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


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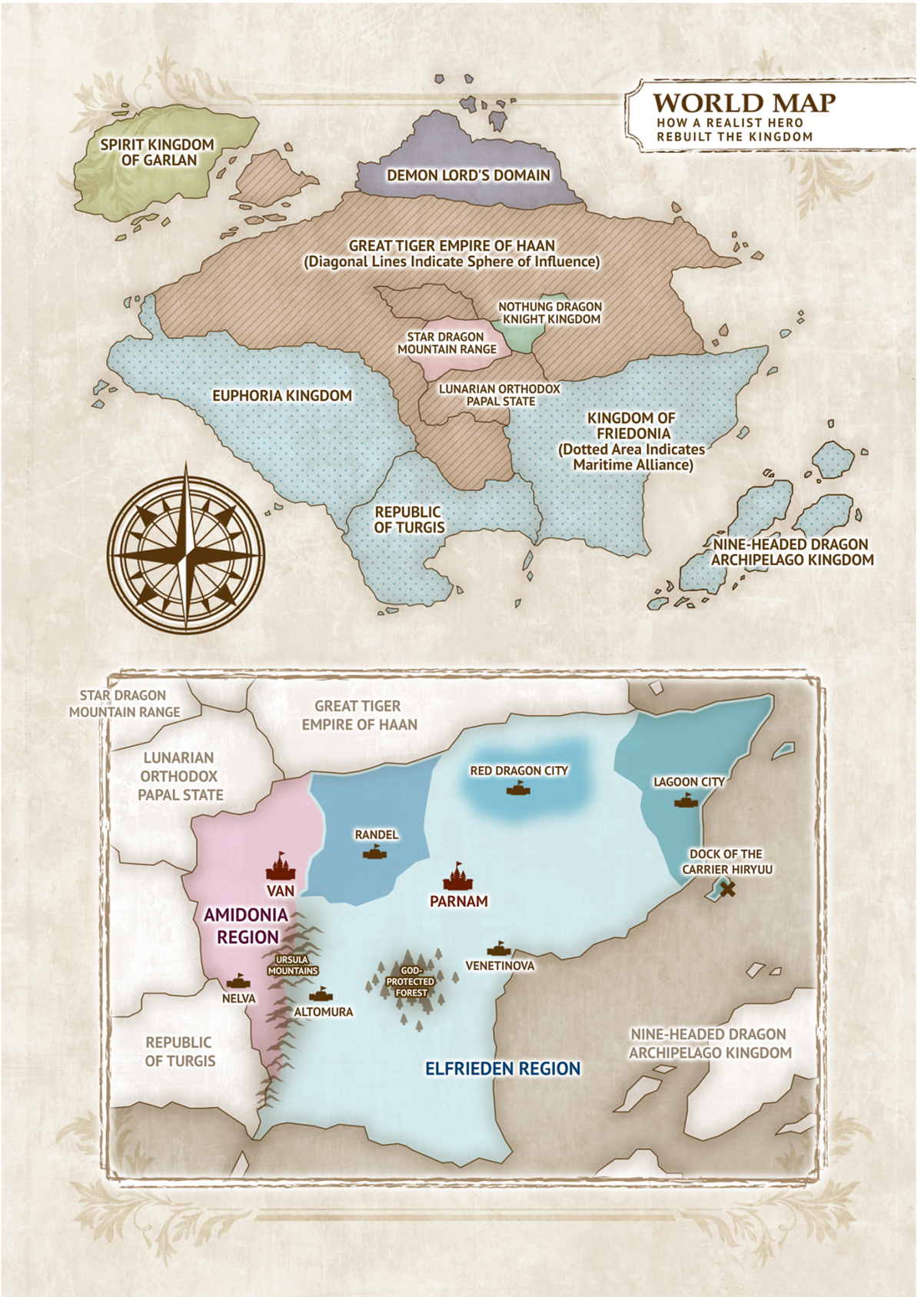


XIX

HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki


"YOUR DREAM IS OVER NOW, FUUGA."
Souma E. Friedonia
Liscia Elfrieden
Ludwin M. Arcs
Halbert Magna
Fuuga Haan


WORLD MAP
HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM
SPIRIT KINGDOM OF GARLAN
DEMON LORD'S DOMAIN
GREAT TIGER EMPIRE OF HAAN
(Diagonal Lines Indicate Sphere of Influence)
NOTHUNG DRAGON KNIGHT KINGDOM
STAR DRAGON MOUNTAIN RANGE
EUPHORIA KINGDOM
LUNARIAN ORTHODOX PAPAL STATE
KINGDOM OF FRIEDONIA
(Dotted Area Indicates Maritime Alliance)
REPUBLIC OF TURGIS
NINE-HEADED DRAGON ARCHIPELAGO KINGDOM
STAR DRAGON MOUNTAIN RANGE
GREAT TIGER EMPIRE OF HAAN
LUNARIAN ORTHODOX PAPAL STATE
RED DRAGON CITY
LAGOON CITY
RANDEL
DOCK OF THE CARRIER HIRYUU
VAN
PARNAM
AMIDONIA REGION
URSULA MOUNTAINS
VENETINOVA
GOD-PROTECTED FOREST
NELVA
ALTOMURA
REPUBLIC OF TURGIS
NINE-HEADED DRAGON ARCHIPELAGO KINGDOM
ELFRIEDEN REGION

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.



Maria Euphoria

Former empress of the Gran Chaos Empire. Focuses her efforts on her charity work now that she is Souma's third secondary queen.



Yuriga Haan

Younger sister of Fuuga Haan, king of the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan. Came up with a plan that made her Souma's fourth primary queen.



HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

XIX

Souma A. Friedonia

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.



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.



Mutsumi Haan



Eldest daughter of the House of Chima, who ruled the Duchy of Chima. A wise and brave commander. Married Fuuga, and supports him on his path to supremacy.

Fuuga Haan



King of the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan. Defeated the Gran Chaos Empire and is now preparing to fully liberate the Demon Lord's Domain.

Halbert Magna



The Kingdom of Friedonia's National Defense Force's sole dragon knight, and captain of the elite Dratroopers unit. Called Hal for short.

Hashim Chima



Eldest son of the House of Chima, who ruled the Duchy of Chima. As Fuuga's advisor he is a cold, calculating wielder of cruel schemes.

Kagetora



Head of the Kingdom of Friedonia's intelligence operatives, the "Black Cats." Also an excellent warrior, he carries out activities both inside and outside the kingdom.

Mio Carmine



Daughter of former general Georg Carmine, and now a member of the land forces. Married Colbert, who manages her domain.

Carla



Daughter of Castor. Was made a slave for the crime of treason and now works in Parnam Castle as a maid.

Castor



Former General of the Air Force in the Elfrieden Kingdom. Now attached to the Naval Defense Force as captain of the island-type carrier *Hiryuu*.

Juno Minazuki



Thief adventurer. Has been on a number of quests with "Little Musashibo," who is controlled by Souma.

Julius Lastania



Former crown prince of the Principality of Amidonia. Now married to Princess Tia of the Kingdom of Lastania, he works hard in his role as next in line to the throne.

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Prologue: The Great Fuuga’s Final Battle

The world war between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire had split the continent of Landia in two. Just as the forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia, led by Souma, were about to collide with the forces of the Haan Great Tiger Empire, led by Fuuga, Souma’s plan went into action…

Images of the unexplored northern hemisphere were projected into the sky, showing Juno and her adventuring party arriving before anyone else. Souma unveiled to the people of the southern hemisphere a promotional video meant to lure people to the new world.

The reveal of a new world full of mysteries shattered the illusions of the Great Tiger Empire’s people, who had believed that if they could force the Kingdom of Friedonia to submit, the entire world would belong to Fuuga. He might have been able to conquer the continent, but that wouldn’t mean he had conquered the world.

At the same time, the existence of a new world to explore made their dream of continental conquest feel stale. By offering them an ambition more exciting than conquering the continent, he redirected Fuuga’s followers’ interest towards adventuring in the new world. A great man lays his road to hegemony atop the hopes of the people, and it is through their affirmation of his severity that he shapes history, no matter how bloody that road is.

But now, people’s interest had turned away from the great man.

They had found a tale of adventure that excited them more than the legend of Fuuga. Souma likened his actions to showing them an appealing promotional video for a new hunting action game when they had reached the final stages of a simulation game, with nothing left but a grinding battle of attrition. He believed that anyone would choose the new game.

A new era had arrived, one without the need for a great man.

The one most affected by this change was Fuuga himself. He had kept challenging this era, asking how high he could rise and how far he could go. He embodied the spirit of adventure. His little sister Yuriga and her husband Souma had taken advantage of that.

Fuuga didn't have much time left. Even he felt his attention shifting from continental domination to the new world. If he couldn't win this battle and seize the world, he wouldn't be able to maintain the passion to fight another war for control of the continent. His ambitions would fade, as though he were a man recovering from a fever or waking from a sweet dream.

"Yeah. Seriously... You're one hell of a little sister, Yuriga!" Fuuga said as he looked up at the video projected into the sky.

Unlike Fuuga, who took a philosophical view of the situation, the soldiers in his army were massively confused. Souma's broadcast had shown the world the shape of the era to come.

Now that they had been shown that a new dream awaited them in the new era—one they could embrace instead of entrusting to Fuuga—what meaning was there in fighting the Kingdom of Friedonia any longer?

It would be fine if they won. But what if they lost? Or if it ended in a painful tie? That would only slow the Great Tiger Empire's progress into this new era.

If they died in battle or were badly injured, they'd lose the chance to go to the world of the north. For the soldiers who had valued this last chance at honor over their own lives when they believed they were embarking on the final battle of continental domination, Souma's PV made them value their lives once again.

There were likely those among them who wished the Great Tiger Empire would hurry up and reconcile with the Kingdom of Friedonia so they could go to the world of the north. However, once the march towards hegemony began, it could not be abandoned. The Great Tiger Empire was made up of the victors, their defeated, those who had made sacrifices, and the surviving relatives of the sacrificed, all bound together by Fuuga's charisma. If they started to think of their own dreams instead of obeying Fuuga, the country would splinter.

Sensing the mood in their camp, Hashim approached Fuuga with an expression as if he had just bitten into something unpleasant.

"Lord Fuuga. It seems we didn't make it in time," were his first

words.

It was proof that the victory they sought was slipping away. Fuuga nodded.

“Yeah. I knew from Yuriga’s attempts to dissuade me that this is how Souma sees the coming era, but I didn’t know he’d hit our soldiers with it like this…”

“…”

“So this is why I sensed that Souma wasn’t fighting against us, but against something even larger, huh? I’d never have guessed he was trying to end the very era that supports us…”

Fuuga sounded impressed. Hashim’s frown deepened.

“I knew that Souma was plotting something. If it targeted you or the Great Tiger Empire, I believed your control and momentum would allow us to swallow them up, and we could deal with whatever his plan was. But Souma’s plot was aimed at mankind as a whole. Against something like this…there’s nothing our internal control of the country can do.”

Hearing Hashim’s frustration, Fuuga replied, “Yeah” with a nod. “If we were going to stop this plan, we should have attacked Parnam and defeated Souma before he put together that broadcast. But his retainers thwarted that with their determined delaying tactics. If they needed those delays, it means Souma barely got it done in time too.”

“Yes. That’s incredibly frustrating.”

If they had continued their reckless advance on Parnam without checking their rear after Owen and Herman risked their lives to delay it, things might have turned out differently.

But that was all a “what-if” scenario.

The thorough plan developed by Souma’s side, along with the loyalty of his retainers that surprised friend and foe alike, had cast dark clouds over Fuuga’s path to dominance.

Hashim shook his head, trying to shift gears.

“However, we cannot afford to wallow in regret. A crack has formed in the hearts of our men, one that continues to expand. That crack will lead people to embrace the dream of a new era that Souma speaks of. So, to summarize…”

“‘We have no future if we don’t fight and win now,’ right?” Fuuga finished for him.

“Indeed,” Hashim replied with a nod.

They needed to solidify their dream of dominating the current world before people embraced the dream of a new world in the

north. There could be no rematch. If they didn't achieve their dream with this one attempt, people would move on to the next dream. That had been Souma's aim.

Seeing the calm on Fuuga's face, Hashim said, "This battle allows no failure and has a time limit. If it drags on, we lose. We need to be prepared to win now, and in a single day."

He was telling Fuuga that today was their only chance to fight. Hearing the unreasonable advice, Fuuga's eyes glinted sharply as he let out an amused laugh.

"We've really got our backs to the cliff now! I haven't felt this way in a while!"

Fuuga Haan was a man who had overturned disadvantageous situations to build his nation to where it was now. Despite countless life-threatening moments, he had pacified the steppe and swallowed up the Union of Eastern Nations. In doing so, he had built a great nation that encompassed the northern half of Landia. However, once he had established this power, he was in another league. There was a sense that it was natural for him to win, and he rarely sensed a threat to his life.

Even against an evenly matched force like the Maritime Alliance, he'd never felt they had the will to invade the Great Tiger Empire.

Fuuga's days as a sovereign felt dull to him. Even with the Demon Lord's Domain, which he had anticipated would be a formidable opponent, there had been an unexpectedly tough battle, but they had easily negotiated peace afterwards. Fuuga was so tired of peace that he had felt swayed by Yuriga's proposal.

But now he was suddenly at a disadvantage.

Harsh conditions for victory had been imposed, forcing him into a position where, if he lost here, he might lose everything. There was no way that wouldn't ignite a fire inside Fuuga.

"Give orders to all our forces. Today, we launch an all-out attack on the King of Friedonia to decide the outcome of this war," Fuuga said, raising his thick arm into the air. "It is fine for them to think of the future! But will the one to carry that next era be me, or Souma?! We ask the heavens that question, and today we shall hear the answer! Men, this is the last great battle of the southern continent, so fight with bravery!"

"Yes, sir. Understood."

Hashim crossed his arms and bowed his head.

Then he left to give orders to all their forces.

The forces of the Great Tiger Empire let out a war cry in response to Fuuga’s impassioned speech and began their attack on the Kingdom of Friedonia’s defensive positions.

And so, the curtain rose on the final battle of Fuuga the great man…



Chapter 1: The Warriors' Competition

On the plains near Parnam, the forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Great Tiger Empire finally clashed.

The Friedonian side had roughly ninety thousand defenders, while the Great Tiger Empire's forces numbered around one hundred eighty thousand. The Great Tiger Empire outnumbered their opponents by about two to one, but the confusion caused by Souma's broadcast hadn't subsided, and morale didn't rise as much as they had hoped.

Now that they had glimpsed the shape of the coming era, Fuuga's soldiers were divided. Some focused on the battle in front of them, while others realized they had nothing to gain by becoming casualties here. Many were intimidated by the inscrutable nature of the Kingdom of Friedonia, while others remained unwavering in their devotion to Fuuga. Because they fought for different reasons, it was hard to unite them with a single will.

Even so, brave commanders like Gaten the Flag of the Tiger, Kasen the Crossbow of the Tiger, and Gaifuku the Shield of the Tiger rallied their troops and launched fierce assaults on the Kingdom's battle lines.

Determined to end the battle in one day, the Empire's forces attacked the Kingdom's camps in the west, east, and center simultaneously. However, as Gaten and Kasen assaulted the west camp defended by Weist, they encountered a level of resistance they hadn't experienced on the way there.

"Grr... What is this feeling?" Kasen spat the words out with a scowl while Gaten, normally a talkative man, fell into thoughtful silence.

While the camps that the Kingdom's forces had shut themselves in were well constructed, they weren't anything that couldn't be explained by existing knowledge. They hadn't deployed any wonder weapons like the magic canceler or machine dragon, so a common battle of offense and defense was being waged. And yet, ever since the two of them had

approached this enemy position, it had felt strangely hard to fight.

It was as if they couldn't muster their usual strength while the enemy was performing better than they should have been able to. No matter how low the Empire's morale was, they should still have been able to fight more boldly than this under normal circumstances.

Sensing something amiss, Kasen spurred his temsbock onward, joining Gaten to seek his opinion.

"You said the enemy commander is Weist Garreau? I've heard he made a laughingstock of Sovereign Prince Gaius during the war with the Principality of Amidonia using nothing but his tongue... Could our troubles be because he is commanding the enemy?"

Gaten considered this question before shaking his head.

"No... This is not the work of a general's commands. I see nothing strange in the tactics used."

"Hmm? Then why does it feel so hard to attack?"

"It must be because we cannot muster our full power."

Having said this, Gaten cupped his ears. "Young Kasen, have you not noticed there's been music playing all this time?"

"Music...? Yes, I suppose there has been, now that you mention it. Do you think the enemy is playing it?"

Since the battle began, there had been frequent bursts of music from the Kingdom's camps. It was common to beat drums to raise morale or break the enemy's spirit, so Kasen had assumed this was the Kingdom's way of doing that and thought no more of it.

However, Gaten's usually aloof attitude vanished, and he glared at the Kingdom's camp with a sharp look in his eyes.

"It seems this music has two patterns."

"Two of them...you say?"

"Yes. One is a passionate tune, making me feel the vigor of an assault. The other is a heavy tune, reminiscent of a hardened fortress, evoking a determination to defend others. When the former plays, the Kingdom's attacks intensify, and when the latter plays, our own movements are slowed... That's how it feels to me."

The moment Gaten sensed something was off about his forces' performance, he searched the battlefield for the cause. That was how he noticed the connection between the music he

heard and the results on the battlefield.

Kasen's eyes widened in surprise.

"Is the Kingdom casting enhancement magic with their music?!"

While this was not entirely accurate, it reflected what was happening. More precisely, to strengthen the mental images people had when using magic, they played music that made it easier to visualize the effects they desired. The overall result was akin to casting enhancement magic on their weapons.

Gaten nodded.

"Yeah. They change up the music when they attack or go on the defensive... I'm convinced of that. But..." Gaten cracked his favorite whip, made with iron woven into it. "If that's what they're doing, there are ways to deal with it. We can listen to their music, attack when the offensive music plays, and when their defensive music plays, we can 'attack to defend our comrades.' Because even if we are the attackers, we're also defenders of Fuuga's dream."

"Ah! Right!" Kasen nodded vigorously.

Gaten called over one of his subordinates and ordered him to convey their discussion to Hashim in the main camp. Hashim would devise a similar plan and communicate it to the entire army.

Having finished giving his commands, Gaten brought the temsbock he was riding alongside Kasen's.

"Now then, young Kasen. You know what we must do, right?"

"Yes! Risk our lives to break through the enemy position!"

Kasen sounded enthusiastic, but Gaten shook his head.

"No, no. We'll do our best, but there's no need to throw our lives away. You're still young and have things you want to do, right? Like flirting with Madam Lumiere, or taking her in your arms, or burying your face in her chest."

"Why Madam Lumiere?! And why are they all essentially the same thing?!"

"When you were drunk, you told me you prefer older, bolder women. She's exactly your type. It's plain to see from the way you act around her," Gaten said with a hearty laugh. "So don't waste your life, young Kasen. If you die gloriously in battle and I return alive, I'll romance her in your stead."

Hearing this, Kasen couldn't help but imagine the scene.

"Hey there, Madam Lumiere. I see you've been working hard."

“Why, Sir Gaten. I see you have too.”

“How about it? Will you join me for dinner?”

“No, I have work to take care of.”

“Hmm. Then I’ll help you so it gets done faster.”

“You’re sure? I can’t pay you, you know?”

“What better payment could there be than spending time with you?”

“R-Really? Well, I’ll take you up on the offer, then…”

“Yuck… I absolutely hate it. I’ll have to make it back alive no matter what…”

The scene flashed through Kasen’s mind in the blink of an eye.

Because Lumiere was devoted to her work and harsh on herself, men in the Great Tiger Kingdom found her beautiful but frightening, and no one tried to woo her. Kasen admired a career-focused woman like her, but she intimidated many other men.

But the dandy Gaten, with his many romantic conquests, treated Lumiere like an innocent girl, and she might easily fall for him as a result. That’s what Kasen’s delusions were telling him, at least.

He gripped the reins of his temsbock.

“I could never let myself die before you. I’ll win here and make it back alive.”

“Ha ha ha! That’s the spirit, young Kasen!”

After their banter, the two focused on the task at hand and headed to the front line.

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Meanwhile, Weist Garreau, who was fending off their advance, noticed a change in the movements of the Empire’s forces.

Hmm. It seems they’ve figured out how the music works.

He had been keeping the Empire’s forces at bay with gunpowder weapons borrowed from an old friend in the National Naval Defense Force, but his forces were gradually losing. Once the temsbock cavalry appeared on the front line, bouncing around, the Empire’s forces started moving much better. In this situation, he’d want to pick off the enemy commanders, but it was difficult with the temsbock cavalry jumping freely around the battlefield.

If this is how it's going to be, I should've asked Lady Accela to leave more gunpowder weapons for me… Weist sighed.

In truth, he wanted more gunpowder weapons, but Accela, Excel's daughter and Castor's wife, had said, "I want them to defend Red Dragon City, so lend me some, okay?" and walked off with a large number.

Weist was indebted to Excel, so he couldn't refuse her daughter's request. All he could say was, "Go ahead…" with a twitching smile.

Besides, I'm not the type to lead on the battlefield anyway… Though he was defending this place because he unfortunately knew how to command troops, Weist was better suited to a role as a staff officer or bureaucrat.

However, because they were fighting a world war, their commanders were spread over a large area, resulting in a shortage of officers to deploy to any specific battlefield. That was why Weist had been sent here.

If the enemy were amenable to negotiations, my silver tongue could do wonders, but…because of my eloquence in the war with Amidonia, word of me has spread, for better or worse. It's reached the point that calling someone a "Lord of Altomura" has become an idiomatic way of saying they make promises they cannot keep, so I'm sure the enemy will want to keep attacking rather than negotiate with me…

As he mentally grumbled about the situation, a messenger raced over.

"I-I have a report!" The man seemed in a hurry, and his voice was shrill. "The enemy has broken through our fortifications! The nearby soldiers are blocking their advance, but the fighting is difficult! They need immediate reinforcements!"

"Good grief…"

It seems I'll need to spearhead the defense… Weist thought as he got up. *I have to stand against famous generals from…Malmkhitan? I'm not the type who gets excited about battle. I just want to run away.*

But if he voiced those thoughts, let alone ran away, there was no telling what Excel might say to him later. There wasn't a man from the naval forces who didn't fear her wrath. If she ordered him to die, all he'd be able to say was, "Yes, ma'am!"

Ohh… I want to go back to Altomura. It's almost time to harvest the grapes, and I want to kick back and relax with a glass of wine

made from grapes that were stepped on by beautiful young maidens. If Duchess Walter were here with me, like during the war with Amidonia, I'd feel reassured knowing she'd join the fight if necessary, but…when all she says is "I'll pull some strings, so get out there and do your best," I don't know what to think…

Despite this litany of mental complaints, Weist feigned calm as he headed to the area that had requested reinforcements.

However, another messenger ran up to him…

"I have a report! A unit appeared from the northwest and slammed into the enemy's flank! Now that the enemy's attack has temporarily abated, they think they can recover!"

"The northwest?" Weist echoed. "But I had no troops positioned in that direction."

The messenger replied, "That unit carried the flag of the House of Carmine!"

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"We made iiiiiit!!!" Mio Carmine, who had arrived on the plains outside Parnam as the Kingdom and Empire were fighting, couldn't help but shout.

She was leading a force of two thousand cavalry composed of knights from the time when there were still three dukes.

After routing the forces of the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State in the Amidonia Region, Mio had left the task of keeping the Orthodox Papal State's forces in check to Glaive and Margarita while she took a small elite unit to join the decisive battle.

That had been two days ago.

She had left the Amidonia Region that night once victory there was assured, but she had barely made it here in time for the main battle. Freed from the worry of what she would do if she didn't make it, she looked at the person riding alongside her with glee on her face.

"Look, look! Everyone's still fighting! Fath… I mean Sir Kagetora!"

She was with a strong man wearing a black sword tiger mask —Kagetora, the commander of the Black Cats.

Unlike the excited Mio, Kagetora carefully observed the battlefield with a calm expression.

"Settle down. We made it here thanks to Duchess Walter's directions. We must do a job befitting the consideration she has

shown us.”

“Oh! R-Right!”

Mio sat up straight in response to Kagetora’s quiet rebuke.

When it came to moving large numbers of personnel, Friedonia famously had the rhinosaurus train, but it wasn’t as quick as a fast horse. To get as many soldiers here from the Amidonia Region as possible, Excel had arranged supply depots and spare horses, similar to the relay rider networks common in ancient empires.

“When facing the Great Tiger Empire, no number of soldiers is too many. If you can successfully drive off the forces of the Orthodox Papal State, then I want you to take your best knights to the main battle,” Excel had said, concealing her smile with her fan.

As a result, Mio and her men had made a forced march here without proper sleep, but…this was the moment that would determine whether they could defend their country. Their joy and excitement at participating in such a momentous battle outweighed their exhaustion.

Her second-in-command, Inugami, who had taken a unit of cavalry ahead to scout, returned. Many brave fighters from the Black Cats were among the two thousand knights.

“It seems Sir Weist’s camp on the west side is struggling!” Inugami reported to Mio and Kagetora. “Sir Weist is fiercely resisting with gunpowder weapons, but the enemy’s momentum is incredible, and they appear to have broken through some of his defensive positions!”

“Is Sir Weist the only one in command? That doesn’t seem sufficient…” Mio tilted her head.

She knew battles were raging across the continent, and Souma’s retainers had been dispatched to various locations. Mio herself had been sent to the Amidonia Region. Therefore, she understood that only so many commanders could be assigned to a single place, but she felt that Weist alone was not enough to defend the western flank.

“Could it be that the plan accounted for us arriving and aiding him?” Mio asked, looking to Kagetora for an answer.

Kagetora crossed his arms and groaned. “No, that can’t be all there is to it. If they were relying on us for support, that would be a gamble. He would be in great danger if we didn’t arrive.”

“That’s true… We barely made it, after all.”

Mio nodded repeatedly. Kagetora stroked his mask’s chin.

“Most likely…we’ve arranged positions where it’s easier or harder for the enemy to attack. That creates variance in their momentum, and can disrupt their coordination.”

If the enemy kept pushing where they had the advantage and were delayed where they were at a disadvantage, it would hinder their coordination. Even if the disadvantaged units requested support from those doing better, it could be difficult for messengers to reach them if they were too far ahead.

“They must think that even if Sir Weist cannot maintain the current battle lines, as long as he can slowly pull his forces back without collapsing, it will disrupt the enemy. And if fast reinforcements like us arrive during that time, he’ll be able to hold out…” Kagetora looked towards the main camp as he spoke. “She specializes in using her forces this way. Likely, even if we hadn’t made it, she would have sent troops from the main camp to support him. The idea was to create the illusion that the enemy could win without letting them actually do so.”

Kagetora imagined the lady with blue hair and antlers hiding a smile behind her fan. No doubt she was doing just that in the main camp right now. Mio imagined the exact same thing.

“I don’t know what to say…other than that Duchess Walter is scary,” Mio said, a little unnerved. Kagetora smiled wryly.

“Regardless, we cannot afford to let them break through Sir Weist’s position. We should focus our power on the western side, as planned.”

“Right! Let’s show these imperials the might of the House of Carmine!” Mio’s response was energetic, but Kagetora frowned beneath his mask.

“I have nothing to do with the House of Carmine though.”

“Huh… You’re still saying that at this point?” Mio objected, fixing Kagetora with an unamused stare. “Honestly… Listen, *Sir Kagetora*. This is getting to be a pain, so could you just get ‘remarried’ to mother already? Then I can call you ‘father’ without issue. I’m sure my ‘late father’ would give you his blessing if it makes mom happy.”

Kagetora averted his eyes from her gaze. Then, with a sense of resignation, he said, “I’ll give it some thought once this battle is over…”

Mio grinned. “Then we’ll have to get this battle over and done with quickly. For my once and future father’s sake. Isn’t that right, ‘Sir Kagetora’?”

“Indeed… Let’s go.”

And so, Mio and the others joined the fray.

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Kasen and Gaten had been attacking the western flank, but their momentum was blunted when Mio and her forces joined the fray. Noticing the change in circumstances, Gaten brought his temsbock alongside Kasen’s.

“It seems our new opponents are skilled. Watch yourself, young Kasen.”

Nodding in agreement, Kasen replied, “Of course, I’m not going to let my guard down.”

Suddenly, they heard a voice shout at them, “You must be the enemy commanders! I challenge you!”

Mio raced towards their position, cutting down imperial soldiers as she went. Her cavalry followed behind her, charging through the center of the opposing force.

“See, just like I told you,” Gaten said, drawing his favorite whip. The iron-studded whip moved like a living snake, its pointed tip stabbing into the base of Mio’s onrushing horse’s neck.

“Neighhh!”

The horse reared back in intense pain, throwing Mio from the saddle as she lost control of it.

“Whoa?!”

Mio somehow managed to land on her feet, but the tip of Gaten’s whip hurtled towards her furrowed brow. Her mind blanked for an instant, but her body responded instinctively in the face of danger.

“Yahhh!”

She deflected his whip with a swift swipe of her longsword. With a pull on the iron whip, Gaten brought it back to rest at his feet.

Mio gulped. *Th-That was close…*

Her previous experience winning the martial arts tournament in Zem had led her to dropping her guard. She’d thought the only enemy to fear was Fuuga Haan himself—someone not even Aisha could match in power. To Mio, anyone other than Fuuga had no chance at beating her. However, Gaten’s recent attack made her reconsider her overconfidence.

Now that I think of it, the enemy commanders are all fierce warriors who've been fighting under Fuuga all this time... I should never have underestimated them. Mio regretted her lack of foresight as she glared at Gaten.

Gaten, despite maintaining an aloof demeanor, was flabbergasted by the lady knight's skill, murmuring to himself, "...She was able to block that attack?"

Even so, as the resident dandy in Fuuga's forces, he struck up a conversation.

"Well, well. What a beautiful and powerful young lady. May I ask your name?"

"Mio Carmine. And what's yours?"

"I go by Gaten Bahr. Hrm... What a shame. Were we not on the battlefield, I'd invite you to share a meal with me."

Gaten was dropping what sounded like a cheesy pickup line, but Mio snorted with amusement and held her longswords at the ready.

"I regret to inform you I'm a married woman. As I'm wholly devoted to my husband, I must refuse your invitation."

"Oh, dear. That truly is unfortunate," Gaten replied, his grip tightening on his whip.

As they stared each other down in a standoff that could erupt into violence at any moment, Kasen came to his senses and nocked an arrow to his bow.

"Sir Gaten—"

"I won't let you do that!"

"Huh?!"

Kasen rolled across the ground to avoid an attack—his attempt to support Gaten foiled by Kagetora's attack.

The masked Kagetora stood blocking Kasen's line of fire to Mio, holding the Nine-Headed Dragon katana he had received from his master at waist level. Once Kasen recovered, he changed targets to aim at his new foe.

"A tiger beastman?! No, wait, is that a mask?!" Kasen exclaimed.

"Stand down, young man. Don't throw your life away by standing before me."

"As if I'd back off that easily! I, Kasen Shuri, am coming for you!"

Seeing Kasen tense up as he gave his name, Kagetora responded. "I am only Kagetora now... Have at you."

Kagetora stepped forward, closing the distance as he attempted to bisect Kasen with his blade.

“Huh?! Tch!” Kasen jumped backwards, immediately nocking and then loosing an arrow.

The projectile flew straight towards Kagetora’s forehead, but his legs kept moving as his katana flashed to cut it down. It was quickly followed by another arrow.

He’s fast… Kagetora managed to avoid the follow-up by twisting his neck, but the arrow forced him to stop and deal with it.

Meanwhile, Kasen had recovered and was aiming yet another arrow at Kagetora, who assumed a combat stance, preparing to reset his offensive.

“You’re skilled…” Kagetora praised his opponent. “Your arrows lack the weight of Fuuga’s, but your speed far outstrips his.”

“Thank you. I may not have the range and power to match Lord Fuuga, but I like to think I make up for it in quantity and accuracy,” replied Kasen, who was honest and knew how to take a compliment. “Despite the silly mask, I can tell you must be a famous commander. Would you mind divulging your real name?”

“I believe I told you… I’m only Kagetora,” he replied, stepping forward.

Kasen loosed an arrow at him as he did, but Kagetora had already accounted for both it and the second shot. Kagetora cut down the arrow with minimal movement, ready to act again, and prepared for the next shot, but…

What?! He saw Kasen with his bow held horizontally and three arrows nocked. Recognizing the danger, Kagetora reflexively pulled back.

A moment later, Kasen’s three arrows flew towards Kagetora’s throat and shoulders.

Twisting his body to dodge an arrow while cutting down the one aimed at his throat, the remaining arrow slammed into Kagetora’s left shoulder. Fortunately, it only pierced his armor without touching his flesh, but Kagetora was still impressed with Kasen’s skill.

It wasn’t like Fuuga’s powerful archery, which shot through armor, nor Leporina’s technique, which quietly sniped vital points. Kasen used rapid shots from a distance and skillfully fired off three arrows when the enemy closed in.

Kagetora considered pressing the attack until Kasen ran out

of arrows, but even on this chaotic battlefield, Kasen's men regularly supplied him with fresh quivers. *This is troublesome… I'm not good against opponents like this.* Kagetora specialized in one-on-one combat. He attacked ferociously, using his refined skills to cut down foes. But he struggled against a fighting style like Kasen's, which kept enemies at a distance by employing a wide variety of moves.

The masked beastman glanced towards Mio, who seemed to be struggling as well.

Gaten sat atop his temsbock, skillfully wielding two whips while unleashing an unending torrent of blows against her. Mio was blocking with her twin swords, but the whips came at her in unexpected ways, delaying her response and forcing her onto the defensive.

"Ha ha ha! Can't do anything but defend, young lady?" Gaten taunted.

"Urgh! What an indecent attack."

The whips writhed like twin snakes, and Mio couldn't predict their movements. Many enemy commanders had lost their lives to Gaten's fierce attacks. It was fair to say that Mio, managing to hold her own by rapidly swinging her twin swords, had inherited her father's combat sense. But even so, she was taking more and more shallow cuts.

Hmph… Watching Mio's battle as he was on the receiving end of Kasen's shots, Kagetora made a decision.

"Mio!"

In a brief gap between Kasen's arrows, Kagetora called out Mio's name and started running with his back to Kasen. He then interposed himself between Mio and Gaten, deflecting the iron whips with his Nine-Headed Dragon katana. This surprised not just Gaten, but Mio too.

"Huh? Why—"

"Mio, watch the archer," Kagetora ordered before she could finish her question.

At his command, Mio immediately turned towards Kasen. Now Kagetora and Mio were back-to-back, defending each other.

Maintaining this position, Kagetora said, "My fighting style prioritizes powerful single attacks, so it is poorly matched for that archer with his diverse moves, but more effective against these whips. You've been struggling with these constantly changing attacks, haven't you?"

“Ohh, I see. I think I’ll have an easier time against the more straightforward archer.” Mio understood what Kagetora meant. “Got it. Let’s trade, then.”

“Yes. Can you handle it?”

“Yeah! Leave it to me!”



Mio immediately raced towards Kasen. Gaten tried to strike Mio's back with his whips, but Kagetora deflected one with his blade. He then caught the other in midair with his hand and gave it a hard tug.

"Whoa?!" This sudden jerk pulled Gaten from his temsbock, and he landed on the ground. "Why you!"

Crack!

"Guh!"

Gaten immediately responded by striking Kagetora's other hand with his whip, causing Kagetora to unintentionally release the whip he had been holding. Then, after pulling his two whips back in, Gaten faced Kagetora.

"A tiger mask? Are you that young feline lady's father or something?" Gaten asked, his brow furrowing.

Kagetora snorted beneath his mask. "No. I know her techniques as if she were my own daughter, but...we are strangers." Having said this, he fell into a fighting stance.

Meanwhile, Mio was running straight towards Kasen and closing the distance. Kasen was initially confused by the change in opponents, but he quickly collected himself and started loosing arrows to keep her in check.

Mio struck down every one of the projectiles with her twin swords.

"Urgh... How can you both knock them out of the air so easily?!"

"Because they're not twisted like that whip master's attacks!"

She crossed her longswords and swung them down at Kasen. He jumped back to evade her, nocking three arrows that he then fired all at once. Mio batted them away with a quick swipe of her longsword.

She turned to Kasen and said, "I like how straight your arrows fly, which is more than I can say for that other man's whips."

"I don't know whether to take that as a compliment..." Gaten commented.

"It is one. Because I have more fun fighting a warrior like you."

"Then I can't let my guard down for a second!"

The two bantered as they fought, with the battle shifting back and forth from offensive to defensive. At one point, it seemed the Kingdom's western flank would collapse under the Empire's ferocious assault. However, thanks to Mio and Kagetora's actions,

the battle returned to a stalemate.



