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Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki



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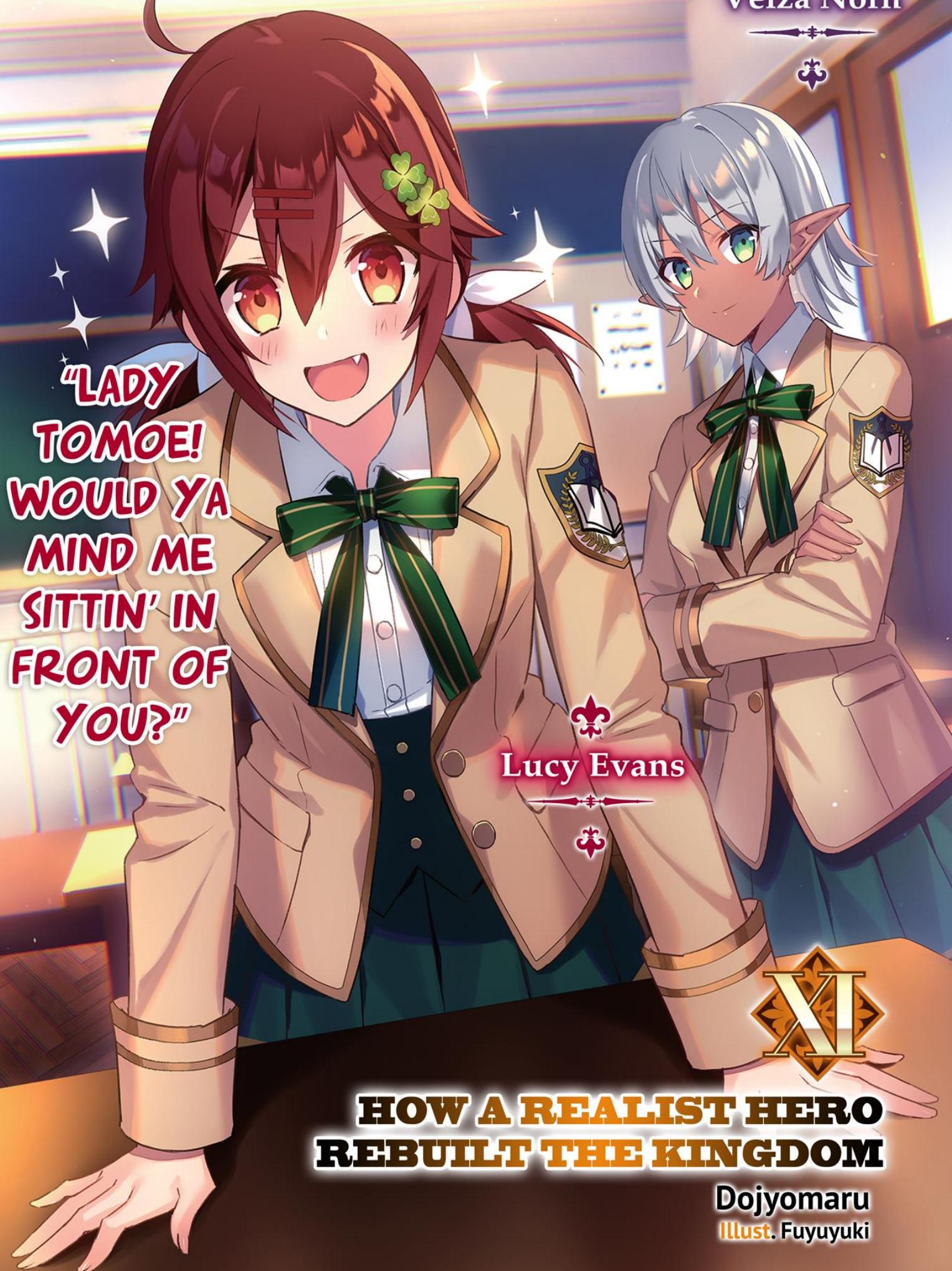
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Velza Norn



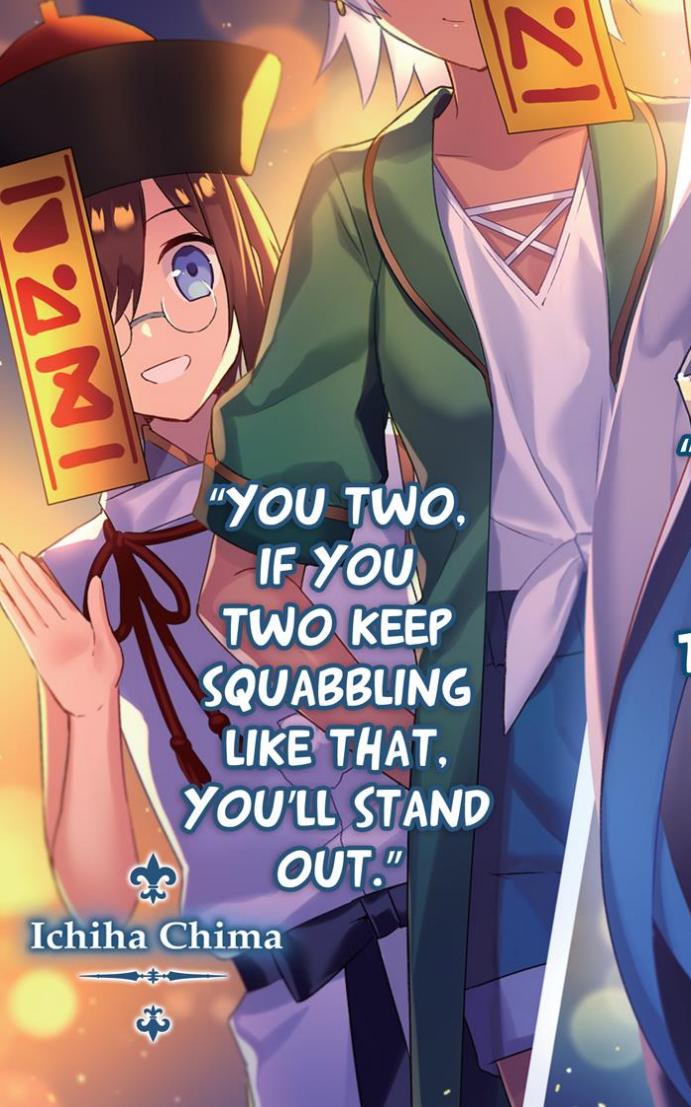
Lucy Evans



HOW A REALIST HERO
REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

"IF TOO MANY PEOPLE GATHER AROUND, THE BODYGUARDS WILL FORCE THEM TO DISPERSE, CORRECT?"



"YOU TWO, IF YOU TWO KEEP SQUABBLING LIKE THAT, YOU'LL STAND OUT."

Ichiba Chima

"HONESTLY... I MEAN, HOW IS TOMOE ANY DIFFERENT FROM USUAL?"

Yuriga Haan

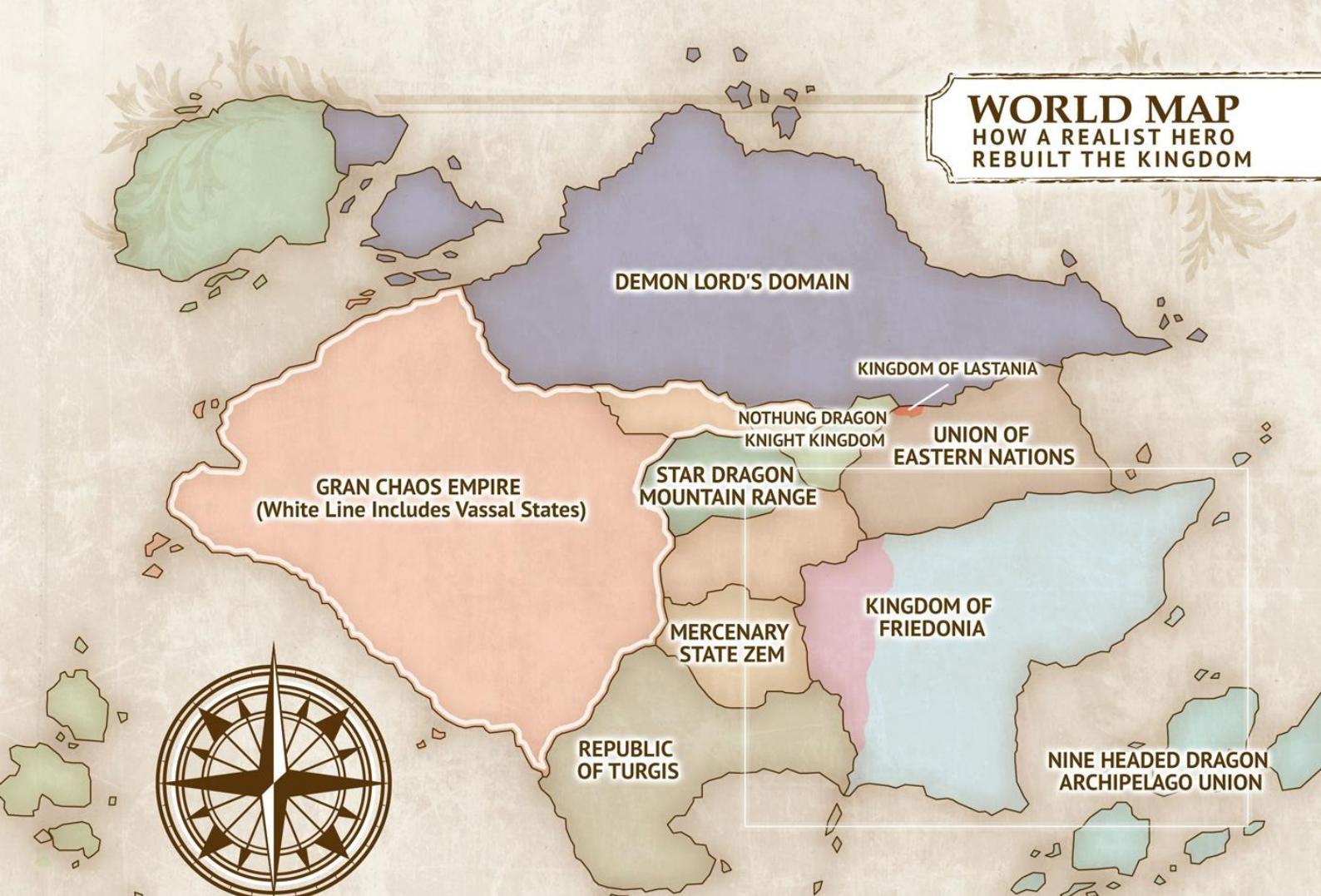
"THANKS. Y'KNOW, IT FEELS LIKE WE'RE SISTERS NOW."

Tomoe Inui

"YOU'RE SUPER CUTE, LU!"

WORLD MAP

HOW A REALIST HERO
REBUILT THE KINGDOM





Aisha U. Elfrieden



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



Juna Souma



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



Roroa Amidonia



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



Naden Delal Souma



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

HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM



Souma Kazuya



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



Liscia Elfrieden



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



Yuriga Haan

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



Hakuya Kwonmin

The Kingdom of Friedonia's "Black-robed Prime Minister." With a wealth of knowledge in various fields, he handles military and political strategy, as well as foreign affairs.



Ruby Magna

Red dragon girl from the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Formed a dragon knight contract with Hal, and became his second wife.



Tomoe Inui

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



Ichiha Chima

Youngest son of the House of Chima, who rule the Duchy of Chima. Has a gift for researching monsters, and was invited to the Kingdom.



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.



Juno Minazuki

Thief adventurer. Has been on a number of quests with "Little Musashibo."



Excel Walter

Commander-in-Chief of Friedonia's National Defense Force. This powerful woman is a member of the sea serpent race, and also a first rate mage.



Genia M. Arcs

Calling herself an over-scientist, she is the top genius in Friedonia. Married her childhood friend Ludwin.



Ludwin Arcs

Formerly the head of the Elfrieden Kingdom's Royal Guard. This genius is second-in-command of the Kingdom of Friedonia's National Defense Force.





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Prologue: The Night Before New Days

— Late at night on the 1st day, 4th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar —

“...I feel kind of uneasy,” I mumbled to myself, alone in a dark room.

It had happened just today. We held the coronation and wedding ceremonies, making me officially the King of Friedonia, and Liscia, Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Naden into my wives and real family. With all of the ceremonies complete and the unveiling event for the general public over, there was now a great feast underway celebrating my rise to the throne and marriage.

It was a large-scale event, but it was fundamentally a celebration being hosted by the royal family. My vassals who had been attending weddings throughout the city joined us, and it made for quite a lively event. ...Actually, even as we were now heading into the second day of it, it was still ongoing.

This room was distant from the great hall where the event was being held, but I could still faintly hear the riotous good time being had by all. I had been there myself not long ago, but Hakuya approached me and requested I take my leave before midnight. It might seem strange that I, the host, was being driven out, but he said that was how these things worked.

“It is also your duty to increase the number of royals, sire,” he’d told me with an over-serious look on his face.

I guess that meant he wanted me to make the most of our first night of married life. My partner for the night, Aisha, had been thrown out of the party along with me. I was never going to forget the smirking faces, or desperately-trying-not-to-smirk faces, of my retainers as the two of us left together. I wish I could just crawl into a hole.

It seemed it was traditional to make a show of, “We’re going to go work hard on the baby-making now,” and have the retainers pledge their loyalty to the royal family and all of our progeny.

“Ho, ho, ho. Work hard for our country.”

“I know my daughter has her shortcomings, but please, be gentle.”

That’s what my fathers-in-law Albert and Wodan said. It seemed they had both drunk heavily, and were in an ecstatic mood... I didn’t know how to respond.

The first primary queen, Liscia, had already left early to put Cian and Kazuha to bed, so Roroa would take over as host once we left. Hopefully she wouldn’t get too carried away, but... Well, Juna was around, too, so it would probably work out fine.

I was sitting on a bed while I thought about all that.

This was Aisha’s room. Because she was a warrior, the room gave a generally spartan impression, and the walls were decorated with shields and other equipment. Though, the head of the mannequin which bore her light armor was adorned with a cat ears headband I had seen before. There was also a teddy bear I had made sitting next to her pillow, and other girlish touches here and there. The room really was a good reflection of who Aisha was.

Then the door opened, and Aisha entered, fresh from the bath.

“P-Pardon me,” she said, a little shyly, as she sat down next to me.

Her long, silver hair which was always tied back was down now, and wet, making her somehow feel more feminine than usual, and making me feel highly conscious of her. Her current dress made a massive impact, too. Aisha was wearing nothing but a short bathrobe. Her ample bosom, usually restrained beneath a breastplate, pushed back against the fabric, and with her healthy

thighs peeking out, too, I had trouble deciding where it was okay to rest my eyes.

"Um... Sire..." Aisha said, shrinking into herself a little, as I struggled to find my words. "P-Please... take good care of me tonight."

"Y-Yeah..."

When Aisha subtly leaned in closer to me, I put my arm gently around her shoulder. I had been through this with Liscia before, but I still felt tense, worried that she might not want me to be her first. Though, if I was uneasy, Aisha must have been even more so.

I figured we should talk a little, if only to ease the tension.

"You're so beautiful..." I gasped. "I never knew that outfit would look so appealing."

"R-Really?" Aisha stuttered, looking down at her robe. "Before, when the princess and I tried to approach you in these outfits, you only slept next to us. I worried that perhaps Your Majesty thought it looked unseemly..."

Worried...? How could she be? How silly. She was more than attractive enough. I was already feeling a bit lightheaded. Honestly, I'm amazed I managed to restrain myself after seeing Aisha like this last time.

"It's alluring. It's a wonder that I was able to keep a level head last time."

"You were awfully depressed at the time, sire."

"Yeah... It was just after some bloody things happened, too. But if I hadn't been so down, I might have given into my lust and attacked the two of you. Though I'm sure you'd have beaten me back."

"I-I wouldn't have," Aisha said shyly. "Ever since that time, I've been prepared to offer myself to you, body and soul..."

It was so cute the way she acted shyly like that, I hugged her tight. Her supple muscles were slightly hardened with tension, but she had a feminine softness, too. While savoring that sensation, I whispered to Aisha, “Today, we became king and queen, husband and wife. Starting tomorrow... It’s not that far off, huh? Soon, our new life as royal partners will begin.”

“Sire?”

“If I’m being honest, I have my misgivings. There’s no room for excuses from now on. I’m not provisional, or a candidate, or anything like that anymore. Our kingdom, our family, and our children all rest on our shoulders. We have to take responsibility for all of them ourselves.”

Why am I letting myself sound so weak at a time like this? I wasn’t entirely sure of that myself. But I felt very strongly that I needed her to hear this. Then Aisha reached out and stroked my back.

“We will bear that burden with you. I am sure Lady Liscia, Madam Juna, Madam Roroa, and Naden feel the same. We are husband and wives, after all.”

“Aisha...”

“I am not that smart,” Aisha said, a smile spreading across her face. “But I have confidence in my stamina, so please allow me to support you in my own way, Darling.”

I felt something come over me. I lay down, still holding Aisha tight. My head was already filled with desire for her, but... then, suddenly, a thought popped into my head.

“...Hey, Aisha. Can I ask you for just one thing?”

“What might that be?” Aisha was a little bewildered by my sudden return to calmness.

"Um... When we do the deed, would you mind if I forbid you from hugging me? No putting your hands around behind me like this."

When I put my arms around her to illustrate, Aisha's eyes widened in surprise. "Huh?! Why do you ask that?!"

"The last time you gave me a bear hug, it scared me hearing the way my bones creaked. If you gave it to me at full strength, I wouldn't last a second. If you broke my spine, and I became an invalid, it would be a serious issue."

Sure, they told me producing children was one of my official duties, but if I became unable to do any of my other duties in the process, it defeated the point.

"Urgh... It's unfortunate, but I understand," Aisha said, accepting it once I explained about the risk of spinal injuries. "In that case, please, sire, hug me lots instead."

When she asked me that, with upturned eyes... it was incredible.

"Of course I will," I said, placing a kiss on Aisha, then got on top of her.

Chapter 1: Let's Go To School

— Morning of the 7th day, 4th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar —

I sat in my office chair with Liscia and Hakuya standing flanking me as three young children stood in front of me. They were Tomoe, a mystic wolf who was my adorable adopted little sister; Ichiha, a human who was the youngest son of Duke Chima; and Yuriga, a celestial who was the younger sister of Fuuga Haan.

Though they were of mixed national and racial backgrounds, today they all wore the same outfit.

“Those uniforms look good on all three of you,” Liscia told them with a smile.

“Heehee, thank you, Big Sister,” Tomoe said with a big smile.

“Y-You are too kind, Lady Liscia,” Ichiha stammered, bowing his head.

“...Thanks,” Yuriga muttered, looking away in embarrassment.

These three were wearing the uniform of the Royal Academy. The blazers were indistinguishable in design from the one from the Officers’ Academy that Liscia wore when we went into town in secret, but were beige instead of red.

The uniforms were provided to each individual student by the academy, free of charge. This was in part because, in addition to the nobility, the Royal Academy actively recruited those students noted for academic excellence, and this prevented differences in clothing being a mark of class. Because some students, like Yuriga, belonged to winged races, their uniforms had to be custom made, and this was done as a way of lifting that financial burden. Though, that did mean

that admittance required academic performance worth more than the cost of the uniform.

After watching their innocent reactions, I rose from my chair and said, “Liscia’s right. You all look great. ...Now, can we have a word from your teacher, perhaps?”

I turned the conversation over to Hakuya, who had been their instructor up until this point, who said, “Well...” and walked over to stand in front of the three. When they looked up to him, as his height necessitated, Hakuya calmly said, “I expect you three will have no problems academically. You already possess the academic prowess to keep up with classes at the academy. ...You did, at least, receive a passing mark, too, Yuriga.”



“Why am I the only one you say that to?!”

“Whoa, Yuriga,” Tomoe interjected, sounding like she was trying to get a horse to stop.

“Don’t treat me like an animal, you little kid!”

“Ohhkay, ohhkay...” Tomoe said through pinched cheeks.

Yuriga and Tomoe started squabbling. Even on the morning of the first day of school, these two were the same as ever. That went for Ichihai, who was trying to stop them, too.

“When you see them like this, Yuriga feels more like my little sister, huh?” Liscia whispered beside me.

Yeah...she did have the tomboy princess thing going on. They were different races, and Yuriga’s ash gray hair was pretty far from Liscia’s platinum blonde, but I felt like they had a lot in common in terms of personality.

As for Tomoe, she was more like Juna, maybe? She could be a little devil at times, too. It was going to be fun seeing what she grew up to be like, but also scary... My feelings about it were complicated.

“Ahem,” Hakuya cleared his throat to get the three of them to pipe down, and the three stopped talking and stood at attention. In a scolding tone, he said, “I certainly see no problems academically, but school is also where you learn to get along with others. You three, in particular, are individuals of status in your respective countries. The academy is a place where no one will be given special treatment, but it is inevitable that others will view you as special. How will you think about your position in the group, and what sort of friendships will you form with whom...? I would like for you to keep these things in mind as you live a valuable school life. Do you understand?”

“““Y-Yes,””” the three of them responded in unison.

"Well, I understand where Hakuya is coming from," I cut in, thinking he was being a bit too strict. "But you're going to be spending four precious years of your youth there. Find some friends you get along with, and have a good time."

"Understood, Big Brother," Tomoe smiled, as she gave me a salute.

""Okay,"" Ichihira and Yuriga responded in kind.

When the three of them left the room, I turned to look at Hakuya.

"You were talking about there being no special treatment, but... I know you. You've got some sort of protection planned for them, right?"

"But of course," Hakuya said with a nod, as though it were obvious.

"I talked it over with Sir Inugami, and we've already placed our observers among the academy's staff. If anything happens with your little sister, I will hear of it immediately."

"If Inugami's involved...it's probably foolproof."

Inugami adored Tomoe as if she were his own daughter. If that "doting father" was taking part in this, I could expect the security around them to be perfect. As we nodded to one another in relief, Liscia looked at us with exasperation.

"Being a little overprotective, aren't we?"

"That may be true, but Tomoe's position warrants caution," I replied. "She's a former refugee, now the younger sister of the king. She also gets the credit for setting up the rhinosaurus train. That's a position that nobles and commoners alike are going to take notice of, with both good and ill will. Eventually, she'll need to handle all of that herself, but I want to protect her while she's a child, at least."

When I impressed on her that I wasn't just being a doting adoptive brother, Liscia shrugged.

“I do understand how you feel, but...I resented having that sort of overprotective environment around me back when I was a student. I don’t think you should be too pushy about it.”

Well, I could sort of see what Liscia wanted to say. Still, though...

“That’s how you felt back then, right? What do you think now? Cian and Kazuha are going to go to school eventually, too, you know?”

“There are times when you need to be overprotective,” Liscia said, easily retracting her earlier statement. Hakuya and I could only smile wryly at how quickly she changed tack. Even if she couldn’t understand her parents as a child, now that she had a child she understood how a parent felt. *This is how it looks when someone grows and learns...* Nah, just kidding.

“Now then, I guess I should get ready to head out, too.”

“I’ll help you. Carla and the other maids are looking after Cian and Kazuha.”

I was scheduled to give a celebratory address to the new students at the Officers’ Academy and Royal Academy today. Because of the occasion, I had been told I was to appear in formal wear, which meant my military uniform. It always took so long to put that thing on...

“Okay, Hakuya. We’ll leave you to handle the rest.”

“Yes, sir. Take care.”

Hakuya saw us off with a salute as Liscia and I left the office.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Wow...”

Tomoe’s jaw dropped as she got out of the carriage and saw the building in front of her. The red brick building she could see on the other side of the thick, iron gate was the Royal Academy.

The Royal Academy. Situated in Parnam, it was the highest educational institution in the Kingdom of Friedonia. The other major cities had academies, too, but even among them, the Royal Academy was the top.

In contrast to the Officers' Academy, which was also located in the capital, and was responsible for training knights and military officers, the Royal Academy was a place that taught a variety of different fields, as well as provided the necessary education to the children of the kingdom's nobility.

"It's so big," Tomoe sighed, seeing the academy for the first time.
"It's practically a castle."

"You literally live in a castle, and you're going to say that?" Yuriga, who was standing beside her, said in exasperation.

"Now that I think about it, we've all been staying in the royal castle, huh?" Ichiha said, a wry smile on his face. "Because Sir Souma and so many of the others don't make a big deal out of it, it doesn't usually occur to me."

"Hmph. My brother Fuuga's name will echo across this world.
Someday, I'll live in an even bigger castle!"

"You sure do love your brother, huh, Yuriga?"

This time it was Tomoe's turn to look at Yuriga, who was always bragging about her brother, in exasperation. Then...

"Well, this is as far as we can take you, so please, continue on by yourselves from here. We will be back to pick you up when the time comes," the servant who had been acting as their chaperone said with a respectful bow.

"Thank you. Okay, Yuriga, Ichiha. Let's go." Tomoe thanked the servant, then walked onto the academy grounds hand-in-hand with Yuriga and Ichiha.

“Hold on, we’re not children. We don’t have to hold hands.”

“I-I’m getting a little tense...”

Tomoe pulled Yuriga and Ichiha through the gate with her.

Thus, the three small children took the first step of their school lives... and yet, immediately, their eyes went wide. At the enthusiasm of the many people there. And the noise.

There were many students who would be entering the academy this year, the same as Tomoe, Yuriga, and Ichiha, on the road from the main entrance to the school building. However, on either side of that road, there were older students carrying flags, signs, and banners in many colors, desperately calling out to the new students.

“The Enchantment Magic Club is currently recruiting! Any new students who are interested are welcome!”

“Hey, all you cute boys and girls! Would you like to come unravel the secrets of dungeon relics with us?!”

“You there, you look clever! Please, join our society!”

“Huh? You mean me? But...” said the confused student.

“O young one, our field of study is certain to make great leaps in the future! I say that because they tell me we have promising new students joining the academy this year...”

“Our club members register as adventurers and take part in activities off campus...”

“N-No, I refuse!” the student cried.

“Command Center, a new student has fled, requesting immediate backup.”

“This is Command Center. Roger. Dispatching reinforcements immediately.”

There were the voices of older students' engaged in enthusiastic (and in some cases weird) attempts at recruitment, and the screams of new students running around trying to escape. There was a scene of unexpected chaos playing out in this house of learning. Having witnessed all of the shouting, the three froze up.

"Th-This isn't... quite what we were led to expect, huh?" Yuriga said, her cheeks twitching a little.

The three thought back to the advance knowledge of the Royal Academy that their teacher, Hakuya, had imparted to them.

The Royal Academy was largely divided into two sections. There was the school, where students learned the basic subjects, as well as the education, manners, and management skills they would require as nobles; and then there was the research academy where students performed further academic research.

If you were to equate this to Souma's original world: the former would have been equivalent to a combined junior and senior high school, while the latter was equivalent to university. When a person graduated from the school's four-year program they were deemed to be able to take care of themselves, but those with excellent grades who wished to continue down the path of a researcher could enter the research academy. Though, in the case of the nobility, the oldest legitimate son would need to manage his domain eventually, so many of those who wanted to join the research academy were people who had been disinherited.

In addition, the research academy was a total meritocracy, so they accepted talented researchers from outside without regard to their identities. Because of that, the research academy was even less hung up on notions of hierarchy than the school. Conversely, though the school was set up so that anyone who had the good grades to get through the entrance exam was able to enroll, it was still a class society, and the nobles acted full of themselves.

The children of the nobility were especially prone to viewing the school as a place to build connections. They looked at the rare commoners in attendance with cold eyes, and spent all their time ignoring their studies and holding tea parties with the children of any house with the slightest influence. Liscia hated this aspect of the academy, which was why she joined the Officer's Academy instead, despite being a princess.

This had been their understanding of the Royal Academy before now. However, the school had changed greatly in the past two years or so.

"Come to think of it, when Mr. Hakuya was explaining the academy to us, he did say, 'As for how the school is now... it may be faster for you to see for yourselves,' didn't he?"

"He looked exhausted by it, yeah. So, does that mean...?"

With Ichiha and Yuriga both looking to Tomoe, it hit her, too.

"This is Big Brother's influence... right?" Tomoe concluded with a wry smile. That expression had a strange resemblance to the one her big sister made every time her big brother did something off the wall.

There were two major factors that led to a change in the overall environment at the academy. One must have been that King Souma's If You Have a Gift event caused a change towards valuing talent highly. The way influential nobles ran around gathering personnel, and even competed to recruit slaves if they had some ability, was still fresh in everyone's memories. That trend led people to look to the Royal Academy as a place to train talented personnel.

The other factor was the rise of another high school-level educational institution in the capital, Ginger's Vocational School. This vocational school, which opened with the sponsorship of King Souma, constantly researched fields of study that no one had paid any heed to before, and had obtained quite successful results in

many of them. Those results were then covered in the broadcast program Nameless Heroes, spreading knowledge of them throughout the country.

In addition, at Ginger's Vocational School, if you had knowledge of a special field or ability, and a novel idea, they would accept any student there, regardless of wealth or class. That brought prospective students rushing to their doors. The more attention they gained from the people, the more talented personnel gathered there... and the result was that Ginger's Vocational School was recognized as an academic center. That made the Royal Academy sit up and take notice of their predicament.

Unlike the Officers' Academy, which turned out soldiers, the Royal Academy was tasked with training personnel in cultural fields, so there was overlap in their roles. Of course, the sort of research being undertaken at the vocational school would have been summarily rejected at the Royal Academy, so there was differentiation. Still, the Royal Academy couldn't sit still while talented personnel in cultural fields were drifting to the vocational school, and they were forced to reform their old ways. Now, as for what result that led to...

"Instead of a focus on creating personal connections to powerful families, they've placed a greater emphasis on securing talented personnel. Is that it? It's taken things in a more meritocratic direction," Ichiha plainly stated the impression he got from this.

The children of the nobility wanted to form connections with talented personnel, regardless of their class background. That was because, under King Souma's meritocratic politics, that was the road to fame and glory. Because there was a demand for it, if someone had something they specialized in, they would try to improve at it. The classes that everyone took were not sufficient for that, and, as a result, clubs and societies grew more active.

In order to maintain and expand those clubs, they needed people. What they wanted were talented people. But even if they were untalented, it didn't matter. To even enter this school required a certain level of academic ability, so if someone lacked an area they specialized in, it was possible to train them from nothing into the kind of person that the group wanted.

They set their eyes on talented individuals in both the school and research academy while they were still enrolled, and plotted to have them join their research after graduation. These days, every person of talent in the academy had those sorts of eyes set on them, and even those who had still yet to develop any ability did, too, in their own way. The result was this mad rush to recruit new students.

As they watched the chaos unfold, Yuriga let out a frustrated sigh.
“Honestly... this country makes no sense.”

“But I still like this country. The country that my big brother and big sister rule,” Tomoe said with a smile, to which Yuriga shrugged in exasperation.

“*You* would. But isn’t it about time you realized? The people know your face, right? There’s going to be plenty of people looking for you, aren’t—”

“Oh! Hey! Isn’t that Lady Tomoe over there?!” The voice of a female student cut Yuriga off mid-sentence, and the older students who were doing the recruiting all turned to look towards Tomoe.

“Despite being a refugee, she was adopted by the former royal couple because of her gift...”

“That means she’s incredibly talented, right?”

“Wasn’t there talk of royalty from another country coming to school with her?”

“Then, are those two...?”

“Indeed?! Then, perchance, could the young boy who stands next to Lady Tomoe be Sir Ichiha Chima who our society so admires? He of the Monster Encyclopedia...”

“I like the leg muscles on that winged girl with the twintails. She must have considerable athletic ability. I really want her for our club.”

There were hushed whispers. Then, a sudden gleam in the eyes of the older students. Yes... those were the eyes of hunters who had found their quarry. Their thirst for new blood was almost palpable.

“I-It looks like it’s not just me,” Tomoe winced. “You two are popular, too, huh?”

“Wh-What should we do?” Ichiha asked in a mild panic.

“This is unexpected,” Yuriga said, taken aback. “...I don’t want any trouble.”

“...Should we run?”

““No objection there.”” The three made an immediate decision to flee, but the school building was on the other side of the older students.

“I’m starting to want to go home.”

“You know we can’t go home before the entrance ceremony has even started.”

While Tomoe and Ichiha were struggling with what to do...

“All right, you two, see you later.” As the only one with wings, Yuriga jumped up into the air.

“Hey! No fair, Yuriga!” Leaving a protesting Tomoe behind, Yuriga flapped her wings in an attempt to clear the human wall, but...

“Whoa, hate to break it to you, but you’re not the only one who can fly,” a girl who looked to be a dragonewt rose up to block her.

“Urkh!”

“Now, young lady, why don’t you work up a nice, youthful sweat doing some sports with me?”

“Nooooo!” The dragonewt girl began chasing Yuriga across the sky.

The realization that even flying was not enough to let them escape left a look of despair on Tomoe and Ichiha’s faces. Even now, the older students were closing the net around them.

You won’t get away. That was what their eyes said.

“I-Ichiha.”

“T-Tomoe...”

The two held hands as they trembled.

“““Please, join our society!””” As the mob was rushing towards them... it happened.

Suddenly, Tomoe felt herself scooped up by someone, and the next thing she knew she was floating in the air. Had they jumped about ten meters? From where she was, held in someone’s arms, Tomoe looked down at the green leaves on the branches of the trees. There, beneath them, she saw Ichiha being swept away by a wave of people.

“Ichi—mmph!”

“Shh!” a figure said, covering her mouth. “If you shout, the people down there will find us.”

They had acted fast, just before the human wave struck, so nobody had noticed Tomoe being spirited away.

“I know I was only able to save you, Lady Tomoe, but he is a boy, I am sure he will manage just fine by himself.” It was a girl’s voice that came from behind her. When Tomoe nodded to show her acceptance, they removed the hand covering her mouth.

When Tomoe turned around, behind her stood a girl with dark skin, white hair, and pointy ears—all traits that were the same as Aisha's. If there was one thing that was different from Aisha, it was that this girl's hair was cut short. Tomoe's eyes widened with surprise.

"Are you a dark elf?!"

"Yes, Lady Tomoe. I believe we are not yet acquainted," the dark elf girl said, bringing a hand to her breast and bowing her head. "I am Velza Norn, daughter of the warrior Sur of the God-Protected Forest. In order to gain the education I will need to, one day, be fit to serve a certain person, I have come here today to enter the same school as you, Lady Tomoe. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Velza smiled at Tomoe, who was clearly taken aback.



About an hour later.

Tomoe and the others were in the Royal Academy's auditorium. They were in the middle of the entrance ceremony, and the new students sat in rows of seats, listening (disinterestedly) as the stout, white-bearded principal up on stage gave a congratulatory address. Yuriga and Ichiha were on either side of Tomoe, slouched in their chairs with exhaustion on their faces.

"A-Are you okay?" Tomoe asked in a worried whisper. The other two weakly waved their hands.

"I-I thought I was going to die. That dragonewt, she's too stubborn..."

"I was forced into the Monster Research Society. I wanted to join a group like that if there was one anyway, and once I was in, my seniors protected me from the other recruiters, so it was fine, but...it still took a lot out of me."

It seemed Yuriga had managed to give her pursuer the slip, but Ichiha had found refuge under the protection of this Monster Research Society. Seeing how exhausted they looked, Tomoe mentally thanked her rescuer, Velza, once again. Speaking of Velza...

"Now, new student representative Velza Norn."

"Yes!"

The principal called her name, and she walked up on stage. It turned out she had been near the top of their class on the entrance examination, and was chosen to give an address as the representative of the new students.

"But the offer came to you and Ichiha, too, right?" Yuriga, who had recovered a little, asked, and Tomoe nodded with a wry smile.

Tomoe and Ichihha had both received good grades on the entrance exam (Yuriga had received just over a passing grade), and so, in light of their position and status, they were each asked to give remarks as prospective representatives.

"I didn't want to stand out too much, so I turned them down," Tomoe explained.

"The three of us already belong to the ruling families of our countries, and we live in the castle. That puts us close to His Majesty, a position which invites both excessive good and ill will. I wanted to avoid standing out too much and having people take note of me," Ichihha agreed with her, but Yuriga wasn't convinced.

"You already stand out plenty," Yuriga replied. "That being the case, why not take in any talented people from among those who approach and build your own clique? You could call it the Tomoe Army."

"...You think that would be fun?"

"I think it would be too much hassle, so I won't be doing it myself."

"Whaa..."

"But the idea of seeing you panic as people give you more praise than you deserve sounds amusing," Yuriga said with a smug smile. "Seriously, why not do it? If you do, I'll be your lieutenant."

"You're definitely planning to be in control behind the scenes. I don't want an army like that, either."

While the two of them were whispering about that, "Ahem," a woman with pointed glasses cleared her throat loudly. The apparent warning not to chit-chat any more made them both shrink a little. While all this was happening, Velza's address continued.

"...Therefore, with pride and an awareness of our role as students in my heart, I would like to do my best in academics, athletics, and

amicable relations with my school friends. Not just as your new student representative, but as myself, Velza Norn.”

With that, it seemed her remarks were finished. There was a round of applause, and Tomoe, Ichihara, and Yuriga joined the clapping. Velza bowed, then came down from the stage and returned to her seat.

The teacher who was acting as event coordinator tried to announce the next item on the program, but the piece of paper it was written on was shaking in his hands, and he looked tense about something.

“O-Our next guest will offer a congratulatory address. Yes. His Majesty Souma A. Elfrieden, King of Friedonia. I-If you will, please.”

“Huh? Big Brother?” When Tomoe looked up, Souma walked on from the side of the stage. In that moment, every student and every member of the staff rose in unison.

Souma, who was dressed in his black military uniform as formal wear, smiled wryly and said, “There’s no need to be so stiff,” tapping the nerve-wracked teacher on the shoulder as he took the podium.

You were the special guest for the entrance ceremony today, Big Brother?! You could have said something. Tomoe’s cheeks puffed up with a slight dissatisfaction, but this must have been Souma’s way of keeping the surprise for his little sister. Then Souma turned to the students and began to speak.

“I am Souma A. Elfrieden, as I was just introduced. New students of the Royal Academy, congratulations. You must be here because you demonstrated, through the entrance exam, that you were fit to be students of the Royal Academy. That means you may be one of the people who support this country in the future. As king of this country, I look forward to you learning in this academy, and becoming people capable of supporting my country.”

There was a regal confidence in the way Souma spoke, and the students were listening to him closely, without chatter. No one was

going to be so impertinent as to talk when the king of this country was speaking. Nobody wanted to be hauled off for the crime of *lèse-majesté* right after getting into school. Even Tomoe, who knew Souma wasn't the type to mind, was standing up straight and listening to him now.

Big Brother really is a great king. Seeing him look regal for the first time in a long time, Tomoe felt a little proud, but...

“Okay... I’d say that’s enough of the stiff, formal address from the king. Oh! Standing at attention like that’s got to be hard on all of you, so, please, be seated.”

Souma broke the tense air in the room on his own. The way he suddenly shifted to casual speech left Tomoe and everyone else feeling bewildered. The students and teachers, who were looking at one another, wondering if it was really all right for them to be seated, began to sit down here and there.

“Okay, everyone’s sitting.” Souma spread his arms out towards the students, and grinned. “It’s a fact that our country is looking for smart people. Every person who can do something at an above-average level is valuable. A country can’t run on the people we call ‘geniuses’ alone. The country keeps running because of diligent workers who may never see their day in the sun. I’m sure, if you’ve watched the broadcast program Nameless Heroes, you understand that.”

The students nodded in agreement. Nameless Heroes was a popular broadcast program that shone a light on engineers who supported the country in ways people wouldn’t usually see.

“However! I’d be in real trouble if all I had were people who can study. It’s definitely true that personnel who can do one thing really well are appealing. Those who can run ahead of the pack, pushing

into a new era, and those who will help lay firm groundwork. This country needs both of them!"

Souma spoke passionately, slamming his hands down on the podium as he did.

