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

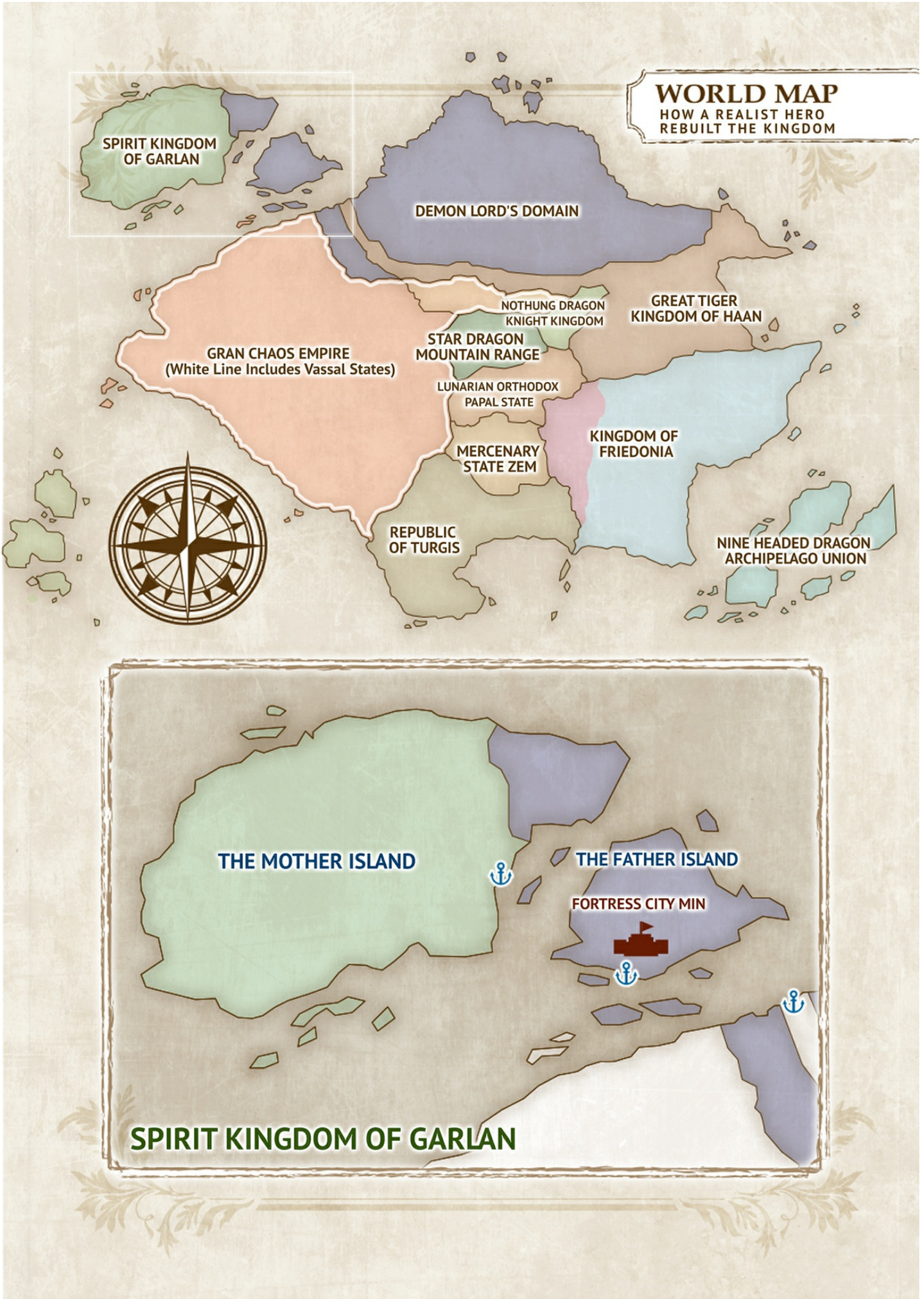



# XV

# HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

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Maria Euphoria
Sha Bon
NOW, LET IT BEGIN.
Fuuga Haan
Souma A. Elfrieden
Sill Munto
Kuu Taisei


WORLD MAP
HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM
SPIRIT KINGDOM OF GARLAN
DEMON LORD'S DOMAIN
GREAT TIGER KINGDOM OF HAAN
NOTHUNG DRAGON KNIGHT KINGDOM
STAR DRAGON MOUNTAIN RANGE
GRAN CHAOS EMPIRE (White Line Includes Vassal States)
LUNARIAN ORTHODOX PAPAL STATE
KINGDOM OF FRIEDONIA
MERCENARY STATE ZEM
REPUBLIC OF TURGIS
NINE HEADED DRAGON ARCHIPELAGO UNION
THE MOTHER ISLAND
THE FATHER ISLAND
FORTRESS CITY MIN
SPIRIT KINGDOM OF GARLAN

# HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

XV



## Aisha U. Elfrieden

Female dark elf warrior. Boasting the greatest martial ability in the kingdom, she is Souma's second primary queen and also his bodyguard.



## Juna Souma

The Prima Lorelei, with the greatest singing voice in the Kingdom of Friedonia.
She is Souma's first secondary queen.



## Roroa Amidonia

Princess of the former Principality of Amidonia.
The third primary queen who also supports Souma with her rare economic sense.



## Naden Delal Souma

Black ryuu girl from the Star Dragon Mountain Range.
Having formed a dragon knight contract with Souma, she is his second secondary queen.



## Souma Kazuya

Young man summoned from another world. With the throne suddenly thrust upon him, he rules the Kingdom of Friedonia.



## Liscia Elfrieden

Princess of the former Elfrieden Kingdom. Realizing Souma's talent, she resolves to support him as his first queen.

## Hilde Norg

Three-eyed doctor.
Her third-eye can see bacteria and microorganisms.



## Brad Joker

Human doctor.
He was the sole surgeon in a world where treatment with light magic is the norm.



## Fuuga Haan

King of Malmkhitan.
Souma views him as dangerous due to his drive for world conquest.



## Shuukin Tan

Fuuga, King of Malmkhitan's right hand man.
A brave and intelligent commander who is also Fuuga's friend.



## Yuriga Haan

Younger sister of Fuuga Haan, king of Malmkhitan. Her brother suggested she study abroad in Friedonia.



## Tomoe Inui

Little mystic wolf girl.
With the discovery of her gift that allows her to talk to animals, she was adopted as Liscia's little sister.



## Maria Euphoria

Empress of the Gran Chaos Empire. Also called a "saint." Formed a secret alliance with the Kingdom of Friedonia.



## Sill Munto

Princess of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom.
A powerful dragon knight who fights on the back of her partner, Pai the white dragon.



## Kuu Taisei

Son of the Republic of Turgis's head of state. After staying with his ally Souma as a guest, in order to learn from his rule, he returned home to become the next leader of the Republic.



## Shabon

Daughter of Shana, the king of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. Was made Nine-Headed Dragon King by her father Shana in recognition of her efforts to defeat Ooyamizuchi.



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# Prologue: As One Country Rises The great library of Parnam held the largest collection of books in the Kingdom of Friedonia. This world already had printing, and there was some distribution of books, but owing to the low literacy rate, they had never gotten to establishing libraries. Still, with the greater focus on education since Souma ascended the throne, a full six out of ten people were now literate, and there was already demand for libraries.

“Books are the crystallization of mankind’s knowledge. There can never be too many kinds.”

Having said that, Souma bought or borrowed all of the books that he could from around the country, and from foreign countries with which they had relations, and ordered reproductions of them made. In the world he came from, there was the legend of the Library of Alexandria, which it was said would take foreign books from any traveler visiting the city and, after copying them, would return the copy. Souma, of course, wasn’t doing anything so malicious. He returned the originals, as was only proper.

The books collected were not limited to academic or technical subjects, but also legends and children’s fables, and even strange texts filled with obscure and absurd knowledge. These were all copied by the librarians and researchers to be stored in the great library. (Magical texts, however, owing to the difficulty of handling them, were instead sent to a specialized analysis department.) Souma’s policy of not neglecting any knowledge or technology was on display

here too. There had been a shortage of librarians and researchers in recent years, and even after recruiting from the graduates of the Royal Academy and Ginger's Vocational School, there was still no shortage of work to be done. This was the sort of work that noted bibliophile Hakuya, the Black-robed Prime Minister, would have preferred doing. And while he often did help out during his time off, there weren't many individuals with such curious tastes as his.

However, in the previous year, a woman of singular talent had arrived in this library. It was Ichiha's elder sister, the third daughter of the House of Chima, Sami. Having lost her adoptive father in the political struggles of the Union of Eastern Nations, the emotionally wounded Sami was taken in by this country. She happened to be an excellent mage and avid reader, so much so that she often shared books with her sister Yomi when they were younger. However, as they grew, Yomi came to seek knowledge of a wide variety, while Sami focused on accounting, math, and the sciences.

When he heard that from Ichiha, Souma said, "Rather than staying cooped up in the castle, I'm sure Sami will be able to distract herself better if she's surrounded by books," and selected her to be a librarian in the great library.

She proved to be the perfect pick.

Sami demonstrated great talent in organizing the books left in her care, and was also excellent in her handling of the magical texts that occasionally got mixed in with them. This quickly made her a central figure of the librarian team. For Sami's part, being in a quiet library surrounded by books helped to soothe her, so she worked hard at her tasks. It would still be some time before her wounds healed, but it seemed she was able to smile more and more often.

— Around the middle of the 1st month, 1550th year, Continental Calendar — On this day, too, Sami was organizing the bookshelves. There was a ladder placed in front of a shelf close to twice her height, and she sat on it, speaking to the person below her.

"Ichiha, hand me the volumes of that Amidonian fable anthology in order."

"Okay." Ichiha searched through the pile of books on the floor to find the tomes Sami had asked him for. "Here, sister."

"Thanks." Sami slotted the books into open spaces.

As he handed the volumes to Sami, Ichiha was looking at her in profile. Sami's side ponytail, tied on the opposite side from her elder twin sister Yomi's, was shaking. Her expression was peaceful.

Back during his time in the Duchy of Chima, Ichiha had been tormented by his musclehead older brothers Nata and Gauche for having no talent. Because Sami and Yomi hated those brothers and stayed away from them, Ichiha hadn't had much contact with his older sisters.

*Is Big Sister Sami going to be all right...?*

Because she wasn't the expressive type to begin with, Ichiha couldn't figure out what Sami might be feeling right now. He was thinking about it so hard that his hands had stopped moving.

"Ichiha?" Sami looked at Ichiha dubiously.

"Ah, sorry." Ichiha hurriedly passed her the next book. Sami accepted the book, placing it on her lap.

"You're worried about me?"

"Oh! Um... Yes..." Ichiha replied, giving up on trying to hide it. Sami smiled a little.

"You're so kind, Ichiha."

"I mean, we *are* family."

"Family...huh? It's amazing how different we all turned out despite coming from the same parents."

A shadow fell over her expression, likely as she remembered their eldest brother, Hashim. Ichiha didn't know what to say, but Sami shook her head, as if to drive off the emotions welling up inside her.

"Hey, Ichiha. Do you like living in this country?"

"Huh?"

"This country is just lovely. It's peaceful, and the people in the castle are all so cheerful. They even treat me kindly, and look out for my well-being. You especially. You come to help all the time because you're worried about my

feelings...right?”

Sami was right. The reason Ichiha was helping her was because Souma and Hakuya had told him it would be better if there was someone by Sami’s side so that she wasn’t left alone. Being the clever woman that Sami was, she had come to notice this.

“Do you already serve Sir Souma?”

“Y-Yes. I’m still only a student, but he accepted me as a retainer.”

“I see... You won’t be going back north then.” Sami smiled slightly at that. “Yeah. This is for the best. If you went back north, you’d just be used.”

“Used...?”

“You know Sir Souma sent Fuuga Haan the *Monster Encyclopedia*, yes? The rulers of the Union of Eastern Nations were all so frustrated when they found out *you* were the author. No one, myself included, ever thought that your knowledge would be worth so much.”

Sami slid over on the ladder, patting the empty space next to her. That apparently meant, *Have a seat beside me.* Ichiha took her up on the invitation, and she put her arm around his shoulder, patting him fondly on the head.

“I’m sure if you did go back, they’d welcome you with open arms. They’d constantly praise you, totally forgetting the dismissive attitude they had towards you before. You’d be a hit with the girls too. I’m sure you’d be swamped with marriage proposals. But...from your perspective, it’d all be a bit too late, right?”

“Yeah, it would...” Ichiha sighed deeply. “I like this country, where I live among those who recognized me for who I was. The Duchy of Chima is already gone, so I have no reason to return.”

“Good. Now that people know what your knowledge is worth, I can’t see Hashim Chima leaving you alone. You’ll be safer under Sir Souma’s protection.”

Sami kept referring to their brother not as Big Brother Hashim, but by his full name, Hashim Chima. Ichiha sensed that this was intentional.

How far did her grudge go? It obviously included Hashim, who plotted her

foster father's murder, but did it extend to Fuuga, who carried out the plan, as well? What about Fuuga's wife, Mutsumi? How about her twin sister, Yomi, who had joined Fuuga's camp? How much did she resent her?

"Big sister. One of my friends is... Um..."

"I know. Fuuga Haan's little sister, right?"

"Ah—"

Ichiha had been trying to choose his words carefully, but Sami figured out what was up.

"Does she live here in the castle? I haven't run into her yet, though."

"Do you resent Sir Fuuga, Big Sister Sami...?"

"I suppose... I can't say that I don't," Sami said before shaking her head. "But the one I really can't forgive is Hashim Chima. Setting aside Fuuga Haan, who carried out the plan given to him, I bear no grudge against Big Sister Mutsumi, who tried to save me. And as for Yuriga, who is just Fuuga Haan's little sister...I have no problem with her at all. If anything..."

"If anything...?" Ichiha echoed.

Sami let out a self-effacing laugh. "The way she's been jerked about at her brother's whims, I feel a sort of kinship with her."

"Uh..." Ichiha didn't know how to respond to that.

As he was struggling to find the words, Sami told him, "If you say she's your friend, then look out for her. As the sister of a ruler who has been entrusted to the central nation of the Maritime Alliance, she's an easy piece to use. As a hostage, she can help to lower their guard, and by abandoning her, they can lay a trap for you. I can't see Hashim Chima *not* using her."

"I...see."

It was certainly true that Hashim would suggest such a plan. The question was if Fuuga would use it...and that would probably depend on the situation. Under normal circumstances, Fuuga wasn't that heartless. In fact, he was quite caring when it came to family. But as the scion of the times, it wasn't improbable that a time may come where he would cast Yuriga aside.

Sami pulled Ichiha closer, pressing her head against his. “Not everyone cares about blood relations. Try to keep that in mind.”

Ichiha nodded silently.

There was another party silently listening in on their conversation, but that person left as if running away.

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*Knock, knock.*

As I was in the governmental affairs office, battling with paperwork alongside Hakuya like I did every day, there was a knock at the door. It was...still a little early for our afternoon break, but someone must have come to call me.

“Come in,” I called to the door.

“Excuse me...” Yuriga replied, entering. She looked uneasy somehow.

“What’s wrong, Yuriga?”

“I had something to talk to you and Mr. Hakuya about... Ah! If you’re busy with work, I can come back later...” Yuriga seemed awkward and noncommittal.

*Is it hard to discuss with others around? Hmm... Well, we were going to take a break soon anyway, so it’s fine.*

I cleared my throat loudly and said, “I think we’ll take our afternoon recess early today. Everyone but Hakuya may leave.”

“““Yes, sir!”””

All of the other bureaucrats working in the office bowed and filed out of the room at my suggestion. With Hakuya, Yuriga, and myself left alone (albeit with guards outside the door), I addressed Yuriga again.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Um... I happened to overhear Ichiha and Sami talking in the library...”

“Oh...”

Ichiha’s elder sister, Sami, was staying in the castle as a refugee from the Union of Eastern Nations. From what Ichiha had told us, Sami was a talented

mage with a gift for accounting, so I had wanted to put her to work under Roroa. But because she was a guest, not a retainer, I couldn't do that. If she seemed likely to eventually volunteer her services to this country, I would have recommended her to the Ministry of Finance, but it was too soon. The wounds hadn't healed yet.

Still, just spending her days in idleness would be depressing. It would give her all the time in the world to worry, after all.

After talking things over with Ichiha and Hakuya, I decided it was best to give her something to do so she wouldn't have so much time to think. I'd heard from Ichiha that Sami liked to read, so I tried giving her a job as a librarian in the great library. This seemed to have been somewhat effective, as she worked in silence, reading in her spare time. As if trying to shut away her painful memories...

Ichiha frequently went to help as well, in order to keep her from feeling alone. That must have been what Yuriga walked in on. As far as Yuriga was concerned, she was the younger sister of the man who killed Sami's adoptive father, so she couldn't bear to listen.

With a calm expression on my face, I told Yuriga, "For now...I'd prefer not to agitate her. I know this may feel restricting, but could you stay away from the library for the time being?"

"I know that much...!" Yuriga said, averting her eyes.

Hakuya and I exchanged a momentary glance before, in a consoling tone, I said, "You don't need to worry too much. From what Ichiha's told me, it seems her anger is directed more at their older brother Hashim rather than Fuuga. So long as you don't do anything strange to provoke her, she's probably not going to resent you."

"I wouldn't do that... I won't, but..."

Seeing Yuriga get more and more deflated, Hakuya let out a sigh.

"It would seem that that's not what she wanted to hear."

"Ah?!"

“Huh? What do you mean?” I asked, and Hakuya shrugged.

“Madam Yuriga was more interested in asking about Sir Fuuga.”

“About Fuuga, huh?”

“Recently, when I’ve been teaching Madam Yuriga, I see her taking what I can only assume is a different perspective from his occasionally. I think that...”

“That’s enough, Mr. Hakuya...” Yuriga raised a hand to cut Hakuya off. “I’ll say the rest myself.”

Raising her face, Yuriga looked straight into my eyes.

“In order to unify the Union of Eastern Nations, did my brother need to deceive and murder Madam Sami’s adoptive father...? I wanted to hear your opinion, as a king, on that.”

“Was the deception and murder justified, you mean?”

The look in Yuriga’s eyes was completely focused. She wasn’t looking for encouragement or platitudes... It was a serious question that demanded a serious answer. So I gave her one.

“I don’t know.”

“Huh?! I’m serious here...!”

“And I’m being serious. There’s no way to be sure what the right choice was. If I’m not going to take a side, this is the only answer I can give.” It was rare you could neatly divide things into good and evil, after all. “If I were Sami, I’d think that what Fuuga did was evil. So it’s only natural she’d hate him for it. But if he had started a war to annex all of those countries with rulers that wouldn’t submit to him, even more lives would have been lost. On both sides.”

Yuriga remained quiet, so I continued.

“If Fuuga had invaded Sami’s country, and Sami’s adoptive father had surrendered after a battle and been spared, the people would have still been sacrificed. If someone, or someones, die so that others may live... There’s no way you can say with certainty which way was right. It may be that Fuuga’s actions are praised by later generations for minimizing the number of people sacrificed.”

*Later generations are only able to view things with the benefit of hindsight, after all. They can only see this many people died, or this many people didn't die. Especially when they try to look at things from a neutral point of view...*

"Besides, I've done something similar myself. I have no right to cast stones."

"Huh? You have?" Yuriga's eyes widened. She seemed pretty surprised.

"Do I not look like I would?"

"Yeah... You don't seem like you have that kind of ambition."

"Ha ha ha... Well, she's right about that. Isn't she?" I said to Hakuya, who nodded.

"In order to stabilize a political regime, there are times when blood must be shed, even if we would prefer not to," Hakuya said. "It is for the sake of rooting out sources of future strife."

"But if you overdo it, you'll breed resentment, and come to a bad end fairly quickly. You have no choice but to do it, however, within reason. That's the kind of duty a ruler takes on. I've made a whole lot of people shed blood and tears to come this far, and I'm sure there must be those who hold grudges against me for that... Even now, I have nightmares sometimes."

"Oh...? You do?" Hakuya asked, looking surprised. I nodded with a wry smile.

"I occasionally have these dreams where Gaius VIII rises from his grave to come kill me."

The fear of him must have been seared into my memories. Regardless of how the man himself would actually feel, in my dreams he did whatever I was most afraid of. Nightmares show us the things we wouldn't want to see. *It's not quite The Butterfly Dream, but...I sometimes wonder if what I'm seeing is actually reality.*

On nights when I wake from a dream like that, I bury my face in the bosom of whichever wife is sleeping next to me to calm myself down. They always understand and hug my head, but... *Wait, what am I rambling on about all this embarrassing stuff for?*

"Uh, anyway, I can't say whether what Fuuga did was right or wrong. We can

only look at the results of the decision he made.”

“Right...”

“Sorry I couldn’t give you the answer you were looking for.”

Yuriga got very quiet. I’m sure she was hoping I would tell her that Fuuga wasn’t wrong, or maybe that he was.

If I said he wasn’t wrong, she wouldn’t have to feel a sense of guilt over Sami’s misdirected resentment. If I told her he was, she could feel sympathy for Sami, and be considerate of her feelings. Either way, Yuriga wouldn’t have to grapple with the righteousness, or lack thereof, of Fuuga’s actions, and would be at ease. But neither Hakuya nor I would give her an easy answer.

That might have been harsh for a girl in her teens, but she would eventually be a figure of national prominence. Coming to grips with intractable problems was just something she would have to learn to do.

Yuriga let out a sigh. “You’re harsher than you look. Both of you.”

“Ha ha ha. Well, we’re always happy to hear your complaints.”

Hakuya followed up with, “If I might add, Madam Yuriga, you have reliable friends at school, so you would do well to talk to them rather than internalize it all by yourself. Of course, you are always welcome to talk to me too.”

“Yeah... I’ll do that.”

Yuriga smiled just a little at what we’d said.

# ♔ Chapter 1: The Kingdom's Baby Boom

# *Wahhhhhhhhh!* There was crying in the distance.

If we could hear it at this volume when we were seemingly so far away, it must have been incredibly loud. When that kid started crying, she absolutely wailed. I was in the governmental affairs office handling paperwork, but I could never ignore that voice.

"Hey... Can I go take a look?" I asked Hakuya, who was working with me, and he let out a sigh.

"There are already plenty of other people looking after her, so you joining them isn't going to do any good. Focus on your work."

"B-But...she's crying so loudly."

"Princess Enju is loud to begin with."

The cries belonged to my recently born daughter with Juna. She was my third, following Cian and Kazuha, but she was Juna's first...and a girl too. Her name was a mixture of Juna and her grandmother Excel's: Enju Souma.

She was a cute girl, taking after Juna, but with darker hair, and her loud voice was no doubt inherited from the Prima Lorelei. She cried loud enough that, had we lived in a residential area back in my old world, we'd have been reported to the police for potential child abuse.

That said, normally, she didn't cry that much; only when she was hungry, wanted her diaper changed, or was sleepy. The essentials, so to speak. Despite this, she was actually surprisingly easy to take care of. I sensed Juna's parentage in that natural consideration for others too.

"If you want to go check on them, then finish your work quickly. Sir Julius is taking time off to be with his wife as she's soon to give birth, so we don't have enough hands around here."

"Roroa's just about to give birth too..."

“I am sure she is more than prepared. You’ve already ensured everything is in order, sire. Now, please, focus on your work.”

“Okay...”

I used my Living Poltergeists ability to its fullest in order to sort out the mountain of paperwork in front of me.

Things were unstable with the Great Tiger Kingdom running wild up north, but we weren’t publicly opposing them. We had alliances with the Empire, Republic, and Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, and our relations with them were good. If you looked only at the Kingdom itself, things were remarkably stable, and I was able to focus on internal policy.

Because of that, there were no major problems, and work went smoothly.

Working at an even higher pace than usual, I made it to Juna’s room, stumbling a little due to overtaxing my spiritual energy. Juna was there, holding Enju, and so was Liscia, watching them warmly.

Liscia looked at me, pressing her index finger to her lips. That meant, *Be quiet.*

I looked at the rocking chair where Juna was sitting and saw that she was sleeping too. The way she held Enju lovingly with her eyes closed was so divinely beautiful that I wanted to capture it on video, in a photograph, and have the court artist paint it too.

“She just fell asleep,” Liscia said in a whisper when I got closer. “Juna nodded off with her.”

Lowering my voice so as not to wake them, I said, “Good work. How are Cian and Kazuha?”

“Aisha and Roroa are looking after them in the nursery room. They started crying too when they heard Enju’s wailing.”

Cian and Kazuha could already stand by pulling themselves up, and could waddle around on unsteady feet or crawl around surprisingly quickly. Kazuha, in particular, would move all over the place if you let her, even trying to leave the room, so we couldn’t take our eyes off her. I was glad she was growing up healthy, but it was troublesome that she was as much of a tomboy as her

mother.

“Thanks, Liscia. For being supportive of Juna.”

“She was there for me, so this is the least I could do.”

With that said, Liscia clapped me on the shoulder, adding, “Well, I’ll leave the three of you alone now. I need to check in on Cian and Kazuha.”

Liscia was probably trying to be considerate of Juna’s mental state after giving birth by making time for me, Juna, and Enju to be alone together.

“Thanks, Liscia.”

“Hee hee, this is part of my job as first primary queen.”

“Oh, come to think of it, you didn’t mention her, but where’s Naden gotten off to?” I asked as I remembered.

“Oh...” Liscia nodded. “Naden’s at the Magna domain today. They’ve got one too, remember?”

“I see...”

That made a lot of sense to me.

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A baby was sleeping quietly in its crib. When she saw its little baby hands were formed into fists, and its mouth was hanging just a little open, Naden couldn’t help but say, “I-It’s so cute.”

“Heh heh, I know, right?” Ruby agreed, puffing her chest up with pride.

“Wait, what are you so proud for...?” Naden looked at her dismissively.

This was Halbert’s parents’ home, the House of Magna’s mansion. The baby had wisps of red hair, and tiny little fox ears spurting out of its head. This was the child that had been born to Halbert and Kaede. And Ruby, the second wife of the family, loved it too.

“She’s Hal and Kaede’s. That makes her practically mine too.”

“Yeah... I know how you feel.”

Naden loved Liscia and Juna’s children like they were her own as well.

Because dragons were one of the long-lived races, they were not very fertile. Also, because dragons were naturally inclined to highly value propagating their species, their love for their families was intense. That was why, even if the children were born to another wife, they adored them all the same.

“It’s a boy, right?”

“The long-awaited first son of the House of Magna. They call him Bill.”

“Bill Magna... That’s kinda cool. He’s a mystic fox, I see.”

Because Halbert was a human and Kaede was a mystic fox, their children could be born with the traits of a human, a beastman, or a half-beastman. However, the mystic fox race’s defining traits were only those of half-beastmen (ears and a tail), so the only difference was if the baby had fox ears and a tail or not.

“He gets his red hair from me,” Ruby chimed in.

“More like he gets it from his *father*. If you get carried away and start making him call you momma, Ruby, his real mom’s going to get mad... Real mad.”

“You’re...speaking from experience, huh?”

“It wasn’t just me. All four of us (excluding Liscia) did it.”

“What is our royal family even doing...?” Ruby said in dismay. Then Bill started moving his hands and feet around in his sleep.

“”.....””

They both grinned and returned to watching Bill.

“Babies sure are great, huh?” Ruby said.

“Yeah, they are,” Naden agreed.

“I want one.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll need to make Hal work hard at it.”

“Souma too.”

“If you look at him with hungry eyes like that, your husband’s going to get put

off by it, you know?” said Kaede, who had just returned, and was clearly weirded out by the way the two of them had been talking. She’d been having them watch Bill for a moment while she went to fetch some of his baby clothes.

Naden cleared her throat loudly, possibly out of embarrassment. “By the way, are you returning to the military, Kaede? Or will you be staying here in your domain?”

Kaede grinned at Naden’s question.

“Let’s see. I think I’ll return as a staff officer when Bill’s more grown. Sir Ludwin, the vice-commander of the National Defense Force, and Julius are both in the castle, and His Majesty has told me I can leave Bill in the nursery there.”

“With me around, Hal can commute to his post from anywhere, after all,” Ruby added, thumping her chest—which had grown considerably in the last few years—with one hand.

It was true that with a red dragon, they could join the National Defense Force from the Magna domain, Parnam, or anywhere else.

Kaede giggled. “We can trust Father Glaive to handle the domain in our absence too.”

“So you two and Bill are going to live in the capital? Won’t his grandpa be lonely like that?”

“Well, yes, but Mother will keep him company... I expect Father will still come visit us in the capital regularly, though...” Kaede’s smile was a little strained as she said that.

It might have been part of the national character in this country that the father doted on his family, and the wife kept him firmly under her thumb.

That’s what Naden and Ruby thought as they remembered their own husbands.

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Ginger’s Vocational School had an experimental farm near the capital. Being that it was still early on in the year, nothing had been planted yet. Objects were stirring on the lightly snow-covered ground, though. Those “objects,” with their

firm but mutable skins, were the gelins that had played such an active role by becoming udon during the food crisis. However, these gelins were pink—colloquially known as agricultural gelins.

Poncho, the Kingdom's Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, and Ginger, the principal of the vocational school, watched the agricultural gelins crawl around a field that had been growing tomatoes.

"Do you think those agricultural gelins will prevent the damage from growing the same crop repeatedly, yes?" Poncho asked and Ginger nodded.

"Yes. They'll be a trump card for the Kingdom's agriculture."

If you keep planting the same crops in the same fields, it's not good for the soil. It disturbs the balance of nutrients, and pathogens and insects that prey on those crops spread. The former problem can be managed with fertilizer and new soil, but the latter remains an issue. In Souma's old world, pathogens and bugs were eliminated through the use of agricultural chemicals, but those sorts of things didn't exist yet in this world.

Ginger crouched down and placed his hand on the ground.

"Thanks to the microscope that His Majesty directed the development of, which proved the knowledge the three-eyed race had, we learned of the existence of bacteria and other microorganisms. As well as the fact that they can cause illness."

Poncho nodded in agreement.

"His Majesty spread ideas about 'sanitation' that only the three-eyed race had before now. I hear that because we've learned to wash our hands and clean our mouths with well water, the number of people who have gotten sick has gone down, yes. When the midwives started to focus on using clean water, the number of deaths during childbirth decreased considerably, yes. I get chills thinking about what might have happened if Serina and Komain had given birth before we knew, yes."

"I feel the same way."

Poncho and Ginger let out a joint sigh of relief.

If their wives had been giving birth when the mortality rate in childbirth was high, they'd have been beside themselves with worry. No, they might have been rolling the dice on their wives and children's lives without even knowing it, and the odds were stacked against them. It was horrifying to think of.

Ginger shook his head to dispel the unpleasant thoughts before changing the subject. "We've learned that bacteria, microorganisms, and insects are the cause of problems with monocropping. And it was known that planting the same plants in the same place repeatedly made them grow less well, but now it feels like we finally understand the reason."

"That's true. The farmers seemed to have an instinctive understanding of it even if they weren't aware of the cause, yes." Poncho nodded. "They handled it by changing the soil, letting fields lie fallow, or changing the crops, yes."

This world had a system of crop rotation just like Souma's old world. A famous example would be England's Norfolk four-course system, which cycled wheat, turnips, barley, and clover. However, crop rotation required a sizable area of land, and different methods of harvesting each year. That was the same in this world too.

"If we could raise the same crops in small fields, it would let us develop better techniques for cultivating them. We might be able to produce wheat and rice with higher yields, and vegetables that are more resistant to insects and the cold, yes."

"You have a point. We have a lot of babies being born healthy in the Kingdom now. We can expect the population to grow. And with Fuuga Haan retaking land from the Demon Lord's Domain up north, people are starting to go back there. The demand for food is going to rise even more."

"We need to increase our food production capacity, yes. And that's what the agricultural gelins are for."

Ginger nodded in agreement, pointing at the agricultural gelins.

They were a subspecies of the gelin subspecies known as the medical gelin, which members of the three-eyed race like Dr. Hilde used to produce three-eyedine. The agricultural gelin had been selectively bred from the medical gelin, which lived in places with high levels of toxins.

“Our agricultural research team worked with the three-eyed race to create these gelins, adjusting them to feed on excessive insects and pathogenic bacteria in the soil. In combination with the fertilizer that the Empire taught us how to make, we can limit the damage done by monocropping, and shorten the time the fields need to lie fallow.”

These agricultural gelins killed specific bacteria and insects, thus functioning like agricultural chemicals, in a way. However, unlike liquid chemicals, the gelins maintained their shape to a degree, so even after they finished crawling around there weren’t parts of them left in the soil. While they were still in an experimental state, Souma was hopeful that there would be no effect on people who ate the finished crops.

“This is all sounding good, but are there any drawbacks, yes?”

“It would be easy to make a gelin that eats every bug and bacteria in the soil, but much harder to make them only eat specific ones. The pests and bacteria that grow out of control vary from crop to crop too, so we also need to make a gelin for each type.”

“Hmm...that does sound time-consuming, yes.”

“The only ones we have results for so far are the gelin for tomatoes, and the gelin for wheat, which has been our top priority.”

The agricultural gelins were still being tested. They definitely needed them for grains, which were easily preserved. The ones for other crops wouldn’t be introduced until after that. It was frustrating, but they had to keep striving towards the dream of one day raising their food production capacity by leaps and bounds.

Suddenly, a voice could be heard in the distance.

“Lord Gingeeer!”

It was the voice of a woman who was waving from on top of a hill nearby. She was Ginger’s wife, the raccoon beastman Sandria. Her belly was heavy with child; currently nine months pregnant.

“It’s about time for lunch, you twooo!”

“Okay, San!” Ginger replied, waving back. “Let’s get going then, Sir Poncho.”

“Yes, yes.”

They both headed over to where Sandria was, and there were two other women with her. These were Poncho’s wives. A sheet was laid out on the ground, and there was a basket of bread along with veggies, cheese, and ham to make sandwiches with.

In the middle of the sheet there were two large baskets, each containing a darling little baby with a round face, sound asleep.

Poncho asked his wives, “Are Marin and Maron sleeping, yes?”

“Yes, dear. They went right to sleep as soon as we finished breastfeeding them,” Komain replied with a smile.

Marin and Maron were the daughters that Serina and Komain had given birth to at nearly the same time. Because they were born so close together, they decided to give them similar-sounding names too.

They looked like twins, having both inherited Poncho’s round face, but Komain’s daughter, Maron, had a slightly redder shade of skin, so they never confused the two.

Serina pressed a hand to her cheek and sighed. “It’s good that they eat well and sleep well, but I worry they may grow up to be built like my husband.”

“Ulp! I-It’ll be fine, yes. I think they’ll be just as beautiful as you and Ms. Komain.”

“Hee hee, it’s okay, Serina. Poncho was able to lose weight when he tried.”

Komain chuckled, perhaps thinking back to the emaciated Poncho of not so long ago. Serina giggled too.

“You have a point. He’s already regained his original shape, so why don’t we slim him down again? Hee hee, I think I’d like a boy this time.”

“Oh, I’d like a boy too, darling.”

With his beautiful wives pressing towards him with smiles, Poncho felt a chill run down his spine as he recalled just how he’d lost so much weight before.

Ginger and Sandria watched the three of them with wry smiles on their faces.

# Chapter 2: The Truth Overlapping Events Lead Us To

With a heretofore unseen baby boom hitting the Kingdom of Friedonia, our royal family was just as busy as so many others with taking care of our newborns.

In the middle of this busy time, Archbishop Souji Lester, head of the newly independent Kingdom Lunarian Orthodoxy, and his right hand, the former saint Mary, requested a meeting with me. *They likely have reports to make about the saint candidates we had granted asylum the other day.* That was what I thought, but the request also bore the names of Overscientist Genia M. Arcs and Merula Merlin, who was a high elf and enchantment magic expert.

The two tops of the Kingdom's science and engineering team were asking for a meeting together with people connected to religion. I always thought religion and science were like oil and water, or that they got along like cats and dogs. *Is this going to be okay?* Merula, in particular, had been considered a heretical witch in Lunarian Orthodoxy until just recently too.

Curious about what was going on, I arranged the meeting immediately.

Then, the day after the request came, Hakuya, Souji, Mary, Genia, Merula, and I all gathered in a conference room. After some brief formalities, Mary cut straight to the point.

"First, let me thank you for your help regarding the saint candidates. Having a role in the choir has helped them to settle into life in the Kingdom."

Nearly fifty saint candidates had sought asylum after a political struggle in the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State. In order to comply with Mary's request not to separate them, I put together a gospel choir called the Lunaria Choir. I was aiming for an image of sisters who sing love songs to angels, but because they had all been trained to please people of influence, the saint candidates were all beautiful and gifted at song and dance.

Basically, they were well-suited to become idols. That's why, despite being a

choir, they managed to amass a following similar to a group of loreleis.

“I hear they’re popular with the people too. But what do you mean by a role?” I asked.

Mary lowered her eyes, a troubled look on her face. “The saint candidates are loyal to the gentlemen they serve, and have been taught that service is their duty. I was the same way. Only by serving someone—being needed by someone—can they find their place. Conversely, without a role to play, they can’t feel they belong anywhere.”

“Is this...something we should be happy about?”

“The saint candidates are all former orphans. They know instinctively that if no one needs them they’ll be left to die in a ditch. So I’m grateful for their current situation,” Mary replied, a small smile forming on her face.

I was relieved, but also felt like I had seen the dark side of Lunarian Orthodoxy. If this let them feel at ease though, it wasn’t my place to say anything.

“So long as they’re able to live in peace, that’s fine with me. I have the Lunaria Choir helping with our research on Area Heal, after all. And Souji is finding us light mages who want to become medics too, so it’s a case of ‘I scratch your back, you scratch mine.’”

“Well, the guys in the Orthodox Papal State may not like it much,” Souji said, crossing his arms with a wry smile. “Obviously, they’re not going to be happy about the saint candidates, but if they found out about the other thing...”

“You mean with Hilde...?”

A little while back, our doctor couple Hilde and Brad discovered a way to cure diseases with light magic. In short, what this meant was that with a sufficiently advanced understanding of medicine, it was possible to heal illness with magic.

It had been thought for all this time that curing such sicknesses with magic was impossible, but with a thorough knowledge of the human body, as well as the parasites and bacteria afflicting it and the damage they cause, it could be done.

Brad was a man who couldn't use light magic, but had mastered surgery in order to save lives. He often worked with Hilde, who had the medical knowledge of the three-eyed race, and could use healing magic. This led to deep ties between medicine and magic, and culminated in a higher level of magical medical treatment.

It was the sort of discovery that would change history. However...for as wonderful as these techniques were, it was very difficult, politically, to put them into practice.

