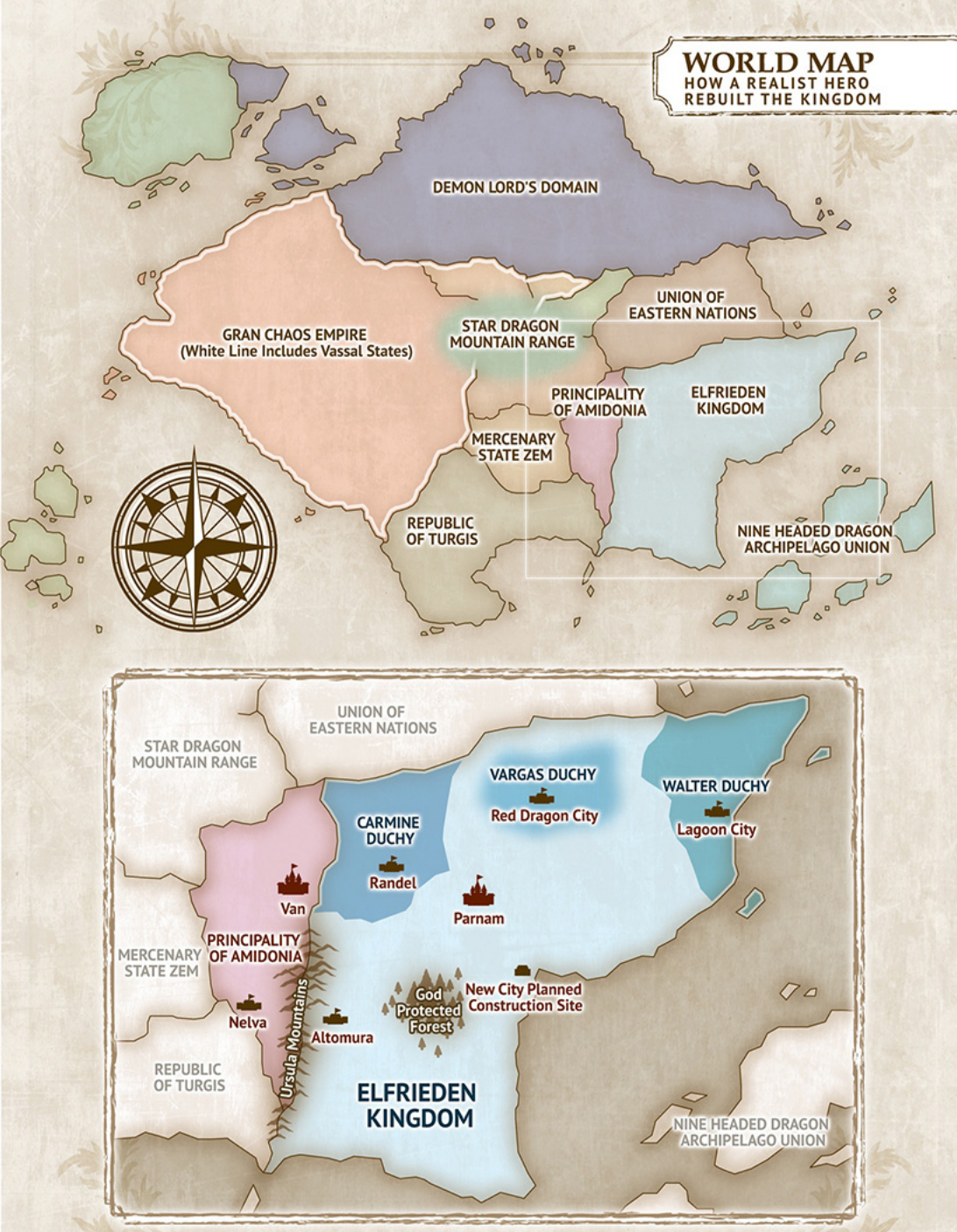

HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM
II
Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki


"I WILL DEFEAT YOU AND DESTROY THE KINGDOM."
Gaius Amidonia
II
HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM
Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki
"YOU CAN DEFEND AGAINST THAT?"
"THAT MAN IS VERY POWERFUL."
Souma Kazuya
Carla Vargas


I AM ARMY GENERAL GEORG CARMINE.
Georg Carmine
I'M AIR FORCE GENERAL CASTOR VARGAS.
Castor Vargas
Issuing an Ultimatum to the Three Dukes
I AM THE PROVISIONAL KING, SOUMA KAZUYA.
I AM EXCEL WALTER, AT YOUR SERVICE.
Excel Walter


WORLD MAP
HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM
DEMON LORD'S DOMAIN
UNION OF EASTERN NATIONS
GRAN CHAOS EMPIRE
(White Line Includes Vassal States)
STAR DRAGON MOUNTAIN RANGE
PRINCIPALITY OF AMIDONIA
ELFRIEDEN KINGDOM
MERCENARY STATE ZEM
REPUBLIC OF TURGIS
NINE HEADED DRAGON ARCHIPELAGO UNION
UNION OF EASTERN NATIONS
STAR DRAGON MOUNTAIN RANGE
VARGAS DUCHY
Red Dragon City
WALTER DUCHY
Lagoon City
CARMINE DUCHY
Randel
Van
Parnam
PRINCIPALITY OF AMIDONIA
MERCENARY STATE ZEM
New City Planned Construction Site
God Protected Forest
Nelva
Altomura
Ursula Mountains
REPUBLIC OF TURGIS
ELFRIEDEN KINGDOM
NINE HEADED DRAGON ARCHIPELAGO UNION

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Prologue to the Post-war Period



Prologue: On Your Side

"Liscia, hold these documents for me," Souma said.

"...Okay. Got it," I responded.

Lately, Souma had been acting strangely.

As I took the stack of documents from Souma, a thought occurred to me.

Recently, Souma had been working on paperwork with even greater zeal and enthusiasm than before. It was as if we'd returned to that time shortly after my father had abdicated the throne to him. He shouldn't have been as busy now as he was back then, but it seemed to me as if he was seeking out work and packing in more of it than he reasonably could.

And yet, when he suddenly found himself with free time, he didn't do anything in particular, just stared vacantly out the window. Before, when he'd had free time, he would have come to my room and worked on dolls, or on cute outfits to dress Tomoe up in, but he didn't even do that lately.

I watched Souma silently processing documents.

The change was a subtle one, and I was sure that hardly anyone else in the castle would have noticed it.

I started to speak.

"...Hm? Is something the matter?" Having noticed my eyes on him, Souma looked up.

I said, "...No. It's nothing." With just those words, I turned around and walked out of the governmental affairs office.

"Ah! Hey, Liscia."

I could hear Souma's voice from behind me, but I couldn't bring myself to turn back. Or, rather, I couldn't bear to look at Souma as he was now.

That night, Juna Doma came to my room.

"So, Princess, His Majesty's behavior is strange... that was what you wanted to talk about, right?" she asked, tilting her head to the side questioningly.

I had called out to her as she was preparing for a Jewel Voice Broadcast program, and I had her come back to my room when the broadcast finished. I was grateful that, when I told Juna that there was something strange about the way Souma had been acting, she had come with me, despite the late hour.

"Have a seat, Juna." I sat on the bed, gesturing for Juna to sit next to me.

"Excuse me," Juna said, taking her seat next to me.

I got down to business. "I don't know how to say it... He seems distracted. Sometimes it seems he's more absorbed in his work than ever, but the next thing I know, his head is off in the clouds and he's staring vacantly outside."

"...I see. I think I can understand, if only a little." Perhaps Juna had some insight as to what was going on, because she nodded with a mysterious look on her face. "I've seen the same. When I had a meeting with His Majesty about our broadcast program, his mind seemed to be elsewhere. Though, I couldn't tell you how long he's been like this."

“I think it’s been since we came back from the God-Protected Forest,” I said.

It had been just two weeks ago. A landslide had struck the home of the dark elves, the God-Protected Forest, which was also the homeland of Souma’s bodyguard, Aisha Udgard. Souma had led the unit he was with at the time to carry out a relief effort.

When notice of the disaster arrived, I had been asked to come back to the capital to call in reinforcements, so I hadn’t personally participated in the rescue operation. Souma, however, had been there with Halbert, Kaede, and the other Forbidden Army soldiers, carrying out relief operations in that hellscape of a disaster zone.

I felt like that was the point when Souma had started acting strangely. “Maybe it was after that relief effort that he started to act strangely, after all…”

“But I heard that His Majesty accomplished a great deal while he was there,” Juna said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I think he did a good job there, too.”

I’d heard that he’d used his ability, Living Poltergeists, to control wooden mice and had had them search under the dirt and sand, helping to find many people who’d been buried alive. However…

“But that’s not how Souma feels about it. Maybe it’s because he saw so many bodies, he thinks, ‘Couldn’t I have handled things better?’”

“I don’t think it’s bad, in and of itself, for him to think that way, though…” Juna had a complicated expression on her face.

It was important to reflect on things. However, excessive reflection could lead to self-hatred, and that would be counterproductive.

“That’s exactly why I want you to encourage him for me.” I took Juna’s hand, placing my own over it.

Juna's eyes went wide. "Y-You want... me to?"

"You're about the only person I can ask to do something like this. Aisha's still in the God-Protected Woods, and Tomoe's still little. Even so, if I were to ask Mother or Serina, they aren't close enough with him."

"But, if that's the case, wouldn't you yourself be an even better choice to do it, Princess?" she asked. "The two of you are betrothed, and I can see that you're concerned for him."

"I... can't be the one," I said, lowering my eyes. "I'm younger than Souma, so he probably thinks, 'As a man, I don't want to show her my weaknesses.' When he's in front of me, Souma puts up a strong front."

"...I'm the same age as His Majesty, too, you realize?'

"You may be the same age, but the way you act is more mature," I said. "I think you would do a fine job of indulging a young boy who's trying to put up a strong front."

As I sat up straight, Juna bowed her head.

"That's why, Juna," I finished. "That's why I'm asking you to take care of Souma for me."



“Princess... I understand. I may not be of much help, but allow me to do all that I can,” Juna said, bringing a hand to her chest and nodding.

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After leaving Liscia’s chambers, Juna went to the governmental affairs office, which doubled as Souma’s room. Things were hectic here during the day, with all the bureaucrats coming and going, but late at night, it was quiet enough to make the memory of all that daytime hustle and bustle seem like a lie.

Two guards who were there to protect Souma stood on either side of the door.

Right, Aisha isn’t here, Juna thought. *That’s to be expected, considering...*

It wasn’t the case that Aisha stayed by Souma’s side 24-7, but she was with him often enough that it felt unnatural to not see her there protecting him.

Juna walked up to the door, giving a slight nod to the guards. Perhaps Liscia had already spoken to the guards, as they made no attempt to stop Juna.

It’s a bit late to bring it up it now, but it’s a rather bold move for the princess to be sending a lady to her betrothed’s chambers late at night...

After leaving a man and woman alone at night, what did she intend to do if “something” were to happen? Did she believe nothing would happen? Or was it that, even if “something” were to happen, she was prepared to accept it if that cheered Souma up?

...Somehow, I get the sense that it’s the latter.

Juna let out a sigh of admiration. Lately, when she looked to Liscia,

there were times when she could see a queenly dignity in her. When her sudden betrothal to Souma had first been decided, there had been some awkwardness between the two of them, but now she seemed to have accepted the reality of the situation.

She's truly a magnificent individual.

For each day she spent with Souma, Liscia grew a little more attractive as a woman. Someday she would make a splendid queen, as well as a good wife and a wise mother. Juna couldn't help but respect her as a fellow woman.

The princess asked this of me, personally. I, too, must do my duty.

Firming up her resolve a little more, she gently knocked on the door to the governmental affairs office, and called, "Your Majesty, it is Juna Doma. Are you still awake?"

She kept her voice low enough that, were he already asleep, she would not disturb him.

"Juna? Come in," she heard Souma say from inside the room.

When Juna opened the door with a "Pardon me," and entered, she found Souma looking through some paperwork by candlelight. Souma laid the document down on the desk, turning a somewhat wearied smile to Juna.

"What is it, so late at night? Are you sleeping over at the castle?"

"Ah... Yes, I am," Juna said. "It's been decided that I'll be staying in the princess's room tonight."

"Having a girls-only party? That sounds like fun."

When he gave her that frank and unguarded response, while Juna may not have been lying, she still felt guilty. "No... Anyway, what are you up to, sire? I had heard you were finished with your government work for the day."

“Ah, I did lie down to go to bed... But I just couldn’t get to sleep, so I started looking through the papers I was going to go over tomorrow. I figured, maybe it would help me feel a little more sleepy,” Souma said, glancing to the stack of papers on his desk. Juna could see the tiredness in his expression.

“Could it be... You’re not sleeping, lately?” Juna asked.

Souma scratched his head a little awkwardly. “My body’s tired, but my mind just won’t let me get to sleep, you know. When I close my eyes and try to sleep, I end up thinking about all sorts of things. About everything I’ve done, about everything there still is to do, about whether the decisions I’ve made were right, about whether the decisions I’m going to make are right... It all whirls around inside my head, and I just can’t get to sleep.” Souma gave a weak laugh.

Juna remembered that ever since Souma had been summoned to this world, he had been forced to carry many heavy burdens: getting the country back on its feet, resolving the food crisis, and providing relief to the disaster area. Any one of these would have been too heavy for Souma, who had been a student until just recently. And now, this time, he needed to find a solution to the friction between him and the three dukes, along with the problem of the Principality of Amidonia’s maneuvering in the shadows.

All that pressure must have been keeping him up at night. When that occurred to her...

“Oh! ...Pardon me, a moment.” Juna took Souma’s hand and had him stand up.

“Huh? Hold on, what?” he stumbled.

Paying no mind to the flustered Souma, Juna pulled him by the hand, tugging him over to the simple bed set up in a corner of the room, then pushing him down on it with a thud. As Souma lay there, eyes wide, having just been laid down on the bed, Juna spoke to him in a quiet tone.

“Please, sleep.”

“Huh? J-Juna?”

“Please, just sleep.” Juna, who always wore a warm smile, had an unusual expression on her face. It was like one she might use to scold a naughty little brother, stern, yet at the same time full of concern for the person she was talking to. “I know things are difficult, but please take care of yourself. Princess Liscia is worried, too.”

“Liscia is?” he asked.

“Yes. She saw right through your front, sire. She knew something was wrong, and sent me here. She asked me to do my best to indulge you.”

“...Well, darn.” Souma looked up at the ceiling, a wry grin on his face. “I had thought... I was working hard and doing my best, you know...”

“You *are* working hard, sire. However, you work too hard.” Juna sat down on the edge of the bed, resting a hand on Souma’s forehead. He could feel Juna’s cool hand robbing his forehead of warmth. While enjoying that pleasant sensation, Souma closed his eyes.

As she watched Souma, Juna began to sing quietly:

Go to sleep, for tonight. Sleep until tomorrow.

When you wake, walk.

When you tire, sleep.

The longer you walk, the more hands there will be to support you.

It wasn’t a song from Souma’s world, but a lullaby from this one. A song mothers sang to children who had learned to walk. A song that

prayed that they would walk a lot, sleep a lot, and grow up healthy. However, the line “The longer you walk, the more hands there will be to support you” touched Souma’s heart, bringing forth tears.

Souma put his arm over his eyes, hiding them. “...Sorry. For letting you see me look so uncool.”

Juna smiled. “It’s okay for you to whine now. Because I, too, am on your side.”

As she said that, she gently stroked Souma’s head.

“I can understand why you don’t want to look bad in front of the princess,” she told him, letting her gentle voice stroke Souma’s ears. “It’s because of those feelings that you’re able to work hard and try to be strong. However, when you grow tired from that, call me. On the nights you can’t sleep, let me be there to sing for you.”

Not long after, Juna heard his shallow breaths as he drifted off to sleep. His body and mind were both more than exhausted enough for it. He must have fallen asleep the moment his heart had been set at ease.

Juna rose from the bed, checked that Souma was fully asleep, and pulled a blanket over him. Then, she headed for the door to make a silent departure, reached for the handle, and... suddenly, she stopped. Juna made a U-turn back to the bed, and pulling the hair hanging over her ear back, she brought her face to Souma’s ear and quietly whispered:

It’s okay. I am on your side. If the princess brings out your strengths, then I will hide your weakness.



Chapter 1: A Sign

In the middle of the 9th month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar.

In Elfrieden, where the four seasons were especially distinct, even compared to the other continental nations, the lingering heat of summer had faded and it was now a more temperate season. The season of bountiful harvests, when this country's food crisis was expected to be resolved. Even with that season lying before them, there was still an air of unease hanging over the kingdom.

The source of that unease lay in the opposition between the new king, Souma Kazuya, and the three dukes.

Souma, who was said to have been summoned from another world as a hero, had had his potential recognized by the former king, Albert Elfrieden, who had then ceded the throne to him. With support from the daughter of the former king, Liscia, who became Souma's betrothed, Souma moved to enrich the state and strengthen the military. He gathered a diverse variety of gifted personnel, solved the food crisis, set up a transportation network, and got involved in disaster prevention. It all might have been a little plain for one called a hero, but his stable reign had the support of the populace.

The three dukes, on the other hand, were the three people who controlled the kingdom's land, air and sea forces.

General of the Elfrieden Kingdom Army, Duke Georg Carmine, who was a lion beastman.

Admiral of the Elfrieden Kingdom Navy, Duchess Excel Walter,

who was a sea serpent.

General of the Elfrieden Kingdom Air Force, Duke Castor Vargas, who was a dragonewt.

These three had protected the kingdom for many long years, but they were still not loyal to the new king, Souma, and they had taken their forces and were secluding themselves in their own territories. It was unclear what each of their intentions were, but of the three dukes, Army General Carmine had given shelter to nobles being investigated by Souma for corruption, and he was taking a clearly defiant stance.

The new King Souma and Army General Georg Carmine.

People believed it was only a matter of time before the two came into conflict.

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"Listen, Souma," Liscia told me. "In this world's wars, it's coordination between the land and air forces that's important."

It was a day that, with things gradually growing chilly, you could really feel that it was now autumn. On this day, I was having Liscia teach me about wars in this world. As the inevitable conflict with Georg, who was sheltering corrupt nobles, and Amidonia, who were maneuvering in the shadows, drew ever closer, I wanted to at least have a sense for what the flow of battle would be like.

Of course, as a total amateur, I wouldn't be commanding troops. When the war came, I would probably end up leaving control of my personal forces, the Forbidden Army, to the Captain of the Royal Guard, Ludwin. Even so, as the king, and thus the one who had to decide whether or not to open hostilities, I felt I should know these things, and so I was having Liscia teach me.

Though she was royalty, she had graduated from the Officers' Academy and was knowledgeable enough on military matters that

Ludwin had said of her, “While she lacks the experience to lead a large army, she has courage, and would have no trouble leading a smaller army.”

...Honestly, I just wanted a rough outline of how a skirmish would go, so she could have kept it simple, but Liscia was too serious for that. She had even prepared a blackboard to draw diagrams on as she explained things, turning this into something like a lecture at officers’ school.

Liscia drew two circles on the board, labeling them “Our Army” and “Enemy Army.” She also wrote the words “land force” and “air force” in both circles.

Here, I should caution you about one thing. What was meant by a “land force” or “air force” here was different from what you would expect on Earth. The wars in this world were still fought by knights in armor, so if you were looking at just the style, it was similar to the Hundred Years’ War. However, in this world, there was magic and there were fantastic creatures like wyverns.

In the land forces there weren’t just infantry, cavalry, and archers, there were also mages. And as for the air force, it wasn’t made up of fighter planes, it was made up of wyvern knights, who fought on the backs of great flying lizards. Because of that, the flow of battle naturally ended up being different than on Earth.

“I’m not familiar with naval battles, so this will only cover land battles, okay?” Liscia said. “First, in a field battle, the air and land forces of both camps will begin to fight at practically the same time.”

Liscia first drew arrows from the two land forces and had them ram into one another.

“The battle between land forces is orthodox. It starts with long-range fire from archers and mages, and then, when the enemy formation breaks, infantry advance and push in. Knights and cavalry look for openings, charging in small numbers to disrupt the enemy’s formation, or massing in larger numbers to charge the enemy,

followed by infantry, in order to tear the enemy unit apart. We call the former tactic 'cutting,' and the latter 'breaking.' That's probably pretty similar to the battles in your world, right?"

"...Well, we don't hurl spells back and forth, but aside from that, I think it's the same," I said.

Somehow, it called to mind memories of watching the battle scenes in the *Taiga* drama series.

It started with an exchange of fire using the matchlock rifle and bow and arrow. Then, when the ashigaru foot soldiers were given the order to charge, they advanced through rifle fire, even as they were shot down, to reach the enemy's fence. Because it was hard to use ranged weapons to deal with enemies once they were allowed to close in, the defenders would send out their own unit of ashigaru soldiers, and from there the two units of ashigaru would slug it out. Because this world hadn't developed firearms, it might be easiest to think of magic as a replacement for matchlocks.

Next, Liscia drew arrows from the two air forces, having them ram into one another, too.

"And, at the same time as the two land forces are colliding, the air forces will crash into one another, too. If they can seize the airspace over the battlefield, the wyvern cavalry can fly at altitudes that arrows can't reach to drop gunpowder barrels (a sort of bomb), after all."

"That's... brutal," I said.

It was like... the fear and the pain that came from being punched, with no way to fight back.

"In that case, is the key to victory or defeat in battle held by the air force, then?" I asked.

"No," she said. "The battle between air forces almost never decides the outcome of a battle."

“Huh? But, just now, you said if you can gain control of the air, you can attack without there being any way for them to fight back...”

“Yes, I did. Which is precisely why the primary goal of the air battle is not to gain control of the air, but to keep the other side from gaining control of the air.”

Next, Liscia wrote “1,000” next to the air force of our army and “500” next to the enemy’s.

“Wyvern knights are only a small fraction of the overall army. In the Elfrieden Kingdom, there are 1,000 knights, and in the Principality of Amidonia, around 500 knights. Now, hearing that, you might think in a straight up fight, our side would win, but the enemy know they’re at a numerical disadvantage. They won’t actively try to go on the offensive: they’re going to stick purely to defense. If we try to force the attack, we’ll take heavier losses. It takes a lot of time to raise a single wyvern knight, so we don’t want to take those losses.”

“Ah, I think I’ve got a sense of it. Basically, in a field battle, the air force’s job is to guard the air until the battle between the two land forces is decided, right?”

“You’ve got it. ...Well, if our air force is considerably more powerful than the other country’s, there are times when things can be decided by just the air battle, though.”

Liscia turned to the map of the continent on the blackboard and pointed to the big country on the western edge, the Gran Chaos Empire. Then she pointed to the Star Dragon Mountain Range in the center, and to the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom in the north.

“The Gran Chaos Empire has air force units that are organized not around wyverns, but another type of mount called griffons.”

“When you say Griffons... they’re the ones with the head of an eagle, and a body that’s like a lion with wings, right?”

“Yeah,” she said. “They can’t fly continuously for as long as

wyverns do, but they can make tight turns in mid-air, and they can overpower wyverns in a fight. On top of that, the Empire has a large number of wyverns, too. That makes them dangerous."

From what I was hearing, wyverns were like bombers, while griffons were like fighters. Both had strengths and weaknesses depending on how they were used, but when it came to a battle, fighters, which could make tighter turns, would be the stronger of the two. While I was sitting there satisfied with my own explanation, Liscia continued on.

"Next, the Star Dragon Mountain Range and Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom have dragons."

"Now that you mention it... I think I heard about them when we found the dragon bones at the sedimentation pool," I said.

Dragons had a degree of magical power that was incomparably higher than what wyverns had, they were intelligent, they understood human language, and apparently they could even take on human form. While they didn't fall under the classification of mankind, they had a pact of mutual non-aggression with mankind and had built a country of their own in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. In terms of appearance, while wyverns had wings in place of their forelegs, like pterosaurs, dragons had wings, but they also had front legs and back legs, looking more like the Western conception of dragons on Earth.

"North of the Star Dragon Mountain, in the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, there are dragon knights who've formed contracts with dragons from the Star Dragon Mountain Range," Liscia said. "A dragon knight takes a dragon as their partner, and in exchange for helping them to produce offspring, the dragon lends them their strength on the battlefield. Basically, they get married to the dragons."

"Hmm... Can I think of them like an upgraded version of the wyvern cavalry?" I asked.

"They're similar, but dragon knights are an order of magnitude more powerful. When a dragon and its knight become husband and

wife, they're in perfect sync with one another. Even 1,000 soldiers from the land force would be no match for them. I hear they even managed to turn back an invasion by the Empire when it was at its peak once, even with the Empire's griffon units."

"Well... they definitely have the strongest air force, then," I said.

So they went into battle like a married couple running a three-legged race... No, in their case, I guess it would be a five-legged race.

By the way, dragonewts, like Air Force General Castor Vargas, were a race born from the union between those dragons and their knights. When a child was born to a dragon and knight, it might be a dragon, it might belong to the knight's race, or it might be a dragonewt. There was no way to predict which it would be. It was totally random. On the other hand, a dragon couldn't be born from a dragonewt. And if a dragonewt married someone of another race, there was a 50-50 chance a dragonewt would be the result, so they were fairly numerous.

"Wait, huh? Why did we start talking about this again?" I asked.

"Because we were talking about how it's hard for wyvern cavalry to be the deciding factor in battle, remember?" Liscia stared at me, appalled.

Oh, right, right, that was it.

Next, Liscia drew a picture of a castle on the blackboard. "That's a trend that becomes especially apparent in castle battles. At first glance, you might think the air force could fly over castle walls, directly attacking the castle and town, but it's actually impossible."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because there are what you could call air force killers, anti-air repeating bolt throwers, installed on the castle walls."

According to Liscia, from practically the moment wyvern knights

first came into this world, there had been research into countermeasures against them. That was because, if the wyvern knights were allowed to fly over the walls as they pleased, it was a threat to the security of the state.

In order to counter the wyvern cavalry, the anti-air repeating bolt thrower had been invented.

Inside a large rectangular box, there were small compartments, like a honeycomb, and in each of them was a thick, stake-like bolt. The bolts had their flying distance extended with attached spells, and they would also trace anything moving in the air. The anti-air repeating bolt thrower could fire dozens of these bolts simultaneously.

If any wyvern knight carelessly got too close to the wall, the bolts fired by the anti-air repeating bolt throwers would attack them like homing missiles.

"That's why, in order to bomb a city, it's first necessary to attack the castle walls from ground-level and destroy the bolt throwers," Liscia explained. "Up until that point, the air force's job is just to guard the air above the land force."

"I see... castle battles are like a three-way deadlock," I said.

Land forces were beaten by air forces, air forces were beaten by bolt throwers, and bolt throwers were beaten by ground forces. It was because of those inter-related strengths and weaknesses that Liscia said coordination between the air and land forces was important. Basically...

"Setting aside the navy for the moment, in the present situation, where we don't have a land or air force, if the Principality of Amidonia were to invade, we would have no way to deal with them, huh?"

Liscia was silent.

The Elfrieden kingdom had a total manpower of around 100,000

troops.

To break that down, the king's personal army, the Forbidden Army, had over 40,000.

40,000 in the army, led by Duke Georg Carmine.

10,000 in the navy, led by Duchess Excel Walter.

1,000 in the air force, led by Duke Castor Vargas.

First, when it came to the king's personal army, the Forbidden Army, in reality only around 10,000 of those troops could be mobilized. Publicly, the Forbidden Army was said to be more than 40,000 strong, but those numbers had included mercenaries dispatched by the mercenary state, Zem, as well as the personal forces of nobles not attached to the army, navy, or air force.

Of those, I had already terminated our contract with the Zemish mercenaries. This was partly to save expenses, and partly because of Machiavelli's advice against trusting mercenaries. On top of that, while things might be different in a battle against Amidonia, in the upcoming conflict between myself and the three dukes, many among the nobility were going to be fair-weather allies. If it actually came to war against the three dukes, I probably wouldn't be able to count on using their personal forces.

As such, the number of troops I could deploy would be only 10,000 or so, made up of the royal guard and the forces I controlled directly.

My directly-controlled army was almost entirely made up of infantry (800 members of the royal guard were heavy cavalry), but because I had put them to work on infrastructure projects recently, all of them also had the skills required to be combat engineers. Furthermore, in my personal forces, there were also 500 earth mages like Kaede.

Now, as for the three dukes, if I were to give you the quick rundown, this is what it looked like.

First, there were the 10,000 in the navy. Most of these were the crew of battleships, cruisers, destroyers, or torpedo boats. There were only about 2,000 marines who could go ashore and fight. So, even if we had to fight them, because it would be on land, they weren't much of a threat.

However, their admiral, Duchess Excel Walter, warranted caution.

She was an incredible woman, possessing not only wisdom and courage, but political savvy as well. I'd heard that she had overcome the food crisis that had struck the whole kingdom using her own independent plan. If I made an enemy of her, she would probably come up with surprising ways to take advantage of my weaknesses, even from outside the battlefield. Personally, of the three dukes, she was the one I least wanted to make an enemy of.

In contrast, the air force had a leader who would be easy to handle, and soldiers who would be dangerous to fight.

Each of their soldiers generally came paired with a wyvern, and there were around 1,000 of these wyvern cavalry. Wyvern knights were every bit as strong as Liscia had explained earlier. With the Forbidden Army having only a few wyverns used for relaying messages, it would be hard to fight them straight up.

Air Force General Castor Vargas was a dragonewt, and it was no exaggeration to say that he was a peerless warrior. Also, being a dragonewt, even without a wyvern he could fly using his own wings. He was hot-blooded, impulsive, and had a distaste for using any sort of petty tricks. While his actions would be easy to read, he had a tendency to put his beliefs before his own interests, so if I were to attempt to persuade him based on what was to his advantage... he was the one that would be least likely to work on.

Finally, we were left with the 40,000 in the land forces, but both the general and his troops were going to be troublesome.

While the simple number of soldiers they had was already impressive, their equipment and overall quality was like an upgraded

version of what I saw in the Forbidden Army and my directly-controlled forces. In addition to infantry and cavalry, there was also a siege weapon unit, and the firepower provided by their fire mages would be on another level. This was truly an army built to play the main role in a war.

The man leading this army corps, General Georg Carmine, was a fierce commander and veteran of many battles.

While his martial prowess was no less than Castor's, he didn't just rely on that. He was the rare warrior who could make level-headed decisions backed up by past experience. Honestly, I didn't want to make an enemy of him any more than I did Duchess Walter, but... It didn't look like he had any intention of backing down. He had sheltered the nobles I was investigating for corruption, and was clearly positioning himself for a confrontation.

From what I had been told by Hal's father, Glaive Magna, there were many nobles and knights in the army faction who had left Duke Carmine over doubts about the position he was taking, but his forces were bolstered by the personal soldiers of the corrupt nobles he was sheltering as well as Zemish mercenaries that he had hired, so there was no real change in the numbers.

40,000 in the army vs. 10,000 in the Forbidden Army.

If fought, the enemy would have four times our number.

"Four times our number... Those are numbers where Sun Tzu would say to either flee or avoid the battle," I said.

"Sun Tzu?" Liscia asked.

"A military strategist from my old world."

The name Sun Tzu refers to Sun Wu (He wrote *The Art of War*), who served the King of Wu during the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history, or to his descendent, Sun Bin (He wrote *Sun Bin's Art of War*), who served King Wei of Qi during the Warring States

period. They were both excellent strategists, and *The Art of War* and *Sun Bin's Art of War* are both excellent books on military strategy.

When I explained that to her, Liscia looked at me dubiously.

"Souma, you were a student, right? Were you reading books on military strategy?"

"Yeah, because I liked history," I said. "It was related to my interest in that."

I had especially liked reading *Records of the Grand Historian, Romance of the Three Kingdoms,* and books about the Warring States Period in Japan. As an offshoot of that, I had read both *The Art of War* and *Sun Bin's Art of War* because both Sun Tzus appear as characters in *Records of the Grand Historian*.

If you read them, they're actually quite interesting. Like Machiavelli, they lived in turbulent times, and in their work they accepted that "This is just the way humans are," and so they discussed how best to deal with the unending wars.

Both became famous through war, but that wasn't to say that they were bellicose men. Both of them spoke against easily resorting to war. Sun Wu had said, "To break the enemy's resistance without fighting is best" (in Sun Wu's "Strategic Attack") and when giving council to King Wei, Sun Bin had said, "War is not a place for merriment" (in Sun Bin's "Meeting King Wei").

However, in a chaotic world, such platitudes wouldn't always be enough. If you didn't defend, didn't attack, the result would be that people died.

Both Sun Tzus understood that. Sun Bin said, "Even the great rulers of legend wanted to rule by morals, but they couldn't do that. That was why they had to subjugate evil kings by means of war."

It's important to separate ideals from reality, and to do the things that, realistically, you ought to do.

“Even if I don’t want to do it, I have to,” I said. “Because I’m the king now.”

“Huh?! Souma...!” Liscia began to say.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I called out, and my adopted little sister-in-law, Tomoe, poked her head out from the shadow of the door.

“Big Brother Souma, Hakuya is calling for you,” she said.

It seemed that Tomoe had been sent by my prime minister, Hakuya, to come and call me.

“Hakuya is?” I asked. “Got it. Well then, Liscia, please teach me the rest next time.”

After making that request to Liscia, I left the room to go see Hakuya.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Um... Is something wrong, Big Sister?” Tomoe asked.

As I stared vacantly at the door Souma had left through, my adopted sister spoke up, sounding concerned.

Oh, that’s no good, I thought. *I can’t go worrying such a little girl...*

“It’s just... There was something that bothered me...” I said.

“Something bothered you?” Tomoe tilted her head to the side quizzically. She looked adorable the way she did it, which helped to calm me down a little bit.

“...You see, Souma, he said, ‘Because I’m the king now.’”

“Big Brother Souma *is* the king of this country, you know?” she

said.

"Well, yes, but..."

But... I didn't think that the Souma I had known up until then would ever have said those words.

Up until just recently, he'd said things like "I'm just holding onto the crown temporarily," or "Once I've finished reconstructing this kingdom, I'll give it back to you, Liscia." Like I'd thought, taking part in the relief effort at the God-Protected Forest might have caused Souma to have a change of heart. Of course, I wanted Souma to be the king, and if he'd gained an awareness of his position, it should have been a good thing, but...

But, I don't know... For some reason, there's an uneasiness in my heart.

I couldn't put it into words very well. There was a sort of premonition creeping into my breast. It felt as if Souma was slowly turning into someone he wasn't.

"Big Sister? Is Big Brother Souma strange?" Tomoe was looking at me worriedly again.

It seemed I'd had a gloomy look on my face again. I patted Tomoe on the head. "It'll all be okay. Souma's not alone. He has all of us with him, after all."

"Yes, he does!" Tomoe's little wolf tail was wagging about energetically.

...Yes, that's right. No matter what future awaits...

...I will walk alongside you to the very end, Souma.



Chapter 2: The Casts of Two Nations

—9th Month, 1,546th Year, Continental Calendar — Princely Capital Van.

The city of Van, in the princely capital of the Principality of Amidonia, was surrounded by high castle walls, and its architecture was without stylistic excess or ornamentation. Put in a flattering light, it could have been called austere and rugged. Termed less favorably, it was dull and monotonous. The unrefined scenery of this town closely resembled the people who inhabited it.

This country, which had lost land in a war with Elfrieden two reigns ago, had made revenge on that kingdom a national policy. What they valued above all else was the warrior ethos. Of their men, they demanded austerity. Of their women, they demanded servility to those men, as well as a feminine modesty. Because of that, there were no men laughing in the streets and no women promenading in fashionable outfits.

That was the nature of the “quiet city” Van, but recently there was a strange giddiness in the air. It had started when their neighboring country, the enemy Kingdom of Elfrieden, had gone through a sudden change of leadership.

In the 1,546th year of the Continental Calendar, King Albert of Elfrieden had abdicated his throne.

Albert, the now-former king, had been a mediocre individual, but owing to his gentle nature, he had been respected by his vassals and

the people. However, also owing to this gentleness, he had not implemented the drastic policies that would have rooted out the corruption of wicked vassals. Thanks to this and a variety of other, overlapping causes, the kingdom had fallen into a slow decline.

This Albert had turned over his throne to a hero said to have been summoned from another world.

The hero was apparently named Souma Kazuya.

At the same time as Albert had entrusted the throne to Souma, he had also arranged for the betrothal of his only daughter Liscia to the new king, ensuring Souma's hold on power. This Souma, who the throne had been turned over to, had yet to be formally crowned, but he was, in effect, the king, and had embarked on a series of political reforms.

With this sudden change of kings, there had been those who had suspected usurpation at first, but, with the support of Liscia, he had righted the wrongs of his vassals, gathered new personnel, improved the food security situation during a time of shortages, and installed a domestic transportation network to boost shipping capacity. With the steady implementation of these policies and more, Souma was gathering the support of the people. For a hero he was rather plain, but as a king, he was a superb. That was the people's appraisal of him.

However, Souma's reign was not to be smooth sailing in all aspects.

First, the three dukes who controlled the land, air, and sea forces of Elfrieden (there was also a force other than these, the Forbidden Army, which served the king directly) had still not sworn loyalty to Souma.

The lion beastman who was General of the Army, Georg Carmine.

The sea serpent who was Admiral of the Navy, Excel Walter.

The dragonewt who was General of the Air Force, Castor Vargas.

Ever since the change of kings, these three had taken their armies and secluded themselves in their own territories.

Because this was all taking place in another country, their exact intentions remained unknown, but it was clear that their relations with Souma were strained. In particular, there were rumors that the general of the army, Georg Carmine, had been gathering forces in his territory, making his position in opposition to Souma clear.

In addition, the nobles who had been investigated by Souma for corruption were pushing back against him.

Those engaged in serious wrongdoing had been stripped of their titles and had their lands and assets seized. Those whose crimes were even more severe were to be jailed or otherwise punished.

The corrupt nobles were not happy about this and had attempted to take their assets and flee the country. However, the borders had already been sealed, and, with no other alternative, they had gathered under Georg Carmine, who was in open opposition to Souma.

Thus, with the discord between Souma and the three dukes rising to the surface, the citizens of Amidonia were in high spirits. There were plausible rumors that King Souma had begun to raise troops to subjugate the three dukes who would not step back from their rebellious position. The kingdom was experiencing a conflict between the king and his vassals.

This was a situation that had the Principality of Amidonia watering at the mouth. It looked like an unparalleled chance to pursue their national goals, to “reclaim our stolen land” and “take revenge against that kingdom.”

Because of that, among not only the soldiers but the general populace as well, the overwhelming consensus was that: “Now is the time to invade the kingdom!”

In this militaristic state, the army came first and the lives of the

people second. Priority was given to the military when funding was handed out, meaning that the people did not become more prosperous. Of course, there must have been discontent from this, but the people were taught that "all of our suffering is the fault of the Elfrieden Kingdom, who stole our land."

Rather than direct their anger towards the politicians or the army, instead they directed it at the Kingdom of Elfrieden. No matter how badly they were misgoverned, it was always that kingdom's fault. From a statesman's perspective, there could be no situation that was more ideal.

Furthermore, this belief that "that kingdom is responsible for our difficult lives" led naturally to a belief that "our lives will become better if we can defeat the kingdom." That was precisely why, given this seemingly-ideal opportunity, there was growing momentum to invade the kingdom.

Having caught wind of that momentum, bold words could be heard on every street corner.

"Finally, the time has come for us to fight that kingdom!"

"That's right! We will bide our time no longer!"

"The brave and manly Lord Gaius will never lose to that whelp!"

"A war, huh..."

While many people were spoiling for a fight, there were also those who felt uncertain about the war that seemed to be drawing closer. They feared that they themselves, their homes, or their families might get caught up in it.

However, right now, the public sentiment in this country wouldn't allow them to voice those worries. They had no choice but to suppress their anxiety, entrusting themselves to the flow.

One person silently watched the people from the shadows of an

alleyway.

This person was wearing an ochre robe, the hood covering their head entirely, so it was not possible to see their expression. However, they were of slight build and stood less than 160 cm tall. The person sighed at the way the people of the city were acting, and then walked off at a brisk pace.

The person was heading towards a shop. From the goods in the show window, it seemed to sell men's apparel. The sign out front read "The Silver Deer."

The person entered the shop, and the moment they drew back their hood, two braided twintails appeared. The hood had been hiding the adorable face of a young girl.

Next, a middle-aged man with graying hair who was dressed like a bartender emerged from the back. This man had a gentlemanly demeanor and upon seeing the young girl, he greeted her with a "Welcome back."

"What did you think, Lady Roroa?" he added. "How did things look in town?"

"There ain't no two ways about it, Sebastian... it's terrible," the girl said.

The girl who addressed the owner of this store in merchant slang (a fake Kansai dialect) was the first princess of Amidonia, Roroa Amidonia.

"Nearly everyone's lookin' forward to the comin' war," she continued. "They're thinkin' this King Souma is young and can't keep his people in line. They haven't even thought that my old man could possibly lose."

"Lord Gaius is strong and manly, after all," the store owner said.

"He just looks rugged, that's all," said the princess. "Even if he is

strong, that's just one man."

Even though they were father and daughter, Roroa was merciless in her criticism. Between Roroa, who had great economic sense and wanted to use the money she had earned to rebuild the country, and Gaius, the militarist who wanted to pour the funds into military hardware, there was a wide divide in their ways of thinking.

It was sad to see such a gulf between parent and child, but Roroa, as the first princess of this country, found herself in a position where she had to do more than simply lament that fact. As one who stood above others, she had to take action to prepare herself for any eventuality.

Perhaps out of consideration, Sebastian asked in a friendly tone, "Well then, Lady Roroa, how do you read this Souma character?"

"I dunno," she said. "The things I'm hearin', they aren't his personal accomplishments, they're the accomplishments of his subordinates. That's why he's so hard to figure out. He does seem like a king who's good at listenin' to his vassals, though."

With those words, Roroa put her hands on her hips and groaned.

"If we're startin' a war with someone we can't get a good read on, that's dangerous. That doesn't change just because the king and the three dukes ain't gettin' along. Whether it's territory, or power, or population, the kingdom's got us beat in all three. And, of course, there's the number of soldiers they can field, too. We've got ourselves a lot of mineral resources, so the quality of our equipment's good, but... that's about all we've got goin' for us."

With Roroa giving that pessimistic assessment, Sebastian asked, "...Lady Roroa, do you believe this country will lose?"

"I told ya, I dunno," she said. "War's not my area of expertise. Still, though, what I do know is that if we lose, it's gonna be real bad for us. It ain't just the kingdom that we've gotta worry about. There's that irritatin' theocracy to our north, the Papal State of Lunaria, and

then there's the Turgis Republic, who're lookin' for any opening to advance north. We've got an alliance with the Mercenary State of Zem to our west, but I'm not sure they'll be much help for us if we end up on the back foot."

The Papal State of Lunaria was the headquarters of Lunarian Orthodoxy, a religion which stood, next to Mother Dragon worship, as one of the two largest faiths on this continent. That country was ruled by the Lunarian Orthodox Pope, who was both a temporal and religious authority, and they had a system of values that was markedly different from other countries. There were many followers of Lunarian Orthodoxy in the Principality of Amidonia, and with some agitation, it was possible the state could topple their principality.

The Turgis Republic to the south was a land of frigid cold. During the long winter, their lands were buried in snow and their seas locked with ice. Because of that, in their quest for unfrozen land and warm water ports, they were always keeping an eager eye on the north for any opportunity to expand.

The Mercenary State of Zem was a unique country. They professed eternal neutrality, yet obtained mutual security guarantees by dispatching their mercenaries to every nation. They had dispatched mercenaries to the principality as well as all the rest, but... mercenaries were motivated by profit. If their country ever found itself at a disadvantage, there was no way to know how seriously the mercenaries would take the fighting.

If the worst should happen, and they were to lose, how would these three countries react?

That was what worried Roroa.

