we all rose up to defend it, isn't it?!"

I could see where Vintora was coming from, but after I had already gone to all the trouble of saving these people once, I wasn't about to leave them to die, even if that meant making them cast aside their homeland.

"Would you be willing to lead the people, then?"

"What do you mean...?"

"I'm thinking of accepting all of you in Eintorian. My country doesn't have a lot of land just yet, but I promise you it will grow by leaps and bounds. Also, I don't plan to do anything that would expose my people to the dangers of war."

Once I had said all of that, I bowed my head to Vintora.

"And I know you should be able to lead the people of Luaranz."

"N-No...!"

Vintora seemed even more bewildered at the way I had bowed my head to him.

"Many of the people already respect you," I explained. "I want you to lead them to find refuge in Eintorian. I will find land for them. I know this may seem like a bit of a roundabout method, but once the situation in the north stabilizes, I swear we'll return to take back Luaranz. You'll all be able to return to your homeland then... I believe you're the only one fit to be made lord of the former domains of Luaranz. Let me make this simple, Mayor. I'm asking you to become a vassal of Eintorian."

Vintora shook his head with a look of surprise.

"No, but... I mean to end my life as a humble farmer. I could never handle such a role!"

"I'm asking this for the Luaranzine people. You're the only one who can lead them properly. They can't be expected to just obediently follow a foreigner like me. I won't make life hard for them. I'll work my hardest to give them peace. Or... would you prefer to create a situation where many of them will die in the war, leaving the rest to become refugees or orphans? If you'll just stay in Eintorian for a short while, you'll be able to go back home again. I promise you that, if nothing else."

Vintora's mouth hung open as he searched for a response.

*This guy'll make a good lord for Luaranz when we come back here. If I have him work with Mirinae to encourage agriculture for the time being, I expect he'll be able to produce considerable results since that's his specialty. He's indispensable to me in all sorts of ways.*

"We're only a tiny domain now, but I swear to you that I will eventually unite the continent under Eintorian's banner. I'm asking you to become my people. If, at any point, you don't think I'm up to the task, then you're free to leave Eintorian immediately without question. So, please, let me say one last thing. Will you join me? In these chaotic times, I expect your neighbors, the Holy Ramie Kingdom, will be coming across the border shortly. There's no time to delay, Mayor."

Vintora just stared at me in silence, but then finally made up his mind. “I can’t bring along those who insist they won’t go,” he said at length.

“Of course not. It’s everyone’s choice what they want to do with themselves. If they come, I’ll exempt them from taxes for now and provide them with land they can farm. They’ll receive support until things stabilize, and after that, they just need to pay the taxes we agree upon and live as they like. I won’t exploit them. Make sure that you explain that thoroughly.”

“Well, let me try talking to them, at least... I trust in your character, Lord Erhin.”

I could only offer this because of the gold in my coffers. That mound of gold was the only thing keeping Eintorian’s finances from collapsing. Obviously, if I didn’t shift over to a more stable budget, it would eventually run out. Eventually, I would need that gold in order to open trade with other countries, but for now, increasing our population was the priority.

Fortunately, Vintora nodded his head in assent, and then fell to his knees. I planned to talk to the folks in Eliu Village and get them to cooperate with him. I wasn’t sure exactly how many people would migrate to my country with a current population of five hundred thousand, but I’d prepared for word to spread throughout Luaranz.

\*

“Your Majesty, this is clearly the perfect opportunity!”

In the palace of the Holy Ramie Kingdom, the nobles were trying to persuade their king. The reason, it went without saying, was that Luaranz had fallen into a state of anarchy and its lands were up for grabs.

“I see your point... but what if the Naruya Kingdom were to invade us while we were preoccupied?! That’s what happened to Runan. Their lust for Brijit’s lands ended in their own destruction!”

“The situation is different. We have no border with Naruya!”

“Well, no, but...”

Ramie’s king was not a bad monarch. He led his country reasonably well, but the fact that he could be rather indecisive was an issue.

“Sire! Sire! Urgent news!”

“What is it?”

The king shook his head in dismay as the noble who led the intelligence division rushed into the room with a report.

“It’s Rozern. Rozern is on the move.”

“What?! Are they after Luaranz, then?”

Now that the Runan Kingdom had collapsed, Luaranz had Rozern to the west, and the Holy Ramie Kingdom to the east. Because Luaranz was sandwiched in between them, Ramie didn’t share a border with Rozern, though.

“The way that things are going, won’t the Sintrage Kingdom in the north set their sights on Luaranz too?”

“Sire! We must act first. If we occupy the territory, surely the others won’t take aim at us. Ultimately, the faction that will gain the most land when a nation falls is the one that acts fastest!”

The thought that other nations might steal his prize cured the king’s indecision.

“Invade Luaranz at once!”

“Yes, it will be done!”

It was the same in every nation that shared the slightest border with Luaranz. They all heard that Rozern was on the move. Of course, Rozern’s move was all for show, and they had no intention of going to war.

Erhin controlled them, in truth, and the other countries fell for the deception hook, line, and sinker. He didn’t *just* plan to cause chaos and trigger a mass migration of Luaranzine peasants.

Only one other thing was on his mind, one other thing he had to gain from the fall of Luaranz: the jewel he had coveted all along. This long trip abroad had all been so that

he could take it for himself without trouble.

"This is the Dofrey Domain, huh?"

"That's right. It's been so long since I've been back."

The Dofrey Domain had been laid waste under Lushak's rule and was in a state of total collapse as a result. It saddened Serena to see her homeland in such a state, but there were survivors in this once ruined land.

We had come here to pick up the retainers of the former House of Dofrey.

Once Serena appeared, the retainers who'd escaped Lushak's forces and gone into hiding made contact with her one after another. Due to Dofrey's good character, his retainers had stuck with his family to the bitter end, never abandoning them.

"Erhin slew my father's killer!" Serena explained after gathering them together. "So why don't we help him now?"

Once they knew what had happened, the loyal Dofrey retainers were, of course, all too happy to join Serena. Even those who had served under those retainers but were still in hiding came. The remaining Dofrey retainers all raced to swear their loyalty to Serena, and also to me, who had avenged their master.

There was another reason this was important: I had something for Dofrey's retainers to do in Luaranz's port. Once that was done, we returned to Eintorian.

Sometime later, a fleet appeared off the coast of Brinhill, which was now practically the de facto capital of the Eintorian Domain. It was the pride of Luaranz, the First Fleet.

"The Dofrey Domain is also a port. There wasn't a soul there who hadn't been on a ship, because we of the House of Dofrey prided ourselves on our many sailors."

That was how Serena had introduced the House of Dofrey to me, and it was why I'd rushed to her domain as soon as the uprising succeeded in order to save the people there for my navy.

Now, I could see the results before my eyes.

As the ships drew closer, I could see the fleet were now flying Eintorian's flag, and standing at the prow were the two people I'd entrusted with bringing together the members of the former House of Dofrey, and retrieving the First Fleet from the capital, Yusen and Gibun.

# CHAPTER 4

## A SHOCKING REUNION

It wouldn't be long now until I announced the founding of the Eintorian Kingdom. The revival of the Ancient Kingdom was almost here. The only thing holding me back now was Duke Ronan. After making a fortuitous escape, he'd created the South Runan Kingdom. Now that they had occupied the former Runanese capital, Naruya had shifted their attention to their front with the Herald Kingdom. The loss of so many men had forced them to focus on the invasion that they already had in progress there. My spies told me that the occupation of Herald was going smoothly, and in all likelihood the kingdom would soon be destroyed.

My problem was with Duke Ronan, who had fled south into southern Runan and made himself king there.

The King of Naruya had deployed his forces in Runan's direction, which is to say the thirty thousand or so of them who'd survived fighting against me, to the Runanese capital. I'd even received a report recently saying those forces were now close to South Runan, positioned to advance. Ronan would no doubt seek a hurried alliance with the Gebel Kingdom and try to get them to send reinforcements. Ronan's family had marriage ties there, so he'd certainly make use of them.

For me, the very existence of South Runan was a hindrance—a chain around my leg, keeping me from proclaiming the foundation of the Eintorian Kingdom. If I was going to absorb the former territories of Runan, I needed the support of the people there. Using the name "South Runan" to assert greater legitimacy than my "Eintorian Kingdom" could potentially sway the populace, and that would be a serious nuisance.

Only once Ronan and South Runan disappeared would Runan truly be gone for good. I hadn't heard anything from him yet, but the moment Ronan got into serious trouble, he'd definitely call for me. If I didn't go to his aid, I'd be labeled a filthy traitor.

Our relationship was annoying. Because Ronan was a blood relative of the Royal House of Runan, I couldn't destroy his country personally while it was called South Runan. Regardless, most of the retainers and soldiers who were originally from Runan were now in South Runan, as well as the majority of the common people.

Even if the people had sworn loyalty to me, with South Runan carrying on the Runan name, it would shake their loyalty to me if I were the one to destroy it. I suspected that that was true of most of my Runanese subjects. At the hands of another nation altogether, however... That was a different story. Heina was central to my plans for that. She was a spark of discord I'd cast into their midst.

Besides, the Gebel Kingdom wouldn't be so eager to send reinforcements. Ronan would no doubt promise them a portion of Runan's lands in exchange for protecting South Runan, but he didn't have the power to make good on any such arrangement. In fact, he had been unable to do anything to stop the first Naruyan invasion—I'd handled that one—and he couldn't do anything to stop this second invasion either.

All he had was a lust for power.

When the time came, I would pretend to help by sending him aid, and then just watch as he died. Then I just had to feign grief as I took in the South Runanese soldiers, and I'd be free to declare my new country after that.

Obviously, I had to control the timing of it. Waiting for Naruya to attack South Runan would take too long. If Ronan was trying to get the Gebel Kingdom to make a move, then I would turn that around and use it to destroy South Runan. Once the deed was done, I would sway the people by fighting the Gebel Kingdom to show I'd tried to save South Runan, but it was just too late.

*First, I'll make the Gebel Kingdom South Runan's enemy. Then I'll fight them because I can't leave an enemy alone. That's my plan to destroy South Runan. In fact, it's been in progress for quite some time now.*

\*

"Let's head out, Euracia. A new café opened in Brinhill, and I hear their fruit cake is delicious."

"Really? Let's go, then! Right away!"

It had been a few days since I made it back to Brinhill, and I decided to take a much-needed break by asking Euracia out on a date. Euracia got up the moment she heard the word *cake*. If there was something she loved more than eating, I'd yet to see it. Her ability to pack away a heaping plate of food in an instant was an incredible talent.

“What made you look for information on the new café, though?”

“I figured I put you through a lot of hard work while I was away, so I wanted to take you somewhere. Do you like cakes?”

“Of course! Cake is righteous!”

*Wasn’t it meat that was righteous, and the truth before? How quickly she changes her mind.*

“Cake! Cake! I want a big ol’ cake!”

She spread her arms wide and started speaking like a child. This was a sign that I’d better take her there quickly, so I did just that. “But didn’t you just eat?”

“I have an extra stomach for desserts! Heh heh, cake!”

Looking at Euracia, I could believe it. *Still though, who knew she was such a big fan of cake? I should’ve brought her here sooner.*

When the cake finally appeared, Euracia cooed with delight.

*Um, excuse me, it’s out of character for you to be so obviously delighted when there’s this many people around.*



"Oooh, you can tell they're popular with a cake that looks as good as this," Euracia said, nodding emphatically.

"Your Excellency! Your Excellency!"

At that very moment, Bente raced into the shop, drenched with sweat. Euracia looked on, fork still in hand.

"We've got trouble!"

Euracia's fingers twitched, perhaps getting a bad feeling for reasons beyond what Bente had already said. Her fork was almost touching the cake. Erm, now probably wasn't the time to be watching Euracia, but she was so darn adorable I couldn't help myself.

"What's happened?"