For instance, because Hilde could use magic to heal some illnesses, the Orthodox Papal State might try to use her as a saint, or eliminate her. That's because the church's power was supported by God's blessing (or so they called it), which was the large number of light mages in their service. From their perspective, if a light mage who was greater than their own light mages appeared, they had to act in order to defend their authority. They would almost certainly come after Hilde.

And this was precisely why this new technology had been kept secret from most of the people and our allied countries until enough magical medical practitioners could be trained.

"I'm really grateful to you, Souji, for finding us so many light mages."

Souji crossed his arms and smirked at my words of gratitude. "Up until now, light magic was seen as the blessing of the gods. That's why many of the light mages feel a duty to heal others. Many people without magic feel a sense of powerlessness over their inability to heal the sick too. Those kinds of people wouldn't hesitate to study medical techniques."

"Thanks to that, we have been able to steadily increase their numbers," Hakuya said with a bow.

With Souji finding people for us, the number of light mages who had studied medicine under Brad was increasing. We wanted to grow those numbers to keep Hilde from being seen as special, so I was working with Hakuya on providing the information to our allies.

*Anyway, that's enough about that for now.* I looked at Genia and Merula.

“So, why did you two come here with Mary and Souji? I feel as if science and religion don’t really mix.”

“Yeah... That doesn’t seem to be true, you know? We’re here to bounce ideas off each other.”

“Bounce ideas off each other?”

“Let me explain,” Merula said, raising her hand to interject. “You remember I snuck into Yumuen, the holy capital of the Orthodox Papal State, and stole a glance at the Lunalith, right? It’s a monolith stored deep inside their main temple, and oracles from Lunaria appear on it.”

“Ohh... That’s why they were chasing you as a heretical witch, right?”

I glanced at Merula and she had a difficult look on her face. She’d said she didn’t plan to stir up any more trouble, but there were probably things she wasn’t satisfied with.

I pretended not to notice and moved things along.

“You saw text on it, right? Hold on...”

I rose from my seat and headed to the governmental affairs office which was nearby. Rummaging through my desk there, I produced a single piece of paper. Then, returning to the conference room, I laid it on the table for everyone to see. It was a note with the symbols Merula said she’d seen on the Lunalith.

“This is what it said, right?”

“Yes. And it seems Madam Mary remembers even more details than I do. Isn’t that right, Madam Mary?”

“Indeed... I believe the characters looked like this...”

Mary rose from her seat and drew three new characters beneath the symbols that seemed to be made of triangles, squares, and lines.

“Wha?!” I cried out, my eyes widening as I saw what she’d written.

“如 律 令”


如律令

There was no question that this was writing from my world.

“Were these characters in front of them, maybe?”

I took the pen from Mary and wrote 急急 in front of the other three characters.

This time it was Mary’s turn to be surprised.

“Huh?! Y-Yes. That’s right.”

“Do you know what these words mean in the Orthodox Papal State?”

“Not exactly...but I know they’re written before urgent messages.”

“I see...”

*Kyuu kyuu nyo ritsuryou... Act with haste, in accordance with the law.*

It meant something should be done with the utmost urgency. It originally came from ancient Chinese documents, but Japanese people would recognize it better as that thing onmyouji say.

“*Kyuu kyuu nyo ritsuryou.* These are words from the world I came from.”

“I figured...” Genia said with a knowing laugh. “Your former world is connected with ours in some way. That’s been suggested repeatedly. Most of your knowledge is applicable to ours, and you were able to have children with your queens. The new field of Monsterology that Ichiha created has led to new perspectives on the origin of man, animal, plant, and monster.”

*The dungeon theory on the origin of life, huh?* This was also information we hadn’t made public, but... *Yeah, she has a point.*

“In my view, this is a phenomenon that fuses science and religion, and links our worlds together. You must have some sense of that yourself,” Genia continued, sounding uncharacteristically serious. “It’s likely that we’re living in the future of your world. Where it lacked magic, but science was more developed, right? In that case, the magic and miracles in this world could be the products of science from an era after your own.”

“Hm...”

“So, with all that in mind, I want to ask you about the foundation of this

world's magic and miracles. The substance at the root of it all." Genia looked straight into my eyes. "What is magicium?"

I gulped at the question.

Magicium. It was said that all magic was generated by the workings of this substance. However, that was simply an old-wives tale. No one had actually seen it themselves, not even the three-eyed race with their microscopic vision.

"I told you, didn't I...? There was no magic in my world. Obviously, that means no magicium either. How could I possibly know?" I replied, troubled, but Genia quietly shook her head.

"That was probably true in your time. But I feel as though there's a large gap between the era that you came from and now. Even if it couldn't be realized in your time, wasn't there any technology that seemed feasible, or like it might be feasible in the future?"

"I'm not sure what to say to that..."

"It might be good to think through this one step at a time," Merula interjected. "Fire, water, and wind magic manifest in the open air, or wreathe objects in those elements. We could see this as the magicium in the air or on the surface of objects reacting to the caster's mental image."

"Hmm..."

"We call the other one earth magic, but it actually alters the weight of things. It can manipulate the magicium in the ground to cause it to rise, or control the weight of substances."

"There's my magic, which makes golems from dirt, and yours...Living Poltergeists, was it? That magic that lets you control puppets seems similar. Though, in your case, you're able to divide your consciousness too, so it's a bit special," Genia said, chuckling.

Dark magic was where they lumped any magic they didn't understand, after all.

Merula nodded. "You could say my enchantment magic is the same. By carving a spell into something, it reacts with the magicium inside it, which does

things like making arms and armor more durable. Good examples of that would be the set of equipment left by this country's first hero king, and the Empire's Magic Armor Corps."

Oh, yeah, that ridiculously hard helmet (which was just hard, and did nothing else, so I'd had no use for it but as a museum piece) and the Empire's heavy pikemen who wore black armor that was almost impervious to magic. Both were examples of equipment with attached spells being strengthened by magicium.

Here, I noticed Merula glancing at Mary and Souji.

"And there's light magic... What you might call healing magic."

When the name light magic came up, the two religious figures in the room's brows perked up.

"It's said," Merula continued, "that a capable mage can even reconnect a severed arm. Up until now, it was only external wounds that could be healed, but now some of them have discovered they can treat illnesses too."

"With medical knowledge, light mages can cure a certain subset of sicknesses..."

"Exactly. If we think about how this connects with magicium, we have to conclude it exists inside our bodies as well. With external injuries, we could assume it was due to magicium in the air, but that doesn't work inside the body."

*Magicium exists not just in the air, but inside objects, and even the bodies of living creatures, huh?* A substance inside the body that fights disease... Not antibodies and the immune system which we already had, but something which could fight illness at the will of something outside the body. *Huh...? Could it be...?*

"Sire, do you have any idea what it could be?" Genia said, noticing I'd thought of something.

"Nanomachines..."

"Nanomawhats?"

“Machines too tiny for the naked eye to see. They could be injected into the body to remove diseased parts, or treat them... I think?”

“I see. That sounds like exactly what we’re looking for.”

“No, no! They weren’t implemented! It was a potential future technology...still just the product of people’s imagination.”

“Sire...” Genia tabbed her index finger on the table. “This could very well be that future, you know?”

“Urgh...” She had a point.

Genia crossed her arms and grunted thoughtfully. “Machines too small to see, huh? If they’re all over the world, and in our bodies, and they cause the phenomena we know as magic, then that’s fascinating.”

“But is that possible? Making machines so small even the three-eyed race can’t see them?”

“I don’t know if this is connected, but...one of your wives can make major changes to her body mass, can’t she?”

“Oh! You mean Naden?”

It was certainly true that the dragon race’s body mass changed considerably between their dragon and human forms. I believe Lady Tiamat, who was Mother Dragon, had an even larger form which she could change with that of an elderly woman. Their whole race just up and ignored the principle of mass conservation.

“Perhaps those who created magicium could freely control mass too. That’s just speculation, though.”

“Right...”

“But if magicium is made up of small artificial machines, then that could explain all sorts of interesting things. There are places in this world where it’s harder or easier to use magic, right?”

“For places where it’s easier... You mean my old homeland, right?” Merula said. She had come from the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan. The high elves who lived there wielded powerful magic, and that was one reason they believed they

were the chosen people.

However, based on the fact that Merula's own magic weakened after leaving, it seems that land is simply suited to manifesting more powerful magical effects.

Genia nodded.

"And for a place where it's harder, there's the sea."

"Oh! I get it!"

For some reason, it was hard to use anything but water magic at sea. That was why gunpowder weapons that hadn't seen much use on land were developed by the navy and in places like the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. If magicium was nanomachines, I could see why. Saltwater is like the natural enemy of machines.

"The more complex the machines in my old world, the more trouble they had with saltwater. Even some that were waterproofed couldn't handle it."

"Hmm... There may be different types of magicium then. The magicium that water mages control was designed to work in water, so maybe they took countermeasures."

"Makes sense."

They could only use salt-proof, waterproof nanomachines, or other types of magicium that had usage limitations on them, huh?

"What sort of face am I supposed to make as I listen to all of this?" Mary mumbled, looking troubled. "It's not just Lunarian Orthodoxy, but every religion in this world believes magic is the blessing of the gods... I've always believed it too. If you're going to say it was made by people..."

"But there's a similar story in Lunarian Orthodoxy, isn't there?" Merula interjected. "Lunarian Orthodoxy was founded when the people of the moon, the lunarians, descended to this world and brought the Lunalith. If the lunarians built the Lunalith, couldn't we assume that magicium was built by a similar group...or even the exact same one?"

"So magicium may still be a gift from the gods, then...?" Mary glanced in my

direction. “In that case, would Sir Souma, who lived before the age of the gods, become an object of worship for us?”

“Please, no...”

I had already nearly been crushed under the weight of titles like “king” and “hero” before. If they went and tossed “living god” on the pile, it’d be more than a hassle, it’d be a disaster. There would be pushback from the Orthodox Papal State since they had sided with Fuuga’s Great Tiger Kingdom, and even my own allies like Maria would look at it and say “Wait, you’re deifying yourself now?”

It was bound to have a bad influence on my wives and our children too.

“We’re still speculating about the origins of magicium. Even if this becomes established as fact, the era I lived in and the era in which they would have made magicium might be far apart. If you want to venerate the people who made it, go ahead, but please leave me out of it.”

“I see...” Mary backed down, looking a little disappointed.

Then Genia clapped her hands as if to dispel the heavy atmosphere that had fallen over the room.

“There’s one more important thing about magicium we need to consider.”

“Still...?”

I’d had enough, and was starting to develop a headache.

“Just this one last thing,” Genia said with a laugh. “Curse ore.”

“Those cursed rocks...?” Mary’s brow furrowed with suspicion.

Because you couldn’t use magic near this ore, it was hated by miners who used magic to mine. As for the religious people who saw magic as the blessing of the gods, they thought it was the devil’s ore because it rejected magic. However, the House of Maxwell’s research had shown it actually stored the energy from magic. Our country had since used it to produce the Little Susumu Mark V propeller and to power the drill.

Genia produced a black lump from inside the pocket of her lab coat and unceremoniously rolled it onto the table.

“That’s a crystal of curse ore, huh?”

Genia nodded. Mary and Souji’s eyes narrowed.

Paying no mind to the two of them, Genia continued, “My family has studied curse ore for many long years. You could say our discovery of its ability to steal and store magic’s power was the result of intergenerational research. During all our time studying it, I had one constant doubt: If magic was the result of magicium, what exactly was curse ore?”

No one answered her question, so Genia elaborated.

“I had a vague idea. Perhaps the curse ore which was able to steal the power from magic was, in fact, magicium itself.”

“““Wha?!”””

*Curse ore is magicium... In other words, a mass of nanomachines?* The moment I thought that, a theory started to come together like the pieces of a puzzle falling into place.

If magicium were nanomachines, they needed energy. Solar, wind, geothermal... *Honestly, in this case, any source, even ones I knew nothing about would do.* If they were machines, they needed to have some sort of charging mechanism. This was important to stop them from suddenly ceasing to function due to an inability to take in energy.

If nanomachines that had finished their job accumulated on the ground, and all they had left afterwards was that charging mechanism, they might become something like curse ore.

*How can this be...?* I’m sure only someone like me, with knowledge from the past, could have come up with a theory like this.

Her explanation wasn’t going to click for anyone else here. Still, Genia, or rather, the House of Maxwell had come to a similar conclusion. That was scary. I was really glad they were a part of my country.

Genia looked at me.

“These nanomachines you told us about are fascinating. I have a feeling that there are about to be great leaps in the study of magic and curse ore. Could I

ask you to explain in more detail at a later date?”

“Yeah. It piqued my interest too. I’m probably going to have you focus on it in the future. The country will provide support, of course.”

“I’ll be grateful for that. It’ll save me from doing too much damage to Big Brother Luu’s wallet and stomach.”

Genia smiled when I promised to support her research.

*Still, magicium are nanomachines, huh...? I dunno.* I felt like, after today, a lot of things were going to begin to move.

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Some days after we got a vague glimpse of the true nature of magicium, and by extension this world, Yuriga came to visit while I was working in the governmental affairs office with Prime Minister Hakuya and Liscia.

“Sir Souma, Mr. Hakuya, I have a letter for Sir Souma from my brother.”

“From Fuuga?”

“Yes. It isn’t the usual update on how things have been going lately, but a formal letter from King Fuuga Haan of the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan to Souma A. Elfrieden, head of the Maritime Alliance.”

*A letter from a guy with a big, important-sounding title to another guy with a big, important-sounding title,* I thought.

In truth, I was only allowed to call myself head of the Maritime Alliance by Kuu, the head of the Republic, which had no real navy to speak of, and Nine-Headed Dragon Queen Shabon, who felt indebted to me over the incident with Ooyamizuchi. Once things settled down a little more, I figured we could have the head of the alliance be a revolving position.

Still, hearing that this was a formal letter, Liscia and Hakuya’s expressions grew a little harsh. I probably looked the same way. *What exactly is he going to say to us...?*

“Do you know what it says, Yuriga?” Liscia asked and Yuriga nodded affirmatively.

“Yes. I don’t think it should be too difficult a request...”

“You don’t?”

“Anyway, let’s read it and see,” I said, accepting the letter from Yuriga and looking through it.

If I were to sum up the contents, it went like this:

*Hey Souma,*

*How’re you and Yuriga doing?*

*We’re making good headway liberating the Demon Lord’s Domain. I’m following your advice and not pushing too far north, moving west through the areas close to the nations of mankind.*

*I’ve got the western sea in my sights now. Malmkhitan’s on the eastern sea, so I’ve just about crossed the continent. The land we’ve liberated is still like a bunch of cities dotted about, connected by a line, but with our march across the continent almost at an end, the men’s spirits are high.*

*I think I’m going to take the west coast even if it involves pushing ourselves a little too hard.*

*So, here’s the deal. I want to ask the Maritime Alliance to ship us supplies. I’d like you to carry material from my homeland and all the other countries to the west coast. The supplies should already be prepared back home. Could you carry them across the sea for us? You basically rule the seas, after all.*

*If you talk to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union and the Empire, you should be able to deliver the stuff without issue, yeah?*

*If you could throw in* a little something extra *from the Maritime Alliance while you’re at it, that’d be great.*

After showing it to Liscia and Hakuya, I pressed my fingers into my temples and groaned.

“He says it like, ‘Hey, man, it’s summer, let’s hit the beach...’”

“He’s so innocent...” Liscia said. “And I mean that in both a positive and negative way.”

“Umm...I apologize for my brother,” Yuriga said apologetically as Liscia and I let out a communal sigh. It seemed Yuriga had felt the same way, and was troubled as the messenger.

Hakuya brought his hand to his mouth as he read the letter.

“Setting aside the content here... As a general policy, it’s not bad.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sir Fuuga gathers people with his rare charisma. And in order to keep them together, he needs results that back up that charisma. ‘Cutting across the Demon Lord’s Domain’ has to be one of the best accomplishments he could ask for in that regard. And so long as he’s dealing with that aspect, we can’t afford to refuse him.”

“I’d rather not be declared an enemy of mankind, yeah...”

The people of this continent longed to reclaim the Demon Lord’s Domain. It was a problem that those driven from—or at constant risk of being driven from—their lands always had in mind. Right now, the only nation that *appeared* to be grappling with that problem was the Great Tiger Kingdom.

We and the Empire were working behind the scenes to prepare for when the day came to address it, but no one could see that. If we got in Fuuga’s way or refused to help him, it would earn us the enmity of a large number of people. Had Fuuga asked knowing that? He even asked us to throw in a little something extra.

“He’s even prepared proper compensation for us...huh? All the bases are being covered.”

At the end of the letter, Fuuga had written “In exchange for delivering the supplies, we will give the Kingdom a port city on the western coast.” He’d probably looked at the naval base exchange agreement we’d signed with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union after slaying Ooyamizuchi and thought a port would be good bait for us.

The Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan had considerable land forces, but almost nothing at sea. The west coast would be close to the Empire’s territory, and if they dispatched their fleet, it would be hard for Fuuga to hold the coast. The

Empire was also primarily a land power, but they still had a proper navy when compared with the Great Tiger Kingdom.

That's why Fuuga wanted to bring the Maritime Alliance into port, in order to keep the Empire in check.

Because it was far from our homeland, he saw us as less of a threat than the Empire. Hidden behind the casual wording of the message there was no doubt a plan that had been carefully crafted by Hashim.

"Well...we probably have no choice but to help," I said, resting my head on the palm of my hand.

"I believe that's acceptable," Hakuya agreed, nodding.

The fact was, we *wanted* a port on the west coast. I had been planning to eventually sign the same sort of naval port exchange agreement with the Republic and the Empire. But because it would reveal our close ties with the Empire to sign such an agreement, it would have been a poor move right now. I was more than happy to have a port on the west coast outside of the Empire. However, I wasn't going to say that with Yuriga here.

"Tell Excel to prepare a transport fleet. She can choose the number of ships and which ones to send. Also, throw in some extra rations as a bonus for them."

"Understood." Hakuya bowed and left the room. After he'd left, I looked at Yuriga.

"You heard how it is, Yuriga. Send Fuuga a response to that effect."

"Thank you, Sir Souma," Yuriga said, sounding relieved.

Still...I feel like this request came to me because I had become the head of the Maritime Alliance, putting myself on the same level as Maria and her Mankind Declaration or Fuuga and his Great Tiger Kingdom.

*I may get more requests like this in the future...* When that thought occurred to me, I let out a sigh.

And my premonition was soon proved accurate.

# Chapter 3: Envoy

Today, I was having a broadcast conference in the Jewel Voice chamber. No one but me was in the room now. I hadn't cleared everyone else out in the name of secrecy. If anything, it was the opposite. All we had scheduled for today was pleasantries, so I had decided I was the only one who needed to bother being here.

I spoke to the two people projected on the simple receivers in front of me.

"It's been a while... Or, perhaps I should say 'Long time no see.' Sir Kuu, head of the Republic. Madam Shabon, the Nine-Headed Dragon Queen."

"Ookyakya! It hasn't been that long since we saw each other," Kuu said with a laugh on the other side of the simple receiver.

My meeting today was with Kuu, who had just taken his place as head of the Republic, and Shabon, who was now the Nine-Headed Dragon Queen.

"Besides, this isn't a public meeting, right? Can't we just talk the same as always? Even if you're the King of Friedonia and I'm the head of the Republic, bro."

"Well, yeah, but you'd like to do things right the first time, at least, wouldn't you?"

"What's the point of putting on airs with you now, bro? I feel itchy just thinking about it."

"Hee hee, I see that you two are quite close," Shabon said, smiling at the exchange between me and Kuu. "I would like to become close friends with both of you too. Feel free to speak informally. It does not bother me."

"Ookya? You're talking awfully formal for someone saying that, missy."

"This is how I always speak. It is hard to change something like this once it has become so ingrained in who you are."

"Kyakya! Is that how it is?"

Kuu and Shabon were having a pleasant chat. They seemed plenty friendly to

me.

I cleared my throat loudly, deciding to get things back on track.

“Well then... It’s good to see you both again. Have you been well?”

“Sure have!”

“Yes. Are things the same as ever for yourself, Sir Souma?”

“Ahh... Well, nothing much has changed aside from adding some new members to the family.”

“Oh! Congrats, bro.”

“Congratulations.”

“Ha ha ha... Thanks.” I scratched my cheek awkwardly as I thanked them. “Now that you’ve both inherited countries of your own, there must be people hassling you to get on with it, right?”

“W-Well... Yes.”

“Eh, I figure I’ll get serious about it after the wedding.”

Shabon and Kuu were both embarrassed by the topic.

That was surprising. Shabon was one thing, but I expected Kuu to be real gung-ho. Taru and Leporina were both in love with him, so he probably wouldn’t turn them down if they made a move. It was surprisingly innocent of him to be waiting until after the wedding, but I could respect that.

“A-Anyway, that’s enough personal chat,” Kuu somewhat forcefully got us back on topic. He seemed embarrassed. “This is supposed to be a serious conference for the Maritime Alliance.”

“Yeah, I guess it is...”

The Kingdom of Friedonia, the Republic of Turgis, and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. These three nations made up the Maritime Alliance. This was the first time all three of them were holding a conference, albeit over a broadcast. It was the third faction, comparable in strength to the Gran Chaos Empire’s Mankind Declaration, or Fuuga’s rapidly growing Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan. At sea, it was fair to say we were the most powerful entity.

Incidentally, the Republic, where the seas were locked in ice during the winter, was mainly participating as a maker of parts and other industrial support. But Kuu had told me he wanted to use the drill we had developed to build a fleet of icebreakers someday. That was a deviation in policy from the Republic's long-held goal of a warm-water port, and a sign that things were changing there. If that became a reality, we would have access to the Empire via the Republic even in winter, so I wanted to support it. It was possible to go via the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago too, but you could never have too many trade routes.

"How about you, Shabon? Have you been able to bring the island chiefs together well?"

Shabon grinned at that question.

"Thanks to your help, yes. Ever since the day we slew Ooyamizuchi, the island chiefs have been highly aware of the need for unity. That creature was far beyond what any one island could have handled alone, after all. Discourse between the islands has grown as well, and if I approach them with sincerity, the others are willing to hear what I have to say."

"Hmm. Sounds like things have changed for the better."

"Yes. However, as our people are quick to anger, minor disputes still break out regularly. There is nothing that can be done for it though, so as long as things do not get out of hand, I leave them be. I do go out and mediate when asked, however."

"Ah ha ha... Sounds tough."

"I could not agree more," Shabon said with a sigh and a smile. "Still, it has become a norm for them to have a banquet and reconcile after a fight, so it seems a waste to worry about it. Like the hotpot party we had after slaying Ooyamizuchi, remember?"

"Oh, right... I'd had enough that I don't want to eat offal for a long time."

"It seems it became popular after that. They say 'With food and drink, any problem is water under the bridge.' But I have trouble seeing that as anything but the excuses of drunks."

*That fight created this weird new aspect of their culture? Man, the Nine-Headed Dragon Islanders are tough.*

“Seriously, any place that gets involved with you becomes a whole lot more fun, huh, bro?” Kuu said, his tone half exasperated.

“Hey now, don’t go saying that like it’s my fault...”

“Hee hee hee.” Shabon just laughed.

*She didn’t disagree... Aw, seriously?*

“Well, what about you, Kuu? Are you being a proper head for the Republic?”

“Sure am! Looks like my old man did a lot to lay the groundwork for me,” Kuu said, thumping his chest with pride. “There’s been a generation change at the Council of Chiefs. They’ve all been replaced by guys my age. I used to hang out with a bunch of them, and they’re all flexible thinkers so it makes life easy for me.”

“It’s hard to imagine them as heads of their clans if they’re so young...”

“Ookyakya! You’ve got that right. First order of business was deciding on a new name for the council. We couldn’t agree on one, so it’s fine as the Council of Chiefs for now though.”

“It is?!”

I was mildly concerned, but Kuu just laughed.

“It is. That’s how loose we all are. Better than some hard-head set in his ways bringing up the ‘Go North’ policy. They’re all passionate about changing the Republic. So...it’s gonna be fine.”

“All right then...”

*Well, it seems to be working for him, so I guess it’s fine.*

“How’re things at your place, bro? You’re neighbors with Fuuga’s country, aren’t you?”

“Does the Great Tiger Kingdom say anything to you?”

The two of them looked worried, but I shook my head.

“Nothing yet... Oh, wait, they did ask us to ship supplies for them by sea. But there haven’t been any military provocations or unreasonable demands so far.”

If Fuuga was going to make his move, it would be after his faction had grown larger. He was a cautious person, even if he didn’t seem it, so he wouldn’t act until he held an overwhelming advantage over us. Though, turning that around, it could mean he would attack as soon as he felt he did.

“Tell us if he does say anything, will you? I’ll definitely be there to help you out.”

“As will I. You have our gratitude for the matter with Ooyamizuchi still, so I am sure that the island chiefs will cooperate.”

“Thanks. I’ll be counting on you when the time comes.”

I smiled at my trusty allies. Then I remembered something.

“Oh! This has nothing to do with Fuuga, but I had an envoy from a somewhat troublesome place just recently.”

“Troublesome?”

“Where was this envoy from?”

I felt myself getting a little angry just remembering it. Forcing a smile and making sure not to let that show, I spat out the name:

“The Spirit Kingdom of Garlan.”

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Earlier in the day...

“There’s an envoy from the Spirit Kingdom?”

“Yes.”

I was working in the governmental affairs office when Hakuya informed me of someone who had come seeking an audience. They were apparently already in Parnam and waiting in an inn for our response.

*The Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, huh...?* It was a country of high elves consisting of two islands, one large and one small, northwest of the continent.

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair. “That’s awfully sudden... Has there been any report from the Black Cats?”

“No. Nothing. The country is closed off, and the island near the continent has been occupied by monsters, so we haven’t been able to send spies. It’s fair to say we have no information whatsoever about that country.”

“I wonder what they’re sending us an envoy for... Could it be about Merula?”

Merula, a high elf from the Spirit Kingdom, was currently being sheltered in our country. The Spirit Kingdom viewed themselves as the chosen people, and it was taboo for high elves to leave the country, so Merula would be considered a serious criminal for breaking that rule. It’d be troublesome if they demanded we turn her over.

“Have you assigned bodyguards to Merula?”

“Yes. Sir Kagetora is already on it. She’s been told not to go outside or leave Souji’s church for the time being.”

I should have expected as much from Hakuya. He moved fast.

“I worry what will happen if we ignore the envoy... I’ll see them right away to find out what they want. Could you arrange it?”

“Yes, sire. It will be done.”

And that’s how I decided to have this meeting.

*Let’s see if anything good comes of it...*

Days later, before meeting their envoy, I heard from Hakuya that he’d had a report on the Spirit Kingdom put together. He’d apparently asked Merula to tell him what information she knew about her homeland. The report was in another room, so he wanted me to read it with my Living Poltergeists ability using a Factory Arm.

I looked through the report as I was preparing to meet the envoy. It said that just before Merula ran off, the Spirit Kingdom had just seen a new king take the throne. The ones running that country now were King Garula Garlan and his younger brother and right hand, Gerula Garlan. The elder brother, Garula, was a hot-blooded warrior by nature, known for his strength and boldness, while the

younger brother, Gerula, was a capable warrior but also a wise general with great foresight.

The brothers formed a team like Maria and Jeanne of the Empire, with the elder serving as king and directing policy, while the younger handled the military. You might think their personalities were suited to the opposite, but this was better than letting a hothead run the military. That was bound to cause domestic troubles. However, this intel came from before Merula left the country, so things could be different now.

I looked at Aisha, who was sitting in the queen's seat beside me.

"Aisha, you'll be representing the queens."

"O-Okay! Leave it to me!" Aisha looked a little tense, but she nodded.

Out of a sense of caution, I had chosen to have Aisha on the queen's throne instead of Liscia so she could act as my bodyguard. She wore the queen's tiara and a dress, but with a dagger hidden on her person in case it became necessary. The dark elves were also a race of elves, so she was a good pick to show that our country didn't discriminate based on race. It would help keep that high elf country's statements about them being the chosen race in check.

As I, Aisha, Prime Minister Hakuya, and General Julius, who we had called in for good measure, were waiting in the audience chamber, the doors opened and the guards called out.

"The envoy from the Spirit Kingdom has arrived!"

The young elvish man who appeared was tall and thin like Hakuya, with golden locks, pale white skin, and red eyes. The high elves were predisposed to something akin to albinism. Still, they were as long-lived as the other elf races, so it didn't seem to have an impact on their health.

The envoy stood tall, proudly introducing himself.

"This is our first time meeting. I am Gerula Garlan, come on behalf of the Spirit Kingdom King, Garula Garlan. I have come to negotiate with you, Sir Souma, as his representative."

*If this is Gerula, that means the king's younger brother and the head of their*

*military came.* He showed no deference to me, instead standing tall. That put Aisha in a sour mood. *Is it because he is royalty too?*

The one thing I found hard to understand was that Spirit Kingdom King title. Apparently, unlike the Nine-Headed Dragon Queen who headed the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, he wasn't the Spirit King... According to the report Hakuya had prepared, it was called the Spirit Kingdom because they worshiped the Spirit King who protected the high elves, and while their leader was seen as a high priest who directed that worship, he was not deified. This stood to reason why Garula was named the Spirit Kingdom King.

"I am Souma A. Elfrieden. Now then, Sir Gerula, what business brings you to my country?"

"The Maritime Alliance has become one of the three major powers of the world. As you are their leader, I have come to request your support in retaking the Father Island, Sir Souma."

Of the two islands that made up the Spirit Kingdom, the smaller of them was apparently known as the Father Island. The larger was called the Mother Island. They apparently thought of the large island where the majority of high elves lived as their mother, and the smaller island which was the center of their religious rites as their father.

With the expansion of the Demon Lord's Domain, and the attacks by the monsters it brought, they had lost the Father Island. They'd been driven further and further back with each demon wave. They had withdrawn all the way to the Mother Island now, and even lost an eastern part of the island, but were holding off the monsters there.

"We wish to eliminate the monsters on the Mother Island, and retake the Father Island."

"And you're demanding our assistance?"

"We've been tormented by attacks by flying monsters that come by way of the smaller islands. They swarm us like locusts, and we lack the air power to handle them. We have few wyverns, and their fear of the sea keeps us from intercepting the monsters over it, allowing them to make landfall."

Gerula's face was distorted with chagrin. He continued talking.

"However, I have heard that the Maritime Alliance... No, the Kingdom of Friedonia is able to use wyverns at sea. Your navy also far outstrips that of the Empire or the upstart Fuuga Haan. I am told you used that naval power to slay the great monster that was attacking the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. We would like for you to support our battle to regain our homeland. That is my liege Garula's hope."

"I understand what Sir Garula is thinking. Let's see..."

I glanced at Hakuya and Julius, and their eyes told me, *We can't take on this task lightly.*

*Yeah... Given who we're dealing with, this isn't an issue where we can just nod our heads so easily,* I thought.

"This all sounds awfully convenient for you..."

Julius was the one to speak. He glared at Gerula imperiously.

"It's not as though our fleets move for free. It will place an appropriate strain on the nation's coffers. The reason we sent support to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago was that we didn't know when the monster Ooyamizuchi might attack us next. The situation meant that it was in our national interest to dispatch the fleet. But the Spirit Kingdom is far away. Even if we were to leave you to yourselves, it seems unlikely that any harm would befall us in the immediate future."

"But—"

"Furthermore, even if the battle is against monsters, the goal is to retake your territory, correct? Pardon my rudeness, but it is your own fault that you lost that land. I question why we should be the ones to retrieve it for you."

"Urgh..."

Julius chose to be the bad guy for us. Gerula looked like he'd bitten into something unpleasant as he glared at him. Julius's words may not have been sufficiently polite for an envoy from another nation, but he was fundamentally correct. And there didn't seem to be any counterargument.

As the air grew tense, Hakuya spoke up, “You go too far, Sir Julius. This is a foreign envoy you are speaking to.”

“Hmph!”

“I apologize, Sir Gerula. But I want you to understand what Sir Julius is saying. It’s not that easy for us to send the fleet.”

While he apologized for Julius’s rudeness, he still doubled down on what Julius had been saying. They were both sharp and knew how to work together.

Julius was putting on an act of being upset at the rebuke. *I dunno... It’s kind of chilling to see these two work together.* No matter how he struggled, Gerula was dancing in the palms of their hands. I almost felt sorry for the guy.

“Sir Gerula,” Hakuya continued. “If, as you say, you came to negotiate, I would like you to offer us something that would make this worth our while. The other day, when Sir Fuuga Haan asked us to deliver material for him, he offered to cede a port on the coast to us. Can the Spirit Kingdom offer similar recompense?”

“In the event that His Majesty regains the Father Island, he makes three promises as reward for your cooperation. I have a written pledge here.”

Gerula produced a letter from his pocket and began reading.

“First, he will allow trade with the Maritime Alliance.”

“Oh hoh...”

It was a short statement, but I was a little impressed. The Spirit Kingdom was closed off to the world at present, with no ties to the outside world, let alone outside trading. That essentially made this an announcement they were opening up the country. The report said that the Spirit Kingdom had access to spices that could probably be used to make curry. You couldn’t ask for better trade goods.

“Second, he will forgive the crimes of Merula, who you are sheltering, and allow her to return to our country.”

*So they knew about Merula, then, huh?* Well, she was being treated as a heretic by the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, and after the troubles we’d had

with them, of course they would figure out she was here. I had people guarding her, and hadn't put any restrictions on her movement inside Parnam, after all. Merula was one of our top engineers, equal to Genia. If this stopped them from chasing after her, that would be good.

"And third, the Spirit Kingdom will join the Maritime Alliance instead of the Mankind Declaration or Fuuga Haan's new faction."

I raised an eyebrow at the last promise. It was an interesting proposal.

If the Spirit Kingdom were to join the Maritime Alliance, there would be a sea route that went Republic of Turgis → Kingdom of Friedonia → Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union → Spirit Kingdom of Garlan. We would have control of every island around the continent, and could even surround the Empire and the Great Tiger Kingdom. The Demon Lord's Domain would still be a wildcard, but we could send troops anywhere along the coastline.

So if the Maritime Alliance were in a contest for supremacy with the Empire and the Great Tiger Kingdom, this proposal might have looked appealing. However, we had a cooperative stance towards the Empire, and were attempting to avoid conflict with Fuuga. As a result, it did nothing for me.

I sighed, resting my elbow on the armrest of my throne and my cheek on my palm.

"Yeah, that's not even worth discussing."

"Wha?!"

"The first proposal is a good one. It benefits both sides. But as for the second, Merula is already one of my retainers. Your country has no place saying anything about it, and if you make any attempt to harm her, I'll show you no mercy. You had best tell Garula that much."

When I glared at him, Gerula stared right back... A bit unnerving, but I had to hold my ground.

"And as for the third, regarding joining the Maritime Alliance... I refuse."

"Why?!"

"Our values are too different."

The Spirit Kingdom of Garlan essentially barred everyone but elves from entering the country. Even among those elves, they said that high elves were the greatest, with light and dark elves below them, and half-elves beneath everyone. All other races in that country were treated as slaves. I didn't know how things were now, but that was the kind of class-based society it was when Merula lived there.

"I understand every country is different. We each have our own history—our own cultures. But your view of yourselves as the chosen people is too strong. If we allowed a country like yours into the Alliance, some might take that as me countenancing your views. The people would reject it. There may be class differences in our society, but we don't tolerate racial discrimination."

I stood up and walked to stand next to Aisha's seat, placing my hand on her shoulder as if to show Gerula. Aisha put her hand in mine and smiled to show the depth of our love. We were totally in sync when it came to things like this.

Gerula bit his lip and looked at us in frustration.

"That's why I can't admit you to the alliance. If your country wants to amend its racial supremacist policies, I'd welcome you, but...is that going to happen?"

"....."

I left unspoken the fact that I didn't believe they were capable of it, but Gerula had no response. There was a long, heavy silence, and then Gerula glared at me once more.

"In the event you refuse...I will take this same proposal to Madam Maria of the Empire and Sir Fuuga of the Great Tiger Kingdom."

If we refused, they were going to go to one of the other two powers? That wasn't even a threat.

"Do as you please. The Mankind Declaration doesn't tolerate racism either. Madam Maria should come to the same decision I have. And as for Sir Fuuga of the Great Tiger Kingdom...I'd advise against trying to use him. He's the kind of man who defines a generation. He takes advantage of those who try to take advantage of him—uses anyone who tries to use him, and discards those who thought they'd be discarding him. He pulls anything and everything into his own

world. That's the kind of man he is. Touch him carelessly, and you'll get burned."

"I'll bear that in mind..." Gerula said, glaring at me.

Negotiations had broken down. I indicated for him to leave, and he turned on his heel...then stumbled a moment.

"Ngh!"

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"It's nothing... Now, if you'll excuse me."

This time, Gerula strutted out of the audience chamber. There was no compromise in this meeting, only a statement of demands and compensation. It grated on my nerves talking with someone so assured that they were right about everything.

*Man, I'm exhausted...*

"Ugh. Spread some salt on the ground."

"Salt? Are you going to be eating something? I'll join you!"

I felt the tension melt out of my shoulders as I saw the smile on that gluttonous dark elf's face.

*Yeah... Forget that guy. Let's have a meal with everyone.*

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"...And, well, that's about how it went."

I told Kuu and Shabon about my meeting with the Spirit Kingdom's envoy the other day. They both smiled wryly at the story.

"Sounds like you had a rough time, bro," Kuu said, and I shrugged.

"I couldn't agree more. He wasted my time, and the amount of work I still have to do hasn't decreased in the slightest."

"Still, this envoy from the Spirit Kingdom... Gerula, was it? They've had, like, a third of their land taken by monsters, right? If he wanted help, shouldn't he have been more subservient?"

“Yes, I agree. He hinted at alliances with other powers, but does the Spirit Kingdom have the means to be considered a threat now? It all seems rather awkward,” Shabon said, cocking her head to the side. I agreed with her.

“He must have had far too little experience with negotiating. That’s how Hakuya and Julius saw it. His country is closed to the outside world, after all, as I’m sure you both know,” I said, crossing my arms. “If you’re going to negotiate with a country you don’t have cordial relations with, you ultimately have to either be overbearing and extract concessions, or subservient and try to minimize your own. But Gerula couldn’t do either.”

“That is why he lacks experience?” Shabon murmured to herself, and I nodded.

“A situation which demands seeking help from another country, and long years spent steeping in the belief of his people’s superiority. His attitude was the result of the conflict between those two things.”

“Sir Souma. That is awful...”

“Hah! So the Spirit Kingdom’s in a bad spot, right? They refused to talk with anyone, and now they’re so screwed they have no choice but to negotiate with other countries?”

Shabon was compassionate, while Kuu was disgusted. Being rulers themselves, they must have had their own thoughts on the matter. I did too.