"The sentiment that's taken hold in this country right now is the worst," Roroa said with a sigh. "There ain't nobody thinkin' about what'll happen if we lose. Even though, in the worst case scenario, we could be invaded by three of our neighbors at once."

She thought it over, then said:

"That's why I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do. Even if it means partin' ways with my old man, I have to be ready if things go south..."

As she said that, she flashed Sebastian a big smile.

"So, there ya have it, Sebastian. Help a gal out, will ya?"

"...I suppose I'll have to, won't I?" Sebastian said with a shrug, as if trying to sound very put-upon. That was the appearance he projected, but he had already resolved himself to throw his lot in with this girl. Sometimes Roroa's actions betrayed her youth, but she had a certain charm that drew people to her.

Sometimes, I think it's a pity she was born a woman... he thought.

Had Roroa been able to take the throne, might this country have become a more comfortable place to live in? Sebastian couldn't help but wonder.

As for Roroa herself, she had already moved on to thinking about the next thing.

"Well, now that that's settled, we're still short of hands," she said. "I'd like to spend a little more time looking for collaborators, I think."

"...And you have your eye on someone in particular?" Sebastian asked, having sensed something in the way Roroa spoke, and she gave him a mischievous laugh in return.

Some days later...

At his castle in the princely capital, Van, the Sovereign Prince of Amidonia, Gaius VIII, had gathered the principal military commanders of this country in the audience hall. Gaius rose from the throne, addressing the assembled commanders.

"The time is come! Let us gather our forces on the southern border

with Elfrieden!”

That was the declaration that opened the war with the Elfrieden Kingdom.

Gaius had received reports that the gulf between Souma Kazuya and one of the three dukes, Georg Carmine, had become unbridgeable, and that it was only a matter of time before the two clashed. Soon enough, the kingdom would be thrown into chaos. In that chaos, they would take back the lands stolen from them fifty years ago.

“At the same time as Georg launches his rebellion, we will begin our invasion of Elfrieden!” he announced. “Our target is the grain-producing region in the south! Now is the time to take back the lands stolen from our forefathers!”

“““Hurrah!””” The gathered commanders let out a cheer.

Finally, the time had come to take revenge for their past losses against the kingdom. These commanders, who were military men to the core, couldn’t help but feel their blood boiling and seething inside them. In that environment...

“Please, wait, Your Highness!”

...a single man spoke out in opposition, walking forward to kneel before his sovereign.

It was the young Minister of Finance, Gatsby Colbert.

With his rare sense for economics, he had been entrusted with the post of Minister of Finance despite only being a young man in his mid-twenties.

While Roroa’s talent lay in spending money to get the economy moving, Colbert specialized in eliminating wasteful spending and freeing up funds that way. While they took different approaches, these two worked together to cut what needed cutting and to spend

where spending was needed. They were the ones who were just barely keeping this country's economy from tumbling over the brink.

"Oh, it's you, Colbert." Gaius turned a stern eye on him. He was clearly displeased.

When Gaius, a man who even generals who had survived many battles feared to anger, turned that gaze on Colbert, a mere bureaucrat, Colbert began to tremble. Still, he worked up the courage to offer his advice.

"I say this with all due respect, sire," he managed. "Please, reconsider invading Elfrieden! The people of our nation are suffering from a food crisis and a poor economy! If we start a war now, our people will starve!"

"I know that," the king snapped. "That's why seizing the grain-producing region is so urgent."

"Wars require a vast expenditure on the part of the state!" Colbert protested. "If you have that much leeway in the budget, you ought to be able to import food from abroad! Rather than fight a war we don't know if we will win or lose, and which, even if we do win, we don't have any guarantee our efforts will pay off, isn't this the time when we should build our strength and..."

"Silence!" Gaius roared.

He walked over to the bureaucrat and kicked him hard enough to send the man flying.

"Urkh..."

As he looked down at Colbert sprawled out on the floor, Gaius had a look of rage on his face.

"You domestic affairs ministers always say the same thing! Work on domestic affairs, now's not the time for this, that's all I ever hear! Look where that's gotten us! It's plain to see how exhausted our

country is! Yet, in contrast to us, that kingdom, despite stagnating somewhat under the fool who was their last king, have begun to rebound with this new king coming to the throne!"

"Th-That's because... the new king, Souma, has been working to enrich his country..."

"You're still saying that?!"

Gaius kicked Colbert across the floor once again.

Perhaps he had gotten a cut in his mouth, because there was blood streaming from the corner of Colbert's lips. Even so, Colbert didn't stop speaking.

"Your Highness... The total manpower of Amidonia's army is around half that of Elfrieden's army. This is just... just too reckless a plan!"

"I know that without some lowly civil servant telling me so!" the king roared. "That's precisely why now, with the king and the three dukes in conflict, we have an opportunity!"

"Even so, there's no telling how long that will last," Colbert protested.

"Bwahaha! There's no need for concern. *The* Georg Carmine will be launching the rebellion. That young pup of a king will have no easy time subjugating him, I'm sure. Civil wars drag on for a long time. It will be the same even if Georg wins. If a traitor rises to the top, there's no way the country will stand united!"

Colbert bit his lip in frustration. *Is* that *the reason His Highness is acting so boldly?!*

Because it was Georg Carmine, one of the three dukes, and the one who was famous for being a fierce general, who was raising the flag of rebellion against Souma, that was likely pushing Gaius to act.

The truth was, there was no guarantee that an opportunity like this would ever come along again. Gaius was already 50 years old, by no means a young man. He didn't want to let this ideal chance pass by while he was still fit to stand at the head of an army and give orders.

However... It's too optimistic to think that way! Colbert thought stubbornly.

"Please, listen to me, Your Highness!" he burst out. "If you invade Elfrieden, our country will be exposed to criticism from all of the other countries! We've signed the Empire's Declaration of Mankind's Common Front Against the Demon Race!"

"...The Mankind Declaration, is it?" Here, for the first time, Gaius had a strained look.

Led by the Gran Chaos Empire, the Declaration of Mankind's Common Front Against the Demon Race (also known as the Mankind Declaration) referred to a declaration and resultant international treaty backed by the largest, most powerful empire on the continent. It stated that, in light of the expansion of the Demon Lord's Domain, all conflicts between mankind were to cease. And, in order to prevent the monsters and demons from advancing any further south, all of mankind were to work as one and cooperate.

The essentials of the Mankind Declaration were given in these three articles:

First, the acquisition of territory by force between the nations of mankind would be deemed inadmissible.

Second, the right of all peoples to equality and self-determination would be respected.

Third, countries that were distant from the Demon Lord's Domain would provide support to those nations which were adjacent to it and were acting as a defensive wall.

The second of these had been adopted to protect minority races in each country. Given that the acquisition of territory by force was inadmissible, some countries might have otherwise expelled or oppressed their minority races to try to seize their wealth for themselves. It was an extra provision that had been added in caution against that.

Furthermore, though not explicitly outlined in the text, if any country violated these three articles, the Empire, as leader of the pact, would intervene militarily.

To put it simply, this Mankind Declaration was a security treaty in which countries gave up the right to invade other nations in exchange for protection from the Empire.

Colbert pleaded: “If we invade Elfrieden, we may be inviting an intervention by the Empire! Sire, I beg of you, please, reconsider!”

“You cur!” Gaius brought his hand to the hilt of the sword hanging at his hip.

Just as everyone present was sure the man was about to be slain, someone slipped between Gaius and Colbert.

“Sir Colbert, there should be no worry of that.”

The one who had interposed himself between the two of them was the crown prince, Julius Amidonia. His cold eyes, which betrayed no emotion, were fixed on Colbert. “That is because Elfrieden has not signed the Mankind Declaration.”

“Julius... sir,” Colbert said, “that’s a specious argument! We would be taking protection under the Mankind Declaration, while at the same time attacking a country that has not yet ratified it. If we do that, it would be like kicking mud in the face of the Empire!”

“However, in diplomacy, only the treaties that have been signed are important,” Julius said coldly. “This has all been brought about by the stubborn foolishness of Elfrieden in not supporting the sublime ideals

of the Empire. Surely the Empire can find no fault with us for it."

"But..."

"Enough!" Gaius withdrew his hand from his sword's hilt, turning to address the gathered commanders. "I hereby dismiss Colbert from his position as Minister of Finance."

"Sire!" Colbert cried.

"Colbert, I am placing you under house arrest for the time being," the king snapped. "You are to watch from the sidelines. Watch as we reclaim the land of our forefathers."

With those words, Gaius led his commanders out of the audience hall without sparing so much as another glance at Colbert. Colbert stayed there for a time, biting his lip, but eventually he punched the carpet in anger, rising to his feet and confronting Julius, who had remained behind.

"Julius! Is this really... really the only path?!" he shouted.

Colbert spoke more freely, unlike when he had stood before Gaius. Partially because they were around the same age, despite their positions as crown prince and vassal, Julius and Colbert were close enough to be called friends.

In a cold tone, Julius said to Colbert, "He's right that it's a once-in-a-lifetime chance. In addition to Georg Carmine, there are many nobles who have secret ties to our country. If we coordinate with them, we should be able to slice off some land in the south for ourselves."

"But, if we lose, it could mean the death of our country," Colbert said.

"However, on the other hand, if we miss this chance, we may never be able to regain our territory. If, as you've said, the new king is working to enrich his country, doesn't that mean the gap will only

widen if we let this chance slip by?"

It was clear that Julius looked at the situation through calmer, more rational eyes than Gaius. Even so, his decision remained unchanged.

"It is the long-held wish of the Princely House of Amidonia to reclaim the lands we have lost and to exact our revenge," Julius continued. "No, it's not only the Princely House: the soldiers and the people hold that wish, as well."

"That's..."

That's because you've shown them no other option! Colbert wanted to say that, but... he couldn't. To do so would be to overstep his bounds as a vassal.

As Colbert cast his eyes downwards, at a loss for words, Julius placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Please, just stay quiet for now, Colbert. I rate your abilities quite highly. For my own sake, as the one who will someday rule this land, I would rather not lose you to Father's short temper."

"Julius..."

Colbert looked at him with clinging eyes, but Julius didn't return the emotion.

Some hours later, as the dejected Colbert dragged his feet through the corridors of the princely castle, a young girl with an adorable face poked her head out from behind one of the marble pillars.

"Hey there, Mr. Colbert. What are you lookin' so glum for?"

"Princess?! Um, that's, well..."

The one who had stepped out from behind the pillar was Roroa

Amidonia, the first princess of this country. Colbert panicked a little as he realized he'd let Roroa see him feeling down.

Roroa had had a good sense for economics from a young age and, as she'd grown up, she'd come to hang around with the owners of large businesses and the bureaucrats of the Finance Ministry increasingly often. For Colbert, who was Minister of Finance, Roroa was a compatriot who understood the ins and out of the economy. She was also something akin to a needy little sister.

"Lookin' at that face... you tried to talk some sense into my old man for me, didn't ya?" Roroa asked apologetically, looking at the bruises on Colbert's face.

"Huh? Ah, no... These are, uh..."

"No need to hide it," she said. "Sorry about my idiot father. Good grief... If he's pushin' away vassals who're tryin' to give him solid advice, he's leadin' this country straight down the road to ruin. Honestly, what is he thinkin'?"

While saying things others would have been too terrified to, Roroa made a big show of how angry she was. Colbert was satisfied just to see Roroa looking like that on his behalf.

"Thank you, princess," he said. "I'll be fine."

"You will? Well then, get yourself ready."

"Huh...? Get myself ready for what?"

Unable to keep up with this sudden turn in the conversation, Colbert blinked repeatedly.

Roroa waved her hand at him with a laugh. "The old man just gave ya all the free time in the world, so you've got nothin' to do, right? Well, maybe you can help me out with what I'm doin', then. I've already talked to all the bureaucrats who seemed amenable to it, but I could still use more people to help, after all."

“Huh? Um, princess? Just what are you planning to do?”

“That’s obvious,” she said. “We’re all gonna disappear together. Sebastian’s movin’ forward with the plans, but for now I think we’ll go stay with Uncle Herman in Nelva.”

“Huh? Whaaaaaa?!” he exclaimed.

Roroa grabbed him by the sleeve and walked off quickly, dragging Colbert behind her.

Some days later, at the same time as Gaius VIII and Julius departed from Van, there was an incident where Princess Roroa and a number of bureaucrats vanished.

It was an incident that ought to have caused a big stir, but it was craftily covered up by Roroa, and neither Gaius or Julius ever noticed it.

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It was the Royal Capital Parnam, late September, the 1,546th year of the Continental Calendar, in the royal palace of the Elfrieden Kingdom, Parnam Castle.

In the governmental affairs office, I was listening to reports from Poncho and Tomoe.

First, I heard from Poncho.

Until just the other day, his title had been Minister of State for the Food Crisis, but with that issue now resolved, I had made him the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry. In addition to agriculture, forestry, and management of military provisions, I also had him overseeing the construction of terraced rice fields and other projects that would establish new crops in this country.

By the way, the reason he was not also in charge of fisheries was

that this country did not manage fishing rights. The various fishermen's guilds each had their own zones, to a degree, but all that the country did was receive taxes from the guilds in exchange for protecting their rights.

Eventually, I wanted to set up something for that, but it would likely have to wait until I had the navy under my control. In order for the country to guarantee the rights of fishermen, we were going to need something like a Maritime Safety Agency. If we tried to force obligations onto the fishermen without any protections, they wouldn't obediently go along with that.

It looks like I'd gotten off-topic, huh?

I asked Poncho a question. "How are things going with the supplies (military provisions and cavalry horse fodder) that I asked you about?"

"All right. Somehow I managed to procure them, but..." Poncho sounded awfully non-committal, especially considering he was saying he'd managed to get the supplies ready.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"No... I was just worried whether these numbers were correct," Poncho said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "The supply totals you requested could easily support the Forbidden Army for over a month, you see... It wasn't easy to gather them, so if the numbers were in error, it will mean we've taken massive losses, yes."

Ah, that made sense. When he looked at the numbers I could currently mobilize from the Forbidden Army, he worried that the amount of supplies was too high. There were only around 10,000 men, after all.

"It's not a problem," I said. "We do actually need all those supplies. In fact, you could even say that this massive stock of supplies is what will decide whether we win or lose."

“I-It is?” he stammered. “...It’s a good thing that we had such an abundant harvest this year. If you had asked me last year or before that, I wouldn’t have been able to gather this quantity.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Though this is the fruit of everyone’s hard work. Of course, that means it’s thanks to you, too, Poncho.”

“Y-You are too kind, yes!” Poncho, humbled by the sudden praise, stood up so straight, it looked he might bend over backwards.

I gave a wry laugh at his behavior, then shifted my gaze to Tomoe. “How have things been on your end, Tomoe?” I asked.

“R-Right. I think I have another five rhinosauruses that will help us.”

Because Tomoe was gifted with the ability to understand animals and monsters, I had sent her to “recruit” some of the giant lizards, rhinosauruses, that we used during our mission to provide relief to the God-Protected Forest.

Their ability to haul cargo, as I had seen during the road construction, was truly amazing. I wanted to increase the number of them held by the Forbidden Army, but because they were living creatures, it took quite some time to train a rhinosaurus. Still, if we tried to deploy them without substantial training, if the worst were to happen and they went berserk, their bodies were huge. They could do a lot of damage.

That made this a job for Tomoe, who could understand the languages of all living creatures. Tomoe could listen to requests from the rhinosauruses.

Mind you, it seemed rhinosauruses weren’t all that smart (maybe on the same level as stegosauruses, which they say had brains the size of a chicken egg?), so their requests usually amounted to “tasty food” and “a place to breed safely.”

In order to accomplish that, I had ended up creating a rhinosaurus

preserve in the kingdom, but it was a small price to pay for a long-distance, high-speed means of shipping, roughly equivalent to a train, that would be loyal and require no training.

"M-Madam Tomoe's ability truly is incredible, yes," Poncho said.

"It sure is," I agreed. "I'm glad I was able to take her under my protection before she fell into the hands of some other country."

"Y-You're flattering me." Tomoe turned a bright red and looked down in embarrassment.

The doors to the governmental affairs office opened, and Liscia walked in. "Souma..."

There's something troubled in her expression, I thought. *...I'm a little worried.*

"...Poncho, Tomoe," I said. "Could I ask you to leave us alone for a moment?"

"Y-Yes, you can, yes."

"O-Okay, Big Brother..."

With a bow, they headed out of the governmental affairs office, leaving me and Liscia alone in the room.

We were both silent for a moment, but then I rose from my seat and moved over to the bed in the corner. Then, sitting down on the bed, I motioned for Liscia to come over to my side.

Liscia sat down next to me, like I'd asked. Sitting on my own bed, a beautiful girl at my side, this should have been a lovely situation, but the atmosphere was heavy and oppressive.

"...You came because you needed to talk about something, right?" I asked Liscia, unable to bear the silence any longer.

Liscia seemed to resolve herself and began to speak, the words

coming out slowly. “In the castle town... there are rumors that you’re raising an army against the three dukes.”

I said nothing.

“They say a clash with Duke Carmine is inevitable.” Liscia turned to face me. Her eyes were quivering with uncertainty.

...I could hardly blame her. For Liscia, I was her king and fiancé, while General Georg Carmine had been her superior during her time in the army, and she respected him. If the two of us came into conflict, Liscia would feel like she was being crushed from both sides. In order to avoid that, I knew she had sent a number of letters to Georg, who was secluding himself in his own territory, asking that he meet with me.

“Is... Is there nothing else you can do?” she stammered.

When she asked me that with those quivering eyes, I wanted to say something, but...

Unable to find the words, I could only nod in silence.

Seeing my reaction, Liscia murmured, “Right... Of course...”

With just those words, she faced forward and her shoulders slumped.

It was frustrating. Having to take this route, even though I knew it would hurt Liscia. This had gone far enough that neither Georg or I could back down. In that case... At the very least...

“...Liscia.”

“...What?”

“I want you to tell me about Georg Carmine,” I said.

“?!”

Liscia raised her face and looked at me.

"...Why now, when it's this late?"

"I want to know what kind of person the man I'm going to fight is," I said. "Now that I think about it, I've never met the guy, after all."

Liscia was silent for a moment. She seemed a little bewildered, but in time, she began to talk.

"Duke Carmine... Georg Carmine is a warrior of unprecedented ability. He's a burly lion-headed beastman, and while he has no small amount of personal ability in combat, they say it's when you put him in charge of an army that he shows his true value. He is a great general, able to handle himself in a field of battle, or as the attacker or defender in a siege. When he led the vanguard during a retreating battle under the man who was king before my father, I hear that he managed to take the head of the enemy commander, even in that losing battle."

"That's pretty amazing, huh..." I said.

You're doing well if you can just keep ally losses to a minimum during a retreat, but to go and deal a blow to the enemy, as well—that was like something a famous general from the Warring States Period would have done. It reminded me of the young Shingen Takeda, who had run ahead of his father Nobutora's retreating army to seize a castle in a surprise attack.

"You're darn right it's amazing," she said. "Not only did he have the leadership to keep up the morale of a defeated army, but it was also a feat he couldn't have pulled off without the perception to locate a spot where they could meet the enemy efficiently."

There was a slight pride in Liscia's voice as she spoke. She really... did respect him, huh.

"When my father took the throne, this country changed the way it expanded," she continued. "With my father, who was, for better or for

worse, an ordinary king ruling this country, we ought to have been an easy target for nearby countries."

"You're awfully harsh, even though he's your own father," I commented.

"Well, it's the truth. Still, that never happened. Because Duke Carmine always kept a keen eye on the west, neither Amidonia or Turgis tried to lay a hand on us. Despite being the greatest warrior of his generation, he had no ambition and served my father loyally. ...No, that's not it. Rather than it being for my father's sake, Duke Carmine just had a pure love for this country."

"Why for this country?" I asked.

"Don't you know?" she asked. "There are still countries in this world that discriminate against other races. The Empire holds up the values of racial equality now, but there is still discrimination against nonhumans in some regions. There are also places where it's the other way around; in the northwest, there's a high elf island country that promotes a policy of high elf supremacy, and it's humans who are looked down on there."

It looked like those sorts of problems that you find everywhere existed in this world, too.

"But, in this country, we don't have that sort of discrimination," she continued. "Even if it exists, there's no outlet for it. The races that were against that sort of discrimination to begin with gathered under the first king and cooperated to make this country prosperous, so that they wouldn't have to live under the yoke of anyone else. That is what this country is like... and Duke Carmine loved it more than anyone."

There, Liscia paused for a moment before continuing to speak.

"In his personal life, Duke Carmine is a man who knows how to be polite. He had a close relationship to my father that was more than just professional, and he often offered my father advice. He even cared for me like his own daughter. As for myself... I loved Duke

Carmine."

I was silent.

She continued, "When I went to the Officer's Academy because I wanted to become a soldier, he was opposed to it at first. He said it was unbecoming of a princess. But, in the end, he let me have my way. Mind you, once I graduated from the academy, I was placed at his command, and was only used to encourage the troops."

Well, yeah... He couldn't have used the princess, a blood relative of the king, as one of his subordinates. Even Georg, as impressive a man as he was, must have had a lot of trouble dealing with Liscia's tomboyishness.

"So, he was like a second father to you, huh?" I asked.

When I said that, Liscia hung her head in sadness. "Yeah... He was a wonderful man. So why did he..."

Liscia started to say something, but stopped, shaking her head.

"I don't know exactly what Duke Carmine was thinking... But perhaps, it may have been because he was a warrior."

"Because he was a warrior?" I asked.

"Duke Carmine is over fifty," she said. "A beastman's lifespan is no different from a human's. Were he just a general, he would still have many years left to grow, but as a warrior, it's all downhill from here. I think, maybe, that's why he's trying to do something big for his country right now."

"...Even if that means becoming a traitor?" I asked.

"If he thought that would benefit this country, Duke Carmine would do it."

There was a degree of trust in those words that I couldn't help but

envy a little.

I spoke up. “Tomorrow... I will hold a conference with the three dukes over the Jewel Voice Broadcast.”

There were four Jewel Voice Broadcast jewels in this country. Three of them were held by the three dukes. Using those jewels, we would hold something like a video conference. There, I would issue a final ultimatum to the three dukes that they were to submit to me as my vassals. I would have to fight anyone who refused. And, regardless of what the other two did, there was zero chance that Georg would comply.

“Liscia, if this is hard on you...” I began.

“I’m going to attend,” she said.

She wouldn’t even let me say she didn’t have to.

Liscia put on a smile clouded with sadness. “I know. Duke Carmine has already made his choice. He can’t turn back now.”

“Liscia...” I said.

“I want to watch to the end, because I know that. I want to see how that man lives his life.” Liscia looked straight into my eyes.

Really... I had no words for her. So, to do the least I could do, I hugged her tightly around the shoulders. She was trembling a little.

I tilted Liscia’s head onto my shoulder.

Even though I was the king, I couldn’t do anything more for her, and I was angry at myself for that.

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—The same day, in Red Dragon City.

“Damn it... What the hell is going on?!”

In Red Dragon City, located in the north of the Elfrieden Kingdom, the commander of the air force, Castor Vargas, was at his desk, holding his head in his hands.

Red Dragon City was the central city of the Vargas Duchy, and also where Castor's castle was located.

It was built at a slight elevation on a portion of the mountain that had been cleared. This might have seemed a poor location for a central city, given the inconvenience of transporting goods to it, but for the Vargas Duchy, the ones who held the kingdom's air force, it gave them the convenience of having access to transport wyverns in addition to combat ones.

Each could carry as much as a cable car loaded with supplies, and there were bus-like vehicles carried by four wyverns that went to each city, so the remoteness of the site didn't matter that much.

Also, because the castle of the General of the Air Force was located in Red Dragon City, the city's defenses were hardened.

While the location already made it like a mountain castle, it was also surrounded by high walls. While the mountain slopes kept away battering rams (vehicles with a massive stake meant for breaking through gates) or scaling ladders (these came on vehicles built like fire trucks, which provided a foothold for getting over the castle walls), the high walls would defend against any attacks by infantry or cavalry.

The only means of attack that might have been effective was an assault from the air with wyverns, but this was the Vargas family's specialty, so it was fair to call it an impregnable fortress.

Furthermore, Castor, the current ruler of the city, was an excellent commander. Even though Castor was not so good at the intricacies of politics, he displayed an unmatched strength on the battlefield. In the last hundred years of war for the Elfrieden Kingdom, he had always stood at the head of the wyvern unit, mowing down foreign enemies as their vanguard commander.

He had made a lot of errors due to not thinking things through well enough, but his broadminded nature, his hot-blooded personality, and his incredible strength had lent him a charisma that charmed his subordinates. If we were to compare him to Zhang Fei in Chinese history, or Masanori Fukushima in Japanese history, that might make it easier to understand.

Because he was that kind of person, he left management of the city entirely to his wife, Accela, who was Admiral Excel's daughter, as well as to Tolman, the man who was his second in command in the air force and also the steward of his house.

No good could come from a poor manager butting into administrative decisions, so this was probably for the best. Castor knew that running around the battlefield suited him far better than managing a city.

Now Castor, the man who was ill-suited to thinking, was wracking his brains over what to do for once.

"Tolman! Has Duke Carmine still not said anything?!" he exclaimed.

"...Not as of yet," the man in gentlemanly attire standing across from him answered, continuing to stand upright as he did so. This was the man entrusted with administrative control of Red Dragon City, the steward of the House of Vargas, Tolman.

Castor banged his hands down on the desk. "The king's ultimatum comes tomorrow! What is he contriving by not sending us any word before that?!"

Tolman said nothing.

The people were all talking about a confrontation between the new king and the three dukes, but that didn't mean the three dukes were all in agreement. Army General Georg Carmine had made his opposition to the king clear, but Navy Admiral Excel Walter took a more negative view of fighting the king. Finally, for Castor... He was

showing a position of opposition to the king, but was wavering on that stance internally.

General Georg was his comrade in arms, and he respected him as a warrior. Because Georg was the one raising the flag of rebellion, Castor had assumed he had thought it through, and he had even pushed back against his mother-in-law Excel to side with Georg in opposing the king. In other words, while it was true that Castor had been suspicious when there had been the sudden change of kings, he had left the decision of whether or not he would oppose the new king to someone else.

Castor's own emotional immaturity had been one of the causes for this.

Dragonewts like Castor were a race that was longer lived than either humans or beastmen. The speed of emotional development tended to be inversely proportional to how long a race lived. Because of that, though Castor had lived for over a hundred years, his mental age was around thirty, and he treated the fifty-year-old Georg as an elder.

However, though he had sent a number of letters to Georg asking him what their next course of action should be, he had received no response.

"There's got to be something wrong here!" Castor exclaimed. "If he was going to make peace with the king now, he never would have acted against him to begin with. On the other hand, if he intends to fight the king, he should be desperate for our air force to help him. So why isn't he telling us anything? Does he mean to fight the king with just the army?"

Tolman pondered. "The one thing I can think of is... Could he have been 'driven mad by ambition,' like Duchess Walter suggested? Master, even if you distrust the new king Souma, you wouldn't want to harm the former king Albert, his wife Elisha, and even Princess Liscia, would you?"

Harm the royal family.

When Tolman spoke those words, Castor cried out in a loud voice, “Of course not! Duke Carmine himself said, ‘Once King Souma is removed, I will have King Albert take the throne once more, and we will support him’!”

“And what if that were a lie?” Tolman asked. “Could it be that, in truth, he wishes to take the throne for himself? If that is the case, you and Duchess Walter will surely be his next enemies. In preparation for when that happens, could he not be trying to settle things with just his own forces, so as to keep the two of you from gaining influence after the war ends? So that he can abolish both your houses after the war?”

“That’s absurd!” Castor burst out. “There’s no way Duke Carmine would ever think of doing that!”

Castor denied it, but as would be expected from one entrusted as the steward of his house, Tolman had the ability to calmly analyze things. This was the conclusion Tolman had come to, setting aside appeals to emotion and looking purely at the interests of those involved.

However, because Castor knew Georg well, he couldn’t accept that argument.

“There isn’t a warrior who cares more for this country than Duke Carmine!” Castor protested. “He could never harm the royal family…”

“However, was it not because of her doubts about Duke Carmine that Duchess Walter parted ways with him?” Tolman asked. “Even going so far as to take the mistress and Young Master Carl back home with her?”

“…”

Fearing Castor’s wife Accela and their young, eldest son Carl would be held collectively responsible, Excel had demanded that he divorce Accela, and she was now sheltering them at the House of Walter. At

the very least, they would not be caught up in the showdown between Georg and Souma that was no doubt coming. That offered Castor some small comfort, at least.

Castor rested his elbows on the desk, covering his eyes with his hands. "...I just can't imagine that Duke Carmine would be driven mad by ambition."

"Master..." Tolman began.

"I'm sorry, but could you leave me alone for a moment?"

"...As you wish."

With a bow, Tolman left the office.

Left alone in the room, Castor leaned all the way back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling. And then...

"Carla," he said quietly. "You're there, aren't you?"

The window behind Castor opened, and a girl with red wings came in with an embarrassed look on her face. With long red hair the same color as her wings, this beautiful girl who looked to be around eighteen was Castor's only daughter, Carla. In contrast to her pretty girl look, she had the courage and combat sense to lead an air force unit into battle.

"So you noticed me," she said.

"You'll need to hide your presence better than that. The sound of your wings when you landed on the balcony gave you away."

"But that's not sensing my presence." Carla shrugged her shoulders. Then she pulled a bundle of letters from her pocket.

Because he was talking to his daughter, Castor was taking a less formal tone. "What are those?"



“From Liscia,” she said. “Liscia sent a number of them, asking us to make peace with King Souma.”

Carla considered Liscia a friend. They had gotten to know one another after Liscia had joined the army. Because both had serious personalities, and both had enlisted in the military despite being women of high birth, they had a lot in common, and had become fast friends.

However, because Carla was even more serious than Liscia... or, to put it in less favorable terms, she was a bit hard-headed... when Liscia had gotten engaged to King Souma, Carla had suspected coercion, and she had become hostile towards Souma. Because of that, even when her mother and brother had gone to the Walter house, she had remained here by herself with her father Castor.

However, at this point, Carla was beginning to have a change of heart. “I can feel Liscia’s passion in these letters. It’s not coming from someone who was coerced into a betrothal she doesn’t want. Also, in her letters, Liscia cautioned to ‘Beware Duke Carmine as he is now.’ ...We may have been the ones who were mistaken.”

“...I see,” Castor said. “So Princess Liscia feels the same way, does she?”

Castor’s shoulders slumped. Then, as if making up his mind, his head rose.

“Carla... It’s not too late. Go be with Accela. I’m the only one who needs to go along with Duke Carmine.”

As a father, he must have wanted to avoid getting her caught up in something he was doing out of friendship. However, Carla shook her head, her mind already made up.

“I don’t even know how I’m supposed to show my face to Liscia after all this,” she said. “Besides, you still believe Duke Carmine has put some thought into this, don’t you, Father? In that case, let’s see

our position through to the end. Even if Duke Carmine is defeated and we become traitors, if you fall at his side, having believed in your friendship, I doubt the people would laugh at you for that."

"But... then you'd..."

"I was born into a military family," Carla told him. "I am prepared. Oh, don't worry, we have Carl, so at least the house and our bloodline will remain. That's why, as members of the House of Vargas, we will leave behind a record of distinguished military service."

"...I see."

Learning of Carla's determination, Castor made his own decision. He would believe in Georg Carmine to the end, and he was ready to fall for that.

To that end, he did not call up the air force units stationed around the Vargas Duchy. This was done out of consideration, so that even if he came into conflict with the king after the ultimatum tomorrow, he would fight with only his own personal forces in Red Dragon City, and would not drag the rest of the air force into the conflict.

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—At night, the same day, in a certain location.

"I see... Those two have resolved themselves to do it, then."

When she learned of Castor and Carla's movements from the spies she had sent to Red Dragon City, Navy Admiral Excel Walter's beautiful face took on a look of sorrow, and she let out a sigh.

This antlered beauty who, despite having lived for five hundred years, looked no older than twenty-five, stood at the window in her dark room, staring out at the night sky. Even the clothes she wore seemed to weigh her down now.

Tonight it was cloudy, and she could barely see any stars.

“Castor is prepared to martyr himself for his friendship with Georg,” Excel said sadly. “And Carla is prepared to follow him to the end as he does it. Fools though they are, I cannot bring myself to deny the validity of their choices entirely.”

Excel closed her eyes slowly, bringing a hand to her ample bosom which was apparent even through her kimono-like outfit.

What was she to think, having learned of her son-in-law and granddaughter’s determination?

Some time passed before she opened her eyes once more, turning her back to the window and walking away.

“If anything, this only gives me more reason to do as I must.”

Even if that meant treading on their determination...



Chapter 3: Ultimatum

It happened in the Jewel Voice Room, Parnam Castle.

In this room where the two-meter diameter jewel used in the Jewel Voice Broadcast floated, there was also equipment for receiving a Jewel Voice Broadcast. The receivers in each city used equipment installed in fountains to produce mist, then used water-type magic to reproduce the recorded video, and wind-type magic to reproduce the recorded sound. The system in this room, however, projected the image on a piece of equipment that was like a thin, wide tank filled with water.

To differentiate the two, I was calling this one a “simple receiver.”

If the fountain receiver was like a theater, you could say this simple receiver was like a television. The simple receiver produced a clearer image, too. The jewels were a rare item found in dungeons, so it seemed that it wouldn’t be possible to mass-produce them, but maybe we could mass-produce these simple receivers. If that could be arranged, maybe someday families would be able to watch the Jewel Voice Broadcast in their own homes.

Anyway, let’s get back to the story. There were three of those simple receivers set up in this room.

The three receivers showed the faces of Army General Georg Carmine, who was a lion beastman, Air Force General Castor Vargas, who was a dragonewt, and Navy Admiral Excel Walter, who was a sea serpent. I was sure that, on their end, they had a projection of me and Liscia standing together, too.

"...It's our first time meeting face-to-face like this, huh?" I said. "I am the one to whom the former King of Elfrieden, Sir Albert, entrusted with the throne, the provisional king, Souma Kazuya."

"You're..." After hearing me introduce myself, Castor opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"No, I had heard you were a hero summoned from another world, so I had expected someone more tough and rugged..."

"Duke Vargas!" Excel interjected, as if scolding him. "If you call yourself a warrior, you must always show the proper respect to those you deal with."

After Excel's rebuke, Castor meekly gave his name.

"...Right. I'm Air Force General Castor Vargas."

According to my information, Castor was Excel's son-in-law. Perhaps the reason he was acting more meekly than the personality I had heard for him (a muscle-head) was because of that power dynamic between them.

"...I apologize for raising my voice just now," the sea serpent said, accompanying her words with an elegant bow. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Excel Walter, at your service."

"I am Army General Georg Carmine," the beastman said shortly.

This brought the introductions to a close.

...This lion-faced beastman is Georg Carmine, huh? I thought.

He had a well-built physique that an ordinary guy like me couldn't hope to compare with, a mane that served to accentuate his manliness, and, lastly, the shining, fiery eyes of a lion. Even though I was only seeing a video image of him, it felt like he was right there in

the room with me.

I could understand why Liscia had admired him. He had the look of an experienced warrior.

“Duke Carmine...” Liscia began.

The duke said nothing.

Liscia had let out his name without intending to, but Georg didn’t even cast a glance in her direction.

“I will now issue an ultimatum to the three dukes.” In order to keep myself from being overwhelmed by Georg’s presence, I issued this pronouncement in a clear tone. “In the time since I took the throne, you have all failed to respond to repeated requests for your cooperation. While it may have been Sir Albert’s own idea, I am sure the suddenness with which the throne changed hands must have played into that. As such, I will not hold you responsible for not obeying my commands up to this point. However, if you continue to disregard my orders, I will be left with no choice but to declare you traitors. I would like to hear your opinions on this.”

“I have something to ask you, sire.” The first to open her mouth was Excel.

“...What might that be?” I asked.

“What do you intend to do about the three duchies?”

I looked Excel’s image in the eye. As might have been expected from a woman who had inherited the blood of sea serpents, her eyes were endlessly cold, seeming to stare into the depths of my heart.

“If you obey me... I have no intention of laying a hand on the three duchies themselves,” I said.

She immediately came back with another question. “Then what of the three ducal armies?”

Her ability to accurately cut to the heart of the matter impressed me.

"...The three ducal armies will be folded into the Forbidden Army to create a new unified army," I said. "Furthermore, noble fiefs will be forbidden to maintain personal forces in excess of what is needed for policing. These excess troops will also be incorporated into the Forbidden Army. In accordance with this, the special rights afforded to the three duchies for maintaining an army will be abolished. They will henceforth be treated the same as any other noble fief."

"So that is it, after all..." Excel murmured.

"...You understand what you're trying to do here, right?" Castor said, glaring at me.

"Castor..." Excel seemed to be trying to rebuke him for his attitude, but Castor held up a hand to stop her.

"This is important, Duchess Walter."

When he responded with that serious tone of voice, Excel grudgingly closed her mouth.

Taking it as a sign of acquiescence, Castor looked me straight in the eye and spoke. "The three ducal armies are a system put in place to prevent the rise of a tyrant. This is a multiracial state, but the royal family is human. If a tyrant were to become king and institute policies that favored humans, the other races might face oppression. In order to prevent that, our predecessors came up with the three ducal armies. We three dukes of different races support the royal family, but we also monitor it, so that we can step in and depose a tyrant if it comes to that. Are you saying you want to destroy that system?"

It was a direct question, so I looked Castor in the eyes and answered. "In times of peace, that system would be fine, I'm sure. However, the world is full of instability now. While the expansion of the Demon Lord's Domain to the north has stopped, there's no telling

when that might change suddenly and drastically. The intentions of the great power to the west, the Gran Chaos Empire, also remain unclear. The Duchy of Amidonia, who long for revenge on this country, and the Turgis Republic, with their Go North policy, are actively looking for any opening to seize our territory. The disputes with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union to our east over fishing rights are unending."

I was speaking about the situation this country had currently found itself in. This country's situation was incredibly unstable. Ordinarily, we shouldn't have had time for this petty squabbling.

"Look at the situation in the world, Duke Vargas," I continued. "In this unstable situation, an army with multiple command structures is not going to perform anywhere near well enough. This is the time to centralize power."

"And what if the center is rotten?" he demanded. "How can you say for certain that you won't become a tyrant? If we leave the entire army in your hands, who could hold you to account?"

"If that happens, then come for my head yourself!" I slammed my hands down on the desk hard, knowing this was where I would have to fight.

In the corner of my eye, I could see the image of Georg, his eyes closed and his arms crossed. That man... He wasn't about to stop now. However, that only made it more important that I win Castor and Excel over to my side here.

"I'm only human," I said. "I can't guarantee that I won't turn into a tyrant. Of course, that said, I have no intention of ever doing anything that would make Liscia and the others sad."

"Souma..." Liscia said sorrowfully, but I went on.

"I will be dismantling the three ducal armies, but I will promise you positions within the national defense force. So, if I do become a tyrant, then lead the armies and stage a revolution, or whatever."

"Talk is easy," Castor said. "If that time comes, wouldn't you move to protect yourself?"

"There's a political thinker from my world, Machiavelli, who had something to say about that. 'The best possible fortress is not to be hated by the people.' If the people are on your side, anyone plotting rebellion will quickly be exposed. On the other hand, if the people abandon you, you might wait out a rebellion or two by hiding in your castle, but there will never be a shortage of foreigners willing to assist a people who have taken up arms against you. If I were to become a tyrant, so causing the people to abandon me, a rebellion would easily succeed."

Castor was quietly listening to me speak.

Were my words reaching him...? At this point, I couldn't be sure one way or the other.

Then, Excel spoke.

"I would like to ask one more thing. I hear that you are building a new coastal city. When that city is completed, what will become of Lagoon City, I wonder?"

Lagoon City was the central city of the Walter Duchy.

I had heard that for Excel and her race, the sea serpents, Lagoon City always came first. Apparently the sea serpents had been driven out of their former home, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, and Lagoon City was the place they had found to live in peace after many years of wandering, or something like that.

Since I didn't want to incur the wrath of the sea serpent people, I made a point of explaining myself carefully. "The new city is being planned as a tourist destination and trade port. Because, from a secrecy standpoint, the tourism industry and a military port mix incredibly poorly, I have no intention of having the new city function as a military port. So, Lagoon City will likely continue to serve in that capacity. I'll generally be leaving the construction of warships to

Lagoon City, too."

If Lagoon City was a military port and the new city was a trade port, they would each have their own distinct role. It should be possible for them to coexist and prosper together that way. When I explained it like that, Excel nodded in satisfaction.

"Hearing that has put me at ease. Sire, as of this moment, I, Excel Walter, and the Elfrieden Navy are at your command. We await your orders."

With those words, Duchess Walter took a knee, swearing loyalty to me as a vassal. This meant that the 10,000 under Excel's command in the Navy were now on my side.

"I am grateful for your wise decision, Duchess Walter," I said. "Please, continue to work for this nation."

"I will."

When Excel placed herself at my service, Georg's expression didn't change in the slightest and Castor looked on with what seemed like resignation. One more time, I tried extending a hand to Castor.

"Duke Vargas. Please, lend me your strength for this country's sake."

"...Sorry, but I can't do that."

"Castor!" Excel scolded.

Despite that, Castor shook his head silently. "You seem to have decided you can trust him, Duchess Walter, but... I can't. I've protected Elfrieden since the time of the king before the last. I've eliminated foreign enemies, taking territory from them, for close to one hundred years now. Despite that, why did King Albert not consult us at all before giving the throne to you, who just suddenly appeared out of nowhere...?"

"Yeah... I'd like an answer to that one myself." Without thinking, I let my true feelings slip out. Ever since being given the throne, I had worked desperately to avoid being turned over to the Empire and to save this country from its crisis.

I had been much too busy to think about it, but why had Liscia's old man been so quick to hand over the throne to me when I had just been summoned? In this country, a hero was apparently "one who leads the change of an era," but was that really so trustworthy?

Castor tried asking Liscia, who was standing at my side. "Princess Liscia, do you know anything?"

"...I'm sorry," she said. "In regards to this matter, my father is insisting he will not get involved. I asked him to help convince the three of you, but 'Were I to take action, it would cause undue suspicion. Sir Souma is king now,' is all he would say..."

"...I see."

Castor seemed confused and unable to understand what the former king's intentions were, but it was the same for me. I had absolutely no idea what he had been thinking. It was something that made me wonder, but... I knew that I wouldn't be getting any answers here and now.

I had to focus on persuading Castor. That was what I was thinking, but...

"I just can't bring myself to serve you," Castor said, rejecting me once again.

"Duke Vargas..." I began.

"Don't say any more," he said. "Considering Duchess Walter has agreed to obey you, I know there must be some merit in what you say. However, I can't imagine Duke Carmine would oppose you without good reason. If Duchess Walter says she's siding with you, I'm going to side with Duke Carmine."

It seemed to be a difficult decision for him, as Castor had a pained look on his face. Once I saw that expression... I knew there was nothing left I could say.

"That's... the decision you've come to, is it?" I asked.

"Yeah. However, it's my decision alone. The ones siding with Duke Carmine are myself and one hundred of my personal troops. I will not call up the remaining units of the Air Force. They will remain neutral. If... I am defeated, please, take care of those I leave behind."

"...I see."

He was acting on the assumption that he would lose. If that was the case... there was nothing I could say.

"Sire, Castor is..." Excel tried to speak in his defense, but I raised a hand for her to stop.

"It's no use," I said. "I can't spend any more time on this."

"Urkh..."

I understood how Excel must have felt, but events were already in motion. I couldn't spend any more time trying to persuade him.

In the end, I hadn't gotten Castor and the Air Force on my side. That was going to make things a lot harder, but at least most of the Air Force would be remaining neutral.

Trying to change gears to fight off the disappointment, I turned to the last of the three, Georg. "Now then, Army General Georg Carmine."