Chapter 2: The Pride of the Brilliant Commanders

Meanwhile, on the Royal Friedonian Army's eastern flank…

Here, too, the Great Tiger Empire was launching a fierce assault. The attackers were Mutsumi, the Partner of the Tiger, and Gaifuku, the Shield of the Tiger, while the defenders were Liscia and…

"Now, warriors! Let's show the enemy what dark elves are made of!"

"With our strength of arms, we will strike down the invaders who threaten this kingdom and the God-Protected Forest!"

…the dark elf warriors led by Aisha's father Wodan, his younger brother Robthor, and Velza's father Sur.

Once the dark elves had finished their mission obstructing the Great Tiger Empire's advance, they joined the main force and placed themselves under Liscia's command. Dark elves were excellent archers. Their arrows intercepted the enemy's long-range magic attacks and pierced through one advancing soldier after another.

Now that I think of it, Sir Sur has even shot down cannonballs before… He's so reliable. As she watched the dark elves fight, Liscia was reminded of the war that had taken place in the first year after Souma was summoned. Back then, Ludwin, Halbert, and Kaede had only been able to defend the fort they had shut themselves in to buy time because the dark elves had arrived to back them up. *We've really got to be grateful to Aisha for building ties with the God-Protected Forest for us…*

From atop her horse, Liscia shouted at the men under her command, "Everyone, you can't let the dark elves outshine you! All of us, as residents of this country, regardless of race, need to protect our families and homes! That's what this battle is all about!"

"""Yeahhhhh!""" Liscia's men shouted in response to her orders.

Then Sur and his daughter Velza, who was Halbert's secretary,

raced over to her.

“My queen!”

“Lady Liscia!”

They had been hiding in the woods, watching the enemy.

Knowing this, Liscia asked, “Sir Sur, Velza, how is the battle going?”

“Ma’am, an individual who appears to be an enemy general is giving commands near the front line,” replied Sur.

“It’s a woman with long, dark hair riding a horse,” added Velza. “In all likelihood, she’s…”

“Madam Mutsumi, yes,” Liscia finished, immediately recognizing the description.

Fuuga Haan’s wife had come to the battlefield. That showed how serious the enemy was, but…Liscia decided it would be dangerous in all sorts of ways to leave her unchecked. So, she immediately gave orders.

“Sir Sur, please ask Sir Wodan to take command for me for a while.”

“Huh?! Y-Yes, ma’am! Understood.” Sur blinked for a moment, not fully understanding what he had just been asked to do, but seeing the seriousness in Liscia’s eyes, he quickly agreed.

After watching Sur race off to carry out her request, Liscia turned to his daughter.

“Velza. Guide me to where Madam Mutsumi is.”

“R-Right!”

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“Haaah!”

“Guh…!”

With her longsword wreathed in flame, Mutsumi cut down one of the Kingdom’s knights. With his chest torn open, the man fell from his horse with agony on his face. After confirming her enemy was dead, Mutsumi calmed her horse and raised her voice to address her allies.

“Don’t bunch together! Take advantage of our numbers and force the enemy into a wider battle so they can’t concentrate their forces! That will be the strategy the Kingdom’s forces will hate the most!”

When an army had fewer troops than its opponent, it sought to concentrate its forces and divide the enemy, aiming to reverse

the numerical advantage in localized areas and defeat the enemy. Throughout history, smaller forces have lured larger forces into a bottleneck, then whittled them down from the sides to achieve victory. To prevent this, the larger force must send in many units simultaneously, leaving the smaller force no opportunity to concentrate its strength.

In short, they had to launch a total offensive, which was the strategy Mutsumi was employing.

The eastern flank, commanded by Liscia, had been using their powerful archers to eliminate enemy units one by one. However, by launching a total offensive, the Empire's forces could prevent the Kingdom's dark elf archers from regrouping. The Kingdom would have to split up to provide supporting fire where needed, which would limit their ability to pressure the enemy as much as they had expected.

With that done, Mutsumi pointed her longsword forward and shouted at her enemies, "Withdraw if you value your lives! Come at me if you value your honor! I will cut down all who oppose my husband—the heroic Fuuga Haan—and his great ambition!"

Her bold, dignified appearance made the Kingdom's soldiers gulp. After all, when Mutsumi had been in the Union of Eastern Nations, she had been known for her wisdom, bravery, and beauty. No shortage of royals, nobles, and knights had sought her hand in marriage. Now that she was Fuuga's wife, she fought beside him much of the time and didn't stand out as a result, but her capability as a commander was equal to Shuukin's.

Just as the Kingdom's forces were faltering in the face of Mutsumi's intensity, they heard the sound of hoofbeats closing in from the distance. The sound was awfully clear on this noisy battlefield. Mutsumi turned to look, and there was Liscia, making a dynamic entrance as she rode in on a white horse.

"Ah! Lady Liscia?!"

"Madam Mutsumi!"

Clang! As their horses ran past each other, Liscia greeted Mutsumi with a thrust of her rapier, which Mutsumi blocked with her longsword.



It was only a moment, but it was enough for each to confirm that it was the other who had just shouted, and they put some distance between them.

Liscia and Mutsumi had only met in person at the Balm Summit, and all their conversations since then had been by broadcast. By all accounts, they were acquaintances at most. However, Liscia understood Mutsumi deeply, and Mutsumi understood Liscia in return. Their positions were similar; both women had chosen to accompany the man they loved wherever his path might lead.

Mutsumi's expression grew tense as she looked at Liscia. "Sir Souma's queen has come to the front lines?"

"I could ask you the same. Your husband has started wars all over the world, and we're constantly short of personnel."

"So short the queen has to help out? I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

Even as they bantered, the two were cautiously gauging each other's range.

Then Mutsumi charged with her horse, her longsword outstretched in one hand, aiming for Liscia's throat. Liscia parried with her rapier and attempted a quick follow-up, but the reach of Mutsumi's longsword kept her from closing in.

The two continued trading blows on horseback. The soldiers on both sides anxiously watched their queens fight, worried that if they interfered, their own queen might be injured. Despite being the center of attention, the two exchanged words as they traded blows.

"I know *you* know, Madam Mutsumi! You know this battle is meaningless!"

While executing a quick combo with her rapier, Liscia tried to persuade Mutsumi.

"Souma has changed the era! We've moved into a time when charismatic figures like Maria and great men like Fuuga are no longer needed! Fuuga's era is over!"

"That doesn't change anything!" Mutsumi deflected Liscia's attacks with her longsword. "So long as Lord Fuuga continues forward, I will never stop! Just as you decided to walk alongside Sir Souma, I have chosen to stay with Lord Fuuga until the end!"

"I understand your feelings so well it hurts! But that's all the more reason for me to want you to back down!" Liscia slammed her rapier against Mutsumi's longsword. "You have to

understand—we already won when we showed that video. That video will shake the world, and the confusion it will cause will stop you. That's what has put a time limit on Fuuga's ambitions."

"..."

"So if we can just buy time...even if it means abandoning Parnam to flee south in the end, we will have still won the war without winning the battle here. But if we had simply fled first, the people who support Fuuga won't be able to feel the change in the era!"

"What are you saying...?"

"They might try to continue the dream they've lost! To prevent that, and as the final move in changing the era, our strategists decided we should fight here for this one day!"

"You prepared a glorious path for Lord Fuuga, is that it?"

Mutsumi understood. Now that the world had seen that video, the Great Tiger Empire believed the only way to overturn things was to crush the enemy in a single day with an all-out offensive. However, even that chance was something the Kingdom was giving them.

As she realized this, a faint smile crossed Mutsumi's lips. "Now I'm even less willing to accept defeat. I need to lend some color to Lord Fuuga's...to my husband's last grand performance."

"Grr... You're so stubborn!" Liscia ground her teeth at how Mutsumi's eyes sparkled even more than before.

"You and I both! But if you must call me something, I'd rather you say I was singularly devoted!"

"Yeah, sure... I like the sound of that better for myself too."

And so, this singularly devoted pair crossed blades once more. Their battle, fought with incredible finesse, was not violent but had a quiet grace to it, like a sword dance. The soldiers watching forgot to intervene and even stopped fighting themselves as they intently observed the duel.

"Lady Liscia!"

"Lady Mutsumi!"

That didn't change with Velza and Gaifuku's late arrival. The two ignored their surroundings, focusing all their talent and stubbornness on one another.

But then it happened—

"Urkh...!"

"Huh?!"

A look of agony suddenly flashed across Mutsumi's face, and

her sword swing went awry. The longsword slashed in the wrong direction, throwing Mutsumi off-balance. She was left wide-open, but Liscia lowered the rapier she had been about to swing and backed off.

Mutsumi covered her mouth, turning her body so she wasn't facing Liscia. It looked like she was trying to vomit where Liscia couldn't see. Realizing this, Liscia understood what was happening to Mutsumi.

"Madam Mutsumi, you…"

"It feels so pathetic…" Mutsumi wiped her mouth and looked at Liscia with chagrin. "As his wife, I want to lend him my strength…and yet it's *precisely because I am his wife* that I cannot fight you to the death right now."

Tears formed in Mutsumi's eyes as she smiled self-mockingly.

She was pregnant with Fuuga's child.

Learning that Mutsumi had been fighting in that state, Liscia couldn't help but shout, "There's nothing pathetic about that! It's a wonderful thing!"

"Is it really? To be unable to lend my strength to the one who is more important to me than anything?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Seeing the sadness in Mutsumi's eyes, despite their fight to the death moments before, Liscia shouted, "When our children were born, Souma said he felt like it had changed his priorities. But even if your priorities change, the things that were important to you before don't just go away! You just have more to care about! That's all!"

Liscia looked around as if searching for something. Her eyes fell on Gaifuku, wearing a big, imposing suit of armor, with a physique that set him apart from others.

"You, the commander over there! You must be a warrior in a position of authority! If you heard our conversation just now, then take Madam Mutsumi away at once!"

"Urgh… Understood! Everyone, we must hold off the enemy for the sake of Lady Mutsumi and her child!"

Though he was upset at being ordered around by the enemy, he reasoned that Mutsumi's safety was his priority, and set her horse running towards the main camp. Then he faced down the Kingdom's forces to cover her retreat. In deference to Gaifuku and his men's willingness to lay down their lives, Liscia waited for Mutsumi to withdraw before attacking.

"Was it okay to let her go…?" Velza asked Liscia, an arrow

nocked to her bow as she watched the enemy.

Liscia remained facing forward as she replied, “If anything were to happen to Madam Mutsumi or her child, there would be no end to the fighting. If we captured her, she might kill herself, and that would have the same outcome. We need her to live, if only to stop Fuuga from turning into a fiend with nothing to lose.”

Even though Mutsumi withdrew from the battle on the eastern flank, Gaifuku assumed command and fought his hardest, bringing things to a stalemate like on the western flank. Thus, the outcome of this war, which was hard on both sides, would be decided by the battle in the center.

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Back at the Kingdom of Friedonia’s central camp...

With the battles in the east and west bogged down, a fierce conflict raged in the center. Both nations had concentrated their forces there, and the intensity of the fighting surpassed that on the flanks. The Kingdom’s forces were commanded by Strategist Julius, while the Empire’s forces were under Advisor Hashim. Known for their clever tactics and bravery, they fought alongside their men as they led.

“Take advantage of the terrain! Make use of the walls! If any areas start to crumble, report it! Kaede will be bringing earth mages, so hold out until they arrive!” Julius shouted while fending off the troops assaulting the walls.

“Use our numerical advantage to deny them a chance to rest! The enemy is desperately trying to avoid being swept away by our wave! We must keep moving and draw their attention to us!” Hashim ordered as he pressed the attack, steadily strengthening his offensive.

Members of the House of Magna—Halbert, Kaede, and Ruby—observed the front lines from a position slightly to the rear. All they could do was watch.

Halbert irritably punched his left palm with his right fist. “Damn it! Are we really just going to stand here while everyone is out there fighting?”

“Come on,” Ruby sighed. “You know that’s part of the plan.”

But perhaps Ruby was also feeling anxious, as indicated by her tail striking the ground.

“Calm down, both of you,” Kaede, standing beside Halbert, chastised them. “If Fuuga Haan comes riding in on Durga, you’re about the only ones who can slow him down, you know. That’s why our strategy has you on standby until he appears.”

Despite her tone, Kaede’s fox ears were flat against her head.

“If I’m being honest,” she continued, “I don’t want you fighting Fuuga Haan. Strategy means nothing when he’s involved. He can alter the situation on the battlefield all by himself. I’d be beside myself with worry watching you two stand against him.”

With greater martial prowess than Aisha, the strongest warrior in the Kingdom, and wielding bolts of lightning that rivaled those of Naden the black ryuu, Fuuga Haan also possessed charisma comparable to that of Maria, once known as the Saint of the Empire. When Fuuga unleashed his fury on the battlefield, he transformed into a berserker who cared nothing for the losses suffered by his men.

The Kingdom was on high alert against Fuuga. He was fearsome on his own, but he also had a powerful mount, Durga the flying tiger. Together, they had defeated many of Nothung’s dragon knights and had even left Queen Sill and Pai severely wounded.

Most warriors would stand no chance against him. Faced with this overwhelming threat, which they could not even slow down with sacrificial pawns lacking the ability to fly, the Kingdom had decided that only the dragon knight duo of Halbert and Ruby, along with an elite team of wyvern cavalry equipped with the Little Susumu Mark V Light, could hope to stop him. This was precisely why the Magnas couldn’t join the fight unfolding before them.

At that moment, a large man on horseback approached. With dark skin and dressed in tribal clothing, it was Julius’s close friend and confidant, Jirukoma.

“I have a report for Madam Kaede!” Jirukoma exclaimed.

“Sir Jirukoma! What’s happened?” Kaede asked.

“Orders from Julius!” he said, steadying his horse. “Part of the wall is collapsing under concentrated fire from cannon-mounted rhinosauruses! He requests that Madam Kaede have earth mages repair it with all possible haste!”

“Understood. It’ll be fastest if I go myself.”

“Hrm, you yourself, Madam Kaede?”

“Yes. So take me with you, Sir Jirukoma.” With that, Kaede

climbed onto the back of Jirukoma's horse. She then turned to Halbert and Ruby, saying, "You heard him, Hal, Ruby. I'm going now, but don't do anything stupid. If we win the war but only Bill and I are left... I'd hate that."

Halbert and Ruby nodded.

"We know. Don't you do anything reckless either, Kaede."

"Leave this to us. I swear I'll protect Hal."

Hearing their responses, Kaede smiled faintly. "You also need to protect Ruby. We're all going to go home together. The war isn't over until you make it back home, you know. Now, let's go, Sir Jirukoma."

"Yes, ma'am! Understood!"

With that, Kaede headed towards the front line, accompanied by Jirukoma.

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As Jirukoma returned to the front line with Kaede, Julius was engaged in a fierce battle to defend a wall that was on the verge of collapsing. The Empire's cannon rhinosauruses continued to bombard it, but he was coordinating his archers and other ranged attackers to intercept the cannon fire. However, he couldn't afford to let himself be distracted by the incoming shots, as he also needed to counter the advancing land offensive.

"Julius! I've brought Madam Kaede!" Jirukoma called out.

"Oh, thank goodness," Julius replied, visibly relieved. "We needed to strengthen our defenses against Fuuga, which left their cannons free to fire at us... This delay has been costly."

Once Jirukoma helped her off the horse, Kaede rushed over to Julius.

"Sir Julius, how much repair work needs to be done?" she asked urgently.

Julius gestured towards the damaged sections of the wall. "I want you to put up plenty of earth walls in front of any areas that are crumbling. There's no need to make them durable; with all the incoming fire, they'll just fall apart anyway. Just keep rebuilding them as needed."

"Understood."

Having said this, Kaede turned her hands towards the ground. And then...

"There...!"

Rummmble! As Kaede raised her hands, the ground swelled as if she were pulling a large turnip from the earth, effectively halting the oncoming imperial soldiers. It wasn't a perfect solution, but it would buy them some time.

Just as Julius breathed a sigh of relief, a clear voice shouted from the other side of the wall.

"Julius Amidonia!"

Suddenly, a figure climbed over the wall with his soldiers and attacked Julius, who instinctively blocked the assault with his sword. The metallic clang echoed through the air as he recognized his opponent's face.

"Julius!"

"Sir Julius!"

Jirukoma and Kaede shouted in panic.

"Huh?! Hashim Chima?!"

It was Hashim, the imperial advisor who had led his troops right to the front line. His clothes were stained red with the blood of his enemies.



How many soldiers of the Kingdom had he cut down on his way here? It seemed that Hashim's reputation as the smartest and bravest of the Chima siblings, which Julius had heard about during his time in the Union of Eastern Nations, was well deserved.

"Julius. Why are you helping this country?" Hashim demanded as he slashed at Julius.

"Hmm? What are you on about?"

"I've heard that your father championed the destruction of the Elfrieden Kingdom and was killed while trying to achieve that goal. You should be the one to carry on his legacy, so why humiliate yourself by becoming Souma's servant? What do you say, Julius Amidonia?"

"Grr... Your rambling grates on my ears. First, let me correct you on one thing!" Julius deflected the attack and pointed his sword at Hashim. "I am Julius Lastania now! You'd best remember that!"

"You'd trample on your father's wishes?"

"I have inherited some things from my father, yes. The determination of a man from Amidonia, for one. But I also have other priorities that are important to me now."

He hadn't forgotten his father's unfulfilled ambitions, but the members of the Lastanian royal family—his wife Tia and son Tius foremost among them—held far greater significance in Julius's heart. All he could do for his deceased father was mourn his passing. However, he could do much more for the people he cared about who were still alive. Now it was Julius's turn to confront Hashim.

"I see... If you're calling me out on that, it means you're trapped by the same thing—the curse of needing to fulfill your father's wishes."

"Tch!"

"You betrayed your father, Mathew, by siding with Fuuga Haan and ultimately striking him down. But knowing his personality, even that betrayal was aligned with Mathew's wishes, wasn't it? That's why you feel no guilt towards your sister, Fuuga's consort, Madam Mutsumi."

Julius looked directly into Hashim's eyes as he spoke.

"You are driven by the will you inherited from your father, demanding that you 'use your cunning to its fullest and make the House of Chima's name resonate across the continent.' You

don’t care how much blood you have to shed to achieve it. It’s all you have, so you move forward without ever hesitating.”

“What of it?” Hashim replied irritably, earning a derisive snort from Julius.

“Your perspective is too narrow. You focus solely on one goal, to the exclusion of everything else, and that limitation constrains you. Even among the free spirits of Fuuga’s army, you may be the least free of all. I’m astounded that you can still call yourself Fuuga’s advisor.”

Influenced by the battlefield around them, Julius’s harsh words became even more cutting. He almost seemed to regain some of the blackhearted nature he had had as the son of the Sovereign Prince of Amidonia. Hashim maintained a calm expression, but it was laced with anger.

“Silence!”

Hashim swung his sword with frustration, but Julius leapt back out of the way. Once Hashim had completed his swing, a large shadow pounced.

“I’ll assist you, Julius!”

Jirukoma attacked Hashim with two kukri-like knives. Hashim blocked one with his sword and kicked Jirukoma in the stomach before the other could reach him.

“Don’t interfere!”

“Gwugh!”

Jirukoma stumbled back a few steps before Julius caught him.

Facing Hashim alongside a recovered Jirukoma, Julius said, “If you could broaden your view instead of focusing on just one thing, you might have noticed the family and friends at your side. It’s not too late to find a wife, you know?”

“How risible. I’ll cut out your tongue and ensure you never speak such nonsense again.”

Taking Julius’s words as a provocation, Hashim readied his sword once more.

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As intense battles raged all around him, a man slowly advanced. His rock-rending blade, the Zanganto, rested on his shoulder as he rode Durga, the flying tiger, towards the battlefield at a steady pace. Despite the deadly conflict unfolding before him, the man’s heart was calm and relaxed, as if he were

merely sightseeing.

This man was Fuuga Haan, the Great Tiger Emperor and the favored child of his era. For him, the battlefield—where blood was spilled and lives were lost—was his daily life, his playground, and his reason for living. He had fought tirelessly to reach this point, building a great nation, becoming emperor, and liberating the Demon Lord's Domain.

Yet, deep down, he always felt that it was all a dream from which he would eventually awaken. If he were to lose or be struck down, it would all come to an end. And if he fought until the last foe was vanquished, that would also conclude Fuuga's way of life. He saw no place for himself in the peaceful world that was to come. That was why he had recklessly pursued his path thus far.

But things were about to change. Times were shifting. Now that Souma had introduced a new era, people's interests were naturally drifting towards it. Fuuga's heart was already wavering.

This new era could be enjoyable, he thought. He felt an urge to conclude his conflict with Souma so he could rush off to the northern world alone. However, Fuuga bore too great a burden to simply walk away. Those who had fallen while entrusting their dreams to him, or those who had become his victims, would not allow him to retreat until the conflicts of this era were resolved. That was the fate of the great man Fuuga.

Yuriga wanted me to walk away despite that, but... This is the path I chose. I won't stop until I reach its end.

With the spirits of the fallen urging him onward, Fuuga spurred Durga forward.

Chapter 3: Racing Through the Era

“Tch…!”

“Ngh?!”

As Hashim’s blade lunged for Jirukoma’s throat, he jumped back, grimacing. His muscular brown-skinned arms were marked with several fresh scratches, all inflicted by Hashim.

“Are you okay, Jirukoma?!” Julius shouted, rushing over while holding his side in pain. The wound wasn’t fatal, but it was from his battle with Hashim.

“For all that he looks like a bureaucrat, he’s incredibly strong…” spat Jirukoma.

“Yeah,” Julius agreed. “He’s the kind of man you don’t want to make an enemy of.”

Praised by the people of the Empire with the epithet “the Wisdom of the Tiger,” Hashim was Fuuga’s advisor who had just successfully defeated the Kingdom’s resourceful commander along with his fierce companion.

Damn it… I never would have thought Hashim was this skilled, Julius mentally cursed. He had always taken pride in being an intellectual who could also fight, but Hashim had surpassed that.

Julius, not one to be easily intimidated, decided to continue provoking Hashim. It was a slight blow to his pride, but he said, “I see Fuuga has an incredibly strong advisor.”

He was half bluffing, hoping that if he could distract Hashim even a little, it would make the fight easier. However, the other part of his statement was simply the truth. Julius had not seen Hashim issue a single command to his forces since the battle began. Before the conflict, Julius had entrusted command of the forces in the central camp to Kaede, but there was no indication that Hashim had done anything similar.

The Kingdom had several leaders, including Liscia, Excel, and Ludwin, who were capable of commanding the entire military. However, without Shuukin present, the Great Tiger Empire had only Fuuga and Hashim available. Despite this, Hashim seemed to have completely abandoned the idea of giving orders.

“You’re not having Fuuga take command, are you? I can’t imagine any sane person would let Fuuga loose at this stage of the conflict…”

“Heh heh heh…” Hashim let out a guttural laugh. With an icy smile that chilled everyone who saw it, Hashim said, “You don’t understand, do you, Julius?”

“What?”

“From the very beginning of this battle, we have been acutely aware of our desperate situation. There was only one strategy we could use.”

Having said this, Hashim cupped his hand to his ear.

“Don’t you hear it? The heartbeat of a great man. The sound of an era being crushed beneath his feet.”

“What are you talking about?”

Yahhhhhhhhhh!!! A distant sound rose—was it cheering, screaming, or shouting? Perhaps it was all of these. It was so loud that even from here, it was deafening.

“Heh heh heh,” Hashim laughed with satisfaction. “At this point, we have no need for a flexible plan. There is one person who can overturn strategies, change the course of this war, and even alter the era itself—my lord and master, the great Fuuga Haan. Allowing that majestic individual to reach Souma is the sole objective that I, along with all the soldiers of the Great Tiger Empire, have been tasked with.”

“Huh?! It can’t be!”

That was the reason for the total offensive? Julius gulped.

Rather than concentrate their forces, the Empire had opted to spread them over a wide front, putting pressure on their enemies across a broad area. This strategy would force the Kingdom to divide its forces while Fuuga launched an attack like a single needle—a poisoned sting that could potentially kill Souma if it reached him. This was the strategy devised by Hashim. If the needle struck its target, they would win; if it missed, they would lose. The plan was so simple that Hashim did not need to issue any commands along the way. All they had to do was fight until they could fight no more.

Crash!!!

“”Wha?!””

Lightning flashed behind Hashim, followed by an earthshaking rumble and a cloud of dust billowing into the air. But it was more than just a dust cloud. Men in armor and horses

were thrown into the air as well, clearly not by their own volition; they had been sent flying by a powerful ground-level attack.

“Heh heh heh.” Hashim cackled.

Although it was impossible to see the source of the dust cloud from their position, it was evident who was responsible for it.

Hashim pointed his sword past his two opponents towards the Kingdom’s main camp.

“Now, race onward, great one! Use your power to upend the heavens, the era itself—everything!” Hashim shouted.

At that moment, a white tiger soared overhead.

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“Ha ha ha! This is fun, Durga!” Fuuga exclaimed, patting Durga on the back as they soared into the air after obliterating an entire unit of the Kingdom’s forces with a strike from his Zanganto, which crackled with electricity.

An era was coming to an end. This festival of chaos would soon conclude, and Fuuga, sensing this, joyfully tried to savor every last moment.

“I should thank Souma for preparing one last grand stage for me!” he said.

The glorious stage on which his fate would be determined—that was where Fuuga was dancing. He crushed the soldiers of the Kingdom along the way, instilling fear in them. They would remember whose era this was.

Perhaps, like a falling flower or a shooting star, he was putting on one last show. He fought and raced past them, heading straight towards the main camp where Souma was located. At that moment, he felt he was not just the great man carrying the hopes of others, but his own man, Fuuga Haan, doing as he pleased and fighting the battles he wanted to fight.

And so, Fuuga and Durga continued their advance until...

“Fuugaaaaa!”

“Roarrrrr!!!”

...a red dragon and her knight suddenly dropped from the sky to attack them.

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As she descended rapidly, Ruby the red dragon aimed to

strike Durga the flying tiger with her front claws.

"Durga!" Fuuga shouted, prompting Durga to look up.

The flying tiger saw the incoming attack and met claw with claw.

Clang! The sound of hard objects colliding echoed in the air. Durga was determined not to lose this test of strength, even against a massive red dragon.

"Hmph...!"

Fuuga felt a surge of satisfaction seeing a short spear, wreathed in flames, rushing towards him.

"Ngh!"

Bang! Fuuga batted the short spear away with his Zanganto. The spear attempted to fly off, but a yank on the chain attached to its haft pulled it back to its owner.

Fuuga fixed a feral gaze on the spear's wielder. "So, you've come to face me after all, Halbert Magna!"

"Hmph! You remember me, huh? What an honor." Halbert snorted provocatively. "For a mighty emperor like you, aren't we just pebbles by the roadside? Just things that make it harder for you to walk, ones you can kick aside or crush?"

"Ha ha ha! If you were just another inconsequential officer, sure!" Fuuga replied with amusement. "But the strongest dragon knight in the Kingdom is a different story. You're one of the biggest threats on the Friedonian side, which makes you one of the most likely to let me have some fun."

"I'm not planning to fight to satisfy your whims," Halbert stated, pointing the spear in his right hand at Fuuga. "I'm fighting to protect the people I love from being trampled by you. That's what I, Ruby, and everyone else in the Kingdom, starting with Souma, have been preparing for!"

Fuuga felt the corners of his lips curl upward as he listened to Halbert. "Aw, that's so nice. You're giving me a real 'most favored nation' reception here."

"You're about the only one dumb enough to be happy about it."

"Ha ha ha! No doubt about that. All right, let's do this, Halbert Magna!"

"Ruby!"

"Durga!"

The two shouted for their partners, who promptly moved aside. As soon as they did, Fuuga grabbed his bow and began

firing arrow after arrow, aiming to hit Halbert with his impressive archery skills.

"Like I'd let you do that!" Halbert retorted.

Fuuga's arrows flew towards him like missiles, but Halbert used his two spears connected by a chain to deflect them. Even Fuuga was astonished by this tactic.

While training with the Dratroopers, Halbert had practiced repeatedly cutting down projectiles from an anti-air repeating bolt thrower. This experience served him well in the current battle.

"Ha ha ha! Not bad! You're more entertaining than the queen of Nothung and her white dragon!"

"Hey!" Ruby exclaimed telepathically. "I won't let you mock Pai!"

Determined to resolve the battle, Ruby and Durga clashed once more. As the dragon and tiger grappled, Ruby wrapped her tail around Durga's hind legs.

"Tch!" Fuuga clicked his tongue as Durga lost the ability to move.

With the tiger immobilized, Ruby opened her jaws wide, aiming at Fuuga.

"Eat this!"

"Not happening!" Fuuga shouted back.

Ruby unleashed a blast of fire. In response, Fuuga released electricity from his Zanganto to intercept the flames.

Bzzzap!!! As fire and electricity collided, fireworks and sparks flew through the air. The next impact forcefully separated Ruby and Durga, creating some distance between them. A human had just neutralized the flaming breath of a dragon, which was far more powerful than that of a wyvern.

Halbert's and Ruby's expressions tensed.

"Is that guy...for real?" Ruby asked.

"Damn it! He really is a monster," Halbert replied.

Though they had expected this to some extent, they both gulped, taken aback by Fuuga's extraordinary power. Then it happened.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Countless fireballs suddenly appeared and began targeting Fuuga.

Looking towards the source of the attack, they saw the wyvern cavalry, equipped with the Little Susumu Mark V Light (a simplified Maxwellian propulsion device), rapidly approaching

the dueling warriors to unleash a volley of fireballs.

"Tch!"

"Grrr."

As the flames bore down on them, Fuuga's Zanganto and Durga's claws struck the fireballs down with ease. To them, who could fend off Ruby's flames, it felt like swatting away insects. However, the wyvern cavalry flew overhead, unfazed. They executed a rapid hit-and-run strategy using their propulsion devices. While they might not have inflicted any damage on Fuuga and Durga, they had certainly given Halbert and Ruby a chance to recover. It was akin to Science Guard fighter planes providing suppressive fire while a giant hero battled a kaiju. They didn't need to land a decisive blow; they just needed to assist.

After a brief respite, Halbert and Ruby charged at their opponent once again.

"We're not done yet!" shouted Halbert.

"Ha ha ha! Good!" Fuuga replied. "I feel like I'm taking on a whole country here, and I like it!"

The two warriors clashed their blades several times. As expected, Fuuga maintained the upper hand. Halbert found himself repeatedly pushed into a corner. However, each time, the wyvern cavalry launched hit-and-run attacks to support him, giving both him and Ruby chances to recover. This tactic made it difficult for Fuuga to land a direct attack. Meanwhile, Halbert continued to strike back whenever he regained his strength.

"Urgh...! This is starting to get annoying."

As the wyvern cavalry executed another support attack, Fuuga wore a displeased expression, as if he had just bitten into something unpleasant. He was preparing to swat away yet another attacker when suddenly, he heard a collective shout...

""""Lord Fuuga!!!""""

At that moment, the Empire's wyvern cavalry flew into the path of the Kingdom's wyvern cavalry, who were charging forward rapidly. Unable to stop in time to avoid the sudden interlopers, one of the Kingdom's wyvern riders crashed directly into them. As the riders of the two colliding wyverns plummeted to the ground, the Kingdom's wyvern cavalry halted their assault on Fuuga and separated. Meanwhile, the Empire's wyvern cavalry regrouped around Fuuga, who had ventured too far ahead and left them behind.

"Lord Fuuga! We will keep the enemy's wyvern cavalry at bay!"

“Please, push onward, Your Highness!”

“Fulfill our greatest wish, Your Highness!”

There was a noticeable difference in the quality of equipment between the Kingdom’s and the Empire’s wyvern cavalry. If there had been griffon cavalry available, they could have countered the wyvern cavalry effectively. However, all the griffon riders had been left with Krahe to keep Castor’s Air Force pinned down in Red Dragon City. In a direct confrontation, the Empire’s wyvern cavalry would be dominated by the Kingdom’s forces, which were equipped with propulsion devices that allowed for hit-and-run tactics.

Despite the odds, the cavalry still tried to protect Fuuga, believing that his dream was also their dream.

“Got it…” Fuuga nodded and headed towards the Kingdom’s main camp. The Kingdom’s wyvern cavalry attempted to stop him, but the Empire’s wyvern cavalry threw themselves in the way.

“Damn it… Ruby!”

“I know!”

Now, the only ones left to block Fuuga’s path were Halbert and Ruby again.

“Fuuugaaaaa!” Halbert roared as he hurled a spear wrapped in flames towards Fuuga. “This is what keeps getting people killed! The more you chase your dream, the more lives are thrown away for you! Stop it already!”

“They *want* me to keep pressing forward!” Fuuga exclaimed as he deflected Halbert’s attack. “I’m not just showing people a dream! I’m carrying their dreams with me, and that’s even more reason for me to keep moving forward! I’ve inherited the feelings and karma of those who died for me and those I’ve defeated along the way, so I can’t stop!”

“That doesn’t mean you can drag the living into it!”

“Yeah! It’s a real nuisance!” Ruby shouted, slamming into Durga’s side. “Don’t force us into a story that only reflects your worldview! You’re free to dream, but there are more important priorities! There are people you should care for! Even I have someone—like Hal’s son, Bill!”

“Urgh!”

Durga flinched after Ruby’s impassioned tackle. But despite that, Fuuga and Durga kept moving forward, closing in on the main camp where Souma was stationed. Suddenly…

“Roarrrrr!”

As Ruby howled, something large and black lifted off from the Kingdom’s main camp. It was a black ryuu, soaring into the skies as if climbing a waterfall. This was Souma’s second secondary queen, Naden Delal Souma. Between Naden’s antlers stood a brave dark elf warrior with a greatsword resting against her shoulder—Souma’s second primary queen, Aisha U. Elfrieden.

“We won’t let you reach His Majesty! Let’s go, Madam Naden!” Aisha declared.

“Roger that!”

Souma’s two queens stood in Fuuga and Durga’s way.

Chapter 4: Elegy for a Great Man

“Here she comes, the Kingdom’s strongest!” Fuuga shouted with glee as he spotted Aisha riding atop the black ryuu Naden’s forehead.

The strongest pair of dragon and knight in the Kingdom, aside from the unique case of Souma and Naden, were facing him simultaneously. This showed just how much of a threat his opponents perceived him to be, which only pleased Fuuga’s sense of self-affirmation.

“Madam Naden!”

“Roger that!”

In response to Aisha’s command, Naden gave a powerful shake of her head, propelling Aisha forward like a bullet aimed at Fuuga. Fuuga’s eyes widened as he saw the dark elf warrior charging towards him, but Durga met her with its claws.

“Hahhhhh!!!” Aisha shouted as she slammed her greatsword into the oncoming claws. When their attacks collided, Durga lost the struggle, and Aisha managed to deflect the claws that had fought against dragons.

“Whoa?!” Fuuga exclaimed.

Durga lost its balance midair for a moment. Fuuga hurriedly grabbed hold of the tiger’s fur, managing to avoid being thrown from his saddle. He had nearly fallen headfirst towards the ground—something that even made him break into a nervous sweat.

“Almost had me there… She’s got that same stubborn strength as ever.”

He observed Aisha, who had fallen past him when her attack was deflected. Naden caught her and placed her back on her head. Since Aisha hadn’t formed a dragon knight contract with Naden, she lacked the blessings that Souma possessed, which prevented one from falling off. Their surprise attack had aimed to capitalize on her superior ability to mount and dismount quickly.

“Augh, how is it fair that he can withstand that?” Naden

complained.

“He’s not the kind of foe we can use the same strategy against again,” Aisha replied. “I wanted to end it with that strike.”

Both were frustrated by the failure of their surprise attack, but they quickly shifted their focus. Aisha fell into a battle stance with her greatsword.

“But even so, we will stop Fuuga here. He’ll not be reaching His Majesty.” she declared.

“You’ve got that right!” Naden agreed wholeheartedly as she glanced over at Halbert and Ruby. “Are you okay, stupid Ruby?” she called out. “Aren’t you tired?”

“What are you talking about, dumb Naden?” Ruby answered. “This is still no big deal for me.”

“Sir Halbert!” Aisha shouted. “You’ll be the main attackers since you’re experienced at fighting in the air! We’ll provide support, so fight to your heart’s content!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

The four fighters moved to block Fuuga’s path, the final obstacle preventing him from reaching Souma. Fuuga wore a feral smile that never wavered; he was exhilarated at the prospect of facing such powerful opponents. It was a pleasure that only someone who had reached the pinnacle of strength could truly appreciate.

“Nice! Now this is an ensemble fit for the final stage!”

“Grr! Sir Fuuga, you…” Aisha growled.

“Now, let’s all fight to the death!” he cut her off as he sent Durga rushing towards them.