"I hear the Royal Academy has changed since my If You Have a Gift event and the opening of Ginger's Vocational School. I want to see both kinds of people cultivated here. I want you to recognize every person with a gift, no matter how pointless it seems. Conversely, I also want you to recognize anyone who is able to do everything well because of their hard work, even if they have no outstanding talents. If there are people like that here, please, let the country know."

When Souma turned to the line of teachers and said that, the principal and all of the faculty bowed their heads as one, as if to say they accepted his request. Souma nodded, then turned to the students.

"That was my request to the school, but I have a wish for you, the new students coming to this academy, too."

""""....."""

Hearing the king had a wish for them, the new students waited with bated breath to hear what he might say. After a brief dramatic pause, Souma's wish was...

"I want you to really enjoy your time at school."

""""...Huh?""""

...That was it.

Looking at the blank stares he was getting from the students, Souma laughed and said, "It may only be four years, but it's still four years during your youth. The knowledge and friendship you cultivate in a place like this will be an asset that lasts you for life. We're creatures whose heads and bodies work more efficiently when we're enjoying

ourselves. That's why I want you to enjoy learning, enjoy spending time with your school friends, and get the most out of your school life. While you're doing that, I want you to look for something that you can get absorbed in."

Souma brought his hands down on the podium with a bang, then grinned and continued, "If, among the things you enjoy, there is one that you can get absorbed in and you want to master it, that's a great strength in and of itself. It doesn't matter how small it is, or that no one else can understand it. Naturally, you have to avoid causing trouble for others in the process, but when a person has something they enjoy and are absorbed in, they shine brighter than other people. Someone will be watching that effort, and recognize you for it.

"That's true of the country, too. In fact, in the music program at Ginger's Vocational School, there's this one student pursuing a fanciful topic of research that seemed like hogwash at first glance, but the reports say they're getting some interesting results. We plan to do everything the country can to test it soon. It involves knowledge of magic, so the Royal Academy will be cooperating, too."

Even if their research looked like hogwash initially, it could find recognition. These words from Souma earned more applause from the existing students than the new ones. Those cheers came from the members of minor research societies. Their work, which they thought might never see its day in the sun, might receive the recognition it deserved. Seeing the reaction from those students, Souma gave a satisfied nod before continuing.

"You can work hard if you're having fun. And if you work hard, people, and the country, will be watching. So, to all you new students, I'd like you to enjoy your school lives. That is all."

With Souma's congratulatory address finished, the students clapped and cheered. In the middle of that applause, Souma came down from

the stage. When he did, he glanced towards Tomoe, and gave her a little wave, warming her heart.

Thank you, Big Brother. I'm going to do my best! Tomoe gripped her hands into fists in front of her chest so Souma could see.

The entrance ceremony ended, and Tomoe and the other children moved to their classrooms. There were six classes in each year, and each class had thirty students. Tomoe and her group were in Class 1-1.

Class assignments were made based on the results of the entrance examination, irrespective of social class, and the most gifted students were assembled in Class 1. While social class was not a factor considered in the assignment, the upper classes often hired talented tutors, which resulted in Class 1 overwhelmingly being made up of the children of the nobility.

“Isn’t this great, Yuriga? We made it into the same class.”

“Of course we did... is what I’d like to say, but it was exhausting.”

Yuriga, who was sitting next to Tomoe, stretched out over her desk. They were apparently free to choose their own seats, so Tomoe had taken one a little to the right of center (closer to the hallway), while Ichihara sat behind her, and Yuriga was to her left.

Tomoe and Ichihara had always had good grades, so it was seen as a given that they would make it into Class 1.

“You really did your best, Yuriga.”

Yuriga’s academic ability would normally have put her in the lower half of Class 2. Not wanting to be put in a lower class than the others, Yuriga had begged Hakuya for help, and studied like mad for the entrance exam. Thanks to that, she made it into Class 1, but thinking back to those days spent studying always seemed to depress her.

“But you didn’t really need to push yourself to get into the same class as us, did you?” Ichiha asked. “I mean, Class 2 is right next door. It would have been easy to come visit, wouldn’t it?”

Yuriga snorted. “I am going to learn in this country, and become someone who can be of use to my brother. Do you think I could let you two stay ahead of me?”

“You say that, but the truth is you were worried about being in a class full of people you don’t know, right?” said Tomoe. “That’s why you studied so hard, so you wouldn’t be separ—aww, aww, aww.”

“Be quiet, you little kid!”

Yuriga pinched Tomoe’s smiling cheeks. As Ichiha smiled wryly at them getting along as well as ever, things were getting noisy over by the blackboard.

“Looks like they’ve finally settled on one.”

“A-Ahahaha...”

“...Honestly, I can’t see why they care,” Yuriga said in exasperation.

Over at the blackboard, there was a lottery in progress. It was to decide “Who will sit next to Tomoe?”

Tomoe might have been a former refugee, but she was now the king’s younger sister. It was only natural that the people of this kingdom would want to get closer to her; by sitting next to her in class, for instance.

That being the case, when they learned that seating was free, their classmates crowded around, saying, “Please, let me sit next to you!” They were very pushy about it.

“I-I’d like to sit close to Ichiha and Yuriga... I think...” Tomoe managed to force those words out despite feeling intimidated.

None of her classmates wanted to earn her scorn, so those two seats were secured. That left the seat to the front and to the right of her. That is ultimately what led to the current situation, and judging from the noise over there, one of those seats had just been decided.

“...The Kingdom sure is peaceful, huh.” Yuriga sighed, and Tomoe smiled happily.

“Of course it is. Big Brother and Big Sister are ruling it.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was being sarcastic. Sar-cas-tic.”

“Murgh...”

“Ahaha... Oh! It looks like they’ve settled on the other person, too.”

When Ichihia pointed to the blackboard, there was one student jumping for joy in the middle of her dejected peers. It was a petite girl who had forced her short hair into two pigtails.

The girl looked towards them, then rushed over. With distinctive beady eyes, she slammed her hands down on Tomoe’s desk and asked, “Lady Tomoe! Would ya mind me sittin’ in front of you?”

“S-Sure. Go ahead...” Tomoe answered somewhat hesitantly, and the girl’s face burst into a beaming smile.

“Thanks! The name’s Lucy Evans; thirteen years old. I’m the daughter of the representative of Evans Company, and we do business in the capital. Pleased to meet ya!” The girl who called herself Lucy introduced herself energetically with a mix of merchant slang.

Lucy of the... Evans Company? Though she was intimidated by the girl’s vigor, Tomoe remembered them.

The Evans Company was a fairly influential merchant family in the capital, engaged in the operation of restaurants and cafes. They were the first to serve dishes incorporating the recipes from Souma’s world that Souma and Poncho had published, and that had brought

them great profit. Her house was one of common birth, but they might have had more influence than a minor noble. She had heard Roroa saying, “Nyahaha, there’s some companies on the Elfrieden side with an eye for business, too, huh!” with a cheerful smile on her face.

Huh? Roroa? That’s when Tomoe realized something. It was about Lucy.

The merchant slang, the beady, personable eyes, and the pigtails, even if her hair wasn’t quite long enough... She was exactly like a mini-Roroa.

“You look... like Roroa?”

“Nice one, Lady Tomoe! You noticed!”

Th-This is a lot of pressure... thought Tomoe.

Then, putting her left hand over her chest, and raising her right hand into the air, Lucy declared, “I’m an adorin’ fan of Lady Roroa. She’s a lovely princess, but she’s also got a good head for business, and that’s won her every merchant’s heart. We always thought of Amidonia as full of uptight men, so who’d’ve thunk there’d be a lady like her there. She’s a business goddess! The way I talk, and the way I look, I’m doin’ it all out of admiration for Lady Roroa!”

“O-Oh... I see...”

Though she was intimidated by the way Lucy was touching her hair as she rambled on, Tomoe managed to nod along. Then, with a sideways glance, she looked to Ichiha or Yuriga to rescue her.

However, Ichiha put his hands together in a silent, “Sorry, I can’t help you,” and Yuriga looked away, resolutely ignoring her.

While Tomoe was agonizing over what to do... it happened.

“Ohh, would ya be so kind as to introduce me to Lady Roroa some—Gwuh!”

Mid-sentence, someone pulled on Lucy from behind. For a moment Tomoe wondered what was up, but then she saw the dark elf girl with short silver hair behind Lucy.

“How about you calm down a little? Can’t you see you’re bothering Lady Tomoe?”

“Velza?!”

It was Velza, daughter of Sur. It seemed she had grabbed Lucy by the scruff of the neck, and was dragging her away from Tomoe.

Then, still holding Lucy by the neck, Velza introduced herself, “Hello, Lady Tomoe. I will be sitting to the right of you, so I hope we will get along.”

“You were participating in the lottery, too?!”

“Yes. In considering the future, I believed it would be best to be seated next to you so that we might form a bond. Fortunately, I was able to draw the seat beside yours, and I am pleased by that.”

“I-I see...” Tomoe gulped.

There was a feeling of heaviness behind this talk of the future. Though she wasn’t as pushy as Lucy, Velza had a certain tenacity about her, too.

“Hey, hey, would ya mind lettin’ me go now?” Lucy, who had ended up like a kitten being carried by her mother, protested. When Velza let go, Lucy angrily said, “What’s the matter with you. Treatin’ me like an animal. Did ya hear me meowin’ or somethin’?”

“I wouldn’t want to have trouble communicating, so please, be human.”

"Oh, come to think of it, I might've heard Roroa meowin' as a joke before," Tomoe commented.

"Meowhat?! Is Lady Roroa a cute goddess?!"

"She's a queen!"" Tomoe and Velza retorted in unison.

"Well, aren't you all oddly in sync."

"I agree. It feels a lot like watching His Majesty Souma banter with his queens."

When Yuriga and Ichihira said that with exasperation and a wry smile respectively, the three looked at one another and then laughed.

"I guess you're right, huh? I have a lot of respect for Big Sister and the other queens."

"Lady Aisha is the pride of all women living in the God-Protected Forest."

"Lady Roroa for life!"

Each had a different woman she admired and was trying to be a bit more like, so perhaps that was why their interactions had come to be similar, too.

After a hearty laugh, Tomoe rubbed the corner of her eye and said, "Ahaha... Hey, since you're both my classmates, can we not do the whole 'Lady' thing? I'd really be happier if you'd just treat me like a friend who sits next to you in class."

"Okay! If that's what you want, Lady Tomoe... I mean, Tomoe."

"...Yeah, if that's how ya want it, I can do that, Tomie."

The two both gave hesitant nods. From the way she'd already given Tomoe a pet name, you could see Lucy was similar to Roroa in her ability to close the emotional distance between herself and other people.

"I, for one, don't mind you calling me Lady Yuriga, you know? I *am* the younger sister of a king, after all," Yuriga said, maybe because she felt left out.

Tomoe sensed what Yuriga was thinking and chuckled.

"Very well, Lady Yuriga," she said, bringing a hand to her chest and bowing.

Ichihia, Lucy, and Velza did likewise.

"""Very well, Lady Yuriga,""" they said in unison. Yuriga froze solid, her cheeks twitching.

"...No, don't do that, after all. It's kind of creepy."

"Don't say that, Lady Yuriga."

"Gahhhh! I'm sorry, now stop it, you little kid!"

A red-faced Yuriga was pinching Tomoe's cheeks, and the smiling Tomoe was at her mercy. The remaining three watched them warmly.

They continued chatting until a woman with pointed glasses entered the classroom.

"Hey, hey, Tomie."

As the first day of lessons came to an end, and Tomoe was preparing to go home, Lucy called out to her while kneeling backwards in her chair. Ichihia, Yuriga, and Velza all came over to see what was up.

Tomoe tilted her head to the side as she asked, "What is it, Lu?"

"I was thinkin', since we're all friends now, maybe we ought to go somewhere and have fun?"

"Somewhere... You mean in the castle town?"

"That's right. You come to my place, and I'll hook ya up with a whole lotta sweets."

As Tomoe was considering how she'd respond to the pushy Lucy, Velza interjected, "Lucy, don't you think that's a bit too much to ask? Tomoe is His Majesty's little sister, so I doubt she can go play in the castle town so easily."

"Well, it won't be easy without King Souma's permission. In my case, I'm allowed to go anywhere in the capital. My big brother's very hands-off, you see."

"Setting Yuriga aside, there's a carriage coming for us, too. Oh! I need to report I joined the Monster Research Society. I'll probably be staying late on meeting days."

"You're all no fun," Lucy said, puffing up her cheeks. "Hangin' out together after school. Stayin' together durin' the summer break. Ain't that the joy of school life? His Majesty said we were supposed to enjoy our school lives, didn't he?"

"That's the same king we're telling you she needs permission from," Yuriga sighed, but Tomoe tried to mollify her.

"Now, now. Lu, I really can't go off without Big Brother's permission. I made everyone worry the last time I snuck off on my own..."

Tomoe must have been talking about the time they were in the Chima Duchy. When she slipped out of the room she had been told to stay in out of curiosity, some nasty men had picked on her and almost sparked an international incident.

Nothing happened because Ichiha, who she met that time, protected her, and Souma and the others found them in time, but she didn't want a repeat of what happened there.

At Tomoe's words, Lucy came to her senses and sat down normally in her chair.

“O-Oh, yeah,” she laughed, rubbing her head with her hand. “I was so gung-ho on gettin’ to know ya, I got ahead of myself. I wasn’t thinkin’ about your position at all. Sorry.”

“Nah. I want to go out and play with everyone just as much as you do. That’s why I’ll talk to Big Brother and the others about it. They’re all really nice, so if I bring it up with them, I’m sure they’ll work things out for us.”

Lucy smiled as Tomoe gripped both her hands. “No need to push it too hard, ya hear? This’s just a selfish request of mine.”

“Sure. I’ll do what I can to get that selfish request granted.”

Tomoe felt highly motivated.

◇ ◇ ◇

That night. Tomoe visited Liscia’s room alone.

When she went to the governmental affairs office to see Souma, there was only Hakuya inside. He informed her that Souma had been relieved of his work for the day, and he had gone to Liscia’s room to be with Cian and Kazuha. If she wanted to see him, she should go there.

When she knocked, she heard Liscia say, “Come in,” and upon entering, she found Souma and Liscia sitting on a king-sized bed holding the babies.

On Souma’s lap was Kazuha in light blue baby clothes, and on Liscia’s lap was Cian in red baby clothes. They were only four months old and couldn’t sit on their own yet, so without support, they would fall on their backs.

The full-body baby outfits they wore were hand-made by Souma, and were modeled on bizarre creatures called Machapin and Zukku from his old world. The faces of the characters on the hoods looked kind of silly, but the two babies wearing them were super adorable.

They were in the middle of playing with stuffed animals and dolls. Cian was holding the hand of a doll like he was shaking hands with it, and Kazuha was hugging a stuffed bear as she nibbled on its ear. Th- This was a carnivore woman (in infant form)...

“Is something up, Tomoe?”

“You came here for a reason, right?”

Tomoe came back to her senses upon hearing Souma and Liscia call out to her.

“Oh! Um... I had something to talk to you about...”

““Something to talk to us about?””

From there, Tomoe told them about what had happened at school. That she had made friends with the dark elf Velza and the merchant girl Lucy. That she had been invited to play after school by Lucy. And that she had wanted to go and play with everyone.

When she had gone through all of that, “Hmm...” Souma groaned in thought, stroking his jaw. “Well... What do you think, Liscia?”

“What do I think? I’m worried, of course.”

“Yeah... We’ve told Naden she’s free to do what she likes in the capital on her days off, but that’s only because of how powerful she is.”

“I can’t see Tomoe being able to protect herself...”

The two frowned. Tomoe thought she might not get permission. While she tensely waited for them to come to a conclusion, “But...” Souma said, “How was it when you were at the Officers’ Academy, Liscia? Did you just go back and forth from the castle to the school?”

“I slipped out all the time, of course. Ditching my bodyguards.”

“Haha! I figured.”

“...I feel bad about it now, okay? Now that I have children of my own, I know how my mother and all the rest must have felt.”

“Whoa, the tomboy princess is sounding all mature now,” Souma said, giving Liscia a little poke.

“Oh, stop teasing me.”

There was a warm air around the newlywed new parents. Tomoe had been bracing herself for a more harsh opinion, so she almost felt a little deflated by it.

“Well, the best part of being a kid is the time you’ll spend with friends, after all.” Souma shuffled to the side a little, creating a space between him and Liscia, and beckoned for Tomoe to come over.

Tomoe sat herself snugly between them, with Souma and Kazuha on one side, and Liscia and Cian on the other. Now sandwiched by the royals, Souma and Liscia both patted Tomoe on the head.

“Though it was for your protection, we did force you to become a member of the royal family. That’s why I don’t want to make you feel too constrained by being royalty.”

“I always hated it when things were too rigid and formal, so I don’t want to force that on you, either, Tomoe.”

“Big Brother, Big Sister...” Tomoe squinted, feeling a little tingle in her eyes, and...

“Dahh.”

“Ahh.”

Imitating Souma and Liscia, Cian and Kazuha started touching Tomoe’s head, too. Though there was no blood relation between them, there was a familial scene unfolding here.

“Okay. I’m going to permit you to go out with friends,” Souma said, patting Tomoe’s head with a grin.

“Really?! Big Brother!”

“I really do think spending time with your friends is important... There's two conditions, though.”

“Conditions...?”

“Yeah. First, I'll be sending a unit from the Black Cats to protect you, so you'll have to accept that. I'll tell them to watch from the shadows while you're in the capital so they don't inconvenience you. But if you decide you want to go outside the capital with your friends, they'll be protecting you openly, not in the shadows. Well, think of them as bodyguards. I'm sure Inugami can handle it.”

“Yeah... That seems like a reasonable call. It'll be reassuring for us to know someone is by her side, too,” Liscia said with satisfaction as she made Cian clap his hands.

Tomoe nodded in agreement. “I understand. So, what is the other condition?”

“That you don't try to ditch your guards. The more active you become, the more you resemble your ‘Big Sister,’ so I'm a bit worried about that.”

Souma shot a cold glance in Liscia's direction, which she blatantly looked away from. That exchange between the two of them made Tomoe chuckle.

“I understand. I'll absolutely abide by those conditions.”

“Okay. Well, I can tell from the way you came to talk about it with us that you're understanding, Tomoe. Those conditions are merely added insurance. I want you to enjoy your time with your friends without worrying too much about it.”

“Hold on, Souma. You say that like I'm not understanding?”

“It’s a fact, isn’t it? Once you set your mind on something, you don’t budge, now do you?”

“...What’d you say to me?” Liscia glared at Souma.

“...What’d *you* say to me?” Souma glared back.

Invisible sparks flew over Tomoe’s head. Because Souma and Liscia were so close, they occasionally had these little fights. Still, they always passed quickly, and the two would make up in no time. No one wanted to get in the middle of a marital spat, and that included Tomoe.

As she was fretting over what to do...

““Fwah...! #\$/%&ahh!”” Cian and Kazuha started wailing. Souma and Liscia hurried to soothe them.

“Ohh! Look, Kazuha. It’s Mr. Bear.”

“Don’t cry, Cian. There, there.”

Their desperate attempts to soothe the babies managed to get them down to just sniffling. Tomoe stood up, put her hands on her hips, and told them, “Geez, the scary looks on your faces made Cian and Kazuha cry! Big Brother, Big Sister! Try to get along, for the children’s sake!”

““Right. I’m sorry.””

The royal couple bowed their heads to a twelve-year-old girl. What would the people have thought?

Once they had apologized to one another, “Oh!” Souma seemed to remember something and pulled an item out of his pocket. He then offered the thin object to Tomoe. It appeared to be some sort of wooden token.

The words written on it were...

“Rent-a-Cycle? ...What is this?”

“If you’re going to the castle town, you’ll need to get around, won’t you? You can ask the merchant girl you met how to use it. She probably knows.”

“Okay. Thank you,” Tomoe said, sticking the wooden token under her arm.

For now, she had permission to go play in the castle town.

Tomoe couldn’t wait to tell everyone.

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The next day. When everyone had gathered at the school, Tomoe’s friends were glad to hear she had been given permission, conditional though it was, to visit the castle town.

Then, when Tomoe pulled out the wooden token...

“A Rent-a-Cycle token?!” Lucy raised her voice in surprise.

“You know what it is, Lu?”

“Do I know? The whole capital’s talkin’ about it!”

“They are?”

That’s when Lucy banged her hands down on the desk, and leaned in closer.

“It’s easier to show you than explain it... No, it’s even faster to have you experience it yourself! You’ve got the token, so how about we all go after school?”

“S-Sure...”

It seemed what they’d be doing after school was already decided.

After school that day.

“So, we’ve come to Rent-a-Cycle! Please clap!”

“““Yaaaay!“““

“...Why are you all so high-strung?” Yuriga said, exasperated by the way Lucy looked like she was ready to play a fanfare, and how Tomoe, Ichiha, and Velza were so willing to go along with her.

After school, the five kids had set out with the wooden token Souma had given Tomoe in hand, and stood in front of a business whose sign simply said “Rent-a-Cycle.” Naturally, the Black Cats were watching them from the shadows, but anyone else watching would only have seen five children getting along.

“This is... Rent-a-Cycle,” Tomoe mumbled as she looked at the shop.

The business was not on the shopping street, but on a main road. Looking at it from the outside, it was plain to see what kind of place it was... There were several of the same thing lined up out front.

Lucy pointed to one of them with a grin. “That’s right. Rent-a-Cycle rents out these here tricycles.”

“Tricycles... Ah, they do have three wheels, yes,” Velza said as she stared at one of the tricycles.

As per the name, Rent-a-Cycle was a business that rented out cycles, these three-wheeled tricycles in particular. Naturally, these weren’t the kind a child might ride, with the pedals attached directly to the wheels. These had a proper chain, and the two wheels in the rear turned as it went around.

“Wheels, a seat... and a basket in back. It looks like this is a vehicle, huh. Could it be that spinning the things down here makes the wheels go around?”

“Ohh, ya got it!” Lucy clapped, impressed that Ichiha had managed to discern the function of the thing from its form. “If ya sit in the seat and pedal, I hear it’ll go forward. You put stuff in the basket, and it

makes carryin' it easy, even if ya don't have a horse. His Majesty Souma's the one who invented it, y'know?"

"...Yeah. I sort of guessed," Tomoe said with a slightly troubled smile.

Off-the-wall ideas like this generally came from either Souma or Genia. If it were Genia, it'd be even more crazy, so she assumed that, because this still showed some semblance of common sense, it must have been Souma's idea. Tomoe had come to understand how her big brother was over the past two years.

I can just imagine the look on Big Sister's face when he came up with this. As Tomoe thought that, she looked to the castle where the two of them were.

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Meanwhile.

"Go, go, Darlin'!"

"Right, right..."

In the courtyard of the castle Tomoe was looking at, Souma was pedaling a cycle with Roroa sitting behind him. Instead of a tricycle, like they used at the Rent-a-Cycle, they were riding a more standard mountain bike.

"I'm seein' everythin' from a higher vantage point, and the speed is refreshin'," Roroa said, having fun behind him.

She was standing on bars that came out of either side of the rear wheel, and had her hands on Souma's shoulders for balance. If a police officer saw them, they'd have received a warning for this behavior, but there were no such laws governing bicycles in this world yet, so give them a break.

"Mweheheh, Darlin'."

Roroa took her hands off his shoulders, wrapped them around his neck, and pushed herself up against his back. The impact made the bike wobble a bit, but Souma managed to keep his balance.

“Hey, that’s dangerous.”

“I was just thinkin’. I can play all the tricks I want on ya right now.”

“If I go down, you’re going down, too. Behave.”

“Don’t be like that. The truth is, you’re enjoyin’ this, aren’t ya, Darlin’? The way you can feel my breasts on your back.” Roroa snickered, but her cheeks were just a bit red. Even she must have found that line a bit embarrassing.

Souma couldn’t see her face because he was driving, but having lived with her so long, he could pick up on it from the way she was laughing.

That’s why Souma started feeling a bit mischievous himself.



“They are touching me, yeah. Just a little, though.”

“Unyah?!” That direct response made Roroa’s face turn bright red.

“Wh-What’re you sayin’, Darlin’! You idiot! You pervert!”

“This coming from the person who touched me...”

“I’m not pressin’ them against you, I wanted to get you flustered.”

“That’s a novel comeback.”

It wasn’t that old, “I’m making them touch you,” line.

When they finished one lap of the larger-than-you-might-expect courtyard flirting like that, Liscia was waiting at the central terrace with a look of exasperation on her face.

“Souma’s gone and made something weird again...”

“It’s a fascinating vehicle, though...”

Beside Liscia was Souma’s personal trainer and sounding board, the old commander Owen.

“Hmm, I think riding with someone will help increase muscle mass in the thigh area. How does ten laps with me riding in the back sound as part of your daily training menu?”

“Riding double with you, Owen?! Give me a break...” Souma groaned. Riding double with an old macho man was nothing but a punishment.

“Whew, that was fun, Darlin’,” Roroa said cheerily as she hopped off the bike.

Liscia looked at the bike Souma was riding and said, “Still, it’s strange. How does it stay upright when there’s only one wheel in front and back?”

“It’ll be a long explanation, okay? First, let’s start with the gyroscopic effect...”

“Ahh, if it’s going to take that long, I don’t need it. I doubt I’d understand anyway.”

When Liscia smiled wryly, scratching her cheek, Souma let out a sigh.

“...Well, just assume anyone can ride one with practice. In fact, using the technique my grandfather taught me, every member of the Hiryuu’s crew learned to ride a bike. Do you want to try it later, Liscia?”

“Hmm. What’s the technique?”

“First, you use really shallow, short strokes to...”

Souma taught Liscia and the others his grandfather’s technique for riding a bike.

In fact, Roroa learned to ride the bike using this technique (Liscia declined), but because there was no guarantee of safety, they decided to put off doing it in public for now.

When she had heard the full explanation, Liscia cocked her head to the side as she touched the bicycle. “So, why did you make this thing?”

“I received a report that there was a lot of trouble moving around our carrier, the Hiryuu. Given that we already carry wyverns, there really wasn’t space left for mounts like horses, too. That’s why I thought bicycles would be a faster, easier way to get around than walking.”

Now that they had access to a rubber-like material, we were able to make tires. Souma remembered how bicycles were put together, and if he gave Genia and the other researchers a rough outline, he figured they could have a bicycle developed in no time. But it wasn’t that easy.

“I never expected making the chain and gears to be so difficult...”

Not once did it cross his mind while riding a bike in his former world, but it was an incredible feat of engineering to make the chain and gears mesh perfectly. The technology was already established, and there was no room for improving it, so not even a genius idea from Genia was going to solve things. In the end, hard work was the only option available to them.

“I asked Kuu to get Taru to help us, and we somehow managed to get to a finished product, but it ended up being incredibly expensive. I had to give up on spreading the technology far and wide.”

“Th-This thing was that expensive?” Liscia asked in shock.

“Nyahaha, almost as much as one of the royal family’s ornamental carriages,” Roroa told Liscia with a wry smile, making her eyes go wide.

“You... can’t mass produce them then, huh.”

“Right? I wanted them to be available to the common folk who can’t afford horses one day, but this is out of their reach. Still, I can’t see the nobles and knights buying them, either. The nobles would never think to pedal a vehicle on their own, and the knights generally have horses of their own. Basically, there’s no demand for it.”

The only place to ride a bike in this world was inside the cities, where the roads were paved. There were roads outside the city too, of course, but in a world full of dangerous monsters, it would be unsafe to keep your hands occupied riding a bike.

Souma had said himself that no matter how excellent a policy or system might be, if it was out of step with the times, it wouldn’t be accepted. That applied to inventions, too. It might have been too soon for this country to have bicycles.

"Huh? But there's a Rent-a-Cycle business in town, right? Doesn't that place deal in cycles?"

"Hm? Ohh. I talked with Roroa about how we could use the bicycle, and..."

"I said, if they can't buy one, why not lend them out?" Roroa said, looking slightly smug.

This was Roroa's proposal:

Because cycles were expensive, they were unsuited to individual ownership, but they were attractive as a means of transportation that didn't require mounted beasts. Even if the range of movement was limited to within the city, there were merchants who had used carts for transporting their loads all this time. By renting them out to such people at low prices, the development costs could be recouped, and at the same time, it would ease the flow of goods.

"We decided on mainly usin' tricycles, which the merchants can ride without trainin', and to rent them for cheaper than it'd take to keep a horse fed."

"Yeah. With a one-per-store limit. If they intend to use them for other purposes, the cost goes up, by the way. Because I mainly want them to be for commercial use... But still, between making numbered plates for them as a preventative measure against theft, and having the guards watch closely to ensure they weren't taken out of the city, there was a lot of annoying work that had to be done."

Souma slumped his shoulders, having been unable to get a return that was worth the upfront costs in labor. There was no guarantee that every idea he had would end up working out, and things often played out in ways he didn't expect.

Roroa gave Souma a slap on the back and said, "We're just gettin' started. I hear Rent-a-Cycle's doin' pretty good business. Apparently

it's a real hit with the guys in the shippin' business. They don't get much speed when they're loaded up with luggage, but they can go through the back alleys. The old ladies who run restaurants were sayin' it's made stockin' up on ingredients from the market way easier, too."

"...Yeah, I guess it's good that we're getting even a little use out of them."

If they're not completely useless, the effort wasn't entirely in vain, thought Souma. Like Roroa said, things were just getting started.

"Why not try spending the income from Rent-a-Cycle on cycle production? We may have a real 'cyclical industry' on our hands here... Heh." Souma intended it as a joke to lighten the mood, but...

Roroa followed up, "Well, duh, they're dealing in cycles."

"What are you stating the obvious for?" Liscia groaned.

These times when the joke doesn't work in their language can be real tough...

Souma slumped his shoulders again.

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As for what was happening with the five children who had come to Rent-a-Cycle down in castle town...

"Whoa, the wind feels great," Tomoe said as the background scenery streamed past her faster than usual. She was currently on the back of a tricycle being pedaled by Ichiha, sitting on the luggage rack with the basket removed.

Thanks to the token she had received from Souma, it allowed them to borrow this tricycle for a single day. Primarily, Rent-a-Cycle lent to commercial users for a limited time, so to borrow it for personal use would typically cost a fair bit of money.

"Heehee, keep going, Ichiha." Tomoe cheered Ichiha on as he pedaled.

"Y-Yes."

There was a limit of two cycles that could be loaned out for personal use, so they ended up splitting riders for today. One was being ridden by Tomoe and Ichiha (the driver), and the other by Yuriga (the driver), with Lucy and Velza struggling to fit on it together. As such, Yuriga's pedals felt heavy.

"Th-This... isn't much fun."

"Ya think? I'm havin' a blast."

"Yes. It's refreshing to see the scenery stream past us."

"Well, yeah, you two are just riding! It's about time one of you took my place!"

"Aw, don't be silly. A frail little thing like me'd never be able to manage with two people ridin' in back."

"I can take over in a little while."

"I can fly, so why do I need to ride this thing anyway?!"

The three of them, despite their arguing, seemed to be having a good time.

Meanwhile, as for Tomoe and Ichiha...

"Take that!"

"H-Hey! Tomoe! Don't poke the driver in the cheek."

"Ahaha, sorry, sorry."

...They were writing another page in the story of their youth.



Some ten minutes later...

“Whew... I’m beat...”

Yuriga was sitting with her head down at a table on the balcony, exhausted from pedaling a cycle with Lucy and Velza on it all the way here.

As she lay there, Lucy brought a spoon to Yuriga’s mouth with a smile.

“Here, Yurie. Say ahh.”

“Ahh?”

Unable to think straight, possibly due to exhaustion, Yuriga just opened her mouth, and Lucy put a spoonful of something inside. To her surprise, Yuriga remarked, “...It’s sweet.”

“Isn’t it, though? I hear when you’re exhausted, eatin’ somethin’ sweet’ll do you good.”

“You’re saying that when you’re the one who tired me out?”

“Here, say ahh.”

“...Ahh.”

It must have tasted really good. Yuriga did as she was told, opening her mouth wide like a baby chick, and let Lucy feed her.



Tomoe, Ichiha, and Velza watched the two of them with wry smiles.

The five had come to the fruit parlor run by Lucy's parents, The Cat's Tree. It was a trendy main street shop with, as the name suggested, a cat on the sign. It was two floors, with a quarter of the floor space taken up by fresh fruit they were selling, and the remaining space being a cafe which served sweets made using that fruit.

Tomoe and the others were The Cat's Tree's main street balcony, trying out the sweets Lucy was so proud of. There were two plates of them laid out on the table.

Tomoe took a spoonful of the treat in front of her, put it in her mouth, and smiled.

"This pudding is really delicious."

"Glad to hear it. That's our best sellin' item, the 'Special Pudding a la Mode.' We pride ourselves on the fact that the pudding, fruit, and cream are all delivered fresh through our own routes."

Lucy puffed her chest out with pride when her product was complimented. It was that sort of gesture that made her look like Roroa. Then Ichiha, who was also enjoying the pudding, tilted his head to the side. "What's 'a la mode' mean?"

"Dunno."

"Huh?"

"Couldn't tell ya why, but that's what they call puddin' in Souma's world when it's bein' served with fruit and whipped cream like this. Feels kinda fancy, doesn't it?"

"I-I guess..."

Ichiha worried whether it might be a strange word, but even if it was, no one from this world would know it, so he decided it was still fine.

“A la mode” means something like “modern style,” so there was no issue, but Ichihia couldn’t have known that.

Lucy also seemed to like it, so it would probably have been rude to say anything, too. While Ichihia was thinking about that, Lucy continued to pile the pudding into Yuriga’s mouth.

“Here. Say ahh.”

“Ahh... Wait, how long are we going to do this?! That’s enough! Don’t make me eat any more!” Yuriga said, moving her head away.

“Aww, I was havin’ such fun, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Well, help yourself! And hold on, Velza, what have you been so quiet about all this time?!”

Now that she mentioned it, Velza hadn’t said a word. Wondering what was up, the four turned to Velza.

“Whew...”

She was frozen stiff. A spoon in her mouth, and a look of ecstasy on her face. Her eyes were gazing up and to the right, unmoving, as though her mind had gone elsewhere.

“H-Hold on, Velza, are you okay?!” Tomoe said as she shook Velza.

“Ah!” She blinked as though she had just come back to her senses. “I-I’m sorry. It was so delicious, I lost myself.”

“Th-That badly? I know it’s good, but...”

“Apologies. In the God-Protected Forest, the only sweet food that we have is fruit, so...”

“Oh...”

Aisha did say that, remembered Tomoe. She also remembered Souma watching Aisha with a wry smile and saying, “Half of Aisha’s loyalty might have come from me taming her with food.”

Velza held her cheeks in embarrassment. “Ohh... Ever since I left the God-Protected Forest, the food has been so good I don’t know what to do.”

“Uh, yeah, I sort of get that from having watched Aisha.”

“But, even with that in mind, I think this pudding is delicious... I would very much like to share this with them. And I’d like to come back here with everyone again...”

“Huh? Who’s ‘them’?”

“Oh, just talking to myself there.” Velza smiled and brought an index finger to her lips. It was a soft, mature smile; an expression that implied she would not divulge on this topic any further.

“Huh? Is this a kuku berry?”

“Huh?! Whoa! It is!”

When Ichihia scooped up a round, translucent fruit that was next to the pudding, Yuriga looked surprised, too.

“Kuku berry?” Tomoe asked, tilting her head.

“It’s a little round berry that comes from the Union of Eastern Nations, and it has a distinctive gummy texture,” Ichihia replied as he held up the spoon.

“*Nom... Munch...* You’re right, it does have an unusual texture,” Tomoe commented, having snapped up the kuku berry that Ichihia offered her.

This was a scene where there were indirect kisses and lines like, “Say ahh,” going around, but Tomoe and Ichihia were both still children, so they didn’t care.

In fact, in order to return the favor, Tomoe took a different fruit and fed it to Ichihia. Once he had swallowed, Ichihia continued his explanation, “*Munch...* But kuku berries don’t last long. They may not

spoil immediately, but I never expected to be able to eat them outside the Union of Eastern Nations.”

“Heheheh. You’d better not go underestimatin’ the Kingdom’s ability to ship things. There’s rhinosaurus trains runnin’ to and from the border almost every day. That’s why we can put these short-lived fruits on our menu.”

“Why are *you* acting so smug about that...?” Yuriga said, sounding exasperated at the way Lucy was puffing up her still flat chest.

Lucy stood up, and got so close to Tomoe their cheeks might have been touching. “What’re you sayin’, Yurie? The one responsible for gettin’ that rhinosaurus train set up is our very own Tomie here.”

“Hm? It is?”

“I-I only helped out a little.”

Tomoe told Yuriga about how she could speak to animals, and how she had used that ability to arrange an area suitable for rhinosaurus mating, securing their help as a means of mass transportation. Naturally, she kept quiet about the top-secret information that she could speak to monsters and demons, too.

“I was iffy on it at first, but as I was listening, it started to sound incredibly useful,” Yuriga grunted approvingly. “If you have that ability, why not join the dairy farming club, or something like that? If I recall, there was a farm with horses and cows on the outskirts of the school, you’d be instantly useful to them...”

“Absolutely not!”

“Whoa!” Tomoe’s firm refusal made Yuriga bend back in surprise. “I-I didn’t expect you to be so against it.”

“...Okay, Yuriga, try imagining it.”

Tomoe rounded on Yuriga with a face so serious you could hear the dramatic sound effects. Her threatening attitude made Yuriga sweat as she asked, “Imagine... what, exactly?”

“The voices of livestock that will be made into meat. Of chickens having their eggs taken away.”

“...I’m sorry,” Yuriga meekly apologized. It was tough just imagining it.

Tomoe adjusted herself in her chair, then, “Whew...” she let out a sigh. “Obviously, I plan to do whatever I can with my ability if it helps Big Brother and Big Sister, you know? I think I can help with creating an environment that won’t stress the animals... But I don’t want to get seriously involved in farming livestock. I don’t think I’d be able to eat the oyakodon that Big Brother makes anymore if I did.”

“No, seriously... I’m sorry.”

There was an awkward air in the room. The once sweet pudding had lost all its flavor.

In an attempt to change the atmosphere, Lucy clapped her hands and said, “Now, now, let’s get back on topic. So, like I was sayin’, we’re able to offer unusual fruits thanks to a distribution network that includes the rhinosaurus train. It’s just that, well, products that are subject to shipping fees end up being more expensive. The only ones who’ll be orderin’ this puddin’ a la mode regularly are the family of nobles, knights, or influential merchants.”

“Ah... So it is expensive.” Velza looked wistfully at the already half-eaten pudding. Lucy smiled and crossed her arms.

“That’s right. For my part, I wanna make it cheaper so your average girl can come eat, too. If we had reasonably-priced sweets, that’ll make puddin’ a la mode feel more special. If we can manage that, maybe the gals out there’ll buy it as a luxury on special days.”

“Wow... That’s amazing, Lu. You’ve got all of this thought out.”

“Nyah, nyahaha. You’re makin’ me blush.”

Tomoe’s compliments made Lucy a little bashful.

Looking at the way she thought about the common folk at the same time as she thought about business, it was little surprise she idolized Roroa.

“So, it was just as I was thinkin’ about that. The God of Food, Lord Ishizuka, released a new recipe. Hold on just a sec.”

Lucy rose from her seat, and rushed down the stairs to the first floor. Not long after, she returned carrying a single plate. This plate also had pudding on it, but... this pudding was different somehow. It was glossy, shining, and wobbly.

Lucy laid the dish on the table, and, smiling, she said, “Ta-dah! This is our store’s future hero product! It’s called gel pudding!”

““““Gel pudding?””””

The other four cocked their heads to the side in unison.

Lucy confidently laughed and said, “It’s faster just havin’ you eat some. Go on, try it.”

The four dug into the pudding with their spoons as directed, and each took a bite. Instantly, their eyes widened.

“How is this so delicious?!”

“It’s wobbly, but smooth on the tongue. It goes down like a drink.”

Yuriga responded instinctively, and Ichihira analytically.

Though they expressed it in different words, each was extremely pleased with the taste. Tomoe, meanwhile, was smiling despite herself, and Velza even had tears in the corners of her eyes.