The fierce lion-headed beastman general glared back at me. Even though I was speaking to him through a monitor, he was incredibly intimidating. If I had been meeting him in person, my legs would have started to shake, and I would have made a pathetic show of myself.

“Duke Carmine,” I said. “I will not ask whether you will obey me. At the point when you gave shelter to the nobles under investigation for corruption, it was made clear that you had no intention of obeying me. Attempting to persuade you is a waste of my time.”

He said nothing.

“So, I would like to ask you one thing,” I said. “What is it that drove you to this?”

“My pride as a warrior.” That was Georg’s response. “Being more than fifty years of age, my body will only grow weaker from here, but now I have been given the greatest of opportunities. I will decide the fate of Elfrieden with my own talents. Once in his lifetime, it is every warrior’s wish to accomplish something that will be remembered by later generations.”

“For something as petty as that…” I murmured.

Had he planned all this for reasons as simple as the “Human life lasts only 50 years” line from the Noh play *Atsumori*? He had known how it would sadden Liscia, yet still this was the only path he could choose?

“I can’t understand it,” I said. “You are… an incredible fool.”

“It was a silly question,” he returned. “One cannot be a warrior without also being a fool. I will have you bear witness to the way I live.”

“Are you sure you don’t mean the way you’ll die?”

“They are one and the same,” he said. “Those who wish to live die; those who wish to die live. That is what it is to be a warrior.”

He spoke in a resolute voice that was reminiscent of a lion’s roar. He showed no sign of wavering.

And so, I could not waver, either.

“If you are to be a great tree blocking my path, I will step over you,” I said.

“Rotting though I may be, I am a tree with strong roots,” he responded. “You will not step over me with half-hearted resolve.”

“I have resolve!” I had long since found the resolve to stain my hands with this one-time cruelty. “Georg Carmine and Castor Vargas.”

Duke Carmine said nothing.

“What?” Duke Vargas asked.

“As we will soon do battle, I have one proposal,” I said. “I doubt any of us want for this war to drag on endlessly, ensnaring the common people who have nothing to do with it. That’s why I want one rule in place. ‘If one of us is struck down or captured, that person’s subordinates will immediately come under the command of the other side.’ This is meant to prevent an army that loses its leader from seeking revenge or continuing to rebel.”

When they heard my proposal, both nodded.

“Very well,” Georg said.

“I’m good with that, too,” Castor agreed. “I will inform my men that, should I fall, the entire Air Force is to obey you.”

“...Thank you.”

“Now, I shall take my leave.” Georg rose from his seat, moving to cut the transmission.

“Wait!” Liscia burst out, after remaining quiet all this time.

Georg narrowed his eyes. “Princess...”

“Duke Carmine...”

Each addressed the other, but neither could find any words beyond that. They only gazed into each other's eyes in silence.

Liscia and Georg. In the palace, they were princess and vassal. In the army, they were subordinate and superior. From that alone, they should have been able to find some way to understand each other.

For some time, the two of them looked at each other in silence, but then, in the next moment, Liscia drew the rapier she kept at her hip.

While I was still surprised at the suddenness of it, Liscia brought the blade around to the back of her head, cutting off her platinum blond ponytail.

Wait, whaaaa?!

Her hair, like golden thread, fell to the floor.

It was so sudden that not only I, but the three dukes as well, were left speechless.

Liscia suddenly had a medium-short haircut, but she showed no sign of caring. Instead, she thrust her rapier out towards the jewel. Then she said: "This is my resolve. I will walk alongside Souma." She declared this with unwavering eyes.

Georg was dumbfounded like me at first, but soon his eyes took on a sharp glint, and he smiled like a carnivore that had found its prey. "I have seen your resolve, princess. However, I will have you show me that resolve on the battlefield."

"Count on it."

The two seemed to have come to an understanding. I couldn't comprehend it myself, but it was probably just the way warriors communicated. The meeting had ended with everyone being taken aback by Liscia, but... Anyway, that was the end of the ultimatum to the three dukes.

“Was that okay... cutting your hair like that?” I asked Liscia once the transmission to Georg and Castor had ended.

Now that the ultimatum to the three dukes was over and done with, Aisha, who had come back from the dark elf village, as well as Hakuya, Poncho, and Tomoe, had come into the Jewel Voice Room. When they had all noticed the change in Liscia’s appearance, everyone’s eyes (except for Hakuya’s; he didn’t show much change in expression) went wide with surprise.

Liscia played with the ends of her freshly-cut hair, blushing. “I did it to make my position clear. ...Does the new look not suit me?”

“No, I think it suits you,” I said. “Right, guys?”

Everyone nodded.

“You cut a wonderfully gallant figure like that, Princess,” said Aisha.

“I do think the short hair is quite fetching for you, too,” said Hakuya.

“I-It really suits you, I think, yes,” said Poncho.

“It’s cute, big sister,” said Tomoe.

With all these people complimenting her, Liscia’s face flushed with embarrassment. (Though she didn’t seem to entirely mind the attention.)



The atmosphere in the room had softened like that, when...

"Sire..."

...the only one of the three dukes who was still connected, Excel, called out to me.

"...My apologies, Duchess Walter," I said.

"No, I have already sworn my vassalage to you, sire. Please, just call me Excel."

"Excel, then. Sorry," I said. "For not being able to convince Castor."

"There was nothing you could have done. He had made up his own mind." Still, the corners of Excel's mouth were drawn tight with frustration.

They said this beautiful woman, who looked to only be in her mid-twenties, was, in fact, five hundred years old, that Castor was her son-in-law, and that her granddaughter was also with Castor. Her family were split between opposite sides of the conflict, so it was perfectly natural for her to think it regrettable.

Oh, right. Speaking of Excel's family...

"Excel. Is she there with you?" I asked.

Excel drew in her breath sharply. "...Yes. She is."

"You called, Your Majesty?" Another blue-haired beauty appeared, standing beside Excel on the screen. She had a face that anyone would fall in love with, impeccable style, and an air about her that seemed more mature than her age. Yes, she was the lorelei songstress whose popularity was surging across the Elfrieden Kingdom, Ms. Juna Doma herself.

"Thank you, Juna," I said. "Because we had you tying us to her, we didn't have to fight with Excel."

“No. I only did as ordered,” she said. “Besides, I was investigating you and reporting back to Grandmother at one point. I beg your forgiveness for my rudeness then.”

Yes, Juna had been a spy dispatched by Duchess Walter.

With her foresight, Excel had known that if Liscia’s father, the former king Albert, had ceded the throne to me, something must have been going on, and so she had begun looking into it immediately.

The spy she had chosen to dispatch for that was Juna, who was actually the commander of the Marine Corps.

On top of that, Juna was apparently Excel’s granddaughter. One of Excel’s sons had married into the Doma family, who were a merchant family in Lagoon City with loreleis among their ancestors, and that was how Juna had been born. That beautiful face of hers came from Excel’s side of the family, it seemed.

When Juna had used the Gift Proclamation event as an opportunity to make contact with me, it had been to investigate whether I had what it took to be king. Then, when she had deemed me fit to be king, she had reported those thoughts back to Excel, and finally chosen to reveal herself to us on her own.

I’d been surprised when I’d first heard, but between the maturity that belied her young age and the swift movements she had displayed during the argument with Hal, it had made some things suddenly make a lot of sense, so I’d been able to accept it fairly quickly.

After that, Juna had become the pipe connecting us to Excel. In other words, Excel had been the only one to swear loyalty to me before the ultimatum.

However, in order to monitor Georg’s disquieting movements and to try to convince Castor up until the very last moment, we had concealed that fact, and, for a time, she had gone along with the other dukes.

As Juna bowed apologetically, I said to her, “No. Because of you, we were able to coordinate with Excel. You took my side, so I have every reason to be grateful, and I have no intention of faulting you for what you did.”

“It’s just like I told you that day,” she said. “‘I, too, am on your side.’”

“...You did say that, didn’t you?”

On that night when I couldn’t sleep, Juna had told me that and then sung for me until I fell asleep. Afterward, I had heard from Juna that Liscia had arranged the whole thing.

Liscia was always looking after me. True to her words on that day, Juna had stayed on my side. Even Aisha, scatterbrained as she could be most of the time, could be counted on to defend me if it came to it.

I was able to be the king because of all these people supporting me. And so I wanted to do right by them, too.

“Hakuya, how are the preparations?” I looked over at him.

Hakuya put his hands together and bowed. “All is as planned. Sir Ludwin and the 10,000 soldiers that make up the directly-controlled portion of the Forbidden Army can mobilize immediately.”

“What movements have we seen from the Amidonian army?” I asked.

“They already appear to have assembled on the border,” he said. “It is as we anticipated.”

Having heard Hakuya’s report, I turned to everyone with a nod, thrusting my fist into the air. “Let’s go! Now it’s a battle against time! We’ll brush away the falling sparks and show Georg what he’s up against! Let him see the power that will support this country from here on!”

“““Yes, sir!”””

Everyone responded to my command. The time was ripe.

I spoke. “Now, let the subjugation war begin.”

◇ ◇ ◇

—30th Day, 9th Month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar.

Souma, King of Elfrieden, had raised an army to subjugate Georg.

A message bearing this information was delivered to the armies of the Duchy of Amidonia massed near the border.

When Gaius VIII heard this report he said, “The time is come! Now, we shall achieve our long-held desire!”

With that declaration, he finally led the 30,000 strong army of the principality to begin the invasion of Elfrieden.

There were two routes into Elfrieden from Amidonia.

One was the route passing through the Carmine Duchy in the northwest. It was an open plain, easy to traverse, but Gaius did not use this route.

That was because this route was entirely blocked by the Carmine Duchy. Even if it was purely for appearances, Gaius had claimed that he was aiding both the king and Georg, so he needed to avoid any route that made it look like he was in league with Georg. Furthermore, the Carmine Duchy was where the king’s and Georg’s forces would collide, so if the principality’s army appeared there, there was the risk that the war would be stopped. The principality wanted the conflict between the king and Georg to last as long as possible.

Because of that, the principality’s army chose to advance along the other route, the one that passed through the mountainous region to the south. The Ursula Mountains stood along the southern half of the

border between the Principality of Amidonia and the Elfrieden Kingdom. This route passed through the Goldoa Valley in the mountains.

While the path was steep, once they crossed the valley, they would come to the city of Altomura. Fed by the mountain streams coming out of the Ursula Mountains, this was one of Elfrieden's few grain-producing regions. What was more, it had also once been part of Amidonia.

As he rode his horse among the 30,000 soldiers of the principality's army, Gaius VII had a glint in his eye and a bold smile on his face.

"Heh heh heh. Souma and Georg can fight as hard as they want. While they do, we will reclaim our lost lands."

As he passed through the shadows of the valley, Gaius VIII had no doubt that his dearest wish was about to be granted.



Extra Story: The Story of a Certain Group of Adventurers 2

It happened a few days before the ultimatum to the three dukes.

I was in a dark room with Hakuya, poring over a big map of this country that was spread out across the table. There were pawns of various sizes, all shaped like upside-down “T”s, at various points on the map.

At the point representing the royal capital, Parnam, there was a large pawn and a medium-sized pawn. In the central city of the Carmine Duchy, Randel, there were four large pawns. In the central city of the Vargas Duchy, Red Dragon City, there was a single pawn that was smaller than the others. These T-shaped pawns represented the forces positioned in each location.

Hakuya was using a long stick to explain each of the pawns.

“The large pawns represent a force of 10,000, the medium ones a force of 5,000, and the small ones a force of 100. In other words, the number of troops you can mobilize is 15,000, while Duke Carmine has gathered around 40,000. There were many deserters from the Army, such as Glaive Magna, but they seem to have made up their losses from that with the personal troops of the nobles who were engaged in corruption.”

“So, no change to the numerical values, there, huh,” I said.

“Correct. Furthermore, according to the information we received from Duchess Walter, Duke Vargas has done as he declared he would. He has not called up the Air Force. It seems he intends to go into

battle with only 100 of his own troops."

"Hm... Still, if they're Castor's troops, they're all wyvern cavalry, right?" I picked up one of the medium-sized pawns from beside the map and replaced the small pawn at Red Dragon City with it. "I've heard a single wyvern knight can do the work of 500 soldiers from the Army. If we're looking at comparative power, we should think of them as being equivalent to 5,000 of our troops. Even if there are only 100 of them, we can't afford to underestimate their power."

"I am awed by your astute powers of observation." Hakuya bowed reverently. He made a big deal of it, but I knew he was probably just flattering me.

"Please, stop. I take no joy in being able to point out how bad the situation is for us."

"I suppose not," he said. "It appears as though the situation is still worsening, too..."

With those words, Hakuya placed three large pawns on the southwest border with the Principality of Amidonia. These three large pawns represented the forces of Amidonia which were about to invade this country.

"The armies of the Principality of Amidonia are prepared to advance through the valleys of the Ursula Mountains to invade," he said.

"Their total manpower was 50,000 or so, right?" I asked.

The Principality of Amidonia was only half as powerful a nation as the Elfrieden Kingdom. Because of that, they could only maintain half the standing army. On top of that, the Principality of Amidonia shared borders with three other countries in addition to us, so they had to leave troops to defend against them.

"Given their circumstances, 30,000 is a lot to be sending," I said.

"You can see how serious Gaius is just from that, I suppose," he replied. "He is ready to win or die trying."

"That's just going to mean problems for us," I sighed. "...What will the principality do from here?"

"They likely mean to occupy the southwestern city of Altomura," he replied. "Once Altomura falls, they will sweep all opposition from the surrounding area and move to secure the grain-producing region. Once they have de facto control of this area, I expect they will declare it part of their domain."

Gaius was mobilizing his army with the resolve to win or die trying, but then he was just going to do the equivalent of burglarizing a building while it was on fire.

"For all his resolve, he's not doing much," I said.

"With the manpower Amidonia has, I believe this is the most they could accomplish," Hakuya responded. "If they get too out of hand, the nobles who have been taking a wait-and-see approach to your conflict with Duke Carmine would likely gather to your side, after all."

"I see... What's the strength of our border defense force?" I asked.

Hakuya moved the medium-sized pawn that was in Parnam to the southwest border. "I have already dispatched 5,000 from the Forbidden Army to the area near the border."

"We're sending a land force of 5,000 to face a force of 30,000 which will have air forces as well, huh..." I murmured.

We were outnumbered by more than six-to-one. I had known this would be the case, but... I didn't feel good about those numbers.

"...How long can they hold out?" I asked.

"Even if they shut themselves up in the fortress near the border,

they would be doing well to last a day," he responded. "The intent is only to buy time, so the commander has been ordered not to be reckless, and to carry out a staged retreat."

"That's easier said than done... She can pull it off, though, I guess. But even if we assume the troops are fine with all this... what do you plan to do about the people living in the area?" I turned a harsh eye towards Hakuya.

Unless they were expecting an ambush, armies would avoid the steep slopes and advance along roads across flat land. Those roads saw the daily coming and going of people, and people gathered at them to form towns and villages. There would be towns and villages at points along the route the armies of the principality would be advancing through to reach Altomura, as well.

"We don't have long before the armies of the principality strike," I added. "Should we issue a royal order to encourage them to evacuate?"

When I asked that, Hakuya shook his head silently. "Please, refrain. If we show we are aware of the principality's intentions, their armies will be on alert. It could make all our preparations for naught."

"...You're telling me to abandon them?"

"I believe we have no other choice," Hakuya said firmly, his eyes never wavering from my glare. "Now that you have made the decision to fight, sire, you must be aware that that means the blood of your people will be shed. As king, sometimes you must swallow your tears and be prepared to make sacrifices to save a greater number of people."

Hakuya said this with a serious look on his face. It might have sounded cold, but he was taking it upon himself to say the things he knew would hurt for me to hear. So that I couldn't run away from making those choices.

"...Yeah," I said. "I get what you're saying. That's probably the

more guaranteed, safer way. But... is it really the only option?"

He said nothing.

"On this occasion, I don't mind if the method is a little bit rough, or dangerous," I added.

With a war coming, there was going to be some number of people sacrificed no matter what I did. Even so, if I didn't work to lower those numbers to the absolute minimum, that wasn't being safe, it was being negligent.

"I'll take whatever you've got," I said in a strained voice. "Is there something, anything we could do?"

Hakuya paused for a moment to think. Then... he let out a sigh, shrugging his shoulders in exasperation. "And here I had thought you had been acting quite kingly of late, sire."

"I've still got a long way to go if I let compassion get the better of me, is that it?" I asked.

"If you are aware of that, then very well. Good grief... It seems I have no choice."

For all his complaining, this was the closest I had seen to a smile on Hakuya's face in some time. It seemed that even Hakuya had some reservations about abandoning the people along the highway to their fates.

"I do have one idea," he said. "However, this is a rather rough method..."

The plan he proposed was definitely very rough. For the people along the highway, it was sure to be a real nuisance. Still... it was far better than abandoning them.

"Let's go with that plan," I said. "There's little time. Contact the adventurers' guild at once."

“By your will.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Unidentified monsters had appeared in the southeast of the Elfrieden Kingdom.

The monsters were bipedal and humanoid, had patchwork, clown-like bodies, and their heads were on fire. These were monsters that had never been discovered before.

From their appearance, the monsters came to be known as flame pierrots.

Flame pierrots would appear in groups, attack a village, then use the flames on their heads to set houses aflame. While it wasn’t common for a new species of monster to appear like this, in a world where there were dungeons everywhere, it was far from unheard of. These flame pierrots had no doubt been born in some dungeon or another.

Dealing with new monsters like these was mainly a job for adventurers. So, soon after reports of the flame pierrots came in, a quest was issued by the adventurers’ guild. “Protect the refugees displaced by flame pierrot attacks,” it said.

This quest had been issued by a kingdom under the king’s own name. It seemed that the king’s first thought had been to evacuate people from the villages near where the flame pierrots were appearing. However, the current king, King Souma, and the General of the Army, Georg, were currently in a state of conflict, so he couldn’t afford to dispatch troops.

By having the guild issue a quest, he had probably hoped to have adventurers protect the refugees. As a quest issued by a country, it seemed like there would be a good payout for it, so all of the adventurers accepted the quest and worked to protect the refugees.

Here, too, there was another party that had accepted that quest.

There was their leader, the young and muscular swordsman, Dece, the baby-faced, female thief, Juno, the quiet, affable priest, Febral, and the shapely, quiet beauty, Julia. This was the party that had once gone on a quest with Little Musashibo.

This time, in addition to those four, there was the brawny, macho brawler, Augus. The reason Little Musashibo had joined their party last time was that Augus had been unavailable and they had been looking for someone to fill in for him.

They, too, had taken on the quest issued by the kingdom.

The closer a village was to the capital, the sooner a group of adventurers had claimed it, and so, having gotten a late start, their group accepted a mountain village near the southeastern border. They were now pushing on towards the east through the dense forest, protecting thirty or so villagers.

So far... All clear. The party scout, Juno, was surveying the area from up in the treetops.

In the process of protecting the villagers, they had to be on alert for more than just flame pierrots. There were vicious wild animals, and, in areas where public order was poor, they also had to watch out for brigands during an escort mission. Because of that, Juno was jumping from tree to tree like a monkey, surveying the area.

For pay this good, there haven't been many problems... I'm kind of disappointed, Juno thought to herself while leaping through the air.

Most of the time, if a quest paid well, it was going to be highly difficult. Even for quests that appeared to not be so difficult at first glance, if there was a good reward, you could count on there being something more to it. "Beware anything that seems too good to be true" was an iron rule among adventurers. Even if the quest came from a trustworthy kingdom.

However, once they had accepted it, no flame pierrots had appeared, and it was turning out to be a simple quest where they just

went for a walk with some villagers.

When Juno finished her patrol mission and returned, Dece and Febral were talking.

“I think this quest really is too easy,” Febral said.

“Hey, what’s wrong with easy?” Dece replied to the more pensive Febral, swinging his arms in a circle as he did.

Febral was the party analyst and also served as advisor to Dece, the party leader.

“For starters, we haven’t even seen the flame pierrots that were supposed to be the reason for this quest,” said Febral. “There’s been a lot of talk about how dangerous they are, but... I can’t help but feel it’s exaggerated.”

“Ah, I’ve been thinking that, too.” Juno said, joining their conversation.

Dece looked to Juno. “What’s the situation?”

“All clear. The forest was quiet.”

“I see... So, what is it you were thinking, too, Juno?”

“This is an escort quest where we protect people from the flame pierrots, yeah? I was wondering why it wasn’t a subjugation quest against the flame pierrots. From what I’ve heard, there aren’t many of them. Rather than make all these villagers move, wouldn’t it be faster to wipe out those flame pierrots?”

“I think that’s a reasonable opinion,” Febral said with a nod, but Dece still seemed doubtful.

“Doesn’t that just mean they’re too dangerous to put out a subjugation quest for them?” he asked.

“If they were, you’d expect reports of more extreme damage than

what we're seeing," Febral replied. "The only damages I've heard of are an empty village or two burning to the ground after its residents were already evacuated..."

"...Well, I guess that does seem a bit odd," Dece said.

As would be expected of a party leader, Dece knew how to listen to others. When he thought an opinion was worth listening to, he was open-minded enough to follow the advice of others.

Dece spoke to Juno, who had her hands behind her head, her fingers interlocked.

"Juno. I'm counting on you to be thorough with your scouting. From here out, keep an eye out for more than just monsters or animals."

"Roger that!"

With those words, Juno climbed up into the tree again, then jumped away.

After watching Juno go, Dece said, "Febral, go tell Augus and Julia up at the front everything you told me. I'll stay here and guard the rear."

"Roger."

As he watched Febral run off towards the head of the party, Dece let out a sigh. *Here's hoping this quest stays this good until the end...*

That was Dece's fervent hope.

After splitting off from Dece and the others, Juno went back on patrol.

The forest was as quiet as ever, but when she came out onto one of the narrow mountain paths, Juno's sensitive ears picked up

something.

Juno descended from the trees, getting down on all-fours and putting an ear to the ground. *This noise... Is it the sound of hooves?*

The noise was coming from not far away. There was more than one of them, and the noise was loud.

For now, all she heard was the sound of hooves. Taking into account that she didn't hear wheels, as well, she judged that the sound was likely coming from horsemen... a group of heavy cavalry, at that.

There's heavy cavalry galloping along this mountain road?

Suspicious, Juno decided to scout in the direction of the noise. But, before heading off to scout...

"Awoooo!" she howled, imitating the cry of a grey wolf.

This was a message to Dece and the others. "Abnormal situation detected. Be on your guard," was what it meant.

Having done this, Dece and the others would stay alert. If something happened to delay her return, they would probably come to rescue her.

Juno remained even more silent than before, jumping from tree to tree as she searched for the individuals making the noise.

After some time, she heard the rustling of armor in the distance. Juno hid in the shadows, surveying the area around her.

When she did, as expected, she spotted a group of heavy cavalry galloping along the mountain path. There were five of them in total. Each of them wore black full-plate armor.

What're they doing here?

While Juno was suspiciously observing them, the emblem on the

shields they carried caught her eye.

That crest... It belongs to the Principality of Amidonia. Then... are they horsemen from the principality?

This was Elfrieden Kingdom territory. It was strange for horsemen from the Principality of Amidonia to be here at all. Adventurers wandered the continent in search of dungeons and quests, so their loyalty to any given state was weak. However, because they wandered the continent, they were very knowledgeable about the relations between different countries.

The principality is supposed to be hostile to the kingdom, she thought. *If principality horsemen are out here... has the Elfrieden Kingdom been attacked by the Principality of Amidonia?*

She recalled there having been talk of the Principality of Amidonia massing its forces on the border.

The adventurers' guild had a system that allowed a country that was under attack to pay a certain amount of money to conscript all adventurers inside their territory. Because of that, adventurers working in the kingdom had been keeping a close eye on the movements of the principality, but the guild received no request for support from the kingdom. Because of that, she had thought nothing would come of it.

Incidentally, Souma had canceled that contract with the guild, declaring it a waste of money for the same reasons as hiring mercenaries, but the adventurers themselves hadn't been informed of this.

Judging from their numbers, they're a scouting party. In that case, is the main force nearby?

If the soldiers came across the villagers the party were escorting, it was going to be very, very bad. The party might be fine against five horsemen, but if they came at them in large numbers, the party didn't stand a chance. The villagers might be dragged off as prisoners of

war, but they, the ones escorting them, might just be killed. Even so, if they abandoned their quest and fled, they would find themselves on the guild's wanted list.

Juno let out a little sigh, trying to set her feelings aside. *For now, I need to stall them*.

Juno hid in the foliage, hiding herself as she gradually approached the five horsemen. Then she took a stone into her hand and threw it at the head of the horse running at the head of the group.

Whack.

"Neighhhh!"

"Whoa?!"

Having been hit in the side of the neck with a stone, the lead horse reared back. The surprised principality soldier was nearly thrown from his horse.

His comrades clustered around him. "What happened?"

"I just suddenly lost control of the horse..."

"Did it get stung by a bee, or something?"

"Dunno. I think something came flying this way, though..."

While the principality horsemen were talking about it, Juno circled around behind them. Then, once again, she threw a stone at the horse that was at the rear of the group.

Whack.

"Neighhhh!"

The moment she hit it, the horse that had been at the rear jumped and ran wild.

“Whoa! Hey, calm down!”

“What?! Is there something here?!”

The horsemen looked around restlessly. With two of their horses having been startled by something in short succession, they seemed to have become very cautious.

When she saw that, Juno was relieved.

Good. That ought to bring their pace down.

The more cautious they were of their surroundings, the slower they would advance. Now she just had to join up with Dece and the others, then get the villagers to hurry up. With that in mind, Juno was turning around to leave when it happened.

Because she had turned suddenly, the branches rustled slightly. That vibration, unfortunately, startled a bird perched on the branch above Juno and it took off. With the loud beating of wings, the principality soldiers looked in Juno’s direction.

“Is there something over there?!”

“Oh, crap...!” Juno fled at once.

Making a snap decision, she took off in the opposite direction of the way she’d come. She couldn’t lead these guys back to where the villagers were.

The horsemen chased after Juno. “Don’t let her get away! Make sure you capture her!”

Juno could hear the voices shouting from behind her. Juno fled through the areas where trees were densely packed, making use of tight turns to try to shake her pursuers, but horses were faster on land. The horsemen deftly controlled their horses, diverting around the dense trees to pursue Juno.

Dammit... These guys just don't give up!

Juno wasn't convinced she'd get out of this alive. As an adventurer, Juno had no particular loyalty to the kingdom. However, they weren't likely to care about that. If she was caught, there was no telling what they might do to her. The thought sent a chill down her spine.

Huff... huff... Someone, save me...

It happened just as she was praying for salvation.

She saw flickering flames ahead of her. Six of them, in total. If she could see them so clearly from this far off, they had to be pretty big fires. Juno nearly came to a stop, despite herself. Then, "Whoa!"

An arm suddenly reached out and pulled Juno into the bushes.

"O-Ow...!"

Pompf.

Juno started to scream, but something soft covered her mouth. Now that she got a better look, there was a round-ish, puffy thing in front of her. When she saw it, Juno let out a little cry.

"Y-You?!"

Juno knew this thing. That roly-poly body. That face wrapped in white silk with acorn eyes peering out. The wicker basket on his back, the large prayer necklace he wore, the naginata in his hands.

This was the one known in rumors as the Kigurumi Adventurer, Little Musashibo.

"You're Mr. Kigurumi! What are you doing here?!" she exclaimed.

In response to Juno's question, Little Musashibo brought a round hand up to cover his mouth.

"..." (Little Musashibo was saying, "Be quiet, please. They'll find us.")

Find us? My pursuers are right there... she thought.

"..." ("It's okay. Just look," he said, gesturing for Juno to look.)

Hmm?

After going through one of their usual conversations, where they managed to communicate somehow, Juno poked her head out of the bushes in time to see the flames from before passing by. They had patchwork bodies, tattered clothing, zombie-like movements, and flames blazing from their heads.

The flame pierrots...

Juno instantly recognized them as the new monsters that had been reported to the guild. However, when she looked at them closely, something seemed wrong. Their movements were strangely jerky, almost like they were marionettes.

While she was thinking that...

"Ahhhh!"

"Wh-What are these things?!"

...the principality horsemen who had been pursuing her started shouting.

Once they saw the flaming aberrations moving towards them with a click-clack noise, the horsemen had bigger things to worry about than their scouting mission. They had nothing to gain by staying here and fighting these unknown monstrosities. Notifying the main force about the existence of these things came first.

"Tch! We don't have time to deal with these guys. We're heading back!" the leader shouted.

The horsemen retreated. Juno breathed a sigh of relief, but she wasn't out of danger yet.

Now, she had a swarm of flame pierrots near her. Juno drew her short sword, so she would be ready to fight at any time.

Pompf.

Little Musashibo placed his hand on Juno's head.

It was so sudden, Juno's eyes went wide. "H-Hey, Mister?! What do you think you're doing at a time like this...?"

"..." ("It's okay now. The danger has passed," he said, patting her head.)

"The danger has passed...? But, those things are still here!"

"..." ("Never mind them. Let's hurry back to Dece and the others," he was saying.)

Then, Little Musashibo lifted Juno up, throwing her into the wicker basket on his back.

"Whoa! This again?!"

Ignoring Juno's protestations, Little Musashibo plodded off. Juno was bewildered for a while, but once she came to her senses, she rested her chin on Little Musashibo's head.

"...This is the second time you've saved me now, Mister."

"..." (Little Musashibo gave a thumbs-up.)

"What are you doing here?"

"..." — Little Musashibo didn't say anything to answer Juno's question. No—he never *had* said anything, but even Juno couldn't sense his feelings this time. However, as she looked at his back, she felt that she could sense something like sadness.

Juno scratched her head, then started bopping Little Musashibo's back repeatedly.

"..." (S-Stop, please," he said, flailing his arms around.)

"Hmph!" she said. "If you want me to stop, then cheer up. Things don't always work out in life, but still, just surviving is a victory. It means you still get to eat tomorrow."

"..."

Little Musashibo said nothing in response. However, his footsteps seemed a little lighter now than they were before.

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"Just surviving is a victory... huh."

Juno had gotten a little rough, but she had probably been trying to encourage him. Juno's words had certainly reached Souma, who had been controlling Little Musashibo and the flame pierrots from far away in the capital.

This was the plan Hakuya had come up with to save the people of the southeast from the principality.

By using Souma's power, Living Poltergeists, they would have a bunch of bizarre dolls go around as a new breed of monster, the flame pierrots. They would use them to attack towns and villages along the route of the principality's army and force them to evacuate. Then they would issue a quest to the adventurers' guild. This would lend the story credence, and they could leave escorting the refugees to the adventurers.

In fact, he had even used the flame pierrots to burn some of the now-unoccupied towns to the ground. From the perspective of the people whose villages were being torched, it was a terrible inconvenience. He did intend to compensate them later, but he was still burning down their homes, no doubt filled with precious

memories, for his own benefit.

Little wonder Hakuya had warned him in advance that it was a rough plan.

Despite that, Souma had still chosen it. He had thought it was better than leaving the unsuspecting people to be tyrannized by the armies of the principality. He had weighed his options, then made his choice to save what he could and cast away the rest. His actions were certainly not praiseworthy.

It had weighed on his heart, but Juno's words had lifted his spirits a little.

"She's right. If they don't survive, I wouldn't even be able to apologize later." Whispering those words to himself, Souma walked out of the Governmental Affairs Office.

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Meanwhile, around that same time, Julius, who was with the main force of the Amidonian army, was looking at the report he had received, puzzled. The appearance of a flame monster... It was hard to take at face value.

There are reports that towns and villages along the army's path have burned down...

When he'd received the report, he had thought that some soldiers must have run wild, running ahead of the army to engage in pillaging. They were aiming to annex this region after the war, so it wouldn't serve their interests to alienate the local population too much.

Just as Julius had been thinking he should warn the entire army against this, he had received a report saying that those towns and villages had burned down a number of days before the principality forces had arrived. While he was glad it hadn't been caused by rampaging soldiers, why had the towns and villages burned down?

The next thing that came to Julius's mind was scorched earth tactics. In other words, he suspected that the people had burned down the towns and villages along the Amidonian army's route to keep them from replenishing their provisions locally. In that case, it would mean the kingdom had predicted exactly what they were up to. If so, it was dangerous to advance now, and Julius should advise his father Gaius to retreat.

Still... It's too poorly done to be a scorched earth strategy.

With it being the end of the ninth month of the year, they were in the middle of the harvest season now. If they were using scorched earth tactics, they should have razed the fields and destroyed or poisoned the wells, too.

Yet all that had been burned down were the towns and villages themselves. The fields were left untouched, and the wells were still usable. The principality forces could still resupply in the field. Furthermore, they had found valuables in the burned-out towns. This had to be proof that the residents had evacuated in a hurry.

In the end, he came to the conclusion that the towns and villages in this area must have been attacked by monsters or brigands. Because of that, Julius did not advise Gaius to do anything.

The report of fire monster sightings is not inconsistent with the conditions at the site... But, still.

Was it not all a bit too convenient? That was how it felt to Julius.

I can't help but feel there's something off about the kingdom right now.

—It's pandemonium.

While he looked off into the northwest, that was what Julius thought.



Chapter 4: The Lord of Altomura

—32nd Day, 9th Month, 1,546th Year, Continental Calendar.

King Souma's war, which began on this day, came to be called the Three Front War because the battle took place in three locations at the same time, or the One Week War due to its brevity.

Because of its incredible importance to both the Elfrieden Kingdom and the Principality of Amidonia, there are many historical idioms that came from this war. The expression "Lord of Altomura" was one such historical idiom.

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It happened in the city of Altomura, in the southwest of the Elfrieden Kingdom.

It was a walled city in the middle of a grain-producing region, but Altomura was now besieged by a force of 30,000 troops from the Principality of Amidonia. Altomura had a garrison of only 5,000, and the city would surely fall in a matter of days if the enemy troops chose to press the attack. Even so, the new king had sent his forces to fight the rebellious General of the Army, Georg, so he was unable to send reinforcements.

Everyone must have believed the fall of Altomura was only a matter of time. However, with the Amidonian force laying siege to the city making no move to attack, a strange silence fell over the area.

Why had this situation arisen?

This was the work of one man. Right now, that middle-aged man was in the main camp of the principality's army, bowing and scraping before Prince Gaius VIII. The man was thin and scrawny, with an easily-cowed look about him.

His name was Weist Garreau.

He was the lord who ruled over Altomura and all of the area around it.

Weist, who had a manor in Altomura, should have been the one heading up the effort to defend the city, but now, of all things, he was here prostrating himself before Gaius VIII.

Gaius sat on a camp stool, the Crown Prince Julius at his side. Then, still seated on his camp stool and glaring down at Weist, Gaius spoke.

"I see... So Altomura will open its gates to us without resisting."

"Y-Yesh! We have no intent of resisting the forces of the Principality of Amidonia!" Weist answered, the words catching in his throat a little.

Gaius narrowed his eyes. "...Let us hear your reason."

"I don't need a reason. It's impossible to defend against a force as massive as yours! Altomura is a city built on the plains of a grain-producing region, not terrain that can be easily defended. Our only defenses are the castle walls anyway, and we only have a garrison of a few thousand. In a situation where there is no hope of reinforcements from the capital, if such a massive force were to attack, the city would fall swiftly and inevitably!"

Gaius glanced to Julius, and Julius responded with a silent nod. He could see no contradiction between Weist's words and their own understanding of the situation.

Having decided that there were no lies in his words... "Hmm,"

Gaius grunted. “And so you say you wish to surrender to us?”

“Y-Yes. If defending ourselves is impossible, we are left with no choice but to cling to your mercy.”

When he heard Weist’s words, Gaius grinned wickedly.

For Gaius, Weist’s surrender was a godsend. He had dispatched troops to take advantage of the discord within the kingdom, but if the kingdom were to unify under either Georg or Souma, the weaker principality would be at a disadvantage. In order to prepare for a situation like that, Gaius would like nothing more than to take the city without suffering the loss of any troops.

“Very well,” he said. “Then open the gates at once.”

“P-Please, wait for a short while.”

Gaius’s brow twitched with displeasure. “Why?”

“C-Currently, the castle is divided between one faction that doesn’t want to fight and another faction that wants to resist to the bitter end,” Weist explained. “There are those in the resistance faction who say that ‘The Amidonians will kill us all even if we surrender,’ and some among the faction that don’t want to fight suspect that is the case, too.”

“I see... and are you one of them?” Gaius asked.

“P-Perish the thought! I am here to beg for our lives. I must never doubt the man I am negotiating with!” Weist hastily explained, breaking into a cold sweat as he did. “I-I trust you, but it’s an opinion that some in the castle hold. That is why, first, I have come to your camp to hear your thoughts, Your Princely Highness.”

Gaius thought deeply about Weist’s words. While he saw nothing wrong with them, still, was it wise to trust this man?

While Gaius was thinking, Julius, who was standing next to him,

interjected.

"Even without persuading those in the castle, we can take Altomura at any time."

"Yes. I am already well aware of that," Weist replied to Julius, showing him the same obsequience. "However, there are many fools who do not understand that. Surely, His Princely Highness would not wish to lose any of his soldiers due to those people's foolishness. If you will guarantee us our lives, I will go and bring everyone in the castle around to the same point of view."

As Weist's head bounced up and down like a grasshopper, Julius felt nothing but disgust for the man.

Are the nobles of the kingdom all so peace-addled? Julius thought. *It must be because there were no great wars during the reign of the last king. Perhaps it is little wonder that a fierce general like Georg would give up on this country.*

While Julius was thinking that, Gaius slapped his own knee. "...Very well. If you open the gates, I will guarantee the safety of everyone in the castle. Return inside at once and convince your people."

When he heard Gaius's words, Weist thanked him as he rubbed his forehead on the ground. "Th-Thank you! I will excuse myself at once!"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Weist quickly left the main camp. As he watched the man scurry away like a mouse, Julius asked Gaius a question.

"Was that all right? He didn't seem like that important of a person..."

"Hmph. Once he opens the gate, we will be the ones in control." Gaius wore an evil smile. "I have no use for a little mouse that flatters his enemies. Once he has outlived his usefulness, I will part his head

from his body and use it to decorate the gates."

"...I see." Julius backed down, seemingly satisfied with the answer.

When Gaius rose from his camp stool, he sent orders to his generals, saying, "When the gates of Altomura open, enter the castle and occupy it at once."

However, even once the sun had gone down, the castle gates showed no sign of opening.

"Argh! What is taking Weist so long?!"

Having been left waiting, Gaius was growing irritated.

His generals looked to one another, worried that their wrathful prince's anger might be turned upon them. Julius was the only one there who was still calmly analyzing the situation.

"Did he fail to bring around everyone in the castle...?" he wondered. "Or perhaps, we may have been deceived by Weist."

"Damn! How about we attack them with all of our forces now?" Gaius seemed ready to launch an all-out attack immediately.

Seeing Gaius like that, Julius offered a word of advice using the calmest tone he could manage. "Please, wait. If the enemy has been plotting something, there may be a trap waiting. If we consider the possibility of an ambush under cover of night, I believe we should tighten our defenses and wait for dawn, then launch the attack at first light. We can take a city like that in half a day."

When Julius pointed all of that out, Gaius lowered his raised fist. "Urgh... It seems I have no choice."

Gaius accepted Julius's advice, ordering his generals to attack at dawn. Even as he was relieved that Gaius had held off on the attack, Julius had a bad feeling about Altomura, somehow.

The revulsion Julius had felt towards Weist. Had that feeling really come from the obsequious posture Weist had shown?

When that man was grinding his forehead against the ground and prostrating himself before us, what expression was he making where we couldn't see? Was he relieved that we wouldn't attack? Or perhaps...

Was there... something more to it?

Julius felt as if he was being pulled deeper and deeper into the depths. As if he were being toyed with by someone unseen...

I smell someone other than Weist Garreau here....

As he looked towards Altomura, it was creepily silent.

—1st Day, 10th Month, 1,546th Year, Continental Calendar.

The dawn broke on the next day. The night raid that Julius had feared never occurred.

Gaius VIII went to order the armies to attack, as planned. That was when it happened.

"Wooooooooooooooooo!"

A roaring battle cry suddenly rose up from inside the castle at Altomura where all had been quiet before.

It was a spirited cry, enough so that Gaius hesitated to give the order to attack. What had happened in Altomura? It had been so quiet up until yesterday. Reinforcements couldn't have arrived, could they? Various possibilities flashed through Gaius's mind, but he could make no decision.

Meanwhile, a single horse raced towards the Amidonian camp from Altomura. Riding atop the horse was Weist Garreau. When Weist

dismounted, practically falling from his horse, he was greeted by an angry Gaius and prostrated himself before him.

"Weist! You cur, what happened to our agreement to open the gate?!" Gaius roared.

Weist shrunk into himself even more. "I-I cannot apologize enough! The people in the castle have given in to desperation. It is taking some time to persuade them."

"Enough! I don't want to hear excuses!" Gaius drew the sword at his hip, pointing the blade at Weist's neck.

"Eek!"

"I'll lop your head off and send it to those inside the castle as a warning!"

"W-With all due respect, Your Princely Highness. I hesitate to say this, but... we cannot make rational decisions when surrounded by an army of tens of thousands like this..." Weist fumbled to explain while clearly in a state of terrible panic. "J-Just now, the war cry you heard from Altomura was the voices of those saying, 'The Amidonians will never keep their word, so let's take as many of them with us as we can.'"

Since Gaius had, in fact, had no intention of keeping his word, he found himself at a momentary loss for words.

If every soldier in the castle was prepared to die, it was far too risky to force the attack. Such soldiers were like machines: they would fight to their last breath, taking as many of the enemy with them as they could manage. In a straight-up fight, his allies would take major losses. Amidonia's victory was still unshakable, but because their victory was so unshakable, he didn't want to waste manpower here.

Unable to just watch any longer, Julius spoke up. "Father, fighting death-crazed soldiers will cause major losses. We should avoid that. Why not make a display of your magnanimity, then ask Weist to

attempt to persuade them once more?"

Weist leapt on Julius's suggestion, as if thinking, *My life is saved!*

"Th-This time, I'll not fail! I swear, I will convince the people in the castle!" Weist cried.

Gaius thought for a moment, but ultimately decided to let Weist handle it. "Very well. Consider this your final chance."

"Y-Yes, sir! Leave it to me."

"Hmph... Still, how am I to show my magnanimity?"

"For that, why not break the siege as soon as I return to the castle?" Weist asked.

Weist's suggestion enraged Gaius. "Break the siege, you say! Do you take me for a fool?!"

"P-Perish the thought! Of course, it only needs to be for a short time! If you could break the siege until at least noon, I will use that as a show of Your Princely Highness's magnanimity and persuade the people in the castle."

"Hmph," Gaius snorted, "...Very well. From now until noon, we will lift the siege. Should the gates not open by then, we will take them by force. Is that acceptable?"

"Y-Yes! I swear, I swear I will convince the people in the castle!"

Once Weist left, as frantic as he had come, Gaius immediately moved his troops to break the siege of Altomura. Of course, he took measures to ensure he could capture any unit that tried to take this chance to escape. He placed a highly mobile unit under the command of Julius and positioned them at the front.

Hmph, Altomura has but half a day to live...

Gaius looked at Altomura with a gaze full of rage.

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Meanwhile, at the other end of Gaius's gaze...

In Weist Garreau's manor in Altomura, besieged by the forces of Amidonia, right now, there was a woman making herself at home and relaxing.

Despite being in a city besieged by a force of 30,000, the woman was elegantly enjoying a spot of tea. Having returned from the principality's camp, Weist explained how the negotiations had gone.

He held a wry grin at the woman's boldness, which no one would have anticipated from her appearance. His expression showed no hint of the pathetic display he had been putting on in the Amidonian war camp earlier.

"Was that good enough, ma'am... no, Duchess Excel?" he asked.