"There's a messenger from South Runan!"

*Looks like the time has come.*

\*

Ronan's envoy was his retainer who also happened to be a count. There's no need to learn the man's name, so just remember that he was incredibly arrogant. He seemed to believe that South Runan had all of the legitimacy of Runan, and that me and my forces in Brijit were just a territorial force of theirs.

"I am sure you must be quite pleased with yourself, living a relaxed and affluent life down here like this."

To think a mere count would dare talk to me like that. I was too appalled to say anything.

"I will now read out His Majesty's message. On your knees, Count Erhin Eintorian!" Ronan's envoy commanded in an intimidating tone.

Obviously, the commanders attached to Eintorian like Yusen, Gibun, Jint, and Hadin were all visibly upset by this. Still, I couldn't just kill the guy. South Runan was not long for this world, but it was still Runan, so it was best for me to bow to public sentiment

and obey them.

Yeah, I knew that, but it didn't mean I wasn't pissed.

*Should I kill this asshole and invade South Runan? No need. With the proper application of my strategy, South Runan will be finished in no time. I just have to bear it for now. I've been putting up with this kind of nonsense all along, so I can't make the worst possible move by losing my temper now, when Ronan's so close to going down on his own.*

I couldn't let myself become a traitor to Runan. I had to be seen as the one who'd saved the ruined nation and founded his own on top of it. If I attacked Runan now, I'd never win the opinions of the Runanese people in South Runan over to my side.

Normally, in a war of conquest, the invader had to win over the sentiment of the people afterward, but that's when they were a different nation. As a former vassal of Runan, I was restricted by that position. If I was directly responsible for the nation's ruin, it would have a massive negative effect on the people's opinion of me.

*So I have to put up with this. I need to endure, so Ronan can suffer an even more miserable fate. But that doesn't mean I need to kneel, right?*

"By 'His Majesty,' do you perhaps refer to Duke Ronan?"

"Of course! What other 'majesty' is there?!" Ronan's retainer roared.

I chuckled. "So he's using 'His Majesty' now. If you insisted on me bowing my head to *His Highness*, I might have agreed, but *His Majesty*? What gives him that kind of legitimacy? Do these orders you come with bear the royal seal of Runan?"

"The royal seal... We don't have it yet!"

Of course they didn't. That would have been with the king when he fell into Valdesca's hands.

"If he doesn't have the seal, then doesn't that mean Duke Ronan is just another of those who abandoned His Majesty?"

"Don't make me laugh! His Majesty evacuated before the duke, and met with tragedy as he did. Everyone knows that Duke Ronan is of royal blood. Even without the royal seal, he has legitimacy..."

"Speaking of legitimacy, I would think there ought to have been a prince who fled along with you. No?"

"Enough! You're being disrespectful. I am an envoy who comes bearing His Majesty's words. You are to treat me with the respect accorded to the king himself. Or does Eintorian mean to rebel against his righteous authority?"

The envoy's voice got louder as he realized he was losing the argument. In terms of legitimacy, as a direct heir of the Ancient Eintorian Kingdom, my claim to it was just as good.

"Not at all. If you have orders, then let's have them."

"Fine. Count Erhin, you are to lead your troops to South Runan at once, and defend the new capital! This is your duty as a retainer of Runan!"

*Well, then. The orders themselves are obvious ones. These are the chains that bind me as a Runanese retainer. Now is the time to break them. Well, I'll just take it slowly. Nice and slow.*

\*

Heina Berhin was still agonizing over what to do.

When Erhin said that the duke was the man responsible for her father's miserable death, he wasn't wrong. His talent exceeded her own, which was why she had been more frustrated with him.

*But the facts are the facts.*

Her father's untimely end and the fall of the House of Berhin were purely the fault of Ronan's whims. She'd spent years kissing up to Ronan in an attempt to do something about it. But the world had changed, just as Erhin had told her it would.

Because she'd been warned in advance, she had returned to her own domain, and prepared a small force of soldiers of her own. When the second Naruyan invasion came, Heina led her unit to go and save Ronan. If the Naruyan pursuit had been more intense, they wouldn't have been able to fend it off, of course, but then Erhin drew the Naruyans' attention and routed them.

Erhin had won. Again.

"He's incredible..."

Heina bit her lip. She had to face the facts: the man was an amazing strategist. Thanks to his efforts, Ronan was able to settle in South Runan without further issue. The reason Heina had deferred her revenge against Ronan so far was because he still had his forces and retainers to stop her from taking his head. She also felt he deserved a more miserable end.

Heina knew Ronan's ambitions.

*He clearly wants to be king.*

Knowing that, she wanted to strike at the moment he finally did, knocking him from the zenith of joy to the nadir of despair all in a single instant.

*A fate as miserable as my father's. Now that would be the ultimate revenge.*

She was ashamed that she couldn't move into action until now, when Ronan was no longer the most powerful man in Runan, and not such a frightening figure anymore, but that didn't mean she was going to do nothing about it. Now that the chance had come, she was going to carry out her revenge no matter what it took.

*There's one problem, though...*

If he became king, that would make killing him harder. With Erhin having smashed Naruya's grand army, South Runan was now able to survive even longer. This meant her fears came to fruition, and Ronan did become king. She was constantly searching for a chance to kill him, but Ronan was an incredibly distrustful man, and never met with her alone.

*I'm the one who saved him, and yet he never trusted me.*

The most galling thing about Ronan was that, even without that trust, he'd still try to use her as much as he could. Despite being the very person who had removed her from her position as advisor, he hinted at giving her another important position. He was an unbelievably cunning man.

But she was also a strategist.

Things had gotten easier for her the moment that she accepted she couldn't keep up with Erhin, but she'd been able to read the situation on the continent, at least. South Runan? Ronan becoming king? Those were but momentary issues, seeing as the kingdom couldn't last long.

But if things played out the way she saw them going, she wouldn't be able to take revenge personally. Ronan would just die. What part would she have played in the fall of the man who had wronged her father and her entire house?

As she was worrying about this, a man came to visit her in secret.

"My name is Yusen. I've come with a letter from my lord. I must ask that, whether you agree to do as it says or not, you read it and then burn it in my presence."

*Burn the letter.* He was asking her to destroy the evidence. That way, even if she agreed to do as the letter said and then betrayed them, there would be no evidence of her connection to Erhin. The nobles in Runan knew what her relationship with Erhin was like—absolutely terrible. So even if she later confessed that Erhin was the mastermind, no one would believe her.

"You're very cautious," was all Heina could say, a hint of self-mockery creeping into her tone.

"His Excellency wants to believe in you, but... if your feelings on the matter aren't settled, then he says there's nothing he can do about it."

"It doesn't matter. I'll consider the contents of the letter, but tell him that whatever I do about it, I acted of my own accord. I have pride enough for that, at least."

"Yes, ma'am."

*Ronan was the one who killed my father.*

Her enmity toward Erhin was merely born of jealousy toward his abilities. She had opposed him before because of it, so, as a strategist, it would be unwise for him to ever fully trust her. But that didn't matter. She had already resolved to take revenge on Ronan, and the moment she'd made that decision she gave up any particular desire for life.

*I'll watch Ronan die a miserable death, and then die laughing at my own ineptitude as a*

*strategist of a failed nation.*

That was what she resolved to do. Having led a miserable life where she never trusted anyone, she at least wanted to cap it off with something glorious and go out with the self-satisfaction of knowing that she'd taken the ultimate revenge for her family.

The predictions in Erhin's letter were all correct.

After founding South Runan, defending against Naruya was an urgent priority, so Ronan had requested an alliance with the Ducal House of Kalt in the Gebel Kingdom, with which he had marriage ties. The cost was a promise to divide Runan's lands between them. It wasn't an especially appealing deal from the Gebelians' perspective.

They could do away with their marriage ties whenever they wanted, so there was no need to go out of their way to save South Runan. They were even considering attacking South Runan themselves. Erhin wanted to work through Heina to incite them to do just that.

Heina went to the Gebel Kingdom as a formal envoy, and met with Duke Kalt's more ambitious rival, Duke Plenett.

"You're saying you'll create an opening for me, and you want me to take just South Runan?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

It was certainly a tempting proposal for Duke Plenett. Of course, not being able to tell if she was sincere about it, he couldn't take her at her word immediately.

"The moment Ronan is gone, the Gebel Kingdom will be able to take South Runan without issue. The land there is fertile. With Naruya still at war with Herald, their forces are currently spread out toward the east. Who do you think they'll want to fight next once they're done? The Gebel Kingdom, of course. This is your best chance to expand before then, securing fertile land, and also easing your access to strategic resources."

This was also true. The king and nobles of the Gebel Kingdom were prepared to stand and fight against Naruya. Having already had their request for an alliance rebuffed, they already knew Naruya's ambitions better than anyone.

"Here in Gebel, we have a powerful commander named Papme Diondi. Although he may be fooling around now, saying it's his time to rest... so long as we have him, we can fight Naruya. If you say there are fertile lands up for grabs, then of course we want them. But the question remains. How can I trust you?"

That was the most important issue, of course. She had no collateral, and nothing she could promise.

"Currently, South Runan has made a request for troops, so please send the Royal Army for now. Answer that you cannot form an alliance yet, but you will send troops to help, and a formal alliance can be agreed to later. Then, once the Gebelian Army has entered South Runan, I will raise a rebellion in the heart of the nation."

"What?"

"That will give you an excuse to move your troops to quell the insurrection. Using the chaos, you can blame whatever happens on my rebels. Why not say that, while you were able to put down the revolt, the South Runanese government had already fallen?"

"Heh heh heh heh, gah hah hah hah! In short, we move our troops under the guise of putting down the rebellion, then strike the government of South Runan too, huh?"

"Correct. All I ask is a chance to take Ronan's life. You can blame everything that happens on me, if you'd like."

"You hate Ronan that much?"

"He is the enemy of my parents, and my house."

"If I tell him about this, your life is over, you know...?"

"It's a life I've already cast away. Now, will you take advantage of it to enter the capital of South Runan effortlessly and claim it as your own? Or take nothing but my life? I believe that is the question I've set before you. Anyway, the rebellion will be our signal."

Heina explained it all in a dispassionate tone. Duke Plenett was actually aghast at how detached she seemed. He had nothing to lose. If he executed Heina here and now, he would gain nothing, but going to South Runan with the Gebelian Army to wait and see wasn't a problem.

If they attacked once an alliance was formed, they would face international criticism, so no matter how profitable it might be, it was best not to betray South Runan in that way. They risked becoming an enemy of the entire continent. The disappearance of any country made it easier to unite the continent, but that wasn't an excuse that other countries would quietly accept.

However, if he did as Heina suggested and sent troops before the alliance, then moved them only to suppress a rebellion, then he could claim they'd had a just cause. With just cause, they wouldn't be subject to criticism. Things were bound to happen during the chaos of a rebellion. It would be easy to lay all the blame on Heina like she had offered.

He didn't know how great her resentment of Ronan was, but it wasn't a bad idea to at least send in the troops. He'd go there first, and act if it seemed advantageous to. If not, then he would make some excuse to withdraw.

Anyway, that was about the shape of it. That was how badly Gebel wanted the land of South Runan. And if they could get it easily, without having to fight? With the capital of Runan already occupied, they were going to end up bordering Naruya soon anyway, which made the proposal all the more tempting.

\*

The time to send troops to South Runan had come.

I still needed to leave units to defend each of my domains, of course, and I also couldn't send fresh recruits who hadn't been adequately trained into battle. I planned to send in a force of twenty thousand men, one half of them iron cavalry and the other half infantry.

Erheet came to me to say, "I'd like you to take me with you. There's something I need to confirm for myself..."

I could hardly blame him for asking, especially considering his relationship with Ronan.