Naden and Ruby both attempted to stop the charge, but Fuuga and Durga moved in perfect unison. Their attacks were so precise that it was nearly impossible to defend against them. Halbert and Aisha fought back with a spear of flame and a sword of wind, yet Fuuga effortlessly parried every strike before launching his own counterattacks. His expression revealed that this was a simple task for him.

“Come on! Is that all you’ve got?!” Fuuga taunted.

“Urgh…” Aisha grunted.

“Damn you!” Halbert retorted.

Despite being attacked by four skilled combatants, Fuuga and Durga refused to back down. They pressed onward, undeterred by the assaults they faced. For the fighters from the Kingdom, falling was not an option; they were determined to protect what

mattered most. Fuuga, ignoring his injuries, understood that if he were to fall here, it would mean everything was over. The difference in their mentalities was clear.

As they fought, Fuuga continued to draw closer to the Kingdom's main camp. When they were near enough to distinguish the faces of those within the camp, Aisha made a decisive statement. "We can't let things continue like this... Madam Naden!"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Let's use *that*. You know, the other thing we came up with."

"Whuh?! In a real battle?! Where we only have one shot?!" Naden blinked in surprise, her dark ryuu eyes wide.

Aisha nodded. "If we don't stop him here, His Majesty will be in danger. No matter what...we have to stop that guy."

"All right..." Naden replied hesitantly, her usual composure faltering; she couldn't quite bring herself to say her signature "Roger that!" catchphrase.

Naden lowered her guard against Fuuga's path and rose into the air.

What is she planning...? Fuuga thought as he looked up at them. Meanwhile, Halbert and Ruby seized the opportunity to attack.

Halbert taunted, "This must be easy for you if you've got time to look away!"

Ruby chimed in, "We're your opponents!"

Fuuga clicked his tongue in annoyance as he turned to face them.

At the same time, Naden climbed even higher into the sky above Fuuga.

Aisha placed a hand on Naden's antlers and said, "Well then, Madam Naden. Are you prepared for this?"

"Yeah. You be careful too," Naden replied.

"I will... Now let's go!"

"Roger that!"

Naden transformed into her human form while in midair. In this form, even she could not remain afloat, and both she and Aisha were pulled down by gravity.

"Now...!" Aisha commanded.

As they fell, Aisha clasped hands with the human Naden. They spotted Fuuga fighting directly below them. Aisha helped Naden onto one side of her greatsword and wreathed it in wind magic

before swinging it towards the ground.

“We call this the Black Dragon Shooting Star Shot!!!” Naden shouted.

“Gooooooooo!!!”

Aisha launched the petite Naden using wind magic. As they noticed Naden plummeting at a speed faster than terminal velocity, Fuuga’s, Halbert’s, and Ruby’s eyes widened. Then, Naden began to gradually revert to her black ryuu form. Caught off guard, Fuuga was too slow to react.

“Roarrrrrr!!!” Durga growled.

Naden transformed into the black ryuu just as she closed in on Fuuga and Durga, slamming into the tiger with tremendous force. After absorbing such a heavy attack, even Durga could not remain aloft. The tiger struggled to recover as it tumbled to the ground, but Naden quickly wrapped her long, serpentine body around Durga.



The two massive beasts struggled as they fell. Halbert's and Ruby's minds went blank, but they quickly regained their senses, trying to parse the situation. Below them, Naden and Durga were plummeting, and above, Aisha was also falling.

"Naden can fly! We have to save Lady Aisha!" Ruby shouted into Halbert's mind, grasping the situation before he could.

"R-Right," Halbert agreed.

They caught Aisha in midair. Cradled in Ruby's forelegs, Aisha's face was tense with genuine fear.

"Th-Thank you, Sir Halbert, Madam Ruby," Aisha stammered.

"Honestly! Why are you so reckless?!" Halbert exclaimed.

"Naden too. Just watching gave me the chills," Ruby added.

After that moment of relief, Aisha regained her composure.

"Right! Where's Fuuga Haan?!"

He should have fallen alongside Durga, but...

Looking down at the struggling Naden and Durga, they noticed a pair of wings gliding towards the ground—Fuuga's. His wings couldn't lift him high, but they allowed him to glide even while wearing heavy equipment. Fuuga was descending right on the Kingdom's main camp.

"Urgh! Even after everything we did, we could only deprive him of his mount!" Aisha groaned in frustration.

"Ruby," Halbert said as he got to his feet. "Make sure to take care of Madam Aisha, all right?"

"Huh? Hal?"

Before she could respond, Halbert leapt from Ruby's back.

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—Kingdom of Friedonia Main Camp

"Not even that can stop him, huh...?"

Those words slipped from my mouth almost unconsciously, I watched the battle unfolding in the air from the Kingdom's main camp. Fuuga would be arriving soon, and his blade was closing in for the decapitating strike. Yet, strangely, I felt calm.

I had likely shifted into "king mode." I might shudder later when I returned to a more level state of mind, but for now, my own life felt insignificant in the grand scheme of things. This realization kept the fear of death at bay.

Hey, Fuuga, you understand, right? Even if you win this battle—even if you take my head—it's not going to change a thing, okay?

The times were changing into a new era—one that could not be driven by any single great man. Should I fall here, the course of events was already set. People would gravitate towards the world of the north. Though Fuuga might be able to bring this country and the Maritime Union to their knees, individuals would ultimately act on their own initiative. The great nation united under a powerful leader would soon crumble.

That momentum was something Fuuga could not halt. The times would cast him aside as someone who had outlived his usefulness. This battle had been decided the moment I released that promotional video. Fuuga's dream was already shattered. I was only fighting to help Fuuga's followers accept that the times had changed, and to provide a grand finale for the great man they had entrusted with their hopes.

This battle serves as an elegy for you, Fuuga. While I found myself lost in sentimentality...

"Sire..."

"Sire?"

Ludwin and Excel called out to me. I nodded.

"I know. Now...we just need to end it like we planned."

It's curtains for you, Fuuga Haan.

"Ludwin, prepare the you-know-what."

"Yes, sire."

"Excel, be ready to raise a ball of water at any moment."

"As you request, sire."

Once I had given Ludwin and Excel their orders, I took a deep breath. After holding it for several seconds, I gently exhaled, which helped me calm down. I looked at both of them.

"No matter what happens, stick to your roles. Absolutely. No matter what."

Their faces tensed at my words.

"Are you saying we should not act even if you're in danger, sire?" Ludwin asked, visibly shaken. I nodded firmly.

"Yes. This battle is nearly over. It's more important for Excel, who is in charge of the plan for the final strike, and for you, who can lead our armies in my place, to survive right now than it is for me. You absolutely must not confront Fuuga."

"If you talk like that, Carla will get upset again," Excel warned, covering her mouth with her fan.

Oh, right. I did get scolded during the Amidonian War, didn't I? Back then, I had tried to shield my heart from breaking by acting

like “the system known as a king,” but that wasn’t the case now. After reflecting on it, I’d realized that if it meant protecting the children waiting with Roroa in Venetinova, I was prepared to sacrifice my own life here.

“If I come out of this intact, she can yell at me all she wants. And so can Liscia and the others, for that matter,” I said with a shrug. Then, steeling myself, I added, “I’m counting on both of you.”

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As Fuuga glided towards the main camp where Souma was located, he wore a feral smile on his face. He had used everything at his disposal to come this far, employing enough forces to wage a global war. He had dispatched his retainers to various fronts and even sent his wife, Mutsumi, and his loyal mount, Durga, into battle. Now, he was within reach of Souma.

He had sacrificed everything to arrive at this moment. In other words, he faced an opponent who pushed him to give his all. For Fuuga, who possessed overwhelming power and charisma, the emergence of such a formidable foe had been pure bliss. He was intoxicated by a sense of satisfaction unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life.

“Ha ha ha! I see you, Souma!”

Finally, Fuuga’s tigerlike eyes locked on Souma, who stood in the main camp. Though he was in a location protected by his soldiers, only a few people were immediately around him. The thinness of the guard surrounding him was noticeable.

He’s inviting me in…? Is it a trap? Fuuga thought.

In all likelihood, this was an attempt to lure Fuuga. If he charged in carelessly, a trap or trick would undoubtedly await him. But Fuuga didn’t care; he didn’t hesitate. No matter what trap he was jumping into, he was determined to dismantle it and confront Souma. That was how Fuuga Haan lived his life.

“All right, let’s settle this, Souma!”

He had gotten close enough for them to see each other’s faces. As Fuuga braced for landing, his feet pointed downward like those of a hunting bird of prey, Souma made his move.

“Ludwin!” Souma shouted, raising his right hand.

“Whoa?!” Fuuga gasped as he lost balance in the air. He had been gliding steadily until that moment, but now he was falling

straight down.

As he descended, Fuuga spotted a machine a short distance away, positioned behind Souma.

Damn! It's that magic-sealing weapon, huh?

Unlike the cannonball type used by the Kingdom in the Gran Chaos Empire, this was a stationary magic canceler. While the area of effect was similar, the stationary model could be easily turned on and off since it stayed near the user. Celestials and other winged races relied on magicium for flight, so losing the ability to use it would cause them to plummet from the sky.

You're using that here? It's clearly a countermeasure against me.

This weapon would have given them a significant advantage in battle, yet they had reserved it specifically for Fuuga. This demonstrated that the Kingdom was more cautious about Fuuga himself than about his retainers and armies.

For a moment, this thought amused Fuuga, but then he slammed into the ground. "Guh..."

Instinctively, Fuuga rolled to dissipate the momentum of his fall, but it wasn't enough to avoid injury. He sustained several wounds beneath his silvery armor, but that didn't mean he couldn't fight. Given the adrenaline pumping through his system, this level of pain was practically negligible.

Fuuga readied his Zanganto and rushed at Souma. The commotion caught the attention of the guards in the main camp, and they swarmed towards him.

"Your Majesty!"

"Don't let him get any farther!"

"The enemy is wounded! Surround him and press in!"

"Out of my way!!!" Fuuga shouted.

With the magic canceler activated, no one—friend or foe—could use magic. Despite this, a single swing of Fuuga's Zanganto sent the swarming guards flying as if they were rubber balls. The terror of this display forced the guards to switch tactics and attack him with bows and arrows, but most of their shots were easily cut down by his blade.

Several arrows had lodged themselves into his armor, but none had inflicted a fatal hit. This was because the arrows that had penetrated were the ones he had deemed less dangerous. Although he couldn't possibly fight at his full strength after the fall he had endured, Fuuga's martial prowess was still remarkable.

Finally, Fuuga reached Souma.

“Hey, Souma. Thanks for the warm welcome.”

“I’m actually trying to chase you off at the gates, though…”

As Souma spoke, he drew his sword, which caused Fuuga’s eyes to widen in surprise.

“You’re gonna fight me instead of running away? *You*?” Fuuga knew Souma’s weakness and Souma knew Fuuga’s strength. Even wounded and unable to use magic, it was like a turtle fighting a tiger. “A slow turtle like you doesn’t stand a chance against me.”

“Running’s not an option for me right now… I’ve got to keep you tied down here, even if it means using my own life as bait.”

“You’ve still got a plan? Then in deference to your bravery, I’ll put you down with one blow.”

Fuuga raised his Zanganto and swung it down at Souma’s head. Souma angled his sword, hoping to parry the blow. It was the same move he had once used in the refugee camp to defend Juno from a brigand. But this time, he wasn’t facing some two-bit thug; he was up against the great man of the era, Fuuga Haan.

Snap! His sword broke without managing to redirect the attack, and Fuuga’s blade slashed from Souma’s left shoulder to his chest.

“Gwagh…”

As Souma’s eyes widened in surprise, red blood seeped through the tear in his black military uniform. The intense pain that followed made him drop to one knee and hang his head.

“”Your Majesty!”” Ludwin and Excel shouted from a distance.

Meanwhile, Fuuga looked down at Souma…

A shallow cut? My aim must’ve been off a bit. He hadn’t landed the solid blow he’d been expecting. He’d meant to split Souma’s head in two, but the attack had veered to Fuuga’s right, resulting in a gash that ran from Souma’s shoulder towards his chest.

The fresh blood made the scene look dramatic, but the blow probably hadn’t struck anything vital. The damage he’d sustained from the fall and the exhaustion he felt had likely affected his swing, making it less powerful than he intended. However, it was also due to Souma’s surprisingly well-practiced parry.

Oh, yeah… This guy’s been ruling a country all this time too.

Fuuga had indeed underestimated Souma. He’d seen him as a weak king, preoccupied with bureaucracy and incapable of fighting on the battlefield—the kind of leader who, when alone

and lacking the support of his comrades, would easily be overpowered by a strong adversary.

However, Souma was still a king. While he had reached this point with the help of his companions, it was ultimately Souma who bore the responsibility of protecting his nation and its people.

As Fuuga came to this realization, he felt a deep sense of shame for his arrogance. He had dismissed an opponent who was giving his all, belittling the significance of Souma's efforts.

But it's over now. Rest in peace.

He could see Ludwin and the others rushing in. As he swung to decapitate Souma before anyone could intervene, he caught a glimpse of Souma's face. Despite the pain in his expression, he was smiling…

"Damn it… Looks like you won," Souma murmured.

"What?"

A sudden admission of defeat. Fuuga paused, unable to believe his ears.

"You won your bet, Owen!"

Just as Souma shouted that…

"Hyahhhhhhh!!!"

Slash!

…a red shadow suddenly dropped onto Fuuga from behind. Halbert had fallen down from the sky, his spear lopping off one of Fuuga's wings.





Chapter 5: Checkmate

“Your Majesty’s life is the life of the nation itself.”

As pain raced along the cut Fuuga had slashed from my shoulder across my chest, I thought I could hear the voice of my personal instructor and sounding board, Owen.

“If you are attacked by an assassin, being able to deflect even one enemy attack could buy time for your guards to save you. That single exchange of blows could delay the demise of our country. That one exchange could lead our nation towards greatness.”

Owen had talked about this endlessly during our training.

“No, no, of course, I’ll do everything I can to prevent that situation, but if it does happen, then there’s really no helping it, is there?” I’d complained, still exhausted from training.

I’d been slightly annoyed that he’d worn me out physically when I was already mentally drained from my bureaucratic work.

Owen had smiled at me.

“Ga ha ha! Then let’s bet on it! If my training comes in handy someday, treat me to the finest liquor money can buy on this continent!”

“A bet…? What if your training never comes in handy?”

“In that case, you’ll have lived a peaceful life, Your Majesty! Excellent, excellent!”

With that, he’d let out a hearty laugh.

Damn it, Old Man Owen. You won the bet.

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Earlier, Halbert jumped off Ruby’s back to chase Fuuga, deploying the parachute that was part of his Dratrooper gear. As he slowed his descent, he noticed Fuuga gliding towards the Kingdom’s main camp.

Souma?! He hasn’t evacuated?!

The main camp should have seen Fuuga coming, but there were no signs of panic. Suddenly, Fuuga went from gliding to plummeting towards the ground. Souma must have activated the magic canceler. While this wouldn’t affect Halbert, who was

using a parachute, he still felt odd without access to magic.

Halbert watched as Fuuga slammed into the ground but quickly got back on his feet, cutting his way towards Souma. Though the fall had likely caused some damage, Fuuga was mowing through the guards in the main camp and making steady progress.

Damn! Can't I descend any faster?! Halbert thought, frustrated that he couldn't increase his speed.

Meanwhile, he saw Fuuga reach Souma. Fuuga swung his Zanganto at Souma, and at that moment…

Halbert exclaimed, "Souma?!"

He was certain he had been cut down himself. He saw Souma drop to one knee, the blade he had tried to use to block snapping in two. Souma was barely clinging to consciousness; it was only a matter of time now.

"Damn it! I'm not gonna let it end like this!"

Halbert was still quite high up, but he knew Souma would die if he didn't act. Souma wasn't the type of leader who inspired Halbert to risk his life for him, but they had been friends for a long time. He was the kind of friend for whom Halbert could risk everything. *I'm not just gonna let you kill my bud!*

He shed his parachute and began free-falling towards the ground. He couldn't use magic with the magic canceler active, but he only knew how to wreathe his weapons in fire anyway, so it hardly concerned him. As he fell, Halbert adjusted his position, removed the chain connecting his two spears, and tossed one away. It was easier to balance with just one spear in both hands. He tightened his grip on the remaining spear.

"Hyahhhhhhh!!!"

Slash! As he fell, the tip of his spear tore through Fuuga's wing just as Fuuga raised his Zanganto to deliver the finishing blow to Souma. Blood spurted from Fuuga's back, and he fell to his knees.

Halbert saw Fuuga as he rolled across the ground. He had attempted to fall in a way that would lessen the impact, but it hadn't worked, and now his entire body ached. *Ouch… Damn, that hurts!* But that didn't mean he could just lie there.

Immediately rising to his feet, he pushed his battered body to walk over to Fuuga, who still had no idea what had just happened. Fuuga's back was wide-open.

"Fuuugaaaaa!" Halbert shouted.

Just as he aimed his spear at Fuuga to strike the killing blow, Souma yelled, “Ludwin! Restrain him!”

Ludwin rushed forward, positioning himself between Halbert and Fuuga. He blocked Halbert’s spear with his sword while pressing Fuuga into the ground with his shield.

As Halbert’s eyes widened in surprise, Ludwin told him, “Well done! You’ve beaten Fuuga. But you’ve done enough.”

“Huh?! But—”

“You don’t need to bear the burden of killing a great man. No one in this country does.”

Halbert fell silent, brought back to his senses by the sincerity in Ludwin’s eyes. He withdrew his spear, and Ludwin nodded in acknowledgment. Together, they helped restrain Fuuga.

Due to the pain of losing a wing and the exhaustion from the fierce battle he had endured, Fuuga sat on the ground, cross-legged, as if he had already given up. He was bound while Ludwin and Halbert kept their weapons trained on him.

“Souma! Are you all right?!” Liscia cried as she burst into the main camp on horseback. When she saw Souma sitting on the ground, bleeding, the color drained from her face. She jumped down from her horse and rushed to his side. “You’ve been slashed?! Are you okay?! Are you still conscious?!”

“Yeah… It hurts like hell, but I’m still breathing,” Souma replied weakly.

“Thank goodness… I saw Fuuga flying in here, so I came as fast as I could. When I arrived, I found you on the ground, bleeding. It gave me chills. I could feel the blood draining out of my own body.”

“Sorry… Sounds like I gave you a real fright.”

“You’re right, you did! You were so reckless again. You’re in for an earful from all of us later!”

Tears filled Liscia’s eyes as Souma offered her a faint smile.

“Yeah. I’ll listen to all of it once this war is over.” With that, Souma limped over to where Fuuga was seated cross-legged, supported by Liscia. “Your dream is over now, Fuuga.”

“I’ve still got another rampage in me if I feel like it,” Fuuga replied, maintaining a feral look in his eyes.

He certainly looked ready to break free from his restraints and start wreaking havoc again at any moment. But Souma shook his head silently.

“Nope, your time’s up. This is the end of the line for you. The

battle has already been decided, and the last move of the game was played far from here."

"What?"

"Excel!" Souma called out, wincing in pain. "Ow, that hurt..."

Excel approached and raised both hands. "Honestly, now... You had me worried there for a moment. It worked out fine because you're still alive, but you just shaved ten years off my lifespan!"

Even as she complained, a massive sphere of water formed overhead. The magic canceler had been turned off, and several nearby water mages were working together to grow and stabilize the sphere's shape. By the time it became large enough to be seen from anywhere on the battlefield, the sounds of combat had quieted down. It was likely that everyone, regardless of which side they were on, realized what was happening upon seeing the massive ball of water and stopped to watch.

Turning towards the broadcast jewel behind her, Excel spoke, "Juna, you understand the situation here, right?"

"Yes, Grandmother," came the reply.

A beautiful young woman with blue hair, dressed in an officer's uniform, appeared projected within the ball of water. She was Juna Souma, Souma's first secondary queen. Her expression was noticeably tense.

Noticing Juna's worried look, Excel whispered, "Don't worry. His Majesty is wounded, but his life isn't in danger."

Only Juna could hear her, as the comment was not picked up by the video feed. Juna had likely been watching the broadcast when Souma was slashed, which had left her beside herself with worry. However, after Excel reassured her that Souma was fine—though that was still somewhat questionable—Juna regained some of her composure.

Taking a deep breath, Juna looked straight ahead and began to speak.

"I speak to everyone fighting on this continent, whether you are with the Kingdom of Friedonia or the Great Tiger Empire. I am Juna Souma, one of Souma E. Friedonia's queens and the daughter of Duchess Excel Walter. I am speaking to you today not as a lorelei, but as the commander of the Marines in the National Maritime Defense Force."

This message was being broadcast on the same frequency as Souma's announcement marking the beginning of a new era, so

she was truly addressing everyone across the continent. Roroa and the other evacuees in Venetinova, Kuu and the fighters in Turgis, as well as Hakuya and Jeanne, engaged in a standoff in the Euphoria Kingdom, were all watching.

Juna moved slightly, gesturing to the scenery behind her.

"I believe those of you from the Great Tiger Empire will recognize this location."

It was a castle located somewhere, surrounded by a massive army numbering in the tens of thousands. When Fuuga saw the image, his eyes widened as he stared in disbelief. He could hardly believe what he was seeing, but Juna confirmed the truth.

"Our detachment from the Maritime Alliance has surrounded the Haan Great Tiger Castle. We have also occupied Sir Fuuga's country, the steppes, on our journey here. If you continue your fruitless battle against the Maritime Alliance, we will launch a full offensive, and I assure you that the castle will fall."

Juna's revelation shook the soldiers of the Great Tiger Empire. The cradle of their empire, Malmkhitan, had been captured. The center of their power, the Great Tiger Castle, was under siege.

Fuuga personally didn't consider this castle more important than his others, but for many of the fighters, it held a special significance because that was where they had left their wives and children. This created enough psychological pressure that they felt they couldn't continue fighting without addressing those feelings first. The forces of the Great Tiger Empire believed they had put their opponent in a vulnerable position, but in reality, it was they who found themselves in a precarious situation.

"Hey, wait. Where did he get an army that big?" Fuuga asked as he began to regain his senses. He pondered the question.

Could it be the forces from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago that haven't participated yet? No, that doesn't seem right; there were too many soldiers for that. Have Friedonian troops joined their ranks? They've already mobilized a significant number, so they couldn't have many left for a detached operation. Are the Nine-Headed Dragon forces the core of this unit? But they aren't accustomed to fighting on land. The garrisons I left back home should have been able to hold out against them for a while. They might have captured a coastal city at best, but there's no way they could reach the Great Tiger Castle in such a short time.

Despite racking his brain, Fuuga couldn't figure out what had

led to this situation.

Souma then said, “Fuuga, you carried out a diversionary operation before this battle, right?”

“Hmm…? Oh, you mean how I sent troops to the Euphoria Kingdom?” Fuuga replied.

To draw as many of the Kingdom of Friedonia’s troops to that front as possible, Fuuga had attacked the Euphoria Kingdom in the west. He’d understood that the Kingdom of Friedonia would see through the ruse, but the plan was that if he made a move to attack an allied nation and the leader of the Maritime Alliance didn’t send reinforcements, it would weaken their position.

Fuuga and Hashim had not been particularly hopeful that the Kingdom of Friedonia would send sufficient reinforcements to strengthen their defense of the homeland. This uncertainty was why Fuuga had not thought much about it until now.

“Do you remember the move we made in response?” Souma asked.

Fuuga cocked his head at the question.

“Your move… I think you sent an island that was like a battleship?” he replied.

By deploying his ultimate weapon on the high seas, which he sadly couldn’t use inland, Souma had cleverly maintained the appearance of supporting an ally with the island-type carrier. Both Fuuga and Hashim had suspected that the carriers were likely empty since transferring the wyvern cavalry off the carriers would make them usable on land.

Given the number of wyvern cavalry they had encountered on their way here, it was clear that there couldn’t have been any left on the carriers. However, Souma had another question for the skeptical Fuuga.

“Do you know what happened to my carrier after that?”

“It was an empty ship, right? Didn’t it just stay in port at the Euphoria Kingdom?”

“Yeah, that carrier was indeed empty. It had lost its ability to fight.” Souma’s lips curled into a smile. “But here’s the thing… While a carrier is a strategic weapon, it’s also a ship. And an empty ship can be loaded with anything, right?”

“Don’t tell me…”

As the realization began to dawn on Fuuga, Souma decided to elaborate.

“An empty carrier is essentially a massive transport ship. I

sent two carriers and the transport ship, King Souma, to each of the member states of the Maritime Alliance, gathering enough troops to form a detached force."

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The image of Souma's forces surrounding the Great Tiger Castle was broadcast around the world, even reaching the port city of Venetinova. There, the bureaucrats of the Kingdom, along with Roroa, Tomoe, and the royal family's children, had taken refuge.

"Oh, thank goodness! They made it in time!" Ichiha exclaimed.

"Yeah!" Tomoe agreed, both of them expressing their relief as they watched from the garden of the lord's manor in Venetinova.

The fountain in the garden was equipped with a receiver, allowing them to view the broadcast projected in the water. Next to them stood Roroa and Poncho, the lord of the manor.

"Coulda seen it comin' from a mile away. Didn't they ever figure we might be pullin' some kinda trick behind the scenes?" Roroa boasted as she flexed her arm. "Even just the core unit from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom is close to eight thousand men. Add in the forces from our other allies, and it's over a hundred thousand. With a talented commander and a stable supply of provisions, crossin' the Great Tiger Empire while their main force was away was no big deal. Course, ensurin' that supply of provisions was our job."

"It certainly was a massive undertaking, yes," Poncho said, wiping the cold sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. "As the head of the alliance, we were responsible for providing supplies for all the troops from other members. Even though we'd been saving up for this, it was still a close call."

"Sure was," Roroa added. "We had provisions stored everywhere and the means of transportin' them, but we were short on bureaucrats who could manage it... I mean, it's not like we could just strap wheels on 'em and they'd move themselves."

"With the war ongoing, our ability to move around was limited, and we were shorthanded everywhere, yes," Poncho continued. "Even Serina and Komain, who always do so much to support me, were assigned other missions and had to leave. If not for Lady Tomoe and Sir Ichiha's help, we would have been in trouble, yes."

Tomoe and Ichiha smiled wryly as their companions let out exhausted sighs.

“I’m just happy I could be of some small help to my big brother. If all I could do was sit here and wait…I’d have been crushed under the weight of my worries,” Tomoe said.

“I agree… I’m worried about Yuriga, who we left in the capital,” Ichiha added.

“Yeah. I hope she’s not letting things get to her too much…”

Roroa, placing a hand on her hip, nodded in agreement. “Same here. I mean, she’s married into the country that’s fightin’ against hers. I know what it’s like, bein’ in a position like that. But regardless of whatever ties you have, in the end, all ya can really do is believe that you’re makin’ the right decision. That’s probably what’ll leave ya with the least regrets.”

“”Right.””

Roroa’s words were filled with experience, and both Tomoe and Ichiha nodded firmly in response. After grinning at their affirmation, Roroa gazed up at the projection in the sky.

Fuuga Haan… Maybe you were only focused on the warriors who do the fightin’, but we noncombatants have minds of our own. We’re not just here to be trampled. We support the soldiers who fight ’cause they’re worried about their families and the countries they live in. Unlike your people, who worship you and have left all their decisions up to you. Roroa thrust her fist out towards the projection. *You lost because you couldn’t imagine what people like us, who don’t fight, were thinkin’! Now get ready to pay for it, Fuuga!*

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At the border between the Great Tiger Empire and the Euphoria Kingdom, Lumiere glared at Jeanne after witnessing the scenes projected in the night sky due to time zone differences.

“You pulled a fast one on us, Jeanne…”

The forces of the Great Tiger Empire and the Euphoria Kingdom had agreed to pause their pointless fighting and maintain their standoff until the outcome of the direct battle between Souma and Fuuga was determined. However, the commanders from both sides continued to meet regularly to exchange information.

Today was no different: Queen Jeanne, Consort Hakuya,

General Gunther, and Sami the mage represented the Euphoria Kingdom, while Commander in Chief Shuukin, his aide Lumiere, and Elulu of the High Elf Volunteer Force represented the Great Tiger Empire. They gathered in the middle of the field, where their forces faced each other.

During this meeting, they observed a scene depicting Haan Great Tiger Castle being surrounded, with some troops displaying the colors of the Euphoria Kingdom. This indicated that the Euphoria Kingdom had secretly transferred some of their forces from the western front—where they were supposed to be evenly matched—using island carriers to reinforce Souma's detached force.

To conceal their true intentions, the Euphoria Kingdom had deployed more standard bearers than usual, deceiving both Shuukin and Lumiere.

"Just how many men did you send?" Lumiere asked.

Jeanne replied sincerely, "We were going to bring ten thousand men here, and another ten thousand from the rear guard, so...twenty thousand in total, I suppose."

Upon hearing this, Lumiere slapped her forehead and then looked up at the heavens. Resignation replaced her anger at that moment; she realized they had been outsmarted.

"Combined with the troops from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom, they should number nearly a hundred thousand. That's more than enough to cross the Empire while our armies are away and surround Great Tiger Castle." Lumiere returned her gaze to Jeanne. "But I'm surprised you sent the soldiers away in this situation. If we had attacked instead of agreeing to negotiate, wouldn't you have suffered significant losses?"

"Yeah, I was concerned about that too, but Sir Hakuya convinced me."

Both women turned to look at Hakuya, who shrugged.

"Before the war, you made it seem like you were going to attack here. I believe it was a diversion you expected us to see through, but at that point, our roles were already assigned—you as the attacker and us as the defenders."

"Hmm? I suppose they were," Lumiere replied.

"Just as a king must act like a king, people tend to think they must play the roles they're given," Hakuya said nonchalantly. "As the attackers, you assumed that the defenders would never be

so foolish as to send away part of their forces. We simply took advantage of that."

His words left Lumiere, Shuukin, and even Jeanne at a loss for a response. Strategies that exploited the blind spots in people's thinking were Hakuya's specialty. His skills had earned him the title of Black-Robed Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Friedonia.

Lumiere looked at Jeanne awkwardly. "Isn't your husband...a little too much of a schemer?"

"Ah ha ha... That's what I love about him, Lumi," Jeanne replied.

"I think I'd prefer a man who's a little more honest and forthright."

Despite sharing many interests, the two old friends clearly differed in their taste in men.

Hakuya was enduring a great deal of verbal abuse, but he maintained a cool expression.

"There's something I don't understand," Shuukin said, crossing his arms. "You have the manpower, and I've no doubt the Kingdom of Friedonia can supply it. But that detached force is primarily made up of soldiers from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago who aren't used to fighting on land. Even if they have experience with naval battles and landing operations, we can't expect them to push far inland. I know you sent twenty thousand men from the Euphoria Kingdom, but all of your distinguished commanders are still here."

Shuukin then shifted his gaze between Jeanne, Hakuya, and Gunther.

"Can soldiers maintain order on their own? From what I saw in the broadcast, the Kingdom of Friedonia appeared to be leading them, but with us attacking on every front, they probably didn't have even ten thousand of their own troops left to send. Frankly, I doubt that a patchwork force would obey a faction that makes up less than ten percent of their numbers. Even if they did, I can't imagine them fighting their way past the garrison troops to reach Haan Great Tiger Castle..."

His observation was astute, as expected from Fuuga's right-hand man. He had pinpointed the issue with the detached force. But Jeanne and Hakuya exchanged a glance and smiled softly.

"It seems you've forgotten something, Sir Shuukin," said Jeanne.

"Yes, he has," Hakuya agreed. "There is one very important

individual you've overlooked."

"Who would that be...?" Lumiere asked suspiciously.

Jeanne couldn't help but smile at that. "Did you forget, Lumi? There is one person. She belongs to the Kingdom of Friedonia now, but the people of our Euphoria Kingdom respect her like a goddess. The men would gladly give their lives for her."

"No! You can't mean..."

Lumiere quickly figured it out. Jeanne continued speaking regardless.

"There is someone who united the once-disunited nations and held off the threat of the Demon Lord's Domain for a long time, isn't there? You call our detachment a patchwork force, but they're not nearly as much of a patchwork as the United Forces of Mankind after their campaign failed... She is the one who brought those battered nations together and accepted all the respect and resentment from other countries. Don't you think that makes her ideally suited to lead the Maritime Alliance's detached force?"

At that moment, a great commotion erupted among soldiers on both sides of the battlefield. Jeanne and the others looked up at the scene projected in the air above them, their eyes landing on the person standing next to Juna. Despite her now short hair, her beautiful face was one that the people of neither the Euphoria Kingdom nor the Great Tiger Empire could ever forget.

However, she wasn't wearing the elegant dresses of her time as empress or the casual attire she donned during her philanthropic activities, but a swallow-tailed officer's uniform like the one Liscia always wore. Hers was light pink, while Liscia's was red.

When Lumiere saw her, the name slipped naturally from her lips.

"Lady Maria..."

It was the former empress of the Gran Chaos Empire and Souma's current third primary queen, Maria herself.

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In a land far north of Parnam, on a hill overlooking Haan Great Tiger Castle, Juna was interviewing Maria in front of the enemy capital.

“Maria, how is the deployment of the troops going?” Juna asked.

“Everything is ready to go. At my command, soldiers from the four nations of the Maritime Alliance will launch a coordinated assault on Haan Great Tiger Castle. If I do not receive word from His Majesty within the hour, I am confident we will capture the castle.” Maria gazed straight ahead as she spoke. The slight hint of anger in her eyes did not suit her demeanor.

Juna and Maria had been observing the fighting near Parnam until just before their broadcast. They had witnessed Souma fall to one knee, bleeding, after being struck by Fuuga. It was clear how they must have felt, watching from this distant location and being unable to go to their wounded husband’s side.

Juna suppressed her anger as she turned to face the jewel. “If the war continues, that city will be reduced to ashes. We urge the leaders of the Great Tiger Empire to make a wise decision.”

With those words, Juna terminated the broadcast. Although it might have seemed brief given the circumstances, they knew they couldn’t let the broadcast continue for too long since it was projected on Excel’s supermassive sphere of water.

“Whew…” Juna let out a big sigh of relief and turned to speak to Maria, who had just done the same. “That was exhausting, but you did well, Maria.”

“Juna… Yes, it was nerve-racking. I’ve been on broadcast many times before as empress, but never in a military uniform.”

“Really? I think you project a dignified aura in it.”

Although it was an earnest compliment, Maria smiled wryly and shook her head. “I’ve always left military matters to Jeanne and the generals, so this is actually my first battle. Yet despite that, I’ve been made commander of the detached force, even if only in name. It makes me worry whether that’s appropriate.”

“No! It’s fine…”

“It’s not a problem at all! You’ve done a great job as commander!” An energetic voice came from behind them.

They turned to see a muscular warrior of the snow monkey race approaching. It was Gouran Taisei, the former head of the Republic and Kuu’s father. He had a stony, apelike face and cut a heroic figure in his armor. If Kuu was Sun Wukong, then his

father was the Monkey King.

"It is only thanks to your virtues that this motley crew of soldiers from the Kingdom of Friedonia, Euphoria Kingdom, Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom, and even a small contingent from the Republic can work together," he said "They all remember how you united humanity to resist the Demon Lord's Domain. The Saint of the Empire is worthy of being a commander."

"N-No! You give me too much credit!" Maria exclaimed, waving her arms frantically to deny the compliment. "I may be the one carrying the flag, but you are the one giving the actual commands, Sir Gouran. Your extensive experience in land battles has been what has allowed us to advance this far."

As Maria pointed out, while her responsibility was to keep the troops united, it was Gouran's to provide the military commands and lead the efforts to capture cities and fortresses along the way.

When the current head of the Republic, Kuu, had learned about the detached force from Souma, he'd said, "Ookyakya! I can only loan you a few hundred of our soldiers, but my old man has plenty of time on his hands, so you can borrow him. That'll suit him better than holding down the fort and watching the kids, so really run him ragged for me."

In the extreme cold of the Republic of Turgis, they had never developed a navy or air force, which meant that all their conflicts were fought on land. As a result, they possessed unparalleled expertise in land battles, primarily using infantry. If the enemy deployed their air force, the Republic's forces would have to retreat, but they exhibited unmatched strength in the absence of a significant aerial presence.

Having ruled a nation like that for so long, Gouran had become an expert in land warfare. With him commanding the army from Maria's side, they had quickly scattered the garrisoned troops as they advanced towards Haan Great Tiger Castle.

Juna nodded in agreement with Maria. "She's right, you know. In our original plan, I was supposed to take command instead of Maria, but...the Marines' training primarily focuses on landing operations. In a land battle, I might be caught off guard. It's incredibly reassuring to have you with us, Sir Gouran."

"Yes, I agree," a voice from behind Gouran added. It belonged

to Shabon, the Nine-Headed Dragon Queen. Beside her stood her royal consort, Kishun. “We’re not accustomed to land warfare in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom either. It’s thanks to your command, Sir Gouran, that our soldiers have fought with the same fierce bravery they demonstrate at sea.”