“As a king, there are times you have to get your hands dirty... Times you have to get down into the muck. Times you need to endure humiliation. Those whose leaders can’t do that when those times come...will be the first to die off.”

“You’ve got that right.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Both of them gave firm nods.

Kuu had come to our country in order to learn. He must have looked almost like a hostage to others. But he didn’t let that bother him, and he learned a lot, growing more than any of us had expected from him. Shabon had appeared before me as well, who she believed to be the king of a hostile nation, prepared

to offer up her own body as she bowed, scraped, and begged before me.

I had gotten my hands dirty for my family, and the people, and tarnished my own name before too. Gerula wasn't prepared to do that.

I let out a little sigh. *If Gerula went to the Empire, it's going to be painful for Maria...*

She was too kind for her own good. It ran counter to the Empire's nature as a country calling for a joint front between all the nations of mankind to take Gerula's offer, but she'd still imagine all the people who would suffer because she didn't extend a helping hand. She would accept things we wanted to avert our eyes from. It was the reason they called her a saint, but...it still had to be rough on her. *Hopefully she won't beat herself up over it too much...*

*I might have Hakuya touch base with Jeanne later and arrange a meeting where Maria could vent her frustrations to me.*

Then, Shabon clapped her hands to change the topic.

"By the way, I have heard that the Kingdom, Republic, and Empire have a tripartite alliance for medical reforms."

"Huh...? Oh, yeah, that's right, huh?"

"The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union would like to work towards adequate medical treatment too. Could we possibly join that pact and learn from your medical advances?"

A little while ago, I had brought up the topic of medical research cooperation with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. The more heads working on this kind of thing the better, after all. The field of folk medicine was not to be taken lightly, and crops grown in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago could well be key ingredients in the cure for something. It was my policy to be open with this kind of information with countries that were friendly to us.

Though...I was still worried about what I should do in regards to Fuuga's faction.

"I brought it up with you to begin with. Of course I don't mind," I told Shabon. Kuu cocked his head to the side.

“Ookya! By the way, what is medicine in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago like?”

“Not so different from other countries, I suspect. Light mages handle the treatment of external wounds. Although, because each island has a rich history of folk traditions, they are not all concentrated in a single church.”

“Really? That must make it easier for the country to manage.”

“It would have been difficult before, but with the move towards centralization, it should be possible now. Oh, when it comes to disease, there are herbal remedies we use as well. More varieties than on the continent, I suspect. We also have exercises that circulate the body’s energies in order to prevent illness.”

The former sounded similar to traditional Chinese medicine, while the latter was like *tai chi* or *kanpu masatsu.* I had thought of her country as a mix between Tang China and Edo Japan, but they were slanted a bit towards oriental medicine. That was interesting in its own way.

“I’d like to send a team from the Kingdom to study it too. You may have experience and knowledge that we don’t yet.”

“Oh! I’ll send some guys from the Republic too. They’ll bring medical equipment with them as a gift.”

“Hee hee. I’ll be waiting for it.”

And so the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union was added to the Kingdom, Empire, and Republic’s medical pact.

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Some months passed after that. The Kingdom was focusing on the study of magicium, which we had begun to understand the true nature of. The Maritime Alliance’s three countries each individually worked on strengthening their internal policies and building their power. While the south of the continent was stabilizing, there appeared to have been a major shift up north.

First, after being rejected by the Maritime Alliance, Gerula Garlan had gone to Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire to seek an audience there next. The content of

the negotiations had not changed at all aside from him offering to join the Mankind Declaration instead of the Maritime Alliance.

Maria would never let them enter the Mankind Declaration while maintaining their racial supremacist policies, so that's where the meeting ended.

Maria told me about it over a broadcast, looking exhausted. "I can tell that his state feels backed into a corner, and his people are suffering. However...if he can't ask properly, I can't extend my hand to him."

As I expected, Maria found it frustrating. She also expressed dissatisfaction at Fuuga giving us a port on the west coast in exchange for delivering his supplies.

"I trust you, Sir Souma, but it seems the people below me do not. Some of them are wary of the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Great Tiger Kingdom growing closer... They're pushing hard to convince me that the Empire needs to move to take back just as much land from the Demon Lord's Domain as Fuuga's faction."

"Are you okay?"

"The clear-sighted ones realize that taking ruins from the Demon Lord's Domain is not any advantage to us. However, the number of people who care more about fame than the actual benefit has increased. They must have been incited by Sir Fuuga, who has been able to bring everyone together using his renown."

The circle of influence around Fuuga's faction grew by the day.

*Anyway, let's get back to talking about Gerula Garlan.* Having been rejected by the Empire as well, he went to Fuuga's Great Tiger Kingdom next, and sought an audience. Fuuga accepted immediately. Gerula was relieved to have accomplished his mission, and stayed in the Great Tiger Kingdom as their contact with the Spirit Kingdom.

Anyone who knew what Fuuga was like would have realized that he never acted in ways that were convenient for others. They would have suspected there was something more behind his decision. But Gerula didn't know that.

# Chapter 4: The Battle of the Father Island

Having received a request from Gerula for military aid, Fuuga was holding a war council with his wife Mutsumi, his close friend Shuukin, and his advisor Hashim in preparation for retaking the Father Island.

“So, you’re sure I don’t need to go along with this dispatch?” Fuuga asked.

Hashim nodded, his arms crossed in front of his chest. “Yes. The lands retaken from the Demon Lord’s Domain remain unstable. If you were away and something happened, our response would be delayed. It’s unlikely you could return quickly from overseas, right?”

“Well, Durga does hate it...”

The flying tiger would fearlessly charge into hordes of thousands or even tens of thousands of monsters, but for some reason hated the sea and wouldn’t go near it. That was likely for the same reason wyverns didn’t like to go so far out to sea that they couldn’t see land, but as Durga was one of a kind, there was nothing more that could be said on the matter.

“Come to think of it, Yuriga’s report said something about Souma being able to use wyverns at sea. He has this massive island-like ship...or something like that? Do you think if we built one of those and trained on it, Durga would be less afraid of the sea?” Fuuga said jokingly, and Hashim shrugged.

“Surely you jest. It may be rude of me to say this, but just how much manpower and resources do you intend to spend on a single tiger? And even if we wanted to build one, we couldn’t. We have no technology that can move large steel ships without sea dragons to pull them.”

“Hrmm, I was obviously joking, but...when you look at it that way, Souma’s made one hell of a thing, huh?”

“The skills to develop that kind of technology...” Mutsumi, who had been listening, suddenly murmured. “If he applied them to the military, wouldn’t he have been able to destroy the Empire by now?”

“I agree with you, my lady. The Kingdom of Friedonia...is terrifying,” Shuukin

said, and Fuuga nodded.

“Yeah...you’re right. But for better and for worse, he’s got way too little ambition. Instead of seeking greater happiness in the future, he tries to defend what he has now. If you just know how to get along with him, there’s no one easier to manage, but...”

“And what if we don’t get along with him?” Mutsumi asked, and Fuuga laughed, a dangerous glint in his eye.

“There’ll be no one more dangerous to deal with.”

“I see. And that’s why he worries you, darling.”

“I agree. At this point, he poses a greater threat than the Empire,” Hashim agreed, nodding.

Shuukin cocked his head to the side. “Oh? You’re wary of the Kingdom too, Sir Hashim?”

“They have too many capable people. This is partially my fault, but no small number of talented individuals from countries in the Union of Eastern Nations that we destroyed have drifted there. Julius of the Kingdom of Lastania, for instance.”

“Ohh... The guy who acted faster than you, huh? It was a shame to lose him,” Fuuga said, groaning, and Hashim nodded.

“I couldn’t agree more. If we could have taken the Lastanian royal family into custody, we might have been able to make him submit to us, but...he was too well prepared. And now King Souma has happily taken in all of those people. They bear a grudge against Lord Fuuga, so we won’t be able to win them back by offering favorable conditions. There’s no way for us to get in between them.”

“But didn’t Julius’s father die in a war with Souma?”

“Lord Fuuga, which would you be angrier at? Someone who injures you, or someone who injures those you love...say, Queen Mutsumi, for instance?”

Fuuga closed his eyes to think about Hashim’s question.

“Mutsumi.”

When he thought about himself being injured or killed... Well, there wasn't much to be done about it. He'd probably be able to accept that he had been capable of no better, or that he had simply been unlucky. But if anyone were to hurt or kill Mutsumi, he would never let them get away with it. Whatever they did to her, they'd pay for it several times over.

"Exactly," Hashim nodded. "That's how people are."

"So, the guy who killed his dad earned less of a grudge than we did for taking his wife's country?"

Hashim wouldn't know this, but in Machiavelli's *The Prince* it says "Men more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony."

Unlike Souma, who had to work to put those ideas into practice, Hashim came by them naturally, and was very Machiavellian (including in that sense of the word which comes from a misunderstanding of the man's work).

"Yes. That's precisely why we need this dispatch of troops to be a success." Hashim pointed to the Father Island on the map on the table. "Rather than the Spirit Kingdom itself, we must stop the Father Island and Mother Island from falling into the Maritime Alliance's sphere of influence. It would give the Kingdom of Friedonia a base of operations on the western coast of the continent."

"But didn't we promise to give them a port?"

"We can take that back with our land forces at any time. Souma knows that too, so he will only build it up to the absolute minimum. However, if he were to build a base across the sea, in another country, that would be troublesome. We must bring the Father Island into our sphere of influence no matter what."

When Hashim explained that, Mutsumi brought a hand to her mouth and cocked her head to the side.

"Judging from what we saw of Sir Gerula's personality...the high elves must be rather haughty. Will they so willingly submit to us?"

"You are precisely right. That's why we'll have to take action." Hashim pointed to the Mother Island, which was the heartland of the Spirit Kingdom. "As you well know, the Spirit Kingdom believes in high elf supremacy. And

excessive discrimination based on race will always breed resentment. There must be those of the other oppressed races in the heartland of the Spirit Kingdom, and even high elves who are opposed to the current state of things. Once the Father Island is retaken, we will support those people, and have them create a puppet state on the island for us."

"I get it. You're going to break the Father Island away from the Spirit Kingdom and have them join our faction, huh?"

"Yes, my lord. Fuuga the Liberator needs no racist high elves among his vassals."

*It's all in how you say a thing,* the other three thought, but none of them said it.

If we were to sum up Hashim's plan, it looked like this:

First, land forces on the monster-infested Father Island at the invitation of the Spirit Kingdom.

Second, eliminate the monsters and liberate the island.

Third, have the Spirit Kingdom launch an offensive to eliminate the monsters on the east side of the Mother Island, and when that is finished, have them cooperate in liberating the Father Island.

Fourth, have those discontented with the Spirit Kingdom declare independence on the Father Island to create a puppet state, and then effectively take control of the island with the excuse of providing them support.

When the monsters were extirpated from the Spirit Kingdom, the high elves would no doubt think of Fuuga's men as their saviors. There was an opportunity to take advantage of that.

Hashim's cunning plan was to team up with those high elves who were opposed to the racial supremacist policies in their country and wanted to pursue a more liberal path. He would set up a puppet state for them on the Father Island, allowing him to present himself as something other than an invader. As could be seen from the example of Merula Merlin, the people of the Spirit Kingdom were not an ideological monolith.

Furthermore, because the puppet state would create a society where people were not divided between high elf and non-high elf, instead instituting what might be called a more equal system, it would be hard for other countries to criticize. People would be hard-pressed to say that living under a regime steeped in racial supremacy was worse than having racial equality but effectively being under the control of the Great Tiger Kingdom.

Not even Maria, the head of the Mankind Declaration, could say that.

Naturally, the Spirit Kingdom would gnash their teeth at this result, but they didn't have the power to face Fuuga's forces alone. Even if Fuuga's men left the island, there was still the uncertainty of whether their country could survive another attack from the monsters. They'd want to avoid finding out.

The Spirit Kingdom would have no choice but to regretfully accept the independence of the Father Island.

"The reinforcements will need someone who will be able to discern who should be made to declare independence and is capable of making political decisions," Hashim said, crossing his arms and respectfully bowing his head. "It pains me to say this, Lord Fuuga, but your subordinates are..."

"Yeah, I know. They're a bunch of lunkheads."

"Indeed. In order to bring this plan to fruition, we will need a sensible person with the intelligence to be able to win the hearts of the local people. It would be unthinkable to send someone like my own brother, Nata, who just wants to run wild."

"That means it has to be...you, Shuukin, or Moumei, huh? But you have other duties, so I'd be in trouble if you took off. Moumei may look like a big oaf who swings around a giant hammer, but he's surprisingly learned and sensible. But people tend to mistake him for a barbarian based on his appearance, so he's not a good choice to win people over."

Fuuga counted on his fingers as he spoke. His camp included many great warriors, but he had a limited number of wise commanders who could make political decisions.

"Gaifuku is a wizened old general, but he still hasn't healed from the injuries

he took protecting me. Kasen is wise but too young, and opinion will always be divided on the showy way Gaten presents himself."

"Yes, all of that sounds correct. There is also my younger sister's husband, Sir Lombard, the former King of Remus, but it has been so soon since he joined us that it would be hard for the men to follow him. I also suspect that, given his honest nature, subtlety may be beyond him. He would make a good second-in-command, however."

"Which leaves..."

They both turned to look at the same person.

"Yeah, it's gotta be me," Shuukin said, thumping his chest with one hand. "Let me handle it. I will represent you to the best of my abilities, Lord Fuuga."

"Sorry, Shuukin. I'll be making you do a lot of hard work."

"What else is new? You have been ever since we raced across the steppes together."

Shuukin and Fuuga both smiled.

Mutsumi giggled. "Male friendship is a wonderful thing."

"Don't tease... So, Hashim, how many reinforcements should he take?" Fuuga asked, and Hashim bowed his head.

"We want to be sure this succeeds, so we should send about a third of our forces to take control in one fell swoop. Let Sir Lombard be his second-in-command. And...let's have Sir Bito, the former King of Gabi, and his men go to the Father Island as well."

"Those guys, huh...?" Fuuga's expression grew harsh.

Bito had been the master of Gauche, who had tried to assassinate Fuuga. He'd been pardoned of that crime after switching sides at the Battle of the Sebal Plains. He'd been one of Fuuga's vassals ever since, but it was hard for them to trust him.

With a sinister smile, Hashim said, "Let's use up Sir Bito and his men in this battle. Once they're gone, we'll be free to use the elite archers from the former Kingdom of Gabi as we please. Sir Bito must realize we don't trust him, so he'll

work desperately to prove himself.”

“Well, what goes around comes around, I guess.”

This sort of dark scheme was not to Fuuga’s liking, but he understood that he had to do some evil for his greater purpose.

Ultimately, this strategy was how Fuuga’s forces decided to dispatch an army to the Spirit Kingdom. Their intervention was the start of an incident that would shake not just the Great Tiger Kingdom and the Spirit Kingdom, but the nations of the Mankind Declaration and the Maritime Alliance as well.

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First, let’s review the situation in the Spirit Kingdom.

The monsters that had attacked the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan were almost entirely of the insect type. However, these bugs were all man-sized, if not larger. The insect monsters had appeared en masse during a demon wave before Souma was summoned, and crossed to the Father Island via a series of islands too small to appear on maps.

The high elves resisted, but because they lived in a land where magic was stronger, the insects were also powered up, and more ferocious as a result. The high elves fought at a disadvantage, and were finally driven from the Father Island. Then, with the island taken, the insect monsters settled there, and their numbers didn’t fall even after the end of the demon wave.

Because there were a variety of types of insects, they likely fed off each other on the Father Island, creating a sort of ecology. And as the monsters fought among themselves, those driven out came to invade the Mother Island next.

The Spirit Kingdom had not only lost the Father Island, but allowed an incursion onto the Mother Island as well. For the operation to retake the islands, Shuukin would be sent to the Father Island and eliminate every last monster there. At the same time, the Spirit Kingdom would exert their full power to destroy the monsters on the Mother Island, then volunteers would go to the Father Island to assist Fuuga’s forces.

— Fuuga’s camp — The Father Island —

Shuukin; Lombard, the former King of Remus who had been chosen as his second-in-command; and Yomi, who was Lombard's wife and a capable magician, were in the main camp, discussing what they were going to do.

A messenger rushed into their tent.

"I have a report! Sir Bito and his unit from the former Kingdom of Gabi have been isolated in the middle of the enemy!"

"What?! Why did they rush ahead?!" Lombard demanded.

The messenger fell prostrate before him before responding. "Sir Bito and his men were headed towards Min, which was once the most prosperous city on the Father Island, sir. It's well-suited for garrisoning troops, and they were likely hoping to take the credit for liberating it themselves."

"Urgh... Was he too desperate for glory, or was he trying to atone for his past betrayals?"

"Lord Lom..." Yomi said, looking at Lombard with concern.

He looked at Shuukin who was silent. "Lord Shuukin. Should we send reinforcements?"

"No... They're too far. We'll never make it in time." Shuukin quietly shook his head.

Fuuga's advisor Hashim had been planning to use up Bito and his men in this operation. He might have been behind their decision to rush ahead. Hashim may have suggested, "If you achieve great things on this expedition, that will demonstrate your loyalty, Lord Fuuga's view of you will improve, and I am sure your former lands will be returned to you," or, "If you can retake the central city of the Father Island, all other glories will pale in comparison."

*In that case... It's my duty to leave him to die,* Shuukin thought. He wasn't enthusiastic about being placed in this role, but they had chosen him as commander because they believed he could do it. As such, Shuukin felt he had to do it, for his liege's sake.

He gave an order to the messenger. "We'll withhold reinforcements to avoid increasing our losses. I'll take Sir Bito's archers under my command for now.

Deliver that message to all the commanders!”

“Yes, sir!”

Shuukin let out a sigh after watching the messenger rush out of the tent. Without knowing the reason for that sigh, Lombard tried to comfort him.

“It’s not your fault that Sir Bito and his men rushed ahead. Don’t let it weigh on your conscience.”

“Thank you, Sir Lombard.” Shuukin felt a little guilty over the man’s kindness.

Yomi clapped her hands, as if trying to change the topic. Then, opening her collar a little, she mimed fanning herself with one hand. “It sure is humid in this country. It’s quite a change from my homeland.”

“It certainly is...” Shuukin agreed with a slight smile. “This kind of humidity makes me long for the dry air of the steppes and the desert.”

“Hrmm...” Lombard groaned as he looked outside the tent. “The dense foliage and the suffocating earthy smell... It really makes it painfully obvious we’re in a foreign land.”

“Yes. We’re on unknown ground here. But in order to make Lord Fuuga’s majesty felt, we cannot afford to lose.”

With Shuukin’s words, Lombard and Yomi nodded in agreement.

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Meanwhile, on the Mother Island of the Spirit Kingdom, the battle to repel the monsters from their island was in its final stages.

“Hahhhhh!”

Standing at the vanguard was Gerula, the younger brother of Spirit Kingdom King Garula, who had traveled around many nations, starting with the Kingdom of Friedonia, to seek assistance.

Gerula approached a massive pill bug with a carapace as hard as stone (its Magic Part Identification system name was “rock pill bug”), planting an upwards kick under its head then stabbing its soft underbelly with his rapier. The rock pill bug squirmed a while, then stopped moving.

When Gerula was sure his opponent had breathed its last, he casually tore his rapier free. Showing no concern for the yellowy ichor that stained his face, Gerula shook the blood from his blade and returned it to its sheath. Much like the dark elves of the Kingdom of Friedonia, the high elves specialized in fighting at long range with bows, but Gerula was the uncommon elf who preferred melee combat. Even among that rare breed, he was top class.

There was a buzzing of wings, and a swarm of bees that had a spiral shell on their abdomens (MPI name “snail bee”) came to attack Gerula.

He swung his hand up. In an instant, there was a whooshing sound as countless arrows flew over his head and pierced all of the snail bees.

It was a barrage from the elite high elven archers behind where he stood.

With a glance to the snail bees as they dropped to the ground, Gerula raised his voice to shout, “Now, it’s time to finish the job! We’ll wipe these monsters from the Mother Island!”

“”””Yeahhhhhh!”””

The high elf soldiers seemed to be venting all their rage at having been pushed to the edge all this time. They were roused by Gerula’s speech, and continued exterminating the monsters.

Not long after, the operation to wipe out the monsters on the Mother Island came to a successful end.

That night, when Gerula visited the tent in the center of the main camp, King Garula was there sitting on a camp stool, and a beautiful high elf girl wearing the breastplate of an archer was standing by, ready to serve him.

Garula’s eyes narrowed when he saw his younger brother. Being twins, their faces looked exactly alike.

Gerula took his place next to the girl, putting his hands together in front of him and bowing his head.

“Elder brother. The extermination of the monsters infesting the Mother Island is complete.”

“Well done, Gerula.”

Garula rose and walked over to Gerula, moving to place a hand on his brother's shoulder to thank him for his efforts. However, Gerula stopped him just before he could.

*You mustn't touch me,* he seemed to say.

Seeing that, Garula and the girl next to Gerula got pained looks on their faces.

Once Garula had returned to the camp stool, Gerula bowed his head and said, "Even with the monsters cleared from the Mother Island, if the Father Island is not liberated, we can expect they will come again."

"I know. We will send an army to work with Fuuga's forces in retaking Father Island. The commander-in-chief of that force, Elulu, will be you."

"Yes, father. I will fulfill my duty even if it costs me my life."

Elulu was Elulu Garlan, daughter of Garula. She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen years of age, but as a member of a long-lived race, her true age was much older.

Gerula looked apologetically at Elulu.

"I'm sorry. Normally, I should have been the one to go..."

"No. You've been working too hard, uncle. Please...just rest now," she responded with a sad look on her face.

Everyone here understood. This battle to drive the monsters from the Mother Island was also to be Gerula's last.

Elulu slapped her own cheeks to psyche herself up and then bowed her head to her father, the king.

"Well, father, uncle, I'll be on my way."

"Mm."

Elulu left the tent without turning back.

Once they had watched her go, King Garula let out a long sigh. "I may not be seeing her for a long while..."

Gerula looked up and offered an encouraging laugh. "We're a long-lived race. It's unlikely you'll never meet again."

“To hear that coming from *you*...? I can’t laugh.”

“Please do. I put *my whole body* into that joke.”

“That’s not funny either.”

When the twins were alone, they always talked like brothers.

“We may not get the Father Island back...” Garula said with a sigh.

“We don’t know that.” Gerula shook his head. “But Fuuga was not so kindly as Souma of the Kingdom of Friedonia or Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire. His skills I am sure of, but his ambitions are just as great as a result. Most likely...he’ll try to bring our country under his sway. That’s why you sent Elulu to act as commander-in-chief, right?”

Garula nodded in response.

“Yeah. As an easy puppet for them. She’s progressive by this country’s standards.”

Among the high elf race, which had a strong belief in their status as the chosen people, Elulu was comparatively liberal-minded. That was likely the influence of the researcher, Merula Merlin. Among the younger generation of high elves, there was a tendency to view Merula, who had questioned high elf supremacy and the closing of the country to the point that her curiosity eventually drove her to escape, as a hero.

Garula said, “They’ll make a puppet state out of all those who question high elf supremacy and declare independence on the Father Island. She’s the perfect flag-bearer for that. And once they’re under his influence, Fuuga’s army will have to defend the island.”

“Even if Elulu and her faction break off with the Father Island, the Mother Island will be protected...right? Does Elulu know?”

“She understands well. She’s enthusiastic about it, even. She’ll no longer be held down by the old ways.”

“You wanted to do this yourself, didn’t you...?” Gerula said mischievously, but Garula laughed it off.

“If our father were still alive, sure. But now I have to defend my own

country.”

“Sorry... I’m putting you through a lot of work.”

“Don’t be sorry. I mean...like Elulu was saying, you’re...”

“Yeah. I’m going to use *my remaining time* as I see fit.” Gerula rose, then he spoke in an almost theatrical tone. “O king. O brother. O Garula. I ask your permission to go on leave.”

“Huh?! Gerula?!”

“This is one last selfish request... No, I guess I’ve always been selfish, haven’t I? Well, this is the end of that. I’m sorry to leave you to handle everything...”

King Garula looked Gerula in the eyes and could say nothing. They were the eyes of a man who had made up his mind.

“You’re going, Gerula...”

“Yeah. Even if it costs my life, I’ll lead this country to the best outcome.”

“I see...”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a time and then nodded.

“Farewell, elder brother.”

“Farewell, younger brother.”

With that last exchange, King Garula watched Gerula turn and go.

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Some time after that, there was a battle against insect monsters on the Father Island...

This island was swarming with warped insects that, despite having parts from unrelated creatures, still moved around agilely. The most common were the snail bees that had also been on the Mother Island, as well as a beetle monster with a turtle-like shell (MPI name “shell beetle”), and an ant monster with a conical shell on its abdomen like the snail bee’s (MPI was “snail ant”).

A large amount of smoke rose up from the forest. Not a fire’s, but artificial white smoke.

At the same time, there was the rumbling of many feet and the buzzing of many wings.

Fuuga's commander Shuukin was watching from just outside the forest, and he gave an order to the elite archers who had once served the former King of Gabi, but were now under his command.

"They're coming... Archers, mages, get ready!"

The archers nocked their arrows and drew back their bowstrings while the mages, led by Yomi, prepared to loose their magic.

A moment later, a great many insects rushed out of the smoky forest. First the bees flew out, and then the ants crawled after them.

"Shoot!"

The countless arrows and spells unleashed at Shuukin's command rained down on the insects, and the bee monsters dropped like flies as the attacks tore through their heads and wings.

Next the arrows rained down on the ants, lowering their numbers.

"Don't stop! Keep on shooting!"

The insect monsters were good at concealing themselves, and it would be trouble if they hid in the forest. That was why the plan had been to set off a smoke the insects hated in the forest, and have the archers crush them with a synchronized volley when they were smoked out.

This was the most effective and least dangerous way of fighting them.

"Lord Shuukin! Something's coming!" one of the soldiers watching the forest shouted.

There was the sound of trees snapping, and a massive beetle standing maybe three meters tall emerged from the forest. It was a shell beetle.

"Focus your attacks! Don't let the big one get near us!"

"It's no use! Our arrows do nothing!"

The archers shot at the monster, but their arrows plinked harmlessly off of its turtle-like shell. It probably couldn't fly like an ordinary beetle with a shell like

that, but in exchange, it seemed to have gained a powerful defense.

The massive beetle moved forward almost like a heavy tank, paying no heed to the arrows and magic raining down on it. If it charged now, it would break through their fortifications in no time, and cause mass casualties.

Shuukin gave an immediate order.

“Sir Lombard, lead the infantry to hold off the snail ants.”

“Got it.”

“Cavalry, follow me. We’re going to stop that shell beetle.”

“““Yes, sir!”””

Shuukin mounted his temsbock and raised his sword aloft, leading a cavalry charge into the swarm of monsters. They cut down snail ants as they pressed onward, getting closer to the shell beetle.

“Aim for the legs!”

Shuukin circled around to the side of the beetle and lopped its leg off with his sword. While it had hard armor in the front and on top, its spindly insect legs weren’t so tough.

After losing two legs on one side, the beetle lost its balance and tumbled over, thudding to the ground.

“Once you stop them from moving, there’s no need to risk going for the kill! They can’t do anything at that point! Don’t forget we’re in the middle of the enemy!”

Following Shuukin’s orders, his cavalry sliced the thin legs off of the shell beetle, or pulverized them with blunt weapons, one after another, stopping it dead, or at least disabled, in its tracks.

With the big one’s advance stopped, Shuukin gave the next order.

“Okay! We’re going to break through the enemy and return to camp!”

That’s when it happened...

“Urgh!”

The soldier next to him let out a groan of pain and fell from his horse. Looking at the man, Shuukin saw a long, thin spike that resembled a throwing spear sticking out of him. Looking up, he saw the bee monster that had no doubt launched it hovering in midair, its compound eyes watching Shuukin and his men. It had probably launched a needle (or more like a stake) out of the end of its abdomen.

*Tch... They have a troublesome means of attacking us.*

As he complained mentally, the bee monsters all launched spikes at them in unison. This time it was Shuukin and his men's turn to face a synchronized volley.

"Incoming! Defend yourselves as you pull back!"

At Shuukin's orders, the cavalry raised their shields against the needles as they retreated.

Normally, after a volley, they would have used their mobility to get away, but the jungles of the Father Island were thick and had quagmires scattered about. That limited the temsbocks' ability to jump, and the horses got their feet caught in the muck, preventing Fuuga's forces from using their vaunted mobility.

"Sir Shuukin! Damn it!"

Lombard, who had been watching the cavalry, tried to take his infantry to back them up, but he couldn't abandon their camp, so was forced to watch in frustration. As the cavalry fought a hard battle, Shuukin broke into a cold sweat, worrying that they might actually be in a bit of trouble, until...

*Whoosh, whoosh... Thock!*

A rain of arrows coming from the opposite direction of the camp accurately shot the bees that were attacking the cavalry. Looking towards the forest the monsters had come out of, there were countless people carrying bows standing in the treetops.

One of them called out to him, "Lord Shuukin! Are you all right?!"

"Ah! Princess Elulu?!"

The voice came from Elulu, the daughter of Spirit Kingdom King Garula.

The people in the trees that she was leading were a unit of high elves called the Garlan Volunteer Force. They were nominally a group of vigorous young folks who Elulu had brought along on her own initiative to assist Fuuga's forces. In reality, though, they were officially sanctioned reinforcements from the Spirit Kingdom. You could say that the harm of the Spirit Kingdom's closed-off nature was evident in the way that they had to engage in a pretense like this.

However, the Garlan Volunteer Force led by Elulu was unusually cooperative. The smoke used to drive the monsters out of the forest had been the work of her volunteers, who had been hiding in there.

With the Garlan Volunteer Army's volley having reduced the number of bee monsters, Elulu rushed to Shuukin's side.

"Are you okay, Lord Shuukin?!"

"Yeah... You saved me, Princess Elulu," Shuukin said, relieved, and Elulu puffed up her cheeks angrily.

"Murgh! Don't call me princess! Please, just call me Elulu. On the battlefield, I'm just another soldier."

"Ah ha ha... Fair enough. You saved me there, Elulu."

"Yes!"

It seemed this princess was quite the tomboy. She was also so friendly it was hard to believe she was one of the high elves famed for their xenophobia. Her personality let her interact candidly with just about anyone. In some ways, she reminded Shuukin of his liege's little sister. Although Yuriga wasn't so honest with her feelings, and her tone was standoffish.

"For now, we need to hurry and esc— Look out!"

"Huh?"

One of the ants had leapt at Elulu while she was distracted.

Shuukin jumped from his temsbock, pulling on Elulu's arm to trade places with her, and then severing the ant's thorax from its abdomen. Seeing how the ant flailed around, scattering its bodily fluids, after losing its abdomen, Shuukin cut off its head to put it out of its misery.



Elulu looked at him with eyes full of admiration.

“Lord Shuukin, you’re so cool!”

“Is this really the time...?” Shuukin said with a sigh, wiping the bug juice from his sword and sheathing it.

Then, mounting his temsbock once more, he pulled Elulu up with one hand and placed her behind him. Elulu hurriedly wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Hang on tight, Elulu!”

“Okay!” she replied, squeezing him.

Looking around as he maneuvered his temsbock, Shuukin saw that the insects that were closing in on their camp had been fended off and wiped out by Lombard and Yomi. As for the bugs that were surrounding the cavalry, they had been destroyed by a coordinated attack with the Garlan Volunteer Force.

“Okay! The monsters nesting in the forest have been dealt with! Everyone, head back!”

With that order given, the cavalry and Garlan Volunteer Force returned to camp.

Bringing Elulu back to camp, Shuukin was greeted by Lombard and Yomi.

“Good work. I was scared when you got surrounded out there.”

“It’s a good thing you were okay.”

Looking a bit relieved, Shuukin said, “It was a close shave, but the Garlan Volunteer Force saved me.”

He dismounted and then helped Elulu down from his temsbock.

“It’s only to be expected that we’d come to our allies’ aid!” Elulu said, puffing her chest out proudly, and the other three smiled wryly.

“Weren’t you in danger yourself, Madam Elulu?” Yomi pointed out, and Elulu gulped, short for words, her eyes darting around awkwardly.

“W-We just let our guards down a little.”

“You say that, Princess, but your endgame has always been weak,” one of the

other high elves chided her.

“I’m sorry, Sir Shuukin, for making you protect our princess,” another apologized.

“Huh?! You people...!”

Elulu turned a bright shade of red. Shuukin and Lombard watched the Garlan Volunteer Force warmly.

“She’s a nice girl, isn’t she?” Lombard said.

Shuukin nodded. “Yeah. All of the high elves she led here are good people.”

“Agreed. I always had the impression that high elves were arrogant and full of themselves...”

“There are probably misfits and dissenters no matter where you go.”

Lombard watched Elulu chase the subordinates who’d teased her.

“Apparently, they’re the reformers and liberals,” Shuukin explained. “They’re a group of relatively young high elves.”

“Are they? I can never tell an elf’s age by looking at them...”

“It probably means their ideologies are more flexible. They’re the ones who found themselves in a closed-off way of life and wanted to go beyond. They wanted to bring in things from outside, and would be willing to abolish the policies that favor their own race if it will make that possible... Elulu said she’d gathered people like that who have no place in the Spirit Kingdom as it is now.”

“And she’s the king’s daughter? She must have been a handful for King Garula... Hmm? So the reason he sent these reinforcements...”

“I’m sure part of it was getting rid of troublemakers,” Shuukin said with a shrug. “If they can retake the Father Island, then good. If they can’t, the Spirit Kingdom can at least isolate its dissidents. Maybe he’s thinking it would be best if they never returned from their mission?”

“Even though his own daughter is here?”

“That, I don’t know. From what Elulu tells us, she seems to be on good terms with her father, so I don’t think he’s abandoned her. He may have yielded to

her passion, and plans to take her back once the fighting is over. Well, we have no way of knowing the truth."

"It's difficult when you have a position to consider..." Lombard said, his voice full of emotion. Shuukin, however, had his mind elsewhere.

*It's certainly a difficult situation for the Garlan Volunteer Force, but...you could say it's convenient for us.*

Shuukin was under secret orders to search for high elves who they might be able to support as a puppet regime. While he was able to make political decisions, Shuukin was too honest, and was not fond of scheming, so he hadn't been keen on the order. However, he thought Elulu might be the right person for that role. She was a reformer and a liberal with an interest in the world outside. She also got along well with other like-minded high elves. It seemed likely that she wouldn't hesitate to become the head of a puppet regime for their sake.

So long as he was careful to respond to their needs, she and her people wouldn't end up in a bad situation because of it. Elulu was someone he could support without many pangs of conscience.

*Maybe I'll talk it over with her at length tonight. To see if she's willing to act as our puppet.*

That night, Fuuga's forces held a small victory banquet in their camp.

With the insect monsters in the forest wiped out, the surrounding area was now safe. The battle for the Father Island was still ongoing, but it wasn't good to be too tense. *This was probably a good time for a break.* That was what Shuukin had decided when he arranged this banquet.

"Hey, you high elves! Is this enough to get you drunk?"

"What are you talking about, young'un? We're not even tipsy yet!"

"Who're you calling young? You've got the face of a kid!"

"And you haven't even lived a century! You're basically a child compared to us here in the Spirit Kingdom!"

The mixed races of Fuuga's forces and the high elves of the Garlan Volunteer

Force were all sitting shoulder to shoulder, pouring drinks for one another. Some drank, sang, or fought, while others told emotional stories. Maybe because many of the members of both forces were so approachable, it felt like they were comrades who had been fighting together on the battlefield for a long time.

Shuukin sat around the campfire with Lombard, Yomi, and Elulu, and they all poured drinks for each other. Elulu was in high spirits, and looking a little flushed as she chatted with Yomi.

“Lord Shuukin was just so cool when he protected me!” Elulu exclaimed, knocking back and draining a wooden mug full of wine. “Have you seen his muscular arms when he swings his sword? Is there a girl alive whose heart wouldn’t race seeing that?!”

Elulu seemed quite taken with Shuukin, and it was awkward for him to listen to her praise him so effusively. Lombard and Yomi could only listen with wry smiles.

“But aren’t the warriors of Garlan strong too? You all seem so reliable,” Yomi said as she refilled Elulu’s mug with fresh wine.

Elulu held her mug tight, groaning in thought.

“Sure, they’re strong, but most of them are thin. It’s how our race is. We’re more suited to long-range attacks. Oh! It’s not that I’m into, like, super buff guys! I just think that some nice, firm muscles are good and healthy.”

*Is this girl into muscles?* the others all thought, but decided not to dig into it. It seemed like it’d be an awkward question, and more importantly, they had more pressing questions.

When Shuukin signaled to the other two with his eyes, they stood up.

“I’m tired from today’s fighting,” Lombard opined. “We’ll be going now.”

“Pardon us.”

With that, Lombard and Yomi headed into their tent.

“Whaa, you’re going already?” Elulu protested, her voice carrying a tinge of loneliness. Although there were other soldiers drinking and having a raucous

good time around them, it was only Shuukin and Elulu left at this campfire.

“It’s suddenly feeling all lonely,” she mumbled. “I wanted to talk with the two of them some more.”

“Well, Sir Lombard and Madam Yomi *are* husband and wife. They need their alone time.”

“Ohh, that’s why...” Elulu’s ears perked up a bit with interest.

With a wry smile at her behavior, Shuukin moved on to the main topic. “By the way, Princess Elulu?”

“Grr, you’re calling me Princess again?”

There was indignation in her eyes, but Shuukin continued.

“This is a serious question. What do you plan to do after this battle?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’?”

“After the island is liberated. Will you be returning to your father?”

“Hrmm... I wonder about thaaat,” Elulu said, the wine having left her relaxed and easygoing. “I’m one thing, but those hard-heads back on the Mother Island probably don’t want the reformers I brought with me coming back. They probably think this volunteer force was a good way of getting rid of us, so we’ll probably need to stay here awhile. None of the reformers are going to want to go back to the Mother Island where they’re looked at with scorn either.”

Shuukin’s eyes widened at how easily Elulu broached such a heavy topic.

“Umm...Princess Elulu, does your father treat you unkindly too, perhaps?”

“Hmm? My father and I get along well.”

Shuukin had asked out of concern, but Elulu laughed it off.

“I hear he used to be a militarist, but father has always seemed like a flexible thinker to me. He’s far easier to talk with than the old folks who are set in their ways. Even with this volunteer force, it felt less like father wanted to exile us, and more like he wanted to set us free. He even let me, his own daughter, lead it, after all.”