“To think there could be something so delicious... I’m so glad I left the God-Protected Forest.”

“Velza, do you need a hankie?”

“Th-Thank you, Tomoe.” Velza took Tomoe’s handkerchief and wiped her tears.

Lucy was nodding ecstatically at their response. “Reactions are lookin’ good. Looks like we’ve got a big hit on our hands.”

“It’s like pudding, but not, right? What’s different?”

“That there’s a good question, Tomie. To make it simple, custard puddin’ is made by boilin’ it, while this gel puddin’ is made by chillin’ it. The base ingredients’re similar, but custard puddin’ uses the way that eggs harden when heated, while gel puddin’ uses the power of an ingredient that isn’t in custard puddin’ which hardens when chilled.”

“An ingredient that hardens when chilled?”

“Like this.” Lucy put a jar filled with a white and slightly greenish-yellow powder on top of the table. Everyone peered at the contents of the container.

“What’s this?”

“Dried, powdered gelin.”

“Gelin?!”

“Huh?! I just ate gelin?!?”

Ichiha and Yuriga both cried out in surprise.

Gelins were invertebrates that lived in the fields, and primarily lived by absorbing the remains of animals. The Union of Eastern Nations had no such culture of consuming gelin, so seeing it came as a shock to them.

"The same gelins from gelin udon?" Tomoe asked.

"We had that sent to us in the God-Protected Forest, too, after the disaster," said Velza. "It was called instant gelin udon, and they told us it was developed for military rations, but it was delicious."

The children's reactions were divided into two clear camps. Lucy smiled with amusement as she explained, "For gelin udon, you destroy the core and use the hardened remains, right? Well, this is the opposite. We cut or bludgeon them without destroying the core, and then use the liquid that produces. It turns out, chillin' liquefied gelin makes it get hard. You know how, when ya boil meat, the juice that comes out can turn into a jiggly lump when you leave it? It's like that."

Even after being appointed a minister, Poncho had continued his research on dishes from Souma's world. He tried, through trial and error, to recreate the sort of gelatin-based pudding he had been told about (the kind where you pull the tab, and it wobbles out of the package), and in that process, he arrived at using gelins. The liquefied gelins were a source of collagen, and he discovered they could be used in place of gelatin to produce an exceptionally smooth result.

Naturally, because gel pudding used raw eggs, it required fresh eggs to make. The Kingdom had put food hygiene laws into effect after taking over Van, the capital of the Principality, so using old eggs was illegal. However, in a situation where fresh eggs could be prepared, gel pudding was less expensive to produce than custard pudding. That was because powdered gelin was cheap, and it meant less eggs and milk were required.

There was also the ease of mixing together the ingredients, then leaving them in an ice room in the basement to set.

The ice could be made by packing in the snow that fell in the winter season, or replenished by hiring a user of ice magic, so most businesses that handled even slightly larger ingredients had an ice room in their basement.

Incidentally, last summer in the castle...

“Liscia, I want to cook. Can you make me some ice?”

“Again? Don’t treat me like an ice merchant.”

“I was planning to make ice cream for dessert, you know...”

“...Well, okay then.” (<- Cheerily producing ice.)

This was a conversation that took place between people at the highest level of power. It reflected how ice was rather important to the people. But we’ve digressed. Let’s get back on track.

This was how a low-cost, delicious gel pudding came to be.

“The God of Food, Lord Ishizuka, sure is incredible. Praise be to him.” Lucy brought her hands together as if praying to a deity.

But for Tomoe, who knew the man personally... *I’m sure Poncho would be so troubled to see her praying to him like that...*

She could just imagine Poncho laughing (because what could he do but laugh?) with a troubled look on his face.

“Tricycles, rhinosaurus trains, and gel pudding...” Yuriga whispered to herself as she stared at the streets of Parnam from the balcony.

“Yuriga?” Tomoe tilted her head to the side, causing Yuriga to look back to her.

“It’s a weird country, huh... This country of yours.”

“Murgh, there you go, saying that again...”

“I don’t mean it sarcastically.”

Yuriga grabbed Tomoe's puffed-up cheeks. She didn't put any force into it. It was more like she was just lightly rubbing them. She didn't pull like usual.

As Tomoe was thinking this was odd, Yuriga smiled wryly and said, "I don't really understand what it is your brother is trying to do with his policies. If he were like my brother: stronger than everyone, leading the warriors with his charisma, defeating enemies, and protecting his people... that would be easier to respect. But King Souma is making tricycles and bizarre food?"

"Th-That's not all he does. He's always busy attending to his duties."

"But the people can't see that, right? They only see the result. The sight of my brother fighting inspires the troops, and the way they sing his praises wins him the support of the people. That united the clans on the once fractured steppe, and is about to unify the Union of Eastern Nations, too. Do you think your people will feel the same way when they see a tricycle?"

"....."

When she put it that way, Tomoe had no response. It was a fact that Souma wasn't doing things in a way that stood out.

His dealings with other nations, the place where Souma was most regal, were hidden from the people. He had their gratitude for the Jewel Voice Broadcast programs, but it was hard to see them associating that with how he was doing as a king. Souma had their support, but he was not showing them much that was kingly.

"...That's what I don't get."

"Huh?"

When Tomoe tilted her head to the side, Yuriga crossed her arms and groaned, "My brother is king because he's been recognized as more regal than anyone else. But King Souma never acts like a king,

and yet he is able to continue being one. Even though he's making nonsensical contraptions like this."

"...Aren't you ragging on the tricycle a little much?"

Had being forced to pedal with three people riding on it left her with a negative impression?

While Tomoe was thinking about that, Yuriga let out a sigh and said, "It all looks pointless to me. But from what I hear, it's helping, isn't it? I can tell that from looking at the city. Everyone's smiling, full of energy. They don't think tomorrow will be worse than today. The people aren't fanatically obsessed with their king, but they do trust in him. That's why I said it's a weird country."

"Yuriga..."

Though Yuriga called it a weird country, Tomoe felt like it was a compliment.

This country has a set of values not present in Malmkhitan, and it felt like Yuriga was recognizing that. Tomoe grinned at the thought of it.

"What're you smiling for, you little kid?" Yuriga grumbled as she pinched her cheeks (for real this time).

"Ow, ow, ow."

As they were jostling about, it happened.

"Huh, Tomoe? What're you doing here?"

""""""Whoa!""""""

There was a sudden voice from the direction of the window, and all five of them shuddered. The first to realize who it came from was Tomoe.

"Wait, huh? Naden?"

Sitting on the balcony railing was King Souma's second secondary queen, Naden Delal Souma. For some reason, she was carrying a basket full of vegetables on her back.

The sudden appearance of the second secondary queen made Velza and Lucy, as citizens of the kingdom, stand and salute. Being so startled by the queen they couldn't speak was seen as rude to them.

""Excuse us, Lady Naden!""

"I don't really mind. You don't need to salute, either." Naden waved her hand and gestured for them to sit down. "I noticed you while I was running, so I decided to call out."

"Um, Lady Naden, this is the second floor, you know... Did you climb up here?"

"I was running along the roofs, so I climbed down, actually."

"D-Did ya now?" Lucy said, blinking. The way she started out talking more formally but was slipping back into merchant slang showed her confusion.

"Is this a tea party on your way home from school? It looks like you're having fun."

"Y-Yes. Something like that," Tomoe replied. "What about you, Naden? Are those vegetables..."

"Ohh, when Souma's cooped up in his office, or when there's no weather forecast, I have nothing to do. So I've been told I can do whatever I like inside the capital. When I'm talking to the ladies in town... I get asked to do all sorts of things. I'm delivering vegetables right now."

"We have a queen acting as the town's errand girl?! Does Big Brother know?!"

“I’ve got his permission. Souma sort of laughed about it, but told me, ‘It’ll probably help earn you support among the people, so I think it’s fine.’ Besides, he’s always super happy when he sees the fresh fruits and vegetables they give me as ‘thanks.’”

“They even pay you in product?! Is this why I see Big Brother gleefully standing in the kitchen more often lately?!”

Naden and Tomoe were having a conversation no one would have expected between a queen and the (adopted) royal sister.

As Yuriga stood beside them, watching, she whispered, “Yeah... This country is weird.”

◇ ◇ ◇

That night, Yuriga, who had returned to Parnam Castle with Tomoe, was visiting the kitchen that was near the Souma family’s section of the castle.

This was a simple kitchen, prepared for Souma, who said he still wanted to cook for himself. The question of how long the king should continue borrowing the kitchen that was attached to the cafeteria had apparently become an issue. To sum it up, he had been quarantined.

Now with it decided they would be building him his own personal kitchen, Souma had Genia and the others develop cooking equipment for him. Thanks to that, though it was a narrow space, the room had quite similar functionality to kitchens back in the world he had come from. He obviously couldn’t get a microwave, but he did manage to make a pseudo-hotplate using an ore that absorbed heat.

The door to the kitchen had been removed in the interest of making it easy to bring serving trays in and out, as well as due to ventilation concerns, so when Yuriga simply said, “Excuse me,” and entered without knocking...

“Aisha. Say ahh.”

“Ahh. Hamph... *Munch, munch.*”

“Souma. Me, too. Me, too.”

In front of a bubbling pot, Souma was feeding Aisha with chopsticks. They were probably taste-testing the food, or something.

Having been fed, Aisha’s face broke into a contented smile.

Naden, who was standing behind Souma, may have been jealous, because she was pulling on the hem of his shirt and making her presence known.

“Here. You, too, Naden.”

“Ahh... *Chomp. Munch, munch.*”

“...Um, what are you doing?” Yuriga said, exasperated by the syrupy-sweet scene she had witnessed the moment she stepped into the room.

““Guh...! *Cough, cough.*”” Perhaps startled by the sudden voice, Aisha and Naden choked in unison. When he realized Yuriga had seen him making his wives say, “Ahh,” Souma got a little embarrassed, and he scratched his cheek as he asked, “What’s up? Why are you here?”

“I was looking for you, Sir Souma. I went to the government affairs office, but Mr. Hakuya was the only one there. I asked him, and he said, ‘His Majesty has finished work for the day. I believe he is in the kitchen. He looked giddy, carrying the daikon Naden brought home for him when he left.’”

“Was I that obvious...?”

“So, really, what were you doing?” Yuriga asked again.

Souma pointed at the bubbling pot and said, “It’s just like Hakuya predicted. Naden brought home an amazing daikon, after all. I just

had some octopus delivered, too, so I was thinking I'd make oden for the first time in a while."

"O-Oden?"

"It's a sort of soup... no, a hot pot dish from my old world. I can't get any boiled fish-paste products, so it's just daikon, octopus, boiled egg, and then konbu for the soup base. ...If I were to tie together some gelin udon, would that work in place of shirataki noodles? Hmm, the texture is similar to konjac jam, so it shouldn't taste bad, but it would take it further away from being oden..."

"...The one thing I understood from all that is that you're up to nonsense as usual." Yuriga gave an exasperated shrug. She had begun to get used to the weird atmosphere in this country... or rather, the bizarre actions of the people around Souma.

Why was the king of a nation so happy to get a daikon?

Why was the king cooking it himself?

Why were the queens saying, "Ahh"?

If Yuriga looked at this through the lens of common sense, there were any number of things she could call them out on, but that effort would surely be in vain. She had figured out this much already.

"So, you came because you needed me for something?" Souma asked.

"That's right," Yuriga replied, having remembered her reason for coming. "I want to send a letter to my brother about recent events in my time here... I was hoping to get permission. May I?"

Having said that, Yuriga pulled a letter from the tool bag at her waist, and showed the front and back of it to Souma. It had apparently not been sealed yet.

Looking seemingly uninterested, Souma turned back to the pot and said, “Hmm? If it’s about mail, you can hand it to the relevant official. I’m sure they’ll take care of it. There’s no need to come out of your way to report to me.”

“Huh?! You’re not going to check the contents?!” Yuriga’s eyes went wide.

Being treated as a transfer student from Malmkhitan, she belonged to a foreign country, and was trying to contact another person in a foreign country. Shouldn’t he have been concerned she would leak national secrets?

If Yuriga were in Souma’s position, she would have been. That was why she had assumed this letter would definitely be read by Souma and his people. Even if it was only an update on her current situation, why wouldn’t they still search it for anything resembling a coded message?

However, Souma said there was no need.

“...I’m not the one who needs to tell you this, but shouldn’t you be more cautious? What if I were leaking this country’s secrets to my brother?”

“Oh, I’m fully aware of the danger,” said Souma with a laugh. “If someone from another country goes anywhere where they might come in contact with secret information, I have covert agents who will let me know. I just haven’t gotten any such report yet. I don’t think there’s anything you could have put in that letter that would cause me trouble.”

The lack of tension in his voice left Yuriga bewildered.

“That’s... true, yes, but I’m not quite convinced. Okay, what would you do if I tried to find that secret information?”

“In that case, I’d use that fact to send you back to Fuuga. If we judged you under our own laws, it might give him a strange excuse to do something, so you’ll be going home in one piece. I need to treat you respectfully as a transfer student, but I don’t think I need to be so concerned about the feelings of a spy.”

“That you can handle it with such disinterest is... actually more scary in some ways.”

He had absolute confidence in his covert agents, and believed beyond a doubt that Yuriga could never leak his secrets.

In the way he handled her with disinterest as he fussed over how well-boiled the contents of his pot were, Yuriga felt she had seen the image of a king who would not be disturbed easily. It made a chill run down her spine.

Incidentally, around when he got to the, “If you try to leak our secrets...” part, the looks Aisha and Naden were giving her got noticeably sharper.

This country... is frightening. The king and queens, too.

“Obviously, I have no intention of leaking any secrets.” Yuriga put her hands up, unable to bear the way the queens were looking at her any longer. “This really is just an update on my situation. This country has been taking care of me, after all. There’s a lot I want to learn, so I’d rather not be thrown out yet.”

“That makes things easier on me. I wouldn’t want to throw one of Tomoe’s few friends out like that.”

“I-I don’t particularly think of myself as her friend...”

Yuriga was trying to play tough, but she and everyone else already knew she was friends with Tomoe and Ichiha. Her poor attempt to deny it was met with a smirk from Souma.

“Oh, right. Back to the oden, would you like to join us, Yuriga? I was so excited to eat it again after so long, I made too much. I was going to call Tomoe, and Ichihā, too.”

“...Can I?”

The scent of soy sauce and soup broth had hung in the air for a while, and it had Yuriga interested.

She was uncomfortable about joining the king and his queens at the dinner table, but if Tomoe and Ichihā were there, she’d probably be fine. In fact, if they got to eat something tasty, and she was left out, that would have bothered her.

“...If those two are coming, I will join you, too.” Yuriga said with a blush.

That evening, dinner was very lively.

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— Roughly a week later —

“Hahaha, looks like she’s having fun.”

Far to the north, Fuuga Haan, the King of Malmkhitan, grinned as he read Yuriga’s letter.

“What are you reading, Darling?” Mutsumi asked as she came into the room.

Fuuga handed her the letter he had been given and replied, “It’s a letter from Yuriga. It sounds like she’s having fun in the Kingdom of Friedonia.”

“Oh, it’s from Yuriga?” Then, looking through the letter from her sister-in-law, Mutsumi cocked her head to the side. “Hmm? It seems to be a report on recent happenings in her life. The writing style is fun, though...”

“Does something about it bother you?”

“Oh, no, I thought she might be *made* to write a letter like this. I wondered if we should really take the pleasant tone at face value...”

“You’re saying Souma might’ve forced Yuriga to write this? Not a chance.”

Fuuga blew off Mutsumi’s concerns with a hearty laugh.

“This is unmistakably Yuriga’s handwriting. Besides, if Yuriga is forced to write letters against her will, she’s been taught to deform her writing in a certain way. Well, knowing how overly cautious Souma is, he wouldn’t do anything so silly as to harm his relationship with me. There may be some censorship, but I’m sure what’s written in there is how Yuriga really feels.”

“Her true feelings... Then *the thing she wrote at the end* is how she really feels, too?”

“Yeah, it means that’s how she felt.” Fuuga grinned.

This is what was written at the end of Yuriga’s letter:

“Brother,

Friedonia is a weird country.

It is fun living here, but I feel something other than just enjoyment from it. My preconceptions are breaking down, and the values inside me that I thought were absolute are colliding with a set of values that are different from them... It’s hard to put into words. I haven’t sorted it out myself yet, either.

You have been cautious of King Souma since the beginning, so I doubt you will let your guard down, but let me say it regardless. By no means should you underestimate him.

Sincerely, Yuriga.”

“Yuriga believes in me more than anyone, and even she’s saying that. He’s one hell of a guy, huh?”

“...You are enjoying this,” Mutsumi said, sounding exasperated.

There was a ferocious sparkle in Fuuga’s eyes.

“We’ve *only accomplished one so far*. From here on, I don’t know who, or what, will stand in my way. Not being able to see that excites me. This era’s gonna get so hot it makes my blood boil!”

Then, resting his feet on the walls of a city he had reclaimed from the monsters, he roared towards the sun which hung high in the northern sky.

In the northern lands, a tiger was about to take flight.

Chapter 2: The East and West Real Song Battle

“...Ngh.”

When I woke up, the person who should have been sleeping next to me was gone.

Not yet fully awake, I touched the space where she had slept, and found it still slightly warm. That meant she hadn’t been gone long. I felt a certain loneliness that the white softness that had been seared into my mind was not there.

I rolled over on to my back, and stared idly up at the ceiling as I reviewed my current situation. I was naked from the waist up, but I was still wearing pants. Then...

“You’re awake now, my darling?”

The voice came from the opposite direction of where I was looking, and when I turned around Juna was waiting with tea prepared. I slowly sat up.

“...Morning, Juna.”

“Hee hee, good morning.”

When I greeted her, Juna responded with a smile.

I could be more casual with her now because... well, we were married. I had promised to try to be less formal when we were alone together, and I was trying to follow through with that.

While pouring hot water into the teapot, Juna said, “I’ve prepared things. Would you like a cup to start the day?”

“Yeah, I would. But before that...”

I got out of bed, and embraced Juna from behind as she put a lid on the teapot to allow it to steam. “Gosh...” she said, with a slightly troubled chuckle. “It’s dangerous when you hug me so suddenly.”

“Sorry. But you’re half to blame here, Juna.”

“Oh, my.”

I was the one who got turned on, but Juna was the one who had provoked me.

Her current attire had more than sufficient power to blow away any reason I might have had. That’s because all she was wearing over top of her underwear was the white shirt I had cast off.

The sleeves were a bit long, but the chest was bursting at the seams. With one look, I was on the verge of losing all control, and I couldn’t resist holding her.

“Darling...” Juna turned just her head around, and reached out to put her hand on my cheek. “I never knew you were so passionate.”

“I mean, now that we’re husband and wife, I don’t have to hold back anymore.”

“You were holding back?”

“Well, you’re attractive, and your occasional coquettish gestures tickled me just right as a man. It was a long battle between my self-restraint and the temptation to give in.”

“Hee hee... That explains why last night was so intense...” Juna smiled, tracing her fingers gently along the arms that embraced her. “It may not be long before we have children at this rate.”

“If we do, Cian and Kazuha will be their big brother and sister, huh? Cian is a gentle boy, so I’m sure he’ll be fine, but Kazuha is too energetic, so I’m a little worried there.”

“Hee hee, I’m sure it will be fine. If she’s inherited Lady Liscia’s personality, I’m sure she’ll make a good, caring older sister.”

“...Yeah. You may be right.”

We laughed, and then flirted with one another until the maid came to inform us breakfast was ready. It’s a good thing we lived in the castle.

If it were just the two of us living together, I suspect Juna’s charms might have turned me into a useless person... Though, it’s still a bit of a shame we didn’t.

◇ ◇ ◇

— 6th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar —

It was an afternoon with clear skies. I was in the governmental affairs office looking over some documents that Hakuya had handed to me. As I read them... I couldn’t help but let out a sigh.

“...He’s finally taken one.”

“Yes. It will be vital to pay attention to the situation from now on.”

“What’s goin’ on, Darlin’? Why the frowny face?”

“Did something happen?”

Because Hakuya and I had difficult expressions on our faces, Roroa and Juna got worried.

Roroa was here to handle financial documents, and Juna was here because, though their heads were more stable and they could sit now, Liscia was still fully occupied by dealing with Cian and Kazuha, so Juna was taking her place as my assistant.

In order to show them there was nothing to fear, I gave a small smile and waved the piece of paper.

“I was just reading the regular report from Julius.”

“From my brother?”

“Yeah. ...It seems that Fuuga’s reclaimed a city inside the Demon Lord’s Domain.”

I laid the documents on the table, and rested my chin on my hands as I explained, “The Eastern Union of Nations is in an uproar over it. Fuuga was no more than the king of a minor nation, but now his name echoes like thunder.”

When I said that, Roroa cocked her head to the side.

“Hmm... Sure that’s impressive, but it’s still just one city, right? When the Empire sent their expeditionary force, they must’ve gone in deeper, but no one ended up makin’ that much of a fuss over it...”

Yeah. I largely agreed, but the way they interpreted it on the ground was different.

“Ever since Madam Maria took the throne, the Empire has been cautious about launching an expedition. If the greatest of mankind’s nations will not act, then we’re all forced to sit quietly and watch. That’s why they’ve worked to maintain the status quo and keep the situation from deteriorating further, but if you look at it another way, it meant there was no chance to break out of the situation. Now they’re getting good news for the first time in a long time.”

“The people are more excited than the accomplishment merits... Is that what you’re saying?” asked Juna.

I nodded to her as Hakuya spoke up, too, “In addition, the Union of Eastern Nations is an amalgamation of many small to medium-sized states. The fear of the demon wave externally, and the haphazard system of alliances and familial ties internally, makes acting with unified purpose difficult. Even if a ruler like Your Majesty, Madam

Maria, or Sir Gouran were to try to make their country better, those fetters would get in the way.”

“It’s easy for the nail that sticks up to get pounded down there,” I said.

“Hmm,” Hakuya nodded. “Is that a saying from your world, sire? It’s quite apt... There are limits to what they can accomplish so long as they remain a country of small to medium sized states. They have no bright outlook, and the nation is enveloped in a feeling of entrapment. That is the current situation in the Union of Eastern Nations.”

“And that feeling of entrapment is fertile ground for the rise of a ‘great man.’”

When a society felt trapped, the people would look for a great man who could break through whatever was holding them back. The sort of entity who could use radical means to smash everything and let them stand up anew.

Oda Nobunaga, Cao Cao, Napoleon... These men all held the potential for greatness, but what made them great men was the people of the era they were born into. Their actions, which would have been considered massacres in peacetime, were deemed necessary by their people, and that was the birth of their status as great men.

If I thought about it now, the lack of notable resistance when Sir Albert gave me the throne was a manifestation of the people’s desire to change the plight of their directionless country.

The people placed their hopes in the words, “the summoned hero.”

With Liscia’s support and some words from Maria, I was able to pull myself back from the brink, but if I had kept trying to role-play being a king any longer... I might have been forced into the same “great man” position as Fuuga.

"The report from Julius indicates nearly all the refugee soldiers serving under Jirukoma have joined Fuuga's forces now as volunteers. With the exception of a small number who, like Jirukoma, married Lastanian women, they all wanted to flock to go to Fuuga's side."

"That's a real hit to the ol' manpower. Is my big brother and big sister's country gonna be okay?"

Roroa looked worried. Her relationship with Julius was mending, and she got on well with his wife, Princess Tia, so she must have felt uneasy.

"They're fine," I said with a laugh, trying to reassure her. "I told them to flee to the Kingdom if they have to."

"You told that to Sir Julius, who was once, even if only for a short time, the Prince of Amidonia...? I apologize to Lady Roroa, but I cannot recommend stoking the fires of potential strife like that," Hakuya said, frowning.

Roroa looked like she wanted to say something, but she must have understood Hakuya's point and didn't voice her displeasure.

"It's nothing to worry about," I told Hakuya with a shrug.

"Machiavelli said, 'People will forget the harm you have done them, but they will never forget the women and the money you stole.'

Right now, the most important thing Julius has is Princess Tia. For as long as her safety is guaranteed, Julius won't get his priorities out of order. That's what I felt when I actually met him."

"...Very well. Let us trust in your eye for people, then." Hakuya looked me directly in the eye as he backed down.

He must have wanted to be sure I wasn't simply being soft on Julius because he was family. I couldn't have been more grateful to Hakuya for taking on an important role that would only hurt him. If I didn't

have someone like him at my side, I wouldn't be able to have confidence in my own decisions.

With that conversation sorted, I decided to change topics.

"Now then, partially as a means of preparing for Fuuga, there's a project I'd like to push forward."

"Oh! It's finally time to get movin' on that, huh!"

"Hee hee, I've been looking forward to it ever since I heard about it."

Roroa and Juna smiled happily.

Hakuya, meanwhile, shrugged in exasperation. "I understand this project is likely important, but is there a need to make it such an overblown affair? It's an experiment for the country, is it not?"

"Well, sure, but it should make for a fun image. Since we have the opportunity, why not put it on the Jewel Voice Broadcast, and let the people enjoy it, too?"

"...I have to acknowledge my lack of knowledge in these matters, so I will defer to your decision, sire, but please ensure you do not forget the original purpose of all this."

"Yeah, I know," I said, standing up as Hakuya impressed his point on me. "All right, now let's make it a big, fun experiment."

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"Magicum."

This substance was said to be the key to the appearance of magic in this world.

Magic was divided into six elemental types: fire magic, as wielded by Carla and Hal; water magic, as wielded by Liscia and Juna; wind magic, as wielded by Aisha; earth magic, as wielded by Kaede; light magic, which could heal external wounds; and dark magic, which

encompassed all the powers, like mine and Tomoe's, as they did not fall under one of the other groups.

It was an important element, and yet we knew hardly anything about magicum. Even Doctor Hilde, a member of the three-eyed race, who each bore a shining third eye on their forehead that allowed them to see with the precision of an optical microscope, was apparently unable to see this magicum. I didn't know if that was because it was invisible, or because it was so incredibly small that even the three-eyed race couldn't see it, and we would need an electron microscope.

When things were this unclear, I almost began to doubt the very existence of the stuff, but if I considered the connection Mother Dragon had hinted at of continuity between "this world" and "that world" where I had once lived, there had to be some reason for the emergence of magic. There were various feats we could do here that couldn't be done in my former world.

In that world, there was a cause and effect relationship between all things. There had to be a "cause" that resulted in the "effect" of magic emerging, so I thought that "cause" was magicum.

The other point I had learned about magic was that its power was greatly diminished over the ocean. Even water magic, which was less affected than the other elements, was affected to at least some degree near sea water. This was why Excel had once been called, "the mage who is unbeatable anywhere there is fresh water."

It had become established as common sense that magic did not work well near the sea. That was also why firearms, which had been ignored for use on land because they were inferior to magic, had still been studied by the Navy.

Because of all this, I had hypothesized that magicum's effects were limited by nearness to the sea. The fact that magic could be used

with fresh water, but not with sea water, was interesting. If fresh water was good, but sea water was bad, it was almost like you-know-what, right? If so, perhaps magicum was... No, I didn't have enough to go on just yet. I could go on about my conjecture, but I couldn't be sure of it. It needed to be studied more firmly.

Some months ago, when I was thinking this, a research proposal for a certain experiment came to me from Ginger's Vocational School. I was in the midst of preparing for my coronation and wedding ceremony at the time.

"The Work Songs Society?" I cocked my head to the side as I looked through the report Ginger had brought to me in the governmental affairs office.

Ginger's Vocational School did more specialized research, focusing on the kind of things they wouldn't handle at an academic institution like the Royal Academy. That could be skills like cooking and singing, or more esoteric topics that would be wasted on the Royal Academy.

Though, recently, Ginger's Vocational School had catalyzed a shift towards supporting more unique research at the Royal Academy. Competition was an important factor for academic development. I wouldn't tolerate them interfering with each other, but surely a close competition between the two was to be welcomed.

The thing that Ginger had brought to me on this occasion was also something that had been wasted on the Royal Academy, and drifted over to Ginger's Vocational School instead.

Ginger nodded in response to my question. "Yes. The Work Songs Society. The formal name is 'The Society for the Study of Work Songs.'"

"By work songs, you mean those songs everyone sings while they're working?"

“That is correct.”

In essence, these were songs that laborers tended to sing in place of shouting as they worked. In terms of ones I would know, there was Asadoya Yunta, which I had learned in elementary school. I seemed to recall that was a work song. Hmm, studying the work songs of this country, huh?

I was a little curious about what there were... but still...

“I think it’s interesting as an object of ethnological study, but was this something you needed to come all the way to the castle about?”

“Oh, no, this isn’t simple ethnology.” Ginger hurriedly shook his head.

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“According to the head of the Work Songs Society, some of the songs that the common people sing seem to have the effect of increasing the potency of magic.”

“Singing makes magic more effective, you’re saying?”

It sounds like something out of a game, but is it possible? I thought, but on more careful consideration, from the perspective of my old world, wasn’t this world of swords and sorcery already kind of like a game?

Madam Tiamat had suggested there was some temporal relationship between that world and this world, so was something so absurd possible? I was only half-convinced, but Ginger shook his head strongly.

“No, it seems the effect is gained by listening, not singing. The effect doesn’t affect all magic, either. There are songs suited to specific spells. For instance, a work song used in the quarries affects the magic used when extracting stone. It doesn’t work on other magic... like, say, the enchantments placed on weapons.”

“So listening to the woodcutters’ songs makes you better at magic used for cutting down trees, and so on?”

“That’s right.”

“I see. That’s fascinating.”

Did that mean if they were listening to the most famous woodcutters’ song from Japan, their logging magic would get stronger? No, that was an enka song, not a work song, huh.

Hmm... At the current juncture, I couldn’t really be sure if this was incredible or not.

“It’s an interesting thing to focus on, but... I can’t decide if it’s a worthwhile thing to study or not,” I said. “I’d like to get an opinion from Juna, since she’s a singer, and from an expert on magic, too.”

“That makes sense. I think that would be good.”

“So, could I ask you to come back with the head of this Work Songs Society someday soon? I’ll bring together the people who can make a decision.”

“Understood.”

From there we moved on to a discussion of Ginger and Sandria’s upcoming wedding. They had apparently been having problems, so I gave Ginger some advice, and arranged behind the scenes for things to be set up for him.

With that done, I went back to thinking about the plan Ginger had brought me again.

Now, who was I going to need other than the loreleis...? Ah, I know of one.

“Aisha,” I called out to her as she was standing guard by the door.

“Yes, sire?”

“Send a messenger to Genia’s dungeon workshop. Have them tell Merula, who is involved in the drill research project, to appear at the castle.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

Having left the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan and dappled with a variety of magic cultures, primarily enchantment magic, Merula Merlin was an expert in all things relating to magic.

If I showed her this report, how would she react? I was kind of looking forward to it.

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“I do not believe it’s impossible,” Merula said, not seeming particularly surprised.

It had been some days since then, and a new group of people had been gathered in the meeting room at the castle.

The members other than me included Liscia, who had come to help because the children were having an afternoon nap; Juna, who had been called as an expert on music; the high elf Merula; and Souji, the worldly bishop who had for some reason insisted on accompanying her; as well as the central figures of this gathering, Ginger and the head of the Work Songs Society, Morse Butchy.

I was surprised by how large Morse was. He stood easily over two meters tall, and was pretty thick, too. But, more than that, he had the face of a walrus.

He was a member of one of the five races of the snowy plains, which made up the majority of the population in the Republic of Turgis, the walrus race. His family had apparently immigrated to the Kingdom in his grandfather’s time.

This man was more rotund than Poncho, and was wearing an academic uniform, so I couldn't help but think, *What fantasy movie did you escape from, buddy?*

On top of that, the moment we met...

"Ohh, Your Majesty. I am most honored to have received your invitation on this occasion," said Morse. "It is an honor beyond anything I deserve that you know about our research."

His low voice overflowed with a dandyism that I would not have expected from his walrus face, so I was quite surprised upon meeting him. It was so good I instantly fell in love with it. From what I heard, he wasn't just a researcher, he was also a bass singer.

From there, I received a thorough explanation of the Work Songs Society's activities from Morse. They had gathered work songs from all over this country, and had been satisfied just to be able to record them. However, when they tried using magic while singing a work song used in the forge, they got the feeling it had increased the power of their flame magic. Did songs have the power to affect magic?

With that thought, ever since then, the Work Songs Society had been studying which songs had what effects. As a result, they began to learn that the mental image was what was important.

If you listened to a song that made you envision roaring flames, it would strengthen your fire-type magic, and if you listened to a song that made you envision a raging gale, it fortified your wind-type magic instead. The key point here was that songs that were about a quietly burning flame, or a gentle breeze would instead lower the power of the associated magic. That was presumably because of the mental image, too.

"A strong image will strengthen the magic, while a weak image will weaken it," Merula said, following Morse's explanation. "And the

simplest way to conjure that image in people's minds must be through song."

"Is it possible for a song to affect magic?"

"Yes. It's pretty commonly said that image is important in magic."

Merula stood up, and began writing on the prepared blackboard.

Person's Head → Will → Magicium → Reaction → Phenomenon

Person's Head → Strong Will → Magicium → Strong Reaction → Large Phenomenon

"In regards to the system of magic in this world, it is said that first you convey your intention to manifest a spell to the magicium, and then the magicium responds to that will by triggering a phenomenon. Though the all-important magicium's existence has not been proven, it is clear that magic is manifested by our will. The size of magic each person can use differs, but in most cases, they can adjust their power at will."

Oh, yeah. My Living Poltergeists had a limit on the number of things it could control, but that didn't mean I need to control all of them all of the time. I could control just one thing, too.

Satisfied she had convinced me, Merula went on, "This will could also be referred to as the 'image of using magic.' With a stronger image than usual, we can see that the magic's power is increased. This is something that is on display in spell names."

"By spell names, you mean... the attack names that Liscia and Aisha shout? Ice Sword Mountain and Sonic Wind, was it? Oh, and there was Water God Calling, which Excel showed us in the Kingdom of Lastania."

"Yes, but... when you say it like that, it's kind of embarrassing." Liscia sent me a resentful glance as she blushed.

It apparently was embarrassing to have her attack name pointed out by someone else. My own Living Poltergeists sounded a bit like a name that a kid in middle school would come up with, too.

“But, normally, manifesting magic doesn’t require you to say the spell name aloud,” Liscia commented.

“It doesn’t? Oh, now that I think about it, Aisha was using it without calling the name, huh?”

“When I say the name, it helps me get fired up! Augh, just leave me alone.”

When I looked at her, she was covering her face with both hands. Her ears were red, too. She must have felt pretty embarrassed. If I poked at her any more, I was probably going to get an earful later, so I decided to lay off.

Merula coughed politely and resumed, “What Princess Liscia said is more or less correct. The key point is that how strongly you imagine the result is how well the effect will manifest. That’s why people shout spell names, or chant incantations to help them imagine things more concretely. The latter method takes more time, so it’s actually less effective in battle or when in a hurry, though.”

“Hmm, so it’s not just because they’re cool.”

“Yes. Also, in the sense of forming an image, I think that songs should have the same sort of effect. In fact, there are even types of magic that make use of that. Right, Souji?”

When she suddenly threw the discussion over to him, Souji’s eyes went wide. “Huh? What’re you asking me for?”

“There was magic in the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State that we could infer was making use of song-based effects, right? The reason I had you come here today was so that you could explain that, so do it properly.”

“Songs and magic... Oh, you mean Area Heal?” Souji said, sounding convinced, as scratched his head.

Area Heal... The name suggested it was a mass healing spell.

When I expressed that opinion, Souji nodded.

“You’re not wrong. It’s rare, but among the Orthodox Papal State’s light mages, there are a number who can heal multiple people’s wounds at the same time. When those guys become cardinals or archbishops, they get cloistered away. Then, when a large number of people are hurt because of a disaster or a battle, they’re taken there to heal the wounded. With talk of how it’s ‘Lunaria’s grace’ or whatever.”

“Huh?! They can heal all of the wounded at once?!”

If they could heal multiple wounded people at the same time on the battlefield, I was scared they were going to pull a zombie attack on us. That was too good a match for religious groups, like the Ikko Ikki back in the other world, who believed they would get into paradise if they died for their beliefs.

However, “Oh, yeah, that’s not happening,” Souji said, waving off the idea. “It’s called Area Heal, but for every additional person being affected at the same time, the effect on each individual person is lessened. Besides, all it can heal is gashes up to a certain size and some minor bone fractures. Healing multiple broken bones at the same time, or reattaching severed arms... that’s beyond their power. Of course, it doesn’t work on sickness, either.”

“...I still think it’s plenty threatening.”

They might not be on the same level as zombies, but they’d still be a tough group.

Though, it did seem like the sort of magic that would be useful in disaster areas. I’d have liked to have users of Area Heal in our

country, too, but they had probably hidden them and all of their blood relatives away. That's definitely what I'd have done if I were in charge there.

"Whoops, got off-track there. When they perform Area Heal, the wounded and their families are supposed to sing a hymn. They're praying to god, basically. I had figured it was a religious rite, but... if Merula's explanation is correct, it's to make the magic user's image of 'being healed by the power of god' more concrete, and to boost the power of the spell."

"I believe that's the case. Whether or not they are aware that's what they're doing is another matter, though."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

When I asked that, Merula raised her index finger and explained, "People have a tendency to focus on the causes when things work well. To take it to an extreme, 'I walked out of the door with my left foot first today and something good happened, so I'm going to walk out of the door with my left foot first again tomorrow. It's a sort of wish.'

"Oh, like routines."

It was like the way athletes would go through the same routine each time in order to elevate their spirits.

Merula cocked her head to the side, looking confused, but she went on without worrying about it.

"Whatever the case, when something works for people, they have a tendency to repeat that action. If that goes on for about a century, it can become a religious or cultural ritual. So, for the hymn sung with Area Heal, they sang it, and the effect seemed to improve. They kept singing because they felt like there was an effect. Then, at some point, it was recognized as a religious rite... I think that's the sequence of events."

“I see...” I crossed my arms and groaned.

If the same routine was repeated with a common understanding of it, it would eventually be recognized as a religious or cultural ritual, huh?

“So, you believe Morse’s theory that certain songs can enhance the effect of certain magics,” I said.

“There’s a need to prove it more thoroughly, but I believe there would be value in doing so. I believe there are things we could learn about the nature of magic by studying this, too.”

“Hmm... What do you think as a lorelei, Juna?”

“Well...”

Juna brought her clasped hands up to her mouth, and made a slightly difficult expression.

“As a singer, I’m happy to feel the potential of songs in it. However, as someone who was in the Marines, I also think we may be able to use songs in battle. What if there were songs that could boost the power of offensive spells...”

“...I went straight to that, myself.” Liscia agreed with her. As someone tasked with managing a country and a military, it was an inevitable thought.

“Me, too. Though, depending on how you look at it, it may be more suited to defense than offense. We can’t send a military band out to the front lines, after all. If we were going to run a band, it would probably stay inside a castle or camp. That’s why I intend to prioritize studying defensive music. In order to defend this country... Does that sound convincing?”

It sounded like a fallacious argument to me even as I made it, but Juna still smiled and said, “I already believe in you, sire. No matter what you do, I will simply trust and support you.”

“I’m prepared for that, too. You should do what you believe in, Souma.”

“Thank you, Juna, Liscia.”

This was how the project to study the relationship between magic and songs began.

However, because it was a major undertaking and would require a number of staff, it was decided the experiment to demonstrate it would not be performed until after the coronation and wedding ceremony.

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— End of the 6th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar —

On this day, there was a massive crowd overflowing from the fountain plazas where people could watch the Jewel Voice Broadcast. That was because word had spread that the young king would be doing something interesting again.

Ever since Souma had begun to use the Jewel Voice Broadcast, the number of fountain plazas had grown, and in turn, the content’s popularity as well. The broadcasts drew massive crowds, and so people were gathered in Parnam’s central fountain plaza, waiting with bated breath for the broadcast to begin.

“Whoa! What a crowd. There’s so many people, you could sweep them up and throw them out.”

“Oh, Yuriga. Don’t talk about people like they’re garbage.”