“Ga ha ha! All these compliments from you lovely young ladies are making me a bit uncomfortable!” Gouran laughed it off, trying to mask his embarrassment. The smile he wore added charm to his otherwise rugged features.

Chuckling at this sight, Shabon remarked, “You remind me a little of my father.”

“Of Lord Shana? I can see it…” Kishun replied with a nod. “I’ve heard that you enjoy your liquor, Sir Gouran. I believe you would make good drinking buddies with our former head of state.”

“I would love to introduce the two of you once the war ends… Now then.” Shabon walked over to Maria and Juna. “I have seen Lady Juna in uniform before, but you also look lovely in uniform, Lady Maria.”

“Hee hee, thank you, Lady Shabon,” Juna said with a graceful smile.

“Thank you,” Maria replied, spreading her arms. “I’ve wanted to wear something like this ever since I saw how cool Liscia looked in her uniform. My sister, Jeanne, can pull off this look easily, and since our faces are similar, I imagined I wouldn’t look too odd in it. It’s a relief to hear your compliment.”

“Oh, not at all! You look so brave and lovely. I, on the other hand, am too short for such clothes. They make it seem like I’m just playing dress-up…”

Shabon was wearing her usual frilly bureaucrat outfit. It was true that whenever she donned military uniforms, she tended to look cute rather than cool.

“”Well…””

As Juna and Maria searched for the right response, Shabon continued, “I understand how you feel.” She smiled wryly while clenching her hand into a fist. “That is why I aspire to be a woman who can look dignified even in frilly clothes. Yes, like Lady Excel Walter of the Kingdom of Friedonia.”

“Um, I think you should choose a different role model…” Juna warned her hesitantly.

Kishun nodded emphatically. It seemed he didn’t want to see his cute wife transform into a polished woman like Excel.

Although the atmosphere had lightened a bit, Maria's expression turned serious as she looked at Juna.

"Do you think His Majesty will be all right? He was bleeding," Maria asked.

Silence fell over the group at her words. Despite their earlier joking, everyone felt concern for Souma's well-being.

Juna glanced at the simple receiver as she replied, "He was able to carry on a conversation with Fuuga Haan, so...I think he'll be fine. If it's just a gash, the mages should be able to heal him."

"Y-Yeah," Maria said, letting out a sigh of relief.

"However..." Juna continued, "If anything should happen to him, I will burn this country to the ground."

Gasps echoed around the room as everyone took in her serious tone. Normally, she would follow such a statement with a playful "tee hee, just kidding," prompting laughter from the group. But this time, she was dead serious. Suddenly, everyone was reminded that she was Excel's granddaughter.

Her love is powerful enough to destroy a nation... I can hardly express how incredible that is. Even Maria flinched at what she was witnessing. She loved Souma as her husband too and feared she would cry if anything happened to him. Yet, even in her sorrow, her sadness would pale in comparison to Juna's overwhelming emotions. Just how much greater must Juna's love have been if it could so easily transform into anger and hatred?

It wasn't just Juna who felt this way. The frightening reality was that Liscia and Aisha likely shared similar feelings. Would reason be enough to keep Roroa and Naden in check? Yuriga would probably shudder at everyone's reactions.

Maria glanced at the simple receiver. *Souma, please be all right. For the sake of peace*, she thought, genuinely worried.

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The scene unfolding on the massive body of water that had formed on the plains near Parnam had quickly dampened the spirits of those on the battlefield. The soldiers of the Great Tiger Empire had fought fiercely, but now they felt numb. With their capital surrounded and realizing they had suffered a counterinvasion, they began to wonder if they were fighting a "losing battle."

Having fought for the ever-victorious Great Tiger Empire, they

had never before grappled with the question of “What happens if we lose?” Fuuga’s forces might have found themselves on the back foot at times, but they had never truly faced defeat. They believed that, even in adversity, Fuuga would secure victory. That was why, despite considering the rewards and glory they might earn, they had never considered the possibility of losing.

Even when common sense suggested they couldn’t defeat an opponent, these soldiers had faced them with the confidence that they would ultimately prevail. But now, having come this far, they were confronting an opponent that made them doubt their ability to win. For the first time, the fear of defeat lingered at the back of their minds. Only the elite fighters of the old guard could continue to throw themselves into the fight without hesitation. The vast majority of the army, who had joined Fuuga after he united the Union of Eastern Nations, now hesitated.

At this point, it could be said that the battle had been decided. The Great Tiger Empire would struggle to maintain its fighting posture. If they continued to fight, they would eventually run out of steam; however, if they forced a retreat, they would suffer a punishing blow as the Kingdom’s forces chased them down.

Souma now held the power of life and death over the forces of the Great Tiger Empire, and Fuuga, who had just failed to take Souma’s head, understood that better than anyone.

“I’ve lost, huh?” he muttered.

With Halbert and Ludwin holding him down, Fuuga let go of his Zanganto, which fell to the ground with a clatter. The expressions on his captors’ faces shifted to surprise. Fuuga was offering so little resistance that they began to worry that if they pressed down with too much force, they might accidentally crush him.

“Sir Ludwin! Take his weapon!” Halbert shouted.

“Ah! Right.” Ludwin quickly picked up the Zanganto that Fuuga had dropped.

Fuuga found their caution amusing. “You’re as careful as your master…”

“There’s no such thing as being too cautious with a great man like you,” Souma replied.

Fuuga roared with laughter at Souma’s comment. “Don’t worry, Souma, you’ve won. I’m not going to throw a tantrum… I saw my dream through to the end. Now take my head and display it if that’s what you want.” There was a hint of loneliness

in Fuuga's voice.

Having risen to his feet with Liscia's help, Souma looked down at Fuuga. The scene clearly illustrated who was the winner and who was the loser.

Just as Souma opened his mouth to speak…

"Souma!"

…Yuriga rushed in from the back of the main camp.

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Yuriga rushed over and stood in front of Fuuga. "Brother…"

"Hey, Yuriga. Looks like I lost," Fuuga said casually, despite his circumstances.

"Looks like it… I mean, you're missing a wing now," Yuriga replied, her expression serious. A tense atmosphere settled between them.

Yuriga's expression was pained as she glanced from Souma, who was covered in blood and supported by Liscia, to Fuuga, who had lost a wing. Nevertheless, she managed to rein in her emotions.

"I had a feeling this would happen… That's why I told you not to fight Souma," she said.

"You've got it backwards," Fuuga replied. "Even if I knew this would happen, stopping wasn't an option."

"Even if this is how your dream ends?"

"If I fall after doing everything I could, I'll have no regrets. I'm satisfied."

"Honestly… You're so selfish." Yuriga looked directly at Fuuga. "Do you remember what I said to you that day?"

"Hmm? Which day?"

"The day you ordered me to marry Souma, brother," Yuriga glared at Fuuga. "I warned you then… 'I can't say for certain that you won't end up dragged before Sir Souma bound in ropes someday.' I told you that I would work for the Kingdom of Friedonia and make Souma love me. That way, when the time came, I could beg for your life."

Oh, right… I vaguely remember Yuriga saying something like that. Fuuga wasn't bound in ropes, but being pressed against the ground with one wing cut off was still pretty close to the scene Yuriga had envisioned. It had been a vague premonition, but if she had predicted the outcome that early on, then…Yuriga was

one hell of a girl.

Yuriga turned her back to Fuuga and faced me. Then she said, “I will now do what I promised that day…”

“Hey, cut it out,” Fuuga urged, trying to intervene, but Yuriga didn’t listen. She knelt down before me, clasped her hands together in front of her chest, and bowed her head.

“Your Majesty. I am not only your wife, but also a friend to your little sister, and the younger sister of Fuuga Haan. If you hold even a shred of love or pity for me, I implore you to spare my brother’s life. I would offer my body and my life to you in exchange for his safety, to be used as you wish. Please, I beg you, show mercy to my foolish brother.”

Yuriga was on her knees, pleading for Fuuga’s life. However, her words were far from weak. She spoke boldly, as if the weight of her plea was directed solely at him and not the others present. It was a performance of desperation, yet it carried an underlying intention to inflict emotional pain.

“You’re forcing your sister to beg for your life,” her actions said, confronting Fuuga with a symbol of his defeat. The pain etched on his face was even greater than when his wing had been torn off. There was something more humiliating in being compelled to accept defeat by someone else rather than admitting it himself.

“You’re merciless, Yuriga…” I whispered, and she turned her head away peevishly.

“We need to take this chance to shatter my brother’s heart into pieces, so he doesn’t pursue any more of his strange ambitions. I refuse to be jerked around by him any longer.”

“Hee hee. You know, I really do like you, Yuriga,” Liscia said, her smile a mix of approval and irony.

I supposed the rest was up to me. I gritted my teeth against the pain from my wound as I tapped Yuriga on the shoulder, urging her to stand so I could take her place in front of Fuuga.

“How does it feel to have your little sister begging for your life, Fuuga?”

“It sucks. Makes me sick at myself.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“I’d rather you just lopped my head off here.”

“Yeah, well, that would actually cause more trouble for us.” I must’ve looked like I’d just bitten into something unpleasant. “There’s a part of me that struggles to forgive you for starting

this war. So much blood has been shed, and my teacher, as well as a relative of one of my wives, are dead."

"Oh, yeah?"

"But if I kill you here, that makes us the victors."

In a manga I once read in my old world, there had been a line about how the one standing taller than his opponent when the fight ended was the true winner...or something like that. By that logic, since I was still on my feet—albeit with Liscia's help—I was the victor. But...I couldn't accept victory.

"The victor must also bear the burdens carried by the defeated. If he ignores them and crushes the fallen, it ignites a cycle of resistance and retribution. If I kill you, I may emerge the winner, but I would also have to shoulder the immense weight of the Great Tiger Empire. I want no part of that."

The Great Tiger Empire was three times the size of my country, held together solely by Fuuga's charisma. It would fall apart as soon as he was gone. The seeds of discord had already been sown by his aggressive expansion policy. If we were the ones to strike him down, there would surely be factions calling for revenge against the Kingdom of Friedonia.

With bloodthirsty individuals like them around, the Great Tiger Empire would descend into civil war, plunging us back into the troubled times reminiscent of when the Demon Lord's Domain was expanding. Such strife would breed even more conflict, creating new waves of refugees that would overwhelm the southern nations. The only way to prevent this was to spare Fuuga and allow him to maintain control. Even if he eventually lost power, as long as we were not the ones to strike him down, the impact of any ensuing succession war on the south would be minimized. I explained all of this to Fuuga.

"From this point on, people's attention will shift north. With the allure of conquering the continent gone, it will be impossible for you to incite them to invade the south again. Although...thanks to Yuriga's 'poison,' I suspect you'll want to head north yourself."

"Tch..." Fuuga clicked his tongue in distaste. Yet, his lack of denial was a clear admission that I was right.

I told him sternly, "You can no longer compete with the Maritime Alliance for supremacy. Therefore, instead of killing you, it's better to let you live and help facilitate as smooth a transition as possible for the Great Tiger Empire. You must take

responsibility for everything you did on your path to power.”

“How do you plan on ending this battle?” he asked.

“With reconciliation. In practical terms, it will be a loss for the Great Tiger Empire. Your forces will completely withdraw from my country and the other nations of the Maritime Alliance, but the land taken by our detached force will remain under our control. This will leave the impression that you couldn’t defeat the Maritime Alliance.”

“You’ve taken my homeland, huh? Yeah, that’s going to make it look like we lost.”

“Since we won’t be the victors, we can’t demand reparations. Consider it your payment for all the trouble you caused.”

I would have to cede some coastal cities to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom for their assistance, but I probably couldn’t calm the people of the Kingdom without something to show for this. We could present ourselves as having merely repelled the invaders, which would make it easier to placate our population than it would be for the Great Tiger Empire, who had lost much and gained nothing.

Fuuga let out a listless laugh. “I’ve always lived an all-or-nothing lifestyle, but being left with nothing but a vast country that’s lost its ambition… That’s even harsher than losing everything. You want me to remain emperor of a nation that no longer holds any appeal for me, right?”

“That’s your responsibility.”

“Even if I survive here, all that awaits me is a boring life in a country with no passion… I can’t take that!”

“Whoa?!”

Fuuga threw Ludwin off of him.

He still had that much strength left?! My mind froze for a moment in sheer surprise. Liscia drew her rapier, and Halbert readied his spear. But Fuuga calmly picked up Ludwin’s fallen sword and pressed the blade to his own neck.

“If I end my life right here, do you think I could push all of that onto you guys?”

“Stop it, brother!” Yuriga cried out desperately, fearing he might actually do it.

In reality, Fuuga wasn’t desperate. He showed no signs of agitation. If anything, his expression was calm.

“My dream ended when I was defeated by a formidable opponent after a hard-fought battle… That’s the kind of ending I

want for it. It's a cleaner end to the story of a great man than if I went on living, right? Although, I feel a little bad making you all pick up after me."

"Brother! You can't!"

"Screw you! Don't try to take the easy way out after everything you did!"

Yuriga and I shouted, but his resolve remained unshaken.

"Sorry, Yuriga, Souma."

Just as Fuuga was about to draw the blade across his own throat, Liscia shouted, "Madam Mutsumi is pregnant!"

Everyone froze for a moment at the unexpected news, but Liscia continued speaking.

"The baby is yours, of course! I was just fighting her a little while ago, but Madam Mutsumi had morning sickness and couldn't carry on! Nobody else knew, so she might not have told you yet, right?!"

Madam Mutsumi is pregnant with Fuuga's child? And she kept it a secret from him? I can't believe she fought Liscia in that condition... I was overwhelmed by this surge of new information. *Wait, so what now? If anything happens to Madam Mutsumi, we would quickly find ourselves unable to resolve this war!* My mind was racing, and I felt as if I were struggling to keep afloat.

"Sorry, Souma," Liscia said apologetically. "I know it wasn't what I should have done as a commander, but I chose to let Madam Mutsumi go. I think she's back in the Great Tiger Empire's main camp by now."

"Uh, well... I don't think that was the wrong call," I replied hesitantly.

If Liscia had captured Madam Mutsumi and she had taken her own life—or worse, if Liscia had killed her—that would have sparked a wave of resentment and turned this war into a quagmire. Thank goodness it was Liscia who had encountered her.

A stunned expression crossed Liscia's face as she shouted, "Are you going to give up on everything without even seeing your child's face?! You call yourself a 'father' doing that?!"

Those words carried an indescribable weight coming from a mother of two—powerful enough to overshadow all of Fuuga's charisma.

"..."

Clatter. Fuuga dropped the sword he'd been holding and cast

his eyes up to the heavens.

“Me…a father? Was I…a person, all along…?”

The words slipped from his lips, and I felt I could understand his turmoil. Just as I had once allowed my identity as king to define me, Fuuga had been playing the part of a great man all this time. Unlike me, he was not the type to hesitate or question his role, which had allowed him to charge forward blindly as a great man.

Now, after coming this far, he had suddenly learned he was a father. He was forced to confront his true self—the man Fuuga Haan, not just the role he played. The Fuuga Haan who had a wife and a child. The responsibilities he had cast aside in his pursuit of greatness were no longer easy to ignore once he became a father. This was why Madam Mutsumi had kept her pregnancy a secret from him.

A single tear rolled down his cheek as he gazed up to the heavens.

“I’m defeated.”

“Fuuga…”

“Brother…”

As Yuriga and I hesitantly called out to him, he turned to us with a peaceful expression and slowly spoke, “Right now, my era just ended.”

Chapter 6: Conclusion

With Fuuga's fangs finally broken, things began to settle down.

"Your Majesty?! Are you hurt?!"

"Grrr, grarrrrr!"

"Hey, stop struggling!"

"Naden, hold it down properly!"

There was quite a commotion, and I turned to see Durga the flying tiger, with Naden the black ryuu coiled around it. They were being rolled into camp by Ruby the red dragon. It looked as if she were rolling a chocolate cornet—except with tiger filling!

The Black Chocolate Cornet Rolling Festival... Maybe it's a weird local event somewhere?

Aisha was riding on Ruby's shoulders when I suddenly blurted out, "Wait, what's happening here?"

Quickly jumping down from Ruby, Aisha rushed over to me. "I'm sorry, sire. It took us a while to restrain Durga... But more importantly, you're covered in blood! A-Are you going to be all right?"

Aisha was visibly shaken by the sight of my wound, shaking me so hard I thought she might finish me off.

"Settle down, Aisha!" Liscia shouted, unable to watch any longer. "He's lost a lot of blood, but the wound isn't fatal."

"Hwagh?! I-I'm sorry, Lady Liscia," Aisha replied, regaining her composure.

Next, she glared at Fuuga, who was just standing there, and threatened him with her greatsword. I could practically see the aura of rage radiating from her. She began to walk towards him with slow, deliberate steps.

"Damn you, Fuuga! How dare you leave a mark on His Majesty's body!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I called out to her.

"P-Please, wait, Lady Aisha!" Yuriga shouted. "Forgive my brother! It's already been settled!"

Yuriga and I rushed to stop Aisha, who looked ready to swing

at Fuuga. I momentarily forgot my own injury as I clung to her, while Yuriga genuinely pleaded for Fuuga's life, without the theatrics she had displayed earlier.

Liscia let out a resigned sigh and said, "Stay still, Aisha."

Thwack! Liscia delivered a light chop to the back of Aisha's head, leaving her in shock and on the verge of tears.

"Ow...! Lady Liscia?"

Whew... If Aisha had struck down Fuuga right there, it would have undone all our efforts and sacrifices in an instant. Warriors can be frightening when they're angry. I needed to resolve this quickly. I called out to Fuuga, who was still standing in a daze. "Fuuga, can you get Durga to calm down?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure." Once he snapped back to his senses, Fuuga approached Durga, who was still coiled up with Naden. He sat down next to them and placed a hand on Durga's snout. "Durga, our war is over. You don't need to run wild anymore."

"Grrrrr..." Durga was clearly enraged, but as Fuuga spoke, the flying tiger gradually relaxed and became calm.

Watching Durga settle down as its master patted it, I was reminded that it was just a really big cat. *Wait, is it a cat? Well, whatever.*

Once Durga was pacified, Naden released the tiger but remained in her black ryuu form, saying, "Ruby and I will keep an eye on it, just in case."

"Please do," I replied.

With the situation under control, I turned to the clearly relieved Yuriga.

"Yuriga."

"Ah! Yes, what is it?" she responded.

"The fighting is still going on in the battlefield. I'm going to leave wrapping things up to you."

"T-To me?" she echoed, her eyes wide in surprise.

I nodded firmly. "Yes. You have a lot of pull with people on both sides, so you can reach the greatest number of them. Use the broadcast to tell them in your own words that the war is ending and that we're starting reconciliation."

Yuriga looked around. Family members like me and Liscia, retainers like Hal and Ludwin, and even the enemy commander, her brother Fuuga, were all nodding in agreement. Seeing our reactions, Yuriga made up her mind and faced forward.

"Got it... Duchess Walter, if you don't mind."

“Understood.”

Excel raised her fan to the heavens, summoning a massive sphere of water that was visible from anywhere on the battlefield. Inside the sphere, an image of Yuriga appeared. As the noise subsided, soldiers on both sides turned their attention to her message.

In the ensuing silence, Yuriga spoke.

“I have something to say to the forces of both the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Great Tiger Empire of Haan,” she began, facing directly ahead.

“I stand here as Souma E. Friedonia’s fourth primary queen and the younger sister of Great Tiger Emperor Fuuga Haan to announce that His Majesty and my brother have reached an agreement to end hostilities.”

Yuriga paused, sharing the news of the truce aimed at halting the fighting.

“My brother Fuuga made a valiant attempt to reach Souma, but my husband’s loyal retainers put up a brave fight and thwarted his advance. Neither of them is in critical condition, but my brother’s charge ultimately ended in failure.”

The globe of water showed me covered in blood, leaning on Liscia for support, while Fuuga sat on the ground with one of his wings missing. *It looks more like a painful tie than a victory...* I thought.

Yuriga was carefully choosing her words, trying not to upset the pride of soldiers on either side. She conveyed to the Kingdom’s soldiers that Fuuga’s assault had been brilliantly halted. At the same time, she did not belittle Fuuga in front of the Imperial soldiers, emphasizing that although he had fought well, he had ultimately fallen short. This sensitivity to the nuances of people’s feelings was a result of her training under her teacher, Hakuya.

Right now, the soldiers of the Great Tiger Empire must have been scowling in disappointment. Nevertheless, Yuriga continued to speak calmly.

“The war ends here. My brother Fuuga is wounded, and continued hostilities are no longer feasible. Prolonging the battle will not give the Great Tiger Empire a chance for victory and will only lead to further losses. For His Majesty Souma, this has been a defensive war, and he sees no purpose in continuing until the Great Tiger Empire’s forces are completely eliminated. Therefore,

both sides must stop fighting, and reconciliation will begin once the Great Tiger Empire has fully withdrawn its forces."

Yuriga closed her eyes and clasped her hands together in front of her as if in prayer.

"There is nothing left to gain from fighting. I ask everyone, on both sides, to cease hostilities until your superiors instruct otherwise. I was born and raised in Malmkhitan, the predecessor of the Great Tiger Empire, and later married into the Kingdom of Friedonia. I pray that no more blood will be shed in this futile battle."

Perhaps due to Yuriga's words, the noise from the distant battlefield faded away. I could sense the fervor driving this conflict quickly diminishing. Then the bell signaling a retreat rang out from the Great Tiger Empire's main camp. Hashim must have concluded that continuing the war was impossible.

Upon hearing that sound, the Kingdom also rang its bell for their soldiers to pull back. No matter how people attempted to glorify war, it ultimately led to slaughter. The excitement of battle might temporarily dispel the fear of death and the aversion to violence, but once calm returned, those suppressed feelings resurfaced, making it impossible to continue fighting.

Yuriga was right—the war was over.

Now that both sides had signaled withdrawal, the soldiers would soon start to return to camp. It wouldn't be good if Fuuga, who no longer wished to fight, was still hanging around.

"It's already over. Take Durga and go home, Fuuga," I told him.

"Yeah, I'll do that..." he replied, resting one hand on his knee as he stood up.

Unlike I, who could barely stand from all the pain I was in, Fuuga was still able to move around normally, albeit partially out of stubbornness. He hadn't become the great man of the era for nothing.

Fuuga had Durga stand up but hesitated to get on the tiger's back.

"Hmm? What's the matter?" I asked.

"Well...now that I think about it, I've never returned home defeated before. When I consider how I'm going to face Mutsumi and everyone else...it suddenly makes me feel down." He looked uncharacteristically troubled.

As the great man who had always won and never lost, he was completely lacking in experience when it came to handling this

situation. We were all so exasperated that we didn't even know what to say.

"Not my problem. Now beat it," I told him.

"I agree with Souma, Brother," Yuriga chimed in.

Fuuga smiled wryly. "You're both so blunt... Well, I guess I'll think it over when I get back."

With that, Fuuga jumped onto Durga's back.

"Ah!" I exclaimed, suddenly realizing something. "Hey! Take your severed wing with you," I called after him, noticing he had left it on the ground. "You can have them stick it back on with light magic, right?"

Fuuga roared with laughter. "Keep it as a trophy for having defeated me! I bet a great man's wing is worth something!"

"We don't want it!" I protested. "Forcing it on us is just a headache!"

"See you later, Souma! Yuriga!"

"I'm telling you to take the damn thing with you!"

Fuuga ignored me, and Durga dashed off. I guessed he had never learned on a field trip to "leave the place more beautiful than he found it." Of course he hadn't. That guy was always leaving a mess behind him.

Looking at the wing he had left behind, I turned to the equally exasperated Yuriga.

"Hey, what do you think I should do with it?" I asked.

"Why not make feather pens? You use them a lot in your job, right?"

"Ew. I don't want a pen made from the body parts of someone I know."

"Yeah, of course not."

Yuriga and I exchanged a sigh. He was causing trouble for us even as he left... That was Fuuga Haan for you.

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The first person to greet Fuuga upon his return to camp was his advisor, Hashim—seemingly not reacting to his master's missing wing as he put his hands together in front of him and bowed his head.

"I am pleased to see you have returned safely," he said.

"Yeah, sorry. My blade didn't reach Souma," Fuuga admitted.

He spoke of his failure with surprising ease. However, Hashim

showed no signs of disappointment or frustration, maintaining a calm tone. “That you were even able to strike a blow against Souma in such a tense situation is a testament to your valor, Lord Fuuga. The crafty Kingdom of Friedonia might have repelled our assault, but no one would doubt your bravery.”

“What? Are you trying to console me?” Fuuga asked, giving Hashim a suspicious look.

“Hardly,” Hashim replied with his usual intelligent smile. “I’m simply expressing my gratitude. To command in a battle that divides the world into two camps is a remarkable experience. For a man from the House of Chima, who has spent his time plotting to carve land from smaller nations, this was nothing short of a dream come true. We might not have won, but I have undoubtedly put the Chima name in the history books. I’m sure my departed father would be pleased with me.”

Hashim had already accepted the outcome. He likely started considering his options for defeat when the battle unfolded on these plains, when they found themselves with a single piercing strike as their only chance. The intelligent Hashim had already been formulating ideas for the next steps.

He placed his hands together in front of him and bowed once again. “Before we continue our conversation, please go see Lady Mutsumi. My younger sister is…”

“Yeah, I heard from Queen Liscia already. She’s pregnant with my kid, right?”

“Indeed. It frustrates her that this situation has hindered her on the battlefield.”

“Gotcha. I’ll head over right away.”

With that, Fuuga left Hashim to console the troops and made his way to Mutsumi’s side.

Entering the ger at the back of the main camp, Fuuga found Mutsumi sitting in a chair, looking down dejectedly. He was about to call out to her but hesitated for a moment. As a defeated commander, he felt unsure how to face Mutsumi, just as he had told Souma.

However, seeing her in such a state of despair, unaware of his presence, Fuuga couldn’t bear to leave her like that. He attempted to maintain his usual carefree attitude as he called out to her.

“I’m back, Mutsumi. Just got here.”

“Ah!” Mutsumi’s head snapped around to look at him. Her eyes were a little red, possibly from crying, and she covered her face the moment she saw it was him.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” she exclaimed, suddenly starting to apologize repeatedly, which made Fuuga panic.

“H-Hey, what are you apologizing for?” he asked.

Mutsumi hung her head, still covering her face. “I was watching you on the broadcast. You fought until your wing was cut off, and yet not only did I fail to help you, but I also allowed Lady Liscia, the enemy commander, to pity me. I’m so mortified that my body wouldn’t do what I wanted it to when I needed it the most. I can’t bear to face you after that.”

“Uh, no, it’s my fault we lost,” Fuuga replied. “I’m the one who can’t face you.”

Fuuga knelt in front of Mutsumi. As he was larger than her, his eyes were nearly level with hers as she sat. He wrapped her in a gentle hug, even as she continued to cover her face.

“I heard over there that you’re having my baby.”

“Yes…” she replied softly.

“If I’d known before the battle, I would have never let you fight.”

“I would have hated that…so I kept it a secret.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll bet I would have done the same thing in your position.”

“I can’t imagine you as a queen…”

“Ha ha ha! The image of you as a king fits surprisingly well though.”

Their conversation shifted to casual banter, and as they continued to talk, Mutsumi gradually relaxed in Fuuga’s arms. He rubbed her back as gently as he could.

“Sorry, Mutsumi. I lost. My blade didn’t reach Souma.”

“Darling, you managed to strike a blow against him. We should be the ones ashamed of ourselves.”

“That’s not true. The wall of talent that Souma has built around him was thicker and harder than I’d imagined. A ruler’s effectiveness boils down to his own abilities. I guess I had already lost to Souma when he created a ‘nation’ that couldn’t be challenged by the martial prowess of any single individual. That was my limitation.”

“Does this mean…you’ve come to the end of your dream?”

Fuuga nodded. “Yeah. The great journey of Fuuga Haan ends

here. When Souma beat me, and then I learned I had a kid, I really felt it."

"Then...!"

Mutsumi looked horrified. But Fuuga gave her a gentle smile.

"Don't get me wrong. I was shocked when I found out I was having a kid, but I was also happy about it. That happiness made me feel like I was no longer the great man sought by this era; I had returned to just being a man."

"Just...a man?"

"Yeah. Just an ordinary guy, making love to his wife, having babies, and living in peace. It was fun to chase a dream, but looking back...it was a lot of stress and pressure." He spoke to Mutsumi like a husband sharing his feelings after a long day at work.

While he had been caught up in the excitement of striving to be great, the stress and pressure had never really affected him. But now, without that burden, he could reflect on it with a clearer perspective. The fact that he could feel this way now was proof that Fuuga had returned to being an ordinary person.

Fuuga scooped Mutsumi up in his arms and carried her to the bed in the back of the tent. He gently set her down and stroked her head.

"You're tired today. Take it easy for a bit. The Kingdom doesn't want a total victory, so they won't come after us. Let's begin our withdrawal slowly, starting tomorrow morning."

"You're...not going to sleep yourself?" Mutsumi asked, looking up at Fuuga.

He gave her a wry smile. "Oh, I'll sleep... Just not until I get my back treated. To tell you the truth, it's been aching this whole time."

"You were putting on a brave face? By the way, what happened to your severed wing?" she inquired.

"I gave it to Souma as a prize for beating me."

"What were you even thinking...? That's just a nuisance for them."

Mutsumi looked exasperated, but Fuuga burst out laughing.

"It was a good way to get back at him, huh? Anyway, I'm headed out for a while."

"Yes. Please come back soon, okay?"

"Sure."

After leaving, he went to receive treatment with light magic

and washed the blood off before returning to Mutsumi's tent.

That night—unlike the victorious Souma, who endured the pain of his wounds while commanding his people—the defeated Fuuga finally slept soundly in Mutsumi's arms for the first time in ages.

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The next day, the forces of the Great Tiger Empire began their quiet retreat from the Kingdom of Friedonia. The Kingdom's troops watched closely to ensure that the retreating soldiers did not attempt any deceptive moves on their way out of the country.

According to the agreement between their leaders, the Great Tiger Empire returned all the cities they had occupied to the Kingdom. While half of the territory gained during the counterinvasion would remain under the Kingdom's control, the Kingdom agreed to withdraw from Haan Great Tiger Castle and the surrounding areas.

As long as the agreement was upheld, the forces of the Great Tiger Empire were guaranteed safe passage back to their homeland. The exchange of prisoners was scheduled to occur after the withdrawal was complete. Many lords from the Kingdom had temporarily surrendered, allowing themselves to be taken prisoner in order to lure the Great Tiger Empire's forces deeper into their territory.

The Maritime Alliance had captured several high-profile individuals, including King Lombard of the former Kingdom of Remus and his wife, Yomi. As a result, the exchange of prisoners was set to occur without any ransoms being paid. Along with the withdrawal of the main forces, Shuukin's troops, who were facing the Euphoria Kingdom, and Moumei's forces, confronting the Republic, also withdrew. Additionally, the detached force under Juna and Maria that had surrounded Haan Great Tiger Castle pulled out as well.

The public would view this war as a failure on Fuuga's part. He had seized half of the world but was unable to conquer the Kingdom of Friedonia.

To use an analogy from my old world's history, this situation was reminiscent of the Battle of Red Cliffs. Even when a great nation lost some territory in a failed war, it remained intact.

Fuuga's followers might consider this a single defeat and believe they would one day return for revenge. But they'd be mistaken.

This war had caused Fuuga Haan to lose his passion for fighting, and it was unlikely that he and I would ever engage in battle again. Just as the Battle of Red Cliffs had had a surprisingly negative impact on the state of Wei in Chinese history, this defeat marked checkmate for the Great Tiger Empire. We had framed our victory in such a way that Fuuga's supporters were prevented from realizing the true implications.

Many living now might view this war as ending in a tie or as a Pyrrhic victory for the Maritime Alliance. However, in the future, it would be recognized that this war effectively thwarted Fuuga's ambitions and was a complete victory for the Maritime Alliance.

—Some Days After the Great Tiger Empire Completed Their Withdrawal, Courtyard of Parnam Castle

"People in the future are probably going to hate me..." I murmured to myself as I gazed up into the blue sky.

"What's this, all of a sudden?" Liscia asked with a dubious look.

"I was just thinking about how history is told not just through textbooks, but also through the stories that emerge from it. If this is framed as the story of a great man, then Fuuga will undoubtedly be the protagonist. I'll likely be seen as the one who hindered his quest to achieve something great."

I imagined I would be portrayed similarly to Tokugawa Ieyasu. He was referred to as Duke Ieyasu out of respect in Aichi and Shizuoka, but fans of Ishida Mitsunari and Sanada Yoshimura despised him. People often side with the victors, but the honorable Mitsunari and Yoshimura, who bravely fought against overwhelming odds, had the more dramatic narratives. In stories featuring them, Ieyasu is usually depicted as a scheming old tanuki. I would probably receive the same treatment.

When I explained my thoughts, Liscia chuckled.

"True. And on top of that, there were all those rumors about you being a sex fiend, so you're sure to be portrayed as evil."

"Even though almost all of my marriages were political! Uh, I still love all of you though."

"But those who truly know will understand," Liscia said, holding my hand gently. "What you wanted and what you defended... I'm sure that even in the future, there will be people who grasp that. Besides, we know the truth. The people living

today do too. That should be enough."

Liscia gave me a soft smile, and she was right.

"It's more than enough for me."

"Yeah. So right now, let's welcome them back with a smile." Liscia let go of my hand and gave me a friendly slap on the back.

Suddenly, Aisha pointed up into the sky.

"Ah, they're here, sire!" she shouted.

High above, I spotted a wyvern gondola as it made its descent towards the courtyard. Liscia, Aisha, Yuriga, and I patiently waited for it to land. When the door of the gondola opened, I heard a cheerful voice call out.

"Darlin', I'm home!"

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as Roroa leapt out and wrapped her arms tightly around my neck. It felt like she needed to confirm my presence, rubbing her cheek against mine over and over.

"You're still alive, right?! Not a ghost or nothin'?! You're not cold and dead, are ya?!"

"C-Calm down, Roroa. I'm alive, as you can see for yourself," I reassured her.

"Ya dummy! I saw you were hurt! We were beside ourselves with worry while watchin' the broadcast!"

I tried to get her to settle down, but that only made her angrier. Apparently, she had seen me covered in blood, standing with Liscia's support after being slashed by Fuuga.

I glanced at Liscia for help but her eyes seemed to say, *"This is your fault. You deal with it."*

It's my own fault, huh? I thought, placing my hand on Roroa's head and gently patting it. "Sorry. I know I worried you."

"Darn right ya did... But, well, you're alive, and we were able to meet again, so it's all good. I'll let ya off the hook."

"Ha ha ha. Thanks," I replied, continuing to hug Roroa while patting her head. As we did, the other passengers in the gondola began to disembark.

""Yuriga!""

Tomoe and Ichiha spotted Yuriga and rushed over to her. Tomoe even hugged her tightly, tears streaming down her face.

"Ohhh... Yuriga! I'm so glad you were safe!"

"Hey, stop crying on me! You'll get my clothes dirty!"

"But...I was worried about you...all this time... Wahhhhh!"

"Ichiha! Do something about your fiancée, would you?!"

Ichiha just smiled serenely. "You really did your best, Yuriga."

“Hmph…!” Yuriga turned her head to the side in embarrassment.

The other passengers were Carla and Serina, who were taking care of the children. They had gone to pick up Roroa and the kids as soon as their mission was complete. Liscia and the others were welcoming them. Our family had returned to Parnam.

Juna and Maria will return soon from the north, and once they do, the entire family will be gathered in this castle again. As I thought about that, I was reminded once more that the war was finally over.

Chapter 6.5: They Say Souma’s Got a Fever

Hello, I’m Souma E. Friedonia. This may sound sudden, but I have a fever.

Just a few days ago, Fuuga’s Great Tiger Empire withdrew from my country, and there are still soldiers from both nations stationed at the border, watching to ensure that the truce holds.

In any case, Roroa, Tomoe, and the kids who had been evacuated from the capital—along with Juna and Maria, who led the detached force up north—have all returned to the castle now. With the family back together, the war feels over. We have begun the movement to restore the lands that were devastated. Yet, even as we take that first step into a new era, I am feeling unwell.

At first, I just felt a little woozy, but…

“Huh? I feel kinda…”

“Hmm? Souma…?”

I was in the governmental affairs office, battling a mountain of paperwork with Liscia by my side when suddenly, my whole world seemed to shake. I unintentionally let go of my pen, and my thoughts became incoherent, as if a fog had descended upon my mind.

“Hey, are you okay?” Liscia sensed something was off and leaned over to examine my face. “Your eyes seem out of focus, and… Wait, you have a fever!”

Liscia jumped back in surprise as she touched my forehead.

“Souma! Did you know you’re running an incredibly high fever?!”

“Huh? I am? I thought I was just spacing out a bit.”

“We don’t have time for this. Aisha! Are you there?”

“Yes, ma’am! What can I do for you?”