The more he heard, the less Shuukin understood. He’d been convinced that

the Garlan Volunteer Force members were driven out of their country due to policy differences. And due to this, it'd make them easy to bring in. Yet, from their discussion just now, it didn't seem that simple. At the very least, Spirit Kingdom King Garula didn't view Princess Elulu with any sort of hostility.

*Is it...really okay to have her join our side?* Shuukin was at a loss. As a figurehead for pulling the Father Island away from the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, there couldn't be a better candidate. However, since her relationship with her father Garula wasn't particularly bad, she might still want to return to the Spirit Kingdom.

For his own part, Shuukin was hesitant to tear father and daughter apart by pulling Elulu into his own forces. He thought over all of this, not saying a word, before finally resolving himself and downing his drink in one go. *It's not like agonizing over this is going to get me an alternative plan...* He wasn't like Mutsumi or Hashim. Shuukin knew better than anyone that he couldn't use trickery the same way those two did.

That was why, at the very least, he wanted to be loyal to his lord and honest with his allies. To be trusted by everyone—the easiest pawn to use. Hashim had to have known his personality when choosing him to lead this force anyway.

"Hey, Elulu."

"What is it?"

"I've heard that the reformers and liberals are interested in the outside world," Shuukin said, looking straight into her eyes. "Lord Fuuga is seeking to strengthen our country even more in order to liberate the Demon Lord's Domain. That's why he wants to incorporate the Father Island into our forces."

"I'm sure he does... It's why he sent us reinforcements, right? To have the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan form an alliance with him as a reward."

"Yes. However, at the same time, our leaders can't trust the high elves."

Hearing this, Elulu's eyes downturned.

"It's said that people who hold themselves up as superior and look down on other races can't be expected to meekly submit. Of course, I now know there are relatable people like yourself and the others in the Garlan Volunteer Force.

But as for whether we can trust those on the Mother Island...”

“...is another issue entirely, I’m sure. I can’t say that I blame you,” Elulu answered quietly. “And? What will you do, Lord Shuukin?”

“Let me be honest with you... Lord Fuuga has tasked me with finding high elf dissidents, and supporting their independence on the Father Island so that we can incorporate them into our forces.”

“So he means to set up a puppet?”

“That makes it sound like a bad thing, but you’re welcome to see it that way. It’s just that we want to see the Father Island in the hands of those we can trust,” Shuukin said, cautiously gauging her reaction. She chuckled.

“You can’t tell a lie, can you, Lord Shuukin? You’ve probably missed out on a lot of things as a result.”

“It’s just my nature...”

“I find it pleasing, you know? So, have you found the person you’re going to support?”

“I think you’re the one best suited to it, Princess Elulu,” Shuukin said. “You aren’t steeped in traditional views of your own race’s supremacy. You’ve been able to interact with a group of mixed races, like ours, without discrimination. And you’re highly interested in the outside world and what mysteries it holds. I think you could serve as a bridge between the continent and the Spirit Kingdom.”

“Aren’t you overestimating me...?”

“We just agreed I can’t tell a lie, didn’t we? This is how I truly feel,” Shuukin asserted. “I don’t think I’m making you a bad offer. Not every reformer and liberal on the Mother Island has joined this volunteer force, right? If you rise up, then you’ll be able to take in those still left behind. From what I’ve heard, they seem suffocated there. Why not invite them to the Father Island and wait for attitudes to soften across the whole of the Spirit Kingdom?”

Elulu was silent for some time before finally speaking. “I hear that our views on high elf supremacy were born from a sad history of oppression on the

continent.”

Shuukin looked straight into her eyes once more.

“If we’re separated from the motherland, the Father Island will have little power. Will you and your people protect us during that time, Lord Shuukin? Will we find ourselves oppressed the moment we change our allegiance?” Elulu asked, staring right back at him.

Shuukin crossed his arms.

“I swear that I will protect you and the high elf liberals. If Lord Fuuga mistreats you, I will risk my life to chastise him for it. I will be your shield against the terrible customs of the Spirit Kingdom, political malefactors, and the threat of the Demon Lord’s Domain,” he said sincerely, bowing his head.

“Okay. I understand,” Elulu answered quickly. Even Shuukin was taken aback.

“Huh? That easily...?”

“It wasn’t easy. I’ve given it a lot of thought,” Elulu said, chuckling. “Which, of course, means I already had a similar idea of my own. It seems we can trust you, Lord Shuukin, so I thought we should go along with your plan.”

“R-Right...”

Seeing how thrown off Shuukin was, Elulu let out a little sigh.

“The situation the Spirit Kingdom finds itself in right now...is worse than it appears from the outside. When we have no ability to resolve it ourselves, closing the country to the outside is the stupidest thing we could do.”

“Are you talking about the monsters that landed on the Mother Island...?”

“That’s not all...” Elulu said with a self-effacing smile.

“What are you...” Shuukin began, confused at her words.

“I...can’t say anything for certain just now. It’s an issue on the Mother Island. I don’t know if it affects the Father Island too at this point...”

Elulu made no attempt to answer. That bothered him, but he decided that since he’d accomplished his goal, there was no need to push her and provoke her to anger.

And so, as the night went on, a secret agreement was formed.

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Some time later, Fuuga's forces and the Garlan Volunteer Force succeeded in liberating the Father Island.

When Fuuga received a message from Shuukin saying "The Father Island has declared independence under Elulu, and joined your forces," Gerula Garlan just so happened to be visiting.

"So, there you have it..."

Fuuga related the events to Gerula, who was kneeling before him in the audience chamber.

Once he had heard it all, Gerula glared at Fuuga.

As he did, Fuuga asked, "Are you angry that things played out this way?"

"Of course..."

"Well, you went to the wrong people for help," Fuuga said dismissively. "No, maybe we were the right people. We'll leave the Father Island to Princess Elulu and her high elves. Shuukin asked me to, and as long as they cooperate with us, I'm not going to mistreat them."

"If you'll excuse me..." Gerula rose and left.

Fuuga didn't feel anything in particular as he watched him leave in frustration. Gerula, however, was highly irritated—angry—not at Fuuga and his men, but at himself. *How pathetic... Everything I've spent my life to protect...*

It wouldn't be until a little later that they'd hear Shuukin had collapsed out on the Father Island.

# ♔ Chapter 5: The Spirit King’s Curse Some time had passed since Fuuga brought the Spirit Kingdom’s Father Island under his control.

I received a report from Hakuya as I was working on my administrative duties in the capital.

“The Spirit King’s Curse?”

“Yes. We received a report on it from members of the Black Cats staying in the port that Sir Fuuga gave us.”

As payment for delivering support to his forces, Fuuga had given us a port. However, we only deployed the bare minimum needed to use it as a supply base. We couldn’t fully build it up, as the port was a long way from the Kingdom. Our fleet couldn’t get there immediately if anything were to happen; for example, if Fuuga went back on his word and sent in troops to take it back.

While repairs to the port stopped out of caution for a potential attack, we did, however, station a unit from the Black Cats as contacts there.

Reading from the report as he spoke, Hakuya said, “It seems there are rumors of a Spirit King’s Curse running rampant through the Father Island and the Great Tiger Kingdom’s lands near it. The people in the area collapsed for unknown reasons, and there have been many deaths too.”

“A disease... Is it some kind of epidemic?”

“We are currently gathering information. However, given that the disease first appeared on the continent around the same time as Fuuga occupied the Father Island, they say that the Spirit King was enraged, and spread his curse in retribution.”

“I don’t care about this talk of curses. The important thing is that the disease really exists.”

*It’s a disease terrible enough that people speak of it as a curse.* I rested my elbows on the desk and held my head in my hands.

The damage wrought by epidemics back in my previous world flashed through my mind. Diseases like the Black Death and the Spanish flu had left their horrifying mark on history. Even in my own time, there'd been a variety of epidemic diseases. I knew the harm they could do, and the difficulty of keeping that harm from expanding.

"That curse hasn't reached our port yet, right?"

"Right. There are some optimistic people who suggest that if it truly is the Spirit King's curse, it will only affect Fuuga's forces because they were the ones who took the Father Island."

"If it were a curse, sure. But a disease won't pick its victims based on nationality or race."

Whatever the reason, I needed to act at once.

"Leave only the bare minimum of agents at the port and have everyone else return home immediately. Also, forbid them from carrying back any materials gathered in the area. They can give whatever excess they have to Fuuga."

"That...would be the same as abandoning the base."

"It's an awkward one to use anyway. We haven't gotten the return on our investment, but I want to shut down any vectors for the disease to come to our country."

"We still don't know what kind of disease it is. Are you sure you don't mind doing this?" Hakuya asked, as if seeking confirmation.

He likely felt the same way I did, but wanted to be certain of my intentions.

I gave him a firm nod. "Ideally, this ends up being a lot of overblown worry on my part. I don't mind if people laugh at me for scaring easily. The biggest problem would be being too optimistic and leaving the situation unaddressed until it got out of hand. It would be too late for regrets then."

"Understood. I will arrange it." Hakuya bowed. "Anything else?"

In response, I fired off orders in rapid succession.

"First, I want you to call in the doctors, Hilde and Brad. I have a ton of questions for them about possible diseases and the ways to deal with them.

Hilde was such a hypochondriac that she used disinfectant everywhere, so I think her knowledge will be especially useful in fighting disease. I'd like them to stay in the castle for a while as advisors."

"By your will."

"I will hold a broadcast conference with Madam Maria of the Empire, Kuu of the Republic, and Shabon of the Archipelago Union. Since Princess Sill of the Dragon Knight Kingdom is unable to join the broadcast, have her come here. Set all of that up for me. I'll listen to Hilde and Brad's opinions, and make a direct appeal to the others about the danger. Depending on the circumstances, we may need to place certain limitations on the freedom of movement for goods and people."

"I see. And what of the other countries?"

"The countries in the Empire's sphere of influence can be handled by Madam Maria, and the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria can be handled by Fuuga now that they're his ally. Madam Tiamat is in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, so they'll be fine... That only leaves Mercenary State Zem, correct? We can't be sure they'll listen to us, but we'll at least send them a letter warning them about it."

"Yes, sire. I believe that would be advisable."

"Oh, and call Yuriga. I want to contact Fuuga to find out the details."

"By your will."

With this, the whole castle moved into furious action, trying to gather information on the Spirit King's Curse. However, in order to avoid needless confusion among the people, I decided to keep this information under wraps until things were more certain. If I wasn't careful in my handling of it, this could cause interracial strife.

*I'd better not count on it turning out I was too worried...* I let out a sigh, sensing the murderous workload that was coming my way yet again.

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A little later, on a day sometime in the 7th month, Yuriga came to the

governmental affairs office.

“Sir Souma, a simple receiver has arrived from my brother.”

“Ah...! It came, huh?”

I wrapped up working on my paperwork.

A little earlier, I had sent Fuuga a simple receiver that could be used for broadcast meetings. I had heard from Yuriga that Fuuga had gained hold of several jewels in the course of his expansion, so I proposed setting things up so we could have broadcast meetings.

In Fuuga’s case, he might do something big while I was still spending my time trying to make sure we were on the same page. I wanted a communication channel with him more than anything. I had already sent him our simple receiver, so it was just a matter of waiting for him to send us his. With it arriving, it was finally possible to use them for contacting now.

I rose from my seat and began giving orders.

“Hakuya, contact Hilde and Brad at once.”

“Understood.”

“This is our first broadcast meeting with Fuuga, so I’ll want Liscia in attendance...and you too, Yuriga.”

“Got it.”

We were able to hold the meeting right away. There were five with me: Liscia, Hakuya, Hilde, Brad, and Yuriga.

When Fuuga appeared on the simple receiver, his advisor Hashim and his queen Mutsumi were behind him.

“This is Fuuga Haan...” Liscia mumbled to herself.

*Come to think of it, she’s never seen him before, huh?* I was going to want to hear her opinion on him later.

We did some quick introductions and then got right down to business. I was the first to speak.

“First of all, I guess I should say...congratulations on liberating the Father

Island.”

“Ha ha ha... I don’t know if I should reply by saying thanks or not,” Fuuga said with a wry laugh. I could sense a little exhaustion in his voice. “I thought I’d use those arrogant high elves to expand my forces, but...if you just look at the results, it looks like my luck ran bad.”

“The Spirit King’s Curse...was it?”

“It’s no curse. It’s a disease. An unknown one,” Fuuga said with obvious distaste. “There are rumors saying I ‘angered the Spirit King by touching the Father Island,’ but from what the high elves under my protection tell me, the disease has existed on the Mother Island since before my troops invaded. It’s pretty serious there too.”

*So it really was an epidemic disease then?*

Fuuga’s shoulders slumped and he let out a sigh. “If I’d known the situation on the island, I’d never have touched it. That high elf...Gerula Garlan, was it? He went to you and the Empire with the same offer, right? Did you turn him down because you had information on this?”

“Hardly. I just didn’t want to save a country full of those who think they’re the chosen people.”

“Ha ha ha, that’s a weird way of putting it, but it fits.”

“I’m sure it was the same for the Empire.”

“They got us. I think, more than liberating the Father Island, what Gerula Garlan may really have wanted was to make us do something about this disease.”

“And where’s Gerula now? Is he still at your place?”

“Nah, once we took control of the Father Island, he got angry and left. I assumed he’d gone back to the Mother Island, so I let him be but...that *bastard*.” Fuuga ground his teeth in frustration.

He was good at making others dance to his tune, but this time, he was the one being made to dance. Even for a guy blessed by the era we lived in, he couldn’t have things go his way all of the time.

“Are you okay, Fuuga? Didn’t you go to the island yourself?”

“Nah, I didn’t... My partner doesn’t like the sea. We’d expanded our power, and it didn’t seem like it needed my personal attention, so I put my trusted friend Shuukin in charge of the expedition.”

*Shuukin’s one of Fuuga’s commanders as well as his childhood friend, right? He put his friend and right hand in charge of the expedition. And now he’s looking exhausted despite not going himself.*

I put the pieces together.

“Don’t tell me... Shuukin’s...”

“Yeah... He’s got the curse.”

“No...!”

Behind me, Yuriga was covering her mouth. She looked incredibly disheartened.

Liscia placed a supportive hand on her shoulder. On the other side of the broadcast, Fuuga shook his head weakly.

“He was like a brother to me. A second brother to Yuriga.”

*A brother... They were like family, then.*

“Is his condition...bad?”

“No, he’s still all right. But...that’s only for now.”

“It’s gradually getting worse then?”

“That’s apparently the kind of disease it is, and exactly why I want to borrow your country’s know-how,” Fuuga said, a serious expression on his face. “Yuriga’s told me that the state of medicine in your country is far more advanced than anywhere else. I want you to tell me how to deal with this curse —how to treat it—if possible.”

“It’s not exactly a problem we can ignore... We have no way of knowing when it might enter our country, so we won’t hold back anything in cooperating with you. But we have no information. Please tell us everything you currently know about the Spirit King’s Curse so that we can search for countermeasures and

treatments.”

“Of course.”

Fuuga relayed to us about the disease they called the “Spirit King’s Curse.”

“From the reports Shuukin sent...sometime after going to the Father Island, a few men we’d sent started to complain of fatigue. At first, they thought it was just them not taking well to an unfamiliar climate, but...the symptoms worsened by the day,” he explained, seeming dispirited. “When the numbers got out of hand, Shuukin decided something was strange, and talked to the high elves who were collaborating with him about it. And...that’s how he found out about the disease.”

“I see...”

“It starts with fatigue, and gradually more and more symptoms appear, ultimately leading to death. By the time he learned this, Shuukin realized he was already infected. He doesn’t know how, but... Well, whatever the case, he said not to send any more reinforcements. And that I absolutely must not go there to join him.”

It looked like it pained Fuuga to talk about it. Given the state his friend and right-hand man was in, it was only natural.

“For a start, tell us how contagious the disease is.” I’d asked that because it was the first thing we ought to check, and the thing I most wanted to know. “If it’s spreading, it must be infecting other people, right? How fast does that happen? Do people living in the containment area and those treating the patient develop it quickly?”

I was imagining the seasonal flu from my old world. Once one person in a household contracted the flu, it quickly infected the rest. I was told to be careful of it when I was living with my grandparents.

Fuuga looked at Mutsumi and Hashim. They both shook their heads, and his shoulders slumped.

“We don’t know...”

“What?”

“We don’t know how contagious it is. We don’t even know *how* people get infected by the disease.”

“What do you mean...?”

*Wasn’t the disease spreading?* I was getting confused.

“There’s a whole lot of guys who’ve caught this ‘Spirit King’s Curse’ disease, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And yet you don’t know how they caught it?”

“Exactly.”

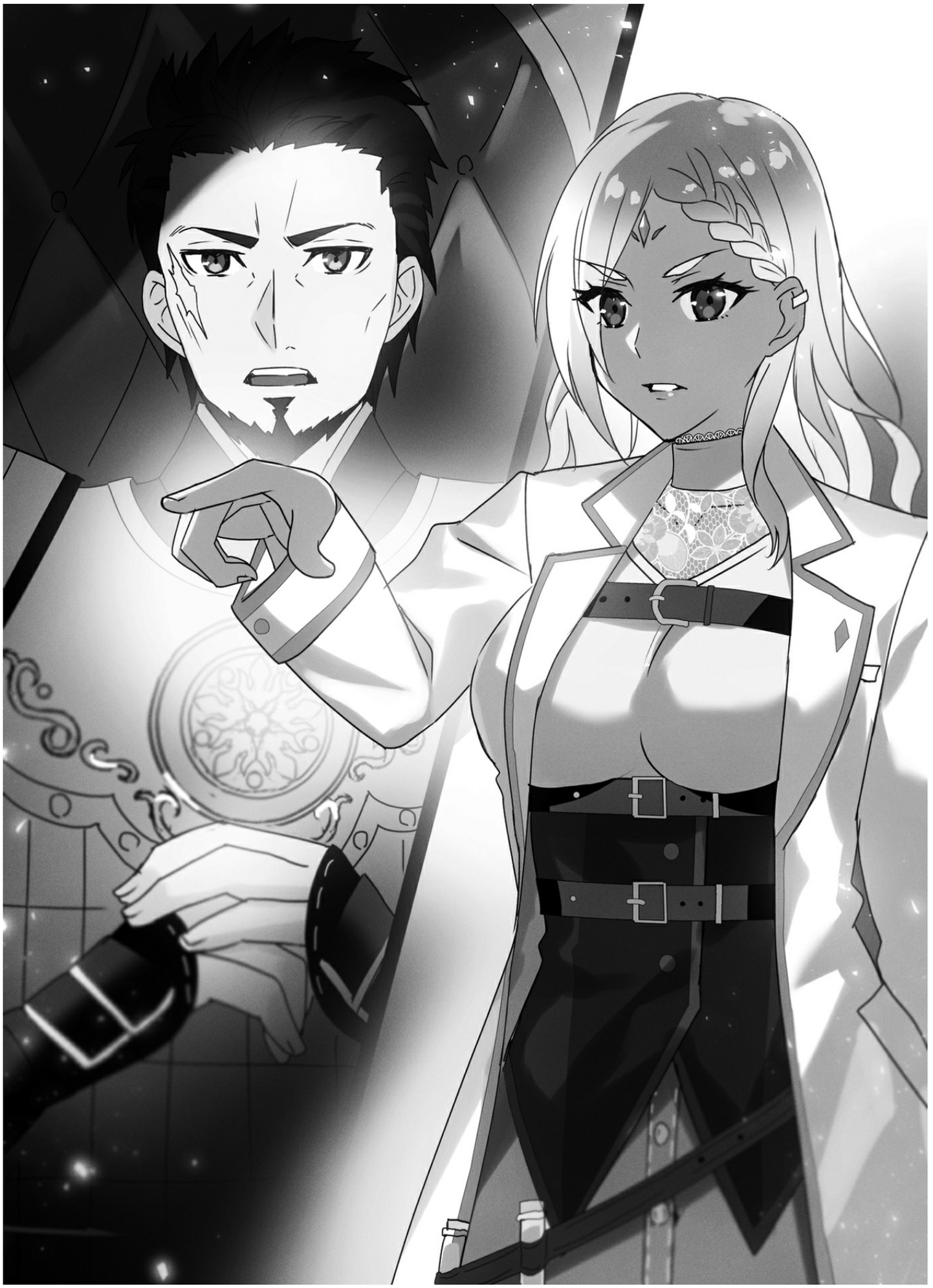
“Seriously, what...?”

“Ahh, may I interject, sire?” Hilde said, stepping forward to stand beside me. “Considering the situation, would you mind if I spoke to the gentleman there directly? It seems like the two of you have different levels of understanding when it comes to disease, so it’s probably faster for me to ask the questions.”

“Oh, uh, sure. I’ll allow it.”

“Very well. Now then, Your Foreign Majesty, I’m Dr. Hilde. Would you answer some questions for me?”

Fuuga nodded. “Yeah, of course. Ask away.”



“I’ll do just that, then. First, there’s a number of transmission routes. The most common in epidemics is person to person. If you’re in the same room as them, breathing the same air, or talking to them and their spit flies in your direction, that’s how it happens. Does this disease spread person to person?”

“I don’t know...”

“Hrm... What about those treating the infected? I know you probably don’t have a lot of doctors like me, but there must be light mages and those providing first aid to the patients. Have they gotten infected?”

“No... We haven’t received any reports like that.”

So there was no infection of medical practitioners...uh, if you could call them that, then?

“How about the patient’s family?”

“We have no confirmation on that.”

“Eh? Hrm...” Hilde seemed to be thinking deeply. “Now, just so I’m clear on this... The disease really is spreading, right?”

“Yeah. It seems that twenty to thirty percent of the soldiers we sent to the Father Island have come down with symptoms.”

“Soldiers? Have any of the common folk been infected?”

“That’s part of why they call it a curse...” Fuuga said, scratching his head in total confusion. “More than ninety percent of the people affected are in the military. And almost none of them were in the rear support group. It was all people involved in the fighting. That’s what got people jabbering about how it’s a curse, divine punishment, or whatever other nonsense they’re spreading.”

*A disease that only affected soldiers?* That interested me a little.

“Fuuga,” I began, “you guys built a semi-autonomous domain for the liberal high elves on the Father Island, right? If ninety percent of the people infected are in the military, then is that true in the high elves’ territory too? No differences based on race or gender?”

“Yeah. It seems like it. I could go a bit further and say that the disease on the

Mother Island is the same way, because they know it as a disease that mostly affects warriors too.”

“Even in the Spirit Kingdom, huh...?”

“Sire,” Hilde said, turning to face me. “Based on what we know at this point, we can speculate that it’s not contagious through airborne or droplet transmission either. The spread compared to the number of patients is just too low.”

“Yeah... It looks like being in the same place doesn’t cause infection,” Brad, who had been listening, agreed.

I cocked my head to the side.

“So there’s no person-to-person transmission?”

“We can’t rule out transmission from close contact or bodily fluids, but...there’s been a large number of cases in a short time frame. Not having examined the patients myself, I can’t say anything for certain, but person-to-person transmission seems unlikely. And with the number of cases...the cause has to be elsewhere, I think. Some foreign element.”

“Could it be in the water? Perhaps something they ate?” Brad asked, and Hilde groaned as she thought about it.

“What gets me is that they’re all warriors. I can’t imagine they keep separate reserves of food and water for the front line fighters and their supporters back in camp. If the supporters have been largely uninfected, food seems like an unlikely cause.”

As I was listening to them, something came to mind.

“Hey, Fuuga. Did the expeditionary force use the monsters as food?”

“Huh? Nah. They were sent with plenty to eat. They’d have to have been pretty desperate to do that. That ‘Monster Encyclopedia’ you gave us said to be really careful when using monsters for food too.”

“Then it’s not food poisoning from eating monsters...”

Remembering Jeanne’s story about eating monsters, I thought that might be a possibility. I figured the kind of tough soldiers who went to fight on the front

lines might want to give that sort of thing a go, while the guys in the rear wouldn't go to the trouble. But if they hadn't eaten monsters, as Fuuga says, it probably wasn't that.

That left me even more lost though.

"Monsters..." Hilde started mumbling to herself. "What if the monsters..."

*What could that be about?*

Suddenly, she looked up, and realized something.

"Your Foreign Majesty! The expeditionary force only fought monsters, right? Not soldiers from the Spirit Kingdom?"

"Yeah." Fuuga nodded. "We just drove the monsters out of the Father Island."

"I heard monsters had pushed the Spirit Kingdom to the brink. That means they were fighting them back there too. In other words, the people who fought monsters are the ones who caught the disease."

""""Ah!""""

Everyone gulped at what Hilde had said.

"So...it's monster-to-human transmission then?"

"That's right. And if the supporters in the rear have barely gotten infected at all, whatever the cause of the infection is, it must have happened during direct combat. Either those who were wounded in battle or covered in their enemies' blood... It should be something like that."

*That makes sense. I could see how that would mean only warriors got infected.*

"Hey, Doctor. What should we do about it?" Fuuga asked Hilde with a serious expression on his face. "Monsters are going to attack us even if we don't attack them. You can't expect us *not* to deal with them. Is there any way to heal the warriors, or keep the disease from spreading any further?"

"Not knowing the kind of disease it is, I have no idea how to treat it. It's purely speculation at this point that monsters cause it, but...if you don't want any more victims, you'll keep to long-range attacks, and not get too close to the

monsters.”

“Got it. I’ll make sure my men do that.”

“Also, I want to hear exactly what kind of symptoms it causes. I understand that it’s ultimately terminal, but what problems do the patients experience before then?”

“Right... The most typical symptom of the Spirit King’s Curse...” Fuuga looked directly at us as he said this. “Is losing the ability to use magic.”

*Losing the ability to use magic?*

“Can I understand that as losing the ability to use your *own* magic?” I asked, but Fuuga cocked his head to the side in confusion.

“What else could it mean?”

“There’s stuff like recovery light magic that has a magical effect from outside the body, after all.”

“Oh, that’s what you mean. It seems like you gradually lose the ability to use your own magic. As for light magic... How was it again?” Fuuga looked behind him.

Looking through a report, Hashim replied, “It seems to work at first, then gradually weakens, and ultimately fails...is what our reports say.”

“Is the magic itself being neutralized? What about magic attacks from enemies?”

“We have no reports of experiments like that, but...there are reports that one of the patients who had injuries from a fire attack was slow to heal, so I suspect attack magic works.”

*Their own magic becomes unusable, and so does external light magic... What’s the difference that decides what magic works and what doesn’t?*

“Hey, Souma,” Fuuga called out to me as I was thinking.

“What is it?”

“How about your country and my country fight this disease together?”

“Fight...together? You mean do a joint investigation?”

“If we stay ignorant, there’s no telling when it might spread across the whole continent. That’s something you’re worried about, right? So I’m saying we ought to team up.”

“I get that, but...”

His reasoning made sense. But when it came to working with Fuuga’s forces, I was always going to be hesitant. Fuuga was a man who hid nothing and had no ulterior motives when he was on his own, but now he had a shifty guy like Hashim at his side. I felt like we’d just be taken advantage of.

If we acted like we were close to Fuuga’s faction, that might provoke the people of the Empire. In point of fact, after Fuuga turned over that port to us, Maria’s vassals had put some serious pressure on her.

As I hesitated to respond, Fuuga went on. “We’d like to do what we can not to create any more cases, and if possible, find a treatment. You wouldn’t want this disease in your country either, right? The only way to prevent that is studying it together and coming up with countermeasures.”

I remained silent, unable to give a response.

“That’s an awfully self-serving thing for you to say,” Hakuya interjected. “For one thing, if you had never intervened in the Spirit Kingdom’s troubles, you wouldn’t be suffering from this disease right now. This is the result of actions that you took, so it’s not right for you to seek other countries’ help in solving it.”

“I believe we have a difference of understanding here,” Hashim swiftly countered. “Our liberation of the Father Island was done at Sir Gerula’s request. It troubles me that you would suggest it was done for personal gain.”

“You quibble, but the fact of the matter is that the Father Island is now a part of *your* sphere of influence, is it not?”

“You must not know the circumstances there either. When we actually made contact with the high elves, we found they were divided into a group obsessed with notions of their status as the chosen people, and those who sought reform or liberation from those who held such views. As the liberators of the Demon Lord’s Domain, we merely decided that the latter group were correct, and sided with them.”

“All you did was create a puppet state. It is disgusting to think you call yourself liberators.”

Neither Hakuya nor Hashim would cede an inch of ground in this exchange. They both needed to stay in control of the argument—Hakuya to keep the Kingdom from being pulled into the Great Tiger Kingdom’s situation, and Hashim to prevent any excuses for refusing to help them.

You could have called their war of words a power game between us and the Great Tiger Kingdom...

“Shut up, both of you.” Fuuga tired of it and shut them both down. “In this matter, my will as an individual comes before my will as a king. I want to save my friend Shuukin, as well as the other men who serve under me that are suffering from this disease. If I have to lower my head and beg, I’ll do it. So please.”

With that, Fuuga took off his helmet and bowed his head deeply.

One of us was asking a favor of the other. That should have made our positions clear, but somehow, when he was able to so confidently bow his head to me, it made him feel like the more impressive one here. We had made him bow his head, and yet it felt like he was the one in control. *This has to be the difference in our caliber as individuals...*

Unlike me, who was able to manage because he was supported by others, Fuuga had incredible capacity all on his own. In one-on-one situations like this, the difference between us was readily apparent.

“Fine... We’ll help you.”

It was the only answer I could give.

“If it’s transmissible through contact with monsters, not air or droplets, the doctors aren’t at much risk of infection. It’s easy to send people.”

“Ohh! Thanks.”

“However, our medical technology is several levels above yours. You’re to follow our doctors’ instructions to the letter. I don’t want you moving around patients and spreading the disease. If you can’t abide by that, we’ll have to

decline.”

Fuuga gave a large nod in response to my demands.

“Yeah, you’ve got it. I’ll be strict with my people about that.”

“I’m counting on you... That goes for Hashim too, all right?”

For better and for worse, when Fuuga said he was going to do something, he did it. Now that he had accepted my demands, I could expect he wouldn’t go back on his word. But that didn’t hold for everyone on his side.

“He seems like the kind of guy who’d send the dead bodies of people who died from the disease to an enemy country.”

“I’m not *that* ruthless...” Hashim said, looking away like my words wounded him. I wasn’t convinced.

“It’s human nature to want to use the tools we have at hand. Even when they’re too much for us.”

In my previous world, there were things like bioweapons and anthrax, after all. Bacteria and viruses were *alive*. Living things rarely moved the way people wanted them to. For an example that didn’t directly harm humans, I’d heard a story where people had released mongooses to fight vipers, but they instead started attacking some endangered local wildlife.

“If you get arrogant and think you can control this thing, I guarantee it will come back to bite you in the ass.”

Fuuga looked pensive for a moment before saying, “Yeah, I get it. I’ll keep an eye on Hashim so he doesn’t do anything weird.”

He took it on himself because he didn’t want to see the negotiations descend into squabbling again.

*Well... I figure that’s probably good enough for now.* We had agreed our two countries would cooperate where the disease was concerned.

With that decided, I had to look into what the Kingdom could do, so we decided to end the broadcast meeting there. Once the video cut out...

“This has all turned into...kind of a big deal, huh?” Liscia said, and I nodded in

agreement.

“But this time, we really do need to cooperate. Disease knows no borders.”

“Yeah...”

“Um, I’m sorry about my brother,” Yuriga said apologetically.

“You don’t have to be,” I reassured her, placing a hand on her shoulder. “In this situation, it’s not entirely Fuuga’s fault.”

“Right...”

Next Hilde and Brad came up to me.

“Sire, once I hear about a disease, I can’t leave it alone. Let me go there.”

“No, they’ll need someone to perform autopsies. I should be the one to go.”

They both volunteered out of a sense of duty as doctors. But...

“Not happening!” I immediately refused. “You’re the Kingdom’s top authorities in medicine. I’d even call you the king and queen of the medical world. You two are so famous that people know your names even when they don’t know the name of their nearest doctor. If I sent the two of you out and you got sick, what would I do? The country would fall into chaos if it was a disease even the two of you couldn’t overcome. When they found out, there might even be rioting.”

“”.....””

“As doctors, you wouldn’t want a riot that broke out because of you to result in casualties, would you? Well, as king, I feel the same way. I can’t send you there.”

“Urgh...” Brad groaned.

“Fame has its price, huh?” Hilde complained.

They looked frustrated, but they were going to have to deal with it. I don’t want to say some lives were more important than others, but the fact is that some deaths have a lot more of an effect. As king, I had to do everything I could to keep losses to a minimum.

“You need to be patient. Ludia’s still little too.”

When I brought up the name of their child, they both had a moment of realization. They couldn't make an orphan of her. Still, they had a job to do as doctors. I could see the conflicted expression on their faces.

I bowed my head to the two of them.

"I want you here as my advisors. I'll give you all the information we have. And once specimens are available, I'll have them brought to you. So please, stay in the capital for now."

"Fine, I get it..." Brad said.

"I guess we've got no choice," Hilde agreed.

They didn't like it, but they accepted it. *That's a relief.*

# Chapter 6: For the Future We Must Protect

On the Father Island there was a city known as Min, where the rites of the Spirit Kingdom had once been carried out. It was a city of historical importance, and the stone building in the middle of it—reminiscent of the pyramids or Chichen Itza—had long since been a nest for the insect monsters. Still, once it had been liberated by a combined force of Fuuga's men and the Garlan Volunteer Force, they were able to use it as a key base. Being easily defensible and with a port nearby, it was obvious the city was going to be important. It was here that Bito, the former King of Gabi, had rushed ahead to claim the glory of retaking before he got surrounded and killed by monsters.

Now that the monsters were being extirpated from the Father Island, Min was to become the center of the island's recovery. Many people were gathered there, busily milling about. However, their faces were glum instead of filled with hope. The cause: a disease known as the Spirit King's Curse.

The "curse" was only contracted by warriors. First, the infected gradually lost the ability to use magic, and then healing magic ceased to work on them. Eventually, it would begin to affect the body, causing a variety of symptoms. Ultimately, this terrifying disease would result in death.

Countless warriors had already fallen to it on the Mother Island. Fuuga's forces hadn't even known the disease existed, and the members of the Garlan Volunteer Force didn't expect so many people would catch the disease on the Father Island either. Even if they'd been vaguely worried it was possible, they'd had no way to defend against it.

The high elves must have hoped that the disease only affected people on the Mother Island. But those hopes had been dashed. And here on the Father Island, an event would transpire that would shake the new people of the islands. It would be discovered that the commander-in-chief of their combined forces, Shuukin, had contracted the disease.

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"Oh! I'll bring this to him!" Elulu said, holding a tray in her hands. She was in

the kitchen of a mansion in Min that had once been used by members of the high elf royalty.

The faces of the high elves working in the kitchen contorted.

“Princess! Maybe you shouldn’t do that?”

“It’s dangerous! If anything were to happen to you...”

“Surely there’s no need for you to play at being a serving girl, Princess.”

Everyone seemed opposed, but Elulu smiled and shook her head. “Let me do this at least. He fought for our sakes, and this is about all I can do to repay him.”

“Princess...”

Everyone knew that the bright smile on her face was only to keep the atmosphere in the room from getting too dark. As they stared at her, at a loss for words, Elulu’s expression relaxed a bit.

“I’ll be going now,” she said cheerfully, and left with the tray.

She rushed to a room on the east side of the mansion. Stopping in front of it for a moment to make sure she looked presentable, she then knocked on the door.

“I’m coming in,” she said, holding the tray with one hand while opening the door with the other.

“Lord Shuukin, how are you feeling to... Ah!”

Elulu’s eyes went wide as she saw the inside of the room. The sick man who should have been lying in bed was not there; he was instead hanging vertically from the top of the frame of the open window.

“Hundred and one... Hundred and two...” he counted.

She stared at him, dumbstruck.

“Ah, yes... Those are some fine muscles between his wings... Wait, no!”

Elulu hastily laid the tray down on the table, and tried to pull Shuukin down from the window frame. However, between their weight difference and Shuukin’s firm grip, she couldn’t pry his fingers loose.

“You’re sick, so rest!”

“Oh, it’s Princess Elulu.”

Shuukin had been focusing on doing chin-ups, but when he noticed Elulu, he let go of the window frame and dropped to the ground. Caught off guard, Elulu fell on her bottom.

She rubbed her aching rear end and looked at him resentfully, but Shuukin didn’t seem to notice, and wiped his sweat with a towel.

“Whew... You should really stay away from me,” he said, smiling. “It’d be a problem if you caught what I’ve got.”

“I’ve never heard something so unconvincing before!”

He was probably cooling down. The way Shuukin spun his arms in circles, it was hard to imagine he was sick. Seeing him like this left Elulu exasperated.

“I don’t think anyone has caught this disease while caring for the sick. It probably doesn’t spread from person to person that way...but, no, before that, why can’t you stay put?!”

The reproachful look in Elulu’s eyes had no noticeable effect on Shuukin.

“I may not be at my best, but my body still works. So I’ve gotta keep up my training until I can’t move anymore or it’d reflect poorly on me as a warrior.”

“Just sit down, please!”

Elulu had Shuukin sit down, and laid a tray with gruel on his lap.

“It’s mealtime! Please eat!”

“Oh, okay. I understand.”

Seemingly intimidated by her intensity, Shuukin ate his gruel. As she watched, Elulu sighed, a sad look in her eyes.

“Lord Shuukin... How can you be so full of energy?”

“*Mmph...* Hmm? What do you mean?” he asked between bites of food.

“When warriors fall victim to the Spirit King’s Curse...most despair. The moment they catch it, they see the writing on the wall and give up on

everything... Some even end their own lives the same day... Wait, I guess I'm in no position to say this, though."

"Princess Elulu?"

"If we'd told you about this disease sooner, then maybe..."

Elulu shrunk into herself with regret. When he saw that, Shuukin shook his head.

"It's not your fault, is it? No one knows what causes the disease, so no one knew we could catch it on the Father Island as well."

"B-But still..."

"I have only myself to blame. After all the victories I've attained under Lord Fuuga, I'd grown so complacent that I didn't see the huge pitfall at my own feet. You never know where traps may lurk in this life. It's been a good lesson."

Hearing him say that, Elulu looked at him with surprise, and then envy.

"You're so strong, Lord Shuukin..."

"That's not true..."

"No, you're truly strong. How can you be so stout-hearted despite your illness?"

"Hrmm..." Shuukin crossed his arms in thought, a wooden spoon hanging out of his mouth. After a few seconds, he answered, "It's...probably because I don't think this is the end."

Elulu's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"Take a look at the message there." Shuukin nodded towards the bedside table.

"What is this?"

"A letter from Lord Fuuga."

"From Sir Fuuga? Is it all right for me to read it?"

"Yeah. There's nothing in there I shouldn't let you see."

"Oh, okay... So, what does Sir Fuuga say?" Elulu asked as she took the letter.

Shuukin smiled.