Yuriga’s all-too-frank opinion left Tomoe pursing her lips in dissatisfaction.

The five kids: Tomoe, Ichiha, Yuriga, Velza, and Lucy, were currently on the third floor terrace of the restaurant managed by Lucy’s family,

which was near the central park. Lucy had invited them because they could see the Jewel Voice Broadcast from here without getting caught in the crowds.

“What do ya think? It’s a pretty good location we’ve got goin’ on here, huh?”

“It is, yes. It’s a bit far, but I can see the fountain plaza well,” Ichihia said with a small smile as Lucy puffed out her still non-existent chest, with pride.

Velza, who was quietly eating the nut cookies that had been left out, had yet to respond. Unlike Aisha, who devoured her food like a lion, she had more of the look of a small animal desperately stuffing as much into her cheeks as she could.

Lucy looked at Velza and chuckled. “I’m glad to see you’re likin’ the food.”

“*Munch, munch...* Yes. I am quite satisfied with it,” Velza said shyly.

Ichihia pointed to the fountain plaza. “Oh! It’s starting now.”

The third primary queen Roroa and the kingdom’s first newscaster, the half-elf Chris Tachyon, appeared. Lucy squealed in delight at the sudden appearance of her idol.

“Eeek, Lady Roroa’s super cute today, too!”

“*Munch, munch...* Whoa, girl.”

While grabbing a cookie and putting it in her mouth with her left hand, Velza tapped Lucy on the shoulder with her right. Then, as the many people watched, the two on screen shouted in unison.

“The—“The East and West Song Battle”—tle.”

...Correction. They were not quite in unison.

“Hey, Chrisie. We practiced this. Why’re you not matchin’ my timin’?”

“S-Sorry. It’s my first time MCing a program like this.”

“Why’s that? You’re always fine when you’re readin’ the news, aren’t ya?”

“The news has a fixed script, but they only gave us a rough outline to go off of for this kind of thing. Why am I the MC anyway? We had other people to do it before now, didn’t we?”

“They’re more or less all bein’ used for this event, so there ain’t much else we can do. Now then, was the next part of the program the one where we make you strip off some of your clothes and strike a sexy pose?”

“It is not! Seriously, please don’t say things that we haven’t discussed in advance!”

The plaza filled with laughter at the sight of Chris’s flustered response.

Lucy watched Roroa’s mischievous snickering with pure ecstasy. “Not only is she smart, she’s charmin’, too. Is Lady Roroa our cute goddess?”

“““She’s our queen,””” Tomoe, Ichihia, and Velza dutifully pointed out.

Yuriga was the only one to remain silent, apparently having had enough of playing along with their nonsense.

“Now then, getting back to it, I’m Roroa Amidonia, the third primary queen of Friedonia. I’d like everyone to go home at least rememberin’ my name and face.”

“I don’t think there’s a person in this kingdom who *doesn’t* know your name and face... Erm, I am Chris Tachyon. Along with Lady Roroa, I am here to act as the MC for this project. Please, enjoy the show.”

“Wow, you’re actin’ stiff... Come on, smile.”

“Fake smiles are my specialty, you know?” Chris said with a smile.

“Now there’s a smile that looks like it was stamped on your face, but it’s time to introduce the program.”

“Yes. In regards to the ‘East and West Song Battle’ that will be held, it is fundamentally the same sort of thing as the ‘Red and White Song Battle’ held at the end of the year. The loreleis and their male counterparts, the orpheuses, as well as singers of our country will be divided into two teams, and they will take turns singing.”

“The difference is, unlike with ‘Red and White,’ the National Defense Force’ll be doin’ a trainin’ exercise along with it,” Roroa added. “The National Defense Force will be divided into the ‘East Force’ and ‘West Force.’ During this program, we’ll be showin’ you video as the East Force attacks a certain fortress outside Randel, and the West Force defends it. Basically, the loreleis are gonna be cheerleaders for the opposin’ sides in the battle. Get a good look at our brave soldiers fightin’ as loreleis sing in the background.”

“We hope you will enjoy the show.”

“...They’re up to something weird again. It sounds fun, though,” Yuriga said in dismay as she sipped her tea after hearing what the program would be about. “But are you fine here, Tomoe? If you asked your brother, wouldn’t he have taken you to the event site?”

“Yeah. Well, you’re right, but...”

Tomoe had been invited to come to the event by Souma, in fact.

However, though this was, on the face of it, just a new broadcast program, behind the scenes it was also an experiment on the connection between music and magic. Because the whole nation was being mobilized for the experiment, they couldn’t let exchange

students like Yuriga and Ichihara, or a commoner like Lucy, see the full picture. Even if they were her friends, she couldn't bring them.

"I wouldn't be any help this time, and besides... I'd rather watch here with all of you than alone by myself."

"Aw, you're makin' me blush," Lucy said, grabbing Tomoe around the shoulders. "Go on, have another biscuit. Drink some tea."

"I-I will."

Tomoe took one of the sweets with a wry smile. Watching them, Yuriga sighed a little, then turned to look straight at the broadcast. Her eyes were too serious to think she was watching a simple entertainment program.

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Meanwhile, around that time.

We were in the fortress outside Randel, the city that housed the castle that once belonged to former General of the Army, Georg Carmine. There were a large number of officers from the National Defense Force gathered here.

This place was where the Forbidden Army and the Army fought during my fake confrontation with Georg Carmine. Though, the most intense fighting was between the Forbidden Army and the personal forces of the corrupt nobles and their Zemish mercenaries, so the Army itself had hardly moved at all.

It was made by reviving a long since destroyed castle using military engineers, and had been used as a training facility for the National Defense Force since the end of the war.

"Now then, let us review the rules of this exercise," I said.

Inside the fortress, I was standing in front of the broadcast jewel wearing my military uniform, explaining the outline to the men who

would participate in this combined training exercise and experiment. The only ones watching this broadcast were the officers and soldiers gathered in the fortress as well.

In order to maintain secrecy, we used separate jewels so that the people couldn't watch. The rules had, of course, been communicated beforehand, but you can think of this like the announcement before the start of an athletics festival.

"In this exercise, you will be split into the attacking team and the defending team. The attacking team will be called the East Force, and will be commanded by Commander-in-Chief of the National Defense Force, Excel Walter. The defending team, meanwhile, will be called the West Force, and I will be their commander-in-chief. But, in actual practice, command will be taken by Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the National Defense Force, Ludwin M. Arcs. The attacking team wins if they can break through the fortress wall and reach where I am within the time limit, while the defending team wins if they are able to protect me the whole time. The winning team will receive a bonus to their pay, so give it your all."

The moment I mentioned that bonus, the soldiers cheered so loudly I could hear them in the distance.

Yeesh, what a mercenary lot. It's just bonus pay... Anyway, getting back on track.

"In light of the inherent advantage the defending team has, the attacking team will have double the number of members. In addition, there will be a major magical experiment during this exercise. Because we are observing the power of magic, the attacking team will be limited to using the tactic of attacking by force from all sides. There will be no aerial forces involved in the battle. We've gathered people who are used to magic here, so I'd like you to listen to the loreleis, orpheuses, and singers and really let loose with all your power."

Next, I went over the rules for fighting.

“I know I am repeating myself, but the objective of this exercise is to observe the power of magic. Because of that, those who fight with weapons must use the arms and equipment provided. The weapons are blunted swords and spears, as well as arrows with rounded tips. You must enchant these with magic as you fight. Throwing them without magic is forbidden. The armor is a suit of breastplate that has been enchanted to slightly resist magic. If this armor is destroyed, or you run out of magical power, you are out. You must leave the battlefield at once.”

Incidentally, the one who came up with this equipment was Genia.

While we were discussing the best way to observe magic while also limiting the number of injuries, she proposed these rules and equipment.

When I first heard the rules, I couldn’t help but think, *Clothing destruction KOs?* But only the breastplate would break, so there wouldn’t be any particularly sexy results.

Well, ninety percent of the soldiers participating were male anyway. I was relieved to know we wouldn’t be showing the people a video where there were half-naked men everywhere. Besides, Aisha was participating as a combatant, too, and I would hate to let others see my wife naked... So, yeah, that about did it for the rule explanation.

“This exercise is a combat experience, and an experiment. At the same time, it is also important that you do not forget the people are watching your bravery. That’s why I have an order for you.”

I thrust my fist skyward.

“Fight hard, and make it flashy! The ones who stand out the most win! If you were especially noticeable, you will receive a special cash prize regardless of if you won or lost! Now give me a heroic display of magic!”

“““Yeahhhhh!“““

There was cheering from inside and outside the fortress. It seemed I had them good and motivated.

Once I had checked that the broadcast was terminated, I returned to a table set up in the back of the fortress.

“Good job,” Liscia said. “Here, have some water.”

“Thanks... Whew.”

I took a breath, then loosened the collar on my uniform. I looked at the simple receiver placed in the middle of the room. There I could see Roroa and Chris explaining the plan (the one for public consumption) for this event. They were recording in a separate room, so that their jewel wouldn’t pick up the sound of our broadcast.

“Did the sound from when I riled the men up end up getting broadcast to the people?” I asked.

“Roroa did a good job playing it off with a, ‘Sounds like the soldiers are rarin’ to go!’”

“Well, that’s good. Now... we just wait for the report to be done.”

For this experiment, the Royal Academy had dispatched a large number of researchers who specialized in magic and related fields, and they were positioned all around the area to report on minute fluctuations in magical power.

What songs would affect which magic? I was looking forward to finding out.

“Now then...” Liscia smoothly stood up, and put her rapier on her hip.

“Hold up, Liscia. You can’t be planning to...”

“Aisha’s participating, isn’t she? I have Mother watching Cian and Kazuha back in the castle, so I want in on this, too. Between the pregnancy and birth, I’ve been letting my skills get rusty. If I’m going to be a cool mom, I’ve got to get my combat instincts back.”

“Does a mom need combat instincts...?”

There had been signs that Liscia would be a tough mom, and that was exactly what she was shaping up to be. Well, there was hardly any danger involved this time, so I guess it was fine. She had been spending all her time looking after our kids lately, so I needed to let her spread her wings occasionally.

“Have fun.”

“Thanks, Souma.”

Liscia gave me a kiss, then was out of the room in a flash. She was as brave as ever.

“Now then... I guess I’ll go help Roroa.”

I left the room to attend to my own work.

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“Juna... Oh, no, Lady Juna.”

With the battle about to start shortly, the *lorelei* Komari Corda, who was wrapped in a dress of spring colors, struck up a conversation with Juna while they were waiting in the wings of the stage.

Juna, who wore a blue dress, looked very noble and beautiful. Even now that she was married, none of her glimmer had faded.

“Just Juna is fine, Komari,” she said with a smile.

“No, you’re a queen, Lady Juna...”

“It’s really all right. When I’m standing in front of the Jewel Voice Broadcast, I want to be myself.”

“...I understand. Juna.”

Touched by Juna’s soft smile, Komari sensed anew at how great a presence the one they called the Prima Lorelei possessed.

In general, the word lorelei was synonymous with the term idol back on Earth, so Juna, who could no longer be an idol after marrying Souma, was called a singer like Margarita.

However, the people still referred to her not as a singer, but as the Prima Lorelei. As if the words Prima Lorelei had been separated from the concept of what a lorelei was.

The title Prima Lorelei had become Juna’s alone. That showed how great the people’s support for her was, even now.

For Komari, who was referred to as the Post-Juna, her successor, Juna was an ideal she strived toward, but also a great wall she hoped to someday transcend.

That was why she had spoken to her: to convey that resolve.

“I am here because you saw something in me. I couldn’t be more grateful for that. Which is why... I want you to listen to my songs on the opposing team.”

“.....”

In this program, the singers would also be split into two teams, cheering for the attackers and defenders, respectively. In short, they would be competing against one another as well.

Komari was on the attacking side, while Juna was on the defending side. Their voices would collide on the battlefield, and allow the men to fight their hardest.

“I’ll sing with everything I have,” Komari started, placing her hand over her breast. “So that I can pull the music industry as your replacement. So that I can put on a performance that doesn’t make

me ashamed to be the one you chose, your successor. I intend to repay that favor by showing you, through this project, just how much I've grown."

"...Is that so?" Juna erased her smile and listened to Komari's bold proclamation with a serious face. Then, looking her straight in the eye, she said, "I can see your resolve. But there's one part of what you said that concerns me."

"...What might that be?"

"That you're replacing me. Am I already a person of the past to you? Does my marriage to His Majesty somehow decrease my appeal as a singer? Is that, perhaps, what you're trying to say?"

There was a quiet but intense emotion hidden in those words.

".....!" Intimidated by the air around Juna, Komari gulped.

It was like she was looking at a blue flame. Hot despite looking cold. This dignified air that overwhelmed those who saw her was that of a queen, no matter how Juna might try to deny it.

As Komari stood there speechless, Juna looked to the side. When she did, the air of dignity around her vanished.

What's going on? Komari wondered as she followed Juna's line of sight. There she saw Souma talking to Roroa who had just finished presenting. He must have come here when he finished his speech to the soldiers. No sooner had he joined them than...

"Darlin', I know you just got here, but you've got a job to do!"

"...I know, but the schedule's pretty tight, huh?"

It seemed he would be compiling the reports that came in from around the experiment site. Because Souma's ability specialized in paperwork, people looked to him to do the work even though he was king.

“Desk work even here, huh? It’s just as tiring as always.”

“Nyahaha, it’d be nice if there were a song that strengthened your magic, though. Know any good ones? Like a labor song for filling out paperwork.”

“Hm... Day-O, maybe?”

“What kinda song’s that?”

“In between the lyrics, there are call and response segments about how they want to go home.”

“Listening to that’d kill your morale...”

...Is being a king that much hard work? Komari was a little weirded out. Then Juna, who had been listening to the two of them, chuckled.

“Um, was there anything in that conversation to laugh at?” Komari asked.

“Don’t you worry. This happens all the time.”

“All the time...?”

“You couldn’t leave him alone, right? That’s exactly why I want to be by his side, supporting him,” Juna said, clasping her hands in front of her chest as if she were singing.

“In meeting him, and meeting all the people around him, I’ve been touched by so many kinds of love. Romantic, parental, familial... It’s an invaluable time, walking with those important to me, and the joy of life itself. Now that I understand that, I can sing even more powerfully than before. About love, dreams, belief, sadness, and the joy of being alive right now.”

They should have been kind words, but they struck deep in Komari’s heart.

This is Juna Souma... she thought. It was a fresh reminder that, even now that her family name had changed, she was still a lorelei loved by the people.

“...Haha! You really are the Prima Lorelei, Juna.”

Komari laughed. It wasn’t a cold laugh, or a laugh of scorn. She was just happy. That Juna, her ideal, and her target, still stood before her as a towering figure.

So she looked Juna straight in the eye, and made a declaration, “Someday, I will transcend you!”

“That’s a wonderful show of resolve. But I won’t clear the way easily, you know? I want you to see me shine. Because we need figures like that.”

“Of course! Now that your shine has grown next to His Majesty, I’ll aim even higher!”

“Hee hee, I’ll look forward to it. Now let’s go.” Juna smiled and extended a hand to her. Komari took it without hesitation.

“Okay! I’ll sing with all my body, all my soul, and all my strength!”

The opening performance of this experiment was a duet by the two loreleis.

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As the two loreleis sang, the battle began.

They were singing the passionate opening theme of a relatively new robot anime. Pulled along by their voices, the attacking team opened with a strong offensive.

The defending team desperately shot down the fireballs and magic arrows that arched towards them, or deflected them with shields. In the middle of all that, Halbert was just standing on the edge of the wall.

Though he knocked away the occasional attack that came straight at him, from the look on his face, he seemed a bit out of it. What was dominating his head right now wasn't the battle, but a single woman. It had happened just yesterday.

"I'm pregnant, you know, Hal."

His childhood friend who was now his head wife announced in front of Ruby and his parents.

Kaede had seemed a little off recently, but it was apparently because of morning sickness. They had been given a long vacation after their wedding, and used it to travel around to Venetinova and other places, with all three of them making love to their heart's content, so... Well, it was kind of the obvious outcome.

Naturally, the House of Magna had been turned upside-down by the furor it caused.

His father, Glaive Magna, was overcome with emotion and started slapping Halbert on the back, while his mother, Elba, got teary-eyed as she congratulated her daughter-in-law.

His second wife, Ruby, was as happy for Kaede as she would have been for herself.

Halbert, meanwhile... was so shocked his mind went blank. He'd known this day would come, and even prayed for it too. Yet it was so sudden, he couldn't process it.

Then, snapped back to his senses by the pain of Glaive continually slapping him on the back, it slowly dawned on him, and the emotion rapidly welled up inside him.

"Aw... yeahhhhhh!" Halbert lifted Kaede up and spun her around.

"Whoa! Hold on, Hal?!"

When Souma discovered he was going to be a father in the Republic, he was disappointed that Liscia wasn't there in front of him. But Kaede was here, right in front of Halbert, and so he hugged her as he burst with joy.

Though, he'd gotten carried away, so...

""Take care of her!""

...Ruby and his parents all shouted at him.

For that reason, Kaede wasn't participating in this mock battle. There were apparently a large number of people who couldn't participate for similar reasons.

Two months after all those weddings in the capital, there was an epidemic of morning sickness in the newlywed families. It would be followed by a baby boom the next year.

Now, some days later, Halbert was thinking about it with muddled thoughts. *I'm... gonna be someone's old man, huh...?*

"You're too dazed, Hal."

The next thing he knew, Ruby was standing next to him. Because there were to be no air forces involved in this mock battle, Ruby the red dragon was only allowed to participate in her human form.

This was the first time in a long time that Halbert would be fighting on the ground alone.

Putting her hands on her hip, Ruby shook her head in dismay. "I'm sure this is about Kaede and the baby, right? Well, get your act together. You're the ace of the defending team."

"Well, yeah... I know that, but still."

"Besides, I'm sure Kaede is watching this broadcast while on maternity leave, you know?" Ruby pointed to the broadcast jewels

positioned here and there around the battlefield. “Don’t you need to show off how cool you are? Dad?”

“...Darn straight I do.” Halbert readied his spear, and looked down at the soldiers swarming towards the walls below. “I’m not ready to be a dad yet, but I don’t want to let her see me looking uncool!”

“Hee hee, that’s the way to be. You remember your order, right?”

“Of course. You stay on task, too, Ruby.”

This time, their orders from the commander of the defense team, Ludwin, had them acting independently.

They listened, and the music had changed to a firey song by the orpheus unit, Yaiba.

In terms of the anime songs from Souma’s world, this would be the sort of theme used when rising up against a massive enemy and turning things around. The energetic song spurred on the attacking team, and in turn, made it harder for the defending team to act.

That being the case, the defenders had to go on the offense.

Halbert turned around, giving the order to the Dratroopers who were waiting behind him.

“Hit them where it looks like you can push in! Let’s show the people of this country what the Dratroopers can do!”

“““Yeahhhh!”””

The men’s morale was high. If they stood out here, the girls out there watching the broadcast might squeal over them. It’d give them something to brag about to women in the tavern, too.

These single men who had been forced to watch all of Halbert, Kaede, and Ruby’s flirting were desperate for partners of their own. Even for the one-in-three who was married, their families were sure to be watching the broadcast, so they wanted to stand out, too.

“And... Drop!” On Hal’s order, Ruby and the Dratroopers threw themselves over the edge of the wall. “Ooh, rahhhh!”

“Whoa!”

“Wh-What is with this unit’s strength?!”

Halbert and the Dratroopers were an elite unit, and they went around to places where the defense seemed ready to break, joining the fray and pushing back the attackers.

The song that had been playing up until then stopped, and a new tune began to play.

This time it was an orchestral piece without singing, included in this experiment to help measure the effect of lyrics. Incidentally, because they were looking for battle songs, many of the pieces were game music from Souma’s world.

The one that just ended played in the castle scenes of a game where you explore a cave and collect treasure. This piece, which rearranged the main theme into something with composure and dignity, made the attackers imagine high walls, and highly damaged their morale.

Halbert destroyed a few enemies’ armor with his flaming spears, then let out a sigh. Because he wasn’t allowed to use the Twin Snake Spears that he always trained with, he was using two spears provided for the experiment.

“This is a cinch. If this’s all they’ve got, we’ll be able to defend until time’s—Guh?!”

Before he could finish that line, Halbert got a bad feeling and doubled over backwards. When he felt the wind rush past his nose, a number of the Dratroopers who had been in front of him moments ago were flying through the air.

Halbert continued to do a backwards flip, and when he landed, he saw a person in front of him who had just finished a full swing of her greatsword.

Tch! I have to fight against that again...? Halbert mentally clicked his tongue.

The music had just changed to the sort of thing used to hype the arrival of an invincible general. The defenders, faced with a person wielding a greatsword, cried out despite themselves.

“““I-It’s Lady Aisha!”””

“...Hahh!”

Facing those soldiers, Aisha slammed her greatsword into the ground. In the next instant, a gust arose that blasted more than ten of them into the air, scattering them like leaves.

“Having to use magic with every attack... It’s a troublesome rule, don’t you think?” Aisha sighed as she watched.

Normally, she fought with a style that relied on the weight of her greatsword and the strength which let her swing it about with ease. Though she did attack with magic blades of wind, too, that was only when there was a distance between her and her opponent, so she wasn’t used to fighting while imbuing every attack with magic.

That was because, if she were using her regular greatsword, she didn’t need to imbue it with magic; her blade didn’t even need to be sharp, she would crush her opponents to death with the weight of the thing.

However, she wasn’t using that sword this time; she was using a sword that looked similar on the outside, but was made of wood from the God-Protected Forest. In order to blow them away effectively, she had to use magic.

“This is not a fight I am familiar with, but to answer his majesty’s expectations of me, I—Ah?!”

Kaching! A sound more high-pitched than anything you’d expect from a training weapon echoed. Two spears of flame swung down on her greatsword, which she had instantly used to block the attack from above.

“Today’s the day I stop you, Young Miss Aisha!”

“Sir Halbert, huh!”

In the instant they traded blows, their eyes met and sparks flew between them.

After their momentary encounter, Aisha swung with all her might, and Halbert made a nimble landing meters away. Her usual dumb strength brought a strained smile to Halbert’s face.

“I didn’t expect you to be on the attacking side. Don’t you need to guard the castle where your husband is?”

“I was told to stand on the attacking side to maintain the balance of power. In order to go be with His Majesty, I will slip past you here!”

“You think it’ll be that easy?!”

Their weapons clashed and grinded as they jostled against one another. If it weren’t for magical reinforcement, both of their weapons would have been shattered by now.

“...Are your wives not with you today?”

“Ruby’s here, but elsewhere. Kaede’s on maternity leave.”

“Ohh, she’s with child. I am happy for you.”

“Thanks... Oh, no, I should say ‘Thank you,’ huh?”

“You’re a friend of His Majesty, it is fine to speak like you normally would. I am naturally inclined to be a bit more formal.”

Their conversation was idle chatter, but their arms never stopped swinging their weapons. It was amazing they could keep up a conversation next to that banging noise.

The conflict continued a while before Aisha began to overwhelm Halbert with her natural strength. Now at a disadvantage, Halbert clicked his tongue, “You’ve got the same dumb brute strength as ever...”

“And you don’t have Madam Carla and Madam Kaede with you this time, either. If I let myself lose to you when you’re not on Ruby’s back, I will never be able to defeat *that man*. ”

“...Fuuga, huh? Then I can’t lose, either!”

Halbert desperately held out against Aisha’s fierce attack.

“““Whoa, whaaaaaaa?!“““ The nearby soldiers were blown away by the shock waves of their battle.

“When the time comes, it’s gonna be my job to take that bastard down! So...”

“It is my duty to defend His Majesty from that man! So...”

““I can’t afford to lose!““

“Hey, hey, you two sure are getting worked up.” In the middle of their test of wills, an easygoing voice came down from above.

“Ookyakya! Let me in on this, too!”

Kaching! As a cudgel swung down from behind together with those words, Aisha blocked it without turning back, using only her gauntleted left hand. The music had already changed from that of the undefeated general to a jaunty tune from something that might have played in the original monkey’s great adventure.

Aisha glared behind her and said, “If that was meant to be a surprise attack, you shouldn’t have shouted first, Sir Kuu.”

“In this festive atmosphere, it’d feel boorish to launch a sneak attack. That’s why I gave you a shout, Bro’s wife.” His attack parried, Kuu did a flip to land beside Halbert. “I’m gonna take the redhead’s side. That should be a fair handicap, right?”

“Be my guest. It will make this better training for me.”

“Wait, did you get permission from Souma? You’re not from this country, right?”

When Halbert asked, Kuu let out a hooting laugh.

“There’s no way I could stay out of something so fun. I appealed to Bro directly, and got his permission to participate. He gave me some condition about staying away from the experimental observation posts, and the data gatherers, and a bunch of other stuff, though.”

Halbert, who had been having a hard time alone, grinned. “Oh, yeah...? Well, give me a hand then, would you?”

“You got it.”

“Heheh. Very well. I will smash both of you.”

As Aisha boasted, Halbert and Kuu both kicked off the ground towards her.

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Meanwhile...

In another place, amidst a raging thunderstorm, the sparks of an intense battle were spreading. It was clear skies a moment ago, and now this sudden thunderstorm? And mixed with sparks? The viewers might have been left wondering, but there were, in fact, sparks flying on the battlefield as it was pounded by the tempest. In the middle of all of it...

“Tahhhhhhhh!”

“Daryahhhhhh!”

Zukabakidokozubashucchuindokan!

In the middle of all of it, the hero with a red and silver scarf traded blows with the Emperor of Evil. It was the protagonist of the Kingdom's popular tokusatsu show, Overman Silvan, and his ultimate nemesis, the Great Evil Ogre Emperor, Akki Taitei. It seemed like a good opportunity to see how music affected Ivan and Molto's illusions or performance.

In addition, because Ivan was known as the actor who played Silvan, we decided it would confuse the children if he was seen fighting normal soldiers instead of monsters and villains, so we had his father Molto face him in the guise of Akki Taitei. It meant father and son would be fighting for real, but they fought all the time, so that was no issue.

The song currently playing on the battlefield was the Silvan theme song, sung by Nanna. Thanks to it being their own theme music, the two of them were fired up, and sparks flew as their fists collided; their moves left afterimages, and countless phantasmal Silvans and Akki Taiteis appeared around them then vanished. It looked like they were moving at high speed, fighting one another all over the place, and it may have made Souma whisper, "What kind of warrior race are these people from...?"

Rain fell when they stared each other down, and when they collided, sparks flew and lightning struck. Even knowing it was all an illusion, the storm of intense special effects made soldiers on both sides stay away. No, actually, it wasn't so much fear as a feeling they shouldn't interfere that kept them from approaching. Sort of like how people feel bad walking in front of a person who's trying to take a photograph.

There was no reinforcement magic on their bodies, by the way. Though the effects were flashy, all they were really doing was

beating the crap out of one another. With no magical armor to decide the winner and loser, their battle had turned into a quagmire.

As Souma thought, *The one who runs out of stamina first loses...*

The music changed to an ominous melody.

It sounded like a piece that heralded the coming of a one-winged angel, and Silvan and Akki Taitei both stopped. They looked up as the section that celebrated the arrival of a warrior played, and red wings alighted on the wall in front of them.

“Why...? Why?!” the figure cried out.

That person slapped the wall with the reptilian tail that protruded from her rump, clenching her fists as she spread her wings wide. Her highly revealing, swimsuit-like outfit, which was open in the middle, exaggerated her cleavage as she puffed her chest out and shouted.

“Why do I have to dress like this agaiiiiiiiiiin?!?” The cry of her soul echoed across the battlefield, and Ivan and Molto’s eyes widened.

“Is that Miss Dran?!”

“...Young Miss Carla?!”

The one who had landed on the wall was Carla, in the sexy villain costume of Miss Dran. Her face was red with shame, and her eyes wet with tears.

“Here I thought... I could participate in a training exercise for the first time in so long. I was happy to be able to serve as a warrior once more, so why do I have to wear this getup?! Urgh! I hate myself for underestimating that person. I thought she wouldn’t be so unreasonable while she was pregnant, but I never expected her to have already ordered the other maids to block my escape...” Carla muttered to herself, her eyes like those of a dead fish.

The person Carla was talking about must have been the head maid, Serina. Incidentally, though she just sort of threw that out there like it was nothing, Serina was pregnant with Poncho's child.

Being the capable woman she was, Serina had predicted the coming baby rush, and taken action immediately, so this was to be expected. As for what action she had taken, please understand that everyone was concerned by Poncho's sudden weight loss. This was why Komain, who had become pregnant like Serina, had stayed behind in the capital with her.

Given the family of workaholics she came from, it seemed Serina didn't intend to go on maternity leave until the last possible moment, and the way she was working at the castle, even now, had Poncho and her maids worried.

With all this, Carla had expected to be able to fight without Serina's eyes on her for the first time in so, so long. However, the next thing she knew, the other maids had hidden her clothes as she slept, and the only thing she had to put on other than her underwear was Miss Dran's sexy costume.

Her colleagues had put their hands together, begging her forgiveness, as they explained this was on Serina's orders—who was probably watching the broadcast from the capital with a smile.

Carla looked at Ivan and Molto with muddy eyes. "I'm sorry, but... I will be taking this sadness out on you."

"W-Wait, Carla... No, Miss Dran!" Ivan pleaded.

"Calm yourself, Miss Dran!"

They made a point of calling her Miss Dran for the viewers' benefit, but that ended up enraging Carla.

"Don't call me that naaaaame!"

Countless balls of fire launched forth from Carla's arms, and they rained down with a *Boom, boom, boom*.

These were real fireballs, not illusory ones. Getting hit would leave no trace behind. Ivan and Moltov broke into a sweat as they looked to one another with a nod. They extended their hands forward and shouted in unison, ““Deploy illusion!””

When they did, countless Overman Silvans and Akki Taiteis appeared. At a glance, there had to be hundreds of them. It was almost like a duplication technique. They hid among the illusions as they tried to escape the area. However, it wasn't going to be so easy.

“Heheheh, we've worked on the same program, so of course I know about your abilities. That the illusions you make are without form, and lack the presence of a living person.” Carla narrowed her eyes as she looked around. There were countless Silvans and Akki Taiteis, but she only felt life from two of them. She formed a fireball in the palm of her hand, and the corners of her mouth turned upwards.
“...Heheheh, I fouuuund you.”

The ball of fire shot straight toward Ivan and Moltov.

““Nwahhhhhh?!””

The direct hit blasted both of them into the air. With the originals gone, the illusions vanished, and only Carla's flames remained.

“Hahaha, burn! Burn away, along with my memories!”

The image of her as an evil queen was burned into the viewers' memories instead. No one approached the scorched earth, and for some time Carla's desperate laughter echoed through the area.

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Meanwhile, behind the scenes of that intense fighting...

“Sire. I'd like the records of that battle just now.”

"Hm... Does listening to your own theme song increase the power? Maybe I should make theme songs for Aisha, Hal, and the other powerful warriors. Like the themes that play when a pro wrestler enters the ring."

Souma and his group were carefully recording the results of Ivan, Molto, and Carla's battle. When he finished recording, Souma looked up at the simple receiver which showed images of Carla going wild.

"She's gone too far," he sighed. "The evil female commander won."

Both the hero and his nemesis were blown away by Miss Dran. Souma was wracking his brain over how to explain this development to the viewers.

Incidentally, this utter domination by Carla would go on to be discussed by the viewers as the one episode where Miss Dran awakened and, unable to control her great power, went out of control, and even defeated her master Akki Taitei along with Silvan. Silvan would undergo intense training to defeat her in the next episode. But that's another story.

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Now, let's get back to the battlefield.

Maybe because the battle had been engineered to produce a stalemate, the attacking and defending teams pushed back and forth, neither side achieving dominance.

In the main camp of the attacking team, Excel Walter watched the proceedings unfold with boredom. It might have been hot out, because she was sitting in a chair beneath something like a beach parasol, fanning herself as she watched the battle on a simple receiver.

“Because the focus of this event is on the magic experiment, we haven’t been allowed to use any tactic other than pure force. I have nothing to do. It’s such a pain to be in this position now. If only I could leave someone else to be commander, and go out to fight as one of the common soldiers... Hold on?”

The hand holding Excel’s fan stopped. Looking like she had come up with an idea, she clapped her hands and folded up her fan before rising from her seat.

“Now that I think about it, I was never told, ‘The commanders must sit quietly in their main camps.’ Well, then. I suppose that means I *can* participate!” With a devilish smile, Excel opened her closed fan once more. “Hee hee, they said the ones who stand out the most win, so maybe I’ll give this battlefield a little more flair.”

“Wh-What is that?!”

“The water’s rising?!”

The soldiers fighting on the south side of the fortress all gulped, regardless of which side they were fighting on. The water in the river south of the fortress suddenly surged upwards. Then the vast amount of water transformed into a great five-headed snake, its heads all poised to strike the fortress.

“I-Is that...?! There’s no mistaking it, it’s the same as from back then!”

“It’s Duchess Walter! Duchess Walter’s magic!”

“I-If we stay here, won’t we attackers get caught up in it, too?”

The water snake was familiar to those soldiers that participated in the battle in the Union of Eastern Nations to divert the incoming monster assault. However, now, standing at the base of the snake, Excel looked dissatisfied.

“I knew it... It looks a little thin. It would be better if it had the volume of water that the Dabicon provided, but I suppose this is the most I can expect from a river like this.”

It was true that the serpent she had given birth to was a size smaller than the one from the Dabicon. The river running by the forest was little more than an oversized stream, and it did not have that much volume. Even so, from the point of view of the soldiers, it was no less of a threat.

Excel refocused, and looked towards the fortress. “Well, if I try to control too much, my magical power will run dry in no time. This is fine. Now... What will you do, defending team?”

As she said that, Excel pointed her fan toward the fortress. When she did, one of the five snake heads rushed towards the fortress like a water cannon.

The song playing at that time came from the most famous kaiju movie in Souma’s old country. Hearing music that seemed to stir terror in people, the defenders felt as terrified as if a massive creature were attacking them. However...

“There’s not much that needs to be done.”

Bwoooooosh...!

Flames suddenly rose from the battlefield to evaporate the snake head in an instant. The next thing she knew, there was a girl in a red scale dress that looked out of place on the battlefield standing in front of Excel with a defiant look in her eyes. Her red hair streamed behind her, and a reptilian tail protruded from her rear.

Excel’s eyes narrowed as she regarded the girl and said, “I believe you’re... from the House of Magna, yes?”

“Yes, Duchess Walter. I am Halbert Magna’s wife Ruby.” As she introduced herself, Ruby produced flames in the palm of her hand.

“Sir Ludwin predicted this. Knowing how capricious you are, it seemed likely you would want to come out and play. That’s why I, who have power to rival your own, was ordered to keep you under control.”

“Hee hee, Lord Ludwin understands me well. But you on your own won’t be enough to stop me now.” Excel was smiling, but her eyes shone like a raptor that had sighted its prey. “It’s true that you have considerable magical power as a member of the dragon race. However, under current rules, you must fight in human form. Because using air power is forbidden. And the amount of force you can exert in that form is limited, right?”

“...You know your stuff.”

“I am Commander-in-Chief of the National Defense Force, after all. I am well acquainted with this country’s strengths in war. So let me ask you again. Do you truly believe you can stop me in that form?”

When she said that, Excel turned the remaining four snake heads towards Ruby and had them lunge. Ruby loosed flames from both her hands as she stepped back, causing two snakes to evaporate.

“How naive.”

Before Ruby knew it, one of the water snakes had circled around behind her. Then the last snake came from the front, threatening her with a pincer attack. Ruby dug her heels in, spreading her arms wide, and threw fire at both snakes.

Hissssssssss...!

“Urgh...!” she grunted.

However, Ruby couldn’t fully evaporate them. That was because Excel kept up the supply of water to them. The power of the flames kept things at a stalemate, but Ruby couldn’t knock the attack aside.

The steam hung in the air around the two of them. Then...

“Do you know they call me, ‘the mage who is unbeatable anywhere there is fresh water?’” Excel said, creating a new snake head to menace Ruby, who was unable to move. Its lips were upturned in a crescent shape. “That’s because, in any place where there is fresh water, I can wield my magic more efficiently. Now, let’s have you step aside.”

“Urgh... To think you can control this much magic when in a human form. It’s not fair...”

“Call it whatever you like. Now, I’m going to strike the final blow.”

The water snake assaulted Ruby from above, when...

Crack!

Lightning flashed through the sky, and the water snake was blown away.

“Huh?!”

Excel took a huge jump back in surprise, and two bolts of lightning came down where she had just been standing. This broke Excel’s magic, and Ruby was finally set free. A black figure who had a tail on her rump and a pair of antlers that were even larger than Excel’s growing through her glossy black hair landed, then turned to Ruby.

“Looks like you’re having some trouble. Want help?”

“...You’re being a busybody, Naden.”

Naden already looked ready for battle, her hair standing on end, and sparks crackling around her as she slapped the ground with her tail.

The sudden intrusion of Naden made Excel chuckle. “Oh, my. The second secondary queen is joining the fray, too?”

“For the same reason as Ruby over there. Souma asked me to stop you if you came out to play. You did help me with those lessons of yours, but I won’t let you go any further.”

“Hee hee, now this is interesting. Both of you come at me together.”

Excel spread her arms and created more snakes. Eight of them this time. When she witnessed Excel’s incredible magical power, Naden spun her arms in circles with a resigned sigh.

“...This is going to be tough if I can’t take ryuu form. Ruby?”

“I know. I’ll take you up on your offer to face her together.”

“Don’t get in my way, stupid Ruby.”

“I could say the same, dumb Naden.”

Even as they argued, they readied themselves for the fight, and then ran towards their joint foe.

Excel sent two water snakes at them, but they nimbly dodged. Ruby launched a great ball of fire toward Excel, who had a water snake coil around her, forming a wall, and blocking the attack. Piercing through the steam created when they canceled each other out, Naden rushed in close to Excel, her body wreathed in electricity.

Excel sent a water snake after Naden and shouted, “Come to me, ancestor of the sea serpent race!”

“I’m not as old as your five hundred years!”

Their attacks collided, and the splash of water sparkled with electricity. The soldiers who witnessed this battle later reported it was like a fight between three massive beasts. Fortunately, the theme playing at the time was the theme song of a film where three kaiju fight a great war.

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The excitement on the battlefield was reaching its peak.

I was in a room deep inside the fortress the defending team was protecting, fighting with the reports delivered by researchers from the Royal Academy and Ginger’s Vocational School.

"Your majesty, reporting from Observation Point 8. Track number 28. Effect witnessed on defending side," said a researcher.

Another followed up with, "Report from Observation Point 14. Track number 52. No effect detected."

"Observation Point 2! The battle between Duchess Walter, Queen Naden, and Lady Magna has become too loud to hear the music!"

"Also from Observation Point 2! The aftermath of their battle has caused a large number of casualties!"

"Don't talk all at once! I can write several things at once, but there's still only one of me!" I shouted despite myself. I might have sounded angry, but it was a cry of desperation. I wasn't Prince Shoutoku; if they talked at me at the same time, I wasn't going to be able to hear them all.

If they were talking in front of my note-taking machine, Factory Arm, it would at least be able to think independently. But even if it could do that, it couldn't respond, so I had to do what I could with my main body.

"I only need the records, so talk to the Factory Arm," I said. "Also, let them do whatever they want over where Excel is. Even if we told her to lay off, she wouldn't listen. Oh! But make sure you get all the data."

"Yes, sir. It will be done."

Having sent all matters that didn't require me to talk over to the Factory Arm, the number of people dropped a little, and I was able to catch my breath.

The three simple receivers set up in the room all showed images of the soldiers fighting. They were going all out while listening to the loreleis sing.

I could only smile wryly at the fact that the showiest places were Aisha, Hal and Kuu's, and Naden, Excel and Ruby's, all people I knew personally.

...Watching this, it does look like the music has an effect.

Listening to music elevated the power of the imagination, which had an effect on magic. When cheerful music that urged the soldiers to fight played, the attackers pushed forward, and when music played that made you imagine a solid defense, the defenders pushed back.