When Liscia called out towards the door, Aisha, who had been standing guard outside, quickly came in.

“It looks like Souma has a fever. I’ll go fetch the doctor, so you carry him to bed! Not just this room’s simple bed—a proper one!”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m on it! Pardon me, Your Majesty!”

Aisha scooped me up in her arms, and there was nothing I could do to resist. She was holding me in what they call a “bridal carry.” *Damn, this pose is super embarrassing.* I wouldn’t mind carrying someone like this, but *being* carried this way was something I felt quite reserved about. Not that I could complain with my head refusing to cooperate.

I may be sicker than I realized… I thought before uttering, “But…I’ve got paperwork that needs doing…”

Nonetheless, my nature as a wage worker—*Huh? I’m the king, aren’t I?*—reared its ugly head as my two wives fixed me with stern looks.

“What if you aggravate your condition?! Just rest already!” Liscia demanded.

“That’s right! If you won’t hear reason, I’ll knock you out if that’s what it takes to put you to bed!” Aisha warned.

“Oh… Okay.”

I’ve got some scary wives… Just how is Aisha planning to knock me out? A chop to the nape of the neck? A choke hold? I couldn’t focus at all. My head was such a mess that silly thoughts kept whirling around inside it.

And so, Aisha forcefully escorted me to bed (bridal-carry style).

“Hmm… It’s not a cold,” Hilde muttered.

A few hours later, the beautiful three-eyed Doctor Hilde was examining me. I was sitting up in bed with my shirt open as the doctor pressed a stethoscope to my chest. She had already taken my temperature, looked down my throat, and measured my pulse. This was all ordinary medical procedure, but…

“Um… This situation is making it a bit embarrassing…”



All seven of my wives were watching with rapt attention as Hilde examined me. Their concerned expressions made me even more self-conscious.

"W-Well, we're worried," said Liscia.

"Urgh, if anything were to happen to you, sire..." moaned Aisha, trailing off.

"It would be a national crisis," Juna added. "And a personal crisis for me too, of course."

"W-Well, it just shows how much we all love ya, Darlin'," said Roroa.

"Humans are frail; of course I'd be worried," Naden chimed in.

"And you were badly injured not that long ago..." Maria piped up.

"I-I'm just here because everyone else said they were going to check in on you," Yuriga insisted, sounding a bit tsundere.

I appreciated their concern, but I couldn't help feeling like they were blowing things out of proportion.

After completing her examination, Hilde removed the stethoscope from her ears.

"You have a fever as a symptom. There's no swelling in your throat, and you still have an appetite. Regarding your lifestyle, while you may not be able to avoid it, you haven't been getting enough sleep. This is probably due to stress and overworking yourself."

Stress and overworking myself... I thought. We'd been at war not long ago, so it was understandable. Between preparing for conflict and coping with the loss of old man Owen, I had been through a lot. Just thinking about all that had happened was starting to overwhelm me...

"Oh, and I imagine *this* played a big role too," Hilde said, pointing at the massive gash that ran from my shoulder across my chest. It was the injury Fuuga had inflicted on me the other day.

I had disinfected the wound and treated it with light magic after making peace with the forces of the Great Tiger Kingdom and after Fuuga had pulled his troops out, but it had left a nasty scar. Every time I saw it, I shuddered, reminded of how lucky I was to still be alive.

Hilde traced the scar with her fingers. "Thanks to the quick disinfection and treatment, the wound has healed properly. However, you still lost a lot of blood. I believe various bacteria

have entered your body, and your immune system is responding by giving you a fever."

So I should be grateful for the fever, huh? It was an immune response after all. If she said it was for my own good, I just had to accept it.

"Oh, also, since light magic enhances the body's natural recovery processes, it uses the patient's stamina to heal them," she added. "I'd say that loss of stamina contributed to this fever."

"Is that how it works?"

"Well, make sure you eat well and get plenty of rest and sleep. Just do that, and you'll start feeling better on your own. I'll prescribe some fever medicine just in case."

Hilde handed the medicine to Liscia and began packing up her equipment. I still felt a bit out of sorts because of my fever as I laid back down.

"Thank you... And I'm sorry to have made you come in when you're so busy..." I said.

"Tell me about it. There are patients everywhere..."

Because the war had just ended, there were wounded soldiers in every region. As we spoke, her husband Brad was making rounds at different hospitals. I needed to see a trustworthy doctor, but I felt like I was imposing on her.

Hilde looked at me and let out a sigh. "It's true that many patients need my help far more than you do."

"Sorry..." I replied.

"But if you go down, the country will be paralyzed. If that happens, it could impact funding, and we'd lose lives we could have saved. We need you to stay healthy and recover quickly if that's possible."

I realized this was her way of encouraging me.

"Thanks," I said, but Hilde snorted to hide her embarrassment.

"Well, anyway, get well soon," she said before taking her leave. It was clear she didn't like admitting how she really felt.

"Doctor Hilde is right, you know. You need to rest for now," Liscia insisted.

"She's absolutely right. We'll take care of your work for ya in the meantime," added Roroa.

"I'm a former empress myself, after all," Maria noted. "I believe I should be able to help."

My wives are way too reliable... Man, that sounds like a good light

novel title. Just as I was thinking that…

"Um…" a hesitant voice broke the silence.

We all turned to see the acting prime minister, Ichiha, and my adopted little sister, Tomoe. They must have entered as Hilde was leaving.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm sorry to say this, but…there's something we'd like you to do immediately, Your Majesty," Ichiha said.

"What is that?" I inquired.

"I know you aren't in good shape right now, but… Well…"

"Big Brother, we'd like you to show your face to the people as soon as possible," Tomoe interjected, as Ichiha was struggling to find the right words.

"Show his face… You're saying he can't rest yet?" Yuriga questioned. Tomoe shook her head.

"I'd like to let Big Brother rest too, but the people saw him being attacked by Mr. Fuuga on the broadcast, right? He hasn't appeared on the broadcast since then, and the people have been worrying."

"Yeah. They're concerned that your injury might have worsened and that you could be in critical condition. It seems speculation is only feeding more rumors. Honestly, I wish we could wait until you recover, but there's fear that the rumors could spiral out of control before then…" Ichiha said apologetically.

Oh… Now that he mentions it, I haven't been on the broadcast since I announced the reconciliation. I'd planned to observe the Great Tiger Empire for a while longer and announce the end of the war once I was confident they wouldn't attack again. However, I came down with a fever first, and I still hadn't shown the people that I was all right.

During the Chu-Han Contention, when Liu Bang of the Han faced Xiang Yu of the Chu, he was hit by an arrow fired by an ambusher. The injury wasn't fatal, but as he lay in his sickbed, rumors of his demise spread through the Han army. His strategist, Zhang Liang, took him around in a carriage to show everyone he was still alive.

Yeah… This whole situation really was similar to that, I thought, and then I asked, "Do you want me to hold a parade or something in Parnam?"

"Oh, no, nothing so grand," Ichiha said, quickly shaking his

head. “You can just appear on the broadcast.”

Come to think of it, they didn’t have mass media during the Chu-Han Contention. I can dispel rumors of my demise just by appearing on the broadcast. Thank goodness for the march of civilization… But I realize I’m really not thinking straight, huh?

“If you don’t mind doing it that way, I’m happy to go along with it,” I said.

“That’s not going to work,” Liscia replied, looking appalled for some reason. “You don’t have to get out of bed, but you need to look a little healthier. Otherwise, you’ll just worry people more than they already are. Juna, could you take care of it?”

“His makeup, you mean? Just leave it to me,” Juna said with a smile.

So, Juna applied my makeup, and when she was finished, I looked in the mirror.

“Whoa…”

I looked completely normal. My previously worn-out face now stared back at me. With the help of makeup, I appeared to be my usual, healthy self.

Oh right, there is makeup that can make someone look like this too. If I remember correctly, it’s called…

“Oh, corpse makeup…” I began to say, but then—*smack!* “Ow, that hurts.”

“Don’t jinx yourself like that,” Naden said, crossing her arms as she administered a tail slap.

“Could you go a little easier on me? I’m sick here,” I said.

“Hmph! You had it coming,” Yuriga exclaimed with exasperation. She certainly had a sharp tongue.

“Your Majesty, I’ve brought it,” Aisha announced.

As we spoke, Aisha entered with the broadcast jewel, placing it carefully at the foot of the bed. We were now ready to begin the broadcast.

“Okay… If you would, sire.” Ichiha gave the signal, and I started speaking.

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Around the same time, crowds had gathered around the fountain plazas in cities throughout the Kingdom of Friedonia. They had been summoned there in anticipation of a broadcast

from the castle. However, unlike usual, the people's faces were marked with concern.

"What do you think they'll announce?" one person asked.

"You don't think his condition has taken a turn for the worse, do you?" another replied.

"Don't say ominous things like that!" a third person interjected.

The grim expressions on their faces were understandable. Many had witnessed Souma being slashed by Fuuga during the broadcast and seen him fall to one knee, drenched in his own blood. Although he had announced reconciliation afterwards, there had been no further updates on Souma's condition since then, and the people were worried about him.

As they waited anxiously, an image projected into the air above them: It was Souma, sitting up in bed.

"Um... Good day, citizens. It's me, Souma E. Friedonia."

While his pallor wasn't terrible, the fact that he was broadcasting from bed caused some concern among the people. They breathed a sigh of relief at his apparent good health, but their worries weren't completely dispelled.

"First, let me apologize for appearing to you like this. I've been running a bit of a fever. They tell me I've been working too hard, and yes, I have been quite busy lately. The doctor assures me I'll be fine with a few days of rest. I promise to work really hard as soon as I'm better, so please let me rest for now."

Souma's tone was casual, and his mention of the doctor helped alleviate the people's concerns. Then, unexpectedly, he opened his collar and revealed his collarbone.

""""Huh?!"""" the people gasped, shocked to see a large, prominent scar there.

"This is the scar that Fuuga gave me, which I'm sure has been what's been worrying you the most. The wound is fully healed and no longer hurts, but I was informed that using my stamina to heal this injury contributed to my current fever. However, it's not life-threatening, so you can rest easy."

Souma had reassured them, but the people's reactions were more complex. Thanks to the meticulous preparations made by Souma and his team for the war with the Great Tiger Empire, most people beyond the soldiers who had fought in the battles—the refugees from towns along the invasion route and the citizens of cities that had welcomed those refugees—were

largely unaware of the war's occurrence.

For example, in the eastern and southern regions of the Kingdom of Friedonia, by the time rumors surfaced that "We're apparently at war with the Great Tiger Empire," it wasn't long before people began saying, "So, it seems the war with the Great Tiger Empire is over." For those who weren't directly involved, it was easy to adopt a naive perspective and think, "If the war ended so quickly, it must have been an easy victory."

People were shocked to see Souma's wound. Although many had witnessed him getting slashed, most had been too stunned to truly believe their eyes. Now, as they confronted the reality of his scar, they came to understand the intensity of the battles he had faced. Their king, Souma, who had been at the very back of the main camp, had flirted with death.

While he might not have been the most flamboyant figure, his queens and retainers were exceptionally skilled, and the citizens recognized that he held them all together. If Souma were to die, the country would plunge into chaos. Seeing this broadcast, the people were forced to face the unsettling truth that they had been on the brink of losing the peace they currently enjoyed. This realization was a harsh shock, but no one in the castle, including Souma, fully grasped it. As participants in the war, they'd already known the Kingdom was in peril. If Hakuya, who was particularly adept at understanding others, had been present, perhaps he would have recognized this, but he had been in the Euphoria Kingdom at the time.

"Whoa, was the country really in that much danger?" someone exclaimed.

"I mean, just look at that wound the king received."

"So His Majesty actually went to the battlefield himself to protect us?"

"I always thought kings just issued orders from a safe distance..."

What had been intended as a reassuring broadcast ended up unsettling the citizens in a way that Souma and his companions hadn't anticipated. This would result in some uproar later on.

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"Here you go, sire. I've peeled an apple for you. Say 'ahh.'"

"Ahh..."

Aisha fed me a slice of apple. It had been a full day since the broadcast, and I was still taking time off to recover. My wives had been adjusting their schedules to take turns caring for me. It was just a fever, though, so all they were really doing was chatting with me to keep me from getting bored while making sure I didn't sneak in any work. *No, I'm not really that much of a workaholic…probably.*

Carla brought the children—Cian, Kazuha, Leon, Kaito, and Enju—to visit me at one point, but aside from Stella, the baby in Maria's arms, they were too rambunctious, so the visit was kept short. It made me feel a bit lonely.

Now it was Aisha's turn to look after me, and she was peeling apples for a snack.

"Munch, munch. Mm. I didn't know you could peel apples, Aisha."

"I can! It's not hard."

"I mean, I've never thought of you as someone who can cook."

"I'm good at cutting things because knives are useful weapons too," Aisha said, puffing her chest out.

Is that really something to be proud of? As I was pondering that, the door suddenly flew open with a *bang*.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" I asked as Liscia rushed towards me.

"There's no time for questions! We have a serious problem!"

"What problem?" I replied.

"The people of Parnam are crowding around the gates of the castle!"

"Huh? What? Is it a riot? A revolt?"

Did I do something to upset them? Did Hashim incite them? But the war's over… Are they angry with me for being in bed with a fever while the country is supposed to be recovering? No, the people aren't so shortsighted as to besiege the gates over that.

When I shared these concerns with Liscia, she raised her eyebrows in disbelief.

"Huh? How can you be so far off base?"

I didn't understand her reaction.

"Okay, why are they crowding around the gates, then?" I asked.

"They're here because people from the city want to see you. No, they're not just from the city; they're coming from all around the country. Apparently, similar events have been occurring in

other cities too.”

“”Come again…?””

Aisha and I both tilted our heads in unison.

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To describe the phenomenon succinctly, a crowd of well-wishers had gathered in front of the castle gates, all worried about Souma.

“I hear the king has a fever. Let him have some of my fish; it might perk him right up!” one person exclaimed.

“Don’t be silly. You should bring fruit to sick people. Please, give this to him instead,” another replied.

“All I have on me is some materials from dungeon monsters, but they might be useful during the reconstruction. Please take them,” said a third.

“It’s not much, but please accept this get-well money,” offered yet another well-wisher.

Each person in the crowd had brought a gift for Souma. To thank the king they believed had fought for them, they presented food, medicine, money, and more, hoping the guards would accept these offerings on the king’s behalf.

Initially, Liscia ordered the guards to refuse the offerings, but as more people rushed to the castle, it became evident that the situation risked becoming dangerously overcrowded. She then changed the policy to have the guards accept everything brought in. The congestion prompted an urgent need for more guards, and Roroa dispatched bureaucrats from the Ministry of Finance to help sort through the gifts. This same scene was unfolding in other cities as well.

“Send this to the king!” the people cried as they pushed their offerings forward. The chaos was palpable.

The reason for this frenzy was that everyone knew Souma was incapable in battle. He was perceived as weak—a ruler focused on domestic policy with no reports of any heroic feats on the battlefield. When he was compared to Fuuga Haan’s combat prowess, the difference was as vast as that between a wyvern and an insect—with Souma being the insect, of course.

Souma had stood injured before Fuuga, facing an opponent he knew he could never defeat. Still, he had stood his ground because, as king, he had to defend his people. This act struck a

chord with them, igniting their desire to protect the vulnerable Souma. They naturally began to think, “I want to do something for the king.” In a sense, this was a reflection of Souma’s personal virtue.

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“What are we going to do?” Liscia asked. “Money is one thing, but fish and vegetables won’t last long, right?”

“Yeah…” I replied, unsure what to say. Me getting a fever meant that the people would give me all sorts of things? The relationship between a king and his people felt like that of an exploiter and those under his protection, didn’t it? And yet, here they were, offering me gifts simply because I was sick.

I felt like a new streamer bewildered by receiving a high-value Super Chat. Not that Liscia and the others would understand that reference if I explained it. Anyway, I knew I had to do something.

“Aisha… I’m sorry, but could you bring the broadcast jewel? Also, please gather the water mages so we can create a water sphere at the castle gate.”

“R-Right. Understood.” Aisha hurried out of the room, leaving Liscia and me alone. We both let out a deep sigh.

“Honestly… How did it come to this?” I wondered aloud.

“Don’t pretend this has nothing to do with you. This is all because you’re so virtuous, isn’t it?”

“Virtuous? Is that really what we’re calling this?”

Unlike Fuuga, who attracted people with strength, or Maria, who drew others in with her charisma, I was weak. People gathered around me not out of admiration, but because they felt they couldn’t leave me alone. Was that virtue?

Liscia chuckled. “Sure, why not? People can’t help but want to help you, Souma.”

“If you say so…” I replied, scratching my cheek somewhat shyly.

Soon, Aisha returned, carrying the jewel. “I’ve brought it, Your Majesty.”

“”””Excuse us!””” a group of mages announced as they entered to assist with the broadcast.

“Um, Madam Excel happened to be here, so I sent her to the gates,” Aisha said.

“Good. Then get the broadcast started right away,” I commanded as soon as I heard her.

Shortly after, the mages signaled me, and I began to speak towards the jewel.

“Ahem… This is your king, Souma. I know this may come as a surprise, but I want to thank you for your concern for my health. I’ve heard that many have come bearing get-well gifts. I truly appreciate them, but as you can see, I’m already feeling better. So, I’d like to accept just your kind feelings and nothing else.”

First, I discouraged them from bringing any more gifts. The question now was what to do with the stuff that had already been brought.

“With regard to the items people have gathered, we will put any money and materials towards the recovery fund. As for fresh food, I ask that you please enjoy it among yourselves. We will also be providing some barrels of wine from the castle’s cellars, so I’d like you to celebrate the end of the war.”

Now that we had accepted the food, people would be upset if we let it spoil or asked them to take it back home. Hosting a feast with the food was probably the best way to avoid discontent. I could hear cheering in the distance; it seemed people liked the idea of having a feast.

Once we were sure the broadcast had been cut off, Liscia said, “Good work. You sure are good at finding solutions, huh, Souma?”

“Can I take that as a compliment?” I replied.

“Yes, because that’s exactly what it is,” she said.

“It’s true. You’re very reliable,” Aisha added.

Satisfied with my efforts, I laid back down in bed. I needed to get better quickly—for all the people out there who supported me.

On this day, there were lively feasts all around the Kingdom.

Chapter 7: Memorial

With the war over and the world gradually returning to calm, my health had improved, and life was finally getting back to normal.

“Is this the place, Julius?” I asked, and he nodded in response.

Julius, known as the White Strategist, was dressed in black today. It wasn’t just him; everyone here wore black. The only one for whom this didn’t feel particularly fresh was me, as I always wore my black military uniform.

“Yeah, this is where Sir Owen and Grandfather Herman met their ends,” he replied solemnly.

“I see… So there’s nothing left now, huh?”

It was evening as we stood before the remains of a mountainside fort north of Parnam. Only a small portion of the walls that once defended this stronghold remained. Owen and Herman had set off a massive blast using gunpowder, taking the forces of the Great Tiger Empire with them. After the battle, only scorched rubble was left behind.

The scattered corpses had been disfigured beyond recognition. The rubble had been cleared away, and the bodies had been buried without regard for which side the fallen had fought with—not that it had been possible to tell. Now, all that remained was an empty plot of land. The burn marks on what was left of the walls were the only evidence of the intense battle that had taken place here.

“I finally made it,” I said, kneeling and placing my hands on the ground. “I want to give you a piece of my mind for ignoring my orders and throwing your lives away. However, it was only because of your sacrifice that our family was able to reunite.”

With me today were my queens and children, along with Herman’s grandson Julius, his wife Tia, and their son Tius. The key retainers of the country—Tomoe and Ichiha, Hal and Kaede, and Excel and Castor—were also present.

A broadcast jewel was positioned at a distance from us, allowing not just those gathered here but the entire country to

remember those who gave their lives in this place. I had asked the people of the nation to observe a moment of silence.

“Aisha, bring that here.”

“Understood.”

Aisha approached, carrying a rock about a meter in diameter above her head. She set it down in front of me with an audible thud. It was a memorial. Since Owen and Herman were buried with the others, they did not have graves of their own. This stone monument would serve as their gravestone. It bore a poem praising their sacrifice for the country, and their names were carved alongside those of the men who died with them.

“It’s always like this for those sacrificed. The only beautiful thing about it is the words on the monument.”

I recalled a line from a giant hero show I had seen in reruns in my old world. It had been spoken by a member of the Science Special Search Party after reading the inscription on a memorial for someone who had returned to Earth after becoming a monster, sacrificed in the name of science and progress. I didn’t know how much significance there truly was in the words we carved into memorials, but I understood why those left behind feel compelled to do so.

“Roroa, Julius, Madam Tia…”

Once Aisha stepped back, I called for the three of them. Roroa led Leon by the hand, while Tia did the same for Tius. Herman’s grandchildren, along with their spouses and children, had gathered here.

“Grandfather Herman…”

Roroa held a letter tightly to her chest with her free hand—the one not holding Leon’s. She had been informed of Herman’s death while in Venetinova, but she had received the letter containing his will only upon returning to Parnam. It expressed his fondness for Roroa, who grew to resemble his daughter more each day. He mentioned how pleased he was to have seen his great-grandchildren and included an apology for passing away here.

Roroa and Tia each gave their respective child a single flower.

“Tius, go give the flower to your grandfather.”

“You too, Leon. Say ‘good night’ to your grandpa, okay?”

“To grandpa?”

“Okay!”

Tius tilted his head in confusion, while Leon responded

enthusiastically. Neither of them was old enough to understand death yet. They took the flowers, tottered forward, and laid them in front of the monument.

“‘G’night, Grandpa,’” they said with smiles on their faces.

Yeah… It’s better this way. Because the old men had given their lives to protect those smiles. Roroa and Tia were the only ones who needed to cry here.

I put my hand on Julius’s shoulder as he gazed up at the heavens.

“Hey, Julius?”

“What…?”

“How about we get back at the old men who disobeyed orders by building a grand mausoleum for them? Let’s have them worshipped as gods of war and drinking.”

“Heh, I can just imagine how they’d cringe.” Julius’s expression brightened.

Knowing how serious those two old men had been, they would’ve found it pretty awkward to be treated like gods. *I’ll suggest alcohol as the best offering, so you two had better enjoy your punishment for violating orders.*

After Roroa and the others finished, I called Naden over.

“Naden, would you do the honors?”

“Roger that.”

Naden transformed into her black ryuu form, and I climbed onto her back. She then picked up two barrels of alcohol that had been prepared for the occasion and carried them up about fifty meters.

I raised my voice and shouted, “Old Man Owen! For winning the bet with me, you get the most expensive alcohol on the continent! I had Maria request this from Queen Jeanne, and I used all the pocket money I’ve been too busy to spend to purchase these luxurious barrels of wine that were untouched in the former imperial capital, Valois! I hope you enjoy them with Grandpa Herman and your men!”

When I finished, Naden began pouring out the contents of the barrels. It rained wine around the monument. Beneath the soil here lay imperial soldiers—not just our own, but… I didn’t want to get cursed, so they’d have to share fairly with everyone.

Once we were back on the ground, I addressed my family and retainers.

“Okay! There’s still more drink to go around! Queen Jeanne

and Hakuya cut us a deal and gave us plenty! We can't hold a big celebration of our victory with the people of the Great Tiger Empire watching, but for this one day, I think it's fine for just us here to celebrate!"

Poncho and his wives, Serina and Komain, quickly organized the setup, carrying out tables and chairs to create an outdoor banquet area in the empty field.

Meanwhile, Carla and the maids brought out the food. Barrels of wine were placed all around, and my family and retainers gathered eagerly in front of them.

"I want you all to relax and enjoy yourselves, just for today! Let's remember those we've lost and drink together in their honor! Now, let's break open those barrels!"

At my command, knives and swords were drawn, and their hilts were used to break the thin boards that served as lids for the barrels. Long-handled ladles were then used to serve the wine.

Holding up my glass, I raised my voice once more. "Let's toast to our fallen comrades and the victory we can't celebrate too heartily!"

"""Cheers!!!"""

With that, the mood quickly shifted from somber to festive. Surely, Owen and Herman would have felt reassured to see us having a raucous time instead of quietly weeping. Perhaps because I had given the okay to really let loose, things became lively.

The warriors—Hal, Castor, and Mio—showcased their martial prowess, while Liscia, Aisha, and Kaede chatted away. Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga enjoyed their reunion with Velza and Lucy, who they had invited. Meanwhile, Excel, Albert, Elisha, and Kagetora formed a group of adults quietly drinking together. Roroa, Julius, Tia, Colbert, and others from the former Amidonia laughed and smiled as they remembered Herman, while Ludwin, Weist, and Piltory, who had briefly returned to the Kingdom, honored Owen's memory.

As night fell and we all became inebriated, Carla and Serina took the children away. From that point, things got hectic, with an argument between Naden and Ruby nearly escalating into a monster battle, while Juna and Maria formed an impromptu lorelei unit, singing and dancing. I made the rounds with several groups and ended up drinking too much, losing all memory of

how things ended.

I hope you old guys are enjoying watching this from the next world… My eyes spun, and I fell to the ground, lifting my glass to the sky. *I didn't know if this was a proper memorial, but it felt like we were moving forward towards the tomorrow those old men led us to.*

Then, roughly a year later, we received a report stating that Fuuga had died.



Chapter 8: The Great Man Leaves the Stage

—Roughly One Year After the Decisive Battle Between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire.

What has Fuuga Haan done in the past year...? Nothing of note. Well, that was an exaggeration.

He approved the documents prepared by Lumiere, gave orders to Shuukin and the other generals to maintain peace, and spent his evenings with his beloved wife, Mutsumi, doting on their newborn son, Suiga. It was a very ordinary life—he simply didn't engage in anything befitting a great leader.

He didn't fight foreign wars, confront powerful enemies, or attempt any unprecedented feats. Instead, he lived a quiet life, as if the flames of ambition had burned out within him. He'd fought to a painful draw with the Maritime Alliance (or so they loudly claimed within the Great Tiger Empire), and people whispered that this outcome might have dampened his motivation.

The veterans, like Lumiere, who sought to use this moment to strengthen the administrative foundations of the Empire, and Shuukin, who aimed to regain what had been lost through reckless actions, viewed this as a positive development.

If Fuuga were to rekindle his ambitions, they would support him wholeheartedly. However, if he did not, they would focus on stabilizing the nation and protecting its peace. Yet, the Great Tiger Empire was too vast for its people to unite behind this idea, and they held markedly different values.

Many within the Great Tiger Empire could no longer tolerate the stagnation of Fuuga's ambitions. Some had hoped to change their lives through Fuuga's vision, while others had lost their homelands for his dream. Many had even prepared to risk their lives in support of his cause. Their discontent was growing. They had believed Fuuga would unify the continent and had entrusted their own aspirations to him, setting aside their grievances over losing their homelands. They had been ready to give their lives

for the cause.

Now, they viewed Fuuga's stagnant progress as a betrayal of their trust. As a result, revolts had erupted throughout the Great Tiger Empire since the decisive battle with the Maritime Alliance. Instead of addressing the rebellions himself, Fuuga left that task to his subordinates, like Shuukin.

Previously, Fuuga would have rushed into any fight, no matter how small, and found enjoyment in it. However, as people observed him prioritizing administrative duties over battles, they began to realize that he had "seen his dream through to the end." This realization led to their growing uncertainty:

"Has Fuuga's era come to an end?"

"Who will guide us through the next era?"

The people became confused, and their words reached Fuuga Haan.

"Ha ha ha! Everyone just says whatever they want," he said, relaxing in Mutsumi's room as if it had nothing to do with him.

Mutsumi was holding their sleeping son, Suiga, against her chest, smiling serenely.

"You're like the sun to them, darling. Of course they would panic if you suddenly withdrew from view."

"This is what happens when I don't show myself in public, huh? I'm just living the same way he does, though."

The "he" Fuuga referred to was Souma. Though frustrated by losing his previous ambitions, Fuuga had also gained a son. He didn't know how he should live now, and until he figured it out, he thought he'd try to imitate Souma. He had spent the last year living an incredibly ordinary life—just doing his job, delegating tasks to his retainers, and cherishing time spent with his family.

"So, how is it? Living like Sir Souma?" Mutsumi asked him with a smile.

He scratched his head. "It's not half bad; I'll give it that."

"Oh, I didn't expect that. I thought you'd be bored."

"I haven't had time to get bored. I'm not used to paperwork, and playing with the kid is harder than I thought. It took a while for Suiga to stop crying at the sight of my face, y'know?"

"Hee hee, that's right, it did," Mutsumi replied, chuckling at the memory.

Fuuga had once declared war on the world, yet he had struggled to soothe a single baby. Suiga would cry whenever he saw his father's face, and Fuuga's attempts to calm him had

often ended in failure. When he had Mutsumi help him stop Suiga's crying, there were many times she noticed, despite his efforts to hide it, how dejected he felt about the situation.

Regardless, he kept trying with Suiga, and after much trial and error, he managed to reach a point at which he didn't make the boy cry anymore.

"I think you put in a lot of effort. You're a real 'father' now."

"Ha ha ha! That's good to hear."

"Hee hee... But I feel like you'll eventually return to being the great man you once were," Mutsumi said, her expression still serene. "You're relaxed now, but you can't change the personality you were born with. This is just a momentary rest; eventually, you'll take off running again. But I can't be sure whether it will be to conquer the continent or to venture into the world of the north."

She spoke as if she could see right through him, and Fuuga's expression shifted slightly.

"Mutsumi... Is that how you've always viewed me?" he asked.

"Yes. You act like Souma, as if you've settled down, but someday your dreams will sprout wings and fly again. I hope to join you when that time comes."

"What about Suiga?"

"He carries our blood. I'm sure he will want to join us as well."

Fuuga fell silent, feeling a thrill of excitement as he listened to her. Though it lay dormant for now, the impulse within him would awaken soon enough, and when it did, he had a sense that he might shock the world once more.

He had no intention of going against Souma, but the world still extended to the north. Wouldn't it be a grand adventure to lead an expedition there? Once Suiga grew larger, the tiger within him would awaken again. That was their prediction. And yet, that day would never come.

Yahhhhhhhhh!!!

"Huh? What was that?"

Suddenly, an uproar erupted inside the castle. Cheers and shouts echoed in the distance. Then came a series of loud noises: *Booooooom! Crash!* The sounds of explosions filled the air, accompanied by the smell of something burning. Smoke was visible outside the window. It was clear that *something* was happening.

Fuuga rose and reached for his Zanganto, which leaned

against the wall. Mutsumi held the crying Suiga as she changed into clothes that would allow her to move more easily.

Once she had changed, she grabbed her sword and asked Fuuga, “Is it an enemy attack?”

“Dunno. But I’m pretty sure only the forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia could push in this deeply.”

“I can’t believe Sir Souma would do something like this. Which leaves…”

“A rebellion, huh? Who’s the ringleader?”

“I wouldn’t put it past my brother…”

“Yeah. If anyone were going to stab me in the back, I always figured it would be him… But this is too hasty.”

Currently, Fuuga’s forces were spread across the country, working to suppress various revolts. As a result, the defense of Haan Great Tiger Castle had been significantly weakened. His right-hand man, Shuukin, was leading the main force in the west against the rebels, while Lumiere was responsible for maintaining stability in areas that had already been suppressed. In the north and east, Krahe and the duo of Lombard and Yomi were operating, respectively. Meanwhile, Moumei continued to govern the former Mercenary State of Zem. The only officers remaining at Haan Great Tiger Castle were Fuuga’s advisor, Hashim, along with defenders Kasen, Gaten, and Gaifuku, all under Fuuga’s direct command.

Suddenly, there was a pounding at the door, and Kasen rushed into the room.

“Lord Fuuga! There’s a rebellion!” he shouted.

“Who is the enemy?” Fuuga asked.

“It’s General Krahe!” answered Kasen. “His air force is attacking the castle!”

“Krahe?!” Fuuga exclaimed, surprised.

Krahe, who had been sent to suppress the very rebels who were attacking, was now leading a rebellion of his own. It seemed he had rallied those like Nata, who were dissatisfied with the lack of conflict, as well as individuals whose homelands had been devastated by Fuuga. They had been waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

Taking advantage of being ordered to lead a full army to quell a revolt, Krahe and his sympathizers had risen up and were now assaulting the castle with the troops he had previously

commanded.

Kasen had more information to share. “For now, Sir Hashim, Sir Gaten, and Sir Gaifuku are holding them off, but they are vastly outnumbered, and we were caught off guard! The castle won’t hold much longer! Sir Hashim advises you to flee quickly!”

“So, Hashim never betrayed me…?”

Fuuga picked an unusual moment to feel emotional. He had always thought Hashim would be the one to betray him, but this hasty rebellion gave him doubts. The era was progressing towards stability, and the people’s attention was focused to the north. Merely striking Fuuga down wouldn’t be enough to convince the people to follow his killer. It was a rebellion without a vision for the future. But if it was an impulsive act by Krahe, that would explain things.

“Kasen, how is Durga doing?” Fuuga asked.

“Since Durga is your mount, it has become a target for Krahe. I suspect they launched a concentrated attack on it…”

“Urgh! Not even Durga could handle all this on its own…”

Durga the flying tiger had gone claw to claw with dragons, but it would be unreasonable to expect the tiger to take on Krahe’s griffon cavalry alone. The beast had always performed best with the great Fuuga on its back.

Suddenly, Kasen shouted, “Ah! Lord Fuuga!”

He shot two arrows towards the window. They pierced through the glass door leading out to the balcony, striking a couple of soldiers who were about to force their way into the room. It seemed the griffons had dropped off assassins.

“The enemy has come this far already…” Mutsumi murmured.

Fuuga let out a weary sigh. “This is what I get the moment I stop moving, huh? It seems the heavens don’t want me to live a normal life.”

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—Same Time, Near the Stables of Great Tiger Castle

“Surround them! Don’t let the enemy escape!”

“Don’t get too close! Fire your arrows from a distance!”

“Grawrrrrrrr!!!”

At the stables of Great Tiger Castle, where battle mounts were raised, an intense struggle had erupted around Fuuga’s partner, Durga the flying tiger. Krahe’s primary concern during his

rebellion was to prevent Fuuga and Durga from uniting. Together, they formed a formidable duo. Once Fuuga mounted Durga, their combined destructive power and mobility surpassed that of even the dragon knights of Nothung, let alone Krahe's griffon cavalry.

In fact, the pair had previously killed multiple dragon knights on their own. No encirclement could contain them. That's why the rebel forces targeted Durga first. They began by stealthily eliminating the handlers responsible for its care, then attempted to poison it. However, Durga either sensed the danger or grew suspicious of the new feeder, refusing to eat and growling to intimidate them. After their poisoning attempt failed, the rebels resorted to brute force, sending an army to kill Durga.

"Shoot! Shoot! Keep shooting!"

"Grrrrrawwwwr!"

As the enemy fired arrows from a distance, Durga continued to fight fiercely, despite numerous arrows sticking out of him, tearing apart and trampling anyone who dared approach for the killing blow.

"Grrarrrrawwwwr!"

"Eeek?!"

"Urgh... You monster!"

Many soldiers' legs buckled under the tiger's fierce glare.

"How's it taking you so long to deal with one animal?" one ill-mannered, irritated voice complained. It was Nata, the Battle Ax of the Tiger, with his large ax resting on his shoulder. He had allied with the rebels despite being Fuuga's subordinate.

"I joined Krahe's cause thinking I'd get to fight some tough guys, but here I am, hunting an animal. I want to get this over with so I can go get a piece of Fuuga."

The battle-hungry Nata could not accept a world moving towards peace, and his dissatisfaction had grown daily. When Krahe extended an invitation, he joined the rebel cause.

"Grrrrr..." Durga's gaze locked onto Nata.

"Hey there, Tiger. You wanna fight me?"

"Grraaarrrrrr."

"I was getting bored. I'll give you the fight you're looking for."

Nata assumed a fighting stance with his ax, and as he did, Durga pounced towards him.

"Grarrrrrr!!!"

"Hyahhh!!!"

Durga lunged forward, claws outstretched, aiming to shred Nata. In response, Nata swung his ax sideways, attempting to slice through the tiger.

Clang! The sound of two hard substances striking echoed through the air.

Nata's cheek was torn open, blood dripping down, while Durga suffered a horizontal slash across its paw, also bleeding.

"Pretty good for a dumb animal," Nata remarked, wiping the blood from his cheek with the back of his hand.

Durga slowly turned to face Nata again. It appeared ready to pounce once more, but then...

"Grrrgarrr..."

Suddenly, Durga stumbled, its breathing becoming labored.

"Tch... You monster. Looks like the poison's finally set in," Nata spat, his voice dripping with disdain.

The rebel army had been using poisoned arrows. Rebels or not, they had fought under Fuuga, and they understood Durga's formidable strength. At full power, even Nata would have struggled to subdue it. That's why the plan was always to weaken the tiger with poison. This way, even if it got past them, it couldn't serve as Fuuga's mount.