“In order to resolve this issue with the Spirit King’s Curse, he’s secured the full cooperation of King Souma of Friedonia.”

“Frie...donia?”

“It’s a huge country in the east of the continent. Until a few years ago there was nothing notable about it but its age. However, it has seen an unbelievable amount of progress since the new king took the throne. It was so impressive that it made Lord Fuuga wary of him, and he even sent his little sister Yuriga there to study.”

“Oh, I remember now. That’s the country that heads up the Maritime Alliance.”

Elulu recalled that her uncle had gone to the Kingdom of Friedonia for help at first. They had apparently used the Spirit Kingdom’s policies of high elf supremacy as a reason to refuse cooperation, however.

With his arms crossed, Shuukin said, “This is just me repeating what I’ve heard from Lord Fuuga, but Lady Yuriga’s letters tell us that that country’s progress in science and technology has been remarkable. And when it comes to medicine in particular, she says they’re decades ahead of us. People who aren’t light mages can provide treatment, and they’re even capable of curing diseases once thought impossible to treat with light magic.”

“They’re that far ahead?! That’s incredible... How great must the gap with our country be? We’ve remained shut off from the rest of the world for so long.”

With a wry smile at Elulu’s shock, Shuukin said, “And they’re going to help us. It’s still far too soon to give up hope, don’t you think?”

“I see.”

“Well, my one regret is that my failings have put my liege in King Souma’s debt. And I may have troubled Lady Yuriga as well.”

“That’s all the more reason you need to get better, then!” Elulu beamed, seeming to regain her cheer. “So long as you’re alive, you can show your gratitude to your liege, and repay his debt to that foreign king. But if you die,

you'll be nothing but an ingrate who never repaid his debt. So please, get better!"

"Pfft...! Ah ha ha ha ha!" Shuukin burst out laughing, amused by her enthusiasm.

Elulu couldn't help but chuckle too. The room was filled with such cheer that it was hard to imagine anyone there was sick at all.

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In a mansion in Parnam, two babies slept soundly in a crib in the living room. Their mothers were watching over them.

"Seein' 'em side-by-side like this, they look like twins. It's remindin' me of Cian and Kazuha," Roroa confided.

"You're right," Tia agreed. "If their hair colors weren't different, I might get them confused."

The two of them were sisters-in-law, and their pregnancies had been discovered at nearly the same time. Hilde had given them their regular checkups together, and they'd given birth at almost the same time too. They had recovered after giving birth by now, so Roroa often brought her baby to play at Julius and Tia's residence.

The doting mothers carried on.

"Leon's sleepin' with his mouth wide open. He's gonna be a big shot someday."

"Tius is so quiet. I sense Lord Julius's intelligence from him."

Roroa's son with Souma was Leon Amidonia, and Tia's son with Julius was Tius Lastania. Because they were both infants, Leon and Tius looked like two peas in a pod; but the thin wisps of hair on Leon's head were a dark brown, while Tius's hair was a light beige.

As the mothers looked lovingly at their children, the fathers watched them from a table a short distance away, where they were having a cup of tea.

"Those two are both mothers... It makes me rather emotional just thinking about it," Souma said between sips of tea. "You know...they don't look that

different from when I met either of them.”

“Well, after the age of sixteen, I suppose two or three years doesn’t make that big of a difference.”

“Emotionally, though, it absolutely does. They say men don’t grow that much after they have children, but when a woman gives birth, she becomes a new creature called a mother... Or so I’ve heard some people say.”

“You speak from experience?”

“We’re on our fourth, after all. I can’t even hold them off at this point.”

“Heh, you say that as if there were ever a period when you could,” Julius said teasingly.

“Oh, shove off,” Souma replied, shrugging his shoulders.

The two of them casually bantered while watching their beloved wives and children.

Would anyone who saw this peaceful scene be able to tell that these two men once led armies tens of thousands strong against each other in a battle to the death?

“Thank you for introducing us to Dr. Hilde,” Julius said, bowing. “It’s thanks to her that both mother and child are healthy.”

“Hilde’s the only one you need to thank. Even if I hadn’t introduced you, the Kingdom has plenty of midwives and gynecologists now. I think any of them could have helped you without it making much difference who you chose,” Souma said, waving his hand.

Julius nodded. “It’s certainly true that the Kingdom is ahead when it comes to medical systems.”

“Honestly, it’s a field I want us to expand in more and more. I think we still need more doctors and hospitals, but...that would also necessitate raising taxes, I’m sure.”

“It’s an important thing to do, but...I could see there being pushback from the people,” Julius crossed his arms and groaned.

“Yeah. I was just talking with Roroa about how maybe we should just throw the idea to the Congress of the People.”

“The Congress of the People... That was the body that collects and organizes requests for the king, right?”

The Congress of the People was attended by representatives of every race and social stature from every region of the country. They were like a suggestion box that allowed “the people’s voice” to reach the king. They only existed to make those voices heard, and it was up to the king whether to act on those requests or not.

However, if he ignored them too much, the king would lose the people’s support, and so he usually implemented the ones that were unlikely to cause him any problems. An example of this was the expansion of the broadcast programs.

“I think we’ll let the people decide whether they want taxes raised to fund an even more complete medical system,” Souma said.

With a somber look in his eyes, Julius shook his head. “They’ll reject it, without a doubt. People are shortsighted.”

“Well...yeah, you’re probably right. The education system has made it so more of the population can think for themselves, but they haven’t gotten to the point where we can make reforms that cut into their own livelihood.”

“Knowing the result, you still intend to leave it to the people?”

“There’s meaning in making them decide.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I’ve already factored in that it will be voted down several times,” Souma said, grinning. “But each time it is, we publicize that result to the people. A robust medical system is a necessity. As time goes by, the number of citizens who understand that will increase. There will be people out in the rural areas thinking, ‘If only my town had a doctor too,’ right? Well, once that happens...”

“...The people will force the congress to pass it, or some of the members will take up the fight in order to play to win their favor.”

I should've known Julius would get it. He was a sharp one, so if I gave him a hint, he'd figure out the rest himself.

"But aren't you being a little impatient? The people won't understand what you're trying to do here."

"I know... But, you see, Julius, I want the people to never stop thinking for themselves. If they take everything they hear, see, or are told at face value, then they'll never find out what's really true. Simplicity can be a virtue, but it also makes people susceptible to conspiracy theories. I don't want that to happen to my kingdom."

Souma sighed deeply.

"It'll help keep them from being taken in by Fuuga's faction too."

"Fuuga Haan?" Julius asked.

"You know how his charisma draws people to him? If Fuuga says, 'Naden is a white ryuu,' people will all agree. If he says, 'I can make your lives better,' people will want him to rule them even though he has nothing to back that claim up. If Fuuga says, 'That guy is evil,' people will hate that person."

"I think I see what you're getting at... All right. That's a move Hashim used to carve up the Union of Eastern Nations. Stir up resentment against the current administration, and draw the people in with Fuuga's charisma. We lost all of our refugee soldiers except for Jirukoma and those who stayed with him that way."

Julius winced at the memories that were brought back.

Souma nodded. "He may try the same thing in this country at some point. When he does, the situation will change depending on how much our people can think for themselves. Even if he tries to win them over with honeyed words, we need our people to be able to think, 'Is it really going to be that good?' and 'Is that person really as bad as Fuuga says he is?'"

"You're training the Congress of the People not to be susceptible to that sort of incitement then?" Julius let out a sigh that was half of admiration and half of dismay. "It's a roundabout method, but seems likely to work... How tiresomely roundabout though."

“You didn’t have to say roundabout twice. And is it that much of a bother?”

“I can imagine the pains Princess Liscia and Prime Minister Hakuya went through working with you for so long.”

“I get that a lot...” Souma replied with a wry smile.

Incidentally, after several rejections, this motion finally passed. The events to come and a certain person would be involved in that, however. When Souma saw the report, he may have said, “That went faster than I expected...” That’s enough of that digression.

There was a clink as Julius laid down his cup in its saucer.

“But before we think about the future, we need to think about *now*. What’s happening with the Spirit King’s Curse?”

“We’re still actively looking into that...” Souma answered after taking a sip of tea. “I’ve sent a medical team to the port city Fuuga gave us on the western coast, and they’re gathering information. First, they’re verifying what little we do know. Fuuga said it was a disease that primarily affects warriors, and not one that spreads from person to person. That seems to be correct.”

“That’s good... Or is it?”

“It’s hard to say. Because people are still coming down with the disease on the Father Island.” Souma wrapped his hands around his cup, looking down into it. “Now that we know the disease doesn’t spread from person to person, Hilde and Brad are asking to go there, but...”

“It’s still dangerous. You should stop them.”

“Yeah, I know. We can’t afford to lose them. I’m having them review all the information we get and come up with countermeasures... The best way to suppress their urge to do something rash is to keep them preoccupied.”

“True.”

“I also have Genia and her crew on the move as well.”

“Genia is...the chief of the Kingdom’s technical research department, right?”

“Mhm. I have them focused on the study of magicium now, and one of the

typical symptoms of the Spirit King's Curse is that it makes the people who contract it unable to use magic. If it's having some effect on the magicium in their bodies, that may give us some hint. I decided to have them cooperate on this."

Julius seemed taken aback for a moment. Souma cocked his head to the side.

"What is it?"

"Oh, I was just being reminded of how well-staffed the Kingdom is. No matter what you set out to do, you have the right personnel for the job and they can get to work right away. Honestly, you've created one terrifying country."

Souma smiled wryly at that.

"What're you talking about? You're one of us now."

"Me...?"

"We'll be doing more negotiations with Fuuga in the future. Hashim will be in the background scheming, no doubt. I'm not sure how well things will go without both you and Hakuya working together. Once you've settled down with your child, please come to work."

"Heh, you are my liege now. If that's your order, then I shall follow it."

As each smiled at the other, they got their cheeks sandwiched from both sides. Roroa and Tia, who had circled around behind their respective husbands, had each stuck their hands around their husbands' faces.

"Come on, darlin', big brother. What're you actin' so glum for?"

"She's right! It's awful you would ignore your adorable wives and children like this!"

"Ah! Sorry, Roroa."

"S-Sorry, Tia."

With their wives getting miffed at them, Souma and Julius were on the back foot.

"Oh my. I see you're all getting along well," came a sudden voice.

It was the gray-haired gentleman who had come to bring them a fresh pot of

tea. Manager of the apparel business called The Silver Deer, and public face of Roroa's company, Sebastian Silverdeer.

"It's only a matter of time before there are even more children, I see," Sebastian said with a smile, and Roroa nodded enthusiastically.

"Darn tootin'. I thought I was gonna die when I was givin' birth, but I already want another."

"M-Me too."

Seeing the expectant looks on their wives' faces, Souma and Julius looked at one another awkwardly. Sebastian watched it all with a smile.

"Father. Baby," said a slightly lisping voice next to the crib.

It was a girl of about three or four years old with the same hair as Sebastian. He walked over to her side and, lifting her up, made it so she could see the babies' faces better.

"Look, Flora. It's Lord Leon and Lord Tius."

"They're cute, father."

This smiling girl was Flora Silverdeer, Sebastian's daughter who had droopy eyes.

As he looked at them, Souma reaffirmed his resolve, thinking, *I have to do my best to protect these children's future.*

◇ ◇ ◇

There was a highway that connected the north of the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan and Parnam, the royal capital of the Kingdom of Friedonia. It was one long, continuous road, but it changed completely the moment you crossed from one country to the other.

The road on the Great Tiger Kingdom's side was just a dirt path trod down by people and their mounts, while the Kingdom of Friedonia's was much easier to use, being paved with Roman concrete and having monster-repelling trees placed at regular intervals to keep wild animals off of it. It was an eloquent demonstration of the difference in commitment to infrastructure between the two rulers.

A single man was on the road on the Kingdom of Friedonia side. His face was hidden by the hood he wore, and his steps were heavy. He walked almost like a prisoner with his legs bound.

And yet the man still didn't stop.

Eventually, he reached a small town in the mountains. He bought a small amount of food and wine there, then sat by the roadside to scarf it all down. The way he ate, it was like getting some nutrition was all that mattered.

"Hey, mister. You're not looking so hot," someone called out to the man.

It was a big man with great muscles and a bushy beard that seemed to be his defining feature. Honestly, he looked like nothing if not a bandit.

The hooded man cautiously grasped the dagger hidden inside his robe as he replied, "I'm afraid I don't have anything on me at the moment..."

"Huh?" the bearded man looked blankly at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. "It's been a while since anyone talked to me like that. If you don't know me, then... You're not from around here, are you, I take it? You a traveler?"

It seemed the bearded man wasn't hostile. The hooded man let go of his dagger.

"Ahh... You could say that... You're not a bandit then?"

"You've got me all wrong. Don't worry, I'm not gonna rob you. The king'd get mad."

The bearded man thumped his chest with one hand.

"I'm part of the mountain rescue team around these here parts... Wait, if you're from out of the country, you wouldn't know about us, huh? Our job is to look for people who get stuck in the mountains, or who disappeared there, and rescue them."

"I've never heard of a job like that... And? Did you have some business with me?" the hooded man asked cautiously, but the bearded man shrugged.

"Sure do. You're obviously not looking too hot. I thought I'd check and see if you were all right."

“Could I ask you to leave me alone...?”

“No can do, I’m afraid. If you drop dead in my area, I’m gonna get all sorts of questions from the higher-ups and be forced to fill out a ton of reports. That’s too much trouble, so would you let me help you before it comes to that?” the bearded man said jokingly.

It was a harsh way to put it, but you could sense his concern.

The hooded man rose to his feet, putting a hand on a wall for support. “I appreciate your kindness. However, I...have a place I must go.”

“Go? Where’re you going in that state?”

“To the capital of this country, Parnam.”

The hooded man started walking, but was unsteady even with one hand on the wall for support. Then his legs gave out beneath him.

“Careful!” the bearded man instantly reacted by supporting him with those thick arms of his.

“You’re tripping all over yourself. There’s a big hospital just a little ways from here. I’ll take you there, so let them have a look at you.”

“What’s a...hospital?”

“It’s where doctors—uh, think of them as medicine men or light mages, only more amazing. Even without light magic, they can treat wounds and diseases that’re hard to treat with magic. Government-backed hospitals are cheap too.”

“Diseases too...? Is the Kingdom’s medicine that advanced? While we shut ourselves away, the outside world changed... What a mistake...” the hooded man said in a self-derisive tone.

The bearded man looked at him quizzically, but the hooded man shook his head.

“I know my own body better than anyone. Even these ‘doctors’ of yours can’t save me.”

“Huh?! It’s that bad?!”

“I don’t have long left. I must go to Parnam as soon as possible. For my

homeland... To do everything I can do with the life I have left.”

The hooded man reached out in the direction of Parnam. The bearded man scratched his head as he watched, then scooped the hooded man up in his arms.

“Cripes. Looks like I don’t got much choice... Whoa, buddy, you’re way too light!”

“Wh-What are you doing...?”

“I already got myself into this. Can’t back out now. I’m a public servant. I’ll contact my superiors and ask if they can take you to the capital.”

“Are you sure...?”

“They’re the ones who’ll decide. For now, just rest.”

The bearded man walked, carrying the hooded man. As he did, the hood fell back. The emaciated face it revealed was that of an elf. The bearded man’s eyes widened.

“You were an elf?”

The de-hooded man didn’t respond.

“Oh, yeah, you never did give your name, did you? I’m Gonzales. You?”

“Gerula Garlan... If you give them my name, I’m sure they’ll figure out the rest.”

# Chapter 7: In the Name of Mankind —The Royal Capital, Parnam— “Gerula has come,” I said as flatly as possible.

Gathered around me in the governmental affairs office were Liscia, Hakuya, and Yuriga. Because Liscia and I have been together a long time now, she gulped, realizing from my expression that the circumstances were extraordinary this time.

“He’s the envoy who came from the Spirit Kingdom, right?” she asked on behalf of the group.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “And apparently he was infected with the Spirit King’s Curse.”

“Ah! The disease you promised Sir Fuuga you’d help fight?”

“Oh, no... Are you saying he brought it to this country?” Yuriga asked.

I nodded slowly.

“It would mean that, yes. The medical teams I sent to the port town, and Hilde and Brad who’ve read their reports, tell me it doesn’t spread from person to person though.”

“I-I see... Okay then,” Yuriga said, relieved.

That was our one salvation. We’d be in serious trouble if this disease spread between people via air, droplets, or contact. *If that had happened... I don’t think I’d be able to forgive Gerula for it.* If someone close to me died of this disease, even if it was inevitable, I would have resented the Spirit Kingdom and the high elves.

I took a deep breath to quell my anger before continuing.

“Still, we don’t exactly know how the disease works. It seems to happen as a result of fighting monsters, but we can’t be certain. The reasoning behind becoming unable to use magic is unclear too. Because of all these unknowns, we can’t rule out person-to-person transmission.”

“That’s true...” Liscia agreed. “So? Where is Sir Gerula now?”

“In a town near the border. I’ve sent an envoy to collect him, and he’ll be quarantined in a facility run by the state outside the castle walls. I intend to have the envoy and Gonzales quarantine at home for a week following this. We’ll also ask around in the places he’s been, and see how much contact people had with him... Yuriga.”

As I called her name, Yuriga jumped and stood up straight.

“Y-Yes!”

“Gerula must have come into our country through our border with the Great Tiger Kingdom. It seems he was taken into custody soon after, so I doubt he went many places on our side of the border, but...on your side, that can’t be true. I’ll relay what he tells us of his route here, so please ask Fuuga to investigate.”

“O-Okay. I’ll definitely let him know.”

While Yuriga was somewhat shaken, she put her hands together in front of her and bowed her head.

“I’m counting on you, Yuriga.”

“Sire, Sir Gerula is seeking an audience with you. Will you see him?” Hakuya asked.

Scratching my head, I replied, “I’ve got to meet him, right? There are a ton of things he needs to tell us, and some of them will require me to make decisions as king.”

“That’s...worrisome,” Liscia said, her expression pained.

It killed me to see her like that, but I still had to go. For her sake, and the children’s as well.

“I intend to take every precaution against infection, of course. But we have Enju and Leon who were only just born, Juna and Roroa who are still weak from giving birth, and Cian and Kazuha who are still little. I’ll be self-quarantining in some corner of the castle after I meet with Gerula.”

Having a big, sprawling castle was useful at a time like this. If I used my

Factory Arms, I could do my work without ever meeting anyone. It'd be lonely not being able to see my family though...

Chuckling, Liscia cupped my face in her palms.

"Then maybe I should touch you while I still can."

"Uh, no, can you wait till we're done here? Hakuya and Yuriga are watching."

I glanced over at them. Hakuya looked like he was done with this nonsense, and Yuriga was looking away, a little red. *Awkward...*

Peeling Liscia's hands off of me gently, I ordered, "Hakuya, contact Hilde and Brad. They'll be seeing Gerula, I'm sure."

"Is that all right?"

"I promised to tell them anything we discovered. If the patients come to us, I can't *not* let them see him. We want all the information we can get, after all."

"Understood."

And with this, the Kingdom made preparations to take in Gerula.

◇ ◇ ◇

Some days later, I received a report that Gerula Garlan had arrived at the facility (or quarantine site, rather) that we had prepared for him. Once I had accounted for everything I could think of, I went there to meet him.

This time, I had refused to allow my usual guards, Aisha and Naden, to accompany me. Instead, I brought two of the Black Cats. Aisha was really against letting me go without her, but I didn't want any more of my family having to quarantine, so she had to put up with it for now.

When I arrived at the facility, my guards and I donned cloth masks and disinfected our hands with alcohol at the entrance. In my old world, there would have been non-woven masks and protective suits, but this was the best we could manage in this country currently.

Once we were inside, they led us to Hilde and Brad, who had arrived ahead of time to examine Gerula.

Incidentally, their daughter Ludia had been deposited at the castle's nursery

with Tomoe's mother for safekeeping. When I met them in what looked like an examination room, they seemed troubled. I asked them about Gerula's condition.

"I can't believe he crossed the continent in this state. He could have collapsed at any point," Hilde said with a face that said, *Is he stupid?*

"That bad, huh?"

"It's more than just bad! In the state he's in...he could die any second."

"Under that robe, he was practically just skin and bones," Brad, who was resting his back against the wall, said. "He's living pretty much on force of spirit alone. Once it comes this far...frankly, there's nothing we can do."

"It's that bad..."

"This is why I hate warriors. They don't value life, even when it's their own," Hilde complained, a sad look in her eyes.

She was feeling the frustration of being unable to save her patient. *But...I don't understand.*

"If he's in such bad shape, why come here? Did he think our medicine would be able to cure him or something?" I asked, but they both lowered their eyes.

"I think...it's better you hear that from him yourself," Hilde said.

"Yeah," Brad agreed. "It's not for us to say."

I decided to meet with Gerula in his room on the east side of the facility. Knocking and entering, the first thing I saw was a sheet of glass bisecting the room. On one side was the entrance door while the other contained his bed. There was another door that allowed people to traverse between both sections. *This seems like a prison visitation room.*

As I walked in, Gerula was sitting in bed, gazing out the window. I sat on a chair nearby, and he slowly made his way over to me.

There was none of the suffering of a diseased man; no lamentation of his fate in his expression. He had the look of a man who had accepted everything. It reminded me of former General of the Army Georg Carmine when he was in prison.

“Sir Gerula.”

“Sir Souma.”

We addressed one another. It felt a lot different from when we’d first met. There was no arrogance from him now. If anything, he came off as quiet and meek.

As I struggled to decide where to start, Gerula bowed his head.

“It’s been some time since we last parted... I’m glad to see you.”

“Glad, huh? Can’t say I feel the same. You did drag a disease in here, after all.”

“I apologize. The circumstances are very much regrettable.”

“Is it the Spirit King’s Curse?”

“Yes. That is what I am afflicted with,” he replied, looking straight into my eyes.

It didn’t seem like he had some secret motive here, or any hint of darkness about him.

I rested my elbow on the armrest as I said, “You’ve changed a lot since I first met you. Back then, you were more...”

“Arrogant?”

“Well...yeah. You didn’t seem suited to negotiating.”

“I was immature. Even after living more than a century. And so was my country...” With a smile too peaceful to call self-mocking, Gerula shook his head. “However, I can understand my immaturity now. When I sensed the final stage approaching and reflected on myself...I thought, ‘How immature I’ve been.’”

“The final stage... You’re talking about your symptoms?” I asked, and Gerula nodded.

“I have seen many die of the same disease. And I know my own body better than anyone. I’m sure I don’t have much time left... We high elves may be long-lived, but it means nothing in the face of such a disease.”

He sensed his impending death. *Does this peace come from his acceptance of*

*it?* I decided to ask him what I'd asked Hilde before.

"Why did you come to this country? Was it because you thought we could treat you here?"

At this, Gerula silently shook his head.

"No. Despite incurring this disease for so long, we still have yet to figure out what causes it. I can't imagine you have the medicine to treat it here where it doesn't even occur."

"Then why?"

"I thought that even if you don't have it now, if anywhere was going to make a cure, it would be this country. To that end, I came here to do what I can with this body and life of mine."

Gerula pointed at a table. On it, there was a single letter. *Is he telling me to read it?* Walking over, I picked up the letter and read through it.

"Huh?!"

I was speechless. *This is... It's just...*

After a few seconds, I managed to say, "Are you...in your right mind?"

"I will donate my body to researching this disease." Gerula nodded. "I don't have much life left in me, but I will cooperate with any sort of examination or medical experiment. And when I am dead, I wish for you to dissect my body, and discover the true nature of this disease. That letter is written permission for you to do with my body as you see fit. It bears the signatures of both myself and Spirit Kingdom King Garula."

In other words, we had royal assent to perform an autopsy on him. Like he was a lab rat or guinea pig.

*This is what Hilde and Brad didn't want to talk about...*

"Why go...so far?"

"Because I saw this country for myself," Gerula said with a slight smile. "You have things here that others don't. Well-maintained roads, recreational broadcasts, foods I've never seen, songs I've never heard...and people who

welcome and celebrate all of these new things. I was surprised at first. While the Spirit Kingdom has been closed off, so much new culture has been born in the outside world."

I remained silent, allowing Gerula to continue.

"At the same time, I envied it. *Resented* it. Back then, I thought the perspective of the Spirit Kingdom was everything, and these shallow things were ill-suited to us high elves... I was too narrow-minded. If I'd been more flexible and accepting, I could have built a better relationship with your country, and requested your assistance with fighting this disease more sincerely."

"Sir Gerula..."

Getting back to the topic at hand, he shook his head.

"It's much too late now... I'm just trying to say that I sensed these new things, and...perhaps the ability to develop a cure for the Spirit King's Curse may be something that only this country has. That's why I thought I'd offer my body to help your research. And now that I've returned to your country, I am certain of it. Sir Gonzales told me about your doctors and hospitals. I think your country can give my death meaning."

"Oh, I see now."

A death not in vain; that was what Gerula wanted. It was why he pushed on to return to this country despite his disease. He did so in hope that, with his life, he could save those of his countrymen. You could even say that he came to this country to die.

I let out a small sigh. I couldn't approve of his decision to cast his life away. But still, I wasn't so cold-blooded that I could tell him that.

"Fine. Let's do it your way," I told him, and Gerula reacted with obvious delight.

"Ooh, thank you so much."

"I'm sure you've met them by now, but Hilde and Brad are the best doctors our country has to offer. This may not be much condolence, but...between your body and their abilities, I'm confident we can find a solution to this disease."

Gerula nodded firmly at that.

“I believe so too.”

“Well... I’ll be going now.”

I rose from my seat. *This is probably the last time I’ll ever see him alive.* I sensed that keenly as I looked at him.

“If you have anything you want, just tell the people here. I’ll tell them to grant your wishes to the degree we’re able.”

“Thank you for your consideration. Please be well.”

“Yeah... May your stay here be as long and peaceful as possible.”

And with that, I left Gerula’s room.

It wasn’t long after that I received word of his death. Mankind’s advances in the field of medicine were a constant repetition of this sort of thing. Those involved in the field studied out of a desire to save as many people as possible. Those who fell to the disease hoped that at least their death would not be in vain, and wished for a world where others wouldn’t die the same way. In many cases, with the donation of the patient’s body, things became clear, and a path to a cure was found.

We could fight the disease, crossing the boundary between physician and patient, and between countries as well.

Yes, in the name of mankind.

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After weakening day after day, Gerula awoke, unable to tell day from night any longer, and saw a woman standing on the opposite side of his room.

Clear white skin. Sharp ears. Red eyes. These were the traits of a high elf.

“Why...is there a high elf here?”

“Oh... You’re awake.”

Approaching the glass, the woman said, “I never expected to meet one of my kind in this country.”

“Who are you?” Gerula asked, and the woman pressed a hand to her chest and bowed slightly.

“I am Merula Merlin. One who broke the taboo of leaving the island.”

“Ah...I see. So you’re Merula.”

A complicated expression crossed Gerula’s face, but it quickly passed and his features slackened.

“That’s right. I’d heard you were in the Kingdom...”

“Yes. For the past few years.”

“And? What are you doing here?”

“Hilde called me here. She wanted a healthy high elf’s blood to study the Spirit King’s Curse. And you and I are the only high elves in this country.”

She had actually been asked for saliva and urine samples as well, but being a woman, Merula didn’t mention that.

Gerula took a long breath.

“I see... I’m sorry to trouble you.”

“Tell me about it,” Merula said, resting her hand softly on the glass. “To think you’d push yourself to come here in that state...”

“I thought this country was the only place that could discover a cure. And Merula... Your presence made me sure of it.”

“I’m not a doctor or anything of the sort, you realize?”

“An eccentric like you is able to live normally here. That fact alone lets me sense this country’s academic efforts,” Gerula said with a small smile. “After you left the country, the number of young people who aspired to be like you increased, and we struggled to suppress them. But looking back at it now...you may have been right. While our country was closed, the outside world has advanced so much.”

Merula smiled wryly and shrugged.

“This country has advanced too much, so it’s not quite right to use them as your benchmark.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure our country must change...” Gerula said, and Merula lowered her eyes.

“I left our home during the reign of the previous king. He had two sons; the elder Garula was a warrior, and the younger Gerula was brave and wise. Your brother has inherited the throne now, right? Do you think he can change?” Merula asked.

Gerula nodded with a peaceful expression. “It won’t be a problem. Garula isn’t a stubborn man with nothing but power now.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes... That girl, Princess Elulu is wise too... The Spirit Kingdom will be fine...”

Gerula’s consciousness was blurring, and his eyelids looked ready to fall at any moment.

“Sir Gerula!”

“Merula... See this through to the end... The end of the disease...”

As Merula watched, the strength faded from Gerula’s body. All that remained was an empty face, set free from all pain and responsibility.

Sensing what had happened, a tear streamed down Merula’s cheek. Wiping it away, she pressed her hand to the glass and said, “Good night, Gerula.”

# Chapter 8: Investigation

One week later...

Hilde and Brad came to the governmental affairs office to report on how things had turned out. For some reason, Merula was also with them.

The quarantine period had ended for those involved at this point. People had been investigating Gerula's route in the meantime, but there were no new infections in the country. Even Gonzales, who had clearly had contact with him, was fine. This all seemed to indicate that this disease really didn't pass from person to person.

Liscia and Hakuya joined up shortly, then Hilde first explained how Gerula had died, and how Brad had performed an autopsy in accordance with his will. While it had been at his request and signed off on by the Spirit Kingdom King, it still felt...awful.

Unable to bear the silence, I asked, "His death wasn't in vain, right?"

Hilde nodded. "Of course not. We learned many things from his body. Including how pernicious this disease is."

"Well...that's good then. And what of his body?"

"We secured the samples we needed, and I embalmed him," Brad answered. "Externally, it should be in good condition. I'd like you to return it to the bereaved."

"It's an infected corpse, right? Don't we need to cremate it?"

"This isn't the kind of disease where someone could get the infection from a cadaver. It shouldn't be a problem."

"Oh, yeah? Did you find something out then?"

Hilde and Brad both nodded with pensive looks on their faces.

"Between how Sir Gerula had described his symptoms to us and what Brad found from investigating his body, there were discrepancies in our findings. Simply put, what Sir Gerula felt and was *actually* happening didn't always

match.”

“What does that mean exactly?”

“This disease has many symptoms, but...” Hilde started, flipping through some papers she was holding.

*Probably clinical records.*

“Ah! Here’s an example,” she continued. “He said he was itching or had stabbing pains in his skin. If you went purely by what he told me, I would have assumed it was some kind of toxic reaction.”

“Wait, like he’d been poisoned?”

*It isn’t a disease? If this is because of a monster’s poison, that would explain why it only affected warriors...*

“No, we can’t say that for certain. In my investigation, I found nothing wrong with his skin. It was the organs that had taken the real damage. I feel like the symptoms are close to those of a parasitic infestation,” Brad added.

Hilde nodded. “In the interview, it seemed like poisoning of some sort. When we examined the body, it looked more like a parasitic infestation. That being the case, we should assume both were happening at the same time. The parasites inside his body were releasing some kind of poison.”

“Which means...what we need isn’t an antidote, but a deworming medicine. If we don’t deal with the parasites, we can’t solve the fundamental problem,” I said, but Brad shook his head.

“A dewormer isn’t going to cut it. That only works when the bugs are in the digestive organs anyway. Unfortunately, I didn’t find any there.”

“Huh? Where were they, then?”

“That’s what we brought Merula here to explain,” Hilde said, ushering her forward.

“Sir Souma. You asked Genia to investigate magicium, right? I know because I was there at the time.”

“Ah, yes, that’s true.”

When the possibility arose that magicium was nanomachines, I had asked Genia and Merula to prioritize researching curse ore, which might be a mass of them.

“Healing magic is the work of nanomachines inside the body. When I heard that idea, I had questions, and Genia and I talked about it. If the magicium or nanomachines is inside the body, where is it?”

“*Where*?”

“I think that the smaller they are, the less impactful they can be. In order for something small to exert a large power, it would take a large number of them gathering together. In order to heal wounds, the magicium in the body would need to be gathered quickly. In other words, there needs to be some kind of large path. And if we’re talking about pathways laid out across the entire body...”

Merula slapped her hand down on a diagram of the human body she had prepared.

“The blood vessels. Magicium is flowing through our blood. That’s my and Genia’s idea.”

“I see...”

*Nanomachines circulate through the body in the bloodstream, huh?* Depending on how you look at it, the idea of a foreign object like nanomachines in your bloodstream could be chilling, but if this world was in the far future, maybe it was possible.

Merula continued, “And now we have this disease, the Spirit King’s Curse. It makes the infected unable to use magic, and causes healing magic to no longer work on them. This could be seen as having an effect on the magicium in their body. And we believe that magicium is in the bloodstream.”

“So, basically, the bugs are in their blood,” Hilde concluded, pulling out two little bottles containing dark red liquid. “One is Sir Gerula’s blood, violated by the Spirit King’s Curse. The other is Madam Merula’s healthy blood. With my third eye, I was able to see bugs squirming around.”

*Bugs in the blood... Ah!*

“Like blood flukes or rat lungworms!”

“What are those?” Liscia asked.

“They caused endemic diseases in the world I came from. The parasites entered the body through the skin, lived and bred in the blood vessels, eventually eating away at their host until the person died... It’s a horrible disease. There are definitely parasites that can live in the blood vessels.”

Merula nodded at my explanation. “I don’t know the specific case you’re talking about, but if you say that bugs in the blood could be affecting magicium, I can understand how that might cause poisoning symptoms. If magicium is so small even the three-eyed race can’t see it, then we don’t know what it’s made of. And if they lose their proper function and become foreign bodies floating through the body...”

“That can’t be good for us, yeah.”

I was kind of convinced. I didn’t know what the nanomachines would be made of, but if it was metal, leaving it to float through the body could cause a toxic reaction.

*There’s a history of cadmium causing itai-itai disease, and organic mercury causing Minamata disease too...* It was still vague, but we were starting to see the full picture of the Spirit King’s Curse here. *No, wait...*

“If you knew what the parasites were, couldn’t you treat them, Hilde?”

I seemed to recall that if we knew what the nature of the parasites was and the damage they were doing, it was supposed to be possible to treat them with light magic. And she might be targeted by theocracies as a result.

Ever since I’d received that report, I had given the light mages who wanted to become doctors in our country medical training, and worked to increase the number of people who could do the same things as Hilde. While it was still secret, their numbers were steadily rising.

Hilde shook her head in disappointment. “Even with my magic, I couldn’t treat Gerula.”

“It seems most likely that Madam Hilde’s magic uses the magicium inside the

body to eliminate parasites. Once that magicium has been rendered inactive by the bugs...I think there's nothing left that we can do," Merula explained.

"I see..."

*It was too late for Gerula, then, huh? No... But still...*

"If they still have limited symptoms, couldn't we save them? If the magicium in their body still works, couldn't it be used to eliminate the parasites?"

"Yes. It's possible," Merula agreed with my speculation.

Gerula's death wasn't in vain by any stretch. I felt like we were seeing the light at the end of the tunnel now.

"So, Your Majesty!" Hilde suddenly moved up real close to me. "In order to confirm that, would you let us go where the patients are?"

Seeing how serious she was, I scratched my head.

I understood how she felt, and I saw the necessity. *When I consider the risk of anything happening to the two of them, I can't give my assent so easily.*

"We understand how you feel, but we cannot allow that," Hakuya said as I was thinking about it. "You are the two leaders of the Kingdom's medical world. It would be a great loss if anything were to happen to either of you. What if there was an outbreak here while you were away? You wouldn't be able to treat it, Madam Hilde."

Hilde was quick with a retort.

"That will be fine. One of the king's key policies has been to increase the number of people who can cure parasitic diseases with light magic the way I can. I'll explain everything about these bugs before I go, so even if there is an outbreak here, they should be able to treat it."

"But—"

"No, in this case, I think we should do as Hilde says," I said, cutting off Hakuya, now that I had my thoughts sorted out.

Hakuya stared into my eyes.

"Are you sure that's all right, sire?"

“With a disease like this, our first steps will be crucial. We couldn’t be careless before we knew the nature of it, but now Hilde and the others have figured it out. If we know what we’re up against, we should deploy everything we have and try to wrap things up as soon as possible.”

If you mess up the initial response, you’ll constantly be on the back foot. That was something the history of my past world had taught me.

Hilde and Brad nodded firmly.

“The king’s got it right,” Hilde said. “Time’s our enemy in the fight against a disease like this.”

“Yeah,” Brad agreed. “Fortunately, now that we know what type of disease it is, we can keep the people treating it safe. Black-robed Prime Minister... Could you leave this to Hilde and I?”

At this, Hakuya finally gave in and nodded.

“I understand. I lack the knowledge to handle medical issues to begin with, so I will defer to your and His Majesty’s opinions.”

“Sorry, Hakuya. You had to make the objection because I was slow to decide,” I confided.

“Don’t worry about it. That’s the prime minister’s job.”

And so, it was decided that Hilde and Brad would go to the site. Once they were prepared, I’d send them first to the port city that Fuuga had given us, and then have him help get them to the Father Island.

“The question is who to send with them...”

“Don’t tell me you’re planning to go too, Souma?” Liscia asked, looking incredibly worried.

In order to wipe away her concerns, I put my hands on her shoulders and silently shook my head.

“No, I can’t go with them right now. It would let me make political decisions on the spot if they become necessary, but...I think there’s other stuff I’ll need to be doing. Things only I can do, probably.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. But, like I was saying, I want to send our best team. So, for a start, I want Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga there.”

“Tomoe...” she gasped, shocked. “You’re sending the children?! Isn’t it way too dangerous?!”

With a stern expression, I nodded and said, “Yeah. I know it’s dangerous. But... Hilde, since this disease only affects warriors, you theorized that it came from the monsters they fought, right?”

When I turned the question to her, Hilde nodded.

“Huh? Oh, yes, that’s right. When you consider that the parasites live in their blood, I think that contact with monster blood is what causes the infection. It’s possible that the parasites entered through their skin after all the spatter from slashing and stabbing monsters got on their bodies.”

“In that case, to prevent the spread of the infection, we’ll want to know what monsters—no, if we think using the MPI system, it might be better to ask ‘the monsters with what part.’ We need to figure out the answer immediately. To that end, Ichiha’s knowledge as a monster specialist, along with Tomoe’s ability, will be effective tools.”

“I get that, but...why Yuriga?” Liscia asked.

“We’re sending them to Fuuga’s territory, after all,” I said, scratching my head. “If his little sister is around, that should keep his people in check. Even if some of the men are uncooperative because they look down on the kids, she’ll be able to keep them in line. And if the opposite happens—like if someone who understands Ichiha’s value tries to kidnap him—they won’t be able to take drastic measures that would risk angering Yuriga.”

