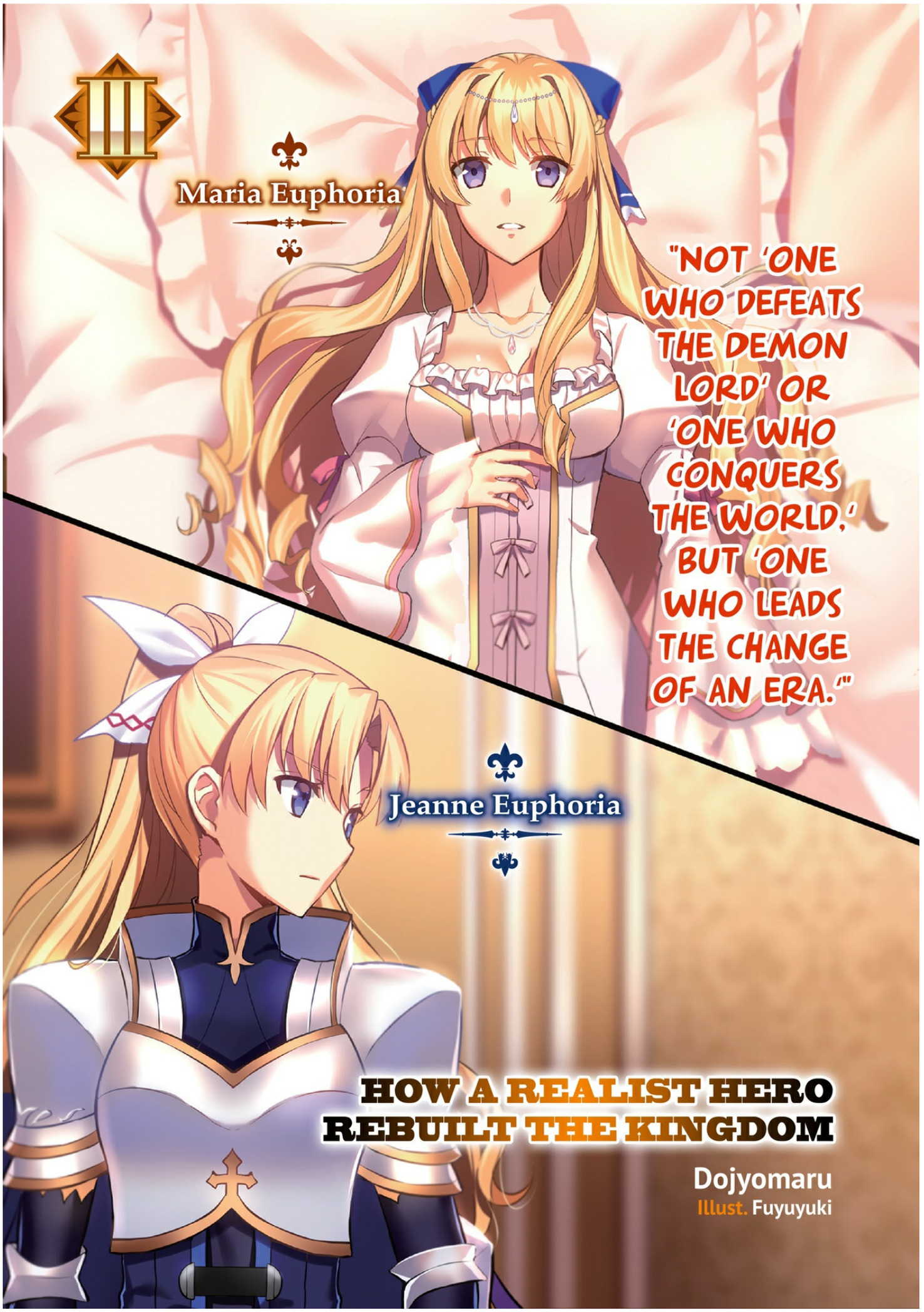
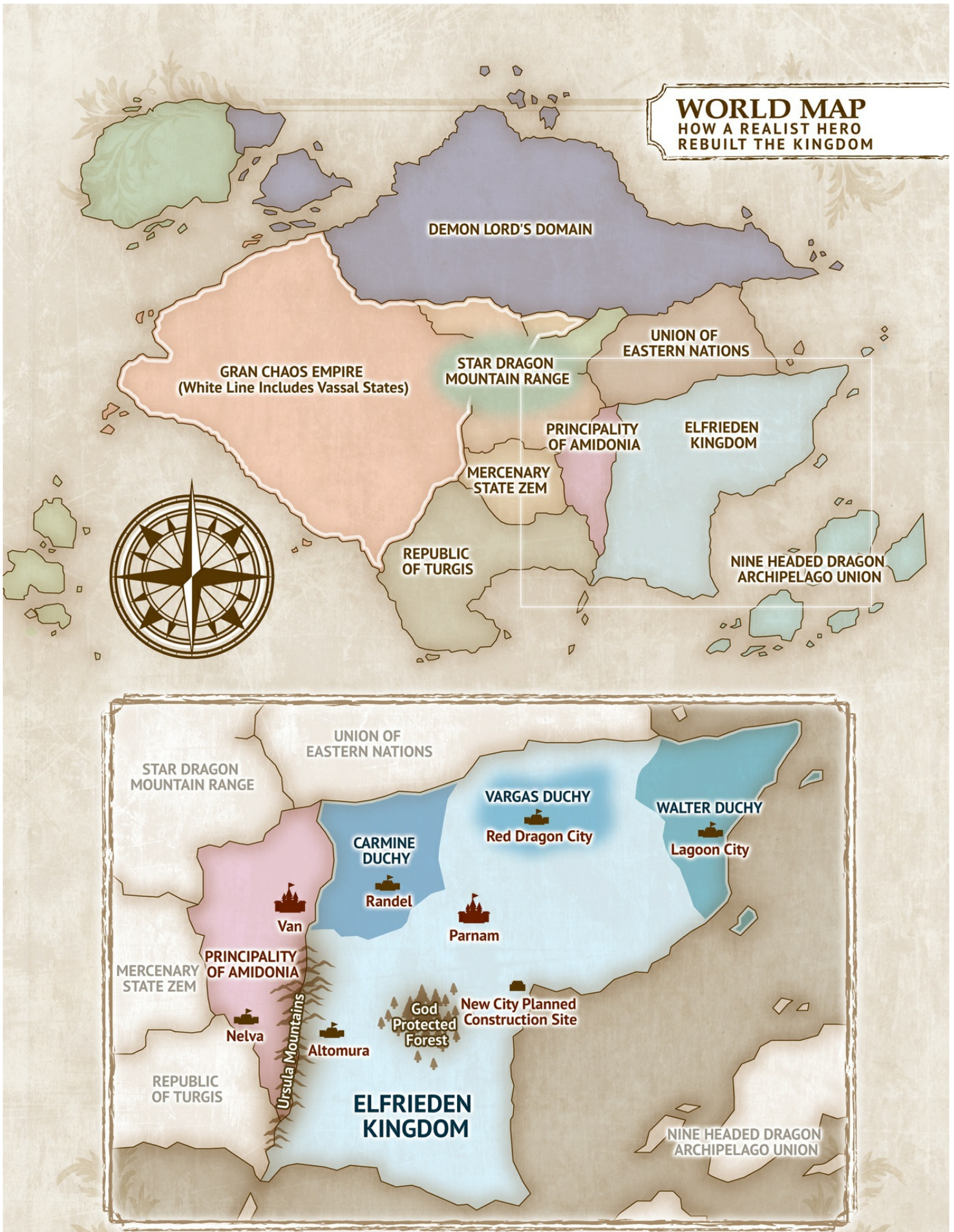

HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM
III
Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki



HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki


"HOW DARE THEY DO THIS?!"
Julius Amidonia
"THAT KING. HE SURE PULLED A NASTY TRICK..."
Roroa Amidonia
"WH-WHAT. WHERE DID THAT LINE COME FROM?!"
"SONGS CHANGE WITH THE TIMES AND THE TIMES CHANGE WITH SONGS. THESE ARE THE SONGS WE WANT TO SEE HANDED DOWN ACROSS THE AGES."
Souma Kazuya
Aisha Udgard


WORLD MAP
HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM
DEMON LORD'S DOMAIN
GRAN CHAOS EMPIRE
(White Line Includes Vassal States)
STAR DRAGON MOUNTAIN RANGE
UNION OF EASTERN NATIONS
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
God Protected Forest
New City Planned Construction Site
Nelva
Altomura
Ursula Mountains
REPUBLIC OF TURGIS
ELFRIEDEN KINGDOM
NINE HEADED DRAGON ARCHIPELAGO UNION

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Prologue: On a Moonlit Terrace

Night, 3rd day, 10th month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar — Royal Capital Parnam.

The moon shone brightly in the mostly-clear sky.

It was a night so quiet that it was hard to believe that only a few days ago, this country, the Elfrieden Kingdom, had fought a major battle with the neighboring Principality of Amidonia.

As the victors in the recent series of engagements, there had been a raucous celebration when news of their triumph had reached Parnam, but now that some days had passed, things had settled down considerably.

The young King of Elfrieden (though he was as yet uncrowned, so he was only king provisionally), Souma Kazuya, had declared the war over with the occupation of the capital of the principality, Van, and the area surrounding it. Now they were waiting for negotiations to begin.

The people were waiting with bated breath to see how the negotiations would play out.

It was a quiet night in Parnam.

Parnam Castle was without its master because Souma and the others had left for Van. The former king Albert and his wife Elisha were enjoying tea in the moonlight on the terrace attached to their bedroom.

“...It is most quiet tonight,” said Albert.

“Hee hee. Yes, it is,” said his wife.

As they drank their tea, the two of them wore relaxed smiles.

“Without Liscia and our son-in-law here, it feels like the fire in this castle has died out,” said Albert. “Even though it was normal for it to be like this not so

long ago.”

“Things have been so lively since you ceded the throne to our son-in-law,” Elisha agreed. “The ministers, the bureaucrats, the castle guards, and even the maids have all been working busily.”

When Elisha said that, Albert said “Indeed...” with a nod.

He went on, “Of all of them, the one who’s worked the hardest has been our son-in-law, though. I never realized there were so many things a king should do, so many things a king could accomplish... It does me no credit as the former king to say this, but I believe I was not wrong to abdicate.”

Albert had suddenly abdicated in favor of the more worthy Souma.

There had been resistance to the sudden change at first, but the steady success of Souma’s policies had gradually won people over, and so had his engagement to Albert’s daughter, Princess Liscia, who worked to support him.

A few days ago, Souma had also defeated his enemy at home, the three dukes, and his enemy abroad, the Principality of Amidonia, and so gained the full recognition of the people as their king.

“Everyone must have been surprised by my eye for talent,” Albert said with a jolly laugh.

Now that they had accepted Souma, the people were beginning to see Albert, who had been an average king, for better and for worse, in a more positive light. “The former king achieved nothing of note himself, but in the end, rather than cling to power, he made the brave decision to turn the reins over to someone more capable” was what they had started saying.

After having a good laugh, Albert looked down into his teacup. The face reflected back at him in his tea seemed slightly tired and wore a lonely smile that seemed gloomy somehow.

“Do you think... we’ve managed to change things?” Albert asked.

In response to his words of uncertainty, Elisha lowered her eyes. “It should be fine. Unlike ‘that time,’ this time ‘that girl’ is with him from the beginning.” Elisha spoke in a calming tone. “If the two of them are together, I think they can

lead us to a different outcome from ‘that time.’ Besides, those two aren’t alone now. Things are even more lively now than they were ‘that time.’”

“Ho ho ho...” chuckled Albert. “I suppose they are. We have ourselves another daughter now, after all.”

Albert grinned broadly, remembering the mystic wolf girl they had adopted. The smile proved contagious, and soon Elisha was beaming as well.

“She’s just the cutest little thing,” Elisha said. “With her fluffy little ears and tail.”

“By the time Liscia reached that age, she was already a tomboy,” said Albert. “That was cute in its own way, but having a meek girl is nice, too.”

“It really is,” said Elisha. “The way she hesitantly calls me ‘Mother’ is just adorable. Oh, I hope Tomoe comes home soon.”

Having been recognized for her unique gift, despite being a refugee, the mystic wolf girl Tomoe had been adopted by Albert and Elisha in order to protect her. The two of them now showered her with love as if she were their real daughter.

“I’ll have to tell our son-in-law to make sure no strange men are lurking around her,” said Albert firmly.

“It’s not uncommon for royal and noble families to adopt children to use in political marriages, but I wouldn’t want that to happen to Tomoe,” Elisha agreed.

“Certainly not,” said Albert.

...If Liscia had been there to hear, she would have indignantly cried, “That didn’t seem to matter to you when you agreed to marry me off without my consent!”

For the rest of the night, the two of them had a lively conversation on the topic of just how adorable Tomoe was.

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““Achoo!””

Meanwhile, in the castle in Van, Liscia and Tomoe sneezed at precisely the same time. The two of them turned to look at one another, both tilting their heads to the side a little, questioningly.

Do you think someone is talking about us? they both wondered.





Chapter 1: Project Lorelei

5th day, 10th month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar — Princely Capital Van.

Several days had passed since the opening of hostilities with the Principality of Amidonia.

In the war room of the castle in the now-occupied Van, five people had gathered. They were: Liscia, Royal Guard Captain Ludwin, Acting General of the Army Glaive, Prime Minister Hakuya, who had returned after finishing up his work in Red Dragon City, and me. We were standing around a table with a big map of the area spread out over it.

When you looked at it on the map, you could see that we had only occupied the capital city, Van, and a small area around it, shifting the border only ever-so-slightly to the northwest. Everything beyond that was still Amidonian territory.

I asked Ludwin, “Is there any sign of a counteroffensive from the Amidonian side?”

“No, they aren’t making any obvious moves.” Ludwin laid out little pawns surrounding Van to represent the cities of the principality. He was indicating how the forces of the principality were currently deployed. “As you can see, they have focused entirely on hardening their defenses in the cities around Van. Most likely, they are severely exhausted from the battle the other day. They’ve given up on retaking the city themselves, and...”

“They’re waiting for the Imperial Army to arrive, huh?” I finished.

The Gran Chaos Empire. It was the largest realm on this continent, excluding the Demon Lord’s Domain. We expected they would be coming to intervene in the conflict as a mediator, at the request of Amidonia.

I asked Hakuya, “For reference, what’s the difference in strength between our kingdom and the Empire?”

“The Empire is superior to us in terms of national power, population, troops, technology, and wealth,” he replied. “If you were only asking about the number of troops, we are outnumbered five-to-one. If you factor in equipment and other things that have an effect on our war potential, their advantage is double that.”

“More than ten times as much power as us, huh... We’re no match for them right now.”

If we wanted to deal with the Empire on equal terms, we needed to get stronger. We had been able to get by with the things we’d already had up until now, but from here on, we were going to need to create new things.

“It’s unfortunate,” Glaive said, his voice full of regret and his shoulders slumping. “The way things stand, we would have been able to seize the rest of Amidonia.”

However, I felt differently.

“Yeah? We don’t really want it,” I said, sitting down in a chair, resting my elbows on the table and my cheeks on the palms of my hands. “Their mineral resources are appealing, but the country is way too poor. We just got out of a food crisis ourselves. While providing for this city and the area around it is one thing, we can’t afford to feed all of Amidonia. And if we only seized the profitable mines, we would inspire them to hate us more.”

“When you say it like that...” Glaive said, “there really isn’t much appeal to it.”

“I know, right?”

Well, it would all be the same once the Empire put in an appearance. No matter how hard we worked and how much land we seized, when the Empire came, we would be forced to return it. That applied to Van, too.

“Besides, the Amidonians are a vengeful people,” I said. “It looks like they’ve been indoctrinated for generations. If we tried to maintain the occupation, I doubt we could establish stable rule here.”

“You’re right,” said Liscia. “With just Van, we’re fine for now because we have a massive force here, but if you were to try to install a magistrate, I doubt the people would obey him.”

I nodded in agreement. “Yeah. That’s why I want to ‘tame’ their resentment.”

“You want to tame it?” Liscia asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve already called in the perfect person for the job.”

There was a knock at the door to the war room. When I said “Come in,” the door opened and a blue-haired beauty entered with a bow and a “Pardon me.”

“I am Juna Doma, serving under Navy Admiral Excel,” she added. “I have come at your command.” Then she stood before me and greeted me not with a salute, but with an elegant bow.

Today she wasn’t in the usual outfit she wore as a songstress of the singing cafe, Lorelei, but in the dignified white uniform of the Navy.

“Thank you for coming,” I said. “I see you look stunning in uniform, too.”

“I’m deeply embarrassed to let you see me dressed like this, Your Majesty,” said Juna.

“You shouldn’t be,” I said. “I think you cut a dashing and beautiful figure like that...”

“...Soumaaaa?” Liscia butted in, trying to stop us from bantering. “We’re in a meeting now. Could you save the flirting for later?”

Liscia had a smile on her face, but the words had a strange intensity behind them. She was starting to give off an extraordinarily unsettling vibe, so I decided it was about time to move the discussion along. I mean, it wasn’t as if I’d called Juna all the way from the southern border just so I could banter with her like this.

The mature Juna was watching Liscia and me with a smile. Anyway, moving on.

“Ahem.” I cleared my throat. “There is one reason why I have called Juna here. That would be...”

“...because you like that she’s easy on the eyes?” Liscia finished.

“...Come on, don’t be like that,” I said. “You know that’s not the reason.”

“Hmph.” Liscia turned her head to the side peevishly.

I thought it was cute when she did girly things like that, but... as Liscia herself had just said, we were in a meeting. When I looked around, everyone else in the room besides Juna was wearing a strained smile. I decided I’d try to appease Liscia later, but for now, I needed to move along.

“Ahem... Let’s get back on track,” I said. “There is one reason why I have called Juna here. That is to put a plan I’ve been refining for quite some time into motion.”

“Plan?” Liscia asked, tilting her head to the side questioningly.

I answered her, brimming with confidence, “Yes. I call it Project Lorelei.”

By the time we moved from the war room to the audience chamber, there were already three girls waiting there, prostrated before the throne.

The girls were each of different races, appearances, and ages. One was a light elf with dark brown hair. One looked like an adorable elementary schooler. The last was a slender beastman girl with cat ears. All three could have fairly been called beauties.

When I seated myself on the throne, Juna saluted me with her hand at her chest. “I have brought the individuals you requested, Your Majesty.”

“There’s no need to make this formal,” I said. “At ease, all of you.”

When I said that, the three women rose to their feet, saying, “”””It’s a pleasure to meet you””” in unison.

Yep, they’re full of energy and they’re in sync, I thought to myself. As I gave a satisfied nod, Liscia was standing at my side, looking at me with another “lovely smile” on her face.

“Heeeey, Souma?” she asked.

“Wh-What?”

“I hope you haven’t gotten so full of yourself now that you’ve captured Van that you’re planning to keep these girls by your side to wait on you hand and foot. Have you?”

Ah, yeah, her face is smiling, but she’s definitely not smiling in her heart, I thought to myself.

“You’ve got it all wrong!” I said quickly. “I called these girls here because they’re a vital part of my plan!”

“Hmm...” Liscia sounded dubious.

“It’s the truth, okay?” I said. “And, wait, didn’t you say you’d let me take up to eight wives?”

“Well, yes, I did,” said Liscia. “But, while I can tolerate it with someone I know, like Aisha, or if you’re forced to do it for diplomatic reasons, I’m not going to be happy if you abuse your power to round up some pretty faces for yourself.”

“I’m telling you, that’s not it, okay?” I said peevishly. “Remember when I was gathering personnel before?”

During my big recruitment event, Aisha and the other four had been hired with a great deal of fanfare, but I had hired a lot more people quietly, or had them added to a list of personnel being put together by the country.

For instance, those who were talented at arithmetic had been hired as bureaucrats, while one turtle man (estimated age: eight hundred years old) who’d said “I’ve been reading books for hundreds of years. I won’t lose to any young whipper-snapper when it comes to my knowledge of books,” had been appointed as the chief librarian in the new city that was under construction.

Furthermore, when those with the same gift had competed, I had still hired the ones who’d lost if I could be sure of their talent.

Aisha had been the winner of the Best in the Kingdom Martial Arts Tournament, but those who lost to Aisha had still been invited to join the forces that reported directly to me in the Forbidden Army if their skills were up to snuff. Though, my directly-controlled forces had been seen as a purely decorative force at the time, so few had taken me up on the offer...

Now, as for these girls gathered here, they might have lost to Juna in the Kingdom of Talent competition, where contestants had competed on talents like singing. And they might have lost to her in the Elfrieden Pretty Girl Grand Prix, where contestants had competed on beauty. But they had still demonstrated their beauty and singing ability in both of those tournaments.

“After the recruitment was finished, I had Juna scout these girls for me,” I explained. “Come on, I’ve told you about how I wanted to make entertainment programs for the Jewel Voice Broadcast before, haven’t I?”

“Oh, yeah... You did mention that,” Liscia said as if she’d suddenly remembered.

I continued on, relieved that she had now mellowed out a bit. “Now, when it comes to entertainment programs, I was thinking we’d start with a singing program. There’s no one who dislikes hearing a beautiful singing voice, after all. These girls are the candidates to become singers on that program. From the day we scouted them up until today, they’ve been training to improve their singing and dancing at Lorelei, the singing cafe where Juna works.”

Though, really, the order of things had been mixed up a bit.

Honestly, I’d wanted to start with a program like *Nodo Jiman,* the amateur singing contest, to get the people used to the idea of a singing program, then have these girls debut as idols.

By the way, when I use the word “idol” here, I mean it in the sense of “A pretty woman who sings well.” The sort you would have seen a few decades ago in the Showa Era. If I tried to introduce a modern-style idol group to a country that didn’t even have the concept of an idol, they weren’t going to understand.

If I went with a single singer format, however, they would likely recognize it as an extension of the traveling minstrel, the busker on the street corner, or the songstress in a singing cafe or bar.

“I see, so that’s Project Lorelei, huh,” Liscia said. “But is that something you really ought to be doing now? When there’s trouble over the fact that we’re occupying Van?”

Liscia looked perplexed. She probably didn't see the point in starting an entertainment program now, right after we had just seized the capital of Amidonia. However, she was wrong.

"This is precisely the time for it," I said. "Now then, Juna, could you do the introductions?"

"Yes, sir," Juna said with a bow, then began to introduce the girls.

She began with the one standing furthest to the right, the light elf girl who wore her hair up.

In this world, fair-skinned elves like her were called light elves, while brown-skinned elves like Aisha were called dark elves. In the country I came from, elves were usually imagined as blonde-haired, but now that I thought about it, I had seen elves with hair like hers in foreign films. She had pale skin and orange eyes. Judging by her appearance, she looked to be in her mid-twenties, perhaps. She held herself with a certain dignity, like a career woman.

"This is Chris Tachyon," Juna said. "She's a light elf, as you can see."

"Hello, Your Majesty. I'm Chris Tachyon."

Chris put her hand in front of her belly, bowing to me at a forty five degree angle. That gesture and the mature vibe she gave off made me think of an airplane cabin attendant from my old world.

Juna went on to explain Chris's talents. "She is a former minstrel and has a beautiful singing voice, but her poetry reciting is especially marvelous. She has a pleasant voice and is able to read smoothly, so her poems are as vivid as if she had cut out a piece of the scenery. In my personal opinion, rather than have her debut as a singer, she would be better suited to a program for disseminating information like the one we broadcast before."

"I see," I said. "You want her as an announcer, not a singer."

It was true that, from what I could hear, she seemed to have a clear voice and speak smoothly. A female announcer could have an idol-like presence on a news program, and there was no problem with the way she looked. I had Hakuya prepare a pen and paper, then I had him write down a certain short statement and hand it to Chris.

“Could you try reading that for me?” I asked.

“This? Let’s see... ‘This story is a work of fiction. The people, organizations, places, and events depicted have no connection to anything in reality.’”

“Yep, sounds good to me,” I said. “Let’s have you work on a news program like Juna suggested.”

“Thank you very much,” Chris said with a smile, bowing once again.

Liscia asked me in a whisper, “What was that statement you just had her read?”

“Some magic words from my old world,” I said. “If you say them, you can get away with practically anything.”

When I told her that, Liscia cocked her head to the side, looking like she didn’t get it at all.

While we were talking about that, Juna moved on to introducing the next person. This time, it was the adorable girl who looked not much older than Tomoe. That frilly lolita-style outfit she wore suited her well.

“Her name is Pamille Carol,” said Juna. “She is a kobito.”

“I’m Pamille. Nice to meet you.” Pamille bobbed her head. It was a cute gesture, but...

“What’s a kobito?” I asked. “A little person?”

“No, she isn’t a hobbit, she’s one of the ever-young,” said Juna. “Not many races stop aging like the elves, but that trait is especially pronounced in the kobitos. Even once they reach full maturity, they only look like twelve-year-old children. Pamille may not look it, but she’s far older than I am.”

“Seriously?!” I exclaimed. “To think there’s a race like that in this world...”

It’s like the ultimate race of lolis and shotas, I thought. *I dunno... I feel very concerned for their entire race. Maybe I should create a protected district for them, put up a sign that says “Yes, loli-shota. No, touch,” outside it, in order to protect them from a certain type of gentlemen and ladies out there.*

Also, I nearly missed it, but I guess there are hobbits in this world, I thought.

Here's hoping there aren't any strange rings out there, too...

As I was thinking about that, Juna continued her explanation. "She has a voice as clear as a bell. She's especially good at singing cutesy songs in a way that makes them even more adorable. ...People always see me as being older than I am, so I'm ill-suited to singing songs like that myself. I envy that gift of hers a little."

"Well, I envy you, too, Juna," said Pamille. "When I heard we would be appearing before His Majesty today, I wanted to wear a sleeveless dress, but I have nothing for it to hang on, so I was told I couldn't."

Juna and Pamille both seemed to be staring off into the distance.

It makes sense for Pamille to feel that way, but is Juna bothered by the fact she seems older than she actually is, too? Setting her appearance aside, with the mature way she acts, it's hard to believe she's nineteen years old, after all.

Now that I thought about it, I remembered a line in a movie I had watched a long time ago that said, "Treat an older woman like she's younger than you, and a younger woman like she's older than you."

Juna's a year older than me, so rather than having her indulge me all the time, I need to find ways to let her rely on me once in a while, I thought.

Juna cleared her throat in an attempt to get us back on track, then continued with the introductions. "Now, last but not least, this is Nanna Kamizuki. As you can see, she's a beastman."

"Heeeey! ♪ I'm Nanna! ♪" the cat-eared girl cried with a toothy grin.

She looked to be around fifteen or sixteen. Compared to the other two, she had dressed up less, wearing a simple tube-like outfit. On her face she wore face paint, like a soccer fan. If I were to judge solely on her appearance, she looked like a girl from a tribe that made their living fishing.

Glaive was about to tell her off for the simple and innocent way she was behaving while before the king, but I gestured for him to stop. That was because I detected an odd accent.

"Is she not used to the speaking the language of this continent, maybe?" I

asked.

Juna rushed to cover for her. “That’s exactly it. It seems she immigrated to Elfrieden from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago and has been living with a group of hardy fishermen in a seaside village ever since. So, if she acts a little rude at times, please forgive her.”

I see... So she’s an immigrant from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, huh?

Many of the countries on this continent used a common language in addition to their national languages, but there were isolationist countries too, like the ones in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, which only used their national language.

“I understand her situation, but... can she sing like that?” I asked.

“Have no worries on that front,” Juna assured me. “She’s been singing sea shanties while out fishing, so she has a powerful voice, one that’s both feminine and masculine, and if you give her a cool song to sing, she can easily outdo me. I believe she’s a good match for those ‘anisongs’ you taught me, sire.”

“Oh... Can she sing something?” I asked wistfully.

“Yes,” said Juna. “As a test, I taught her one. Nanna, could you sing for us?”

“Sure! ♪ Just leave it to Nanna.”

At Juna’s request, Nanna enthusiastically burst out singing. The song was the opening to a mecha anime sung by a female vocalist. Setting aside the choice of song, the stirring melody was a good match for Nanna’s voice.

“By the way, Liscia, do you understand what the lyrics mean?” I asked.

“I don’t,” she said. “It’s like listening to a song in a language I don’t understand. But I can tell that it’s a cool song.”

“Well, as long as that comes across, it’s fine... I guess?” I said.

I can have Juna come up with lyrics for it in this world’s language later, I guess.

When she finished the song, Nanna looked to me with a broad smile. “Your Majesty! ♪ How was I?”

“...Yeah,” I said. “You were amazing.”

“Glad to hear it! ♪”

Nanna waved her hand as if to say, “My turn’s over now, right?” and then quickly went back to her position.

She’s a unique girl... She isn’t timid, she’s not like anything they’ll have seen, and the way she moves in broad motions is bound to look impressive on screen. She might just be the most suited to being an idol of everyone here.

With the introductions now finished, I thanked Juna. “You’ve brought in a good group of people. Thank you.”

“You’re too kind,” she said.

“Okay, all the actors have gathered now,” I went on. “With these three, as well as Juna who can handle the soft, mature songs, we’re going to create Elfrieden’s first entertainment program. We won’t just be broadcasting to Elfrieden, though, we’ll broadcast to the Principality of Amidonia, too.”

“To Amidonia, too?” Liscia asked.

In response to the questioning look on Liscia’s face, I nodded. “Yeah. I mean, we did manage to get our hands on Amidonia’s jewel, after all.”

Of all the things that had fallen into our hands when we’d taken Van, the one that had pleased me the most had been a jewel for the Jewel Voice Broadcast. This was the only broadcast jewel Amidonia had, and it could be used to deliver a signal to every receiver in this country.

The broadcast jewels were apparently artifacts from an ancient civilization. While they still couldn’t be manufactured, there were a good number of them out there. With the exception of the small countries, like the ones that made up the Union of Eastern Nations, and the self-ruling territory of the wise dragons in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, most countries had them.

However, fundamentally, you couldn’t receive transmissions from another country. Of course, that made sense, otherwise information intended for a domestic audience would leak outside the country’s borders. Although technically, if you changed the wavelength settings on the receiver or jewel, it was possible, so maybe it was a little like radio frequency in that way.

In other words, now that we had obtained Amidonia's only jewel, that meant that we had a monopoly on broadcasting rights to every receiver in Amidonia.

If we used a jewel brought from Elfrieden, too, we would be able to simulcast Elfrieden's first entertainment program in two countries. What sort of changes would this broadcast bring to Amidonia? Or would it have no effect at all?

We would have to wait until the actual broadcast to find out.

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The capital of the principality, Van, lacked a fountain plaza with viewing equipment for the Jewel Voice Broadcast like the one in the royal capital Parnam.

The receiver was on the edge of Van, in an open field that was a plaza in name only. That was because, in this country, the Jewel Voice Broadcast was only used once at the beginning of each year when the Prince would say, "We must never forget our resentment towards Elfrieden. The retaking of our stolen lands is a national priority," or something like that, stating the general direction of the country.

Because those who failed to attend the broadcast at the opening of the year could be charged with the crime of disrespecting the state, even if they were sick, even if they were old and bedridden, everyone needed to view that broadcast even if it meant they had to be strapped to a chair and carried there. And so, today, the young king of Elfrieden who had captured Van said he would be using the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

Most of the people, having undergone decades of indoctrination, did not have a favorable impression of the kingdom. However, now, many of those same people were gathered in the field to watch the broadcast. They likely believed that if they didn't watch, they would be charged with a crime, as years of custom had dictated. There were even some who tried to carry in their sick, only to be told by the guards, "Don't push yourselves so hard," and be turned away.

In the evening light, with the sun low on the horizon, the gathered people of Van wore expressions half of apprehension and half of indignation. Because those of the knighthood and nobility had all pulled out of Van, only the general

populace who had nowhere else to go remained.

Here and there throughout the crowd, the masses could be heard whispering to one another about their worries for what was to come.

“Damn the King of Elfrieden... What does he plan to do, making us all gather here?”

“I caught a glimpse of him when he was entering the castle, but he didn’t look very strong...”

“Don’t be deceived by appearances. This is the man who made Prince Gaius dance in the palm of his hand.”

“He’s using the Jewel Voice Broadcast, right? What the hell does he want to say to us?”

With no proper information to go off of, their speculation took increasingly wild turns.

“No... Don’t tell me he’s planning to conquer all of Amidonia, so all of us men will be conscripted and sent to the front lines...”

“No! Without me here as the breadwinner, what’ll my family do?!”

“We’re an occupied people. We can’t be surprised if that’s what happens.”

“No, that’s not even the worst thing that could happen. He might demand we hand over our women and children as slaves. Or that we hand over every beautiful woman in this domain.”

“I’ve heard strong guys tend to have strong urges like that, after all.”

“Seriously? I shoulda hid my wife before coming here.”

“You dolt. Nobody’s ever gonna want your wife.”

“What’d you say?! ...Ah! Hey, it’s starting.”

Suddenly, the receiver in the middle of the field began displaying an image.

The people thought they would see the uniform-clad image of that young king, but contrary to their expectations, they saw a beautiful woman with dark brown hair and elven features sitting in a chair. She rested her crossed arms on the long table in front of her, and, for some reason, the broadcast showed her

not straight-on, but from an angle to her left. Naturally, this meant that her head was turned at an angle.

Her pose, which was like that of the Mona Lisa, brought out her alluring beauty and was especially effective at capturing the hearts of the men of Van. It felt to them as if they were sitting at a bar and this woman, who had been sitting next to them, had turned to them to talk. Now she spoke.

"Good evening, everyone. I am Chris Tachyon."

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"This is *News Elfrieden.* In this information program, we will be bringing the latest news from Elfrieden and its surrounding countries to you, the people. Now, for our first story..."

Chris began reading her script in the impromptu news studio that had been set up in Van Castle's governmental affairs office. I call it a news studio, but we had really just gotten together a long table and a chair. Still, with the other furnishings already in place, it looked the part.

Aisha and I were watching Chris from the corner of the room where we wouldn't be picked up by the jewel.

Aisha pulled on my sleeve. "Um... Why is Chris being broadcast at an angle?"

"Uhh... Stylistic beauty?" I said.

I remembered a female newscaster from my world who had delivered the news in this position, so I had tried to include it. However, during rehearsal, Chris had complained to me, saying, "I feel like I'm going to get a kink in my neck," so this was probably going to be the first and last time we would shoot the program from an angle.

The news Chris was reading out now was a report on the events of the war up to this point.

She explained in a neutral tone that, as a punitive action against Gaius VIII and his son Julius, who had taken advantage of instability in the kingdom to invade, King Souma of Elfrieden had launched a counter-invasion and struck down

Gaius VIII.

Aisha tilted her head to the side in confusion. “Wouldn’t it have been better to deliver this information in a speech of your own, sire? You might have been able to raise your profile in this country, like you did with that program on ingredient gathering.”

“The situation is different this time,” I said. “We aren’t only broadcasting to the occupied territories around Van, we’re broadcasting to the rest of Amidonia, as well. No matter what the king of an enemy state says, the people of the principality aren’t going to listen to a word of it. It’s better that they hear it from a third party.”

Though, when I had discussed the script for this news with Hakuya, there had been the idea of using, “For all of us, His Majesty, our Dear King...” and exaggerating the details, but it had made me sound like some tin-pot dictator, so I’d rejected it.

Well, anyway, as we were talking, Chris continued reading out the news with those smooth reading skills and pleasant voice of hers that had come with Juna’s seal of approval. “The armies of the kingdom are presently occupying the capital of the principality, Van, but hostilities have, for the moment, ceased. In regards to this state of affairs, His Majesty, King Souma of Elfrieden, has released the following statement:

“‘This has been a war of subjugation against Gaius VIII, who invaded my country. It is not my wish to spread the fires of war further or to harm the citizens of the principality. We will provide support to the people living in the area around Van to allow them to get on with their lives. Furthermore, as Van has been annexed as a territory of the kingdom, I promise that the same food aid and infrastructure spending will be carried out here.’

“In advance of that, the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Mr. Poncho Ishizuka Panacotta, will be distributing foodstuffs in Van starting tomorrow. He asks that everyone in Van invite their family and neighbors to come with them.”

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“How dare they do this?!”

In a city close to Van, the crown prince of Amidonia, Julius Amidonia, shouted out angrily.

Having escaped from the earlier battle, Julius was in a city near Van, waiting with the remnants of the principality's forces for the Gran Chaos Empire's armies to arrive. Julius smashed the receiver with a swing of his sword, then immediately gave an order to his subordinates.

"Dispatch messages to every city with orders not to watch this ridiculous broadcast."

""""Yes, sir!""""

His subordinates all ran off to dispatch the messengers at once. Once he saw that they had all left, Julius turned to glare in the direction of Van. *He hopes to win over not just the people of Van, but of all Amidonia, with his honeyed words, does he? I must not let him!*

Julius firmed up his resolve.

Still, even though he'd dispatched messengers, it wasn't as if they could reach every city instantly. Furthermore, with his defeat in battle, Julius had lost much of his influence and so his orders were only carried out in the city he was presently in and those which were very close to it.

In other words, most of the cities in Amidonia were watching Souma's broadcast.

The reactions of the Amidonian citizens who saw it could be broadly divided into two categories.

First, there were the people in Van, who were relieved to hear that they would not be conscripted and sent to fight on the front lines, or to have it demanded that they turn over their assets, wives, or daughters.

In the cities and farming villages outside of Van, what caught the people's attention was not the death of Gaius VIII, or Souma's righteous cause, it was the fact that those areas which had become a territory of the kingdom of Elfrieden would receive the same support as cities within the kingdom.

Of course, the people of Amidonia scarcely believed these words. After all,

they were the words of the enemy king. Everyone thought he was simply trying to buy their loyalty.

...However, it was also true that Souma's words deeply ate into the hearts of the Amidonian people, who were currently struggling through an even deeper food crisis than the one in the kingdom. The harsher their current situation, the more deeply the words ate into them.

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"...And so, at present, medicine in our country is..."

It had been about ten minutes or so since the beginning of Chris's informational program.

The section she was reading out now was the last piece of information to be disseminated. Once this information program was over, the music program would begin at last.

As she stood at my side, visibly anxious, Aisha grabbed my arm. Today, Aisha wasn't dressed in her usual light armor; instead, she wore a cocktail dress. I myself was wearing a tuxedo.

Aisha turned to me with a look in her eyes like an abandoned puppy dog. "Wh-What do I do, sire? I can't stop shaking."

"Just calm down, okay?" I said. "This is your second time on the broadcast, isn't it?"

"Last time, I was all right because I just had to eat..."

It had been decided that I would be the host for the music program with Aisha as my assistant.

I, of course, hadn't planned on being the host of a music program, but Poncho, who I had intended to push the job off onto, was busy with distributing food, and Hakuya had refused because it didn't suit him.

It was my first time, too, so if my partner Aisha was going to be petrified with stage fright, that was a problem.

"Where did the bravado you show on the battlefield go?" I asked.

When I said that in an exasperated tone, Aisha groaned pathetically and her shoulders slumped. “I am confident that no one is a match for me in martial arts. However, at a showy event like this, I have no such confidence. There are a lot of people out there who are prettier that I am, you know. The princess and Madam Juna are both slender and fair-skinned, like lovely young maidens. Meanwhile my skin is dark, and I have some muscle on me, too...”

“Really?” I asked. “I think you’ve got a nice healthy look.”

Even if she did have some muscle, she wasn’t ripped like a body builder. In fact, she had such a shapely body that I had to wonder how she managed to swing around that giant sword with so little muscle. On top of that, she was tall enough to be a model, and, though it was hard to tell when she was wearing armor, her above-average figure was good enough that Liscia was the one more likely to be jealous.

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re pretty, Aisha.”

“I-I am?!”

The compliment had Aisha ecstatic. However, she quickly came back to her senses.

“B-But, really, Madam Juna or the princess would make a better host...”

“Juna is one of the singers, so she’d have to run all over the place if we made her be the host, too,” I said. “As for making Liscia my assistant... I thought it would be best not to do that this time.”

“Hm? Why is that?” she asked.

“Oh. There’s a little thing I’m worried about now that I’ve ended up being the host,” I said. “To be brutally honest, I chose you less because I think you’ll be a good assistant and more because I’m counting on your skills as my bodyguard. If anything happens, you’ll be able to protect me if you’re at my side, right?”

“Of course I will, but... Huh?! Is something dangerous going to be happening?!” she asked.

Aisha seemed concerned, so I put a hand on her forehead and laughed.

“It’ll be fine, in all likelihood. But, as pathetic as it is for me to have to ask this

as a man, will you protect me if something happens?”

“Your Majesty... Yes! Even if it should cost me my life, I will *mmmph.*”

I hurriedly covered Aisha’s mouth. “You’re being too loud. We’re broadcasting now.”

“*Mmph*... I-I’m sorry.”

...At times like this, she really might have been a disappointing dark elf.

“...is what they said. That is all for *News Elfrieden.* Now then, after this program, we will be broadcasting Elfrieden’s first entertainment program. If you have no prior engagements or are not otherwise in a hurry, I hope you will continue watching this broadcast.”

Whoa, it looks like Chris’s program is finished, I thought. *Okay, now it’s our turn.*

The set for the music program wasn’t here: it was an atrium that had most likely been used to hold balls. We had lined up tables in there, bringing in some of the soldiers to sit at them and listen, in the style of the Japan Cable Awards. That was because having an audience makes a huge difference to the level of excitement.

I took my assistant by the hand. “Come on, let’s go, Aisha.”

“Sire, I will follow you anywhere!”

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With Chris Tachyon’s information program finished, there was a short break. Then the receiver in Van’s plaza showed a young man and woman. They were a young man in a black tuxedo and a dark elf girl wearing an extravagant red party dress. While the young man was confident, the girl seemed a little tense.

Then a person in the crowd said, “Hey, wait, isn’t that guy Elfrieden’s king, Souma?”

When people around the man heard him, those who had seen the Elfrieden Kingdom’s army march in through the city gates cried out one after another, “Yeah! I saw him when they came in through the gate,” “That’s Elfrieden’s King Souma,” “There’s no doubt about it,” confirming the first man’s suspicions.

With no way of knowing what they were saying about him, Souma wore a relaxed expression as he held an object that was twenty centimeters or so long with a rounded end (no doubt intended to be a mic, but since the Jewel Voice Broadcast was picking up the sound, it was really just a prop) up to his mouth and greeted them all with a “Hello.”

“Songs change with the times and the times change with songs,” he said. “These are the songs we want to see handed down across the ages.”

“Wh-What, where did that line come from?! You didn’t say that during rehearsal, did you?!” the dark elf girl exclaimed.

It seemed that his last line had been ad-libbed, as the girl was now confused.

“I will be your host for this program, Souma Kazuya.”

“I-I am Aisha Udgard!”

“Come on now, Aisha, your expression is looking stiff,” said the king. “Smile, smile.”

“Wh-What about you, sire? Why are you speaking so politely?!” she exclaimed.

“Well, I’m the host, y’know,” he said. “Even if I’m the king, I can’t go acting too self-important.”

“You say that, but you’re already back to talking like normal!”

“Whoops, pardon me.”

Souma was throwing in a bit of playful humor while Aisha could only react to him.

The people of the Elfrieden Kingdom looked on at their banter with smiles. However, the people of the Principality of Amidonia wore looks of bewilderment.

The rumors about King Souma said he was a man who had made a fool of the

great warrior Gaius VIII using his strategic ingenuity, then struck him down in a display of his own valor. The king of the rumors, blessed with both wisdom and martial ability, simply didn't mesh with the young man poking fun at and playing around with the dark elf girl in this broadcast.

In actual fact, his strategy had been put together with help from Hakuya, while the ones to strike down Gaius VIII had been a late-arriving unit of archers, but the people had no way of knowing these things.

"Did our prince lose to these people?" one of the members of the crowd wondered.

"I know—this must all be an act to make us drop our guards!"

"What for? Van's already fallen, you know?"

"Well, it's so they can... Yeah, what is it for?"

While the people of Van reacted with confusion, Souma continued hosting the program.

"Now then, this broadcast is Elfrieden's first music program. For this broadcast, we've gathered girls with different types of voices. Each of these three is wonderfully gifted, truly, deserving to be called 'lorelei.'"

The moment Souma spoke those words, this world's equivalent to an idol, the concept of a "lorelei," was born.

"I hope this will be a program that helps to soothe the hearts of those exhausted by their daily toil," said the king. "Please, listen to these loreleis' songs and enjoy them to the very end."

"Er... There are just three here today, but we will always be looking for those who take pride in their singing voice in the Elfrieden Kingdom," said Aisha. "M-Meninwimin..."

"You're slurring it, Aisha."

"P-Please, be quiet," said Aisha. "Um... Men and women of all ages, self-

nominated or nominated by another, all are welcome to apply."

"Yeah, I'd like to have male singers on here, too," said Souma. "Though, for the guys, it'd be weird to call them loreleis. Well, what'll we call them, then? Mermen, or something?"

"Then they would just be ordinary sea monsters," said Aisha. "Can't you choose something from outside the sea? Ah! Erm... To those of you proud of your singing, or who just like to sing, I'm told you should go to the Lorelei singing cafe in your nearest city to audition."

"Wait, Lorelei has branch stores now?!" Souma exclaimed.

"Why are you sounding surprised, sire?!"

"Well, I left the auditions entirely up to Juna, after all..."

"By the way, I'm told the one in Lagoon City is their headquarters," said Aisha.

"What, Parnam's was a branch store?!"

When Souma dropped that last line, one of the viewers in Van let out a chuckle, then hurriedly covered his mouth. If anyone took fault with him for laughing while watching the broadcast, he could be lynched by the rest of the viewers. Because of that, Van's plaza had a strange air of tension hanging over it.

Without so much as an inkling of what was going on, Souma continued hosting.

"Now then, let's get this show on the road. Our first lorelei has the body of a child and the spirit of an adult. She's a legal loli from the kobito race, Pamille Carol."

"Madam Pamille's greatest pleasure is taking an afternoon nap," added Aisha. "However, recently, we've had such pleasantly sunny days that she's been sleeping through until morning, and then sleeping in on top of that. ...Um, sire? Is this information really necessary?"

"Now, let's hear her sing," said Souma. "Here is Pamille Carol."

When Souma said that, the lights dimmed and a relaxed tune began to play.

The next thing to appear on the projection was a balcony in an atrium. There, wrapped in a frilly dress, was a girl who looked for all appearances to be around twelve years old. This was Pamille Carol. Pamille clasped her hands in front of her chest, then began to sing with a voice that, as befitted her appearance, was as adorable as a ringing bell.

There was a cute girl singing a cute song. When they saw that scene, the people of Amidonia thought she was cute. However, rather than debate the quality of the song, they were simply at a loss for what to make of it. What to make of the fact that the Jewel Voice Broadcast was being used to show a little girl singing, that is.