The most impressive was the orchestral showdown between the theme of “an action-adventure puzzle-solving game that featured a mark similar to the Hojo Clan’s family crest” vs. “the theme that played in the rebel army base in the second installment of a major RPG everyone in Japan would know.” These were the pieces that gave me the strongest sense of offense and defense.

I tried having them played together, and I could clearly see that when the former played, the attackers gained momentum, and when the latter played, the defenders rallied. These two themes could probably be used in actual combat.

From the reports I’d seen, the presence of lyrics made no real difference. That was likely because, on the battlefield, there was no time to listen to them. However, in a situation where they could hear the lyrics, or where they knew the words in advance, like with the Lunarian Orthodox hymn that strengthened healing magic, the outcome might have been different. I wanted to perform tests under a variety of different conditions, and record lots of results.

“Your Majesty, we received a report from the medical team.” The head of the Work Songs Society, Morse, who had initially proposed this experiment, brought me some papers.

“By the medical team, you mean the group that has the legal lolilorelei Pamille Carol with them to test the effect of music on healing magic, right?”

“Legal... Uh, what are you talking about?”

“Uh, never mind that part. How did it go?”

“...It really does seem like their ability to form a mental image is the key,” Morse said as he handed me the report. “When they cast healing magic on the wounded while singing the Lunarian Orthodox hymn, the effect was different depending on whether or not the injured soldiers were believers of Lunarian Orthodoxy or not. This is a fascinating result.”

“Hm? The magic relies on a mental image, right? Wasn’t this the result you anticipated?” I asked.

The ones who had an image of the hymn healing people were the believers, right? If the followers of other faiths were told this was the mercy of Lady Lunaria, it wasn’t going to feel quite so real to them. In the country I came from, everyone sang the hymns during weddings, but unless they were Christian they probably didn’t have any image of the Lord’s grace.

When people prayed for divine intervention, it was either to Amaterasu, or to the Buddha. Or maybe their ancestors. That’s why I had a vague sense that hymns would only work for followers of the same faith, but according to Morse that was not the case.

“Sire. The predicted result was that adherence to Lunarian Orthodoxy would only be relevant for the magic *users*. If songs have an effect on magic, it should only influence the mages originally casting the spells.”

“Hm... Oh! I see now. As the *recipients*, the wounded soldiers’ faith shouldn’t matter at all. But it actually is involved somehow, you’re saying.”

"Yes. In short, recovery magic does not only exhibit a magical reaction from the caster, but from the subject, too. It's truly fascinating." Morse laughed with that handsome voice of his.

The recovery magic in this world cured external injuries by activating the body's natural ability to heal. That was the explanation why it didn't work on illnesses. Though the one elevating the body's natural ability to heal was the caster, that ability itself belonged to the subject. In that case, the mental image of the subject might be important, too.

"Is that why they have everyone sing the hymn when they use Area Heal? Not to have the casters hear it, but to make the wounded imagine themselves being healed."

"I imagine that's likely the case."

I didn't know if Lunarian Orthodoxy did that because they understood it. Like Merula had said before, it might have become a custom because it was most effective when they did it that way. From a routine, to a custom, to a tradition, huh?

Then, perhaps having listened to our conversation, Ginger came and handed me a report. "This is a report from that medical team. It seems there were non-religious songs that increased the recovery effect, too. One surprising choice was 'the song sung by three villains' from your world. When people heard it, they said, 'I'm not gonna let them beat me,' and it actually made them more energetic."

"Oh, so that sort of image works, too, huh..." I said. "Maybe in addition to divine blessings, songs that make you envision relaxation and health, immortality and indomitable spirit might have an effect, too."

Those three villains' song definitely had an image of invincibility and indomitable spirit.

But a hospital (or church) with their theme playing, huh...? That sounded fun, but it would also make this country seem even more absurd. I felt like I'd get another lecture from Liscia, so I crossed my arms and groaned.

"We've made a discovery that should be useful to the research magic in an unexpected place. The researchers at the Academy should be thrilled. That alone is enough to have made this experiment worthwhile."

"Yes, I agree," Ginger replied. "I believe there is value in continuing the research."

"I would like to continue with my research as well," Morse followed up.

This sort of experiment was too big to carry out easily, but they could continue and develop their research using the data gathered here. Morse had drifted to Ginger's Vocational School because of how preposterous his research seemed, but views of him were bound to change now. If his studies found acclaim, this research that had been overlooked as meaningless by the Academy might be given the chance for further consideration.

That sort of academic development should become a great strength for this country.

Unlike Fuuga's Malmkhitan, which bordered the Demon Lord's Domain, we had nowhere to expand our territory without fighting an external war. That was why we needed to develop on an academic and technical level instead. We needed more and more powers, like our knowledge in the field of medicine, and the carrier Hiryuu, which other countries did not possess.

While I was thinking about that, "Ah!" Ginger suddenly mumbled to himself.

"What is it?"

“It seems something has happened on the battlefield.” Ginger was pointing towards the place where Aisha and the others’ battle was unfolding.

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“Hahhhhhhhh!”

“Whoa?!”

Though Kuu blocked a swing of Aisha’s greatsword with his cudgel, he was still sent flying a good distance. He used his agility to flip through the air and land on his feet, but there was cold sweat running down his cheeks.

“S-Scary, scary. If I hadn’t jumped in time with the impact, I’d have been crushed, weapon and all.”

“Hahh... Hahh... Her strength’s in another league, isn’t it?”

Halbert, who was winded from having been sent flying earlier, lined up beside Kuu.

They were both very capable, and were now fighting together, but were still unable to land a single effective blow on Aisha.

Kuu put on a forced smile as he wiped his brow. “Ookyakya... You’re so strong it’s not even funny anymore, Bro’s Wife #2. Is Bro gonna be okay living the newlywed life with her when he’s such a weakling himself?”

“...Oh, that explains it,” Halbert said.

“Huh?”

“Earlier, I heard him grumbling, ‘My back hurts thanks to Aisha...’”

“...Not his hips? Just what are those two getting up to?”

Kuu seemed a little put off by this revelation, but Aisha must have heard them, because her brown skin turned a brighter shade of red.

“N-N-N-N-Nothing really, I just forgot my promise... and squeezed a little too tight...”

Isn’t it dangerous if she can accidentally injure his back like that?! they both thought in unison.

The two were even more weirded out now. In order to mask her embarrassment, Aisha swung her sword even harder. They still somehow managed to dodge the blades of wind that she produced with each swing.

“Whoa, watch out! She’s not holding back anymore!”

“Ookyakya! Scary, but... it’s not a bad situation. Hey, redhead!”

“What is it, whitehead?!”

“We’re gonna keep Aisha’s focus on us for a while.”

“...Sounds like you’ve got a plan. I’m in.”

They closed in while dodging Aisha’s blades of wind, then, as they swung their cudgel and spear at her, they spoke with their normal voices.

“What do you talk about in bed with Souma?”

“Is Bro ever proactive in bed?”

They decided to use dirty talk to catch her attention. When Aisha heard them, she turned an even deeper red.

“A-A-As if I could ever tell!”

Aisha kept swinging her greatsword, trying to pull the two of them apart. The two had done a brilliant (?) job of getting her attention. Then, sensing now was the time, Kuu raised his left hand.

Just at that moment, the track that began playing was the main theme to the game adaptation of a manga about a hard-boiled sniper. Then...

...Whoosh!

Something flew over Aisha's ear from far in the distance. She turned to her side, and saw an arrow coming straight towards her, and Leporina, who must have fired that arrow, standing on a large boulder.

A sniper?! Oh, no!

Aisha tried to chase off the incoming arrow, but it came directly after Hal and Kuu's attacks, leaving her off balance. There was no way to dodge or block it like this.

Am I out of options? she thought, only to be interrupted by the sound of hooves and the whinny of a horse...

"You let your guard down too much, Aisha."

The person who came riding in on a white horse cut the arrow down. When they saw who the sudden interloper was, everyone's eyes went wide.



“Lady Liscia?!” Aisha exclaimed.

“Whaa?! Bro’s Wife #1?!”

“Huh?! The princess... No, the queen?! Why is she here?!”

“It looks like fun, so I want in,” Liscia said with a smile. “Aisha, leave the rabbit over there to me. You stop these two.”

“...Oh! U-Understood!”

Having come to her senses, Aisha managed to give that much of a response, and then Liscia was off at a gallop, heading towards Leporina.

“Huh? I have to face Queen Liscia?! Master Kuu?!”

Kuu heard Leporina’s bewildered cries in the distance, but unable to do anything about them, he just gave her an off-handed, “Good luck!”

Leporina loosed arrows as she fled, but Liscia cut them out of the air as she gave chase. The fleeing Leporina and pursuing Liscia. It was a scene that looked like a rabbit hunt.

“Eeek! Stay away from mee!!”

“You’re fast, and you’ve got good aim. But a challenge always gets me fired up.”

Liscia looked like she was having fun, and she kept chasing the teary-eyed Leporina. As he watched, Kuu couldn’t help but mutter, “All of Bro’s wives are a little too energetic...”

“...You’ve got a point.”

Halbert could find no words to disagree with him.

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“Liscia’s so full of life,” I said to myself, sighing as I watched her enjoy her rabbit hunt on the other side of the simple receiver.

She was really in her element. Having to look after the children all the time lately must have left her itching for this. Cian and Kazuha were cute enough that she didn’t mind, but she was a warrior trained by Georg, and she must have wanted to really let loose sometimes.

Suddenly, one of the bureaucrats came in and said, “Y-Your Majesty! This is big!”

“What is? What happened?”

When I asked him, the bureaucrat caught his breath and gave his report. “They’ve breached the walls! Please, head to the hall and prepare to meet them at once!”

“They broke through... Seriously? I thought it was a stalemate...”

I looked to the simple receivers, but all I saw was my wives and companions fighting, the same as before. No matter where I looked, it seemed like the fighting was even.

“Yes. The heads of the attacking and defending teams have thrown the major players at one another, so the places that are being recorded are all at a stalemate. However, in the more ordinary spots, the ones not picked up by the broadcast, there was an ordinary fight, fought with ordinary means, and it has broken through the walls in an ordinary way.”

“Oh... Yeah, I guess that makes sense. It’s not like we’re seeing the whole battlefield.”

I was satisfied with their explanation. There was fighting in the places Ludwin and Excel weren’t concerned with, too, and a result had been decided there.

“It’s not really a satisfying conclusion, but... I guess that can’t be helped. I’ll take it on board as something to learn from.”

I didn’t know if we would be doing this a second time, but if we did, I wouldn’t have them fight in a big, chaotic melee like this. There would be proper routes, and the broadcast jewels would be placed along them.

I feel like that’ll bring it closer to *****’s Castle, though.

“Sire, hurry.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m going.”

At the bureaucrat’s urging, I returned to the hall where I gave my initial speech.

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“...And so, the winners are the attacking team! Also, the special award for the person who did the most to make things the most exciting goes to Miss Dran for blowing away both Silvan and Akki Taitei.”

“Yayyyyyy!” ← The crowd roaring.

“...Th-Thanks.” ← Carla wanting to crawl into a hole and die.

“Whew, it’s all done. Lady Roroa was cute as a button, and the whole project was pretty interesting, on the whole, I’d say.”

“Yes. Lady Aisha was as strong and cool as ever.”

With the song battle over, Lucy and Velza, who were both at a restaurant with a terrace overlooking the fountain plaza, both gave their opinions.

Tomoe nodded in satisfaction as she sipped her tea. “Big Sister Liscia was so brave and wonderful, too. And Naden was cool.”

"The fighting was incredible, but the loreleis' performances were amazing, too. That duet between Madam Juna and Madam Komari was simply entralling," Ichihira added enthusiastically.

Tomoe noticed that Yuriga was watching the broadcast in silence. There was no enjoyment on her face, only seriousness.

"What's wrong, Yuriga?" she asked.

"...Hm?" Yuriga grunted hesitantly. She inclined her head towards Tomoe as if to say, "What?"

"No, um... it's just that you were just staring so intently."

"Ohh... I guess I was, huh? I spent the whole time thinking about the purpose of this broadcast. If he's doing something on this large a scale, there must be some reason for it."

"P-Purpose..."

Tomoe jumped a little at the mention of it. She had heard from Souma that this was all to, "Investigate the effect of music on magic." But that information had not been made public. They might figure it out much later, but for now, the people only saw it as another show.

"Big Brother is trying to put on broadcasts that will entertain the people. I guess this is part of that," Tomoe said. "Look, everyone seems to have enjoyed it, right?"

"Is that a job for the king?" Yuriga said with a sigh. "Honestly, your brother isn't regal at all, is he?"

"Huh? Uh! Well... Yeah."

Tomoe was (only slightly) miffed to hear her speak so disrespectfully about the brother she admired. Still, if it meant Yuriga would be satisfied with that answer, that was for the best, so she didn't push back.

“Did you really think I’d buy that?”

“Huh?!”

Yuriga stared at Tomoe with eyes that seemed to see everything. As Tomoe shuddered, Yuriga shrugged her shoulders in dismay.

“I’ve gradually come to understand it, too. The way your brother’s politics work, I mean. I know the things he does that look pointless often aren’t, and the events he seems to have put no thought into have some deeper intent lurking in the shadows. Even if I can’t figure out what that is.”

“.....”

As Tomoe sat there, unable to respond, Yuriga stared at the broadcast image of Souma. “He’s someone my brother is wary of, after all. I guess you could say that while I may not know what he’s thinking, I know he’s thinking *something*, at least.”

“Yuriga, you’re...”

Tomoe felt like she saw something in Yuriga’s eyes that resembled the big sister she admired. Liscia once told Souma, “I may not have faith in you, but I do trust you.” ...and Tomoe was reminded of that now. Souma did all these crazy, off-the-wall things, but she knew there was a reason he did them.

Maybe Yuriga feels the same, Tomoe thought. Come to think of it... Yuriga’s personality is similar to Big Sister’s, too.

As a princess who was serious, with a strong will that would not bend once she made up her mind, and a willingness to take up the sword to fight herself, it was true she had a lot in common with Liscia. Even more than Tomoe did, though that was to be expected because they were not blood-related sisters.

In that case... I wonder if Yuriga will grow up to be like Big Sister. She admired Liscia, but though her ability to talk to animals was a

valuable asset, it was not suited to combat. No matter how hard she tried, she likely couldn't be a brave warrior like Liscia.

But Yuriga had that potential.

That's... kind of frustrating. Tomoe clenched her fists. This was the first inkling of feminine pride inside Tomoe.

The fact was, though she couldn't touch Yuriga in the realm of physical abilities, in terms of academics, she far exceeded her. This was to be expected, since they each had their own specialties, but Tomoe's newfound pride as a woman could not accept the loss when it meant she was somehow less of one.

I'm not the same type as Big Sister. I can try all I want, but Yuriga is the one who'll be more like her. That's why I have to aim to be someone more womanly than Big Sister... The image of her adoptive big brother's blue-haired partner flashed through Tomoe's mind.

The first secondary queen, Juna Souma. Though Juna was also a fighter, her true value was in her beautiful appearance and her refined manner. This was a lady that other women strove to emulate, and one who even Liscia felt slightly inferior to as a woman. *I want to be like her, too.*

Tomoe felt like she could envision the future she wanted for herself. To be a talented and sexy woman who could support her big brother politically.

I'll ask Juna for help when I get back. I need her to teach me to be a more wonderful woman. So I won't lose to Yuriga. Tomoe worked herself up as she clenched her fists.

The other four looked at her mystified.

From this day onward, Tomoe began to learn how to be a woman from Juna, and took her first step towards becoming Tomoe the little devil, who played havoc with the lives of men around her (primarily

Souma, Hakuya, and Ichihara), but... that's a story that comes a little later.

Chapter 2.5: An Unexpected Evolution and Possibility

— Some time after the real song battle ended —

In a clinic in the new city, Venetinova, Hilde stared speechless at her own hands, a beastman woman laid out on the examination table in front of her.

The woman had been deathly pale when she was brought in, but *now that the procedure was complete*, she was sleeping with a relatively peaceful look on her face. Hilde was the one who was pale now.

“B... Brad... Brad!” Coming back to her senses, she called her husband’s name. Hearing her cries, Brad, who had been in the bedroom with their one-year-old daughter, rushed over.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Hil—”

“Brad!” Hilde jumped at Brad as he arrived. Seizing his white coat, she buried her face in his chest.

Normally Hilde was so good spirited and strong-willed that you might have called her manly. In all of their long time together, Brad had never seen this weak side of her.

“Wh-What?! What in the world is going on?”

“Brad... I may have done something terrible.”

“Terrible?”

Hilde looked up at him, her face still pale. Though she didn’t seem to be crying, she did look frightened of something. Brad gently rubbed Hilde’s back to try to calm her.

“What exactly happened? Did you botch the treatment?” Even as he asked, Brad was sure that couldn’t be it. If she had been about to make an irreversible mistake, she would have called him then, not now.

Brad looked at the beastman woman on the table. Her eyes were closed, but her chest gently rose and fell. Her breathing didn’t seem labored, either. ...*As far as I can see, she’s just sleeping.*

This wasn’t like surgery, where a botched procedure could directly result in the death of the patient. This woman had come in feeling unwell, and Hilde asked questions, examined her, and then decided whether or not to provide medicine. Brad, who had nothing to do, had been left to take care of Ludia.

Having finally calmed herself, Hilde began to tell him what had transpired, “Brad. I...”

Hilde related the events to Brad in minute detail. As Brad listened, first his eyes widened, then he cocked his head to the side as he failed to understand what Hilde was worried about... then, when he eventually comprehended what it was that she was concerned about, he frowned.

“What should I do, Brad? Should I go into hiding...?”

“Hold on! You’re getting way ahead of yourself!” Brad clapped his hands down on her shoulders. “The first thing we need to do is calm down. Both of us... Also, no matter what happens, I will always be by your side. Ludia will, too.”

“Ah! Ludia!” Hilde brushed off Brad’s arms and took off running. When Brad recovered from his surprise and chased after her, Hilde was looking at their sleeping daughter.

When Brad approached, Hilde leaned against him with tears in her eyes.

“...If it were just me, I might have fled the country and gone into hiding.”

“...Yeah. I would have gone with you, too.”

“But... I don’t want this child to be caught up in it, too. I couldn’t make her suffer like that.”

“I know.” Brad gently embraced Hilde as he came to a decision.

“Let’s talk to the king about this.”

“Huh?! But what if...?”

“It’s okay,” Brad said, looking a hesitant Hilde straight in the eye. “If this were any other country, I wouldn’t be saying this. But that king, he wouldn’t mistreat you, no matter what’s happened. That king treasures family. He couldn’t abandon you after you helped his wife to give birth.”

“.....”

Hilde seemed torn, but eventually she accepted.

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— Several days later —

Having received a message from Brad and Hilde saying, “We wish to meet with you in secret to discuss something important,” I set aside time to meet with the two of them in a room at the castle.

They had indicated that the fewer people present the better, so only Hakuya and Liscia were in attendance, with Aisha outside the door standing guard and keeping others away.

Incidentally, their daughter, Ludia, was being looked after by Elisha and Carla.

“It’s not everyday you come to the castle, huh, Brad?” The looks on their faces were dark, so I decided to open with some lighthearted

banter. “Maybe you don’t want to come to the den of the powerful, hmm?”

I tried teasing him for the way he acted like he had a bad case of middle school syndrome, but...

“...The situation left me with no alternative,” Brad responded with a grim look on his face. ...This was apparently going to be a serious talk. Liscia elbowed me in the ribs, as if to say, “You shouldn’t be teasing him.” It kind of hurt.

Brad stood up, and bowed his head deeply. “Please. Lend us your power for Hilde’s sake.”

“Please.” Hilde stood up as well and bowed her head, and my eyes went wide.

“No, lift your heads, please.” I had them sit back down, then started over by asking them, “Please, tell me. What in the world happened?”

“...There was a woman who visited our clinic the other day.” Hilde slowly began to explain the situation. “I will keep her name a secret, but she was a beastman woman, thirty years old. She complained about stomach pains, and after examining her, I realized it was the work of bugs.”

“By bugs you mean... parasites, huh?”

Anisakis, or the like. Hilde nodded.

“It seems she ate some fish that spoils quickly raw. Because Venetinova is on the sea, it happens on rare occasions. The usual treatment involves using a deworming medicine to kill the bugs, followed by medical supervision. And, in serious cases, I will have Brad perform an abdominal incision and remove them.”

“Hm...”

“I had this woman drink the deworming medicine and stay in the clinic so I could watch her, but... she was quite weak-willed. She begged me, ‘Please, use recovery magic on me.’”

“Recovery magic? But I heard light magic like that can only heal external wounds?”

The story I’d heard was, indeed, that light magic was not effective in treating illness. That was why I had worked to increase the number of people like Brad and Hilde, who could treat people with the power of medicine, in our country.

“Yes, that’s right.” Hilde nodded. “The symptoms brought on by parasites are an infection, and magic has no effect on it, just like with bacteria. I explained that to the patient, but she wouldn’t accept it.”

“When you’re suffering from illness, you’ll cling to any straw, after all...”

“I think so, too. It was only going to make her feel better about it emotionally, but if it satisfied the patient, I didn’t see the harm. I cast the spell on her, and when I did...”

Hilde paused for a moment, then, seeming to resolve herself, she confessed.

“Her illness... got better.”

“...Come again?” I muttered in disbelief.

It got better? With recovery magic? Huh? Didn’t that contradict her statement from, like, ten seconds ago?

“Was it really a parasitic infection?”

“From everything in my diagnosis, I have no doubt of that.”

“I confirmed it myself later. Hilde was undoubtedly correct,” Brad cosigned her statement.

If the two great doctors were in agreement, I had to believe them.

"You gave her medicine, right? Could that have had an effect?" I asked.

"It wasn't so potent it could have an instant effect on the bugs like that."

"Well, how about a placebo effect?"

"Plasiibow? What's that?"

"Erm... In the world I came from, there's a saying, 'Sickness is in the mind.' The way you think about things can apparently help ameliorate your symptoms. If you drink spring water that claims to be a panacea, you might feel like your symptoms are getting better... That's sort of how it works."

"That's fascinating, but she didn't just feel she was getting better, she was fully recovered."

Hilde had a point. You couldn't make parasites vanish by changing how you felt.

"Your Majesty, this may be huge," Hakuya, who had remained quiet up until this point, interjected. "I haven't heard of a single instance of a disease being healed with magic before this. Because light magic is believed to be a sign of God's grace, powerful light mages have been integrated into the church. If they learn Madam Hilde can heal sickness with her light magic, she will have religious power greater than any mere saint."

That figures... The Lunarian Orthodox Papal State was going to want her more than anything. If she was a saint they couldn't have for themselves, they would have to publicly condemn her. The same way they had criticized Maria and others.

"Me, a saint? Spare me." Hilde hugged herself and went pale.

Oh, I saw what this was about now. Was this why they had come to me? To have the country protect her, so she wasn't caught up in the machinations of some religion?

"...Who was the patient? Does she know it was Hilde's light magic that cured her?"

"When she realized something was wrong, Hilde put her under with drugs immediately. When she awoke, we explained the medicine had run its course, so I don't think she realizes... Lying to a patient may disqualify us as doctors, though," Brad said as he held Hilde's shoulders.

"So the only ones who know are the five of us here, then. Well..."

As I was pondering what to do about this, Liscia tugged on my sleeve.

"Hm? What?"

"...I know, normally, I shouldn't let personal feelings come into this. But, please, Souma. Help Dr. Hilde. She looked after me the whole time I was pregnant. I don't even know if Cian and Kazuya would have been born safely without her."

"Liscia..."

"So, please. Lend the two of them your strength."

"...I know." I gently stroked the back of Liscia's head. "It's already decided that I'm going to help them. If anything happened to Hilde, Brad wouldn't stay quiet about it. It would be to the country's detriment if we were to lose their rare gifts. More than that, do you think I could abandon the people who did so much for our family? I don't want to see such a sad look on my wife's face."

I looked to everyone present.

“For that reason, I first want to organize the information we have. The foremost question is, ‘Why did her magic cure the infection?’ Hilde, have you ever tested something like this before?”

“A number of times. When I’ve had a patient in a condition so serious it was beyond my ability to do anything, I’ve used recovery magic and prayed for a miracle... It never worked, though.”

“There must be countless times that people have tried to use recovery magic to treat an illness before now. But if it’s never had an effect... is there something special about Hilde?”

I presented my suspicion to Brad who replied, “But if that’s the case, why was Hilde never able to cure them before now? This was the first time it was successful.”

“Did her magic evolve? It grows a little each time you use it. I mean, the number of things I can control with my Living Poltergeists has gradually grown.”

“No, I think this has jumped too many stages to be from simple growth. In terms of your ability, sire, it would be like you suddenly being able to control a suit of armor in the Empire that you’ve never even touched.”

If I had that power, I could go on an assassination bonanza. Er, I wouldn’t, of course, but that’s how big of a change it would be. That made this harder and harder to understand.

“Why do you suppose she was suddenly able to cure it with magic?”

“Oh! Maybe it’s like the song battle, and there was something in the situation amplifying her magic?” Liscia said, clapping her hands as she came up with the idea.

“The effect’s too big for that, though.”

“There was no music playing when I was treating her anyway.”

“Urkh. Yeah, that’s right...” With Hilde and me both stepping all over her idea, Liscia backed down.

“Wait— The song battle... Hold on.” Hakuya interjected.

“Did you figure something out, Hakuya?”

“Sire, please, try to remember the goal of that experiment.”

“The goal? ‘To observe the effect that songs have on magic’... right?”

“Yes. And the premise was that, like Madam Merula said, the strength or weakness of a person’s mental image would make that magic stronger or weaker.” As he said that, Hakuya turned to look at Hilde. “I’ve been thinking all this time about the difference between Madam Hilde and other light mages. If Madam Hilde is the one light mage who, unlike the others, can cure illnesses, where does that difference lie?”

“The difference... That she’s a member of the three-eyed race, maybe?”

When I said that, Hakuya shook his head.

“I considered that, too, but the three-eyed race are some of the foremost experts in medicine on this continent. I can’t imagine they haven’t tried to cure illnesses with magic before now.”

“Well, what’s different then?”

This time, Hakuya looked to Brad. “Madam Hilde has Sir Brad at her side.”

“...Me?”

“Yes. *Brad the surgeon*, to be precise. Madam Hilde, even before the two of you were married, you have been watching Sir Brad’s surgical procedures, correct?”

“Huh? ...Well, yes.” Hilde nodded. “When it comes to stitching the patient up after the procedure, the wounds heal faster with light

magic. With all the times I helped out, I learned to perform surgery myself before I knew it.”

“I thought as much... In other words, Madam Hilde is deeply familiar with the structure of the human body, the same as a surgeon like Sir Brad, correct? And she knows about the parasites that harm the body, too.”

“What are you getting at, Hakuya?”

“I am suggesting that Madam Hilde knew all about the parasites, where in the body they were, and what they were doing to harm it.”

Hakuya spoke with confidence.

“Please, remember that people’s mental images influence magic. If she was able to imagine the parasites, their location within the body, and what harm they were doing, she forms an image of removing those parasites, and healing the damage. Turning that around, the reason no other light mage has been able to cure illness may be because they lack that mental image.”

When we heard Hakuya’s guess, we all looked to Hilde, and she nodded.

“...It’s true that I’ve been with Brad several times when he opened a patient’s stomach and removed the parasites. I could imagine what was going on inside that woman’s body, if only vaguely.”

“Basically, if you understand the mechanism behind a disease, it can be cured with light magic, huh...” I trailed off.

It might be possible to cure any illness she understood the mechanism of with light magic. Even diseases that would have been untreatable in the world I came from. Eliminating all those parasites in an instant without surgically opening the patient’s stomach would have been impossible in my old world. Because it was overtechnology, the possibilities were endless.

“To sum things up, if we pound medical knowledge into our light mages’ heads, we can increase the number of them who can cure disease like Hilde did, huh?”

“It is only a hypothesis for the time being... but that seems likely.” Hakuya nodded.

True enough, we couldn’t say for certain until we had tested it, but I was convinced.

“...Thank goodness.” Liscia let out a sigh of relief. “That means Dr. Hilde’s not special, right? If we can increase the number of mages who can do the same thing, Dr. Hilde won’t be seen as anything unique, and countries like the Orthodox Papal State won’t come after her.”

At her words, Hakuya and I felt a little embarrassed.

In our positions as king and prime minister, our minds had been solely focused on the potential of magic and how it could be used. Meanwhile, Liscia was thinking about Hilde the whole time. *This is embarrassing*, I thought, and Hakuya and I looked at one another with wry smiles.

“...Yeah.” I smiled to reassure Liscia. “It’s an issue that powerful light mages are being taken in by the church, but some of them must have the desire to save people. I could speak to Bishop Souji and have him find us some promising individuals. I’d like to have more people like Hilde a few years from now.”

I then looked to Hilde and Brad.

“Until then, it would be best to keep this secret for both of your safety.”

“But... if I have the means to save someone, not using it is not an option.”

I looked to Hilde, who spoke as a doctor, and nodded. “I know. In that case, you can put the patient under with drugs, and pretend that the medicine worked like this time. You’ll have to accept that much of a lie.”

“...I suppose so. It’s easier than being told not to use it at all.”

“I’ll also post guards for the two of you. Their job will be less to monitor you, and more to gather information, and prevent leaks. They’ll watch to ensure this doesn’t get out, and to deal with the situation if it looks like it might, so they’ll do what they can not to interfere with your lives.”

“I know that can’t be helped, but... let me say one thing,” Brad said, raising his hand.

“I’m sure you’re not entirely satisfied, but you’ll have to put up with some inconvenience...”

“No, that’s not it. What I want to say is that I want you to protect Ludia, too, not just us. That girl’s more important than our own lives.”

Hilde nodded in agreement. This was an issue with the way I had explained it.

“I promise the country will guarantee your family’s safety.”

“...Ahaha! Sorry to trouble you, Your Majesty.”

Hilde finally smiled at that point, making my heart feel lighter.

On this day, the history of medical science in our kingdom broke into a new stage.

Chapter 3: Symposium

“Tomoe’s been visiting Juna’s place a lot recently.”

It was a cool summer night when the heat of day had faded.

When I mentioned that offhandedly, Roroa nodded. “Ohh, I’ve been hearin’ about that. Says she wants to learn about the charms of an adult woman.”

“An adult woman, huh... I’d like her to be childish while she’s a child, at least. But maybe that’s just the selfishness of an adult talking.”

“Nyahaha, could be,” Roroa laughed. “Tomoe’s already twelve, ain’t she? That’s when us girls start growin’ up, y’know... But, wait, why do ya think she’s not askin’ me?”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s because you don’t give off that impression at all, right?”

Roroa puffed up her cheeks and pinched me in the side. It kind of hurt.

“Why not? I’m already a married woman, y’know?”

Roroa hugged me so that her skin pressed against mine. She was currently lying in bed with me, using my outstretched arm as a pillow. There was a blanket over us, but underneath we were both naked.

I turned towards Roroa, without moving the arm under her head, and stroked her hair. “It’s more about the kind of woman she wants to become. In your case, there’s that friend of hers... Lucy, was it?”

“Ohh. That kid from the Evans Company, huh?”

“That girl admires you, doesn’t she?”

“Ohh, yeah, I guess. It threw me for a loop when she started callin’ me Big Sister Roroa out of nowhere, though.”

The other day, we heard Tomoe had made friends at the academy, so we invited them to the castle, though not in any official capacity.

While Ichihira and Yuriga already lived in the castle, and I was acquainted with Velza, Lucy, the daughter of a merchant family, was the only one who was new to me.

When I and all my wives came out to greet them, since it involved our beloved little sister Tomoe, Lucy was humbled at first, but when she noticed Roroa was there, too, she let out a shriek.

“Eeek?! Lady Roroa! Isn’t that Lady Roroa?!”

“Wh-What? What’re you shoutin’ for all of a sudden?”

“I’m a huge fan of yours! Please, shake my hand!”

Then she took Roroa’s hand and shook it vigorously. Roroa and everyone else were dumbfounded, but Velza hurriedly grabbed Lucy by the scruff of the neck and dragged her off.

“L-Lucy! This is rude to His Majesty and the queens!”

“Huh?! Oh, no! I was so giddy over finally meetin’ Lady Roroa, I lost control of myself! P-Please, forgive my rudeness! This’s got nothin’ to do with my family, so please only punish me!” Lucy threw herself on the ground and apologized.

Unable to watch her any longer, Tomoe said, “Big Brother, Lu’s usually a good girl. She’s my friend, too, so please forgive her,” or something like that. There wasn’t any need for forgiveness, though. I wasn’t even upset in the first place.

Things were getting out of hand, so I decided to laugh it off so they knew I didn’t plan to make a big deal of it.

“What a cheerful, fun girl. That’s a good friend you’ve found there, Tomoe.”

“Big brother... Yes!” She gave me a big smile. That was all I needed.

Roroa must have been remembering what happened that time, too, because she snickered.

"I'm like a little sister to Big Sis Cia and the rest, but I'm a 'Big Sister' to her. That was kind of a new feeling."

"There was Princess Tia in the Kingdom of Lastania, too, wasn't there?"

"I know she's younger, but she's a Big Sis to me. Oh, right. I've been correspondin' with Big Sis, and it seems my big brother hasn't laid a hand on her yet. He's plannin' to wait about a year."

"Princess Tia was rather petite, after all... I guess that just shows Julius is taking care of her."

That was probably because he wanted her to grow a little more before they started making babies. You know, to lower the risks of pregnancy as much as possible.

While I was thinking about that, Roroa poked me in the side. It was time to get started... apparently.

Then, Roroa covered her body with her hands, and in a desperate-sounding voice, she said, "Y-You can do whatever you like with my body. Just, please, don't hurt the people of my country," her eyes moist with tears.

I looked at her and let out a sigh. "...Can you stop playing the princess of a ruined nation?"

Roroa seemed to be awfully into setting up situations like this. I thought the way she played around was cute, but she seemed awfully eager to make me into a lecherous king in her fantasy scenarios. When I tried bringing it up with Liscia...

"Hee hee, I heard. That girl sure thinks a lot about this stuff, huh? But, you know... I'm a former princess, too, maybe I should do that for you next time?" she said with a smirk.

It seemed my wives frequently traded information among themselves.

It was a very good thing for me, and for the country, that my wives got along, but... I dunno, it was grinding my psyche down pretty quickly.

“My taste isn’t that bad, okay?”

“Well, you’re no fun. Haven’t ya heard the rumors sayin’ you started a war to get your hands on me?”

“That’s an old one. It’s long since been wiped away by now.”

“But doesn’t this sort of actin’ get you goin’?”

I tilted my head towards Roroa, and pulled the head that was resting on my arm closer to me.

“Even without that... you’ve already got me going.”

“Nyaheheh!”

◇ ◇ ◇

The following day, I called Tomoe and Ichihha to the governmental affairs office. Liscia and Hakuya were already in the room. When I explained the reason I had summoned them, they both cocked their heads to the side in unison.

““Monsterology Symposium?””

The word must have been unfamiliar to them. Tomoe followed up with another question, “What is a ‘symposium,’ Big Brother?”

“It’s a word from my old world referring to an academic conference on a specific theme. An exchange of opinions in regards to research, held in a public place. This time, I’ve decided to hold a symposium on the field of monster research—that’s monsterology—at the Royal Academy this weekend.”

“The Academy... You’re doing it at our school?”

“Yes. Okay, Hakuya, I’ll let you explain the rest.”

“Understood.”

Hakuya bowed, and then pulled out a book. On the cover, the words “Monster Encyclopedia” were written in this world’s language.

It was the first encyclopedia of monsters in this world, published as a joint work by Ichiha and Hakuya, and featured illustrations of monsters drawn by Ichiha that had been sorted into categories.

Printing had already existed without me introducing the idea to this world, so there were quite a few copies in circulation already.

“Between the publication of a Monster Encyclopedia featuring categorized sketches by Ichiha, and research on the various monster parts we were able to collect after the demon wave hit the Kingdom of Lastania, academic fields involving monsters have seen a boom in this kingdom. The question ‘What is a monster?’ is an important one for this kingdom, no, this world.”

“There’s the Demon Lord’s Domain to the north, and even if there wasn’t, they’re inside dungeons, too,” Liscia said, sounding convinced.

“Yes.” Hakuya nodded. “There are also the demons that Tomoe enc... No, that exist inside the Demon Lord’s Domain to consider, too. If we have a proper understanding of monsters, I believe it will be easier to distinguish them from demons. It may be possible to negotiate with the sapient demons to avoid pointless strife.”

“I’d rather not fight them if we don’t have to, too.” Tomoe clutched at her chest as she spoke. “In Lastania... I touched the minds of those lizardman monsters. They all had an intense feeling of starvation, and they only saw me as prey. They didn’t think about anything but eating. So...”

Tomoe's unspoken feelings, I don't want to lump the kobold who saved me with those things that could only think on that level... came across clearly.

Ichihai was here right now, so she wouldn't touch on it, but she must have wanted to say there were demons with hearts, too.

"...Yeah." I nodded to her. "They say that the demons are intelligent, but it's still unclear. Even if they are intelligent, it's dangerous to assume we'll be able to hold dialogue with every demon. Still, we need to consider the possibility that some are like that. To make sure the war doesn't wage until one side is completely annihilated."

Seemingly in agreement, everyone nodded gravely.

"Well, anyway, on that note, it's in our national interest to research monsters. That's why I'm holding the Monsterology Symposium. Well, instead of the study of monsters itself, the main topics will likely be, 'The Importance and Verification of Monster Research,' and, 'The Way Forward for Monster Research.' Given how important the topic is, we need to move forward cautiously."

"Researching monsters... That sounds pretty close to heresy, huh? The Orthodox Papal State will probably raise a fuss."

I agreed with Liscia's observation.

In a country that placed such importance on religion, even if academic development was necessary, it was bound to meet pushback if it tried to unravel some divine mystery. They wouldn't want to permit the study of monsters, which served as an easy-to-understand enemy of God.

"Let's have their bishop, Souji, take part in the symposium. It will be hard to wipe away all their concerns, but it should provide some cover for us. I intend to have Kuu take part as a representative for the Republic, and to let Madam Maria in the Empire watch via Jewel

Voice Broadcast. Hakuya, the preparations are in place for that, right?"

"By your will. I have received her eager consent by way of Madam Jeanne."

I gave Hakuya's answer a satisfied nod and said, "Monsters are a topic I want to study together with the Empire and the Republic. Besides, I wouldn't want to risk making them investigate us when we're doing nothing wrong."

"Um... can I say something, Big Brother?" Tomoe hesitantly raised her hand.

"What is it, Tomoe?"

"I think what you're saying makes sense, but this symposium will be public... which means anyone can listen, right? How will you handle Yuriga?"

"...Oh, right. Yuriga, huh?" I held my head.

Yuriga, being the younger sister of the King of Malmkhitan, periodically wrote letters to her brother describing her life here in the Kingdom. If she attended the Monsterology Symposium as an observer, the contents of it would make their way back to Fuuga. This was vital information for him, as he was the center of the land reclamation movement.

Fuuga was a man who could blow up big riding the waves of this era, so I didn't want to show him any of our cards that I didn't have to, but... like I already said, it was dangerous to conduct this research in secret.

"What do you think, Hakuya?"

"...I think it's inevitable. If possible, I would prefer that Madam Yuriga not participate, though."

“If she’s not interested in monster research, it’s possible she won’t...”

“There’s no chance of that,” Tomoe stated awfully clearly. “During the song battle, Yuriga told me. The events you seem to have put no thought into have some deeper intent lurking in the shadows. If she hears about an off-the-wall event like this, she’s guaranteed to realize it’s important.”

“...That girl’s not bad. Managing to understand Souma’s personality at her age,” Liscia said, sounding impressed.

Now that I thought about it, Liscia had said something similar to me once, too. Liscia and Yuriga... They might have a lot in common, huh?

“In that case, we can’t hide it...” I hesitated for a moment, but eventually resolved myself. “If the information is going to come out either way, let’s publish it ourselves.”

“Are you certain you want to do that?” Hakuya asked.