“I see... So you’ve thought this through...” Liscia seemed to understand it intellectually, but was still worried.

“I’ll send bodyguards for the kids too, of course... Hakuya.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure there’s going to be the need for someone to make political decisions

over there. Would you go, and chaperone the kids while you're at it?"

Hakuya seemed a little surprised when I asked that.

"Me?"

"I'm uneasy about sending my prime minister to the site of an epidemic, but could I ask you to handle it?"

"If that is your command, sire. It's certainly true that if one of us goes to the site, we can avoid any delays in decision making. However, you were just saying there are things you'll need to do. Is it all right for me to be away from the castle?"

"Yeah, that won't be a problem. Er, well... It'd be reassuring to have you here, but I can use Julius as a sounding board too. Let's have everyone do what they're best suited for."

"Very well. I'll accept the job."

*Good. The team's been decided then.*

"Well then. Hilde, Brad, and the team of doctors made up of their apprentices will be going to the port city on the west coast together with Prime Minister Hakuya and the three kids, Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga. Inugami and some other Black Cats will be going as bodyguards too. Oh! What about Hilde and Brad's daughter? Do you want us to take care of her here at the castle?"

Hilde and Brad looked at one another before shaking their heads.

"There's no telling when we'll be able to come back. We'll take Ludia with us, I think," Hilde said.

"If we take the right precautions, we can minimize the risk of infection, after all," Brad agreed.

*Looks like they'll be taking her along.* Ludia was about a year older than Cian and Kazuha. They'd probably be worried about leaving her with us too long. If that was their decision, I was fine with it.

*Now, with all this hashed out... It's time for those of us staying behind here to get to work.*

“Liscia. Send an emergency messenger to Julius and have him report to the castle for duty.”

“At the house of the Lastanian royal family, right? I’ll get that done.”

“And Hakuya, before you go, contact Kuu in the Republic and Shabon in the Archipelago Union to set up a broadcast meeting.”

“Understood.”

Okay, that was our general policy more or less set. I rose and said, “All right, everybody, let’s give this everything we’ve got.”

“““Yeah!”””

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Roughly another week later...

*Whoosh... Rattle... Woosh... Rattle...*

“It’s the sea...”

“It sure is...”

Tomoe and Yuriga were standing together on the pier in the port town given by the Great Tiger Kingdom. They could hear the sound of the waves, and small boats moored nearby shaking as they rose and fell on them.

Yuriga spread her wings and flapped them.

“I like looking at the sea, but I hate the sea breeze. I felt the same way in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago too. My wings feel all sticky.”

“Jeez, Yuriga. We’re not here to play around, you know?”

“Yeah, I know... So, where’s Ichiha gone?”

“Gathering information on the monsters with Mr. Hakuya. They say they want to find out what monster’s causing this. They’re hoping to have some ideas before we go to the Father Island.”

Yuriga grinned at Tomoe’s explanation. “Well, your ability isn’t so useful until we go where the monsters actually are, huh?”

“Murgh... You say that, but you’ve got nothing to do either.”

“I’m doing my job just by standing right here. It’s what your brother asked me to do.”

Before their departure, Souma called Yuriga aside and asked her to keep a keen eye on Tomoe and Ichiha and protect them to make sure that none of Fuuga’s men mistreated them. At the time, she’d asked, “So, um... If anything does happen to them, what will happen to me?”

“Well...if anything does, I won’t be able to let you stay in this country anymore. We might get into a head-on confrontation with Fuuga’s country over it, after all.”

“Y-You’d go that far...”

“Well, I’m trusting it won’t come to that though,” Souma replied curtly.

His eyes didn’t give off the usual laid-back impression. They were the eyes of a king who wouldn’t hesitate to let his power do the talking. Yuriga understood quite well how much he cared for his family, and just how much laying a hand on any of them would enrage him.

“R-Right! Obviously, I’ll look after them for you. I still want to learn here, and I don’t want to be chased out either.”

That answer had made Souma mellow out.

With a slight bow to Yuriga, who was younger than him, and a lower social stature, he said, “Please take care of them.”

Yuriga sighed as she remembered this.

*I still want to stay in his country, huh? Just how long will all this be able to last?*

She wasn’t as good a student as Ichiha or Tomoe, but Yuriga was cleverer than her years showed, and knew exactly what position she was in. She’d likely be able to stay with them until she graduated from the academy. But what about after that? What would happen to her then?

Yuriga was one of Fuuga’s few relatives. As the younger sister of a king, it was easy to see she’d be used in a political marriage. That was a given for the royal families of this world, and Yuriga agreed it was only natural. But...she had to

wonder where she'd be married off to. Who Fuuga saw as his enemies and allies would likely change that.

Yuriga glanced at Tomoe.

This girl would no doubt be putting down roots in the Kingdom of Friedonia. Based on the way she was acting lately, she might take Ichiha as her husband. Lucy and Velza would likely live in this country too.

*When the time comes, where will I be, and who will I be with?* When she thought about it, frustration welled up inside her. *What am I even thinking about...?*

If she'd just blurt it all out, maybe it would be easier for her. But she couldn't tell Tomoe. Their positions were too different, and moreover...it just rubbed her the wrong way.

*If I'm looking for someone in a similar position... Oh!* Suddenly, someone flashed through Yuriga's mind. A lovely lady who had married the current king for political reasons, but still shone brilliantly even now. Tomoe's adopted big sister. *When we get back...I think I'll talk to her about it...*

Suddenly, a voice called out, "Ship's coming!"

Looking out to sea, Yuriga could see the sails.

"They're here, Yuriga."

"I know. We're going to go greet them."

The two of them hadn't just been killing time at the pier. Today, the first batch of patients from the Father Island was arriving, and they had been tasked with greeting them.

"They're all people with relatively light symptoms, right?" Tomoe asked and Yuriga nodded.

"Yes. And those in positions of leadership in the military. Without them, their units won't function, so..."

As the large ship arrived, Yuriga thought, *Sir Shuukin must be on this ship.*

The ship landed, and Tomoe and Yuriga rushed to its side. The "cargo" was

already being unloaded. Stretchers with four handles were being lowered from the side of the ship by rope.

“We’ve got sick men on there! Easy does it!” an energetic young woman shouted up above.

Tomoe and Yuriga looked up to see a beautiful woman with clear white skin and pointy ears standing there.

“An elf?” Tomoe wondered.

“Must be one of those high elves from the Spirit Kingdom, right?” Yuriga replied.

As the two were talking, the elf woman jumped down from the ship. Despite the height, she landed agilely and stood in front of the two surprised girls.

“Children? We’re unloading the patients, so you should stay a—wait...you have wings.”

The elf woman’s eyes widened. Yuriga was miffed about being treated like a child, putting her hands on her hips and puffing out her chest.

“I am Yuriga, younger sister of Great Tiger King Fuuga. And this is Tomoe, adopted sister of King Souma of Friedonia.”

“H-Hi,” Tomoe stammered with an awkward smile.

The elf woman reacted with surprise and hurriedly bowed. “Ah! I-I apologize! I am Elulu, daughter of Spirit Kingdom King Garula! I apologize for treating you so rudely when I didn’t know you were foreign princesses!”

“Um, it’s okay... You don’t have to be so polite. You’re a princess too, Ms. Elulu,” Tomoe said. She wasn’t fond of being treated so reverently.

“R-Really?” Elulu raised her head.

Yuriga’s anger seemed to have subsided by this point, and she asked, “So, Madam Elulu. Is Sir Shuukin aboard this ship?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. If you’re looking for Lord Shuukin...”

“I’m right here, Lady Yuriga.”

A hand reached out of the stretcher that had just been lowered, and it waved

to the three of them. Yuriga rushed over, and there was Shuukin, looking much paler than the last time she saw him.

“Sir Shuukin...”

“Ah ha ha... It’s been a while, Lady Yuriga. I’m glad that you seem to be well. Sorry you have to see me like this.”

“No... Don’t be...”

Shuukin was acting cheerful, but his expression couldn’t fully hide the fact that he was suffering.

Yuriga didn’t know what to say. As she struggled for words, someone planted their hands on her shoulders. Turning to look, she saw it was Tomoe, who nodded with a soft smile on her face.

Looking at Shuukin over Yuriga’s shoulder, Tomoe said, “Hello, Mr. Shuukin. I’m Yuriga’s friend, Tomoe.”

“Sir Souma’s little sister. I remember seeing you at a distance during the demon wave. I apologize for causing the men and women of the Kingdom of Friedonia trouble because of my own shortcomings this time.”

“Don’t say that! You did a great job as my brother’s representative!” Yuriga protested, and Elulu emphatically agreed.

“That’s right! You saved me many times, Lord Shuukin. And not just me. The only reason we were able to liberate the Father Island at all was that you and your men fought so hard.”

Elulu took Tomoe’s hands, holding them tight as she bowed to her.

“So, please, if there’s anything I can do, I’ll do it. People of Friedonia... Please save Lord Shuukin.”

“I’m not the one you should be saying that to...” Tomoe got flustered by Elulu’s desperate appeal.

However, when Tomoe felt the hands she was holding start to tremble, she came back to her senses. Seeing someone who was more uneasy than she was, she decided she shouldn’t worry the girl any further.

Tomoe squeezed Elulu's hands right back.

"But Dr. Hilde and Dr. Brad have my brother's trust, and I'm sure they'll do something about the Spirit King's Curse. So it's going to be fine."

"Right!" Elulu did her best to smile.

As Shuukin watched them warmly, he said, "I see you've made yourself a good friend in the Kingdom, Lady Yuriga."

"I just can't get away from her. That's all," Yuriga said, looking away peevishly.

Shuukin chuckled. "A bond is a bond either way. If I were with my friend, Fuuga...I could run ten thousand miles. Here's hoping I can run together with him again."

Shuukin looked up to the heavens as he spoke. Yuriga shrugged.

"I'm sure you can. Didn't you hear what that little kid was saying?" Then, putting a hand on her hip and thrusting her chest out, she said, "Well, maybe it's hard to sense this without actually living there, but the Kingdom of Friedonia's potential is incredible. If they're serious about this, I'm sure you'll be fine."

"It's an amazing country, huh?"

"I'm always writing to my brother to make sure he doesn't underestimate them."

And so, Shuukin was moved into the treatment facility at the port city, with Tomoe, Yuriga, and Elulu in tow.

◇ ◇ ◇

A research facility was established at the port city. Here, Hakuya and Ichiha kept records of the various dead monsters sent from the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan. They also cross-referenced which monsters were fought by those who had contracted the Spirit King's Curse.

In another room in the facility, Brad was performing autopsies on monster remains, and using a microscope to search for the parasites responsible.

On the table in front of Ichiha and Hakuya was a lineup of monsters that

Ichiha had drawn based on the accounts of patients who'd fought them.

Looking down at them, Hakuya finally picked out two.

"I think these are the most suspicious."

"Yeah...I agree," Ichiha replied with a nod.

The two chosen were a snail ant, which was a large ant with a spiral shell for its midsection, and the snail bee, which had a spiral shell on the part with its stinger. A common feature they had was their distinctive spiral shell.

Ichiha collected all the pictures of insects with similar characteristics, saying, "Now that we've gathered all these accounts, we can see there are a lot of monsters with this spiral shell trait. And mollusks are famous for causing illness if not properly cooked."

"Hilde was telling me that's also the work of small bugs...parasites. And then there were those endemic diseases His Majesty mentioned. There were mollusks involved with them too."

Before Hakuya and the rest were sent to this port city, Souma had told them that the Spirit King's Curse had some things in common with a disease from his old world called schistosomiasis, which was also caused by parasites in the blood. He talked about a case where parasites in the river used mollusks as an intermediary host to eventually infect farmers working in the mud. Souma had gone to the Sugiura Memorial Museum in Showa Town with his social studies class, and he had to write a report about it after, so he remembered a lot of the details.

"Memories from when you're little really stick with you. I thought writing that sort of report was just a pain back then, but you never know what's going to come in handy..." Souma had said earnestly. And so they kept that in mind too.

Hakuya touched his chin as he thought. "The Spirit King's Curse is likely caused when warriors fight insect-type monsters with the shell trait and get their fluids on them."

"That's right," said a third voice.

Turning towards the sudden inclusion, they saw Brad had come in wearing his

white coat while carrying Ludia on his back. Not a lone wolf and cub, but a doctor and baby.



Brad produced two vials from his coat pocket and laid them down on top of the monster drawings. They were filled with fluid and had little things inside them.

“One of those is the parasites that came out of a patient who died of the Spirit King’s Curse. They’re big enough to be seen with the naked eye, right? Hilde says they match the ones in Gerula’s blood that she saw with her third eye.”

“I see. So then these are...”

“The parasites that cause this disease?”

Hakuya and Ichiha both let out a sigh as they looked at those parasites, each no larger than a grain of sand. They were small enough that Ichiha, who always wore glasses, struggled to see them. It was hard to believe this organism was the cause of so many deaths.

“It’s inconvenient not having a name for them,” Brad continued. “They are bugs that hide in the blood vessels, eating away at our magicium... Let’s call them blood-borne magic-eating bugs. And we found what seems to be magic-eating blood bug larvae in the dead bodies of monsters.”

Having said this, Brad showed them the other vial. It looked similar to the others, but this time it was hard to see anything other than liquid inside. Ichiha squinted but couldn’t make out anything.

“The larvae...are in there?”

“They are. But they’re only large enough that someone with good vision might just barely be able to make them out. It’s only with the three-eyed race’s third eye or a microscope that they’re easily visible.”

Brad picked up the vial between his fingers. “The monster I found these in had a spiral shell, like you said. The infection is caused by contact with fluids from monsters with them...just like you were thinking.”

“Is it possible for there to be person-to-person transmission? Like if we touched someone’s infected blood...” Ichiha asked.

“You don’t want to try it, that’s for sure.” Brad crossed his arms and cocked

his head to the side. “But it seems like there are practically no cases of transmission that way. Even if you come in contact with their blood, so long as you wash and disinfect yourself afterwards, there shouldn’t be a problem. The risk to those who get covered in monster fluids during battle and then don’t clean themselves is far higher.”

“What measures can be taken to prevent infection?” Hakuya asked.

“Well... First of all, you could stay away from them. Fighting up close with these monsters is dangerous. If you really have to fight them, then ideally you want to finish them with ranged attacks, at a distance where their fluids won’t get on you.”

“It seems they’re already doing that, but I’ll let them know to take special caution with monsters that have spiral shells.”

“Also, if you get fluids on you, wash and disinfect anywhere it touches immediately. If you leave it as is, you run a higher risk of infection.”

“Understood,” Hakuya said, nodding. “Sir Ichiha.”

“Right! I’ll go let the people from the Great Tiger Kingdom know!” Ichiha replied before running off.

Brad scratched his head as he watched him go. Turning to Hakuya, he said, “Still...I know I shouldn’t say this, but I never expected to find the cause so easily... This would never happen with a normal disease.”

“You’re probably right. It seems a lot of things came together to help us out. We had you, who is familiar with the inside of the body; we had experts on monsters; Hilde, who can remove parasites with magic; His Majesty’s knowledge of a disease in his former world; and...”

“And someone who donated his body to the cause.”

They both looked pained as they remembered Gerula, who had fallen victim to the disease.

“Yes... It was all thanks to this confluence of events.”

“So it only worked out by coincidence, huh?”

“Perhaps. However, without His Majesty’s decision to pursue medical

development, Madam Hilde's and your assistance, and the contribution of Gerula, who wanted to save his homeland, such a coincidence wouldn't have happened. Even if it was the result of chance, our will to overcome diseases is what brought it to fruition."

"You've got that right."

Brad was often a contrarian, but on this, he readily agreed.

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Patients from the Father Island afflicted with the Spirit King's Curse were arriving at the medical facility in the port city. These were ones with relatively minor symptoms, and would be experimental subjects to test the efficacy of the treatment Hilde had discovered.

The first subject was going to be Shuukin.

"I've heard the reports from Yuriga, so it's not like I don't trust the Kingdom's medical science, but I don't want to test anything on my men when I don't know the risks. Besides, if I show them that I've accepted your treatment, my quick-tempered lot will be more willing to submit to it too."

Shuukin was lying in bed as Hilde examined him. Tomoe, Yuriga, and Elulu were watching at a distance. Yuriga seemed unsteady on her feet, and Tomoe had to help her to stand.

"Are you okay, Yuriga?"

"Ungh... I'm a little dizzy, but I'll be fine."

Hilde made a shallow incision in Shuukin's arm with a scalpel. Shuukin didn't bat an eye at it, but all three of the girls gulped. Hilde immediately began using light magic on the wound. It was a little small and shallow, but it took far longer than normal to heal.

"Your case is fairly advanced," Hilde said with a sigh as she examined him. "The blood-borne magic-eating bugs—okay, apologies to Brad, but that's way too long. I'm just going to call them magic bugs... Anyway, the magic bugs have damaged the magicium in your blood pretty badly. If I was going to exterminate them with just the magicium you have left, it would take a long time.

Considering your symptoms, that'd be the death of you."

"Is...that right?"

"If I did it the normal way, yes. Honestly...since we're trying to test the safety of this, I'd have preferred a subject who had somewhat lighter symptoms," she grumbled.

Shuukin laughed. "Sorry for putting you out like this. But Lord Fuuga entrusted me with those men. If this body of mine is no longer fit to stand on the battlefield, then let me offer it up as a test subject."

"I hate the way you warriors think... But if that's what you're going to say, I'm going to take you up on it."

With that, Hilde produced a large bottle containing a dark red liquid, causing Shuukin's brow to furrow as he saw it.

"What is that?"

"The blood I took from that girl over there," Hilde replied, pointing to Yuriga. Shuukin's eyes went wide.

"From Lady Yuriga?!"

"Yeah. The method I've developed for treating the Spirit King's Curse involves identifying the magic bugs in the blood and using an awareness of where they are to control the magicium in the body to eliminate them with light magic. If I know what effect the magic bugs have on the body, I can treat the other symptoms too, but...Brad's still busy dissecting cadavers and looking into that. That's why I'll be focusing on eliminating the magic bugs for now. If your magicium has been thoroughly destroyed, though, I can't do it... Which is what this is for."

Hilde held up Yuriga's blood for Shuukin to see.

"I'll give you a transfusion from this girl, who's of the same race as you, and supplement your magicium with hers. I've already checked that she's a viable blood donor for you."

"N-No! How could I make you shed the blood of my liege's sister?!"

Shuukin was hesitant, but Yuriga, despite seeming somewhat anemic, waved

her hand as Tomoe helped her stand.

“Oh...don’t worry about it, Sir Shuukin. My brother needs you on his path to supremacy, and it’s no big deal for me to give up a little blood for that.”

“Lady Yuriga...”

“You should be grateful for the situation, and accept it with grace. It was a stroke of good fortune that there was a healthy member of the same race here to act as a donor... Some lives couldn’t be saved even after coming up with this method,” Hilde said, her expression clouding. “It was all too late for the high elf patient we saw back in the Kingdom. The only other high elf there wasn’t a blood-type match for him, so we couldn’t even have tested this method. Although, with the organ damage he had already suffered, it would have only extended his life a little at most... His name was Gerula Garlan.”

“Huh?! Uncle...” Elulu murmured.

Hilde lowered her eyes before responding. “He was...a relative of yours?”

“Yes. He knew he didn’t have long, and was looking for a way to use what life he had left. I see... So he passed away in the Kingdom, then...”

Elulu looked down as tears filled her eyes.

In an uncharacteristically gentle tone, Hilde said, “To that end, he passed away with one of his own kind watching over him, and a peaceful expression on his face. It was only thanks to him offering up his body that we uncovered the true nature of the disease, and I was able to come up with this treatment.”

“My uncle’s death...wasn’t in vain then?” Elulu asked, looking up, and Hilde gave her a firm nod.

“I’d never let it go to waste. None of us would.”

Sniffling, Elulu replied, “Right!”

“It sounds like I’ll have to be prepared too, then,” Shuukin said, exposing his arm with a look of determination. “Princess Elulu’s uncle gave his life to help find this treatment. If my body can be the one that proves it’s effective, I couldn’t be happier. Lady Yuriga, I will be borrowing your blood.”

With Shuukin’s resolve set, Hilde began the treatment. First they extracted

some of Shuukin's blood, then transfused Yuriga's healthy blood into him. Because blood couldn't be preserved for as long as in Souma's old world, time was of the essence. And so the blood was transfused. Hilde also used light magic to eliminate the blood-borne magic-eating bugs.

Shuukin sweated heavily throughout the procedure.

He didn't seem to be in pain, but the feeling of something messing around inside his body was unpleasant. It was exhausting too, and eventually he passed out like someone had flipped an off switch.

Two hours went by...

Hilde used light magic on every blood vessel in Shuukin's body. She sent an image of the magic bugs to the magicium inside the body, and then they destroyed them. There was no standard for how many it might be safe to let escape, so she was as thorough as she could be.

After a long time, Hilde stopped casting magic on the body.

"Please...let this work."

And then, making another incision on Shuukin's arm, she tried casting light magic on it. When she did, it still healed slowly, but faster than before, showing that the magicium in the body was functioning properly.

"Whew..."

Hilde collapsed into a chair, exhausted.

"Um, Doctor. Will Lord Shuukin..." Elulu asked, unable to wait any longer.

"I can't say for certain until I've had time to observe," Hilde said, waving her off. "But this should have eliminated the magic bugs in his blood. I'd say we can call it a success so far."

"Really?! Thank goodness!" Elulu cried out with glee, gently taking the sleeping Shuukin's hand.

With a sideways glance at her, Hilde let out a great sigh.

"For now, I think it's safe to say we've established a treatment. If it can be treated when it's advanced this far, then we should be able to treat the others

with comparatively light symptoms without even needing a blood transfusion. But I hear there's still far more patients on the Father and Mother Islands."

Hilde leaned back in the chair, looking up at the ceiling.

"It took all this time and effort just to treat him. Much as I hate to admit it, I can't handle all of them with just the doctors we've brought with us... No, even with all the doctors in the Kingdom, it still wouldn't be enough. What can we do..."

"It will be okay," Tomoe said, leaning in to peer at Hilde's face. "Big Brother stayed in the Kingdom because he said there are things he needs to take care of. I'm sure he has an idea. So...it's going to work out."

"Here's hoping..." Hilde replied, smiling wryly at Tomoe's total belief in her big brother.

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One week later...

With the treatment of the first batch of patients at the port city complete, they were all on the way to recovery. Shuukin had had the heaviest symptoms, and even he had recovered to the point where he was doing training as a form of rehab. When Shuukin stood up and got out of bed on his own, Elulu jumped into his arms in glee.

And now, on this day, Prime Minister Hakuya; Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga; Hilde the doctor; Brad the surgeon; Shuukin; and Elulu were gathered in one room to discuss the current state of things and what they were going to do going forward.

"How about we start with the condition of the patients?" Hakuya suggested.

"That's no problem," Hilde replied. "They're all on the way to recovery. Even the one with the worst case of it, who's right here with us."

"Thanks to you, Doctor," Shuukin said, bowing his head. For some reason, Elulu, who was next to him, bowed hers too.

With a wry smile at the two of them, Hilde told Hakuya, "For now, I think we can safely say that we've established a treatment for the Spirit King's Curse. The

light mages with a knowledge of medicine should be able to perform it the same as I did without any problem."

"That's a relief to hear," Hakuya said with a nod before looking to Brad. "Now, what can you tell us about the blood-borne magic-eating bugs...the magic bugs?"

"All we know so far is you can get infected with them by touching the fluids that come out of the spiral shell part of a monster's body," Brad replied, crossing his arms. "But when you consider the almost total lack of infections coming from patients, I think the magic bugs only have the power to infect humans when they're covered in monster blood."

"Is this that 'intermediary host' thing that His Majesty told us about?"

"Yeah, that's probably it."

Souma had told them about Japanese schistosomiasis. It was an endemic disease from the world he came from, and it infected people through mollusks that lived in the rice paddies and rivers. In the country Souma lived in, they had overcome the disease by preventing the mollusks from reproducing and eliminating the environment that allowed the parasites to exist.

"It's not clear if the demon wave caused preexisting parasites to change inside the bodies of the large number of monsters it produced, or if they existed in the monsters' bodies all along. The one thing we do know is that to stop the chain of infections, we need to completely eliminate the monsters with spiral shells that are causing it."

"I've reported that to our forces on the Father Island. They're to make eliminating any spiral shell monster their top priority. They have strict orders to do so from a distance; defeating the enemy with long-ranged attacks or magic, and avoiding contact with their blood."

Elulu nodded at Shuukin's explanation.

"I've given the same report to my father, the Spirit Kingdom King, on the Mother Island. I think that should help lower the rate of new infections, but..." Elulu's expression darkened. "There are still a large number of people suffering from the Spirit King's Curse on both islands. Could you possibly perform the

Kingdom’s medical treatment on all of them? Please!”

Elulu bowed her head and Shuukin joined her.

“I’m asking you too. Please save my wounded soldiers and the high elves.”

“That seems to have been His Majesty’s intention all along...” Hakuya said.

Hilde began vigorously scratching her head.

“But the patients on both islands vastly outnumber this first group, right? And from what I hear, many of them are in even worse condition than Sir Shuukin was. I already told little Tomoe and her friends this, but we don’t have nearly enough people to handle them all with just the doctors we brought here. Even if we brought every light mage in the Kingdom with medical knowledge, it still wouldn’t be enough.”

“Also, it would be inefficient to bring them all to this port. There’s no telling how long it might take if we only brought them in batches as large as we can house here, and we don’t have enough blood for Hilde’s treatment either,” Brad added, pointing out further problems. He looked at Yuriga. “We got lucky that her blood happened to match Shuukin’s, but if it hadn’t then his treatment would have been delayed further... Well, if it came to it, we’d have relied on using blood from another race.”

“Hm? It’s possible to do blood transfusions between different races?” Hakuya asked.

“If you’re asking if it’s *possible*...then, yes. Even if people’s races are different, so long as the blood types match, there is no problem with doing a transfusion, but...the medical society doesn’t encourage it,” Brad answered awkwardly.

“Why is that?”

“A little knowledge can lead to rampant superstition. Blood transfusion isn’t an established medical practice outside of our country. What do you think would happen if it became known that you can transfuse the blood of a long-lived race like the elves into humans? What if that started a baseless rumor that doing so could extend a person’s life or restore their youth?”

“I see... I’d rather not think about it.” Hakuya got depressed when he

considered what would happen.

Hunts for members of the long-lived races, completely disregarding their rights, and trafficking in their blood—every illegal method might be tried. The long-lived races wouldn't just take it, of course. In the worst case, it could develop into a civil war.

Brad nodded. "Let me just tell you straight up, their blood doesn't have that sort of effect. But if people are ignorant, they won't believe you when you tell them. We should save transfusions from other races until the people have been enlightened as to how it works."

"You make a good case... It would be advisable to stick to transfusions between the same races until then. That being the case... Should we go to the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, where there are members of the same race, in order to treat them?"

Hakuya brought his hand to his mouth as he thought, looking at Tomoe.

"If I recall, you and your friends are on summer vacation right now, correct?"

"Yes. We have about another month."

"It's kind of a problem that I haven't even touched my assignments yet..." Yuriga said, getting dispirited. "If I don't get them done, I'm in for more remedial lessons..."

Hakuya thought for a short time, and then made his decision.

"Yes, let's go to the Father Island and treat the people there. Since Shuukin has recovered, we'll want him leading his men to prevent further infections."

"Sure! Thank you, Sir Hakuya!"

"Thank you so much!"

Shuukin and Elulu were overjoyed, but Hilde's expression was still grim.

"I'm fine with going there, but that doesn't change our shortage of staff."

"Ah, as far as that goes, I suspect..." Hakuya began to say, but hadn't even finished before it happened.

A messenger rushed into the room, handing a letter to Hakuya.

“It’s a report! It came from the Kingdom of Friedonia, by messenger kui! It’s from His Majesty!”

“Oh! Let me see it.”

Hakuya accepted the letter and looked through it. When he was done, he let out a sigh of relief. Everyone could immediately tell that it wasn’t a negative report.

Looking around at each of them, he said, “The manpower shortage is resolved. Let’s head to the Spirit Kingdom at once.”

# Chapter 9: The Right Person for the Right Job

The story now rewinds to when I ordered Hakuya and the others to go to the port city on the west coast...

After taking Hakuya, Hilde, Brad, and the three kids to the port, I ordered them to gather information and establish a method of treatment. Meanwhile, those of us who remained in the Kingdom moved into action.

I called First Primary Queen Liscia, Second Secondary Queen Naden, and Julius Lastania, my military advisor and brother-in-law, into the governmental affairs office.

“It’s impossible for our country to bring this Spirit King’s Curse under control alone,” I stated resolutely. “It’s not just the Spirit King’s Curse though. Diseases aren’t a thing that a single country can fully suppress. Even if our country develops a treatment, if there’s an epidemic in the surrounding nations, it will eventually make its way here. When that happens, obviously we won’t have enough people to treat all of the sick, and the epidemic can’t end until there are no infected people left in the neighboring countries.”

“Epidemics have happened from time to time in our history,” Julius said, crossing his arms. “They never end easily. I’ve even heard of cases where they led to the fall of a state.”

“Yeah. It was the same in the world I came from.”

I had often heard it said that disease recognizes no borders, and I guess that was no different in this world. When a country fell, it often looked like the work of a single great man, but behind the scenes, there were often other major causes—like natural disasters, epidemics, locust plagues, and famine. It’s these elements that cause the people’s hearts and minds to stray from the state, and lead them to cling to the rise of a new great man. If you want to maintain a healthy nation, it’s important to remove those elements one by one wherever you find them.

Machiavelli said that Fortuna, the goddess of chance, was the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but she still leaves us to direct the other half by human virtù. In Japan, we have a saying that goes, “Do all that is humanly possible, and leave the rest to Heaven.” We had to do everything that we could.

“All nations need to work together on this problem. Frankly, it’s a greater threat than the Demon Lord’s Domain, which has stopped expanding for now. How far the Spirit King’s Curse can spread is still unknown, and we can’t be sure a similar disease won’t break out elsewhere. We need to cooperate not just across national borders, but factional ones like the Marine Alliance and the Mankind Declaration too.”

“Isn’t that essentially everyone? You’re looking for something bigger than the Mankind Declaration...” Liscia said.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “We need to get literally every country to cooperate.”

“Can we do that?”

“Right now, the continent is largely divided into three camps,” I said, pointing to the map on the desk. “Our Maritime Alliance, the Gran Chaos Empire’s Mankind Declaration, and Fuuga’s Great Tiger Kingdom. We can cooperate with our allies in the Maritime Alliance. Head of the Republic Kuu and Nine-Headed Dragon Queen Shabon are engaged in medical reforms too, so they should have the same sense of urgency about this. Likewise, Maria is part of a medical alliance with us, so we can count on her to bring in the countries of the Mankind Declaration.”

“Right,” Julius interjected. “The Spirit Kingdom of Garlan is directly affected, so they’ll probably help, which only leaves Fuuga Haan, Mercenary State Zem, and the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom. If I recall correctly, the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State has an alliance with Fuuga’s Great Tiger Kingdom?”

I nodded. “Yeah. They’re cooperating with Fuuga, likely out of hostility to the Empire. So if we can just get Fuuga to assist, they should obey.”

“We have a relationship with Princess Sill of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, so if we bring this up with her, I think she should help,” Liscia said, and Julius pointed to Mercenary State Zem.

“The Empire can handle Zem. Considering their geographic location, it will be hard to refuse a request from the Empire. There’s mutual benefit, and they won’t be forcing anything unreasonable on them, so they should have no reason to refuse.”

“Yeah, what it boils down to is, if we can just convince Fuuga’s camp, all of mankind can unite against the disease. Furthermore, since all power there is concentrated in Fuuga, we only need to convince him. Me, Fuuga, and Maria... You could say that all mankind can unite so long as the three of us are in agreement.”

“I see... A three-way conference between the leaders of the three factions, huh?” Julius mumbled, seeing straight through to the heart of what I was saying.

I gave him a big nod. This was why I had stayed in the capital.

“I plan to contact Kuu and Shabon by broadcast to get them on board, but Maria, Fuuga, and I are the only ones who need to get together. It would be too much trouble to round up everyone and make it fit into all of our schedules.”

“I get it,” Liscia said, nodding with satisfaction.

“Umm...” Naden, who had been standing there awkwardly all this time, hesitantly raised her hand. “Why did you call me here? I can’t follow any of the political strategy stuff you guys are talking about.”

I had a good reason for having her come, of course.

“Sorry about that. I had two favors to ask of you, Naden.”

“Favors?”

“First, I want you to talk to Madam Tiamat and ask about her policies for defending the Star Dragon Mountain Range from disease. If she wants to stay out of it, like she does with conflicts down below, then that’s fine by me. Madam Tiamat can probably handle it without medicine, after all. Not that I know if she’ll even give us a response.”

Naden nodded at my request.

“Roger that. So, what’s the other one?”

“For the location of the meeting between Maria, Fuuga, and me that I was talking about, I wanted to propose it be held in the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom. They’re positioned as neutral to all three factions.”

Zem was neutral too, but the place was full of ruffians, so security would be a lot of trouble. If they were inviting us like last time, I could count on them keeping their people in line, but not so much if we were the ones requesting to borrow space from them. That said, if we had the conference in the territory of one of the three factions, my people might accept it, but Maria’s and Fuuga’s would raise a fuss. I didn’t want to waste time fighting over who was in control.

With all of that explained, I asked Naden, “You and Pai still keep in contact, right? I’d like you to have him get in touch with Princess Sill for us and request a site for the conference, along with dragon knights to run security.”

“But that country fought a battle with Fuuga’s forces,” Julius pointed out. “Although it was to aid us in our escape.”

We were just going to have to accept that as it was.

“The Dragon Knight Kingdom neighbors Fuuga’s expanding country. They’ll want to do what they can to avoid war with him. They can use this opportunity to hold a separate conference with Fuuga, and get him to agree to mutual non-aggression with defined terms.”

“That makes sense...” Julius agreed.

“We can’t hold talks over the broadcast with the Dragon Knight Kingdom, so it will take longer to negotiate. Messenger kuis will always take time to fly back and forth. It might be faster for you to go there in person, Naden. Can I get you to do that for me?”

“Roger that. You can count on me.” Naden thumped her chest with one hand. Liscia and I looked at Julius.

“I plan to bring Aisha and Naden as bodyguards, but only a small number of people will be able to attend the conference itself. I’ll propose we limit it to each of us bringing two assistants who can double as bodyguards. I’d like you two, Liscia and Julius, to be mine. Can I ask you to do that?”

“Okay.”

“Understood.”

They both nodded. Liscia would be fine, but...I was worried about Julius.

“I’m pretty sure Fuuga will be bringing Hashim, you know?”

As an advisor, Hashim had been instrumental in Fuuga’s takeover of the Union of Eastern Nations. In the process of that, he had destroyed the Kingdom of Lastania, which had been ruled by Julius’s in-laws, and killed many members of the opposition. Even those of the neutral faction, including Ichiha’s sister Sami’s adoptive father, King Roth, were slain.

I knew Julius and Sami had to want revenge on Hashim. Could Julius keep his cool when meeting with him face to face? I gave him a meaningful glance, and he let out a small sigh.

“If Tia or her parents had been harmed, I doubt I could keep a level head around him. But, fortunately, they are all living here peacefully in this country now.”

“Julius...”

“It’s not that I don’t bear a grudge, but prioritizing Tia and her family’s safety is more important now. If working for this country will do that, then my resentment is nothing in comparison.”

“That’s a relief to hear.”

I stood up and turned to face the three of them, saying, “Now, let’s let Hakuya and the others handle things outside while we make this conference a success.”

“““Yes, sir!”””

The incident might be happening out in the field, but there were sometimes things that could only be done in the conference room. Basically, it was a matter of the right job for the right person.

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Thanks to Naden’s help with negotiations, the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom will provide a secured site for a tripartite conference. According to Naden, Princess Sill had gladly agreed with a smile, and said, “It’s an honor for our knights to be able to guard such a historic conference.” It seemed she’d

accepted that what'd happened in her skirmish with Fuuga's faction was an inevitability on the battlefield, which was a relief.

Now that I had the permission of the Dragon Knight Kingdom, I immediately started feeling out the other countries on the idea.

"Ookyakya! Of course I'll help you out, bro! Diseases like this are everyone's problem!"

"Yes. Allow us in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union to offer you our full support as well."

First, I talked to Kuu and Shabon over a broadcast. They agreed that I would represent the opinion of the whole Maritime Alliance at the tripartite conference. After them, I contacted Fuuga next.

"Well, you're already helping me with Shuukin and the rest. Let me make you look good just this once."

It was almost a letdown how easily he agreed. It seemed like he was already informed about Shuukin's arrival at the port town, and his treatment. That was likely why he was so uncharacteristically cooperative. One good turn deserves another, they say.

And finally, I contacted Maria. I'd left her for last because I expected it to go through easily, but...

"Hee hee," she chuckled from the other side of the broadcast.

"Did I say something strange?"

"Oh, no. I already knew this, but you really did have Sir Julius join you..."

In these broadcast calls, Julius was standing at my side instead of Hakuya.

Wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes, she apologized, saying, "I just find it strange, knowing how things were between the two of you at one point. To think our country was your mediator."

Julius and I looked at one another awkwardly.

It felt like when someone brought up the things you'd done as a naughty child. *No, it's even worse than that.* Our reaction apparently tickled her funny

bone even more, and unable to contain herself, with a broad smile Maria said, “Of course my country will support you. We’ll be there at the conference.”

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Later on, we were heading to Balm, capital of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, in one of the royal gondolas. The group consisted of me, Liscia, Aisha, Naden, Julius, and a number of the Black Cats. A number of wyvern riders were escorting us as well.

It seemed unlikely that there would be any danger this time, so we didn’t bring Hal and Ruby along. I’d decided that bringing too much firepower would show a lack of trust.

“Last time, I swam all the way there on my own, but today I’m riding in the gondola, huh?” Naden said, kicking her legs back and forth.

She wanted to swim through the sky with me on her back, but this was a foreign country, and that would make it hard for our escorts to protect me and the gondola, so I had her sit in with everyone else. Back when I was still new to this world, I always looked out at the scenery with great interest, but now that I was used to air travel, I just spent the time relaxing until we arrived.

As we neared Balm, I overheard Liscia as she mumbled to herself.

“There’s King Souma of Friedonia, Empress Maria of the Empire, and Fuuga Haan of the Great Tiger Kingdom...” she said, counting us off on her fingers. “With Head Kuu of the Republic and Nine-Headed Dragon Queen Shabon joining by broadcast.”

“Liscia? What’s up?”