"Yes. Well done," she said. "You've learned how to pull off a psychological act. You're such a good little boy, Weist."

The woman sipping black tea was the Admiral of the Elfrieden Navy, Excel Walter. Even if she looked to be in her mid-twenties, this woman was actually a sea serpent who had lived for over five hundred years. Fifty-year-old Weist was still a child to her.

"Duchess... would it be too much to ask that you finally stop treating me like a child?" he asked.

"From my perspective, all of my marines are children," she said.

"I'm not attached to the Navy anymore, though, you know?"

"Hee hee! No matter how high you are promoted, for as long as I live, you will be my subordinate and child."

He sighed. "It looks like I'm going to be treated as a child for the rest of my life, then."

Even once the human Weist was old and grey, Excel would probably still be youthful and treating him this way. Weist could already see that likely future.

"Still... our new king must be terrifying if he can send you to be his errand girl," he said.

"His Majesty does run his people ragged," she agreed. "I know I've made it clear I'm at his service from the beginning, but, still, he suddenly told me, 'Take a Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel and a simple receiver and get your butt to Altomura,' you know?"

During Souma's ultimatum two days prior, Excel had not been listening from the Walter Duchy, but from here in Altomura. The broadcast could only show so much of the scenery around her, so as long as she was in a room indoors, no one would be able to tell exactly where she was.

When Amidonia's spies had reported that the ultimatum had been issued, they should have assumed Excel was in the Walter Duchy. Souma had suggested they take advantage of that to secretly bring Excel to Altomura.

Her mission was to delay the armies of the principality.

It had been anticipated that the armies of the principality would first occupy Altomura, the central city of the grain-producing region, then sweep all enemies from the surrounding area to entrench their de facto control of the territory. So, with the kingdom lacking the leeway to dispatch reinforcements, the only way to prevent losses was to hold on tenaciously at Altomura, and to do so in a way that avoided battles as much as possible. In other words, it was a job for the sly old serpent, Excel.

"Gaius would never imagine that Duchess Excel is here, of all places," Weist said.

"It's three days' travel from Lagoon City to get here, after all," Excel agreed. "I've been here for the last five days, though... Honestly, His

Majesty and the others are working this poor old woman far too hard."

"Please, don't play the old woman only when it suits you," Weist complained.

"It's fine for me to be self-deprecating," she said. "I won't stand for anyone else saying it, though."

Only Vargas would be so reckless! was what he wanted to cry out, but he tucked the words away inside his chest. He may have been over fifty, but he didn't want to die just yet.

"By the way, Duchess Excel," he said, "I've only bought time until noon. Was that good enough? Don't I need to buy a little more time according to the plan?"

"It's fine. If they break the siege until noon, it will take time to fully encircle us again. Even if they begin an all-out attack, that would surely take until close to evening."

"I see," he said. "Well, then, I think my job is done here."

"Yes. Well done, Weist. Please, relax and leave the rest to me." Excel gave him a motherly smile.

Weist had been run ragged by Souma, Hakuya, and Excel, but he could only laugh at himself for thinking that her smile alone made him want to forgive everything.

Elfrieden Historical Idiom Lessons: Number 1

"Lord of Altomura"

Type: Idiomatic Expression Meaning: A person who makes promises they can't keep.

Origin: During the One Week War, Weist Garreau, the Lord of Altomura, which was being attacked by Gaius VIII of the Principality of Amidonia, made an empty promise to Gaius that he "would have the gates opened," in order to buy time.

Usage: That person's a Lord of Altomura. You shouldn't trust him.



Chapter 5: The Battle Outside Randel

The 30th stratagem in *Thirty-Six Stratagems* says, “Make the host and guest exchange roles.”

It is most often referred to in the context of a weaker force overcoming a stronger one, but it can also refer to making the defender (the host) trade places with the attacker (the guest). Being the defender is advantageous in war, so it is desirable for the attacker to create a situation where he can fight defensive battles even on campaign.

The battle currently taking place in the outskirts of Randel, the central city of the Carmine Duchy, could have been said to be an example of the later meaning of the 30th stratagem.

—32nd Day, 9th Month, 1,546th Year, Continental Calendar.

In the Carmine Duchy, the Forbidden Army, which should have been the invading force, was fighting a defensive battle against the Army, which should rightly have been the defender. As he hid behind the walls of the “fortress” that was being attacked by a 40,000 strong force from the Army, Halbert Magna was grumbling.

“Damn... Don’t you think the enemy are trying a little too hard?”

“There’s no helping that, you know, Hal.” The response had come from Kaede Foxia, an earth mage attached to the Forbidden Army, who was taking cover behind the same wall as him.

Even as the arrows, fired by enemy and ally alike, flew overhead, she remained nonchalant.

"If you look at it from the enemy's perspective, they woke up to find a fortress outside," she said. "One with Forbidden Army troops in it, no less. It's only natural they would be in a rush to do something about that, you know."

"Well, yeah..." he said. "I thought it was beyond reckless taking on 40,000 troops from the Army with 10,000 of our own, but apparently the premise was that we'd be fighting in this fortress. Just how well did he prepare in advance for this?"

"There was originally a fortress facing Amidonia at this site," she told him. "When the border moved far to the west in the time of the king before the last king, it was abandoned. The king simply brought it back to life, you know. And what's more... this is a considerably more well-defended fortress than the one that was once here."

It was yesterday that Souma had sent his ultimatum to Georg Carmine. With negotiations having failed, Souma had immediately dispatched a force of 10,000 troops from the Forbidden Army to the Carmine Duchy.

The Forbidden Army had advanced at a speed that overturned all common sense held by the Army. They had approached the central city of the duchy, Randel, and built a "fortress" right in front of their eyes.

That rapid advance and construction had been enabled by the rhinosaurus land train. Thanks to Souma's honorary little sister, Tomoe, the Forbidden Army had a large number of rhinosauruses that could serve as a rapid cargo transportation system. Thanks to the ability of the rhinosaurus land train to transport massive amounts of cargo, they had been able to send in people and resources in a short amount of time.

The materials for building the fortress had already been partially assembled in the royal capital. They'd used a two-by-four wood frame

construction system, so the parts just needed to be put into the designated places on site.

Souma had taken the idea from the One Night Castle that Hideyoshi (then known as Tokichiro Kinoshita) had built in Sunomata. Basically, the rhinosaurus land train had taken the place of the Kiso River.

In addition, the Forbidden Army troops who had constructed the fortress had a secret. Having been sent out under Souma's orders to assist in the construction of the new city and roads, each and every one of the soldiers of the Forbidden Army was now a capable combat engineer.

The soldiers would dig holes or pile up earth as needed, cover the walls the mages created in Roman concrete, and assemble the materials shipped in from the capital.

The earth mages would gouge out the earth to make ditches, raise the ground's surface to make walls, use magic to make the Roman concrete poured by the soldiers harden, and use reinforcement magic to strengthen the walls.

The common thinking when building a fortress on open land in this world was to have earth mages do all the work. However, because every non-mage member of the king's personal forces was able to take part in construction, the work speed was markedly faster.

And so, even though the Forbidden Army had only arrived at the site yesterday evening, by the time morning came, the fortress was complete. From the people of Randel's perspective, it must have looked like the fortress had been built in one night.

Later historians would come to call this "Randel's One Night Fortress."

This blitz of construction had been carried out immediately after the ultimatum, and the Army and corrupt nobles who were shut up in Randel had been able to do nothing to stop it.

“Still, I have to hand it to Duke Carmine, you know,” Kaede said. “The only ones who are visibly unnerved are the nobles’ private troops. The Army is quietly moving to encircle us.”

“Hey! Don’t expose your face!” Halbert exclaimed. “You’ll get hit by a stray arrow!”

Kaede had been peeking out through an arrow slit, but Halbert pulled her back.

At just that moment—

Boom!

—they heard an incredible explosion nearby.

Halbert saw Kaede was about to fall over backwards, so he quickly supported her. The sudden noise must have caught her by surprise, because Kaede was blinking.

“Th-Thank you for that, Hal,” she said.

“Come on, keep it together,” he said. “...That was pretty close to us, wasn’t it?”

An enemy spell must have struck the walls.

Technically, the walls had been strengthened against magic by Kaede and the other earth mages. That said, if they kept taking direct hits like that one, they weren’t going to hold up.

Halbert wreathed a nearby throwing spear in magical fire, throwing it towards the group he thought had unleashed that last spell. The fire spear flew like a missile, impaling one man and then exploding to incinerate the rest.

“Arghhhhh!”

He could hear their dying screams from here. Seeing that the deed was done, Halbert hid in the shadow of the wall once more.

“Wait, hold on… don’t you think the attack is extra intense just here on the west side?” he asked. “It feels like the other sides are only seeing sporadic attacks.”

“…Those are Zemish mercenaries, you know,” Kaede said as she peeked out from behind the wall. “They must have been hired by the corrupt nobles. The corrupt nobles literally have their necks on the line. If they lose this battle, the only thing waiting for them is a trip to the execution block. It’s do-or-die for them, you know. What with them getting the death penalty and all.”

“I know you think you’re being witty, but that one made me shudder,” Halbert said while throwing his second fire spear. He didn’t miss his mark and many mercenaries burned.

“Arghhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Hot, hot!”

“It burns, it burrrrrrrrrns!”

Halbert watched with a pained smile as the mercenaries turned into balls of flame and rolled around on the ground.

For Halbert, this was his first real battle. While he had much more power than the average person, he wasn’t used to killing.

Well, it’s easier than fighting an Army unit with a lot of guys I know in it, at least, he thought.

As a former member of the Army, Halbert had complicated feelings about this whole situation. Due to their close relationship with the king, Halbert and Kaede were among the few who knew the whole truth behind this war. That was why he understood what the king wanted to accomplish. He understood, but… his feelings about it were still complicated.

“Hal!” Kaede called out to him, snapping Halbert back to his senses.

"What is it, Kaede?!"

"This is awful, you know," Kaede said. "Look at what the enemy just brought out."

She pointed at the giant cannons that were being carried onto the battlefield at this very moment. In this world, where gunpowder weapons had never really developed due to the existence of magic, research had continued on cannons for use in naval battles. While they lacked mobility, their destructive power that didn't rely on magic had caught the Army's eye. The Army kept three of them for use as siege weapons, where mobility was not so important.

At present, the only force in Elfrieden which had cannons that could be used on land was the Army.

"...Come to think of it, they do have those," Hal said. "I'd totally forgotten."

"If you're going to use those, it should be in the opening stages of the battle, after all," Kaede said.

"Well, what're they dragging them out this late in the game for?" he asked.

"Probably the corrupt nobles brought them out because they're panicking, you know."

"...Is it really bad?" he asked.

"It *is* really bad," she answered. "The anti-magic reinforcement is only effective against magic and flames, you know. Against physical impacts, these are just dirt walls coated with 'Roman concrete.' They're more durable than normal, but if they keep hitting them like that..."

Booooom!

...Thunk!

One of the cannons fired with a sound like the air was being sucked away, the cannonball tracing a parabola before striking the wall and punching into it. The dirt wall crumbled around where it had punched through.

The cannonballs in this world were lumps of solid iron.

It seemed they had considered exploding shells, as well, but while those were flashy, they had been unable to inflict damage on walls reinforced against magic, so there was that historical reason for why they were not used. Simple impact damage worked well against reinforced walls. The lumps of iron that had just been fired into the walls were exactly the kind of high-mass projectiles they were weak against.

Seeing their power, Halbert and Kaede looked to one another.

“Wh-What do we do now?!” Kaede stammered.

“Don’t ask me! Can’t you do something with your magic?!” Halbert exclaimed.

“I’m out of magic after building this fortress! What about you, Hal, can’t you intercept them with a throwing spear or something?”

“They’re too fast!” he cried. “That’s like asking me to hit an incoming arrow with a rock!”

While they were bickering back and forth...

“Hmm. How about a bow, then?”

...they heard a calm voice from above them say.

““Huh?””

The two of them turned to see a tough young dark elf (though it was hard to be certain of an elf’s age by his appearance) holding an impressively large bow. The dark elf warrior nocked an arrow,

pointing it upwards on a diagonal and taking aim.

Booooom!

Once again, a cannon fired.

At practically the same time, the dark elf warrior let loose his arrow.

In that instant, Halbert and Kaede thought they heard a high-pitched keening sound. The dark elf warrior had probably used a wind magic enchantment on the arrow. Two seconds later, the iron cannonball was smashed to smithereens in mid-air. Halbert and Kaede could only gape.

"Hmph," the dark elf said. "Easier than taking down a migratory falcon."

"Wh-Who're you...?" Halbert stammered.

"Pardon me. I neglected to introduce myself. I have come from the God-Protected Forest. My name is Sur," the young dark elf man said with a broad smile. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sir Halbert Magna."

"Wh-What do you know my name for?"

"You may not remember, but when the major landslide happened in the God-Protected Forest, my daughter was among those you rescued with the king," Sur answered. "When she heard your name later, she wanted to thank you, but the initial relief force had already returned to the capital, so... back then..."

Booooom!

...Ker-smash!!

"...I am terribly sorry that I did not properly thank you for saving my daughter," he finished.

Even while talking, Sur was able to accurately shoot down the incoming cannonballs. They had heard dark elves were excellent archers, but this was truly impressive.

"No, I was just following Souma's... the king's orders..." Halbert said.

"Even if you were, I still am grateful. Though I must admit to a slight irritation at the fact that, smitten with the way you looked rescuing people, my daughter started saying, 'Someday, I want to join the Forbidden Army, and join in relief operations like that man.' Ha ha ha."

Even as he continued talking like an ordinary father, Sur was shooting down incoming cannonballs one after another. Halbert and Kaede were simply dumbfounded.

"Um, why are you here? You're not in the Forbidden Army, right?" Kaede asked, bewildered.

To this, Sur gave a jovial laugh. "We heard that His Majesty Souma, the savior of our village, was in serious trouble. In order to repay our debt, we warriors of the dark elf village have been sent to his aid. We have always avoided involvement with the outside world as much as possible, but, this time, not a single person voiced their opposition."

To repay their debt. Here, the simple, steady accomplishments of Souma's rule were showing their effects.

"I'm very grateful for this, you know," Kaede said.

"I scratch your back, you scratch mine," Sur shrugged. "This is something we have learned from you people."

When she saw Sur's smile, Kaede felt the tension melt away, if only a little.

We have more reinforcements than I thought, she thought. *At this*

rate, I think we may manage to defend ourselves.

The Forbidden Army had received reinforcements from more than just the dark elf village. There was also Halbert's father, Glaive Magna, and those who had defected from the Army like him. They were participating in the battle as volunteer soldiers with Glaive leading them. Combined with the reinforcements from the dark elf village, there were around 5,000 of them.

In other words, there were 15,000 defenders in this fortress.

I hear an attacker must have three times as many soldiers as the defender in order to win a siege, Kaede thought. *The Army has seen a lot of deserters, Hal's father foremost among them, but they were able to keep their numbers at 40,000 with the mercenaries the corrupt nobles managed to scrounge up. This would have been hard with only the 10,000 troops who report directly to the king, but if you add in the reinforcements, we've just managed to avoid them having triple our numbers.* It was a relief to realize that.

Incidentally, years later, Sur's now-grown daughter would make good on her word. She would join the military and be fortunate enough to be placed under Halbert's command. Somehow, she would also shrewdly manage to arrange for her marriage to Halbert, creating a situation Kaede would not be able to feel relieved about at all, but that is a story for another day.

For now, the only thing Kaede had to wrack her brain over was finding some way to survive this battle with Halbert.

Then...

"Kaede!"

Hearing someone suddenly call her name, Kaede looked towards the gate to see a group of knights, both them and their horses clad in silver armor. These were the Royal Guard who protected the capital and the royal palace.

Standing at the front of the group, looking most impressive of all, was the Captain of the Royal Guard, who was also the head of Forbidden Army, Ludwin Arcs. He was blonde and handsome, clad in silver armor, and riding atop a white horse. It was a look that seemed "too good to be true," and Halbert envied him for it.

Someday, I want to be like that... Halbert felt a strong desire to make a name for himself.

Meanwhile, Kaede paid no heed to his dashing figure as she closed in angrily on Ludwin. "What do you think you're doing?! You're our commander-in-chief, you know!"

"Sorry, Kaede," he said. "You take command here for a little while. We'll go deal with those noisy things." Ludwin pointed towards the cannons with his lance.

Kaede clutched her head. "We have Hal for petty errands like that, you know!"

"Hey!" Halbert exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha, don't be like that," Ludwin said. "Compared to the soldiers who've worked so hard building this fortress and defending it, we in the Royal Guard haven't had a single chance to show off so far. It'll be bad for our appearance if we don't fix that."

"For your appearance... are all men stupid?" Kaede demanded.

"Ha ha ha, you *do* get it," Ludwin chuckled. "Well, I'll leave the rest to you."

Before Kaede could say another word, Ludwin began barking orders at the Royal Guard.

"Open the gates! The target is dead ahead, the three large cannons! We'll return when they are destroyed! Ignore the enemy soldiers: don't pursue them too deeply! Focus solely on destroying the target!"

“““Yes, sir!”””

“If any block your path, run them through with your lance!” Ludwin ordered. “If any try to interfere, see them trampled under your horse’s hooves! We are the lance that defends this country! We bear the dignity of His Majesty! Rush forth, and let nothing hold you back!”

And so, the gates were opened.

“Here we go! We’ll show them the Royal Guard aren’t just here to look pretty!” Ludwin called.

“““Yes, sir!”””

With the intensity of a dam breaking, the Royal Guard surged forth.

The attacking mercenaries panicked in the face of this sudden counterattack, breaking ranks. They could no longer impede the Royal Guard’s charge. Some were impaled on Ludwin and his men’s lances, others were trampled under the hooves of their horses.

Many of them were mercenaries that the corrupt nobles had spent their personal wealth scraping together. The mercenaries were strong individually, but they did not work well in groups. With no unified command structure, they each made decisions on their own.

Because they were only working for the money, they lacked loyalty or patriotism. When their lives were at risk, they were quick to flee. As a result, they were especially ill-suited to face a force like Ludwin’s, which was disciplined and could move with one common will. The mercenaries couldn’t stop the group as individuals, yet they also couldn’t work together with their allies. With the mercenaries being mowed down one after another, they broke and ran.

Then, when Ludwin and his men reached the abandoned cannons, they set them on fire.

His Majesty will probably moan about the budget later... but, there's little choice, Ludwin thought.

He felt it was a bit of a waste, but they couldn't just leave them there, and they couldn't afford the time it would take to drag weapons with such low mobility back. Destroying them was the only option.

As the Royal Guard slowly made their triumphant return, there was a loud roar as the cannons exploded behind them, sending up a great black cloud of smoke.

Jumping straight to the conclusion, the Army returned to Randel at sunset having been unable to accomplish anything this day. If we look only at the results of the battle, it could be called a victory for the defenders.

However, the ones who had originally been the attackers were the Forbidden Army. No matter how many defensive battles they won, they would eventually be worn down.

That much was clear to everyone.

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That night, in the meeting room of Georg Carmine's castle, more than a dozen nobles were pressing Georg for answers.

"Duke Carmine! What was that supposed to be?! How can the Army be so unmotivated?!" a corrupt noble demanded.

"Indeed," another said angrily. "This is not like you, the one once feared as a fierce god of the battlefield."

"We were the only ones out there taking the fight seriously!" another noble exclaimed.

All of these men had fled as soon as Souma had accused them of corruption. They had gathered, like moths to the flame, under the banner of Georg, who had made his opposition to the king clear.

Having embezzled more than they could ever repay, and now even rebelling against the king, they had nowhere left to go. If they lost the war with Souma, it would be the end of them. That was why they had spent their personal fortunes on Zemish mercenaries and challenged the Forbidden Army.

However, they were not satisfied with the way Georg had fought.

The Army had been too passive in today's battle. They understood that the soldiers' morale would be low from fighting the king's forces, but Georg had shown no intention of even trying to encourage the troops. This attitude was unlike the Georg Carmine known for his relentless offenses, and it angered the nobles.

"The Army is full of spineless cowards!" one of the nobles spat. "The battle with the king has already begun, you realize!"

"Show us the power that made the name of Georg Carmine famous throughout the kingdom!"

"Surely you don't mean to tell us you're scared now!" another one shouted.

"Oh...?" Georg glared at the nobles. That alone was enough to knock the fight out of them, making them fall silent and take a step back away from him. "Who are you suggesting I am afraid of?"

There was silence.

With those words alone, Georg took control of the room.

As he looked to each of the nobles, who were speechless in the face of the fierce general's intensity, Georg spoke in a calm, composed tone.

"Do any of you understand the situation? The enemy has only ten, maybe twenty thousand troops. It was a surprise that they built that fortress overnight, but if we slowly close in on them, they are the ones that will be pushed into a corner. Where is the need to recklessly

attack?"

"I-If that is the case... if they are only ten thousand, shouldn't we push the attack and defeat them in one fell swoop?" One of the nobles worked up his courage to speak, but Georg only snorted derisively.

"You tried that and were driven off, were you not?" he asked. "What's more, you even pulled three cannons out of the armory, and then, in your blundering, managed to have them destroyed."

"Urgh... I can't apologize enough for that." The noble who had spoken shrank under Georg's glare.

In fact, deploying the cannons had been a decision the corrupt nobles had made themselves, frustrated that they couldn't take the fortress. They had used their titles to intimidate the person in charge of the armory, forcing him to lend them the weapons. As a result, they had needlessly lost three cannons. Now, the Army looked at the nobles' forces with contempt.

Georg continued, "There was one other thing I found concerning. I couldn't sense Souma in that fortress."

"Hasn't he left the war to his vassals, while he stays trembling back in the royal capital?" one of the corrupt nobles asked.

"Do you think that *that* king could do that?" Georg asked. "Even if we can't see him, he's definitely out there doing something. That is why we need to lure him out."

"In other words, you want to use the soldiers in that fortress as bait?" a noble asked.

Georg nodded at the noble's suggestion. "Right now, there is no way to know where Souma is or what he is plotting, but if he leaves the troops he's dispatched to die, both the soldiers and the people will abandon him. Eventually, he has no choice but to appear on this battlefield. When he does, we simply need to crush him along with the soldiers of the fortress." He grinned.

Georg was a lion-headed beastman. When he grinned, it exposed his fangs.

When the nobles saw those, it sent a chill down their spines. They knew, if nothing else, they must never make this man their enemy.

Georg rose from his seat. “However, you must all be tired from today’s attack. This is not a battle that will be ending tomorrow or the day after. We of the Army will handle the attack alone, so all of you will take the day tomorrow to rest.”

“““Y-Yes, sir!”””

Having received those words of appreciation from Georg, the nobles bowed their heads and departed from the meeting room.

Once they did, a single man came in, as if trading places with them. “Pardon me, Duke Carmine.”

“...Beowulf,” Georg said.

The man’s name was Beowulf Gardner. He was a wolf-faced beastman who wore a black military uniform. In the Army, he and Glaive Magna, who had now parted ways with them, were the two closest to Georg Carmine. He was the second-in-command of the army now.

Using few words, Georg asked Beowulf, “The preparations are complete, I presume?”

“Yes, sir! Everything is flawless.”

“Good.”

As Beowulf saluted him, Georg nodded in satisfaction, grinning broadly.

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Meanwhile, around that time, Halbert and Kaede were sitting side

by side, eating together.

They were eating Souma's invention, "instant gelin udon."

The gelin udon was first boiled, then it was spiced heavily and dried out. When they wanted to eat it, they would pour boiling water on it and wait for one minute. (It absorbed water faster than instant ramen.) So long as they had a cup and boiling water, it could be eaten anywhere. Because of that convenience, it was well regarded by the Forbidden Army soldiers who received it as part of their rations.

"Being able to eat this stuff even in the field...*slurp*... it's nice, isn't it?" Halbert commented.

"His Majesty was complaining... *slurp*... 'I wanted to fry them, but they melted when I put them in oil! Even though I prefer the savory taste of fried noodles to non-fried ones!' you know," Kaede said.

"I don't really get... *slurp*... why he'd be so particular about that," Halbert said.

Once they finished their meal over that sort of conversation, Kaede leaned against Halbert's shoulder. The scent of Kaede's hair so close to him made Halbert blink rapidly in confusion.

"H-Hey, Kaede. What're you doing?"

"Hee hee. Hal, I'm happy, you know."

"Huh?! About what?!" he exclaimed.

"Having you at my side, like this," Kaede said with a little laugh. "I'm glad you came to the Forbidden Army. If you were still in the Army, we might have been enemies, you know. We might not be here."

"Yeah, but thanks to that, I'm surrounded by 40,000 soldiers from the Army," he said.

Kaede smiled to see Halbert rub the bridge of his nose bashfully as he said that.

“It will all be decided today and tomorrow, you know,” she said. “If we can just last that long…”

“Then what?” he asked.

“If we just get past this, I hope the rest will work out.”

“Don’t end it with what you’re hoping for!” he exclaimed. “If you’re going to say that much, then tell me the rest, too!”

“So make sure you protect me, okay? Hal.”

With his childhood friend asking him so cutely, Halbert scratched his head vigorously. “Ugh, fine, I get it! I’ll protect you and everything else!”

“I’m counting on you, you know, Hal,” she said.

In a fortress in the middle of the battlefield, the two nestled close and smiled together.

—1st Day, 10th Month, 1,546th Year, Continental Calendar.

The night came to an end, and the Army resumed their attack.

However, unlike the day before, there were only sporadic attacks on all sides.

While arrows and magic came flying, there were no units trying to press the attack hard. Halbert was a little perplexed at the complete change to such a passive mode of fighting after the day before.

“The enemy’s suddenly let up on the attack,” he said.

“I don’t see any Zemish mercenaries, either,” Kaede said, surveying the enemy. “The change in deployment may mean that the enemy

has changed to fighting a war of attrition."

Halbert spun his shoulders in circles. "In that case, it'll make things a bit easier, maybe."

"One must always remain vigilant on the battlefield, Hal," she said. "You'll get tripped up otherwise, you know."

"...I know."

And so, the sporadic attacks by the Army continued. Then, when the sun was at its zenith, it happened.

The soldier in the lookout post shouted loudly, "Multiple units of wyverns sighted in the sky to the east! It's the Air Force!"

When Halbert and Kaede looked up to the eastern sky, alarmed by the lookout's voice, they saw several thousand wyverns flying towards them in formation.

Halbert unconsciously pulled Kaede tight against him.

Kaede put her own hand on the hand Halbert had put around her shoulder, saying, "It's okay, Hal," with a gentle smile. "We've won our bet, you know."

The wyverns *passed by* the fortress where Halbert and Kaede were, flying towards Randel.

Elfrieden Historical Idiom Lessons: Number 2

"Randel's One Night Fortress"

Type: Stratagem Meaning: To use everything at your disposal to achieve an objective.

Origin: When King Souma was subduing Georg's rebellion, he made use of the Forbidden Army's capabilities as combat engineers to revive an abandoned fortress.

Synonyms: *Thirty-Six Stratagems*' 14th stratagem, "Borrow a corpse to resurrect the soul."



Chapter 6: The Scheming Battle for Red Dragon City

—32nd Day, 9th Month, 1,546th Year, Continental Calendar — Red Dragon City.

Ever since Souma had issued his ultimatum, the lord of Red Dragon City, Castor Vargas, had been incredibly busy. Because he had chosen to support Georg Carmine using only his personal troops from Red Dragon City, there was the risk that Red Dragon City itself would become a battlefield.

Castor was aware that this had all come about as a result of his own pride. He couldn't let the people of his domain suffer for his pride.

Because of that, he ended up having to do the work of evacuating the citizenry to other cities himself. Normally, Castor left these sort of tasks entirely to his steward Tolman, but this time he did the work by himself. He thought this might be the last time he had the chance, so he was trying to fulfill his duties as their lord.

Inside the governmental affairs office in Red Dragon Castle, his castle in Red Dragon City, Castor asked Tolman a question. "How is the evacuation of the citizens going?"

"It is already complete," Tolman replied. "Now, the only people remaining in Red Dragon City are a unit from the Air Force and those connected to the House of Vargas."

"I see... I'm glad to hear that," Castor said, leaning back in his chair, a look of heartfelt relief on his face. "Maybe I shouldn't say this,

but it's a load off my shoulders. Without that burden to carry, I can act as an individual warrior."

"Truly, those were words a lord must never speak."

"I was never cut out to be a lord anyway," Castor said. "Though I inherited the Air Force and my subjects from my old man, I never had a gift for management. When I think about what it would have been like without you and Accela, the very thought of it frightens me."

Castor looked up to the ceiling.

"When I think back now, I realize that King Albert was carrying so much more, and with that timid personality of his. ...And now, that new king, Souma, is carrying that burden. He's pretty impressive, for a kid his age. I can see why the princess was willing to cut her hair to walk alongside him."

Liscia had cut her hair as a show of determination towards Georg, but when Castor had seen it, his heart had been moved. Castor had always had a simple personality, so straightforward expressions of emotion like that really hit him hard.

Seeing Castor like this, Tolman asked him in astonishment, "You've changed your view of him now, after all this time?"

"Yeah. I have. ...You're right, it took me far too long," Castor said, recognizing his own fault.

It was too late to turn back now. He had no intention of trying, either. From here on out, he would face Souma bravely. Even if he was defeated, he would show the king the pride of a long-serving General of the Air Force.

"We have received requests from Air Force units around the country saying they wish to side with you, Master..." Tolman began.

The Air Force was home to a lot of ruffians who felt that might

made right, so a brave and fierce commander like Castor got a lot of respect from his subordinates. However, Castor waved his hand at the idea.

"Tell 'em all to take a hike. I'm not letting them join me in my stubborn pride."

"...I thought you would say that," Tolman said, looking at his awkward master with resigned dismay. "Now then, master. What do you plan to do now?"

"I'm not gonna do anything," Castor said. "I'll just wait here for Souma."

"You won't go to join Duke Carmine?"

"I can't leave Red Dragon City sitting empty. Besides, I wouldn't mind fighting alongside Duke Carmine, but I'll have to pass on riding alongside a bunch of corrupt nobles. I couldn't stay true to my pride like that."

For Castor, the outcome of this war was secondary. Win or lose, live or die, he thought only of fighting in a way for which no one would be able to laugh at him.

"I will wait in this land for Souma to come," he said. "If he comes with a great army, I will fall gloriously in battle. If he underestimates me and only sends a small force, I will chew them to pieces. That is all."

"Ah, but will things go as you've planned...?" Tolman said, looking down to the documents in his hands. "According to reports from our scouts, a force of 10,000 from the Forbidden Army has headed towards the Carmine Duchy. It is unclear whether King Souma is accompanying that army, but I do not believe they have any forces *to* send at us."

"You're saying he's gonna ignore me?" Castor asked.

“We only have one hundred knights, so I believe ignoring you would be an option.”

“Ha, not a chance,” Castor dismissed Tolman’s concerns with a laugh. “The 40,000 strong Army led by Duke Carmine, or 100 knights from the Air Force? Which sounds like the more difficult opponent to you? On top of that, if he defeats me, we have a rule in place that says the entire Air Force will side with Souma. For Souma, the best course of action is to strike me down, then to lead the Air Force into a final battle with Duke Carmine.”

“However, the fact of the matter is that King Souma has no spare troops at his disposal…”

“I dunno about that. The new king’s a shrewd one, and I hear his right-hand-man, the Prime Minister, is sharp, too. They may come up with some method we would never have thought of,” Castor said, smiling in anticipation. His expression was like that of a mischievous boy excited to see whether his prank was going to work or not.

When he saw Castor eagerly awaiting some scheme by his enemies, even though he might soon be in a serious crisis, Tolman held his temples. “Master, I simply cannot understand that sense of yours.”

“Ha ha ha, you don’t really need to understand it. Actually… Tolman, don’t get involved in this battle,” Castor said, suddenly taking on a serious expression.

Tolman was shocked into silence, but after a moment he regained his composure. “…Why is that?” he asked. “I am prepared to serve you to the very end, you realize?”

“If something happens to me, and then you die, too, who’s gonna lead the Air Force? Besides, I’m concerned for Carl, who I left with Duchess Excel,” Castor said, wearing a somewhat lonely smile as he did. “Duchess Walter has sided with King Souma. Even if something happens to us, I’m sure she’ll have Carl, who I’ve cut ties with, inherit the House of Vargas. But Carl’s still young. Accela can’t handle things all by herself. That’s exactly why I want you there to watch over Carl.

You know the House of Vargas well, after all. That's why... no matter what happens, you have to survive. That's an order."

"...You do give cruel orders," Tolman said, wearing a bitter smile with a tinge of loneliness. However, he quickly took on a serious expression. Standing with his back straight, his feet together, he saluted. "I have most certainly received your order."

"...I'm counting on you."

As the master and servant were having this exchange, Castor's daughter Carla rushed into the room, out of breath.

"Father! Souma's forces have appeared!"

When he heard those words, Castor stood up, full of vigor. "He's here, huh! So, how big's this force he's leading?"

How many troops Souma had brought would determine whether Castor would be able to show him his pride. Was it 5,000, or 10,000? Castor had hoped for a large force, but Carla's next words made him doubt his ears.

—The enemy force was... *one ship!*

"...Are you serious?"

Having come up to the walls to look, Castor saw a battleship advancing across the plains towards them. Red Dragon City was built halfway up a mountain in the middle of the plains. There were no rivers near it that a battleship could traverse. However, that battleship was running along the ground, not along a river or anything else.

"Father, that looks like the battleship *Albert,*" Carla said, looking through a telescope.

"The *Albert*? What's that thing doing running across the land?"

Castor asked incredulously.

The battleship *Albert*. Named for the former king, it was the sole ship held by the Forbidden Army, and also the flagship of the Royal Navy. While its shape was similar to the *Mikasa,* the flagship of the Combined Fleet at the time of the Battle of Tsushima, instead of being propelled by an internal combustion engine, it was drawn by two sea dragons.

However, it wasn't sea dragons that were pulling the *Albert* now.

"Ah! Father, look. The *Albert* is being drawn by rhinosauruses."

When Castor took the telescope from Carla to see for himself, he saw that the *Albert* was being drawn by three of the large, land-dwelling creatures called rhinosauruses.

When he looked closer, he noticed that the *Albert*'s keel had been modified. There were what looked like wheels on the sides.

"They put wheels on it so they could force it to run on land?! After a modification like that, there's no way it can go back to being a ship! Do they plan to throw away their flagship here?!"

"It's not like we had much choice," said a transmitted voice. "We've already got a shortage of manpower."

"?!"

When he turned to look at the sudden voice which had responded to his questioning, he saw Tolman standing there holding a simple Jewel Voice Broadcast receiver. Standing behind Tolman were a number of Castor's subordinates who had, for some reason, brought a Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel up onto the wall.

The image of Souma Kazuya was displayed on the simple receiver Tolman was holding. It was too dark to see what was behind him.

"We just received a letter from King Souma requesting to speak

with you by Jewel Voice Broadcast, so we made the necessary preparations," Tolman explained.

Hearing this, Castor said, "...I see," with a nod. "And? Why's the *Albert* all this way inland?"

In response to Castor's question, Souma just shrugged. "Don't underestimate the Forbidden Army's transport capacity. If we use paved roads and rhinosauruses, carrying around a modified battleship is easy."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I'm asking why you went to the trouble of bringing it all this way."

Castor wasn't asking about how, he wanted to know why.

Souma told him the answer without any theatrics. "To attack and take Red Dragon City, of course."

The next moment...

Boooooooom!

...there was a loud noise. Then, only seconds later, there was crunching sound as a great tremor shook the wall. As he stumbled forward due to the tremor, Castor looked around the area.

"What?! What happened?!"

"W-We're taking fire from the *Albert!* It appears to have landed a direct hit on the walls!"

"We're taking fire?! ...Ah! I see! Cannons, huh?"

Firearms had not developed very far in this world with magic.

Within the kingdom, only the Army had cannons that were meant to be used inland. However, because all types of magic other than water tended to be weaker at sea, battles on the water were mainly fought by ships firing at each other with artillery. Of course, warships

were loaded with large cannons. This was also true of the Forbidden Army's *Albert*.

Souma had brought the *Albert* out so that he could use its cannons.

"Since it's hard work attacking a mountain fortress like Red Dragon City," Souma explained. "We don't have much time to spare, either, so I relied on weapons that could attack from long-range."

"You're saying you remodeled the battleship for that?" Castor demanded.

What will this guy think of next, Castor thought, feeling as if he was watching a stage magician at work.

If he'd had modern knowledge, he likely would have just thought, *All you did was use a battleship like a railway gun*. (Which were weapons made by loading the usually large and difficult to transport cannons on a train, making it possible to move them long distances.) However, for the people of this world where there was not yet any concept of a railway gun, Souma's idea was enough of a shock on its own.

Castor stood dumbfounded for a moment, but soon began to laugh out loud. "Ha ha ha, not bad! I never thought I'd see a ship running across land!"

"You like showy tricks like this, don't you?" Souma asked, to which Castor nodded.

"I think I'm in love. You may just become one hell of a king."

"It's not too late for you to surrender. It'd make this easier, you know?" Souma said, but Castor shook his head in silence.

"Sadly... I can't do that. I can't do something as pathetic as folding this late in the game. Now that it's come to this, let me be the wall that stands in your way. If you have what it takes to be king, climb over me."

Seeing Castor brimming with the will to fight, Souma narrowed his eyes. "...That is truly regrettable, Castor."

Booooooom! ...Bang!

Another shot was fired into Red Dragon City's walls.

Castor turned to Carla and ordered her, "Carla, lead the wyvern cavalry out and raise some hell over on that battleship."

When she received that order, Carla's eyes went wide with surprise. "I'm going to lead them? What are you going to do, Father?"

"I'll stay here and watch your battle. Since, no matter what, one of us has to stay behind. Now go out there and shut those cannons up."

"...Understood!"

Carla rushed over to the wyvern stables. After watching Carla depart, Castor turned to speak to Souma over the simple receiver.

"My daughter is coming for you. Prepare to meet your maker."

"I suggest you do the same," Souma replied.

The two men glared at one another.

Thus began the battle for Red Dragon City.

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The wyvern cavalry under Carla flew up into the sky with coordinated movements.

Carla, being a dragonewt, could fly by herself, but she usually flew on the back of a wyvern so that she could focus entirely on the battle. They would use wind magic to rise up to an altitude cannons couldn't reach, and then, after getting into formation, they would perform a

diving attack. When they finished forming up, and just as Carla was about to give the order to attack, one of the wyvern cavalry came over to her.

"My Lady, please, wait a moment."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Something's strange here. We've risen to this high of an altitude, but I don't see any sign of reinforcements behind them. It looks like the *Albert* really is the entire enemy force."

As she responded to the wyvern knight, who had a dubious look on his face, Carla tilted her head to the side in puzzlement. "Haven't we already received reports to that effect?"

"Yes," he said. "However, I think they may be hiding somewhere, or they might have troops standing by in a separate location. My Lady, do you think it's possible to take a castle with only a siege weapons unit?"

Carla considered the question. "...No, it's not. Even if they're able to attack the castle, they lack the power to occupy it and then maintain that occupation. If they want to hold the castle, they'll need a unit of infantry in addition to the siege weapons unit."

"Yes," he agreed. "However, I see no sign of the enemy having those forces."

"So, basically... what does that mean?"

"I don't know. However, do you think the enemy might still have something up their sleeve?"

Carla thought deeply for a moment before shaking her head. "Even if they do, it changes nothing. Right now, Red Dragon Castle is being exposed to cannon fire. In order to ensure Father's safety, we must destroy that battleship."

“Well... Yes, I suppose that’s true...” The wyvern knight could see that, too, so he backed down quietly.

Carla raised her right hand up high. “The target of our attack is the battleship *Albert*! King Souma is a target for capture! Let that king bear witness to the bravery of House Vargas!”

“““Yeahhhhhhhhh!””” Hearing Carla’s orders, the muscular men of the Air Force raised their voices in a cheer.

Compared to the other forces, the members of the Air Force tended to value power for its own sake. In the Air Force, might made right. Might was an absolute. They could leave the thinking and calculating to the other forces.

Those in the Air Force needed only to be strong, and to be ready at all times to tear apart the enemies before them. That was why the soldiers of the Air Force had such a deep respect for Castor and Carla, with their overwhelming power.

“Wyvern cavalry, here are your orders! Descend, charge, then trample the enemy!” she called.

When Carla, who they deeply respected, brought down her hand, the soldiers of the Air Force began their rapid descent towards the *Albert*.

The ultimate strategy for fighting with wyvern cavalry on an open field was to descend rapidly while unleashing the wyvern’s fire breath to scorch the ground, and then to turn and ascend once more. By the time the soldiers on the ground had readied their bows, the wyverns would already be long gone. With the equipment used to fight land-based opponents, there was little that could be done to counteract this high-power, high-mobility attack.

Not even the *Albert*’s main cannon would be able to track them at the speed they went, and its armor wouldn’t last long in the face of an attack by a wyvern unit.

It seemed like only a matter of time before the *Albert* would fall, but...

Twang, twang, twang, twang, twang...

In the next moment, countless objects flew towards the descending knights from the direction of the *Albert*. By the time they realized they were arrows as thick as stakes, the wyvern cavalry were already caught in the rain of arrows.

"Wha?! Arrows?!"

"Gwah...!"

"Th-They got my wings! I'm going down!"

"Evade! Evaaaade!"

In this barrage of arrows that seemed to rain up from the ground, the wyvern cavalry were forced to turn back and ascend. A number of wyvern cavalry had been shot down in that barrage alone.

The attack had come from below, so most of the damage had been done to the wyverns rather than the knights. Even among the wyverns that managed to withdraw safely, many were staggering in pain with bolts having struck them somewhere.

As she looked at this debacle, Carla punched her thigh in anger. "What was with those bolts?! How were there so many?!"

"If they can reach a wyvern unit several hundred meters in the air, those arrows weren't fired by any human," one of her knights responded. "If we consider the number, too... most likely, it was an anti-air repeating bolt thrower enchanted with wind magic."

Hearing that report from her wyvern cavalry, Carla's brow furrowed in concern. "An anti-air repeating bolt thrower?! Why is one of those loaded on a boat?!"

“Most likely... they loaded one from a castle’s wall onto the ship.”

The anti-air repeating bolt thrower was enchanted with wind magic to drastically increase its range and allow it to fire tens of bolts per second. It was a weapon specially created to combat wyverns. Normally they were mounted on castle walls, and it was unheard of for them to be loaded on ships.

This was because one of the differences between dragons and wyverns was that, while dragons didn’t fear the sea, wyverns did. When wyverns were out far enough to sea that they could no longer see land, they grew frightened and would thrash around to the point that they became completely uncontrollable. In other words, wyverns almost never fought battleships, so ships had no need to carry anti-wyvern equipment.

Because of that, Carla and her wyvern cavalry had forgotten their natural enemy, the anti-air repeating bolt thrower, until this very moment.

Carla punched her thigh in anger once more. “Damn! He outwitted us by taking advantage of our expectations...”

When she thought back, from the moment this battle had begun, their understanding of how things worked had been falling to pieces. There was a ship running across the land, loaded with weapons it wouldn’t usually have. Because they had tried to resort to their common sense, the enemy had been able to toy with them.

I don’t know if this was that king’s scheme, or if the Prime Minister in Black came up with it, but whichever of them it was, he’s downright nasty, Carla thought to herself bitterly.

In fact, this plan had been a collaborative work by Souma and Hakuya. Souma had proposed ideas to Hakuya based on weapons and tactics from his world, while Hakuya had formulated them into a plan that would catch the enemy by surprise. If anyone was nasty, it was both of them.

However, that mattered little to Carla at the moment.

The wyvern knight told her, “If they’ve got an anti-air repeating bolt thrower on board, that battleship is a little castle in its own right. This is dangerous.”

Hearing one of the wyvern knights under her analyze the situation, Carla clicked her tongue. “Damn...! What do we do?”