"Now! Surround it and finish it off!"

Seeing their opportunity, the soldiers rushed towards Durga.

"Grrarrr!"

"Gwagh!!!"

With a single swipe of its tail, Durga sent the soldiers flying. Even weakened by poison, it still possessed enough strength to scatter them.

"You bastard..."

Nata readied his ax. In response, Durga met his gaze for a moment before turning to flee. Despite its unsteady paws, it scattered the soldiers in its way and continued to run.

The soldiers moved to pursue, but...

"Stop," Nata commanded, raising his hand. "It doesn't have the strength to reach Fuuga. With the poison in its system, it'll die on its own. If we waste our time on that small fry, we'll let the big fish slip away, y'know?"

The primary target of the rebel forces was Fuuga himself. The soldiers nodded in remembrance and headed back towards the castle to continue the battle.

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—Same Time, Near the Main Gates of Great Tiger Castle

At the main gates of Great Tiger Castle, Hashim, known as the Wisdom of the Tiger, and Gaten, the Battle Flag of the Tiger, were valiantly holding off the rebel forces with a small contingent of elite troops.

Gaten's favored weapon, his iron whips, pierced through the oncoming foes one after another, while Hashim's blade cleaved through them with precision. The rebel forces struggled to breach the gate, defended by these two powerful warriors and the loyal members of the Royal Guard.

"Ha ha ha! If there was going to be a traitor, I always thought it would be you, Sir Hashim!" Gaten exclaimed with amusement as he cut down foes.

Unfazed by the blood splattering around him and the bodies piling up, Gaten fought on as though he were joking around at a banquet.

Hashim responded with a cold smile. "As long as Lord Fuuga is alive, there is nothing to gain by betraying him. Even if I were fortunate enough to kill Lord Fuuga, all I would face is an endless quagmire of succession wars against Sir Shuukin and the other loyal retainers. It's simply not worth the trouble in the slightest."

"Y-Yeah?"

"If I had intended to seize power, I would have done so when my nephew, Suiga, ascended the throne. Lord Fuuga wished to go north, and if I had offered to look after Suiga and the country, he would likely have granted me considerable authority. Mutsumi would want to accompany Lord Fuuga, after all. If that had happened, I could have maintained legitimacy while controlling the country as I wished. It would have been far easier than turning against him now."

Hashim dispassionately outlined his potential path to power as he sliced through enemies.

"Yikes!" Gaten exclaimed, recoiling. "I could actually see you doing that." He turned to face the still numerous opponents and continued, "Anyway, it seems we're in for a lot of enemies. Are you sure you wouldn't rather switch sides, Sir Hashim? You're not the type to martyr yourself, right?"

"I have no interest in whatever regime that fanatic may

establish…” Hashim said with a derisive snort, referring to the absent Krahe. “Even if he seeks to maintain chaos, the people’s attention has already shifted north—just like Lord Fuuga’s. Governing a nation of this size while pursuing world hegemony requires charisma like Lord Fuuga’s. Since Lord Fuuga has lost interest, there is nothing he can do to sustain the chaos. If he fails to recognize that—or chooses to ignore it, clinging to the remnants of a dream—then that is simply pitiful.”

“Ha ha ha! You’re rather harsh.”

“Besides, dying here for my liege’s sake isn’t so bad.”

A sly smile curled Hashim’s lips, reminiscent of someone who had just concocted a devious plan. It was the kind of smile that made everyone who saw it shudder.

“People only care about results,” he continued. “This is especially true for future generations. No matter how terrible my actions might have been during my life, if I demonstrate loyalty to my liege at the end, it will be hard for people to deny that I was a ‘loyal retainer.’”

“Wha… That’s gonna be your legacy?”

Knowing Hashim as he did, Gaten found it hard to accept. The loyal retainers of the Great Tiger Empire were Shuukin and Gaifuku, not Hashim, who had just been calmly explaining how he would have usurped power moments ago.

Seeing the unconvinced look on Gaten’s face only amused Hashim further. “That’s how future generations are. They can only understand our era through the records we leave behind. So if I take command in a war that divides the continent and then die for my liege, the name Hashim Chima—the name of the House of Chima—will be etched into the annals of a great man. That is the wish I inherited from my father, Mathew.”

“Wouldn’t he want the house to live on?”

“Ichiha, or one of the others, can carry on the family name.”

“Good grief… I don’t think you can criticize Krahe. You have some rather odd values yourself.”

Despite his exasperation, Gaten continued to fend off swarms of enemies.

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Meanwhile, as the other subordinates were putting up a good fight elsewhere, Kasen was in Mutsumi’s room, advising Fuuga to

escape.

“There’s no choice but to flee at this point! Sir Gaifuku has gathered the remaining cavalry at the rear gate and is preparing for our escape! If we can somehow get out of this crisis and meet up with Sir Shuukin and Sir Lombard in the west, we may still turn things around!”

“Yeah, but I’m sure Krahe knows that too. He’ll have men lying in wait to the west, and the pursuit will be intense.”

Fuuga listened to Kasen with his arms crossed, looking down at Suiga in Mutsumi’s arms. Noticing his gaze, Mutsumi sensed what he was thinking. She hugged Suiga, who had already cried himself to sleep, and then rose to her feet with determination.

“Sir Kasen,” she said.

“Y-Yes?”

“Please look after Suiga. Take him to Yuriga in the Kingdom of Friedonia.”

With those words, she handed the baby to Kasen. His eyes widened at this sudden turn of events.

“Huh? You want me to take him to the Kingdom of Friedonia, not to Sir Shuukin?”

“Yes. We cannot bring Suiga on the road to the west, especially with an intense pursuit anticipated. Sir Kasen, I am asking you to escape south and seek shelter in the Kingdom of Friedonia. I believe Yuriga and Ichiha will protect Suiga.”

“I was about to suggest that you escape to Friedonia as well,” Fuuga muttered after hearing Mutsumi’s words.

Mutsumi shook her head, a peaceful expression on her face. “I’ve decided to stay by your side until the very end. Whether we live or die, we will do it together.”

“You might never see Suiga again, y’know?” he responded.

“That may make me a failure as a mother. However, if I were to send you off alone, I could never live with myself.”

“All right, then…” Sensing Mutsumi’s resolve, Fuuga made up his mind.

He took a feather pen from the table and began writing something. When he finished, he folded the paper and handed it to Kasen.

“Kasen, give this to Souma along with Suiga.”

“Um, but Lord Fuuga…” Kasen hesitated, unsure how to respond to being entrusted with his liege’s child.

Fuuga fixed him with a sharp look and said, “This is an order.

You've got to get out of here and deliver Suiga to Yuriga, no matter what it takes."

"Ah! Yes, sir!"

Kasen stood up straight at the word "order." He quickly excused himself and dashed off like a bullet, holding Suiga in his arms.

After watching him leave, Fuuga turned to Mutsumi.

"You're sure that was okay...?" he asked.

"Yes. I had enough time to savor being a family this past year. From now on, my path will follow yours, whether it leads north or to hell."

"Ha ha ha... Given those options, I prefer heading north," Fuuga said with a small smile. "If we make it out of this alive, how about we become adventurers up there?"

"I like that idea. We could even sneak back down to meet Suiga."

"Well, as long as we stay out of sight, I'm sure Souma and Yuriga will look after him. It wouldn't be so bad to live freely, without being tossed around by the whims of the era."

Fuuga laughed as he spoke, then turned his back to Mutsumi. She wondered why, until he pointed to his remaining wing with his thumb.

"Mutsumi, cut off my other wing for me."

"Huh?"

"I'll stand out too much with only one. That'll be a liability when we're escaping." Fuuga hadn't given up on living yet.

Sensing his determination, Mutsumi silently drew her sword and, in one swift motion, severed his wing. It fell to the ground with a thud. Though his back was bleeding, Fuuga endured without a grunt or grimace. After she stopped the bleeding with minimal fuss, he extended his hand to Mutsumi.

"Okay... Let's go, Mutsumi."

"Yes!"



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Kasen ran with the baby cradled in his arms. The rear gate, where Gaifuku had concentrated their remaining forces, was under enemy surveillance, so he opted to head to the main gate, which was still fiercely under attack. He hoped that in the chaos of battle, he and the baby could slip away unnoticed.

When he arrived at the main gate, he encountered Gaten, who was engaged in combat there.

“Sir Gaten!”

“Oh! Young Kasen!”

Upon seeing Kasen carrying a baby, Gaten immediately understood the situation. If Kasen was here with the child after reporting to Fuuga, it was easy to guess how their conversation had gone. Realizing this, Gaten shifted from defense to offense, cutting through the enemy ranks and targeting one of their commanders.

“Get out of the way!”

His whips cracked through the air, sending enemies flying as he advanced. He focused on the enemy commander, wrapping his whips around the man’s neck and pulling him down to the ground. Without sparing a glance at the commander, who lay dead from the fall, Gaten seized a horse and returned.

“Young Kasen! Take this horse!”

He dismounted and handed the reins to Kasen.

“Sir Gaten! But—gwagh!”

Even at his master’s command, Kasen hesitated to flee while his comrades continued to fight. Gaten ended that hesitation by slamming his fist into the younger warrior’s stomach.

“Blegh! Wh-What was that for?!”

“Don’t hesitate, young Kasen. The young lord’s life is in your hands.”

“Kh... Right.”

“Then go. Fulfill your duty.”

“Got it...!” Kasen nodded and mounted the horse.

Suddenly, an enemy spear shot towards him, aimed to impale him. It had likely been thrown by a frustrated soldier. Gaten, noticing it before anyone else, leapt up to intercept it, taking the spear’s tip in his own chest.

“Urgh!”

“Sir Gaten!”

Gaten fell to the ground, the spear lodged in his chest.

“Go… Go, Kasen!” he shouted, mustering the last of his strength.

“Urgh…” Kasen shook off the emotions welling inside him and urged his horse forward, breaking through the enemy lines while shooting arrows as he went.

As Gaten watched him ride away, he weakly murmured, “Ha ha ha… Live on, young Kasen. And give my regards to the one you love…”

“You’re trying to act cool even now, huh?” said Hashim, who had joined him unnoticed.

“I get that a lot…” Gaten replied with a faint smile.

Not long after, the defenders at the front gate were overrun by the enemy. Hashim and Gaten fought valiantly and fell in battle.

Hashim, known as the Wisdom of the Tiger, had used his insight to devise strategies that supported the great Fuuga. Even after committing treacherous acts, such as betraying his own father, his courageous stand here earned him the accolades he had long sought. In later generations, some would argue, “Maybe he was a loyal retainer, after all?”

This event would come to be known as the Great Tiger Castle Incident.

Fuuga and Mutsumi escaped with the cavalry gathered at the back gate, heading west. However, the remnants of their forces were decimated by Krahe’s relentless pursuit. Hashim and Gaten fell at the front gate, and Gaifuku, the Shield of the Tiger, went down fighting to buy time for Fuuga and the others to escape.

It remained unknown whether Fuuga and Mutsumi survived. The pursuit was brutal, leaving horribly mangled bodies. Many in their group fell into valleys or were swept away in rivers, making it impossible to identify the dead. The only body that could be recognized with certainty was that of a massive tiger.

Despite having been attacked head-on, the injured beast Durga had apparently made it to Fuuga’s side. Some believed the arm found beside the tiger belonged to Fuuga, but there was no definitive proof either way. With Durga’s remains as proof, Krahe announced Fuuga’s death to the world. However, since no body could be identified, rumors of Fuuga’s survival occasionally

surfaced, but the name Fuuga Haan would never appear in history again.

Chapter 9: Bad News

—Kingdom of Friedonia, Parnam Castle

A year had passed since the war with Fuuga. The Kingdom of Friedonia and the other nations of the Maritime Alliance had begun to heal their wounds, though their hearts would still require time to fully recover. This period ushered in a time of peace. With Fuuga's ambitions crushed, each country focused on strengthening its internal affairs. As developments in diplomacy and distribution networks brought everyone closer together, we assessed the reports from the advance parties in the northern hemisphere.

Research in the northern hemisphere was based in the Seadian city of Haalga. However, once a base was established on the other side, we would be able to send more personnel to the region. With almost all conflicts between nations having ceased, ambitious adventurers and mercenaries seeking both excitement and a change in circumstances were on the rise. If we could direct them to the new frontier in the north, the southern world could finally enjoy lasting peace.

It was fair to say that this past year had been even more peaceful than the one during which we'd all been too busy dealing with magic bug syndrome to focus on much else. The Kingdom of Friedonia was sharing in that peace as well. The only issue at hand was the situation in the northern hemisphere, but it required a long-term approach and didn't demand immediate action. For the first time since arriving in this country, I found myself with some free time. The result of that was, well...the girl sleeping next to me.

"Is something the matter?" Maria asked, lying in bed next to me in her nightgown.

I rolled onto my back, gazing up at the ceiling with my hands behind my head. "Nah, I was just thinking about how nice it is to be able to relax like this."

"Hee hee," Maria chuckled. "It is, yes. I don't think I've ever had the chance to take it so easy."

“I mean, you’ve kept running around even after coming to this country. And I know you were swamped with work as an empress too… Maybe you’re a workaholic?”

“You’re really going to call me out on that, Souma? Even now, there are still nights you stay up late working, right?”

“If I didn’t have to do it, I wouldn’t.”

“I’ll bet. I felt the same way when I was an empress. But I enjoy the work I’m doing now, so I’d like to get back to it in a little while… I’ve taken about half a year off at this point.”

Since coming to this country, Maria had focused her efforts on the philanthropic work she had always wanted to pursue. Marrying me and becoming one of my queens hadn’t changed that. She often convinced Naden to fly her across the country to advocate for the disadvantaged. The people had come to call Maria the “Angel of Friedonia” out of respect. However, she had been cooped up inside the castle for about half a year now, and that was all due to the girl lying between us.

“Let’s wait until Stella is a little more settled in, okay?” I said.

Maria smiled as she gently stroked her child’s newly grown hair. Stella Euphoria—that was our daughter’s name. Maria had continued to travel across the country during her pregnancy, but once her belly became too large, she’d settled at the castle. After giving birth, she had dedicated herself to caring for her newborn.

Maria looked at me and smiled. “Of course, for the next few years, I plan to return home every day. If Stella forgets my face, even for a single day, she might start thinking one of the other queens is her real mommy.”

“Yeah, that’s a genuine concern in this household.”

My queens all got along exceptionally well. Each of them had their own responsibilities, so when they were too busy, whoever was free at the time would help care for the children alongside Carla and the maids. I’d join in whenever my work allowed it, but unfortunately, it was hard for me to find the time. Whenever I played with the kids in the day care, Liscia, Ichiha, or Tomoe would pull me back to the governmental affairs office.

Because of this, it often became unclear who was the mother of each child. Aisha and Naden struggled to conceive children of their own, so they showered affection on the others’ kids. Even Yuriga joined in, saying it was for future reference. It was as if all the queens were mothers to all of our children.

I had always imagined a royal harem would be filled with drama, but everyone seemed more focused on pursuing their work and passions than on fighting for influence. This certainly saved me a lot of trouble.

I rubbed Stella's tummy as she slept. "Well, you can do as you like, Maria. I'll always be here to support you."

"Hee hee. But... I do want to be with her while I can. I know Jeanne is saying she wants to adopt her, and she'll leave the nest someday..."

"Jeanne's pregnant herself at this point, though. She and Hakuya are getting ahead of themselves."

It looked like Hakuya and Jeanne of the Euphoria Kingdom were also going to be blessed with children. However, in their efforts to deal with any overscience relics, they wanted access to at least one child of my bloodline. They had been discussing the idea of adopting Maria's child, but that wouldn't happen until after she became an adult. By that time, the situation might have changed, so there was no guarantee it would occur.

This is why I hope she takes her time growing up. Just as I was thinking that...

"...!"

"...!!!"

A sudden commotion erupted outside the room. Aisha was standing guard, but I couldn't help but wonder what was happening. Maria and I exchanged worried glances before carefully getting out of bed, trying not to wake Stella. Maria slipped on a cardigan to keep warm.

"...jesty is sleeping right now!" Aisha exclaimed.

"This is an emergency. I must see him at once..."

Outside the door, Aisha was arguing with Kagetora. Once Maria and I deemed ourselves presentable, we quietly opened the door and stepped out, closing it softly behind us to avoid disturbing Stella.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

Kagetora put his hands together in front of him and bowed. "Sire, we've received urgent news that requires your immediate attention."

What news could possibly bring the leader of the Black Cats to see me at such a late hour? A sense of dread washed over me as I urged, "Go on."

"There has been an insurrection in the Great Tiger Empire," he

whispered. “Fuuga Haan’s fate remains unknown.”

“Come again…?”

At first, I struggled to grasp what he was telling me. *An insurrection? And Fuuga’s fate is unknown? So…we don’t even know if he’s dead or alive? The ruler of that vast empire in the north? Did he just get Honnouji-ed? Who is his Brutus? Is this just a scheme orchestrated by Hashim, or are we dealing with faulty intelligence?* My thoughts spiraled in confusion; my legs felt shaky and goose bumps prickled my skin. I found it hard to calm down after hearing this news.

Observing my distress, Kagetora continued, “According to reports from our intelligence operatives within the Great Tiger Empire…”

He explained that our men had spotted flames rising from Haan Great Tiger Castle and had sent word about the insurrection. Revolts were common in the Great Tiger Empire, and they had been so focused on gathering intelligence on the rebels that they had not been sufficiently wary of those suppressing them. Meanwhile, another unit of Black Cats had encountered a lone rider fleeing south. After securing him and offering protection, they discovered he was Kasen Shuri, one of Fuuga’s subordinates. He revealed that the insurrection was led by Krahe. He was also carrying an infant as he fled. I had a strong suspicion who the parents were…

“Krahe, you’re still chasing after your fantasies…” Maria murmured.

Hearing her voice snapped me back to my senses, and I looked over to see her scowling. As my mind cleared, uncertainties began to surface about the implications of what I had just learned.

Is Fuuga really dead? Or is he out there somewhere? If he is dead, the Great Tiger Empire is bound to fracture. Even if a sudden coup like this one succeeds, Fuuga’s subordinates and supporters won’t accept it. Even without knowing which of Fuuga’s men have survived, I could be certain they would oppose Krahe. This could lead to civil war in the Great Tiger Empire.

I also couldn’t predict how the former Mercenary State of Zem or the Orthodox Papal State, both of which had been subjugated by Fuuga, would react. If the war in the north turned into a quagmire, it would result in fresh waves of refugees and a resurgence of the situation we faced when I was summoned in

the 1546th year of the Continental Calendar. This had to be avoided at all costs, but more importantly…

“Damn it… What am I supposed to say to Yuriga?” I clutched my head as I stared at the ceiling.

I need to act immediately. I have to gather information, clarify the current situation, and come up with countermeasures. I’ll also need to share that information with Kuu, Shabon, and Jeanne, my allies in the Maritime Alliance. I want to discuss our future moves with Hakuya as soon as possible. But before any of that, I have to tell Yuriga about the death of her older brother, whom she loves and respects. Will I be able to remain calm while conveying this cruel reality to her?

“Souma.” I looked down at the sound of Maria’s voice.

She was staring at me. Maria took the flustered Aisha by the arm and pulled her closer. “We will go to Yuriga and support her along with Lady Liscia. You can play the role of king, doing what only you can do.”

“Th-That’s right, sire! Leave her to us!” Aisha nodded in agreement.

I should probably leave it to them. “Okay… Take care of Yuriga for me.”

“”Right.””

“Kagetora, call up all the men we can muster right now. In particular, I want Julius and Ichiha to come to me immediately. I’ll contact Excel and Hakuya using the broadcast.”

“By your will.”

The peaceful atmosphere was shattered, and we rushed into action. As I headed for the room with the broadcast jewel, I paused for just a moment. In the darkness of night, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirrorlike surface of a window. My expression looked like I was ready to cry.

Fuuga… Did you really…die? The great man who was the darling of an era disappears as times change—like the end of so many tragic tales of epic heroes. Were you really unable to resist that fate…?!

I shook my head, forcibly dispelling the depressing, stagnant thoughts swirling in my mind. Then I started to walk once again.

◇◇◇

Let’s discuss what the various countries did afterwards…

First, the most significant move came from Zem, where many had fled from the Great Tiger Empire. Fuuga's subordinate, Moumei, acting as his viceroy there, let out a wail of despair upon hearing of Krahe's treachery. He then returned control of the people to Gimbal, the last king of the Mercenary State of Zem, who had been living in retirement. Afterwards, Moumei returned to the Great Tiger Kingdom with only his best troops.

Moumei attempted to put down the traitorous Krahe, but his personal troops numbered only a few hundred—far fewer than the rebels supporting the traitor. Despite putting up a valiant fight, Moumei's forces were ultimately wiped out, becoming martyrs for their loyalty to Fuuga.

Meanwhile, Gimbal spoke with the people of the former Zem, and they decided to entrust the rule of their lands to Kuu Taisei of the Republic of Turgis. It was well-known that the Republic was already effectively administering the two cities they had taken from the former Zem, which encouraged the push to swear loyalty to the Republic. The people of Zem had always praised martial prowess and sought a spirited leader, so they were drawn to Kuu's charisma, which reminded them of Fuuga's.

"You opened your people's frozen hearts to the world. In the right situation, Sir Kuu, you might compete equally with Sir Fuuga or Sir Souma," Gimbal said.

"Ookya? You're overselling me a bit there, Old Man Gimbal," Kuu replied.

"No, I can see from the faces of the people of the Republic that I'm not. They're no longer depressed, as they once were; they're envisioning a bright future. Please use your talents to lead the people of Zem who have lost their way," Gimbal urged.

"Ookyakya... If you insist, then I'm gonna have to give it my best, huh?" Kuu accepted Gimbal's request.

The former territories of Zem were incorporated into the Republic, expanding Turgis's territory without any bloodshed. Zem was a mountainous land, not very fertile, but Kuu would rule it well by applying what he had learned about setting up transportation networks from the Kingdom of Friedonia.

Meanwhile, as the former Zem changed masters without turmoil, the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, which had also been subjugated by Fuuga, was thrown into utter disarray. The faction that had upheld Fuuga as a holy king consisted of those who had won the power struggle within the church and survived

numerous purges. However, with the loss of their standard-bearer, Fuuga, the faction could not maintain its authority. Those who had been suppressed as heretics regained their momentum and attacked the current establishment, sensing that the moment for vengeance had arrived. Thus, the storm of purges raged once more.

Many bishops who had supported Fuuga met bloody ends, and Saint Anne was imprisoned in a tower. She was spared execution so she could eventually be held accountable for her sins, and her death would symbolize the change in leadership for the believers. However, with the fall of Fuuga's supporters, no one remained in the Orthodox Papal State to restore calm amid the chaos. Massacres led to further massacres, and with no one able to distinguish between orthodox believers and heretics, the blood of bishops and followers was shed indiscriminately.

The ordinary citizens, weary of the violent power struggle, yearned for someone to quell the chaos. Their hopes turned towards Bishop Souji Lester and Saint Mary of Kingdom Orthodoxy, who held authority over Lunarian Orthodoxy in the Kingdom of Friedonia. Kingdom Orthodoxy had been labeled a heretical sect by the main church, but it remained a branch of Lunarian Orthodoxy, supported by Souma, who had opposed Fuuga. There was hope that Kingdom Orthodoxy's tolerant stance towards believers of other faiths could help restore order in the Orthodox Papal State and promote reconciliation.

While Souji was sluggish to act and showed little interest in the appeals from the people of the Orthodox Papal State, Mary was genuinely concerned for Anne's well-being.

"Please, Your Holiness! We must extend the hand of salvation to that girl before her heart is completely broken. She's like...another version of me, trapped alone in the darkness. If someone doesn't offer her their hand, she'll only sink further into it."

"Well...fine," he replied with a sigh.

After hearing Mary's desperate appeals, he reluctantly took action. Souji requested support from Souma, who agreed. Souji would return to his homeland with troops from the reconstituted House of Carmine.

Having demonstrated military superiority, he proclaimed, "Lay down your swords, and I shall lay down mine as well," assuring

everyone that the Kingdom Orthodoxy wouldn't suppress or conduct an inquisition against any other sect. This relieved the concerns of those who feared it would be a fight to the death, and the ensuing chaos began to subside.

"Anne! Pull yourself together, Anne," Mary urged.

"Auhhh..." came Anne's weak response.

Mary rescued Anne from the tower where she had been confined. Despite signs of malnutrition and dehydration, Anne was alive and was transferred into Mary's care upon her release. However, the one who had been supporting Anne's heart all this time, Fuuga, was dead. This left Anne to confront the murder and death she had long avoided, resulting in deep psychological scars. It was said that she was a complete wreck when they rescued her from the tower.

"Wah... Ahhhhh!" Anne screamed, plagued by nightmares.

"Anne! It's okay! You're going to be okay!" Mary reassured her, caring for her devotedly. While it was uncertain whether Anne's heart would ever heal, it was clear that Lunarian Orthodoxy would slowly begin to change from that moment on, with Souji at its center.

The Great Tiger Empire of Haan, the center of all this turmoil, had fractured into three factions.

The first faction was the Krahe Army, led by the man who had struck down Fuuga. He advocated for the continuation of Fuuga's expansionist policies, attracting those still under the illusion that the Great Tiger Empire was the most powerful nation on the continent of Landia. This faction grew large by absorbing rebels who harbored grudges against Fuuga, as well as mercenaries unwilling to accept the coming peace.

In opposition to them was the Resistance Army, which sought vengeance for Fuuga. This movement began when Lombard Remus and his wife, Yomi, returned to the Great Tiger Empire in a prisoner swap. They shut themselves in a castle in the former Frakt Federal Republic to express their intention to resist. Meanwhile, Shuukin and Lumiere, who had been suppressing rebels during the insurrection, gathered forces in the west of the Great Tiger Empire to defeat Krahe. Their strategy was to prepare while Lombard bought them time. However, faced with Krahe, who had amassed troops for various reasons, the Resistance Army could only rally those loyal to Fuuga or those

angry at Krahe, leaving them at a significant numerical disadvantage.

The third faction, by far the largest, consisted of fence-sitters. Many within the Great Tiger Empire were not neutral; they simply felt unable to act even if they wanted to. Uncertain of who could lead the Empire without Fuuga, they sat back and waited to see how the conflict between the Krahe Army and the Resistance Army would unfold. The people of the Great Tiger Empire had grown accustomed to expanding under Fuuga's charismatic leadership, and many had not exercised their own will for a long time. This large number of fence-sitters made it difficult for the Resistance Army to gain troops and supplies, while simultaneously bolstering the Krahe Army, which demonstrated its own resolve.

In response to these challenges, Shuukin sent a request to the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan through Princess Elulu, while Lumiere cast away her shame and apologized to Jeanne for her past transgressions in hopes of securing her support.

And so, that brought us to the present situation, as the turmoil within the Great Tiger Empire was deepening. I had received a report that Kasen, a commander in the Great Tiger Empire, had arrived at Parnam Castle carrying Fuuga's orphaned child, Suiga. I met with him in the audience chamber, accompanied by Liscia, Yuriga, and Ichiha.

Standing beside me as I sat on the throne, Yuriga glanced at me sideways. I had been too busy to see her on the day we learned of Fuuga's possible fate, but Maria told me that when Yuriga heard Fuuga was missing and possibly dead, she hadn't cried herself to sleep; she simply refused to believe it.

"My brother would never die in an insurrection by his own retainers. Even if I assume this report is accurate...he must have decided it was too much effort to keep ruling and faked his death to let someone else take over... I'm sure that's it," she had said while reassuring Liscia and the others, who were worried about her.

Even now, with Suiga right in front of her, Yuriga might have appeared tense, but there was no anger or sadness in her expression. Even if she was putting on a brave face, I found that impressive.

While still concerned about her in the back of my mind, I opened my mouth to speak. "I'm glad you've come, Sir Kasen."

“Yes, let me thank you…for taking in the young master and me,” Kasen, who was kneeling before me, said as he bowed his head deeply.

Kasen was a young warrior and a celestial like Yuriga. I had seen him a number of times before. Despite his youth, he was one of the most courageous warriors in the Great Tiger Empire. He was carrying a baby under his arm; it was akin to the story of Zhao Yun during the Battle of Changban. Perhaps he would become a similarly great warrior one day.

“This is Sir Fuuga and Madam Mutsumi’s child?” I asked.

“Yes, this is Lord Suiga. I have come to entrust him to Lady Yuriga,” Kasen replied.

“Souma…” Yuriga said, her eyes pleading.

Sensing her feelings, I nodded. Yuriga rushed to Kasen’s side. Kneeling in front of him, she looked him straight in the eyes.

“Sir Kasen… Is my brother truly dead?” she asked.

“I’m terribly sorry, Lady Yuriga… I fled early on, carrying the young master, so I couldn’t stay with Lord Fuuga until the very end. I did see Sir Gaten risking his life to allow us to escape, though…” Kasen’s words were filled with regret.

Yuriga put her hand on his shoulder and then shook her head. “You did the best you could. That’s why this child is still alive. If my brother were here, I’m sure he would praise your admirable performance.”

“Lady Yuriga…” he murmured.

“Can I hold the baby?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Go ahead.”

Yuriga took Suiga from Kasen and held him in her arms. As one of the queens, she had cared for Stella before and knew how to handle a baby.



We all felt emotions welling up inside us as we watched Yuriga hold the child that Fuuga and Mutsumi had left behind.

Then Kasen took a letter out of his pocket and offered it to Yuriga. “This is for King Souma. A message from Lord Fuuga.”

“From my brother?” Taking the letter, Yuriga returned with Suiga still in her arms. I accepted the letter from her.

It was hastily written and said:

“To Souma and Yuriga. I’m leaving Suiga and the country to you. So long as you treat Suiga well, I’ll never show my face on the world stage again—whether I’m living or dead.”

“Yeah, that’s just like Fuuga...” Selfish to the bitter end, for better or worse, he was always true to himself. The letter had no air of tragedy about it and even made me think he had decided that living was too much effort, so he’d let it be thought he was dead and pushed everything off on us.

As I scowled, Liscia asked, “What do you plan to do from here on, Sir Kasen?”

Kasen’s eyes grew sharp. “I’ll slay the traitorous Krahe. Sir Shuukin is still alive and well, as are others, so I am certain they will rise to strike Krahe down. I think I will join them.”

“It’s true that we have reports of Sir Shuukin and Madam Lumiere gathering forces in the west of the Empire,” Liscia said, looking at me. I nodded in agreement.

“Sir Kasen, the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom has regularly scheduled flights from Parnam Castle to Valois, the capital of the Euphoria Kingdom. It would be safer for you to take a personnel gondola to Valois and then travel north from there. I’ll approve it, so please use that route.”

“Incredible! You have my thanks!” Kasen repeatedly expressed his gratitude before leaving the audience chamber.

I then looked at little Suiga, who had been left behind, cradled in Yuriga’s arms.

“Now, as for the child...”

“This child is mine,” Yuriga said before I could finish, turning away from me as if to protect Suiga. “I’ll raise him as my own! So please, spare him!”

“Settle down, Yuriga. We’re not going to harm the child.” Liscia walked over and hugged Yuriga around the shoulders.

At that moment, Ichiha, who had been quiet until now, placed his hand over his forehead and let out a small sigh. “As acting prime minister, I should probably point out the danger of letting

this child live… But I just can't do that. After all, he's Big Sister Mutsumi's child."

Oh, right. Suiga isn't just Yuriga's nephew; he's also Ichiha's.

"If Mr. Hakuya were here…maybe he'd argue that we shouldn't let him live."

"He might have said that, but those would just be words," I replied with a wry smile. "He offers that kind of painful advice because he knows that Liscia and I would reject it to avoid making Yuriga sad."

"That's right," Liscia said, patting Yuriga on the shoulder. "This isn't a burden you have to bear alone. You have a large family, many of whom have experience raising children, so you can relax and rely on us for support, okay?"

"Lady Liscia…" Yuriga wiped the tears from her eyes and responded energetically, "I will!"

Liscia nodded in satisfaction before turning to me. "Now then, Souma, what are we going to do? Should we stay out of the Empire's internal affairs?"

"Nah." I shook my head. "I talked it over with Hakuya, and if there's chaos in the north, we risk returning to the situation we faced when it was the Demon Lord's Domain. If the civil war drags on, it could create new waves of refugees, meaning our country would be affected as well. We need to find a way to resolve the situation quickly without leaving the north in turmoil."

"And what were you thinking of?"

"We crush the Krahe Army. Thoroughly."

Without a charismatic leader, the Great Tiger Empire of Haan would soon fragment. But I wasn't about to let a scenario like the Wars of the Diadochi unfold. Although it meant interfering in another country's affairs, the existence of Suiga and Fuuga's message entrusting his country to me provided a just cause. We would work with Shuukin and the Resistance Army to crush Krahe with all our might. There was no way I would allow this to devolve into a time of troubles.

Krahe, you bastard. You'd better get ready. He would pay for making my family cry.



Chapter 10: The Curtain Closes on an Era

—One month after the Great Tiger Castle Incident.

The Krahe Army had grown to fifty thousand men by absorbing those dissatisfied with Fuuga—individuals who couldn't let go of their pride in being the largest nation on the continent—along with others driven by ambition. They were now attacking the castle where Lombard and Yomi had sought refuge.

Though the castle only had two or three thousand defenders, Lombard and Yomi were putting up a valiant fight against the fierce assault of the Krahe Army. However, they were hopelessly outnumbered and gradually being pushed back. It seemed that the castle would soon fall, but then Shuukin, Kasen, and Lumiere of the Resistance Army arrived with twenty thousand men after receiving support from the Euphoria Kingdom.

Despite the Krahe Army's overwhelming numerical advantage, the wise and brave Shuukin wasn't a man they could deal with while distracted, so they suspended their assault on the castle to confront his forces first. Seeing the Krahe Army preparing for battle, Shuukin and the others hesitated to attack due to their smaller numbers. If they lost Lombard and Yomi, the Resistance Army would lose momentum, risking even more defections. That's why they wanted to free the castle quickly; however, a careless attack could lead to greater losses than they would inflict on the enemy, obstructing their path to the plains, where the decisive battle was anticipated.

With a tense expression, Shuukin looked towards the castle where Lombard and the others were located.

"Time is on our side, but it's still frustrating..." he remarked.

"You're right... As painful as it is, we probably have to wait for now," Lumiere replied.

Both Shuukin and Lumiere prayed that Lombard, whom they couldn't contact, wouldn't do anything rash as they awaited their opportunity.

Meanwhile, the Krahe Army grew annoyed by the way the Resistance Army was suspiciously observing them from a distance. The Resistance reinforcements had arrived in the evening, and as night fell, the Krahe Army stood guard, wary of a potential night raid by Shuukin's forces or an escape attempt by Lombard's group under the cover of darkness.

As dawn broke, the impatient Krahe was preparing to resume his assault on the castle to lure in Shuukin's forces when a messenger rushed into the main camp.

"I come with a report! The forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia have invaded the Great Tiger Empire! They number nearly a hundred thousand and are advancing west towards this battlefield!"

This news agitated the commanders of the Krahe Army.

"The Kingdom of Friedonia?! You're saying King Souma has come to attack us?!"

"That slow turtle has never interfered in another country's affairs before, so why now?!"

"Has he moved to take the Great Tiger Kingdom for himself now that Fuuga Haan is gone?!"

Amid the speculation, one relatively calm individual asked the messenger, "How is a force of only a hundred thousand managing to advance westward through the Great Tiger Empire, which boasts a total strength of four hundred thousand men? I know there have been a lot of fence-sitters, but shouldn't they have faced resistance from the lords whose lands they passed through?"

There was considerable distance between the Kingdom of Friedonia and this castle in the former Frakt Federal Republic. Unlike the Krahe Army or the Resistance Army, the Kingdom's forces were foreign to the people of the Great Tiger Empire. Few lords would simply allow them to pass, and they should have faced challenges securing their supply lines, even with the Kingdom's large-scale freight technologies like the rhinosaurus train.

The messenger shook his head. "The Kingdom's forces have brought Yuriga Haan with them, and she has made a statement to the lords of each domain, requesting that they let them pass without interference."

Yuriga said things like:

"The Kingdom of Friedonia has taken Fuuga Haan's son,

Suiga, under their protection."

"I, Yuriga, will slay the traitorous Krahe in Suiga's stead."

"This is a war of vengeance against Duke Krahe."

"My husband Souma has no territorial ambitions."

With these assurances, she successfully persuaded the lords to let them pass unimpeded. Fuuga's sister, Yuriga, aimed to take down his slayer, Krahe, and to that end, she had brought troops from the country she had married into. If she made this clear, the lords who supported the Resistance Army would welcome her with open arms. This support would allow the Kingdom of Friedonia to tip the scales decisively in favor of the Resistance Army, encouraging those lords to join forces with them.