“I was just wondering if there’s ever been a conference with so many major leaders in attendance... No, maybe no one’s ever thought to gather them like this before,” Liscia replied, sounding impressed.

“It’s doubtful they have,” Julius said with a nod. “Even when the Empire organized a subjugation force in response to the appearance of the Demon Lord’s Domain, they didn’t gather the kings. Maybe some of them met, but it’s unprecedented to gather everyone in one room like this.”

“Oh... Now that you mention it, that makes sense,” I said, convinced.

In my previous world, I feel like I’d seen a lot of these sorts of gatherings of world leaders covered on the news. Like that summit, the G-whatever it was. But those sorts of events were held in a globalized world that’d experienced two world wars in order to deal with problems that no individual nation could address.

The people of this world had put together a combined force against the Demon Lord’s Domain, but because the countries to the north took the brunt of it, the sense of crisis wasn’t felt equally across the whole of the continent. This resulted in a lack of globalism development, and meant there had been no need for these sorts of leader conferences. We were really making history here.

“I don’t understand complicated things, but it seems very typical of you to handle things this way, sire,” Aisha said with a chuckle. “I mean, they say that a hero is one who ‘leads the change of an era,’ don’t they? When I think back to when the God-Protected Forest was my entire world, it feels like I’ve come so far.”

“You know, Tiamat was saying something like that. When the ‘furiously moving gear’ and the ‘gear that has come to a stop’ mesh, things will work out just right... Or something like that? I can’t remember exactly,” Naden said, cocking her head to the side. “Let’s say the stopped gear was me when I was a shut-in, then that makes Souma the moving gear, right? If meeting us is what makes Souma move at just the right pace, then who knows how wild he’d have gone without us cooperating.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Huh? Do you guys think I get out of control that often?”

“”””Of course!””””” Liscia, Aisha, Naden, and even Julius all said at the same time.

“In the case of Fuuga or Madam Maria, I think they come up with a firm decision, saying, ‘I’m going to change the world!’ Then, bringing other people on board, they actually do it,” Liscia explained and I nodded in agreement.

“Oh, yeah. That sounds about right.”

“But in your case, the world’s changed before you notice! We’re forced to accept it after the fact when you say, ‘Okay, yeah, the world’s changed, but it’s not gotten worse, so it’s okay, right?’”

“Roroa is similar in that respect. Since you two are involved in policy making...I’m sure the country’s grown even more terrifying than when I was in Amidonia.”

Liscia and Julius both sighed.

Meanwhile...

“It’s His Majesty and Poncho’s fault, or maybe I should say it’s thanks to them, that my tongue has become so discerning... I can’t return to living off only the blessings of the forest anymore,” Aisha said, her voice filled with emotion.

“I wholeheartedly agree. He’s got us by the stomach,” Naden, the other big eater of the group, said emphatically.

*Yeah... This is getting awkward now.*

I spent the rest of the journey in silence, hoping not to stir up any more trouble.

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“His Majesty Souma A. Elfrieden, King of Friedonia, has arrived!” a guard called out as the gondola set down in the castle of the Dragon Knight Kingdom’s royal family. We were halfway up the mountain next to their capital city, Balm.

As the door opened, I stepped out onto a red carpet lined with dragon knights together with women in dresses, who I could only assume were their dragon partners. Then, once all of us had disembarked, the dragon knights and dragons all took a knee and bowed their heads.

It was truly a welcome fit for guests of honor. Liscia and Julius were fine, but Aisha and Naden weren’t accustomed to this so they both looked a little uncomfortable.

Princess Sill and Pai came walking towards us from the other end of the red carpet. Princess Sill was not in her knightly armor, but wore a dress and a tiara. If you overlooked the hefty muscles on her arms, she looked every bit the

princess that she was. Pai, for his part, was dressed like a gentleman, looking right at home next to her.

“I welcome you to the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom!” Princess Sill said, spreading her arms wide. Then we shared a two-handed handshake.

“We’ll be in your care, Princess Sill.”

“Ah ha ha... The truth is, I’m not a princess anymore.”

“Huh?”

“The other day, my father abdicated the throne to me. Such an important conference being held in our land must have made him sense the times are changing. He told me, ‘From now on, it should be young people like yourself who steer this country.’ Though, you could say he was just throwing all the problems at me.”

“Oh, I see...”

*Hmm... Sounds familiar.*

“Sounds like a big responsibility,” I remarked.

“Tell me about it. Still, now that I’ve been entrusted with the task, I plan to do my utmost.”

Sill’s expression was full of confidence, and I felt strength in her unswerving gaze. It was a bit of a surprise, but I decided to correct myself.

“We’ll be in your care, *Queen* Sill.”

“Yes, King Souma. It’s good of you to come. The people from the Empire and the Great Tiger Kingdom have already arrived. I’ll show you to them, so please come this way.”

We followed Sill’s lead. Proceeding down a corridor lined with clumsy stone pillars that had a sense of history about them, we eventually came to a stop in front of a room. Soldiers from the other major countries present here stood waiting outside.

I recognized one of them. Gunther, a quiet commander from the Empire.

Sill turned to us and said, “Now, as we agreed in advance, I’ll ask the

bodyguards to wait here. Please choose two attendees to go in with Souma."

"Got it. See you later, Aisha, Naden."

They both nodded.

"Understood. We'll be waiting here with the Black Cats."

"If anything happens, give us a holler. We'll be there in a flash."

Nodding to the two of them, I went into the room with Liscia and Julius. The center of it was dominated by a large round table. In one section of it sat Maria, Jeanne, and Krahe of the Empire. In another sat Fuuga, Hashim, and Mutsumi of the Great Tiger Kingdom. In the time it took us to arrive, it appeared like they had...not been having a friendly conversation.

Maria and Fuuga seemed natural, but their eyes told me they were evaluating each other, while Jeanne and Hashim were each cautious of the other, wearing stern expressions. Mutsumi seemed like she felt awkward, while Krahe was weirdly excited. For an ardent believer in Maria like him, he had to be beside himself with glee at being able to attend a gathering of important leaders like this.

When we entered the room, Maria noticed us and rose, smiling, then gracefully walked over to us.

"It's been a while, Sir Souma."

"Yes. I'm relieved to see you're well, Madam Maria."

We shook hands and said our greetings. Next, Maria turned to Liscia.

"This is our first time meeting in person, I believe, Lady Liscia. I am Maria Euphoria."

"Oh! Yes! I am Liscia Elfrieden."

Maria and Liscia shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

*Oh, yeah, Liscia wasn't there for the meeting in Zem, huh?*

Meanwhile, Julius and Jeanne were rekindling their old "friendship."

"I never thought we would meet again like this," Jeanne said with a wry smile.

“Yes, I agree...” Julius replied awkwardly. “I’m already breaking into an unpleasant sweat.”

“You don’t seem like you’re on bad terms with Sir Souma this time, so that’s a relief.”

“Fear not. He’s the master I serve now.”

“You’ve changed... I feel like your expression has gained composure, and your manner is more relaxed.”

“Finding a partner can change a person.”

“I’m envious. I’d like to get married myself, but my sister just won’t settle down...”

“Excuse me, Jeanne?” Maria said with a smile.

“No, forget I said anything,” Jeanne said, backing down.

At this point Fuuga rose from his chair, waving to me.

“Hey, I came like you asked, Souma.”

“I’m grateful for that. But remember we’re here because of the disease that you and your people found.”

“Yeah, I know. Why else do you think I’m doing as you say?”

“You could act a little more sorry.”

“Sorry. It’s just not in my nature,” Fuuga said, shrugging.

*This guy...* I thought.

Mutsumi rose from her seat and came over. “It’s been a while, Sir Souma.”

“It has. Since we met in the Union of Eastern Nations, right? I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Yes. How are Ichiha and...Sami doing?” Mutsumi asked, tripping over her words just a little.

*I’m sure...she must have wanted to ask more about the latter of those two.*

Smiling, I said, “Ichiha is doing well. He’s quickly becoming one of the youths who’ll lead our country in the next generation. As for Sami... She lives

surrounded by books in the capital's library. I don't know how long it will take for her heart to recover, but...I think she's living peacefully."

"Oh! Is that right?" Mutsumi looked just a little relieved. "Please continue to look after both of them."

"Yeah. I'll do what I can."

"Okay, looks like everyone's here," Fuuga said, clapping his hands as Mutsumi and I finished talking. "How about we get on with it? Let's have this top-level meeting between the leaders of key nations, or whatever it's supposed to be."

Maria and I nodded in agreement.

*Let the Balm Summit begin.*

# Chapter 10: The Balm Summit

We sat around the table in the center of the room in three groups: Me, Liscia, and Julius; Maria, Jeanne, and Krahe; and Fuuga, Mutsumi, and Hashim.

Queen Sill joined us, seating herself between the Empire and the Great Tiger Kingdom. There were also simple receivers placed on either side of the Kingdom team, in the middle of the gaps between them and the others. Furthermore, behind Queen Sill was the jewel that had come from our country.

“To ensure fairness and keep a record of the proceedings of this conference, I will be acting as secretary. Is that acceptable to all parties?” Sill asked.

We all nodded to show there was no objection. Sill nodded too.

“Then with all sides agreed, I’d like to begin. Now then, as the man who proposed this event, I would ask Sir Souma to direct the meeting from here.”

“Okay. First... Liscia, Julius. Take care of the simple receivers.”

“Got it.”

“Understood.”

When they activated the receivers, Kuu and Shabon appeared.

“Kuu, Shabon. Can you see us?”

“Yeah! I can see you perfectly here, bro!”

“There are no problems on my end either.”

Nodding at their responses, I turned to Fuuga and Maria.

“As we discussed in advance, in addition to myself, Sir Kuu Taisei, the Head of the Republic, and Nine-Headed Dragon Queen Shabon—both of whom are part of a maritime alliance with my country—will also be participating. The support of these two countries will be indispensable to solving the problem at hand. This isn’t a meeting where anything is going to be decided by majority vote, so I assume there’s no problem.”

“A meeting with the heads of six influential states, huh? Fancy,” Fuuga said

jovially, crossing his arms.

“First, I will explain the epidemic disease in the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan known as the Spirit King’s Curse...or rather, its true nature, as discovered by my doctors, Blood-Borne Magic-Eating Bug Disease—Magic Bug Disease for short—using the latest information sent to me by Surgeon Brad from the port town... Uh, this is getting unwieldy, so I’m just going to speak normally from here on. First...”

I rose from my seat and began writing everything we knew about Magic Bug Disease on the blackboard that had been prepared for me.

The magic bugs were inside the spiral shells of insect-type monsters that appeared in the demon wave, and people got infected when they came into contact with fluids from those shells after defeating them. I also noted it could not transfer from the blood of one person to another.

“To sum things up, the best way to get this disease under control is to eradicate all insect monsters with spiral shells. Without getting their juices on us, of course.”

“Yeah. The faster the better,” Fuuga said, nodding.

“The worst thing would be for a cycle of infection to become fully established.”

“A cycle?”

“As living creatures, blood-borne magic-eating bugs have to produce offspring in some way. If they just kill their host and die themselves, that’s a failure. They have to make eggs of some sort inside people, then have them exit the host body somehow, such as through the person’s excrement. Then, when that dissolves in water that gets drunk by monsters, they grow into a form that can infect people... When you have a complete cycle like this, a disease can get established in an area for a long time.”

“That would be troublesome,” Maria said, her face filled with concern. “There are many historical examples of countries destroyed by epidemics that went on for an extended period of time. I’m sure we’ll have to deal with the problem while it’s still possible to.”

“Right... Souma already told me that insect-type monsters were the cause,” Fuuga said, nodding at Maria’s words. “That’s why I’ve ordered the unit I sent to the Father Island to attack at long range, not up close, but...I’ll tell them to prioritize eliminating those monsters too.”

“Yeah. That’s the main thing.”

Oncomelania hupensis, the intermediary host responsible for schistosomiasis in Japan, was a small snail no larger than a centimeter at most. I remember being surprised by just how tiny they were when I saw them at Sugiura Memorial Museum in Showa Town, which we visited as part of our social studies class. It seemed like they’d have been really hard to find.

In order to exterminate the snails, they mobilized the whole prefecture, and even borrowed the assistance of the occupying American forces, but it still took many long years. The snails were small enough to live in rain troughs, so the exterminators couldn’t keep up. In this case, though, the relevant insect-type monsters were massive and easy to find. We’d need the Spirit Kingdom and Fuuga’s forces to do all they could to eradicate them.

Fuuga leaned in and asked, “I’ll take responsibility for the Father Island, but what do you want to do about the Mother Island?”

“The Spirit Kingdom King’s daughter is in the port town, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. Princess Elulu, was it? She should be looking after Shuukin.”

“I believe so. Hilde and Brad are sharing the information with her.”

Gerula had given his life for this information. I wanted it to save the people of the Spirit Kingdom too.

At this point, Hashim, who had been listening, opened his mouth. “The key thing is to prevent further infections. I understand that. With that in mind, what should be done to treat those already infected?”

Julius’s expression twitched just a little when his enemy spoke.

I did everything I could to remain calm as I replied, “There is a way to treat it. If you have light mages with information on the Magic Bug Disease, knowledge of the body, and an understanding of medicine, it’s possible. I’m going to ask

them to develop medicines that will allow it to be treated even in places without that kind of mage, but...if we wait for that, it could be years or even decades. We have no choice but to rely on these mages for now."

"Just any ordinary light mage won't do?" Fuuga asked and I nodded.

"You couldn't treat Sir Shuukin yourselves, right? But he's on the mend now that our doctor, Hilde, treated him. There's your answer."

"Yeah, I get it... I was just checking," Fuuga said, resting his cheek on the palm of his hand. "What a pain."

I continued. "Just being a light mage isn't enough. They need to have learned medicine. In addition to Hilde, we have a number of light mages who've mastered medicine... Okay, that's a mouthful, so I'm going to call them mage doctors. We've worked hard to train them. But..."

I slammed my hands down on the table and shook my head.

"We don't have enough of them. In addition to the basic prerequisite of being able to use light magic, learning enough about medicine is difficult. Furthermore, at the current stage, the only difference between them and a regular doctor is the ability to treat parasitic diseases. They'll be highly valued in special situations like this one, but it's questionable if we'll see returns fitting the effort it takes to train them."

"We don't have doctors to begin with, so I don't really get it, but... Is that just how it is?" Fuuga asked.

"That's just how it is," I replied with a shrug. "We don't have that many in the Kingdom either. Even if we sent in every mage doctor in the Kingdom, there'd be too many patients for them to handle them all."

"Right..."

"So, that's why I'd like the Empire and Republic to help," I said, looking at Maria and the image of Kuu. "We have a medical alliance with the Empire and Republic, and have been sharing our knowledge with them."

"They...were doing that?" Hashim muttered to himself with a frown.

When I decided to increase the number of mage doctors to keep Hilde from

being treated as special, I'd contacted the Empire and the Republic, and asked them to work on training mage doctors. The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union had joined that alliance afterwards, but it hadn't been long enough for them to be ready in time.

"The Empire and Republic should have mage doctors. With their larger population, the Empire has even more than us, right?"

"Yes, that's true. We've been using the knowledge you provided us with in order to train enough people to cover our vast empire. If you can provide the information on Magic Bug Disease, we'll get them ready to treat it at once," Maria said with a smile.

*That's the most populous and powerful state on the continent for you.*

Kuu thumped his chest with one hand. "Ookyakya! In that case, the Republic will help too. We may have less than the Kingdom, but it'll be a good chance to give our people training out in the field. I'll send you everyone we've got."

"Then allow my nation to provide transportation," Shabon offered, placing her hands over her chest. "You will have to take sea routes to the Spirit Kingdom, I am sure. We cannot help by providing mage doctors, but I promise our country's fleet will deliver people there safely from the Republic and Empire. Leave the shipping of any medical supplies to us as well."

"Ohh. That's a big help."

Whether we went east or west, we had either the continent or the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago between us and the Spirit Kingdom. It was a long way for our fleet to go, so if they were willing to provide shipping for all the countries involved, that was going to be helpful.

Sill, who had been taking the minutes of the conference, looked up.

"In that case, let the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom assist too. You'll be wanting to send necessary supplies from the Kingdom, I'm sure, and our dragon knights can deliver them faster than by sea routes. Oh, we'll need permission to pass through everyone's airspace though."

"That sounds good too. I'd very much like you to do it, but what does everyone else think?"

I looked around to the other attendees, and no one seemed to object, so the plan was adopted. Sill seemed giddy as she jotted it down in the conference minutes.

Fuuga chuckled jovially. “I know you’d touched base with everyone beforehand, but these solutions just keep coming out one after another.”

“Yes, you’re right. It’s fun just listening,” Mutsumi added with a smile.

“Oh, truly, truly. With all of these great leaders in our presence, it’s only to be expected. Oh, I am most pleased to be able to sit among you. It is a shame that Sir Gunther couldn’t join us, but taciturn as he is, he’d be little more use than a statue at such negotiations, so I was the obvious choice. My word, truly, history is on the move. And, I, too, am moved! I feel as though I am about to ascend to heaven this very— Ow!”

As Krahe emotionally babbled on in his affected manner, Jeanne grabbed him by the lapels to cut him off.

“You shut up!”

The group from the Empire were the same as ever.

“Huh?!”

At that moment, I sensed a cold pair of eyes on me. I turned towards them, and next to Fuuga, Hashim was glaring at me. His eyes were wary of me, in contrast to the relaxed mood in the room. Then he averted his eyes. Following his gaze, I saw Julius was keeping a close eye on Hashim too. He’d probably noticed Hashim’s unsettling behavior before I even did. Julius seemed worried the man was going to try something.

The two geniuses stared one another down.

*If I stir up things needlessly, it’ll just drag this out... I can leave watching Hashim to Julius while I keep the discussion going.* I decided to take a hands-off approach to them in order to avoid damaging the atmosphere we had going.

“For now... I think that will do as a general direction for dealing with Magic Bug Disease,” I said, looking at Maria and Fuuga. “But there’s no telling what diseases will show up in future, or where. I think that Magic Bug Disease spread

because the demon wave created the conditions for it, but no one could have predicted that. We don't know what kind of disease will break out tomorrow. It could be in the Kingdom of Friedonia, the Empire, or in the Great Tiger Kingdom."

"Yeah, it could..."

"Yes, you're right..."

Fuuga and Maria nodded. I nodded back at them.

"And as we've learned this time, once a disease like this spreads, no single country can handle it alone. Diseases don't care about our borders or factions. That's why we need to coordinate our response, but gathering all our leaders together like this is a lot of work. That's why I want to decide on an international agreement in regards to diseases here."

"An agreement?" asked Maria.

"Yes. When a disease breaks out, we will not hide it, and instead make the information public. Thus, we immediately take measures to prevent an epidemic, and if necessary, seek the assistance of other countries. In such a case, we respond to those requests by sending medical supplies and equipment... That's the sort of system I want in place. To make it simple, I want us to always be in a position to do what we've done this time for Magic Bug Disease. So the world can work together to suppress diseases before they can turn into epidemics."

"I see. I think that's a wonderful idea," Maria said, clapping her hands.

Fuuga, meanwhile, cocked his head to the side. "If we could do that, it'd be ideal, but will it really work? What happens if someone hides a disease outbreak?"

"You can assume they wouldn't be able to count on international help. If they can handle it on their own, then fine, but if you look at what happened this time, it's clear that diseases aren't something we can control. Would you want to deal with Magic Bug Disease alone?"

"I'd rather not..." Fuuga shrugged. "Okay, I get it. So, you want the five countries here...six, if we count the Dragon Knight Kingdom, I guess. You want

these six countries to make a decision?”

“Yeah. We’ll call it the ‘Balm Declaration on Medicine.’ I’d like our countermeasures against Magic Bug Disease to be the first of many actions taken under this declaration. I’d also like the Empire and Great Tiger Kingdom to work to have Zem and the Orthodox Papal State sign on too. I’m sure we’ll have no trouble getting the Spirit Kingdom to agree.”

“All the nations of mankind? It sounds like an even larger framework than the Mankind Declaration,” Maria said.

“That’s just how terrifying disease is,” I said with a nod. “It’s bad enough that we need to face it united, in the name of mankind. To that end... Fuuga, Queen Sill.”

“What?”

“Huh? Me?”

They both gave me blank looks, responding in unison.

I said, “In order to carry out anti-epidemic measures on a global scale, we cannot have great gaps in the understanding of medicine between different countries. This goes for you in particular, Fuuga. It’s a problem for all of us if a country ruling as much land as the Great Tiger Kingdom doesn’t have basic medical knowledge.”

“S-Sure... But you know we can’t fix that right away, yeah?”

“Neither can we...” Sill agreed. “All of your talk about preventing epidemics was too advanced for me, and I couldn’t understand it at all.”

These two were bold warriors on the battlefield, but all that martial prowess couldn’t help them in subjects they lacked confidence in. You could see the consternation on their faces.

“I understand... That’s why I’d like for the Great Tiger and the Dragon Knight Kingdoms to send people to learn medicine in my country.”

““Wha?!””

Fuuga and Sill’s eyes widened at my proposal.

“You’re sure? This is a diplomatic weapon you’re giving up here,” Fuuga said.

“Well, what choice do I have? There will surely be limits to the medical techniques we’re able to give away, but...this incident showed me just how dangerous it is not to have even the most basic knowledge. It just so happened that the outbreak was on an island this time, so it didn’t spread to the continent. But if it had happened on the continent, in a country without the knowledge to prevent an epidemic, that would have been terrifying.”

“Yeah... I shudder to think what’d’ve happened if it broke out in my country. We’re bordering the Demon Lord’s Domain, so the same conditions were probably there too. And with all the people traveling around, it’d spread real quick.”

Fuuga crossed his arms and groaned. It was a good thing he was picking this up so fast.

“Right? That’s why I want you to send people to learn medicine from us. I’ve said this to the Republic and Archipelago Union too. Right?”

“Yeah. I’ve sent a good number of students there since coming home.”

“As for me, while we are just beginning to send people, I have been asking each of the islands for young people who are interested.”

Kuu and Shabon answered over the broadcast.

I looked at Maria. “I’m sure the Empire has been working on medical development just as much as we have. If Madam Maria is willing to accept them, you could send students there too...”

When I looked to her for a response, Maria smiled and nodded. “Of course. We’ll gladly accept them.”

“Ohhh!” Sill cried out loud and leaned in. “That’s marvelous! Please, take students from my country too!”

“Sure... We’ll send some also. Take care of them for us,” Fuuga, who’d had a thoughtful look on his face, accepted it.

Details still needed to be fleshed out, but it was decided that the first worldwide agreement in this field, the Balm Declaration on Medicine, would be

issued.

In order to put all our effort into the first act under that declaration, Maria, Fuuga, and I set to work giving orders to our countries. I wrote to Hakuya about what had been decided in a letter, and asked Aisha to have it delivered to the port town on the west coast by messenger kui.

“For now, I guess I can say I’ve accomplished something...” I said.

“You did more than enough, Souma.”

As I was feeling relieved, Liscia stood by my side, a gentle hand on my back.

# Intermission: Liscia and Maria

With the summit in Balm finished and the Balm Declaration on Medicine made, the people of the Kingdom of Friedonia, Gran Chaos Empire, and Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan were set to return to their own countries.

Normally, with so many leaders in one place, the host country would hold a banquet, and it would be taken as a chance to deepen relations between all present. But Souma, Maria, and Fuuga were all busy people, and they needed to return home to get to work on the Magic Bug Disease problem, so they had no time to spend a night in this country.

That said, it was still a rare opportunity, so time was set aside for fraternizing.

Souma and Julius were trying to help Fuuga and Sill get along.

“In this case, all of our countries need to coordinate their efforts. There may be some resentment between you, and I’m not saying you have to let go of it, but at least save it for after the disease is behind us.”

“For now, I intend to forget what happened in Lastania too.”

While they had decided to coordinate, it hadn’t been long since the two countries had fought, so there must have been some bad blood. This talk was to prevent any discord that could get in the way.

Fuuga and Sill nodded at what they were saying.

“I know. I’m the one who came to you about working together to fight the disease. I’ll follow your lead completely, for now.”

“As for myself, I’ve accepted that my comrades’ deaths were an inevitability of the battlefield.”

Hearing this reassured Souma.

While the four of them were talking, Liscia was left with nothing to do. Julius was helping negotiate and Aisha and Naden were acting as bodyguards. And so, Liscia went off on her own.

*I should take advantage of the opportunity.*

There was someone Liscia badly wanted to talk to.

“Madam Maria.”

“Why, Lady Liscia.”

When Liscia called her name, Maria gave her a smile that was like a flower blooming.

*Wow... She’s so incredibly beautiful...*

Seeing that smile, despite being a woman, Liscia couldn’t help but stop and stare in admiration. At a glance, she had assumed Maria would be a quiet beauty like Juna, but the vibe she gave off was totally different. If Juna shone like an idol, Maria shone like a divine piece of art. Liscia could see that they didn’t call her a saint for nothing.

“I’m so happy to have this chance to speak with you directly,” Maria said, snapping Liscia back to her senses.

“Y-Yes! I am too. I met Madam Jeanne just once when we were little, and we played together, but...this is our first time meeting, right?”

“Jeanne has been an active girl since she was a child, so father would take her on his trips abroad. I was more introverted, so I tended to get left behind in the Empire.”

“Ah... I guess I was similar to Madam Jeanne. Mother always chided me for being so boyish.”

“Hee hee. You must get along swimmingly with Jeanne then.” Having said that, Maria patted the seat beside her. “Have a seat. We won’t get this chance often. Let’s have some girl talk.”

“Girl...talk?”

“Yes. I’m an empress, and you’re a queen, aren’t you? I don’t have many chances to talk to women of similar rank who aren’t my own family. I’d like to have a very normal, very casual chat—like two housewives in the city, or two women who are friends might have by the well.”

“U-Um... Okay.” Liscia seemed a little tense as she took a seat next to Maria.

“You needn’t be so tense. It is quite all right to speak normally with me.”

“I-Is that so? Well, then you speak normally too.”

“Ohh... The way I’m speaking now is a habit of mine, and it gives me personality.”

“I guess you’re more like Juna, huh?”

“Oh my, Juna Doma! Ah, I suppose she’s Juna Souma now. She’s just lovely, isn’t she? I watch her educational program on the simple receiver Sir Souma sent me.”

“The empress herself watches that?”

When she imagined Maria, the Saint of the Empire, enjoying watching Juna’s educational programs—where she acted alongside the strange mascot Little Musashibo—she got a little exasperated by how surreal that mental image was.

*What is it? This sense of all the tension leaking out of my shoulders as I talk to her... Is it like when Souma says something ridiculous?*

“Oh, that reminds me, you sleep in your office too, don’t you?” Liscia asked.

“Yes. Like Sir Souma does, right?”

“Mhm. Obviously, he does it less now that we’re married, but he used to sleep there all the time.”

“Hee hee, I guess Sir Souma and I make up the Office-Sleepers Alliance.”

“Oh, you can let me and Roroa in on that too. When I was helping Souma after we first met, I nodded off in the office, and Roroa often crawls into Souma’s office bed after staying up all night working on economic policy.”

“Oh, goodness. How adorable.” Maria smiled.

Incidentally, Liscia had slept in the office bed too, but she deliberately omitted that part. After all, that was her first, uh...special night with Souma, so she couldn’t possibly talk about it.

“Speaking of Madam Roroa, she was the Sovereign Princess of Amidonia, wasn’t she?”

Thinking this was her chance to change the topic, Liscia nodded. “Yeah, that’s

right.”

“I see. And she brought her country along with her when she married Souma. What incredible courage.”

“Well, yeah, but...ever since she came to the Kingdom, she’s been more of a goofball, really. She’s a mother now too, so I wish she’d settle down,” Liscia said with a shrug, causing Maria to chuckle.

“It’s good that she’s full of energy. And you get along well as fellow queens too.”

“Roroa looks up to us like big sisters. And for our part, we dote on her as a little sister. Though, that’s all calculated on her part. She’s conniving like that.”

“She sounds wonderful. I’d love to speak with her at length sometime.”

“That sounds fine to me, but what would you talk about?”

“How to thrust your country off on someone else.”

“The Empire?! I’d feel bad for whoever’s on the receiving end of that...”

“You would? Normally, people would be happy to rise to the highest rank of emperor... Thinking that’s an imposition shows you really are Sir Souma’s wife.”

“Well, I’ve seen the pressure Souma’s under. So I can also understand why you’d want to push that off onto someone else if able to.”

“It really helps just to hear you say that...”

There was a sense of solemnity in the air.

Liscia clapped her hands, trying to change the mood.

“Oh, that’s right, you perform as a lorelei like Juna, don’t you?” Liscia asked.

Maria nodded. “Yes. There were a lot of requests from the people, so I still do it occasionally.”

“That’s amazing. I could never.”

“You couldn’t? But you’re so pretty. I’m sure you’d be popular.”

“No, um... I was told my singing would inspire a ‘reverse march’...”

“A reverse march? Like...the troops going back the way they came?”

Liscia’s cheeks flushed red.

“Pfft! Ah ha ha ha ha!” Maria burst out laughing. It was so rare for the empress to laugh out loud that Souma, and a lot of other people, turned and stared.

“Nothing’s happening over here, okay!” Liscia shouted, forcing them to look away. “You’re laughing too much, Madam Maria!”



“I-I’m sorry. Hee hee. When you said ‘reverse march,’ it just struck my funny bone...” Maria wiped the tears from her eyes as she apologized. “Oh, goodness me. I don’t think I’ve laughed this much all year.”

“Well, good for you,” Liscia replied in monotone.

“Hee hee. My, don’t look at me like that. Oh, right, speaking of songs... I’ve been learning the songs of your country, particularly those from Sir Souma’s old world, during our broadcast meetings.”

“Hmm? You have?”

Liscia stared blankly at her. The broadcast meetings between the Kingdom and Empire were generally handled by Hakuya and Jeanne, and Liscia was often absent when Souma held meetings with Maria, so she had no idea they’d been doing that.

Maria smiled and nodded. “Yes. Of all the songs I’ve learned, I liked Katyusha the best.”

“What language is that? Something from Souma’s world?”

“He said it was a foreign language to him too. It’s not a bright and cheerful song, but singing it makes me feel more energetic somehow.”

“Hmm... Why’s that?”

“Who can say? I wonder.” It seemed Maria was unsure herself. “Hee hee. This is fun, chatting like this.”

In the middle of their peaceful chat, Maria’s smile suddenly vanished.

“Madam Maria?”

“I think about it sometimes... If I hadn’t given the Kingdom the option to pay us subsidies, and instead insisted on having the hero sent over, what would my life and the Empire be like now?”

“If we’d sent Souma to the Empire back then, you mean?” Liscia asked, and Maria silently nodded. After thinking about it a little, Liscia shook her head vigorously, saying, “No, no, no, no, I don’t want to think about it. I can’t imagine that the antiquated, history-filled country that is the Kingdom could’ve

overcome all the troubles that we were facing back then without Souma. It would have slowly worn us down, and we'd be dead by now, wouldn't we? Besides, without him, I'd never have met the people he hired, and Cian and Kazuha would never have been born."

"Yes, you're right. It's natural for you to think that in your position, Lady Liscia," Maria replied, affirming everything Liscia had said. "That's exactly why I think about it. Obviously, it's all just possibilities, but I think there was a future there. Where Sir Souma became my partner, and we reformed the Empire, gathering comrades, and building a vibrant country... That sort of future."

"Madam Maria..."

"I might have been a mother too, you know?"

"Er, I dunno about that. It feels kind of weird."

Liscia had complicated feelings about it, but Maria chuckled. Was she teasing her there, at the end? Liscia looked at Maria then let out a sigh.

"You know, if we're talking about being partners, I think you and Souma have a perfectly fine partnership as is. In fact, when I first saw you two talking over the broadcast, it was weird how much you were on the same page."

"Oh! Is that right?" Maria's eyes widened. She must not have expected to hear that.

Liscia put a hand on the back of her own neck, awkwardly explaining, "You come from different countries, and your positions are different. Because you're negotiating, you need to try to read the other person, so you can't have too much fun, but can't act hostile either. It's a complicated relationship, but you and Souma seem strangely able to understand one another sometimes."

"Ohh... Jeanne has said that to me on numerous occasions. When she listens to Souma and me talking, she feels left out."

"I...kind of get that. I mean, that's just me being jealous though."

"Oh my," Maria said, blinking. "You just come right out and say it."

"It's natural for me to be jealous when the person involved is so important in my life. So I learned a long time ago, I need to accept it, not force it down."

“You truly are wonderful, you know that?”

Maria smiled peacefully. Liscia smiled back.

“Hey, Liscia. It’s about time.”

Souma, who had been talking over on the other side of the room, called out to her. He presumably meant it was about for everyone to return to their respective countries.

“I’m happy we could have this talk, Lady Liscia,” Maria said, extending her hand.

“I hope we’ll have the chance to continue in a more relaxed environment sometime.”

“Yes! I long for the day.”

Liscia took her hand, and they exchanged a firm handshake.

# Chapter 11: The End

When the time came for us to part, Maria, Fuuga, and I all put our hands together.

“It was good to see both of you today. Sir Souma. Sir Fuuga,” Maria said.

Fuuga nodded. “Yeah, same here. I was able to get to know the empress. It was a valuable experience.”

“Yes, I agree. I learned how difficult it is to fight disease, and how we need the help of many people in order to do so. I never would have realized it takes a whole nation,” Maria replied, sounding impressed.

“Yeah. In my old world, there was a saying that goes, ‘The best doctors heal countries, ordinary doctors cure people, and inferior doctors treat diseases.’ I was never fond of it though...”

“Really? I think it’s a fine saying,” Maria said, giving me a blank look, but I shrugged with a wry smile.

“I understand the ordinary and inferior doctors. It’s saying that you can’t just focus on curing the disease, you have to consider the feelings of your patient. But when they say the best doctors cure countries, that’s a lesson meant to teach rulers the importance of preventing war and disease... But it’s beyond the control of any individual, right? That’s why I think there are no best doctors, in the sense of that saying.”

I looked at Maria and Fuuga.

“I think, for an individual doctor, curing people is enough. From there it’s a matter of those people banding together, providing support, and fighting disease at the national level. If we join hands, we can overcome Magic Bug Disease. Let’s fight together.”

“Yeah!”

“Yes.”

Withdrawing her hands, Maria lifted up the hem of her dress and curtsied.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me.” With that, Maria, Jeanne, Krahe, and Gunther all left together.

After watching them go, Fuuga quietly said, “She’s a strong woman... That’s the Empress, huh? Even with a great nation resting on those slender shoulders, she’s able to remain resolute, without being crushed by the weight of it. She’s got more guts than a lot of commanders.”

“Yeah... She’s amazing,” I said.

“She’s as strong as Mutsumi or any of your wives—no, maybe even stronger. This world sure is full of interesting people.”

Fuuga crossed his arms, looking genuinely amused.

*Thinking back on it, there was something I wanted to ask Fuuga.*

“Hey, Fuuga...”

“Hm? What?”

“Me, you, and Maria... If the three of us work together, we can change the world, and even fight back against things like disease. Don’t you think, if our nations cooperated, we could make a positive impact on the problem of the Demon Lord’s Domain too?”

At my question, Fuuga’s eyes narrowed.

“Is that not an option for you?” I asked.

*Probably not, huh...* Cooperation between the three nations would lead to the most peaceful outcome for the world. It might take time, but the lack of sudden change would make it harder for there to be pushback against us, or for political distortions to occur. However...

“Sorry, Souma,” Fuuga rejected me with an irreverent grin. “I don’t do words like ‘eventually’ and ‘someday.’ I want to decide for myself while in the moment. Because there’s no telling when or where those moments may come.”

*Of course that would be your decision.*

“Virtù...”

“Hm? What’s that?” he asked.

“No, forget I said anything... Anyway, just work with us for now.”

“Sure. I’m with you—until the disease is beaten, at least.”

With that said, Fuuga and his people left.

I thought about the word I’d said without meaning to. Virtù was a concept Machiavelli thought of in opposition to Fortuna, the goddess of fortune. In his book *The Prince,* it’s used in several senses—from individual initiative, to talent, to human will, and more. Machiavelli said that Fortuna was the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but she still leaves us to direct the other half by human virtù. *By which he means that half of our fate can be changed by human will.* Fuuga was truly a mass of virtù in the shape of a man.

After that, we went to say our goodbyes to Queen Sill before returning home to our own country.

“Hashim was glaring at Souma the entire time,” Julius said in the gondola on the way home. “Given your ability to make a conference like this happen, and to find connections between great nations, it was a natural reaction. For someone trying to lead Fuuga down the path of conquest, the fact that the Kingdom of Friedonia can coordinate actions between the countries must be a nuisance.”

“So he sees Souma as a threat then?” Liscia asked, but Julius just shrugged and sighed.

“It’s a little late to be talking about that. He’s taken in the deposed royal family of Lastania, as well as Sami Chima. He must have seen us as a threat long before now... It’s just that him seeing us as a *clear* enemy is troublesome.”

“You mean he might try something?”

“It’s a possibility.”

The mood grew somber. Seeing this, I clapped my hands, trying to lighten things up.

“Well, for the time being, he has no choice but to work in lockstep with us. He wants our medical techniques, and as long as he’s worried about Magic Bug Disease he won’t do anything stupid that risks angering us. He’ll be biding his

time for a few years, I'll bet."

I gazed at the sky outside the gondola's windows. The sun was setting in the west.

"In the meantime... We have to keep gradually building our strength. So that no matter what the situation is, our country remains unshakable."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

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Meanwhile, Fuuga and his people, who shared a border with the Dragon Knight Kingdom, were returning via an overland route.

Along the way, Hashim brought his horse up alongside Fuuga, who was riding on Durga's back.

"The Kingdom of Friedonia is quite dangerous."

"Yeah... Just like Yuriga said. We'd better not underestimate them," Fuuga replied, stifling a yawn.

"They're not only coordinating with the Republic and Archipelago Union through the Maritime Alliance, but they've got ties with the Empire. If we poke Souma too carelessly, we'll take a beating from both the east and the west. I was hoping that giving them that port town would drive a wedge between the Kingdom and the Empire, but...that's not happening."

Hashim furrowed his brow at how casual Fuuga was about all of this.

"If you understand all that...how can you be so laid back?"

"Because they're no threat... Sure, Maria and Souma are impressive rulers, but they have no concept of growing their countries. That stems from the fact that Maria received her country from her father, and Souma from his father-in-law. Okay, Souma annexed Amidonia, but that's only because Queen Roroa gave it up to him. He has no will to expand his territory or take in more people beyond that. So long as we don't touch them, we can count on neither of them attacking us."

Fuuga lay down on Durga's back as he continued.