*If I can't win him over completely, then I have no use for him, no matter how talented he might be. If I don't bring him along, and then cleanly resolve the relationship between the three of us, Erheet will never be mine.*

Ten thousand iron cavalry, and ten thousand infantry, with me as commander-in-chief. Erheet would command the iron cavalry, and Yusen the infantry, with Jint joining us as a strike commander. We set out for South Runan, and set up camp outside the capital there under the justification that we were securing the main road, which Naruya's grand army would surely use to attack us.

*I'm sure if I send a letter saying we're going to camp here, we'll be told to come inside the capital.*

Communicating by letters like this would serve to buy time, so it wasn't a bad thing. My agents had informed me that the reinforcements from the Gebel Kingdom would be arriving in South Runan soon. While I was on patrol as we were setting up camp, I heard some of the soldiers speaking loudly.

"You say you came from Runan?"

"Yes. My daughter and I came here from Runan. This man came from there too."

Some of the refugees heading toward South Runan from the old capital had apparently gotten lost and wandered into our camp.

"What's going on?" I asked as I approached.

The soldiers saluted me and one reported, "They say they've come from Runan, so we were questioning them. We were told to be on the lookout for spies disguised as refugees, after all!"

If they were hanging around near our camp, I couldn't discount that possibility. That's why I'd told my men to be wary of such people. That order had filtered down from the thousandman to the tenman, and now these soldiers were just faithfully carrying it out.

"I see."

Honestly, I had no way of telling whether they were spies or refugees who had just happened to get lost along the way, so the best thing to do was to give them directions and get them away from the camp.

"Handle them according to the instructions you were given."

"Yes, sir!" the soldier replied so enthusiastically I worried for his throat.

*It's good that his morale is high, but he's going to shout himself hoarse.*

With that idle thought, I was about to move along... Right up until I saw who it was that the soldiers were talking to. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. But no matter how many times I looked, there was one person in the group who I most definitely knew.

*Hold on. Why?*

First, I looked at the man talking to the soldiers now.

Gram

Age: 55

Martial: 45

Intelligence: 81

Command: 70

It was some guy called Gram. His Intelligence caught my eye. He was no ordinary man.

*He's a commoner? With stats like those?*

Celly

Age: 20

Martial: 11

Intelligence: 62

Command: 50

His daughter's Intelligence score wasn't bad either. Maybe it was genetic? It didn't really matter though, because these two weren't the ones who I was so shocked to see. Their identities were still suspect, of course, but the true surprise was the man who'd come with them. The one Gram had mentioned before.

Frann Valdesca

Age: 28

Martial: 90

Intelligence: 96

Command: 90

*What is he doing here now?!*

I looked around, and he didn't seem to have any of his attendants here with him. Not his little sister Medelian, who was first ranked among the Ten Commanders of Naruya, or the retainers who'd helped him to escape.

*What's with this situation? What is he doing, coming here so openly, and all alone at that?*

Gram's and Celly's Martial scores were just awful. I couldn't imagine they were Valdesca's bodyguards.

"Take the road over there! If I find you lurking around our camp again, I'm going to have to kill you as potential spies!"

The soldiers were giving them directions, as per my orders.

“Hold on!” I immediately stepped in.

I had no choice but to. If the system said he was Frann Valdesca, then there was no question that this guy was Valdesca himself. He had long hair, and a face that was attractive. In a manly way, I mean. His face wasn’t androgynous. No, it oozed true masculinity. I thought it might just be a look-alike at first, but it really was him.

My greatest foe was here, right before my eyes, and completely undefended too.

*What in the world is he thinking?*

“It’s been a while, Frann Valdesca. Well, maybe not that long, I suppose.”

When I spoke to him, Valdesca cocked his head to the side, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“What? You’re not going to tell me you’ve forgotten your own name, I hope?”

“I apologize, but I truly don’t know what’s happening...” His head remained tilted to the side as he responded.

“Do you know me? If so, could you please tell me who I am!?”

If anything, *he* seemed desperate for *me* to tell him what he was doing here. *What’s going on? He’s an amnesiac now?*

“Who are you?” I asked Gram, trying to start sorting things out. Based on his Intelligence score, he didn’t seem like an ordinary person.

“I... was staying in the house of Count Seraon in the Runanese capital. I taught the count’s son, and also authored a number of books there.”

“You’re a scholar, then?”

“Yes. Something like that.” *A scholar, huh?*

“Do you know any of the other nobles from the capital? Lord Erheet, perhaps?”

I tried throwing out Erheet’s name.

When I did, Gram happily answered, “I am well acquainted with Lord Erheet. He provided funding for my research.”

Knowing Erheet, that seemed plausible.

“Then considering the young man with you has lost his memory, it seems best to me that you stay here for a while. Lord Erheet is with us as well.”

Gram looked rather surprised. “Do you really mean it?”

Valdesca seemed unable to read the situation, but I couldn’t decide off the cuff whether that was because he was a good actor, or if he genuinely had lost his memory.

\*

Erheet did, in fact, know Gram. That assured me of his identity. Obviously, it was still possible he was a long-term spy sent from Naruya years ago, but by that logic there was no end of people I could suspect of the same thing.

After letting him meet Erheet, I asked for more details.

“That young man traveled with us for quite some time, but it seems he lost his memory after suffering a head injury in the war. My daughter discovered him north of Runan Castle, where he had been sent flying from somewhere else. After treating his wounds and helping him to recover in secret, we came here, where we’d heard people from Runan were gathering.”

Based on what he told me, Valdesca had used his treasure to escape from Eintorian Castle, but somehow the massive mana circle had interfered, and instead of reaching his destination, he’d crash-landed on the northern side of Runan Castle.

The story wasn’t completely implausible. I could see how he might strike his head in the process and lose his memory as a result. But it was too convenient even for fiction. Honestly, if it *wasn’t* true, I couldn’t imagine what would possess Valdesca to show his face here so openly.

*Now, hold on. Is he trying to get me alone to do me in, then? He should already well know how many our troop numbers, so he can’t really have anything to investigate here. It’s just a weird situation.*

The problem was that I couldn't kill him. I'd tried last time, but a powerful protective mana circle boosted his Martial score up to 105. I assumed that had been Valdesca's ultimate mana skill, Circle of Defense. If I leveled up until my Martial was higher than that, then I could kill him, but 105 was still a long way off, even for me.

The other option was to run him off. But that would be a waste. I wanted to take this opportunity to see what kind of man Valdesca was. It was dangerous letting him stay here, but my curiosity outweighed the risk.

*If I'm completely honest, I want to hire him.*

He was someone I needed if I was going to dominate the continent, and it wasn't as though it was completely impossible. I recalled that he didn't always get on with the King of Naruya, and they sometimes ended up wasting each other's time and effort because of it.

Despite the risks, he didn't seem like he was going to try to kill me right now. If he was a genuine amnesiac, then I was lucky that he hadn't made it back to Naruya before now. Sure, he'd likely go home when his memories recovered, but I didn't like the idea of locking the guy up just because I couldn't kill him.

"Frann Valdesca, huh..."

*What's he going to think of me when he gets his memory back?*

With a sense of wonder, Celly asked, "Father, is that the man you were teaching?"

"That's right," Gram answered.

She was talking about Erheet. It was strange to her that Gram had been teaching such an important individual. She jumped up and down with glee.

"You're so amazing, dad!"

"All I did was talk to him a little, Celly. It's nothing that special."

Due to her inquisitive nature, Celly wandered around the camp asking about everything there was to know. Then, when the soldiers scolded her, she'd look up at Gram, frowning. "Can I go back to the lodging house, dad? I want to rest up a bit."

Gram looked around when she asked him that. “Are you getting dizzy? Okay. Let me take you back there.” He led her by the hand. As they walked through the camp, Gram approved of what he saw. The troops were rigidly disciplined, and there was something in their eyes—something he hadn’t seen in the eyes of other Runanese troops.

They had a certain restraint, perhaps even an elegance. Their loyalty to their commander was also a cut above the rest. The other thing that surprised him was that, formally, these men reported not to Erheet, but to Erhin.

*Well, I had figured that a man of his caliber would be able to create troops this disciplined.*

Gram was able to tell a lot about a person just from the way they looked, and he’d sensed that Erhin was a man of considerable skill.

“I can make it on my own from here, dad. You go meet with that noble called Erheet! Talk to him about what life’s going to be like for us from here on. We can’t just keep running forever. Whether it’s research, or something else, you’re going to need to find something to do for a living... since you’re too sickly to work the fields.”

Celly confronted Gram with reality. It was a perfectly reasonable argument.

“I’ll try and find a job too...” she added.

There was no one who was going to pay him to do academic research in the middle of a war. That had Celly pretty worried.

“You will? I probably can’t get him to hire you, but I still want to see Lord Erheet. Should I ask if he’ll see you too?”

“Yeah, sure! Well, I’m heading back to the lodging house now!” Celly eagerly raced off.

The bit about her feeling dizzy was a lie. The camp where all the soldiers were gathered had caught her attention at first, but that faded quickly. It was boring seeing the same thing. But then a certain person popped into her head. Teasing him was her greatest pleasure lately.

Part of why she’d sent Gram off to see Erheet was that, after having claimed to be having a dizzy spell, she’d have had to rest in the lodging house otherwise.

Instead, Celly went looking around for Valdesca.

She found him sitting on the grassy hill where the camp was, and immediately went to sit down beside him.

"Whatcha doing here? Staring off into space, old man?"

"Don't call me that."

With only the vaguest glance in Celly's direction, Valdesca shut her down. Celly had developed an affection for him over the course of the long journey here. She didn't realize it herself, but the fact that she'd secretly gone searching for him when Gram wasn't around was the greatest proof of it.



"Oh, I know you're not an *actual* old man. But you're an old man to me. Hee hee, You're twenty-eight, right? That's eight years older than me. That's why I'm gonna call you 'old man'!"

"You're twenty?"

Celly covered her mouth without meaning to. She'd been keeping her age a secret, but had just disclosed it by accident.

"No, I'm not." She tried to talk her way out of it, but it was too late.

"Did you not just say you were with your own mouth?" Valdesca looked somewhat surprised. "I'd assumed you were younger... You can never tell with women."

"Do I look that young? No way! Your eyes are just bad, mister!"

"Urk..."

Valdesca had spent all his life cooped up indoors, studying military strategy and mana circles, so he had no romantic experience.

"I don't know how it really works, but aren't you happy being perceived as younger? I've heard it works out in your favor later in life. And you're cute too..."

"Wha...? Did you just say I'm cute?" Celly reddened at the unexpected comment. Not that Valdesca had uttered it calculatingly.

The fact of the matter was she was cute. He said it not as a compliment, but as a statement of how things were. Celly turned her head aside bashfully. A long silence passed between the two of them. Celly sat there for a long moment with her head hung and her legs crossed. She raised her head because it seemed awfully quiet, but Valdesca was just lost in thought again.

*He's awful. How can he be like this when I'm right here?* she thought angrily, but then the bandage wrapped around Valdesca's forehead caught her eye.

Thinking back, that bandage had always bothered her. Celly reached out slowly toward Valdesca's forehead. When she first rescued him, he was already bandaged. So it wasn't an injury he got from slamming into the dirt. "How did you get hurt?" she asked out of curiosity.

Valdesca, reacting with surprise, swatted her hand away.

"I don't know. I can't remember. But it seems I have a habit of hitting things with my head when I'm agonizing over something. I still do it too. Even though my forehead is bandaged, I'm compelled to smash it into things."

"Whaaa... That's a weird habit! And you do it so hard you draw blood?!"

Valdesca was a little surprised to hear her say that, and brought his hand to his mouth as he thought about it.

"If you can't focus without slamming your head into something, then why not use my hand instead of something like a table? Here!"

Celly opened her hand wide and pressed it to Valdesca's forehead.