“Well... It may be like a little castle now, but it is still shaped like a battleship, so I suspect it may still have the same blind spots.”

“Where are a battleship’s blind spots?” Carla asked.

“The area between the water’s surface and the deck. A battleship has no means of attacking enemies lower than its deck. For the *Albert*, the area from the ground to its deck should be a blind spot for it. In short, if we’re going to attack that ship...”

“...we just have to fly in really low on the approach!” Carla said with glee, pleased to have found a good strategy.

Ordinarily, minimum altitude flight with wyverns was dangerous. It could result in crashing into the ground at any moment. However, they were a seasoned unit from the Air Force.

“You heard that!” Carla called. “All knights, fly at low altitude and approach the *Albert*. Move quickly to neutralize all weapons, including the main cannon and anti-air repeating bolt throwers!”

“Roger that, but only the weapons? Wouldn’t it be faster to crush the bridge?” one wyvern knight asked, but Carla shook her head silently in response.

“We believe Souma is on that battleship. If Souma is there, Liscia may be close at hand. If we attack the bridge and Liscia gets hurt, that will be unacceptable. Therefore, we just need to neutralize their weapons. Take Souma alive.”

Even as she gave those orders to her subordinates, Carla herself felt differently. *Besides, if we kill Souma, I'm sure Liscia would be sad.*

Carla had been watching from behind Castor while Souma had delivered his ultimatum. Of course she had seen everything, including Liscia cutting her hair.

Castor might have been moved by Liscia's determination, but as her friend, and as a woman herself, Carla had been moved even more powerfully. Liscia had been so determined to live at Souma's side that she had been able to cut off her beautiful hair without hesitation.

The engagement had been forced on her by her parents at first. That was why Carla had been so angry, and she had chosen to stay with her father when he'd opposed the king, saying she was going to save Liscia. ...However, after being shown that level of determination, she had no choice but to accept it. Liscia already loved Souma from the depths of her heart.

If I were really thinking of Liscia, I should have tried to persuade Father, Carla thought. *Then, rather than opposing them, I should have served under them, I'm sure... Well, it's a little late for regrets now.*

How was she supposed to face Liscia now?

Carla shook her head, as if to shake herself free from those feelings, then bowed to the knights following her. "I know I'll be putting you all through unnecessary trouble, but I'm counting on you."

When Carla bowed, the men all pounded their chests once. "Leave it to us, My Lady."

"We swear we'll capture Souma for you!"

Hearing the men's reassuring response, Carla nodded and raised her right hand. Then...

"Charge!"

...she lowered her hand, giving the order to charge once more.

All of the wyvern cavalry fell vertically, head first, like puppets with their strings cut. Then, they recovered mere instants before impacting with the ground and flew at minimum altitude, as if crawling along the surface. It was a dangerous flight path, but as a testament to the rigorous training they underwent daily, not one of the knights dropped out while accomplishing this feat.

With Carla at their head, the wyvern cavalry continued flying at minimum altitude, heading straight towards the *Albert*. As they had anticipated, there was no cannon fire or rain of bolts. Carla visually confirmed the presence of anti-air bolt throwers mounted on the sides of the *Albert*.

"Found them! All knights, proceed as planned to attack the enemy armaments! We don't know where Souma is, so don't hit any section of the ship that you don't have to!"

"""Yes, ma'am."""

"Here we go... Fire!"

As Carla gave the order, balls of fire erupted from the wyverns' mouths. The fireballs impacted the weapons aboard the *Albert* one after another. The two main batteries at the fore and aft of the *Albert* exploded, and the bolt throwers burned. The difference in what exploded and what didn't was decided by whether it was a gunpowder weapon or not.

With all of the weapons destroyed in an instant, the wyvern knight unit climbed upwards away from the *Albert*, as if riding the rising smoke.

Confident of her victory, Carla had her wyvern fly in a graceful circle. "Good! Now, storm the *Albert*! Take Souma into custody!"

"Yeahhhhhh!"

But she said nothing in return.

Among the fired up wyvern cavalry, Carla was alone in wearing a dubious expression.

...It's strange. The Albert *has secondary guns, but the only ones to fire on us were the two main batteries and the anti-air repeating bolt throwers. If they'd wanted to put up a curtain of fire, the more guns firing, the better, I would think. Maybe that battleship... doesn't have the* numbers *for it?*

As Carla was growing suspicious, the wyvern cavalry had already headed for the bridge of the *Albert*. Despite her doubts, Carla followed after them.

When Carla reached the *Albert*'s bridge, there wasn't a person in sight. The bridge was empty.

It made sense that now, at this particular moment, she couldn't see anyone, but there was no sign of anyone having been here recently at all. As Carla stood there dumbfounded, a wyvern knight ran in to give her his report.

"Reporting in! We are presently searching the inside of the *Albert*, but we have yet to find a single soldier, let alone Souma!"

"That's absurd! Then who were we fighting up until now?!" she demanded.

She felt like the wool had been pulled over her eyes somehow. The ship lay vacant. The gunners were nowhere to be found. It was practically one of those ghost ships she had heard of. Did King Souma have some bizarre secret powers at his disposal?

As a cold chill began to creep up the wyvern knights' backs, a new report came in.

"I have a report! We have recovered parts of what appears to be armor from around the destroyed main batteries and bolt throwers!"

“Armor? Were there dead bodies?”

“About that... inside the gloves we found, there were hands from a mannequin.”

“A mannequin?”

Mannequins had been found instead of gunners.

Then there was the premonition she had felt herself, that maybe the ship lacked numbers. When she considered all of that, Carla came to a conclusion.

“All knights, return to the castle on the double!”

“But we haven’t found Souma yet!”

The wyvern cavalry reacted to the now-frantic Carla with puzzlement.

Carla explained to the wyvern cavalry, her face filled with regret, “No... Souma probably isn’t aboard this ship. I don’t know what magic he used, but he was controlling the mannequins we found to have them attack us. The unmanned *Albert* was bait, and we fell for it hook, line, and sinker.”

“It was bait...?! Then what was his real target?!”

Seeing it beginning to dawn on the wyvern cavalry, Carla nodded gravely. “Most likely, it was my father back in Red Dragon Castle.”

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—One hour earlier. As seen by Souma Kazuya.

Castor’s opposition was not something we had expected.

Georg had been making unsettling moves, and Castor had left his wife and child with Excel after she’d tried to persuade him. However,

even if he took a rebellious attitude up until the last moment, I had thought Castor would side with us in the end.

However, that was a naive hope. We had underestimated Castor's sense of chivalry.

I'd never thought Castor would side with the enemy, ready to martyr himself for his friendship with Georg. It was a small respite that out of concern for his subordinates, he had only taken himself and one hundred of his personal troops. Still, when Excel's spies had brought that information to us, both Hakuya and I held our heads in our hands.

That was because it meant we were going to have to change part of our carefully formulated plan.

When it was confirmed that Castor would oppose us, the biggest problem was that I had no forces to send to Red Dragon City.

Of the 15,000 troops I could move, the 10,000 from the Royal Guard and Forbidden Army had to go to the Carmine Duchy, while the remaining 5,000 had been dispatched to the south of the kingdom where the armies of the Principality of Amidonia were. While I had managed to secure Excel's cooperation, I had other orders for the Navy.

So the problem was, I had almost no troops left on hand.

Even though Castor only had one hundred of his personal troops, they were all wyvern knights, said to be equivalent to five hundred soldiers from the Army. If I sent anything less than a proper force, they wouldn't be able to take Red Dragon City.

With this lack of manpower, Hakuya and I chose to befuddle our opponent with scheme after scheme, then try to take Red Dragon City in one quick strike.

First we remodeled the Forbidden Army's battleship, the *Albert*, to be able to operate on land.

In order to put pressure on Red Dragon City, which was halfway up a small mountain, we absolutely needed to have long range weapons. That was why it had occurred to me to use the *Albert*'s cannons. The idea had come from the railway gun I had seen in a war manga.

By putting wheels on the ship and having it pulled by the rhinosauruses that Tomoe had managed to gather for us, we were able to make it so it could run across land.

...Though, after a crazy remodel like that, we'd probably never be able to make it back into a ship again. It meant that I'd thrown away the Forbidden Army's only battleship, but hard decisions had to be made.

Using the *Albert* as a mobile artillery platform, the first thing I did was bombard Red Dragon City. That must have surprised the enemy. I mean, there was a ship running across the land and firing on them.

At the same time, I used the jewel for the Jewel Voice Broadcast to contact Castor. When I did that, it made him think I was on the *Albert*.

Plans that took advantage of human psychology like this were Hakuya's specialty.

Castor was sure to lead his hundred personal troops out to attack the *Albert*. Wyvern cavalry were a type of troop that had both power and mobility. Even though cannons could destroy castle walls, it didn't matter how powerful they were if they couldn't hit them. Since all we had done was drag the *Albert* up on land, it would probably be destroyed by the wyvern cavalry in a matter of moments.

In order to prevent that, we loaded a wyvern killer, the anti-air repeating bolt thrower, onto the *Albert*. If there were anti-air repeating bolt throwers aboard, the wyvern cavalry couldn't approach it easily. At the very least, it would buy time.

By the way, the *Albert*'s cannons and the anti-air repeating bolt

throwers were being operated by dolls I controlled with my Living Poltergeists. In other words, the *Albert* was unmanned.

Then, once Castor and his wyvern cavalry went to attack the *Albert*, I thought we would take Red Dragon City while it was lightly defended.

Because Excel had sided with us, we knew that there was a series of escape tunnels under Red Dragon City, just like the ones in the capital. By using those tunnels, if we sent in an elite unit led by Aisha, no matter how firm the castle's defenses were, they would be able to easily occupy it.

Once Red Dragon City was taken, the city's anti-air repeating bolt throwers would be used to attack Castor and his troops as they returned. Besides which, once his own castle fell, Castor would finally have to admit defeat... or so I thought.

However, this was where something we hadn't planned for happened.

Castor had remained in Red Dragon City.

When we came up to the castle walls to seize Red Dragon City's anti-air repeating bolt throwers, we ran right into Castor. Standing behind him was a middle-aged man who looked like the family steward.

When our eyes met...

"...Castor Vargas."

"...Souma Kazuya, huh."

Like that, Castor and I each said the other's name. This was our first time meeting face to face.

Meeting him in person, Castor was both large and looked younger than he had when I saw him on a screen. While he had red hair,

dragon wings, and a tail, he also had fine features that made him look more like a young man than a general.

I didn't have the luxury of time, but I chose to give my name as a show of respect. "I am the one serving as the provisional king of the Elfrieden Kingdom, Souma Kazuya."

"I am General of the Air Force, Castor Vargas." When I gave my name, Castor responded in kind. Then, Castor cocked his head to the side and asked, "If you guys're here, does that mean the battleship putting up a big showy firefight over there is a diversion?"

"Yeah. The plan was to take Red Dragon City while it was lightly guarded, but, well..."

"Ha ha ha, too bad for you that I stayed behind," Castor laughed jovially.

When I saw Castor acting like that, I grew suspicious. "Sure, you stayed behind, but it's just the two of you, right? I don't think you ought to be laughing right now."

"Whoa there, I'm the only one who'll fight you," he said. "Leave Tolman here out of it."

"I am Tolman, steward to the House of Vargas," the middle-aged man behind Castor turned to me and bowed. "I also served as Duke Vargas' second-in-command in the Air Force."

"Tolman has nothing to do with all this," Castor went on. "If I lose, you can have him lead the Air Force. He ought to make a fine General of the Air Force."

As he said that, Castor slapped Tolman on the back vigorously.

He had considered what would happen after his defeat, and he was making recommendations for his successor, huh?

"...If you're going to be that good a sport about it, why don't we just

call this off entirely?" I asked. "You must realize it by now, right? This battle is pointless."

"It's not pointless. You can become the man who bested me," Castor said and then grinned. "Besting 'General of the Air Force Castor Vargas' will earn you a lot of prestige. Duchess Excel already follows you. Now, just try defeating Duke Carmine. If you do that, I'm sure all of the nobles who are acting like fair-weather allies will be stumbling over one another to come serve you."

"You..."

"Though, that said, I have no intent of making it easy on you."

When he finished saying that, Castor drew the sword at his hip.

"Sire, stay back!"

Aisha and the others in the infiltration team moved up, putting themselves between me and Castor. A number of my Little Musashibo (Large) dolls were mixed in with them, which made for a surreal scene.

Castor turned his blade towards me. "You're a hero, aren't you? Want to take me one-on-one?"

"Don't be crazy. An ordinary guy who spends all his time doing nothing but administrative work isn't going to be any match for you."

If he wanted to challenge me to a duel, I was just going to have to shrug.

I had come here as part of the infiltration team, but I hadn't defeated a single one of the guards. Well, though I wasn't any use here, I was in the middle of fighting elsewhere right now.

By using my divided consciousness to the fullest, my armored dolls were manning the *Albert*'s main guns and the anti-air repeating bolt throwers we had secretly loaded aboard. I was using them to fight

against the wyvern cavalry that we had lured in.

However... the wyvern cavalry were better trained than I had imagined.

It seemed I had caught them by surprise, but even the weapon called the wyvern killer, the anti-air repeating bolt thrower, might not be able to stall them for long.

While I was thinking about that, Aisha took a swing with her great sword. “Castor! How long do you intend to point your blade at His Majesty?!”

“Guh! For a little kid, she has incredible idiot strength!” Castor cried.

He said that, but given that he had stopped Aisha’s great sword with his own blade, I figured he had some “idiot strength” himself.

Aisha seemed indignant at being called a little kid. “I’d rather not say this in front of His Majesty, but I’ll have you know I’ve been alive for decades!”

“Hmph! Well, I’ve been fighting for this country for over a century!” he declared.

“Mrrrrgh...”

Come on, what were they competing over? Was this a pride thing because they were both from long-lived races? That was what I was wondering, when....

“If you underestimate a dragonewt, born of dragon blood, you’re going to get more than just hurt!” Castor shouted, spreading his wings wide to intimidate her.

The gust of wind that created was powerful enough on its own to blow a number of the nearby soldiers up against the wall. Aisha was managing to withstand it by putting her hands on the ground.

...So, that was the power of a dragonewt. It looked like he'd gotten more than just a cool look out of belonging to a race descended from dragons.

Then, in the next instant, Castor kicked off from the ground, remaining in the air as he dove forward. He didn't pay the others any heed, thrusting his sword out straight forward as he tried to impale me on it.

"Sire!"

Aisha stood between us to protect me, using her great sword to block Castor's charge. The clang of metal on metal echoed as their blades collided.

"Ha ha ha! You're not half bad, dark elf girl!"

"My name is Aisha! I will not allow you to lay so much as one finger on His Majesty!" Aisha swung her great sword with all her might, knocking Castor away.

Castor made a graceful landing before hurling some verbal abuse her way. "Damn your idiot strength!"

"Yes. I'm not very smart. But if he needs a smart person, there's the princess, or Sir Hakuya, or Madam Juna, or Duchess Walter. If my strength can still be of aid to His Majesty's rule, if it will let me stay by his side, I don't mind having 'idiot strength'!"

Aisha adjusted her grip on her great sword. She was slowly closing the gap between herself and Castor.

Castor laughed jovially. "A fine display of loyalty. Is Souma a good master to you?"

"I don't know!" she declared.

"Oh, come on..." I muttered.

She didn't have to be that blunt. That hurt my feelings.

"I'm an idiot, so I don't know what a good master is like," Aisha went on. "However, I wish to be at His Majesty's side! Because he heard my plea. Because his country's food is delicious. Because he saved my village. I have many reasons, but the biggest must be because I like him! I want to be with His Majesty and the princess forever!"

It was a straight response, not calculated at all, which was so very like Aisha.

...It was a bit embarrassing.

I knew it wasn't that kind of scene, but how could I not be happy when a beautiful dark elf had so many good things to say about me? I could feel myself barely holding back a grin.

Castor laughed even more jovially. "Ha ha ha! I knew you were like my Carla! But...!" Castor's expression grew serious and he took up a fighting stance with his sword. "If you lack the power to back up that loyalty, you won't be able to protect your master or yourself."

With those words, Castor was about to attack Aisha again, when...

"I won't let you do that."

"?!"

One of the Little Musashibo (Large) dolls that was behind Castor came at him swinging its naginata. Castor turned suddenly to block it, but the moment he went to counterattack, the Little Musashibo spun around. When it did, its back split open like a cocoon, and someone leapt out.

The person who leapt out of the Little Musashibo doll was none other than Liscia, rapier at the ready.

"Wha?! Princess Liscia?!" Castor cried.

Faced with Liscia's surprise attack, Castor pulled his sword back despite himself. Liscia was a member of the family that he had sworn loyalty to. Ordinarily, she wouldn't be someone he could point his sword at.

Had he been aware it was Liscia he was facing from the beginning, with Castor's martial prowess he could no doubt have incapacitated her without bringing her to harm.

In order to prevent that, and anticipating this might happen, Liscia had hidden inside a Little Musashibo doll, waiting for an opportunity.

This hesitation would be Castor's undoing.

"Freeze! Ice Sword Mountain!" she shouted.

"Urkh!"

Not missing her opening, Liscia unleashed an ice magic attack at close range. Castor narrowly avoided it, but the magic struck the stone wall and floor, creating spikes of ice. Because of his large wings, Castor got caught in the spikes and was unable to move.

"Dammit!"

"Aisha!" she called.

"I'm on it, princess!"

While Castor was rendered immobile, Aisha swung the flat side of her great sword into him at full force. Castor was knocked flying along with the ice. There was the sound of ice shattering against the wall and then, an instant later, the sound of Castor slamming against it, too.

Right before my eyes was a scene of a person being thrown into a wall and leaving cracks in it, something I had only ever seen in battle anime before. After seeing him take a hit that I was sure would have killed me instantly, Castor was bruised but still conscious. I guess

that's what made dragonewts so impressive, huh.

With his back to the wall, he slumped down, groaning, "Urgh... So this is it, huh... I admit defeat, princess."

"Duke Castor..."

Seeing the sad look on Liscia's face, Castor smiled a little. "Don't look like that. I stayed true to my pride, fought, and was defeated. I have no regrets. But, that aside... I'd like to ask you the same thing I asked the dark elf girl."

"...What might that be?" Liscia asked.

"Is Souma... a good king?"

"Yes. For me, he's a good king." Liscia gave a clear answer to Castor's question. "Whether he was good for the country and people is something to be decided once a king has died. There is no end to the number of kings who ruled well at first, only to become tyrants in later years. So, I can only give you my own opinion."

"..."

"Many of Souma's political measures can be roundabout, or downright strange, but I feel at ease watching him. That's because I can feel that this country is slowly but steadily improving. So... call me selfish if you want, but I want Souma to be king. If my father demands his crown back, I'll fight him at Souma's side."

I had heard those words before. If I recalled correctly, they had come before we'd gone to the planned construction site for the new city. While I had been exhausted from repeated all-nighters, Liscia had said this to me when I'd been trying to take a nap.

"Never forget. You're the one I want to be king, Souma. I'll accept no substitutes. If my father were to demand the crown back, I'd fight him at your side."

Since her words hadn't changed, was that proof that her feelings hadn't either?

...I was happy. At the fact there was someone who would say they wanted me to be king. That she could feel at ease with me in that position. It was because Liscia was at my side that I was able to be king.

As I was thinking that, I saw the *Albert* explode in the distance.

"Liscia, the Air Force is coming back," I said. "Hurry and get that thing out."

"...I know." At my urging, Liscia took something black out of her pocket and fastened it around Castor's neck. "I'm sure you're aware, but that is an item called a slave collar. It can be tightened at the master's will, and if the wearer seeks to harm their master, the collar has a spell in it to automatically decapitate them. It will decapitate the wearer if they attempt to remove the collar contrary to their master's wishes, too. They can't commit suicide, either. Also, the master of this collar is set to be Souma Kazuya."

"...I don't have the will left in me to resist at this point," Castor said.

Having been collared, Castor limply let go of the sword he had been holding. The hilt guard bounced on the stone floor with a clatter. This was the moment the battle was decided.

Then...

"Father!"

A girl with blazing red hair, gleaming golden eyes, dragon wings, and a tail flew down from the sky, rushing over to Castor, who had his shoulders slumped.

Come to think of it, Excel had told me "I have a granddaughter who stayed with Castor" with a deeply pained look on her face, hadn't she? In that case, this girl had to be Castor's daughter, Carla.

The *Albert* had just blown up moments ago, but when I saw her red armor, it occurred to me that she may have been fighting with the *Albert* up until now.

The moment she saw my face, Carla unsheathed the sword at her hip. “Curse you! How dare you do this to my father?!”

“Stop, Carla!”

Castor stopped Carla just as she was about to come swinging at me.

“Father?! But...”

“That’s enough. We’ve lost.”

Liscia stood between me and Carla, spreading her arms wide. “Stop this already, Carla! Duke Vargas is already wearing a slave collar! If you kill Souma, Duke Vargas will die, too!”

“Liscia...?!” she gasped. “I see... We lost, huh.”

The strength seemed to drain from Carla’s body. The sword fell from her hands and Carla limply slumped to the ground where she stood. She wore a stunned look, tears streaming from her eyes.

It pained me a little to see it, but she had taken part in this rebellion. I couldn’t show her preferential treatment. I asked Aisha to put a slave collar on her, too.

Around that time, the wyvern cavalry who had been fighting the battleship *Albert* began to gather. They were all seething with anger, but as soon as they saw the collars on Castor and Carla, they realized they couldn’t touch us and just ground their teeth in frustration.

The glares of the wyvern cavalry hurt, but I didn’t have time to be concerned by that now. “Tolman, steward to the House of Vargas!”

“...I am here.”

I raised my voice, and Tolman, who hadn’t interfered and had just

silently watched how things had played out, just as Castor had said he would, stepped forward.

"You recall the rule that was agreed on when I delivered my ultimatum, I trust," I said. "'If one of us is struck down or captured, that person's subordinates will immediately come under the command of the other side.'"

"Yes..."

"As you can see, I have captured General of the Air Force Castor Vargas," I said. "From this moment, I temporarily give the powers of the General of the Air Force to you. You are to lead the Air Force under the command of the Forbidden Army!"

"Yes, sir. I understand... However, might I ask one question?" Tolman asked with a face stricken with grief.

"...What is it?"

"What will become of Duke Vargas and Lady Carla?"

"We will deliberate on what is to be done with them after the war. There is no need to decide that right here and now."

Then, looking to the wyvern cavalry around me, I said, "If you come under the command of the Forbidden Army now, you will be treated as only having acted under the orders of Castor. Those who do not comply will be tried alongside Castor as traitors when the war is over."

"You want us to sell out our masters?!"

"Yeah! We won't abandon Lord Castor!"

Some spirited voices shouted out from amidst the wyvern cavalry. I glared in the direction of those voices.

"Consider this carefully. This country has a system of joint

responsibility for crimes. If you are found guilty of treason, your relatives will be punished, as well. I hope you were prepared for that before you spoke!"

""..."

The room fell silent. Surely even the fearless soldiers of the Air Force weren't willing to gamble with lives other than their own. When told their families would be implicated as well, they didn't have the spine to go through with it.

In that heavy atmosphere, Tolman bowed his head to me. "...I will follow your orders, Your Majesty."

"S-Sir Tolman!"

"We can still fight!"

"Silence! Can't you see that the more you resist, the worse you make Duke Vargas's position?!"

"Urkh..."

Having silenced all opposition, Tolman bowed to me once more. "Your orders, please, sire. How would you have the Air Force move from here?"

As Tolman admirably bowed before me, I gave him my order.

"First, announce the end of the battle using the Jewel Voice Broadcast. Announce to the people of your domain that Duke Vargas has been captured and the Air Force will come under the command structure of the Forbidden Army. After that, call up the members of the Air Force that aren't present here. Once your forces have gathered, I will have you head to the Carmine Duchy. Also, I want you to announce that anyone who continues to resist, especially after all that's happened, will be judged as a traitor once the war is over. Do I make myself understood?"

“Yes, sir! It will be done.” Tolman saluted me, then moved to carry out his orders at once.

With this, the terrible battle in the Vargas Duchy, which had been a “needless battle” for both the losers and the winners, came to a close. That was one obstacle surmounted.

Now, finally… I can head to the Carmine Duchy.

From the wall, I looked off into the distant west. There, I knew that man must be waiting for me.

“I’ve kept you waiting, Georg Carmine. I’m coming now.”

Liscia was watching me with silent concern, but I barely noticed it.

Elfrieden Historical Idiom Lessons: Number 3

"Attack a Castle with a Battleship"

Type: Figure of Speech Meaning: Doing a thing that no one had ever thought of before.

Origin: During the One Week War, when King Souma attacked the rebellious Castor's castle, he employed the unusual strategy of using a battleship on land to win.

Synonyms: "Copernican Revolution," "Egg of Columbus"



Chapter 7: Sacrifice the Plum Tree to Preserve the Peach Tree

—1st Day, 10th Month, 1,546th Year, Continental Calendar — Red Dragon City.

It was the morning following the battle where wyverns had flown through the skies and battleship cannons had roared.

Liscia and I were eating breakfast with Castor's daughter Carla in the governmental affairs office at Red Dragon Castle.

Aisha stood behind the exhausted Carla, her hand ready on the hilt of her great sword, as if to say, "If you make any suspicious moves, I am prepared to cut you down at any time."

It occurred to me that Aisha was still my "self-proclaimed bodyguard." Given her accomplishments in the battle for Red Dragon City, I thought it might not be a bad idea to formally create a title like Captain of the King's Personal Guard for her.

...Well, it could wait until after the war.

Having captured Castor Vargas and taken control of the Air Force, we were staying in Red Dragon City while we waited for the Air Force to gather. Right now, Hakuya, who had arrived after the battle, and Tolman must have been busy calling up those who had yet to respond and organizing those who had already gathered.

I'd had Castor shipped back to the capital along with a number of rebellious wyvern cavalry.

They would have only gotten in the way if we had brought them all with us, and Castor was wearing the slave collar. That collar had a spell attached that would make it tighten if he did anything untoward, and in the worst case would decapitate him. As long as he wore that slave collar, no one would try to seize him during the transfer.

Incidentally, Castor's daughter Carla was the only one I'd had stay here, and I was keeping her close at hand. That was because I figured having a visible hostage would help to nip any unwanted resistance from the Air Force in the bud. I had a slave collar on her, too, and Aisha was keeping a watchful eye on her from behind, so she probably wouldn't be able to do anything she shouldn't.

I didn't know if it was because of that, but her violent temperament from yesterday was all but gone, and Carla was resolutely silent. To make up for her taciturn friend, Liscia was being even more talkative than usual.

"Carla may not look it, but she's actually the caring type," she said. "She has a lot of integrity, so no matter how much she dislikes something, she'll always help out when she's asked. I think she's a great girl."

I said nothing.

Everything she said was all about selling me on Carla's virtues. She had been talking about nothing but Carla's many charms as a woman for a while now.

We were sitting in the office of the man who had been the enemy commander until yesterday, eating boxed meals we had brought from Parnam (this having been enemy territory up until yesterday, I was being careful not to get poisoned), while my fiancée and future primary queen recommended that I take the daughter of an enemy general, who was now wearing a slave collar and sitting next to us, as a secondary queen. It was quite a bizarre scene.

By the way, to explain the difference between primary and

secondary queens, in this country primary queens were those whose children had the right of succession, while those who did not were known as secondary queens.

It was possible to have any number of primary or secondary queens (ranking within the two categories would be expressed as 1st X Queen, 2nd X Queen... and so on), however, in order to become a primary queen, a woman had to be born to the gentry, nobility, or higher.

Conversely, any person of any class could become a secondary queen. If one didn't care about appearances, even a slave could be made into a secondary queen.

"O-Oh, and you know what?" Liscia went on. "When Carla strips down, she's got a killer body. Maybe you can't tell when she has armor on, but she's way more stacked than I am. Dragonewts are long-lived, too, so she'll always be young."

"What are you saying, Liscia?!" Carla suddenly burst out.

It seemed that once Liscia started spilling the details on her proportions, even Carla wasn't going to be able to stay quiet. And yet, Liscia snapped back at her, even angrier than Carla was.

"Carla, just be quiet! Hey, Souma, Carla's an attractive woman..."

"...Liscia," I said that in a somewhat stern tone, making Liscia inhale sharply and then go quiet. When I saw that worried look on her face... it hurt my heart. I didn't want to make her look like that. I scratched the back of my head vigorously. "Liscia, I can see what you're thinking. But have you properly considered the risks?"

She went silent.

No primary queen would ask her king to take a secondary queen. Yet Liscia, the 1st Primary Queen, was eagerly suggesting that I take Carla as my secondary queen, because she was trying with all her heart to save her.

The officers and soldiers of the Air Force who had followed Castor were under suspicion of participating in the rebellion, regardless of whether they had taken part in the battle or not. But of course it wouldn't be possible to punish all of them as rebels, and so, formally, I was going to have to treat them as "having only acted under the orders of the General of the Air Force, Castor, and a number of high ranking officers," under the condition that they come under the command of the Forbidden Army.

Because of that, Castor would have to bear responsibility.

As Castor's daughter, and having taken part in the fighting herself, it was seen as a certainty that Carla would face the same judgment as her father when the war was over. As things stood, their execution seemed inevitable.

Because Liscia thought that, she was trying to push Carla into the royal harem.

In this country, the king had a lot of power. In principle, there was supposed to be an independent judiciary, but if the king exercised his powers, it was possible to shield a criminal from prosecution. Liscia was trying to convince me to like Carla so that I would work to keep her from going on trial. But that... was not something that should be done lightly.

"Where might is master, justice is servant," I said. "If a king doesn't uphold the law, the people the law protects will lose their respect for that king. If we don't act logically, we ourselves will pay the price for it later. You must understand that, right, Liscia?"

"Well, yes... But..."

Of course, I was sure Liscia knew that. Still, she couldn't let her friend go without saying something. Honestly... being a king was such an unpleasant role.

"Still, I..." Liscia began.

“Liscia, there’s no need to beg for my life,” Carla said as Liscia was still searching for the words. “You sent letters again and again, asking us to pledge our allegiance, yet we chose to refuse. I followed my father knowing this could happen if we lost. I’m only getting what I deserve. I consider myself to be a warrior. Now that it has come to this, I will not regret losing my life.”

Carla seemed to have already come to terms with her fate. I felt like I could understand why she and Liscia were so close. Her personality was similar to Liscia’s, earnest and stubbornly unyielding once she made up her mind. That was why all I could do was sigh.

“I wish you had directed that determination into something that wouldn’t make Liscia sad.”

“There’s nothing I can say in response to that,” Carla said. She added in a discourteous tone, “Don’t *you* dare... Urkh!”

“Carla?!” Liscia cried.

In the middle of her sentence, Carla groaned in pain. The slave collar had tightened. It looked like this item wouldn’t tolerate any disrespect towards the master. It seemed pretty harsh.

Some seconds later, once she was released from the pain, Carla turned to Liscia, who was looking at her with concern, and said, “I-I’m fine.” Then, looking back to me, she bowed her head. “True, I wasn’t as polite as I could have been. Let me rephrase that. King Souma, I ask that you not sadden Liscia the way I have.”

“...I know,” I said.

As we were talking, Hakuya and Tolman entered the office. Tolman stood before me, giving a military-style salute before beginning his report.

“Your Majesty, we have finished calling up the Air Force.”

“Good,” I said. “Well, then... let’s get going.”

I rose from my seat and gave everyone their orders.

"Hakuya, I'll have you handle the cleanup here. Also, use this place's jewel to get in contact with Excel while she's staring down the Amidonians in Altomura. Tell her she only needs to hold out until this evening."

"By your will," Hakuya bowed.

"Tolman, lead a unit from the Air Force to bomb Randel in the Carmine Duchy," I continued. "However, your only targets should be the anti-air repeating bolt throwers on the castle walls and Randel Castle itself. Don't you dare drop even a single gunpowder barrel on the people's houses! If anyone is found to have killed a civilian, I'll see to it that they will face punishment after the war. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir! I understand!" he said firmly.

"Liscia and Aisha, come with me," I added. "We'll join up with Ludwin and his group."

"Okay," said Liscia.

"Understood, sire," Aisha agreed.

Good. After giving orders to the others, I turned to look at Carla.

"Carla, you come with us, too."

"I can't have that much value to you as a prisoner at this point," Carla said. "Please, just throw me in a cell somewhere,"

She seemed to have no strength remaining, but I shook my head in silence.

"You should see how this ends. See just whose strings you were dancing to."

"Huh?" She looked startled. "What are you talking about? Nobody

was making us dance…”

“Oh, no, you were dancing,” I said. “After all, we were, too.”

“What?” Carla asked, giving me a dubious look, to which I responded with a sigh.

“It’s not like we have a complete grasp of the scenario. Still, if we play our roles in it out to the end, I think we’ll start to see. We’ll see just who it was that wrote the script for this battle.”

◇ ◇ ◇

—The same day, a few hours later, in the city of Randel in the Carmine Duchy.

There was a relaxed atmosphere on the castle walls surrounding Randel, the central city of the Carmine Duchy. The Army and Forbidden Army were engaged in hostilities, but that battle was being fought entirely at the fortress the Forbidden Army had built near Randel.

Because of that, there wasn’t so much as one arrow flying over the walls of Randel.

“Sure is boring…” one of the Army soldiers muttered to himself.

One of his fellow soldiers happened to overhear and looked at him with a frown. “Hey, we’re at war with the Forbidden Army right now, you know.”

“That’s what they tell us, but… all the fighting’s going on over by that fortress, isn’t it?” he complained. “Is there any point in us being on guard here?”

When he said that, another of his comrades laughed heartily and said, “What’s wrong with boring? Would you rather be on the front line against the Forbidden Army?”

"I-I never said *that*."

"If anything, I'll bet the guys on the front line wish they could trade places with us," the other soldier continued. "If they resist the Forbidden Army, suddenly they'll be being called rebels and part of a rebel army. On top of that, I hear there are a number of Army soldiers being led by Sir Glaive Magna, who parted ways with Duke Carmine, mixed in with the enemy. Who would want to fight against men they once ate from the same pot as?"

"You've got that right," another soldier said, joining in on the grumbling. "I've heard talk that the Amidonians are on the move down south, too. What are the king and Duke Carmine thinking?"

"When you look at it that way, nothing beats guarding the castle walls," the second soldier said.

"...You could be right," the soldier who had been complaining at first said, starting to sound convinced. That was when it happened.

"Hey, look at the sky in the east! Something's coming!" someone shouted.

Hearing that, they all turned to look at the eastern sky.

When they narrowed their eyes, it was true, they could see what looked like a swarm of mosquitoes in the sky to the east. For a moment, they thought it might be a flock of birds, but there were too many. There had to be close to a thousand of them.

As the swarm closed in, they realized it was the Air Force's wyvern cavalry.

As soon as that became clear, a wave of relief washed over the soldiers.

"...Good. Duke Vargas is our ally."

"The Air Force is coming to support us!"

“If they are, then the battle’s already over. That fortress of theirs will fall easily under aerial bombardment.”

Everyone nodded sagely in agreement.

...Yes, the end of this battle was most certainly near. However, that end was to be precisely the opposite of what those soldiers expected.

The Air Force *passed over* the fortress built outside Randel where the Forbidden Army were holed up, then dropped barrels filled with gunpowder on the anti-air repeating bolt throwers on the walls of Randel.

◇ ◇ ◇

The wyvern cavalry flew over the walls of Randel. Their leader Tolman looked down as an explosion rang out, flames flew around, and black smoke rose. Their targets, the anti-air repeating bolt throwers, had been blasted away without a trace, along with chunks of the wall where they had once been.

The gunpowder barrels used by the Air Force were similar in design to the fire arrows pirates had used during the Sengoku Period to sink enemy ships. To explain it quickly, they were like firework shells.

The time it took for them to explode could be adjusted with the length of the oil-soaked rope used as a fuse. Once the fuse was lit and the bomb dropped, it would go off after the set amount of time. They weren’t like incendiary bombs, which explode with the force of the impact, but the Air Force could adjust their fuse length based on the altitude they would be dropped from, so they could be used in a similar manner.

Incidentally, because the gunpowder from those barrels that failed and impacted the ground would scatter, then be set off by the gunpowder barrels that succeeded, the extent of the damage inevitably grew.

How many Army soldiers have died in that blast now... No!

Tolman shook his head, forcing down the depressing feelings that were welling up inside him. *I will not ask for forgiveness. This is for my master and the princess.*

In order to lighten the situation Castor and Carla would both surely find themselves in after the war, he needed the Air Force to achieve as much as possible here. As if trying to raise his own morale, Tolman shouted orders to the rest of the Air Force.

"The bolt throwers have fallen silent! We will now begin the bombardment of Randel Castle! Do not, under any circumstances, allow your bombs to fall on residential blocks! By the pride of our Air Force, we cannot allow any more needless deaths!"

"""Yeahhhhh!"""

The men and officers cheered in response to Tolman's words.

And so, a formation of wyvern cavalry began the aerial bombardment of Georg Carmine's castle in the center of Randel.

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—At the same time, outside Randel.

It was around the time that the wyvern cavalry being led by Tolman began their bombardment of Randel's castle walls.

A wyvern carrying a gondola containing Liscia, Aisha, the captive Carla, and myself descended to the fortress where Ludwin and the others were holding out. It was dangerous to land at a fortress that was under attack, but the Army had withdrawn in surprise when the bombardment at Randel had begun. Thanks to that, we had been able to enter the fortress quite easily.

When we stepped out of the wyvern's gondola, Ludwin, Hal, and Kaede were there to greet us. While they all showed signs of exhaustion, I was relieved to see they were completely unharmed. While they had only been defending themselves against a siege for a

day and a half, I knew unexpected accidents could always occur.

I bumped fists with Hal. “I brought the Air Force, just as planned.”

“Well, we held out against the Army for you, just as planned,” he said.

We both proudly boasted about what we’d accomplished.

“It was only a day and a half,” I said. “If you hadn’t been able to hold out that long, I wouldn’t know what to do with you.”

“You idiot,” he snorted. “The enemy even brought out cannons, you know? If the dark elves hadn’t come to support us, we might have taken serious losses.”

“I see... I’ll have to reward those reinforcements after the war,” I said. “Anyway, I’m glad to see you’re doing fine.”

“You, too, Souma,” he said. “You’re weak, so don’t push yourself too hard.”

“And you, Hal, you’re strong, but you never think. I worry you’ll charge in blindly and get yourself killed.”

For some reason Hal and I went from crowing about our own achievements to pointing out each other’s faults.

Liscia, Alicia, and Kaede watched us, rolling their eyes.

“What’re those two doing?” Liscia muttered.

“Well, perhaps you could call that a kind of manly friendship?” Aisha suggested.

“It’s just Hal’s burning sense of rivalry towards His Majesty, you know,” said Kaede.

The girls just said whatever they wanted to about us. Carla was the only one who didn’t know what our relationship was like, so she just

stood there blinking.

"That man... He's a little too friendly with the king, isn't he?" she asked.

"Officer Halbert has been given permission to treat him like a friend. Basically, he's the same as us," Liscia explained to her.

Then Ludwin knelt before me and gave his report. "Sire, we have successfully constructed and defended the fortress, as ordered."

"You have served me admirably," I said. "I will see to it that you and your troops are duly rewarded for your effort after the war."

He addressed me in a formal tone, so I responded in kind. Seeing me suddenly shift into that self-important tone, Hal and the others grinned, but I did my best to ignore it. Time was precious right now.

"Ludwin, get the troops together and prepare to move out," I ordered.

"Yes, sir! Then, are we attacking Randel?"

"No... The battle here is already over."

"Huh? What do you..."

"I have a report!" The next moment, a soldier of the Forbidden Army was rushing up to us.

He looked incredibly flustered. He came at us so fast that Aisha and Ludwin both nearly drew their swords.

The soldier practically threw himself to the ground in prostration before me, then raised his voice to say, "The white flag has risen over Randel! O-Our forces are victorious!"

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Slightly before that, there was an uproar in Georg Carmine's castle

over the sudden surprise attack. There were many different rumors flying back and forth in the castle.

Had Castor Vargas betrayed them?

Had the king and Castor Vargas been colluding behind the scenes?

No, wasn't the one who had plotted all this, in fact, Excel Walter, that capable woman and veteran of many battles?

...That was how it went, with various theories bandied about, but no one guessed the truth: that Souma had pulled a trick that had let him defeat the Air Force in a single day.

The ones who made the most noise about these events were the ones who had exhausted their personal troops in the battle against the fortress yesterday and who had been removed from the front line today, the corrupt nobles who had been resting in Randel Castle. As soon as they found out that the large explosion had been due to an aerial bombardment by the Air Force, they rushed to the governmental affairs office, where Georg Carmine was doing the work of governing despite the ongoing situation.

"Duke Carmine! What are you doing, taking things so easily during this crisis?!" one of them exclaimed.

"The Air Force has betrayed us! We must come up with a plan of action at once!"

"Give us your orders, please! What are we to do?"

As the nobles worked themselves into a frenzy and shouted all manner of verbal abuse at him, Georg's wolf-headed lieutenant, Beowulf, who was here at this very moment to report on the bombing, furrowed his brow in anger. He was about to draw the sword at his hip to respond to the affront, but...

"Beowulf," Georg addressed him.

"Yes, sir!" He stood at attention.

Georg asked him in a calm tone, "What is the extent of the damage from the aerial bombardment just now?"

"Sir," he said. "The bombardment on the castle only blasted away a portion of the roof and towers. Fortunately, there were few casualties. However, we've lost every one of the anti-air repeating bolt throwers on the castle walls. The soldiers assigned to guard the walls are in a state of panic and confusion."

"I see..."

Georg showed no sign of a change in his expression at Beowulf's report, but the nobles who were listening went ghastly pale. The loss of the anti-air repeating bolt throwers meant the loss of any ability to oppose the wyvern cavalry. The Army now had no means to stop the Air Force's bombardment. In other words, even if they attempted to hold out inside the castle, they would be one-sidedly bombed to death.

Georg stroked the beard that had merged with his mane. "In short, everyone in this castle is now their hostage."

"Yes, sir. That would appear to be the case."

When he heard Beowulf's response, the corners of Georg's mouth rose as he said, "Then this battle is our loss."

He accepted his defeat so easily that the corrupt nobles did not understand what he had said for a moment.

They had lost.

The moment they managed to process that, their faces all turned red or blue and they rounded on Georg.

"Wh-What are you saying, Duke Carmine?! We've not lost yet!"

"Indeed! The army is still practically unharmed! There is ample

opportunity to turn things around!"

"If we have no anti-air repeating bolt throwers, we need only retreat to a city that has them! Let's plan our comeback and face the king and the Forbidden Army there!"

"...You would have me abandon Randel?" Georg said with a tone of exasperation as he looked at the nobles who were saying they would resist to the last. "What is a ruler if he casts aside his subjects? If a lord flees and deserts his people, surely the people of another city will never accept him."

"What are you saying?!" one of the nobles exclaimed. "Subjects are those who have no choice but to obey the victor! Even if they're discontented for a time, so long as you win in the end, they will yield to you on their own!"

"Indeed! Platitudes are only worth something if we live! First, we must think of a way to survive!" another cried.

As he listened to the nobles who, even now, were only concerned with their own well-being, Georg let out a sigh.

"In the end, the only ones you fear for are yourselves. Ah, but now I recall, you people were like that from the beginning. Honestly... in the short time since we last fought a foreign enemy, I never would have expected our roots to rot so badly. As I thought, in order for the new buds to flourish, first the rotting leaves and branches must be cleared away."

"Duke Carmine? What are you saying...?"

The nobles were bewildered by the sudden change in Georg's demeanor.

Georg paid them no heed, ordering his lieutenant, "Beowulf. Do it as we planned."

"...Yes, sir," Beowulf said.