“Who is that girl? She’s absolutely adorable.”

“Well, yeah, sure, she’s cute, but... is it really okay to use the Jewel Voice Broadcast for this?”

“Don’t ask me. It’s not like I know.”

“Lord Gaius barely ever used it, you know.”

“Maybe this is normal in Elfrieden?”

Conversations like this one were springing up all over. Was this the difference between Amidonia and Elfrieden? Were broadcasts like this what defined the Elfrieden Kingdom? they asked. The people of Van, under occupation by the soldiers of the Elfrieden Kingdom, were strongly impacted by what they saw.

“I see... Is this place part of Elfrieden now, then?” one of the viewers in Van whispered.

That off-handed comment seeped into the crowd, like water poured into a vast dry plain.

“Has Van become part of the Elfrieden Kingdom?”

“Well, we are under occupation, after all.”

“So, then, this isn’t part of the Principality of Amidonia anymore?”

“Well, then does that means it’s okay to broadcast this sort of video?”

Even as the people of Van reacted with confusion, the broadcast continued. When Pamille finished singing the song with lots of charm, Souma and Aisha came back on screen.

“That was Pamille Carol,” said Souma. “My, isn’t music a wonderful thing?”

“Why is it, do you suppose?” Aisha asked. “Hearing it made me think, ‘That can’t possibly be music.’”

“Now for a change of tune, we’ll have an energetic song sung by this person here,” said Souma. “Having trained her singing voice in a fishing village with nothing but men, the power of her voice is incredible. She’s a simple and innocent cat-eared girl from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. Nanna Kamizuki.”

“Madam Nanna’s favorite fish is the giant spearfish, and her dream is to eat one whole someday, but because they’re worried she’ll snack on the day’s catch, the fishermen won’t let her on the ocean-going ships...” Aisha began. “Um, again, was this information really necessary?”

“Now then, let’s hear her sing,” Souma announced. “Here’s Nanna Kamizuki!”

“...You’re just ignoring me, aren’t you.”

The next person to appear on screen wore a lightly punk outfit. She was the energetic cat-eared girl, Nanna Kamizuki. Her sleeveless top and short pants left her healthy arms and legs exposed, while the way her bellybutton would occasionally peek out helped accentuate the appeal of the cuteness she had not lost even with her androgynous appearance.

Then, as Nanna started to sing, she *leapt off* the balcony.

“Wha?!” someone in the crowd shouted.

“H-Hey...”

The viewing masses gulped when they saw that scene. It must not have been in the program plan.

They could see the staff were rushing to move the fixed jewel. They could still hear her singing, so they knew she must be all right, but Nanna didn't appear on screen again for a little while. When she finally reappeared, Nanna was having a great time dancing by the stairs on the floor below. Even as the crowd sighed in relief, they were gradually being drawn into the rhythm of her song and dance.

"You go, girl! Keep it up!"

"The song's nice, too. It really cheers you up."

With this being the second time, perhaps they were getting used to it, because voices like that could be heard even from the tense crowd in Van. There was a cute girl enjoying herself singing and dancing. No man wouldn't enjoy watching that. And, surprisingly, it had an even stronger impact on the women of Amidonia than it did the men.

What drew the women's attention was Nanna's fashion.

"Isn't she cold dressed like that?"

"She's indoors, so it's probably fine."

"But, if she dresses like that... won't they get upset with her because it distracts and seduces men?"

Amidonia was, more than anything, a militaristic country. Men were expected to be strong first and foremost, while women were there to support them, and the greatest virtue sought from them was modesty.

As a result, in the Principality of Amidonia, except on special occasions, public opinion would not allow women to dress up. This stemmed from the idea that it would be a problem if they tempted men, making them become weak. To say nothing of the fact that if they wore an outfit that showed so much flesh (even an outfit that showed the shoulders or thighs was seen as showing too much here) in a public place, they ran the risk of being arrested for offending public morals.

"Do they not get angry about that in the kingdom?" one woman wondered.

"Well, it *is* another country. Their king seems gentle, too."

"...I'm so jealous."

In the minds of the women who wanted to dress up and be pretty, borders and race did not exist.

Pamille's frilly dress had been cute, and they admired the more liberal outfit that Nanna was wearing now, too. If they could do it, they wanted to try wearing those outfits and dancing. The outfits those two wore began to kindle a fire in the hearts of the women living in the principality. Especially for the women in Van.

"This isn't Amidonia anymore, right?" one woman asked.

"Then, can we dress up if we want to?"

"I guess? All the soldiers who would have gotten mad have left now."

And, well, they even started saying things like that.

By the time Nanna's energetic song came to an end, the people of Van gave a round of applause. None of them cared if Souma was just trying to buy their loyalty anymore.

When Nanna finished singing, the video cut out for a while. The jewel must be being moved back to its original position. When the screen came back up, it showed Souma and Aisha with wry smiles on their faces.

"...We were underestimating just how much energy Nanna has," Souma said.

"...Indeed," Aisha agreed.

"To think she'd go out of frame on a fixed-camera... Nanna, what a terrifying girl!"

"Why did you say that line like an old woman...?" Aisha asked.

"Now then, let's get things back on track," said Souma. "Now, now, we've kept you all waiting. Next up, the pride of our country, the Prima Lorelei, makes her appearance!"

"Madam Juna is incredibly popular even in this first broadcast, isn't she?" asked Aisha.

As the two of them had just said, Juna had already secured the position of Elfrieden's top lorelei for herself during the last Jewel Voice Broadcasts. Her popularity had surprised and confused even Juna herself.

"When the Congress of the People, which collects petitions, issued me a request saying, 'Broadcast programs more often and let us hear Juna's singing,' even I was a bit weirded out," said Souma.

"Wow... err, Madam Juna has been looking for a good herb tea to help with stiff shoulders lately..." said Aisha. "It's not easy when they're so big, it seems."

"...Anyway, let's hear her sing," said Souma. "Here's Juna Doma."

"What was that pause for?" Aisha demanded.

"...I wasn't imagining anything, really."

"You inadvertently let that slip, I see."

The adorable image of Souma turning to look away and Aisha staring at him as he did so faded out, and now the blue-haired Juna Doma appeared on screen.

On her upper half, she wore an outfit that looked like she had just wrapped a piece of fabric around herself, while on her bottom she wore loose white pants that tightened around her ankles. Wearing a thin, veil-like piece of silk on top of her head, she looked like a dancer girl who had escaped from the world of *One Thousand and One Nights.*

Her beauty captivated every last member of the audience, man and woman alike, while her singing voice would indiscriminately intoxicate the peoples of both Elfrieden and Amidonia.

The viewing masses were made to see why Souma had called her the Prima Lorelei. Juna's voice didn't have a unique character to it like Pamille's did. However, her expressive control of her pitch was carved even deeper into people's memories than Pamille was. Juna's voice also lacked the power that Nanna's had from training with the fishermen. However, thanks to that, her gentle timbre was able to seep deeper into the hearts of people than Nanna's

had.

The viewing public were certain of it. Certain that Juna Doma was the lorelei who stood above all loreleis, the Prima Lorelei.

The viewers in Amidonia had all been completely charmed by the three singers. They were surprised to find out that the Jewel Voice Broadcast could be such an enjoyable experience. At this point, none of them were concerned if this broadcast was Souma's way of trying to win them to his side anymore.

In Japanese, the word "music" was written "to enjoy sound." They were enjoying it for its sound. That was why no one noticed Souma's true aim.

—With one exception.

◇ ◇ ◇

"That king, he sure pulled a nasty trick..."

In Nelva, a fortress city in the southwest of Amidonia, one individual who had mixed in with the viewers to watch the broadcast muttered. This person wore a hooded cloak which covered their entire body, making it impossible to read their expression. All that it was possible to discern was that, compared to those around the person, this person had a small build, and a voice that was most likely female.

A similarly hooded man standing beside her asked the girl in the hooded cloak a question. "A nasty trick?"

"It's nasty," said the girl. "After all, he's takin' all the things my old man deliberately kept away from the people and then suddenly givin' 'em to them all in one go. There ain't any hope of my brother gettin' himself reinstated after this. ...Well, for the people, that may be for the best."

With those words said, the hooded girl shrugged as if to add, "Good grief."

The hooded man beside her looked at her with confusion. "Um, princess, what are you saying Lord Gaius stole from the people?"

"Freedom, that's what, Mr. Colbert," said the hooded girl.

The hooded girl was Gaius VIII's daughter, Roroa Amidonia. The man beside

her was the former Minister of Finance, Colbert.

Roroa pointed at the video. “Usin’ the Jewel Voice Broadcast like that, women dressin’ up fancy, and men lustin’ after cute young girls in broad daylight, none of that woulda been allowed in the principality before now, yeah? That was because neither the prince or the people wanted the ideologies of weaklings to spread. But that king, he’s showin’ them with this broadcast that all of that stuff is allowed in the kingdom.”

“In other words... showing off their ‘freedom,’” Colbert said.

Roroa nodded. “That’s right. That’s what makes it nasty. Freedom is ‘free.’ Givin’ it away doesn’t cost Souma anythin’. Now, if ya try to take it away, there’ll be resistance. Even if he borrows the Empire’s power and manages to get Van back, do ya see my brother bein’ able to let them keep that ‘freedom’? ...I don’t. Under my brother, it’ll be a rehash of how my old man was rulin’ the place. There’ll be chaos, no two ways about it.”

“No... do you mean to say Souma calculated all of that before making this broadcast?!” Colbert exclaimed.

“That’s what it’s lookin’ like to me.”

Colbert’s eyes went wide. He was shocked that this girl, who when she pulled back her hood had adorable beady little eyes like a tanuki, had seen through the designs of King Souma, the man who had played Gaius VIII for a fool.

If the ruler of Amidonia had been not Gaius or Julius, but Roroa instead, the world might be a very different place right now. No, there was no doubt it would have been. When he thought about that, Colbert couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of regret.

However, it seemed Roroa herself wasn’t even thinking about that. “It just means my old man was no match for him. That old man was hopeless when it came to anythin’ off the battlefield, after all. Honestly... I told him if he didn’t stimulate the eagerness to spend and get the economy movin’ again, this economic slump was gonna last forever, but he didn’t hear a word I said.”

Hearing her speaking so bitterly, Colbert hurried to respond. “Um, princess... about your father...”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that none,” she said. “I ain’t too bothered by it myself.”

In the recent battle, the forces of Amidonia had suffered a major defeat at the hands of the forces of Elfrieden, and Roroa’s father Gaius VIII had been struck down by the Royal Army under the command of Souma Kazuya.

When Colbert tried to show her some sympathy for her loss, Roroa just waved for him to stop. “I wondered why it is? I heard my old man’s dead now, but I don’t feel sad about it one bit. I guess in the end, I never did get along with my old man or my brother...”

“Princess...” murmured Colbert.

“If anythin’... I’m shocked that I ain’t more shocked by it,” said Roroa. “I oughta want revenge against Souma, but all I’m feelin’ towards him is curiosity. The way he rebuilt that old country and the strange way he uses the Jewel Voice Broadcast, I wonder what kinda world he must’ve lived in to learn to do all that. I’d like to meet him and talk about it. Hey, Mr. Colbert. Do ya think I’m heartless, maybe?”

For the first time, her uncertain eyes peeked out from behind the hood. Her moist eyes were like those of an abandoned puppy. When Colbert saw her like that, he hurriedly said “No!” and shook his head.

“You were trying to save this country in a different way from Lord Gaius!” he declared. “That’s why you never got along with Gaius or Julius, who put ideology before the people, and you feel a kinship with King Souma who always looks at things through the eyes of his people! That is the true proof you are the princess of this country!”

When Colbert said that, Roroa, who had just moments before had the look of an abandoned puppy, said, “Y’sure? Well, good,” then started chuckling to herself.

W-Were those crocodile tears?!

Even the mild-mannered Colbert was ready to snap at her for that, but he reconsidered. Roroa was capable of pretending to be sad, but she was also capable of pretending to be pretending to be sad. Only Roroa knew what she

truly felt. So... Colbert said nothing.

Then, suddenly, Roroa pulled back her hood. With her two ponytails hanging forward in front of her, Roroa's adorable face came into view. Colbert's eyes opened wide with surprise.

"Princess, what do you think you're doing?! We are in hiding, you realize?! What if someone sees you?!" he exclaimed.

"Everyone's busy watchin' the music program," she said. "They ain't gonna be lookin' at either of us. But, before we talk about that, as the man I'm gonna be up against, I was thinkin' I should burn the image of Souma's face into my eyes now."

In Roroa's eyes, Souma was a plain, ordinary young man, the kind you could find anywhere. However, she was also well aware that there was more to him than met the eye. A normal person couldn't restore a declining kingdom, or defeat the three dukes and the principality. He was a difficult opponent to gauge precisely because he looked so normal.

Roroa put her hood back on, pulling Colbert by the arm as she walked away. "Now then, we've got some preparin' of our own to do. Souma moves faster than I thought."

"...Ah! Yes, ma'am!" Colbert said.

Thinking that this was where things would begin in earnest, Colbert wore a serious expression on his face. As she walked, Roroa turned back, looking at the image of Souma projected by the receiver, and giggled.

Now that you've gotten us in the mood, don't go thinkin' we'll let you run off while you're ahead, she thought. *You're gonna have to take responsibility for it. Oh, yes, you are. Better get yourself ready, Souma!* ♪

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With Juna's song finished, it was Pamille's turn again. We didn't have enough loreleis yet, so for today's broadcast, each of them was going to sing two songs.

When Pamille's turn ended, I waited for Nanna to begin her second song, and then dragged Aisha off to somewhere out of sight, where we wouldn't show up

in the broadcast.

“Wh-What is it, sire?” she asked. “We’re still live, you know?”

“I told you there was something I was worried about during this broadcast, yeah?” I said. “It’s what comes up after Nanna.”

When she heard those words, Aisha took on a serious expression.

I quietly told her, “When the next act begins, I’m counting on you as my bodyguard.”

“Wha?! You don’t mean to say Madam Juna would do somethi—*mmmph*.”

Even though we were still in the middle of the broadcast, Aisha had started to raise her voice, so I’d covered her mouth with my hand.

Once she’d calmed down, I silently shook my head. “It’s not Juna. In between Nanna and Juna’s second songs, we have a singer who jumped in to participate at the last minute.”

“*Mmph*... I-I never heard about that!” Aisha cried.

“Like I said, she jumped in at the last minute,” I said. “We decided on it suddenly, right before we went live. Besides, if I’d warned you in advance, I figured you’d be too busy thinking about it and you’d flub your lines.”

“Murrgh... I can’t deny it,” she said.

Oh, come on... I thought.

Still, I clapped her on the shoulder. “So, there you have it. I’m counting on you if it comes to that. You’re one of the hosts, so you can’t carry your greatsword, but do you want to keep a smaller weapon on you?”

“No, in that case, I’m better off bare-handed... Wait, is this person that dangerous?!” Aisha exclaimed.

“Nah... I think, probably, it won’t be an issue,” I said. “I’m just taking out some insurance.”

“Insurance, I see... Understood. I will protect you to the death, sire.”

Aisha thumped her chest once. It usually made a metallic clang because of her armor, but today Aisha was in a cocktail dress. The ample bosom that was

usually hidden beneath her armor swayed, so I turned away in embarrassment because I didn't know where to look.

Now, then... Let's see how this goes.

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"This music program sure is nice..." someone in the crowd said.

By the time they had finished listening to Nanna's second song, an air of relaxation had set in for the Amidonian viewers. They were sincerely enjoying the music program. Judging by the order of things so far, Juna Doma was up next. They were even excited to hear her singing again.

However, that air was all but blown away in the next instant.

A woman appeared on the screen. She looked to be somewhere between thirty and forty years old. She stood nearly two meters tall, with a build so muscular that it was apparent even through the military uniform she wore. There was a sharp glint in her eye, and she wore her hair slicked back, so it was hard to tell what her gender was.

In fact, the only ones who knew that she was female were the viewers in the principality. It turned out viewers in the kingdom thought she was a guy in drag.

Souma and Aisha appeared on the screen next to the woman. Souma still had his forced smile on, but Aisha was looking at the woman warily.

"Now, we have a surprise guest participant," said Souma. "It's the Amidonian commander, Margarita Wonder. While the troops garrisoned in Van were withdrawing, Ms. Wonder remained here to monitor whether we were respecting the agreement and not harming the people."

The people of Van nodded. *That sounds exactly like Madam Wonder,* they thought.

Despite living in the Principality of Amidonia, where it was hard for women to make a successful career for themselves, her extraordinary martial prowess and ability to lead had let her rise to the rank of general, and she was now an

experienced warrior. Her martial ability and stern appearance made her feared by the people, but she had also gained their trust for her reputation as a fair and upright individual.

Still, that made it all the harder for them to understand. What was Madam Wonder doing here, next to Souma?

“Ms. Wonder was a prisoner of war, but the reason for her capture being what it was, we had her under house arrest,” said Souma. “However, when she heard about this broadcast, she said, ‘I’d like you to let me sing, too,’ and volunteered to participate.”

Souma was talking in a cheery tone, but Margarita herself was silent. That difference in enthusiasm between the two of them was palpable, and it sent a chill running down the spines of the residents of Van.

“Hey... is something about to happen?” someone in the crowd wondered.

“You don’t think Madam Wonder would use this as a chance to try and kill Souma, do you?”

“No, Madam Wonder would never stoop to doing something so underhanded...”

“But look at that dark elf’s expression. She’s on guard.”

“Souma’s smiling, but you can tell he’s on edge, too.”

Even though the events were actually unfolding in the castle, the people in Van could pick up on the uneasy air and it frightened them. In that atmosphere, Souma kept on talking with a smile.

“Now, let’s hear her sing. Ms. Margarita Wonder’s song will be... ‘Through the Valley of Goldoa.’”

When they heard the song title, the air flowing around the audience seemed to freeze.

The announced song, “Through the Valley of Goldoa,” was the national anthem of Amidonia. She was going to sing the anthem in occupied Van, right in front of Souma, the occupying power’s king.

The people of Amidonia understood the significance of that in an instant.

Madam Wonder was prepared to face death.

Once Souma and Aisha had gone off-screen, a solemn piece of music in a minor key began to play. Then, at last, Margarita started to sing.

“In the land beyond the mountains, where Ursula will be born tomorrow, ♪ Is the land that birthed our forefathers, the land to which we will return. ♪ Press on, O horses, climbing over the hill of our fallen comrades. ♪ Press on, O brave warriors, to become the earth of the land beyond. ♪”

It was a powerful song sung in a husky voice. The people of the principality naturally stood tall with pride.

Margarita’s singing forcibly reminded the people of the principality that they were citizens of Amidonia, including the ones in Van.

They had been feeling a budding admiration for the “freedom” enjoyed by the people of the kingdom, but her song was like a frost that caused those buds to close.

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It’s an intense song...

I was off in a corner, listening to it.

While there had been a slight commotion from the soldiers in the audience when she started to sing, because they had strict orders to “Remain seated no matter what happens, and listen to the music quietly,” no one made a scene over it.

However, it was hard to blame them for being unsettled.

After all, this song was about an invasion of the Elfrieden Kingdom.

The lyrics “In the land beyond the mountains, where Ursula will be born tomorrow,” referred to the lands east of the Ursula Mountains which were once part of Amidonia but were now part of Elfrieden.

It called for their horses and brave warriors to press forward towards there.

In other words, their national anthem was a song about crossing the Goldoa Valley to invade the Elfrieden Kingdom.

I dunno... It felt like, did they really have to take it that far? It showed just how vindictive a militaristic state could be that even their national anthem was trying to incite the people.

While I was thinking about that, Aisha asked me in a hushed voice, “Is this all right? Do you want to let her sing like this?”

“...Well, it’s about what I expected,” I responded in a whisper, with my arms crossed. “Someone who was a general of the opposing army suddenly said she wanted to participate in my music program. About the only reasons I could come up with were ‘to stir up the patriotism of the viewers,’ or ‘to wait for a chance to get close to me and then strike.’ After a cursory investigation into what sort of person she was, I expected it to be the former. That’s why I asked you to protect me, Aisha.”

“You knew this would happen?!” Aisha exclaimed. “In that case, wouldn’t it have been better not to let her sing?”

“...Well, just watch,” I said. “I’m going to turn her plans around on her.”

While I was saying that, Margarita finished her song. As soon as she finished singing, Margarita sat herself down on the spot.

When we walked over to her, she said, “I’ve shown you the pride of the Amidonian people. Now, lop off my head.”

She sat up straight. As I thought, she had come prepared for this. Being cut down here was probably part of her plan. In fact, if I laid a hand on Margarita here, this entire broadcast would be a wasted effort.

That’s why I *smiled*, and said, “Why? I thought you sang well.”

Perhaps because it wasn’t the expected response, Margarita’s eyes went

wide.

I felt bad doing this to her when she'd had such strong resolve, but I wasn't about to go along with her plans.

"You have a good voice, one that would work well for R&B, maybe," I said. "I have lots of songs I'd like to hear in your voice. I'm sure the people feel the same way."

When I said that in an off-handed manner, Margarita glared at me. "...I sang the Amidonian national anthem, you realize. If you let this outrage stand, people will question your authority as the King of Elfrieden."

"Don't call it an outrage yourself... and so what?" I asked. "There's no law in Elfrieden saying you can't sing another country's national anthem. This isn't Amidonia."

I looked away from Margarita, turning towards the Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel and saying, "What makes for a good country? It's not a simple question to answer. However, if nothing else, I think a country that lets its people sing freely is a good one. If a country lets you sing happy songs, sad songs, love songs, local songs, foreign songs, military songs, and anti-war songs freely, I think that's the mark of a good country."

Then, reaching out towards the jewel with my right hand, I asked, "What do you, the viewers, think?"

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There was a tower on the west side of Van Castle.

That moss-covered tower with its bizarre and imposing presence was home to a jail, and it was used to confine criminals of high status (nobility, knights, and higher). While it was a jail for those of high status, it wasn't a luxury suite by any means. Inside it was a typical dingy jail.

Under Amidonian rule, it had primarily been political prisoners who'd been confined in this tower. Those people who were *said* to have plotted to overthrow the state, or to oppose the direction of the country.

While they may have been said to have done those things, whether they

actually had was another matter. Sometimes these sorts of political crimes were used to take down a political rival.

Underground there was a torture chamber used to extract confessions. It seems that the nobles who were falsely accused would be forced to confess there, then sent to the execution block along with their families. If you approached this tower at night, you could hear the moaning of the prisoners who were being tortured during the day, so at some point it had come to be known as the Moaning Tower.

In one of the jail cells of the Moaning Tower, Liscia and Carla were sitting on the floor looking at one another across a set of iron bars. Carla, who was being kept as a hostage against the Air Force, was currently imprisoned in this tower.

Liscia had brought in a simple Jewel Voice Broadcast receiver, and she was watching Souma's program with Carla. They had taken it for a simple entertainment program at first, but when that Amidonian general had suddenly appeared, the two of them had realized Souma's true aim.

"Had he calculated that that female general would use the broadcast to stir up patriotism..." Carla wondered.

"...so he showed off the freedom and magnanimity that would allow him to accept that patriotism?" Liscia finished.

The two of them sighed in admiration.

Liscia traced the edge of the simple receiver with her finger. "Souma taught the people of Amidonia that in Elfrieden people are free to sing whatever songs they want. No, it's not just songs. Music, literature, paintings, sculptures... He showed that every form of artistic self-expression is allowed."

"Self-expression, huh..." Carla said. "I can't think of anything the principality hates more."

In a militaristic state like the Principality of Amidonia, it was easier to rule if the people were all the same. That way they could gain the support of the people just by calling for the downfall of Elfrieden. If they allowed for a diverse political discourse, people might start suggesting, "We should make peace with Elfrieden, trade with them, and coexist." That was the most frightening idea for

the members of the princely house, so anyone who espoused those sorts of ideas was thoroughly suppressed.

However, with their defeat in the war and the death of Gaius VIII, the princely house had lost their authority. Souma had chosen a time like this to make his broadcast, teaching the people of the principality about the existence of something called “freedom of expression.”

They could sing whatever songs they wanted to, draw whatever pictures they wanted to, and write whatever stories they wanted to.

He had shown the people of Van that the people restricting them from doing those things were already gone.

“From here on... even if their crown prince, Julius, manages to regain power, I doubt he can rule like they did before,” said Liscia. “The people of Van have now tasted the bliss of expressing themselves. If he wants to take that from them, he’ll have to crack down on it.”

“If he does that, he’ll only alienate his people more... huh.” Carla sighed, resting her back against the bars. “I think I finally get what Souma meant when he said, ‘There’s only work for a king before and after the war.’ For him... he’s still fighting right now.”

“Fighting...” Liscia murmured. “I see, so that’s why Souma chose Aisha as his partner.” Liscia let out a sigh, leaning back against the bars. The two of them were now back-to-back with the bars in between them. “I’m happy that he doesn’t want me to get hurt, but I get a little jealous. I’d like him to rely on me more...”

“Ha ha ha...” Carla laughed. “It just shows how much he cares for you.”

“Does it?”



“It does,” Carla assured her. “When he was whining to me on the battlefield, he said he couldn’t let you and the others hear him like that. Grandmother once said that the more a man cares about someone, the more prideful he is around them.”

“Y-You think...? Oh, wait, Carla, he was whining to you?” Liscia asked.

“It’s because I mean nothing to him, I’ll bet. I did oppose him, after all.”

“Carla, Souma is...!”

When Liscia turned around and looked at Carla’s face, she was at a loss for words. Her expression showed none of her usual defiance; it was lonely somehow, with an air of peaceful resignation.

“I know, Liscia,” said Carla. “On the battlefield, he forced me to see the weight he’s carrying on his shoulders. He’s no phony. He’s a splendid king. You and King Albert were right in your judgment of him. We were the ones who lacked your clarity of vision.”

“Huh?!” Liscia exclaimed. “If you’ve figured that out, then...”

“It’s why I can’t let you intercede on my behalf.”

Liscia stood up and slammed on the bars. “Carla! Do you have any idea what Duchess Walter and I are going through to...”

“No,” said Carla. “That’s not it, Liscia.” She shook her head silently. Then, folding her hands on her lap, she forced herself to say, “We made a mistake. That’s why I don’t want to cause any more trouble for you. If you try to help us survive, you’ll be putting Souma in a bind. He’s already pushing himself too hard to be king, so I don’t want to increase the burden on him anymore.”

“Carla...” Liscia looked as if she were in pain.

Carla smiled weakly. “I don’t want to be a burden on you and the one you love any longer.”

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“Now then, everyone, I think we’ll have this person here close out the program for us,” I said. “Here’s the number one singer, the Prima Lorelei, Juna

Doma!”

Having finished with the lead-in to the last song, I moved off-stage to somewhere the jewel wouldn’t pick me up. When I got there, I found Margarita kneeling and Aisha looking at her with a grim look on her face.

“...King of Elfrieden,” snarled Margarita. “Did you know what I was going to do?” She looked extremely frustrated as I approached.

“Yeah, kinda,” I said. “Someone tried the same thing in the world I came from.”

Although that had been in a movie. It was an old musical, but my grandpa had loved it, so I had seen it a bunch of times.

Margarita hung her head. “I see... If someone has tried it before, it’s little wonder I failed.”

I placed a hand on Margarita’s shoulder. “Despite being from the Amidonian military, you didn’t rely on brute force, and you had a wonderful singing voice. How about it? Why not try becoming a singer in our country for real? An R&B singer, maybe.”

“...You put me to shame with such kind words for a defeated soldier,” she said bitterly. “I’m not sure what this... arr and bee is, but given I have failed as a soldier, perhaps that would be fine.”

“Yeah, we can never have too many singers,” I said. “You’d be more than welcome.”

A troubled smile formed on Margarita’s tough-looking face. “...Let me think about it.”

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Margarita Wonder was hesitant at this point, but not long afterwards, she did make her debut as an R&B singer from Amidonia. Her powerful singing with that husky voice of hers mostly found support with middle-aged people.

Furthermore, with the larger-than-life personality she had cultivated on the battlefield, and the courage to rival any man’s, she took over hosting the program, eventually becoming a mainstay of the kingdom’s entertainment

industry.

Regardless, the curtain now fell on the highly-eventful first broadcast of the music program.



Intermission 1: Lord Ishizuka

“Okay... on to the next document,” I said.

Whether I was in the royal capital, Parnam, or the princely capital, Van, my work as king was always the same. I stayed in the governmental affairs office, poring over the documents Hakuya had prepared for me and signing off on them. Especially now, with the occupation of Van having begun so recently, my workload had increased.

Letting several days worth of work accumulate so that I could produce that music program hadn’t helped. Even as I worked day and night, using my Living Poltergeists to their fullest, the number of stacks of paper in front of me refused to decrease. In the end, I had ended up installing a bed in the governmental affairs office of Van, too, so that I could get back to work as soon as I woke up.

So, today, like every day, I had sat myself down at the desk the moment I got out of bed, and I was staring down a pile of papers as the morning sunlight streamed into the office.

“Isn’t it about time you got your own room?” Liscia asked from her position beside me, sounding a little exasperated. She had been helping me. “This castle has a lot of rooms.”

“I’m buried in work from dawn to dusk,” I said. “There’s not much point in having a room if I only go back there to sleep. Honestly... just when things had finally settled down in the kingdom, I ended up creating more work for myself by occupying Van. It’s like, to hell with the Labor Standards Act.”

“What kind of nonsense are you even talking about?” Liscia asked. “Come on, here’s the next document.”

“Yeah... Wait, this again?”

When I looked over the document she passed me, I slumped my shoulders.

It said, “The people of Van want to hold an outdoor music concert in the plaza. Is it okay for us to permit that?” I had already processed several similar petitions just today.

They were for concerts, plays, art exhibitions, calligraphy exhibitions, and circuses, among other things. It seemed that, after seeing that broadcast, the people of Van had awakened to the idea of expressing themselves through the arts. Yes, it was truly...

“A *renaissaaaance,*” I said, stretching out the word.

“...What’s up? That came out of nowhere,” Liscia said.

“...Nothing.”

Liscia looked at me kind of funny.

Yeah, if I was going to make her laugh by saying the word funny, I was probably going to have to introduce it to the local language first, I thought.

While the original Renaissance had come as a revival of Greek and Roman humanism as the influence of the Christian church had declined, this one would be a cultural revival that came from people celebrating the arts after being freed from militarism.

“But, still... I know fall is the season for art, but this awakening is way too sudden,” I commented.

To be honest, I’d have preferred not being swamped with an endless stream of requests for art and culture events. This city was technically under occupation, after all. If the events drew large crowds, it was possible that conspirators could gather there or they could be targeted by terrorists. I wished they’d put themselves in my shoes, as the guy who had to check thoroughly to make sure that wasn’t happening.

When she saw me holding my head in my hands, Liscia gave a wry smile. “You can’t blame them, really. It just means your broadcast had that much impact, right? It seems like this sort of stuff has been being suppressed pretty heavily up until now.”

“...I’ll bet,” I said. “I doubt a militarist state would let them express

themselves.”

Burning books for being slightly critical of the ruling regime, jailing people for singing songs that called for peace, publicly executing the head of a theater troupe for putting on a play that satirized the government... I thought. *They’d probably have done all of that without a second thought. This excitement I’m seeing is probably the recoil from that.*

“Though, thanks to that, my workload increases,” I said glumly.

“No grumbling,” said Liscia. “It’s better than them opposing us.”

“Well, yes, but... Maybe I’ll set up a bureau to handle events,” I said, inspiration striking. “If I put Margarita in charge of it, I could have her handle everything to do with entertainment.”

“That’s fine with me, but... you do the paperwork for it.”

“Oof...”

It looked like, struggle as I might, my workload wasn’t going to decrease.

Well, I’m the king, so I guess there’s no helping that, huh.

I worked into the afternoon, and just as I was feeling hungry and was saying to Liscia that we should break for lunch, the Minister for the Food Crisis, Poncho Ishizuka Panacotta, entered the room.

Poncho walked over to stand before me, his round belly shaking as he did, then gave a tense salute. “U-Um, Your Majesty, I was hoping I could have a moment of your time, yes.”

He was clearly anxious. He might not have looked impressive at the moment, but Poncho here had been instrumental in solving the food crisis, and he was a man I had hand-picked to work at my side, so he was a respected figure in the country.

That’s why I wish he’d get used to standing in front of me already... I thought.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Y-Yes! There is something I wanted to show you, sire, yes,” Poncho said, pulling something out of the bag he was carrying and placing it on the office

desk.

“You wanted to show us... a flower?” Liscia, who was watching us, said in confusion.

Poncho had pulled out a single flower. It looked similar to a lily. However, it had a toxic-looking combination of pink, yellow, and brown petals.

If this were a mushroom, that’d be a clear warning not to eat it, I thought.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Y-Yes! This is a flower called a ‘beguiling lily,’ yes.”

“Oh, okay, I know what a lily is,” I said. “But what’s so beguiling about it?”

“This flower’s pollen has a powerful hallucinogenic effect,” he explained. “It induces anyone who inhales it into a state similar to sleepwalking. It primarily grows in the mountains. Long ago, there was an incident where an army division inhaled it while marching. They fell off a cliff fleeing from enemies that didn’t even exist and were wiped out as a result.”

“Scary!” I exclaimed. *Is it like a non-controlled drug, or something like that?* “Wait, don’t bring that stuff in here!”

“I-It’s fine,” said Poncho. “I’ve already removed the pollen, yes.”

“...Really? Well, as long as you’re sure it’s safe,” I said.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Besides, the pollen from one or two won’t have any effect. If you try to approach a field where hundreds of them are growing, though, even covering your nose and mouth with a cloth won’t help... Yes.”

Well, yeah, short of wearing an air filtration mask, I doubt you can block out all of the pollen, I thought. *I’ve never had to deal with it myself, but the people with pollen allergies look like they have a hard time even with a mask on.*

“So, you wanted to show me this flower?” I prompted.

“No, the flower is merely a something of a bonus, sire. What I wanted you to see was this.” With those words, Poncho pulled out a small roundish object. This one was... a vegetable, perhaps? It was white, round, and lumpy, like scallion bulbs or cloves of garlic densely clumped together into something like a

pine cone.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Th-This is a beguiling lily rootstalk, yes.”

“The rootstalk...” I murmured. “Oh, lily root, huh!”

“Eek! ...What was that for, so suddenly?” My sudden outburst had surprised Liscia.

I’d been excited by the sudden and unexpected appearance of a luxury ingredient.

Hmm, so this is lily root, I thought. *I’ve seen a single piece as an ingredient in a bowl of* chawanmushi *before, but this is my first time seeing a whole bulb. It’s supposed to taste like potato, if I remember correctly.*

“...Well then, Poncho Ishizuka Paramedic,” I began.

“I-It’s Panacotta, yes.”

“Can you eat it?” I asked.

“Yes, of course you can. This root has no hallucinogenic effect, yes.”

“And, how does it taste?” I asked.

“If you steam them, they’re soft, flaky, and delicious. I might add, these beguiling lilies grow all over the mountains of Amidonia.”

That’s good to hear, I thought. *Lily root is rich in carbohydrates. It can be used as a staple food, like potatoes. If we could harvest these, it might lead to a breakthrough in solving the principality’s food crisis.*

“But with the pollen, you can’t go anywhere near where they grow, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” he agreed. “And if they aren’t harvested while they’re releasing pollen, toxicity builds up in their rootstalks. That’s why they aren’t customarily eaten in Amidonia, yes.”

“Well, that’s no good, then,” I said. “Even if they’re edible, if you can’t harvest them, then... Wait, huh? Then how’d you get this one here?”

When I asked that, Poncho pulled out a map and pointed to an area in the northeast of the Gran Chaos Empire.

“There is a people in the mountains of the Gran Chaos Empire who harvest the beguiling lily and use it as their staple food. They’ve developed a peculiar method of harvesting them, yes.”

“What is that method?” I asked.

“They use the *shoujou* for it, you see, yes.”

“The *shoujou*... They’re a type of orangutan, right?” I wondered aloud, to which Poncho nodded.

“Among the varieties of orangutan that live in the mountains, one species has a resistance to the effects of beguiling lily pollen. It seems these orangutans regularly dig up the rootstalks and eat them. The mountain people of the Empire have trained these orangutans to do the harvesting for them.”

I see, so like the cormorants used in cormorant fishing, huh, I thought. *Taming them would normally be the hard part, but... we have an expert in that field in our country.*

“Are those orangutans here in Amidonia, too?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It seems they live in the mountains near Van, too. I already have Tomoe negotiating with them for us. The *shoujou* are famous for their love of alcohol, so I suspect they’ll happily work for us if we give them a barrel once in a while in lieu of money, yes.”

“...It’s good to see that you work so quickly,” I said.

Not only do we have the Rhinosaurus Preserve, now we’re making the Van Ape Army, too, huh, I thought. *At this rate, I could turn Elfrieden into a literal animal kingdom. Ha ha ha...*

“...Hey, Liscia,” I said.

“What?” she asked.

“If you think this policy is too crazy, you’re welcome to stop it, okay?”

“...Don’t look to me to make that decision.”

Liscia turned away, refusing to have anything to do with this.

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One week (eight days) later, the food distributed in Van included a dumpling made with the root of the beguiling lily (lily root for short).

“We are distributing lily root dumplings here, yes,” said Poncho.

Poncho, the Minister for the Food Crisis himself, stood at the distribution site, personally handing out lily root dumpling soup to the people of Van. The food crisis had affected Amidonia deeply, so the people of Van lined up with pots in hand to take their soup ration home with them. In addition to the soup being distributed, there was also some on hand for tasting, and he was serving it to the people who had lined up for it.

“It really warms you up,” said one woman. “This is better than I expected.”

“The soup itself has a nice flavor to it,” another agreed. “I think it was called miso, right?”

“These dumplings, I bet they’d taste good fried, too, huh?” a third commented. “I’d love to try cooking them myself.”

As housewives of Van were talking, Poncho called out to them. “W-We have lily root dumplings that you can take home here, too. I would very much like for you to bring them back with you and let your family try them, yes.”

When Poncho held up a bag filled with lily root dumplings, a gleam flashed through housewives’ eyes. Then, before he knew it, Poncho was surrounded by the ladies.

“My, how considerate,” said one. “It’s a big help, young man.”

“You, you’re one of that king’s personal retainers, right?” another asked. “Do you already have someone special to you?”

“Ah. No, I haven’t even considered marriage...” The moment Poncho said that, clearly flustered, there was a gleam in the housewives’ eyes.

“Why, splendid! My daughter is a sweet girl, you know,” said one woman. “Maybe you’d like to take her off my hands?”

“Hey, no fair!” another protested. “If you take a wife, it should be my daughter! She has good birthing hips, like me, so I can promise she’ll give you a healthy baby!”

“If she went to live with a portly fellow like yourself, I wouldn’t have to worry about her going hungry,” another added.

...And, before he knew it, they were already trying to set Poncho up with a wife.

When they heard all the noise, some of the young ladies even volunteered themselves for the position.

“He’s one of the king’s favorites, isn’t he?” a young woman asked. “Sounds like a keeper to me.”

“It’s a chance to marry into money,” another agreed. “Yes, yes! Sign me up for that.”

The next thing he knew, Poncho was being swarmed by women young and old alike. Souma had just recently shown them that it was okay to express themselves, so the women were very forthright with their emotions. For Poncho, who was not used to this sort of attention, he had no idea what to do and was standing there nervously, when...

“What are you doing, Sir Poncho?”

...someone called out to him with a voice that wasn’t loud, but which carried well.

When the many women looked towards the voice, they saw a beautiful woman in a maid outfit with a ladle in her hand. Seeing the maid’s stunning beauty, the women gulped despite themselves.

Then, of all things, that maid walked over to Poncho, wrapping herself around his thick arm. “I’ve come here at His Majesty’s request to assist you with your work because you’re so shy, you know? Do you mean to slack off while I’m working for you?”

The moment after she said that, Serina cast a glance at the crowd of women. Serina wasn’t glaring at them, precisely, but they felt intimidated by her

beautiful face.

What's a beauty like her doing next to a tubby guy like him?! they thought.

They were even arm-in-arm. Could it be they were in a scandalous relationship?

Paying no mind to the women's feelings, Serina shot Poncho a meaningful glance. "Do be sure that you make this up to me later. I won't be satisfied with doing it just once tonight."

Whaa?! The ladies gasped at Serina's suggestive words.

By the way, the thing that Serina wasn't going to be satisfied only doing once that night was taste-testing Poncho's experimental dishes. Serina had become enraptured with the dishes Poncho made based on the B-grade cuisine from the world Souma came from. In other words, she was saying she wouldn't be satisfied taste-testing only one dish.

Poncho correctly understood what she meant, and he said, "Y-Yes! I will get right back to work, yes!" and returned to his job distributing food.

Serina gave an indifferent shrug, then turned and gave the women an elegant bow before following after Poncho.

The women could only watch as the two of them left, feeling like they had been tricked somehow.

...Well, while there were some troubles, the lily root dumplings were delicious both fried and boiled, which did a lot to calm and soothe the hearts of the occupied people.

The culture of eating lily roots spread to Van, and Poncho Ishizuka Panacotta, who had distributed the dumplings to them personally, became respected almost in a godlike way by the housewives of Van, who came to call him "Lord Ishizuka."

Perhaps, someday, he would have shrines built to worship him, like the Billiken.



Chapter 2: Meeting on a Street Corner in Van

Late in the 10th month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar — Princely Capital Van.

A little more than three weeks had passed since the army of the Elfrieden Kingdom had come to occupy Van, the capital of the Principality of Amidonia.

The people of Van had looked harshly on their conquerors when they'd first arrived. However, with Souma keeping a tight rein on his soldiers, public order had improved, and with the lily root dumplings being distributed, the people were no longer at risk of starvation. Their distrust of the soldiers was gradually fading as a result. The fact that the nobles and knights who would normally have worked to foment a rebellion had all fled the city likely helped, too.

An air of calm was beginning to take hold in the city.

Though, that said... while it would have been nice if it had been purely calm, it seemed that the music program Souma was broadcasting had the people of Van burning with a passion for the arts. On every street corner there were minstrels, street musicians, and street performers of all kinds plying their trades.

On top of that, there were those who wanted to repaint their homes to be more colorful, and even those who wanted to produce wall murals displaying the beautiful countenances of Juna and the loreleis, Chris the newscaster, and Aisha, who was known for her part in hosting the program. Things were beginning to get out of hand.

Who would have believed this had been the capital of a militaristic state merely one month ago?

Souma called this period of Van the Amidonian Renaissance.

Sudden changes were always fraught with confusion, and in Van there were daily conflicts over the best places to hold street performances. The Forbidden Army troops who had been left to occupy the city were sent out to mediate,

and the soldiers of the Army and Air Force who were camped outside the city looked on them with pity. Still, such disagreements never led to a major riot, and Van was more or less peaceful.

However, this day began with Aisha shouting noisily. “P-Princess!”

“Eek!” Liscia shrieked.

It was morning. Liscia had been getting dressed in the room she was using as her own when Aisha had barged in without so much as a knock at the door. It was so sudden that Liscia froze in surprise, but when she remembered she was in the middle of getting dressed, she continued putting on her uniform and asked, “Wh-What is it, Aisha? Why are you so flustered?”

“Th-That’s... His Majesty... His Majesty is...” Aisha sputtered. Perhaps because she was out of breath, she was having a hard time getting the words out.

“Calm down,” Liscia said. “Take a deep breath.”

“R-Right.” Aisha took a deep breath, as instructed. She swung her arms up and down in time with each heaving breath.

Once she was sure Aisha had calmed down, Liscia tried asking again. “So, what’s going on with Souma?”

“Right,” Aisha said. “I went to the governmental affairs office to greet His Majesty like usual this morning, but he wasn’t there. Instead, I found this note he left.” Aisha passed the piece of paper to Liscia.

Liscia took the piece of paper and read it over. It said, “I am going on a journey. Please, don’t look for me. - Souma Kazuya.”

Liscia pressed a hand to her temple and sighed, while Aisha returned to freaking out.

“Wh-Whatever shall we do? We must search for him at once!”

“I’m telling you, just calm down,” Liscia said. “Souma’s taking the day off.”

“Huh? A day off?” Aisha stared at her blankly.

“Right,” Liscia said, with a nod. “He’s with Tomoe. It looked like he’d been getting pretty close to the breaking point with his workload lately, so I

suggested he take some time off. I even cleared it with Hakuya. When I did that, Souma said, ‘Well, maybe I’ll just laze around in some room making dolls, then.’ It didn’t sound healthy, so I asked Tomoe to drag him outside for me.”

“I heard nothing of this!” Aisha exclaimed. “I am His Majesty’s bodyguard, you realize?! Why didn’t he take me with him?!”

When she saw Aisha with tears forming in her eyes, Liscia gave a shrug. “You stand out too much. This was a primarily human country, so dark elves stand out to begin with, and with your recent fame from the broadcast, you’re not exactly going to be able to keep a low profile.”

“This was enemy territory not that long ago, you know?!” Aisha complained. “If anything were to happen to His Majesty and Tomoe...”

“Have no fears,” Liscia assured her. “They’re in disguise, and Juna and a number of elite marines will be watching over them from the shadows this time.”

“Madam Juna is accompanying them, too? Well, in that case, he should be safe...” Aisha got that far before Juna’s mature smile flashed through her mind.

To Aisha, Juna was the ideal woman. Gorgeous, graceful, gentle... She would have given anything to be like her. However... setting that aside, when she imagined Juna’s smile, every instinct Aisha had as a woman began setting off alarm bells.

If we let our guards down, she’s going to run off with all the best parts, she thought.

“He will be safe... won’t he?” she asked.

“...”

In truth, Liscia had been thinking the same thing, so she had nothing to say in response.

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“The weather sure is nice today, huh, big brother?” Tomoe asked.

“It sure is, Tomoe,” I agreed.

I was on Van's shopping street walking hand-in-hand with my honorary little sister, the mystic wolf girl Tomoe. There had been a nigh lethal amount of administrative work to do lately, so Liscia, unable to watch me torment myself any longer, had suggested that I take my first day off since that time I'd patrolled the royal capital.

I figured if I had time off, I'd rather use it to laze around, like a father on vacation, but Liscia had said that was unhealthy and ordered little Tomoe to drag me into the castle town.

It was a place that had been enemy territory until just recently, so we were lightly disguised today. My facial features were supposedly similar to those of humans from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, so I was dressed like a traveler from there. I wore a traveling cape and conical straw hat, making me look like Kitakaze Kozou. Tomoe, meanwhile, wore a white robe with a hood, like a white mage from some game. Honestly, I'd wondered if it was worth the trouble of disguising ourselves to go out, but...