“Fuuga is invading the Demon Lord’s Domain. In this present moment, he’s the leader most likely to run right into the demons. It’d be bad for us if he starts hostilities with them because he can’t tell the difference between monsters and demons. We should give him information on monsters, as a warning, if nothing else. Maybe we should lend him a copy of the Monster Encyclopedia while we’re at it?”

“I see. That seems wise.” Hakuya seemed satisfied, so our course was set.

I rose from my seat, and faced everyone.

“That’s that. Everyone, keep everything we talked about in mind this weekend.”

“Okay, got it.”

““Understood, sire.””

“In regards to how to handle the children... I’m honestly not sure what to do.” Once Tomoe and Ichihia were sent away, I conferred my thoughts to Liscia and Hakuya. “I’m sure Ichihia will be fine. He’s not that loyal to the Duchy of Chima, and with some negotiation, I’m convinced he’ll offer his allegiance to this country. You would agree with that, right, Hakuya?”

“Indeed. I believe we can look forward to his service in the future.”

“The problem is... Yuriga. What do we do with her, going forward?”

“What do you mean, do with her?”

“We’ve set our policy in regards to Monsterology for now, but for as long as Yuriga stays in this country, things like this will keep happening. It’ll be a pain having to worry about Yuriga’s eyes every time we try to do something that takes us forward.”

“That’s... true, yes.”

As Liscia chewed on that thought, I held up two fingers and showed them to her.

“There are two options available to us. The first is to send her back to Fuuga without teaching her anything of importance. If we send her back ignorant, it won’t improve our relationship with Fuuga, but it won’t make it any worse, either. It will just maintain the status quo.”

“That’s the safe choice, yeah.” Liscia nodded. “So, what’s the other one?”

“We bring her to our side.”

“You mean... make her our ally?”

“No, there’s no need for her to be completely aligned with us. She just has to not be an enemy.”

“...I’m not sure I quite get the difference.”

Liscia seemed confused, so I crossed my arms and explained, “From what the recent reports tell me, though Fuuga and Yuriga are brother and sister, I feel like their personalities are quite different. Yuriga is more realistic, I guess you could say? The more powerful the opponent, the more fired-up Fuuga gets, but I feel like Yuriga would rather avoid the dangerous battles.”

“...I think I can understand.” Hakuya agreed with me. “The girl is clever. Her ability to study was nowhere near the level of Little Sister or Ichihira, but she possesses a mind capable of flexible thinking and imagination. You might say she’s adaptable... She possesses a skill for seeing through to the true nature of things. The way she praises the way you reign, but is also wary of it, is another sign of that... Ahh, I see. You think you can use her as a deterrent against Sir Fuuga?”

Hakuya nodded in fascination, perhaps having seen through what I was planning.

“It’s true that if you show Madam Yuriga what this country is capable of, she will warn Sir Fuuga not to fight with you. Perhaps she is already warning him through her letters.”

“Hrmm,” Liscia crossed her arms and groaned. “I get what you two are saying, but... I’ve never met this Fuuga. From everything I hear, though, he doesn’t sound like the type who would stop because his sister warned him against something, you know? I mean, if he was, Souma would have no reason to be so wary of him.”

Liscia had struck at the heart of the matter, and I nodded.

“That’s right. I think Fuuga would likely be able to throw Yuriga away for his ambition. But he wouldn’t like doing it. There’s a slight difference in nuance between ‘not hesitating,’ and ‘not being able to hesitate.’”

Think of the similar great man, Oda Nobunaga.

He killed his younger brother, and murdered the families of his wife and his sister's husband, so he's remembered as a cruel and merciless demon king, but he could be awfully soft on those close to him. He forgave his little brother and Matsunaga Hisahide several times for betraying him, and offered that same Hisahide and Azai Nagamasa the opportunity to surrender up until the very last moment.

Ultimately, Nobunaga dominated the era by destroying whoever he had to destroy, but he had a strong heart, and it wasn't like he didn't struggle with that.

"Having to do it over his little sister's objections should put some psychological pressure on him, if only a little. If we're going to face that man, I feel we're going to need to build up every little advantage that we can."

"It's a tough one... But do you think Yuriga will actually oppose him for us?" Liscia asked.

"That's the problem, isn't it? What do you think, Hakuya?"

"It is hard to say at this stage," Hakuya said, shrugging his shoulders as if giving up. "In the end, that will depend on who Yuriga thinks would win in a conflict between you and Sir Fuuga. If she decides Sir Fuuga would win, we won't be able to use her as a restraint on him. If she thinks you would win, or perhaps that Sir Fuuga would have difficulty winning, I expect she will do whatever she can to stop him. The latter would be good for us, but..."

"That's the ideal outcome... but we'd have to show her a certain amount of our real power to convince her our country is strong, right? It's still too early to show her something like the Hiryuu, obviously."

"Yes. That's why we should have her participate in events like this symposium. To show that we are studying fields that other countries

aren't is one easily-understood signal that we are ahead of the other nations academically."

"We should proactively show her what we can, huh...?"

Well... that's the only way to do it, I guess. I thought. *I don't know what will happen between our countries in the future, and I can't be sure what decision Yuriga will make when that time comes. If possible, I'd like her to see us as a country they don't want to tussle with...*

"All we can do is watch and wait for now. We'll have to show her what we can afford to in order to make her see this country's power, and keep a watch on her. Hakuya, you keep your eyes sharp, too."

"I intend to, of course."

When Hakuya bowed, Liscia let out a sigh and said, "The girl is clever, but we'll just have to hope she'll act as a good deterrent for us."

I agreed with Liscia from the bottom of my heart.

In the afternoon, on a day some days after the guardians had that discussion.

Having finished her classes at the Royal Academy, Tomoe and the other students had gathered in the grand auditorium following after-school homeroom. They were here to clean up and bring in seats in preparation for the Monsterology Symposium to be held tomorrow. This world did not yet have folding chairs, so they had to bring in the wooden ones they usually used in the classroom.

Later, when he heard about this, Souma considered developing a folding chair. Mass-producing them would be expensive, and they were doing well enough moving the wooden seats they already had around, so he decided to put it off.

While Tomoe was setting the chairs up in neat rows on the carpet, Lucy came along with a one under each arm and laid them down with an “Oof!” Then she sat down in a chair herself.

“Augh, this is exhaustin’.” Lucy sighed, hanging her head. “The chairs’re heavy, and too far away.”

“You okay, Lucy?”

“I dunno if this is a symposium, or a symbolium, or whatever it is, but what’re they makin’ a frail young maiden work like this for? And where’re Yuriga and Ichiha at a time like this?”

“They both have clubs. The teacher said that takes priority, and Ichiha’s in the Monster Research Society, so he must be especially busy.”

“I get that, but it’s killin’ me goin’ back and forth over and over to get chairs. I ain’t never carried anythin’ heavier than a sack full of wheat before, y’know?”

“That’s pretty heavy, isn’t it? More than a chair, I’d say.” Tomoe pointed that out with a wry smile, and Lucy cocked her head to the side.

“If you add in how awkward they are to carry, isn’t it about the same? How about you, Tomie?”

“Me? Hmm... I haven’t carried a lot of heavy things, but I may have pulled some.”

“Pulled them?”

“Back when I was a refugee, we all pulled a heavy cart together.”

“.....”

The ease with which that emotionally taxing story came out left Lucy speechless. It reminded her once more that Tomoe lived quite the

odd life in her twelve years, and she put her hands together and bowed apologetically.

"Aw, I'm sorry."

"Ahaha... Don't be. With Mr. Jirukoma and Ms. Komain leading the refugees, we hardly lost anyone, and we've been treated well ever since we came to the Kingdom. Things were hard back then, but it's not that unpleasant of a memory."

In Tomoe's case, that was largely because her family had been there with her. Many of the refugees had been separated from their families, but because the kobolds had spared her, Tomoe was able to evacuate.

Once they came to the Kingdom, the kind but indecisive King Albert had given them tacit approval to stay, and a small amount of support. Then, once Souma took the throne, Tomoe became Liscia's adopted sister, and the refugees were accepted as citizens of the Kingdom.

The kindness of many people had allowed her to be where she was now. The thought of this warmed her heart. Those had been days of uncertainty, where she never knew what tomorrow would bring, and she would not willingly go back to them, but there was nothing in them that made it painful and sad just to remember them.

Now, all it made her think was, "Oh, yeah, that's a thing that happened, isn't it?"

I hope I can repay the kindness I was shown someday. To the former refugees, and the kobolds in the north, too. The first step to doing that had to be the Monsterology Symposium being held tomorrow.

While Tomoe was thinking about that, Lucy suddenly cried out in surprise, "Whoa?! Just how many of those things can you carry, Velie?"

When she looked over, Velza had brought a stack of five chairs. The wooden seats weren't designed to be stacked, so the pile was awkward and shaking. Still, Velza carried it with a cool look on her face.

"This is nothing. I still have a long way to go before I'm anything like Lady Aisha."

"No, no, what're you comparin' yourself to the strongest person in the Kingdom, the Kochiji Queen for!" (*Bop!*)

"Ow...!" Lucy bopped Velza with the back of her hand for comedic effect, and the impact made her tower of chairs lurch even more.

""Whoa?!"

While Tomoe and Lucy cried out in surprise, Velza was concentrating.

"Oof, there..."

The tower was shaking to and fro, but Velza managed to balance it and stop it from collapsing, to which Tomoe and Lucy broke out in applause. When the shaking completely subsided, Velza laid down the chair tower, and the three of them dismantled it together.

"Oh, right, I believe you two were saying something about clubs earlier?" Velza asked as she lined up chairs.

"Oh, yeah, we were. Ichiha and Yuriga are both in clubs," Tomoe replied. "Aren't you going to join one, Velza? You're really athletic, so I'll bet you've had invitations from all those clubs."

"It is true that I move well, but... I'm not that interested. I am thinking I would rather join the Cooking Club."

"Huh? Cooking?"

"Yes. If I consider my future, I believe it will be necessary."

Velza said, her cheeks reddening a bit.

Come to think of it, Velza said she came to this academy so she would be fit to serve a certain someone. From the way she's acting, is it someone she loves?

Tomoe was already twelve. The time in life when you first take an interest in romance. She wanted to hear about it in detail when she got the chance.

But Velza joining the Cooking Club, huh...? If you considered the fixation she'd shown on the food served at the fruit parlor Lucy's family operated, it might be a more natural fit than you'd think.

“Have you not considered joining anything yourself, Tomoe?”

“Hmm... I wouldn't mind joining Ichihira in the Monster Research Society, but... How about you, Lu? Aren't you going to join a club?”

“If there were a Lady Roroa fanclub, I'd be joinin' it.”

“Fan club?! There are fan clubs?!”

“No way. That's why I'm thinkin' of makin' one myself. Lady Roroa's popular, so I think I can get members, and if we make it somethin' business-related, for public purposes, I think I can get it approved. Ahh... Big Sister Roroa.”

A look of bliss fluttered across Lucy's face. It seemed meeting the genuine article at the castle had only intensified her love for Roroa.

“Ahh, if only I could see you again. Lady Roroa, are you the wonderful mother goddess?”

““She's the queen! And wait, she's leveled up from last time?!””

Tomoe and Velza could only smile wryly.

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“Oh! That's Yurie over there, ain't it?”

“Ah! You're right.”

Having finished preparing the grand auditorium, the students dispersed. The three were discussing where they might drop by after school when they passed by one of the sports grounds inside the academy. Out on the field, the trio spotted Yuriga with her club. They were divided into two teams, using their feet to try and seize control of the ball. It looked like soccer at first glance, but if that were what it was, the sounds they were hearing would be strange.

Shoom...! Whoosh...! Ring!

Rumble... Kaboom!

It was hard to imagine they were playing soccer from these noises. If Souma were here, he'd think, "Is this a factory, or the runway at an airport?"

This was to be expected though, since they were, in fact, not playing soccer. What they were playing was a new sport, created by merging the rules of the sport called soccer that Souma had brought them with a new rule allowing all non-offensive magic.

It was aptly named Magic Soccer.

"Yuriga, I'm going!" A female dragonewt player kicked the ball high into the air.

She looked familiar, and she was. She was the senior who had chased Yuriga through the air to recruit her into a club on the day of the entrance ceremony. Yuriga had escaped then, but it seemed she had eventually caved to the other girl's enthusiasm and joined.

The ball flew to a height even an amateur could tell might be too high (about ten meters in the air), and Yuriga kept after it, taking advantage of her ability to fly. Then, getting in position for an overhead kick, she wrapped the wind around herself.

“Goooooooooo!”

Shooooom!

Yuriga’s powerful shot flew straight towards the goal.

“I won’t let you!” The goalkeeper opened her hands wide, and the ground in front of the goal rose up, taking the form of an earthen doll.

The girl who was goalkeeping was a user of earth magic, like Genia, and had summoned a golem that was three meters tall. No, it had been spread thin to better protect the goal, so it looked less like a golem, and more like the creature Nurikabe from Japanese folklore.

The ball, wreathed in wind, struck the Nurikabe-like golem. When it did...

“Break throuuuugh!” Yuriga bellowed, and the Nurikabe-like golem cracked.

“No way?! My golem!”

The shot tore through the Nurikabe-like golem, and into the net. A whistle blew to indicate a goal had been scored, and the team that scored it celebrated with high-fives.

“The scrimmage is over! Take a break!” A long whistle blew as one dragonewt club member made the announcement, and the other members started to disperse.

Yuriga, who had been mobbed by her side because she scored the point, was set free, and fluttered over when she noticed Tomoe and the others had been watching.

“Well, if it isn’t Tomoe and the gang. What, is the auditorium set up already?”

“Yeah. That shot you made was cool.”

“Well, of course it was.” Yuriga puffed up her still underdeveloped chest with pride. Looking towards the auditorium, she said, “About the symposium tomorrow. It’s all right for me to go and see, right?”

“Huh...? Oh, yeah. The audience seats are open to the public. But Ichihira and I are both going to be in the seats for people involved in the symposium, so you’d be watching on your own.”

“That’s fine. I’m sure there will be people watching me, too, though.”

“I think so, too, but...”

Yuriga put her hands on her hips, laughing as if she had just remembered something. “When we went to Lucy’s fruit parlor before, the ice seller who came to restock the ice room was singing something. That’s because of that song battle you held, isn’t it?”

“.....”

She was totally on the mark, and Tomoe didn’t know how to respond when it came up so suddenly.

The Work Songs Society had received state support after the experimental skirmish called a song battle, and part of their research on improving magic used in daily life had been made public. Incidentally, the song the ice seller had been singing was from Souma’s old world, and was one that made you want to build a snowman when you heard it.

“Even when your brother’s policies seem pointless, they do have some meaning to them. Now that I know that, I can’t afford to look away,” Yuriga proclaimed while Tomoe remained speechless.

Uh, oh. I can’t let things like this shake me. Coming to her senses, Tomoe shook her head. *I’ve got to do like Juna told me. At times like this, I...*

"Always smile, so your opponent doesn't know how you truly feel. Always act with composure, and only let the one you love see your weaknesses." That was what Juna, her vision of an ideal woman, had taught her.

Tomoe smiled at Yuriga and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"...What's that pasted-on smile for?"

"Oh, nothing really."

"You're kind of pissing me off... Anyway, I'll be watching from the guest seats tomorrow."

"Sure. Please, do as you like."

Yuriga looked dubiously at the smiling Tomoe. Smile and stare collided.

"Wh-What, what? What's goin' on here?" Lucy stammered.

"...I was stunned for a second, too," Velza muttered. "I need to train myself more."

The unease flowing between these two who were, on the surface, just having a peaceful chat gave Lucy and Velza the chills.

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It was the day of the Monsterology Symposium, and the auditorium at the Royal Academy was packed. The theme had been narrowed to monsterology, but experts in various fields had been called in to hear their opinions, so there were quite a large number of people gathered. In addition, there were ten times that number of spectators who wanted to watch and listen, so it was likely the largest gathering this auditorium had ever held.

In terms of seating arrangements, the main guests of this event, the authors of the Monster Encyclopedia, Hakuya and Ichihira, were

seated at a table in the center of the stage. Also sitting with them was the head of the Monster Research Society, a young man who was petrified with nervousness. He had been brought in solely because he headed the club Ichiha belonged to, and I had to feel bad for the guy being put under the spotlight like this.

At the table on the right were the members of the royal family: Liscia, Roroa, Tomoe, and me. The left table held the headmaster of the Academy; Ginger, the head of Ginger's Vocational School; Kuu, the son of the head of the Republic; and Souji, a Lunarian Orthodox bishop. Because of the VIPs gathered on stage, Aisha, and Kuu's servant Leporina were there as bodyguards, while Carla and Ginger's wife Sandria were there to assist with other tasks.

There were rows of long tables in front of the stage, and researchers of Monsterology and all the other fields were gathered around. Among them, there were familiar faces like Genia the Overscientist, and Merula the high elf. This symposium was basically going to be an exchange of opinions between us on the stage and those researchers and experts at the tables in front of us.

On the other side of the researchers and experts, there were chairs filled with those who had come to observe. Given that this was being held at the Royal Academy, a large percentage of them were students. Yuriga was probably in there, too. The symposium was also being broadcast to Empress Maria of the Empire over the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

With the preparations nearly complete, I spoke to Liscia who was sitting beside me.

"I feel like I haven't sat next to you at an official function in a long time."

"Yeah. I'll have to thank Mother for watching Cian and Kazuha," Liscia said with a smile.

The children were being watched by Lady Elisha, who often helped with raising them, and Sir Albert, who had come to the castle to see his grandchildren's faces for the first time in a while. They were always helping us out.

On the other side of Liscia, Roroa had a grumpy look on her face.
“Hey, Darlin’, I’m here, too, y’know?”

“Yeah. I’m counting on you today as well, Roroa,” I said as I stroked her hair. “I think your area of expertise will probably come up.”

“Nyahaha, you leave it to me.” Roroa grinned as she puffed her chest up with pride.

Okay... It looks like everything’s good to go, so I’d say it’s time to get this show on the road.

I stood up and walked to the lectern in the center of the stage. At the same time, all the people assembled rose and bowed their heads to me. They couldn’t sit while their king was standing, after all.

“At ease, everyone.” I started by having them raise their heads.
“Thank you all for coming to this Monsterology Symposium.”

Because there were so many people from different classes and positions gathered, I figured it was most efficient for me, the top person in this country, to MC and run the show. This was the first time we were doing it, too, so it was probably fine.

“First, I’d like to ask you all to be seated, and to look at the cover of the materials you will find in front of you.”

With everyone now situated, I moved on to explain this symposium once more.

“Now then, the theme of this symposium is ‘Monsters.’ The monsters from the Demon Lord’s Domain that attacked in large numbers and destroyed the lands of the north. As well as the monsters that live in dungeons, occasionally appearing on the

surface and threatening the area around them. Monsters are a threat to mankind, but studying them is of great importance if we are to protect our lives and property. I believe you are all aware that there is considerable research being done into monsters in my country now.”

I gestured for Ichiha and Hakuya to stand. Hakuya bowed his head, and seeing him do so, Ichiha hurriedly did the same.

“The impetus for that has been this Monster Encyclopedia, written by Sir Ichiha Chima, an exchange student from the Duchy of Chima, as well as our own Prime Minister Hakuya. I am sure everyone here, interested in monsters as you all are, has already read it.”

I could see the researchers nodding. It was a favored book among them, and anyone who hadn’t read it might as well have been living under a rock.

Once Hakuya and Ichiha raised their heads and were seated again, I continued.

“I, myself, have seen monsters on multiple occasions. From the monsters that overflowed from a dungeon in the Republic of Turgis, to the great army of monsters surging towards the Union of Eastern Nations from the Demon Lord’s Domain. These were horrifying beings that devoured people. At the same time, I felt they were creatures full of mystery.”

I paused slightly and gazed out at the audience.

“What are monsters? Why are they born? Why do they attack people and other living creatures? Do they always come in such aberrant forms? What makes them different from the demons who are said to live deep inside the Demon Lord’s Domain?”

I spoke strongly, pounding my hands down on the lectern.

“It was the Monster Encyclopedia here that made a number of those mysteries clear to me. ‘What is a monster?’ If that mystery is solved, we can handle them more efficiently, and lessen the threat to people considerably. This is a theme that we should be putting the nation’s resources behind studying. I hope this symposium will provide a lively forum to discuss what direction that research should take.”

A small number of people began making side glances at others, or whispering amongst themselves.

“This is the first time, so we are still feeling around in the dark. It’s not as though every method of studying monsters has already come to light. That is why I have summoned a variety of leading experts and researchers. There are times when the perspective of a completely different field of research can aid the discovery of a new approach. Also, in this field in particular, there is the need to consider both the safety and ethical aspects of your work. To that end, I want to encourage an active exchange of opinions. Little by little, I want us to find the path together. With all of that said, I hereby conclude my opening remarks.”

When I finished, the hall burst into applause.

Once they settled down, I clapped my hands together.

“Now, with that out of the way, let’s get right to the point. We will start with a lecture from Sir Ichiha and Hakuya on the topic of, ‘The Beings Known as Monsters.’ Following this will be a question and answer period, so save your words for the end. Now then, Sir Ichiha, Hakuya, you take it from here.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.” Hakuya bowed politely, while Ichiha’s response was a stiff “Y-Yes!”

I returned to my seat and sat down as they took my place at the lectern.

"Do you think Ichiha will be all right?" Tomoe asked, her face full of concern. "He looks tense."

"I know he isn't the best at standing in front of people, but if things get bad, I'm sure Hakuya will cover for him," I said. "I think it's about time he overturned it, though..."

"Overturned it? What is he supposed to overturn?"

I looked at Tomoe with absolute seriousness and said, "The common opinion that he, the 8th child of the House of Chima, is just an extra."

◇ ◇ ◇

A little before the symposium began, Ichiha was standing in the wings of the auditorium stage, looking tense. He couldn't believe he would be standing on a stage like this.

During his time in the House of Chima, his body had been feeble and overshadowed by his brothers and sisters—he had never stood out. Many adults laughed that he was the extraneous eighth Chima sibling, when he was even counted among them at all. It was Mutsumi who had always tried to encourage Ichiha.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure you'll become an amazing person one day, Ichiha."

The words his sister gave him that day provided Ichiha with emotional support. However, other words tormented him. "He led in all those troops, and all he got for it was the youngest brother. It's hardly worth the bother."

The snickers and jeers that day came back to Ichiha. When Souma had invited him to the Kingdom, the generals of the Union of Eastern Nations had put Ichiha down in order to praise Souma. "Let them say what they want," he'd said, but those words had still been too harsh for the ten-year-old Ichiha.

Am I... worth being so kind to? That his life in the Kingdom was so much fun only made him think that more.

Firstly, ever since he came to the Kingdom, he'd felt super healthy. In the Duchy of Chima, he often spent the day in bed, but he hadn't done it once since coming here. In regards to this, Doctor Hilde who examined him said, "The kid's got a respiratory disease. The air up north is bad because of the desert and the proximity of the Demon Lord's Domain. If he lives in a place with comparatively good air quality, his condition should improve as he grows."

Just being told that he wouldn't be frail forever had made Ichihia feel far better. As well, the people of the Kingdom were kind towards him. Tomoe had been especially close since they'd met in the Duchy of Chima, and her family, the royal family, were good to him, too.

He'd met a teacher he could respect in Hakuya. And, with Yuriga, Velza, and Lucy, he now had more friends in his own age group. Finally, by writing the Monster Encyclopedia with Hakuya, he was being praised by people for the first time. The head of the Monster Research Society had even wept for joy when he joined the group. He could never have imagined any of these things happening back when he was in the Duchy of Chima.

Now, today, he would be giving a big joint presentation on the subject of researching monsters, in front of a large number of people. He had prepared for it together with members of the Monster Research Society.

"I-Ichihia, i-it's going to be okay. We'll be r-right there with you." The president of the society was beside him, looking even tenser than Ichihia himself.

The only pressure on Ichihia was whether or not his presentation would be a success. For the president, though, presenting in front of members of the royal family and key retainers of the country was a

major event in his life, and one that might never come again. It was only natural he would be nervous. Because Ichihia interacted with Souma and the others in a friendly manner on a daily basis, though, he was numbed to that.

“I-It’s okay. His Majesty won’t get mad if we flub our lines a little.”

While Ichihia was trying to reassure the president, someone tapped Ichihia on the shoulder. When he turned to see who it was, Hakuya was standing there with a faint but peaceful smile on his face.

“...Mr. Hakuya?”

“Your shoulders are too stiff, too. You would do well to relax more.”

“R-Right... I know that, but... I want to do my best for you, and Sir Souma, and Tomoe, and everyone else who’s done so much for me.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that, but you’re putting too much pressure on yourself.”

Hakuya walked around behind Ichihia, and began rubbing his shoulders. He felt ticklish, and ducked his head for a second, but he couldn’t shake Hakuya off so he sat there and accepted it.



As Ichiha got a relaxed look on his face, Hakuya asked him, “Sir Ichiha, you like researching monsters, right?”

“Huh...? Oh, yeah. I’ve done nothing but study them, so it’s become a hobby. When I see a monster I haven’t before, I want to sketch it.”

Ichiha’s face reddened in embarrassment, but Hakuya smiled gently.

“Then you should think of this as a place to speak about your hobby. People can speak on and on about the things they love, and they want the people they tell about them to love them too, right? I could go on forever about books.” Hakuya said, as he put his hand on top of Ichiha’s head. “Leave the success or failure of the symposium out of your head. You should just enjoy yourself, and say what you want to say. Because everyone has come to see you speak.”

“Mr. Hakuya...”

“You’re still just a child, so leave the complicated parts to us adults... I believe I said something similar to Little Sister not long ago.”

“You said that to Tomoe, too?”

“It’s common to want to act more mature at your age. There’s no need to rush.” Hakuya patted Ichiha on the head.

You should think of this as a place to speak about your hobby. Just enjoy yourself, and say what you want to say. Hakuya’s words seeped into Ichiha’s heart. *Don’t worry, have fun...*

Ichiha turned to face forward. He could enjoy researching monsters, without burdening himself. That was what having a specialty meant. A specialty that none of his siblings could beat him at. Even once the time came and he took his seat at the table in the middle, Ichiha was no longer hanging his head.

"Now then, Sir Ichiha, Hakuya, you take it from here," Souma said to them after opening the symposium. Ichiha stood up together with Hakuya and the president.

Standing at the lectern, Ichiha kept his head up, and looked straight ahead as he spoke. "First, I would like to thank His Majesty for granting me the opportunity to speak here, as well as all of the people of the Kingdom of Friedonia who have come. I am Ichiha Chima, an exchange student who has come here from the Duchy of Chima, one country in the Union of Eastern Nations. I am honored to be able to discuss monsters with you here today."

The way he spoke with confidence inspired everyone who had gathered in this place. Even in the Kingdom, there were rumors about the supposed extraneous eighth child of Duke Chima. However, the people assembled in the audience knew he was the author of the Monster Encyclopedia. That Hakuya participated in a primarily supportive role had been made clear in the text of the book. When they learned that the radical new encyclopedia had been written by an eleven-year-old boy, the research world got excited.

Extraneous and prodigious.

There was a disconnect between these two evaluations, and people were watching closely to see which Ichiha truly was. Judging by the confident way he spoke here, it was likely the latter. Souma had not been stuck with the leftovers, after all. The people here understood that, true to his reputation of a maniac for recruiting capable personnel, King Souma had seen the boy's potential and brought him back.

"I was worried before he got started, but it looks like I didn't have to be," Souma commented, impressed by Ichiha's sudden boldness.

"You said it. He's the type that's really strong."

"That's obvious. Big Brother, Big Sister," Tomoe said proudly. "Ichiha is timid, but that's because he lacked confidence in himself. But he has a strong heart and he'll never run away when it really counts. He protected me when we were surrounded by scary people in the Duchy of Chima. That is the real Ichiha."

"".....""

When Tomoe spoke of him almost like she would herself, Souma and Liscia both looked at her fondly. They could sense an absolute trust of Ichiha in her words.

Eventually, Souma let out a small sigh, and Liscia smiled.

"...If Daddy Inugami could hear, he'd be so jealous."

"And you aren't, Souma? Hee hee, it's so bittersweet."

"???"

There was a blank look on Tomoe's face and question marks hovering over her head. She had no idea what they were talking about.

While the Souma family were having their chat, Ichiha was still giving his speech.

"The Duchy of Chima, where I was born, borders the Demon Lord's Domain. Due to that, incursions as large as the demon wave are infrequent, but small groups of monsters come out of the north on occasion. In short, it is a situation with plentiful subjects for observation. The monsters would be put down by soldiers led by my older brothers, who excelled in the martial arts, but I sat on the walls, where it was safe, sketching the monsters my brothers fought. Of all my siblings, I was the only one with no notable skill, so I wanted to be what little help I could be to everyone by learning about the monsters..."

Ichiha trailed off, and his face brightened.

“...Though, along the way, it just became a hobby. It’s fun, you know? If any of you have the chance to go north, please give sketching a try.”

The whole audience chuckled. It looked like he’d gotten adjusted to the point where he could mix in the occasional joke.

“The first to recognize me for my sketches was my eldest sister. The second was His Majesty’s little sister, Tomoe. I was able to come to the Kingdom because she introduced me to His Majesty, and that let me meet my respected teacher Hakuya. I thank her from the bottom of my heart.” Ichihia looked at Tomoe and smiled.

Ichihia... Tomoe’s wolf ears perked up happily.

He looked forward, and picked up the Monster Encyclopedia he had written.

“This book was produced using those sketches, with the help of Mr. Hakuya. There is also the basis on which we compiled the Monster Encyclopedia. That is the Monster Part Identification system. Ah—”

Ichihia cut off, before continuing again.

“That’s kind of long, huh. Let’s call it MPI for short. Yes. In order to provide a guidepost along the path of monster research, I would like to give a lecture on MPI. President of the Society for Monster Research, if you don’t mind.”

“U-Underst-stood,” the president blurted out. He sounded a bit shrill due to the nervousness of being called on.

Still, he put a large paper up on the movable blackboard that had been prepared. That paper was full of monster drawings. The lizardmen that Souma had encountered in the Kingdom of Lastania were there, as well as the pudgy, winged snake monsters they had gotten them to eat.

Standing in front of the pictures, Ichihia resumed his presentation.

“While I was drawing pictures of monsters in the Duchy of Chima, I realized something. There are monsters that, despite being of different races, shared the exact same parts. Ever since I realized this, I have paid close attention to monsters’ body parts.”

He stood in front of the picture of a pudgy, winged snake and boxed both the wings and the snake’s main body in long, thin, colored paper cutouts.

“Take this monster as an example. There is no official name for it, but I believe that His Majesty’s temporary name, the flying tsuchinoko, feels apt, so I am going to call it that. This flying tsuchinoko is composed of two types of parts: the snake body part, and the wing part. Its defining features as a creature are its powerful jump, and the ability to fly, albeit only for short distances. Also... it’s edible.”

There were hushed voices from the crowd when he said it was edible. Most of mankind did not yet know about this fact. Even in this hall where many experts had gathered, it was a bombshell statement.

“Would God forgive us eating monsters...?” One voice could be heard saying that. It was apparently a Lunarian Orthodox bishop.

There were those participating in this symposium who viewed the study of monsters with a sense of crisis and taboo. In order to learn what reactions there might be to them studying monsters, Souma had not denied them entry.

The whispering continued, with Ichihira unsure as to what to do, Hakuya stepped in and said, “This is a fact. There is a precedent for eating flying tsuchinoko in the Empire. Though, obviously, with monsters like the lizardman, which possess a human body part, it just felt too wrong to try eating them. A flying tsuchinoko is basically

snake meat with chicken wings. It should not be that surprising that it would be edible.”

At Hakuya’s words, the room calmed down a little. Thinking it would result in a scandal, he had decided not to include the fact that Jeanne, the younger sister of Empress Maria, had been one of the ones to eat it.

Continuing from where Hakuya left off, Ichiha resumed speaking, “I will address the matter of edible monsters later, so please listen. Now, in regards to the flying tsuchinoko’s wings, there are other monsters confirmed to have the exact same wings. Please, turn to page 5 of the booklet you were provided.”

Ichiha paused to give the audience time to navigate themselves before following up.

“The monster there is a dog with two heads. We will call it an orthrus. Now, for some reason, it and the flying tsuchinoko have the same part despite being two different types of monster. When I noticed this, I sorted my sketches by each monster’s body parts. It was then that I realized there were an unusually high number of cases where this same thing occurred. The orthrus has the same wings as the flying tsuchinoko. And I have found another monster with the body of a turtle and the same head as this orthrus, too.”

Then Ichiha moved to stand in front of the lizardman picture.

“It is the same with this lizardman. This is a monster that the Friedonian National Defense Force fought in the Kingdom of Lastania, and we have been able to obtain many dead samples for research. This lizardman’s upper body resembles a human, but the face and lower body have traits typical of a large, bipedal lizard. It has human elements, but its nature is strictly that of a wild beast. It seemed they had as much intelligence as a shoujou, and could divide

labor among their pack, but not so much that we could communicate with them. Isn't that right, Tomoe?"

When Ichihia asked her, Tomoe blurted out, "Y-Yes!" and rose to her feet.

"I saw a captive lizardman in the Kingdom of Lastania. I have the ability to speak to animals... to understand their hearts, but the lizardman only recognized me as 'food'... or as 'prey.' It was actually creepy how it seemed to lack any other feelings. Normally, if an animal is captured, no matter how hungry it is, I would be able to feel anger and unease..."

Tomoe crossed her arms and clutched her elbows as she recounted the event. That terrifying memory of being seen as prey was seared into her mind.

Ichihia felt bad for her as he continued in a quiet voice, "Thank you. As Tomoe just said, it is interesting that they lack the emotions that they should have as living creatures."

Checking that Tomoe had sat back down, Ichihia returned to the topic at hand.

"As you can see, monsters are a mix of elements from a variety of different creatures. Furthermore, there are zombies and skeletons, which seem to be existing creatures that have rotted or skeletonized. The reason monsters seem creepy to us compared to wild animals may be because, according to our preconceptions, they have unneeded body parts (parts from other creatures), or unneeded features (rot or skeletonization)."

"Makes sense..." said Souma.

He hadn't used a loud voice, but the words caught everyone's attention since they came from the king. When Souma realized everyone was looking at him, he felt awkward about holding up the presentation.

“...May I say a word?” Souma asked, raising his hand.

“Yes. Go ahead.”

“Being overly formal is too much trouble, so I’m just going to talk casually, but... I encountered four-legged ogres in the Republic of Turgis. Isn’t that right, Kuu?”

Souma turned towards Kuu, who was sitting at the table opposite his.

“Yeah,” Kuu said with a nod. “Those furry ogres, right? I remember they had big arms, and four legs. They came out of the dungeon, attacked villages, and ate people. Considering how vicious they were, I’ll bet they were the same as the lizardmen, and they only saw us as prey.”

Kuu was making his hatred for the ogres plain to see as he spoke, and Souma agreed with him.

“When I saw those ogres, I thought they were warped creatures. Thinking back now, they had ogre faces, but their bodies must have come from some other creature. The gorilla... That’s a large creature from my world that’s similar to the shoujou, and they resembled it.” Souma crossed his arms and groaned as he spoke. “When I remembered that, and heard what you were saying, Sir Ichihia, it made me feel like I understood why monsters are warped. Sorry. I seem to have ended up interrupting you.”

“No, that was a valuable story you’ve just told us.” Ichihia bowed, then turned back to the crowd and resumed speaking, “It is exceptionally difficult to categorize monsters which are such a hodgepodge of different traits. That is why Mr. Hakuya and I came up with MPI, which sorts each monster into its constituent parts. I would now ask Mr. Hakuya to explain the reason for doing so.”

“Very well.”

Ichihai retreated from the lectern, and Hakuya came to take his place.

“I am Hakuya Kwonmin, the Prime Minister of this country. The Monster Encyclopedia is considered to be jointly authored by Sir Ichihai and me, but I merely made it look nice. The core of the material is in the sketches Sir Ichihai drew, and the method by which they were sorted. I feel bad, taking the lectern when that is the situation, but I would like to explain MPI on Sir Ichihai’s behalf.”

Turning to Ichihai, Hakuya gave a small nod.

“Now then... Normally, monsters are like evil spirits, and unless they form packs all of the same kind, it is difficult to sort them into species. They come in a multitude of forms, and it has been impossible to sort them into species based on their whole bodies. However, when I learned of Sir Ichihai’s system, which sorts the monsters based on their body parts, there were a variety of ways I found it could be applied.”

Hakuya pointed to the monster pictures behind him.

“As you can see, when monsters were sorted in this way, we are able to recognize those which share the same parts. This has made it possible to name monsters.”

“Ohh...” The was an exclamation of awe from some members of the crowd. Those must have been the ones who understood what Hakuya was trying to say.

However, most of the crowd simply went, “Name them? What’s the point?” and cocked their head to the side. Was it even possible to name monsters when they all looked so different?

Having anticipated that response, Hakuya explained, “In order for us to recognize a thing, we must first name it. Because when something has a name, we can take it as a subject, and research becomes possible. By sharing that with other people, it allows us to spread information about the subject of our research— To give a quick

example, by giving ‘people’ the name ‘people,’ and sharing that word with others, I can communicate to them that I am studying people.”

He began to pace slowly towards one side of the stage as he spoke.

“Looking back in our conversation a little, we know that monsters have aberrant forms when compared with other creatures. Because of that, it is difficult to perfectly convey what we have seen about monsters to other people. How about the ‘flying tsuchinoko’ His Majesty named, for instance? If you were to communicate the existence of this monster to others, how would you describe it?

...You would say it is a fat-bodied snake-like monster with wings, or something similar, I suppose.”

With a slight pause, Hakuya turned and began pacing back towards the center of the stage.

“It would be nice if that sufficed, but there are monsters with a variety of traits like, ‘Has horns,’ ‘Has two heads,’ ‘Spits poison,’ and more. To name all of these species individually, and share a common understanding of them would be too daunting a task.”

Stopping at the board, he gestured towards the paper filled with sketches.

“This would serve as an impediment to sharing information on monsters. If we were studying them in detail, it would be tolerable. However, when a group of monsters that are a hodgepodge of different traits overflow from a dungeon, there’s no time for that. The situation must be addressed at once.”

Hakuya moved towards the lectern, and placed his hands on it with a sigh.

“When the soldiers on-site contact the military for backup, they won’t have time to report every single one of those traits. The information from the scene will be limited to, ‘There is a monster attack,’ ‘There are around this many,’ and, ‘They do or do not fly.’ If

the group is composed of a single race, like the lizardman pack we encountered in the Union of Eastern Nations, their abilities are clearly defined and countering them becomes easier.”

He raised his arm and pointed it toward the board.

“Lizardmen do not fly. However, they have the ability to jump. The green ones do not spit fire, but the red ones require caution... It’s easier because we can share these common understandings about them. Meanwhile, in the case of a horde composed of many species, it is not so simple. First of all, because there are monsters that take on warped forms, and it is hard to even communicate the enemy’s traits.”

Here Hakuya took a sip of the water left next to the lectern and paused for a breath.

“There is a risk that information will be miscommunicated. ‘We neglected to understand the situation before rushing to the scene, and were not equipped to handle the monsters,’ or ‘We took too long carefully preparing, and the damage spread.’ I can imagine either of these situations arising. However, if we identify monsters by their body parts, and have a shared naming system, that time can be shortened considerably.”

Hakuya tapped the picture of the flying tsuchinoko with a pointer.

“Take this ‘flying tsuchinoko’ for instance. We will call monsters with this wing part ‘flying,’ and those with this short, fat snake part ‘tsuchinokos.’ Further, wolf monsters will be called ‘wolves,’ those that are rotting will be called, ‘zombies,’ those that are poisonous will be called, ‘poison,’ those with horns will be called, ‘horned,’ and those with two of a part will be called ‘twin-plus-the part name.’”

He paused again to allow the audience to absorb this information.