“We, on the other hand, started with a small country. We can play with the big boys like the Kingdom and the Empire, but even if we lose we’ll only return to being a small country. Because we don’t have to fear that kind of loss, nor do we have a fear of change, we’re able to grow big. Sure, we have to walk alongside the Kingdom and the Empire for now, but...during that time, we’ll have to keep steadily amassing power.”

“Then you’ll continue liberating the Demon Lord’s Domain?” Mutsumi, who was on the opposite side of Durga from Hashim, asked.

Fuuga laughed. “Yeah, I guess so. We have bonds of our own to strengthen. We can integrate half of the Spirit Kingdom, and use Anne to strengthen our influence over the Orthodox Papal State. They must have a lot of light mages, so let’s have them place a percentage under our command and then send them to study medicine in the Kingdom. And...”

“You want the Mercenary State... Right?”

Hashim’s words made Fuuga laugh jovially.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! You bet. A country where might makes right is just up my alley.”

The country seemed ready to head into a period of stability, but the sparks for the time of chaos to follow were already smoldering.

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— In the middle of the 8th month, 1550th year, Continental Calendar —

Some time had passed since the meeting between the leaders of the three major factions. Prime Minister Hakuya and the children, Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga—as well as Hilde and Brad—were in the walled city of Min, capital of the Father Island, which belonged to Fuuga’s faction now.

Min had once been the center of religious festivities, but now it was like a field hospital. Patients suffering from Magic Bug Disease were brought in, and it functioned like a front line base for treatment.

Even the building in the center of Min, a step pyramid that resembled Chichen Itza, had many of its rooms being used to house the ill. The Magic Bug Disease patients came not just from the Father Island, but the Mother Island as well.

Princess Elulu had sent a letter to her father, Spirit Kingdom King Garula, and informed him that they had a treatment and would be accepting patients. As a result, Garula enthusiastically accepted the proposal that led to this development.

The old high elf supremacists on the Mother Island had resented that the young, liberal high elves were living in a state of semi-independence on the Father Island, but even they couldn't oppose Garula's acceptance of the offer.

Garula took advantage of the situation to unite the Mother Island, and sent patients to the Father Island along with healthy high elves who could give blood. At the same time, things were set up so that he could keep in close contact with Princess Elulu, who was the leader of the liberals and reformists; Fuuga's commander, Shuukin; and the Kingdom of Friedonia's representative, Hakuya. The joint front between all factions was a success.

"We'll treat those with the lightest symptoms first! Start with the ones who don't need blood transfusions!"

Hilde was on the scene, directing the mage doctors and dividing the patients. The more advanced their case, the longer their treatment would take, and the more blood they would need.

First they would treat the patients with mild symptoms; the ones who still had magicium in their bodies, in order to prevent any increase in the number of serious cases. This meant that the more likely someone was to die, the later they got treatment... They were choosing who lived and died.

"This is...kind of hard to watch," Yuriga said.

"Yeah..." Tomoe agreed.

Tomoe and Yuriga, who were in charge of disinfecting laundry, carrying baggage, and looking after Hilde and Brad's daughter Ludia, had difficult expressions on their faces. Because there was a shortage of hands at the moment, even noncombatants like them had been asked to help.

"There are all these people, suffering in front of us, but we can't do anything for them..."

Tomoe nodded. "Yeah. But I think the doctors have it worse than anyone."

“True... It must be frustrating. They don’t have anywhere near enough staff to handle this caseload.”

“Mr. Hakuya was saying that Big Brother will do something, though.”

As if willed into existence, someone could be heard shouting off in the distance.

“It’s a boat! The boats are heeeere!” they said.

“Look how many of them there are! They’re flying the flag of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago!”

““Huh?! They’re here!””

The girls looked at one another, then rushed to a certain house in the residential area.

In that house, Hakuya, Ichiha, a fully recovered Shuukin, and Elulu were sitting around a map on a table, checking carefully that there weren’t any places there might be insect monsters they missed exterminating.

““Mr. Hakuya! The boats are here!”” the girls said in unison as they rushed inside, and the other four all turned to look at them at once.

“Oh! They’ve arrived?” Hakuya replied.

“They made it! It’s the reinforcements we’ve been waiting for!” Shuukin said.

Hakuya and Shuukin both rose instinctually, and Elulu and Ichiha followed suit.

“Let’s hurry to the shore, Lord Shuukin! I’ll gather the men,” Elulu suggested.

“We’ll go too,” Ichiha said.

With that, they all headed to the beach that was near Min.

The Father Island had no port where so many ships could dock, so they would have to drop anchor near the coast, then send boats ashore. When they reached the beach, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago fleet had already started unloading.

There was also a load of people who must have been light mages disembarking from the ships. There had to be dozens of them. These were

probably the light mages rounded up by the Empire and the Republic.

In the middle of all those people, there was a man in silver armor who stood apart from all the rest.

“Whew... I just can’t get used to ships,” the man grumbled.

When they saw him, Shuukin and Yuriga’s eyes widened.

“That’s...Lord Fuuga?!”

“Huh? Brother?!”

As they both rushed over, Fuuga noticed them too.

“Shuukin!” Fuuga shouted, waving, and then they exchanged a firm handshake. “You look well! You had me worried!”

“I apologize for the trouble! Thanks to you, I was able to survive!”

“Damn right you did. Can’t have my right-hand man going down to a disease, of all things.”

As the master and servant were enjoying their reunion, Yuriga came forward.

“It’s been a while, brother.”

“Hey, Yuriga! Have you been okay too? We haven’t met in person in a long while... You’ve grown up a bit, huh?”

“H-Have I?” Yuriga shyly looked at her own body.

Hakuya walked over to join the three of them.

“Welcome, Sir Fuuga. I am Hakuya Kwonmin.”

“Hey, you must be Souma’s Black-robed Prime Minister. Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands, and then Fuuga looked at Tomoe and Ichiha who were behind Hakuya.

“And I haven’t seen Little Miss Tomoe or Ichiha since they were in the Union of Eastern Nations. I hear about you two all the time in Yuriga’s letters, you know. Thanks for always looking out for her.”

“Stop it, brother!” Yuriga protested, her face bright red. She was embarrassed that he’d let them know she was writing about how well they got along in her

letters.

They both grinned at her reaction.

“Yes! We’re always great friends with Yuriga,” Tomoe said.

“She’s a hard worker, and a good person at heart,” Ichiha agreed.

Now Yuriga looked as red as a boiled octopus.

After that moment of harmony was over, Hakuya asked Fuuga, “What brings you here, Sir Fuuga? I hadn’t heard you would be coming.”

“I wanted to see the scene myself, and to encourage the troops. Durga doesn’t like the sea, so I left my partner behind and had Souma help me hitch a ride on one of the Archipelago’s ships. Mutsumi and Hashim weren’t happy about it though.”

*Of course they weren’t,* Hakuya thought.

As far as he could see, Fuuga hadn’t brought any companions with him. No matter how confident they were in his strength, his wife and retainers must have been beside themselves with worry when he decided to ride on a foreign ship, alone.

Shuukin looked exasperated. “I don’t know what to do with you...”

“Don’t be so stiff. I wanted to see you healthy, you know?” Fuuga said, throwing his arm around Shuukin’s shoulders with a smile. “Man, it’s a good thing you got better.”

“Yeah. I have the Kingdom of Friedonia’s doctors to thank for that.”

“Oh, yeah? I’ll have to say thanks to Souma’s doctors then.”

“Yes. They saved our lives. I couldn’t possibly show enough gratitude.”

Seeing Shuukin smile like this reminded Fuuga of what Hashim said before he set out.

“The real harm in this incident is that when we face the Kingdom of Friedonia in the future, we can no longer place Sir Shuukin in any key position.”

Fuuga had furrowed his brow dubiously. “I don’t plan on fighting Souma anytime soon, but... Okay, let’s hear what you have to say.”

“Sir Shuukin is a straightforward man and a warrior by nature. He no doubt feels indebted to the Kingdom for saving him from the Magic Bug Disease. That is one of his virtues, but...if we get into a war with the Kingdom of Friedonia in the future, we can assume it will slow his sword. That hesitation may lead to unexpected blunders.”

“And when that happens...we’ll have no choice but to pull him to the rear, huh?”

“Indeed. Much as it will pain me to leave such a capable commander aside...”

It looked like Shuukin felt indebted to the Kingdom of Friedonia, just like Hashim had said he would.

*If I get into a struggle with Souma in the future, I should probably keep Shuukin off the front lines. For his own sake too, since I’m sure he’d struggle with it,* Fuuga thought.

Meanwhile, the mage doctors kept coming ashore, and as she watched Elulu leading them to Min, Yuriga told Tomoe and Ichiha, “With all these people here, maybe they won’t be so short of hands.”

“Yeah,” Tomoe agreed. “This should save a lot more people.”

“Yes. A load off Dr. Hilde and Dr. Brad’s shoulders will be lifted,” Ichiha added.

“And we’ll be set free from all these chores, right? I want to get back to the Kingdom and relax,” Yuriga said, sitting down on the beach.

The other two looked at her apologetically.

“But summer break will be over soon, you know?” Ichiha said.

“Ugh! It’s been that long?! Oh, crap! I haven’t even touched my summer homework.”

“Hee hee, let’s work hard together, Yuriga. Or you’ll get remedial lessons again.”

“Noooooooooo!!!”

As Yuriga clutched her head and screamed, Tomoe and Ichiha looked at one another and smiled.

# ♔ Epilogue: His Name Is — In the middle of the 9th month, 1550th year, Continental Calendar — It had been a while since Hakuya and Tomoe returned from the Father Island.

Hilde, Brad, and the doctors gathered from all countries were still stationed there studying and treating Magic Bug Disease. The situation wouldn't subside so easily, so their return was likely to take some time still.

In the meantime, Liscia, Aisha, Naden, and I were at sea with Excel on the ship she captained, the *Albert II*.

The ship had left Lagoon City at the start of the 9th month, and we were heading through Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union waters to the Spirit Kingdom on the Mother Island with our five escort ships.

Three of those escorts were given to us by Shabon to guide us through the Archipelago Union's territory.

On the deck of the *Albert II*...

"Whew, the wind feels great," Liscia said, leaning over the side, letting her hair blow freely in the sea breeze.

The warm days had continued into the 9th month, and the way the sun shone on the sea spread out in front of us looked like a scene out of summer. *This might be the first time I've ever gotten to enjoy summer.* Before, when we had a beach barbecue in the Republic, we could see the frozen continent in the distance, and when we fought Ooyamizuchi, it was on the rough winter sea.

Liscia, who was at my side, looked at me with a chuckle. "I haven't been able to take such a relaxed trip with you in a while."

"True... You've been watching the kids all this time."

Liscia had been with the children pretty much ever since they were born, and I was always dealing with my political duties. Situations like the bonus

diplomatic voyage to Zem and the quest to slay Ooyamizuchi kept my schedule murderously busy.

Obviously, we lived in the same castle, and I was helping with the kids as much as I could, so we were managing to have family time, but heading out somewhere with Liscia—except on official trips like the summit in the Dragon Knight Kingdom— just hadn't been possible.

Now Cian and Kazuha were big enough to stand up without holding on to anything and could toddle around on their own. In my old world, that would make them big enough to leave at daycare, so they could be left to other people.

That's why I invited Liscia to come on this trip to the Spirit Kingdom.

"I wanted to let Cian and Kazuha ride on the ship's deck too."

"That's...going to have to wait until they're a little older."

Cian and Kazuha were staying home in the Kingdom.

Between Juna and Roroa, who were on maternity leave; Carla the maid, who they were quite attached to; and Albert and Elisha, who made frequent visits to the castle to play with them, there was no shortage of people to look after our kids.

Maybe because of that, even when we left, they never cried, which made Liscia and I feel kind of sad.

Liscia moved closer to me, slipping her arm through mine. "Hee hee! Having some together-time, just the two of us, is nice every once in a while."

"Ah ha ha, agreed."

"But, you know, the staring from behind hurts just a little..."

Liscia glanced behind her as she pressed close to me. I turned to look too, and there were Aisha and Naden staring out from behind the door to the bridge. When they noticed we'd noticed, they ducked their heads back in.

"They're still being pretty considerate," Liscia said with a wry smile. "Since this is my first relaxed trip with you in ages, they're letting me have time with you to myself... I guess they can't help but be curious though."

“Ha ha ha...”

All I could do was laugh awkwardly. It wasn’t my place to tell my wives how they should show consideration to one another.

Then Liscia groaned and stretched. “Still—traveling by ship is nice. It’s slower than a gondola, but I can stretch wherever I like, and even spar with Aisha on the deck if I want to.”

“Sure, but...don’t get carried away and wreck the ship, okay?”

“We won’t. Obviously.”

“Well... We had to carry you-know-what with us safely. We couldn’t just get in a gondola and take a direct flight with Naden,” I said, thinking of what was in the ship’s hold. “It needs to be handled carefully, so we had to do it this way... You know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Liscia said, looking a little sad, and rested her head on my shoulder.

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Some days later, our ship arrived at the Mother Island in the Spirit Kingdom.

There were a lot of high elves gathered at the port, cheering. It was like the whole country was welcoming us. For a xenophobic country like theirs, they were being unusually welcoming, but the fact that they knew our country played a large role in curing Magic Bug Disease, and that they weren’t under Fuuga’s control like the Father Island, had a lot to do with that.

When we disembarked from the *Albert II*, a high elf man wearing a prominent, laurel-like crown approached. He looked a lot like Gerula.

“Welcome, O King of Friedonia. I am Garula Garlan, elder brother of Gerula, who you cared for in your country, and king of this one.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Souma A. Elfrieden.”

“We, the high elf people, welcome you.”

“Thank you.”

As we exchanged a firm handshake, the assembled crowd burst into applause.

The others from the Kingdom were shaking hands up on the ship too.

I quickly introduced Garula to Liscia, Aisha, and Naden who had disembarked with me, and decided to deal right away with my primary goal in coming to this country. I signaled to the *Albert II*, and raised my voice so the crowd could hear.

“As of this moment, I hereby return a treasure of your nation which mine has been holding on to for you!”

When I did, the *Albert II* began carefully lowering her cargo. It was a single coffin, the lid of which was made of glass.

I brought Garula next to it so he could see, and when he did, he narrowed his eyes, and then gazed up to the heavens.

Inside, with a number of flowers, frozen to prevent rot, were the remains of Gerula Garlan. The long battle with disease had hollowed out his cheeks, but careful mortuary makeup made him look as though he were merely sleeping.

I told Garula, who seemed to be struggling to hold back tears, “Gerula donated a number of organs to research after his death. However, I still felt his body should be returned to the land he loved.”

“You have my thanks for this... King Souma,” Garula said, looking me in the eye, having won against his tears.

Gerula’s remains were slowly carried between two lines of high elves. They couldn’t help but shed tears for the man who had literally given his life for his country, saving countless people from Magic Bug Disease.

“Ohh, Lord Gerula!”

“I feel so sorry for you...and yet, your sacrifice saved us.”

The previous cheering was at an end, replaced instead by sobbing and wails of mourning.

As I looked at those people, I asked Garula, “What will the Spirit Kingdom do now?”

“We’ll have to change what needs changing, I’m sure,” Garula said in a quiet voice. “It should be clear to anyone that we can’t afford to keep the country shuttered any longer. Those ossified by old ideals will finally be forced to move

forward. I would like to unify them, and begin trade with your Maritime Alliance.”

I was a little surprised to hear him say that.

“How unexpected. I’d heard from Merula that the king of the Spirit Kingdom was a militarist.”

From what I was told, the children of the former king were an elder brother who was an excellent warrior, and a younger brother who was brave and wise—and it was the elder who took the throne.

That’s why when I first met Gerula, I assumed the Spirit Kingdom King would be even more stubborn, but now that I actually met him, he seemed gentle-mannered and a flexible thinker.

“Oh, I see...” Garula smiled a little. “Well...I’m just going to talk to myself for a moment. Please ignore me.”

“Huh?”

“Would the elder brother, the militarist, really want the throne? He only longed to fight on the front lines, so what would he do if asked to take it? Especially if he had an identical younger brother who found administrative work no trouble at all.”

“Wait... Don’t tell me?!”

*Did they pull a switcheroo? Just so that he could remain a single commander fighting on the front lines instead of becoming a king. If so, the king in front of me is... And the remains sleeping over there are...*

I was taken aback, and must have had a silly look on my face, because “Garula” broke into a smile.

# Midword Thank you for buying volume 15 of *Realist Hero*. This is Dojyomaru, who has been either inside his house working or biking alone along the embankment during the state of emergency. I was already an at-home worker, but this has turned me into even more of a shut-in.

Now then, this volume has mainly focused on the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan and medicine... I have a vague sense of what your readers must have thought when you first read the synopsis.

*"Is this guy crazy? This theme, really? Is it really okay to be doing that?"* I can practically hear you all saying it.

Err, at the point when I'm writing this, I still can't say whether it was "okay" or not. However, this scenario is actually one I'd already been thinking of back in 2019, before the virus really took off. I'd have medicine as my theme, drop the information that magicium is made of nanomachines, and more or less make it certain that there was a temporal connection between the time Souma lived in before and the one he lives in now. All that to show this isn't a transferred-to-another-world story, but a time-travel story.

At the time, I had no idea that all of our lives would be turned upside down like this...

The web serialization of the content in volume 15 started in February of 2020, and in March I wondered if it was okay to keep serializing this story for a while, but by April I realized, "Oh, this problem isn't going away any time soon." If I tried to wait until it was over, there was no telling when I could start back up again, so I decided to resume serialization. There were a lot of twists and turns, I have to admit.

Obviously, the disease that appeared in this story has no connection to any real-world disease.

My reference wasn't a virus, but diseases like schistosomiasis that are caused by parasites. Souma mentioned in the story that he went to the Dr. Sugiura Memorial Museum in Yamanashi Prefecture as part of his social studies class, and I did too. It was a very quick trip where we took the highway bus to Showa Town, looked at the exhibits, bought lunch at a convenience store, and headed straight home, but it was still a valuable experience.

We heard all sorts of stories from the guide there, and were shown *oncomelania hupensis nosophora*, the intermediate host for *schistosoma japonicum,* the Japanese blood fluke. I was surprised it was so small, and indistinguishable from other freshwater snails. They showed us the medical equipment that was used back then, including a big syringe that made me shudder, and then, on the second floor, we watched an American-Japanese co-production titled *In the Name of Mankind.*

I'd like to use this space to thank the guide who showed us around the Dr. Sugiura Memorial Museum.

There was also a newspaper article on display on the second floor of the memorial museum which explained how people faced this disease, and I found it very moving. I think that people's stance towards disease is the same whether it's a virus, parasitic infection, or a fictional disease.

There are patients who want to get better, doctors who want to treat them, and people who don't want to see more victims. That's why they can make logical decisions, and even if they're standing in different positions they can fight together. I'm sure there are people who think it would never go so well, but as far as fighting diseases goes, I want there to be some hope, even if only in the world of fiction.

This is getting kind of depressing... Let's have a change of mood.

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Now then, volume 15 is scheduled for release in June, so the Realist Hero anime will be airing soon. As I'm writing this, they are still very busy with production, so I don't know how it will turn out.

I’ve seen up through episode 2 at this point, and Liscia’s gestures are just so adorable. Thanks to the acting of Ms. Inori Minase and the comical way she moves, she’s turned into an even more appealing girl than I imagined. I’m going to have to write short stories for the anime’s Blu-ray release now, and I think Liscia may get a little influenced by that acting.

Now then, I give my thanks to the artist Fuyuyuki, to Mr. Satoshi Ueda of the manga adaptation, to my editor, to the designers, to the proofreaders, to the people involved with the anime version, and to all of you who now hold this book in your hands.

This has been Dojyomaru.

# After Story: One Summer Night

— One night around the end of the 8th month, 1550th year, Continental Calendar —

It was a summer evening, where the heat of the day still lingered. In a candlelit room in Parnam Castle, the three students who had returned from the Father Island the other day were working on their summer homework from the Royal Academy.

In short: they were rushing to finish their summer homework.

Because they were sent to the Father Island by official request of the Kingdom, they were exempted from some of it, but they were still given homework for core subjects like math and history where they wouldn't be able to keep up with the class if they didn't do it.

"Urgh... I'm so tired... Let it end..." Yuriga said, collapsing on top of the table. Her wings were drooping.

Tomoe and Ichiha were both watching Yuriga study.

"Yuriga, this one's wrong."

"You got the equation, but you messed up the substitution at the end."

Because Tomoe and Ichiha were both good students with strong marks in the core subjects, they finished their own work in no time, and were now helping Yuriga with the parts she struggled with.

Yuriga pursed her lips, looking upset. "I was forced to do manual labor on the Father Island, and now that I'm back you force me to study all the time? Isn't that unfair? Aren't we just ordinary students?"

"Hrm... You say that, but doesn't everyone have their own problems?" Tomoe said, cocking her head to the side slightly, and Ichiha nodded in agreement.

"Tomoe's right. I don't think there are many students who get to focus just on studying. Those from noble and knightly families likely have to help out when they go home, and the common people have to work to earn their tuition during the break."

“Lu works for her family at the Evans Company to earn pocket money, and Vel works at Lu’s fruit parlor as a salesgirl.”

“Huh? I understand Lucy working, but Velza too?” Yuriga asked, and Tomoe nodded with a wry smile.

“Tasty food costs money. And if she works at Lucy’s place, they feed her sweets, so it’s perfect.”

“Oh, yeah, she was always buying and eating things.”

Yuriga recalled the way Velza’s face melted with glee as she ate Lucy’s latest sweets. As Aisha provided another example, dedication to the ones they loved and the pursuit of food were apparently racial traits for the dark elves.

Tomoe chuckled. “But I’d like us all to get together and have fun at least once.”

“Yeah...” Ichiha agreed. “It’s summer break, after all.”

“That’s right!” Yuriga nodded enthusiastically. “Souma said during the entrance ceremony that we have to enjoy our school lives to the fullest!”

“But we need you to finish your homework first,” Tomoe told her.

“Urgh... I know that.”

“Ah ha ha...” Ichiha laughed awkwardly.

Just then, a knock came at the door.

“Come in!” Tomoe shouted in reply, and Souma entered carrying a tray, followed by Juna with a teapot.

“Big Brother and Juna?”

“Hey there, Tomoe.”

“Good evening, everyone. It’s good to see you’re still working so hard late at night.”

““G-Good evening.””

Ichiha and Yuriga seemed unsure if they should jump to their feet to welcome the sudden arrival of the king and first secondary queen, but Souma waved his

hand.

“Ahh, we’re in private right now, so don’t bother with that stuff.”

The king himself said so, so they stayed seated.

Souma looked at the table the three of them were sitting around.

“So, Tomoe, how goes the homework?”

“Oh! Well, Ichiha and I are finished, so we’re helping Yuriga with hers.”

“Hey! Yes, that’s true, but...you don’t have to say it,” Yuriga protested, puffing up her cheeks, but everyone just smiled at her attempt to hide her weakness.

“It sounds like you’re working hard. I thought I’d bring you all a late-night snack,” Souma said, laying the tray on the table.

“Ohh, I was just feeling hun...gry?”

“Thank you, Your Majesty... Huh?”

“Whatever, I’m just happy for a break... Wait, what?”

When they saw what was on the tray Souma had brought, the kids all looked at him blankly. It was three bowls of white rice, a plate of white sashimi dipped in soy sauce, three sets of wooden spoons, and a set of long chopsticks.

“Rice...and sashimi, Big Brother?”

“It’s a little different. Here’s what you do.”

Souma put a few pieces of sashimi on top of the rice with the long chopsticks.

“Okay, Juna. Go ahead.”

“Okay.”

Juna poured the contents of the teapot over the sashimi.

When she did, the delicious smell of soup stock tickled the kids’ nostrils. It made their empty bellies feel even emptier. Souma offered a bowl and wooden spoon to Tomoe.

“Here you go, it’s ochazuke.”

“Ocha...zuke?”

“It’s a standard dish for late-night snacks in my old world. And Shabon just happened to send me some good tea leaves grown on Yaezu Island. Since I had everything I needed, I thought I’d try making it.”

In the world he came from, Souma had heard that green tea, black tea, and oolong tea were all made from leaves of the same tea plant, and the only difference was the degree of fermentation. He’d been looking for a country somewhere with a culture of drinking green tea for a while now. When Souma found out that the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago had a culture of green tea and grew tea leaves suitable for it, he’d asked Shabon to send him some.

The teapot contained a mixture of tea from those leaves mixed with soup stock.

“I wish I had some more elegant tableware to serve it in,” Souma said as he began preparing two more bowls. “I’d definitely prefer to have tea bowls, along with a kyusu teapot or a kettle, but...well, wanting for things I can’t have isn’t all that productive, so I found substitutes. Here, for both of you too.”

“Thank you,” Ichiha said.

“We’re grateful,” Yuriga added.

With that, the three of them each took a scoop with their wooden spoons, and their eyes went wide when they put them in their mouths.

“It’s really good, Big Brother!”

“The soup stock has really seeped into it, and the flavor warms you up.”

“I could eat as much of this as you gave me, even though it’s late...”

The kids messily gobbled away at their ochazuke.

Souma and Juna smiled contentedly as they watched them. In no time, the kids polished off their meals.

“Whew... That was good, Big Brother,” Tomoe said.

““Thank you,”” Ichiha and Yuriga added in unison.

“Sure, it was no big deal,” Souma replied, taking their used dishes. “I hear you three worked hard on the Father Island. Did this help reward you for it a bit?”

“Big Brother... Yes! I feel full of energy now.”

“I do too. Now that my stomach’s satisfied, I think I can try a little more.”

Yuriga, who had been grumbling earlier, was ready to go again. Not long ago, she might have felt obligated to say, “What’s the king doing bringing us snacks?!” But by now, she was pretty used to this country’s style—or rather the royal family’s style—and wasn’t thrown by minor things like this.

Souma nodded with satisfaction as he looked at the kids.

“You should get your homework done. Before it’s time for the event, at least.”

“Event?” Yuriga asked.

“Oh! That’s right!” Tomoe clapped her hands with a look as if she’d just remembered.

“Lu and Vel wanted to go together too! Come on, Yuriga! Let’s hurry up and finish your homework!”

“Huh? Where’s this sudden motivation coming from? What’s going on?!”

“Come on, move that pen! Ichiha, you help too!”

“O-Okay!”

“Seriously, what is happening?!”

The kids suddenly got a lot noisier. Souma and Juna looked at one another, smiling, and then left the room so that they wouldn’t be in the way.

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— Evening, two days later —

“Heh heh! You look good like that, Yuriga,” Tomoe said.

“You too. But you wear clothes that look like this all the time,” Yuriga replied, a little embarrassed by the compliment.

This evening, they were both wearing yukata. Incidentally, Souma was the one who made them, and while they were actually all made for Tomoe, she had given Yuriga a light blue one. They were about the same height, so the length didn’t need to be adjusted all that much, but the hole for Tomoe’s tail needed

to be closed up, and new ones cut for Yuriga's wings.

"I just put this on because I was told this was the thing to wear at festivals, but it's pretty nice," Yuriga said, holding her sleeves as she looked at herself in a yukata. Feeling like that was a compliment to her brother, Tomoe smiled with satisfaction.

Today was the city-wide summer festival in Parnam.

At the request of Roroa, who'd wanted some kind of event to get the economy going, Souma proposed a summer festival like the ones in his world, where there were rows of food stalls and they launched fireworks.

Incidentally, when the king proposed this idea, the third primary queen had a question.

"What does the summer festival celebrate, darlin'?"

"Hmm? What do you mean, 'what does it celebrate'?"

"I mean, it's gotta be celebratin' somethin'. That's what festivals are for, ain't it?"

"Now that you mention it... What does the summer festival celebrate? Because it wasn't just at shrines; we had them on shopping streets too..."

And that was how this all started. Eventually, they settled on this festival celebrating their sadness over the departure of summer. Now that it was being held, Tomoe and her friends were here to enjoy it. In fact, you could even say that they'd struggled through that homework hell just to be here.

"Heh heh! It's a good thing you got your homework done, huh, Yuriga?"

"Tell me about it. I thought it was going to be death by homework for me... By the way..." Yuriga looked all around. "Where did Ichiha go?"

"Ichiha? He's over there."

Tomoe pointed towards a pretty girl in a yellow yukata that Ichiha was pulling along by the hand. The girl wasn't used to the length of it, and struggled to walk.

"I'm sorry, Ichiha. I just can't get used to this outfit."

“It’s okay. Here, hold on,” Ichiha said, offering a hand to the yukata-clad girl. “Let’s go, Big Sister Sami.”

Sami Chima—as you might expect from the younger sister of Mutsumi, who was like an embodiment of the ideal traditional Japanese beauty—looked really good in Japanese clothes. Her hair was shorter than Mutsumi’s, and tied off at the side.

She looked at Ichiha apologetically and said, “Thank you... Even though I’m supposed to be your bodyguard here.”

“Don’t worry, sister. I’ll be counting on you when it matters.”

Sami was the one chosen to chaperone the children at the festival. Because they were expecting crowds today, the Black Cats could only protect them so much from the shadows, so Souma and the others had wanted at least one person at their side.

That said, having a gruff warrior like Inugami around during a happy time with their friends would feel out of place, so the task had fallen to Sami. She was a similar age, and also an accomplished mage, which made her a good candidate. It also seemed like it wouldn’t be good for Sami’s mental or physical health to stay cooped up in the library forever, so it was also a good way to have her get out. Incidentally, her yukata had been borrowed from Roroa, who had a similar build to her.

“Is this...all right?” Yuriga mumbled as she looked at Sami.

“Yuriga?” Tomoe said questioningly.

“My brother killed someone important to her, you know? Is she okay with being around his little sister?”

For Sami, Fuuga and Hashim were the ones who’d murdered her adoptive father, Heinrant. However, Yuriga had happened to overhear Sami saying that she had nothing against Yuriga just because she was Fuuga’s sister. In fact, she’d even said “The way she’s been jerked about at her brother’s whims, I feel a sort of kinship with her.”

Still, there had to be some feelings she couldn’t get over.

Tomoe grabbed Yuriga by both arms and said, “It’s okay, Yuriga!”

“Huh? Tomoe?”

“Big Brother and the others decided that it was safe to leave our protection to her. Sami knew you’d be here when she accepted the job, so you don’t have to worry about any of the stuff you’re thinking of!”

Tomoe tried to push past this with pure momentum. Yuriga blinked, then, smiling slightly, she grabbed Tomoe by the cheeks.

“You’re acting awfully cheeky for a little kid. I haven’t fallen so far I need *you* worrying about me.”

“Ow, ow!”

“Jeez... But anyway, you’re okay with that?” Yuriga asked, letting go of Tomoe’s cheeks to point at Ichiha and Sami.

Sami was holding onto him tightly as they walked along.

“Those two look awfully close to me.”

“Huh? Isn’t it good for siblings to be close?” Tomoe said, rubbing her cheeks as she gave Yuriga a blank look.

“Hmm—” Yuriga said with a suppressed laugh. *I wonder how she would’ve reacted if it wasn’t his sister hanging off of him like that.*

Tomoe seemed to have been paying an awful lot of attention to Ichiha since around the time of the Monsterology symposium, so it was about time she became more aware of it herself—is what Yuriga, Velza, and Lucy had been saying. The only ones who didn’t know were Tomoe and Ichiha themselves.

When she saw how Yuriga was watching her warmly, Tomoe stared back at her with suspicion.

“What, Yuriga...?”

“Oh, *nothing*.”

“Sorry for the wait,” Ichiha said as he and Sami caught up. Sami bowed her head to them.

“I’m sorry for taking so long, you two.”

“No, it’s no problem at all,” Tomoe replied.

“It’s not your fault. You’re not used to that kind of outfit,” Yuriga added.

Sami smiled at them softly.

“Well, shall we be off, then? We’re meeting up with your other two friends who aren’t here at Ginger’s Vocational School, right?”

“Oh, right. That’s Lu and Vel!”

Sami blinked at Tomoe’s reply.

“Both of them are girls too? Ichiha, are you popular with girls now?”

“Hold on, sis! It’s not like that!”

““Ah ha ha...””

Tomoe and Yuriga could only smile wryly at the way Ichiha turned bright red as he tried to deny it.

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The four of them met up with Lucy and Velza in front of the vocational school.

“So, why are we meeting up here?” Yuriga asked.

“Heh heh heh, obviously, because they’re doin’ this,” Lucy said, pointing to the main gate of the school. It had an arch that said “B-Grade Gourmet Exhibition Site” in big letters.

“It’s been some time since His Majesty and Poncho started recreating dishes from His Majesty’s old world, and the number of recipes has only increased, so the plan is to show all of them off here,” Ichiha explained, and Lucy nodded.

“There’s gonna be a whole mountain o’ good eats. I’m thinkin’ we oughta fill our bellies before we get goin’.”

“Good eats... Do you suppose that will include sweets?” Velza asked, her eyes sparkling at the mention of delicious food. This was standard for her, so Tomoe and the others chuckled, and decided to just head inside.

There were food stalls all around the school, and a myriad of dishes being sold. Some of them, like okonomiyaki, horumonyaki, ice cream, and Napolitan

spaghetti, were familiar to Tomoe and the others who lived in the castle, while others weren't.

"Huh? Lady Tomoe?"

"Huh?"

Turning to see who'd called her name, Tomoe saw Jirukoma and Poncho's second wife Komain both wearing aprons as they worked at a stall with a sign that read "Sunny-Side-Up Egg Yakisoba." In front of them was a hot steel plate with yakisoba noodles and sunny-side-up eggs frying on it. It was surreal seeing this pair that looked like Native Americans dressed in aprons, with triangular bandannas on their heads and a spatula in each hand.

"Komain? You have a stall here?" Tomoe asked, blinking.

"Yes!" Komain replied with a smile. "There are a lot of stalls at this event that my husband is helping with, and the people involved with the Lastanian royal family don't have much to do other than provide security, so I had my brother come help."

"Not much to do beyond provide security? Well, I suppose that's true," Jirukoma said with a complicated expression on his face. Komain ignored him and kept talking.

"I'm sure my husband is running all around the event site right now. What do you say, Lady Tomoe? Would you and your friends like some yakisoba?"

"Ohh, that's soundin' pretty good. How about we buy three plates and we'll share?" Lucy suggested, and Velza nodded enthusiastically.

As for Yuriga, on the other hand...

"No, I'm more concerned about what I'm seeing behind them..." she said, pointing behind the stall.

The school building was right behind the stall, and the closest classroom was brightly lit.

"Come on, don't fight, you two. Play nice now."

"Oh, are you sleepy? Come on over here."

There were about ten children between the ages of one and three in the classroom, and Jirukoma's wife Lauren and Poncho's first wife Serina were looking after them.

Jirukoma and Komain looked at each other and smiled wryly.

"N-No, um, this is, well... You know," Jirukoma stammered.

"If you put me and my brother's children together, there are six of them, so we set up an impromptu daycare."

Jirukoma and Lauren currently had four children, while Poncho had one each with Serina and Komain. All together that made six children that needed someone to watch them, so they'd decided they might as well look after the other participants' children while they were at it.

Komain narrowed her eyes at Jirukoma.

"I mean, *my* family is normal. It's my brother, popping out four kids within a few years of being married to only one wife, that's weird."

"There's one set of twins in there, so you can't really blame me..."

"That doesn't make it any less trouble for Big Sister Lauren."

"But Lauren is the one who keeps saying the kids are so cute she wants lots of them..."

As those two were arguing...

"Hee hee, doesn't this make you want a second, Lord Ginger?"

"San?!"

At some point, the principal of the vocational school, Ginger, had appeared with his wife Sandria wrapped around his arm.

When Komain noticed them, she smiled and said, "Good evening. Are you two making the rounds?"

"Oh! Yes. We were checking to make sure nothing is amiss."

"Forget that, Lord Ginger," Sandria said, tugging on his sleeve. "I want our second now."

“Huh? We agreed we’d wait a while, didn’t we?”

“We did, yes, but now that I’ve seen Serina surrounded by children like this, I find myself wanting another.”

Maybe it was because they were both maids, but Sandria paid a lot of attention to Serina, who had been less interested in romance than herself before, but now Serina was happily surrounded by lots of children. *Me too,* Sandria thought, seeing this scene.

“Let’s try hard starting tonight.”

“Oh... Okay. I understand.”

“Um... Could you do that sort of family meeting somewhere else?” Komain complained with a wry smile, and Ginger flushed red.

Tomoe and her friends, who had also been listening to them, were blushing too. They all had a basic knowledge of this sort of thing from lessons at the academy.

Meanwhile, Sami, who had been eating yakisoba as she watched, smiled wryly and mumbled, “It’s so peaceful, yet so loud... What a weird country.”

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*Boom, pop, boooom!* A great many fireworks were spread out across the sky.

In the country Souma came from, they valued the ephemeral feeling of the fireworks fading away, so when they sent up fireworks it was one shot at a time, in slow and fast bursts. However, in this country, there was no such culture, and the artillerymen brought in to act as pyrotechnicians were judged on who could more efficiently fill the whole sky without any breaks. The former was like looking at a flower arrangement in the living room, while the latter was like seeing a mountain of blooming cherry blossoms. It wasn’t a case of one being better than the other.

“““Wow!”””

You could tell that from the way that the kids’ eyes sparkled as they stared up into the sky. They were on the roof of the Royal Academy, which Tomoe and her friends attended.

The academy, which felt a sense of rivalry towards the newer, more cutting edge Ginger's Vocational School, had decided that if the vocational school was going to open up their campus, then they would also have events with music and stage performances.

Tomoe and the others had heard that the academy's roof was going to be a good spot to watch the fireworks, so they brought the food they'd bought at the vocational school and had sat down to enjoy the show.

"Tamaya!" Tomoe suddenly shouted, and Yuriga looked at her with wide eyes.

"What was that about?"

"Big Brother told me that's what they shout while watching fireworks in his world."

"Oh, yeah. That's interestin'. Tamaya!"

""Tamaya!""

When Lucy shouted, Velza and Ichiha joined in too. Yuriga and Sami, who were watching, would feel a little left out if they didn't participate, so they did the same. And so, the six of them ate food they'd bought at the stalls, and enjoyed a sky full of fireworks.

"We were able to make a good summer memory, huh, Yuriga?" Tomoe said, sounding like she was enjoying herself.

"Well, it wasn't a bad one," Yuriga replied, shrugging.

Although she said that, this scene of watching the fireworks at night with friends would be carved deep into Yuriga's heart.

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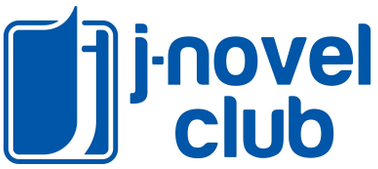
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How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom: Volume 15

by Dojyomaru

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