"Wowwie, there are so many different shops, big brother!"

...when I saw Tomoe so excited, nothing else mattered anymore.

"If you see one that catches your fancy, why don't we go inside?" I asked.

"Okay! ♪" she sang.

When Tomoe gave that energetic reply, I patted her on the head. The hair between her two wolf ears was fluffy and soft to the touch. It felt amazing. Ahh... So soothing.

I tried talking to the person who was on the opposite side of me from Tomoe, too. "Juna, are you okay with that?"

"Yes," Juna said, giving me a soft smile. "If it pleases you, Master Kazuya."

For this undercover vacation, instead of Aisha, I was supposed to have Juna and around ten of her marines watching over me from the shadows.

...Yes, from the shadows.

"Um, Juna? Why are you wrapping yourself around my arm?" I asked.

Juna had wrapped herself around the arm I wasn't using to pat Tomoe's head.

She was incredibly close. Right now, Juna was wearing a longsword on her back, with breastplate armor over top of her clothes. With her dressed up like a typical female adventurer, I didn't feel those voluptuous things pressed up against me. Still, I could feel Juna's warmth directly on my arm.

Juna seemed to see how flustered I was, and she flashed me a mischievous smile. "Oh, is it wrong for me to do this?"

"It's not a matter of right or wrong... Weren't you supposed to be protecting me from the shadows?" I asked.

"We're protecting you like we're supposed to," Juna said. "Right now, my elite marines are protecting you in the shadows. They're circling ahead of us to watch for any potential blind spots, too."

"No, but... isn't your face out there, too?" I protested.

The people of Amidonia should know Juna's face from the music program. Even if she wasn't as recognizable as the dark elf Aisha, Juna wasn't hiding her face at all right now. Wasn't someone going to notice her?

When I asked her that, Juna giggled. "It should be fine. I was wearing makeup then. I should have given off a very different impression."

Now that she mentioned it... Juna was only wearing the bare essentials of makeup today. Whenever she stood on stage or before the jewel as a lorelei, she must use charming makeup that would be recognizable from a distance. The Juna I saw now had a natural beauty, but just taking off her makeup made her look younger than usual. Right now, she actually looked her age.

"That's right," Juna said, as if reading my mind. "...The reason I look like a mature adult is because of that makeup, got it?"

"No, I'm pretty sure the way you act is part of it, too..." I said. "So it did bother you?"

"I *am* a girl, after all," she said. "Does it bother you linking arms with me, sire?"

Juna wore an expression that seemed somewhat uncertain. That face... She just wasn't playing fair.

“It’s not that it bothers me,” I said. “Bring it on.”

“Hee hee,” she giggled. “Thank you.”

“Whew... You sure are amazing, Juna,” Tomoe said. “I wish I could be like you.”

“...Don’t you think you’re fine just the way you are, Tomoe?” Juna said pointedly to the girl who was looking up at her with great respect. Tomoe was cute, and she might develop into a beauty like Juna as she grew up. Once she grew up and learned how to play games with men, it could be the birth of an incredible little tease.

While I was thinking about that, I ended up walking with Tomoe’s hand in mine, and Juna wrapped around my other arm. Nobody realized our true identities, but the jealous looks from passing men and the whispering of housewives trying to guess at the relationship between the three of us started to make my stomach hurt.

In order to distract myself from it, I tried talking to Juna. “Well... Where to? Unlike in Parnam, Van doesn’t have much in it, so there aren’t many places I want to go patrol.”

“When you’re out on the town on your day off, I don’t know that you should be thinking of it as patrolling.” Juna laughed wryly at my workaholic thought process.

Sorry for being so work-obsessed, I thought.

Then, Juna took a peek over at Tomoe before whispering in my ear, “How about giving Tomoe some new clothes as a present? Since she’s your honorary little sister, you can call it a gift between family.”

“Ohh, there’s an idea.”

Now that she mentioned it, ever since I’d accepted Tomoe as my little sister (though, technically, she was Liscia’s adopted little sister and my future sister-in-law), I had been busy with administrative work and hadn’t been able to act like a proper big brother. Tomoe had been working hard on negotiating with the rhinosauruses and *shoujou*, so it might be nice to spoil her rotten today.

“Juna, do you know a good place for that?” I asked.

“I’ve done my research,” she said. “Leave it to me.” She placed her hand on her chest, bowing slightly.

Juna recommended a clothing store on a street corner.

The little sign out front had words meaning “The Silver Deer” written on it in a stylish font. From what was on display in the show window, it looked like it dealt not just in clothing, but in shoes and apparel, too. It was hard to judge with my untrained eyes, but the products on display all appeared to be of high quality. It was very much a high-class shop. The sort of place a guy like me, who had always bought his clothes on sale from the major retailers, would never come to.

Incidentally, ever since coming to this country, I had worn whatever I could provide myself or we already had on hand. Lately, the work I’d done creating and maintaining the Little Musashibo dolls had improved my sewing skills, so I was making everything but my underwear myself. I technically had what would be considered a highly-paid position, so I could afford to make custom orders, but I had no interest in indulging myself with luxuries now. The shirt and pants I had on under this traveling cape, as well as the hooded robe that Tomoe was wearing—both of them had been made by me.

“You can even make stuff like this. You’re amazing, big brother,” Tomoe said.

When Tomoe showered me with that look of respect, I could feel my head swelling with pride. “I can’t buy the clothes I was used to wearing in my own world here, after all. Though I’m doing it half as a hobby,” I said to hide my embarrassment, then looked to The Silver Deer. “Still, this is a surprise. A stylish store like this in Amidonia, of all places.”

“I hear it originally dealt in men’s clothing and apparel,” said Juna. “After that broadcast, when women started dressing up, they began stocking clothing and accessories for women as well.”

It seemed their selection changed in response to customer demand.

“Still, it’s quite a selection, don’t you think?” I asked. “Where do you suppose they order it all from?”

“There are trade guilds,” said Juna. “While they may not be able to do much about food, which is in short supply, the guild can arrange for them to buy any other kind of goods. For the merchants, Elfrieden and Amidonia are both sources of goods and also valued customers.”

“How crafty...”

Of course, it was those crafty merchants who maintained the balance of supply and demand... but that was neither here nor there, and I figured we shouldn’t loiter out front forever.

“Well, how about we head inside?” I asked.

When I went inside, gesturing for the two of them to follow, a man with ash gray hair who was dressed like a bartender was arranging products on the shelves. He seemed like the sort of middle-aged gentleman that the aroma of black tea would suit well. When he noticed us, he stood with his feet together, brought a hand to his breast, and then bowed. “Welcome. Are you travelers, perhaps?”

“Ah... Erm...” I stuttered a bit. While revealing my true identity was out of the question, how was I to explain the combination of a man in a conical straw hat, a beautiful female adventurer, and a wolf girl in a white hood? While I was wracking my brains to come up with something, Juna stepped forward.

“Yes. These two personages come from a kingdom in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. They are Kazuya, the heir to a crêpe fabric merchant in the Echigo Kingdom, and his younger sister Tomoe. I am their humble servant, Silvia. Master Kazuya will one day inherit the family business, and so we are traveling across many countries to broaden his horizons.”

She was very eloquent.

Nice work, Juna, I thought. *And, wait, I’m impressed you actually remembered my nonsense backstory about being the heir to a crêpe fabric merchant in the Echigo Kingdom. Even I had completely forgotten that backstory. Also, who is Silvia supposed to be?*

The middle-aged man didn’t show any particular interest. “I see,” he said with a gentle nod. “I apologize for taking so long to introduce myself. I am Sebastian,

the proprietor of this establishment.”

With that name, are you sure you aren’t the butler, rather than the proprietor? I thought for a moment, but I reminded myself that not all Sebastians have to be butlers.

Smiling, Sebastian asked, “And what may I help you with today?”

“Well... do you have anything that would look good on my little sister here?” I asked,

“Whuh?!” Tomoe reacted with surprise.

I put my hand on top of her head, patting her from over top of her hood. “Well, that’s how it is, so if you see anything you like, let me know, okay?”

“Um... But...”

“It’s fine. Let me act like a proper big brother every once in a while.”

With those words, I pushed Tomoe off towards Juna.

Juna nodded to me, taking Tomoe by the hand and going to look at the wares on display. Tomoe was stiff at first, but she was a girl. As she looked at the different items with Juna, I could feel her gradually getting into shopping.

Now, this left me as a man with little to do. I enjoyed watching the beautiful woman and little girl enjoying themselves shopping for a while, but I got tired of just waiting, and wandered around the store myself.

They had clothing, shoes, accessories, and even makeup. There was a really wide selection of items here. Truly, it was the 109 of Amidonia... Well, not that I’d ever been to 109, or even to Shibuya, for that matter. Perhaps because the women of Van had begun awakening to fashion, more than eighty percent of the sales floor was devoted to women’s products. This shop had supposedly catered only to men before, but now it had coats for them, and that was about it.

As I was looking around, I found a number of products that interested me.

The first was lipstick. It was a color lighter than light pink.

The second was a hair accessory. It was made with gold and little stones,

making it seem like a quality piece, but it had a ladybug motif, making it seem incongruously childish.

The third was a choker. It was made of blue leather with silver foil scattered around like stars. The clasp was made of gold, with a design like a bird spreading its wings.

They all looked good.

Then, finally... the last thing that caught my eye was a pair of tiny loafers meant for a young girl. They had clips with a ribbon motif on them, and were absolutely adorable.

These loafers... I think they might look perfect on Tomoe, I thought.

“Hey, Tomo—”

“Master Kazuya.”

Just as I was about to call out to them, Sebastian stopped me. I turned around, thinking it suspicious, and Sebastian said, “Pardon me for the sudden interruption,” with a bow. “There was something I’ve been wanting to ask you, Master Kazuya. Would that be acceptable?”

“...What is it?” I asked.

“Let us suppose that, on the battlefield, the generals had gathered for a war council.”

...What? Battlefield? War council? Why’s he bringing this up all of a sudden? I thought.

“Let us also suppose that the first idea brought up at that war council was a good one. If you were the supreme commander of that army, would you immediately adopt that idea?”

“...I wouldn’t,” I said. “I’d think there might be better ideas.”

“Precisely,” he said. “That is why, if you were one of the generals, and you wished to have your idea adopted, rather than submit it at once, you should wait until the council comes to an impasse.”

“I see... I see...”

“What I mean to say is, the games played between men and women are also a battle.”

“...Ah,” I said. “I get you.”

I finally understood what Sebastian was trying to say. He was saying I should wait a little longer before pushing the loafers I thought would look good on Tomoe.

That was fair enough, because Juna and Tomoe were enjoying looking through the other products. If I brought them something good now, it would be like pouring a bucket of cold water on them when they were having a good time. If they chose to go with it, their fun time would end, and if they choose not to, it’d be awkward for me. Neither of those was what they wanted.

I was deeply grateful for Sebastian’s consideration. “You, sir, are a wonderful tactician.”

“I am honored by your praise.” Sebastian placed his right hand on his belly, respectfully bowing to me. It was a theatrical gesture, but it was smoothly delivered, so it didn’t offend me.

Then, something occurred to me.

“By the way, you just used a war council analogy...” Could he be aware of our true identities? I brought it up because I thought he might be, but Sebastian hurriedly shook his head.

“Oh, my... Pardon me for that. Until just the other day, I had only dealt with the nobility, you see. I can’t seem to break the habit. If I offended you somehow, I apologize. I have a regular customer who is fond of such banter.”

“...No, it’s no big deal,” I said. “Is that regular of yours a soldier?”

“No, no, more like an adorable little tanuki,” Sebastian said.

A little tanuki, huh. Between the proprietor I couldn’t get a read on, and this person he called a little tanuki... I was intrigued. But, setting that aside for now, I bought a few things quietly so that the other two wouldn’t notice. After that, I waited for the two of them to finish looking things over, then recommended those cute loafers to Tomoe. Tomoe was hesitant to accept, as I expected she

might be, but she seemed like she liked them, so I half-forced them on her as a present.

Tomoe held the box with the loafers in it tight to her chest. “Th-Thank you... big brother... I’ll treasure them...”

As she said that, tears formed in her eyes, so I patted her head gently. Maybe now we’d been able to act a little like brother and sister. If I thought about it, the only ones I’d been able to call family before were my grandparents. But now there was Liscia, there was Tomoe, and there were Aisha and Juna.

...Yeah, it’s nice being able to feel connected to people. As I patted my little sister’s head, that thought really began to sink in for me.

Juna was standing next to us, watching with a smile.

“Ah, Juna,” I said. “Hold on a second.”

It was just past noon when we left Sebastian’s store. While we were on the move, looking for some place to maybe get lunch, I had Juna stop for a second.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

I handed Juna a little bag as she looked at me quizzically. “I wanted to give this to you.”

“To me?”

Juna accepted it, opening it up, and inside was that ladybug shaped accessory. It was one of the ones I’d secretly bought earlier.

“Huh?!” she cried. “Um, what is...”

“You’re always doing so much for me,” I said. “It’s my way of saying thanks.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly accept something like this. I don’t have the right...”

“Pass it here.” I took the ladybug from Juna, fixing it in her hair.

Yep, it looked just like I’d imagined it would. It was far too childish a design for the usual mature Juna, but when the younger-looking Juna of today wore it, she looked like a young girl trying a little too hard to be mature. It was cute.

“It really suits you, Juna,” I said.

“Ohh...”

When I acted like I was the more mature one, Juna uncharacteristically blushed. I felt like I’d finally won a small victory over her, the one who always seemed more mature. Juna whipped her head to the side and looked away.

“Sire. If you are going to give presents to women, make sure you give them to the princess and anyone else simultaneously. In your position, you’ll probably end up taking multiple wives. If that happens, you can’t play favorites. You have to either love all of them equally, or accept that marriage is just another political tool and love none of them. Anyway, not causing discord between the women in your life is another of your duties, okay?”

Juna spoke rapidly, trying to distract me. That she spoke so much was proof of her embarrassment.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I have something for Liscia and Aisha, too.”

When it came to accessories, Liscia tended to prefer ones she could wear in battle over ones that were just pretty. I’d chosen the blue leather choker for her because it was stylish, yet wouldn’t get in the way. For Aisha, who, like Juna, was always helping me out, I planned to give her that lipstick I found which would go well with that healthy brown skin of hers. While hosting the music program, it seemed like she’d been worried about how feminine she was.

“So you don’t need to worry about that,” I explained.

“I-Is that a fact...?” she asked.

“It is. And by the way, Juna?”

“...What is it?” she asked.

“It’s not ‘sire,’ it’s ‘Master Kazuya,’ remember?”

“Ah...”

For a little while now, Juna had been calling me “sire” instead of “Master Kazuya.” It looked like when she started talking fast at me, she really was trying to hide her embarrassment.

Juna had a sullen look on her red face. “Master Kazuya... is a surprisingly big bully.”

“Is he now?” I asked.

“Yes. And quite the ladies’ man,” she said, wrapping herself around my arm again. Even more tightly than last time.

Over my shoulder I could see Juna’s embarrassed smile, with that hair piece shining above it.

“Wow... there are lots of little shops out, big brother!” Tomoe cried gleefully, seeing all the street stalls lined up in the plaza.

In our search for a place to get lunch, Juna had led us to the plaza with the Jewel Voice Broadcast receiver. This place had been an open field only a month ago, but now it was packed with stalls selling food and assorted goods. We had only just set foot in the plaza, but we could already hear the owners of stalls calling in customers, and customers haggling for a better deal.

The faces in the crowd were diverse, too. Housewives were here to buy ingredients for dinner. A group of craftsmen was here for lunch. Even off-duty soldiers from the kingdom’s forces were here to buy snacks.

Must be from the Army, I thought to myself. The Army and Air Force soldiers camped outside were allowed to enter the city when they were off duty.

I could also see a large number of non-humans who looked like travelers or adventurers. Race, job, nationality... none of it mattered here. It was one big hodgepodge of people of all ages and genders.

“...How did it end up like this?” I wondered.

“Thanks to Sir Poncho, Van’s food crisis has been alleviated considerably, but only so many people can produce food good enough to support a restaurant,” Juna explained. “However, the people who think they can manage a food stall gather here. This is the largest marketplace in all of Van now.”

“In an out-of-the-way place like this?” I asked. “Wouldn’t they be better off on the main street?”

“It’s because the receiver for the Jewel Voice Broadcast is here.”

“Oh, I get it...”

Ever since that music program had aired, as a test, we had been broadcasting

Chris Tachyon's news program during the day and the singing program at night. The customers hadn't gathered because there were stalls here; the stalls had gathered because there were people here waiting to watch the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

It's kind of like the black market in post-war Japan, I thought. *Maybe it'll end up like Ameyoko someday.*

Juna and the loreleis only appeared on the music program on weekends. On every other day of the week, we ran a program where contestants hoping to become loreleis competed. The Jewel Voice Broadcast was always live, so if the loreleis had been the only ones who ever appeared on the program, it would have put too much stress on them.

If anyone who appeared on that contest program was deemed to have a gift for singing, they could be newly instated as a singer like Margarita, or, if they were attractive, a lorelei. If they were male, they could debut as one of the new class of male idols: the singing knights, orpheuses.

The program was simulcast in two countries, Elfrieden and Amidonia, and it could be seen in any city where there was a receiver. The reaction might be different in Amidonia, or the cities in Elfrieden might be reacting similarly to this.

I'll need to estimate the economic impact of this later, I thought with a grin. That was when Tomoe pulled on my coat.

"Big brother, I'm hungry," she said.

"Oh, right," Juna said. "Well, how about we get something from one of the stalls?"

"Yeah! ♪" Tomoe sang.

"Then that's what we'll do," said Juna.

The three of us looked around the different stalls. Forty percent of the stalls sold food, twenty percent sold various accessories, twenty percent sold equipment, while the remainder dealt in other things.

It looked like a lot of the food stalls were selling skewers. Van was a long way

from the sea, so they could only get their hands on river fish, and with the food crisis, grains and vegetables were in short supply. For meat, on the other hand, all they had to do was hunt wild animals.

They were likely selling meat that had been hunted outside the city walls. Because of that, none of the stalls openly stated what kind of meat they were selling. This was worse than them mislabeling their meat to sell it at a higher price; it was a total mystery what creatures any of it came from.

“It feels like a gamble buying any of the skewers...” I muttered.

Horned rabbit meat, I could probably handle, but giant rat and lizard meat, well... I think my sanity stat would take some serious loss from eating that. Besides, if they had just hunted whatever they could get their hand on from the nearby fields, there was no telling what diseases or parasites it might have. There were no food sanitation laws in this world, and none of the cooks were licensed.

I’ll need to institute all of that, too, eventually... I thought.

“It’s fine,” Juna said with a *very lovely smile.* “I had the marines come here ahead of us and serve as poison tasters. Allow me to guide you to a safe stall.”

“Poison tasters?! Not taste testers?!”

“If anything were to happen to you, it would be a national crisis,” she said. “It’s only natural that we would test anything from the market for poison. Your body is no longer yours alone, you know?”

What, am I pregnant now? I wanted to quip, but I got what she was trying to say. I didn’t know if I’d be able to use Living Poltergeists if I was sick from food poisoning. If I couldn’t, that would mean the country’s administration would be short several instances of me.

...Yeah, it looked like poison tasters were going to be a necessity, for my people’s sake. I’d just have to accept it.

“And? What was the result of the poison tasting?” I asked.

“One person complained of stomach pain and dropped out.”

“Dispatch a messenger to the castle!” I exclaimed. “Whenever a dish including

meat or fish is sold, the ingredients must be listed in the store! Inform them that if they fail to do so, or if there is an error in the ingredients displayed, their business will be shut down!”

“Understood.” Juna sent one of the marines who were guarding us to run off that message to the castle.

This was the moment the Elfrieden Kingdom saw the beginnings of its first food safety law.

I intended to expand the range of things that required their ingredients be posted in due time, but before that, I wanted to clamp down on meat fraud. If there were bacteria or parasites, it could be a matter of life and death.

“O, fallen marines,” I mourned. “I will not let your deaths be in vain.”

“No, they’re not dead. It’s just food poisoning,” Juna said, rolling her eyes.

No, no, even food poisoning can be a matter of life and death, I’ll have you know, I thought. Once, my grandfather had eaten some raw eggs that were past their expiration date. He got salmonella, and was hospitalized for days. Fortunately, it wasn’t too serious, but his refusal to throw out a few eggs that were ten yen apiece had cost him tens of thousands of yen in hospital fees. Grandma had teased him about that for a good long time.

Well, setting that aside for now, we bought our skewers from a place Juna suggested, along with some mixed juice from a fruit seller, and sat down on a simple bench to eat.

Tomoe chomped right down on her skewer. “Yeah, this is delicious, big brother.”

“Yeah. This meat is pretty good,” I agreed.

“The juice is delicious, too, Master Kazuya,” said Juna.

The meat was nice and juicy. It wasn’t that far off from the beef skewers that were sold at festivals, so I asked what meat it was. It turned out it was from a bigbull, a big, buffalo-like animal.

The juice wasn’t chilled, but it was getting to be late in autumn now, so it didn’t feel too warm. It was a bit sour, but that was refreshing after eating the

greasy meat skewer. With our stomachs now full, we took a breather and relaxed for a bit.

Tomoe started nodding off next to me, so I decided to let her have a nap. Tomoe rested her head in my lap, she curled into a ball, and her breathing became shallow. When I petted her head, it was silky smooth, like a real dog's fur.

"Hee hee, isn't she just the cutest?" Juna said as she peered at Tomoe's sleeping face. Then, moving in close enough that our shoulders touched, she quietly whispered with a sad look on her face, "I hope these peaceful days last forever..."

"Please don't go saying things that trip event flags like that," I said. "You know that can't happen, right?"

Juna nodded. "The Imperial Army is almost here. They number nearly 50,000."

"50,000? That's fewer than I thought," I said.

We had a force of 45,000 troops from the Elfrieden Royal Army gathered in Van now, so our forces were more or less equal. Of course, once Amidonia's troops were added into the equation, they'd no doubt had the superior force, but I had expected them to come with three times our number.

For the Gran Chaos Empire, which had called for mankind to unite against the threat of the Demon Lord's Domain, I highly doubted that they wanted to open a new front against us, but if they'd brought enough troops to make it possible for them to take Van, it would have worked to intimidate us.

And yet, Juna shook her head. "Most likely, the Amidonians were hesitant to allow that. They must have been worried that if the Empire came with a huge army, there was a risk they'd take this country for themselves."

"As the country that issued the Mankind Declaration, I somehow doubt the Empire would do that, though, you know?" I said.

If they said they wouldn't recognize any changes in borders on one hand, and then launched a war of invasion on the other, the Mankind Declaration wouldn't be worth the paper it was written on. If that happened, they would

lose the trust of the countries in their alliance, and the Empire's strategy of uniting mankind in the face of the Demon Lord's Domain would collapse.

"I mean, that's exactly why the Empire offered to mediate," I added.

"Amidonia has already circumvented the Mankind Declaration," said Juna. "Having betrayed the trust of the Empire themselves, they may be nervous about being betrayed in turn."

"...Like being caught in their own web of lies, huh."

They had been caught in their own trap. The principality had acted against the wishes of the Empire, but they had to cling to its authority now that they had found themselves in a crisis. They must have felt somewhat guilty about that.

On top of that, nobody respects opportunists, so they had lost the trust of other countries. They had to be trembling with fear that the Empire would abandon them.

"It makes you want to roll your eyes a bit... but it's convenient for us," I said. "If there's a rift between the principality and the Empire, there may be room for us to act."

"Hee hee hee, it's time for our king to show off his skills," said Juna.

"...I wish you wouldn't put so much pressure on me, you know?" I asked.

"Oh, my, and here I thought you were Master Kazuya right now?" she responded playfully.

She probably wanted to get back at me for earlier. That was Juna for you—just when you thought you had a leg up on her, she'd turn things back around.

"Good day, everyone. It's time for News Elfrieden."

Then, suddenly, we heard Chris Tachyon's voice.

It looked like it was time for the afternoon news broadcast. When I looked up, the image of Chris reading out the news was displayed on the mist in the air.

Wow... So this is what our broadcasts look like to the people in town, I

thought. This was my first time seeing it on one of the fountain receivers. With the screen being as big as a movie theater's, it made quite an impact.

"Now, our first story of the day. The new coastal city under construction in Eastern Elfrieden, Venetinova, is currently nearing completion. With Venetinova in place, shipping by land and sea will become more efficient, allow for the faster delivery of commodities to..."

This news would had been gathered from all around the Elfrieden Kingdom (which included Van), using messenger kuis like the one Aisha used to stay in contact with the God-Protected Forest. (Messenger kuis were birds, like messenger pigeons. Using their homing instinct and their ability to detect the waves emitted by their master at long distances, they allowed a specific individual and location to contact each other.) Their strength was that even mountain villages that didn't receive Jewel Voice Broadcasts could still receive information. However, unlike the Jewel Voice Broadcast, which could communicate information in real time, that information would come a day or two late.

For instance, if an incident occurred in Lagoon City in the far northeast of Elfrieden, the information wouldn't be directly delivered to Van. Instead, it would wait for the kuis that carried news to each city at regular intervals. Then, when the kui carried the news to another city, other kuis would leave that city to bring the news to other cities. The kuis had to fly long distances, so this was to protect against communication being cut off if a kui was attacked by a predator en route. By the way, urgent news would be delivered not by messenger kui, but by wyvern riders.

Because of that, it wasn't possible to deliver all the news that happened in a day on that same day.

"Now, onto our next story. In the early hours of yesterday morning, a minor fire broke out in Van..."

From there, Chris reported the various accidents and incidents that had occurred in the kingdom, followed by information on how to cook lily root dumplings and other useful information for people's daily lives.

As for myself, I thought it would be convenient if we could incorporate a weather forecast into the program, but that seemed like it would be quite difficult. There was a certain amount of weather lore in this world, and there were people who could predict the weather by reading the clouds based off many long years of experience. However, as I just mentioned, without a high-speed means of communication, we couldn't transmit that information in real time.

News about typhoons can be a matter of life and death, so I'd like to figure out something... I thought.

As I was thinking about that, I heard a sudden sigh.

"To think they'd use the Jewel Voice Broadcast like this..."

In front of me, a girl dressed like an adventurer stood with her back facing me. She stood with her back straight, her airy golden ponytail swaying behind her. For a moment, I thought she looked a lot like Liscia, but this girl had her hair tied back in a higher position, and Liscia's hair was medium-short now. The girl turned to show me her pretty face in profile.

"We absolutely must implement this system in our country," she said. "When I return, I'll draw up a proposal for it. Still, just how would you come up with such an advanced idea?"

She asked me that with a straight face.

What's this, out of nowhere? I was thinking, when Juna stood up beside me. Then she placed herself between the girl and me.

"Juna?" I asked.

"Be careful," Juna cautioned as she stood there to protect me. She had a grim look on her face, and it was apparent from her tone of voice that she was worried. "This girl is an accomplished warrior. It's regrettable that Aisha isn't here. Even if I were ready to die taking her down, I don't know that I could stop her..."

“Is she that strong?” I asked.

Seeing the cautious reaction from Juna, the girl with the ponytail grinned. “You needn’t worry, I have no hostile intent, Lorelei Juna Doma.”

Juna inhaled sharply. “You know me...”

“Of course,” she said. “I approached you because I’m aware of who you are. We have agents of our own, after all.”

That means she knows who I am, too, huh, I thought.

She must have planned to make contact here knowing that I would be coming in disguise. This had happened because the establishment of an intelligence corps for the kingdom had been delayed by my doubts in the personnel I had to run it.

But, if she says she has no hostile intent...

“You’re with the Empire?” I asked.

“Yes,” the girl said, bringing a hand to her chest and bowing her head. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sir Souma Kazuya. I am the younger sister of Empress Maria Euphoria of the Gran Chaos Empire, and the one who handles military affairs in her stead, Jeanne Euphoria.”

I whispered to Juna, “What happened to our guards?”

“It seems she has guards of her own, so they can’t move,” answered Juna.

“That would be why she came alone, huh,” I said. “...Take care of Tomoe for me.”

I left Tomoe, who was groggy from being suddenly shaken awake, with Juna and stood facing Jeanne Euphoria. She had been in the reports I’d received. There was a princess who handled military affairs under the Saint of the Empire, Empress Maria Euphoria; and, as Maria was currently unwed, she was also the first in the line of succession. This must be her sister, I reasoned.

“Does Madam Maria’s younger sister have some business in our country?” I asked.

I made a point of talking down to her. Because our country hadn’t signed the

Mankind Declaration, I didn't have to pay respects to Empress Maria as my leader. In other words, as both of us were leaders of independent nations, my rank was equal to Maria's. And seeing as Jeanne was the younger sister of the empress, her rank was that of a vassal, and so I was above her. I had no desire to put on airs with my own vassals, but when dealing with foreigners, it was important that our positions be made clear.

Jeanne responded as if that were perfectly natural. "No particular business. I simply wished to see how the person I'll be negotiating with rules for myself, but my agents received information that you would be sneaking into the castle town today, so I thought I might as well come introduce myself."

So she hadn't originally planned to meet me. She'd just happened to learn I was taking a day off while she was here, so she'd attempted to make contact.

"Still, it was quite bold of you to come into Van while we're occupying it," I said.

"I'm the type that only believes what she's seen with her own two eyes, after all," Jeanne replied. "The rumors about you have reached as far as the Empire, many of them unsubstantiated, so I wanted to find out for myself."

Rumors? There are rumors about me in the Empire? I thought.

"What sort of rumors would those be?" I asked.

"They say things like: you're 'the brilliant ruler who rescued an economy on the brink of collapse,' or that you 'invented ways of preparing foods that there had been no custom of eating before and saved the country from a food crisis,' or that you 'demonstrated unparalleled strength in battle, mowing down swarms of enemies one after another'... and more."

"There's been a lot of embellishment along the way, huh," I commented.

Not one of those things had been accomplished by my strength alone. The economic restructuring had been the bureaucrats' hard work, and gathering the ingredients and teaching us how to prepare them had been Poncho's accomplishment. As for the war, I'd only set the armies in motion, then left the fighting to stronger people. In the end, if you were to name one thing I'd done, "I delegated tasks to people who could handle them" would be it.

“Oh, and there were rumors that you were an ‘insatiable sex fiend,’ too,” Jeanne added.

“Wait, hold on!”

Who’re you calling a sex fiend?!

“Where did those rumors come from?!” I exclaimed.

“The rumor says: ‘Despite being betrothed to the beautiful daughter of the former king, he gathered beauties from around the kingdom to select a concubine,’ or something like that. Is Madam Juna here not the one chosen to be your concubine?”

What a horrible misunderstanding! They must have been talking about the Elfrieden Pretty Girl Grand Prix I’d run as part of my search for talented personnel. When I’d said I was searching for people with any gift, there had been a lot of applications in the fields of martial arts, beauty, and arts. All I’d done was create a tournament format for them to compete in.

I hadn’t even come up with the plan for Project Lorelei at that point. Come to think of it, at the time there had been rumors that “The beauty tournament might be for the king to find mistresses,” and the nobles had all tried to send their relatives to participate. Had other countries seen it the same way?

“A-A concubine, am I...? Well, yes, I did know there were rumors to that effect,” Juna said, her face turning red.

Was she serious?

I hadn’t known there were rumors like that... and it was kind of hard to accept it. Ever since I had taken the throne, I had been struggling under such a murderous workload that even my relations with Liscia had stayed completely chaste. Actually, it was a bit late to say this now, but my relationship with Liscia had skipped over a lot of important steps, hadn’t it? We were betrothed to be married, and yet we hadn’t even been on a proper date, let alone kissed.

While I was thinking about all that, Jeanne looked at me pensively. “Hm... If that rumor was false, I suppose I can’t use that method.”

“What method?” I asked.

“Well, if you were a lecherous king, I thought if I had my gorgeous sister welcome you and ask really nicely, you might accept our requests quite easily.”

“What were you planning to make the Saint of the Empire do?!” I yelped.

“It seems my sister is not overly fond of that ‘saint’ title, but... maybe men find her being a ‘saint’ quite appealing?” she asked.

“Well... I can sort of see that,” I said. “The Saint of the Empire, Maria”... The words themselves had an incredible impact. For one thing, if a woman is being called a saint, it makes you want to see her. It raises the expectation that she’s beautiful and noble.

...Wait, I had that title of “hero,” too, now that I thought about it. Even though I’d been summoned as a hero from another world, I hadn’t done anything particularly heroic, so I’d totally forgotten.

“Titles, hm?” Juna asked. “Do you think they find ‘lorelei’ appealing, too?”

“Why are you getting in on this, Juna?!” I cried.

“Oh, no... I just wondered...”

Jeanne giggled. “Hee hee! You’re more fun than I thought you’d be.”

Jeanne was watching us banter with a smile.

“We’re not doing it because we want to amuse you, though,” I said.

“No, no, the closeness between you and your vassals is a mark of the stability in your country, I’m sure,” she said. “We couldn’t get away with that back home.”

“...It’s different in the Empire?” I asked.

“Our territory is needlessly large, and the empress’s power is great,” said Jeanne. “They call her a saint and half-worship her, so everyone is very reserved around her. About the only people she has that she can talk with casually are our family. On top of that, my sister takes being an empress entirely too seriously, so she tries to treat everyone equally, which leaves her in a position where she can’t open up to anyone.”

Jeanne shrugged her shoulders and looked at the crowd in the plaza.

“It was the same with this. Even though there’s no benefit to us in helping Amidonia after they ignored the Mankind Declaration...”

“For the younger sister of Madam Maria, with all the ideals she tries to uphold, you take an awfully realistic perspective,” I said.

“If the elder sister is a dreamer, the younger needs to be firmly grounded,” Jeanne said with a wry smile.

Hm... It felt like Jeanne was closer to my way of thinking than Maria. Instead of embracing lofty ideals, she was the sort who could come up with pragmatic solutions.

When you hold up ideals, people gather around you. However, if you hold up those ideals for too long, sooner or later, you lose your path. Someone has to be there to keep an eye on the ground in front of you. Having the more realistic Jeanne by her side must have been what let Maria keep holding up her ideals.

The Empire had the largest population on the continent. I didn’t know how many extremely talented people they had there, but in terms of relative numbers, they must have had far more than my country.

Jeanne pointed to image of Chris projected in the air above us. “By the way, that’s an incredible way of using the Jewel Voice Broadcast. By releasing information regularly, you use it to help alleviate the fears of your people. Do you mind if we do the same back home?”

“...Do as you please,” I said.

I mean, it wasn’t like it would be hard to imitate. It wasn’t something I could forbid her from doing, either.

“Thank you,” said Jeanne. “How do you come up with such advanced ideas?”

“This is advanced?” I asked. “It was pretty normal in the world I came from.”

“The world you came from... Of course.” Jeanne’s smile suddenly vanished.

As I was wondering what was up, Jeanne straightened her posture and bowed deeply. She bent over until her hips were at a right angle. It was a deep enough bow that, if the custom existed in this world, she might have done a formal kowtow instead.

I was befuddled by her suddenly lower profile. “Wh-What’s wrong? This is so sudden.”

“You’ve been horribly inconvenienced because of us,” said Jeanne. “In my absent sister’s place, I apologize.”

“You’re apologizing?” I asked, startled.

When Jeanne raised her face, she bore a pained expression. “This is about the hero summoning. It was our request that caused the Elfrieden Kingdom to summon you to this world. My sister Maria deeply regrets that you, who had done us no wrong, were cut off from your homeland and called to this world. Please, forgive us.”

With those words, Jeanne lowered her head once more.

...*Oh, is that all?* I thought.

“Raise your head. It’s all in the past.”

“But...” she said.

“Yeah, at first, I was mad, and I worked my hardest not to get turned over to the Empire,” I said. “Now, though... when I think about it more calmly, the Empire has no reason to want a hero.”

At first, I thought they’d wanted a hero to fight back against the threat of the Demon Lord’s Domain, but the more I came to understand this world, the more I realized that probably hadn’t been it.

Right now, the Demon Lord’s Domain had stopped expanding. The expansion of the border meant that the monsters that came south were spread further, and the various countries could handle them. It was a stalemate; with neither side able to push forward, the situation was more or less stable.

In other words, the Empire wasn’t in a situation where it would want a hero. A superpower like the Empire had had no need to cling to a summoning ritual that the kingdom itself wouldn’t have been sure they could pull off in the first place.

Besides, when they’d summoned a hero, they’d gotten *me.*

While a guy who could use incredible magic with power comparable to a

weapon of mass destruction would be one thing, or a guy who could equip invincible sword and armor, a guy from another world with a power that happened to make administrative tasks a little easier wasn't going to be of any interest to the Empire with its massive population and the large number of personnel it had as a result.

However, that being the case, the Empire had asked the kingdom to perform the hero summoning. After considering the matter with Hakuya for some time, we had come to a certain conclusion. It was...

"That was an attempt to show consideration, right?" I asked. "Towards a kingdom that couldn't pay the war subsidies."

Jeanne reacted with startled surprise. "...Yes," she said with resignation.

...I knew it.

In the Mankind Declaration, which the Empire had proposed, it said, "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."

The Empire had wanted the Elfrieden Kingdom, as a country that was distant from the Demon Lord's Domain, to provide support to the countries adjacent to it. If they hadn't, there would have been complaints from the other signatories to the Mankind Declaration.

However, at the time, with the food crisis and financial crisis slowly pushing the kingdom to the point of collapse, it would have been nearly impossible to find the money for war subsidies.

"That's why the Empire had the kingdom perform the hero summoning, to give them the appearance of having provided support," I said. "In order to keep down the complaints from the other signatories."

"...That's exactly it," said Jeanne.

"Hold on," Juna protested. "This country never signed the Mankind Declaration. Were we ever obligated to provide support to begin with?"

I shook my head. "It's a fact that this country was benefiting from the defensive wall the Empire built with the Mankind Declaration. Because we have

the Union of Eastern Nations to the north of us, we didn't have to share a border with the Demon Lord's Domain." It was also a fact that the Union of Eastern Nations was being propped up by war subsidies under the Mankind Declaration. "If we benefit from it, but refuse to fulfill the obligations set out under it because we're a non-signatory, that's going to breed resentment from the signatory countries. With that as a pretext, Amidonia might have been able to create an alliance of several nations to invade the kingdom. With the Empire taking the lead."

"No..." Juna said, at a loss for words, but this was the truth.

In the recent war, because the only nation plotting to invade had been the Principality of Amidonia, we had been able to induce them to do so under conditions that were favorable to us, and defeat them.

From Amidonia's perspective, I was sure they'd wanted to make all of the land they occupied their own, but if they had roped in the mercenary state Zem, the Republic of Turgis, and some portion of the Union of Eastern Nations, along with the Imperial Army, there would have been nothing the kingdom could have done to avoid a total collapse.

I looked Jeanne straight in the eye and said, "With your goal of uniting all mankind to prepare for the menace of the Demon Lord's Domain, the Empire wanted to avoid that. That's why you demanded war subsidies from non-signatories, and for those that couldn't pay, you tried to find a workable substitute to appease the signatories, right? In the kingdom's case, that was a hero."

"...I have no words," said Jeanne.

"To be brutally honest, the Empire didn't even expect the hero summoning to work, did it?" I asked. "Okay, this being a world with magic, you might have thought they'd summon *something*, but you can't have had high expectations for something the kingdom itself didn't think would work. Even if the summoning had failed, you would have been satisfied by the fact it was performed."

"That's right. But, as a result of that, you were summoned," Jeanne said, looking troubled. "What's more, ever since you were summoned here and given

the throne by Sir Albert, you've worked actively to rebuild this country, even finding the money to provide war subsidies. While my sister was grateful, she also regretted forcing such a heavy burden on you when you were called here at our convenience. We truly are sorry."

Jeanne bowed once more.

I sighed, saying, "I already told you, it's in the past. Now that I now the situation, I don't resent you for it. It's not like I don't have a lingering attachment to my old world, but... but..."

I glanced from Juna, with a tense look on her face, to Tomoe.

There was nobody left who would wait for me to come home in my old world. Since coming to this world, I had found people here who would. Whenever I returned to the castle, Liscia, Aisha, Juna, and Tomoe would be there to say, "Welcome home." Having felt the loneliness of solitude, that was something I never wanted to lose again.

"I've found people here I want to protect," I said simply. "That's why I'm not too hung up over it. Mind you, if you feel bad enough about it that you'll recognize my sovereignty over Van, I'm not gonna complain."

When I said that jokingly, Jeanne raised her face quietly shook her head. "...Sadly, I, too, have a family to protect."

Neither of us averted our gaze. We each looked the other straight in the eye.

"I see... well, we'll have to *negotiate*, then," I said.

"Yes," Jeanne said. "Please, go easy on me when the time comes."

With an "I'll take my leave," Jeanne turned her back and faded into the crowd. She vanished as quickly as she had appeared.

"The presences I felt surrounding us have vanished, too," Juna commented. "It looks like Jeanne's bodyguards have withdrawn."

"She really did just come to say hello, huh..." I looked in the direction Jeanne had left. "Jeanne Euphoria... the pragmatic younger sister who supports the idealistic saint."

If it had only been Amidonia's crown prince, Julius, I'd have to contend with, I

felt there was no way I could have lost at the negotiations. But with Jeanne mediating, I wouldn't be able to rely too much on his weaknesses. If I tried to get too crafty and they saw through it, there was the risk that they might turn things to his advantage by pointing it out.

I'll have to let Hakuya know he's going to need to give his all at the negotiations, too...

I slapped my cheeks, trying to psyche myself up for it.

That evening...

"Liscia, Aisha," I said. "I brought souvenirs for you two."

Having returned to the castle, I gave Liscia and Aisha the gifts I'd bought for them. Liscia got that choker made of blue leather with silver foil scattered around like stars, while Aisha got the pale lipstick.

Liscia immediately put the choker around her neck, fingering the bird clasp with a satisfied smile. "Thanks, Souma. I'll treasure it."

The slightly shy smile wasn't like Liscia, and I couldn't help but stare at her, enthralled.

Whew, I was relieved that she liked it. It suited her well, and I was glad I'd bought it.

Meanwhile, Aisha...

"Ohhhh, Your Majesty! To think you would bestow a gift even on one such as me, I am awed and delighted! When you left me behind, I felt down, but this has lifted my spirits as high as the heavens!"

"W-Well, good for you... Aisha..." Juna said.

"Yes, Madam Juna! With this lipstick, I swear I will polish my femininity! Then, His Majesty will never let me leave his side... heh heh heh."

"G-Good luck with that..."

Aisha was a little too thrilled. The happy aura beaming from her entire body seemed to be enough to seriously weird Juna out. Juna, by the way, was also

wearing the hair piece I'd given her.

"Sire! Sire!" cried Aisha. "How is it? Does it look good on me?"

Aisha put on her lipstick and started acting flirty right away. If Aisha hadn't been a dark elf, and she had been a mystic wolf like Tomoe instead, her tail would have been wagging like crazy.

When she saw how overexuberant Aisha was, Liscia traced the outline of her choker with one finger, looking to me. "Don't you think the collar would have been a better match for Aisha?"

"...Let me go with 'no comment' on that one," I said.



Chapter 3: Negotiations

20th day, 10th month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar — Van Castle

“Now then... Here I come, sire!” Aisha cried.

“Bring it on, Aisha!” I called back.

We were in the training grounds inside Van Castle. In this space, which was open to the sky like an archery range in Japan, I stood facing a fully armed Aisha. In her usual light armor, Aisha took up a stance with her greatsword pointed towards me. I had medium-sized Little Musashibo dolls (the ones that were toy-sized were small, while the ones large enough to fit a person were large), five of those medium-sized dolls (hereafter referred to as A-E) protecting me.

In the corner of my vision, I saw the referee, Liscia, raise her right hand.

The next moment, Aisha made a big downwards swing with her greatsword. A visible shockwave flew towards me and the Little Musashibos.

I put Little Musashibo A (equipped with shields in both hands) up front, having it ready its shields. The moment the shockwave hit, there was an incredible clang, but somehow Little Musashibo A managed to hold its ground.

“It’s not done yet!” Aisha called.

There was no time for relief. Aisha turned to the side, keeping the blade of her greatsword pointed in my direction, and then thrust with all her might. Little Musashibo A tried to overlap its shield to defend, but Aisha’s blow hit with the force of a battering ram, punching through both of the shields and Little Musashibo A.

Uwah... She can punch through two thick shields...? I was nearly struck dumb by the absurd amount of power she had, but then Aisha stopped moving momentarily.

Thinking this was my chance, I sent Little Musashibo B (equipped with two swords) and Little Musashibo C (equipped with a spear) around to attack her from both sides.

Aisha stabbed her greatsword, which was still impaling Little Musashibo A, into the ground, using it to fling herself into the air, like she was doing a cartwheel.

Aisha was standing on her hands atop the hilt of her greatsword.

“There!” I cried.

With the remaining two Little Musashibos, D and E (both equipped with crossbows), I took a shot at Aisha, who presumably couldn’t maneuver with her feet off the ground. The two bolts fired straight towards Aisha.

“Not good enough!” Aisha called.

On top of the greatsword thrust into the ground, Aisha did something similar to one of those capoeira kicks where you stand on your hands (I don’t know the proper name for them), spinning her feet and kicking the incoming bolts out of the air.

“Ow!” I called.

With a *splat* sound, a light impact on my forehead that knocked my head backwards.

In the middle of my forehead there was a smushed ball of clay about the size of a 10 yen coin. If it had instead been a throwing knife, or a stone, I’d have died instantly.

Well, this being a practice match, the bolts didn’t have arrowheads, and we were using clay instead of stones, so neither of us could possibly have died, but still, losing this badly was depressing...

I sat down dejectedly.

“Aw, geez... I’m not even a match for you, huh,” I said.

“Th-That’s not true...” Aisha stuttered, hastily trying to reassure me.

“Aisha, an accurate analysis of his fighting strength is important, so you should be honest with him,” said Liscia.

She was right. I was searching for a fighting style that suited me. As king, I was in a position to be protected, but it wouldn’t hurt to be able to protect myself, if it ever came to it. I’d had a narrow miss with Gaius in the battle a little while ago, after all.

“Liscia’s right,” I said. “Give it to me straight.”

“W-Well, then... it may seem harsh to say this, but even though you set up your dolls like an adventuring party, they didn’t feel all that strong,” Aisha said. “I feel as though giving them each two swords and having them rush me would have been more difficult to deal with.”

I considered that. “Pi*min tactics, huh... but you still blew them all away when I did that, didn’t you?”

“Which means what you did was even worse than that, I suppose?” said Liscia.

“Urgh...”