Valdesca just stared at her. He'd never thought of this before. But consider the idea as he might, the floor was a much better option. He couldn't see how smacking his head against the palm of her hand was supposed to help him focus. Still, Celly's innocent laughter left Valdesca at a loss for words. He was an incredibly innocent man himself. He'd never held a girl's hand before, not even once. Despite his incredible power as a duke, he'd done nothing but study all his life.

As Valdesca sat there in silence, Celly got impatient and shoved her palm against his forehead again.

"How's that? Is it helping you focus? My hand is fine too, right? See?"

The girl laughed as she said this.

Valdesca was just confused.

# CHAPTER 5

## RUNAN RUINED

I was going to have to wait until the Gebel Kingdom's expeditionary force arrived in the capital of South Runan, and that was assuming that Heina even did as I was planning.

In the meanwhile, Valdesca was the bigger issue for me, but I chose to take an optimistic view of the situation. I could take this chance to lay the groundwork for recruiting him later, and if it didn't work out, then I just had to beat him again when he went back to Naruya. Whether his amnesia was genuine or not, I had no idea what his intentions were, but I chose not to care. Because regardless of what they were, the mana circle protecting him meant that I couldn't kill him right now anyway.

Locking him up wasn't ideal, though. I didn't want anyone to see me doing something that lame. Even if this was just my pride making me take a less practical decision. I also didn't want to eliminate the possibility of recruiting him later. If he was unkillable, then it was best to just leave him be for now. Losing his memory wouldn't change his personality, so this was a prime opportunity to learn what kind of man Valdesca was. If that made me genuinely eager to recruit him, then maybe I'd start working on a scheme to actually do it.

*I'll do whatever I have to do to recruit him.*

Setting that aside for the moment, I called for Gram and Celly. Gram was a scholar, and of Runanese origin, so I definitely meant to hire him. Gram and Celly came to my lodging house. Celly was fidgeting awkwardly.

“Come in. Sorry for making you stay in the camp for so long.”

“Don't be sorry. Thanks to you, I was able to meet with Lord Erheet, and the young man was able to discover who he was, so I'm happy with how things have turned out. But while the young man can decide for himself what to do, I don't think that us staying in your camp any longer can lead to anything good, so I would like to leave...”

Celly arched an eyebrow at what Gram said. She wasn't happy about it.

“I’m not ready to go, dad... That guy hasn’t fully recovered yet.”

*Hm? It seemed she was quite fond of Valdesca. Is it a one-sided thing? Or am I totally off base here? Well, that’s not important right now.*

“Where do you plan to go, and what will you do?”

The father and daughter looked at one another. They had no plans, apparently. With there being a war in progress, he’d struggle to find work as a scholar, so that should have been obvious.

“We’re always looking for people with a wealth of academic experience. So, I was thinking... I’ve heard that your research focused on improving the people’s quality of life, starting with agriculture. Would you be interested in continuing it?”

“Do you really mean that?”

A scholar to the core, his eyes sparkled at the mention of research. Scholars put their whole lives into their chosen field of inquiry, after all.

“Oh! In that case... will you be able to fund us?” Celly chimed in.

“Of course. I’ll see that you receive the best treatment possible. We need researchers in your father’s field.”

“In the Eintorian Domain, right?” Gram checked.

“Right.”

Yeah, it was still called the Eintorian Domain. I needed to make it a country soon. This was getting inconvenient.

“Dad! Dad! This is an amazing chance! We’d have a hard enough time just making a living elsewhere, and you’ll also be able to do your research! I’ll do everything I can to help too! Oh, but if we’re taking this offer, we don’t need to leave here right away anymore, right?”

“Yeah. You can come back to Eintorian together with us.”

Hearing this, Celly nodded and began working to persuade Gram. Obviously, he was

already pretty enthused by the prospect, so it looked like I was going to have little trouble recruiting him.

The issue was Valdesca.

\*

The commander-in-chief of the Royal Gebelian Army, Ruteca Mikal, arrived in South Runan together with a force of fifty thousand men. Ruteca was Duke Plenett's right-hand man. Known for his incredible caution, the duke had placed him in charge of carrying out the plan. Ronan welcomed Ruteca eagerly, because if he hadn't come with the Royal Gebelian Army, then Ronan would have had to go to that upstart Erhin for help. He didn't like the idea of that.

Much as he meant to go on using Erhin, he needed an insurance policy, so he'd use each of them to do half the job. In Ronan's mind, this was the best way to handle it.

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. Congratulations on the founding of South Runan."

"There's nothing to celebrate about it. We're in the worst situation imaginable. But with your help, I am sure we will both be able to take part of Runan's lands. Isn't it wonderful to have such a mutually beneficial arrangement?"

"Yes. That is why the Gebel Kingdom agreed to send troops."

King Gebel was a very practical man, and he'd intended to send troops from the very beginning. He'd initially thought that even if he went out of his way to help South Runan, he had more to lose than to gain, but Duke Plenett was able to convince him otherwise. If he was able to get his hands on the lands of South Runan for free, then it would be pure idiocy to pass up the chance.

"I see. All right! I'll prepare a banquet! Hey, you, we're throwing a massive party for the reinforcements!"

Ronan began enthusiastically barking orders. Ruteca immediately scowled. The kingdom of South Runan was founded after they had narrowly escaped with their lives, so they needed to be sparing with their supplies right now. This behavior showed a lack of understanding of that, and yet, as it was his men who were being treated to a banquet, he had no need to refuse it.

It was another nation's supplies being depleted, after all.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," replied Ruteca.

If nothing happened in the capital of South Runan, then the Gebel Kingdom would use the excuse of an invasion from their north to withdraw their forces. If the rebellion broke out, then they would chase out any soldiers who witnessed it, and shut down the capital after spreading rumors. With the leaders of South Runan purged, it would be easy to gain hold of the territory.

All they had to do now was wait.

"I am grateful that you'd feed my men so well. But we can never know when Naruya will attack, or from where. You requested reinforcements because Naruya has deployed its troops forward, didn't you? That being the case, we must decline this banquet. Wouldn't you agree that it's a warrior's duty to prepare for such a conflict with a sober head?"

Having said all of that, Ruteca forbade his men from drinking alcohol.

\*

Heina stood atop the gates, looking out toward the Eintorian camp being built on the west side of the South Runanese capital. "His Majesty requested that Count Erhin come inside the palace?"

"Yes. It's getting late today, so he says they will enter the palace tomorrow."

Heina nodded at what her second-in-command told her, and then turned and went to visit Ronan. He met her with his retainers in tow. The same as always.

"Well done, Heina."

"I only did what I ought to."

"You've been on a roll lately, Heina. Coming to welcome me, and getting reinforcements from the Gebel Kingdom. I always knew you were intelligent. It's why I appointed you as advisor in the first place. You've made mistakes in the past, but if you keep on like this, I expect there will continue to be important work for you."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Heina said with a bow of her head. An important post in a state with no future would do her little good. It was irrelevant anyway. As Heina was about to rise, he continued.

"Yes, keep working as you have been. Without repeating the folly of your father. That alone will let you restore your house to glory. Do I make myself clear?"

Ronan was the last person who should have been saying that. He was the man responsible for her father's death.

He'd let him die so miserably. If all he'd done was murder him, she wouldn't have complained. But Ronan had pushed the responsibility for his own failures onto her father, and driven him to suicide. The result was that Ronan came out unscathed, while her family had been treated like garbage.

Heina bit her lip. It was all she could do to hold back the venomous words rising inside of her. Why had she ever tried to rebuild her house working for a man like this? *Don't defy His Highness, Heina. He's the path to restoring our house.* She cursed herself for having resolved to follow her father's will.

The position of duke, and the overwhelming power it granted Ronan had been frightening to her, of course. But while she was envious of Erhin's abilities, which allowed him to easily transcend that power, he had also shown her that Ronan wasn't such a big deal.

"I understand... Your Majesty."

*It's the last time I'll be calling him that. I have to hold my tongue for now. Because I need to command the troops from my domain.*

Gritting her teeth, she left the palace. "Father, our house will meet their end as traitors. But I fully intend to drag the hated Ronan down with us," Heina said as she looked at the palace.

The sun was setting, and the curtain of night would soon fall over the land. She had to get things started before Erhin reached the palace. It all had to be over before morning.

"Maybe you should rethink who you ought to be taking revenge on?"

Heina suddenly thought back to what Erhin had said to her. Back then, her desire for

vengeance had still been directed at him.

*South Runan will be ruined, and so will my house.*

If she hadn't been in the depths of despair, her hatred would likely still have been toward Erhin, the subject of her envy. Although she had only found the resolve to take revenge now that there was nothing left for her, Heina mistakenly believed her desire for it was genuine. But whether it was or it wasn't, Heina called up her retainers, resolved to witness the moment of Ronan's ruin.

"I'm sorry to have made you all wait so long. Your parents were killed by Ronan, just as my father was. Just for being members of our house. I cannot apologize enough to all of you."

"No, Your Excellency. We're just honored to be able to join you in your revenge."

When Heina was plotting this out in the capital, she had let all of her retainers who held no enmity toward Ronan go. The ones still with her resented him as much as she did.

"When is the changing of the guard?"

"Two hours from now."

"That will work out perfectly. We'll force our way into the palace then. I intend to make this insurrection a big one. As big as I possibly can."

"We're with you, ma'am."

"We'll set fire to the palace as soon as we're inside. Don't forget to prepare oil for that."

"Yes, ma'am!"

\*

"Commander! Commander!"

As Ruteca was sitting in his room inside the large barracks he'd had constructed in his camp outside the walls, his retainer rushed in shouting.

"Has something finally happened?"

"Yes, it seems like it. There's a fire in the palace. The Berhin Domain Army rose in revolt, and the battle is still raging inside!"

"So it was true, then. To think she'd do this to avenge her house. I can see why it's important for her, but still."

"What will we do?"

"Wait for the fighting to spread from the palace to the gates before we go in. Let word of the insurrection spread outside the walls first."

"Understood."

"But get our troops moving now. Once the fighting spreads to the gates, we'll intervene immediately and seal off all the gates of the capital. We will be entering strictly in the name of putting down the rebellion. Then, after swiftly storming the palace, slay the king. There's no need to spend time on the soldiers, although, obviously, anyone who witnesses what we do inside the castle must be eliminated. When the deed is done, we seal off the palace too. Leave the Runanese regular forces fighting outside to do what they will."

*Whatever happens inside the palace, it was the doing of the rebellion, and we were too late to stop it. Or that's the story, at least.*

Whatever ended up happening in the battle between the palace and the gates was none of Ruteca's concern. The Gebel Kingdom only needed word to spread that they had sealed off the palace after going inside to save the king, but it was already too late. They would then remain in the fractured territories of South Runan under the pretense of bringing stability.

The plan was perfect. But well, as the expression went, "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry," and all that. Execution was key.

\*

There was shouting and screaming as the palace fell into utter disarray. Death and murder unfolded around every corner. The defenders inside were confused by the surprise attack. However, the Berhin Domain Army's numbers were incredibly small.

They held the initial advantage as the flames first rose, and the chaos broke out, but they soon started to be pushed back.

"What are you doing, Heina?" Ronan demanded, surrounded by his retainers and soldiers, and she came for his life with only a few retainers of her own. "Did you think you could take my life with so few men? Even after I cautioned you repeatedly. Don't be like your father. To think this is the path you'd choose. It's pathetic. That's what it is."

"*You're* pathetic. You and your greed, *Duke* Ronan. My father died a miserable death because of you... Isn't it only natural I would do this in response?" Heina said as she glared at Ronan.

"Bah hah hah hah! Maybe save those words for after you've done something! What do you think you've even accomplished here?" Ronan laughed mockingly at Heina.

Heina just laughed back at him, which in turn only made him laugh all the louder. "Ah hah hah hah! Hah hah hah hah hah! Duke Ronan, you have no right to be called king! This is the end for you!"