Moreover, even lords who favored Krahe could not risk the wrath of a hundred thousand troops if they refused passage, so they would still allow the Kingdom's forces through. The same logic applied to the overwhelmingly more common fence-sitters. The size of Souma's forces was impressive; he had left Liscia and Excel to watch the home front but had taken his best troops with him. While his army was large enough to defeat the Krahe Army, it wouldn't be sufficient to confidently seize territory from the Great Tiger Empire, which supported his claim of having no territorial ambitions.

"Damn it! If we could just take the castle before reinforcements arrive..." someone spat venomously.

For the Krahe Army to stand any chance of victory, they first needed to capture the castle where Lombard was holed up and then take down Shuukin and his reinforcements. Once the resistance was eliminated, the fence-sitters would lean towards supporting the Krahe Army, and the Kingdom's forces wouldn't be able to advance smoothly with only a hundred thousand men.

However, this was all wishful thinking. Because...

"Sir Shuukin and his men must have known the Kingdom would be coming..." Krahe murmured, drawing every eye towards him. "While Sir Shuukin should want to save Sir Lombard, he hasn't moved proactively to do so. That's partly because they are the smaller force, but I'm sure they are also waiting for the Kingdom's forces to arrive. They must have coordinated in advance."

"Th-Then what are we supposed to do about it?" one panicked commander asked Krahe, who seemed unconcerned by the situation.

Krahe smiled slightly. “We have no choice but to break our siege on the castle and pull our troops back to a position where we can meet their forces.”

“Y-You can’t mean that! You do realize that the Kingdom and the Resistance Army outnumber us three to one, right?!”

“And what of it?” Krahe replied, his expression calm. “We defeated Fuuga Haan, the mightiest and most invincible man to have ever lived. Is there anyone among our enemies who is more formidable than him?”

The crowd was silent, awaiting his next words.

“Souma? Sir Shuukin? Those men are nothing compared to Lord Fuuga. Even if they have numbers on their side, a fighter like Souma, who could never rival Lord Fuuga, won’t pose a real threat. We can simply knock him aside. Besides, we can’t be sure how well the Resistance Army and the Kingdom’s forces can coordinate their actions anyway.”

“”””Yeah!!!”””

Everyone cheered at Krahe’s declaration. They felt proud to have been the ones to strike down Fuuga.

The guilt of having slain their own master left them with no way to escape their actions, while the thrill of having defeated a great man inflated their sense of self-worth. People tended to interpret events in the way that was most convenient for them.

Krahe’s assertion that they were the strongest resonated with his troops. Deep down, however, he felt differently. Everything he had just said was merely a way to motivate the men; it didn’t reflect his true thoughts.

The actors are coming on their own. Surely, this is the role heaven has bestowed upon me, he mused as he moved his troops to meet Souma’s forces, all the while wearing a bold smile. *Lady Maria had lost her radiance as the Saint of the Empire, but she regained it when I became her enemy. Now she is earning the respect of the people in the Kingdom of Friedonia. By removing Fuuga from the stage during his time of stagnation, I’ve set the Great Tiger Empire back into motion. Now, great leaders like Souma and Sir Shuukin are gathering to strike me down. I knew it would come to this. By embracing evil, I have ignited the fervor of this era.*

For Krahe, his victory or defeat in this battle was irrelevant. He believed it was his divine mission to prolong the times of war and chaos, as these periods held great potential for stories.

Maria, the empress he had once adored, had thrown away her

position, and Fuuga had fallen into stagnation after his fight with the Maritime Alliance. To Krahe, who had once burned with passion playing a role in their tales of greatness, this had felt like a betrayal that shattered him. He might have appeared tempted by the words of others, but in reality, he had simply allowed the dangerous thoughts that he was born with to flourish. His nature would never permit him to accept an era of peace.

Now, kings and heroes! Energize this era as you strive to defeat me! Krahe fully embraced his role as the Demon Lord and reveled in it.

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"Julius. I have a request."

"Hmm? What is it?"

Before the battle, I reached out to my strategist, Julius. He seemed momentarily taken aback by my request and stared at me in surprise.

"You're serious...?"

"Yeah. We can't let him run free."

"I understand that, but still..."

Noticing his frown, I sighed and added, "I know I'm causing you grief, but there's no one else I can trust with this."

"Well, we couldn't ask for a better outcome..." he replied.

"Of course, you'll have my full cooperation. So please...take care of it."

"All right..."

Julius nodded and then left the army with his best men.

This all happened yesterday.

Now, as we stood atop a small hill overlooking the main camp, our combined forces, along with Shuukin's, were engaged in an intense battle against the Krahe Army. Next to me stood Yuriga, her eyes fixed on the battlefield. Her expression was serious, devoid of any anger or sadness.

That actually worried me more, so I asked, "Is everything okay, Yuriga?"

"How so...?" she replied, her tone impassive. I wasn't sure how to respond.

If she was forcing herself to maintain a strong facade, it might be best to leave her alone; if she was on the verge of collapsing, I should support her.

Should I extend my hand or pretend not to see her struggle? I didn't know which would be kinder, so I simply said what was on my mind. "Well… I was thinking you may want to avenge him yourself…"

At my words, her expression darkened. "Frankly, I don't care. Obviously, I can't let Krahe get away with what he did; he has to atone for his treason with his death. Honestly, it would piss me off if that was enough for his atonement. I wish he'd just go die in a ditch somewhere. But I haven't been thinking of killing him with my own hands or anything like that. For me, protecting Suiga, as my brother asked, is far more important than risking my life against a worthless guy like that."

"Oh…"

She wanted to kill Krahe, not out of vengeance, but likely to keep Suiga safe. If Krahe were allowed to survive, there was no telling when he might pose a threat to Suiga. I could easily imagine him abducting the kid to use as a figurehead.

Perhaps sensing my tension, Yuriga leaned closer to me. I wrapped a reassuring arm around her shoulders.

"Don't worry. I've brought some of my best troops. I can guarantee they'll handle Krahe."

Liscia, Juna, and Excel had stayed behind to hold down the fort, but I had brought along some of the finest, including Aisha, Naden, Ludwin, Hal, Ruby, Kaede, and Mio. These were the trusty retainers who had successfully repelled the forces of the Great Tiger Empire under Fuuga, so they wouldn't falter against a pissant like Krahe.

Yuriga nodded in agreement.

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The Friedonian military, led by Souma, and the Resistance Army, led by Shuukin, were significantly superior to the Krahe Army in terms of the number and quality of soldiers, officers, armaments, supplies, and nearly every other measurable aspect. The fact that even Fuuga Haan, with all the might of his empire, had been unable to secure a victory against the Kingdom of Friedonia spoke to their true power. With Krahe, a mere commander, and the forces under his control, their chances of defeating the Friedonian forces were slim.

However, the Krahe Army had just defeated Fuuga and were

now considered traitors by the Great Tiger Empire. Their future depended on winning this battle. If they failed, the ringleaders would be held accountable for the crime of regicide, and the loyal retainers, led by Shuukin, would ensure they faced a bloody end. In short, they had their backs against the wall.

"Forward! We are the ultimate army that killed Fuuga!"

"Souma? Shuukin? Who are they before us?!"

"We will slay Souma and carve another great deed next to our names in the annals of history!"

The morale of the Krahe Army was high, and they remained resolute despite the odds stacked against them.

The soldiers of the Kingdom, confident in their victory, were more cautious with their lives and less eager to fight than the death-crazed warriors on the other side. If the Krahe Army had boasted a great man like Fuuga among them, they might have seized the opportunity to turn the tide. But this was an era that lacked the need for great men.

"Hyahhh!!!"

Slash!

""""Ahhhhh!""""

The muscle-bound battle maniac Nata swung his favorite great ax, mowing down the Kingdom's soldiers. It didn't matter if they carried shields or wore armor; a single strike from Nata's ax sent them flying.

"Ga ha ha! This is how a fight oughta be!" Nata shouldered his ax with a jovial laugh.

Nata had joined Krahe to keep fighting powerful opponents, insisting on proving his martial prowess strictly against his fellow man. He yearned for a return to chaos, so he could continue fighting. In that regard, this situation was exactly what he had been waiting for. It mattered little to him whether they were at a disadvantage or whether they won or lost. What truly mattered was having enemies in front of him to kill. That was the only thing that gave his life meaning.

"Come on! Bleed more and entertain me!"

Nata's great ax swung down towards a soldier who had collapsed in fear before his terrifying presence, but then something unexpected happened.

"Hmm? What?"

For a brief moment, the area grew dark as Nata's hand halted mid-swing. He glanced up to see a large, black squiggly shape

pass overhead—Souma's second secondary queen, Naden. She blocked out the sun as she flew by. And then...

"Huh?!"

Slam! Nata instinctively jumped back just as a dark elf warrior woman descended from the sky, driving her greatsword into the ground where he had just stood. The impact left a deep gash in the earth, creating a wide indentation around it. She stood ready to strike, her greatsword raised. It was Aisha, Souma's second primary queen, who had evidently leapt off Naden's back.

Aisha pulled her sword from the ground and glared at Nata. "So you're Nata? The beast who continues to spread violence and shed blood."

"A dark elf... Oh, I know you. You're one of that weakling king's wives." Nata leveled his great ax at Aisha. "If he's hiding in camp while you defend him, that bastard isn't worthy of being called a man."

"Watch your tongue!"

Her shout rippled through the air, causing Nata to gulp involuntarily.

Gone was the disappointing dark elf who devoured Souma's cooking with reckless abandon, blushed when teased by Excel, and wagged her tail for her beloved Souma with unfaltering loyalty. Now, she bore the fierce resolve of a warrior, her murderous intent so palpable it could be felt on the skin. This was Aisha, the mightiest warrior in the Kingdom.

"A savage like you cannot understand the strength and kindness of His Majesty, who bears the weight of the country. With so many intelligent brothers and sisters, how is it that you were born a beast?"

"Shut your mouth! I'll sever your head and toss it at Souma later!"

"Sir Ichiha's brother or not, I'll show you no mercy. Here I come!"

Nata's great ax clashed with Aisha's greatsword. *Clang!!! Clang!!!*

There was a reason Nata had earned his reputation for incredible strength; each strike of his ax against Aisha's sword generated an explosive sound that reverberated across the battlefield.

Soldiers from both armies, witnessing this horrifying spectacle, stopped fighting and cowered. Amid the chaos, Nata

wore a ferocious grin as they exchanged blows.

"Well, how do ya like that?! I'm gonna go even harder! Entertain me more!"

Meanwhile, Aisha's gaze was icy. She had indulged Nata for a while, but eventually sighed. "You're no good... You don't know what you're doing."

"What?!"

"You're not only inferior to Sir Fuuga, but you also fall short compared to anyone I've faced."

Aisha recalled the fierce opponents she had battled before. The brilliance of Liscia, with whom she had sparred countless times to support Souma. The stubbornness of Castor, who had fought valiantly while upholding his friendship with Georg and his warrior ideals, pushing himself beyond his limits until it had taken both her and Liscia to defeat him. Mio's earnest technique, which she had showcased in a martial arts tournament to uncover the truth about her father, Georg. And then there was Fuuga Haan, whose overwhelming power and technique had made her question, for the first time, whether she could defeat someone. Each of these memories was etched deeply in her mind, yet Nata's technique stirred no such feelings.

"You have *nothing*. You throw around violence like a baby tosses anything within reach. I feel nothing when I fight you."

"What kind of nonsense are you spewing?!"

"I'm saying I'll forget my fight with you in no time!"

With that, Aisha unleashed a kick into Nata's abdomen.

"Gugh...!"

A look of anguish crossed Nata's face, but he quickly recovered... *Stab!*

"Gwagh?!"

"So... Go to sleep."

Aisha's greatsword rammed through Nata's chest. She slowly pulled her sword out of him, then wiped the blood from it. Nata, barely still on his feet, reached out towards her, but Aisha was already walking away, as if to say his life no longer mattered to her.

"Damn...it..." he breathed.

Treated like a weakling, Nata expired in a state of stunned confusion.

Meanwhile, around the same time that Nata fell...

The Krahe Army had been holding on tenaciously, but their accumulating exhaustion was pushing them back. Unlike the Kingdom's forces, which could afford to give their soldiers time to rest and recover thanks to ample personnel and provisions, the Krahe Army had been engaged in constant fighting with no opportunity for rotation.

"Let's show these upstarts who rules the skies, Ruby!"

"Sure thing!" Ruby inhaled sharply and then unleashed a "Roarrrrr!!!"

Bwooooooosh!

"Arghhhhhh!"

"Hot! Hot!"

Halbert and Ruby, the Kingdom's sole dragon knight pair, were holding their own against the griffon cavalry. While the griffon riders could make tighter turns, Ruby's fiery breath was intensely hot, incinerating any griffon riders that attempted to surround her. They acted like a fixed gun emplacement in the sky, hovering in place and breathing fire to take down the enemy's aerial cavalry one after another, like moths drawn to a flame. However, Halbert and Ruby were not the only threat to the griffon cavalry.

"How careless of them not to be on guard against us!"

"The House of Magna isn't the only one guarding the Kingdom's skies!"

As the griffon cavalry struggled to engage Halbert and Ruby, the wyvern cavalry equipped with propulsion devices charged in, led by Castor and Carla. They flew in formation, rapidly closing the distance and employing hit-and-run tactics that the griffon cavalry could not effectively counter. The Krahe air forces continued to suffer losses.

Meanwhile, Castor smirked. "How one-sided. Is this really all their air force can do without Fuuga and Durga?"

"Um, Father. It was crazy that he could handle our attacks in the first place."

In response to his daughter's verbal jab, Castor laughed and conceded, "Fair enough."

Thus, Krahe's vaunted griffon cavalry were defeated by the dragon knight tag team of Halbert and Ruby, along with the propulsion device-equipped wyvern cavalry led by Castor and Carla.

At the same time, on the ground, the Krahe Army was being surrounded by forces commanded by Ludwin and Kaede.

“There’s no need to rush! Our forces hold an overwhelming advantage in both manpower and equipment over the Krahe Army! Don’t overextend yourselves; instead, steadily wear down the enemy, like peeling away the layers of an onion!”

With precise commands, Kaede continued to press the Krahe Army, which found itself trapped with no way out. However, if they gambled on a desperate charge to try to recover...

“The enemy is coming out... Men, strike that unit in the flanks!”

“”””Yes, sir!”””

The royal cavalry, led by Ludwin, charged into the advancing unit and quickly pulverized them. Although Ludwin was the commander of an entire army, he often left command to Kaede to seize the opportunity to crush the enemy directly.

The Kingdom of Friedonia had many capable leaders. Yet, there was no confusion in the chain of command. By strategically employing numerous individuals and leveraging their strengths for the country—sometimes in ways even Souma hadn’t envisioned—the military of Friedonia reflected the nation itself. They utilized an organizational structure akin to mission-type tactics, allowing each individual the freedom to make decisions while occasionally coordinating with others to achieve operational objectives. There was no one in the Krahe Army who could effectively counter such an unconventional force.

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In the main camp of the Kingdom of Friedonia’s forces, it was already clear to everyone who would win this fight. Shuukin and Lumiere arrived at the camp where Yuriga and I were located.

“I am so sorry, Lady Yuriga!” The moment Shuukin entered the camp and saw her face, he dropped to his knees, pressing his forehead and fists against the ground. “I was unable to protect my master, and my friend—who was also your brother. I failed to avenge him, yet I continue to live on in shame! No words can express my contrition!” He spat the words out as if expelling his own blood.

“Sir Shuukin...” Yuriga knelt in front of him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m just glad you survived. We don’t know if my

brother is still alive, but thanks to Sir Kasen, Suiga is. My brother and his wife's legacy lives on. Given the burden on young Suiga's shoulders, he needs as many loyal retainers as possible."

"Lady Yuriga... I'm so sorry..." he murmured as Yuriga consoled him.

As I watched them, Lumiere also knelt and bowed her head. "Sir Souma, we are truly grateful for your assistance."

I hesitated for a moment before replying, "The chaos in the north affects us all. There's nothing we'd like more than to see a speedy resolution to this."

When she raised her head, our eyes met.

"Lumiere, regarding how we'll handle things moving forward..."

"I know. We'll leave everything to you, Sir Souma. As the one who incited Krahe and awakened the insanity within him, I have no right to dictate the course of this era."

"I see..."

The weight of regret was almost crushing for Lumiere, so I kept my response brief. I had previously informed Shuukin and Lumiere about how the Great Tiger Empire would be treated after this battle. It might have been harsh for them, but it was impossible to keep the vast Great Tiger Empire under the will of a single person any longer. The infant Suiga couldn't possibly bear that burden.

I looked out at the battlefield, where the Krahe Army was retreating in defeat.

"This...will put an end to it."

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The Krahe Army collapsed.

Krahe Laval, their commander in chief, retreated from the battlefield with a small contingent of his best troops, while the rest of his forces were encircled by the Kingdom and faced the grim choice of death or surrender. By evening, the battle was decided. Night fell, and Krahe escaped through a narrow mountain pass.

Yes! This is good! The era can still get even more heated!

Despite his defeat, he almost looked happy. Krahe had embraced his role as the Demon Lord destined to add color to this era. He had no intention of falling gloriously in battle.

Instead, he planned to survive by crawling through the muck, viewing it as his mission to prolong this time of turmoil—during which saints and heroes could distinguish themselves—for as long as possible. That was why he would endure and create new battlefields, again and again.

"This is the task the heavens have bestowed upon me! I will return to this stage once more!"

"I won't let you do that."

"Huh?!"

He was startled, unsure where the voice had come from.

Whish, whish, whish... In an instant, he heard a flurry of objects slicing through the air. It was raining arrows. The sudden barrage pierced Krahe's men, and he was thrown from his horse onto the soft, rain-soaked ground.

Krahe looked up, covered in mud, and saw a man clad in white standing before him. The man drew the sword at his hip and pointed it threateningly towards Krahe's throat.

"Don't drag the world into any more of your illusions." the man grunted.

"N-No... But my mission..."

"I told you that was an illusion."

The man's sword parted Krahe's head from his body, leaving an expression of shock frozen on Krahe's face as it fell to the ground. It was as if he had believed until the last moment that he "could never die in a place like this." As the man wiped the blood from his sword and sheathed it, his troops gathered around him.

One of the soldiers, a large man wearing a black tiger mask, spoke up.

"With this...it's over, Sir Julius."

Julius nodded, picked up Krahe's head, and handed it to the man in the black tiger mask. "Sir Kagetora, take the head and report to His Majesty."

"Understood. I'll ensure you are credited for the kill."

"Well, that's why I was positioned here."

This had been decided before the battle. Souma had ordered Julius to wait for Krahe along his expected escape route. Once the battle was decided, Julius adjusted his encirclement of the enemy to encourage Krahe to flee in this direction.

"I'll have you slay the enemy's commander in chief, Julius."

He had done everything for this moment.

Julius let out a sigh and smiled wryly. “When you consider what will happen next…it might have been easier to let someone else slay him in my place.”

“I understand the feeling. Now, I must be off.”

Julius watched quietly as Kagetora carried the head away. It was around the time the sky lightened and day broke.

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One night had passed since the battle with the Krahe Army. The rain that had begun to fall during the night had finally eased, leaving the dawn sky clear, although scattered clouds lingered.

Yuriga, Shuukin, Lumiere, and I had stayed up discussing the future of the Great Tiger Empire for so long that we were awake to witness this moment. Although we had emerged victorious against the Krahe Army, we still needed to pursue the remnants who had escaped and manage the prisoners, so we couldn’t grant the men any rest just yet.

As Aisha and Naden, who were standing guard, began to yawn, a messenger from the Kingdom’s military rushed in.

“I bring a report! Sir Julius has slain Krahe!” he exclaimed. “Sir Kagetora has arrived carrying the head, which he received from Sir Julius!”

His words dispelled the drowsiness from everyone who heard them.

Shuukin growled, “Krahe!” under his breath, while Lumiere closed her eyes in silence. Yuriga also closed her eyes, clasping her hands in front of her chest as if in prayer.

“It’s over now, Brother…” she murmured.

As for me…

It’s over…huh, I thought. I probably wore an expression of utter relief. It felt as though I had managed to bring this battle to a safe conclusion.

I told the messenger to summon Kagetora and then turned to Yuriga. Her face was a mosaic of emotions—part bitter, as if she had bitten into something unpleasant; part relieved, as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders; and part sorrowful, as if she were enduring a quiet sadness. It was a complex expression, difficult to decipher yet filled with meaning.

Before Kagetora arrived, I spoke to her. “Yuriga, do you want

to sit this one out for a while?"

"Huh...?"

Though Yuriga was athletic and probably way tougher than I was in a fight, she wasn't one to seek out battle. She had seen battlefields since her time in the Union of Eastern Nations and had undoubtedly encountered death before, but I doubted she had ever seen the severed head of an enemy general... When Kagetora entered, he would be bringing Krahe's head. Even if it was the head of her brother's killer, I didn't want Yuriga to witness it.

When I expressed my concern, Yuriga looked me straight in the eye and said, "No. I want to see it for myself. In my brother's stead."

I couldn't argue back with such directness. All I could do was reluctantly say, "You don't need to force yourself to."

Not long after, Kagetora appeared.

"This is the head of the enemy commander, Krahe, struck down by Sir Julius," he announced as he placed a wooden box on the ground.

It was a box designed so that all sides could be removed except for the bottom. He lifted the lid, revealing Krahe's head. They must have tidied it up after his death, as his eyes were closed, and I couldn't tell how he had met his end from the look on his face.

"Urgh..." Yuriga, sitting next to me, covered her mouth to suppress a groan.

I tried to tell her not to push herself... I'd have liked to think I had some experience with this, but it was still an unpleasant sight. She must have wanted to see this through for Fuuga's sake. Now that she had, there was no need for her to force herself to continue.

"Naden. Take Yuriga to get some rest."

"Roger that."

"I'm sorry..."

Yuriga left the room with Naden's help. The rest of us turned our attention to Krahe's head.

This was the kind of thing that posed nothing but a problem for those of us living in troubled times, yet people would get all excited about it when the story was told in future generations. Krahe had been entranced by the nature of stories and stirred up the world like some kind of trickster.

Similar to a great man like Fuuga, a man who played a role like Krahe had no place in the coming era. That was likely why he hadn't been able to accept me, who encouraged the change of the era, Maria, who went along with me, or Fuuga, who had accepted that times were changing. Thinking about it that way, maybe I could understand him a little...

No, I really can't understand him at all.

For me, family was paramount—my wives and children... I couldn't fathom a man so lost in his own illusions that he hurt those closest to him in reality. Some people were simply beyond understanding.

You wouldn't have wanted me to understand you anyway... Right, Krahe?

I looked coldly at Krahe's silent head. If Liscia, who was watching over Parnam, had been there, she might have offered me some comfort. I found myself missing her warmth and feeling a bit homesick.

Some time later, Julius returned and knelt before me.

"I have returned."

"Good work, Julius. Taking the enemy commander's head is the biggest accomplishment of them all."

"You're too kind."

I stood up and walked to his side, then tapped him on the shoulder to prompt him to raise his head. "I want to reward you. Is there anything you'd like to ask for?"

Julius looked straight into my eyes. "In that case, I wish to restore my wife's house."

"Hmm. Your wife was Madam Tia Lastania of the Kingdom of Lastania, if I recall correctly. So you're asking for the restoration of the Kingdom of Lastania?"

"Yes. I want my wife to return to her homeland as royalty."

"I see..."

Although we played out this scene, we had actually agreed beforehand that Julius would request the restoration of Lastania. Shuukin and Lumiere were also aware of this arrangement, which is why I had set things up for Julius to kill Krahe.

Under normal circumstances, this exchange wouldn't have been necessary. However, numerous guards and onlookers were present, and we needed to conduct ourselves appropriately for appearance's sake.

I patted Julius on the shoulder. “I’ve heard your wish, and I’ll do what I can to grant it.”

“Thank you.”

I added, “You must be tired. Take the rest of the day off,” and dismissed Julius.

Once Krahe’s head was taken away, I finally had a moment to rest.

I turned to Shuukin and Lumiere, who looked just as exhausted as I felt, and said, “It’s only going to get harder from here. More than half the continent has lost its master.”

“I know… We need to bring this chaos under control as soon as possible, but where do we even start?” Lumiere replied, pressing her hand against her forehead in dismay.

Shuukin sighed. “The Great Tiger Kingdom could only be maintained because Fuuga Haan was leading it. No one—not young Suiga or any of the remaining retainers—can rule it. If there is one man who could, it would be you, Lady Yuriga’s husband, who already controls the largest military on the continent…” he said, glancing in my direction.

Don’t be unreasonable, I thought, then replied, “No, I can’t just suddenly take on responsibility for a territory three times my country’s size. I’ve already received a request from Souji to quell the chaos in the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State. There’s no way I can look after the north too.”

“I’ll bet…” Lumiere said. “So… What’s to be done, then?”

All three of us sighed.

There was a mountain of tasks that needed addressing, but I knew what took priority. It was essential to prevent further chaos on the continent.

“Now then, there’s something we need to do first,” I said.

“Okay.”

“What might that be?”

Shuukin and Lumiere asked, looking at me.

I smiled. “Let’s gather all the sovereigns and heads of state of the southern hemisphere together.”

Epilogue: Reorganizing the Continent

About a month later, near Balm, the capital of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, in the royal castle of the dragon knights that was built into the mountainside…

In the meeting room there, a five-nation summit had been held to address the issue of magic bug syndrome. The representatives came from the Kingdom of Friedonia, the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan, the Gran Chaos Empire, the Republic of Turgis, and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom. Over the past month, the meeting room had been rapidly remodeled and expanded, transforming it into what could now be called a conference hall, although the round table in the center remained unchanged.

The attendees in the room included: myself and Liscia from the Kingdom of Friedonia; Queen Jeanne and her consort Hakuya from the Euphoria Kingdom; Kuu, the head of the Republic of Turgis, along with his wife Leporina who served as his bodyguard; Queen Shabon and her consort Kishun from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom; Grand Bishop Souji and former saint Mary from the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State; King Garula from the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, accompanied by Princess Elulu as the representative from the Father Island; Queen Sill from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom; Mao, the representative of the Seadians in the north; and Shuukin, Lumiere, and Lombard, who represented the remaining retainers of the Great Tiger Empire of Haan. Additionally, Julius was present as a representative of the Kingdom of Lastania, which I had promised to restore.

To summarize, representatives from every nation in the southern hemisphere—except for Lady Tiamat of the Star Dragon Mountain Range—were gathered in this room. It was an impressive assembly of important figures, and that might even have been an understatement given the significance of this gathering. If a bomb were to go off in that room, the ensuing chaos would have made the troubles we had faced before seem

insignificant in comparison.

To prevent such a disaster, this room was heavily guarded by security personnel from every country, as were the castle and the entire Dragon Knight Kingdom. Such a high level of security was necessary to accommodate the heads of all these nations in one location. Although discussions could have been conducted via broadcast, having all these leaders gathered together would convey to the people of the southern hemisphere that the decisions shaping the next era were being made by those present.

When the moment arrived, Sill, who occupied the chairperson's position, spoke up. "Now, we will begin the second Balm Summit."

Everyone present turned their attention to her. Sill had provided the location for this summit and was seen as a neutral party among all the nations involved, which is why she had been chosen to moderate. Although I had proposed the meeting, if I had taken on the role of moderator myself, it might have seemed like I was trying to follow in Fuuga's footsteps.

"Now then, Souma E. Friedonia, the one who called for this summit, please proceed."

"Right," I said as I stood up when Sill called on me. "First, I'd like to express my gratitude to the leaders of each country who responded to my call, especially given how busy we all are. I've gathered you here today to discuss how to govern and bring stability to the Great Tiger Empire and the world, now that Fuuga Haan is no longer with us... Madam Mao, if you would please."

Mao replied, "Okay," and as she did, a map of the southern hemisphere was projected in the middle of the conference room.

The leaders, who had been informed in advance about this, remained calm, while the guards oohed and aahed.

"In short, we're here today to reorganize the world," I said, pointing at the map. Then I clapped my hands together. "Now that I have taken time out of your busy schedules, we all know each other well enough, so let's skip the overly wordy formalities. I'd like you all to speak freely."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

I continued, "To begin, let's address the easiest issues first. Our first topic is...the Republic of Turgis."

"Ookya? You're starting with us?" Kuu asked, tilting his head to the side. I nodded in response.

“The Republic of Turgis recently annexed the region of the Great Tiger Empire which used to be the Mercenary State of Zem, right?”

“Y-Yeah. But don’t go telling us to give it back, okay? Old Man Gimbal was put in charge of the territory by Moumei, the former viceroy, and he entrusted it to us because he believed we could govern it well. I know we’re bros and all, but no other country has any say in this.”

Kuu looked upset. *Does he think I’m going to ask him to return the territory? How’d he jump to that conclusion?*

“I said we’d start with the easier decisions first, didn’t I? Not only do I have no objections, but the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Euphoria Kingdom will also support your acquisition of the territory. Isn’t that right, Jeanne?”

I glanced over at her, and she nodded in agreement.

“Yes. The people of the Zem Region were the ones who requested the annexation, so even if my sister’s Mankind Declaration were still in effect, we wouldn’t be able to condemn you for it. If you can provide stability to that region, which has experienced too many changes in rulers, it would be a welcome development for my country as well.”

“There you have it. If our countries, which share borders with you, support it, then I don’t think any other country will object. Am I right?”

I looked at the other participants, who responded with a resounding “No objections.”

Kuu’s eyes widened in surprise at how easily his annexation had been accepted. “Hold on, we’ve got a border with the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State as well. Are you okay with this, Old Man Souji?”

When Kuu directed the question to Souji, he scratched his shaved head thoughtfully.

“I don’t really care. This is something I’ll discuss later, but my country is too much of a mess internally for me to govern right now… The Republic can do what it wants.”

“You heard the man, Kuu. Any other concerns?” I asked.

Kuu finally accepted the situation and shook his head. “No, I don’t have any. We’ll take good care of the Zem Region,” he declared, thumping his chest with one hand. But then… “Just one thing, Madam Jeanne,” he added hesitantly, looking in her direction.

“Hmm? What is it?” Jeanne asked, tilting her head to the side.

Kuu clapped his hands together in front of his face. “Please, let us borrow your Drill Princess. Zem has a lot of mountains, and the land isn’t very fertile, but if we can drill tunnels through the mountains, we can develop it into a transportation hub. This’ll help drive trade between the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Euphoria Kingdom too. I don’t think it’s a bad offer, so how about it?”

Jeanne glanced to the side to gauge Hakuya’s reaction. He smiled gently and nodded. Seeing this, Jeanne turned back to Kuu and did the same.

“Understood,” she said. “Please, feel free to work her as hard as you like.”

“Ookyakya! I really appreciate it! I’m also planning to station Nike in the Zem Region. He’ll look after her, so there’s no need to worry.”

It seemed the Republic had sorted out their business. Now, it was time to move on to the next place.

“Next is the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan. What do you want to discuss?”

Currently, the administration of the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan was divided between the conservatives of the Mother Island and the liberals and reformists of the Father Island, the latter of whom had allied with the Great Tiger Empire. However, as part of international measures to combat magic bug syndrome, the high elves of the Mother Island had also begun embracing reform and liberalization. Meanwhile, the Father Island had lost the support of their backer, the Great Tiger Empire. Additionally, the leaders, King Garula and Princess Elulu, had developed a good relationship. Because of their distance from my country, I had little choice but to let them handle their own affairs, but…what decision had they come to?

Garula signaled to Elulu with his eyes and began speaking in a slow, relaxed manner.

“The Spirit Kingdom of Garlan will shift away from our previous policy of isolationism. From now on, we will actively seek to engage with other countries. With this change, the Mother Island is prepared to welcome high elves from the Father Island. Our two islands have become one nation once more.”

“From this point forward, we will establish relations with any country! And since they’re our closest neighbors, we’d like to get

along with the Great Tiger Empire. Right, Lord Shuukin?" Elulu said with a cheerful wink in his direction.

Shuukin smiled wryly at her enthusiasm. Just as the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan seemed to conclude, we were preparing to move on to the next subject when Souji raised his hand.

"Sorry, but could we discuss the Orthodox Papal State next?" he asked.

"Well... I'm unsure whether to address you or the Great Tiger Empire first," I admitted.

"I think it's better if everyone is aware of what's happening with us first," Souji replied, then looked around at each of the leaders before continuing. "I mentioned this before, but the Orthodox Papal State is currently in turmoil due to constant purges. This is the consequence of treating our political opponents as heretics and subjecting them to inquisitions and suppression. Mary and I have put an end to the worst of it, but even with the Kingdom of Friedonia's support, the country remains ungovernable as it stands."

Everyone listened quietly as Souji spoke. He was about to announce the decision he'd reached after a long discussion with me and Hakuya.

"So, here's what I propose. I plan to separate the church and state in the Lunarian Orthodoxy. The capital, Yumuen, and the immediate surrounding area will be designated as a domain under the control of the Lunarian Orthodox papacy, which will function as the world headquarters of the faith. The rest of the country will be ceded to the Kingdom of Friedonia."

"And that's the proposal that Souji made to me," I said, speaking after Souji finished. His idea was to reduce the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State to a city-state, similar to the Vatican, which would maintain enough authority to appease the faithful while stepping back from international power struggles. He was also trying to ensure that we would look after the people and land he would be leaving behind.

Geographically, it could just as easily have gone to the Euphoria Kingdom, but the people of the Orthodox Papal State held lingering hostility towards them from when Maria was Empress, complicating that option. To be perfectly frank, it was a huge pain in the butt for us.

There was considerable risk involved in acquiring territory with so many fervent believers. With Souji's assistance, we had

managed to create an atmosphere of religious tolerance within the Kingdom of Friedonia, but it was uncertain whether the people of the Orthodox Papal State would be able to adapt to that. The key would be whether we could soothe their hearts, as we had done in the former Principality of Amidonia. I would need to be very careful how I ruled there.

That said, if I refused to help and left them to fend for themselves, there was no telling when Lunarian Orthodoxy might cause us trouble again. I looked at the other participants.

"I intend to accept his proposal, but I realize that any further territorial gains will limit my ability to act. Therefore, we're surrendering all the land we took within the Great Tiger Empire, with the exception of key areas like the port city, which was handed over to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom."

Shabon nodded, as I had already discussed this with her.

"Huh?! You're giving up the steppe region of Malmkhitan?"

"But if you do that..." Shuukin murmured.

Lumiere's and Shuukin's expressions showed a complex mix of emotions. The eastern territories of the Great Tiger Empire were lands we had taken following a direct confrontation between our two nations. Normally, returning such territory would be seen as a positive development for the Great Tiger Empire, but they no longer had the strength to maintain such a vast nation. It would only add to their burdens.

Regardless, Souji's proposal faced no opposition and was approved. This left us to address the most pressing issue—how to manage the situation with the Great Tiger Empire.

"That leaves us with the Great Tiger Empire. Fuuga Haan's remaining retainers, his younger sister Yuriga, and I, her husband, have already discussed this matter. It's impossible to rule such a vast empire without the charisma of someone like Fuuga or Maria. Even if it were possible, maintaining it as a massive nation could lead to the rulers and people becoming arrogant over time, potentially causing new troubles for their smaller neighbors. This is something we must avoid." I took a breath to steady myself and then looked straight ahead as I said, "The Great Tiger Empire will be divided into three parts."

"Divided...you say?" Shabon asked, her eyes widening.

I nodded at her and then called out to Mao. "Madam Mao, please bring up the map."

"Understood," she replied.

As Mao raised her hands, a map of the Great Tiger Empire appeared above our heads. I pointed to the map, and two lines were drawn, splitting the country into three regions.

I looked at Shuukin and Lumiere. “I’ll ask the representatives from the Great Tiger Empire to explain things from here.”

“”Right,”” they both replied, nodding.

Shuukin was the first to speak. “As already mentioned, Lord Fuuga’s heir, Lord Suiga, is still young and cannot bear the burden of ruling a vast country. Thus, we will divide the Great Tiger Empire into three regions—east, west, and center. We will appoint a king to rule each region. I’ll start with the west. This land, which includes the former territories of the Gran Chaos Empire and is closest to the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, will become the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan, ruled by Lord Suiga.”

The words “Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan” appeared on the map. With this size reduction, the region would revert from an empire back to a kingdom, as it once was.

Shuukin continued, “Lord Suiga will be king, but given his young age, he cannot manage the important affairs of state. There is a possibility that someone may attempt to manipulate him. Therefore, until he comes of age, Lady Yuriga and the Kingdom of Friedonia will watch over him. During this time, Madam Lumiere and I will protect the country, and Lord Suiga will ascend to the throne when he comes of age.”

This decision strongly reflected Yuriga’s wishes. She wanted her older brother’s orphaned son to grow up in a relaxed environment while he was still a child. We had reached this decision in hopes of fulfilling Yuriga’s desire.

Next, it was Lumiere’s turn to speak.