When Liscia pointed that out, I slumped my shoulders. Since Pik*in tactics wouldn’t work, I’d tried using a composition based on an adventuring party, like Juno’s, the one I’d gone adventuring with using Little Musashibo, but... the result had been a miserable defeat.

“In an adventuring party, they’d have a mage, after all,” Aisha said without seeming to care too much. “If those shields had been reinforced with magic, I would’ve had difficulty punching through them, and if I’d had spells flung at me instead of arrows, it would have been more difficult to respond to.”

That she said it would have been “difficult” for her, rather than that she “couldn’t” do either of those things, only served to show how ridiculously powerful Aisha was.

“We can talk about mages all you want, but I can’t use elemental magic or reinforcement magic...” I said. I couldn’t use any magic whatsoever, so there was no way I could use it to give the weapons carried by the dolls I controlled with Living Poltergeists an elemental alignment and make them shoot fire or

ice.

“If I went to a magic school, or some place like that, to train, could I learn how, maybe?” I said.

“No, not possible.” Liscia quickly shot down the idea. “I mean, I’ve never heard of someone with dark-type magic being able to use another element.”

She proceeded to explain.

“The four major elements, fire, water, earth, and wind, manipulate magicium found in the atmosphere to produce various phenomena, and the light element interferes with magicium inside the body to do things like speed up the natural healing process, or strengthen the body. The dark element doesn’t have any sort of ability like that. So... just give up.”

It looked like I could train all I wanted, but I’d never become a mage.

This, after I had the good luck to be summoned to a world with magic, too... somehow, I’m disappointed. I slumped my shoulders dejectedly.

“What’re you moping about?” Liscia asked, with an exasperated look. “The dark alignment isn’t that common, you know? I’ve only ever seen three people with it.”

“Three?” I asked. “Assuming two of the three are Tomoe and me... who’s the third?”

“Mother, or so I hear. She’s been never willing to tell me what her power is, though.”

Hmm... Lady Elisha can use dark magic, huh, I thought. *Lady Elisha is Liscia’s mother. If I recall, Lady Elisha was the one who actually inherited the throne, but she left managing the country to her husband, Sir Albert, right? We haven’t had much occasion to talk, but she’s always smiling and seems like an amiable sort.*

“But with the abilities I have, I can’t see any way to defend myself...” I said.

“Rest at ease, sire! I will always be there to defend you!” declared Aisha, thumping her chest with pride. While she seemed reliable, I was starting to feel pathetic myself.

“It’s pretty lame for a hero to need girls defending him...” I said.

“What are you saying after all this time?” Liscia said bluntly. “You were never much of a hero to begin with.”

I mean, she was right... but couldn’t she have sugar-coated it just a wee bit more? I was thinking she could have, but then she said, “Besides, isn’t delegating the tasks that you can’t handle yourself one of your strengths, Souma? You’re protecting all of us in ways that only you can.” She smiled tenderly.

Aisha nodded in agreement. “The princess is right! You protect the country we all live in, sire, so let us protect you in turn!”

When they said it like that, I still felt pathetic, but I was a little happy. *I might be an unreliable king, and a hero in name only, but I just need to protect them in my own way... no, I* want *to protect them.* I felt that way from the bottom of my heart.

“Your Majesty!” a voice called out, and I turned to see Juna in her marine uniform bowing to me with one hand at her chest.

“Sire Hakuya has been looking for you,” said Juna. “He wishes to discuss the districting of the city, he says.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll be right there.”

I stood up and brushed the dirt off of myself. Leaving the clean-up to the soldiers, I brought Liscia and Aisha with me to the governmental affairs office. It was time for me to do what I was able to do now.

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When I reached the governmental affairs office, Hakuya and the Captain of the Royal Guard, Ludwin, were waiting for me.

I sat at my desk, while Liscia, who had been acting as my secretary for a while, and Juna, who had been doing the same because we had a shortage of people lately, stood behind me, on either side. Aisha stood by the door, acting as a guard. Lately, it had become the norm for us to work in this formation.

Once I confirmed everyone was ready, a somewhat sleepy-eyed Hakuya laid out a map of the divisions of Van that he had prepared. “I have completed my

proposal for the redistricting of Van, so I will have you take a look."

At Hakuya's behest, I looked at the map. The square walls of city were vertical, while lines representing the main roads were running towards the princely palace in the center. Each of these main roads had side roads running off of them at a right angle in regular intervals, giving it a grid of squares, like a Go board. It was like a map of one of the ancient capitals of Japan, Heijo-kyo or Heian-kyo, that you might see in a history textbook.

The nobles' residences were clustered in the northeast, while the workshops were clustered in the southwest. Garrisons for the guards were distributed evenly throughout, and it looked super efficient.

I was silent. I leaned back in my chair, looking up to the ceiling, and sighed. "...Hakuya."

"Yes, sire," he said.

"This goes too far," I said.

What's with this efficiency-focused layout? I thought.

Ane san rokkaku tako nishiki... I felt like I needed to chant the Kyoto road song, or I was going to get lost.

Actually, if we're going to change so much, it'd be faster burning the entire castle town to the ground and starting from scratch, I thought. *Are you trying to turn me into Emperor Nero?*

"I'm sorry," Hakuya said. "When I saw what a chaotic mess the town layout was, I was impelled to make it more efficient..."

Hakuya seemed to understand that what I'd meant. He smiled wryly and pointed to the main streets. "However, as a measure against fires, the city must be split into districts. Laying down these main roads is a necessity, I would think."

"I agree, but... for everything else, I'd like the changes to reflect the will of the people who live here," I said. "What sort of city they want to make this, how they want to make it more livable for them. I want the people who live here to think about that. I mean, if we just decide everything ourselves, they'll probably

resist it.”

“I have already reached out to some of the architects who live here, but... you want to make the locals think?” Hakuya asked skeptically. “With the atmosphere in the city now, they’re likely to turn it into a piece of avant-garde art...”

“An artful city, huh... that could be interesting in its own way,” I said. *It might be good to try building art galleries and museums, too.*

...Wait, huh? The marketplace already looks like it’s going to turn into something like Ameyoko. If I build a bunch of galleries and museums on top of that, I feel like Van is going to end up more and more like Ueno. Maybe I ought to build a zoo and call it a day.

If I borrowed Tomoe’s power, it would be easy to accomplish. I could already recreate Monkey Mountain.

However, Hakuya shook his head. “Van will be the city on our front line with Amidonia. At this juncture, we cannot allow them to have too much fun with its design.”

“...I suppose not,” I said. *We can’t count on an artistically-designed city to be particularly defensible, after all. In that case, I guess we’ll have to maintain Van’s function as a military city, while making it easier to live in.*

“I guess that’s how it has to be,” I said. “Take things in that direction, please.”

“Understood.” Hakuya bowed and left the room. Next, I turned to Ludwin.

“How is progress on rolling out the transportation network?”

“Sir,” he said. “The Army and your directly-controlled forces in the Forbidden Army are making every effort to realize that goal. A highway from Van into the kingdom’s territory has been completed, and we are beginning work laying road to the smaller nearby villages that are presently under our control. Also... we’ve built eight bridges over the rivers, but...”

“But what?” I pressed. The man was sounding evasive.

Ludwin gave me a look like he didn’t understand what I meant. “Sir. Right now, is there any reason for rolling out a transportation network for Van? I

understand the importance of setting up military supply routes, yes. However, if we build roads and bridges to the smaller cities around Van during a time when the Empire doesn't acknowledge our sovereignty here, won't it have been pointless when we're pushed to hand it back?"

"That's right... of course, I'm sure the Empire will request the return of Van," said Liscia. "It's a bit galling to think that Julius and his lot will use the roads and bridges that we build." She furrowed her brow.

"That will not be the case." Hakuya immediately rejected Liscia's opinion. "Even if we return Van and Crown Prince Julius returns here, he will never use infrastructure built by the kingdom. If anything, he will work to eliminate all traces of the kingdom's influence from Van. He can't afford to keep them out of convenience, as they might ingrain a fondness for the kingdom into the people of Van."

"Me, I'd use whatever I could, Amidonian or not," I said.

"Hee hee, I'm sure you would, sire," Juna piped in with a smile. "You used that female commander with the husky voice as a singer, didn't you?"

"Oh, you mean Margarita Wonder," I said. "She was a good find."

I had hired Margarita as only a singer initially, but lately she'd been hosting the amateur singing competition, too. Making full use of the grit that had let her rise to become a commander in this patriarchal country despite being a woman, the way she spoke frankly, even to men, was making her popular with women all over.

Oh, I got off track there. Let's forget Margarita and focus on Julius and his followers for now.

"I know..." I said. "If that's what's going to happen, let's try messing with them a bit."

"Messing with them?" Liscia asked.

"We'll put our names on the bridges," I said. "There were eight of them, yeah? Well, we'll carve the names Souma Bridge, Liscia Bridge, Albert Bridge, Hakuya Bridge, Ludwin Bridge, Poncho Ishizuka Bridge, and Aisha Bridge into their railings. If the bridges themselves say 'This bridge was built thanks to the

Elfrieden Kingdom,' the anti-kingdom faction is sure to bust them up, don't you think?"

"...You can be a real piece of work, you know that, Souma?" Liscia said with a sigh, half impressed, half aghast.

However, because there were no objections, this idea was carried out as proposed. Also, so that it wouldn't matter if they were destroyed, we confirmed that they should be built only to be sturdy, not fancy.

That was everything that needed to be sorted out for the time being. Once we had seen Ludwin and Hakuya leave the room with the plans and policies we had just decided on, Liscia asked me, "If the Empire demands we return Van, do you still think it would be difficult to refuse?"

I could only nod in response to that question. "Well, yeah... I have no intention of changing my overall plan, but I can't see us being able to strong-arm Madam Jeanne. It would be a huge loss of face for the Empire. We don't have the power to fight it out with them right now, So if the Empire sees us as hostile to them, that would be a diplomatic failure."

"You were saying you met Jeanne Euphoria, right?" Liscia asked. "Is it true? That the hero summoning was their way of showing some consideration to our country?"

I said, "Yeah, kinda."

"When did you realize that?" she asked.

"When I heard Empress Maria was called a saint," I said. "I figured anyone being called a saint wouldn't do anything too improper. That said, from what Madam Jeanne told me, Madam Maria isn't overly fond having that title."

"You trusted in the title?" Liscia asked.

"People adopt titles because they're convenient," I said. "And because they're convenient, they'll try to maintain them, too."

In a nation like the Empire which covered a vast swathe of territory and incorporated many people of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, a title like "saint" must have been useful for accumulating power. Because it let her hoist

the flag of a united human resistance in response to the threat from the Demon Lord's Domain. That was why Maria had chosen to act like a saint, continuing to carry a title she didn't care for.

"Interpreting the Empire's request in a positive light, and taking all of that into account, it would probably be something like that... I figured," I said.

Not that I could have been sure until I'd talked to Jeanne. But after talking to Jeanne, I was certain.

The Gran Chaos Empire wasn't an evil empire, like the ones that show up in stories, or even a prideful superpower. They were *just another powerful country*, desperately trying to maintain themselves.

"That's why we can't let our guards down," I said. "When facing an earnest opponent, there's no room for carelessness or pride."

"True," said Liscia. "We need to face this with resolution."

Liscia and I both nodded, grave looks on our faces.

I would be tomorrow that Jeanne Euphoria would come, accompanying Julius, Crown Prince of Amidonia, as an envoy to negotiate the return of their territory.

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21st day, 10th month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar — The Walls of Van

"Oh, what a view! What a view!" I cried.

Looking down from the castle walls, there were a little over 50,000 troops from the Elfrieden Army in formation around Van. Opposite them were, at a rough estimate, over 50,000 troops of the Imperial Army in formation, with roughly 5,000 more from the Amidonian army next to them, for a combined total of somewhere around 60,000. There were an even greater number of troops here than during the last engagement.

"Is this the time to be impressed? What if that army attacks us?" Liscia asked exasperatedly. She was standing beside me.

"There's pretty much no question that we would lose," I said, then looked over at Hakuya, who was also standing beside me. "Yeah?"

“Indeed, that is correct,” he said with a nod. “In number of troops, number of commanders, equipment, training, morale... no matter which of those you choose to look at, our country is behind the Empire in all of them. If it comes to war, our forces stand no chance of winning.”

The flow of war is said to be decided by the heavens, earth, and people. That is to say, the temporal advantage of heaven, the territorial advantage of the earth, and the harmonious unity between people.

The temporal advantage lay with the Empire, lead proponent of the Mankind Declaration, while the territorial advantage lay with the forces of the principality. If I were asked whether the kingdom had a harmonious unity that could stand against those two, I would have had to say no. It had not been long since the Army and Air Force had pledged allegiance to me, so while they might be motivated to fight the Amidonian invaders, it would be difficult to maintain their morale against the far superior Imperial forces.

In short, we were not superior to the combined forces of the Empire and Amidonia in any of those three categories.

“I wish we could have at least had the equipment advantage...” I said.

One type of troop the Imperial force had that I could see from here was rhinosauruses carrying cannons. I had heard of rhinosauruses being used as siege weapons, but it seemed the Empire was using them as mobile artillery platforms.

In fact, I’d had the same idea, but before we could load cannons onto the rhinosauruses, they needed to be trained not to startle when they heard the sound of them firing. Our rhinosauruses had been gathered with Tomoe’s negotiation skills, so with no timetable for when the training could be done, that plan had been shelved.

It was frustrating to see that a type of troop I’d come up with was already being used by the Empire, but, well, it was something a military amateur would be able to come up with a little thinking. If there was a demand for them, most ideas like that would have been put to practical use already.

Well, anyway, with things as they were, we couldn’t fight.

I'd never intended to fight to begin with, but if we'd been in a position where we could, it would have been one more card on the negotiating table. Put the other way around, the force spread out before my eyes which could easily defeat us was a card in the other side's hand.

While I'd known this would happen, it was still a tough situation to be in.

"Sire, there is a type of troop I am unfamiliar with," Aisha, who was surveying the enemy forces from a distance, said.

"A troop type you're unfamiliar with?" I asked.

"There is a group clad all in black full-plate armor!" she declared.

"All in black?" I asked. "...Wait, wow, I'm amazed you can see that." The people looked as small as grains of rice from this distance.

"Dark elves have good eyes!" Aisha puffed up her chest with pride. "That black armored group are carrying rather long weapons of some sort."

"That is most likely the 'Magic Armor Corps,' I believe," Hakuya explained.

Now there was an unfamiliar word.

"Magic Armor Corps?" I asked.

"You could call them the anti-magic version of the heavy pikeman, I suppose," said Hakuya. "That black armor endlessly produces a barrier that blocks any and every type of magic. When they form ranks and advance, it's said that every step they take is another step that the Empire's territory expands. They are the treasure of the Empire, which is fiercely proud of them."

Hrm... if I recall, pikemen are a unit with long spears meant to be used against cavalry, right? I thought. *My knowledge comes from playing war simulation games, but they're a troop type that forms up a phalanx against charging cavalry, sticks out their spears, and counters the charge. If I recall, they can stop cavalry, whose mobility is their life. Depending on the situation, I think they can be a powerful type of troop, but because theirs is primarily a waiting tactic, they can be hard to use well.*

"Even if they can negate magic, are they really a treasure?" I asked.

Hakuya looked at me with dismay, then in turn asked me, "Do you remember

the reason why gunpowder weapons never developed on this continent?”

“Since magic is more powerful and has better range, they weren’t necessary, right?” I said. “That’s why the only cannons developed were for use at sea, where magic is weaker, or for during a siege, where they can still do good work.”

“Yes,” said Hakuya. “There is also the fact that the skins of creatures living on this continent are hard and tough, so an ordinary gunpowder weapon couldn’t even hurt them.”

In other words, the fact that they couldn’t use them for hunting was another reason gunpowder weapons had never developed.

If people here had developed the rifle, which increased the penetrating power of the bullet by spinning it, things might have been different. However, that was an invention that had come about because the musket (Japan’s *hinawaju* matchlock was equivalent to the early musket), which simply fired a bullet, had already spread. They didn’t have the basis for that research to happen.

Just as I was thinking that maybe I should develop the rifle for them, Hakuya said, “On top of that, we have attachable spells in this world. Some defensive items are better than others, but they have a spell that reduces damage attached to them. The reverse is also true, and a weapon will normally have a spell attached that increases its damage to break through that defense.”

“What the heck?” I said. “It sounds like a game of whack-a-mole...”

“With all due respect, I believe that is the way technology advances,” said Hakuya. “And for the spells attached to weapons and armor, the greater the item’s mass, the more powerful they can be. In other words, in this world, the bullet is weaker than the arrow and the arrow is weaker than the spear.”

Does that mean that even if I develop the rifle, the tiny bullets won’t have much power behind them? I thought. *A unit of riflemen is sounding less and less practical. Well, I don’t want to turn this country into a gun society, so I don’t really mind.*

Hakuya continued, “In a world like this, there is a group on which magic and

bombing by wyverns does not work, cavalry charges cannot get past, and because they are human-sized, they cannot be targeted with cannons. This group in black armor slowly advances forward. From their enemies' perspective..."

"...that'd be mildly horrifying, yeah," I said. "They'd look like the armies of Hell."

In an open field battle, they're probably invincible, I thought. *If I could fight in somewhere like a hill or swamp with bad footing, or if I could lure them somewhere with loads of traps and break their formation then surround them...*

But these ideas all relied on me fighting a defensive battle. It was difficult for the attacker to choose where to fight. In that sense, I could see why they talked about their every step expanding the territory of the Empire.

"Besides, the Empire has other powerful units in addition to the Magic Armor Corps," Liscia said, glaring out towards the enemy. "They have the griffon knights, which rival not just wyvern cavalry, but dragon knights in power. They have a unit of mages that overwhelmingly outnumbers and outclasses ours. They have a combat-trained unit of rhinosauruses. If we're fighting the Imperial Army, it means taking all of those on at once."

Why, yes... yes, it would, I realized. The enemy had more than just the Magic Armor Corps.

It was the shallow thinking of an amateur that had let me believe that if I could pick the location of the battle, I could win.

"...We really are no match for the Empire, huh?" I said.

"Souma..." Liscia looked concerned, so I gave her a smile.

"It's not going to happen yet," I told her. "Eventually, I'll build this into a country that can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with them."

I clapped my hands, giving the signal.

"Now then, how about we go and welcome Madam Jeanne?"

They were in the audience hall in Van.

In this space, with colors and decorations much more ostentatious than those

in Parnam, the younger sister of Empress Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire, Jeanne Euphoria, and the eldest son of Sovereign Prince of Amidonia Gaius VIII, Julius, stood on a carpet several steps below where I sat on the throne.

So this young man was Julius. He looked to be in his mid-twenties—a beautiful man with calculating genius, like Hakuya, but Julius came off as even colder. He seemed to be suppressing his emotions, but in his eyes I could see his enmity towards me flickering like a pale blue flame.

In contrast, Jeanne was truly magnificent. This was enemy territory for her, so the courage she had shown in coming here with no bodyguards, only Julius in tow, deeply impressed me.

As we greeted these two, we were arrayed with Liscia and Hakuya on either side of me, Aisha behind me diagonally, standing by as a bodyguard.

Seeing that, Jeanne cocked her head to the side. “This is a surprise. I had expected our meeting to have a large number of soldiers watching.”

“If I brought too many soldiers to the meeting, it would only make you two uneasy, wouldn’t it?” I asked.

“I see,” she said. “You’re a courageous one.”

Jeanne said it as if she was impressed, but inside, I was smiling wryly.

It was just that I had read a historical chronicle (whether it was *Records of the Grand Historian,* or *Romance of the Three Kingdoms,* I don’t remember) in which a certain ruler had welcomed an enemy envoy with an attitude similar to Jeanne’s. That envoy had said things like, “Is it a show of respect in your country to place so many troops with you just to meet with one person?” and “Or are you a coward who doesn’t feel safe without his soldiers protecting him?” It had humiliated that ruler, and I’d just happened to remember it, but... I decided not to let Jeanne in on that fact.

“Of course, with that one behind you, you must feel quite safe.” Jeanne perceptively looked at Aisha. Perhaps it was because they shared something in common as warriors, but she had accurately judged Aisha’s ability. “She’s a fine warrior, I can tell. I would ask for a match with her, but it might prove difficult for me to win. You have a fine vassal, Sir Souma.”

“...Thanks,” I said.

There was no way for me to tell how serious she was with her praise, but judging from how tense Aisha looked, Jeanne was not to be underestimated as a warrior, either.

“You, as well,” I went on. “It’s very courageous of you to face the king of another nation without bringing an entourage of guards. Did you not worry that I might have you assassinated here?”

“I have come as an envoy of peace,” Jeanne smiled. “Why should I need fear I would come to harm?”

I could tell she was quite the actor. She might not have guards with her openly, but perhaps covert operatives had slipped in to keep watch over her. Even now, somewhere we couldn’t see, they might be competing fiercely against Juna and her marines.

Next, I looked at Julius. “This is our first time meeting. I am Souma Kazuya.”

“...I am the Sovereign Prince of Amidonia, Julius.”

Not hiding the hostility in his eyes, Julius gave himself that title. He must have inherited it on the death of Gaius VIII. With us occupying Van, he likely hadn’t been formally crowned yet, but I (as a provisional king) was in the same boat, so I didn’t point it out.

“Now then, let’s hear why the two of you are here,” I said.

Julius immediately opened his mouth. “Let me get straight to the point. I want you to return Van at once.”

“Sir Julius...” Jeanne looked troubled by his outburst, but Julius continued, not caring.

“Our nation is signatory to the Mankind Declaration. In the text of the agreement, it says, ‘The moving of national borders by force will be deemed inadmissible.’ The Elfrieden Kingdom has occupied Van by means of force. As such, in accordance with the declaration, I have come here with Madam Jeanne, an envoy dispatched by the Gran Chaos Empire, to seek the return of Van and the surrounding area.”

“That sounds awfully selfish.” I rested my elbows on the arms of the throne and my cheeks on my palms, glaring down at Julius. “You started this by invading Elfrieden first. First you attempt to expand by force, and then, when you lose, you turn to the Mankind Declaration for protection, clinging to the power of the Empire to seek the return of your territory. Don’t you think that’s pathetic?”

“The decision to invade Elfrieden was one my father, Gaius, made on his own,” Julius said stiffly.

“You accompanied him on the campaign, so you share in his crime,” I said. “Besides, before we start negotiating the return of your territory, isn’t an apology for invading my country in order?”

“Urkh...”

“Sir Julius,” said Jeanne. “Sir Souma is right. We are in the position of requesting that he return your land. We have to start with you showing your sincerity.”

Julius seemed deeply mortified by the thought, but with his one lifeline, Jeanne, pressing him to do it, he grudgingly, ever so grudgingly, bowed his head. “...While the invasion of your country was solely the decision of our former ruler, Gaius, it was my own lack of virtue that kept me from stopping him. Allow me to apologize for that.”

It didn’t sound like much of an apology, but it seemed it was all that could be expected.

Julius continued to speak. “However, it is your country that is now infringing on our borders. As signatories to the Mankind Declaration, it is our right to request that the Empire work to return our territory to us.”

“...So says Julius, but what’s the Empire’s take on it?” I asked, turning the conversation over to Jeanne.

She shrugged. “The Empire would prefer not to help Amidonia, who are really only getting what they deserve... but, as signatories to the Mankind Declaration, we have no choice but to respond to their request.”

“Basically, you are saying that the Empire will request that we return all

occupied territories, including Van?" I asked.

"That would be what it means, yes."

Yeah, I thought. *I figured the Empire would take that position. It's a little irritating seeing Julius act as if it was a matter of course that they would, but this is all within the range of what I expected. So, let me give them the answer I expected to give, too.*

"I refuse."

"Wha...?!" Jeanne gasped.

Julius was at a loss for words momentarily. Maybe he hadn't expected such a clear rejection. However, he immediately rallied and took on a furious expression, saying, "Are you sane?! Thinking to defy the Mankind Declaration!"

"My intention isn't to defy the Mankind Declaration," I said. "However, I can't abide the way Amidonia does things. First you invade Elfrieden territory, and then when we launch a counter-invasion, you whine about us changing the border by force. That doesn't stand up to reason."

"That's... It was all decided by the former ruler Gaius, on his own..." Julius sputtered.

"That's pure sophism, and you know it, don't you?" I asked.

Julius seemed at a loss for what to say, at first, but then he responded, "Say what you will, it will not change the fact that the people of my country are living under your occupation. I, as the ruler of this country, must liberate my people."

That was his argument. Liberation from occupation, huh...

"I question whether the people of Van *want* to be liberated," I said.

"What?" Julius sputtered.

"Sir Julius," I said. "Did you not see the streets of Van on your way here?"

In response to my question, Julius's eyes went wide, and he immediately glared at me. "Van is the city that birthed and raised me. I know it better than you."

"Do you now...? Well, what do you think of the *color* of Van now?" I asked.

“The color?” he asked hostilely. “I did see a number of houses with their roofs and walls painted in garish, tasteless colors, but what of it?”

Yeah... Well, maybe it wasn’t unfair to describe them as tasteless.

“We each have our sense of aesthetics, so I won’t comment on that,” I said. “However, Sir Julius. If the people were choking under the yoke of our oppression, do you think they would want to make their roofs and walls more colorful?”

I chose my next words carefully, so as not to drive Julius into a rage.

“If a ruler is oppressive, the people will try to act in a way that doesn’t stand out. That’s because, if they were to catch his eye by doing something showy, there’s no telling what kind of disaster might befall them. So the more oppressed the people, the less you will hear them complain. They don’t show their feelings or attitudes, keeping their true feelings bottled up deep inside their hearts. They would never dream of doing something like painting their roofs and walls in showy colors.”

There, I paused for a moment to look Julius in the eye.

“Now, tell me, what color were the colors of Van like when you and your father were here?”

In response to my question, Julius clenched his jaw. Of course he did.

When I’d entered Van, the color I’d sensed here was *gray.*

The labyrinthine streets, not even properly divided into districts, had had only houses with gray walls and earthen roofs, without the slightest hint of personality. Even though they hadn’t been part of a unified color scheme, they had all appeared standardized because the residents of this city had not been free in spirit.

“Between Van under my rule, and Van as it was under your rule, which really looks more like it’s ‘under occupation’?” I asked.

“You... Are you trying to say we were oppressive?” Julius shouted.

“Yes, because it’s a fact that you were,” I said. “It looks like most of your national budget was going to military expenses. The taxes your people pay are

supposed to be returned to the people in the form of welfare. Instead of maintaining your city, or your roads, or supporting industry, you bled your people with heavy taxes that only went into the military. What is that if not oppressive?!”



“You cur!” Julius screamed, lunging for me.

“Sir Julius!” Jeanne snapped, reaching out a hand to stop him.

While Julius did stop after only taking half a step, he still gnashed his teeth in frustration. I hadn’t permitted them to carry weapons during the audience, but it would have been a risky situation if Jeanne hadn’t intervened.

“Aisha, you take your hand off your hilt, too,” I said.

“...Yes, sire.”

I had been able to feel the bloodlust behind me, so I’d put a stop to it. Her voice sounded dejected, like a child who had been scolded.

She didn’t have to let it get her down so badly, though. The reason I could brazenly tear into Julius like this was that I felt safe in the knowledge that, if it came down to it, Aisha was there to protect me.

“Sir Souma... I would ask that you refrain from agitating Sir Julius,” Jeanne objected, with a sigh.

“I only spoke the truth,” I responded. “Governing the nation and providing relief to the people... those are the two duties of a ruler. They, however, taxed the people heavily to pay for their wasteful military spending. That is the very definition of oppression.”

“And whose fault was that?!” Julius shouted. “If the royal family of Elfrieden hadn’t stole land from my grandfather...!”

“Not this again...” Hearing Julius trot out the same tired arguments, I let out a sigh. “The royal family of Amidonia calls out for revenge against Elfrieden at every turn, but neither you, nor even Gaius, were party to those events. What’s more, I haven’t been in this world that long. What grudge could you possibly have had against me?”

“Ah! That’s...”

“If anything, your country is the one that’s continuously tried to bring harm to mine,” I said. “...Hakuya.”

“Yes, sire.” Hakuya pulled out a piece of paper that was rolled up inside a

cylindrical tube and handed it to the two of them.

On the paper was written a number of names. When they saw those names, Jeanne seemed confused, but Julius had a look on his face like he had just bitten into something unpleasant.

“What... is this?” Jeanne asked.

With a bow, Hakuya explained, “The names you see written here are nobles of the Elfrieden Kingdom who were incited to sedition by the Principality of Amidonia. Some of them rose up during the reign of the former king and were put down. Amidonia incited them, fomenting rebellion, tempting them into corruption, and encouraging them to adopt an uncooperative stance towards the royal family.”

“Oh, my...”

When Jeanne turned a cold look towards him, Julius clenched his jaw.

It had seemed like they’d been trying to stir up the three dukes, so I’d had Hakuya look into it, and, boy, had we ever found some shady stuff. I could see the names of corrupt nobles who had taken part in the uprising on the list, but some of the names I saw belonged to nobles who had refused to take a side in the recent conflict. When I returned to the royal capital, I was going to have to do something about that.

“Madam Jeanne,” said Hakuya. “While they pay lip service to the Mankind Declaration, the Principality of Amidonia has been engaging in all of this skullduggery behind the scenes. It’s hard to see how they can talk about revenge against our kingdom after all this.”

“Even when it comes to that revenge, they only bring it up when it benefits them.” I glared at Julius as I spoke, following Hakuya’s example. “‘Our country is poor because of the kingdom, everyone goes hungry because of the kingdom, our people suffer under their heavy toil because of the kingdom, the heavy taxes we levy go to the military and not the people because of the kingdom.’”

“What are you getting at?” Julius demanded.

“It’s awfully convenient,” I said. “If you just use that excuse to pay lip service to the theme of revenge, you can hide your policy blunders and redirect the

anger of your people towards Elfrieden.”

“You cur! How dare you say that!” Julius exclaimed, dashing towards me.

“Sir Julius!” Jeanne snapped, stopping him again. Then she turned an equally harsh glance in my direction. “Sir Souma, I believe I asked you not to agitate him.”

“...Sorry,” I said. “It’s just that we want you to see that we’re furious with Amidonia’s behavior, too.”

“That... I can understand,” said Jeanne.

“Thank you,” I said. “Now, I have a proposal.”

I turned to them, as if saying, *Now, it’s time to get down to business.*

“Could we have Sir Julius leave the room?”

Julius’s face contorted with rage. “Don’t be absurd! Why should I be removed from negotiations that will determine the fate of my nation’s capital?!”

An intelligent and beautiful face showing all that anger was at least fifty percent more intimidating than an ordinary person’s would have been. Before coming to this world, I’d probably have been overwhelmed by his threatening attitude, but... now I had spent around half a year as king, dealing with far scarier people such as Gaius himself, in matters of life and death. After all of that, this level of intimidation wasn’t enough pressure to faze me.

“It’s simple, really,” I said. “I don’t even need to negotiate with Amidonia to begin with.”

“What did you say?!” he shouted.

“I am at the negotiating table because I want the Empire to *recognize my sovereignty over Van,*” I said. “The Empire takes the position that they can’t recognize the changing of borders due to the exercise of force, so they’re here to negotiate because they *want me to return Van,* right? In that case, the matter can be settled entirely through negotiations between the kingdom and the Empire.”

This had always been a negotiation between the kingdom and the Empire. The principality had never been more than a sideshow. If his resentment was

going to stop the smooth proceeding of the negotiations, I would be happier to see him removed from them. Jeanne seemed to understand this, too.

“...Sir Julius,” she said. “Could I ask you to let me handle this?”

“Madam Jeanne?!” he exclaimed. “But...”

“These negotiations will go nowhere with you both at each other’s throats,” said Jeanne. “The Empire does not wish to spend its time mediating other nations’ disputes. I will definitely reclaim Van, so I would like you to leave this to me.”

“That’s... very one-sided of you, isn’t it?” Julius asked angrily. He seemed ready to keep arguing, but Jeanne cut him right off.

“Then the Empire will have nothing more to do with this matter, and you will be welcome to negotiate for yourself. In my personal opinion, the fault lies with Amidonia on this occasion. We are doing what we can to help you because you’re a signatory to the Mankind Declaration, but if you find yourself unable to trust us, the Empire will withdraw from these negotiations.”

Julius knew the principality could not reclaim Van on its own. If the Empire hinted they might withdraw from the negotiations, there was nothing he could say.

Julius looked anguished, choking out the words, “You will... get Van back for us, yes?”

“I swear it on my sister, Empress Maria Euphoria’s, name.”

“I’m counting on you.” Julius bowed his head to Jeanne, then left the audience chamber.

After we had seen him off, Jeanne and I looked to one another and sighed.

“...I’m sorry,” said Jeanne. “Our signatories can be such a handful.”

“...I feel your pain.”

We both smiled. In order to hide our true feelings, both of us had naturally put on a smile. The dangerous air had vanished from the room, but the air was still as tense as ever. No, if anything, it was more tense now than before.

These talks would decide what was to come from here on for both the kingdom and the Empire, so that was probably inevitable.

“Did you deliberately agitate Julius to set the stage for this, perhaps?” Jeanne asked.

I shook my head with a wry smile. “I meant most of what I said. Thanks to his father and him, the kingdom’s recovery was delayed, and I had to do a lot of unnecessary work. I wanted to vent a little.”

“Is that so?” Jeanne said, not seeming to care all that much. Then Jeanne brought one hand to her chest, giving a polite bow. “Let me introduce myself once more, Sir Souma. I am Jeanne Euphoria, emissary of the Gran Chaos Empire. I come representing my sister Maria Euphoria.”

“Welcome, Madam Jeanne,” I said. “I am the (provisional) King of Elfrieden, Souma Kazuya.”

To start things afresh, Jeanne and I had reintroduced ourselves.

Jeanne had been a little taciturn before, but she now took on a cheerful tone, completely at odds with that. She smiled to Liscia who stood beside me. “I’m relieved to see you are well, Princess Liscia.”

“You seem to be in good health yourself, Madam Jeanne,” Liscia said, returning the smile.

“Hm? You two were acquainted with each other?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Liscia. “We met just once, when we were little. Before the Demon Lord’s Domain appeared, I believe?”

“Yes, it was,” said Jeanne. “If I recall, it was the time I forced the minister in charge of talks with your former king, Sir Albert, to bring me along. Because of our close age, we played together.”

I see, I thought. *When they’re both royals, they have those sorts of connections, huh.*

Then, Jeanne eyed Liscia’s body up and down and said, “You must be even stronger now than you were back then. I can tell just looking at you.”

“I could say the same of you,” said Liscia. “Back then, I never did manage to

land a single hit on you.”

Whoa, hold up! How did we get from the two of them playing to them landing hits on each other?!

“You two were way too tomboyish...” I muttered.

“Even the mild-mannered Marx was mad at us that time,” said Liscia nostalgically.

“Our foreign minister was in tears, too,” Jeanne chuckled. “Ha ha ha!”

No, no, that’s nothing to laugh about... I felt bad for Marx and this minister for the Empire whose face I’d never even seen.

“Well, anyway, that’s enough reminiscing about old times,” Jeanne began. “I think it’s about time we talked heart-to-heart.”

“I know,” I said. “Let’s move somewhere else, for a start.”

I wanted to take this chance to speak frankly with the Empire. In order to make that possible, the meeting site needed to be a spot where both sides would feel comfortable. I was going to want a pen and paper, too.

“But, first... Liscia, could you summon Serina for me?” I asked.

Liscia nodded, leaving the room. Shortly thereafter, a woman in a maid uniform entered.

It was Liscia’s personal maid, the head maid Serina. The head maid, an intellectual beauty who was slightly older than me, lifted the hem of her apron-skirt slightly, and curtsied. “I have come at your behest, Your Majesty.”

“Serina,” I said. “Amidonia’s crown... no, Amidonia’s sovereign prince, Julius, is in the visitor’s room. I may be speaking with Madam Jeanne for some time, so begin the banquet without us and see to it that he is made welcome.”

When I gave her that order, Serina bowed respectfully. “Very well. In that case, sire, I would like permission to open a well-aged bottle of tequeur from the castle’s wine cellar.”

In the moment she said that, I thought I saw a suspicious glint in Serina’s eye.

Does she want to drink that alcoholic beverage, whatever it was called? I

wondered. *She seems like the tight-laced sort to me, but maybe she's actually a drinker. Is she saying it's for our guest, when really she wants to drink it herself?*

"I'll leave the matter to your discretion," I said at last. "So long as our guest is properly entertained."

"Understood. I will pour Sir Julius's share and *entertain* him personally."

With those words and an icy smile, Serina bowed and exited the room.

Her smile did worry me, but she'd said she would entertain him, so I figured it was probably fine. As I was thinking that, I looked next to me to see Liscia and Hakuya grimacing.

"Wh-What is it, you two?" I asked.

"Souma... tequeur is famous for being a *strong* alcohol," said Liscia.

"It has a pleasant taste, which encourages heavy drinking. However, if one who is not used to drinking it does that, it will quickly send them off to the land of dreams. Normally, it's the sort of thing you'd drink a few drops of mixed into a glass of tea or juice," Hakuya explained, looking like his head hurt.

"Huh? Wait, if she goes pouring him glasses of the stuff..."

"The banquet will be over not ten minutes after it begins."

"She has no intention of entertaining him whatsoever?!" I exclaimed.

The head maid Serina. She had an elegant beauty, she carried out her duties perfectly, she was polite, and she could also show great consideration, all of which made her flawless as a maid. However, she was also a little too much of a sadist.

When it came to cute girls, she always wanted to "buwwy" them. Not "bully," "buwwy." Not that she'd do anything that would hurt them; she just enjoyed stirring up their senses of shame a little.

Left alone with Serina, Julius didn't stand a chance.

Well, the goal of the banquet was always to keep Julius from finding out what's going on with our negotiations with the Empire, I thought. *If she gets him to drink himself into a stupor, that's one way of doing it...*

“Just this once, I feel bad for Julius,” Liscia said, with eyes as emotionless as those of a dead fish. “Serina, she just loves to toy with swaggering types like him.”

“I-It sounds like you have personal experience with this...” I said.

“Whenever I misbehaved, Marx was the one who would scold me, but Serina was always the one in charge of disciplining me,” said Liscia. “Of course, Serina’s a maid, so she couldn’t punish me physically. No, she went for psychological attacks instead. If only... If only she didn’t know about that one thing... No, there’s that, too, isn’t there...? Augh, why does she always, always have to see me at the worst possible moments?”

As I tried to console Liscia, who was holding her head in her hands, I let out a sigh. “Just how much blackmail material does she have on you...?”

“Heh heh. This really is an... interesting country.” In the corner of my vision, I saw Jeanne doing her best to hold back a smile.

After that, we changed locations, and I showed Jeanne to the governmental affairs office. That was because, if we were going to be sitting down and negotiating at length, I felt this was the best place to do it.

It was large enough to hold a reasonable number of people, and there were plenty of pens and pieces of paper there. Being able to easily get our hands on any documents we might need was another point in its favor.

...Though, when Jeanne had entered the room, the first thing that had caught her attention was the bed off in the corner.

“Sir Souma, what is that bed for?” she asked.

“It’s mine,” I said. “I’m too busy to have a room of my own.”

“You sleep in the governmental affairs office?!”

“I am ashamed to admit it, but yes,” Hakuya, not I, said, sounding deeply embarrassed.

However, it apparently wasn’t the fact that I slept in the office itself that surprised Jeanne. “I never thought there would be a king doing the same things as my sister...”

“Come again?” I asked, startled.

Her sister... That’d be Madam Maria, right? Huh? The empress sleeps in the governmental affairs office, too?!

When I asked her about it, Jeanne awkwardly responded, “She does have her own room, too, of course, but when she finds herself busy with administrative work, she sleeps in a bed that’s been set up in the office, yes. What’s more, in my sister’s case, she doesn’t settle for a simple bed. She’s brought in a proper, comfy one. That makes it all the worse.”

I was silent.

I wonder why, I thought. *Right now, I feel an incredible kinship with the Saint of the Empire.*

“My sister needs to realize that she’s the ruler of a vast empire,” said Jeanne. “I keep telling her not to do it, and to consider how it looks to her vassals, but all I get in return is, ‘I don’t see the problem. I sleep so well in this bed.’ She doesn’t listen to me at all.”

When Jeanne said that with a sigh, for some reason, Hakuya was nodding along. “I understand. I don’t know how many times I’ve advised His Majesty to get his own room and sleep there. Yet, every time I do, he brushes me off with a simple, ‘But this is more efficient.’”

“Oh, I understand,” said Jeanne. “I know she’s tired from her work, but I wish she’d consider how her subordinates see her a little more. Especially since my sister has this image of being a saint, I’d rather she not do anything too unseemly.”

“I can understand that,” said Hakuya. “I’ve given up on that front. His Majesty could have carried the title of ‘hero,’ but everything he does is so...”

The two of them just keep saying, “I understand, I understand,” I thought. *Why are they hitting it off so well?*

“I think it’s good that when Sir Souma does it, at least he’s doing it calculatingly,” said Jeanne. “When my sister does it, it’s just laziness. She can be a bit of an airhead at times, too.”

“Well, at least that’s cute,” said Hakuya. “In His Majesty’s case, I think it’s all the worse because he’s planned it out. Why does the king who is so good at listening to his subjects in matters of state pretend not to hear a word I say when it comes to advising him on his personal life?”

“I can see you’ve been put through a lot, too, Sir Hakuya,” said Jeanne.

“No, no, Madam Jeanne, you must have had it worse,” said Hakuya.

Jeanne and Hakuya were really hitting it off. They looked like they might exchange a firm handshake at any moment.

And so, right here, right now, the “Association of the Victims of Slothful Masters” was formed. That was a joke I couldn’t laugh at. It was getting awkward for me, and I wanted to move the conversation along to another topic quickly, but if I interrupted now, I was going to get a scolding and get slapped with a paper fan, so I decided to keep quiet for a little while.

I watched carefully for their conversation settle down a bit, then, clearing my throat loudly, I gestured for Jeanne to take a seat at the long table in the middle of the room. “Well, anyway, take a seat. Let’s get right to the negotiations.”

“Ah... Right. Very well.” Jeanne’s expression changed, and she sat at the table.

Once we were both seated across from each other at the long table, Jeanne looked me in the eye and began. “I suppose the first order of business is your current occupation of Van.”

I said nothing.

“As much as I truly regret that I must say this, I did give my word to Sir Julius, so the Empire has a role it must fulfill here,” she said. “Could you please return Van?”

“There’s no need to rush to the conclusion like that,” I said. “I mean, this is a rare chance for the head of the kingdom and the Empire’s number two to negotiate directly. There are a lot of things I want to take this opportunity to discuss, and a lot of information I want to share. Let’s leave any topic that might put us both in a foul mood for after all of that.”



Jeanne took on a pensive look, but eventually she nodded. “...Well, then. In that case, I would like to call in the bureaucrats from my country who are standing by outside the castle here. Would that be acceptable?”

“I’ll allow it,” I said. “They’ll have to go through a body check first, though. ...Is someone there?”

When I called out towards the entrance, Serina responded, “Pardon me,” and entered the room.

Wait, why’s Serina here?! I thought.

“...Didn’t I ask you to keep Sir Julius entertained?” I demanded.

“I have already finished with the *entertainment*,” Serina said with a nonchalant look on her face.

It’s only evening, but Julius is already passed out drunk? I thought incredulously. *Serina... you really are a terrifying woman.*

“Is something the matter, sire?” she asked.

“Oh, no... Gather our bureaucrats and the ones who came with Jeanne, please. Be sure to at least give them a cursory search for weapons and the like.”

“Very well.” Serina departed with an elegant bow.

If there was one person I never wanted to make an enemy of, it was her...



Chapter 4: Pact

The congress danced at a dizzying pace.

“How did your harvest fare in the Empire this year?” I asked.

“Thankfully, this year most of our crops have performed well,” said Jeanne. “Our wheat crop, in particular, was quite fruitful. How were things in Elfrieden? I had heard you were facing a food crisis.”

“Our yields have been steadily improving,” I said. “Partly thanks to the replanting effort having begun in time, I don’t believe we have any fears of a food crisis any longer. That said, I do have some misgivings about the levels of our food stores. Even if the harvest is good this year, if we were to have a crop failure next year, or the year after, there could be a relapse of the food crisis.”

“It’s a problem that every country shares, I’m sure,” said Jeanne. “There’s little that can be done but to pray for a good harvest.”

As Jeanne and I spoke, bureaucrats from both the kingdom and Empire were going about their business quietly, but busily nonetheless.

Some were frantically keeping a log of the proceedings. Once committed to paper, a verbal agreement was as good as a contract. They listened intently, ensuring no word was missed.

Others were confirming that there was a mutual understanding of what those words meant, in order to ensure that nothing was misconstrued. There were also those thrusting the documents they had prepared in advance towards one another, comparing the goods and materials which each nation had an excess or deficit of. Because we shared no land border, it would be difficult to engage in direct trade, but if both sides shared that information, then something might be worked out through a third party.

The scene was truly a battlefield.

Hakuya was scrutinizing the documents presented to him, while Liscia acted

as my aide.

Only my bodyguard, Aisha, stood erect and motionless, but she probably didn't want to have to deal with the numbers. With the large number of people present, she was paying close attention to her duties as my bodyguard, but she looked fed up with it all.

...It hasn't been like this in a while, I thought.

The way things were going so blindingly fast reminded me of the days when I had just taken the throne.

Normally, in foreign affairs, even if the heads of state only meet for ten minutes, behind the scenes there have been bureaucrats from each country negotiating for weeks, perhaps months.

Things were this busy because it hadn't been possible for the kingdom and Empire to hold talks ever since the appearance of the Demon Lord's Domain. Incidentally, the first thing Jeanne and I had agreed to was the resumption of shuttle diplomacy between the Gran Chaos Empire and the Elfrieden Kingdom.

"Speaking of foodstuffs, I found those lily root dumplings most delicious," said Jeanne. "I believe the primary ingredient was the rootstalk of the bewitching lily. I would like to hear how you go about harvesting them."

"I'm happy to tell you," I said. "From what Poncho was telling me, he learned the method from a mountain tribe inside the Empire. If you enlist their help, it should be simple to do."

"Oh, my. There was a tribe like that inside the Empire?" Jeanne asked. "Even though it's my own country, I must shamefully admit, I did not know."

"That's just how it goes," I said. "It can be hard for anyone to see what's lying at their own feet."

The same went for our country. I mean, when I'd put out the call, "I don't care what it is, if you have a special talent, come and show me," I'd had quite a number of people show up. If I kept digging, there were probably more such people to be found.

In order to develop this country, I'll need to find them, I thought to myself.

While drinking the coffee Serina had prepared for me, I looked to Jeanne. “Now, since I gave you information on the lily root dumplings, I’d like some information in return.”