When Beowulf raised his right hand, suddenly soldiers rushed into the room, swords drawn, and surrounded the nobles. With twenty to thirty soldiers holding them at sword point, the nobles who were unable to move finally realized they'd been deceived by Georg. They were stripped of their weapons and forced into slave collars one after another.

"What is the meaning of this, Duke Carmine?!" one of them exclaimed.

"You wouldn't, Duke Carmine! Do you mean to turn over our heads to beg the king to spare your own?!" another one screamed.

"Th-This isn't fair!" a third one shouted.

"Curse you! This is dirty, Georg Carmine!"

When he heard the nobles still talking like that, Georg sighed once more in disappointment. "I take offense at the suggestion that I am anything like you people. ...Take them away."

The bound nobles were led out of the room by the soldiers.

Some tried to resist, but having already been forced into slave collars, their master Beowulf merely willed for the collars to constrict, knocking them unconscious.

Even once the door was closed and they were out of sight, they could still be heard cursing Georg foully from the corridor. After a little while, those voices faded and at last Georg returned to his seat. Then, exhaling deeply, he asked Beowulf a question.

"What has become of their personal troops and the Zemish mercenaries?"

"Sir, they are being detained by our forces as we speak."

Hearing Beowulf's response, Georg nodded in satisfaction. Then, as if casting off the stern mask he had worn all this time, a gentle smile

came to his face.

"I have done as I sought to. Now, I have no regrets in this world."

In contrast to Georg, who looked bright and cheerful, Beowulf bore a look of agony.

When he thought of what he had to do now, it must have weighed on him heavily. Georg understood how Beowulf felt, so he gave the order as calmly as he could.

"Now then, Beowulf. Could I ask that you do the same for me?"

"...Yes, sir." He showed a moment's hesitation, but Beowulf wrapped a slave collar around Georg's neck, as well.

Even though he was receiving a death collar that would force him into absolute subservience to his new master, Georg wore a calm expression, like he might when asking his wife to adjust the fancy bow-tie he intended to wear to a wedding reception. With the slave collar wrapped around his neck, Georg now gave his final order as General of the Army.

"Dispatch a messenger to deliver our surrender to the Forbidden Army and place yourself at His Majesty's command. All of the men and officers, with the exception of the corrupt nobles and their troops, acted only under my orders. I bear responsibility for all their crimes. From here on... I leave things to you and Glaive. Do I make myself understood?"

"...Yes, sir. I will do so at once." Beowulf saluted him and left the room.

After watching him go, Georg opened the bottom drawer of the office desk.

Inside was a bottle of wine from the year Princess Liscia had been born. It had been given to him by the former king, Albert, with the request, "No matter what should happen, I want you to protect my

daughter." He had held onto it dearly ever since that day.

After Liscia's graduation from the officers' academy, during the time when he had kept her at his side, he had often told her, "On the day of your wedding, I intend to drink myself into a stupor with this wine" with a laugh.

Her marriage... huh, he thought. *Not being able to see the princess on her wedding day is my one regret, but if I think of this as the greatest wedding gift anyone could offer, it doesn't feel so bad. As for this wine... I will have to ask someone to see that it makes its way to that young king. Though, as he is the man who stole the princess from me, I am somewhat loath to do it.*

With a self-mocking laugh, he imagined Souma and Liscia standing next to each other on their wedding day.

Will the king himself enter this castle, I wonder? I would dearly like to meet him in person and to talk just once.

That was Georg's wish, but what came instead was a messenger.

"Reporting! King Souma did not enter Randel and has already departed leading the Forbidden Army *to the west!*"

...was what his report said.

Then, right after that, he also reported that orders had arrived saying, "Once the army is reorganized under Beowulf and Glaive Magna, they are to follow after the Forbidden Army at once."

When he received that report, Georg's eyes went wide for a moment.

"If you are to be a great tree blocking my path, I will step over you."

He recalled Souma's face when the young king had said those words. And so, Georg understood at once. "Gya ha ha! I see, so that was it! The king was looking to land a big fish of his own!"

Suddenly understanding everything, he let out a hearty laugh.

"I see! I've been used as a stepping stone! Was this the king's plan? Or was it the Black-robed Prime Minister? Regardless, it was brilliant, young ones! This is the dawn of a new generation! My time has now ended. Now, my king, my princess! Hand in hand, step over this old tree and be on your way! Glory to the new buds, and glory to Elfrieden!"

As he witnessed the end of his own era, Georg blessed it with all his heart.

"Sacrifice the Plum Tree to Preserve the Peach Tree."

That was the stratagem that Georg had followed, achieving the greater victory by sacrificing himself.

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Let's sort out the details of the battle up until this point.

First, this series of battles began when the three dukes opposed the former king's abdication, choosing not to swear loyalty to me. Ever since I had been given the throne, the three dukes had been secluding themselves in their duchies along with the armies they controlled.

The three dukes had been uncooperative during the period when I was gathering personnel and desperately trying to get this country back on its feet. Then, a number of nobles that I was having investigated for corruption as part of my reconstruction of the economy fled. When they took refuge in Carmine's Duchy, that was one event that pushed us into a more definite state of opposition.

Then, when I had issued an ultimatum the other day, things had finally developed to the point where the king and the three dukes were

in open conflict.

However, one of the three dukes, Admiral of the Navy, Excel Walter, swore her loyalty to me when issued the ultimatum. This prevented the Forbidden Army and the Navy from coming into conflict.

After that, Georg, who rejected my ultimatum, and Castor, who was prepared to martyr himself for his friendship with Georg, raised the flag of rebellion against me. This was what had caused this current war... Well, anyway, that was the scenario that not only my people, but also the Principality of Amidonia believed.

—However, this scenario only appeared that way on the surface. The true state of affairs was completely different.

First, people thought that Excel had sworn her loyalty to me when I issued the ultimatum, but, in fact, she had done so before that. Excel had sent her granddaughter Juna to be at my side in order to judge whether I had what it took to be king. When she received reports back from Juna saying that I did, she swore her loyalty to me and we used Juna as an intermediary between us.

However, in order to monitor Georg, who had been making some disquieting moves, as well as to attempt to persuade Castor, we concealed that fact, and she continued to work alongside the other two dukes for a time.

Next, the reason this conflict had broken out was also different.

The plan Hakuya and I had been working on was something entirely different, and we hadn't been thinking about subjugating the three dukes at all.

When Liscia told me what sort of person Georg was, I thought he was the kind of guy who would listen to reason. Even with Castor, I knew he had a short temper, but if Excel and Georg both worked to

persuade him, I had thought he would reluctantly comply.

However, because Georg sheltered the corrupt nobles, my plans were all thrown off course.

That said, neither Hakuya nor I had seen the corrupt nobles as being of any great consequence. They had already been driven from their positions. If we sealed the border and could just seize their assets, I didn't care where they went after that. However, Georg kept those nobles close at hand, adding their forces to his own.

At first, when I'd seen he was acting so differently from what Liscia had told me about him, I had been indignant.

That was when Glaive Magna, who said he had left the Army, had appeared before me.

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Technically, he had come to me in order to apologize for Hal's rudeness in town, but even if not for that, I'm sure he would have appeared before us. Glaive had been entrusted with a certain secret mission by Georg.

Once he finished apologizing for Hal's impropriety, he began by saying, "Now then, sire. I realize this is incredibly rude, but I have come to tell you something."

When I asked him what it was, he said, "Well... it is something best not heard by many people..." and he asked me to clear the room.

I had Liscia, Aisha, Hakuya, Hal, and Kaede remain, and dismissed everyone else. Once I did that, Glaive finally began to speak about Georg's plan.

"Duke Carmine intends to gather all of the corrupt nobles in one place, launch a rebellion with them, then have Your Majesty put it down."

This was to catch all of the corrupt nobles in one fell swoop, because they would be dangerous if left lurking around. Georg took a position of clear opposition to me, drawing these destabilizing elements to himself like moths to a flame.

Then he had Glaive and his people, the ones he trusted the most in the Army, break away due to "distrust over his having sheltered corrupt nobles." They would join the Forbidden Army so that there would be people left who could reorganize the Army after the war. After that, he would reject an ultimatum from me, and once the destabilizing elements had gathered, he would take things onto the battlefield. His plan was to have the nobles captured along with him.

The Army were powerful enemies with 40,000 troops, but if the Forbidden Army, Air Force, and Navy all worked together, they could easily put them down.

In fact, even in this recent battle with the Army, all it took was destroying their anti-air repeating bolt throwers with a surprise attack by the Air Force to set the stage for a surrender. Then, at the same time as he surrendered, Georg's retainers would detain the nobles and their personal armies, which included Zemish mercenaries.

That was Georg's plan.

When I heard the plan from Glaive, I found myself shouting in anger without intending to. "What the hell?! Who ever asked him to do that?!"

"Your anger is understandable, but... this was Duke Carmine's own idea." Even as Glaive bowed his head, it seemed he had no intent of yielding.

"Why would he do that?! The corrupt nobles have already been dismissed. We've already seized their assets, too. Just let those cockroaches go!" I shouted.

"If you ask Duke Carmine, he feels that's being naive." Glaive raised his voice in anger, but then controlled himself. As a retainer, he

couldn't get into a shouting match with his king.

When I saw that, I cooled my head, too. "...What's naive about it?"

"Sire, when grain rots, the rot spreads to nearby grain. The problem with nobles is their wide connections. In order to preserve their influence, they repeatedly marry off their daughters to create new relatives. Most likely, if you only put them on trial for something minor like corruption, other houses will intervene to prevent it. Furthermore, even if they lose their own houses, it's possible they will all seek protection from another house where they have relatives. As such, it is necessary to knock them down all the way to being traitors against the state."

I fell silent.

I understood what Glaive wanted to say.

In order to bring judgment upon those corrupt nobles with all their ties, I would have to make them commit a crime that would cause their families to be held accountable. Then, fearing that they might be caught up in it as well, the other nobles would cut ties with them of their own accord.

It sounded like it made sense. It sounded like it, but...

"...Do we really need to go that far?"

"Yes," he said. "There is one more reason."

"What, there's still more...?"

"You say you've seized their assets, sire, but you've only taken what was visible," he said. "These shady sorts have money and influence in places where people won't notice. In fact, the nobles who've already come to the Carmine Duchy have been using that dark money to hire Zemish mercenaries. I believe this is proof you have yet to take everything from them."

When he pointed that out, I pressed my palm to my forehead.

Of course. I had been staring at ledgers and deluding myself into thinking that I knew where the funds had gone from that alone. It had slipped my mind that it was possible to accumulate wealth in ways that wouldn't show up on the books.

When I looked to Hakuya, he had a similar expression on his face.

For me, who never had anything to do with nobles before this, and for Hakuya, who had been a recluse until just recently, we hadn't fully appreciated how scheming nobles could be.

At times like this, I was reminded that I still lacked enough capable people.

"Does Georg intend to make the nobles use up that dark money?" I asked. "Even if he does, the money will just go to Zem for sending the mercenaries..."

That was when I realized the way to shake down Zem and reclaim the funds that flowed into their coffers.

"Ransom money!"

"Yes," Glaive said. "At the same time as we capture the corrupt nobles, we will also capture all the Zemish mercenaries they hire."

Like in Japan during the Sengoku Period, there was a system in place for soldiers who were taken prisoner to be released in exchange for a ransom. Ransoms went up depending on a person's status, and if no one would pay the ransom, that captive would be sold as a slave. In most cases, those of low status would be released in large groups when their country paid a lump sum, but those of greater status would have their ransoms paid by the members of their house. There had been many instances where a house with limited ability to pay fell to ruin as a result.

"Georg intends to have the nobles use their dark money to hire

mercenaries from Zem, and then he'll recoup the money from Zem by making them pay ransom for their captured mercenaries?" I asked.

"That is correct."

The mercenaries Zem sent wouldn't be anyone of high status, but the amount they would have to pay as a lump sum would be considerable.

Honestly... it was a well thought out plan. That made this all the more irritating.

"Why do I have to waste a man who can think things through this well?" I protested bitterly. "I'm already short-staffed as it is, so if he's that determined to help, he should just help me normally!"

"Please understand, sire," Glaive said, looking me straight in the eye. "Duke Carmine has entrusted you with the future."

I gulped. "...How could he believe in me so strongly? We've never even met before."

"That, I do not know. When you meet Duke Carmine for yourself, I suggest you ask him."

I fell silent.

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At that time, there had been no answer, but later, when issuing the ultimatum, I had tried to subtly ask Georg what his motivations were.

"What is it that drove you to this?"

To my question, Georg had answered, "My pride as a warrior."

He'd continued, "Being more than fifty years of age, my body will only grow weaker from here, but now I have been given the greatest

of opportunities. I will decide the fate of Elfrieden with my own talents. Once in his lifetime, it is every warrior's wish to accomplish something that will be remembered by later generations."

Depending how you interpreted them, those words sounded like something an usurper setting out on the gamble of a lifetime might say. However, the fact of the matter was, he had been declaring that he was ready to give his life for this country.

To decide the fate of Elfrieden with his own talents and to accomplish something that would be remembered by later generations... That was why he'd had to destroy the corrupt nobles, even if he had to sacrifice himself to do it.

I didn't know if those words were the truth. However, I could tell that his resolve was unshakable. Liscia's steadfastness may have come from this man, her teacher.

Let's get back on topic.

The information brought to us by Glaive had been tucked away inside the hearts of all those present. There had been six people present: myself, Liscia, Hakuya, Aisha, Kaede, and Hal. If word of this had leaked out by some chance, the whole plan could have come undone.

That was why we couldn't communicate this plan to Excel, who was already cooperating with us, or even to Ludwin, the commander-in-chief of the Forbidden Army. Because of that, Excel remained suspicious of Georg, and there was another miscalculation made.

Castor's rebellion.

Because the plan had advanced in absolute secrecy, Castor harbored doubts about me, and so his Air Force ended up siding with Georg. For us, and for Georg, this event was completely outside our predictions. No matter how simple Castor might be, it hadn't occurred to me that he would side with Georg when Georg was acting in such a blatantly suspicious manner.

I had never once thought that he would take only one hundred of his personal troops and throw his lot in with Georg, ready to martyr himself for their friendship.

Thanks to that, the battle at Red Dragon City had been a completely ad-libbed etude, one not found in Georg's script. While it was fine, since we'd won, it was a situation that could have turned the entire script into improv theater.

Perhaps Excel might have been able to foresee that Castor would act like this. However, because we'd been keeping Georg's plan a secret from Excel, there had been no way to consult her. Looking at the results, my failure to use the people I had available to me had caused the situation to become confused, so I probably had a lot to reflect on here.

Well, it was a battle with many twists and turns, but somehow I think we managed to play Georg's script out to the end. Finally, the curtain could fall on the stage for Georg's script.

Now, this was where it would start. Finally, we could get to the main event.

Hakuya and I would be the scriptwriters for this new stage about to start. We took the long route to get here because of Georg, but, finally, we were now able to raise the curtains on our stage.

"Now, let the subjugation begin."

That was what I had declared.

Subjugation is a word used to describe putting down a revolt in one's own country, but, more broadly, it can also refer to the suppression of a hostile foreign power.

Here, I would like you to remember one thing. Amidonia was invading from the southwest because of their correspondence with Georg, and it had been timed to coincide with his rising up.

However, Georg himself was only focused on domestic matters.

Of course, that meant *he was never connected to Amidonia to begin with*. Now then, who, I wonder, was it that assumed Georg's name and sent those letters to Gaius VIII?

—Now, let the true subjugation begin.



Chapter 8: Declaration of War

—Evening, 1st Day, 10th Month, 1,546th Year, Continental Calendar — Near Altomura.

The Amidonian army had agreed to break their siege at the request of the lord of the castle, Weist Garreau, but when noon came, there was no sign of Altomura's gates opening.

The sovereign prince of Amidonia, impatient with the current state of affairs, ordered that the siege be resumed. Then, once the encirclement was complete, he gave the order for an all-out attack. However, having broken the siege of the city, it took a considerable amount of time to encircle the city once again. It had grown close to evening by the time the task was complete.

"Curse you..." Gaius swore. "To think I'd be played for a fool by a petty man of no significance like Weist."

Sitting on a stool in Amidonia's main camp, Gaius tapped his foot impatiently. When they saw him like this, it put all of the officers and men standing at his side on edge. They knew if they did anything to set off his short temper now, it might cost them their heads. That naturally caused a heavy air to fall over the camp.

In the middle of it all, the crown prince, Julius, did his best to pacify Gaius.

"That just means a petty nuisance did as petty nuisances do," he said. "He's making a futile attempt to buy time. We'll just have to ensure that we crush him this time. What is there to be so irritated

about?"

"...Hmph," Gaius said. "Yes, his struggle certainly has been in vain."

He seemed mollified by Julius' words, but continued:

"It's too late for them to beg for their lives now. I'll destroy that country town by the time the sun goes down. When that time comes, Weist, I'll hang your head from the castle gates, but not before I torture you until you beg for death!"

"...I believe that would be appropriate," Julius said.

Unlike Gaius, who had let the blood rise to his head, Julius wore an icy expression. Still, uncertainty was beginning to take root in his mind. He sensed a suspicious presence on the other side of those walls. Had Weist truly just been buying time with no hope of winning?

As he was contemplating that, a single Amidonian soldier rushed into the main camp. "I-I have a report! A woman has been spotted on the walls of Altomura!"

"A woman?" Julius asked.

As he listened to the soldier who bowed low as he gave his report, Gaius raised an eyebrow. "Just who is she?"

"Well... according to one commander who recognized her, she is Excel Walter, Admiral of the Elfrieden Navy," the soldier said.

"Did you say Excel Walter?!" Gaius doubted his own ears. "You say that one of the three dukes was inside that castle?!"

It was hard to believe. The King of Elfrieden, Souma, had issued his ultimatum to the three dukes only a few days ago. Certainly, Admiral Excel Walter had sworn loyalty to him there, but by the time the spies had delivered that information to them, the armies of the Principality had already besieged Altomura.

Her base of operations was Lagoon City on the northeast edge of the Kingdom, while Altomura was close to the southwest edge. No matter how quickly she traveled, it should have taken three or four days to travel that distance. If Excel had been in Lagoon City when the ultimatum was issued, she couldn't possibly have gotten inside Altomura.

"Why?! Why is Excel there?!" Gaius screamed.

Unlike the bewildered Gaius, Julius looked as if things suddenly made sense to him. "...Most likely, Excel was in communication with Souma prior to the ultimatum."

The identity of that sensation which he hadn't been able to put a name to... the one that he had been feeling from Altomura. Had it been Excel's shadow?

The moment he realized it, Julius figured out the enemy's ploy and turned pale. If Excel and Souma had been secretly in contact, it was possible the other two dukes had been, as well.

If that ultimatum was a farce...!

That was where Julius finally realized the enemy's true aim.

"Father, prepare to withdraw posthaste! We've been lured here!" he shouted.

Julius took a knee before his father, regretfully offering that advice. Gaius blinked at the sudden suggestion of retreat. "Lured here? What do you mean?"

"Most likely, Excel was in Altomura when she took part in the meeting where that ultimatum was issued," Julius said. "We have a Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel in our country, just like they do, and it certainly wouldn't be impossible to transport one."

“Why would she need to do that?” Gaius asked.

“To keep us pinned down at this city, I’m sure,” Julius said bitterly. “The enemy’s target is…”

“This is an announcement which concerns all citizens of Elfrieden.”

Cutting Julius off mid-sentence, a voice loud enough for all the Amidonian soldiers encircling Altomura to hear it echoed through the area. When they turned to look, there was a giant silhouette standing on the walls of Altomura.

It must have been around 20 meters tall. If that were the man himself, he would truly be a giant, but the scenery behind him was see-through. It had to be an illusion of some sort.

That silhouette was the provisional King of Elfrieden, Souma Kazuya.

Today, he wasn’t wearing the casual attire he usually did; he was dressed in a proper military uniform. They say the clothes make the man, and he did look much more intimidating than usual.

Gaius and Julius looked hatefully at Souma.

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“I repeat. This is an announcement which concerns all citizens of Elfrieden. I am the provisional King of Elfrieden, Souma Kazuya.”

Meanwhile, up on the castle walls, Excel was looking up at the giant image of Souma in military uniform with a complicated expression on her face.

The mist this supersized image of Souma was being projected on had been produced by Excel’s magic.

With the magical power Excel held as a descendant of sea serpents, it was easy for her to imitate one of the mist-dispersing receivers used for the Jewel Voice Broadcast. Right now, Excel was using that power to show the Amidonian army Souma's Jewel Voice Broadcast.

Souma began by giving a straightforward explanation of the sequence of events that had led to the current situation.

How the General of the Army, Georg, had been sheltering corrupt nobles, and so the Forbidden Army and the Army had come into conflict.

How the General of the Air Force, Castor, had rebelled against him, ready to martyr himself for his friendship with Georg.

And how, of the three dukes, only the Admiral of the Navy, Excel, had expressed her intention to serve him loyally from the beginning.

Of course, he was just laying out the facts one after another, not delving into the details, but details mattered little to these people. What they wanted to hear was whether they were going to be caught up in the fighting or not.

"A lot has happened to bring us to this point, but at present the Forbidden Army, Army, Navy, and Air Force are all under my command," Souma announced. "As such, I hereby proclaim the civil war to be at an end."

The conflict between the king and the three dukes was over.

For the citizens, just knowing that was enough. However, Excel wore a pained look on her face.

It had been only two days since the ultimatum. This announcement meant that, in that time, Souma had defeated both Castor Vargas's Air Force and Georg Carmine's Army.

She could understand Castor. He had only rebelled with his personal troops, and Excel had shared her knowledge of routes that could be used to invade Red Dragon City in order to aid in his capture.

However, she sensed something contrived in the way that Georg had surrendered so easily.

The amount of time I was asked to buy was so short, I thought there might be something up, but... I never expected they were working together from the very beginning, she thought. *It looks like Castor, myself, and even His Majesty may have all been dancing in the palm of Georg Carmine's hand.*

Despite her youthful appearance, Excel wondered if this was what it was like to grow old. As she began to comprehend Georg's plan, she gazed off into the distance with a sigh.

If this was how it was going to be, I should have pressed harder to make Castor stop. ...If I risk this old neck of mine, is there some way I can save their two lives?

That was what Excel thought as she looked up at the image of Souma.

Souma's speech was rising towards its climax.

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"The civil war has come to an end. Yet it is too soon for us to sheathe our blades! The armies of the Principality of Amidonia have crossed the border and invaded our country! At this very moment, Amidonian forces have besieged the southwestern city of Altomura!"

When the king suddenly revealed the Amidonian invasion, roughly half of the population grew tense, while half reacted with shock. The ones who grew tense were those in the west who had already received information of the Amidonian incursion, while the ones who were shocked were those in the east of the country where the news had yet

to spread.

Not many days had passed since the Principality of Amidonia had launched their invasion, so the information hadn't fully spread yet.

The people of the east reacted to this sudden news with panic. However...

"But fear not," Souma declared. "I had anticipated this might happen, and so I sent Duchess Excel to Altomura. Thus far, the enemy has been unable to capture Altomura."

When the people heard these words from Souma, it helped calm them a little. He continued.

"I already have the Forbidden Army, Army, Navy, and Air Force under my command. The invading force from the principality numbers 30,000. With the Forbidden Army, Army, and Air Force combined, we can mobilize roughly 55,000 troops. If we marched on Altomura now, it would be a simple task to drive these barbaric invaders back."

When they heard those words, an air of relief fell over the people. However, the next moment...

"But, my people. Is that alone enough?!" Souma shouted.

That air of relief was blown away as the king raised his voice.

"The Principality of Amidonia has always been targeting this country's lands," Souma continued. "For generations, their princes have called for the return of their lost lands, expanded their military,

and kept the border in a constant state of tension. The current prince, Gaius VIII, is no different. He fanned the flames of conflict between the three dukes and myself, acting behind the scenes to further his own aims! Then, when the clash between myself and Georg became a thing of certainty, he raised his armies and trampled lands belonging to our country underfoot!"

Yes, Souma had done some maneuvering behind the scenes, issuing a quest to the adventurers' guild in order to have them evacuate the towns and villages in the path of the armies of the Principality. However, that didn't mean there had been no losses. There had been villages deliberately put to the torch. There had likely been plundering, too. If any people had had the misfortune of running into enemy scouts as they'd fled, there may have been lives lost, as well.

Putting his anger at all of that into his words, Souma continued.

"I ask you once more! Are you satisfied to merely chase them off?! In this era, when all mankind is trying to unite under the Gran Chaos Empire against the armies of the Demon Lord, can such backwards and barbaric behavior be tolerated?! Nay! It most certainly can not! As such, while it is unnecessary for our country to say this, having already been subject to a surprise attack, I will say it nonetheless."

Here Souma paused for a moment, taking a deep breath, then made a clear proclamation.

"The Elfrieden Kingdom hereby declares war on the Principality of Amidonia!"

It was a declaration of war. The people tensed when they heard those words.

These were words they had never heard in the time of the former

king, Albert.

The men were engulfed in a strange sense of elation, while the women were frightened, and the elders who had experienced the days of war and chaos during the reign of the king before Albert, the one called the Conqueror, worried that those days might return.

However, Souma continued without wavering in the slightest.

"I am sure that the armies of Amidonia are watching this broadcast, as well. And so, I will declare this. I am sending the forces gathered in the Carmine Duchy westward. Their goal will be to capture the capital of the Principality, Van. While you, the forces of the Principality, are wasting their time near Altomura, we will no doubt be burning your houses to the ground."

And then Souma closed his speech with these words, which would no doubt be used to represent this whole scene when it would be dramatized in later years.

"Hear me, Gaius! Now that you have laid a hand on my house, I will see that you pay for it!"

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The Forbidden Army's palanquin-carrying wyverns for royal trips abroad (also known as the "sitting room wyverns") were four wyverns that carried a gondola that was as luxurious as a limousine. They served a role similar to that of an airship.

It had been one of these four wyverns that I'd loaned to Poncho when he'd gone around gathering ingredients.

The inside of the gondola was spacious and luxuriously appointed. When money had been tight at the beginning, I'd considered stripping out all the decorations and selling them, but Marx, who had been Prime Minister at the time, had begged me, "These serve as the face of

our kingdom to the outside world. Please don't sell them!" So I'd given up on the idea.

I was inside that gondola, having just finished with the declaration of war against the Principality of Amidonia.

The jewel for the Jewel Voice Broadcast was sitting there right in front of me. As spacious as the gondola was, we'd still had considerable trouble loading the jewel into it. Because the jewel was just large enough that it would poke through the roof, we had been forced to cut an opening in the top and lower it in through there.

Because of that, now that we were flying, the wind blew inside the gondola and made it very cold. I just hoped my shivering legs didn't make it into the broadcast during the declaration of war...

"You did a good job, Souma," Liscia said. "Come on, get in here."

Now that I had finished withstanding the cold long enough to declare war, Liscia opened up the blanket she had curled around herself and let me in.

Two people wrapped in one blanket. Oh, how warm. I finally felt like I could rest a little. I'd never been so grateful for the warmth of another person before.

"Ahh, that was so cold," I moaned. "If I'd known it was going to be so cold, I think I'd have preferred to go by land."

"If you were going to load the jewel into some other vehicle, a horse-drawn carriage wouldn't cut it," Liscia said. "And if you'd transported it by rhinosaurus, wouldn't you have gotten motion sickness instead?"

"...They're both equally bad, huh," I muttered.

I had ridden with the rhinosauruses when we had gone to provide aid to the dark elf village. It had been anything but a smooth ride.

Hal and the others are probably moving around with them, I thought. *I need to find a way to improve the experience, quick. They might go on strike if I don't.*

As I was sitting there, wearily thinking about such things...

"H-Hmph... A little chill like this... is nothing..." Carla said, sitting across from us and trying to put up a strong front even as she shivered.

This girl I had brought with us as a hostage against the Air Force may have been wearing armor, but she didn't have a blanket to protect her from the cold. I had offered to lend her one, but she had refused it, trying to act tough.

I thought she'd be fine, being a dragonewt, but... now that I think about it, they're reptilian, aren't they?

"Do dragonewts have trouble adapting to the cold, like lizards?" I asked.

"Don't lump us together with lizards!" she cried. "Yes, it's true, we do have trouble with the cold, but..."

"But you must fly at rather high altitudes in the Air Force, right?" I asked. "Isn't it cold when you do that?"

"...We take the proper measures to protect against the cold," she said.

"Ah, yeah, I suppose you'd have to."

This sort of chill had to be an everyday occurrence for the Air Force, so they had to have means of dealing with it.

When I put a spare blanket over her, Carla gave an awkward "...Hmph," and wrapped it around herself as she sniffled.

Then...

“Honestly... How can you say ‘You have laid a hand on my house, and I will see that you pay for it’?” she burst out. “You were the ones who tempted the forces of Amidonia to attack in the first place, weren’t you, you bast... I mean, Your Majesty.” Carla turned and looked away.

“...You noticed that, huh.”

“Now that I know the full picture, it wasn’t hard,” she said. “You used the unrest inside the country to lure in the Amidonians, and now you’re going to strike them, right? Was Duke Carmine in on it, too?”

“...I guess you could say that you’re half-right,” I said. “What Georg did, he did entirely on his own initiative. The target of the subjugation Hakuya and I had been planning was the Principality of Amidonia from the very beginning.”

While investigating the nobles’ corruption, I had learned there was no small number of nobles inside the kingdom who were working for the Principality of Amidonia. Whether it was family ties, bribery, or the illegal diversion of supplies, their connections took many forms, but the existence of those nobles was extremely dangerous to this country. For instance, if Amidonia were to invade as it now was, and if they were to stage a revolt all across the country, that could have proved to be a fatal blow.

Because of that, Hakuya and I had thought of ways to solve the root of that problem. And by “the root,” of course, I meant the Principality of Amidonia itself.

“The Principality of Amidonia has been a constant threat to this country,” I said. “If we had left them to their own devices, I had little doubt that they would continue to foment rebellion. If that had happened, many more people would have been hurt. That’s why Hakuya and I planned to use this opportunity to deal them a crushing defeat and strip them of their influence. In order to do that, we used forged letters, among other methods, to try to lure them into a trap, but...”

There, I stopped for a moment, scratching the back of my head.

"At pretty much exactly the same time, Georg was coming up with a completely separate plan of his own," I said. "By deliberately taking a rebellious stance against me, he gathered the corrupt nobles around himself. Then he planned to launch a rebellion and lose, so that they'd all be captured along with him. That was his plan, you see."

"You... weren't informed about it, either, were you?" Carla asked, her eyes widening as she did.

I nodded quietly in response.

Liscia looked downwards, looking pained by this.

"We were told of Georg's plan much later," I said. "Once things had progressed to the point that no one could pull back. He must have thought we'd stop him if he revealed the plan to us. As a matter of fact, if I had been told from the beginning, I think I would have. This sort of... self-sacrificing plan... I wouldn't have wanted to accept it."

"I see. In a way, what my father said was right," Carla murmured, her shoulders slumping.

"What Castor said?" I asked.

"The day before you issued your ultimatum, my father said something. 'I just can't imagine that Duke Carmine would be driven mad by ambition.'"

Come to think of it... Castor had said something like that when I'd issued my ultimatum, too. He'd said, "I can't imagine Duke Carmine would oppose you without good reason."

...He'd been right. There had been nothing wrong about what he'd said. Castor was prone to hasty decisions, but perhaps he had instinctively grasped the true nature of the situation.

"Why...?" Carla asked regretfully after a moment's silence, still

averting her eyes. “Why didn’t he tell my father in advance? If he had just done that…”

“…The more people who knew the secret, the greater the risk of the plan leaking out,” I explained. “He couldn’t afford that. That and, if Castor had known, he absolutely would have tried to stop him, wouldn’t he?”

“That’s…” Carla fell silent.

I clenched my fists tightly under the blanket. “We’ve already spent a lot, including Georg’s life, in order to make this plan happen,” I said. “Now that we can’t turn back, we need to ensure it succeeds. If we don’t, we’ll have spent all of that in vain. That was why I had hoped Castor would choose to side with us of his own free will. Excel and I both kept trying to persuade him to. And yet… Castor said he would die for his friendship, then sided with Georg.”

I ground my teeth in frustration. Why had things gone so poorly?

Everyone had just done as they’d pleased for their own arbitrary reasons. By the time I’d realized it, I was dancing along to a script I didn’t even know the author of. I no longer knew whether my role on the stage of this world was that of a king, or of a jester.

Carla hung her head, unable to say anything. Liscia seemed to want to say something to her, but held herself back.

As I watched the two of them, I let out a small sigh. *It really is… an unpleasant role. Having to be king.*

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“Their goal will be to capture the capital of the Principality, Van.”

When they’d heard Souma declare this, the 30,000 Amidonian soldiers laying siege to Altomura beat a hasty retreat.

From on top of the wall, Admiral of the Navy Excel Walter and Lord of Altomura Weist Garreau looked out as the setting sun shone down on the fences and banners that had once surrounded the camps they had left behind.

When Weist turned to the side, there he saw Excel's face in profile, the setting sun lending it a bewitching beauty.

"...Is it okay not to attack them?" Weist asked, as if trying to cover up the fact he had nearly been entranced by her beauty.

A pursuit battle would be a chance to inflict considerable damage on the enemy.

However, Excel silently shook her head. "There were wyvern cavalry in their rear guard. If a force without wyvern cavalry like ours were to leave the castle and give pursuit, we would suffer a punishing counterattack. Gaius VIII... As you would expect from the man who's been sharpening his fangs and preparing to strike our country for so long, he gives sound commands. Though I doubt that will be enough to let him escape from the palm of His Majesty's hand."

When Excel said that and closed her eyes, Weist opened his eyes wide. For Excel, who treated everyone she met like children, had there ever been a person she'd held in such high esteem before?

"Is His Majesty that resourceful?" Weist asked.

"I think when it comes to plain resourcefulness, he's not that impressive," said Excel. "It is rather that, for every scenario he encounters, he comes up with a plan that seems like a prepared answer. Almost *like he already knows a similar battle*."

"Hm? What do you mean?" Weist asked.

"...Just maybe, His Majesty comes from a world far worse than this one. A vortex of scheming and trickery."

Weist shuddered at Excel's words.

He had heard that Souma was a hero summoned from another world. What if he assumed that this other world had seen the fall of many more countries, and experienced turbulent times that had brought the deaths of many more people?

If, by some chance, that world were to connect with this one, could the people of this world possibly fight back against the people of that one?

From the image he had seen, that young man didn't look especially suited to fighting, yet he could still come up with such well-developed plans.

Of course, it was probably about as likely to happen as the sky falling...

"That... is dreadful to think of, yes," said Weist.

"Yes, it really is. ...Now then," Excel said, clapping her hands as if to signify a change of mood. "Do you suppose our work is done here?"

"...I know it's a little late to ask now, Duchess Excel, but rather than just buy time, couldn't you have easily run off the forces of the principality with your magic?"

When Weist pointed that out, Excel chuckled. "Oh, my. You can't rely on this old woman forever, you know. I think it's an elder's duty to watch over the young ones when they're trying so hard."

"Indeed..."

Weist wasn't quite sure what to say to that, but contrary to Excel's cheerful expression, she was feeling irritated inside.

This time, my role required me to stay in the background. When I consider what will happen to Carla and Castor after the war, I'd like to accomplish as much as I can... but if I stand out too much, it will

only harm His Majesty's impression of me.

She sighed internally, but Excel wasn't the sort to let it show. "Now then, let's leave the rest to our young king and his friends while we head south as planned."

As she said that, Excel's thoughts turned to *the other young one.*

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In the twilight, with the moon hidden behind the clouds, the forces of the principality were running with torches in hand.

The horde of 30,000 men carrying torches moved like a snake slithering across the ground. From a distance, it must have seemed like a fantastical sight. However, for the men themselves, they were just being forced to run while covered in sweat and dirt.

Towards the front of that line of troops, the Prince of Amidonia, Gaius VIII, was in the center of the cavalry unit that was leading the way. Surrounded by five bodyguards who each carried a torch, he was driving his horse onward like a man possessed.

His expression was grim. All of this was the fault of that young king.

That king had baited Gaius and his men by using the lands they'd lost, the fertile grain-producing region. That had exposed the capital Van, their soft flank which would normally have been protected by hard armor. Elfrieden had then taken their chance to stab at it.

Georg Carmine had been blocking the route to the capital, but he had capitulated a mere two days after the ultimatum. Now Gaius had heard that Souma's forces, the Forbidden Army and Army, were advancing on Van with a force 55,000 men strong.

Van had been built to block incursions from the Kingdom and to give them a foothold to serve as a front-line base in any invasion of Elfrieden. Because of that, there were no fortresses between the

Elfrieden Kingdom's army and Van.

Due to how passive the former king, Albert, had been, Gaius had let his guard down. He had grown prideful, taking the Elfrieden Kingdom lightly in the belief that they lacked the courage to invade another country.

Now that it had come this far, Gaius realized he'd been tricked by Souma and Georg.

Too much scheming can spell the end of a schemer. All too often, a schemer forgets that he, too, may fall victim to the schemes of another. That was what had happened to Gaius.

This is terrible! To think that that nation of weaklings, Elfrieden, could make me taste such hardship! Gaius thought bitterly.

As he made his horse race along, he cursed his own carelessness.

When they'd found themselves on the receiving end of the Elfrieden's expansionism two generations ago, the King of Amidonia had lost half of his lands and died in despair. To ensure they never forgot that mortifying defeat, Gaius's father had renamed the country from the Kingdom of Amidonia to the Principality of Amidonia. It had been a show of determination, as the man had felt that they couldn't call themselves a kingdom with half of their lands stolen from them.

He'd named himself the Sovereign Prince, and from then on, Amidonia had made the restoration of its lost lands a national policy, always watching closely for any chance to realize that goal.

When the King of Elfrieden from two generations ago had died, Albert had taken the throne. (Or, more accurately, he had married the former king's daughter, who had inherited the right of succession.) When he did, Amidonia had taken advantage of his passiveness to extend a scheming hand to Elfrieden's nobles and support the growth of dissident groups within the kingdom.

That had continued even after Gaius's father had died and Gaius had taken the throne as Gaius VIII.

The majority of those nobles had been crushed by Georg and Excel, but the remaining nobles who had been in on the scheme had gone underground, slowly exhausting the kingdom. That was good.

Albert hadn't had much potential as a king, but the difference in strength between the kingdom and principality had still been great.

Being the less powerful nation, Amidonia had only been able to wait patiently for their opportunity to come.

And then, at last, the chance they had long waited for had arrived. The Demon Realm had appeared, and the food crisis and financial crisis it had caused had exhausted the kingdom. Then, with the sudden change of rulers, the three dukes who were supposed to protect the kingdom had rebelled against the new king.

The principality had gathered their strength for a renewed attack. Right now, they knew, the kingdom wouldn't be able to move freely. The time had come at last for the Principality of Amidonia to realize her dream... Yes, that was what Gaius had been convinced of.

However, on closer inspection, had that really been the case? Was it not the Principality of Amidonia that was being driven into a corner now?

If we lose Van now, Amidonia will never recover, Gaius thought frantically. *I couldn't face the ghosts of my ancestors if I let that happen!*

Gaius VIII's face was distorted with frustration.

However, that hasn't happened yet! We're not finished yet! Van is a solid fortress. I've left it in the hands of 5,000 elite troops. Even if the enemy come in great numbers, they should be able to hold out for two or three days. If we can reach Van in that time, then catch the kingdom's forces in a surprise pincer attack with the troops inside the

castle, we'll have a chance of victory!

That was what Gaius thought to try to encourage himself. But, as he was thinking that...

"Father!" Julius brought his horse up alongside Gaius. "We're advancing too quickly! At this rate we won't only leave the wagons behind, we'll start to see our infantry dropping off, as well! I suggest that we lessen the pace slightly, and..."

"Silence!" Gaius bellowed. He completely disregarded Julius's advice by shouting his son down. "If Van falls, we will never rise again! No matter what, we must arrive at Van before it falls! Then we will catch the kingdom's forces in a pincer attack with the soldiers in the castle!"

A Gaius ranted, Julius felt slightly uneasy. It seemed to him that, right now, Gaius was too fixated on the capital, and he was getting a little too worked up.

"Father, even if we did lose Van, our army would still be intact," Julius said. "Could we not enter another secure city and seek help from the Empire? Unlike the Elfrieden Kingdom, we've signed the Mankind Declaration, after all."

The Declaration of Mankind's Common Front Against the Demon Race (also known as the Mankind Declaration) was a policy that had been proposed by the largest, most powerful empire on the continent, the Gran Chaos Empire, in order to resist the advance of the demons.

First, the acquisition of territory by force between the nations of mankind would be deemed inadmissible.

Second, the right of all peoples to equality and self-determination would be respected.

Third, countries that were distant from the Demon Lord's Domain would provide support to those nations which were adjacent to it and were acting as a defensive wall.

These were the three main articles of the Mankind Declaration.

Amidonia had signed the Mankind Declaration, but even after Souma had taken the throne, Elfrieden had not. Because of that, if Amidonia approached the Empire saying their land had been seized, as the leading power behind the Mankind Declaration and therefore Amidonia's ally, the Empire would likely push Elfrieden to return the seized lands. (Though the territory lost before the Mankind Declaration wouldn't be affected.)

First they invaded a country, then they complained when the same happened to them. It would be a specious argument, just like the Minister of Finance, Colbert, had said before they left for the front, but that was Elfrieden's own fault for not signing the Mankind Declaration. Julius thought it was a good idea. However...

"You fool! The Empire isn't the soft-hearted country you take them for!" Gaius mercilessly shot it down. "This invasion took advantage of a loophole in the declaration. Yes, if we send the request, the Empire will have to act, but after we've gone against the grain like this, they can't have a positive opinion of us. They would like to use what's happened here as a pretext to remove both of us, then turn our country into a puppet state."

Julius fell silent.

Once he was told that, Julius could say no more.

Gaius looked at him, snorting, then raised his voice and ordered loudly, "If you understand that, then make haste! We must arrive before Van falls!"

However, their forced march ran into an obstacle.

It was in the Ursula Mountains which separate the Elfrieden Kingdom and Principality of Amidonia along the south of their border. When they came close to Goldoa Valley, which was the path

through those mountains, men and horses got caught in the muddy ground one after another.

"Wh-What?! Where did this mud come from?!" a soldier shouted.

"Damn! My horse is stuck in the mire! Someone, pull him out for me!" another one howled.

"Oh, come on! There wasn't any place like this on our way here, was there?!" yelled a third.

There were horses stuck in the mud everywhere, with people struggling with their feet stuck in the mud, too.

When Gaius saw this fiasco, he was astonished.

They had come through the Goldoa Valley on their way here. The ground hadn't been muddy then like it was now, and no one had gotten their feet stuck like this.

"Why...?" he muttered. "It can't have rained. Why is the road so bad?"

As if in response to Gaius' mutterings, a single soldier called out:

"E-Enemy attack!"

The next moment, there was the sound of arrows swishing through the darkness, then the sound of something violently smashing. Each time that sound rang out, the Amidonian soldiers fell, one by one. When one of the soldiers carrying a torch near him fell from his horse with a muffled scream, Gaius felt an unease stirring inside him.

"What?! What is happening?!" he shouted.

A soldier rushed over to give him his report. "It's an enemy ambush! It seems the kingdom had troops lying in wait for us in this valley! The enemy are hidden in among the trees, shooting arrows and ice at us!"

“Ice, you say?” Gaius blustered.

“We suspect there are ice mages mixed in with the enemy!”

“Mages... Of course! Curse them, this bad footing must be their work, too!” Gaius burst out.

Seeing that Gaius’s face was now a mask of rage, Julius desperately tried to get his father to stop. “Please, calm yourself, Father! The main force of the Kingdom’s army is headed towards Van. There can’t be many soldiers lying in wait. Also, it’s impossible to maneuver a large force on this narrow path. Right now, our best course of action is to get through the valley as quickly as possible.”

“Urgh, but with the road this bad...” Gaius muttered.