“Now, concerning the central region—this area will be ruled by Sir Lombard Remus, who has previously served as a king. It is a difficult region that includes the Frakt Federal Republic, which exists only in name and lacks a functioning congress. However, Sir Lombard will use his experience as a ruler to manage this region despite its challenges. The area will be known as the Kingdom of Remus.”

The name “Kingdom of Remus” then appeared on the map above.

This one probably also counts as a restoration... I paused to gather my thoughts before speaking. “The new Kingdom of Remus encompasses the northern tip of the continent. However,

the city of Haalga, which is ruled by the Seadians, will fall under my jurisdiction. This is important because Haalga is a key city on the route to the northern world. The gate will be jointly administered by all countries, but I would like to take responsibility for protecting the Seadians myself. I've already come to an understanding with Sir Lombard on this matter."

I had discreetly informed countries outside the Maritime Alliance that there were relics from the old world, such as Mao, that could only be controlled by those of my bloodline. If the gate were to go out of control again, our response might be delayed if Haalga were administered by another nation. They had all understood this concern.

Once everyone indicated their agreement, Shuukin spoke again, "That leaves the situation in the east. We had asked King Souma, who is the husband of Lord Fuuga's sister, to govern that area, but...he has already refused."

"Of course. We lack the resources to oversee any additional territories beyond what we already manage," I said.

Having already agreed to rule the territory that was once the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, I definitely did not possess the resources to expand my domain further. Additionally, if my state appeared significantly larger than the others on a map, some might try to force me into the role that Fuuga had once occupied. I had no interest in that.

"However, it *just so happens* that Julius, who defeated Fuuga's killer, Krahe, asked me to restore the Kingdom of Lastania as his reward. This country in the east will incorporate the area that was once the Union of Eastern Nations, where the Kingdom of Lastania was located. It also borders their former ally, the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom. I intend to restore the Kingdom of Lastania in the east and appoint Julius and his wife, Madam Tia Lastania, who is of royal lineage, to govern it."

The name "Kingdom of Lastania" was inscribed on the remaining territory on the map. With this decision, the Great Tiger Empire of Haan was divided into three countries: the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan (also known as the New Great Tiger Kingdom), the Kingdom of Remus, and the Kingdom of Lastania. Furthermore, it was decided that a portion of the territory where the New Great Tiger Kingdom had once bordered the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State (land they had acquired from the former Gran Chaos Empire) would be ceded to the Euphoria Kingdom,

establishing a border between us.

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Through this process, the continent of Landia—except for the Star Dragon Mountain Range and the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom—was divided into six parts. This major reorganization, accomplished without significant chaos, became known as “Souma’s Cutting of the Cake.”

Consequently, the nations of the southern hemisphere joined the Maritime Alliance, which eventually evolved into the Union of the Southern Continent. Conferences were held in the capitals of each nation within the Union, similar to the one conducted in the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, where issues between countries were addressed, leading to the emergence of an era of peace. Many remarkable individuals either vanished or chose to settle down to pursue other ways of life, heralding a new era.

Thus, the world was divided into two realms: the northern realm, filled with romance and adventure, and the southern realm, characterized by stable governance, where scholarship continued to flourish.

Northward ho, you with ambition. Northward ho, you who seek adventure.

Stay in the south, you who wish to live in peace. Stay in the south, you who wish to study.

Each of these people have their own tales to tell.

“It’s time to find the new me too…” I murmured to myself in a quiet corner of that world.

Afterword

Thank you for buying the nineteenth volume of *Realist Hero*. This is Dojyomaru, who visited Fukuoka's V Gundam and the Yoshinogari Ruins in 2003. Is this the future or the past?

At this point, I've followed up on all the foreshadowing and setting details I hinted at back in the first volume. Whew! It sure took a long time. Has it been about a decade since I started writing the web version? I'm truly grateful to those who have stuck with me throughout this journey.

Having written all of this, you might wonder how much was planned out from the beginning. I had the content up until volume 4 locked in. I think anyone reading this will already be aware that it was a good cutoff point. It was the threshold I had to reach if I wanted to have something still worthwhile in the event the series got canceled... I believe I've mentioned this elsewhere.

From there on, I just decided on the broader flow of events, and ad-libbed the rest. This larger flow included the collapse of the Gran Chaos Empire, the truth of the Demon Lord's Domain, and a great man emblematic of the era standing in Souma's way...or something like that. I figured if I just touched on all those points, the larger story would come together.

As for the parts I made up as I went along, it was a matter of considering what stories I could tell with the characters at hand and what I wanted to write. After all, up until this nineteenth volume, hardly any of the named characters left the stage, except for Gaius VIII... Oh, and Georg and Beowulf, right? For some reason, I always seem to forget that those two left the stage. Funny, that.

Anyway, there were lots of characters, so it was easy to find ones suited to the kinds of stories I wanted to tell. If Souma's involvement was enough to solve everything, that would've been too convenient and would have gotten monotonous. That's why I focused on perspectives other than his after volume 4.

For instance, volume 8 concentrated on the story of Julius's

return during the demon wave, while volume 11 mainly focused on Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga for similar reasons. This style of focusing on the character that fit the situation is the ad-libbing I mentioned earlier.

The one that stands out in this regard is volume 6, which features Naden. Most of her story was originally part of a different novel. I had the idea of an Eastern-style character living in a country of Western-style dragons but rejected it as not strong enough to stand on its own. So, I fit it into the world of *Realist Hero*. (Did I mention this somewhere before?) That's part of why the world of *Realist Hero* grew far beyond what I'd initially envisioned.

Now, the curtain will fall with the next volume, volume 20. The main focus will be on doing epilogues for each character and concluding the stories of theirs that I haven't been able to finish yet, so I hope you will stick with me until the end.

With that, I'd like to thank everyone involved with this book, and all of my readers.



Side Story 1: It Comes Around Again Just When You Forgot About It

Hello, everyone. It's Maria E. (for Euphoria) Souma, the former empress of the Gran Chaos Empire and Souma's current third secondary queen.

In the past, I spent most of my time traveling around the Kingdom, providing humanitarian assistance, and I would only stay in the castle longer on days I could flirt with Souma to my heart's content. However, ever since the birth of my daughter, Stella, I have been spending more time at Parnam Castle on maternity leave.

Stella is the crystallization of our love for one another. *Oh, her puffy little cheeks are just the cutest! Looking at her sleeping face reminds me of Jeanne or Trill when they were little. She's going to grow up to be so beautiful... But I'm getting sidetracked here.*

While I was spending an unusually long time in the castle, I received a call from a certain individual and was instructed to go to a specific room. In that room, I found chairs and desks arranged with equal space between them, along with a lectern and a blackboard at the front. At a glance, I could tell it was a classroom, similar to those found in educational institutions like the academy.

I found myself in that classroom along with Liscia, Aisha, Juna, Roroa, Naden, Yuriga, and Tomoe—eight of us in total. It was a gathering of Souma's queens, with Tomoe joining us.

I know I was summoned here, but I'm curious about what brought the others together. Everyone except Yuriga naturally took a seat as they entered the classroom, so Yuriga and I followed their example.

Once we were all sitting down, it really started to feel like a classroom.

"Um, why were we called here today...?" I asked Liscia, who was sitting beside me. She gave a wincing smile in response.

"You'll find out soon enough," was all she would say.

None of this is adding up. Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Naden were

all nodding in agreement, while Tomoe scratched her cheek awkwardly. It seemed that Yuriga and I were the only ones in the dark.

"Really, what kind of gathering is this?" I wondered aloud.

Yuriga, sitting opposite me from Liscia, replied, "I don't know. But it makes me mad that Tomoe seems to—"

Suddenly, there was a loud rattle and a bang!

""...!""

Yuriga and I nearly jumped out of our seats in surprise as the door swung open. We looked towards the noise, and there stood a woman with blue hair, little antlers, and a glamorous figure wrapped in a Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago-style outfit—Lady Excel Walter. She was Juna's grandmother and had lived for five centuries but retained her youthful appearance because she was a member of the long-lived sea serpent race. I had just discussed her over tea with Juna and Naden recently...

"Come to think of it...you've never had much interaction with my grandmother before, have you, Maria?" Juna asked.

"She still doesn't know what that sea snake's really like," Naden added.

Juna and Naden had rather awkward looks on their faces. I couldn't help but wonder what Excel was truly like.

"Um, what do you mean...?" I asked.

"Hee hee... You'll find out soon enough," Juna replied.

"Yeah. More than you ever wanted to know."

Both of them had a distant look in their eyes.

Reflecting on that moment now, I felt a sense of foreboding.

Lady Excel smiled as she said, "I see everyone's here."

Once she confirmed our attendance by looking around, she moved to the lectern and retrieved something from the drawer.

Is that...a white coat, a pointer, and...a professor's cap?

As I stared in disbelief, Lady Excel quickly adorned herself, transforming into a teacher in no time.

I kind of want to try it myself. As I thought that, Lady Excel smiled and began to speak.

"Now then, I'm sorry for keeping you all waiting," she said as she quickly wrote "Bridal Training Course" on the board. "We will now begin the thirteenth installment of my bridal training course."

A...bridal training course?

"What's that supposed to be...?" Yuriga took the words right

out of my mouth.

Lady Excel pointed her finger at Yuriga. “Right. We have some first-time participants among us, so I’ll explain things again. In the relationship between a king and his queens, marital issues are a national crisis. Maintaining good marital relations is the first step towards national stability. These lessons are designed to teach you, the queens, the secrets to maintaining healthy relationships.” Lady Excel spoke with full confidence.

I-Is that really what this is all about?

Next, Lady Excel looked over at Tomoe, who was seated on the far side.

“There are two queens participating for the first time,” she continued. “Normally, this course is meant for the queens, but I have allowed Tomoe to join as well, at her request.”

“Really? You have?” Liscia asked Tomoe, surprised.

Tomoe nodded a little shyly in response. “Y-Yes, Big Sister. I’m, um, well…engaged to Ichiha, so I thought I should learn about these things…”

“O-Oh. If that’s what you want, then okay…”

“Hee hee, what a wonderful show of initiative! Okay, everyone, give her a round of applause.”

At Lady Excel’s urging, we all clapped, which made things awkward for Tomoe, who blushed and shrank into herself.

“So, what exactly are you going to teach us?” Yuriga demanded, earning a smile from Lady Excel.

“The secrets to maintaining good relations with your husband until death do you part. This includes the psychological aspects of approaching the role of a wife and understanding a man’s psychology, as well as how to fulfill your nightly ‘duties’ as husband and wife.”

“”O-Our nightly duties…”” Yuriga and I repeated in surprise at this unexpected topic. While the others appeared to feel awkward about it, they seemed to have accepted the subject matter already.

I see… So this was what they meant when they said I’d find out.

“Now then, Maria.”

“Y-Yes!” I jumped a little when Lady Excel suddenly called on me.

“I want to begin by saying something to you!”

“Wh-What might that be?”

“A lot has happened since His Majesty’s coronation ceremony

—from a kaiju attack, to the collapse of the Gran Chaos Empire, to an epidemic, and a war with Sir Fuuga. Because of all this, I haven't been able to hold these lessons."

"R-Right..."

The collapse of the Empire and the war with Fuuga were sensitive topics for both Yuriga and me.

But why bring them up now? I wondered.

"However! Despite not having learned anything from me, you have made love with His Majesty, conceived a child, and given birth to an adorable baby girl named Stella. It's quite marvelous! Okay, everyone, give Maria a round of applause!"

Clap, clap, clap, clap! The others gave me a hearty round of applause.

Huh? What is this? I feel embarrassed, like I'm being put on display for everyone to laugh at. I could understand why Tomoe had earlier shrunk into herself. I looked at Yuriga, who was avoiding eye contact, as if she didn't want to talk.

"Okay, moving on," Lady Excel said as she clapped her hands. "As per our usual routine, I will hand each of you a notebook containing the various things I learned from His Majesty after getting him thoroughly drunk. However, as I mentioned earlier, we have new participants with us. In keeping with our past sessions, I'd like to announce what His Majesty thinks of each of them."

She had my attention now, but I hesitated to ask. If I did, I would probably end up embarrassed.

Lady Excel opened one of the notebooks. "Let's start with...Tomoe!"

"Huh?! Me?!" Tomoe seemed taken aback. She jumped slightly, then began waving her hands frantically. "But I'm not even Big Brother's queen!"

"I have, of course, taken that into consideration. For you, I've created a notebook based on Ichiha, the information for which I extracted from him in the same way I did from His Majesty."

"Huh? So it has what Ichiha thinks about me?!"

"Precisely. I planned to do the same for Sir Hakuya and subtly inform Madam Jeanne of what I learned, but...he seemed to be onto me and never showed any openings."

I'm not sure if that's good or bad news for Jeanne...

"Now then, I'll begin reading," Lady Excel said, ignoring how flustered Lady Tomoe was. "'Tomoe is like my goddess or my

guiding star. She led me out of the darkness, and meeting her felt like a miracle.'"

"Bwhuh?!" Tomoe's face turned a bright shade of red in an instant.

Well...that was incredible.

At that moment, I realized the purpose of getting Ichiha drunk before asking questions. There wasn't a hint of pretense in his words; it was impossible not to feel embarrassed by them.

"'She pulled me out of the shell I had closed myself off in, so now I want to support her. I want to be there as her husband, seeing her smile closer than anyone else. That's what inspired me to follow in our teacher's footsteps as prime minister. I want to become a man worthy of Tomoe, a princess of this country. That's how much I love her.'"

Tomoe was speechless.

I don't blame her. After hearing such a direct admission of his love for her...

"By the way," Lady Excel continued, "when I asked him, 'How many children do you want?' his response was, 'I'll keep going as long as Tomoe still wants more.'"

"Hwahhh..."

Tomoe's brain seemed to overheat, and she collapsed onto the desk.

"From the looks of it, they'll be blessed with many children," Liscia remarked.

"The House of Chima is secure," Aisha agreed.

Don't kick her while she's already down...

"Wow, his words of love sound much weightier than Darlin's," Roroa remarked.

"Perhaps it's because His Majesty is unconsciously aware of his responsibilities as king. I suspect he feels a duty to shower each of us with an equal share of his love," Juna speculated.

"That makes sense. There's nothing forcing Ichiha to hold back his love like that," Naden agreed.

W-Well, I can see how taking multiple lessons like this has gotten them used to this.

"Huh? What? Is that the kind of thing you announce here?" Yuriga was aghast.

She knows she could be next... Wait, I could be too?!

"Now then, Yuriga is next."

"Urgh... I knew it."

Yuriga clenched her fists as she braced herself.

“Here is what His Majesty said about you,” Lady Excel began. “‘At first, she felt like my little sister’s friend. Then she started to feel more like a little sister, and with various factors overlapping, she became my wife. I think it’s the same way for Yuriga. Her friend’s big brother just sort of became her husband at some point, so I worry whether she’s been able to accept that.’”

“…”

Yuriga’s expression was inscrutable, but she sat straight and listened. Their relationship had started as a political marriage—a union based on mutual benefit.

Lady Excel continued. “‘Yuriga is a hard worker, almost to a fault. Now that we’re married, I’m sure she’s trying hard to see me as a man and as her husband. When I look at her, it reminds me that I also need to view her as a woman and as my wife. I have to show her so much love that she can hold her head high and say she’s not just my little sister’s friend or someone I think of as a little sister, but truly my woman.’”

“Oof…”

Yuriga flushed slightly; it seemed those words had struck a chord with her.

“‘I think I should be able to love her. She’s becoming more and more womanly, and lately, a lot of the little gestures she makes really do it for me. I don’t know if she’s doing them intentionally, though.’”

“O-Of course I’m not!”

“‘I think I’ll come to love her more and more. I don’t know how Yuriga feels, though.’”

“I-I think…I’ll be fine too.”

“Um, Yuriga…” Lady Excel smiled wryly. “I’m just reading what I wrote down, so you don’t need to respond to everything.”

“Ah…!”

Yuriga’s face turned crimson. Just like Tomoe, she collapsed weakly onto her desk. That made two people down now.

“Even if it’s not possible immediately, you’re both able to show consideration for one another. With time spent together—including time spent in bed—you’ll naturally become a good couple,” Lady Excel concluded.

D-Didn’t she just say something incredible there? Not that I think Yuriga heard it…

“S-So, is this the trial that awaits those who marry into this

country?" I murmured, shuddering.

"Uh, no, there's no trial. It's just our family that's like this," Liscia said.

"I really must apologize for my grandmother," Juna added.

O-Oh, I see.

Next, Lady Excel looked at me. "Finally, we have Maria."

"R-Right."

Since I'm third in line, resignation has set in... No, I'm prepared for it. I'm definitely curious about what Souma thinks of me anyway.

"Here is what His Majesty said: 'She's a partner...I suppose?'"

"A partner, you say?"

For a moment, I wasn't sure what that meant, so I repeated it. Lady Excel nodded.

"'We only married recently, but we've known each other much longer than that. We've been communicating since just after I met Roroa, albeit over the broadcast.'"

"Ohh, that's right, huh?" Roroa said, nodding. "Now that he mentions it, I'm thinkin' that's right."

If I recall, during my first broadcast meeting with Souma, he was complaining about Roroa having foisted her country on him, so that's likely how long we've known each other...

"'Ever since that time, we've been partners, fighting in the same arena. In Liscia's case, she has always been a queen or a retainer, working to support me from a position lower than mine. However, the one who stood beside me as a fellow ruler was Maria. Kuu and Shabon joined her later on, but until then, it felt like it was just the two of us, shouldering the burdens of the world.'"

"..."

I feel the same way. Our personalities, approaches to our goals, and the ideals we pursued were all different. Yet, despite these differences, we took each other's hands and, remarkably, learned to trust one another.

"If we're facing in opposite directions, we can eliminate our blind spots by cooperating."

Those words I had said to Jeanne had been sincere. The truth was, Souma had been a great ally up until the Empire collapsed, and even afterwards he freed me from the burden of sovereignty and welcomed me as a woman.

"'Because we've shared so many good and bad times together, it felt so natural when she became my bride. By that point, she

had already become as irreplaceable a partner as Liscia and the others.'"

"Yes, I agree... Because I felt the same way."

Thinking back to the decision I made to split from the Empire, I reflected on my hopes for the future. I had wanted to marry Souma and live a normal life. At that time, it seemed like a dream—an unattainable wish. But now, it had come true. Not only that, but I'd also been able to engage in the philanthropic work I had hoped to undertake once I became an ordinary woman, so I'd received even more than I ever wished for.

And all of this is thanks to Souma... I wish I could show this future to my past self, who felt so trapped. The thought warmed my heart.

"I feel like I can understand how Stella was born so easily," Naden said.

"They were keeping up a long-distance romance. I can't blame them for getting so fired up once they were finally together," Liscia added. They nodded sagely.

Huh? Did I get all fired up...? Maybe I did. After all, I got pregnant with Stella pretty quickly.

Lady Excel clapped her hands. "I have nothing more to say about Maria's relationship with His Majesty. I think you two should continue on the path you're on and be happy together forever."

After concluding that discussion, Lady Excel took out another notebook.

"Now then... That wraps up the introductions. Next, we'll continue with my regular lessons on husband psychology, wife mindset, and how to keep things exciting in the bedroom. But first..."

W-Wow, that's some incredible stuff she's teaching. I may learn something.

"It looks like I have an extra notebook here... What was this one for again, I wonder?" Lady Excel said as she began flipping through it.

A dubious look crossed her face. Had something not meant for the lesson slipped in?

"Let's see... 'Natural... That's the only word for it. I admire her freedom, with nothing burdening her. In my old world, I always assumed I'd marry a woman like her and have an ordinary family someday. That's what she reminds me of.'"

‘‘‘‘‘…’’’’’

Wait… Who said that, and about whom? From the mention of a past world, I could only assume it was Souma’s opinion of someone.

“‘Right now, we’re more like friends. But sometimes I imagine things. Like, what if the summoning had gone awry, and I had appeared outside the castle instead? And what if I met her by chance in the town? I can’t help but think things still would have worked out somehow. I mean, there were stories like that in my old world…’ Oh! I remember now. I asked him this on a whim, so it has nothing to do with anything.” Lady Excel shut her notebook tightly.

“Hold on! That’s something you got out of Souma, right?!”

“Who’d Darlin’ say that about?!”

Liscia and Roroa pressed in towards Lady Excel.

“It doesn’t seem to apply to any of us.”

“A secret lover…? Wait, there’s no way Souma has time for that.”

“His Majesty is with one of us at all times, after all.”

Juna, Naden, and Aisha remarked, discussing it with serious expressions.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious. The person who had dropped this bombshell casually said, “Hee hee, don’t you worry about it. I only asked out of personal curiosity,” while sporting an amused smile.

She knew exactly the reaction this would get. I see Lady Excel likes to stir up trouble. As I thought that, I picked up the booklet on my desk, which looked like a textbook for the course. Flipping through, my eyes landed on the words: “Stimulation is important in maintaining good marital relations.”

I see… The reason the others can keep their relationships so fresh is that they’re all influenced by Souma’s every reaction. In that case…maybe I should try acting jealous and interrogate Souma too? Like I could ask, “Who is this mystery girl everyone is talking about?” or “Are you cheating when you already have so many darling wives?” I wonder how Souma would respond? Would he go into a panic? Sorry if I end up troubling you. But…forgive me, okay? Because I want to keep things lovey-dovey between us forever.

Even as Stella grows up, leaves the nest, and after that… Forever.

Hee hee. I’m having a lot of fun for some reason, I thought to myself as I watched everyone make a ruckus.

Side Story 2: The Little Musashibo Power-Up Plan

Before total war broke out between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire, an incident occurred in Genia's dungeon laboratory near Parnam.

"It's time for Genia!"

"And Merula's!"

""Let's remodel!""

The two leaders of the Kingdom of Friedonia's technological development, Genia M. Arcs, the overscientist, and Merula Merlin, the high elf, announced cheerfully. However, this was followed by Merula giving Genia a cold stare.

"Do we really need to start like this every time?" Merula asked.

"You say that, but you're used to it by now, aren't you, Merumeru?" Genia replied with a grin.

"I only do it because if I don't, you can't get into the mood, and our efficiency drops. And don't call me Merumeru," Merula retorted.

"I haven't heard that comeback in a while," Genia said, still enjoying herself.

"You're a married woman now. Why don't you settle down a bit?"

"What's that? You want to hear about my lovey-dovey married life with Big Brother Luu?" Genia teased.

"Nobody said that!" Merula exclaimed.

"So, you know how Big Brother Luu and I have a height difference, right? He's always really careful with my body because of that. Like, when we're doing it, he'll be like, 'Are you okay?'"

"I'm telling you, don't blab about things nobody ever asked about!" Merula protested.

Genia hid her flushed cheeks behind the white sleeves of her lab coat, twisting in what might have been embarrassment, but Merula kept pushing back.

"Look! Your husband and keeper is blushing crimson!"

Upon further inspection, Ludwin, who was there to keep an eye on Genia, was covering his face. He must have been embarrassed to have her spill details about their romantic life in public like that. The poor guy…

“Sir Ludwin’s the only one here today, so go easy on him,” Merula chastised Genia.

“Huh? Now that you mention it, where is Sir Souji?” Genia asked.

“He’s coming up with countermeasures against the Orthodox Papal State with Mary.”

Merula’s guardian, Souji, wasn’t present today. He had been summoned by Souma to help prepare for the battle against the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, which was expected to ally with the Great Tiger Empire. So, no matter how much psychological damage Ludwin experienced, no one was there to comfort him.

“Now then, setting aside Big Brother Luu…” Genia began.

“Hey, you should show more care for him,” Merula interrupted.

“Hmm? Okay, time for some more lovey-dovey stories from our home life—”

“Let’s move on,” Merula said, cutting her off. “So, we’re doing some remodeling instead of testing this time?”

Genia nodded. “Yep, let’s remodel. We’ve received a quest from His Majesty to remodel a certain something.”

“He did? Now that you mention it, you did have something, right?” Merula replied, noticing a covered object in front of them.

Genia placed her hand on the sheet covering it. “Yep. Here it is,” she said, pulling back the sheet.

“Huh? Isn’t this…?” Merula asked as Genia revealed a roly-poly kigurumi costume equipped like a monk soldier.

Was it the Marshmallow Man? Or Barbapapa? No, this kigurumi was the adventurer known as Little Musashibo.

“The king wants us to remodel this,” Genia explained.

“This thing? Does he want new armaments because there’s a war coming?” Merula wondered, recalling how they had modified Mechadra to counter a kaiju in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.

Genia shook her head. “Apparently not. They’re not going to use it in the war. He’s sending it to the world of the north.”

“The world of the north…by which you mean the Seadians’ homeland, right?”

“That’s the place. It hasn’t been made public yet, but the king plans to send an advance team of adventurers to the world of the north. He wants this kigurumi to go with them.”

Souma’s ability, Living Poltergeists, allowed him to imbue an object with his consciousness, enabling him to control it. If the object resembled a doll or some living creature, he could continue to control it without any range limitation. Taking advantage of this, he had used wooden mice to assist during the rescue operations after the disaster in the God-Protected Forest and had Little Musashibo act as an adventurer.

Merula brought her face close to the kigurumi and examined it closely. “Hmm… You know, he’s used some incredibly good materials to make this kigurumi. Probably from monsters or a dungeon.”

“Good eye. That’s the result of him generously spending the pocket money he hasn’t had time to use. He started making it blade-proof, shock-resistant, cold-proof, and acid-proof, and it’s turned out super tough as a result. I’ve tinkered with it myself and made it even stronger.”

“The dungeon materials were your handiwork, then…” Merula sighed. “But what are we supposed to remodel? You’ve probably fortified it in every way you can think of, right?”

“He wants to be able to communicate with it.”

“Ohh… So that’s the reason.”

That made sense to Merula. If Souma was going to use it in the northern world, it would need to communicate with the adventurers there. After all, this kigurumi suit couldn’t talk.

“Using this kigurumi, the king can gain an understanding of the situation, but he has no means to express his desires to the people who are there.”

“Yep,” Genia agreed. “The king says, ‘Juno is somehow able to understand me, even as a kigurumi, but I have no way of expressing myself to anyone else. I’d like some means of communication, even if it’s simple.’”

“Wait, why is that Juno girl able to communicate with him…?”

“Don’t ask me.” Genia waved the sleeves of her white coat as she spoke. “I think the fastest way would be to use the broadcast again, though.”

“That’s not realistic,” Merula said. “The broadcast requires equipment, and wouldn’t he only express himself as King Souma that way? Does he even have time to talk over the broadcast for

every little thing?"

"Not with how he's always swamped with work," Genia replied, having already dismissed that idea from the beginning.

He was separating a portion of his consciousness into the kigurumi to explore the northern world on his behalf due to his busy schedule, so requiring his main body to participate would have defeated the purpose.

"So, the king asked me, 'Couldn't I communicate using handheld signs or something?'"

"I see. Using text to converse, huh? But why does he want to use signs?"

"Apparently, in his old world, there was a black-and-white bear that communicated that way. It was a fictional creature though."

"What kind of bizarre animal is that…?"

Souma had been thinking of a panda character from an old romantic comedy manga he had read long ago, but Genia and Merula wouldn't know about that. Even though it seemed like a silly idea, the geniuses considered it seriously.

"It should be possible to have the kigurumi write," Genia said.

"Huh? With those ball-like hands?"

"No, no, not with the hands. We'll install a Factory Arm."

"Ohh, that creepy mechanical hand thing, huh?"

"What do you mean, creepy? That's rude."

The Factory Arm was a writing machine designed by Genia, which operated using Souma's Living Poltergeists ability. It resembled a mannequin's arm protruding from some machinery. Souma could maneuver the arm as if it were his own, but its humanlike appearance made people find it unsettling. (One of the maids who saw it had even fainted.) Nowadays, they intentionally stripped the arm down to make it look more distinctly mechanical.

Genia placed her hand against Little Musashibo's ball-like one. "How about we have Factory Arms emerge from its hands?" she suggested.

"That sounds creepy," Merula replied. "Why not have them come out of the basket on its back instead?"

The idea sparked excitement in Genia's eyes. "Ooh! Just imagining it makes my heart race."

"I don't see what's so exciting about it, but…I think having it do the writing inside the basket and then reveal the finished product would be better. However, the challenge lies in what it

should write on.”

“If it writes on a handheld sign, it can’t erase it, and if it writes on paper and places that on the sign, that might be a waste of resources…”

“Ideally, we want it to be able to write and erase.”

“Oh! How about a blackboard? You can write on and erase those.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea. If we attach a handle to a small blackboard, it’ll serve as a handheld sign. So, we’ll need a blackboard, chalk, and a chalk duster.”

As expected from the two leaders of the Kingdom’s technology division, they were able to foresee problems alongside solutions as they discussed the idea. They already had a rough framework for Little Musashibo’s communication functionality.

The two set to drafting the remodeling plan on paper.

“Hey, it may be a bit late to bring this up,” Merula suddenly said, stopping in the middle of her work.

“Hmm? What is it, Merumeru?”

“We clearly don’t have enough space in the basket. If it’s going to write, we’ll need two Factory Arms. Without one to hold the sign and another to hold the chalk, it’ll be inefficient, and there’s no way to fit everything into the basket.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Genia quickly agreed, almost disappointingly so. “There’s technically storage space inside the kigurumi, but if we put items in there, it might affect how the king controls it, so I’d prefer to leave it empty.”

“We don’t have nearly enough space. What do you plan to do?” Merula asked.

“I’ve already thought of a solution.” Genia smirked. “Just hold on a moment.”

With that, Genia turned and headed to a corner where research materials and prototypes were chaotically piled. She began digging through them.

“Let’s see… I know I tossed that item the king left with me over here… Huh? Where did it go?”

Genia continued rummaging, muttering worriedly about losing something the king had entrusted to her until…

“Oh! Found it!” Genia lifted the object above her head, and her smile made it feel like a “you got an item” jingle was about to play. “The ‘Hero’s Sack.’”

“Ohh, that thing.”

Merula clapped her hands together as she pieced it together. The Hero’s Sack had been used by the first King of Elfrieden, who was reputed to have been a hero summoned from the same world as Souma. Although it looked like an ordinary sack, it was, in fact, a relic of overscience that could hold far more than its appearance suggested. In short, it was a one-of-a-kind artifact.

“Huh? You’re planning to use that?” Merula blinked in surprise.

While placing the Hero’s Sack in the basket would solve their storage issue, it raised concerns about whether it was appropriate for a kigurumi to carry a national treasure. Genia, however, seemed unconcerned.

“The king left it with me, and I’m using it for his sake, so I don’t see the problem,” she stated confidently.

“You’re really something, y’know that...? Ah!”

Out of the corner of her eye, Merula noticed Ludwin hurrying out of the room. He was surely going to report this to Souma. It was likely less about seeking permission for Genia’s sake and more about asking, “My Genia is about to do something outlandish; do you want me to stop her?”

As for Genia herself...

“Here’s hoping the king is okay with it,” she sighed.

She was taking it easy and showed no concern for the pain in Ludwin’s stomach. Fortunately, Souma approved with surprising ease, and that was how Little Musashibo gained a new method of communication.

◇◇◇

Later, in the world of the north, after the world had been reorganized...

Totter, totter, totter...

Silly footsteps echoed across the dry land.

Totter, totter—STOMP, STOMP, STOMP, STOMP!!!

Then came a rumbling so loud that it drowned out those footsteps.

The footsteps belonged to Little Musashibo, while the stomping was caused by a massive, boarlike creature that was currently chasing him. This creature stood on two legs, resembling a tyrannosaurus in body, but with only its head resembling a boar’s, complete with fangs and a piglike snout.

The locals called this enormous creature, which had never been discovered in the southern hemisphere, a “sauroboar.”

The sauroboar’s body was covered in lacerations, with throwing knives embedded in it, indicating a long battle. Its eyes burned with rage.

As he ran for his life, Little Musashibo held up a sign that read, *“Help!”*

Then…

“Mister! Over here!”

Juno poked her head out from behind some rocks, beckoning him to hurry.

Little Musashibo raised a sign that said *“Roger!”* and made a sudden turn, diving into the rocks where Juno had retreated. The sauroboar, intent on its pursuit, ran past them before turning to follow into the rocks.


HELP!

It was a narrow path, lower than the surrounding area, yet still wide enough for the sauroboar to pass through without issue. As it moved, it spotted Little Musashibo and Juno fleeing on the other side.

“Grrrrrrr...”

This time, it wouldn’t let them escape. With a threatening growl, the sauroboar charged forward, ready to attack them, but then...

Clunk! Whoosh!

“Bwarfah?!”

Suddenly, the ground gave way beneath the sauroboar. The hole was only about half the creature’s height, but given its massive size, the sudden trip strained its ankles. The sauroboar struggled, unable to climb out of the hole due to the pain.

“Now! Everyone get in there!”

“Yeah!”

“Right!”

“Got it!”

Dece, Augus, Febral, and Julia, who had all been hiding in the elevated terrain above the narrow path, launched a coordinated attack on the sauroboar. The creature had already exhausted itself during the earlier battle, and their combined effort was slowing its movements even more.

“You’re finished!”

Crack! Augus leapt down from the heights, delivering a punch to the sauroboar’s forehead as he fell. The impact sent the creature reeling, its eyes rolling back in its head.

“Grr...fss...”

Finally, the sauroboar ran out of strength and collapsed.

“Aw, yeah! We finally downed it!” Augus flexed his arms as Dece and the others gathered around.

“Finally...” said Dece. “I know we kind of expected it, but many creatures in this world are powerful.”

“And according to the researchers, this sauroboar is just a wild animal, not even a monster,” added Febral. “If it can put up this much of a fight, then we really can’t afford to underestimate the natural world up here in the north.”

“It took us half a day to beat it, after all,” Julia agreed.

All three of them let out sighs of relief.

They had encountered the sauroboar in the early morning, and it was almost evening now. Its incredible toughness had

forced them to retreat temporarily several times, taking breaks before resuming the battle. Then, when the sauroboar looked exhausted, they lured it into the trap that Juno had prepared and quickly finished it off.

"Oh! Looks like they managed to beat it."

"Good work."

Juno and Little Musashibo rejoined the others. Dece greeted them with a smile.

"Nicely done, you two. That was some top-class decoy work, Mister."

"You can count on me," read the sign that Little Musashibo held up.

"Uh, right," Dece said, slightly taken aback.

"It's easier to communicate with him now, but I still can't get used to it," Augus grumbled, earning nods of agreement from Julia and Febral.

"But before, only Juno could understand him. We should be glad the situation has improved," Julia said.

"It's still a mystery how Juno could understand him," Febral added. "But seeing that basket the signs come out of, along with the arms inside it, he certainly is a man of many mysteries."

"Well, the biggest mystery is who's inside," Augus said. "Do you know, Juno?"

Suddenly put on the spot, Juno looked away awkwardly. "Um, uh, nope! I don't know either! No clue who could be in there!"

"You sure? You sound pretty suspicious." Augus was unconvinced.

"I mean it. For real. Right, Mister?"

On cue, Little Musashibo held up a sign that read, *"The only things inside of me are hopes and dreams. You shouldn't be asking such boorish questions."*

"Hrmm... I'm getting kind of pissed off," Augus grumbled.

"Now, now. There are certainly a lot of people with unknown backgrounds in this world," Febral said, trying to calm Augus down. "Many of the adventurers who've arrived recently wear masks or full-face helmets to hide their identities."

"Ooh, I know what that's about," Dece replied. "Now that peace has come to the southern world, those who still want to fight have come up here for a fresh start. But because they rebelled against the system down there, many of them can't show their faces...or something like that."

Febral nodded. “Yeah, there are people presumed dead in the other world who are hiding their backgrounds and carrying on as adventurers here. Or so I’ve heard…”

“Hmm? So is that this guy’s deal too?” Augus asked, patting Little Musashibo on the head.

“What kind of nonsense are you talking about?” Juno kicked him in the backside.

“Ouch! What do you think you’re doing?” Augus exclaimed as he rubbed his aching rear.

Juno snorted while Augus complained.

“He is who he is. We’ve been working together for a long time now. That should be good enough,” she declared.

“Hee hee. That’s true. He’s someone you trust, after all, Juno,” Julia added.

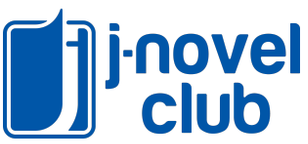
With Julia taking Juno’s side, Augus sighed and said, “F-Fine,” backing down.

After giving a wry smile at their behavior, Dece clapped his hands together. “Now, let’s strip the materials that’ll serve as evidence of the kill before it gets dark. Oh, and Febral, make a note of this spot so we can report it to the guild.”

“Understood,” Febral replied.

“Okay, let’s finish this up and head back. And then…it’s time for a feast to celebrate another quest completed!” Dece said enthusiastically.

“”””Yeah!””” the entire party cheered, and Little Musashibo joined in, holding up a sign that said, *“Yeah!”*



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by Dojyomaru

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