“Think of it like how we already call monsters with human parts ‘men.’ In doing this, a group that would once have been reported as

containing, ‘fat snake monsters with horns and wings, two-headed wolves with poisonous fangs, and lizardmen whose bodies are rotting,’ can now be reported as, ‘A group of horned tsuchinoko, two-headed poison wolves, and zombie lizardmen,’ and the same information will be conveyed. We know in advance that if there are many flying monsters, it would be wise to send anti-air equipment, and if there are a lot of poison monsters, we should send antidotes and serum.”

“““Ohhh!“““ The crowd cried out in awe. They finally understood the practicality of it.

As Hakuya was speaking, Souma thought, *Hm... If they used a system of writing that represented ideas, not sounds, we could compress it even more, though...*

What Souma was thinking of was ‘kanji,’ which had existed in the language of the country he once lived in. With kanji, those three monster names could be written, 角飛槌蛇, 双頭毒狼, and, 腐蜥蜴人.

However, Souma shook his head. *Continental Standard uses an alphabet like English, so it's not gonna be possible, huh... Maybe if I invented something like pictograms... Wait, those can't be communicated verbally.*

While Souma was thinking about that, Hakuya continued, “Now, MPI does more than just allow us to share information by naming monsters. This came up in the beginning, but it’s also relevant to the question of which monsters can be eaten. The flying tsuchinoko is edible. This has been proven by the cases of them having been eaten in the Empire, and consumed by the lizardmen. Flying tsuchinoko contain a snake part and a wing part, but both of them must be edible. It is probable that monsters made of all edible parts are edible.”

He pointed at the body and wings on the sketch for emphasis.

“Conversely, if they have even a single poisonous part in their bodies, there is a high possibility that those monsters are not suitable for consumption. However, due to the lack of trials at this point, this still remains just a prediction. If we feed the monsters we slay to animals and continue to experiment, we may be able to come to a more precise conclusion. I would like to ask you all to cooperate with demonstrating this.”

Hakuya bowed his head, and the crowd nodded at his reasonable suggestion. The memory of the food crisis was still fresh in this country.

“There are also monsters with human parts, and even if those parts are not toxic, I doubt anyone would want to eat them unless they were in a serious crisis. However, on the front line, if our men are starving for some reason, they could serve as a valuable source of food to keep them alive. It is important to address the legal and ethical implications of consuming meat from monsters with human-like parts. This is something on which I would like to proceed cautiously, taking into consideration the opinions of the state, and, of course, the religions which support our people’s spiritual well-being.”

There was a buzz of hushed voices from the crowd at Hakuya’s words. The researchers leaned towards those nearest them, whispering, “What do you think?” They were exchanging opinions, but the religious figures in the audience had harsh looks on their faces.

The Lunarian Orthodox bishop who had been suspicious of the idea of studying monsters to begin with was glaring at Hakuya unhappily. He must have thought consuming monsters was unthinkable. Even with the opinions of those looking at him so divided, Hakuya continued to speak.

"The third merit of MPI is that, by categorizing the body parts, we can determine just how many human parts are in a subject. This is still just a theory, but it seems that monsters with more human parts are more intelligent."

He pointed at the flying tsuchinoko and lizardman pictures.

"The flying tsuchinoko acts on animal-like thoughts. The way it flies to attack its prey, then consumes its meat, is a purely instinctual pattern of action. No different from any wild animal. The lizardmen that the National Defense Force encountered, on the other hand, demonstrated the ability to learn. When we showed one lizardman how to cook and eat a flying tsuchinoko, that lizardman cooked and ate one when it was back among its pack. The other lizardmen that saw this imitated it, and they began attacking flying tsuchinokos. The key takeaway here is that lizardmen can learn."

Hakuya looked out emphatically as the entire hall went quiet.

If there were monsters with the ability to learn, that made them that much more dangerous. It was said that the demons that lived on the northern end of the continent were intelligent. And those same demons had once destroyed the united forces of mankind that were led by the Empire.

Monsters were not intelligent like demons, so it was assumed they were simple to handle. However, if some of those monsters had the ability to learn, they couldn't maintain an optimistic perspective. It's harder to deal with a pack of wolves than one great bear. If the beasts were clever, that raised the threat to humanity.

Hakuya continued, "Intelligence is the greatest advantage we hold over the monsters. If they possess even a shred of what we do, that is a threat to us. However, can we not also say this? If those that possess even a small number of human parts are intelligent, then

those with more parts will be more intelligent. Perhaps to the point that it may be possible for them to communicate with us.”

He stopped there and looked out at the crowd once more.

“I am sure you can all think of a group this applies to... The demons.”

With his words, the assembled people gulped once more. They had heard that the demons seemed to be intelligent, but they hadn’t thought they were so intelligent they could communicate with humans. An enemy with human-level intelligence was dangerous. It also opened the possibility for dialogue, but with some notable exception, almost no one had realized that yet. Those exceptions were *the people who already knew about this*.

“Have we finally come this far...?”

“It certainly took a while, huh?”

Up on stage, Souma and Liscia whispered to each other. Only a select few in the upper echelons of this country had been privy to the story of how the kobolds had contacted Tomoe. It was not simple to prove the communication that Tomoe’s power had made possible, though, and they risked condemnation from other countries for being in communication with demons.

If other countries found out and began trying to contact the demons independently, it would be chaos. None of the countries could tell the difference between monsters and demons at the time. Because of that, Souma had kept this fact a secret. But today, it was finally revealed for all to see.

With the advancement of the study of monsters and demons through Ichiha’s MPI, they had newly presented the objective potential that dialogue was possible. If it looked like that was objectively the case, the other countries couldn’t condemn them for it. Of course, there was only a potential at this stage, but the times

were slowly catching up to the facts they had gleaned through Tomoe's ability.

"If demons are intelligent like us, do you think they can understand monsters that have only meager intelligence?"

Hakuya's words hung in the air.

"Think about it. If you were surrounded on the road by a pack of wild dogs, you would be frightened. What if you were a demon? Do you suppose you would be calm surrounded by monsters? Between monsters and demons, could there not be conflict between them? Do you suppose the terrifying demons and monsters have built a symbiotic relationship? Perhaps we need to think of demons and monsters separately... That is all. Thank you for listening."

Hakuya bowed and stepped down. There was no applause. Everyone was busy thinking through the new possibilities that had just been presented to them.

Amidst the silence, Souma began clapping his hands. Liscia and Tomoe followed suit, and the crowd, brought back to their senses by that sound, gave a huge round of applause. When the clapping stopped, Souma rose and spoke.

"Now, with the explanation of Sir Ichiha and Hakuya's MPI system finished, I would like to move on to the exchange of opinions that is the goal of this event. Taking into consideration what Sir Ichiha and Hakuya have explained, I would like to hear your frank opinions about monsters, researching monsters, and the MPI system."

Then, taking a deep breath, he said, "If you have questions, please, raise your hands."

There was the swish of clothing. Many hands went up in unison.

Chapter 4: Exchange of Opinions

Whew, they're all so passionate... I gulped, seeing the flood of hands that went up that moment I asked them to raise their hands. They all looked like they wanted to ask their question or state their opinion. To the point that they were willing to push the others aside, regardless of rank. You could tell there were a bunch of research fanatics here.

That passion was to be welcomed, for the country's sake.

"Now, please, give your name and affiliation before stating your opinion or asking a question. Yes, you, in the priest's robe."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I am Priest Bart of Lunarian Orthodoxy."

The first one I called on was a priest who had been scowling throughout the entire research presentation. I knew full well from his demeanor that he would be opposed to researching monsters, so I deliberately let him go first. In order to move research on monsters forward, it was necessary to hear opinions from people like this, and take measures to tamp down on resistance from the public.

"I thank you for your permission to speak." Bart looked straight at me. "This opinion may be out of place in a gathering such as this, but I will voice it despite that. As a man of the cloth... No, as a single person, I have a strong aversion to trying to learn more about monsters."

There was hushed whispering. They were all confused that, at an event that had been called the Monsterology Symposium, the first opinion was one against researching monsters to begin with.

The researchers around Bart said things like:

"What is this guy on about?"

"What're you even doing here?"

They cast cold eyes on him. However, I asked him to go on.

“Let’s hear it. What is your concern?”

“In the teachings of Lunarian Orthodoxy, the monsters were born as evil counterparts to the good god of the moon, Lunaria,” Bart began. “They are filthy beings, and unable to interact with people. That is exactly why, no matter how frail the monster may be, it is forbidden to feed or use them. A monster is a monster, no matter how small. No matter how harmless they may seem, they are dangerous creatures. There is no telling what dangers keeping them near to us may bring about. Even for those who worship another, I suspect the other religions’ understanding of the issue is the same, is it not?”

“.....”

I didn’t really understand the religious views of this country, so I looked to Liscia and the others. “Yeah, that’s right...” they seemed to say as they nodded.

There was no argument, so the priest continued, “I am not opposing this on purely doctrinal grounds. I am suggesting there are realms which man should not touch. It is God who decides the forms of living beings. If we set foot in that domain unduly, might we not do something that we will be unable to take back?”

The buzzing in the room settled down. If you removed the veil of religion from what he was saying, he was warning of the danger of working with things that were too much for mankind to handle.

Let’s imagine research was progressing, and we brought *living* monsters back to the capital. If a number of them escaped, they might breed somewhere, and no one knew what damage that might cause. In my old world, there were more examples than I could count where just a few members of a foreign species released into the wild had completely destroyed the existing environment.

In fact, the disused underground passages beneath the castle had been home to a massive salamander that had grown far beyond any normal size, among other creatures. They might change in response to a specific environment, too. *When I think of it that way, I can't belittle his point...*

I was impressed how surprisingly reasonable it was. Those things he said about God deciding the forms of all creatures, and it not being our place to step into that domain reminded me of the opposition between ethics and practicality when it came to gene editing and other cutting-edge science in my old world.

If I thought about it, with the exception of those that served to reinforce the religion's power, religious precepts were generally meant to convince people to live better lives. Some of them must have been knowledge gained from experience that was then handed down as stories. Maybe someone caught a monster in the past, and because they underestimated the threat, there had been harm caused... or something along those lines.

“Sir Souji, what do you think after hearing his opinion?”

“You’re asking me?”

When I turned to Souji, for a moment he gave me a look like, “You really want my opinion...?” but he quickly recomposed himself and put on a serious expression.

“That is certainly the teaching of Lunarian Orthodoxy. However, Lady Lunaria says elsewhere, ‘Never should you neglect to put in the effort to try things and learn.’ Surely, we must not neglect to learn about monsters. However, there is some reason in what Sir Bart says, too. The utmost caution must be taken in any research.”

Souji gave an opinion that justified researching monsters while giving some consideration to Bart’s opinion. He was equivocating, but that was exactly what I wanted.

“Okay, I get it. We should move forward with the research, but be careful.”

I considered my words carefully, then spoke.

“For now, I believe I will put forward these regulations:

“First, the transport of living monsters from the border region to the inner regions is forbidden.

“Second, in the case of dungeon monsters, living monsters are not to be transported away from the area around their dungeons.

“Third, if you want to study living monsters, it is to be done near the border, or near dungeons. Research to be done in the capital must be performed exclusively using confirmed dead samples.

“That’s what I’ve got off the top of my head. I’d like to come up with some more detailed rules later, but... there are monster parts for sale at the market now, right, Roroa?”

“Sure are. Mostly comin’ from the dungeons, though.” Roroa nodded. “They can be the basis of the economy in towns that’re near a dungeon, and some of the materials’re valuable. Livin’ monsters are dangerous, so I do agree we should be clampin’ down on tradin’ them, of course, but we’ll need to put laws in place either way.”

“That’s our job, yeah... Does anyone else have an opinion on this? ...You, the one who just put your hand up over there.”

When I called on him—the man who looked exactly what I expected a researcher to look like, wearing a white coat and glasses—stood up.

“I am Gordon, a researcher at the Royal Academy. If that is the case, I would like one of the small dungeons in the Kingdom to use for research. Until we conquer it, I do not believe we can study monster ecology and the mechanism behind their creation inside the dungeon.”

“Hmm... What do you think, Hakuya?”

Hakuya thought a little before nodding.

“If we can secure the safety of the surrounding area, I believe that would be fine,” he said. “However, we will need to garrison the minimum number of forces needed to respond to any issue that arises at all times. I believe that we should prepare an environment where anyone can come and participate in the research, too. That will also mean they can monitor one another to ensure no one is using monsters to pursue illegal research.”

“...You heard the man. What do you say?” I turned back to Gordon, and he nodded.

“The Prime Minister’s opinion is reasonable.”

“Good. I think we’ll move forward with that policy then. What do you say, Sir Bart?”

“...I understand. Please, at least take every caution.”

Bart probably wasn’t completely convinced, but we had shown him some consideration, so he stood down.

When I called for the next opinion, a young man raised his hand.
“You, the young man over there.”

“R-Right! I’m Toto, a researcher working in Professor Cosno’s lab at the Royal Academy! N-Normally, I study materials that come from living creatures with the professor.”

The young researcher seemed tense as he introduced himself.

Toto... Oh! I thought I recognized that name. He was one of the researchers who participated in finding a substitute material to replace rubber for me. The secrets of that development were discussed on the broadcast program Nameless Heroes, so I remembered him.

“Erm... What I... I wanted to say was...” It looked like Toto was a nervous wreck. If he got any more tense, he wasn’t going to be able to talk at all.

“Please, relax.” I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible as I spoke. “Whatever your opinion is, it’s fine.”

“O-Okay. Breathe in... Breathe out...”

Toto took a deep breath, then opened his mouth again.

“In regards to the lizardman remains you brought back from the Kingdom of Lastania, Your Majesty. There were samples sent to the lab I work at to probe the potential use of the materials from them. There was an interesting development in our investigation...”

“What was that?”

“They had no reproductive organs.”

When he suddenly brought up reproductive organs, there was a palpable disappointment from the room, but they started excitedly whispering again when they realized what that meant.

The lizardmen had created a massive swarm to attack the Kingdom of Lastania. If they had no reproductive organs, that meant that swarm was not produced through mating.

“They have no genitals, then?”

“They do have an organ for excretion. However, they had no organ which produced the eggs or sperm that would be needed for reproduction. There were few samples available to us, though, so I couldn’t tell you if the entire swarm was like that, or if it was just these individuals...”

“...It’s been a while since then, and I’m sure the Kingdom of Lastania has already finished dismantling them all. I’ll send a letter just in case. Does anyone else know anything about this?”

There was a lot of talking when I asked that, but no actual response. It seemed no one was able to say anything definitive about the reproductive organs of monsters.

“This was probably to be expected. There is a strong taboo against researching monsters, and it is dangerous, too.”

Toto explained why that was.

“When adventurers face monsters in the dungeons, they neutralize them by cutting them with swords, shooting them with arrows, and attacking them with magic, so it is inevitable that the remains are not in good shape. Even if they do manage to defeat them in good condition, it is a lot of labor to bring them back. Ogres are too heavy to bring back whole, for instance. That’s why it’s rare for a full, well-preserved corpse to make its way to the lab.”

“I see...”

Souma felt like he could see one reason monster research had not progressed much up until now. Before even addressing the religious taboo, it was too dangerous, and they couldn’t secure good samples. It would be one thing for a military force, but adventurers like Juno and her party, who tended to work in groups of less than ten, wouldn’t be able to bring back a monster intact. On that point, it was fortunate that we were able to gain lizardman bodies in good condition.

Still, monster reproduction, huh? I’d have to let future research look into whether they had reproductive abilities or not...

“I suppose that means that, despite the presence of individuals with no ability to reproduce, they were still able to create that massive swarm,” I said.

“A word, if I may, King?”

Together with those words that were so casual they could be seen as disrespectful, a hand rose. It belonged to a person I knew well.

“Does something occur to you, Genia?”

“Yeah. Whoops... I’m, uh. I’m Genia M. Arcs. Descendant of the House of Maxwell, who have always studied dungeon relics, and adorable wife to Big Brother Luu, who is Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the National Defense Force.”

“Maybe leave out the last part. Who are you trying to impress?”

“I figured it’s my job as a wife to do PR for my husband.”

“If Ludwin were here, he’d be holding his head in his hands,” grasping my own temples to suppress the headache.

“Now, getting to the point,” Genia continued. “I think I know a little more about dungeon monsters than most people, but their theory that you can categorize monsters by their parts was a real eye-opener for me. So... I hear that many of the monsters in dungeons are more warped than the ones we hear about in legends.”

Genia went on with no regard for formalities, but the House of Maxwell were widely known to be eccentrics, so no one worried too much about it. They were more focused on what a member of a family with such rare talent would say.

“From what Sir Ichihā’s said, that warped nature must come from them being a mixture of parts from different creatures. When you add in the monsters that have no reproductive organs from earlier... I just can’t see these monsters as having emerged naturally.”

“If not naturally... Then, you don’t mean they were created, do you?”

“Precisely!” Genia said with a snap of her fingers. “That’s the natural conclusion. Children are born carrying the traits of their parents. If Big Brother Luu and I have children, they’ll be small if they take after

me, and tall if they take after him. I want to have about two, by the way.”

“Uh, listen, I don’t know about your family planning, but...”

“...But even though we just got married, Princess Trill keeps coming over. Not only that, but she takes forever to leave, and she’s always clinging to me, so Big Brother Luu starts moping, and it’s so much trouble.”

“Okay, now I want to hear more, but... this is a symposium, so can we get back to talking about monsters? I am sure the matter with Princess Trill will be sorted out by her guardian (who was no doubt watching this) later.”

Then, there was a banging from the crowd.

That drill hair, tied off to one side... It was Trill. She was watching from the observer seats, and fell out of her chair in shock. This was a good opportunity, so I decided to give her a lecture.

Genia shrugged her shoulders in dismay. “Understood... Please, I am seriously counting on you to handle Princess Trill.”

Genia was polite there?! ...Was this Trill person really that bad? The people in attendance wondered, but Genia returned to the topic at hand like nothing had happened.

“I don’t get that sense of heredity when it comes to monsters. You can see it with those flying tsuchinoko, right? They look like the lovechild of a snake and a bird, but snakes and birds don’t mate, and it’s not even possible for them to. So, why does a monster like that exist? The parents were flying tsuchinoko, so the children were, too? Then what about the parents’ parents? And the parents’ parents’ parents?”

She paused briefly.

“...That’s right. It’s hard to imagine that a bird and snake mated at any point. That means that, even if we go back, the flying tsuchinoko was a flying tsuchinoko all along. One day, all of a sudden, it came into being in its full form. Almost as if someone created it.”

“Created it...? Who?” I asked.

“Search me. I don’t know, either. Was the producer the Demon Lord, or God? As a dungeon relic researcher, I want to say it’s the dungeon core. In dungeons that maintain their own independent ecology, the number of monsters seems to be kept stable, too. It’s thought that they have some function that gives birth to monsters.”

“But that’s when we’re talking about dungeon monsters, right? The flying tsuchinoko was with the monsters that came out of the Demon Lord’s Domain, you know?”

“No, no.” Genia shook her head at my words. “You can’t say for certain that the monsters from the Demon Lord’s Domain weren’t born in a dungeon. It could be that the entrance to the demon world that’s said to have opened up in the north of the continent was the entrance to a massive dungeon. Well, I can’t be sure, so this is all just speculation, though.”

“I see... If monsters are created beings, that could be possible, huh?” I groaned, convinced by her argument. She wasn’t an overscientist for nothing.

The crowd listened intently to our exchange. That was because we suggested the possibility that monsters were created beings, and not just the ones born in dungeons, but perhaps the ones coming from the Demon Lord’s Domain, too.

“Doctor. What do you think about her opinion?” one student asked.

“I believe it is worth listening to. But in my view...”

“If monsters are manufactured, the next question has to be...”

The academics had already begun debating with those next to them. *The reason monsters are warped... is because they were created... huh?* While the attendees had a lively discussion about monsters, I was alone in thinking about something else.

But it's not just monsters that have traits from other creatures. To me, rhinosaurs appear to have traits from both rhinoceroses and dinosaurs, or some other large lizard. It's the same with wyverns. And...

I looked at the diverse crowd gathered here.

I could say the same of beastmen, dragonewts, and the sea serpent race, too. Looking at it using the logic of my former world, it should be impossible for so many different races to exist.

I had been studying humanities, so I at least knew the rough outline of human evolution.

Pikaia were born in the sea and became fish. Fish became amphibians and came up on land. Some of those amphibians became reptiles, and adapted to live on land as well. The smaller mammals which were born as reptiles were growing to massive sizes, survived an extinction event, became primates, and then eventually became human.

What about the beastmen in this world, though? There were lion beastmen, monkey beastmen, rabbit beastmen, and many other races of beastmen, but had they all evolved from the creatures they were based on?

...No, that was hard to imagine. I had heard that no matter how intelligent chimpanzees were, they wouldn't evolve to become human until modern humanity was wiped out. Unless there is a virus or genetic manipulation like in a certain movie, it was impossible for two human races to exist at the same time.

Come to think of it... Madam Tiamat once called me, "You who have a familiar smell." If I considered the link between my past world and this one that she hinted at... it could be that the diverse races of this world didn't evolve separately from humanity, but were an extension of our own evolution. Yes, almost as if they were "created" by someone. When that thought occurred to me, I shuddered. I felt a primordial fear, like when I thought about the beginning or end of the universe.

Breathe in... Breathe out... I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, then exhaled until my lungs were completely empty. In order to calm my uneasy heart. Once I sensed calm had returned to it, I opened my eyes. *This line of thought... is something I can't bring up here. If a nation that believes one race is superior heard, they might use it to suppress the other races. Claiming that beastmen came from the same root as monsters.*

The high elf supremacist Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, and the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State who claimed they were the descendants of humans who came down from the moon would gleefully proclaim their own race's superiority. I wanted to avoid that, no matter what.

I'll keep this secret until I know more. But I'd like to discuss it with a select few people. To prepare for the day when it comes out... I'll ask Hakuya, Genia, and the others what to do later.

Having thought that to myself, I turned to the still noisy hall and said, "There's still time. Does anyone else have an opinion?"

Even more hands than last time went up in a hurry.

◇ ◇ ◇

After the conclusion of the symposium. The chairs had been moved off to the side after the passionate exchange of opinions ended, and in place of them a number of large tables laden with trays of food had been brought out. The post-symposium party had begun.

Food was served as a buffet, and everyone was free to eat and drink what they wanted as they talked about whatever they wanted to. The entire spread was provided by a team of chefs led by Poncho, and service was offered by the maids who reported to Serina. Serina wasn't here herself due to her pregnancy, but her subordinates helped Poncho in her place.

Once the drinks had gone around to everyone, I stood up on the stage with a bottle of wine and a large glass in hand, and called Hakuya over.

"...What is it, sire?"

"Here, take this."

I pushed the large glass into Hakuya's hand as he approached me with a dubious look on his face, then poured the contents of the bottle into it and spoke loudly so everyone could hear.

"Sir Ichihira, our guest of honor at this symposium, is still just a child. In his place, I would like to ask Hakuya to offer a toast instead."

"...Isn't that a little much you're pouring? You've emptied out half of the bottle there, haven't you?"

"It's more exciting this way, isn't it? Go on, once we all say cheers, you just knock that back."

"Honestly, sire..."

Hakuya sounded exasperated, but he turned to the crowd and raised his glass.

"To monster research, which took a new step forward today, and to the young genius who has appeared in this country to lead it into the next generation, cheers!"

"""Cheers!"""

On Hakuya's call, everyone smiled and raised their own glasses.

Having finished his toast, Hakuya resolved himself and drained the glass that was full of drink, which was met by a myriad of cheers.

“Okay, from here on, we set rank aside. Drink, and eat, and talk away,” I said.

At my words, everyone swarmed the food. It was as popular as you’d expect a menu overseen by the God of Food himself. Meanwhile, Hakuya, who had drunk more than it was easy to in one gulp, wiped his mouth and stared at me with disdain.

“...The juice was delicious.”

“I’m glad you liked it. I’ve heard you’re not much of a drinker.”

By not making it wine, I figured that made it okay to have Hakuya, who got tipsy with a single glass of wine, to drink it all in one gulp. I couldn’t have the guest of honor drinking until he dropped, after all.

I don’t engage in alcohol harassment. Not me.

“I wish you had told me so beforehand,” he sighed.

“Wasn’t everyone excited to watch a lightweight like you steel yourself and drink?”

“...I do believe we weren’t concerned about rank tonight, yes?”

Hakuya pulled a paper fan out of nowhere and smacked me over the head with it.

“Ow! Wait, where’s you get that from?!”

“Pardon me. I appear to be drunk.”

“As if you could get drunk on juice!”

Everyone laughed at that master-servant comedy routine. *Well, they seem to like it, so I guess I’ll let it slide.*

With the party started, a ring of people formed around Ichihara and Hakuya, as I expected. Everyone gathered here was passionate about

monster research. The two of them were being hit with questions one after another, so they probably didn't have time to enjoy the food.

The president of the Monster Research Society, who was acting as something like an intermediary between them, was very busy, too.

Then, as the party was livening up...

"Souma."

"Yeah. I know."

I slipped away with Liscia and snuck off to the changing room behind the stage. Once there, I spoke to the person reflected in the simple receiver.

"I'm sorry. We kept you waiting."

"No, you've let me hear something fascinating."

The gentle smile on the other side of the screen belonged to Empress Maria of the Empire. Her younger sister, Jeanne, stood beside her with an apologetic look on her face.

"Also... I must apologize for what happened with Trill."

Maria was embarrassed when she heard her younger sister Trill was making married life difficult for Ludwin and Genia. As for Jeanne, her smile was so intense that, if this were a manga, I had to imagine Jeanne would have had one of those cross-shaped anger marks on her forehead.

"We will give her a stern talking-to about her behavior."

"Not that she's the kind to listen..." Jeanne murmured.

Even Maria, who always wore a gentle smile, could only sigh and agree. I had heard from our ambassador to the Empire, Piltory, that the third princess had a reputation for being a troublemaker, but it seemed she was worse than I'd imagined.

Jeanne put her hands on her hips indignantly and said, “If she causes any more trouble, you’re welcome to deport her. If she objects, I will come there and drag her back by the scruff of her neck myself.”

“...Please leave that until the joint research project is finished.”

Well, knowing how madly in love with Genia Trill was, if we teased the threat of deportation, she’d probably tone it down a bit. She didn’t want to be torn away from Genia, after all.

Oh, but it might be good to get Maria and Jeanne to sign off on it being all right to deport her. While I was thinking about that, Liscia tugged on my sleeve.

“Souma, you’re getting off track.”

“Oh, right. Now, on the topic of monster research...”

Maria put on her serious face and nodded. “Right. I’d like to carry out research in our country using the same methods as you are in the Kingdom. Therefore, I would ask you to send us a number of volumes of the Monster Encyclopedia.”

“Got it. In exchange, please send us any information on monsters you discover. You border the Demon Lord’s Domain, unlike us, so I expect you’ll be able to gather far more samples.”

“Very well. However... you still have cards you’re keeping hidden, don’t you?”

Maria’s eyes were gentle, but also probing. The fact that Tomoe had spoken to a demon with her ability hadn’t been leaked yet, but it seemed she had sensed there were still things we were keeping from the Empire. Honestly... She was such a clever woman.

I played dumb and shrugged my shoulders. “I will remain silent on that.”

“Hee hee, is that right?”

After that, we exchanged a few pleasantries, then terminated our call with Maria on ostensibly harmonious terms. Jeanne said she was disappointed she couldn't speak to Hakuya, but he was surrounded by people at the moment, and in no position to be thinking about that.

"Today Hakuya stands on stage, while I work behind the scenes, huh? That's the opposite of how it usually is."

"That's good once in a while, isn't it? It lets you understand what Hakuya goes through," Liscia said, linking her arm through mine.

"That's true. It's rough in a different way than being the one up on stage."

"Hee hee, maybe he's thinking the opposite thing right about now?"

Ahaha, she could be right.

When I walked back to where Roroa and Tomoe were, arm-in-arm with Liscia, Roroa said, "Whoa, what're you two doin', actin' all lovey-dovey by yourselves?!"

Roroa angrily hugged the opposite arm. I had two women hanging off of me, but I couldn't eat or drink like this. When I said as much, Roroa snickered.

"We'll be the ones feedin' you. Okay, Darlin', say ahh."

"Hee hee, she's right. Say ahh."

When they each offered me food on forks, I broke into a cold sweat.

"Um, you two, aren't you forgetting that we're in the public eye?"

"It's fine. They're all focusin' on Ichihara and Hakuya anyway."

"It's true. Those two are really popular, huh?"

I looked at what they were looking at, and Ichihha and Hakuya were still surrounded by researchers, the same as before. No, actually, I think there might have been even more people now.

That just meant there were that many people who wanted to hear them talk. If anyone saw this scene, they'd never think of Ichihha as "extraneous" or "the leftovers" again.

"Failure leads to growth, and success to confidence. The results he achieved this time should greatly bolster Ichihha's confidence. ...I guess it's time to bring him into the fold in earnest."

"Bring him into the fold?" Tomoe cocked her head to the side.

"Yes. In his current position, Ichihha is 'a guest from the Duchy of Chima,' or 'being left in our care.' Because everyone thinks I'll be sending him back to the Duchy of Chima eventually, I've kept him away from our secrets up until now. Like your secret, for instance, Tomoe."

"M-My secret..." Tomoe clapped her hands when she got it. "Oh! You mean that thing?"

If mishandled, that information could lead to us being condemned by other countries, so even within this country, only a select few were allowed to know it.

"If Ichihha is going to study monsters and demons, it's a fact he'll have to know. It may open new horizons for him when he learns. But once he knows, we can't send him back to the Duchy of Chima. Obviously, Hakuya and I want Ichihha to offer us his services and stay in this country permanently."

"...I do, too," Tomoe said, gazing in Ichihha's direction.

They were already fast friends. Though that went for Yuriga, too.

“That’s why I’m thinking we’ll reveal the secret to Ichihā soon. I’ll want you there when we do it, so I’d like you to help convince him to serve this country.”

“Okay. Of course I will, Big Brother.”

Tomoe gripped her hands into fists enthusiastically. That gesture was adorable, and I patted her on the head.

“Well, as long as we talk to him, I’m sure it won’t be a problem. Besides, from the way things look over there, it’ll be fine, wouldn’t you say? Word of Ichihā’s skill will spread now, and once they know he has promise, the nobles won’t leave him alone. Those are researchers flocking around him now, but soon enough there will be nobles saying, ‘Marry my daughter,’ in—Ow!”

Liscia suddenly elbowed me in the ribs.

“Wh-What was that for?!”

When I looked tearfully at Liscia, she gestured towards Tomoe with her chin. *What’s that mean?* I wondered, and looked over to Tomoe.

“.....”



“Murgh...” Tomoe had a sulky look on her face. She was turned towards Ichiha, who was in the center of that ring of people.

Because Tomoe was cute, when she sulked like that, she just looked a little upset, but... that reaction...

“Wh-What do you think?” I whispered to Liscia despite myself, and then we both shook our heads with wry smiles.

“I can’t tell just yet. But girls grow up fast, you know?”

“That’s right,” Roroa chimed in. “She’s Big Sis Cia’s little sister, so when she goes and set her heart on somethin’, she’s gonna stick to it.”

The two of them both sounded like they were enjoying this.

“Hrm... If she did that, I could be pretty sure he’d settle down in the kingdom, though.”

But even if that were to happen, just how many people’s expectations would the other party, Ichiha, have to live up to?

There was her birth mother, Father, Mother, Hakuya, Inugami, and me and my wives... More people adored Tomoe like a little sister or daughter than I could fit on one hand. What’s more, a lot of them were in high positions within the Kingdom. They were all hoping for Tomoe’s happiness, so if she wanted him from the bottom of her heart, they wouldn’t get in the way, but... I guess it was too early to worry about it now.

...Well, whatever happens, happens.

I gave up on thinking about it.

Chapter 5: March of the Bon Parade

— 2nd day, 8th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar —

Some time after the Monsterology Symposium...

“They’re here! I count eight of them!”

“Okay, get back, Juno! Augus, we’re moving up.”

“Got it!”

Walking past Juno the thief, who had been scouting the enemy, Dece the warrior and Augus the brawler moved up to block the hallway as the buzz of countless insects closed in.

This place was one of the dungeons inside the Kingdom of Friedonia. It had been thoroughly searched before, and now all that remained was to stop the core that lay in the depths. In doing this, it would turn the dungeon into no more than a labyrinthine cave.

However, some of the monster material that was harvested here was valuable, and many of the villages and towns in this domain were enriched by the trade in them. That’s why they chose not to stop the core, instead opening the place to adventurers, who would routinely cull the monsters inside, and collect their parts.

So long as there wasn’t a hidden room somewhere (and these had no doubt all been found), there was no great treasure left outside of the dungeon core; but the paths had been thoroughly searched, so they could gather monster parts without fear. You might think of this as a comparatively low difficulty dungeon. Today, Juno and her party were here on a quest to gather materials.

“Febral, what’s that monster?”

“It’s a ‘giant dragonfly’ with ‘crab claws,’ so... that would make it a scissor meganeura.”

Febral the priest identified the incoming monsters with a glint in his eye. It was common for adventurers to encounter monsters in dungeons, so Souma had distributed the Monster Encyclopedia to adventurers' guilds inside the kingdom, and was working to spread the knowledge contained within. However, because the Monster Encyclopedia was still expensive, it was put in the guild's closed stack library, and taking it out was forbidden (there were penalties).

Febral had an academic streak, and was very particular about things, so he spent his time off cooped up in the guild, reading the Monster Encyclopedia and absorbing its knowledge... Though, really he was just a bit of a monster maniac.

The Monster Encyclopedia was sorted well, and had pictures, making it a fun read, and that tickled Febral's fancy. Hakuya and Ichiha had let their love for the material run wild when working on it, and Souma had read the finished product with great interest too, so maybe literate types liked this sort of encyclopedia.

In regard to this, Juno had said, "I know it's just your job title as an adventurer, and you're not an actual priest, but is it really okay for you to be so into monsters?"

Her exasperation was evident, but Febral seemed completely unconcerned about that. The monster maniac had identified the incoming foes as scissor meganeuras. Their bodies were mostly giant dragonfly, but their arms (forelegs) were crustacean claws.

The scissor meganeuras flew in and assaulted Dece and Augus with their sharp claws.

"Guh! They're fast little buggers!"

"Damn it! Go down, you crabonfly!"

"Not crabonfly, scissor meganeura."

Ignoring that correction from Febral, Dece drove them off with some sort of flying attack with his sword, while Augus did the same with his gauntlets. They must have been striking heavy blows, because sparks flew every time their metal weapons struck a claw. But there was a reason Dece and Augus were fighting entirely on the defensive.

“So which parts are the valuable ones?!”

“Stop holding back and tell us, Febral!”

There was a sparkle from Febral’s imaginary glasses (he wasn’t wearing any real ones) as they asked him.

“Those crab claws are sold as a luxury food item. There doesn’t appear to be any toxic parts, so the guild should pay good money to take them off our hands. Their compound eyes are also a valuable component for some medical equipment, so they should sell for a good price, too.”

“The scissors and the eyes, huh? Got it!”

“We aim for the body then!”

Augus and Dece slipped past the scissor attacks, using sword and fist to pummel the scissor meganeura’s bodies. Their attacks seemingly crushed its weak dragonfly part. The thin wings, cut free from the main body, fluttered to the ground.

“Okay, me, too!”

Juno threw a knife at one scissor meganeura which had slipped between the other two. That dagger stabbed into one of the scissor meganeura’s simple eyes, and it fell to the ground on its back.

“Whew... Looks like the compound eye is fine,” Juno said in relief as she checked the corpse.

Julia the mage, who had been preparing her flame magic behind them, asked Febral, “Do you not need me to use my magic?”

“The claws last a long time if smoked, and are more useful that way, so if you cook them, their value’s cut in half. Please stand by and be ready to burn them all if the front line stops being able to handle the situation.”

“Okaaaay.”

The gentle beauty, Julia, smiled as she summoned a large flame in midair, but because Juno and the two up front were able to handle the situation themselves, the spell was never fired.

Having secured a large number of crab claws and compound eyes, Juno and her party had their first big haul in some time.

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Some days later, in the capital Parnam. The night of the day Dece and his group returned.

“...And that’s how it went down. We made bank.”

Juno, who had come to the castle for tea, like she always did, jovially related the story. Our tea parties were a valuable chance to hear the voice of the common people, and it was fun to shoot the breeze over tea with my comrades, so I welcomed it.

Juno put a biscuit in her mouth, then laughed raucously. “Seriously, I’ve got to hand it to the Monster Encyclopedia. I hear other adventurers saying it’s helped them avoid wasting parts, and improved their earnings, too.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

It was satisfying to see that the book was having a positive impact on people’s lives.

“Hee hee, I guess it was worth distributin’ it, huh?”

“The ladies in the merchants’ district were happy to see unusual ingredients making the rounds, too.”

Roroa and Naden both piped in. The four of us were here for today’s tea.

“I couldn’t be happier to see it having a positive impact, and it looks like the acclaim for Ichihā is rising steadily, too, so I have nothing to complain about.”

“Ohh... Now that you mention it, the author, Ichihā Chima, lives in the castle, doesn’t he?” From the way Juno scratched her cheek, she had something on her mind.

“Hm? Did you want to meet him? I could call him in for tea...”

“No, that’s not it,” she said with a wry smile. Resting her cheeks on the palm of one hand, she traced the rim of her cup with a finger. “I was just thinking, if Febral found out I had met Ichihā Chima, he’d probably cry out of frustration. When the guy first read the Monster Encyclopedia, he said something like, ‘I want to stop being an adventurer, and become Sir Ichihā’s apprentice!’ The whole party stopped him, though.”

“...The problem is, there’s a lot of guys like that.”

And, as Ichihā’s fame grew, the number of them was steadily increasing. Ichihā had a promising future, and he was a talented academic. In another five years, with his looks, he was going to be a literate pretty boy. There would be no shortage of girls looking to get hitched with him, regardless of their social status.

If I didn’t keep him guarded at the academy by day and the castle by night, someone would snatch him up in no time. I expected something like that rush of marriage meetings that Poncho

experienced was in the boy's future. He was like the protagonist of an anime or manga.

I guess getting him engaged early would be one option. It was more or less decided that we would be absorbing him into our country. If we let a genius like him go, it would be a loss to our country. It would be a blow to the Union of Eastern Nations as well, but there was no way I could let him go anywhere else. *The primary candidate has to be Tomoe... But I dunno.*

Ichihia was turning eleven this year, and Tomoe was turning twelve. In my former world, they would both still be in primary school, and there were relationships they could only build in childhood.

I could see they were close, even looking from the outside, but Tomoe, Ichihia, Yuriga, Velza, and what was the other one's name, Lucy, was it? I was hesitant to put any strange external pressures on them and change their relationships. But what could I do...?

"I think we should watch and wait." I looked up in surprise, and Naden shrugged her shoulders. "It's all over your face, Souma. I can tell what you're thinking."

"Huh? Really?"

When I started touching my face all over, Roroa chuckled. "We're your wives, y'know? Figurin' out what's on your mind's easy, Darlin'."

"Wow, I dunno what to say. Wives sure are amazing, huh?" Juno said, sounding impressed. This was kind of embarrassing. "I can tell what Mr. Musashibo's saying, though."

"No, no, that's the real special ability here. How can ya tell what a doll's sayin'?"

"Julia said it's 'the power of love.'"

"Love...? What's with this girl? Maybe we shouldn't be underestimatin' her?"

Roroa had a dubious look on her face, but Juno just stared blankly back at her.

"Well, anyway, we're turning a nice profit because of you. If there's anything I can do for you, just say the word."

""Anythin' / Anything?"" Roroa and I said with a glint in our eyes.

"Huh? Uh, well... if it's something I'm capable of..." Juno said, despite seeming intimidated. Good, that was a commitment.

"I do, in fact, have a job for you."

"Yeah, yeah. We were just lookin' for a boyish girl like you, Junie."

"Huh? Wait. Huh?"

The devilish smiles on our faces made Juno unintentionally hug herself.

Naden let out a sigh of dismay. "Geez... Explain it properly, you two."