“...Let’s send the soldiers through first,” said Julius. “Our path will be wherever they don’t get stuck in the mud.”

Gaius’ eyes widened at the heartless suggestion. “You would have me throw away my soldiers like sacrificial pawns?”

“...There is little choice,” said Julius. “If the worst were to happen, if you were to be cut down, Father, the armies of the principality would break. Then we would no longer be able to fight the kingdom at all. Please, make the decision.”

“...I suppose there is no choice,” Gaius said.

Sacrificing his soldiers to find an escape route. If their positions had been reversed, it would have distressed Souma greatly to choose such an option, yet Gaius made the choice instantly.

For the Principality of Amidonia, their desire for revenge against the Elfrieden Kingdom had become a part of their identity by this point. It was fair to say that, even though they were surrounded by powerful nations and they had fallen into a food crisis and financial crisis, Amidonia had been able to continue on with an unbroken will thanks to their desire for revenge against Elfrieden. They didn’t care if

they suffered, so long as Elfrieden suffered more.

In fact, even the suffering citizens blamed their woes not on the overzealous elites who had spent too much on the military, but on the kingdom which had robbed them of their prosperity long ago.

Even though 50 years had now passed.

With even the common citizens that far gone, the elites had begun to think it was okay to sacrifice anything in order to fight against the kingdom. In this country, those like Roroa and Colbert, who thought about trying to get by the best that they could with what they had, were outliers.

For Gaius, he was less concerned about the loss of his soldiers than he was about losing the ability to fight the kingdom. He was able to give the order without hesitation. “Advance the troops! We must hurry through to the other side of the Goldoa Valley!”

With this heartless order given, in a reversal of what they had done up to this point, the infantry began advancing first, with the cavalry advancing after them, ignoring the foot soldiers trapped in the mud as they advanced along the safe routes.

It was an awful scene.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if they had only been stuck in the mud. However, with tens of thousands of troops being ambushed, there was no way they would stay in orderly ranks. They were scattered around, so of course some tried to walk over the top of soldiers trapped in the swamp. These soldiers were stepped on and crushed by horses, dying in a way that was terrible to behold.

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There was a group watching that portrait of hell unfold from up among the trees on the mountain slope. That group were all clad in black painted armor, carried bows and magic wands, and had black cloth wrapped around their faces.

This group was a commando unit from the kingdom Amidonia had just attacked. There were perhaps 2,000 of them. The central figure of that black-clad group was of slight build, but her proportions made it clear she was a woman, even through that outfit.

She was the leader of the commando unit.

The people down below were making no attempt to help their comrades who had sunken into the bog. If anything, the Amidonian forces were stepping on them as they retreated.

When she thought that humans could become this cruel in order to survive, it made her shudder a little.

There are times when a king must give cruel orders, she thought. *However, when he shows so little hesitation, I find myself disliking him as a person rather than as a king.*

As she was thinking that, one of her subordinates came to her with a report.

"Lady Canaria, the lead group of the principality's forces has made it through the valley. Should we give pursuit?"

In response, the leader shook her head. "Not necessary. Our mission is to disrupt and stall the enemy. Besides, we're only 2,000 strong. Even if we pursue them, we can't expect better results than we've already achieved. We've done plenty. Prepare to withdraw."

"Yes, ma'am!" he called.

Once the subordinate who had brought her the report left, she removed the cloth wrapped around her face.

At just that moment, the clouds covering the moon drew back, the moonlight shining down on her beautiful *blue hair*.

Beautiful even in the simple act of brushing her hair back, this was the kingdom's lorelei, Juna Doma.

When she'd appeared before Souma, she'd been the lorelei Juna who worked at a singing cafe, but in the Navy she had become Canaria, the leader of 2,000 marines, the sole unit intended to fight in amphibious operations.

Yes, the true identity of this commando unit was the Marine Corps, which reported to Excel Walter.

Juna was relieved to have successfully accomplished her task.

Grandmother handled her part well, she thought. *I can't be the one to screw this up.*

By "Grandmother," she meant the Admiral of the Navy, Excel Walter. In addition to being a lorelei and Canaria, Juna also had her face as Excel's granddaughter. Of course, with Excel's long life and many loves, she had birthed many children, and if she were to count all her grandchildren and great-grandchildren... well, she had enough relatives to populate a small village.

With a family that big, it would be possible to overthrow the kingdom using only her own blood relatives. That was why, to avoid needless suspicion, Excel had kept the "Walter" name to herself. When her children reached maturity, she would disown them and send them off to marry into other houses. Juna was the child of one of Excel's sons who had married into the Doma family of merchants.

Juna, who had inherited Excel's beautiful face, looked at the cruelly abandoned corpses of the Amidonian soldiers and frowned. "...If we leave them be, the local beasts might develop a taste for human flesh. That would be a problem. Let's rescue the survivors and take them prisoner and bury the rest."

"You're going to help Amidonian soldiers?" her subordinate asked.

"After being abandoned by their own king, His Majesty King Souma, the king of an enemy state, will save them," she said. "It could improve His Majesty's reputation, and it can't possibly hurt it."

"I see."

Like the aura she exuded, Juna's thought process was mature, as well. After giving the orders to her subordinates, Juna looked towards the north-northwest. That was the direction she expected Souma and the others were heading in right now. After this, Souma and the others would be entering the final battle with the Principality of Amidonia.

Juna placed a hand on her ample bosom, closing her eyes in meditation. *Your Majesty… Please, stay safe.*

That she prayed for his safety, not his victory, was due to her feelings as Juna Doma, Souma's lorelei, peeking through.

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The ambush in the Goldoa Valley largely killed the Amidonian forces' marching speed. When they tried to reorganize themselves into ranks after leaving the valley, the 30,000 troops had been reduced to 15,000. This indicated that, in addition to those that had been lost to the ambush and those that had been trampled when they'd sunk into the swamp, there had been a considerable number of soldiers who had fled, too.

Furthermore, because the wagons had had no choice but to drop their supplies and run in the chaos, the forces of the principality were now stricken with both exhaustion and hunger.

The soldiers' stress had reached its peak and they were ready to blow at any moment. Even if they made it to Van with 15,000 troops, and then managed to launch a pincer attack with the defenders, it would be difficult to win against the Elfrieden Kingdom's force of 55,000.

In response to this situation, Gaius VIII first had the captain of the wagon teams take responsibility for the loss of their provisions. He decapitated the man in order to pacify the other soldiers.

Next he gathered provisions from the nearby villages and towns, drafting their people into service to bring his total troops up to 25,000. Of course, this caused some resentment, but with the very existence of his country on the line, Gaius didn't care.

While this had let him secure the number of troops he would need, his forces were gathering provisions and soldiers as they advanced, so they moved slowly. It had been some days since the retreat had begun, but they still had no idea when they would arrive at Van.

After spending yet another day, the Amidonian forces finally came close enough that they would likely reach Van within the day. However, the Amidonian forces had been making a fatal mistake all this time.

They'd rushed their advance too much.

You may question what's wrong with that, or you may even think that Sun Tzu himself said that "Soldiers value haste."

However, when Sun Tzu speaks of a "soldier," he means "war." In the original text, it says, "Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays."

What he means by that is: "War (because it's a thing that exhausts countries) is most beneficial when resolved quickly, and there is no country that has benefited from a lengthy war."

That was why the principality's armies should have paid heed to the following words in *The Art of War*'s chapter "Maneuvering":

"Maneuvering with an army is advantageous; with an undisciplined multitude, most dangerous. If you set a fully-equipped army in march in order to snatch an advantage, the chances are that you will be too late. On the other hand, to detach a flying column for the purpose involves the sacrifice of its baggage and stores."

"Maneuvering" is the competition between two forces over which will claim strategically important locations first.

In the case of the Battle of Yamazaki between Hideyoshi Hashiba and Mitsuhide Akechi, that had been Mount Tennouzan, while in the Russo-Japanese War, it had been 203 Hill.

Certainly, if you can secure those important points before your opponent, the battle will be to your advantage.

However, Sun Tzu says developing a fixation on those points and competing with your opponent over them is dangerous. If you send your entire army, you'll likely arrive too late, but if you send a fast unit ahead to do the job, they'll end up leaving the team that carries their supplies behind.

If that happens, even if you do capture the point in question, it's pointless.

Furthermore, Sun Tzu says that if you march one hundred *li* while maneuvering, only one-tenth of your army will reach their destination, and the leaders of all three of your divisions will fall into the enemy's hands. If you march fifty *li*, only half of your army will reach the destination, and the leader of your first division will be struck down.

In other words, if you exhaust your soldiers trying to seize strategically important points, and you lose your supplies in the process, there's no point.

If you look at what the armies of the principality had done, you'll see that they had grown overly fixated on the strategically important capital city, Van, abandoned their supply wagons, and needlessly exhausted their soldiers.

In other words, they'd done exactly what Sun Tzu cautions against.

What the army of the principality found when they reached the open plain ten kilometers south of Van was *a fresh army from the kingdom waiting for them*.

When Gaius saw the forces arrayed before him, all of the power left

his body and he nearly fell from his horse. “This is absurd... You can’t mean to tell me Van has already fallen...?”

There was no one who could respond to his mutterings.

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To jump straight to the conclusion, no, Van had not yet fallen at this point.

When the forces of Elfrieden under Souma arrived a day before the Amidonian forces, they didn’t do anything stupid like try to attack the 5,000 elite soldiers holed up in Van. They split off 10,000 troops to monitor those soldiers, while the main force moved to the open field ten kilometers south of Van, waiting for the main force of the principality’s army which would no doubt be coming.

Souma’s target had been the main force of the Amidonian army from the very beginning. This was why he had told Gaius the target of their attack, something that should normally be kept secret.

By first saying he would attack Van, he would lie in wait for the principality’s forces to rush there, and then he would destroy them.

It was a plan that fell under *Thirty-Six Stratagems*’s sixth stratagem, “Make a sound in the east, then strike in the west,” but he was also reenacting the Battle of Maling, from which the words of the second stratagem, “Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao,” came.

This was the strategy that the second Sun Tzu, Sun Bin, had used to defeat his rival Pang Juan. Gaius had never stood a chance of seeing through it.

While he did have 25,000 troops at his command, in comparison to those exhausted troops which had lost most of their supply wagons, the kingdom’s forces had enough rations from Poncho to feed the whole army, and had spent the day resting on the field and waiting, so they were eager to fight.

55,000 kingdom soldiers in top condition vs. 25,000 exhausted principality soldiers.

The battle had been decided before it even began.

In the main camp in the center of the Elfrieden Kingdom's forces which had taken the crane wing formation, Souma rose from his camp stool, raised his right arm high, then swung it down towards the forces of the principality.

"""Yeahhhhhhh!""" A victory cry rose up from the forces of the kingdom.

With that as the signal, the final battle between the Elfrieden Kingdom and the Principality of Amidonia began.

Elfrieden Historical Idiom Lessons: Number 4

“Let them attack the countryside to take the capital.”

Type: Proverb Meaning: To accomplish something with minimal effort.

Origin: During the One Week War, Souma used the country town of Altomura as bait, then used the opening that created to enable an attack on the capital of the Principality of Amidonia.

Synonyms: “Lose the battle to win the war.”



Chapter 9: The Final Battle

It seems that in later years, many dramatizations of this era have depicted Souma Kazuya as a wise and courageous ruler. They depict him as a ruler who took to the battlefield, as slaying many powerful opponents in single combat, as having confounded enemy armies with his ingenuity, and as having brought happiness to the people with his excellent policies.

However, the historians dispute that appraisal of him.

To begin with, in all his life, Souma only fought enough foreign wars to be counted on one hand. He had very few opportunities to show that sort of military prowess. Nearly all of the achievements he is remembered for were actually accomplished by those who served under him.

As for the ingenuity that let him toy with his enemies, there is no proof that he came up with any of those ideas himself. In the era in which he lived, there were many people, foremost among them being the prime minister, Hakuya, who were masters of such ingenuity, so Souma may only have been implementing the best plans offered by such people.

Certainly, he had many excellent policies, but it is questionable whether he led all of his people to happiness.

From time to time, there were signs that Souma's position caused him suffering. If all of his policies had been having their intended effects, he likely wouldn't have suffered so. Thus, Souma's abilities were not so great as the dramatizations depict. That was the consensus reached by historians.

...However.

Even with that said, there are few who claim Souma was not a great ruler.

Another point of consensus among historians is that "Souma was good at gathering people and using them well." Souma had no great abilities himself, but he was a genius in how he placed capable people where they were needed, and could deploy the necessary number of troops to where they were required.

The event that first spread Souma's name across the continent, his victory in the war with the Principality of Amidonia, was largely a result of this gift. He had a firm grasp of what he was and was not capable of, and was able to delegate the things he couldn't do himself to others.

It could be that this is the most important quality for a ruler.

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"They're more stubborn than I expected..."

As I watched the battle develop from the main camp of the Elfrieden Kingdom's army, I was surprised by how good a fight the forces of the principality of Amidonia were putting up.

It was 55,000 kingdom soldiers in high spirits vs. 25,000 exhausted principality soldiers. The outcome should have been apparent to anyone, but the forces of the principality were holding out well. No, maybe it was that our forces weren't fully able to attack.

First, the kingdom's and principality's wyverns were dogfighting in the skies above. Because they hadn't been hit by the ambush at Goldoa Valley, the Principality of Amidonia's wyvern unit was the most energetic unit in the principality's army.

There were fewer than 500 knights, but if they stayed on the defensive, even the Elfrieden Wyvern Cavalry, who boasted twice

their numbers, would struggle to attack them. If we could seize air supremacy, that would decide the outcome of the battle, but it didn't look like that would happen for a while.

In the end, the battle had been left for the forces on the ground to decide.

The kingdom's army had deployed in the crane wing formation. In the center was the Royal Guard led by Ludwin, plus a total of 20,000 troops, including 10,000 from the troops that reported directly to me in the Forbidden Army and 10,000 from the Army. In the left wing there were roughly 15,000 Army troops led by Glaive (Halbert and Kaede were in this unit as well). Lastly, in the right wing there was a force of roughly 15,000 troops led by Liscia which consisted of Army troops and auxiliaries from the dark elf village.

I wanted Liscia to stay in the main camp, but she said, "This is the final battle. Let me do what I can, too," and forced me to let her have her way.

Partly because she was currently the only person who could still keep the confused forces of the Army together, I hesitantly accepted it.

She had been something like an idol during her time with the Army, after all. Thanks to Georg's training, there was also no issue with her ability to command troops. I made the decision figuring that she would meet little resistance.

I did, at least, send Aisha with her as a bodyguard, though. She was a princess, after all, and I didn't want her being too reckless.

Anyway, since I was in the main camp, to the rear of the central force led by Ludwin, the only person I had to talk to was Carla, who I was keeping close at hand as a hostage.

While Carla was a hostage, her hands and feet weren't bound with chains. She was wearing a slave collar, so it would strangle her the moment she attempted to flee or harm her master. It was supposedly

safe leaving her like this. It seemed to me that if she just seized a sword from one of the guards or stabbed me with those sharp claws of hers, she could kill me pretty easily, but... I guess that was just how the collar worked. Then again, Carla didn't seem to have any intention of harming me anymore.

I tried talking to her. "So, what do you think? I thought they'd break more easily."

"...No one goes to war wanting to lose," she said. "They'll desperately try to avoid defeat."

"Yeah, I guess they would."

Maybe Carla had gotten bored just standing by my side, because she responded surprisingly easily. As a former commander of the Air Force, she must have had a better grasp of the situation than I did.

They're being stubborn because of their inferior numbers, huh. That could be a little troublesome, I thought.

"Our left and right wings, which is to say the units under Liscia and Glaive, don't look like they're moving that much," I said. "If they were a bit more proactive about encircling them, don't you think they could wipe them out?"

"...If you think that, why not send a messenger on a fast horse with that order?" asked Carla.

With the tone she used, it was like she was asking "Is that your final answer?" It made me stop to think about it a little. However, I couldn't come to any conclusions.

"...I don't know," I said. "My knowledge of war is purely theoretical, so Liscia should know far more about commanding troops than I do. Rather than open my mouth when I shouldn't, I'd better leave the decision-making to those in the field."

Carla laughed a little. "Ha ha ha. That's probably a good idea."

It looked like that was the right answer.

"Carla, do you know the reason?" I asked. "Care to fill me in?"

"It's the number of troops the enemy has," she said.

"The number of troops?"

Carla pointed towards the battlefield. "I only know what I've heard from listening in, but those are the 30,000 troops that laid siege to Altomura, right? They were ambushed while they were withdrawing, too."

"Yeah, that's right."

"It doesn't look like their numbers have decreased that much, considering all that's happened."

"Hm? Now that you mention it..."

With such a large force, it was hard to tell anything at a glance, but they looked to be about half the size of our own force, which had 55,000 troops. I guessed they had around 25,000 troops.

It was true that, considering that they'd been ambushed by Juna's marines in Goldoa Valley, it didn't look like they had taken many losses.

"Did the ambush not achieve anything?" I wondered.

"No, from what I see on the battlefield, there are varying levels of morale in the different units of the principality's army. They likely made up the troops they lost to the ambush by taking in conscripts from cities along their route here. That would be why some of them appear to have low morale."

"I see..."

Countries in this world generally had standing armies.

In a world where there are giant animals that, from a person back on Earth's perspective, might as well be monsters running rampant, it was necessary to have troops that could be mobilized at any time. In Elfrieden, the Army, Navy, Air Force and the troops that were under my direct control in the Forbidden Army were standing troops. Of course, in times of need, levies could be raised from the common people. In our case, most of the personal armies of nobles other than the three dukes were made up of levied troops.

After the war, I planned to create a unified army which would incorporate the various nobles' forces as well, but I intended to release the people from military service and have them return to their towns. Right now, raising productivity was a more urgent concern than a decline in military power.

Naturally, the army the principality used to invade us would also be made up of a combination of standing troops and levied troops. They must have raised all the levies they could by now.

So, after the ambush, the levies they'd raised must have come from *those they couldn't have conscripted before.*

For instance, they might be the elderly, the feeble, or even adventurers who had happened to be in their domain. (The adventurers' guild offered a contract that allowed countries to conscript all adventurers who were in their territory in a time of crisis. In return, the country needed to pay a fixed sum to the guild every month, so I had already terminated that contract.)

Carla was pointing out that they couldn't have high morale if that was the case.

"If you leave people like that alone, they'll eventually break on their own," she said. "On the other hand, if you encircled them, it would risk causing them to unite as one. That's why both Liscia and Glaive are waiting for them to break ranks and flee."

"I see," I said. "So I was right to let my field commanders make the decision."

I realized that, in a situation like this, rather than pretending to know what I was doing and making pronouncements from on high, it was better to trust the people in the field and leave it to them. I had capable people out there, after all.

"I'm just a figurehead, so I should stay back in the main camp, twiddling my thumbs," I said.

"I think that's a problem in its own way..." said Carla. "You are the king, aren't you?"

"There's only work for a king before and after the war," I said. "Other than that, well... If it comes to it, maybe I can offer up my own head and beg them to spare the lives of my troops and commanders."

When I said that, Carla's eyes went wide. She looked at me as if she was seeing something completely unbelievable.

Huh? Why was she looking at me like that?

"Did I say something strange?" I asked.

"You... Aren't you afraid to die?" Carla demanded.

What was she talking about?

"Of course I'm scared to die. I'm not suicidal."

"Still, just now, you said you'd offer your head up if it came to that, didn't you?" she asked. "Have you already accepted that?"

"Huh? Ah... I guess I did. That's weird..."

Carla was right. Now that she mentioned it... it *was* weird.

Why had I said I'd offer my head up like it was completely natural?

I knew it was something expected of a king. Power was concentrated in my hands as the representative of this country, so I

had to bear just as much responsibility. That was what it meant to be king.

But why did it feel "natural" for me to do it?

I mean, I'd always been... a bit of a coward, hadn't I? I valued my life, didn't I? I'd taken the throne and worked so hard at internal affairs in order to avoid being handed over to the Empire, hadn't I?

—When had I stopped holding my life dear?

Carla looked at me anxiously. "A-Are you all right? Are you feeling unwell?"

I was silent.

Unwell... that's not quite right. Broken...

There was something broken about me as a person.

Yeah. That made a strange amount of sense.

Only now that it had been pointed out did I notice that my current mental state was messed up.

I felt that I had been taking life too lightly. My own life, and the lives of others.

That was how I was able to do simple arithmetic with people's lives. I had been subtracting the lives saved from the lives lost, and choosing any option where the sum was a positive number.

As if I were a system that handled that sort of computation.

That was when the words I'd once said to Liscia crossed my mind.

"Even if I don't want to do it, I have to. Because I'm the king now."

Oh... I see. So that's how it is...

"At some point, I became a king..." I murmured.

"What's this all of a sudden? You've been a king all this time."

Carla didn't seem to understand what I was saying, but it made sense to me now.

"I was just going along with events as they happened," I said. "At some point... without noticing it myself, I began to act as a system of the state which we call a 'king.' ...By telling myself it was part of my programming, I became able to always choose the 'best' option."

"System? Programming? Hey, what are you even talking about?!" Carla shouted.

All I could do was give a self-deprecating laugh. "Carla, I may be a 'fake.'"

"Wha?!"

"After all... If I can't get into the role of king, I can't send soldiers off to the battlefield," I said.

I was a coward. I didn't want to be hurt or killed myself. I didn't want to see others hurt or killed, either.

For someone like me to go to war as a king, I had to fully embrace my role as a system of the state.

By telling myself this was what a king did, I had been able to suppress my own will and do what needed to be done. If I hadn't... I felt like I'd have been crushed under the weight of all the lives that might be lost because of my decisions. When I saw how far I had taken that, I could only laugh scornfully at myself.

"Man... I can't laugh at the former king now, huh," I said. "If I had

a viable replacement, I'd want to give up right now."

"...What good can come from letting me hear you in a moment of weakness like this?" she asked incredulously.

"You've got it backwards," I said. "Do you think I could let Liscia and the others hear me talk like this?"

For Liscia, who'd told me she wanted me to be king; for Aisha, who served me as king; and for Juna, Hakuya, Poncho, Tomoe, and all the rest, I could never let them hear me like this. Especially since Liscia, being the serious person she was, seemed to feel responsible for the fact that her father had pushed the throne onto me.

"Because you've fought against me, I'm able to let you hear," I said.

"...That doesn't make me happy at all."

Then it happened. It happened as we were talking. I noticed there had been a change on the battlefield.

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On that battlefield, where a pitched battle was still being fought, the principality's army suddenly began to crumble.

Members of the force that had fought hard to resist the attacks of the numerically-superior army of the kingdom up until this point began to flee. The first to run were those who had been hurriedly pressed into service in the time between when the force had left Goldoa Valley and their arrival at the plains.

The Principality of Amidonia had mandatory military service for all men once they reached a certain age, so they were combat trained, but these were people who ordinarily lived as civilians. If they were suddenly sent into a disadvantageous battle, their morale wasn't going to be great.

Eventually, soldiers started fleeing towards the southern side where

the encirclement wasn't yet complete.

The Amidonians cut down fleeing soldiers in an attempt to keep the others fighting, but there were close to 10,000 of these levied troops, so it was little help.

However, the more of them that tried to flee, the more their lines were thrown into disorder, and that ended up disturbing their ability to function as a unit. Elfrieden did not miss this chance to attack.

"Hal, it's time, you know!" Kaede shouted.

"I've been waiting for this!" he called back. "Let go get 'em, you louts!"

""""Yeahhhhh!""""

In the left wing of the kingdom's army, Halbert charged forward with his troops to complete their encirclement of the enemy. In this battle, Halbert was leading somewhere between ten to twenty men from the Army and fighting as a platoon commander under Kaede's command. He rode no horse, spinning his two halberds around and knocking his confused enemies flying. The Amidonian general noticed what was happening and shouted from up on horseback. "Don't let them encircle us! Use indirect fire to stop the enemy's left wing!"

In the next moment, a hail of arrows and magic flew from the principality's army towards Halbert and his unit.

"Earth Wall!" Kaede shouted.

This summoned a wall of earth that was nearly one hundred meters long and three meters high which narrowly saved Halbert's unit.

That must have surprised the forces of the principality. There couldn't have been more than five mages on the entire continent who could conjure such an impressive wall of earth in an instant. Kaede may have had a timid personality, but she was a genius when it came

to her quick thinking and earth magic.

Halbert pressed his back up against the wall of earth for cover, then gave an order to his men who were doing the same. “We can’t let Kaede hog all the glory! We’re going for some payback!”

“““Yeah!”””

This time it was Halbert and his platoon firing arrows and magic over the earth wall at the principality’s army. Halbert threw one of the fire spears he had shown off in the battle near Randel against the Zemish mercenaries.

The principality’s forces were on an attack footing, so they were unable to prepare themselves in time. They were shot full of arrows or scorched, and their formation was thrown into chaos.

Seeing this chance, Halbert leapt out. “Now’s our chance, while they’re in disarray! Charge in!”

Meanwhile, in the disorderly chaos of the principality’s forces, their general was trying to restore calm. “Men, don’t fall into disarray! If we break ranks, we’ll give the enemy exactly what they want!”

He frantically tried to encourage his troops, but the chaos showed no signs of abating. Growing impatient, the general rode up to one of his panicking soldiers and suddenly lopped the man’s head off.

“Shut up! If you’ll not calm yourselves, I’ll behead you like I did this fool!” he bellowed.

“No, you shut up,” a voice said.

“What?!” the general shouted.

By the time the general noticed him, it was already too late. Halbert was in front of him with his arms crossed.

When Halbert uncrossed his arms, the blades of his two halberds

acted like a pair of scissors, catching the general's torso and cutting him into pieces.

The upper torso of the now ex-general thudded to the ground.

The sight of blood spurting from the still-standing, headless horse and the now torso-less rider in its saddle robbed the soldiers of their will to fight in an instant.

Halbert flicked the clotted blood away from his two halberds with a flash, and then he roared, "Forbidden Army Officer Halbert Magna has slain an enemy general! Now, which of you wants to die next?!"

With blood dripping from the halberds in each of his hands, he must have looked like some horrific monster.

Today, Halbert was fired up to compete with Souma and Kaede, who were both around the same age as him. Souma had assembled this massive army, while Kaede was supporting Ludwin with her strategic ingenuity.

I'm not gonna let them get any further ahead of me! That was the feeling that drove Halbert now.

When they saw Halbert with such intensity, the Amidonian soldiers reacted as if they'd run into an ogre in the darkness. They scrambled to retreat, thinking, *There's no way we can fight that thing!*

One soldier of the principality, who saw Halbert at this time and narrowly survived the battle, later told the story like this:

"Back then, I was sure I would die. He was still a young man, but even fierce, veteran warriors didn't want to face him. When I later heard that was 'Hal the Red Ogre,' it made a strange amount of sense. Honestly... I'm amazed I survived..."

It would be fair to say that for "Hal the Red Ogre," who would in later years be used in stories as a representative of Souma's followers, his legend began with this battle.

His style of standing at the front, leading his subordinates forward in a charge, would remain unchanged even when he was given command of a full army. Souma would warn him time and again that it wasn't how a leader should behave, but Halbert would say, "This way suits me better," and never listen.

In fact, because he would always manage to survive, and to get results, Souma wouldn't be able to say anything more than that. It would end up causing Kaede a great deal of worry, but that is a story for another time.

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"Hahhhhhhhhh!"

Meanwhile, in the right wing of the kingdom's army, Liscia let out a battle cry.

While acting as the commander of the right wing, she also rode around on horseback herself, moving up quite close to the front line.

Each time Liscia thrust her rapier out towards the enemy, blades of ice formed in the air and tore apart the Amidonian soldiers. Her form as she did so made her look like a valkyrie. It even had a certain beauty.

But on the other hand, Liscia seemed to be acting in haste, as if the blood had rushed to her head. She gave the impression of having lost her calm.

Of course, if she stood out so much, the enemy were going to target her.

"Don't falter! Surround her and take her head!" an enemy unit commander ordered.

Enemy soldiers swarmed towards Liscia.

No matter how incredibly brave Liscia was, she was at a numerical

disadvantage. If she let herself be surrounded by spearmen, she wouldn't be able to break away using the horse's superior mobility.

The enemy's spears closed in on Liscia. Then, "Princess! Why, yoooou! Get away from her!"

Arriving just in the nick of time, Aisha knocked away the enemy soldiers swarming around her with a full swing of her great sword.

Aisha had been assigned to guard Liscia, but her great sword wasn't meant to be swung around on horseback, and she had fallen behind because she was on foot.

Once Aisha had wiped out the nearby enemies with a slash of her great sword and a blast of wind, she ran up beside Liscia's horse with tears in her eyes.

"Princess, please, don't be so recklessssssss!"

"...Sorry," Liscia said. "I lost my head there."

Seeing Aisha's pleading, tearful eyes brought Liscia to her senses. She put her hand on Aisha's head, which was at thigh-level for her because she was on a horse.

"But I have to be a little reckless," Liscia said. "Because... I want to end this war quickly."

"Princess?" Aisha tilted her head to the side, confused by the worried look on Liscia's face.

While the forces of the principality were showing some stubbornness, the battle was going in Elfrieden's favor. Soldiers were already starting to flee from the Amidonian side, so if the kingdom's forces slowly encircled them, it wouldn't be long before they emerged victorious. There was no need to rush that victory.

However, Liscia turned to Aisha with a pained look on her face. "Hey, Aisha. What do you think of the way Souma's been lately?"

“What do you mean?” Aisha asked.

“He seems... like he’s pushing himself too hard, don’t you think?”

“Well... yes, I think you’re right.”

Even to Aisha’s eyes, as one who offered her unwavering loyalty to Souma, his expression lately had been frightening. No... she wasn’t frightened of him, she was frightened *for* him.

There was something fragile about him.

Of course, considering they were in the middle of a war now, it would have been just as worrying to see a stupid grin on their ruler’s face. Still, she couldn’t help but feel Souma was straining himself to act like a king. Aisha wanted Souma to be smiling.

“Once this war ends... do you suppose His Majesty will smile again?” Aisha asked.

Liscia’s eyes widened for a moment, then she smiled broadly. “We’ll make it so he can smile.”

“Ah! Right you are!” Aisha raised her head, getting back into a fighting stance with her great sword, then stood in front of Liscia. “However, princess, please, stand back. If anything were to happen to you, His Majesty could never smile again.”

“...Right,” Liscia said. “I’ll try to show more prudence.”

“Leave the fighting to me!” Aisha cried.

“No, that I can’t do. Aisha, you do know that if anything were to happen to you, Souma would never smile again, right?”

“...Do you think so?” Aisha asked.

“I do.”

“You do?”

The two looked at one another and smiled. Then, a moment later, they wore the faces of warriors.

"Then, princess, let us both take care of our lives."

"Yes," Liscia agreed. "Let's end this agonizing war together."

The two of them rushed across the battlefield.

◇ ◇ ◇

The battle between the armies of Elfrieden and Amidonia had reached a turning point.

In the center of the principality's army, which was slowly being encircled, the Sovereign Prince of Amidonia, Gaius VIII, had a grim look on his face.

His initial plan to ambush the kingdom's army as they encircled Van, then catch them in a pincer attack with the garrison troops, had gone up in flames. The forces of the kingdom hadn't laid siege to Van. Instead they had waited on the plains for the main force of his army to arrive.

The principality's army had been exhausted from marching and from the ambush at Goldoa Valley, and they then had had to go into battle against the well-rested army of the kingdom, which had had nearly twice as many soldiers.

The kingdom's army hadn't been aiming for the capital city Van, but for the main force of the principality's army, or to be even more specific, for Gaius VIII's head. That was a fact that made Gaius VIII gnash his teeth.

The forces of the principality had fought well at first, but they were exhausted, and their quality had been watered down with fresh conscripts, so they couldn't have hoped to hold out for long. Soldiers had already started to flee, and there was no hope of regrouping.

At this point, Gaius made up his mind and called Julius back from commanding on the front line.

When he returned to the main camp, Julius stood before Gaius filled with anger. “Father! What have you suddenly called me back here for?! You know if I leave the front line, Elfrieden may push through it!”

“...Julius.” Gaius spoke to Julius with a thoroughly calm demeanor. “Withdraw from this battlefield.”

“Wh-What are you saying? The war has only just begun...” Julius stammered.

“We’ve lost this war,” Gaius said to his bewildered son in a self-mocking tone. “The soldiers of my army are strong. They’ll not be found lacking compared to the kingdom’s. However, in their exhausted state after our long march, it will be impossible for us to overturn the difference in power between our forces. I will buy time, so you cut a bloody swathe out of here while their encirclement is yet incomplete and escape by yourself.”

Gaius had accepted defeat.

When he realized that fact, Julius felt his legs begin to give out underneath him. However, if he considered what Gaius was saying, he couldn’t let himself collapse here.

“No... If anyone should do that, it’s you, Father!” Julius cried. “I will be the one to buy time!”

“That is not possible,” said Gaius.

“Why not?!”

“Because Elfrieden is aiming to take my head.”

Having chosen this as the place he would die, Gaius VIII’s mind was now more clear than it had ever been before. It let him see

Souma and Hakuya's aim.

"I am a constant irritant to Elfrieden," said Gaius. "Many of the nobles in their country are beholden to us. By striking me down, they must hope to remove that threat."

Julius fell silent.

"What's more, I am the flag bearer of the anti-kingdom faction in the principality," Gaius went on. "The reason we can take a hard-line position against the kingdom is that the hard-liners have been keeping the moderates down. But, if I were to vanish, the moderates in the principality would gain momentum."

The difference in power between the Principality of Amidonia and the Elfrieden Kingdom was clear. Be it territory, population, number of soldiers, or prosperity, they lost in all respects.

On top of that, Amidonia shared borders with the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria, a theocracy to the north which had its own unique set of values; the Republic of Turgis to the south, with its policy of northward expansionism; and the mercenary state Zem, the neutral state that would dispatch troops anywhere for the right price, to the west. There was no telling when those who were weak of heart might cozy up to one of these other states in an attempt at self-preservation.

That was why, in order to keep Amidonia as Amidonia, Gaius had needed to keep a lid on such things. Now Elfrieden was trying to remove him.

Julius's eyes went wide. "No... You mean to say Souma plotted all of this solely to take your head, Father?! He even used his own land as bait?!"

"Be careful, Julius," said Gaius. "This new king is nothing like Albert."

Gaius no longer underestimated Souma because of his youth.

He continued, “That is why Elfrieden will never let me escape. If I attempt to retreat, they will pursue me to the very depths of hell. Their only goal is to slay me, after all.”

Julius said nothing.

“That is why I will remain here, to show them the pride of Amidonia,” Gaius finished.

“Then I will stay with you!” Julius cried.

“You mustn’t! If we lose you, too, what will become of the principality?!”

“We have Roroa,” Julius said.

“Hmph... She’s not good enough.” Even though he was speaking about his own daughter, Gaius spat the words out with distaste. “It takes a venomous snake to lead Amidonia. A venomous snake that will one day sink its fangs into the kingdom and strike her dead. Roroa may have the blood of a cunning snake, but she lacks venom.”

Even as Julius trembled with fear at the madness his father was starting to display, he asked, “Father, what is this ‘venom’ you speak of?”

“The burning desire for revenge against Elfrieden,” snapped Gaius. “Even while surrounded by powerful states, our Principality of Amidonia has maintained her independence, developed her unproductive land, endured through hunger, dug mines under harsh conditions, and preserved herself as a state solely because of our drive for revenge against the kingdom. Our hatred for the kingdom which stole our fertile lands from us has driven us to become ever stronger, ever more prosperous. ...Unfortunately, Roroa may have a gift for finance, but she lacks that drive for revenge. The only one who has at least somewhat inherited my venom, Julius, is you.”

With those words, Gaius rose from his seat and placed his hands on Julius’ shoulders.

“That is why you must survive. You are the only one who can carry on my desire for revenge and keep Amidonia as she ought to be.”

“Father...” Julius was bewildered.

Did that venomous blood flow in his veins? Certainly, Julius saw the kingdom as his sworn enemy. However, could he burn with the same passion he saw in Gaius?

While Julius was still nonplussed, Gaius said to him, “At this point, we can’t afford to worry about being made into a puppet state. You should seek the Empire’s aid. If you do, it should at least prevent the kingdom’s annexation of Amidonia.”

“But... Like you were saying before, will the Empire forgive us for going against the Mankind Declaration?” asked Julius.

“Lay all of the blame for that on me,” said Gaius. “The vengeful fiend of Amidonia refused to heed even his own son’s warnings and plotted to invade the kingdom against the Empire’s wishes. That is all there is to it.”

Julius gulped. Gaius didn’t only intend to die here, he meant to take all of the ill repute for their actions onto himself. Even Julius, who was known for his coldness and composure, felt his heart stirred by that. Though, at the same time, there was an anger towards the kingdom in his eyes.

When he saw those eyes, Gaius nodded in satisfaction, then pushed Julius away from him. “Go, Julius. You must never let the soul of Amidonia be erased.”

“...Forgive me.” Julius saluted, then turned on his heel and departed.

Even after watching his back until he was out of sight, Gaius stood there for a while. He took a deep breath, and his expression changed.

He no longer felt haste or indecision. He drew the sword at his hip

with the stern expression of a warrior.

"Now, all that is left is to do my duty as a warrior and show them the spirit of Amidonia."

◇ ◇ ◇

"...That looks like it could be bad," Carla, who was standing at my side, suddenly said.

The principality's army was already showing decisive signs of defeat, with no shortage of soldiers fleeing or surrendering. The soldiers near the main camp who were still resisting were completely surrounded. It felt like all that was left was to wait for them to be eliminated.

What about that could possibly look bad?

"What's the problem?" Souma asked.

"There's no sign of Gaius VIII fleeing," Carla replied. "He's chosen to die here."

"I have no intent of letting him escape, so isn't that convenient?"

"...The cowardly have fled, the weak have fallen, and, as a result, the elite are gathering around Gaius as he continues to resist," she said. "If they were to form a suicide squad, no ordinary man would be able to stop them. Especially since, once an army's victory is assured, its soldiers hold their lives all the more dear."

When I looked at the battlefield after she pointed that out, I saw 40,000 soldiers from my own army seemingly unable to eliminate the enemy's main force, which must have already been reduced to less than 500 troops. No matter how many tens of thousands of soldiers we had, only around three people at most could attack any soldier at one point in time. If they were clustered together, that number was even lower.

To say nothing of the fact that the enemy had accepted their deaths and were now fearless while, as the victors, our people held their lives all the more dear.

There would be no rewards or glory if they died. That was why they couldn't press the attack.

A cold chill ran down my spine. I knew historical examples of this.

For instance, in the Siege of Osaka, Yukimura Sanada had led 3,000 men into a suicide attack which had broken through Tadanao Matsudaira's army of 13,000 and nearly reached their supreme commander, Ieyasu Tokugawa.

Another example had been in China, after the Battle of Gaixia, when a pursuing force of several thousand men sent out by the victorious Liu Bang had been defeated multiple times by the defeated Xiang Yu and twenty-eight of his retainers.

When there was too great a difference in will to fight, the difference in number of soldiers lost all meaning. An army without the will to fight could never win, no matter how great its numbers.

...I'll bet that force is going to come straight for my head.

Honestly... I was scared. Sun Tzu had said never to fight a suicide squad.

However, even so, I couldn't let Gaius get away from here. If I did, all our sacrifices would have been in vain.

But... if, by some chance... if the worst were to happen...

"Listen, Carla," I turned and spoke to Carla.

"What?"

"...We need to talk."

◇ ◇ ◇

“Seek only the head of the enemy king, Souma Kazuya!” Gaius VIII shouted from up on horseback.

Gaius had gathered the five hundred knights who were his most elite retainers around him. He was about to carry out a suicide charge towards Elfrieden’s main camp. The area around him was crowded with tens of thousands of enemies. It would be a road to death filled with enemy soldiers, one from which he would never return.

Even if they were successful in striking Souma down, it would only mean that the king fell at the hands of common soldiers. However, their grudge against Elfrieden, which had been passed from father to son for the past fifty years, had seeped into the very marrow of his retainers’ bones. They would not falter.

“Let us show Elfrieden the spirit and valor of the Amidonian people!” Gaius shouted.

“““Yeahhhhhhh!”””

Hearing that war cry from his retainers, Gaius pointed his sword towards the center of the kingdom’s army and swung it down. “Chaaaaarge!”

The nearly five hundred knights of his elite cavalry raced towards the center of the kingdom’s army.

They put any soldier in their path to the sword, crushing both enemy and still-resisting ally alike under their hooves as they advanced with the force of a windstorm. They were like a flame shining one last time before it was extinguished. That was why they shone all the more powerfully.

“Gaius VIII?! Has he gone mad?!” Ludwin, who was defending the center, looked at that rampaging group from up on his white horse with a look of obvious distaste. This sort of reckless charge was nothing less than suicide.

Well, it probably is suicide, he realized. *Now that they’ve accepted*

their overall loss, they're looking for a place to die. Honestly, I'd rather not have to play along with that...

Ludwin put on the helmet which he had taken off, hoisting his cavalry lance skywards. He shouted to the knights of the Royal Guard behind him, "His Majesty is behind us! We are this kingdom's shield! In the name of the Royal Guard, we will stop that group even if it costs us our lives!"

""Yeahhhhh!"""

"Let's go!" Ludwin called.

The nearly two thousand knights of the Royal Guard under Ludwin rushed forward. It didn't take long for them to slam into the front of Gaius' five hundred retainers.

When they collided, roughly half of Gaius' retainers were blown away in an instant. Nearly as many of the Royal Guard were knocked flying as well, but considering that they had had the numerical advantage to begin with, it could be said that they had taken less serious losses. From there, it devolved into a melee with the sound of hooves echoing.

In that jumble of friend and foe, Ludwin searched for Gaius. "I've found you, Gaius!"

The man who appeared to be Gaius was in a group of knights charging intently towards the main camp, and he wore a magnificent cloak. When the man in the cloak saw Ludwin, he pointed his drawn sword towards him.

"You! Who are you?!" the man shouted.

"I am Captain of the Royal Guard, Ludwin Arcs."

"Hmph, an ornamental unit from the capital, is it?"

"Say what you will! Once we strike you down, this war will be

over!" Ludwin spurred his favorite horse forward. When he did, the retainers surrounding the man in the cloak split off in different directions, as if they had signaled one another to do so.

Gaius's retainers have abandoned him?!

Ludwin thought their behavior was strange for a moment, but right now he needed to focus on the man in front of him. It seemed to be all the man in the cloak could do just to parry Ludwin's lance thrusts with his sword.

"Guh... You fight well, considering your unit only exists to look pretty," grunted the man.

"No matter where he puts me on display, my lance exists to pierce His Majesty's enemies!" Ludwin declared.

Ludwin knocked the sword that was swung at him aside with his lance, thrusting with all his might at the man's now-undefended torso. His lance struck true, impaling the man and piercing through his cloak.

The man spat blood and hung his head, but he was *smiling*. "Well done... However, it means nothing..."

"What?"

Then, the man raised his face and shouted, "Your Highness! Make our greatest wish come true...!"

Looking at the expiring man, Ludwin was shocked.

When he thought about it, he'd had no idea what the face of the ruler of a country they had no diplomatic contact with looked like. For instance, if Gaius had *just had one of his retainers wear his cloak,* Ludwin would mistake that person for him.

What if Gaius was one of those knights who had scattered in different directions before...?!

Ludwin inhaled sharply, then shouted, “His Majesty!”

When Ludwin turned around, he saw a lone knight charging towards the main camp.

◇ ◇ ◇

“I have a report! There is an enemy knight bearing down on this main camp at incredible speed!” a soldier shouted, rushing into the main camp.

It was just as I was finishing making my request to Carla.

...Thank goodness, I thought. *It looks like I made it in time.*

Carla’s eyes were wide in surprise, and she gnashed her teeth and glared at me. “Is that... an order?”