Jeanne, who was drinking black tea, laid her teacup down on its saucer and tilted her head to the side questioningly. “What information might that be?”

“I think food for food is a fair trade,” I said. “Are there any ingredients used in the Empire that aren’t commonly eaten elsewhere?”

“...In that case, I know just the thing,” Jeanne said, a mischievous smile on her lips. I dunno, she just looked like she had an incredible ace up her sleeve.

Then, Jeanne confidently said, “Monster meat.”

“...Say what?” I asked.

“It’s possible to eat monster meat.”

Monster... meat? Wait, seriously? I thought.

“The monsters you mean... They’re the ones from the Demon Lord’s Domain? Not from dungeons?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Jeanne. “They tasted surprisingly normal.”

“You ate them yourself?!”

That’s more wild than I’d have expected from her neat, pretty appearance, I thought. *But, still, she’s eaten monsters from the Demon Lord’s Domain... huh. When I heard about the kobold that spared Tomoe and the mystic wolves, I thought negotiating with the Demon Lord’s Domain might be an option, depending on the situation... Oh, but, there’s both “monsters” and “demons,” right? If I remember, kobolds fall under the demon category.*

I hesitantly asked Jeanne, “You didn’t happen to eat... a kobold, by any chance, did you?”

When I did, Jeanne reacted with shock, quickly shaking her head, “Perish the thought! I only ate animal-like monsters! I wouldn’t go around eating demons, with their human-like bodies.”

“No, it’s just I’m not familiar with the distinction,” I said.

“...I see,” Jeanne said. “The Elfrieden Kingdom doesn’t share a border with the Demon Lord’s Domain, after all.”

Jeanne nodded, satisfied. “Very well. This is something of a side note, but allow me to provide you with the information our country has on the Demon Lord’s Domain, as well as demons and monsters.”

She began to slowly explain it all for me.

“First of all, even in our country, we have no information on why the Demon Lord’s Domain appeared,” said Jeanne. “Honestly, all that we can say is that one day, out of nowhere, it did.”

“So even the Empire doesn’t know...?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Jeanne. “So, in the Demon Lord’s Domain, there are aberrant creatures that form swarms, but which demonstrate no intelligence, violently devouring all life they come across, as well as those like the kobolds, which behave almost like well-ordered armies and have few differences from the races of mankind. In order to distinguish the two, we call the former monsters and the later demons.”

I’d heard that much from the former king, Albert.

In the northernmost reaches of the continent, a dimension called the “Demon World” had appeared, and monsters of many sizes and shapes had poured out, throwing the Northern Countries into chaos. The forces of mankind had formed an alliance and organized a punitive force to send in, but the attempt had ended in failure.

In the Demon World there were “monsters,” which had minimal (or, some would theorize, no) intelligence, as well as “demons,” who were intelligent and also powerful fighters. This loss had been inflicted on them by the demons. After that battle, mankind had lost the means to defend themselves against the monsters that appeared from the Demon World. The Northern Countries were laid waste one after another, and the monsters extended their range to cover all of what was now called the Demon Lord’s Domain.

When I explained what I had heard from Albert to her, Jeanne nodded, a

somber look on her face. “That is correct. And the Gran Chaos Empire were the ones to lead that punitive force. The one who commanded it was the former emperor, our father.”

The Empire lead the punitive force, huh? I thought. *Well, given they’re the strongest amongst the nations of mankind, I guess that should have been a given.*

“Then, does that mean the Empire has made contact with the demons?” I asked.

“If you mean waged war against them... then yes,” said Jeanne. “Though, my sister and I being nine and seven at the time, we haven’t seen them ourselves. However, with the passage of time, and as we analyzed the statements of those who were touched by the menace of the Demon Lord’s Domain, the situation at the time has become clear to us.”

“What situation is that?” I asked.

“In the very beginning, when many countries perished, countless lives were lost, and an even greater number were displaced to become refugees,” Jeanne said, “all of those attacks were done by monsters.”

I said, “Monsters? There were no demons, then?”

“Yes. At that point, at least.” Jeanne paused to take a sip of her tea, looking down into her cup as she continued. “The first time demons were spotted was when they met the punitive force in battle. The punitive force was wiped out at the hands of those demons. After that, with our capacity to wage war diminished, mankind was unable to fend off the attacks of the monsters, and we were forced to pull back from a considerable stretch of territory.”

“So, in short, the creation of the Demon Lord’s Domain was a two-stage process?” I asked.

The first stage had been attacks by the monsters that had suddenly appeared. The second stage had been when the demons had destroyed the punitive force, and the weakened forces of mankind had been attacked by monsters. It had probably come some time later, but the attack that had driven Tomoe and the mystic wolves to become refugees had presumably been part of the second

stage.

Jeanne nodded, continuing. “It seems the damages caused differed greatly between the monsters and demons. During the monster attacks in the first stage, I’ve heard it was a terrible sight to behold. The monsters spewed fire, burning cities to the ground, devouring soldiers and civilians alike, with no regard to their age or gender. I’ve heard that in the towns and villages they struck, there was nothing left but the messy scraps of their feasting.”

So, they were literal monsters, huh, I thought to myself. These monstrous beings swarmed over the land like locusts, and even mankind was no more than prey to them.

“Then, the second stage, the attack by the demons, was total war,” said Jeanne. “I hear that they acted in an organized fashion, crushing the punitive force with their overwhelming force of arms. Also, while they are few in number, we have statements from those who claim their villages were attacked by the demons. These situations vary, and in some cases, if they withdrew, they weren’t attacked any further, while in others, the demons raped and pillaged, carrying out massacres.”

“...Almost like one of the races of mankind, huh,” I said.

The way that the damages varied from place to place was one point on which that similarity was especially strong. Even within the same army, when there are both disciplined and undisciplined units, the situation post-occupation for each will be different. When we had occupied Van, I’d made an example of some soldiers in an attempt to keep the whole of my armies in line, but had I not, I can say with certainty that there would have been some who abused the civilian populace.

Monsters... and demons, huh... I thought.

“Where do you think the difference comes from?” I asked. “Did the demons evolve from the monsters?”

“‘They gained sentience by eating human brains!’ ...is what a bunch of religious types shouted about for a while... but that’s nonsense,” said Jeanne. “If that were the case, there would be a lot more demons out there. Ever since the battle lines bogged down into a stalemate, it’s only been the monsters that

attacked us. Though, you could say that's why we've been able to maintain the status quo."

...In other words, we just don't know what demons and monsters are really? I thought.

I said, "Come to think of it, when we were digging a sedimentation pond near Parnam, we found a whole lot of monster fossils. They were apparently from a stratum that would have been the surface more than a few thousand years ago."

"What are these... 'fossils'?" Jeanne asked.

Oh, that's not common knowledge in this world yet? I thought.

"To put it simply, they're bones left in the earth by living creatures that have died," I said. "There are a lot of things that have an effect on the process, but the bones fossilize underground over a long, long period of time. However, even if the bones have only been underground for a few thousand years, they can still be called fossils."

"I see... So does that mean there may have been monsters on the surface several thousand years ago?" Jeanne had a pensive look.

I hadn't expected her calm reaction. When I'd told Liscia the same thing, she had been pretty shocked after all.

"...I thought you'd be more surprised," I said.

"When you think about it, even before the appearance of the Demon Lord's Domain, there were monsters living inside dungeons," said Jeanne. "Couldn't it be that there was a dungeon there?"

"It seems our country has no records of that, historical or legendary," I said. "Though, given that it was thousands of years ago, I can't deny it's possible that it was far enough back that there wouldn't even be legends."

"Hmm... perhaps we should look into this in our territory, too," Jeanne said.

If they did that, I couldn't ask for a better outcome.

"I'd very much like for you to do that," I said. "The kingdom plans to carry out excavations around the country to investigate the matter."

“Please, do tell us if you learn anything,” said Jeanne. “Of course, we’ll do the same.”

“Okay,” I nodded.

The Empire had far more territory than the kingdom. If they were willing to investigate the matter, I could expect further discoveries to be made. Of course, I still intended to carry on with our research in the kingdom.

This established a formal agreement for the kingdom and Empire to exchange information on excavations and research.

Jeanne paused for a breath, finishing off her cup of tea. “Now then, I think we’ve veered pretty heavily from the topic of monsters being edible.”

“Oh, right... We were talking about that, weren’t we?” I polished off the rest of my cup of coffee, too, then asked Serina to get another cup for each of us. When I had my coffee and Jeanne had her tea, we resumed.

“The meat we ate was from a winged snake,” Jeanne said.

“A winged snake? Like a dragon?” I asked.

I recalled there was a god named Quetzalcoatl in Central and South America that was also a winged snake, but this wasn’t Earth, and she’d called it a monster, so it was probably more natural to assume it was something like a dragon.

That was my assumption, but Jeanne shook her head. “No, it was nothing so impressive. It really was just a giant snake with four bird-like wings slapped on it.”

What the heck? I thought. *It sounds like a total chimera.*

“I’m amazed you decided to eat something like that...”

“It tasted like pretty much any ordinary snake,” said Jeanne. “It was more like fish than chicken. Quite tasty, really.”

I was surprised that she’d eaten snake at all, but... well, they’re eaten in some countries. When I thought of snake meat, the image that came to mind was the fake fish meat from Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s *Rashomon,* which I had read in my modern literature class, but... maybe it was tasty?

“You’re supposed to be a princess, aren’t you?” I asked. “That’s some weird stuff you’ve been eating.”

“I’m also a commander of armies,” said Jeanne. “If we can live off the land, we’ll have extra rations.”

“That’s... practical of you,” I said.

“Now, as for what made me think to try eating a monster, it was when one of our scouts came back and reported seeing ‘the remains of a monster which appeared to have been cooked by demons.’”

There was another word there that caught my attention. “’Cooked,’ you say? Not just sloppily eaten?”

“Yes,” said Jeanne. “The bones seemed to have been cut apart with a blade, and judging from the charred head left behind, we could infer that it was likely roasted whole, then cut apart and eaten. That made me think that, if we caught a monster of the same variety, we could consider trying to eat it.” Jeanne popped one of the teacakes she had been served into her mouth and ate it. “Of course, I checked that it wasn’t poisonous first, you know? I had it fed it to animals before I let people try it. Then, once its safeness was ascertained, we ate in order of lowest to highest ranking officer.”

“It’s not easy to test food for poison, huh...” I said.

“So, when I ate it, it had a simple but refreshing taste,” said Jeanne. “It tasted good in an ordinary way.”

“No, I’m not concerned about the flavor, there was something more interesting in what you just told me,” I said.

What she’d said about demons eating monsters was far more shocking than the fact that they were edible. Basically, it meant that demons didn’t see monsters as being the same general race as them.

I loved chicken and pork, but no matter how much their faces made them look like pigs or cows, I would never think of eating orcs or minotaurs. Compared to eating something with a humanoid body, even snake was preferable. Maybe demons felt the same way.

Thinking about that, I came to a certain hypothesis. “Hey, Madam Jeanne.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Could it be that demons and monsters are equivalent to what we’d call ‘people’ and ‘animals’?”

The moment I said that, the air froze. Not only Jeanne, but Liscia and Hakuya opened their eyes wide with shock.

Huh? Did I say something that surprising?

“...What made you think that?” Jeanne asked, erasing all trace of an expression from her face.

I thought about explaining my reason... then hesitated for a moment. What I was going to say might seem discriminatory, depending on how it was interpreted. Of course, I didn’t mean it that way, but I still might cause offense, depending on how people took it.

...Maybe I should clear the room first, I thought.

“Um... I’d rather not have what I’m about to say overheard by too many people,” I said.

“...Very well.”

When Jeanne looked to them, the imperial bureaucrats stopped their work, quietly filing out of the office. I made my own bureaucrats leave as well, having Aisha stand by the door to ensure that no one was eavesdropping. The only ones left in the room were Jeanne, Liscia, Hakuya, Aisha, and me. I looked to Liscia, who was beside me recording the content of the talks.

“Liscia, I want you to stop recording, too,” I said.

“...Okay.” Liscia’s pen stopped. Now, the content of our meeting wasn’t being recorded.

In this room so quiet that it made the earlier excitement seem like a lie, Jeanne shrugged her shoulders. “If you have to clear the room first, it sounds dangerous. Just what kind of bombshell statement are you about to drop?”

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s just that what I’m going to say could be considered

discriminatory.”

“Discriminatory? In a conversation about demons and monsters?” Jeanne seemed doubtful, but I chose my words carefully as I continued.

“Yeah. You asked what made me think that. Well, it’s because... I can’t tell the difference between this world’s animals and monsters. The animals in this world are larger than the ones in my own, with big fangs and sharp tusks, and a generally aggressive appearance. If the animals from your world appeared in mine, the people there would definitely think they were monsters.”

Especially when it came to things like rhinosauruses. If even one giant creature like that appeared in my world, it would probably cause a panic. With their huge bodies, they looked like either dinosaurs, or something out of a monster movie.

“Hmm... Is that how it is?” Jeanne tilted her head to the side quizzically. Not knowing the animals from my world, she couldn’t imagine what it felt like to me.

“That’s how it is,” I said. “And... if I take it a bit further, I have a hard time seeing the difference between races like beastmen or dragonewts and demons.”

She gasped in shock. “That’s...”

I raised my hand to stop her. “Yeah, I know. If the beastmen heard me, they’d get mad and say, ‘Don’t lump us in with them.’ But, still, for me, as guy who lived in a world without demons or beastmen, it’s hard to see the difference.”

When I’d first seen Kaede at the singing cafe, Lorelei, in Parnam, I hadn’t been able to tell the difference between her race, mystic foxes, and Tomoe’s mystic wolves.

At the time, I’d asked, “They’re both canines, so can’t we just lump them both together as mystic dogs?”

When I’d said that, Liscia had retorted, “If you say that, you’ll get both the mystic wolves and the mystic foxes angry. Kobolds are mystic dogs, so it would be like lumping humans together with apes,” and warned me against doing it.

At the time, I had just accepted that was how it was, but when I'd thought about it a little more, what was the difference between mystic wolves or foxes and kobolds?

"Can you tell the difference between mystic wolves or foxes and kobolds?" I asked.

"Of course I can," said Jeanne. "Mystic wolves and foxes have ears and tails, but their faces and bodies aren't markedly different from humans. Kobolds, on the other hand, have dog faces."

"But there are beastmen with animal faces, right?" I asked.

To give an example from my own side, our General of the Army, Georg Carmine was one. If that lion man showed up in Japan, everyone would think he was some kind of demon.

When I pointed that out, Jeanne crossed her arms and groaned. "When you say it like that... it makes sense. Hrm... Oh, I know. Kobolds are covered in fur. In other words, while beastmen have some animal features, perhaps kobolds are just dogs walking on two feet like a human?"

"In that case, how would you tell apart demons with no hair, or short hair?" I asked. "By that reasoning, wouldn't beastman be like the orcs and minotaurs, who have bodies like a muscle-bound human?"

"Murgh..." Jeanne said.

When I shot down her argument, Jeanne thought on it for some time, then said, "I give up," raising her hands in surrender. "I've never thought deeply about the difference between humans and demons before. When you pointed it out, for the first time, I realized I was distinguishing people from demons purely by instinct."

"You're right..." Liscia murmured. "Now that we're being asked to, I can't find a single defining difference."

"I wonder why we never noticed before now..." Hakuya murmured.

They both nodded repeatedly.

This was probably the common understanding of most people in this world.

Turning that around, it meant the people of this world could instinctively tell people and demons apart.

To explain from a Japanese perspective, even among those who love clams in their miso soup, many are probably disgusted even just looking at land mollusks like slugs.

Also, people who will react with shock to videos of aboriginals from Australia eating insect larvae from inside trees are perfectly fine with eating shrimp (raw, at that), which look the same once they're peeled.

It's natural for the environment we're raised in and our customs to have an effect on the way we understand things.

Perhaps this world's understanding of demons was something like that?

"In my world, humans are the only race of people," I said. "I lived in a world with no elves, beastmen, dragonewts, or demons, so I don't have a sense that lets me distinguish between them. To my eyes, demons look like just another race of mankind."

"S-Sire!" Aisha burst out from her place standing by the door. "...Do you hate us dark elves, perhaps?" She looked at me like an abandoned puppy

I grinned back at her. "Not at all. A dark-skinned elf is just plain adorable. Of course, the same goes for an orthodox human beauty, too."

The first was meant for Aisha, while the second was directed at Liscia.

When they heard me, Aisha cried, "Truly, do you mean it?!" her face bursting with glee, while Liscia said "Yeah, yeah, thanks," curtly, but with a smile on her lips that showed she didn't mind the compliment.

Jeanne watched the two of them with a wry smile. "I can see how loved you are."

"They're a better bodyguard and fiancee than I could possibly deserve," I said.

"Well, that's lovely... Whew." Jeanne slumped back in her chair. "I'm glad you kept this between us. If you had said all that without clearing the room, I might have had to slay my country's bureaucrats."

Slay them?! Isn't that a little violent, out of nowhere?!

“I-Is it really something you’d need to go that far over?” I stammered.

“It is,” said Jeanne. “If the way you were talking had spread, it wouldn’t just worsen people’s opinion of you. It could have caused war across the continent. Isn’t that right, Sir Hakuya?”

“You are entirely correct,” said Hakuya. “I wish I could have taught him that sooner.” Hakuya looked at me with reproach.

Huh, is he mad at me? I thought, surprised.

“You need to understand this, sire,” said Hakuya. “If what you said about ‘It’s hard to distinguish demons from beastmen’ spreads, it would give a human supremacist country like the Principality of Amidonia, or the high elves of the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, who think they’re the chosen people, perfect material to use to attack their enemies. Beastmen and dragonewts would be expelled as demons, or accused of potentially conspiring with the enemy, and be subjected to undue persecution.”

The Garlan Spirit Kingdom was an island nation northwest of the continent, I recalled.

It was a country made up of two islands, one large and one small, but the smaller island had been abandoned in the face of monster attacks, and a portion of the larger island was occupied, as well. Apparently, at least... I could only go on hearsay, because the country had highly isolationist policies and very little information leaked out.

The elven races tended to have a lot of beautiful men and women, and this trend was especially strong with the high elves. They called themselves God’s chosen people, and looked down on other races, loathe to have any interaction with them.

It seemed that even now, with monsters invading, that wasn’t going to change.

In a country like Garlan or Amidonia, it was true, they would likely try to use this information to affirm the superiority of their own race. In fact, Amidonia had already succeeded in fomenting hatred towards Elfrieden to make their people easier to rule. There were countries out there that would use hate and

prejudice.

Jeanne nodded. “Sir Hakuya is correct. Furthermore, it’s not something that multiracial countries like mine or yours can ignore. If that sort of thinking were to run rampant, we would be looking at the sparks of interracial violence in our own country. If we had an internal conflict, on top of the external threats we face...”

“...Sorry,” I said. “I hadn’t thought it through that far.”

I bowed my head sincerely. They had both made good points. There were bigger things at stake than my reputation. I needed to be more cautious with my words.

While I was reflecting on my actions...

“No,” Jeanne said, shaking her head. “If you hadn’t pointed it out to me, I wouldn’t have noticed. It’s a thorny issue, but this is better than having it thrust on us by surprise one day. We can make preparations ourselves now.”

“I’m grateful to have you say that,” I said. “...Still, I can’t think of any countermeasures off the top of my head.”

When I said that, Jeanne slumped her shoulders with a sigh. “The Mankind Declaration speaks out against the persecution of minority groups, but that’s an agreement between states. If it were a national policy—like, if someone in the administration, for instance, gave the order to persecute them—we could intervene, but if it’s ordinary citizens doing it, all we can do is call the country’s responsibility for the matter into question.”

“Besides, there are countries like ours that haven’t even signed the Mankind Declaration,” I said. “On top of that, if you try to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, that will breed discontent, which could, in the worst case, lead to war.”

“I agree with you,” said Jeanne. “What’s more, we don’t have all the relevant information about demons and monsters available to us. With so many uncertain factors, it’s dangerous to rush to any conclusions.”

In the end, it was decided that the Empire and kingdom would continue to discuss this problem.

We called the bureaucrats back in, and the conference continued until it was getting to be late at night. Around this time of day, people would start to get hungry.

Jeanne was an important guest from another country, so normally I should probably have held a banquet for her, but time was precious to both of us, so I'd decided we would eat at the conference.

That called for something we could eat as we worked, so I'd decided to serve Jeanne and her entourage a certain type of bun I was debating whether or not to spread throughout the country.

When Jeanne ate that bun, her reaction was...

"This is incredible! It seems wrong to put a staple food on another staple food, but once you dig in, the two contrasting textures are a perfect match. The tomato sauce gives it a nice tangy flavor. What's more, by putting a dish that you would normally eat with a plate and a form on a bun, it lets us eat it using just one hand! My hat's off to you for that idea! What a marvel!"

...she praised it without holding back.

Did you think it was a sandwich? Too bad; it was a spaghetti bun.

The truth was, I'd wanted to make a yakisoba bun, but I just couldn't seem to replicate that thick sauce. That was why I'd used pasta and tomato sauce, both of which already existed in this world, to create a spaghetti bun. By the way, I hadn't given up on replicating the sauce; Poncho was researching it at this very moment.

"When I first saw it, I questioned your sanity, but it really is good," said Liscia.

"Neither bread nor pasta is new, but it's quite a novel experience to eat them together like this," said Hakuya.

Liscia and Hakuya seemed to be enjoying them, as well.

Now that the food crisis was more or less solved, I thought that, rather than off-the-wall ideas like gelin udon, it might be nice to spread some dishes from Earth instead. Developing our culinary traditions would improve our country's

brand power and image, and could also lead to an influx of foreign money.

Now, as for Aisha, the one most likely to dig into these sorts of new dishes with gusto...

“Om, nom, nom!”

Even as she stood behind me as my bodyguard, she was busily scarfing down spaghetti buns.

Wait, hold on, Aisha, I thought. *Just how many have you eaten?*

What had once been a mountain of buns on the plate had now been reduced to less than a hill. Even at a time like this, the hungry dark elf was the same as ever.

Once we had finished eating our buns and taken a short break, Jeanne broached the issue we had met to discuss. “Hmm... Now then, do you think it’s about time we moved onto the topic of your occupation of Van? The Empire’s position is that, in adherence with the Mankind Declaration, we cannot accept border changes brought about by the use of military force. We demand that the Elfrieden Kingdom return Van and the region surrounding it to the Principality of Amidonia.”

“The kingdom’s position is that we can’t accept that demand,” I said. “The Principality of Amidonia were the aggressors in this conflict. I think we’re justified in our actions, no?”

“You could also be seen as having induced them to act, you realize?” Jeanne asked.

“They’ve done plenty to interfere in our internal affairs,” I replied. “It’s not right for them to complain as soon as we turn the tables on them. Is the Empire fine with that? If you accept their outrageous behavior, both signatories and non-signatories to the Mankind Declaration will take you lightly from here on.”

“Yes, they will,” said Jeanne. “That is why the Empire is prepared to force Amidonia to pay suitable reparations. In this matter, I think the Empire has no choice but to punish both sides.”

Well, yeah... I figured that would be your response, I thought.

Because Amidonia was a signatory of the Mankind Declaration, the Empire had no choice but to stand by their side and demand Elfrieden return their territory. But if they allowed Amidonia to get away with their outrageous behavior, it would invite the other signatories to act with impunity, which would create resistance from the non-signatories. That meant they needed to impose harsh penalties on Amidonia, in order to keep the other signatory states in line. The Empire had the power to do just that.

I looked at Jeanne, as if testing her. “And if we don’t comply, you will resort to military force?”

“It is not my preferred method... but if the need arises, I will have no choice,” said Jeanne. “At this moment, the number of *troops* the Empire has brought is equal to your Royal Army, but I am confident that we have the *power* to annihilate the forces of both kingdom and principality at the same time, if need be.”

The Anti-Magic Armor Corps, the griffon squadrons, and the rhinosauruses carrying cannons... I recalled the many troop types they had which would be powerful when fighting against castle walls. There was no hint of boasting in Jeanne’s words.

“...I’ll bet you could,” I said. “We don’t want to fight, either.” I rested my elbows on the table, crossing my fingers in front of my mouth. “That’s why I’d like to sort out each of our intentions here.”

“Our intentions, you say?” asked Jeanne.

“Yes,” I replied. “The Empire doesn’t want to recognize border changes. That’s why you’re asking that the kingdom return Van. Correct?”

“...Yes. That’s right.” Jeanne nodded.

Having confirmed the Empire’s intent, I continued, “Now, as for our intent, we want to reduce the power of the Principality of Amidonia, which continues to engage in hostile actions towards our country, In order to ensure that they can’t influence our country again. Furthermore, we want them to pay for invading us. We took Van to exact that cost.”

“...I see,” said Jeanne. “Then you have no particular desire to hold Van. In

other words, an unconditional return of the city is out of the question, but if the principality pays a suitable price, you are prepared to return it."

It was good to see that she was quick on the uptake. When I nodded, Jeanne turned a harsh glance towards me. "Will you demand Sir Julius's head?"

"That's hardly going to be worth as much as an entire city," I said.

"Then... is it money you want?" she asked.

"It is," I agreed. "If the principality will pay reparations to our country, we will return Van. You yourself said that the Empire would see to it that the principality paid a suitable price for their actions, so that should be perfect, shouldn't it?"

Looking at it in the long term, turning over territory that could produce wealth indefinitely if managed properly in exchange for a one-time payment was a negative. However, because it had been Amidonian territory until just recently, and taking relations with the Empire into consideration, it wasn't a bad decision.

Meanwhile, for the Empire, they would have fulfilled their duty to the principality by securing the return of their land, and they could warn the other signatories, "If you act like Amidonia, you may not have your territory seized, but you're gonna have to pay reparations." That would, in effect, also help to build trust with the non-signatories.

Jeanne sighed. "Sir Julius won't like it..."

"I have no pity to spare for the root of the problem," I said. "Have him pay in imperial coinage. Sir Julius isn't terribly bright when it comes to the economy, after all. He'll probably think he can just mint low quality coins for the reparations."

"You're getting our country involved in this?" Jeanne asked.

"The Empire shares some responsibility for Amidonia's outrageous behavior," I replied. "You have to give me this much, at least."

"...I have no good response to that." After a shrug of the shoulders and a wry smile, Jeanne suddenly slipped into a more serious expression. "I have a

question for you. Why won't the Elfrieden Kingdom sign on to my sister's Mankind Declaration? If you were a signatory, I don't think the kingdom and Empire would have ended up staring one another down over this matter." Jeanne glanced over to Liscia, and added, "I hesitate to say this in front of Princess Liscia, but when it comes to why the prior king, Sir Albert, didn't sign the Mankind Declaration... well, I can understand. It's not so much that he chose not to sign it, as..."

"...he couldn't decide whether to sign or not," Liscia finished for her. "He's so indecisive."

Liscia came right out and said what Jeanne was hesitant to. Jeanne looked somewhat apologetically to her and said, "That's exactly it," with a nod.

She went on, "However, in your case, I think you see the threat posed by the Demon Lord's Domain, as well as the need for all mankind to unite in the battle against it. At first, I thought it was because you couldn't trust us, as the ones at fault for your being summoned to this world in the first place. But, earlier, you said you bear no resentment towards us over that. If that's the case, why won't you adopt my sister's Mankind Declaration?"

When she looked me straight in the eye and asked that, it left me with a conundrum.

I couldn't give her the real answer right now. But if I were to lie, or to completely ignore the question, it would probably hurt relations with the Empire.

After thinking about it for a moment, I began to speak slowly and calmly. "This is... let's call it a 'legend' from my world. Long, long ago, there were two gods, one in the east, and one in the west."

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The God of the East said, "The world should be equal. Thus, I say to you, O humans, you must each till the fields for the same amount of time, and the crops are to be split evenly among all."

The God of the West, on the other hand, said, "The world should be free. Thus, I say to you, O humans, each of you must till the fields, and those who

work the hardest may take an amount of crops equivalent to their efforts."

The God of the East said to the God of the West, "With your methods, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. In a world like that, conflict will arise between the rich and poor."

The God of the West said, "If those who work the hardest only receive as much as those who work the least, they will lose their motivation to work. If that happens, the total amount to go around will fall, and society as a whole will be poorer for it."

And so, the two gods glared at one another. The conflict between these gods influenced the countries that worshiped each of them. As the countries of the East and West glared at one another, each thinking, *We are right, and they are wrong,* the ones most troubled by all this were the countries caught in the middle.

If the countries that believed in the two gods went to war, they would be the first victims. Their houses and fields would be all torn up. When they thought, *Well, what are we going to do about this?*, the countries near the border had a flash of insight.

"I know! It may be inevitable that they glare at one another, but we just need to lay down some rules that will stop a war from happening!"

And so, the countries that lived near the borders came together with many of the countries of the East and West to establish some rules.

One was: "Let's not allow borders to be changed by military force."

One was: "Let's let the people of each country make decisions for themselves."

One was: "Let's arrange cultural exchanges between the East and West and try to get along."

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"What was that story?!" Jeanne burst out.

When I'd suddenly started telling her some old legend, she had looked at me dubiously, but as the story went on, her eyes gradually opened wide with

surprise. Jeanne had seemed composed up until until this point, but that was gone now.

Liscia and Hakuya had similar looks on their faces.

Jeanne slammed her hands down on the table, leaning in closer. “Setting the process aside, those rules they decided on are basically the Mankind Declaration! So, how did it turn out?!”

Jeanne was eager for an answer, but I shook my head quietly.

“As for what happened next... I can’t tell you that yet.”

“Sir Souma!” Jeanne burst out.

“But I do know how the story ended,” I said.

“Were those rules... not enough to prevent the war?” Jeanne asked worriedly, but I shook my head.

“No, at least in the time when those two gods were staring each other down, they were able to avert the worst case scenario of a total war between the two gods. Eventually, the God of the East broke apart, and because that god had lost the power to fight, the God of the West was relieved and stopped glaring in that direction.”

“It sounds like a happy ending,” said Jeanne. “Where’s the problem?”

“Well, if this is where it ended, it would have been a ‘they lived happily ever after,’” I said.

“There’s more to the story, then?”

“...That’s all I can tell you for now,” I said. “Sorry, but I can’t reveal any more of my cards.”

I broke off the conversation with a strong tone. Jeanne seemed to want to keep pressing me, but she gave up when she saw the look in my eyes.

I said to Jeanne, “Don’t worry. You’ll know soon enough. I won’t cause trouble for the Empire.”

“...You’re worrying me,” she said.

“I’d like you to trust me; our country would like to walk alongside yours. For

as long as Empress Maria holds true to her ideal of uniting mankind against the threat of the Demon Lord's Realm, I promise you the kingdom will never become the Empire's enemy."

Jeanne still looked doubtful. "You're not going to join the Mankind Declaration, are you? Yet you still ask us to trust you?"

"The Mankind Declaration is not the only possible pact," I said. "We can't participate in the Mankind Declaration, but our country would like to form an independent alliance with the Empire. Secretly."

"A secret alliance... you say?"

I nodded firmly. "We've finally managed to stabilize the situation inside our borders. From here, I intend to reform the military, creating a system which allows me to move all of my forces with one unified will. Furthermore, I've managed to break Amidonia's fangs in this war. Our country is finally free to move its forces."

Jeanne said nothing.

"So, here's my proposal," I said. "Right now, the Empire is dispatching troops to aid the Union of Eastern Nations, right?"

"...Yes." She nodded. "They're a conglomeration of medium to small states, most of which have signed the Mankind Declaration. As the leader of that agreement, it's only natural that we would dispatch troops there."

"Yeah, that's it," I said. "Can I ask you leave that duty to our country from here on?"

"Are you serious about that?!" Jeanne raised her voice in surprise.

Here was my proposal:

In the center of this continent was the impregnable Star Dragon Mountain Range, where wise dragons lived. If the monsters and demons came south, they would have to go around these mountains to the east and west.

That being the case, I was suggesting that the Empire resist their southern advance from the west, while the kingdom would resist it from the east. In practical terms, that meant if the Union of Eastern Nations was threatened by

the menace of the Demon Lord's Domain, the kingdom would dispatch reinforcements.

However, there was a process required.

"In the event that that happens, and the Empire, as head of the Mankind Declaration, receives a request from the Union of Eastern Nations for reinforcements, you will make a request for reinforcements to us," I said. "When our country dispatches troops, I want it to take the form of us responding to a request from the Empire."

"...That seems like a rather roundabout way of doing things," Jeanne said. "Why?"

"While we don't have the national strength to be called a great power yet, we're the second largest nation by landmass if you exclude the Demon Lord's Domain," I said. "If they learn that the first and second largest nations on the continent are working hand-in-hand, there are going to be countries that get worried by that. The ones caught in the middle between us—the Principality of Amidonia, the mercenary state Zem, and the Turgis Republic—particularly so. That is why, as far as possible, I don't want it known that the Empire and kingdom are cooperating."

"I see. Hence the secret alliance."

Jeanne had a pensive expression. She must have been weighing the pros and cons of this pact. However, there shouldn't have been any cons for the Empire in my offer.

They would save the war funds that would have gone to defending the east, and they could thicken their defenses on the western side of their own country, where they shared a border with the Demon Lord's Domain. If there was anything for them to be suspicious of, it was our intentions...

After some time, Jeanne nodded. "I don't see any harm in accepting your proposal. But, is there any merit for you in taking on that duty?"

"If I were pressed to answer, I might say building trust with the Empire," I said. "That, and because we'd be participating in the war, I would want you to stop demanding war subsidies."

“Of course,” said Jeanne. “That’s something we ask of countries not involved in the war. ...But, are you sure? I don’t feel like there’s enough in it for you...”

“Well, when the very existence of mankind is at stake, there has to be more thought put into it than a simple cost-to-benefit analysis,” I said. “Besides, if we act as if it’s none of our problem when our country is stable, the other countries won’t look kindly on that.”

“I see...” Jeanne crossed her arms, groaning in thought. “In that case, it’s a question of how closely we can collaborate. The Empire and the kingdom are on opposite sides of the continent. It’ll take time for us to communicate. It’s good that we can redirect the requests for aid to you, but if the reinforcements don’t arrive in time as a result, that would be terrible.”

“We have some idea of how to deal with that,” I said. “Hakuya, bring me that.”

“Yes, sire.”

Hakuya rose and left the room, soon returning with a wooden box about the size of a cardboard one. He then offered the box to Jeanne.

Jeanne accepted the chest, looking down at it dubiously. “What might this be?”

“Try opening it,” I said. “I want you to give that to Madam Maria.”

“Is this... a receiver? ...Ah!” It seemed Jeanne had figured it out. In the box was a simple receiver, like the ones used when I’d issued my ultimatum to the three dukes.

“This receiver is set to the same frequency as one of the jewels held by our country,” I said. “When you return to the Empire, I would like you to send one of the Empire’s simple receivers to me. Of course, it should be set to the same frequency as one of the jewels held by the Empire. That way, we can contact each other at any time.”

In other words, by using simple receivers and a jewel in each country, we would establish a hotline between the Empire and the kingdom. Unlike jewels, simple receivers were easy to walk around with.

If either country called the other's simple receiver with a request for talks, the other just needed to go to the location where the jewel was and they could start immediately. This would only allow us to transmit video and audio, so it wouldn't be possible to sign anything, but if we had bureaucrats to go back and forth carrying the documents, even that would become possible.

Jeanne looked highly impressed with this proposal. "With this, you can easily hold meetings with my sister, who can't afford to leave the Empire. I don't know what to say, Sir Souma. Your creativity leaves me trembling in awe."

"You're blowing it out of proportion," I said. "It was pretty ordinary to have something like this in my old world."

"And you think it's perfectly ordinary... Um, Sir Souma? I would like your permission to say something a little crazy," Jeanne said. "Would that be all right?"

Something crazy? What's she going to say? I wondered.

"I'll allow it."

"Thank you. Now then... Princess Liscia."

"Huh, me?!" Liscia looked surprised to have the conversation suddenly turn to her, but Jeanne continued regardless.

"Would you consider restoring Sir Albert to the throne? If you act now, the Empire will support you with everything it has."

Recommending she depose me?! I'm in the room, you know?!

Liscia seemed bewildered at first, but when she came to her senses, she replied angrily, her face flushing red, "What are you suggesting all of a sudden?! I'd never do that!"

"Oh, where's the harm?" Jeanne said. "It was Sir Albert's kingdom to begin with. Then I'd like you to please give the newly-freed-up Sir Souma to us! If he'll come, I'll give him the position of chancellor or any other position he wants! Heck, I'll even throw in my sister as an added bonus, so please become our Emperor!"

No, if you're offering to throw in your sister like a free bottle of detergent...

aren't you treating the Empress a little too lightly?!

Liscia was indignant. "Do you even realize what you're saying?!"

"I'm sane, yes," said Jeanne. "The way Sir Souma thinks is ahead of our time. I want to see the Empire my sister and he would create. If this was how it was going to be, we should have never accepted the war reparations. We should have insisted that Sir Souma come be with us. It's not too late, would you consider coming to the Empire now?"

"Obviously not!" Liscia slammed her hands down on the table. "I need... the kingdom needs Souma!"

Liscia shouted that threateningly, her canine teeth showing. It wasn't just Liscia; Aisha behind us was giving off a grumpy aura. Her hand was inching towards her weapon, too.

I appreciated that they cared so much about me, but Jeanne was, technically, an important guest from another country. I couldn't let them be too hostile with her.

I patted Liscia on the head saying, "There, there. Calm down Liscia. I'm not going anywhere, okay?"

"...I'm sorry," she said. "I lost my composure there."

"Aisha, stay, girl!" I barked. "Don't put your hand on that hilt!"

"I-Isn't the way you're treating me a little undignified?!" Aisha objected.

Ignoring that, I looked back to Jeanne. "I'm sorry, but I can't accede to that request. I do hear that Madam Maria is charming, but I want to stay here and be king in this country where Liscia and the others are."

"Whew... I know that," Jeanne said. "But I really think it's regrettable that you feel that way."

Then, saying, "Thank you for allowing me to say something crazy," Jeanne bowed her head. "Now, back to the topic of the alliance... That's something far too important for me to decide on my own initiative. Now that you've provided a wonderful system for our two heads of state to hold talks over the Jewel Voice Broadcast, I think it would be best if you discussed the matter directly

with my sister. For the time being, I would like a few members of your diplomatic corps to come to the Empire. I will also leave a few members of our bureaucracy here, so please take them back to the kingdom with you."

"I see. That should make coordinating things easier," I said. "Very well... but how about this? What if we each bestow the title of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary on the representative of our diplomatic corps, then establish an embassy in each country's capital? It's inefficient having to travel back and forth between our two countries whenever we decide on something, after all."

"That's marvelous!" exclaimed Jeanne. "I'll look into the possibility at once. My word... the wisdom gushes forth from King Souma like water from a hot spring."

Again, it wasn't like that had been my idea. If she rated me too highly, it was just going to make me feel more constrained... But, well, setting that aside, Jeanne and I continued to talk about various things after that.

For instance, we talked about how Madam Maria wanted to abolish slavery.

Madam Maria had apparently wanted to abolish the system, which was a hotbed for human trafficking, for a long time, but she was now looking to use the looming menace of the Demon Lord's Domain to do it in the name of national unity. Though the policy would be hard to pass in peacetime, she recognized that she could force it through now, and she was quick to act on the opportunity. It seemed she was more than just an idealistic dreamer.

I was in favor of abolition, too, but I felt it was too sudden, so I asked them to wait. Sudden changes, even good ones, always cause chaos. The French Revolution, with its call for *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, ended in the purges of the Reign of Terror, and the Arab Spring movement for democratization (though I did not, in any way, mean to condemn the movement itself) brought chaos to the countries of the region. With my knowledge of precedents like those, I had to be cautious.

That's why I told the Empire that emancipation had to be taken step by step. If possible, I wanted them to move forward on it at the same rate as the kingdom.

And, well, with important topics like that coming up one after another, the bureaucrats of both nations were running around in a frenzy. Even late at night, once the conference wrapped up, they continued.

They would likely be up all night. With a sideways glance to those bureaucrats, I took Liscia and Jeanne with me out onto the government affairs office terrace.

Because it was late at night in autumn, it was quite chilly. I had Serina bring us hot milk in wooden mugs, and though it wasn't really to celebrate of the end of talks, we shared a toast.

Liscia raised her mug. "To the glory to the Empire."

Jeanne raised her mug. "To the development of the kingdom."

I raised my mug. "And to the friendship to both nations."

""""Cheers!""""

We clacked our wooden mugs together.

It was hot milk in them, so after the toast, we could only sip away at them (because if we knocked them back, we'd burn ourselves), but... oh, was it good. One thing I'd come to appreciate since coming to this world was the deliciousness of milk. It was unpasteurized (they probably milked straight into a metal bucket, like you'd see in *The Dog of Flanders,* then chilled it with river or well water), so the flavor was fully intact. The tradeoff was that it wasn't exactly safe, but... this thickness was irresistible!

"This was a highly fruitful conference," Jeanne said as I was being warmed by the delicious hot milk. "We talked for quite a long time, didn't we? It's almost dawn."

"...Now that I think about it, I feel like we talked about a lot of things today that we really didn't have to," I said.

Since we'd gone to the trouble of arranging a hotline using the Jewel Voice Broadcast, I felt like we could have saved a number of the topics we'd covered for a later date. I felt bad for the bureaucrats of both nations whose workloads had increased because of us.

“Maybe because it was so late at night, we got strangely excited...” I said.

“Can you blame us?” Jeanne said with a smile. “I, for one, was thrilled to find new, reliable friends.”

Friends... huh.

True, though our alliance was a secret one, we and the Empire could be called friends now. As for what influence this secret alliance would have on the world... I couldn’t be sure yet, but it was reassuring to know that other countries could share my values. The Empire must have felt the same.

Jeanne suddenly took on a serious expression. “I have something to tell you, my friend in the east.”

“What is it? My friend in the west.”

“It’s about the Demon Lord, said to inhabit the Demon Lord’s Realm,” she said.

The Demon Lord. If I were to employ my knowledge of RPGs, that was the being who ruled over the demons and monsters. While it was unconfirmed, the former king, Sir Albert, had told me there apparently was a being like that inside the Demon Lord’s Domain.

“Have you seen the Demon Lord?” I asked.

“No,” said Jeanne. “More than that, no one has ever claimed to. The ones who penetrated the deepest into the Demon Lord’s Domain were the initial punitive force, but they were almost completely eradicated.”

“Huh? How do you know there’s a Demon Lord, then?” I asked.

“When the punitive force was destroyed, there was a group of demons believed to be capable of speaking, and there was a word they often spoke,” she said. “The researchers in my country have hypothesized that this word might be the name of the Demon Lord.”

There Jeanne paused, then spoke the word as if announcing it.

“That word was... ‘Divalroi.’”

“Divalroi... *Demon Lord Divalroi*?” I asked.

“Yes. They say that’s the name of the Demon Lord.” Jeanne nodded somberly.

Demon Lord Divalroi, huh... hmm?

“Demon Lord Divalroi... Demon Lord... Divalroi, Demon Lord...” I murmured.

Huh? What’s this? I remember hearing that phrase somewhere, I thought. *Is this deja vu? ...No, that’s not it. It sounds familiar. Somewhere. I’ve heard it somewhere. Somewhere other than here. Not in this world. In the other world?*

No, hold on. Why would I think of Earth? There shouldn’t be any demon lords on Earth. I don’t know any Divalroi. I shouldn’t, at least, but there’s something tugging at the back of my mind.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Souma?!” Liscia exclaimed.

When I came back to my senses, Liscia was supporting me. It looked like I had been clutching my head in my hands and stumbled. Liscia and Jeanne looked worried, so I gave them a smile.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I just got hit by a sudden wave of drowsiness.”

“Hmm... it is late, after all,” said Jeanne. “How about we turn in for the night?”

Because Jeanne was saying that too, we decided to meet again tomorrow in the audience chamber with Julius present to announce what had been decided today, then we all went off to rest.

I asked Serina to show Jeanne to a guest room, while Liscia and I headed to the room Liscia was using. I wanted to go to sleep as soon as possible, but my bed was in the governmental affairs office. I couldn’t very well go to sleep with the bureaucrats working right beside me, so I thought I’d borrow a corner in Liscia’s room.

“Souma... are you really okay?” Liscia asked me, sounding concerned, as we reached her room.

“...I’m fine,” I said. “I was just a little worn out.”

“You’re lying!” she burst out. “You’ve been routinely staying up for three nights straight! I’m not going to buy that you’re tired after staying up late for just one night!”

“No, I think it’s pretty bad that that’s what’s tipping you off...” I said.

Liscia sighed. “Come here.”

Liscia sat down on her bed, instructing me to sit next to her. Sitting next to a cute girl on her bed was a situation that should have had my heart racing, but Liscia’s no-nonsense attitude intimidated me into meekly obeying her.

When I did, the moment I sat down, Liscia grabbed my head and pushed it down into her lap. It was my first lap pillow in a long while. I could hear Liscia’s gentle voice above me.

“I don’t know what caused it, but when you’re tired, let me indulge you,” Liscia said, rubbing my forehead.

“...Sorry,” I said. “And thank you.”

“Hee hee. You’re welcome.”

I closed my eyes, letting the tension slip away from my body. When I’d heard the name “Demon Lord Divalroi,” I’d felt a vague uncertainty from the sense that I’d heard the name before. That hadn’t been resolved, but just having my head patted like this made my heart feel lighter.

Thanks to Liscia, in the time it took me to fall asleep, I didn’t have to feel worried anymore.



Chapter 5: Withdrawal

22nd day, 10th month, 1546th year, Continental Calendar

It was noon on the day after I forged a secret alliance with the Gran Chaos Empire.

Jeanne and I met with Julius once more in the audience chamber.

As we all stood in the same positions as the day before, Hakuya, who stood in front of me and to the side, stepped towards Julius and presented him with a piece of paper detailing the decision made in yesterday's talks. "The Royal Army will leave Van and return home to the Elfrieden Kingdom."

Julius's haughty expression showed that he saw this as the natural conclusion, but when he heard what came next, his face turned a different color.

"As a condition of this, the Principality of Amidonia is ordered to pay war reparations to the Elfrieden Kingdom," said Hakuya. "This is to be separate from any ransom negotiated for the return of prisoners of war."

"That can't be right!" Julius rounded on Jeanne. "Madam Jeanne! What is the meaning of this?!"

"The meaning of it...?" Jeanne shrugged. "Why, I do believe I have negotiated the return of your land, as requested?"

Julius couldn't seem to accept the outcome. "Is this some sort of joke?! War reparations? It makes it seem like we are a defeated nation!"

"Given your current situation, it's hard to say otherwise," said Jeanne. "You have lost your capital city, after all."