As Heina laughed, there were screams from outside the hall where Ronan and Heina were facing off. Screams that were gradually drawing closer. Heina absolutely cackled. It wasn't long before the Royal Gebelian Army appeared from behind her. Leading them was Ruteca, clad in a set of armor that, while not particularly aesthetic, was practical in its design.

The soldiers of South Runan fell before him.

"Wh-What's happening?! Count Ruteca, what is the meaning of this?!" one of Ronan's retainers demanded. "If you've come to put down the rebellion, the men you just slew weren't part of it! If you'll just kill Heina, then—"

The retainer's head flew as Ruteca attacked him.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" Ronan shouted at Ruteca in shock, but the man did not answer him.

Ruteca continued swinging his blade without mercy, forcing Ronan's retainers to fight him, but they were no match.

Ruteca was one of the top five commanders in the Gebel Kingdom.

Ronan's retainers couldn't possibly stand against such a man. He was on a completely different level from the retainers of the Berhin Domain.

Ronan's retainers fell in an instant. He was the only one left standing. The other soldiers nearby were all subdued by Ruteca's men. Heina was still there too, of course. The only ones left were Ronan, Heina, and Ruteca and his Gebelian soldiers.

"You curs! What is the meaning of this?! How dare the Gebel Kingdom do this. Aren't you afraid of being denounced?!"

"They won't be, *Duke Ronan*," Heina said, taking great pleasure in emphasizing the word *duke*. "The House of Berhin will take all of the blame. I could never have killed you otherwise."

"Wh-What...?" Ronan began backing away as he finally grasped the situation. "You sold out the nation for your revenge?! You and that garbage house of yours...?!"

"Sold out the nation? What legitimacy does a country like this have? It was only founded on your say-so. I might not have been able to have pulled this off in Runan, but... You were never fit to be a king, *Your Highness*."

Heina shook her head.

"You've said enough, Heina. I respect your desire for vengeance. Allow me to give you the opportunity to carry it out. I'm afraid I can't let you live once you've finished, however."

Having said this, Ruteca stepped back, indicating he meant to kill Heina once she killed Ronan. If the leader of the rebellion survived, it would ruin the Gebel Kingdom's justification for their actions. When the Royal Gebelian Army arrived, Ronan was already dead, so they disposed of Heina, who had killed him. That was how the story had to go.

Obviously, Ruteca could have taken care of both Ronan and Heina himself, but he held Heina in high regard, and so he gave her the chance to settle things.

"I already threw away my own life when I sent the slave traders after Count Erhin. Heh heh heh! Accept your fate, Duke Ronan."

Ronan turned his back to her to run away. Heina had lacked the Martial to overcome his retainers, but she had a better Martial score than Ronan. She'd have no trouble avenging her father. Witnessing one last act of cowardice from the ugly Ronan, Heina bit her lip.

"This is the man my father so feared? What was holding our house back all this time...?" she muttered with a tone of self-mockery as she closed in, then buried her blade in Ronan's back.

"N-Nghhh! You bitch... You'll pay... for this..."

Despite his cursing, Ronan's body slumped to the palace floor all the same, never to rise again. The duke was no more. Heina looked down at him, then closed her eyes. It was a bitter life, and she'd spent all of it thinking about her house. *What a pathetic ending.*

But she had lived a life that deserved an ending like this, so she wasn't dissatisfied. Where did she go wrong? Was it when she saw her father's will? Heina shook her head and then knelt down. Ruteca approached her with slow, deliberate steps.

"Have you any last words?"

"If I did, I wouldn't have planned something like this."

Ruteca raised his sword high to strike.

"That can't be right," came a voice from behind them.

"Huh?" Heina's eyes widened with surprise.

Ruteca turned to look, sword still raised.

A man stood there, with the corpses of Gebelian soldiers who'd died without so much as a sound lying behind him.

“Who are you? Are you with the House of Berhin?”

Ruteca demanded I identify myself, but I didn’t intend to. What good would revealing my identity now do me? And to a man who’d soon be dead. He had been planning to kill Heina, and then manipulate events here to the advantage of the Royal Gebelian Army. I didn’t plan on letting him live. The soldiers still outside in his camp could be pardoned, but the ones who’d entered the palace all had to die.

I summoned Daitoren.

Ruteca Mikal

Age: 36

Martial: 91

Intelligence: 65

Command: 80

The Gebel Kingdom had sent someone fairly capable. They must have understood how important this was for them. But even if he was capable, this commander needed to die. Daitoren slammed into Ruteca’s head. He had a Martial of 91. It was a score high enough that Ronan’s retainers couldn’t even block his attacks, but he was powerless before Daitoren.

*Clang!*

The sound of sword striking sword rang in my ears. I’d already beheaded Ruteca by mashing the Attack command. His head sailed through the air, then rolled across the floor to rest beside Ronan’s body.

“Erhin! What is the meaning of this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t tell me you came to kill me yourself,” she said with a chuckle, still kneeling.  
“Well... In the end, I’m just an incompetent woman who was used by you... It’s almost humorous that I ever tried to make you suffer, isn’t it?”

“Why are you mocking yourself like that?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t here for the reason she thought I was.

“I don’t know what you’re even talking about.”

“Huh?”

“I came here under King Ronan’s orders to support South Runan. But when I arrived, I found the Royal Army under attack by the Royal Gebelian. I simply came here to deal with the treacherous Gebelians who journeyed here under the guise of reinforcements, and then murdered the king,” I explained as I walked toward Heina.  
“The Royal Gebelian Army spread slanderous rumors about the House of Berhin instigating a revolt, entered the castle to kill the king, and then tried to gain hold of South Runan while laying all the blame on you. Or am I wrong?”

“Wh-What... are you saying!?” Heina looked at me, blinking in utter bewilderment.

“You don’t understand? A woman with your intelligence?”

“No, I do... I do understand.”

“Of course you do. Because I only told you the truth. You were the first to step up to stop the Gebelians, and this is what happened. So become my vassal. If you have any interest in restoring your house, that is.”

“...”

The Gebel Kingdom had come to seize South Runan.

People could raise a fuss about there being a rebellion, but that was just a minor detail. Ultimately, the truth was the same. It didn’t change the story all that much. It was a fact that they had come with the intention of betraying South Runan. Even if someone made accusations about a clandestine agreement, there was no proof of it, and they would only be confessing that their own hands were dirty too.

In all likelihood, they would try to claim that Ruteca acted alone.

"It's okay for me to live...?" Heina asked hesitantly.

"Live on," I told her. "Live your own life. I'll forget everything that happened in the past."

*The Royal Gebelian Army are going to run amok now that Ruteca's gone. The war's just started. Because I can't let them have South Runan.*

Even if I chose to give up on the land and go home after this, I needed to bring back the people with me, if nothing else. That meant I had to drive off the Gebelians first. The underhanded Gebelians who'd come to steal South Runan under the guise of providing reinforcements.

"Your house's name can only live on if you do, Heina."

"Heh heh heh... Bah hah hah hah! I truly... truly am no match for you... I would have never dreamed you'd make an offer to me like this. Hah hah hah hah hah hah hah!"

Heina rose to her feet after a good, hearty laugh. Then she knelt down again in front of me.

"I have no pride left to wound... I'll follow you from now on!"

\*

My next concern was the Gebel Kingdom. I tried asking Valdesca how he'd go about conquering them.

"Hmm... So, what do you think?"

"About striking down the Gebel Kingdom, which entered South Runan under the pretense of an alliance, you mean?"

"Right. If I were to do it, what would be the best way to quickly defeat the Royal Gebelian Army?"

It was a direct question, but Valdesca simply stared into space for a while before shaking his head.

“I don’t know about that kind of military strategy.”

“That can’t be right. You were an incredible strategist before you lost your memory.”

My comment brought an even greater look of confusion to Valdesca’s face.

“What is the situation? I should be able to tell you anything that comes to mind, at least.”

“It’s simple. Before we arrive, the Gebel Kingdom will try to seize South Runan. Is there any way to prevent that?”

“Well, let me see. If there is, I don’t know it. But if they are going to try and get their hands on the territory, then isn’t that fine? That will demonstrate to the world that they were coveting the lands of South Runan.”

“Well, you do have a point there.”

*I knew it.*

He’d just been speaking off the cuff, and yet this man accurately cleft to the heart of the issue.

“I think it would be faster if you were to find an effective way of retaking the capital from them afterward.”

“Okay, anything that comes to mind?”

“I think you should deceive the enemy. For instance, you can surround the city, but there is no need to attack. Once you have them surrounded, you use their psychology to control them. I think a war like this can be won in two days.”

“A psychological battle, huh? Is this the kind of thing you’re talking about?” I went on to explain what I was thinking.

Valdesca had another answer for me. “That is a viable option too, but I think a trap like this would be better.”

“Aha, and after I do that, I can use it one more time.”

*Yes. This is the perfect strategy.*

With our opinions aligned, once this affair was settled, it would give birth to an even larger strategy.

"I see. Yes, I think you're right," Valdesca said with a big nod.

He was every bit as capable as I'd thought. It'd be a real headache if he went back to being an enemy.

*Should I just try to find some way to kill him? No. If I can bring someone like him over to my side, it will be even more satisfying than beating the game.*

I couldn't resist that kind of challenge. Even if, after he regained his memories, it ended up like the time Cao Cao recruited Guan Yu. At least Cao Cao survived because of it. Guan Yu was the one who spared him when he fled, defeated, at the Battle of Red Cliffs. I simply thought it would be a shame to let him go. There was no fault in that.

\*

Without their commander-in-chief, the Royal Gebelian Army ran around willy-nilly before ultimately deciding to occupy South Runan. Their leader's last command had been to quickly occupy the capital, after all. If they had made another decision at this point, such as withdrawing to the Gebel Kingdom, that might have served to show that they never had any designs on South Runan, though.

Ultimately, Ruteca's last command tripped them up.

The soldiers of Eintorian were enraged by the Gebelians' treachery.

The Eintorian Army's Morale is now 100.

That anger showed up in their morale. With the addition of Valdesca's strategy, we were able to take South Runan in less than a day. With that done, the foolish Gebelians who had lost their commander began to withdraw.

“Woooooo!”

Eintorian morale was sky-high, and the people of South Runan who had been suppressed by the Gebelians welcomed us with whoops and cheers. To them, I was the one who had come to their aid, and then avenged the wrongs done to them. Thanks to that, their Opinion of me had risen to 99. This was a successful conquest of the South Runan region.

Obviously, I had no intention of leaving my troops here, in a territory wedged between Naruya and Gebel, which was sure to be destroyed. I planned to take the surviving South Runanese soldiers and people back with me to my own domain.

That was one of my goals accomplished. Now there was another truly important one that it would help me with: Erheet.

This was the branching point that would decide if he became my retainer.

\*

“Your Highness... So it turned out like this in the end, after all.”

Erheet buried Ronan with his own hands, and knelt before the grave, reminiscing. This was the man he had sworn to serve all his life. And yet, he had learned the man had a number of flaws. When Erheet heard that Ronan fled the capital while he was risking his life fighting at the checkpoint, that had been the decisive betrayal for Erheet.

Yet still he had shown no visible outrage.

Now that the master who he’d had such mixed feelings about had passed away, Erheet could only shake his head.

“Your Excellency, Duke Ronan had already abandoned the House of Demacine. And twice at that,” said one of Erheet’s retainers who couldn’t bear to see him like this.

“That’s fine. He was still my master,” Erheet answered the man with a sharp look.

After that, his retainers had to remain silent until he stood up once more. Then, after standing there for some time, Erheet looked around at the South Runanese scenery.

“It’s good to see the people seem to be all right.”

“Yes, it is. Thank goodness.”

“Because these people have a new lord who will embrace them.”

“Your Excellency?”