“No, I don’t think it needs to be,” I said. “I’m sure you’ll accomplish it whether I make it an order or not.”

I went to touch Carla’s slave collar, but she batted my hand away.

Immediately, Carla groaned in pain. She had struck her master while wearing a slave collar, so of course she did.

“Urgh... Don’t be ridiculous...” Carla said, glaring at me even as she was in agony.

“Carla?! What are you doing?” I asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous! I could never listen to that request!” Carla flew into a rage, as if the constricting collar meant nothing to her.

“No, I’m just saying that if the worst should happen...” I said.

“Agh! Enough! Don’t talk back to me! Just give me the order to ‘kill him’!” Carla shouted, pointing in the direction the enemy knight was coming from. “Because of this slave collar, I can’t leave your side without permission! Just give me permission already! I’ll deal with

him!”

“...You’re willing to fight for me?” I asked.

I couldn’t believe it, but Carla gave an indignant “Hmph!”

“I’m not doing it for you,” she said. “I’m only doing it because I don’t want Liscia to see you with that face.”

What face? What sort of face was I making right now?

Was it a scary face? Was it full of grief? Was it pitiful?

As I touched my own face, trying to figure it out, Carla stomped her feet indignantly and demanded it again.

“I told you, give me the order! For Liscia’s sake, tell me to ‘kill him’!”

“...I’ll allow it,” I said at last. If she said it was for Liscia, I could probably trust her. “Please, Carla. Kill that knight and end this war.”

“Understood!”

With those words, Carla bowed her head and then took one long sword from each of the two nearby guards. Then she spread her wings and took flight.

She floated in midair for a little while as she searched for her target, then she dove like a falcon that had found its prey and flew to the south.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Carla... I’ll transfer my ownership of you as a slave to Liscia.”

That was what Souma had suddenly said to Carla.

Certainly, it was possible for a slave collar to transfer its ownership

to another if its master willed it. However, if he did that, Carla would be able to harm Souma. So why was it that he had suddenly said that?

When Carla had asked him, Souma had pointed towards the incoming suicide squad.

"That suicide squad is targeting me. Even in the worst scenario, they'll burn out after they've taken my head. It should be easy to wipe them out at that point. So, I have a request. If I fall in this battle, tell Liscia, 'I give the throne to you.' Well... It's my last will."

"Your last will? Are you joking?"

When she'd asked him that, Souma's face had taken on a serious expression, and he'd said:

"I'm dead serious. I'm the king, so I have to consider the worst case scenario. I'd feel bad for pushing things off on her with the job only half-done, but, well, if we can just take down Gaius, Van will fall easily enough. If she does what Hakuya tells her from there, everything will be fine."

After saying that, Souma had *smiled*.

When she saw him smile... Carla realized she had misunderstood something.

The king was the most powerful person in the country, so she'd thought he could control everything. Looking at things as a warrior who served the king, that was what she had come to see a king as.

That was why Carla had thought Souma had usurped the throne.

She'd thought he had been seduced by that tremendous power, deceiving the kindhearted king Albert into giving it to him, and that he had forced Liscia into an unwanted engagement, trying to use her to cement his power. While she had later found out from Liscia's letters that she was wrong, she had still harbored those doubts in some corner of her heart. That was why she followed Castor to the bitter end when he chose to die for his friendship with Georg.

Had Souma truly not been seduced by that power and authority? Even as she stood as a prisoner at his side, Carla had been pondering that question.

However... with his words earlier, it had become clear to her.

"Carla, I may be a 'fake.'"

"After all... If I can't get into the role of king, I can't send soldiers off to the battlefield."

He had to get into the role. That was proof that he was aware he wasn't a king.

Souma never wanted to be king...

If he'd had a carefree attitude and had been able to ignore the responsibility that came with that power, he might have become king without worrying too much about it. However, for one who understood that responsibility, power was nothing but a burden. Souma was managing to bear that burden by playing a role.

The things she thought he had stolen had in fact been forced onto him by others.

By Sir Albert, the former king, by Liscia, by his vassals, by the people of this country, he's been forced to bear every kind of burden, Carla thought. *When I heard Souma speaking so easily about his own death, I thought he might be feeling sick, but... I was wrong. If*

there's something wrong with him, it's not his body, it's his mind.

Souma's mind was slowly being eaten away at by the pressure.

Liscia sensed that. That's why she's been trying so earnestly, so gallantly, to support Souma.

Carla realized it now, but it was too late.

It's too late... Yes, far too late...

She was already a criminal awaiting judgment. Even if she fought for Souma now, nothing would come of it.

Even so, when she saw Souma trying to leave the throne and his last will to Liscia when his own life was in peril, Carla couldn't simply leave him be. If Souma died here, Liscia would be sad.

My blind stubbornness has already brought Liscia enough grief. I won't let Liscia be sad anymore!

Carla readied her two swords.

"That is why I will slay you!" she shouted at the general on horseback who was rushing towards the main camp alone.

"What?!" the man screamed.

Carla glided down, throwing her full momentum into a downward swing with the swords in both her hands. She planned to end it in an instant with that surprise attack.

However, the enemy general blocked with two swords of his own. She thought she had caught him off guard, but he must have been a very capable warrior.

Carla bent her body into an V-shape, using her remaining momentum to land a kick on his open torso.

"Urgh..."

The enemy general was thrown from his horse, tumbling across the ground. However, he immediately rose to his feet, readying his sword and glaring towards Carla.

"You... You're a dragonewt, aren't you?" he demanded.

"I suppose you must be a well-known general," she responded. "I am Carla, daughter of Castor Vargas."

"Castor? Didn't he rebel against the king?"

"...Yeah. That would be why I'm in this pitiful state," Carla said, pointing to the slave collar around her neck.

When the enemy general saw it, he roared, "Then step aside! My only target here is to take Souma's head!"

"Sadly, I can't let you do that anymore," she said.

"Isn't Souma supposed to be your enemy, too?!"

"He was, but he's also the man my best friend loves. I can't let you kill him."

"You make no sense! Very well, then you can die with him!" The enemy general swung at Carla.

Carla crossed her swords to block, but that powerful blow forced her to take a knee.

"What?! Was that really a human's power?!" she gasped.

To make a dragonewt, far more powerful than a human, take a knee... It was hard to believe that this general was human.

"While you in the kingdom have sat on your laurels, we have polished our magic and martial prowess!" the man shouted.

"...I see. Earth magic, huh."

As mentioned when reinforcements came from the Dark Elf village, Earth magic manipulated gravity. He must have increased the power of his slash by making the tip of his blade heavier at the moment of impact.

The enemy shouted as he tried to crush Carla. “Our royal family’s long-held wish is to take revenge on Elfrieden! For that, we have polished our fangs and sharpened our claws! I will accomplish the wish of three generations of our royal family here and now!”

“I see... So you’re Gaius, are you?” she asked.

Having discerned the enemy general’s true identity, Carla turned his heavy blade aside with a smooth motion of her right-hand sword, then used her left-hand sword for a diagonal upwards slash. Just when she almost had him, Gaius leapt backwards.

Carla pointed her blade towards Gaius. “If you’re the sovereign prince... shouldn’t you worry about your people before your revenge?”

“Hmph!” Gaius spat. “I would be in a sad state if I let myself think like the weaklings of Elfrieden’s royal family. In the Principality of Amidonia, a king is one who can use his strength of will and arms to keep the people in check!”

“...Right,” said Carla. “When I look at you, Albert starts to look like a great ruler by comparison.”

He may not have been especially good or bad, but Albert’s reign had at least been peaceful. Gaius had started a war because he cared more about his own desire for revenge than how his people lived. She could never accept a man like that as a king.

“I wouldn’t want Souma to become a king like you...” she muttered.

“Hmph, I don’t need my enemies to love me... Hah!” Gaius suddenly shoved his hand to the ground.

In an instant, spikes began to rise out of the ground around Carla.

The thorns growing out of the ground rushed towards her.

Carla avoided a direct hit, but because the ground around her had as many spikes growing out of it as a hedgehog, her wings were caught and she was unable to move. In a strange coincidence, Carla found herself captured by the same tactic Liscia had used to catch Castor.

“Dammit!” she shouted, trying hastily to get free.

“Now you will pay for blocking my path,” said Gaius. He thrust his sword out towards her.

Carla shut her eyes tight despite herself. *Thud*... She heard the sound of something being stabbed.

...However, there was no pain. When Carla hesitantly opened her eyes, there was a roly-poly something or other right in front of her. It was round, big, and white. When she looked closer, it was a doll big enough for a person to get inside. That roly-poly doll had gotten between Carla and Gaius, blocking Gaius’s sword with its body.

““Wha...?!””

Both Carla and Gaius’s eyes went wide at the doll’s sudden appearance.

Then...

“Get away, Carla!”

Carla snapped back to her senses when she heard the voice that called out to her. She cut herself free from the ground that was binding her and escaped. When she regained her balance and looked to the source of the voice, Carla’s eyes went wide once again.

“You... are you Souma Kazuya?!” Gaius shouted.

It seemed Gaius had figured it out, too.

By the time they noticed him, Souma Kazuya was standing around twenty meters away from them. There were four dolls of the same design as the one that had protected Carla floating around him in midair. It was a large-sized Little Musashibo doll that had protected Carla, while the ones deployed around Souma were medium-sized.

"You idiot! What are you doing out here?!" Carla landed next to Souma and scolded him.

Souma shrugged and said, "This guy's the only one left. Our allies will gather here soon enough. So I decided, rather than wait back in camp, I'd kill time out here fighting alongside you."

"If you die, Liscia will be sad, and you know that!" she screamed.

"Yeah. That's why I came here," he said. "To live. It's better if we concentrate our power. Rather than both of us fighting him alone, the odds of us surviving are better if we cooperate from the beginning."

With that said, Souma swung his arm out in front of him. When he did, two of the medium-sized Little Musashibo dolls that were carrying crossbows fired at Gaius.

The bolts shot straight at Gaius, but Gaius kicked the large Little Musashibo doll that had been in his way to the ground and cut the two bolts out of the air.

This time, it was Souma's turn to be dumbstruck. "You can defend against that?"

"Be careful," Carla cautioned. "That man is very powerful."

With that word of caution, Souma braced himself for what was to come.

"Souma Kazuya!" Gaius howled, a sharp glint in his eye. "I will defeat you and destroy the kingdom."

"...I hate to break this to you, but I'm pretty sure the kingdom won't be destroyed even if you do kill me." Despite the fact that Gaius scared him, Souma had a big grin on his face. "I've gathered talented people. I've laid out a transportation network, I've reworked the city infrastructure, and I've laid all the groundwork for prosperity. Even if I were to die, I'm sure someone could take over and run things just fine."

"Then I will erase all of that!" Gaius stretched out his arm. In that instant, a stone shot at them from the ground.

""I won't let you!"" Souma and Carla shouted in unison.

First, two medium-sized Little Musashibo dolls carrying shields moved up to block that attack. At the same time, Carla circled around to the side of Gaius and took a swing at him.

Gaius blocked that attack with his sword, then kicked Carla to get her away from him and covered his body with his cloak to protect himself from two more arrows that Souma fired. In this world where magic could be attached to things, even a cloak was a viable piece of armor.

"Damn. I know he's a king, but he's way too strong..." Souma grumbled.

"He's trained himself very differently from the way you do, I'm sure... Hahh!" Carla spat fire in Gaius's direction.

"Urkh." Gaius blocked the flames with another swish of his cloak. Then he launched another stone.

Souma blocked the attack with one of his doll's shields, but he could tell it was slowly breaking it. At this rate, they weren't even going to buy him time.

...Then, something occurred to Souma.

"Move!" he shouted.

Souma had the fallen large-size Little Musashibo doll stand up and attack Gaius. Gaius shouted “You pest!” and cut it down, but he’d only cut the top half, so the large-sized Little Musashibo doll wrapped its arms around Gaius.

“What?!” Gaius shouted.

“Now, Carla! Burn the doll!”

“Huh?! Why...”

“Just do it! Hurry!”

“F-Fine!”

With no clue why she was doing it, Carla spat flames towards the large-sized Little Musashibo doll. There was a bright flash when the flames touched the doll, followed by...

Boom!

Gaius was caught in billowing flames and a cloud of black smoke.

It had exploded. Having taken the blast at close range, Gaius was hurled around ten meters through the air.

When Gaius landed on his back, he was burnt all over.

“What was that?” Carla came closer and asked.

Souma answered her question, relieved that it had worked out. “I keep all sorts of tools in that doll’s wicker basket. I remembered I’d put something like a ceramic ball packed with gunpowder in there, too. You ignited it and it exploded. After taking an explosion like that at close range, even Gaius has got to be...”

“...He’s moving,” said Carla.

Even as he heard Carla, Souma could see for himself, and doubted his own eyes.

Even though he had been engulfed in that explosion, Gaius was getting up. He had the serious wounds to his entire body that you would expect, but he stumbled towards the two of them like a zombie.

"I... will destroy... the kingdom... and show them... the spirit of Amidonia..." Gaius murmured, his eyes unfocused.

Truly, he was like a solid lump of tenacity.

"What a guy..." Carla let the words slip without thinking, and Souma agreed with her.

Gaius continued to tread forward, fueled by the sole purpose of destroying the kingdom. Souma felt both fear and reverence towards his tenacity. Then...

Twang, twang, twang, twang!

Gaius's body was riddled with countless arrows. After reorganizing their unit, the archers had caught up at last and fired a volley towards Gaius.

Gaius stopped in his tracks, his body beginning to shake.

He's going to fall... The moment Souma thought that, Gaius switched the sword he was carrying to a backhand grip, and, mustering all his remaining strength, he threw it like a spear.

The sword traced an arc as it flew, stabbing into the ground near Souma's feet.

"...Is this how far your tenacity can reach?" Souma let out those words along with a sigh of admiration. Then he said to Gaius, even though it wasn't clear he could hear him anymore, "I have seen the spirit of Amidonia! Long will they tell tales of your valor! Prince Gaius VIII of Amidonia. I... King Souma of Elfrieden, will not forget the terror you inspired in me for my entire life!"

When Souma said that, it looked like Gaius smiled a little.

Then Gaius gently tumbled forward, never to rise again.

Souma burned that final vision of him into his memory. Then, he looked down to the sword at his feet.

“Perhaps I could stand to learn from his single-minded tenacity.”

“If you turn out like him, Liscia will cry,” Carla, who was standing at his side, said.

“Yeah, I guess she would...”

With those words, Souma walked up next to Gaius’s unmoving remains, put his hands together, and prayed. Unsure what the gesture meant, Carla tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Everyone becomes a Buddha once they’re dead... a god, in other words. It’s a custom from my old world. That’s why I’m praying so he can find his way to Nirvana.”

“You’re praying for this revenge-obsessed monster?” she asked incredulously.

“That’s all the more reason,” he said. “You wouldn’t want him coming back to curse me as a ghost because he had regrets in this world, would you?”

“That’s a very calculating religion you’ve got there.”

Souma stood up with a laugh, then looked down at his hands and sighed again. “...This is my first time seeing someone be murdered.”

When Souma said that, Carla looked at him incredulously. “What are you saying, after everything you’ve done? I’m sure you must have ordered your soldiers to kill people before this.”

“You sure don’t hold back, huh...”

As they were arguing, their comrades who had learned of the main camp's crisis finally arrived. Liscia, Aisha, Ludwin, Halbert, and Kaede reacted with surprise when they saw Gaius' fallen body.

Liscia rushed over and hugged Souma. "Souma, you fought, too?! Are you okay? You're not hurt anywhere, are you?"

As Liscia searched all over his body, Souma wore a wry smile. "I'm fine, really. The two of us managed to handle him somehow until help arrived."

"I see," Liscia said. "...Thanks, Carla. For protecting Souma."

"...It just sort of happened." Carla was too embarrassed to say "I did it for you," so she turned her head to the side and kept quiet.

While he was watching the two of them, Souma clapped his hands to get their attention. "Well, things are settled here. Let's go ride into Van."

As he and his companions began moving, he saw Gaius's body being carried away. From the glimpse he saw of the man's face, he really did seem satisfied.

For you, with your martial prowess... perhaps this was the only path you could choose, Souma thought. *You truly believed that taking revenge on the kingdom would lead the people of the principality to happiness. I don't want to completely deny that way of thinking.*

In order to avoid ruining the victorious mood, Souma offered his prayers in silence.

I don't think you were right. But I don't think you were entirely wrong. Even so, now that I've defeated you, I will move forward...

...to protect Liscia, and all those I consider family.

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Some hours later, Van, the capital of Amidonia, opened its gates under the condition that the city's defenders would be spared, that all those who wished to leave be allowed to depart (they would not be allowed to bring more luggage than they could carry themselves), and that Gaius's remains be returned. When Souma brought his entire army into Van, the series of battles that would come to be known as the One Week War came to a close.

However, it was only the battles that had ended.



Epilogue: The True Raising of the Curtain

It happened around the time that Souma and the others were fighting the final battle in Amidonia.

The prime minister of the Elfrieden Kingdom, Hakuya Kwonmin, was in Red Dragon City sorting things out in the aftermath of the war. Because Souma had had to leave to fight the principality before he could do any real work on the process, Hakuya was handling it on his behalf.

While he was the prime minister, he was also a bureaucrat, so for Hakuya this was his battlefield.

In Castor's governmental affairs office, the only sound was the scratching of Hakuya's pen.

It was quiet in the castle. The master of the castle, Castor, had already been transferred to Parnam. The majority of the Vargas family servants had turned to Castor's wife, Accela, who had been left with Excel, and they had departed for Lagoon City. Because of that, the only ones in the castle were the guards and a small number of bureaucrats.

Tap, tap.

There was a hesitant knocking at the door.

"Come in," said Hakuya.

"...Excuse me. I brought some papers for you," Tomoe said as she

entered the room.

Tomoe would soon be departing for Amidonia to negotiate with the rhinosauruses. Still, they couldn't very well bring a child like Tomoe to the battlefield, so she would be staying with Hakuya until things settled down.

Hakuya stopped writing, and his cheeks loosened just a little. "That's kind of you. You don't have to do this for me, you know?"

"No... I wanted to do something to help, too..." When Tomoe said that, her tail drooped, but her wolf ears perked up and moved around restlessly.

Seeing Tomoe acting like that, Hakuya smiled wryly despite himself. "Are you worried about His Majesty and the others?"

"Ah! ...Yes." Since he had been on the mark, Tomoe's ears flattened down. "At times like this... I can't do anything."

"You could say the same of me," Hakuya said, patting Tomoe's head as he took the documents from her. "We worked hard to refine the plan. Between Duke Carmine's plot and Duke Vargas's opposition, there were a number of events we hadn't predicted, but things are going well for the most part. You needn't worry. I am sure His Majesty, the princess, and everyone else will come back safely."

"...Okay!" Tomoe was encouraged by Hakuya's perfect composure, and she gave him a cheerful response.

That was when it happened.

A single soldier rushed into the office and said, "I have a report! His Majesty Souma's army intercepted the Amidonian army near Van and successfully routed them! It was a major victory for our side!"

He was reporting their victory in battle.

Tomoe smiled.

Clatter.

When he heard that report, Hakuya jumped to his feet so quickly that he knocked his chair over. His face showed signs of his excitement, a rarity for the usually-subdued Hakuya.

Tomoe stared blankly at him.

When Hakuya noticed that, he awkwardly cleared his throat.

"...For an advisor, even if he has some reservations about his own plans, he must never let that show. It wouldn't do for him to stir up uncertainty," he said, the words sounding like he was just trying to hide his embarrassment.

Tomoe suppressed a laugh, giving her mentor, the Prime Minister, a firm salute. "Yes, sir. I toooootally understand."

When Tomoe, the honorary little sister of his master and also his pupil, gave him a response like that, Hakuya sulked a little.

The black-robed prime minister, who was famed for his cleverness, couldn't keep up that image in front of his adorable student.

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Before entering Van, the capital city of the Principality of Amidonia, I gave an order to the entire army.

"We will now enter Van, but this area is already under the rule of the Elfrieden Kingdom!" I announced. "Therefore, the people who live within are already citizens of the kingdom! Killing, harming, raping, or robbing them will absolutely not be tolerated! If anyone should violate this order, regardless of their social stature or the severity of their crimes, I will have that person decapitated and their head put on display! Understand that now!"

Once I had given that order to the entire army, I secretly called Ludwin aside and gave him a note I had prepared. Ludwin accepted it

with a puzzled look.

"What is this note? A list of people's names?" he asked.

I nodded, then said in as calm a tone as I could manage, "Ludwin... find the five people whose names are listed here, decapitate them, and put their heads on display above the gate. However, make the reason for it 'because they attempted to enter and loot the houses of a resident of Van.'"

"Wha?! What have these people done...?"

"It was a gift from Georg that came to me through Glaive," I said. "They're from the Army, but when they were in the Carmine Duchy, they broke into a private residence, engaging in pillaging, rape, and murder. We would just be executing them later anyway, so I'll render judgment on them here to set an example."

"...By your will." Ludwin meekly bowed, then took his leave.

Soon there were five heads lined up near the gate to Van. Next to them was a sign on which the charge against them, "attempted pillaging," was written. It helped enforce discipline in every soldier who passed through the gate. As a result, the forces of the kingdom not only didn't engage in arson, looting, or violence, they didn't even fight back when those who couldn't accept their defeat threw stones at them.

That, despite expectations, ended up inspiring awe and fear in the Amidonian people.

Once the roads were confirmed safe, I myself entered Van.

This time I traveled not in a carriage, but on horseback. It seemed that, as the victor, it wouldn't do for me to ride inside a carriage.

While I had finally learned to ride a horse recently, I still wasn't very good at it. Well, Aisha was holding the reins for me, so it would probably be fine.

As my horse and Liscia's moved forward side by side, I looked at the streets of Van.

The Capital of the Principality of Amidonia, Van.

The militaristic Principality of Amidonia had built this military city as a foothold towards their invasion of the Elfrieden Kingdom, and as a front-line base to defend against invasions by the kingdom. On top of that, because of their unique mentality of not wanting to lose to the kingdom at anything, its scale was comparable to that of Parnam.

When I first entered Van and saw that mishmash of practicality and vanity, I had one strong impression.

I want to re-district this place...

The civilian residential areas were crowded, the roads were complicated, and the layout made me want to call it a "labyrinth city." Even though we were heading towards the castle, we kept turning left and right, and just couldn't seem to get there.

There were mansions that looked like they belonged to nobles here and there in the residential area. When I saw they were higher up than the commoners' residences, I finally understood the layout of the city.

The layout had probably been designed so that, in the event of a battle, any soldiers who broke through the gate would get lost in the labyrinth city, while the defenders would use the nobles' mansions as fortresses from which to attack.

...I dunno, it just made me think: *Did you really have to go that far?*

This city layout would be hard on the enemy, but it was no kinder to the residents. It was inconvenient for getting around, and I was worried about how fires would spread with the buildings crowded together so tightly. The fact that this city seemed to be designed around a policy of decreasing accessibility made my head hurt.

At this point, I had no choice but to rework the entire city. There weren't many cities that would benefit this much from improved infrastructure. When I thought of the mountain of administrative work that was no doubt waiting for me... I couldn't help but get depressed.

"Souma? What's up?" Liscia asked.

"...No, it's nothing."

"Hm?"

"Look, you can see the castle now," I said.

While I dodged Liscia's questions, I braced myself for what was to come.

I entered the castle in the center of Van, then sat on the throne in the audience room which must have belonged to Gaius VIII. Gaius was probably the type who had cared about projecting a dignified appearance.

I had heard Amidonia's finances were in bad shape, but this audience chamber was quite impressive. They might have spent even more on decorating it than the one in Parnam.

If you had this kind of money, was there nothing better you could have spent it on? I wanted to question the former lord of the castle.

As I sat on the throne, Liscia stood by my side and Aisha stood behind me diagonally. The rest of my retainers stood a few steps down the stairs on the carpet, waiting to serve me. It had been a while since I'd had such a king-like scene in front of me.

I ordered them to each give me their reports. They did so in order, with Ludwin coming first.

"First, in regards to the family of Gaius VIII who were in this

castle, we were unable to secure them," he said. "In addition to his son Julius, who fled the battlefield, there was apparently another princess, but she vanished a number of days ago. Furthermore, judging from the fact that the finance minister and a number of other important bureaucrats are missing, it is believed they left Van before we arrived."

"Hm... Setting aside that princess, it hurts that we're missing those bureaucrats," I said. "Contact Parnam immediately and have Marx send some over. Hakuya should be coming from Red Dragon City once things settle down, too."

"By your will." Ludwin bowed.

Poncho was the next to speak. "I-I'm here to report on the state of the national treasury, yes. As expected, you could say, there were hardly any funds or stores of food. While it doesn't really compensate for it, there was a plentiful supply of weapons and such, yes."

"How did they plan to hold out in a siege without food reserves?" I asked.

"Oh, no, if we only consider the guards for this castle, they could hold out for three months, yes," he said. "If we consider the city as a whole, they wouldn't last a week, though..."

"'The townspeople can fend for themselves,' huh," I muttered. "They sure are a militarist state... Let's sell off the excess weapons and convert them into funds. Also, I'd like to distribute rations until things calm down inside the castle. Would it be possible to ship those in from the kingdom?"

"We don't have a lot to spare, but it should be possible within limits," he said. "This place is close to the kingdom, so if we can just make the roads safe, I think we can manage something, yes."

"Make securing the roads our highest priority," I said. "Next, Glaive."

Glaive Magna, Hal's father who now led the Army, made his report. "Perhaps as an effect of Your Majesty's 'example,' the troops are adhering to regulations. However, if you make them hold their desires in for too long, I believe there is the risk that some of them will explode. If any of them were to lay a hand on the townspeople, public opinion would take a turn for the worse quickly."

"We have that sort of problem, huh?" I asked. "Well, there are drinking establishments and a red-light district in this city, aren't there? We'll cover the expenses, so negotiate with the owners to get them some wine and companionship."

"Are you sure that's all right?" Glaive asked, sounding surprised.

Had I said something that strange?

"We can't have them causing trouble for the townspeople, can we?" I asked.

"No, that's not it," he said. "Is it okay to let the men fool around? With our current momentum, I would think we could annex all of Amidonia in short order."

Oh, that was what he meant.

"We'll only take Van," I said. "We won't go any further than that."

"Really? I think it's best to take out your enemies when you can..." Liscia expressed her doubts, but I told her it was fine.

"No matter how much we expand our territory, no matter how many cities we take, when the Empire steps in, we'll lose it all," I said. "The only thing left in the end will be all the lives we wasted."

When I said that, the room froze.

Liscia hesitantly asked, "Is the Empire... going to be coming?"

"They almost certainly will, is my and Hakuya's reading of the

situation. A signatory of the Mankind Declaration, Amidonia, had its border changed through military force. There's no way the leader of that pact won't show up."

We had violated one of the three articles of the Declaration of Mankind's Common Front Against the Demon Race (also known as the Mankind Declaration), which stated that "the acquisition of territory by force between the nations of mankind would be deemed inadmissible," so as the leader of that treaty, the Empire would have to act on behalf of Amidonia. They would probably start by negotiating, but they wouldn't hesitate to intervene militarily if it came down to it.

Incidentally, the difference in power between Elfrieden and the Empire was about as big as the gap between modern day Japan and America.

"But the principality attacked us," Liscia protested. "Why would we be the ones blamed for it?"

"That's just how international treaties work," I said. "Amidonia will probably claim 'It's Elfrieden's fault for not signing the declaration,' I'm sure."

"Urkh... If this was going to happen, maybe we should have signed the Mankind Declaration, too..." she said. "Wait, huh? Come to think of it, why didn't you sign it, Souma? You knew this would happen if we fought Amidonia without signing it, right?"

When Liscia pointed that out, I scratched the back of my head and laughed. "Because we can't sign it. There's a pitfall in that declaration."

"A pitfall?" she asked.

"Yeah. Maybe the Empire doesn't realize it?"

Had they not noticed, or had they noticed and just chosen to turn a blind eye? Either way, that hole was a dangerous one that could

cause the collapse of the Empire. I couldn't sign a faulty declaration like that.

I stood up, then turned and said to everyone there, "Well, I guess we should take care of the post-war clean up until the Empire does something."

—This is where my work as king really begins.



Prologue to the Post-war Period

The Gran Chaos Empire was in the west of the continent.

On this continent, if you excluded the Demon Lord's Domain, this state had the largest territory. When it came to population, war potential, technology, and even the quality of life for its people, it was a great empire to which no other country could compare.

Even the Elfrieden Kingdom, which had the second-largest territory on the continent, was insignificant compared to the Empire. If the kingdom wanted to compete with the Empire, even after annexing Amidonia, they would still need to double their strength.

In fact, that calculation only worked if they were fighting the Empire alone. If they made enemies of the Empire's allied countries, too, there would be no room left for them on the continent.

About the only area where the kingdom could compete with the Empire was in how far back their histories went. The Empire was younger than the kingdom, though only by a little.

It had happened towards the end of the Chaotic Period. There had been conflict between the many diverse races of the continent, and many countries had suddenly risen to power. Unlike Elfrieden, which was founded by the coming together of many races, the Chaos Kingdom of the time was ruled by a single king. He centralized power, concentrating it in the hands of the human race, and created what might be called a dictatorship.

Especially in troubled times, centralized states are more powerful.

This is because the decisions made by a single individual are immediately reflected, so they can make swift decisions and act immediately. By the time the Chaotic Period was drawing to an end, the Chaos Kingdom stood head and shoulders above the other nations on the continent. However, at that point, it was just one power among many. The people back then would never have thought it would become the sort of massive empire it was today.

The biggest revolution came around one hundred years ago, with the birth of a heroic individual in the Chaos Kingdom.

Manas Chaos.

The person who would later come to be known as Emperor Chaos.

Manas was born as the second son of the King of Chaos, but he inherited the throne when his father and elder brother perished in the war with the Euphoria Kingdom, a country which existed in the northwest of the continent. When Manas took the throne, those around him naturally expected a war of revenge against the Euphoria Kingdom.

However, Manas not only didn't launch a war for revenge, he also took the King of Euphoria's daughter as his wife, forming a marital bond between the two countries. What was more, he went as far as renaming himself Manas Euphoria, so those in the Euphoria Kingdom let down their guards.

There was some resistance to this in the Chaos Kingdom, but Manas was a military genius and suppressed all of the dissenters.

As a military genius, Manas understood. Right now, the gap in power between the Euphoria Kingdom and his own wasn't that large. If they were to fight in these circumstances, the war would be drawn out and it would only succeed in exhausting the country.

His plan was to first use the King of Euphoria, absorb the smaller countries around them, and then, once the difference in power between them was overwhelmingly in his favor, he would try to

swallow the Euphoria Kingdom again.

In fact, Manas did absorb the smaller countries, and then, when the difference in power between them was great enough, he invaded the Euphoria Kingdom, his wife's home, and destroyed it.

However, perhaps out of some small feeling of regret, even after he destroyed the Euphoria Kingdom, he didn't return to his former name of Chaos and continued to use the Euphoria name. Even now, the imperial family of the Gran Chaos Empire used the Euphoria name.

Even after destroying the Euphoria Kingdom, Manas continued with his wars of invasion, and before he knew it, his country had become a large nation controlling the west of the continent. This was when the Chaos Kingdom renamed itself the Gran Chaos Empire.

The appearance of this massive country was a cause of great concern even to countries that didn't neighbor it.

This happened some decades later, but in the Elfrieden Kingdom, the reason that the king who was Souma's predecessor's predecessor had taken the path of expansionism was out of fear over the existence of the Empire.

The world had already been transitioning towards an atmosphere of cooperation then, but he must have wanted to strengthen his own country before the threat that was the Empire closed in on him. However, lacking the genius of Manas, when that former King of Elfrieden had seized half of Amidonia, his followers who were unhappy about the exhaustion of the country that had come from his excessive expansion assassinated him.

After that, the kingdom saw a succession war between his relatives (the three dukes of the time didn't want to get involved, so they secluded themselves in their duchies) which led to the near-elimination of the royal line.

In the end, the young girl who would later become Liscia's mother survived the troubles, inherited the throne, and managed to make

things settle down in the kingdom by taking Albert as her husband.

Let's get back to talking about the Empire.

The Empire had become a great power and was even looking at unifying the continent, but the core figure in all of this, Manas, had passed away at the age of fifty, when he still could have done more. There were rumors of assassination, but the truth is that it was illness. Not even such a great man could defeat illness.

With the death of Manas, the situation in the Empire began to look dubious. When a country is built around a strong personality, it often fractures when that strong personality is lost. There have been examples of this on Earth, too. There were Alexander the Great's empire, the Mongol Empire, Qin Shi Huang's Qin Dynasty, and more. The faster a country expands, the more likely it is to fracture before three generations have passed. It was the same with the Gran Chaos Empire.

The second emperor, thanks in part to Manas's loyal associates still being alive, ruled the Empire with a steady hand. However, by the time the third emperor ascended the throne, those loyal attendants had passed away.

Partly because it was a country centered around humans, there were no vassals of other races, such as Excel, who had served the royal family for generations. As a result, the third emperor launched new invasions in an attempt to gain the support of his retainers. He must have wanted to show people both inside and outside the country that he could continue Manas's work of unifying the continent.

However, the war that had broken out sixty years ago had turned into a world-wide war, with many countries being exhausted as a result. The Empire was no exception. With the unexpectedly high war costs ruining the country, it had damaged the support it had been trying to build.

There were repeated civil wars in the Empire, and the third emperor died at the hands of rebels during the fourth such war. Ironically, it

was actually because of the losses inflicted in the war that the third emperor started in on an attempt to carry on the work of unification, one which caused the world to shift towards an atmosphere of greater cooperation.

The fourth emperor, who had inherited an empire in disarray, abandoned the expansionist policies and focused on domestic politics. It could have been called a wise decision, but he was called too passive and was looked down on by the lords of the empire.

When the fifth emperor took the throne, the Empire had already lost its centripetal force, and it was thought it would soon break up. However, roughly ten years ago, something completely unexpected had happened.

The appearance of the Demon Lord's Domain.

The sudden advance of these aberrant armies caused the Empire to lose the former territory of the Euphoria Kingdom along with many of its other northern territories. However, the threat was the same for all countries, leading to calls for mankind to unite in the face of this situation.

And so, they turned to the largest, most powerful nation, the Empire, for leadership. As a result, the Empire managed to avoid the threat of division.

They became the leading power in the alliance of mankind's nations, but, owing to the fact that mankind wasn't working in unison at first, they were forced into a hard battle against the monsters. Then, in a battle during the invasion that pushed deep into the Demon Lord's Domain, mankind suffered a crushing defeat.

The fifth emperor was a man of culture, not gifted in the art of war. As a result of the unfamiliar battlefield grinding him down, body and soul, he had passed away five years ago.

The fifth emperor had no boys, so the one to inherit the throne was a girl who was still only fourteen at the time.

That girl was Maria Euphoria.

Now, at the age of nineteen, she was the empress of the Grand Chaos Empire ("emperor" being a title for males, the position had been newly created.)

At the time, there had been many voices concerned that such a young girl was to take the throne. However, once she did take the throne, she immediately put her natural charisma to work.

She first changed the human-favoring Empire policies, employing those with talent even if they belonged to another race. In peace time, the humans might have pushed back against that, but this was a time of crisis with the threat of the Demon Lord's Domain bearing down on them. Their positions and prestige were dependent on their survival.

Her policies, which were suited to the current era, received the support of her subjects.

Included in Maria's policies was the one said to be her greatest, the Declaration of Mankind's Common Front Against the Demon Race (also known as the Mankind Declaration).

In response to the encroaching threat of the Demon Lord's Domain, she called for a common front between all mankind.

The Mankind Declaration with its three articles, "The acquisition of territory by force between the nations of mankind is deemed inadmissible," "the right of all peoples to equality and self-determination will be respected," and "countries that are distant from the Demon Lord's Domain will provide support to those nations which are adjacent to it and are acting as a defensive wall," was revolutionary in that it not only established a common front against the forces of the demon lord, but also made reference to stopping wars and forbidding racial discrimination.

Also, Maria gave her undivided attention to saving the weak. With her beautiful appearance and the gentle disposition she greeted

everyone with, regardless of their background, she seized the hearts of the people.

At some point, the people naturally came to call her this:

The “Saint of the Empire.”

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That Saint of the Empire, Maria, was now in her room in the imperial capital of the Gran Chaos Empire with a gloomy look on her face.

It was a quiet night. There was something transient about the way she looked as she stood next to the window with moonlight streaming in, not bothering to turn the lights on. Her feminine, well-balanced figure was wrapped in a pure white dress, and she looked beautiful with her wavy blond hair.

Who would have believed that she stood at the top of the most powerful state on the continent?

As Maria looked through the glass at the moon shining in the night sky, she let out another sigh. At that moment, there was a knock at the door to her room.

Maria corrected her posture, then said, “Come in.”

Another young girl entered. “Excuse me, sister.”

This girl was clad in a military uniform, and had a face that looked identical to Maria’s.

If there was a difference between them, it was that she tied her hair back in a ponytail and that her eyes looked slightly more courageous. It was only natural that they would look similar, because she was Maria’s sister who was two years younger, Jeanne Euphoria.

Jeanne stood in front of her sister, giving her a salute. “I, Jeanne Euphoria, will head to the Amidonian capital, Van, as commander of the Army.”

Jeanne had such a great gift for the military that she was called “the female Manas,” and despite being first in the line of succession, she also acted as the commander of the entire Army.

Maria handled the administrative side while Jeanne handled the military. By dividing the roles between these two sisters, they had managed to handle the tasks which had made the previous emperor collapse from being overworked.

Incidentally, there was another sister who was one year younger than Jeanne, but according to rumors she was a rare eccentric and not allowed out in public.

Maria looked at Jeanne apologetically. “Yes... You’ll be meeting with that hero king.”

“...Yes,” said Jeanne. “I don’t like being used like this by Amidonia, but I suppose we’ll have to negotiate the return of Van, which is under occupation.” Jeanne looked as if she’d just bitten into something unpleasant.

A messenger from the *sovereign prince* of Amidonia, Julius, had arrived in the imperial capital, Valois, just a few days prior.

“The occupation of Van by the Elfrieden Kingdom is a challenge to signatories of the Mankind Declaration, which forbids the changing of borders,” the messenger had told them. “As the leading power of the treaty, we ask that Her Imperial Majesty, Empress Maria Euphoria, use her power to take Van back from that country.”

Of course, the Empire knew that the Principality of Amidonia had been the one to initiate hostilities. When pressed on that point, the messenger had said, “That is something the former prince, Lord Gaius, did despite Lord Julius’s warnings to the contrary. It has nothing to do with Lord Julius.” The excuse sounded almost defiant.

When he spoke to them like that, Jeanne nearly drew the sword at her hip, but as the one in charge of the Empire's military, she restrained herself. Then, despite really not wanting to, she agreed to take over the negotiations.

Even if the principality was at fault, the Mankind Declaration had to be respected. The Mankind Declaration was the embodiment of the Empire's prestige. It was a bitter decision for Maria and Jeanne to have to make.

"I'm sorry," Maria said. "Making you go to all this trouble."

"What are you saying? I'm sure you're the one troubled most by this, sister. I swear we'll make Julius Amidonia pay for this someday," Jeanne spat.

Maria could understand how Jeanne felt, but she told her in the calmest tone possible, "It will be fine. The Elfrieden Kingdom's new king, Souma, is by all accounts a wise man. I can't see him being so foolish as to fight with our country."

"Are you sure?" Jeanne asked. "We once demanded he be handed over to us..."

"True... He must have a bad impression of us."

Roughly half a year before, the Empire had requested that Elfrieden provide subsidies for the war against the demons. If they couldn't do that, the Empire had included a condition wherein they could carry out the ritual of hero summoning which was passed down in their country, and turn that summoned hero over to the Empire instead. As a result, the financially troubled Elfrieden Kingdom had chosen to summon a hero.

Then the summoned hero, Souma Kazuya, had been given the throne by the king and become the current King of Elfrieden.

There were many points that remained unclear, such as why the former king, Albert, had handed over the throne so easily, but Souma

had improved the health of the Elfrieden Kingdom's economy and begun to provide subsidies.

Since then, the new king Souma had solved a food crisis, put down a rebellion by the three dukes, and dealt with Amidonia, which had used the rebellion as an opportunity to invade, by launching a counter invasion and occupying their capital, Van.

A man who was close in age to Maria had accomplished all of that in a short time. Even if he hadn't been a hero, she would want someone that capable for herself.

To be honest, rather than Julius who had acted arbitrarily, she would have preferred to be on friendly terms with King Souma. However, because the Empire had demanded he be turned over to them, it was assumed that there was no hope of them forming a friendly relationship. However, Maria hadn't given up hope yet.

"From what I hear in the reports, I think Sir Souma is the type who will understand if we talk to him," she said.

Jeanne, on the other hand, disagreed with her assessment. "You do? I feel the opposite, sister. You and he are like oil and water..."

From all the reports Jeanne had heard about Souma, she felt like he was Maria's polar opposite. For instance, Maria was trying to unite mankind in the face of the threat from the Demon Lord's Domain, while Souma seemed to be thinking his country needed to be able stand on its own two feet first.

Also, no matter how unpleasant things got, Maria respected the law and rules, trying to act logically, like an empress should. Meanwhile, for Souma, when it came to his powers as king, his subjects, and systems, his policy seemed to be, "If they're useful, I use them, and if they're not, I don't," with his criteria for which was which being decided by his own sensibilities. If a system wasn't in line with the facts, he would change it, while if it was practical, he'd employ it even if no one had ever looked at it before.

Maria acted according to logic, while Souma acted according to his feelings. Jeanne didn't think the two of them would ever understand one another.

"To me, it feels like you two are facing in entirely different directions..." she said.

Maria was silent for a moment, then giggled. "Oh, but if we're both facing different directions, don't you think we could eliminate our blind spots if we cooperate?"

When she saw Maria's mischievous smile, even as her little sister, Jeanne thought she was very cute.

Afterword

To all of you now holding this book. If this is our first meeting, it's nice to meet you. If you are one of the people I interact with on Pixiv, thank you for your continued patronage. I am Dojyomaru.

First, I would like to apologize for not being able to properly greet you all with an afterword at the end of *How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom* volume one. I only barely managed to fit that long "Enriching the Country Arc" within my page limit, so there was no room left for an afterword. Because of that, I would like to borrow this space to do what I should have in volume one and thank all of the people involved with this book.

First, I would like to thank Fuyuyuki for providing such wonderful pictures. The schedule was tight, but you still managed to finish enough pictures for us. Thank you. My editor and I were both talking about the illustration of Tomoe in the middle of volume one, saying, "Huh, this is really good."

To that same editor, I would like to thank you for supporting me when I get discouraged so easily. It's because of you that I'm here where I am today.

And finally, to everyone who pointed out typos or missing words in the web novel version; to the proofreaders, to the designers, to my friends M and K who celebrated my debut with me; and, more than anyone, to those of you who've continued to read my novel on Pixiv despite my many mistakes, as well as those of you who bought the book, I offer my heartfelt thanks.

...Yeah, I should have said all of that in the first volume, huh.

I know I'm nothing special, but I hope you'll stick with me for a long time.

In fact, as I'm writing this afterword, I have no idea how many pages it will be. My editor said "Make it two pages, please," but it feels like the book might grow another page during proofreading. If that happens, this entire second page may be cut. Because of that, I prioritized saying the important things first.

Now, on this page which may be cut, I'd like to talk idly about this volume.

For those of you who remember the "Subjugation Arc" which makes up this volume in the web novel version, you may find yourselves wondering, "Was this character always like this?" Opinions may be divided on the changes, but I thought it was the right way to lead into the world I'm currently reworking.

Various characters worry about various things, take various actions, and through the influence of that... the world takes shape. I may be inexperienced, but that is the sort of story I hope to write.

This has been Dojyomaru, writing this as a typhoon approaches.