"No! We haven't lost yet!" Julius shouted. "They've only taken a single city!"

"...Then you're free to do as you please," said Jeanne. "The Empire will be washing its hands of the matter. You may make peace or make war, whichever you please."

Julius groaned, at a loss for words.

Seeing his reaction, Jeanne sighed. “As for that city... I have some heavy doubts that you can write off your capital as just one city being lost, but I believe you turned to us for assistance because you were in no position to retake the city yourself, yes? In that case, you have lost the war. The Empire, under the Mankind Declaration, has provided a means for you to restore the changes in your borders. We can intervene no further.”

“But, war reparations...” Julius complained.

“Sir Julius.” Jeanne turned a cold look on him, one that seemed to push him away. “This matter has saddened my sister, Maria, deeply. You have invaded a sovereign state by taking advantage of a loophole in the Mankind Declaration, which was made to unite all mankind in the face of the threat posed by the Demon Lord’s Domain. As the head of that pact, we cannot let it go unchallenged.”

“That was... our former sovereign, Gaius...” Julius sputtered.

“Even if it was,” said Jeanne, “you still bear the responsibility for failing to stop him. Regardless, in order to ensure that no other signatory of the Mankind Declaration engages in such foolhardy actions, I believe harsh consequences are necessary. I will have you set an example for them.”

Uwah... She’s wording it all politely, but basically what she’s saying is, “I’m going to make an example of you to keep the other signatories in line,” huh? I thought.

Julius stood there trembling with his hands balled into fists, his face a contorted mask of rage and anguish. “...And what if I refuse?”

“I’ve already told you that,” said Jeanne. “You are free to do as you please. The Empire will wash its hands of the matter, and the Principality of Amidonia will be expelled from the Mankind Declaration.”

Julius gasped in shock. “Wait! If you do that, our country will...”

“Yes,” said Jeanne. “‘If they are not a signatory to the Declaration, it’s not a violation if we attack them.’ Which is to say, your... Pardon me, your *father’s* interpretation will be able to be applied to Amidonia, as well.”

The Principality of Amidonia was surrounded by four nations on its four sides. To their west was the mercenary state of Zem, which professed to eternal neutrality despite dispatching mercenaries. To their south was the Republic of Turgis, a non-signatory state with a national policy of northward expansionism. To their north was the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria, which had a unique set of values that differed from its neighbors. And lastly, to their east was the Elfrieden Kingdom.

Setting aside what we might do ourselves, if they lost the protection of the Mankind Declaration now, it was entirely possible that the other three would gobble them up.

Their former ruler, Gaius, had maintained his country by joining hands with the Empire, forming a contract with Zem for their mercenaries, intimidating the Elfrieden Kingdom under its previous timid leader, Albert, and displaying his military might to the countries to the north and south. He'd had the capacity to carry out a balanced foreign policy. Could Julius be said to have the same talent?

Even if he did have the talent, did the young Julius have the kind of authority he would need to take the necessary steps?

The inheritance of authority is best done gradually, while the previous ruler still lives. However, Gaius was no more. Julius now had to deal with the difficult problem of managing the threat of foreign powers externally, while also keeping his own vassals under control internally. If, during that very important process, his country were removed from the Mankind Declaration, he would lose the ability to rely on the Empire's authority and would quickly find himself in checkmate.

Julius understood that, so he bowed his head to Jeanne, his face full of bitterness. "...I will accept your plan."

"A wise decision, Sir Julius," Jeanne said.

Julius looked mortified, but I couldn't allow myself to show mercy here, so I did not stir.

With that matter settled, we moved on to negotiating the specific amount.

We demanded two years' worth of Amidonia's national budget, divided into annual payments over a period of ten years, with the stipulation that it must be paid in Imperial coinage. In other words, they would pay twenty percent of their national budget to us every year for ten years.

Julius, of course, objected, but Jeanne convinced (coerced?) him to accept it. The point was to deprive Amidonia, which had spent half of its annual budget on military expenses, of its military funding. As long as they reduced military spending, I didn't think it would be impossible for them to pay it, but would Amidonia be able to do that?

"Madam Jeanne," I said. "If there are any delays in payment..."

"Indeed," said Jeanne. "The Empire will support the Elfrieden Kingdom in its annexation of Van."

"Urkh..." Julius looked frustrated, but he couldn't say anything.

With that confirmed, I made a proposal. "However, Madam Jeanne, I could see them delaying payment while they harden the defenses around Van. Even with the Empire's consent, it would be a hassle to have to take the city again. As such, I would like something of equivalent value as collateral."

"Collateral?" Jeanne asked.

"An item that we will hold on to until such time as the reparations are paid," I said. "If the reparations are not paid, we will gain ownership of that item. Of course, if the reparations are paid properly, the item will be returned."

"I see... So, what do you want?" Jeanne asked.

"A Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel."

"Wha—! Our country only has one of those!" Julius roared.

With the current level of technology, they couldn't create another. If it were valued as an asset, it was probably equal to a year's worth of Amidonia's national budget.

But still, I said, "You're not using it all that much anyway. Where's the harm in letting us have it?"

"Don't be absurd! Do you mean to incite our people to revolt?!" Julius

shouted.

“It’s a simple matter of changing the frequency,” I said. “That’s all it would take to keep you from receiving broadcasts made by Elfrieden.”

“Urgh... Well, yes...” Julius looked anguished, but he accepted it surprisingly easily.

They had been using the convenient device for little more than a declaration of intent at the beginning of each year, so Julius the militarist probably didn’t realize its true value. It might be that he only recognized it for its material value. As I was thinking that...

“Sire. May I have a word?” Hakuya said, then whispered something in my ear. When I heard what he had to say, I furrowed my brow.

“That’s... mostly just to satisfy your own interests, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Whatever are you saying?” Hakuya asked. “Knowledge is crystallized wisdom.”

“...Well, fine,” I said. “Sir Julius.”

“...What?”

“As an additional piece of collateral, we would like to take the books in this castle’s archives.”

That was what Hakuya had proposed. We would take custody of Amidonia’s books gathering dust in Amidonia’s archives.

In this world, paper was still precious, and books were not in wide distribution. It was entirely possible that Amidonia had books in their archives that Elfrieden did not. Moreover, in the case of books, it would be possible to copy them while we had them in our possession.

Julius snorted with contempt. “Very well. But don’t touch anything else. I won’t stand for you taking our weapons or armor.”

“We already sold off a bunch of those to raise funds for the transportation network here, you know?” I said. “We spent that money on this city, so even if you ask for it back, we can’t comply.”

“Urgh. Then don’t touch them any further!” Julius snapped.

“...Very well,” I said.

The weapons were more important than the books, huh? It was the right decision, given that he was surrounded by countries he couldn’t let his guard down around, but he didn’t seem to understand how scary it was that the collected writings of his people, the crystallization of their wisdom, would be leaking out.

When I looked to Jeanne, she must have been thinking the same thing as me, because she wore a wry smile.

Now, with the matter of reparations settled, we decided to settle other matters.

“I want my the soldiers of my country who were taken prisoner by the Elfrieden Kingdom returned,” Julius demanded.

“Very well,” I said. “However, you will have to pay a ransom for those belonging to the nobility or gentry.”

“...Understood.”

“In addition, we have investigated and composed a list of war criminals who attacked villages and engaged in looting during your invasion of our country,” I said. “Any prisoners who are on those lists will be judged under the laws of our country, and so we cannot return them to you.”

The extreme measure thought up by Hakuya, using the fictional monster of the flame pierrots to induce people to evacuate, had succeeded in getting most of the people out of the path of the Amidonian forces. However, that didn’t mean there had been absolutely no casualties.

The armies of the principality seemed to have dispatched scouts in all directions, and those unfortunate enough to encounter them had been killed. I would see to it that they paid for the innocent blood of my people they had spilled.

“We will also demand that those whose names are on the list and yet remain in your country be turned over to us,” I said. “Only once this is completed can

we begin to return prisoners to you.”

“...Fine,” said Julius shortly, accepting the list of war criminals from Hakuya. “By the way, is Roroa among the prisoners to be returned?”

Roroa? Who?

“I’m not familiar with the name,” I said. “Who’s that?”

“Roroa Amidonia. My unworthy younger sister. She should have been in Van when the fighting started.”

“Your younger sister?” I asked. “When the gates of Van were opened, we allowed any who wished to leave to do so. I think Margarita was about the only one of any status who stayed. I haven’t received any reports that we captured a member of the royal family.”

“...That’s fine, then,” Julius said, cutting off the topic as if no longer interested.

His sister was missing, wasn’t she? He seemed awfully blasé about that fact. Wasn’t he worried?

“If you’d like, I could have my people look for anyone who’s spotted her,” I offered.

“That will not be necessary.”

“Not necessary?” I repeated.

Hakuya whispered in my ear, “Most likely, he is concerned about a succession crisis. My investigations indicate that Princess Roroa is one of the few in the Amidonian royal house who has the support of the civil officials. Having given preferential treatment to the military, Julius is not popular with the civil officials. He must fear that they would support Madam Roroa against him.”

“Even though, with Gaius gone, she’s one of his few remaining relatives,” I whispered back.

“It is a common occurrence in royal families,” he whispered.

“I understand that, but still... I don’t want to understand it,” I whispered back.

Succession wars had not been uncommon in Earth’s history. Even in the

Elfrieden Kingdom, when Liscia's mother Elisha had ascended the throne, the conflict between her relatives had nearly led to the extinguishing of the royal line.

If I recalled correctly, Machiavelli himself called for the purging of political opponents. However... as one who had known the loneliness of losing all of his family, I couldn't help but feel he should treasure his one little sister. It might have been naïve of me, but it was something I couldn't give up on.

"Oh, that's right," I said. "I mentioned Margarita a moment ago. We would like for her to remain in the kingdom. Given she cooperated with us to maintain order in Van, I suspect you would be hard pressed to decide what should be done with her."

"General Margarita Wonder, is it?" Julius seemed to think for a moment. "If you will release five of the nobles you hold prisoner in exchange, I can accept that." he said.

He must have been calculating her value as a prisoner, and he'd judged that, compared to a general he wouldn't know what to do with, a reduction in the ransom for vassals who were actually loyal to him was more beneficial. Calling for five people to be exchanged in return for one was a shrewd decision.

"Very well," I said. "I'll accept those conditions."

"...She was a good general, yes, but good enough for you to want her so badly?" Julius asked dubiously.

I smiled wryly. Julius, only able to judge people's value by their potential as assets in war, wouldn't understand Margarita's true value. As a singer, as a host, Margarita had become indispensable when it came to producing programs for the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

Well, I was under no obligation to explain that to him, so I kept quiet.

With things largely in order now, I declared an end to the talks.

Elfrieden would receive war reparations in exchange for withdrawing from Van. Amidonia would regain control of Van in exchange for paying reparations. The Empire had demonstrated its influence by acting as a mediator in this

dispute.

...Those were results I could be satisfied with, for now.

It could be said that Amidonia had come out at a loss, the Empire had lost nothing, and Elfrieden had come out with suitable gains.

With the talks concluded, Julius turned on his heel to walk away, as if saying he had no more to say to the likes of me, but I called out to stop him.

“Sir Julius!”

“...What?” he snapped, not turning around.

“A political thinker from my own world, Machiavelli, said something like this,” I said. “Those who acquire a principality with difficulty will keep it with ease. Those who acquire a principality without difficulty will find it difficult to keep.”

“Huh? What does that mean?” Julius turned around, glaring at me.

I looked him straight in the eye and said, “I defeated you and your men to take Van. I expelled the vast majority of the nobility and gentry, purging almost anyone who could have become a political opponent. That’s why, if I had continued to rule Van, there would likely have been no major problems. However... can you say the same? Even if you return to this city, can you rule it without issues?”

“What are you talking about?” Julius demanded. “This is my country.”

“However, until just now, it was part of Elfrieden,” I said. “You regained it using the authority of the Empire, which is to say, the arms of others. This would be what the political thinker Machiavelli meant by ‘a principality acquired without difficulty.’”

In history, there are those who became princes with the backing of relatives or powerful countries. However, for those who fly to the top under the power of those backers, to lose their support is to instantaneously lose their fortune.

An example of this would be how the man Machiavelli had held up as his ideal prince, Cesare Borgia of Italy, had fallen upon the death of his backer, the man who was both his father and the pope, Alexander VI.

Or like how, in the time of the Chu-Han Contention, when Xiang Yu had

struggled against Liu Bang, the farmer who had been held up to Xiang Yu's side as a hero, and who had risen from humble beginnings to be named King of Chu, had eventually been killed when he had been deemed to be of no further use.

Having borrowed the authority of the Empire to reclaim his own capital, Julius would surely be looked down on by both his officers and the people of Amidonia. And Gaius VIII, feared for his military might, was no more.

Would Julius, who was clever but lacked intensity, ultimately be able to keep his officers under control? Would he be able to serve the people of Van better than I had, and gain their trust?

"One who acquires a principality without difficulty must work hard to keep it," I said. "Before you begin talking about grudges, I suggest you work hard on policies that will benefit your people."

"That's none of your concern." Brushing aside my words of unfelt support, Julius left.

Jeanne shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes.

I walked over to Jeanne and shook her hand. "These talks have been very fruitful. Give my regards to your sister."

"Absolutely," Jeanne said. "You take care, too, Sir Hakuya. We should complain about our respective masters over drinks sometime."

"That does sound good," said Hakuya. "I'll have a keg waiting for you."

What was that supposed to mean? They'd have enough to complain about that they'd need a whole keg? When I looked in his direction, Hakuya blatantly averted his eyes.

Seeing that, Jeanne gave a jovial laugh. "I hope we find ourselves on the same side when next we meet. Please, speak directly with my sister, too, sometime."

"That's right," I said. "I will be looking forward to the day I can talk with Madam Maria."

We exchanged a firm handshake.

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Once the withdrawal was decided upon, the rest came quickly.

Because it had been decided that we would return Van, staying any longer would only waste our war funds. The Royal Army pulled our troops out of Van with as much of a show as they had put on when we'd first entered through the gates. The small number of Amidonian soldiers stationed near Van were overwhelmingly outnumbered, and the Imperial Army was still in the vicinity, keeping a close watch on both sides, so we didn't need to worry about being pursued.

I was in the middle of the procession, the same as when we'd arrived, riding atop a horse that Aisha held the reins of, with Liscia on another horse beside me. When we entered the castle, the people's eyes as they looked on the Royal Army were filled with fear. However, things had changed a little now.

We hadn't issued an official announcement, but the people who lined the street wore expressions filled with uncertainty. When she saw those looks, Liscia had a dubious look on her face.

"Why does everyone look like that, do you think?" she asked. "I would understand if they were relieved, because they were happy to be liberated, or glad to see us finally gone..."

"It's probably... that they're worried," I said. "Worried about coming under Amidonia's rule again."

"Worried? When things are just going back to how they were before?" Liscia asked.

"That's exactly why," I said. "They're worried, *Will our lives go back to how they were before?*" I faced straight forward as I spoke. "Van's residents were being oppressed by the Princely House of Amidonia. It probably didn't bother them when that was simply a matter of course, but being under our occupation, they learned that it wasn't a given that things had to be that way. Unlike the Princely House, I gave them the freedom to express their feelings and ideas. That's why, with us leaving, they're worried that Julius and his followers' return means all of that will be suppressed again."

Because, well... it probably would. Once Julius entered Van, he would naturally set about clamping down on the relaxed atmosphere there.

Liscia looked pityingly to the people lining the streets. “Now that they’ve known the taste of freedom, they can’t go back to their old lives... It’s like an addiction, isn’t it?”

“I think that’s an apt way to put it, but... couldn’t you find something a little nicer?” I asked.

“It’s a fact, though, isn’t it?” she asked. “But it’s their country, right? Can their minds be changed that easily?”

I said, “In my old world there’s a proverb: ‘Oppressive government is fiercer than a tiger.’ In this case, I guess I would say, ‘Tyranny is more loathsome than an invader.’ The people don’t move according to moral codes or ethics. If their own country is beneficial to them, they’ll defend it from foreign threats, but if another country is more advantageous to them, they’ll actively work to open the castle gates to them.”

When I said that, Liscia sighed. “When I’m walking alongside you, I only see how people act in hard times.”

“Have you gotten sick of it?” I asked.

““Bring it on!”” Liscia and Aisha both cried,

For some reason, Aisha had joined in on that one, too.

“Why did you say it, too, Aisha?!” I burst out.

“If Your Majesty walks alongside me, then no road is hard!” Aisha declared proudly.

Talk about being way too loyal. If she kept it up, she was going to earn herself a nickname like “The King’s Dog.”

Looking at Aisha, Liscia giggled. “I feel the same. If I’m with you, I feel like I can accept any reality.”

“...I see,” I said. “Well, let’s head back.”

Head back to our country, where everyone is waiting.

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—One week later.

When Jeanne returned to the Gran Chaos Empire and reached the castle in the imperial capital, she was immediately summoned by her sister, Empress Maria, without even a moment to catch her breath. Though somewhat exasperated, she dragged her feet up to Maria's governmental affairs office, where she found her sister standing in the middle of the room, waiting for her.

Usually, at this time, there would still be bureaucrats busily working away, but today Maria must have cleared the room because she stood there alone. With a soft smile on her face, the elegance with which she stood there carried a hint of her majesty as an empress.

Jeanne brought one hand to her bosom, bowing to Maria. "Sister. I have just now returned from the princely capital, Van."

"It is good to have you back, Jeanne," said the Empress. "How did things go?"

"There were some issues, but it went more or less as we had hoped," said Jeanne. "Van and its surrounding territory have been returned from the Elfrieden Kingdom to the Principality of Amidonia."

"Excellent," said Maria. "You have served me well. ...Now, then." Maria clapped her hands and smiled. "That's it for work mode. Welcome home, Jeanne!"

Maria burst down from her throne and rushed over to hug Jeanne.

"SSister?!" The sudden hug threw Jeanne into a confused panic. "What's this, all of a sudden?! This is conduct unbefitting an Empress, you know?!"

"Well, I was lonely, not being able to see you for so long," Maria complained. "Everyone outside the family gives me the Your Imperial Majesty treatment, and our other sister is cooped up in her laboratory, the same as ever!"

"Don't give me that! You're not a child anymore!"

Even as she protested, Jeanne patted Maria on the back. She was aware of the solitude and the heavy burden her sister had to contend with as Empress, so she didn't want to push her away.

When Maria let go, she went over to sit down on the magnificent bed installed at the side of the office and patting the spot beside her, encouraging

Jeanne to come have a seat too.

“So, so, what kind of gentleman was Sir Souma?” Maria asked eagerly.

When she saw her sister with her eyes shining, like a child badgering her parent for a bedtime story, Jeanne felt a headache starting to come on. However, it seemed unlikely she would be dismissed until she talked about it, so Jeanne gave up and decided to tell her what happened during the talks.

“All right,” Jeanne relented. “First, let me tell you what happened when I went to scout out Van...”

Jeanne explained the course of events from when she’d met Souma on a street corner in Van until their agreement to form a secret pact. As Jeanne told the story, Maria’s expression changed rapidly. She looked relieved when she learned that Souma wasn’t upset about being summoned, and that he fully understood their intent.

When she heard Souma had said, “Monsters and demons may have the same relationship as what this continent refers to as mankind and animals,” she wore an expression of surprise and uncertainty.

When she heard that something called a spaghetti bun that they had eaten during the conference was delicious...

“Jeanne, that’s not fair!” Maria cried, puffing up her cheeks angrily.

It had been some time since Jeanne had seen her sister so animated while listening to her. She was probably excited.

The greatest explosion of emotion came when Jeanne talked about the secret pact, Souma’s proposal that the Empire would defend the west, while the kingdom would defend the east. When Maria heard that, she threw herself back on the bed holding her belly as she laughed.

Jeanne was taken aback by her sister’s reaction. “Sister. I don’t think it’s really anything to laugh about, is it?”

“Hehehe... S-Sorry. It’s just so funny,” Maria said as she wiped away the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes from laughing too much.

“Funny?” Jeanne asked incredulously.

“I mean, think about it,” said Maria. “Not that long ago, we had to show special consideration towards that country because they had declined so much, but at some point, they turned into a trustworthy ally who can handle the eastern side of the continent for us. I feel like I’ve been tricked by some fairy’s illusion.”

“Well... it’s true, events are moving at a blindingly quick pace,” said Jeanne.

“Yes. Yes, that’s precisely it, Jeanne.” Maria ‘s smile suddenly vanished, her face entirely serious. “Hey, Jeanne. Do you remember how a hero is defined in the kingdom?”

“It was in the reports, yes,” said Jeanne. “If I recall... it was, ‘One who leads the change of an era,’ right?”

“Yes,” said Maria. “Not ‘One who defeats the Demon Lord’ or ‘One who conquers the world,’ but ‘One who leads the change of an era.’ Souma was summoned as a hero, but all he does is administrative work, so some people doubt whether he truly is a hero.”

“It’s true, he doesn’t feel quite like what we’d expect from a hero,” Jeanne said. “He didn’t seem all that strong, after all.”

Maria nodded. “You’re right. I think he’s a long way from what we envision as a hero. But what if we avoid getting caught up on that image, and to instead evaluate him as ‘One who leads the change of an era’? When you think of the speed things have been moving lately, don’t you feel like the times are changing?”

When she heard that, Jeanne gulped.

Maria rose to her feet and walked over to the windowsill. “He sounds like a more interesting person than I expected. Oh, I do hope I can talk to him in person soon.”

Looking to the eastern sky, Maria smiled softly.



Extra Story: The Story of a Certain Group of Adventurers 3

The adventurers' guild.

They would buy relics or materials harvested from monsters found in dungeons explored by adventurers, who made their living doing so. They also were an intermediary for quests that involved things such as dangerous beast eradication, protection of merchants, and slaying of monsters that came out of dungeons.

Because adventurers traveled around many countries, the adventurers' guild was independent from the states it operated in.

A party was visiting the branch of the guild in Parnam. The party consisted of the hot-blooded and handsome swordsman Dece, the baby-faced, slender female thief Juno, the brawny, macho brawler Augus, the gentle, affable young priest Febral, and the quiet, shapely mage Julia.

"Dece's party, right?" the receptionist asked. "Your reward for the villager escort quest is here."

The girl at the reception gave them a perfunctory greeting and a bag full of silver coins. The bag bulged slightly, making Juno and Augus's eyes glimmer.

"We've got more than a couple months worth of earnings here, don't you think?!" Juno asked excitedly.

"Even split five ways, it'll be a lot, won't it?!" Augus exclaimed. "Now I can get some new knuckle dusters... No, maybe something even higher quality!"

Standing beside the two who were blinded by the prize money, Febral tilted his head to the side questioningly. "Even if we're being paid on an individual basis, not as a party, this reward seems too high for the quest. Was there some sort of special bonus applied?"

The receptionist grinned and nodded. “Yes. This quest was issued by the royal castle. It said, ‘What is believed to be a new breed of monster, the flame pierrot, has appeared to the south. We would like to request your assistance in escorting the residents of nearby villages as we evacuate them.’ But, with the untimely invasion by the Principality of Amidonia, we received reports that many of our people had encountered forces from the principality.”

“Oh, that,” said Juno. “I encountered them, too.”

The receptionist nodded. “Fortunately, because the people of the villages were evacuated, they were able to minimize the harm to citizens of the kingdom from principality troops. However, because of the unexpected trouble this meant for the adventurers, the castle has issued a special hazard bonus. That would be the extra amount you see there.”

“I see,” she said. “That makes sense...”

Dece and the others accepted their reward money, heading over to a table in the cafe and bar that was set up inside the guild.

Once the money was evenly split five ways, Dece asked Febral, “So, about what she just told us... What do you think?”

“You mean about the unexpected hazard pay?” Febral asked him back, to which Dece nodded.

“The towns and villages that just happened to be being attacked by the flame pierrots just happened to be on the route the principality’s forces took, and because we just happened to be evacuating the residents human loses were kept to a minimum... I mean, isn’t that all a little too convenient?” Dece said.

“...You’re right,” said Febral. “Perhaps what the kingdom was on guard against was the principality’s army all along. Could they have hurried to have us evacuate the residents because they were anticipating an attack?”

When Febral presented that theory, Juno tilted her head to the side. “Hm? But, I saw the flame pierrots myself when I was with Mr. Little Musashibo, remember?”

“They looked like mannequin torsos with torches for heads, right?” Febral said. “That sounds pretty easy to make, doesn’t it?”

“Were they made-up, thennnn?” Julia asked in a relaxed tone, to which Febral nodded.

“Yes. That sounds highly likely. The king must have had some reason for it.”

“Heh. Not like it matters to us.” Augus wrapped his thick arm around Febral’s neck. “The intrigues of countries are no business for adventurers. What’s important for us is that we complete the quest, and that we make good money for it. Am I right?”

Dece smiled wryly. “You’re right. Rather than fret over it, let’s think about what we’re going to do with all this money.”

“For tonight, how does a feast sound, hmmmm?” Julia said gently... and then it happened.

A roly-poly something-or-other came in through the guild’s entrance. In its hands was a naginata, over its back a wicker basket, over its face a silk covering from under which peeked two adorable acorn-like eyes and bushy eyebrows. Who was it?! Was it a big moth cocoon?! Was it an egg monster?!

“Wait, that’s Mr. Kigurumi!” exclaimed Juno the moment she realized it.

When Little Musashibo entered the guild, he tottered over to the receptionist and handed her something. It was... a letter?

“Oh! A delivery, I see,” said the receptionist. “Thank you for your service.”

“...” (Little Musashibo gave a thumbs up.)

Having delivered the letter, Little Musashibo turned to go, his job done, but Juno wasn’t going to let that happen.

She leaned on the top of his head. “Hey, long time no see. You’re back from down south, too, I see.”

“...” (“J-Juno?” Little Musashibo reacted with surprise.)

Little Musashibo, who had shrunken slightly under Juno’s weight, flailed his arms around.

Juno stayed on top of Little Musashibo, rubbing his cheeks teasingly. “Thanks for the save back there. The principality almost got me.”

“...” (“No, I’m just glad you were okay,” he said, clapping her on the back.)

“Ahaha! But, now I think about it, weren’t you in more trouble than me, walking around all alone like that? I’ll bet you were there on the same quest, so you could have relied on us for help, you know.”

“...” (“I-I’m honored to hear it,” he said, bowing his head repeatedly.)

The rest of the part watched this exchange unfold with rolled eyes.

“How do they even make a conversation work like that...?” Dece wondered aloud.

“Could it be... love?” suggested Febral.

“Oh! You’re starting to believe Julia’s theory now, too, huh, Febral?” said Augus.

“Hee hee,” giggled Julia.

While the four of them were talking about it, the receptionist, who had been reading the letter, called them over. “Oh. You over there. You took the villager escort quest, didn’t you?”

“Hm? Yes, we did... Did something happen?” Dece asked.

The receptionist grinned. “It looks like there’s another additional reward for you from the castle. It was in the letter that just arrived. ‘The work of adventurers saved the lives of many of the people of this country, and so, to reward their hard work, a small banquet will be held at the castle, which they are most welcome to attend.’ That’s what this says.”

“A banquet at the royal castle?” Dece furrowed his brow. When they had already received hazard pay, a banquet seemed lavish.

“I don’t wanna go,” Juno said, clearly uninterested, as she continued to lean on Little Musashibo. “The castle sounds like a stuffy place. We’d look so out of place there.”

“Heh heh heh. Are you sure you want to say that?” the receptionist chuckled and said in a confident tone. “The banquet is being held at Ishizuka’s Place, you know?”

“‘Did you just say Ishizuka’s Place?!’” Augus and Febral gasped.

“You’ve heard of it? Augus, Febral?” Dece asked.

The two of them nodded eagerly.

“We haven’t just heard of it—it’s the talk of the town,” said Augus. “There’s a restaurant with amazingly delicious food in the castle, they say.”

“From what I’ve heard, it’s a restaurant that King Souma and the Minister for the Food Crisis, Mr. Poncho Panacotta, set up inside the castle,” said Febral. “I hear it was made to see if people in this country would be able to accept the dishes eaten back in King Souma’s old world.”

“Yes, yes, yes, that’s right!” For some reason, the receptionist was getting very excited as she spoke. “There are various dishes there, but all of them are quick, cheap, and tasty. It’s the best. However, with it being inside the castle, and only open at night, you can’t eat at it unless you work there. Just once, when I accompanied the guild chief to the castle, I had the opportunity to eat there... Slurp, the taste was unforgettable.”

When he saw the receptionist wipe the drool from the corner of her mouth with an enraptured look on her face, Dece was weirded out. “Are you all right? You’re sure there’re no weird ingredients in that food, right?”

“I’m sure it’s probably fiiiine,” said Julia. “It’s food fit for a king, after all.”

Juno tried asking Little Musashibo, who was underneath her, “You want to come, too, Mr. Kigurumi? You took that quest, too, right?”

“...” (“Oh, no, not me...” he said, sticking his harms out in front of him and shaking his head.)

“What? Come aloooong,” pouted Juno. “If you don’t, I’ll pull you out from inside there.”

“...” (“N-No, stop, please!” he said, flailing his arms and legs around.)

Juno kept manhandling Little Musashibo. In the end, she forced him to promise he would attend the banquet.

And so, on the evening of the banquet.

In the castle, an old wine cellar in the castle that was no longer in use had been remodeled into something like an chain izakaya and given the name Ishizuka's Place. It was here that the few dozen adventurers who had participated in the escort quest were celebrating.

For this banquet, tables were lined up in the center with large plates of food that everyone was free to take from. It was what would be called a buffet. The adventurers ravenously swarmed around the unusual and delicious-looking dishes. (Especially those using soy sauce and miso.)

It happened just when Juno's party, with Little Musashibo in tow, had finished getting in line, securing all of the different dishes and alcoholic beverages they might want, and returned to their seats.

Someone walked up to the podium opposite the entrance. It was a young girl who wore a red military uniform and had medium-short hair.

When they saw that girl...

"Wha?! The princess?!" someone exclaimed in surprise.

There was an excited murmur that spread through the room. The one standing at the podium was, without a doubt, Princess Liscia, the daughter of this country's former king and the one betrothed to the current (provisional) king, Souma Kazuya.

Liscia bowed, then began to speak in a clear voice. "Adventurers, I welcome you to Parnam Castle. I am King Souma's fiancee, Liscia Elfrieden. I am here to greet all of you today, in place of Souma who is currently indisposed due to his heavy workload. I would like to thank all of you for accepting the recent quest."

Liscia bowed once again.

Juno looked on, seeming deeply impressed. "That's a princess for you. She looks about my age, but she feels so ladylike."

Little Musashibo blatantly averted his eyes when Juno gave that impression. That was because he was hesitant to call the princess ladylike, given that she had, just recently, been leading a massive force on the battlefield.

Liscia picked up a glass of wine. Lifting it up high she said, "Thanks to all of

you, many of our people were saved. On behalf of Souma, and all the people you saved, I salute you. Now... Cheers!”

“““Cheers!”””

With that, the banquet began. The adventurers drank much wine, and smacked their lips at tatsuta-age, spaghetti buns, fried seafood skewers, and many other dishes not yet common in this country.

“This *tatsuta-age* stuff is great! I can’t get enough beer with it!” Augus declared enthusiastically, and Febral nodded in agreement.

“It seems they use the mystic wolves’ soy sauce for it,” said Febral. “It’s very good.”

“The fried octopus skewers are good, too,” said Julia. “Here, Dece. Say ahhh.”

“Wait! Julia?! Are you drunk already?!” Dece exclaimed.

They each enjoyed themselves. Juno, whose eyes were already a little unfocused, was wrapping herself around Little Musashibo. She was pushing a wooden mug full of beer up against his cheek. “Come on, Mr. Kigurumi, you’ve gotta drink toooo.”

“...” (Y-You’re a bad drunk?!” he said, panicking.)

“If you won’t drink, I’ll give it to you mouth-to-mouth,” Juno threatened.

“...” (“It will just stain the cloth, so please don’t! I’ll drink it myself, okay!”)

Then Little Musashibo turned his back to Juno. When she was wondering what was up, looking at him dubiously, suddenly a man’s hand came out of the seam in his back.

“Wuh?!” That shocking scene made Juno throw her head back in surprise. The arm that grew out of Little Musashibo took the mug of beer from the dazed Juno before slipping back inside Little Musashibo’s body. Then, after some gulping sounds from inside, the empty mug was expelled from his back.

“Whaa, what was that just now...?” Juno yelped.

Little Musashibo turned to face her and clapped a hand on her shoulder. “...” (“A fantastical illusion.” he said, nodding his head up and down.)

“Huh? But, just now I saw...”

“...” (“A fantastical illusion.” *Got it?* He tilted his head to the side.)

All Juno could say at this point was, “Uh, sure.”

From there on, with the occasional interruption for a fantastical illusion, the two drank together.

As they did, Liscia kept peeking over and watching them.

Twenty minutes later.

“...” (Little Musashibo’s body suddenly tilted over and he fell down on his back.)

Juno who was eating and drinking beside him, shouted out in surprise.

“Whoa, are you okay, mister?! Isn’t it a bit early for you to pass out?!”

Juno shook his body, but Little Musashibo couldn’t get up, it seemed. Then, “Pardon me a moment,” said an adult voice.

“Huh?” Juno asked.

When Juno looked up at the voice that suddenly called out to her, the young girl in the military uniform was rushing over to Little Musashibo. It was Princess Liscia. She was so surprised to have the princess suddenly call out to her that her mouth bobbed open and closed in mute shock.

Liscia pressed her ear up against Little Musashibo’s mouth.

“You’re at your limit. Because of the alcohol. That makes sense.” With those words, Liscia sat Little Musashibo up. “I’ll take care of this guy. You handle things here.”

“S-Sure...” Juno replied vacantly.

Liscia stared into Juno’s face.

“Hm? ...Um... is there something on my face?” Juno asked.

“No, it’s nothing,” said Liscia. “Anyway, I hope you enjoy yourselves.”

With that said, Liscia took Little Musashibo away.

Juno was at a loss for what to think, only able to watch their backs as they departed.

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“Why did you push yourself so far to be able to participate?” Liscia demanded. “Even going so far as to wear a kigurumi suit.”

As they walked down the castle hallway, Little Musashibo borrowing Liscia’s shoulder for support, a male voice came from inside Little Musashibo. “Hey, can you really blame me? Even I’ve got people I have to go out and socialize with.”

“You say that, but they’re not your associates, they’re that doll’s, right? Now hurry up and get out of that thing. Nobody else can see you here.”

When Liscia said that, the doll’s back opened wide and Souma emerged, dripping sweat. In addition to the heat of the kigurumi suit, he had alcohol in him, so his face was pretty red. When he finished crawling out of Little Musashibo, Souma sat down on the floor right there, exhausted.

Normally, Souma controlled Little Musashibo remotely with his ability, Living Poltergeists, but today he’d to eat and drink, so he’d gotten inside it himself.

Liscia looked at him with exasperation, lending Souma shoulder to lean on. “Look, if you’re going to rest, don’t do it here, do it in your bed in the governmental affairs office. I’ll have someone put away the doll later.”

“Ahh, sorry,” said Souma. “It’d be a big help if you could do that for me.”

Souma leaned on Liscia for support as he walked on shaky legs.

“By the way, that girl, Juno?” Liscia asked as they headed to the governmental affairs office. “She was pretty cute, huh?”

Souma looked away. “I haven’t done anything with her that I should feel bad about, okay?”

“Oh, I never said anything about that, did I?” Liscia asked.

Liscia was staring, while Souma couldn’t meet her gaze.

If anyone had overheard, they might have sounded like an old married couple.



Chapter 6: Standing in Front of the Lion's Cage

It had been a few days since we'd returned from to the royal capital Parnam from Van.

Right now, I was beneath Castle Parnam in front of the dungeon. With only candlelight for illumination, it was gloomy. While you likely could infer this from the fact it was inside the castle, a lot of people of high status had been put in here. Most of the inmates were political prisoners.

I was in that underground dungeon, facing a certain individual across a set of iron bars.

After some silence, I spoke to the person in the cage. "This is our first time meeting in person, I believe. I am the provisional king, Souma Kazuya."

"It is an honor to meet you," said the beastman. "I am Georg Carmine."

With those words, the former General of the Army, the man with the face of a lion, Georg Carmine, bowed his head deeply.

While I was seated in a chair, Georg sat directly on the dungeon floor like a general from the Warring States Period might sit when greeting his master.

"I congratulate you once again on your recent victory," Georg said, his head still bowed.

Georg had been imprisoned here a few days before our return. Up until then, he had been under house arrest at his former castle Randel, so he must have been gathering information.

"Raise your head," I said. "It's hard to talk when you're like that."

"Ha ha!" Georg laughed.

I looked straight at Georg as he raised his face. He had a muscular physique and stood nearly two meters tall, so even though he was kneeling, his eyes were at roughly the same level as mine while I sat in a chair. On top of that, the

ethos he exuded as a veteran warrior made him appear all the larger.

Magnificent. That was the word that best suited this warrior.

What I felt while talking to him over the Jewel Voice Broadcast is nothing compared to this... I thought.

I struggled not to be swallowed up by the atmosphere that surrounded Georg. This feeling was similar to what I'd felt when Gaius had been closing in on me. This man had an incredible sense of presence, and yet he was the youngest of the three dukes. Castor was around 160, while Excel was over 500.

"Aren't the apparent age and actual age of the three dukes kind of reversed?" I asked. "Oh, and mental age, too."

When I said that, Georg gave a hearty laugh. "You could be right. Generally, they say that the longer-lived a race is, the longer it takes them to develop mentally and physically. For most the long-lived races, if you take their actual age, multiply it by around one hundred, the oldest a human or beastman generally lives to, then divide by the longest that race live to, you get a good estimate of their mental age."

I see, I thought. *In this world, where in Japan we might say "Cranes live for a thousand years, turtles for ten thousand," they could say "Dragonewts live for five hundred years, water serpents for a thousand," when talking about long life. (Though, in this case, they actually do live that long.) In other words, taking Castor as an example, 160 * 100 / 500 = 32. If I look at it that way, his impulsiveness makes sense, maybe... Wait! Huh? Hold on?*

"By that reasoning, Excel's mental age should be over fifty, shouldn't it?" I asked.

"...There is an exception to every rule," said Georg.

"Don't blatantly look away."

Apparently even Georg, who didn't seem like he had to fear anyone, was hesitant to touch the topic of Excel's age. I could relate.

After talking carrying on with that sort of aimless conversation for a while, I cut to the heart of the matter. "I had a lot I've wanted to ask and hear from you

once we finally got the chance to meet.”

“Ask away,” said Georg.

“Before that,” I said, “won’t you meet with Liscia?”

Georg silently closed his eyes.

It seemed that just once after returning to Parnam, Liscia had asked to meet with Georg. However, Georg had shouted at her (or, to be more precise, he’d had the jailer relay the message) and chased her off.

“What business does a woman who will soon be queen have visiting a convict?!” he had shouted.

Liscia had an overly serious personality, so she’d taken those words to heart, and never attempted to visit again. Then, as if seeking a distraction, she’d immersed herself in work.

“She’s putting on a tough face, but... I know she’s not fine,” I said.

“The princess and I had our last parting during the ultimatum,” said Georg. “There is no need for words between us now.”



“You mean when she cut her hair?” I asked.

“I saw her determination and resolve in that act,” he said. “As a person, as a woman, the princess has grown into an individual who can stand on her own two feet. I don’t want her to dull that resolve by clinging to a dying man.”

He’s rejecting Liscia for her own sake, huh, I thought. *Honestly... What a stubborn old man.*

“I, too, have something to ask,” Georg said.

“What?”

“What has become of the soldiers in the Army and Air Force who rebelled against you alongside us?” he asked. “And what of the nobles who engaged in corruption and then rebelled?”

“In recognition of their valor in the Amidonian war, I have pardoned the soldiers of the Army and Air Force for their crimes,” I said. “The House of Vargas rebelled against me, but I must consider their accomplishments up until the time of the former king. I have decided that only Castor and Carla will be judged for their crimes. I abolished the Duchy of Vargas, but I allowed the disowned eldest son to inherit the family name, and granted him just Red Dragon City as his fief. Though, that child still being young, his mother Accela and their steward Tolman will assist him in his duties. As for Castor and Carla themselves, to repay Excel’s accomplishments in the war effort, I have heard her plea and, at a later date, I will judge the two of them personally.”

Georg closed his eyes and remained silent. How must he have felt listening to me?

“Now, as for the corrupt nobles... I abolished their houses, confiscated their domains and assets... and had them executed,” I said. “For those who acted directly, I did so publicly. For those who were merely implicated, I did so privately.”

Under current law, treason was a crime that carried a death sentence for relatives of up to three degrees of consanguinity. If, like Georg, they had cut ties with their families properly, their uninvolved relatives wouldn’t have had to get involved, but the vast majority of the corrupt nobles had neglected to do that.

They must have thought they couldn't lose.

Worse yet, in addition to treason, they bore charges of corruption, bribery, collaborating with Amidonia, misdeeds within their own fiefs (under the protection of their own status, they'd engaged in murder, rape, theft, etc.), and so on. Anyway, they had broken the laws like crazy.

For those whose only crime was treason, like Georg and Castor, I still received petitions to spare their lives, but for these people, I actually received petitions calling for me to murder them more brutally than I did.

"The system of collective responsibility is supposed to hold their families responsible for not stopping them, right? Isn't three degrees of consanguinity a little much?" I asked.

"There is nothing else to be done for it," said Georg. "If humans or beastmen live to see their great-grandchildren, they've lived a very long life, but there are races that live to see their great-great-grandchildren and greater's faces while still being active. Because of that, the punishment had to reach farther."

"Still, too many innocent people died!" I cried. "Hakuya and I worked like madmen, and we were just barely able to reform the law to only cover two degrees of consanguinity in time. We also stayed the execution of everyone under the age of thirteen, and had them placed in the care of orphanages or the church, but that was the best we could do..."

Those under ten had been placed in an orphanage run by the state, while those who were between the ages of eleven and thirteen had been left with the church.

The difference between the two was whether they would be able to marry and have families of their own in the future. For those in the orphanage, it was possible, but those given to the church would be cut off from secular life and be unable to marry. Furthermore, among the people implicated by association, there had been a woman who had given birth less than a month ago, so she had also been left with the church along with someone to watch her. If she tried plotting anything untoward in future, she would be dealt with then. That was about all I could do right now.

"I'm... opposed to the system of collective responsibility," I said. "The only

ones who should be judged for a crime are those who commit it. Even if they are related, it's wrong to execute an innocent person. And publicly, at that. In order to judge heinous crimes, and as a deterrent against them, I can't let go of the death penalty. That's why I don't want that penalty to be a public spectacle, and I want to reform the minds of people who see it as one."

"The country is already yours," said Georg. "I believe you should do as you see fit."

"...I will," I said.

"Sire, is it hard on you, taking the lives of others?" asked Georg.

I must have looked pretty anguished, because Georg said that as if trying to comfort me.

"How could it not be?!" I burst out. "On my orders, countless lives vanish. The weight of that responsibility feels like it's going to crush me. Up until half a year ago, I was just an ordinary guy, damn it!"

"I've read about it in the princess's letters," said Georg. "She praised you as a king among kings. She wants to support you, with all her body and soul."

"Liscia is... doing a good job of supporting me," I said. "But I have to make a decision that will sadden her. I... have to kill you." I placed my hand on my forehead, speaking in a low groan. "Your plan was brilliant. Hal's old man... Glaive told us everything. By gathering all the corrupt nobles in one place, we were able to round up all of them and their assets in one fell swoop. It was a splendid plan that filled in a number of gaps Hakuya and I had overlooked. But... because it can't be made public, I have to treat you the same as I did the corrupt nobles."

There were two reasons it couldn't be made public.

The first was that there had been death caused by the fighting between the Forbidden Army and the Army. Unlike the Forbidden Army's losses in the battle at Red Dragon City, which were limited to one warship, the battle outside Randel had seen losses on both sides. If we publicized Georg's true intent, the bereaved wouldn't accept it.

The second was that relations with Zem, who had been forced to pay a

ransom for their mercenaries, would worsen even further. The way things stood now, Zem were regretting that they had sent mercenaries to the losing side in order to take revenge for my canceling of our contract.

If they learned that Georg and I had been secretly working together, Zem would think the kingdom had set them up. It was actually Georg who had done that on his own, but I could hardly blame them for feeling that way. Their feelings towards us were bad enough as it was. They didn't need to be made any worse. That was to be avoided.

That was why, as things stood now, Georg's plan could not be made public.

All of that said, Georg himself must have been aware of that fact. He had been fully aware of it, and was literally trying to take the secret to his grave. How stubborn. He really was... an idiot.

"Hey, was this really the only way? This was what you wanted? To sully your own name, and commit a double suicide with the corrupt nobles, are you satisfied with that?" I rose from my chair, slamming my fist into the iron bars. "Where was the hurry? We could have taken our time to purge the corrupt nobles! The same goes with Castor! He believed that you had some idea, followed you to the end out of friendship and became a traitor for it! I had jobs I wanted you to handle after the war, and now my plans are all thrown off! Sure, handling it all in one go was a big deal, I'll give you that. The country's been cleaned up a good deal, and Hakuya's and my stock has risen, making it easier to implement my policies. But, still, it's meaningless if you lose you for it! Do you have any idea how much it hurts a state to lose talented people?! It sure as hell isn't equal in value to getting rid of some corrupt nobles!"

"..." Georg's eyes remained closed as he listened to me in silence.

I pounded on the iron bars once more. "Answer me, Georg! Are you really satisfied with this?!"

"That goes without saying," Georg calmly replied. "From the roots of a great tree that I thought, like my own body, would only wither away and die, I now see new growth sprouting. All I can do is pray for it to grow up well."

"Even if it knocks down that great tree as it does?!" I yelled.

“That is the joy of seeing the next generation grow up strong,” said Georg. “In time, you will come to understand it, too, sire.”

“...Will I really?” I asked.

“When a child is born to you and the princess, I guarantee it.”

I slumped back heavily onto my chair. Feeling strangely enervated, I asked him the last thing that had bothered me. “Please, tell me this... Is this something you came up with *entirely on your own*?”

“What do you mean by that?” Georg opened his eyes and asked.

Don’t play dumb with me!

“This is the first time we’ve met,” I said. “Yet you have a strangely high opinion of me. You’re trying to leave this plan in my hands, as well as Liscia, who you love like a daughter, in my hands, and the future of this country in my hands, too. It’s just wrong, no matter how I think about it. Where did that loyalty come from?”

“Is learning of your unusual talents from the princess’s letters insufficient as an explanation?” Georg asked.