Erheet’s retainers looked at one another as they tried to parse this odd comment. But Erheet said no more. In reality, he was torn over what to do. Runan was truly finished now. As such, he thought that, as a Runanese commander, he was done too. His life as a military leader was over, and it was time for him to retire. His own lands had fallen into Naruya’s hands. He had nothing left, but wasn’t sure he could live on as an ordinary person.

“If I’m going to retire... then there’s no need for all of you to come with me. So... If you can, I want you to be of assistance to Count Eintorian.”

“Come again?”

“Your Excellency! What are you saying so suddenly?!”

His bombshell statement made their eyes widen with shock.

\*

“Where have you been, Lord Erheet?”

“I hear you were looking for me.”

“Yes. I didn’t know where you’d gone, so I asked people to look for you.”

“I went to say my goodbyes to His Highness,” Erheet said with a deep sigh. “I don’t entirely know how to feel about it. Would you let me have a cup of tea?”

“Of course.”

I invited Erheet to sit at the table. His pallor wasn’t looking so good. His face was a mess of emotions. He must have had a lot of worries on his mind. Now, so did I, of course, but that was because I needed to persuade the man.

“To tell you the truth,” Erheet began in a grave tone after taking a sip of tea. “I have to

ask, do you plan to become a king now, like I've long suspected? I always knew you were too great to remain a mere count. You have the power to control public opinion, and in my opinion, that qualifies you as a ruler."

"Well..." I trailed off, not sure how to respond to a question that was so on the mark, but I couldn't dodge it now.

*If I go hiding things from someone I'm truly trying to win to my side, then I'll never be able to act openly.*

"Yes, I do. The fall of Runan was a shame, but I am also a descendant of the Eintorians. I plan to restore the Ancient Kingdom, which has long been the wish of my clan, Your Excellency."

"The Ancient Kingdom, huh? Yes, that's right. You were a descendant of those Eintorians."

"And... there's one other thing I need to tell you." I couldn't tell him I deliberately let Runan fall. But I at least wanted to be open about the matter with Ronan.

"Another thing? What is it?"

"I never liked Duke Ronan. And that dislike only grew after the matter of the slaves. In truth... I didn't have any heartfelt desire to save him."

I was forthright in telling him that I used this incident to manipulate public opinion. In light of Erheet's own connection with Ronan, if I didn't tell him about the conspiracy, we could never have a proper relationship between us.

"Ah... So that's what was going on."

"However, I never meant for the people of South Runan to come to harm. That is the truth."

"I know that. Since you've been honest with me, let me do you the same courtesy. I am planning to retire. I suspect my life as a warrior ended together with the nation of Runan."

"Huh? I hope it's not because of what I just told you."

"No, it's unrelated. Runan has fallen to ruin now, and having been at your side, I know as well as anyone that it couldn't have been saved. Knowing what things were like between you and Duke Ronan, I can fully understand your dislike of him. So it's nothing to do with that. I also know you are incredibly capable. I'm sure you'll do a fine job of protecting the people of Runan... Seeing the way you exempted your people from taxes, I was deeply impressed."

*Okay, so why retire, then? I definitely couldn't let him do that. Do you have any idea how much effort I've put into recruiting you?*

"Are you fully resolved to retire?"

"It's my intention to, yes. I have no lands of my own, so I'm no longer a noble, but I think I'll become a simple man of the countryside."

*No, that's out of the question. Where can you find a man who belongs on the battlefield as much as him, who must be there to shine to his fullest? The man is a true warrior, not a gamer like me, who's just in it for his own benefit.*

"Your Excellency."

*I've been waiting for him to say something to me, but was that a foolish move? It looks like if I want to recruit capable people, I can't be so passive about it. I mean, Liu Bei had to ask Zhuge Liang three times before he was able to recruit him. Not long after they met, he petitioned him earnestly to join him. That earnestness persuaded Zhuge Liang, and he served Liu Bei and his son for the rest of his life.*

I started to think it might be too late, but I bowed my head to Erheet.

"Won't you consider becoming a commander for Eintorian? It's much too early for you to retire! Perhaps the thought of serving under me hurts your pride, but... as a descendant of the Ancient Kingdom, I, Erhin Eintorian, must have your power in order to bring an end to the chaos of war on this continent. There is no other commander on the same level as you, Your Excellency. The Ten Commanders of Naruya? They're strong individually, but that's all they are. There is only one true warrior who reigns supreme on the battlefield, and from all I've heard, it's you."

"..."

However, Erheet didn't respond. He simply stared so hard that his gaze could have

bored right through me. I went on talking. I hadn't said everything I wanted to yet. I needed to say it all, so that even if he did retire, I wouldn't be left with regrets.

"Won't you please become an Eintorian retainer? I need you!"

This caused a complete turnaround. Erheet jumped to his feet and took my hand with alarming alacrity.

"Do... Do you really mean that?!"

"Of course I do..."

"I had thought you didn't need me. That's why I resolved to retire!"

"Huh?"

This came totally out of left field.

"What do you mean? I need you more than anyone, Lord Erheet. I was avoiding saying so out of an excess of caution. There was, um, the matter of your relationship with Duke Ronan, after all..."

Erheet immediately shook his head. "My connection to His Highness is a separate matter. I'd already lost my respect for the man. I was merely trying to behave honorably. So, essentially, you're saying you *do* need me, right?"

"Of course."

"Gah hah hah hah hah hah hah! This isn't news to drink tea to! Hey, you! Fetch us some wine! Wine, I say!" Erheet seemed giddy as a child as he shouted.

I hadn't been ready for this at all. "Your Excellency?"

"If you need me, I'm at your service. I'm saying I'll be your retainer! I, Erheet Demacine, am going to serve Eintorian for life. I think it's wonderful that you're a descendant of the Ancient Kingdom! And I couldn't ask for more in a lord than someone like you, who can protect all the people of the world!"

*Was it this simple all along?*

"No, I'm not doing this right. I can't speak so informally to you anymore," Erheet said, standing up straight as he bowed his head to me. "From now until the day I die, I serve Eintorian!"

My head started to hurt as I looked at him. I really should have gone to him with an offer sooner. From the looks of it, had Erheet just been sulking because I kept making offers to other people, but not to him?

\*

All that remained was the issue of Valdesca. Obviously, unlike Erheet, there was no way to immediately recruit him.

"You called for me?"

"There's something I wanted to talk to you about. We're scheduled to pull out, so I should arrange things so you can go home too."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes. So, you still can't remember anything?"

"No. Not a thing," Valdesca said with a hint of self-mockery. He sounded frustrated.

"Your name is Frann Valdesca. You are a duke of Naruya, a genius in the use of magic circles, and my enemy. Oh, you're also the most feared strategist on the continent too."

"Is that right? If that's all true... then there are two things I'm left wondering."

I told him what he'd wanted to know, but Valdesca's reaction was muted.

*And he still wants to know more?*

"What would those be?"

"If we are enemies, then why set me free?"

*I agonized over that one myself, but ultimately decided to let go of him.*

"It would be a different matter if we'd captured you on the battlefield, but could I really

call it a victory if I took you prisoner after you walked in here of your own accord? When you get your memories back, I'm sure we'll meet again on the battlefield, and that's when I'll capture you. After taking away your infuriating ability to teleport. Oh, I recognize you as a strategist, of course. I'd never have won if I hadn't used the ruins left behind by the Ancient Kingdom. There's really no telling how our next battle will play out. But that's all the more reason it needs to be settled on the battlefield."

Valdesca smiled in a self-effacing manner as he listened to my response.

"Then let me ask you the other thing."

At some point, the smile faded, and Valdesca's expression grew unusually serious. No longer did he have the far-off look in his eye that the young amnesiac had possessed. No, this was his face as a strategist.

"What do you think is the most important thing in war?"

\*

Had anyone ever made him taste defeat like this before?

As his retainers evacuated him, Valdesca was left like a puppet, powerless to do anything himself.

Misery dominated him, and a sense of defeat ruled over his mind. The earthquake gradually intensified as the mana circle spread. The teleporter—a tool that was packed with the essence of the Ancient Kingdom's magic, and was the most special of all those passed down by the Valdesca family. Valdesca's memories cut out at the point where red flames burst up from underground, rushing toward him, and his retainers activated the tool. But tools also work using mana circles, and the influence of the massive one being activated in the immediate vicinity stopped his from fully functioning.

Valdesca awoke north of Runan's capital. When he came to, for some reason, he couldn't remember a thing.

"Are you okay?"

"Dad, water! Go get water!"

A father and daughter found and cared for him. That was Gram and Celly. They saved his life in the middle of all the chaos of war. On top of that, Valdesca heard that he'd been out cold for quite some time. When he learned that, because of him, the father and daughter had missed their chance to evacuate, and were hiding out in the mountains, he felt awful.

"No, don't be sorry," Celly told him. "We were being chased by some brigands when you suddenly came falling out of the sky, and an incredible explosion killed them all! You saved us, so of course we had to take care of you until you woke up!"

"I-Is that what happened?"

"Yeah, it is. So you don't need to be grateful," Gram explained. "But more importantly, that effect when you fell out of the sky must have been caused by a mana circle... When you struck the ground, I saw one activate."

Gram had also done a lot of research on mana circles. They weren't his area of expertise, of course, and he couldn't use them. But as part of his studies, he'd looked into the historical link between the Ancient Kingdom and mana circles.

That's how he was able to recognize one when he saw it.

"Is that a fact?" Valdesca could only scratch his head.

"Now that you've awakened, I'd like to set out. A new nation called South Runan has been formed, and it's possible that a noble acquaintance of mine has gone there, so I was thinking we'd drop by to see."

Hearing that, Valdesca set out on a journey with Gram and Celly. His condition gradually recovered along the way, and though he kept it from the father and daughter, so too did his memory. The shock of defeat and the influence of the mana circle on his brain had kept him from fully remembering, but once he awoke it slowly came back.

It finally came back to him completely when they were in South Runan. There Valdesca saw the Eintorian flag.

"I know that flag..."

In that instant, the sense of defeat rushed in on him again, powerful as ever. However, at the same time, new feelings were born inside of him.

"I'm terribly sorry to have to ask this of you, but I'd like to go over there for a while. Would that be all right with the two of you?" Valdesca pointed at the Eintorian camp, which flew their banners.

"To that military camp? Isn't that dangerous?"

Valdesca mentally scoffed at the question.

If this was a sign from Heaven, then he wanted to meet that man. To see him in a context other than on the battlefield. Thus began Valdesca's life in the military camp. It was a hard act to keep up, but eventually he realized that all he needed to do was pretend he was lost in thought. Looking like he was in a haze came naturally to him when he was agonizing over something, so it was an easy act to pull off.

As he did, Erhin asked Valdesca about strategy. Valdesca hesitated somewhat. He felt as though, perhaps, the man had seen through his amnesiac act. But what did it matter at this point? He also felt a desire to speak with the man about strategy. What kind of superb stratagems would he employ? How well could he make use of his manpower?

Valdesca couldn't help but be curious about the insight that had always been not just one, but two steps ahead of him. It was the entire reason he'd gone to such efforts to infiltrate the camp, wasn't it? Debating strategy with Erhin even became something close to enjoyable. It gave each the chance to point out shortcomings in the other's thinking. With Valdesca and Erhin working together, of course the Royal Gebelian Army was hopelessly routed.

It was a good time.

But all good things had to come to an end eventually. As he sensed the time to go home nearing, Erhin called for him. The man revealed him for who he was, and suggested he go home. Internally, Valdesca smiled. It was a smile of recognition. And the more he recognized Erhin's abilities, the greater his desire was to beat him.

Although being able to keep up the amnesia act as he left would have been far better for Valdesca in the long term, there were things he wanted to ask even if that meant his lies were revealed. There was just one thing that had been on his mind this whole time: Valdesca had visited the Eintorian Domain while Erhin was away rescuing Rozern. Having ultimately given up on moving his forces, he actually went to Rozern instead.