“Yeah, it’s insufficient,” I said. “I can’t see you embracing this loyalty to a bunch of words on paper. If you were going to martyr yourself for something, it could only be for the *House of Elfrieden.*”

Now that I thought of it, something had been off *from the very beginning.*

From the moment I’d taken the throne, the path I had needed to travel down had seemed to have been prepared for me strangely well.

I was suddenly given the throne, I was entrusted with all of the power to control national policy, even given an engagement to Liscia to bolster my legitimacy, and then at some point, the corrupt nobles had been smoked out for me. When I looked back, I could see everything had been moving to make things easier for me. If that was the will of someone... there was only one person who could have done it.

“Was this plan done on that person’s orders?” I asked.

“...I will remain silent.”

“Answer me,” I ordered. “What does that person know, and what do you know?”

I waited for Georg to speak, but he had nothing to say to me. It was so silent in the dungeon that I could hear the ringing in my ears. I realized I could wait forever, and it wouldn’t do me any good.

“Why won’t you answer me?” I demanded.

“When the proper time comes, I am sure that person will tell you themselves,” said Georg.

I rose to my feet, pulling a small bottle from my pocket and placing in front of Georg. “Poisoned wine. While I may not appreciate the form it took, I can’t publicly execute a man who tried to martyr himself for his country. Also... I’ll be offering the same to those who want to martyr themselves for you.”

It must have been the work of Georg’s strong personality, but there were more than a few soldiers and officers in the Army who’d said they would do just that. His former second-in-command, Beowulf, as well as a number of high-ranking officers, had demanded they receive the same punishment as Georg. Furthermore, even among the soldiers of the Army and Air Force who had had their crimes forgiven for their distinguished service in the war against Amidonia, there were those who’d had to be restrained after they attempted to commit suicide in front of the castle after demanding their commander’s life be spared. Honestly... I was sick of all these people wanting to die.

Georg took the bottle and said, “Thank you,” his cheeks loosening slightly. That menacing lion face of his now looked like that of a happy old man. Georg opened the bottle, holding it up in my direction. “Sire. I ask that you take care of the princess for me.”

“I can promise you that,” I said. “Liscia is already an irreplaceable member of my family. ‘Protect your family, come what may’... No matter what happens in the future, that is one belief I will never change.”

I knew the pain of loneliness, and I would protect my family, no matter what might come.

No matter how inefficient that might be.

Perhaps sensing my resolve, Georg nodded with satisfaction. “It relieves me to hear that. I will always there, praying for the Elfrieden Kingdom’s glory and for Your Majesty’s happiness and good fortune, from the shadows beneath this nation’s grass and leaves. Now... I am sorry.” With those words, Georg downed the contents of the bottle in a single gulp.

With time his body began to tilt to one side, then the bottle fell from his hand to shatter on the ground.

With the thud that followed, the dungeon was silent once more. Having fallen over to the side... Georg’s face seemed to be smiling in satisfaction.

I stood, turning my back to Georg’s cell, and walked away.

Step, step, step, step. A few echoing steps later, I turned back just once. “...Don’t make me carry all of this burden.”

I faced forward and began to walk once more. I didn’t turn back again.

The next day, Chris Tachyon’s new program ran a story with the title “Former General of the Army Georg Carmine Takes His Own Life in Prison.”



Chapter 7: Promise

Morning, one week (eight days) after we returned to Parnam.

In the castle's governmental affairs office, all that could be heard was the scratching of my pen and the shuffling of paper as Liscia passed documents to me. I had been getting work done while in Van, but not only had the workload not decreased after returning to Parnam, if anything it had grown.

Now that the system of three dukes had collapsed, I needed to reorganize the army post-haste.

In order to build a relationship of equals with the Empire, I needed to increase military expenditures to counter the threat of the Demon Lord's Domain. In other words, to strengthen the military. That plan for strengthening the military was the one I had spoken of during the ultimatum to the three dukes, the unification of the armed forces.

When I looked at the history of the other world, an army's strength or weakness depended heavily on its mobility. In other words, how fast it could get where it needed to go, and whether it could deploy the needed firepower.

The reason we'd won a crushing victory over the Amidonian forces recently had been that we'd been able to reach the battlefield before our opponents. Because we had arrived a day ahead of the enemy, we had been able to fight the exhausted forces of the principality with a well-rested Royal Army. Had we arrived simultaneously, our exhaustion would have been roughly the same, and while the forces of the principality would still have been outnumbered, they would have dug in and fought harder. If that had happened, the fight would have been much more difficult for us.

In order to achieve that mobility we needed, it would be necessary to roll out a transportation network, and, at the same time, eliminate the divisions between our Army, Navy, and Air Force, to create a system that worked under a single command structure to immediately move all of our forces. That system

would be a unified armed forces.

The Forbidden Army, Army, Navy, Air Force, and, lastly, the troops that were nominally part of the Forbidden Army, but were the personal troops of the nobility, would all be dismantled and reorganized as one force to be called the Elfrieden Defense Force (EDF).

In organizing that EDF, I had to be cautious of resistance from each branch of the military, but with the recent uprising, the Army and Air Force had lost their influence. The temporary heads of each force, Glaive and Tolman, were both cooperative, so they would pose no problem.

Furthermore, the Navy had sided with us and therefore had not lost their influence, so by appointing their Admiral, Excel, as Supreme Commander of the EDF, we could expect very little resistance. Excel wasn't keen on being enshrined as the Supreme Commander, but I had made her accept the position under the condition that it was just until Ludwin gained enough experience to handle the role.

That was enough for the Army, Navy, and Air Force, but the real headache was going to be the nobles' forces.

They were part of the Forbidden Army, but the fact that command over them lay with the various nobles made them hard to deal with.

In this world with wild beasts and monsters (though, before the appearance of the Demon Lord's Domain, these had only existed in dungeons), thieves, pirates and bandits, there needed to be a certain amount of policing power in every area.

That was why the landed nobility trained personal troops, which they were obligated to use to maintain stability inside their fiefs.

However, in this country, the numbers they had were excessive. It was the effect of the king-before-last's expansionist policies.

At that time, battlefield achievements had been the shortest route to glory and advancement, so the nobility used to levy commoners from their fiefs to bolster the ranks of their personal forces. Despite the fact that, while conscripting amateurs might raise their manpower, if it led to a fall in

productivity, it was pointless. Eventually, when the former king, King Albert, hanged tack from his predecessor's expansionist policies, the nobility still maintained their enlarged forces.

That was why, now, I was stuck with the task of dismantling their forces down to the bare minimum required for policing. Those who had a primary trade outside of soldiering would be given severance pay and released from service, while those who sought to join the EDF would be able to undergo testing to enlist.

While the organization would be decided on by Excel, Glaive, Ludwin, and the other military officials, they had looked over my proposal and found they had no choice but to give it their stamp of approval.

While we worked, Liscia and I were silent. There was an awkwardness between us.

...No, I was likely the only one feeling awkward. Liscia was acting the same as always.

That day, even as I'd told her that Georg Carmine had committed suicide in his cell, Liscia's expression hadn't changed in the least. Her face had been emotionless, and my report had only elicited a quiet "I see..."

It wasn't that I thought she would lose her composure. It wasn't as if I thought she would blame me for it. Liscia wasn't that kind of girl, and I was well aware of it.

But I hardly expected her to be able to go about her daily routine this way, like everything was normal. I thought she would look at least a little distraught. There was no way this wasn't painful for her, no way it wasn't heart-wrenching, but when I saw Liscia acting like nothing had changed, I couldn't find the words to say to her.

It would have been easier if she'd lashed out at me a little...

"Why didn't you spare Duke Carmine?!"

...Yeah. No, that wouldn't have been any better.

Just imagining Liscia insulting and demeaning me was enough to depress me.

If she would just punch, and we could forget it all after that... But, no, the only one that would make feel better was me. Honestly, what was I thinking? After running my mouth like that to Georg, could I not even protect the heart of the girl closest to me?

“Souma,” she said.

“Huh? What?” I raised my head, and saw Liscia looking at me with her head inclined to the side questioningly.

“Your pen’s stopped, you know?” she asked.

“...Oh, sorry.”

That’s no good, I thought. *I have to keep it together.*

I went back to work. *Right now, I have to focus on taking care of all the little tasks in front of me.*

While I worked with that thought in mind, there was a knock at the door. “Come in,” I said, and the head maid Serina entered.

“Pardon me,” she said. “The preparations are complete, and your presence is requested.”

“Right.”

We stopped working, and I donned my royal cape and headed towards the audience chamber. Today was a day for rewarding those who had distinguished themselves in the war with Amidonia.

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“Glaive Magna,” I said. “Your loyalty was truly remarkable. In recognition of that loyalty, I grant you Randel and its surrounding region to rule.”

“Yes, sir,” Glaive said. “It will be my pleasure.”

“Very good. In addition, while this is only provisional, I also grant you some of the powers Georg held as General of the Army. Until they are folded into the EDF, keep them in good order.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “I swear I will do my utmost to meet Your Majesty’s expectations.”

In front of me as I rose from the throne, giving commendations in a grandiose tone, Hal's old man, Glaive Magna, bowed deeply. We weren't broadcasting this, so I wasn't keeping up with stiff formality, but there was a secretary in the corner dutifully recording my every word, so I had to act kingly. That was to ensure that future generations who read the records didn't look down on me, or so my chamberlain Marx had sourly told me, but... honestly, I didn't really care what people would think of me after I died.

In the war with the Principality of Amidonia, the Elfrieden Kingdom might not have gained any territory, but we had secured hefty war reparations. Furthermore, we had been able to collect ransoms from Zem for the return of their mercenaries, and I'd been able to confiscate the corrupt nobles' land and assets. The dismantlement of the Carmine and Vargas duchies had been decided on, too.

For all of those gains, there was little need to reward the troops. Most of the troops mobilized had belonged to the Army and Air Force. They were under suspicion of treason, and this had been a battle to clear them of that suspicion, so no rewards needed to be paid.

Additionally, for those who had taken a wait-and-see approach to the conflict, the nobles whose forces were part of the Forbidden Army, I didn't need to pay for any rewards to them, as they hadn't participated. It meant they had missed out on a good opportunity, but that was their problem, not mine.

The only ones who need to be rewarded were the Navy and my directly-controlled forces in the Forbidden Army. Those of the nobility or knightly class in either force would be given land, but that would come from the former fiefs of the corrupt nobles and the dismantled Carmine and Vargas duchies. Those who were of lower status would be given a cash bonus.

And so, today, I was to give personal rewards to those who had contributed the most. It was standard to give titles in the peerage and land, but if they wanted something else, they were welcome to negotiate for it. If it was within my power as king, and a suitable reward for their efforts, it would be granted. If they wanted cash or rare items in the possession of the royal family, that was fine.

Long ago, there had been a knight who'd used this system to request the right to marry a princess he was in love with. There'd also been one who'd used it to request a corrupt noble be brought to justice. This was a situation where you never knew what crazy requests might come flying, so I opted not to air it over the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

This time, the people to be rewarded were as follows:

The turncoat from the Army who had led them in the battle with Amidonia, Glaive Magna.

The Lord of Altomura who had stalled for time and delayed the Amidonian forces, Weist Garreau.

The commander of the marines who had, likewise, delayed the Amidonian forces at the Valley of Goldoa, Juna Doma.

As well as the one who sent reinforcements during the battle outside Randel, the chief of the dark elves who lived in the God-Protected Forest, Wodan Udgard. Sir Wodan was Aisha's father.

Normally, the Admiral of the Navy, Excel Walter, would have been first in both rank and in terms of her contributions. However, she was foregoing any recognition of her achievements for herself in order to seek clemency for the two Varguses, so she wouldn't be receiving a reward.

Also, before giving the aforementioned five their rewards, I formally gave Aisha, who had been defending me as my self-declared bodyguard, the newly created post of *kochiji.*

If I were to explain what that changed, it was that before she had been like a mercenary I was paying out of my own pocket money, but now she was a proper knight with a salary.

Incidentally, her title, *kochiji*, came from the a bit of wordplay on the nickname of Cao Cao's bodyguard Xu Chu, read *Kochi* in Japanese. The original's name was written "Tiger Fool" and meant "a fool who is strong like a tiger," so I chose to write hers with the character for "Eastern Wind" instead.

...Not that there was much point in me obsessing over how it'd be written with kanji in this world.

In addition to that appointment, I gave Aisha a gauntlet from the treasury in the castle that was enchanted with a spell that reduced physical and magical damage (it was called the Iron Wall Gauntlet, apparently). To be honest, I had wanted to give her a shield, as it suited the image of her position better, but Aisha used a two-handed greatsword, so I'd opted for this instead.

Aisha held the gauntlet tight to her breast, stuttering and slurring her words through her tears. "Ohh... Your Majesty... Th-Thank you sho much!"

...I'm glad to see she's happy and all, but isn't that a bit of an overreaction?

Everyone watched her with wry smiles.

"Weist," I said. "You served me well in distracting the Amidonians. Please, continue to maintain stability in your lands as Lord of Altomura. Furthermore, when the city of Venetinova is complete, I am sure I will place you in charge of managing her."

"Yes, sir," he said. "Inadequate as I may be, I will serve you to my utmost."

After Glaive, I finished presenting Weist with his reward. It was decided that Weist would take on the additional post of Lord of Venetinova, the coastal city that was currently under construction. While his original fief had been in the countryside, because it was in a crop-growing region with fertile land, he had quickly gained influence. In the recent operation, he had played the important role of portraying himself as a coward in front of Gaius and Julius. This was his reward.

Now, it was time to reward Wodan Udgard, Aisha's father who had sent reinforcements to aid us in the battle outside Randel.

These were reinforcements neither Hakuya or I had anticipated. We had known how powerful the dark elves were, but we'd assumed they were busy with reconstruction after the landslide, and they weren't interested in affairs outside their forest to begin with, so we had thought it would be pointless to send a request. However, contrary to our expectations, Wodan and his people had dispatched troops to aid us.

Apparently, when Aisha had been staying in the God-Protected Forest, she

had independently made the request on my behalf. From what Hal had told me of the battle outside Randel, the corrupt nobles had brought out cannons and launched a reckless attack. Without those reinforcements, our losses would have been much greater. It was truly a happy miscalculation.

I walked over to Wodan, taking his hand as I thanked him. “You have my gratitude. I thank you for sending reinforcement when you yourselves face such difficult times.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Wodan. “We have only repaid our debt of gratitude. When the disaster struck, the relief force that Your Majesty led reminded us that we have ties to the outside world.”

“I am glad to hear it,” I said. “It shows me anew that this country was built with many different races coming together. If you have a wish, you need only name it.”

Wodan shook his head. “We already owe you more than we can ever repay. With the steady supply of relief supplies you send, our warriors have already been amply rewarded. I seek nothing further from you.”

“Please, don’t be so modest,” I said. “Those reinforcements wouldn’t have come without you making the decision. If you’d like, we can plant trees around the God-Protected Forest to expand your territory.”

“I am grateful for the offer, but the forest is fine as it is,” he said.

Hmm... That leaves me in a conundrum, I thought. I wanted to show my gratitude to Wodan somehow. However, no matter what I offered as a reward, Wodan stubbornly refused to accept it.

“You truly have nothing you want?” I questioned.

When I asked him that, Wodan took on a pensive look. “...In that case, I have one request for you, sire.”

“Name it. If it is within my power, it will be yours.”

“Then... would you take my daughter?”

“Father?!” Aisha yelped. She had been standing behind the throne, and she sounded surprised.

His daughter... He means Aisha, right?

Wodan continued, smiling, “I see my little girl who never used to show an interest in anything but fighting and food has grown into a fine woman. That change came from her feelings for you, sire. Could I ask you to take her as your wife?”

“Sir Wodan is called Chief in the village in the God-Protected Forest, but he is actually nobility with the God-Protected Forest as his domain,” my chamberlain, Marx, hastened to add. “You would be able to take his daughter Aisha as your second primary queen.”

Marx was handling things here today on behalf of Prime Minister Hakuya, who was indisposed.

I have mentioned this in past, but in this kingdom queens were broadly categorized into primaries and secondaries, and it was possible to have multiple of each.

Originally, there had only been one primary queen and the rest had been either secondary queens or concubines (mistresses) with no power, but one king a number of generations ago had said, “I don’t want to call these women I love concubines.”

...He must have been a passionate man.

As a result, all of his secondary queens had been made primary queens. (The original primary queen had been made First Queen, with the others called Second Primary, Third Primary, and so on, to distinguish them.) And his concubines had been promoted to secondary queens, a convention that continued to this day.

While I’m at it, let me explain the difference between a primary and secondary queen.

To become a primary queen, the lady in question had to be of the knightly class, the nobility, or higher. To make a woman of lower status a primary queen, she would first have to be adopted into such a family. That process wasn’t necessary for a secondary queen.

The children born to a primary queen had the right of succession. The line of

succession was determined not by order of birth, but the children born to the First Queen, the Second, and so on. In cases where there was a large gap in age, the numbering of queens could be changed.

Conversely, while a woman of any class (even a slave or a prostitute) could become a secondary queen, their children had no right of succession. However, they were still royalty, and noble and knightly houses that wanted to form a blood connection with the crown would try to marry their sons and daughters off to the king's children from those queens. It was definitely one way of marrying into money.

While the position didn't come with any power, it also took less responsibility than being a primary queen, and they were allowed to act freely, within limits. For women of common birth who had no interest in power, this was often the position they dreamed of.

But... making Aisha my second primary wife...

"Would you consider that a reward?" I asked.

"As a father, my feelings are complicated... but she seems to be hoping for it, and a father always wants to grant his little girl's wishes," said Wodan. "Besides which, with the people of the God-Protected Forest beginning to look to the outside world, I think it would be valuable for them to see their chief's daughter marry into the royal house. It wouldn't just create a bond between the royal house and the God-Protected Forest, it would become symbolic of the bond between humans and dark elves, as well."

Then it wasn't just for his daughter's sake. There were political considerations, too.

Looking at it from my position, if I strengthened my ties with the God-Protected Forest, I would probably have the elite archers who showed their might in the battle outside Randel at my disposal.

No, even if I set that sort of pragmatic gain aside... Aisha was cute. If I had to ask myself whether I'd want her as a wife or not... I did.

She might be a little too loyal to me, but it let her affection for me come across all the more directly. Though it did feel a bit like I'd tamed her with food.

I couldn't expect much from her as a political operator, but Aisha had more than sufficient martial prowess to compensate for that. She was the sort of woman who would be reassuring to have at my side.

...But, is that really okay? I returned to the throne, looking at Liscia beside me.

I had told Liscia we were only temporarily engaged so that I could potentially get out of it. But, now that the war with Amidonia was behind us, my thinking on the matter had changed.

People had died because of my orders. I carried a weight of karma far too great to ever return to ordinary life. I could no longer stop being king, or abandon this country.

I felt the same about my relationship with Liscia. Since the day we'd first met, we had overcome so much pain and hardship together. I couldn't break off our betrothal, and I had no desire to. If Liscia would be my queen, I could accept being king.

...But, that's a different issue entirely.

While I had resolved myself to be king, I still had reservations about taking more than one queen. Liscia, Marx, and even Juna had repeatedly told me it was normal, but as someone dragging along the moral views of modern Japan, I was hesitant.

...Yeah, it wasn't that I thought it was insincere to love more than one woman. I wasn't that full of myself. But I thought giving an immediate answer here and now wouldn't be fair to Liscia.

I'd feel like I was cheating on her...

While I was thinking that, Liscia looked at me. Seeing that I was at a loss for words, Liscia said exasperatedly, "Souma, marry Aisha like you ought to."

"Like I *ought* to...? You're fine with that, Liscia?"

"I don't have the right to refuse, but Aisha and her father have already told you it's fine, haven't they?" she said. "Actually, if you don't take her, that's probably going to be the bigger headache."

"How so?" I asked.

Liscia stressed the practical aspects. “You’re a king, Souma. There may be situations where you’re forced to marry the daughters of major nobles or princesses from other countries as part of your internal or external diplomacy. In preparation for that, I want the higher-ranked queens to be filled out with people I can trust.”

“No... But... I mean...”

Seeing me still hesitating, Liscia sighed. “Souma, you’re able to make decisions when the country hangs in the balance, but when it comes to the women in your life, you’re so indecisive.”

“Urkh...”

“Honestly... Aisha!” Liscia called.

“Y-Yes!” The dark elf jumped in surprise. Aisha had been standing in her bodyguard position waiting anxiously as she watched things unfold.

Liscia leveled a finger at her. “I’m not giving up the position of First Queen, you hear me? You’re Second Queen, got it? If that’s all right with you, it’s all right with me. In fact, I welcome it.”

“Y-Yes! If it lets me be by His Majesty’s side!” Aisha cried.

Liscia nodded and looked me straight in the eye as she said, “I’ve set everything in place for you. Now... treat her right.”

“...Right,” I said slowly.

I dunno. I felt like I had been the future balance of power between the two of us get decided right there.

Liscia had shown so much spirit. I couldn’t keep pathetically waffling any longer.

I walked over to Aisha. Aisha, the fearless warrior of the battlefield, had eyes that were trembling with uncertainty.

Oh, geez, don’t look at me like that, I silently pleaded.

“Aisha,” I said.

“Y-Yes!”

“So... will you marry me?”

She inhaled sharply. “Yes! It would be my pleasure!”

I refrained from any quips about how her response made her sound like a server responding to orders at a Japanese-style pub. My face was burning with embarrassment.

In among all the smiles, I could see Sir Wodan’s face dripping with all the complicated feelings of being a father.

I said to him, using not the tone I would usually use as king, but a tone used towards those above you, “...This is how it turned out. I’ll come to formally give you my regards at a later date, Father.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “I will be waiting. Son.”

Thus, Aisha became my second fiancée.

With a second primary queen chosen...

“Finally, that’s one less burden on my mind,” Marx said with an expression of relief. Marx had felt a sense of crisis about the shortage of royals brought on by the succession crisis after the reign of the king before the last one. That was why, with my formal marriage to Liscia not having taken place yet, he was constantly badgering me, “Get more wives, make more babies.” He didn’t even seem to care if they were conceived out of wedlock.

That aside... what was I going to do with the *kochiji* title I’d come up with now? I couldn’t very well make one of my queens act like a personal bodyguard.

When I said that to Aisha, though...

“Leave it to me! Even if I become your wife, I will always protect you, sire!” Aisha declared with a broad smile, so I ended up letting her keep it.

For me, I knew Aisha was tough, so I figured it was all good, but the previously-elated Marx was immediately holding his head in his hands. I wanted to put the Second Primary Queen he had finally managed to get into a position that was synonymous with danger. I had to feel bad for the guy, only having new things to worry about.

Juna watched all of this with a slightly lonely smile on her face, but none of us realized it at the time.

...Juna. You...

With the exception of Excel.

With the very eventful reward for Wodan out of the way, it was finally Juna's turn.

I offered her some words of commendation, then asked, "Is there anything you want of me?"

Of course, I knew what Juna's response would be. She would likely ask that all of her achievements be counted as her grandmother, Excel's. If Excel wanted to save Castor and Carla, she needed to have as much merit to her name as possible. This was the gentle Juna. I was sure she'd do it out of consideration for Excel.

Juna looked me straight in the eye and opened her mouth, "Your Majesty, I ask that all of my..."

"May I have a word," Excel cut her off before she could finish speaking. "Forgive my sudden interruption. I would like permission to speak."

"Hm? ...Granted," I said.

"Thank you." Excel bowed and began to speak slowly. "As you are aware, Your Highness, Juna Doma is my granddaughter. However, Juna's father, my son, has been married into the Doma family of merchants in Lagoon City. In other words, Juna is a commoner."

I had heard that when Juna had disclosed her ties to Excel to me. However, why was she bringing up Juna's low status now?

Excel continued. "I gave her a rank in the military because she is my granddaughter, but that doesn't change the fact that Juna is the child of a common family. She has no connection to the doings of any noble house."

"...What are you getting at, Duchess?" I asked.

Excel turned not to me, but to Juna. "I am sure you mean to use your

achievements for my benefit, but that will not be necessary.”

“But, Grandmother...”

Excel silently shook her head. “It’s fine. You have nothing to do with the House of Vargas You mustn’t use your achievements for people you’ve never met. Use them for your own sake.”

“Grandmother...”

“I can’t sacrifice my granddaughter’s happiness for the sake of my son-in-law and my other granddaughter,” said Excel. “You don’t have to worry about us. You should have your own wish granted.”

As Excel turned her gentle gaze on her, Juna lowered her eyes and seemed to struggle internally for a moment. When she finally raised her eyes, she stepped forward and kneeled.

“Your Majesty. I have a request.”

“...What might that be?” I asked.

“If it is at all possible, then like Aisha... I wish to continue singing at your side.”

Could she mean... No, there was no doubt about it, Juna meant for me to take her as my bride, too.

“Sire,” Marx said gleefully, “if you take Juna Doma, it will be as a secondary queen. If you wish to take her as a primary queen, you will need to have her adopted into a noble or knightly family first.”

He must have been more than happy to have another candidate for the position of queen appear. When I looked to Liscia, she nodded, accepting it.

But...

“I’m sorry, that’s not possible.” I gave a clear refusal.

Liscia’s eyes went wide, while Excel asked “Why...?” looking at me pleadingly. Juna continued to look down at the floor, so I couldn’t see her face.

The air in the room grew heavy, but... I hoped they’d wait to hear everything I had to say.

“I can’t do that now,” I said. “You’re the central pillar of Project Lorelei, the

project to create a music program using the Jewel Voice Broadcast. You are the Prima Lorelei. You're popular with the people, too. What do you think would happen if I announced you and I were getting engaged? There'd be riots."

When I said it that way, everyone seemed satisfied with that explanation. It was fresh in their memories that the Congress of the People had sent petitions saying, "Show more of Juna on the Jewel Voice Broadcast."

It was common for flame wars to break out on an idol's blog if she was discovered to have a lover in my old world, but in the current situation, I worried Parnam itself might get torched. The Kingdom would be burning with jealousy... Yeah, not a funny joke.

That was why I said, "Could you wait, just for a little while?"

Juna gasped.

When Juna raised her face, I thought, *Well, this is awkward,* as I told her, "I need your strength as the Prima Lorelei for producing our broadcast programs. That's why, for now, I'm asking you to stay the people's songstress. When more songstresses have gathered, and we have trained enough people that can keep the program on course, I swear, I will take you then."

When I said that, Juna rubbed the tears from her eyes. "I'll wait longingly for that day, sire."

When she spoke those words, she wore the smile of a pure, innocent young girl.





Intermission 2: What the Black-Robed Prime Minister was Doing Then

That day, when Souma the provisional King of Elfrieden welcomed new candidates to be his queen, there were two people in other places holding talks over the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

Elfrieden's Prime Minister Hakuya Kwonmin was speaking to the image of the younger sister of Empress Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire, Jeanne Euphoria, projected by the simple receiver on a desk.

"Your signal is clear," said Hakuya. "It looks like the simple receiver you sent us is in good working order. Thank you very much, Madam Jeanne, for going out of your way to have it delivered by griffon."

"My sister understood how important the hotline Sir Souma was talking about establishing will be," Jeanne said. "With this, the Kingdom and Empire can coordinate as need be. It's only natural we would hurry to get things in place."

The Jeanne on the screen smiled broadly.

After the conference with Amidonia, Jeanne had reported back to her sister, Empress Maria, about Souma's proposals: A secret alliance with the Elfrieden Kingdom, establishing a hotline between the two countries, and the exchange of plenipotentiary ambassadors from each country, as well as the establishment of embassies for them to be stationed at.

Hakuya had assumed that Maria wouldn't refuse these ideas, and, as he'd expected, Maria had gladly approved all of them. In fact, she had even rolled around in bed laughing as she did.

"I've never seen my sister like that," Jeanne said. "She must have been very pleased."

"Pleased...?" Hakuya asked.

“To find someone who shares her values... a person who understands her, if you will,” said Jeanne. “There aren’t many of them inside the Empire. People who are able to understand my sister, that is.”

“I see.”

Geographically they were west and east, ideologically they were an idealist and a realist, and yet Maria and Souma, who appeared to be polar opposites, understood one another.

That might be interesting, thought Hakuya.

“With a response like that, I want to arrange for my sister and Sir Souma to be able to talk over the broadcast as soon as possible,” said Jeanne.

“They’re both very busy people at the moment, and it’s hard to make their schedules agree,” Hakuya said. “When things eventually settle down, let’s arrange a time for them to talk.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

After that, they made small talk (Including venting their frustrations about their respective leaders) for a little while, then Jeanne said, “By the way, there’s been something bothering me for a while now. I see many books behind you there, Sir Hakuya. Where are you now?”

“...Oh, these are books we have on loan from Amidonia as collateral against the war reparations,” he replied. “There are a good number of them that I want to have copies made of before they have to be returned. I was working on categorizing them until just a little while ago.”

“The Prime Minister himself is sorting them?” Jeanne asked in surprise.

“Of course, I have people to help, but it’s something of a hobby of mine,” said Hakuya. “I actually like to sort books. I divide them into categories, line them up in order, sometimes flipping through one that catches my attention, then derive pleasure from looking at the well-ordered bookshelf when my work is complete. Books are human wisdom. The progress of a country. When I think of them arranged before me on a shelf, available for me to read whenever I please...”

When she saw Hakuya wax eloquent about books, Jeanne's eyes opened wide.

If you mentioned the name Hakuya, the pride of the kingdom, the Black-robed Prime Minister, he was famous as one of the geniuses discovered by Souma, the man who had used his trickery to make sport of Gaius VIII of the Principality of Amidonia.

Having met him herself, Jeanne had had an impression of him as a clever individual. However, when Hakuya spoke about books, his eyes were those of a young boy. That gap made Jeanne's heart skip a beat.

"...I take it you like books?" Jeanne asked.

Hakuya came back to his senses. He quickly regained his usual clever expression, but the tips of his ears were a little red. "...Pardon me. I can get carried away when it comes to books, you see..."

"Hee hee. I feel like I've seen an unexpected side of you..."

"Is it that unexpected?" Hakuya asked. "I think I would make a better librarian than a Prime Minister, personally."

The reason Hakuya had received an audience with Souma to begin with was that his uncle had said, "At your age, you need to stop sitting around doing nothing but read books. Go do something useful to society!" and entered him into the If You Have a Gift event's Gift of Wisdom section without asking for permission.

He had won that competition, and when he'd had his audience with Souma, he had been charmed by the young king. Thinking that, just maybe, Souma could get this country that was on the verge of failing back on its feet, Hakuya had given up being a bookworm and volunteered his services, only to find that at some point he had become the Prime Minister.

The truth of the matter was, while Hakuya did want to support Souma's reign, he had meant to do it as an advisor to Souma and the then-Prime Minister Marx. However, that Marx had gone and recommended him as a better Prime Minister than himself. Thanks to that, Hakuya couldn't read the books he wanted to, and his days had become very busy.

“Hmm... Then if we were to arrange a post for you as Chief Librarian of the Imperial Archives, would you come to our country?” Jeanne asked. “I imagine our archives have a more extensive collection of books than the kingdom’s.”

“Ahh. That is an alluring proposal, yes.”

“But you can’t do it?” Jeanne asked.

“Had you asked me before I volunteered my services, I’m sure I would have jumped at the offer without a moment’s hesitation,” he said.

Nowadays, Hakuya thought these busy days weren’t so bad. There had been a time when, for Hakuya, history was a thing to be found in books. However, now he felt it was a thing that they themselves would make. When he was serving under Souma, the one trying to push this country forward, he felt like he himself was one of the characters in history. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

“But now, I wish to move forward into a new era alongside His Majesty and the others,” he continued. “Then, once I raise my successor, I hope to become a historian and record what happened in these times.”

“A comfortable retirement, huh...” Jeanne said. “That may be a luxury in the times we live in.”

She was most likely right. The times were too hard to allow for an easy retirement.

The threat of the Demon Lord’s Domain was slowly encroaching from the north, and various countries were forging alliances to advance their own goals, or opposing one another. For Hakuya to have his quiet retirement, all of that would have to be resolved. As for whether that was possible, even with all of Hakuya’s wisdom, he couldn’t see the answer to that.

“Well then, I will be looking forward to our next talk, Sir Hakuya,” she said.

“Yes. Let’s speak again sometime, Madam Jeanne.”

The transmission cut out on Jeanne’s side.

Whew... Hakuya exhaled, then rose to his feet. He reached out to the pile of Amidonian books.

These precious books had been paid no attention while they were in

Amidonia, and were now sorely in need of repair. If Hakuya hadn't taken custody of them, some of these books might have been lost forever.

With a sigh, Hakuya reached out and picked up one book. As soon as he did...

"Prime Minister."

There was a man in black clothes kneeling in one corner of the room. There was a black cloth wrapped around his face as well, and he looked like he was melting into the darkness of the closed off, dimly lit room.

Hakuya asked the man, "How are the preparations?"

"They proceed apace. However..." The man seemed to hesitate.

Hakuya furrowed his brow. "Did something happen?"

"The thing is... I feel as though things are going entirely too well," said the man. "Almost as if there was the will of another actor in play here..."

"I see..."

Hakuya dismissed the man, then flipped through the book he had picked up.

When he had taken the books in Amidonia's archives as collateral against the war reparations, Hakuya had had a certain expectation. He had expected there would be family registers and materials regarding rights and ownership. Those sorts of writings tended to be in the archives in a nation's capital, after all. To have those books in hand was to grasp the heart of the nation itself.

When he'd advised Souma to take the books as collateral, it had been because the Amidonian royal family was more inclined towards military matters, and he'd hoped they wouldn't realize the importance of them. However, contrary to Hakuya's expectations, there was only one book of that variety in the collection he'd seized.

That book, the one Hakuya held now, was on the recent genealogy of the royal family of Amidonia. When he flipped through it, there was a folded piece of paper stuck between the last page and the cover.

When Hakuya unfolded the piece of paper, he saw there was a drawing of a small animal with black circles around its eyes holding down one of its eyelids as it stuck its tongue out at him.

When he saw that, Hakuya blinked a few times, then chuckled to himself. “I see. There would have to be someone like this in Amidonia, yes.”

“What is it, teacher?” a sudden voice asked.

Hakuya turned and saw Tomoe there, looking at him blankly. He was embarrassed to have been caught with his guard down, and he cleared his throat loudly to mask it.

“Why, little sister, I’m sorry I didn’t notice you there.”

“No, I just got here,” Tomoe said. “I came in because it seemed like you were done talking. You looked like you were having fun, right? What were you looking at?”

“Oh, this?” Hakuya showed Tomoe a picture with a little animal drawn on it.

Tomoe held the piece of paper up to her face, then held it at a distance, then held it up to the ceiling to look at it, before finally tilting her head to the side. “Was this animal what you found so funny? I’ll admit it’s cute.”

“It’s a drawing of an animal called a bronze raccoon.” Taking the piece of paper back, Hakuya patted Tomoe on the head and said, “They are commonly said to play tricks on people.”



Chapter 8: Crime and Punishment

Early in the 11th month, 1546th year, Continental Calendar - Midnight

It happened in the domain of a certain noble within the Elfrieden Kingdom.

In the manor of the important noble who was lord of that domain, twelve shadowy figures were holding a secret meeting in the darkness.

“What do the rest of you make of this summons?” one of them asked.

“Of all the nobles in the land, our fourteen families have been summoned. Most likely... the kingdom has caught on to us.”

“There have been reports of the black-robed one’s dogs sniffing around us, as well.”

“Then, the intent of this summons is...”

“...to make an example of the others, no doubt.”

“To make an example? It isn’t a trap?” one suggested in a hysterical voice.

Another laughed dryly. “Heh heh heh. Unlike the nobles who have engaged in corruption, we haven’t been caught doing anything. With no crime to condemn us for, that king and the black-robed one cannot bring us to justice.”

“I see... That is why he is making an example of the others.”

“Indeed,” one of them agreed. “To keep us in line by making us think, ‘Tomorrow, that could be me.’”

“Two of the three dukes have fallen, and those nobles who didn’t participate in the recent war have lost their influence. If he can just keep us quiet, there will be nothing left to stop that king.”

“Hmph... All as the king planned,” one of them said. “Or was it the black-robed one?”

“It doesn’t matter which of them it was. But, if we look at it from another

perspective, we can say that this was the best the king could do against us."

"Heh heh heh, you are quite right," another chuckled. He added, with a sneer, "That is why, for now, we must lay low. We must act in a way that will not anger that king, that will not give him reason to punish us. No, if anything, we must cooperate with what the king does."

"It galls me to do it," another one said irately.

"It's no matter... I doubt it will take long," the sneerer replied. "Once all obstacles have been removed, I am sure that king will rush forward with revolutionary policies at an even faster rate than he has been. Reform taken too quickly will breed resistance. We need only support those people from the shadows. The more of them he executes, the more that king will be seen as a tyrant, and that will only breed more resistance."

The other men nodded, impressed by the man's words.

"I see. He cannot keep at it for long, then."

"Indeed. When the time comes, we will push the king from power and place someone more malleable on the throne."

"When that is accomplished, we can take things back to how they were under King Albert's reign."

"The momentum is with that king for now. We mustn't be caught in it. In order to wait it out, we must do as the king demands for now. But, in due time..."

The men laughed darkly.

Then one of the men raised a question. "What do we do about the houses of Jabana and Saracen? Haven't the heads changed?"

"Leave them be. If they displease the king and can no longer maintain their houses, that is their concern, not something for us to get involved in."

"Of course. Now, gentlemen, I ask you to all follow the plan we just agreed on."

"Yes. To take back our era."

“““To take back our era.”””

However, they had not realized that there was a watcher in the darkness.

◇ ◇ ◇

It was a sunny afternoon. I was helping Souma with his administrative work again today.

“Okay, Liscia,” Souma said. “Hand these papers to Hakuya for me.”

“Got it.”

Taking the papers from Souma, I went to leave the office, when...

“Liscia!” Souma called out to me.

Wondering what it could be, I turned around. Souma seemed to be trying to say something, but it wasn’t coming out. He either was trying to tell me something and couldn’t find the words, or kept opening his mouth to say something and then hesitating.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Ah...! No, um... it’s nothing.”

“Okay... Well, I’ll get going then.”

I left Souma and headed out from the governmental affairs office. When I closed the door, I sighed despite myself.

Souma probably felt obliged to say something to me because of what happened with Duke Carmine.

Geez... It’s not something Souma should feel responsible for...

Even when I’d been told Duke Carmine had committed suicide in the dungeon, I hadn’t lost my composure. That man I had respected like a father and a teacher was dead, yet I felt strangely calm. That surprised me.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t sad. Actually, I felt like my heart had been torn apart. But, still, I was able to act like my usual self. That was surely... because I’d had something like a premonition that it would turn out like this. That the Duke Carmine I knew would chose the path of ruin, taking all of the darkness that has

infested this country with him. And that Souma would accept his determination to do so.

Georg Carmine and Souma Kazuya.

Georg Carmine was a great man who I held in high esteem. He was strong and noble, a warrior who epitomized everything I should aspire to be. I respected him, and I thought I wanted to be like him.

And, as for Souma... he was the man I had decided, of my own will, to support.

I had lived a life largely detached from love and romance, so I wasn't sure what it was that I was feeling for Souma. Being a member of the royal house, I'd never held any great hopes for what my marriage would be like.

But when I'd seen Aisha's beaming smile when she became his second fiancée, or Juna's smile when he told her, "I swear, I will take you (as my wife)," I had felt just a little pain in my chest.

...I knew now. This was probably that sort of feeling. I felt strongly enough about Souma to be having those sorts of emotions.

This was something that two men who were important to me had decided on. Even if it was sad, if it was painful, I had to accept it or I would be making a mockery of their resolve. I chose to believe in their decision.

That was why, when I heard about Duke Carmine's death, I didn't take out my frustrations on Souma.

Duke Carmine wouldn't have wanted to hurt our relationship. That was why, if I stayed right there at Souma's side, like normal, that would be paying my respects to Duke Carmine. That was how I felt.

I would continue to believe in Souma. No matter what decision he made, I would accept it and stand by him.

Today was the day of judgment for Duke Vargas and Carla. As her friend, my desire to spare Carla remained unchanged, but no matter what decision Souma came to, I was prepared to accept it. No matter what tragic conclusion it might lead to.

And yet...

Hey, Souma, I thought. *Why do you have such a* pained look *on your face?*

A strange atmosphere had fallen over the great hall in Parnam Castle.

This was the place where Castor and Carla's sentence was about to be handed down.

In response to the pleas of Duchess Walter, who had contributed greatly to the recent war effort, Souma had taken the right to judge them from the courts, and would be doing so personally. It was no praiseworthy act for a king to insert himself in the affairs of the courts, but Duchess Walter had gone so far as to return all other rewards for her service in order to make the request, so he had been able to force it through.

Now, Souma could judge the two of them personally.

People were positioned more or less where they would be in the audience hall.

Souma was seated higher than the rest, using a chair that, while not the throne, was still fairly impressive, with Aisha and me flanking him on either side. Aisha's position as bodyguard was no longer diagonally behind him, but directly beside him, a change made to reflect her new status as a candidate to become a queen. That inevitably meant that she was in the center of everyone's attention, so Aisha seemed tense.

Looking down at the floor there was the former General of the Air Force, Castor Vargas, and his daughter, Carla, both kneeling with their hands bound behind their backs. They both, perhaps because they had resolved themselves to accept their fate at this point, were sitting up straight.

Between them stood Prime Minister Hakuya and Duchess Walter, facing one another. Hakuya's role was to call for them to be prosecuted for their crimes, while Duchess Walter was to defend Castor and Carla. In a normal trail, the prosecutor and the defense argue over whether a crime has been committed, but on this occasion the two's crimes were already known.

Because of that, Hakuya's job was to seek punishment for their crimes, while

Excel's job was to defend their actions and seek a more lenient punishment. If her defense was successful, their punishment would be lightened, and if she failed, they would face the punishment Hakuya was seeking. Therefore, there could be no finding of innocence.

Also, to observe this trial, there was a long table facing sideways with fourteen nobles seated in a single row. Souma had told me he would seek their opinions during the trial.

I had been told their selection was random, but... was it really? The nobles seemed to be whispering to one another.

No matter what's in store, I won't be surprised, I thought. *This is a trial that was thought up by Souma, after all.*

While there hadn't been many cases of the king taking the right to judge from the courts, it had happened before on occasion. However, in those cases, normally the king gave a verdict which could not be contested. This format, where the king held a trial where he would be the judge, was unheard of. It was a form of trial with no precedent. I couldn't predict anything that might happen.





“Now then, let us carry out the trial of Castor and Carla,” Souma declared in a quiet voice.

Hakuya read out the crimes of which they were accused. “Former General of the Air Force Castor Vargas and his daughter, despite the lawful transfer of the throne to His Majesty, resisted his authority and even rejected his ultimatum, turning their swords against the Forbidden Army. The crime of treason applies in this case. Therefore, I believe it is appropriate that their land and assets be seized and they be subject to the death penalty.”

I had expected this. Hakuya was pushing for the death penalty for both of them.

...Of course he was. Treason was a serious enough crime that it carried a death penalty for all relatives of up to three degrees of consanguinity.

The number of people affected was being kept to an absolute minimum because Duke Vargas had heeded Duchess Walter’s advice and formally cut ties with his family. Furthermore, in recognition of Duchess Walter’s distinguished service in the war, it had been decided that Carla’s young brother Carl, who had been disowned and left in the care of the House of Walter, would inherit the House of Vargas with just Red Dragon City and the area around it as his fief. Excel’s daughter, who was also Carla and Carl’s mother, would serve as his advisor.

When Hakuya finished presenting the punishment he sought, it was Excel’s turn to defend the two and request a lesser punishment.

In prior deliberations, Duchess Walter’s offer to “offer my head in exchange for their two lives, or turn over all of the Walter Duchy with the exception of Lagoon City” had already been rejected. Taking her head was out of the question, and if he destroyed all three duchies, it would put the rest of the nobles on guard against Souma.

“It was foolish for Castor and Carla to rebel against Your Majesty,” said Excel. “However, they most certainly did not do it in an attempt to usurp your position. It was their loyalty to the former king, Sir Albert, and friendship with the General of the Army, Georg Carmine, that led them astray. Of course, the throne had been formally ceded to you by Sir Albert, and it is unthinkable that

any of your vassals should have doubts about that.

“However, the sudden change of rulers threw not only Castor but many other people into confusion. Carla only followed Castor as his daughter. Neither of the pair had any ambitions of their own. Fortunately, there were no casualties among their subjects or the Forbidden Army during the battle at Red Dragon City. Can you not spare them their lives, if nothing else?”

Bowing, Duchess Walter sought to reduce the severity of their crimes.

Souma just sat there listening to her speak.

He was so expressionless that it was impossible to read from his face what he might be thinking. I think, probably, he was suppressing his emotions so they wouldn’t show.

Having heard the arguments of both the prosecution and the defense, Souma opened his mouth. “Castor. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“No,” Duke Vargas said firmly. “There is no need for a defeated commander to speak. Please, part this head from my shoulders.”

“...I see.”

“There’s just one thing,” said Duke Vargas. “I’m the one who started the war. Carla only followed orders. I’ll take her punishment, as well. I don’t care if you torture me, or humiliate me in public. But, please, can’t you spare Carla’s life?”

While still bound, Duke Vargas bowed so that his head nearly touched the ground.

Seeing her prideful father do that, Carla’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Father!”

However, Souma let out a sigh, his expression remaining impassive. “I’ve heard that the one leading the Air Force in that battle was Carla. I can’t let that crime go unpunished, can I? You must have known this might happen when you raised the flag of rebellion.”

“Urgh...” Duke Vargas bit his lip. However, he said no more.

This time, Souma looked at Carla. “Carla. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“...I do not.” Carla shook her head weakly.

“Is that all? You have nothing else to say?”

“In that case, there is one thing. I apologize for my lack of wisdom. Lic... The princess tried to mediate between us, but we still stubbornly refused to listen.” With those words, Carla hung her head.

While Carla had been in prison, she’d said she didn’t want to become a burden by having us intercede on her behalf. She probably felt the same way now.

“You won’t beg for forgiveness?” Souma asked.

“I will not. Judge me as you see fit.”

“...I see.”

Souma looked away from the two of them, then said to the nobles seated in the rear, “Now, I would like to hear from those of you gathered here. These people have, in their thoughtlessness, raised the flag of rebellion against me, the current king. What do you think is the appropriate judgment for these fools? I would very much like to hear your unreserved opinions.”

Souma said that with a look that, even to my eyes, seemed a little frightening. For a moment, something seemed off to me. The way he said it, it was as if he had already made up his mind. Though he said he wanted to hear their opinions, it was as if he was saying, *“I can’t imagine any of you would dare object to executing these traitors, would you?”* in order to intimidate them. It was as if he was acting to constrain the nobles watching the trial...

Normally, Souma would listen to any opinion, implementing it if he felt it was right, but what he was doing now was the exact opposite of that.

When I considered that and looked at the nobles, they were all from houses with dark rumors swirling around them or houses that had repeatedly declined to get involved when there was a crisis. Could it be that Souma meant to use Carla and her father to make an example and force these people to swear loyalty to him?

He was showing off his power and saying, *”If you don’t want this to happen to*

you, then obey me." That was the impression I got.

Then, one of the nobles stood and raised his voice. "Your Majesty! When you say it like that, you make it seem as if their crime is already decided!"

The speaker was a young man with a masculine face. He was maybe around the same age as Halbert. But he didn't have the same roughness as Halbert. He seemed to be a serious, good-natured young man.

"Who is that person?" Souma asked.

"That is the head of the House of Saracen, Piltory Saracen," Hakuya said.

Piltory said, "I understand this to be a place to determine the weight of their crime. If you do this, forcing your will on the rest of us, then this trial has no purpose!"

"Ga ha ha! Well said, young Saracen!" another of the nobles said, rising to his feet. With his ash gray hair combed back, and a thick beard the same color as his hair, he was a big, muscular man just starting to show the signs of old age.

Hakuya narrowed his eyes, calling out that person's name. "The head of the House of Jabana, Sir Owen Jabana."

"O Black-robed Prime Minister," the man responded. "Duke Vargas over there has defended this country for over a hundred years, which is longer than I've been alive. He may lack maturity, but I doubt his feelings towards this country have changed. He rose against His Majesty not out of personal greed, but because he was prepared to die for his friendship with Georg Carmine."

"You suggest his treason couldn't be helped because it was done in the name of friendship?" Hakuya glared at him.

"No, no," Owen said, shaking his head. "That's not what I'm saying. The throne had formally been passed to His Majesty King Souma, so I can only say that Duke Vargas acted rashly. It's not a crime that can be pardoned. However, Duke Vargas has already been stripped of his position, his fame, his lands, and his assets. Is it not, perhaps, a little much to now take both his and his daughter's lives on top of all that?"

"'Forgive the traitor'—is that what you are saying?"

“Old as I am, I think it would be regrettable not to,” Owen said. “Duke Vargas is a person who could command troops for another two, three hundred years. Is there anyone in this country who could lead the Air Force as well as he?”

Perhaps emboldened by Owen’s words, Piltory began to argue forcefully once more. “Sire! You yourself said, ‘If you have a gift, I will put it to use,’ didn’t you?! Are you going to lose a rare gift like his?! I cannot believe that Duke Vargas, a man who bared his fangs against you because he trusted in his friend, is somehow inferior to us nobles who opportunistically refused to take a side! I beseech you, do as Duchess Walter has said and lighten his sentence!”

Having listened to their words, Souma closed his eyes for a moment, and then... gave the order.

“...Take them away.”

In an instant, soldiers surrounded the two and removed them from the hall. Owen quietly obeyed the soldiers with a disappointed expression, while in contrast, Piltory continued to cry, “Sire! Please, reconsider!” even as he was being escorted out.

Once they were taken away, an unpleasant silence fell over the hall. Everyone held their breath, unable to say anything until Souma broke the silence.

“Are there any other opinions?”

The other nobles’ opinions were all some variant of “Sentence both of them to death.”

“The law is the law.”

“If you let this pass, it sets a poor example to your other vassals.”

“Any fool who would oppose Your Majesty can be of no use.”

...And it went on like that. While what they were saying sounded reasonable, it was clear they were thinking, “We don’t want to displease the king like those two.”

...

I... was having a hard time understanding it. True, the nobles who had remained feared Souma, and they would have a hard time plotting against him.

However, when I compared the two who'd been expelled with the twelve who remained, I had to question which group would really of more benefit to Souma and to the country.

...No. Don't doubt him. I decided to believe in Souma, didn't I?

I pinched my thighs. As I desperately tried to suppress my internal conflict, I heard Souma whisper, "This is something... that has to be done."

Souma?

"I understand your positions." Souma stood and raised his right hand up high.

When they saw that gesture, Duchess Walter's eyes went wide, the nobles held their breath, and Castor and Carla lowered their heads in resignation.

Souma swung his hand down as he gave a short order. "Do it."

In the next instant, there was the sound of a blade slicing through the air and a splash of blood. And then...

...twelve heads fell to the ground.

◇ ◇ ◇

The book I referred back to when deciding how I should act as king was *The Prince.*

Machiavelli's *The Prince* was called "the devil's book," and for hundreds of years after it was released, it was attacked by the Christian church. The parts most often singled out were, "Chapter VIII - Concerning Those Who Have Obtained a Principality by Wickedness" and "Chapter XVII - Concerning Cruelty and Clemency, and Whether it is Better to be Loved Than Feared."

Chapter VIII had as its theme "even though a good, upstanding ruler can lose his country, one who seized his state through vile and treacherous means may, thereafter, live out the rest of his life in peace, without facing rebellion from his people." In it, Machiavelli said, "I believe that this follows from cruelties being badly or properly used."

Also, in Chapter XVII, he reasoned that men are self-serving creatures, and if asked to harm one of two people, they would chose to harm a person they love

over a person they fear. This meant “it is much safer to be feared than to be loved.”

He also said, “When a prince is with his army, it is quite necessary for him to disregard the reputation of cruelty,” noting, “Hannibal of Carthage faced no dissension among his troops or against himself, whether in victory or in defeat. This arose from nothing else than his inhuman cruelty.”

The Christian church, which preached love, attacked these portions, saying, “What is the meaning of this? Recommending that princes, who should rule through virtue, engage in acts of cruelty!” It angered them, and *The Prince* was banned.

Then, partially because of its established reputation as the devil’s book, its content wasn’t closely considered, with extreme statements being given the most focus. It got to the point where misreadings like, “*The Prince* approves of the use of cruelty,” or, “*The Prince* says to massacre all who oppose you,” went unchallenged. It also saw occasional calls to reevaluate this tendency.

However, what I want to say firmly is: *Machiavelli did not go into extensive detail about cruelties.*

In Chapter VIII, he did say, “An usurper ought to examine closely into all those cruelties which it is necessary for him to inflict, and to do them all at one stroke so as not to have to repeat them.” But when it comes to the content, he only listed historical examples, and at no point did Machiavelli himself say, “Do it like this!”

It was the same in Chapter XVII. He credited Hannibal’s wonderful deeds to his inhuman cruelty, but he didn’t elaborate on what cruelty was. Now, what were these cruelties that Machiavelli said were to be done all at once, or the cruelty that was the burden a prince must bear?

First, Machiavelli said in Chapter XVII that, “A prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that he avoids hatred,” and noted that, to avoid being hated, “He must abstain from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women.” Then, in the same section, he said, “When it is necessary to proceed against the life of someone, he must do it on proper justification and for manifest cause.”

This could be reworded, “Even if a prince has just cause, he shouldn’t lay a hand on his subject’s land, assets, or women, and killing is only permissible with proper cause. (Which is to say, killing without a proper cause is not permissible.)”

In other words, when Machiavelli spoke of “the use of cruelties,” he limited it to “the killing of those for whom you have just cause.” Therefore, how far can those justifiable killings be permitted? Was he saying, as the church condemned him for, that you should “kill all of your enemies”?

I am well aware that opinions are divided on that point, but I believe the answer is “No.”

That is because, in Chapter XX of *The Prince*, Machiavelli himself said this:

“Princes, especially new ones, have found more fidelity and assistance in those men who in the beginning of their rule were distrusted than among those who in the beginning were trusted.”

With those who may have been hostile at first, if they came to need assistance to support themselves, they could be won over with ease. Once they had been won over, they would work desperately to dispel the bad impression they had left, and so they were much more useful than those who, having not opposed the new prince at first, lived in security.

For an example in Japanese history, the fierce general who had served under Nobunaga Oda, Katsuie Shibata, should serve as an easy-to-understand example.

When Nobunaga’s younger brother rebelled against him, Katsuie sided with the younger brother at first, but later surrendered and became his vassal. From there, Katsuie rendered distinguished service under Nobunaga and became his chief retainer. However, if his efforts had been deemed insufficient, he might have been banished like Hidesada Hayashi, who had surrendered with him. That must have been part of the reason Katsuie worked with such desperation.

Now, getting back on topic, what Machiavelli meant when he spoke of “cruelty” wasn’t “Make sure you kill all who oppose you,” or anything like that.

Therefore, what exactly did he mean?

To answer that, we must look to the historical examples Machiavelli used of "cruelties being used well."

When Syracuse was attacked by the Carthaginians, Agathocles deceived and killed the senators and people of influence, and then, once he had solidified his own power, he fended off the Carthaginian attack.

In order to seize the rule of his hometown of Fermo, Oliverotto deceived and killed his uncle who was his patron along with the citizens of influence, then held Fermo for a mere one year.

As for the man Machiavelli held up as his ideal prince, Cesare Borgia, he murdered those he had reconciled with and solidified his power. Among those he killed was the aforementioned Oliverotto.

Machiavelli approved of these actions. And what we can see from these examples is that *the target of cruelties was allies within your own camp.*

The senators, who might have been allies as members of the same camp, but would have got in the way of one's policies.

The father who stood in the way of one becoming a prince.

And finally, the ones who had reconciled and become one's allies, but who could not be trusted not to turn on one again.

Those sorts of troublesome allies, or to put it more strongly, *potential enemies within one's own camp,* were the target of Machiavelli's cruelties.

The same can be said of the "cruelty" in Chapter XVII.

Hannibal was said to be feared by his men due to his inhuman cruelty, but if we are to judge the quality of that "cruelty," by looking at the contrasting example he gives of Scipio, what he means begins to come into view. Scipio was a great general, but his men betrayed him, and the people under his rule rebelled against him. The reason was that his too-great forbearance kept him from punishing his followers when they engaged in abuses.

In short, Machiavelli was saying that Hannibal, who was Scipio's opposite, was able to properly condemn his allies, which made him feared by those who

served under him, and regardless of whether he won or lost, they never betrayed him.

If we think of the target for Machiavelli's "proper use of cruelties" as being allies who might in future become enemies, along with his other assertion in *The Prince* that when neighboring states are at war, you should clearly state which side you are on, because if you attempt to remain neutral, you will generally fail, we can begin to see what Machiavelli's underlying thoughts were.

Basically...

"Don't trust opportunists who join whichever side is winning at the moment."

...That's about it.

Machiavelli had served as a diplomat in a time when Italy was rife with scheming and treachery.

He must have seen countless cases where things were brushed under the rug because someone didn't want to make a big deal of them, only to see the ones whose transgressions had been overlooked become a major source of trouble later. That was why he said that, even if it was deemed "cruel," the source of the illness needed to be cut out at its root.

That was why I had the twelve nobles decapitated.

More than ten men clad all in black stood behind the twelve beheaded nobles. Their faces were covered in black cloth, and they wore black clothing that resembled ninja outfits. In their hands they held bloody swords, making it plain to see that they were the ones who had decapitated the nobles.

The sudden intrusion and murder made everyone present gulp. My expression remained unchanged. Hakuya's did not change, either. We were the only ones.

"Huh?! Souma!" Liscia exclaimed.

"Sire! You knaves, who are you?!" Aisha cried.

Liscia and Aisha both drew their blades and stepped forth to protect me, but I just put a hand down on each of their shoulders.

“It’s okay. These are my *subordinates.*”

Liscia stumbled, “Your subordinates... Huh...?”

While Liscia was still looking bewildered, one of the men in black approached. While the other men all wore nondescript black clothing, this one alone wore black lacquered armor. He stood nearly two meters tall, with a muscular build that was apparent even through his armor. From his neck down, he looked like some sort of dark knight, but his face was covered with a black tiger mask. The man in the black tiger mask knelt before me, bowing his head. “Master. The mission is complete.”

The man in the black tiger mask had a low voice that suited his appearance.

Liscia inhaled in surprise. “That voi... Ow!”

Liscia started to say something, but I gripped her shoulder tighter. Liscia looked at me with surprise, but when I shook my head... it seemed she figured out what was going on. She quietly sheathed her sword.

When I looked over to Excel, she seemed to have grasped the general situation, too. There was a slight anger not quite hidden in her smile.

“I am going to insist... on a proper explanation for all this later,” she seemed to be silently saying. When a beauty like her got angry, it was an incredible sight to behold.

I felt a chill run down my spine as I tapped Aisha, who still hadn’t relaxed her guard, on the shoulder. “Aisha, you put your sword away, too.”

“B-But...”

“His name is Kagetora—‘shadow tiger.’ He is the leader of the intelligence agency, the Black Cats, who report directly to me.”

When I said that, the agents of the Black Cats held up their swords in front of themselves in unison.

I had been caught out by the Empire’s secret service in Van, the capital of Amidonia, so I had recently organized this unit under my direct command to focus on intelligence operations.

To be more precise, I had greatly increased the number of agents Hakuya

already had, refined their skills, brought on Kagetora with his superb abilities as a commander to lead them, and then reorganized them into a unit under my direct command.



They were a unit with many mysteries. The identities of the members were unknown. It was also unclear why, though the unit had only formally been organized the other day, they could act in such unison.

The greatest mystery was Kagetora's identity. The way he commanded his unit as if they were his own arms and legs... it was almost like he were a veteran general of some sort, but was there anyone like that in this country?

Just who could he possibly be? No one knew his true identity.

"...Hey, Souma," Liscia said slowly. "Is Kagetora..."

"No one knows his true identity. Got it?"

"Ah, right..."

Liscia looked like she didn't know what to say, but she nodded. I immediately gave an order to Kagetora and the Black Cats.

"Once the nobles' bodies have been disposed of, contact the units from the Forbidden Army lying in wait around their mansions. They are to charge in and secure evidence. If there is any resistance, suppress it."

"By your will," said Kagetora.

The Black Cats began to clean up the bodies, immediately departing.

Kagetora looked to Liscia one last time, then left the great hall. Once they had left, Liscia gave me a slightly harsh look.

"...You're going to explain all this for me, right?" she demanded.

"I know," I said. "But I'm not sure where to begin..."

"Maybe you want to start with why you killed the nobles."

"Well, yeah, that would be your first question..." I said.

I began to slowly explain my reasons for this murder.

"Now, as for the reason those twelve had to die, they were also connected to Amidonia," I said. "That's something that both Hakuya and Georg had confirmed through their independent investigations."

“They were spies for Amidonia, you mean?” Liscia asked.

I shook my head. “That’s not quite accurate. I said ‘also,’ didn’t I? They were connected to Amidonia, to the corrupted nobles, and also to our side.”

“Huh? What do you mean by...”

“They were opportunists,” I said. “They side with whoever’s winning.”

Those nobles had always cooperated with whoever was on the winning side, in order to avoid trouble themselves.

When the kingdom had been in decline, they’d had underground connections to the Principality of Amidonia. When the civil war had broken out, they’d supported the corrupt nobles from the shadows, while remaining uninvolved themselves. They had always fomented discontent while securing their own safety like that. Only thinking of their own profit and self-preservation.

“They profited by providing supplies and personnel with resistance groups, and if the winning side shifted, they’d crush their current allies to win acclaim for themselves,” I said. “If suspicion turned on them, they would foment rebellion elsewhere, so as to keep the investigation from catching up with them. It seems they did it again and again under your father’s reign.”

Having learned what was going on behind the scenes during her father’s reign, Liscia was at a loss for words. “No...”

“Now, what made them dangerous was that they never directly rebelled themselves,” I said. “When the advantage was on our side, they acted almost like loyal vassals, so it was hard to bring them to justice. That’s because when things were going our way, they actually did their jobs.

“The more confident a ruler is in his ability to maintain power, the more forbearance he has, the more he wants to trust his vassals, the more he will fall into a trap like that. ‘If I can build a stable administration, it should be fine. There’s no need to reduce the number of allies I have,’ he’d think.”

“But... you had them killed, right?” Liscia asked.

“That’s because I don’t see my rule ever being stable,” I said. “In fact, I think someday I may be forced to stand at the crossroads of fate. When that time

comes, I guarantee you that those opportunists would have hurt me. I don't want you, or Aisha, or Juna, or any of the people I care about to get hurt, and then think, 'If only I had disposed of them back then.' If that ever happened, I'd probably go crazy. That's why, here and now, I decided to nip it in the bud."

In Machiavelli's *The Prince*, he said this: "I hold it to be true that Fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less."

In this world, a person's rise or fall will be decided by whether their actions are suited to the era in which they live. However, that can only be judged by those who come later. Nobunaga Oda, Napoleon... Even if they are geniuses in their time, once the times no longer suit them, they will be destroyed.

Machiavelli had likened fortune to a raging river.

He said that, though the sudden change of fortune cannot be stopped, if one prepares for that change in advance, its flow can be made less unrestrained and dangerous.

The important thing was to not be optimistic about one's situation, but to be resolute and do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

In regards to this, Machiavelli said, "Fortune is a woman, and if you wish to keep her under it is necessary to beat and ill-use her," a way of putting it that would upset any feminist who heard it. Setting aside his choice of words, in order to ensure that the roots of calamity didn't remain, I had given the order to strike down twelve nobles here.

When she heard my explanation, Liscia slowly nodded. "I understand your reasoning, Souma. What will you do with the Houses of Saracen and Jabana, the ones you had leave?"

"Allow me to explain that," Hakuya said, stepping forward. "The Houses of Saracen and Jabana had worked alongside the other twelve under their former heads, but that connection between them was broken with their deaths. The present head of the House of Saracen, Sir Piltory, is a fine young man who excels with both the pen and sword, while the head of House Jabana, Sir Owen, is a sober and honest hotblooded man. They can be counted on to serve His Majesty without duplicity. I believe you could see that from the way they acted

while being led out of the great hall.”

“...So you showed some discretion about who was to be executed, then,” Liscia said.

“That is correct.” Hakuya nodded. “The ones executed were all up to something-or-another. Now we are investigating their mansions in the capital, collecting evidence of what that was for each of them. The punishment for the crime and the finding of evidence are in the wrong order, which is hardly praiseworthy, but I ask you to understand.”

With that said, Hakuya bowed his head.

He was probably trying to back me up. By telling her I hadn’t murdered twelve people on my suspicion alone, he was trying to keep it from doing anything strange to my relationship with Liscia.

Liscia seemed to understand that, too, so she didn’t press the issue any further. “Okay, I understand the twelve, but what if the other two had agreed with you, Souma? Would you have killed them, too?”

Hakuya shook his head. “In that event, the plan was for me to provoke them. Though, if they had attempted to curry favor with His Majesty like the other twelve houses, we would have had little use for them after this.”

“You’d thought it through that far...” Liscia looked at me, scandalized.

No, this sort of plan that involved reading the vagaries of people’s hearts is Hakuya’s department, I thought. *I don’t have that nasty a personality... I think.*

Seeing me avert my eyes, Liscia let out a sigh of resignation. “So, what happens to Carla and her father now?”

“...I’m getting to that.” I walked over to stand in front of the bound Castor. Having seen everything that had just unfolded, he looked dumbfounded. The blade he’d expected to fall on his own neck had fallen on another’s. It was little wonder he was so bewildered.

“Castor Vargas,” I said. “Because you refused to heed my ultimatum, you are guilty of treason.”

Castor bowed his head. “...I understand.”

Then he bowed his head even lower than before, grinding his forehead against the floor this time. “That’s why, I beg you. The crime is mine alone. So, please, spare just Carla.”

“You are not the one who decides that,” I said coldly. “This is your judgment. Your crime of treason is plain to see. ...However, as both Piltory and Owen said earlier, I will recognize your contribution to this country in the more than one hundred years you have protected it. I have already taken your post, your lands, your assets, and even your family name from you. Therefore, I will spare you your life, and that alone.”

I turned to Excel, who was silently watching to see how things developed.

“Castor will be left in your custody. However, he is forbidden from entering the former Duchy of Vargas, and also forbidden from contacting his son Carl, or the boy’s mother, Accela. Excel, your son-in-law is the one who did all this, so you must keep a proper watch on him.”

“Ah! ...Yes. It will be as you command.” There were tears forming in Excel’s eyes as she gave me a proper bow.

When she raised her face, I saw her mouth the words “Thank you,” to me. I showed no reaction, moving on to Carla.

Even though her father had been spared, Carla still wore a quiet expression.

“Carla,” I said, “you are guilty of the same crime. What’s more, you don’t have Castor’s distinguished record of having protected the country for one hundred years. I’m sad to say it, but I don’t see any way I could lessen your punishment.”

“...I understand,” she said quietly.

“W-Wait! Then kill me!” Castor exclaimed, grinding his face against the floor in desperation. “Carla turned her blade on you at my orders! So let my record be used for Carla...”

“Take him away.”

My attendants dragged him from the room. He kept screaming “I’ll take her place!” until he was out of the room, but I was under no obligation to listen to him.

Once things had quieted down, I continued. “You have clearly committed the crime of treason. However, if I let the mastermind, Castor, live, it would reflect poorly on me to kill his daughter. Therefore, I will spare your life, but you will live as a slave. Your owners will be the royal family—that is to say, Liscia and myself.”

The second most heavy punishment in this world was forced labor as a convict slave. There was no such thing as life imprisonment. Those who became convict slaves, unless they were granted an amnesty, would be forced to do endless hard labor in the coal mines. Though, in Carla’s case, because I had chosen to give ownership of her to the royal family, she would be spared the coal mines and kept in the royal house as a servant who had to be absolutely submissive.

“...Okay.” Carla accepted my order, nodding weakly.

Excel was about to say something, but she held it in. She must have decided it was better than her being killed, at least. Hakuya closed his eyes in silence, while Aisha was flustered by the atmosphere in the room. And finally, Liscia watched what I would do in silence, her expression unchanging.

“I will give you further directions later, but, for now, I have an order to give you,” I said.

“...As you wish.”

I walked over to Carla, who was hanging her head, crouched down and whispered *a certain order*, quietly, so that only she could hear. Carla’s eyes went wide.

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When Souma quietly whispered the order, I doubted my own ears.

“If it comes to it, kill me.”

When he saw my eyes widen in surprise, Souma needed to me with a serious look on his face. “Not now, of course. If I become a tyrant, I want you to be the one to stop me. With your martial ability, you could kill me easily, right?”

Kill him if he becomes a tyrant...?! Why would he suddenly say that to me?!

I kept my voice low, asking him, “Why would you say that? And why to me, of all people?!”

“Because Liscia and the others might not be able to,” Souma whispered, a troubled smile on his face. “At some point, I found myself surrounded by many people I care about. Just recently, I got engaged to another person on top of Liscia. It’s Aisha, over there.”

He got engaged to that dark elf without me hearing about it? I thought, stunned. *Has Liscia accepted it? Well, knowing her personality, she’s probably being pragmatic about it...*

“Well... Congratulations?” I whispered.

“Thanks,” he whispered back. “So you see, I have more and more people I care about. In itself, that’s a good thing, but when I think of what would happen if, someday, I grew drunk on power and become a tyrant... it starts to scare me. If that came to pass, I worry whether Liscia and the others could stop me like they should, you know?”

“Liscia would stop you,” I whispered. “You know her straight-laced personality.”

“Would she?” he retorted, still whispering. “Sure, if I started indulging in too much debauchery, or started massacring the townspeople, she’d admonish me for it, but what about if I had a good justification, like I did this time? Individual purges aren’t that much of a problem on their own. But when they happen repeatedly, eventually you reach a point of no return. When it comes to that, will Liscia and the others be able to abandon me?”

That’s... No, probably not, I realized.

“It’s not my place to say it, but... Liscia is head over heels in love with you,” I whispered. “If you fall into hell, I’m sure she’ll be right there beside you.”

Liscia was too serious and too devoted a girl. Probably, no matter what happened, she would follow Souma loyally to the bitter end.

Souma nodded. “I know, right? Aisha’s sort of the same way. Do you think Juna would do it, maybe? Anyway, there are a lot of people who would try to suffer alongside me. I don’t want that. If there were a revolution in response to

my tyrannical rule, it wouldn't just be me who got executed, it would be Liscia and the rest, too. I don't want Liscia and the others to turn out like Marie Antoinette."

Marie... who?

While I still had a question mark hovering over my head, Souma whispered with a serious look, "That's why, Carla, before those I care about can suffer with me, I want you to take on the role of putting an end to me."

"...I'm a slave now," I whispered. "If I kill my master, the collar will kill me, you know?"

"Yeah," he whispered back. "So, please, only do it if you're prepared to die, too. And, if I manage to hand the crown on to the next generation, I will set you free."

This man... he says the most incredible things as if they were nothing. I was stunned.

Souma had told me, if he became a tyrant, to become the blade that struck him down. Then, having killed him, to die myself. By keeping me at his side as his slave, he was hoping to use me as a personal deterrent against his becoming a tyrant.

"You really... don't show any mercy," I whispered.

"I only hold back for those I care about," he whispered back.

"I meant towards yourself," I whispered. "Though I suppose the meaning still got through."

I had thought the same thing in the battle with Amidonia, but this man treated himself far too poorly. If he didn't take better care of himself, he was going to cause no end of worry for those around him.

Liscia, you've fallen for a real troublesome guy... I thought to myself.

That was right. In order to keep my best friend's love life from a sad future, I decided to act as his deterrent.

Sitting up straight, I bowed deeply. "I have received your order. Until the day comes that I must act on it, I will work my hardest for you, praying that that day

never comes.”

Souma nodded in satisfaction at my response. “At this moment, we have no work meant exclusively for a slave. For now, you will join the maid force... But... Well... Uh, get the details from the head maid yourself.”

When he gave me that order, he sounded a bit hesitant towards the end. I wondered what was up, so I followed Souma’s gaze to see a beautiful maid who seemed to be around twenty years old smiling happily.

When I wondered what it was about her, I realized Liscia was looking in my direction, an expression of utter pity on her face.

...Huh?

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With the trial of Castor and my friend Carla over, Souma, Aisha, and I were returning to the governmental affairs office when suddenly, Souma stumbled in front of us.

“Souma!” I cried.

“Sire!” Aisha shouted.

When Aisha and I tried to support him, Souma put a hand on the wall. “I’m fine. Just stumbled a bit,” he said, motioning for us to stop with his free hand.

“But...” I said.

“It’s all right,” he said. “...I’d like to be alone for just a little while,”

Then he went into the governmental affairs office by himself.

From the glimpse I got of his face in profile, he looked pale and unwell. Left on our own out in the hallway, I struck up a conversation with Aisha, who had likewise been left behind and was standing there in a daze.

“He was his usual self just a moment ago,” I said. “What do you think happened to him all of a sudden?”

“I am not entirely sure myself,” said Aisha. “However...”

“However?”

“He looked like a soldier returning from his first battle,” she said, looking troubled. “Like one... who had just killed for the first time.”

“You mean he’s feeling bad over how he killed the twelve nobles?” I asked.

But Souma had done that because he’d believed it to be necessary, hadn’t he? If so, he had nothing to regret. Besides, Souma had experienced his first battle in the war with the Principality of Amidonia. He’d struck down Prince Gaius VIII of Amidonia, and he’d had the corrupt nobles executed after that. This wasn’t a first for him.

When I pointed that out, Aisha shook her head. “This is mere speculation on my part, but the time with Gaius was a case of ‘kill or be killed.’ The corrupt nobles had clearly manifested their intention to rebel against him. However, in the case of those twelve nobles, they were not immediately attempting to harm His Majesty. Even if he knows it would be harmful to leave them alive, he questions whether or not it was the right decision to kill them. In his heart, perhaps he can’t quite come to terms with it.”

Aisha looked worriedly at the door to the governmental affairs office.

He can’t come to terms with it... huh.

...Yeah. I thought Aisha’s interpretation of it was correct. I’d heard Souma had come from a peaceful world. There hadn’t been a war there in some time.

Because he had come from a world like that, Souma absolutely hated to have people die. But he wasn’t so unduly optimistic that he thought everything could be taken care of without sacrifices. That was why the policies Souma took were always focused around minimizing the sacrifice while maximizing the reward.

It was a natural frame of mind for the ruler of a nation. However, in Souma’s own heart, he wasn’t so insensitive that he could accept even those minimized sacrifices.

“Hey, Aisha,” I said. “What do you do to support a soldier like that?”

“Well... I have never been a part of the military, so I am no expert on these things... but I often hear it is best to *make them forget about it.*”

“Make them forget about it?” I repeated.

“I hear that their superior officers and the older soldiers will invite them out for wine and women to help them vent,” Aisha said. “It is the sort of thing that only time can heal, so they keep them from thinking about it too deeply and breaking down.”

Wine, or the other thing... huh, I thought to myself. *In that case...*

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The trial had begun at noon. Now it was most definitely night time.

I lay alone in my bed, the governmental affairs office completely dark with all of the lights turned off.

There was a lot of work for me to do. But, just for today, I had asked Hakuya to let me shirk my duties. I just didn’t have the will to do anything. Hakuya understood that. I wished I could just go to sleep. But, contrary to that hope, I was wide awake.

If I used my head just a little, that might help, so I decided to think through whether the execution was justified or not.

I thought that executing the twelve nobles had been correct, examining it in the long term. If I’d left them alive, and if anyone had been hurt by the seed of calamity they would sow, I was sure I would have regretted that. But, well, now I was desperately holding my chest, trying not to regret that I had killed them.

“All cruelties should be carried out in one stroke.”

“A prince need not concern himself over a reputation of cruelty.”

“In order to avoid destruction, it is better to choose to fight.”

“When the time of your demise comes, it is too late for regrets.”

I went over Machiavelli’s ideas over and over again in my head. But all I was doing was looking for an excuse.

If I was going to regret something, I preferred to it be that I had chosen a path that didn’t hurt those I cared most for. I thought I had convinced myself of that before making the decision, and I resented my own heart for still wavering

despite that.

While I was pondering, the door suddenly opened. I moved just my head to check, and Liscia and Aisha were standing there.

In rather provocative attire.

“Huh?!” I reacted in shock.

They were both wearing what looked like thin bathrobes that only went down to a little above the knee.

Maybe they weren’t wearing anything underneath the robes, because the cleavage that poked out from where the collar met, as well as the bare thighs that stuck out from beneath, were captivating. In the light that came in from the hallway beyond the open door, their silhouettes were accentuated in a provocative way. It made Aisha’s height and her shapely figure stand out all the more, while Liscia’s well-balanced body was beautiful, too.

It was a little too much for me to take in all at once, and I stared for a while, entranced.

...Honestly, if I hadn’t been feeling so down at the time, all reason would have likely gone out the window in an instant. However, in my current state of mind, it all seemed more like a bad joke.

“...What do you think you’re doing?” I demanded.

My tone was so scary that I startled myself. No, that wasn’t what I ought to have been saying, and I knew it. It was like I was taking my frustration out on them.

I kept my tone as calm as I could manage and corrected myself. “I believe I asked you two to give me some time to myself.”

“We can’t leave you alone when you’re like that, now can we?” Liscia paid my objections no heed as she came over and sat down on the edge of the bed where I was lying down.

Aisha also said “P-Pardon my intrusion,” and came around to the opposite side from Liscia before politely taking a seat.

Whether I turned my head left or right, there was a beautiful girl’s bottom. I

could only cover my eyes with one arm, looking straight up. “What is this...? What do you two want...?”

“That’s, well... we want to help you forget, you could say...” Liscia said.

“Come again?” I asked incredulously.

“Anyway! You can do whatever you like with us!” Liscia burst out.

“I-It is my first time doing such a thing, so I am counting on you, Your Highness!” Aisha cried.

“You can do what you like with us”... “I am counting on you”... what are these two saying?!

“Listen... I’m not in the mood right now,” I said.

“Ohh, if only we’d had Madam Juna here with us,” Aisha said sounding disappointed.

No, Juna’s busy going through the procedure to transfer here from the Navy right now, okay? I sighed... *Oh, whatever. I’m sure they’re doing it because they’re concerned.*

While I was thinking that, Liscia started fidgeting. “Um, Souma...”

“What?” I asked.

“It’s a bit chilly, so can we join you under the covers for now?”

She was shivering, huh... Well, it is almost winter, after all. They must be cold in those outfits.



Before I could say *It wouldn't be a problem if you had dressed properly to begin with,* the two hurried under the covers. It was a single bed, making it was a tight fit for three people. Inevitably, the two of them ended up pressed up against me. Close enough I could feel their hearts beating.

"Whew," Liscia said. "This is nice and warm, huh."

"Indeed," Aisha said. "I could fall asleep just like this."

"This is my room and office, though, you know..." I could only put on a wry smile in response to their comments. But, well... it really was warm.

My worries from before seemed to be melting away. That was how great the warmth of others was. Just by having someone there next to me, my heart felt lighter.

I could remind myself that I was protecting them. That I wanted to protect them.

"You two," I said.

"Hm?" Liscia said.

"What is it?" Aisha asked.

"Thanks."

When I said that, the two of them smiled, one on each side of me.

Then, perhaps because we were tired, the three of us soon drifted off to sleep.



Epilogue: Peace is Yet Distant

This place was the child care center that had been in the castle for a long time now. It was mostly a place where people who worked in the castle, such as the maids, left their children.

“King, play with uuuus!” one child yelled.

“King, let us ride on your shouldeeeers!”

I said nothing.

Sitting on the carpet, an adorable little wolf-eared boy of around three was playing with a human girl. Meanwhile, a cat-eared girl who was around the same age had occupied my lap and was rolling around on it. The cat tail that grew out of her rear end was swishing back and forth.

“Hmm, I can’t get up now, so just climb up on your own,” I said.

““Aye!”” the kids cried.

The two who had been fooling around together started climbing up my back. Yeah, they were pretty darn adorable. I had gotten used to them hanging over my shoulders and touching my face all over now.

“Hee hee. You really are popular with the children, Your Majesty.” The birth mother of my beloved little sister Tomoe, Tomoko, watched us with a smile as she folded the children’s laundry.

When we’d practically forced Tomoe to become my adopted little sister-in-law, we had also had Tomoko take up residence here to work at the nursery school. By the way, the little boy who was using his slobber-covered hand to touch my face right now was her eldest son (Tomoe’s real little brother), Rou.

“Big brother,” Tomoe said, “I’m happy that you’re playing with Rou and his friends, but are you sure its okay? Won’t Big Sister get mad at you again...?”

Tomoe, who stayed here to help her mother when she didn’t have to do work

negotiating with rhinosauruses, was busy soothing a baby. When I thought about it, Tomoe was still only ten years old. What a good, reliable kid she was.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I don’t have a massive backlog of work to get through anymore. Besides, I’ve left my Living Poltergeists in the governmental affairs office to keep up with the work.”

“Oh, I see,” said Tomoe. “You can play the day away, then. Isn’t that nice, Rou?”

“Aye!” Rou raised his hand up straight.

He’s so cuuuute.

I really liked kids. I could watch them toddling along with their little steps all day. It stimulated a protective urge inside me. When my grandma and grandpa had been alive, I’d helped out with book readings at the local preschool, after all.

After I had played with the children for some time...

“That’s an incredible look for you, Master.”

When I turned to see who had called out to me, Carla was standing there. In a maid outfit.

“No, I don’t want to hear that from you, Carla,” I said.

“...I suppose that’s fair.” Carla said, slumping her shoulders. Really, when I looked at her...

“It’s terrifying how badly that maid uniform suits you.”

“Please, don’t tell me... I feel the same way.”

Carla was a dragonewt to begin with, so she already came with more accessories than your average person. She had a tail, dragon wings, and little horns. If you made her wear a maid uniform on top of that, it was too many character traits piled onto one person, and she beamed with too much personality.

“To top it off, isn’t the skirt on that maid outfit awfully short?” I asked.

“D-Don’t look,” Carla said, holding down the front of her skirt.

The maids in the castle wore classical maid outfits with long skirts, but with the one Carla was wearing right now, it looked more fit for working the floor of a maid cafe. The skirt only went down to just above her knees, and it was an airy dress type maid outfit. It made her figure stand out all the more.

“Urgh... the head maid... said to wear this one...” Carla muttered, flustered.

“Ahh. I thought it might be Serina’s handiwork.”

The head maid, Serina, was a talented maid, but she did have a sadistic side reserved for cute girls like this. Apparently she enjoyed making them wear embarrassing outfits, then watching the girls go through the shame and agony of it.

What was more, the stronger-willed a girl was, the more she enjoyed “buwwying” them, which meant Liscia and Carla were right in the middle of her strike zone. Liscia had told me stories with a distant look in her eyes.

Buddha save both of them.

“But, still... Has it been a week since then?” I asked. “Is your training period as a maid done now?”

“T-Training... Urkh... Ah...” Carla clutched her head.

No, seriously, what happened to you? I wondered. *Weren’t you just trained in the basic skills you’ll need as part of the maid force?*

“The... The whip...”

“Whip?!”

“She used the whip... to hit me...”

“It was that hard?!”

“What’s more, it was a special one, with a magic spell on it,” said Carla. “It wouldn’t leave a mark where she hit me... But. It struck half with pain and half with pleasure.”

What’s with that whip?! That’s not for disciplining, it’s for breaking them in, isn’t it?

“According to the head maid, ‘The pain keeps you from giving in to the

pleasure, while the pleasure keeps you from bearing the pain by tickling your ribs.' While I may have fallen to become a slave and a maid, I won't let myself be reduced to being useless, so I was determined to learn my job properly, but... that whip scares me. Maybe it would be easier if I could have given into the pleasure..."

"That is because the maid force are the master's dogs," a voice said pleasantly. "We have no use for a perverted sow."



“Eek?!” Carla shrieked.

When she turned around, Serina was standing there with a glossy smile. Given that she’d just made Carla, who had fearlessly plunged into the battlefield, shriek like that... just how scary was she?

“Is something the matter, sire?” Serina asked.

“...No, it’s nothing.”

Sorry, but as long as she doesn’t have her sights on me, I’m going to play ignorant, I thought. *It’ll be fine, Carla. I’m sure you won’t die. ...Physically, at least. Emotionally, I’m not so sure.*

“Now then, Carla,” Serina beamed. “I believe I asked you to make His Majesty’s bed in the governmental affairs office, did I not?”

“No, um... Collecting the sheets of a man I’m closely acquainted with was embarrassing, so I...”

“What are you talking about?” Serina demanded. “If you call yourself a maid, eventually His Majesty and the princess will [censored], and you have to make the bed where they [censored] and [censored] while it’s all [censored], while keeping a straight face.”

“I-I really hope you’ll spare me from that, at least?!” Carla said with her face turning a bright shade of red...

Wait, huh? Aren’t Liscia and I being indirectly embarrassed here, too? I was feeling really awkward right now.

On top of that, Tomoe asked her mother, “What is [censored]?” and left her struggling to answer.

Don’t say things in front of a child that are going to affect their emotional development...

As I was thinking that, Serina tilted her head to the side questioningly. “Incidentally, sire. Are you going to be okay, sire?”

“Huh?”

“No, it’s just that I see someone running this way from behind you, sire.”

Serina smiled.

When Serina said that with a smile, I turned around to see...

“Oh, crap!”

I got Rou down off of my back, then hurriedly tried to run away, but... I was grabbed firmly by the collar.

“Gwah!” I yelped.

“Gahaha! I’ve been looking for you, Your Majestyyyy!”

When I turned around, a muscular man who was just starting to show the signs of old age, with his gray hair combed back and a beard in the same color, was standing there with an overbearing smile.

When I had judged Castor and Carla, he was one of the two who had not been intimidated by me and continued to defend them. It was the head of the House of Jabana, Owen Jabana.

After the trial, I had hired him on as my personal educator and advisor (and martial arts trainer). I’ll talk more about that one in a parenthetical later.

Oh, by the way, as for the other person who had defended the two of them, Piltory Saracen of the House of Saracen, when I’d explained the evil deeds of the former head of the house (his father), he had said, “My word... I can’t believe that my father did such things. I can offer you no proper apology. Knowing what I do now, I am prepared to serve you to the bitter end, sire. I will go through any peril for you.”

He seemed to be thinking in the way you might expect from a serious young man of the nobility, so I gave him the very dangerous mission he was looking for. The mission of “Special Ambassador in the Elfrieden Kingdom Embassy to be established in the Gran Chaos Empire.” We were in an experimental phase still, so there was no telling how far extraterritoriality would protect him.

Now, back to Owen.

Owen was the type who could vociferously speak the truth to those above him.

By his own account, “These old bones have nothing to lose. I’m going to live

out what little is left of my life being true to myself!”

He said he didn’t have much time left, but it felt like even if I killed him, he’d still come back somehow...

If I kept someone like this, who could tell his ruler the honest truth, at my side, it would reduce the chance of me straying from the right path. While I might have ordered Carla to die to stop me if it came to it, I would prefer to make it to retirement without getting killed.

So, after a bit of this and that, I brought Owen on to help educate me, but...

“Gahaha, sire! If you were free from administrative work, you should have told me! Come on, come on, let’s start our training for the day!”

I was silent.

It seemed that, in Owen’s mind, education included physical education, and any time I was free from my administrative tasks, he would try to train me. If he caught me, it meant running, practice swings, mock battles, everything on the training menu for a newly-recruited soldier.

“No, I have Aisha training me already, so...” I said.

“What are you saying? The princess of the God-Protected Forest, Madam Aisha, is much too easy on you, sire! She only makes you train with your puppets!”

“You’re too loud,” I said. “But, if I use my puppets, at least I can put up a fight.”

“And what will you do when you find yourself in a situation where you can’t use them?” Owen demanded. “Your life is the life of this country itself. If an assassin attacks, if you can fend off the enemy’s attacks for a few exchanges, or even just one exchange, your bodyguards will be able to get to you in time. That one exchange will decide the life or death of our country. That one exchange will bring our country glory.”

Urgh... Because he was right, there was nothing I could say. As I slumped my shoulders, Carla, who Serina had also grabbed by the collar, looked at me with just a little sympathy.

“I see you have it hard, too, Master...”

“You too,” I said with no emotion.

“Come, come, sire! To the training grounds!” Owen declared.

“You, too, Carla,” Serina scolded. “You need to hurry and learn how to make a bed.”

And so, the two of us were dragged off in different directions.

Some days later, we received a report that a rebellion had broken out in Amidonia.

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“It’s lookin’ like my brother couldn’t win, after all,” Roroa said.

In a room at an inn in a town near Van, the first princess of Amidonia looked at the two people with her. One of them, the former Minister of Finance, Colbert, shook his head.

“This country has already been defeated. The negotiations were only to limit the damage. I think it’s too harsh to blame Lord Julius.”

Julius gave off a cold impression, but he rated Colbert’s skill at finance highly and, partially because of their close age, the two had formed a friendship. Colbert couldn’t bring himself to criticize his employer and friend.

Roroa smiled wryly at Colbert, seeing him like that. “Maybe not, but if there’re war reparations to be paid, the ones sufferin’ will be the folks in town. We call it the capital, but it’s just one city. The area around it’s not all that productive. Shouldn’t he have let the kingdom keep it for a while and avoided takin’ responsibility for the war? We’re not totally beat yet, and if we left the territory as-is, the Empire and Kingdom couldn’t say anythin’ more. If that got us past the current crisis, there were any number of moves left he could’ve played.”

Roroa said all that like it was no big deal.

Sebastian, the other person who was here with her, shrugged. “Not everyone could accept that so easily. People don’t act solely on the arithmetic of profit

and loss. We all have things we're emotionally attached to, you see. Lord Julius has them, you have them... and I am sure the young King of Elfrieden has them, too."

"Me and Souma, too?" Roroa asked.

"Yes," said Sebastian. "In the same way that the spirit of Amidonia was precious to Lord Gaius and Lord Julius, the smiles of the men and women who live in the principality are precious to you, right? Would you be able to cast them aside because your arithmetic said to?"

"...I see," Roroa said.

True, that's somethin' I want to protect, profit or loss aside, Roroa thought. *Does that Souma have somethin' he's attached to, profitable or not, too?*

"You met Souma, didn't ya, Sebastian?" she asked. "Watchin' the broadcasts, he seemed like a clever, funny guy. What'd you think, meetin' him in person?

"Well, let me think... He looked like an ordinary young man, able to listen to the opinions of others and, more than anything else, he felt like someone who valued the people close to him."

"The complete opposite of my old man, huh," Roroa nodded. "But, in that case, there's still a chance."

Roroa shook her closed right fist in circles. It was the gesture she made before throwing dice when gambling or playing a board game.

"Will it work out in my favor or not? I was thinkin' my odds were fifty-fifty, but maybe it's not so bad a bet, after all. He'll make a fine opponent for the biggest gamble of this gal's life."

"Princess... Are you absolutely certain about this?"

Colbert wore a look of concern, but Roroa said with a serious look, "We've gotta do it. Uncle Herman'll keep things under control down south... but somethin' smells fishy up north. We've got information sayin' the forces of the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria have come up near the border."

On this continent, there were two major faiths, Mother Dragon Worship and Lunarian Orthodoxy. The center of the latter faith, the Orthodox Papal State of

Lunaria, was a dangerous theocracy with a unique system of values. With this country looking like it was on the verge of death, they might try something.

Roroa rose to her feet, turning to the other two and clapping her hands. “Now, here’s where we’ll turn it all around. From here on out, we won’t be lettin’ my brother, the Papal State, or Souma go doin’ whatever they please. We’ll be the ones to get the last laugh!”

Roroa spoke proudly, puffing up her meager chest.

Then, mentally, she added, *And, Souma, you’re gonna be laughin’ with us. Though, unlike ours, yours is probably gonna be a strained smile!*

Roroa smiled like a mischievous child who had just though up a new trick.

Afterword

Thank you for buying *How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom* III. This is Dojyomaru. I have one page for the afterword this time. Now then, what should I use it for?

Well, I suppose I'll touch on the content of this volume just a little. Oh, this is going to involve spoilers, so if you're reading the afterword first, please come back when you finish the main story.

Now then, this volume includes about one-third of what was labeled as the Post-War Arc in the web version. It's the section that addresses what Souma will do with the capital of the Principality of Amidonia, which he occupied in the previous volume, as well as what he will do with those who rebelled against him. I believe both the good and bad points of this story come out especially strongly in this volume, and I am thinking with some trepidation about how it will be received by readers as I write this afterword. That miniature pseudo-thesis that received mixed reviews has all been included here, after all.

Now then, that girl who might best be called a "seriousness breaker" will start to really get involved in the story next volume. What's more, what's more, I'm planning to fix the pits that were written out of sequence in the web serialization into a proper chronological order, so I hope you'll join me again next time.

Finally, I give Fuyuyuki, who has once again drawn lovely pictures for us, my editor, the copywriter, and all of you, the readers out there who support me, my greatest thanks.

This has been Dojyomaru.



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How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom: Volume 3

by Dojyomaru

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Emily Sorensen This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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