He had been intensely curious about exactly what Erhin was trying to do. Of course, he thought the strategy employed was incredible, but that wasn't it. That wasn't what bothered him. He understood it. Although, he didn't know if he could have done the same.

There *were* some parts he absolutely didn't get, though, and *those* bothered Valdesca to no end.

"What do you think is the most important thing in war?"

"The opinion of the people, obviously."

Erhin answered Valdesca's question without a moment's hesitation. But that answer wasn't what he truly wanted to know. It was merely a lead-in to his actual question.

"Then could you explain to me what you were doing in Rozern?"

Those words laid Valdesca's deception bare. They revealed he had all of his memory intact. But the question was more important than that. Besides, Erhin was the one who'd opened this serious discussion between them.

"What part of it do you want to know about?"

What composure. The question had revealed he was being deceived, and yet this man remained calm, focusing solely on the question at hand.

"Why did you bury the people of Rozern who were massacred by Brijit inside the cities? No matter how awful the stench of their rotting corpses was, you could simply have had your soldiers rest outside the walls. Was there any need to give your exhausted men such a command? The dead were even foreigners to you."

Even as he pursued the Brijitians, each time he came across another of their massacres, this man had ordered his soldiers to bury the dead. It was something Rozern could have done themselves once the war was over. Yet Erhin carried on doing it, and Valdesca couldn't comprehend why.

"A country without a people is of no use at all. In short, that means that a country is its people. The same can be said of uniting this continent. It's only possible if the people will come along with me. If they won't, then even if I emerge victorious, things will crumble in no time."

Still, his doubts were not dispelled. Valdesca tried asking another question. “What does that have to do with the people of vanquished nations? They are not your people, so why do their opinions matter? I would think a true king is one who looks after his own country’s troops.”

“Well, in general, you’re probably right. However, my actions weren’t for the people of our country who died.”

“Huh?”

Valdesca’s brow furrowed as he failed to understand. Whenever he couldn’t understand something, he rammed his head into a solid object. But he couldn’t do it now, and that only frustrated him more.

“The people inside the cities were all dead, but there was no time for them to have exterminated all of the outlying villages. Those people were out in the mountains, hiding. When the war ended, they would come back out again. If we didn’t bury the corpses, those people were going to see something terrible. There’s a world of difference between hearing there was a massacre and seeing it for yourself. If the people saw, they would all think, ‘Rozern is a garbage nation that couldn’t protect us.’”

“Given you were in foreign land, isn’t it fine for that sort of turmoil to happen? Especially if they are going to think it was Runan that prevented them from feeling that way.”

“That all depends on the circumstances. I didn’t need to improve their opinion of the Runan Kingdom. No, *not of the Runan Kingdom*.”

*Huh?* In that instant, Valdesca felt as though he’d been struck by lightning.

“The survivors of Rozern would go on living in that land. Because Rozern itself was not destroyed. There’s no need for people who will go on living to carry such a deep emotional scar. The things they’d feel seeing the bodies scattered around aren’t conducive to the country’s development. As someone who talks of uniting the continent, shouldn’t I always be considering how to make Rozern’s people my own?”

*What they’d feel when they saw the bodies?*

“And the reason I am letting you go, despite your memories fully returning, is that, someday, you might join me. If you and I work together, there’s no way we could ever

lose, right?"

Valdesca was momentarily speechless. It was like he'd suddenly been punched. This was the second time in this conversation that he felt like he'd been smashed in the back of the head. The entire core of this conversation had never been about the people, or anything like that. Erhin had been using the conversation to extract the questions Valdesca wanted to ask. It made Valdesca want to laugh and to cry at the same time.

He had the boldness it took to try and poach *the* Frann Valdesca? In spite of Naruya being intact, and their king still being alive and well? Yet, surprisingly, a seed of curiosity was budding in Valdesca. He could try to suppress it all he wanted, but it was no use. The king he served, or this man? Who would be the true hegemon? That was the question that inspired the powerful curiosity welling up inside him.

There had been many rulers in history who cared for the people. But would that bring about the unification of the continent?

Valdesca didn't think so.

There were times when mercy could be the greatest weakness. If the argument was about unifying the continent, that is. This man, however, was the opposite. The Erhin Eintorian he'd seen was not simply a lord who cared for the people. He was a person who manipulated them from the shadows, bending them to his will. In short, he was a man who controlled public opinion. That had been visible in the strategy he employed against the Gebel Kingdom here too. It was what made him horrifying, and yet it was also what made him great.

"I already have a master, one who I also believe is fit to be a sovereign. I definitely want to settle things with you. Even if I have already lost three times."

In the First Runan War, in the massive defeat at the Eintorian Domain, and lastly... in this conversation. Yes, Valdesca felt this conversation had also been a defeat for him. As such, he had now lost three times. After all of that, he wanted to win at least once, all the more because his opponent was so strong.

\*

I had gained some things, and lost others. Well, no, Valdesca was never mine to begin with, so maybe "lost" isn't the right word. He couldn't be mine right now. It hurt to let

him go, but this was all laying the groundwork for my later moves, so I just had to hope it had some small effect. Setting aside the bitter feelings, I hired Heina and Erheet, and brought them back to Brinhill along with the soldiers and people of South Runan.

With their numbers added to our own, the population grew again. We now totaled two million and twenty thousand people, with a total manpower of eighty-two thousand. I hadn't drafted people yet, so there was still room in my recruitment cap for more. Although there was room to raise my manpower just a little more, I didn't act on it immediately because developing the farmland was a slightly higher priority. More active farmland led directly to more provisions and more funding for the nation. The Opinion score of the newly arrived South Runanese people was actually higher than the average value across all of my territories. That in turn raised the overall Opinion to 88.

With the fall of South Runan, there was nothing left to fetter my founding of a nation. I was now within sight of casting off this ambiguous position as an amalgamation of different domains and forming them into a single nation.

"Serena."

"Yes, Lord Erhin!"

I summoned Serena before doing so. I wanted to learn my retainers' views. I couldn't imagine any of them would oppose it, but if anyone had a different opinion, then that was something I ought to know about. She had only just joined me as a vassal, and had not been entrusted with any post yet. For that very reason, she could ask questions without it affecting anyone's interests. Either way, everyone was going to be a member of the nobility soon, but there was still some lingering discomfort. Her high Charisma would help get positive answers out of people.

"I have something to ask of you."

"Sure! Whatever it is, I will give my life for it!"

"Uh, you don't need to give your life..."

Serena pressed her hands together with a beaming smile. I actually backed away a little seeing how gung ho she was.

\*

I needed to ask those who became my retainers first. Since all of them were going to become nobles of the newly founded nation anyway, I thought Serena would be the fairest judge. First, she met with Hadin. After hearing from him that of course I should become a king, Serena moved on to Bente. When he was alone with her, Bente couldn't even look Serena in the eye. His gaze wandered. His face reddened. Bente was uncharacteristically unsure what to do.

"It's the first time we've talked alone, isn't it?"

"Yes? Yes, yes!"

Bente answered three times, then scratched his head, his fingers naturally digging into the back of his scalp. His eyes were still focused on the table, not Serena's face. Charmed by her beauty, Bente only stole furtive glances at her face. He'd lost his wits too much to look at her directly. There was no distrust there. He was purely overwhelmed.

"I've called you in here to ask one question."

Serena cut to the chase.

"Huh, what is it? I'll answer all the questions you want. Hah hah hah!"

"What do you think of Lord Erhin becoming a king? Are you prepared to serve him as if he were Heaven itself? A king and the will of Heaven are one and the same, after all."

Bente just blinked at this question. He fidgeted around as he was suddenly hit with a topic of such grand scale, but his answer was already set. It wasn't long before Bente opened his mouth.

"I know I'm a moron. But there's one thing that never changes. Ever since His Excellency saw something in me, and gave me an important position, he'd be the only one I'd ever serve. Even if he goes from being an Excellency to being a Highness or a Majesty, that will always stay the same!"

"Is that right?"

Bente nodded firmly. Serena smiled. Then she thought for a moment. Erhin had told her she didn't have to put on fake smiles anymore. But no, this smile now, it wasn't fake. He really was like the protagonist of the stories her father had told her.

After parting with Bente, Serena's next meeting was with Yusen. He was the most important person she knew of, and had many accomplishments. He was also someone she respected.

"I'm sorry to come calling so suddenly."

"Don't be... But more importantly, my condolences on what happened in Luaranz."

Serena could sense those words weren't just for show. He genuinely felt sorry for her. Grateful for his concern, she hurriedly shook her head. "Thank you. But I've already forgotten it. I'll be fine."

"Really?"

"I'm here to discuss something more important with you today. I believe that Lord Erhin should become a king... What are your thoughts, Lord Yusen?"

"That would be the natural flow of things. His Excellency once said he would make our country the best. And that he'd make those who came with them the best too. After hearing that, I've followed him all this way. In accordance with his will, I've striven to be my best, and to make the men who serve under me their best too."

"Did he say something like that?"

Yusen smiled and nodded. Then, briefly, he added, "So there's only one answer for me."

"And for me," chimed in Gibun, who was with him too.

Serena smiled again. Yes, she really was happy. Erhin had told her not to put on a false smile, but it had never been necessary since coming to Eintorian. The smiles welled up naturally from her own heart. Unlike the fake life she'd led in Luaranz, there was a reason for her glee. Just as he had inspired respect in her, so too had he earned the respect of his subordinates. Her idol was everyone's idol.

Next, Serena went to see Jint. No, she was looking for him, but turned to head back. In her mind, Jint wasn't the sort of man who needed to hear any more words. Still, in order to carry out her mission, she decided it was better to meet with Mirinae instead.

"Serena!" Mirinae exclaimed and rushed over to her.

"Sorry to drop in on you so suddenly, Mirinae. You must be busy, right?"

Mirinae had a number of books open as she agonized over some problem.

"Not at all. Come over—whoa!"

A mound of books collapsed, scattering all over. There was no place left to stand.

"Heh heh, sorry... Looks like over here's not going to work. Let's head over there instead."

Scratching her head awkwardly, Mirinae took Serena by the hand and led her outside. There was a bench out there.

"So, what is it?"

"What do you think of Lord Erhin becoming a king?" Serena cut straight to the chase.

"Uh...?" Mirinae cocked her head slightly. "I don't know about that kind of thing, Serena. But if Lord Erhin told Jint to die, he'd die. Hee hee!" Though Mirinae chuckled as she said that, there was a sincerity in her eyes. Serena concluded that she need ask no more.

Next, she visited Fihatori.

"I've been thinking about it for some time. I was considering when to bring the idea to him, but with South Runan having been destroyed, I think now is the time."

"Is that right?"

He'd already been planning it out.

"Our forces are prepared, and His Excellency was meant to be a king. If he isn't fit to be one, then who else on the continent can claim to be?"

Fihatori had been thinking about this from the time that he left Ronan's camp to come and swear loyalty to Erhin. What's more, because Erhin was a lineal descendant of the ancient Eintorians, his restoration of the Ancient Kingdom had major legitimacy.

That was a vast difference from Ronan, who'd never had any such justification for

founding his own nation.

“Oh, and...”

Fihatori went on expounding on the theories of statecraft. He was just so serious about it all that, this time, Serena couldn’t crack a smile at it.

He’d go on all night if she let him. Excusing herself, she escaped, and next, she went to see Erheet.

“Hah hah hah hah hah hah! It’s a matter of course that he will. Don’t ask pointless questions. I already knew he would when I swore my loyalty to him.”

“I-I see.”

Erheet was exceedingly jovial. As she had expected, no one objected. No one even showed the slightest hesitation about it. However, there was someone she wasn’t able to meet until the very end. Despite seeing everyone else, even Heina and Voltaire, one person remained: Euracia.

Eventually, the two had to run into each other, so Serena steeled herself for the encounter and started walking. The two of them both lived in the royal palace, and both in the outer palace at that. They were a stone’s throw apart from one another, and yet she was the hardest to visit. Serena steadied her breathing as she returned to the outer palace. Once there, she approached the door to Euracia’s room.

*Knock, knock.*

The door opened immediately.

“Oh, hello!”

As Euracia appeared before her eyes, Serena immediately bowed her head. Euracia just stared at Serena. Not only did Serena’s high Charisma score not help her out here, but it was also actively harmful. In short, her skill for making conversations go smoothly was of absolutely no help in this situation.

“Right,” Euracia responded, impassive as ever.

Each looked into the other’s eyes. Neither seemed about to look away. In that instant,

Serena forgot her mission. She couldn't look away once they'd locked eyes. Feeling as if she'd already lost that first exchange, she wasn't about to lose this battle of wills too. For her part, Euracia kept on staring at Serena too.

Silence descended and time seemed to stand still as the two continued facing off.

"Hey, stop that!"

That's when Erhin stepped in.

"No, I guess you've both already stopped."

Incredibly, even after his appearance, the two didn't look away. Each just kept stubbornly staring into the other's eyes.

In the territory of the Herald Kingdom, King Cassia of Naruya had led his forces to occupy all the castles on the western half of the kingdom, and was a stone's throw from Quabi Castle, which was on the road to the capital. Answering his summons, Frann Valdesca knelt before King Cassia.

"Your Majesty, I will gladly accept any punishment!" Valdesca prostrated himself with a look of agony on his face.

"Erhin Eintorian, was it? Was he that strong? I don't understand it. How is it that Frann Valdesca, the greatest genius since the founding of our country, returns to me in such a miserable state?"

"There is no excuse I could possibly make for it!"

Hearing Valdesca's response, Cassia appeared completely emotionless.

"Dying would be easy. But how would that atone for your sins? Atone for them while you live, and *then* die. Do I make myself understood? I hereby strip you of the rank of duke! If you die after having atoned for your sins, I'll restore your title. You must redeem yourself not only for my sake, but for the House of Valdesca as well."

Without a title, he was essentially no longer a noble at all. To take the title from the House of Valdesca also meant stripping all the retainers who served under them of

their titles as well. But Valdesca couldn't speak back to his king.

All he could do was grind his teeth at the words, "Live and atone for your sins."

Yes, that was right. Even if he was going to die, it should be after he'd won once.

"Valdesca, prove your strength. If you cannot prove to me that you are a commander who will not take a defeat lying down, then at least die on the battlefield. That is what it means to be a man," Cassia declared, his eyes a conspicuous golden color.

\*

Two days after I had sent Serena to gather everyone's opinions on the matter, as I was patrolling the streets of Brinhill, all of my retainers converged on me. Hadin, Bente, Yusen, Gibun, Fihatori, Euracia, Serena, Jint, Mirinae, Shanes, Erheet, Voltaire, Heina, Damon, and all of their retainers were all there.

They formed a line and bowed down before me. Once they had, Fihatori spoke on the group's behalf.

"Your Excellency, the time has come at last. Will you become king of Eintorian and lead us forward?"

Once Fihatori shouted this, the other commanders raised their voices to say the same, creating an exciting scene. It was as if they were all chanting it. Of course, this was just what I wanted to see. But still, did they have to come at me with it in the middle of town?

"Please, be our king!"

As all my retainers shouted that once again, the common people began gathering around. They were driven by curiosity at first, but as my retainers kept shouting, they joined in the chant. In no time, word spread, and even more people gathered. I glanced at Fihatori. This was probably why they'd gathered here on the street. He must have forcefully rounded everyone up.

Still, he was confident that if they called for it in a town like this, the people would join in. I was confident of it too, of course. With an Opinion of 88, the people in the game would offer you high praise.

“Your Majesty!”

The people started calling me “Your Majesty” as if I’d already ascended the throne. Obviously, I wasn’t going to let this scene drag on. Now it was time for founding a nation. It was absolutely essential to have a country of my own if I was going to unite the continent.

In short, now I was finally at the start.

With my own faction and a nation of my own, I could jump into the game. Because everything was beginning here and now.

*That’s the kind of game this is.*

Everything before now was a preliminary match to decide if I could participate or not. Because this was a game where you could only win by having your country fight other countries in order to unite the entire continent. Given the situation, there was no need for me to make a show of initially refusing. With everyone gathered like this, it was the perfect time to make an announcement.

Still, I was a little too embarrassed to just say, “I hereby declare the founding of a nation!” right here.

Instead, I declared, “I’ll do as you all say!” and moved along to the palace.

Brinhill became the capital. It might move somewhere else in the future, but in our current circumstances, Brinhill was the only place that was a good fit. The name of the country was also Eintorian, of course. It was the name of a country that no longer existed, but was still carved into the hearts of people everywhere. With the country’s name and capital decided, I ordered a formal assembly of the people. With all of my retainers in attendance too, of course.

The crest of Eintorian and its blue banners went up all around Brinhill. It was a color we shared in common with Runan. Because many of the new country’s people were of Runanese origin, it was the perfect symbol that we were a successor to the spirit of that nation. I looked down at the masses from atop the largest gate in the capital, above which flew an especially large banner.

I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them once more. This was my first step toward mastery over the continent.

*It all starts now!*

As I appeared, a hush fell over the crowd. Their eyes all turned toward me. They were waiting for my announcement.

After some time, I got my voice under control and shouted out, "As you all know, Runan has fallen. Without a country of our own, all of the people who lived in this land may be subject to persecution by other nations. In order to live not as slaves, but as masters, I hereby proclaim the founding of a nation. I will create a country that always strives to do the best for its people. Any country that would cast you all aside deserves to no longer exist! Now that I have taken the throne, declaring the return of the Ancient Kingdom, I am going to rise up for all of you who stand here before me!"

I issued the founding declaration to an audience of two million and twenty thousand people. Obviously, not all of them were here right now. My words would be carried to people who were currently far away. My speech concluded, and there was instant applause.

"Woooooo!"

The great cheer spread backward like a wave through the crowd. Unlike in the game, when I saw a scene like this unfolding before my eyes, there was a genuine sense of excitement.

*I'm really a king now. Okay, yes, it's a game, but it's also reality. So does that mean I'm a real king?*

Having issued the declaration as the feeling that any of this was real slipped away, my words would likely spread across the continent. Some would mock me. Others would dream of revenge. There might be an immediate war over it.

*Ultimately, I'm going to triumph over all of that, and beat this game.*

# AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading the fourth volume of *Only the Villainous Lord Wields the Power to Level Up*. This is the author, Waruiotoko.

We finally made it to volume 4! A whole lot of stuff happened in volume 4, huh? What I'm about to say may count as a spoiler, so if you haven't read the volume yet, maybe you should come back once you have. Are we good...? Okay then.

Erhin finally became the king of a country! I'm sure some of you were frustrated to see him stuck under the King of Runan before now, but that worry is gone from here on out! All the sneaky plotting stops here. From now on, I plan to bring you a grander story as he heads for domination of the entire continent. Please look forward to it!

Also, the manga version on Gangan ONLINE and Manga UP is going great too. The manga fills in some of the gaps left by the novel, and is unfolding a slightly different interpretation of the story, so it's fresh and entertaining even for me, the original author. The printed volumes for it will be out soon, so why not read both the novels and manga and compare the two versions?

Now then, everyone. Watch out for the coronavirus, and stay healthy out there.

I'll see you again in the next volume!

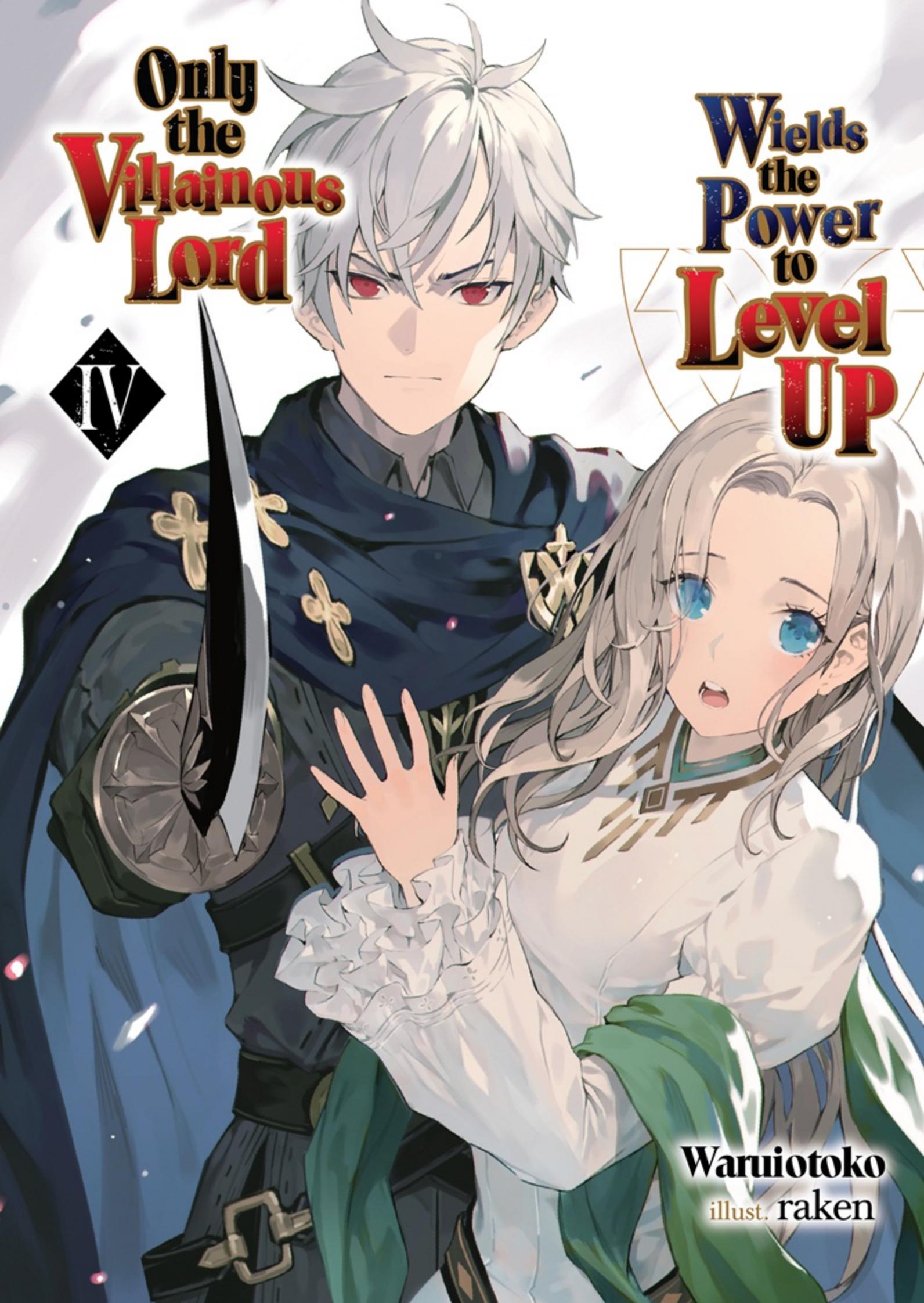
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Only  
the  
**Villainous**  
**Lord**



Wields  
the  
**Power**  
**to**  
**Level**  
**UP**

Waruiotoko  
illust. raken



Serena  
Dofrey



**“Please, save  
my father and the  
king! I beg of you!  
I’ll do anything  
that I can in  
return...!”**



Erhin  
Eintorian



The sound of steel on  
steel rang in my ears.  
I'd already beheaded  
Ruteca by mashing the  
Attack command. His  
head sailed through the  
air, hit the floor, and  
rolled to a stop.



**"If you and I  
work together,  
there's no way  
we could ever  
lose, right?"**

**Frann  
Valdesca**

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