◇ ◇ ◇

The story now turns back to the day after the Monsterology Symposium.

On this day, I was in a room in the castle with Liscia, Roroa, Hakuya, and Genia the Overscientist. We were here to discuss the doubts I had during the symposium. I would have liked to have Ichihira present, too, but we hadn't brought him fully into the fold yet, so he was not asked to participate this time.

In this world, there are several races that were human, but with added characteristics from various creatures. Was this the same as how monsters were constructed with parts from a variety of creatures? If monsters were created, were the races of mankind with a variety of features from other creatures created, too? These

questions could shake society to its core if mishandled, so they were too much of a burden for me to handle alone.

“The reason I’ve called all of you here today is to tell you about something I was thinking during the symposium yesterday. I want to hear your frank opinions about it.”

Having prefaced my remarks with that, I told everyone about the things I described above. As for how they reacted, Liscia and Hakuya were holding their head and looking troubled, while Roroa and Genia listened with great interest. The responses were at two extremes.

Liscia let out a great sigh. “Why must your ideas always be so wild?”

“I agree entirely.” Hakuya nodded in complete agreement with her. “For better and for worse, you are constantly coming up with ideas that could upend the underpinnings of this world, so we, the people who serve you, can never relax.”

...Did he have to go that far?

“I’m not exactly saying wild things because I want to...”

“Of course not. If you were doing this intentionally, it would be downright nasty.”

“Really? I thought it was interestin’,” Roroa said with a cheerful laugh. “The monsters were all made by someone, and so was mankind... Wait a sec. If all of our races were created, it makes groups who think they’re the chosen people, like the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, sound pretty silly.”

“On the contrary, this manner of thinking could give birth to new elitist ideologies.” Genia brought her hand to her chin with a smirk. “From what the king’s said, there’s a distinction to be made between the human race of his world and the human race of ours, but if we choose to view them as the same, it would be easy to come up with human supremacist ideas. If you were to do that, yeah... you could

use the birth of a child between the king and queen as proof of it. If you claim that the birth proves they're the same kind of being."

"Stop it..." Liscia said with a look of distaste. You couldn't blame her. She wouldn't want Cian and Kazuha being used as props for some selfish ideology... No, I wouldn't let that happen.

"It's not just humans." Genia shrugged, seeing the dangerous looks on our faces. "Merumeru's homeland, the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, would probably say, 'Even if we were created, we were created more beautiful than others, which proves that we really *are* special.'"

"Ohh, I could see them sayin' that."

"Their use of fallacious arguments like that only makes them more fascinating to me, though." Genia smiled like this didn't concern her. I couldn't possibly do the same, though. "By the way, do you remember what I said during the symposium, King?"

"Hm? Which one?"

"When we talked about how the monsters may have been produced by someone. I said, 'As a dungeon relic researcher, I want it to be the dungeon core.'"

"Now that you mention it... you did say that, yeah."

"If they really do work that way, then..."

"Huh?! Madam Genia. You can't mean..." Hakuya sounded surprised. About what?

"Heheheh. It looks like the Prime Minister gets it. Hey, King. If monsters and mankind were both created, where did mankind come from, and who made us?"

Genia laughed provocatively.

"Ah... So then mankind in this world was created in the dungeons..."

"I can't prove it. But if your idea is correct, we can make that prediction."

Oh, geez... I clutched my head. In the world I came from, life was born in the sea, and evolved from there. That was why we referred to the sea as our mother, and as the cradle of life.

But, for life in this world, could it be that their "mother" and "cradle" was the dungeon? The dungeon already felt artificial and manufactured as-is. They had once created mankind and animals. Now, they were the home of monsters.

The situation made me think of one word. "Malfunction." Like how a poorly-maintained machine might do something unexpected, and cause a major accident, perhaps the dungeons that created living creatures malfunctioned, and began creating warped creatures like monsters. That was Genia's prediction.

"...I'm scared to carry that idea through to its conclusions."

"I know! ...It's making me sick," Liscia said, her face a little pale.

My face must have looked similar. Thinking about the origin of life or the future came with a primordial fear connected to life and death. If you thought about it too much, it would keep you up at night.

"Still... I feel like it's something to keep in mind... There's the demons, intelligent lifeforms, that aren't on the side of mankind to consider, too."

"Ohh, I see. If we're sayin' mankind was born in the dungeon, then demons may've been born in the dungeon, too, huh?" Roroa clapped her hands as if it all made sense to her now.

Like she was saying, there were physical differences between humans and demons (though, to me, they didn't seem that different from beastmen), but if we traced them back to their origin, they

might be the same. But if we made a mistake in how we released this information, it would no doubt cause confusion in society.

When you looked at it that way, this world was almost like a gigantic minefield. There were mines lying everywhere, and they'd blow up if you stepped on them. But the only solution was to disable them one by one. We had to take our time with it.

"If it's going to take time, I guess we should get to work quickly."

"Souma?" Liscia had a dubious look on her face.

"Now that Fuuga is expanding his actions into the Demon Lord's Domain, there will likely come a time in the not-so-distant future when mankind must confront the demons once more. When we do, the degree to which our side understands the demons will change what options are available to us. If we want to reduce the threat of a return to total war even a little, we need to start preparing for it, little by little, starting now."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"What, precisely, should we do?" Liscia asked.

"The method is the same as when we occupied Van and soothed the hearts of the people there." I grinned. "This is where soft power... the power of culture does the talking."

"Nyahaha! I know what that means."

I met the excitement in Roroa's eyes with a nod.

"Yeah. Let's do this the way Roroa likes."

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— 11th day, 8th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar —

It was a hot summer day. Juno walked through the shopping street in the capital, her face red with shame.

“I know I said I’d do anything to help... but still.”

Right now, Juno and her party of five were in the middle of fulfilling a quest. “Advertise the new event.” And it had been said to Juno, directly by Souma, on the night of the tea party. Naturally, she couldn’t tell her companions that, so he submitted a quest to the guild through the castle and requested Juno’s party.

“This is a notice from the palaaaace. Please, take a loooook.”

“It concerns the event to be held five days from now. Please, look at this to see the details.”

Dece the warrior held up a placard, while Augus the brawler had signs tied to his front and back like he was some kind of sandwichman, and they were both calling out to people as they walked by.

The main difference from usual was that they were both dressed like clowns. They even had clown face makeup on, but it looked a bit creepy, in a way that people who were bad with horror movies, or those who suffered from coulrophobia couldn’t stand to look at for long.

Next to them, Febral was frowning. “Is it really all right for me to be doing this when I technically call myself a priest?”

“There was no other choice. Dece and Augus were both too brawny for the outfit.” The gentle beauty, Julia, tried to mollify Febral.

They were dressed as a vampire and vampiress. Febral wore a white cape and tuxedo (because it was deemed too dangerous for him to wear black in the summer heat), and had fake vampire teeth in his mouth. Though Febral was the indoorsy sort, and he looked like a literate man, the vampire look, which appeared sickly at first glance, suited him, and he got a lot of attention from the ladies.

“Even if it’s white, it’s still pretty hot...”

“Oh, my. Well, mine is black, but it’s quite breezy, you know?”

Julia was dressed like a bunny girl without the ears, but with bat wings on her back, and a pointed tail sticking out of her rear. If you factored in her figure as well, she had a real “sexy vampire” look going on. The men in town—as well as with Dece and Augus—couldn’t take their eyes off her, but because of her own gentle nature, she seemed unconcerned by the eyes on her.

Now, as for how Juno was dressed...

“This getup’s still not okay!”

She was wearing nothing but a tiger stripe bikini, with little oni horns sitting on her head. She looked exactly like the most famous oni girl in the country Souma had once lived in. If someone like Julia, whose body stuck out in all the right places, had worn that same outfit, it would have been erotic. However, with her thin figure and baby face, Juno looked more cute than sexy, so the crowd found it less arousing than Juno herself thought. Though that didn’t make it any less embarrassing for the one wearing it.



A roly-poly hand poked Juno's exposed back. It was the kigurumi adventurer controlled by Souma, Little Musashibo. Today, Little Musashibo wasn't dressed as a priest soldier, but as a mummy man wrapped in bandages. However, because of his roly-poly body, he looked like a giant cocoon made by a moth or something instead.

Juno gave Little Mummy Musashibo a piece of her mind, "Ki—I mean, Mister! This outfit really is not okay!"

"But it's not any more revealing than your usual outfit, is it?"

When Little Musashibo tilted his head to the side, Juno felt like he had said that to her. An angry mark appeared over Juno's head as she shook Little Musashibo.

"It's totally different! I don't have my gauntlets or scarf!"

"Stooooop iiiit." (Flailing his arms.)

"If you want someone to dress like this, tell your wives to do it!"

"....."

Little Musashibo blatantly looked away.

"...Don't tell me you've made them before."

"....." (Pretending to whistle.)

"You and I both know kigurumi don't whistle. Huh? Who? Who did you have do it?"

Because of their late-night tea parties, Juno was friends with Souma's queens too, and her mind raced, wondering who it was.

Naden already had antlers and a tail, so this sort of costume would be difficult for her. Aisha was so fond of Souma you could mistake her for a puppy, and Roroa was a good sport and loved festivals.

Either of them would have gleefully done it for him. But she felt like Liscia and Juna would both do it if Souma asked, too.

Unable to come up with an answer, Juno pinched Little Musashibo's cheek. "Hey, Mister, tell me. Who did you make do it?"

"*B-Before that...!*" (Pulling away from Juno.)

Little Musashibo patted the placard on his back.

"*Let's do the quest first. You were paid in advance.*"

Juno felt like he'd said that to her, and she got upset.

"Oh, fine. Darn it all."

You better not forget this at the next tea party. King or not, you're gonna have to let me sock you one, Juno thought. Then, half in desperation, she called out to the people walking past.

"Five days from now, on the 16th day of the 8th month, the castle will be holding the 'Ghost Festival'! In the king... His Majesty Souma's world, this is apparently a time when the boundary between this world and the next world becomes vague. And, in this festival, they welcome souls that wander into this world, in order to have them return to the next one!"

Then, Juno twirled around to show off her costume.

"On the day of the event, a parade of people dressed as ghosts (?) like we are now will walk and dance through the streets! If you have time, please, dress as a ghost, and have fun! Cute ghosts and scary ghosts are both welcome!"

"Seeking participants. Feel free to jump right in." That's what it said on the sign Little Musashibo was holding.

"Hah, look at them go."

On the terrace of a tavern not far from where Juno and her party were working, Souji Lester, the resident bishop, watched with a glass of wine in one hand. Next to him was the high elf and Genia's research partner, Merula Merlin. Because Genia was being called to the castle frequently of late, work on the drill project had been put on hiatus. That being the case, she decided to go out for a drink with Souji since it had been a while, and they were now drinking in the middle of the day.

"Is it okay to ignore them, Souji?" Merula asked with unfocused eyes as her pale skin flushed red from the alcohol. "Don't religious figures hate it when you dress up as ghosts more than anyone?"

"Well, yes, but... His Majesty spoke to me about it in advance," Souji explained before throwing a piece of cheese into his mouth. "The day after, representatives from all the national religions will offer prayers, and send back any lost souls that wander in."

"He's keeping up appearances then. But will there be complaints from the Orthodox Papal State?"

"I'm sure there will, but I'll dodge them, as usual. There's been less nagging from Little Miss Mary's faction lately, so that makes it easy. ...Though, it might just be that the Orthodox Papal State doesn't have time to be worrying about external affairs right now."

"...The conflict between the hardliners and the moderates, right? I believe Madam Mary was one of the moderates, correct?"

There was presently a division over the interpretation of the Lunalith's oracles. Because she lived with Souji, Merula had heard the story. As well as the fact that Saint Mary had told Souji she wanted to have the moderates and the saint candidates protected by the Kingdom if it became necessary.

"Yeah," Souji said, crossing his arms. "That's why, as a reward for my cooperation in this matter, I've requested that King Souma and the

Black-robed Prime Minister help with Mary's request. There are a hundred people just counting the saint candidates, and if he was to shelter all of the moderates, that would require taking in even more. It will take time and people to put together a plan that includes their escape and transport. A lone bishop like me can't do it."

"Wow..."

Even just thinking about it seems like a pain, thought Merula. In exchange for his support in this event, Souji had passed the whole nuisance off to Souma and Hakuya. *I don't know whether to say he'd shrewd, or shameless,* Merula thought in exasperation.

"That must be a headache for Souma and his people."

"He was clutching his head, saying, 'Now I've got to write another *manyewal.*' That's apparently a book of instructions, by the way."

"I'm sure he was." Merula nodded, sympathizing with Souma.

"He also said, 'Maybe we can put together a *gospel* choir with the saint candidates. Delivering the love songs of the angels,' with a far-off look in his eyes."

"Gospel? Choir?"

"Search me. I have no clue what he was talking about." Souji shrugged.

"I see you've been doing your job as bishop after all." Merula chuckled. "I'll have to reevaluate my opinion of you a little."

The rare compliment brought a wry smile to Souji's face.

"Well, you've got to work just enough to be able to slack."

"Fine words, those. Is that in the teachings of Lunarian Orthodoxy?"

"Nah. Just my philosophy on life." Souji raised a glass to the adventurers working on the shopping street. "Young people have no clue that their work may be saving someone's life. Just like those

adventurers are bringing salvation to those who are lost in the Orthodox Papal State. Unknown to man, but not to God. So work hard, young ones.”

“From where I’m standing, you look plenty young yourself, Souji.”
Merula, whose age was unknown, shrugged with dismay.

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Meanwhile...

I was in the castle, speaking to Empress Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire over the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Madam Maria.”

“Not at all. I thought it would benefit my own country, too.”

“That idea of yours, Sir Souma.” Maria smiled. “I’d like to do it in my country, too.”

“You’ll need to gauge your people’s response as you do it, but... Go ahead.”

After that we engaged in some idle banter and then terminated the call. Once we did, Liscia, who had been quietly watching us talk, came over to me.

“If you’re bringing in Madam Maria of the Empire, this has turned into something pretty big.”

“We needed information that only the Empire could possibly know, after all. I had to play some of my cards in exchange, though...”

“The Dungeon Origin of Monsters Theory, right? Was it okay to tell her? Won’t Madam Maria reach the conclusion that both mankind and demons came from the dungeons, too?”

I could understand what Liscia was saying. If possible, I had wanted to keep it under wraps, still.

“It’s too much to ask them for the information we want, while also concealing everything we know. When it comes to Genia’s theory, it’s still an unproven hypothesis. Even if Madam Maria reaches the Dungeon Origin of Mankind and Demons Theory, she won’t spread it carelessly.”

If the information leaked, she would have trouble managing her own empire, too.

“So, for now at least, with Madam Maria’s cooperation, we’ve gained a reason to hold this event. We’ll just have to do what we can currently.”

“Right... For a project that came up so suddenly, it was all prepared pretty quickly, huh?”

“I had already been talking about wanting to do an event this time of year. You know how we did the Gaius Memorial Festival in Van on the 32nd day of the 8th month last year? That was pretty popular, so there were requests to do something similar.”

However, because the Gaius Memorial Festival was aimed at the people of the former principality, it was difficult to turn it into an event that the whole nation would celebrate. That’s why I was taking this opportunity to retool it into a memorial event for the whole country. I called it the Ghost Festival.

It was primarily going to be a mix of a costume party in the style of Halloween (because the “trick or treat” aspect of that event had been taken by the Spring Announcement Festival, that was cut), the Bon-odori, and a certain strange festival held on the border between two prefectures in the world I came from. On the day of the event, participants would dress as ghosts and monsters, and parade through the town while dancing.

Meanwhile, in Van, we would hold the Gaius Memorial Festival, the same as the year before. If we overdid these sorts of events, it could stir up the emotions of the people of the former principality, but if we didn't do them at all, that could cause a reaction, too. It was safest to make it just one festival of many.

"Hee hee, this takes me back, you know?" Liscia wrapped herself around my arm. "The way you would suddenly come up with an odd idea, and you're running with it. It reminds me of when you had just been summoned."

"Well, yeah, but... aren't you a bit close to me, compared to back then?"

Liscia chuckled. "Of course. We're married with children now."

"Things sure have changed, huh?"

"Yeah. But there are things that haven't, too." Liscia rested her head on my shoulder. "I stay by your side, watching what you do. That's not going to change."

"...You really are amazing, you know that? Liscia."

I had thought it countless times, but... Yeah, I was no match for her. That didn't just go for Liscia; I could say it about all of my queens. No matter how our relationships changed in the future, I was going to fall in love with them anew over and over again.

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Then, on the day of the event.

The sun had set, and normally, at this time of day, the shopping street would only be dimly lit by the lightmoss streetlights. Today, however, there were lightmoss lantern decorations everywhere, making it quite bright. Souma had ordered these lanterns placed there for the event.

The voice of a pretty young girl echoed across the brightly lit streets.

“Woah! Lu, you’re so cute!”

“Nyahaha, thanks.”

Lucy laughed shyly at Tomoe’s compliment. Today she was dressed as a wolf girl, wearing an apron dress along with a wolf ear headband, and a wolf tail on her rump.

Because the Royal Academy was on summer break, Tomoe, Yuriga, Ichihia, Lucy, and Velza were dressed up to participate in this Ghost Festival event. Obviously, a group from the Black Cats, led by Inugami, was watching over them from the shadows.

When she looked at Lucy’s outfit, Yuriga said, “...It looks pretty familiar to me,” with dismay.

Yuriga glanced at Tomoe. It was true, wolf ears and a tail were both traits she naturally possessed. If Souma could have seen Lucy right now, he might have muttered, “The Player 2 palette swap for Tomoe?” to himself.

Lucy grinned, pulling her mouth open with her index fingers. “My crooked teeth are one of my charms. Gotta put ‘em to good use. Besides, I always thought Tomie’s ears and tail were cute.”

“You’re super cute, Lu!”

“Thanks. Y’know, it feels like we’re sisters now.”

Lucy hugged Tomoe. Yuriga pressed her fingers to her temples and let out a sigh as she watched the two of them play around.

“Honestly... I mean, how is Tomoe any different from usual?”

“I’m totally different. Look!”

Tomoe raised her hands, and there were puffy paw gloves on them. She has a choker with a bell around her neck, and three whiskers drawn on each cheek with paint.

“Today, I’m not a wolf girl, I’m a cat girl! Meow!”

“That’s barely a change at all!”

“Murgh. You say that, Yuriga, but all you’ve changed are your clothes.”

Yuriga was wearing her usual tribal outfit, but with a small black hat called a tokin on her head. She wore a pompom sash called a yuigesa, which hung from her shoulders to her belly, and she held a conch shell in her hands. These were all traditional tools of a Yamabushi mountain ascetic from the world Souma came from. Because Yuriga also bore the signature wings of a celestial on her back, she looked exactly like a (slightly moe) crow tengu.

“This is supposed to be a monster called a tengu from your brother’s world. He made the hat and sash himself, too.”

“Hee hee, Big Brother made my paw gloves, too.”

“Listen, I’m sorry to say this when you sound so happy, but isn’t it weird for the king to be good at sewing?”

When Yuriga raised that doubt, Tomoe puffed up her chest with pride. “Big Brother is also a good cook. You’ve eaten his food, too, haven’t you, Yuriga?”

“Sure, it was good, but... either way, those aren’t very kingly skills.”

“Well, I love Big Brother anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I’m sure you do.”

While the two of them were bickering like that, Ichiha and Velza came over.

“You two, if you two keep squabbling like that, you’ll stand out.”

“If too many people gather around, the bodyguards will force them to disperse, correct?”

"Well, yes, but... what are you two wearing?" Yuriga asked.

Today they were wearing their casual outfits, but with round hats on their heads. There was some sort of tag hanging from the front of them. On closer inspection, those tags were made from cloth, not paper, and what was written on them was geometric symbols, not text.

Velza pointed to a stall at the side of the road. "We bought them at that shop run by The Silver Deer. Right, Ichiha?"

"Yeah. They're apparently for a monster from Souma's world, the... Janky? Jiangshi? ...Something like that. These talismans are used to control a dead body, apparently."

"Moving corpses? Are they somethin' like zombies?" Lucy asked.

Ichiha and Velza immediately stretched their arms out in front of them and stood up ramrod straight.

"I hear they hop like this."

"They cry 'paa, paa, paa,' too."

Ichiha and Velza hopped along, saying "Paa, paa."

"Paa paa...? What a weird monster," said Yuriga with an exasperated sigh.

"Aww, I'm jealous. You two have matching hats."

Lucy hugged Tomoe. "Now, now, Tomie. We're a beast girl pair, now aren't we?"

"Oh, yeah. I guess we are, huh?"

"Hold on! You're making it sound like I'm the odd one out!"

As Yuriga protested, Tomoe gave her a cute smirk.

"What? Were you feeling lonely, Yuriga?"

“Argh! You’re such a cheeky little kid!”

“Aww, aww, aww.”

Yuriga grabbed Tomoe by the cheeks, as per usual, and then...

Boom... Boom... Cannons sounded from the direction of the castle.

“Oh, looks like things’re gettin’ started.”

The two shots signaled the beginning of the Ghost Festival.

In the next moment, music began playing throughout the town. At the same time, they saw a drum and fife band, each member dressed as a monster, coming towards them from the direction of the castle.

In the midst of the cheering, Yuriga checked the sign nearby. On it, there was an outline of the Ghost Festival.

[Ghost Festival Outline]

- The goal of this festival is to help any souls that wander into the living world return to the next world without regrets by having a good time together -
- In order to make the souls think we are like them, every participant must be dressed as a ghost or monster -
(This is voluntary for spectators, but you will have more fun in costume.)
- When the cannons fire, our costumed band and parade will begin to march -
- Spectators should sing along with the music, and dance -
(All are welcome to jump in and participate.)

...Well, that was what was written there, more or less.

“Yaaaay.”

“H-Hold on, Tomoe, you’re spinning me too much!”

“...Hey, can I have a moment?” Yuriga called out to Tomoe, who had already taken Ichihā’s hand and started dancing.

“Hm? What?”

“Is this festival one of King Souma’s policies, too?”

“...Hmm, I wonder?”

“What? Are you playing dumb again?”

“You can say that, but I really haven’t heard anything this time. Though, knowing Big Brother, I’m sure there’s some deeper thinking behind a fun event like this.”

“.....”

“But before that, come on.” Having finished spinning Ichihā, she now offered her hand to Yuriga. “You can’t enjoy the festival with that look on your face. Let’s dance, Yuriga.”

“...Hmph.”

Even as she acted unamused, Yuriga took Tomoe’s hand.

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“This is a good place, just like Tomoe said.”

“Nyaha! Everyone needs a younger girl who’ll call them Big Sister, huh?” Roroa said with a laugh.

This was the fruit parlor at The Cat’s Tree, run by Tomoe’s school friend Lucy’s family.

In order to watch the Ghost Festival we had planned in anonymity, we had asked Lucy to reserve the whole place for the royal family. I was here together with my five wives, and our bodyguards and subordinates. To be honest, I wanted to bring Cian and Kazuha, too,

but I was told it would put more of a burden on the guards, so they were left with Carla and the others in the castle.

"I know we paid, but do you think we're hurting them, since this is a profitable time?"

"Don't you fret. Lucy's family'll be makin' their profit off the stall they're runnin' today, so they couldn't spare much staff for the main business, and were only plannin' to run it like any other day."

"Well, I guess it's okay then."

"That's right. But more importantly, Darlin', we've got a good view of the fountain plaza from here."

The fountain with the Jewel Voice Broadcast receiver system was easy to see from the second floor terrace. The image of the costumed parade dancing to the drum and fife band's music was projected there, and it made for a fantastic, or rather a nightmarish scene.

If I recalled, Tomoe had used this place during the song battle. It was a bit far away, but you could see the gathered crowd, so it was a pretty good spot.

"Colbert and Sebastian, thank you for your cooperation, too."

Minister of Finance Colbert, and Sebastian, the proprietor of The Silver Deer, were here too. Their help in arranging this event had been monumental.

Colbert had managed the funding and placement of loreleis, while Sebastian had handled the production of spooky costumes (basically cosplay goods) for the event. The money from goods would go to the business Roroa ran from behind the scenes, so we would be able to make back the costs of running the event somehow.

“If I have been any help to you and Lady Roroa, it brings me the greatest honor, sire.” Sebastian brought a hand to his chest and bowed reverently. He was a true gentleman.

Colbert, meanwhile, slumped his shoulders in exhaustion. “Handling the funding and arranging things with the loreleis was exhausting. I had to place guards along the parade route, and set up areas for them to prepare.”

“Ohh... Yeah, that was rough on me, too.”

I had to make documents, and keep on stamping them... I feel like I worked pretty hard myself.

As we both sighed, Roroa slapped me hard on the back. “What’re you lookin’ so glum for? It’s a festival! You’ve gotta enjoy it.”

“Hee hee, she’s right. I know half the reason we’re here is official business, but it’s like a day off, so why don’t you enjoy it as much as those two over there?”

Liscia was pointing at Naden and Aisha, who were enjoying the sweets (which had been tested for poison) that the staff here had prepared for us.

“After I saw Tomoe and her friends eating here, I wanted to try it, too.”

“I do enjoy your homemade sweets, sire, but the sort of stylish sweets that are sold in restaurants are nice, too... *Munch, munch.*”

The two of them were smacking their lips at the mountain of cakes and puddings before them. ...Well, they seemed to be enjoying themselves, so I guess I could leave them be. Then...

“Um, sire. Was it all right for me not to take part in the parade?” Juna asked, looking a little restless.

“Did you want to participate after all?”

"Yes... I do somewhat feel that way," she answered embarrassed. "It was an opportunity for my songs to be of use to you, so it was a little disappointing... Oh! But I enjoy relaxing here with everyone, too, of course." Juna smiled softly.

Though she was the first secondary queen of this nation, she was also the people's Prima Lorelei. If she couldn't take part in an event that involved singing, she must have felt like a diver in front of a clear sea, but didn't have their diving equipment. There was a reason for it, but she still felt a little bad about not being part of the event nonetheless.

"I'm sorry. This is an experimental event, so I couldn't be sure how the people would react to it. I was too scared to let you join in..."

I had the sense that, with the way the people of this country were now, it would be fine. But if I trusted them implicitly, I would be starting from behind if something happened, and might respond too late. If I thought of the potential tragedy that might occur... I had no choice but to be careful.

Juna brought a hand to her chest. "Don't make that face. I trust in your decisions, sire."

"Juna..."

"Hey, could you two stop ignorin' the rest of us and goin' off into your own romantic little world?!"

""Whoa!""

Roroa suddenly jumped on me from behind, causing me to stumble, nearly taking Juna down with me. I managed to avoid falling over, but Roroa and Juna shrieked as I ended up spinning them both around.

“What’re you doing, geez,” Liscia said in exasperation. “But more importantly, Souma, isn’t it time you told us what the intent behind this plan is?”

“Oh, right. But rather than have me explain, it might be faster if you were to look at that.”

Having regained my balance, and with Roroa still on my back, I pointed to the fountain in the distance. In the sky above the bonfire-lit fountain plaza, there was an image of Nanna, Pamille, and Komari projected.

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“Oh! Looks like they’re here!” Tomoe, who was watching the parade, shouted.

The costumed band and performers had entertained the people so far, but now an even greater roar of applause came from the crowd. The line of floats that were the main attraction of the parade were here.

One of these floats, which were pulled by rhinosaurs, had the loreleis Nanna, Pamille, and Komari aboard, and another had the male idol unit, the orpheuses, Yaiba. Each of them was engulfed in the screams of their respective male or female fans.

“Hey, people! Are you feeling energetic?!”

The cat girl, Nanna, who was wearing a black tube top and hot pants together with bat wings and a pointed tail, shouted to the crowd. That outfit, which accentuated her healthy body more than her sexiness, made her look like a genuine little devil.

Then, wearing a head protector that looked like the one Hal had, along with a Japanese-style dress similar to the ones that his first wife Kaede wore, Komari stepped forward, dressed forward in an oni costume.

“Tonight, let us show you a song that will make both the living and dead dance like mad.”

“Heheh, hear my song, and be cursed.”

Rather than her usual frilly dress, Pamille was wearing a black gothic lolita style outfit, along with bandages, and an eye patch... In some ways, she might have been the one we'd stuffed the most character elements onto this time.

The members of Yaiba were dressed as Dracula, the wolf man, and Frankenstein's monster, only modified to be cooler, and their female fans were squealing.

“Oh, hey, it's the loreleis. They're lookin' mighty cute, huh?” Lucy said to herself when she saw them.

“Certainly. Even though their costumes are modeled on monsters, they are still adorable.”

“Bat wings and horns would usually be creepy, but when they're just one part of the whole, I feel like they actually accentuate the loreleis' cuteness.”

Velza and Ichiha agreed.

“Hrmm,” Yuriga groaned. “Is it like how, if you eat something salty in between sweets, they taste better?”

“I don't know about that analogy... but I feel like you're right.”

Yuriga's unflattering explanation made Ichiha smile wryly.

The monsters look cute... Tomoe looked at the loreleis standing up on top of the float. *They're dressed like monsters, but no one minds, they're just enjoying it, and calling them “Cool” or “Cute.” Maybe that's what Big Brother is after?* Tomoe thought that to herself as she watched the lively parade.

“Squeeeeeee!”

““““Huh?!”“““

There was a sudden loud squeal from next to them. Tomoe and the others turned to look, and Velza's eyes were sparkling as she waved her hand wildly. This was so far from the usual, cool Velza, Tomoe and the rest just kept blinking.

With no regard for their eyes on her, Velza shouted, “Lord Haaaal! Over heeeeere!”

They followed Velza's gaze, and there, on the other side of the floats, a massive red dragon was trudging along on four legs. And there on top of it was a soldier with an oni head protector on.



“Is that Hal and Ruby?”

“Isn’t that the red dragon knight who fought alongside my brother, Fuuga?”

While Tomoe and Yuriga cocked their heads to the side in shared confusion, Halbert took notice of them. He hopped down off Ruby’s back and walked over in their direction.

“Hey, Velza. And Young Miss Tomoe, too. Were you all watching together?”

“Yes, Lord Hal!” Velza responded with an energy that made Tomoe and the rest think, *Is this girl really Velza?*

“Oh, yeah?” Halbert plopped his hand down on top of her head. “I’m glad to see you’ve made some friends.”

“Yes! But why are you in the parade, Lord Hal?”

“Oh... Souma said, ‘You’re the Red Oni, so you can join the Ghost Festival as is,’ and forced me into it. That’s how Ruby and I got put on display in this freak show.” Halbert scratched his cheek, seeming a bit embarrassed.

“You’re not freaks! You’re cool, Lord Hal!”

“Hahaha, thanks.” He patted Velza’s head vigorously.

“Hal... It’s time to get back to it,” Ruby called to Hal telepathically.

“Whoops, gotta rejoin the procession.” Halbert turned around to head back. “Later, Velza. Enjoy the festival.”

“Bye-bye, Velza.”

“Okay! Lord Hal, Lady Ruby!”

Velza waved her hand wildly as she saw Hal and Ruby off. Once they were gone, and Velza turned around, only to be met by blank stares

from Tomoe and the rest, she finally realized. Velza coughed and cleared her throat.

"...I apologize. That was unseemly of me."

"Uh, no, it's too late to try and keep up appearances now."

Yuriga's calm retort made Velza turn red. Then it clicked for Tomoe.

"Wait, could it be that the person you were saying you want to serve is Hal?"

"...D-Did you figure that out?"

"If you're actin' that different around him, who wouldn't?" Lucy chimed in, and Ichiha followed up with, "I-I think it was cute, and very appropriate for a girl your age."

Velza covered her face with her hands. "I had tried to act aloof and keep it hidden, but it came out so easily."

"Nyahaha, you're so cute, Velie."

Tomoe and the rest just chuckled as Lucy poked Velza in the cheek, who smiled shyly at their reactions.

It was a night during summer break. The children enjoyed the festival to their heart's content.

Epilogue: Intentions

At the same time, in the fruit parlor at The Cat's Tree.

"The important thing was to have the loreleis dress up *like that*," I explained, pointing to the loreleis reflected in the distance. "We talked about how mankind may have been created earlier, right? Well, just like there are beastmen, dragonewts, elves, and a variety of other races on the side of mankind, demons may be another race created by someone, one that mankind simply hadn't encountered before."

"Now that you bring it up, we did talk about that," Liscia said as if she had just remembered, and I nodded.

"Someday, when mankind re-encounters the demons, how strong a sense of taboo we feel towards them, and, conversely, how willing we are to accept them will decide whether the negotiations succeed or fail. Appearances will be one of the big things. I'm sad to say it, but first impressions mean a lot to people."

"My first impression of you was 'An exhausted young man.' You even had bags under your eyes."

"...Well, that's an impression from external appearances, too, right?"

It told me that bags under a person's eyes left a strong impression on Liscia.

"Since coming to this world, I've been surprised by the many races I've encountered, since humans were the only intelligent lifeforms in my old world. But I got used to the way other races looked relatively quickly. As for why that is... it's because I was used to seeing them."

"Used to seeing them? But there were only humans, right?"

“Yeah. In the real world, sure. But in the worlds of stories, there were lots of different races.”

I imagined the residents of fictional worlds.

“The was a hero show with a protagonist who had a lion’s head like Georg. There was an adventure story with an elf like Aisha as the heroine. And even more stories with characters like Tomoe, who had animal ears and tails, than there were stars in the sky.”

I stuck the wolf ear headband I had with me on Liscia’s head before continuing, “There were a lot of accessories like these for ‘roleplaying,’ too. If you went to a place that sold fashion accessories, or to that gigantic leisure facility that was like a land of dreams, you could buy them easily.”

“Land of dreams?”

“Oh, don’t get caught up on that. It could land us in trouble, in a lot of ways.”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

The wolf ears slid when Liscia nodded, so I poked them.

“That’s why, even when I actually met beastmen, or any other race that looked different from my own, I just thought, ‘They’re like something out of a story.’ Thanks to that, I got by without developing any weird prejudices. So... I wanted the people of this country to get used to seeing demons.”

Those outfits the loreleis wore were made based on eyewitness reports that were left in the empire. The incursion into the Demon Lord’s Domain by the combined forces of mankind led by the Empire ten years ago.

The forces of mankind were met with an attack (counterattack?) by the demons who lived deep inside the Demon Lord’s Domain, and wiped out, so they definitely encountered demons then. I suspected

that, in the Empire which led the war, there would still be eyewitness reports of the demons from survivors. That's why, on that day, I explained the situation to Empress Maria of the Empire, and asked her to tell me if there were any remaining descriptions of the demons' physical traits. Maria agreed with my thinking, and provided the information.

The result was that, in addition to kobolds, there was an ogre-like race with horns on their foreheads, and a devil or vampire-like race with bat wings. There were also reports of "ones that looked like giant suits of full-mail armor," but I couldn't trust the veracity of these, so I set them aside for the time being. Regardless, I now knew the general features of the demons.

"Beings that look like ogres and devils are a source of fear for people in this world. In the Republic, I saw gorilla-like ogres attacking people myself. Those ones lacked intelligence, but they were pretty scary. The reason we gave Hal that oni headband, and people carve devil faces on their shields is because of the preconception that they're scary, right?"

"Yeah." Liscia nodded. "That kind of equipment exists to intimidate the enemy."

There were things like onigawara back in my old world, too.

"I want the people in this country to adopt a different set of values. Look, isn't Nanna's little devil costume cute?"

"Sure. I bet it'd fit Roroa nicely."

"Nyaha! You want me to try puttin' it on for you some time, Darlin'?" Roroa poked her own cheek and smiled. They were right, it would look good on her.

"Let's, uh, set that aside for now. I was thinking that if people see devilish looks or oni horns as just another fashion accessory, then

maybe if they show up on someone they meet in the future, it won't feel as wrong to them. This is preparing for that."

"Ohh, so that's why you asked me not to participate," Juna clapped her hands together as she got it.

I had thought it was risky to dress one of my queens up in a monster costume, so I had her sit this one out. Once the fashion was more established, and the Ghost Festival was an annual event, it would be fine for her to join in.

"I want to see the people's reactions first, and if they're all right, I'd like you to participate next year."

"I like it. I want to wear an outfit like that, too," Juna said with a happy smile.

...If Juna wore something like that, she'd come off less like a little devil, and more like a succubus, wouldn't she? Just the thought of it was, um... Yeah, pretty awesome.

While I was thinking about that with a wry smile, Liscia got a dubious look on her face and asked me, "Do you think making people look at demons as fashionable is going to be able to eliminate prejudice?"

"...I don't think we can get rid of it entirely." I shrugged. I knew things probably wouldn't go that well. "In the world I came from, we only had humans, but there was still discrimination and conflict there. Human history is a story of people finding differences between themselves and others to fight over, then reconcile, and then do the same thing all over again. So, I want to shorten the time it takes to reconcile, even if we do end up in a conflict."

The tragedy of ten years ago could only have ended with the annihilation of one side or the other. Mankind couldn't tell demons from monsters, and wasn't thinking of the possibility of dialogue. Maybe things were similar on the demons' side, too.

I heard somewhere that war is one means of diplomacy. If you go into a war with no means of negotiation, all that's left is the dirty act of killing one another. Even if it comes to conflict, we must never stop looking for common ground. In order to find that, we must know all we can about the other side.

"I'm hoping this project will help with that."

"I get how you feel, but... don't you think that only a small number of the people will understand it? Even I didn't get it until you explained that was what the project was about." Liscia's frank opinion made me smile a little.

"That's fine. I mean, it's just annoying when those on top try to force their values on you." I put my hands on the terrace railing and looked out over the capital. "Soft power, the power of culture, works little by little without you noticing it. Even if they don't understand, it's fine if they sense it somehow. So..."

Let them just enjoy it for now. When I imagined the innocent smiles of Tomoe and her friends enjoying the Ghost Festival in the castle town, I thought that with all my heart.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the eleventh volume of Realist Hero. This is Dojyomaru, who is slightly relieved to see the afterword in its proper place.

This volume is mainly about the kids, Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga, going to school. They're joined by Velza, who has appeared occasionally since the first volume, and a new character, Lucy, who is like a mini-Roroa. Regardless of whether or not it will be depicted in the story, I'm sure Tomoe and her friends will have a great time at school.

If I were to discuss one alternative possibility here, it was possible that Souma might have gone to school instead.

At the end of volume five, it was mentioned that one option that Hakuya considered to shut down the constant proposals to Souma was sending him to the Officers' Academy or Royal Academy, (The invitation from the Star Dragon Mountain Range happened to come in at just that time, so the plan was shelved, and he ended up doing foreign trips instead) but this is something the author was considering, too.

I thought a story where he went to the Royal Academy with Liscia and Aisha, and they recruited talented people there, might work, but because there are so many school stories in the light novel genre, it would be difficult to set this one apart from others, so I gave up on the idea. But as I was imagining what it would be like if Souma went to school with Liscia and the others, I thought it was workable.

Well, let's let Tomoe enjoy school life as much as Souma would have. They say school is a microcosm of society.

Perhaps that means we can say that the academic scenes which Tomoe and her friends experience are a microcosm of the Kingdom's society.

The authoritarianism of the Royal Academy has crumbled, and now those with skill and talent are welcomed. The children of the knights and nobility actively vie to build a connection with people of talent, and those who might be called prodigies. When they step out into the adult world, I think the Kingdom will change even more than it already has.

Now then, I'm sure those of you following me on Pixiv will already realize this, but this volume has been separated out from the story set in the Mercenary State, Zem, which originally was part of the same chapter as it.

There were a lot of places where I cut corners in the characterization during the web version of the Zem Arc, so I am taking the opportunity to rework it for the book edition. There is a need to write a lot of new content to make it a full volume, and that requires more time than usual, so please forgive me, as I suspect the next volume will take longer than usual to come out.

Now then, I give my thanks to the illustrator Fuyuyuki, to Satoshi Ueda for the manga adaptation, to my editor, the designers, the proofreaders, and everyone who now holds this book in their hands.

This has been Dojyomaru.

Bonus Short Stories

Encouragement for a Hard Worker

“...How does it look?”

Inside Prime Minister Hakuya’s work room, the girl from Malmkhitan, Yuriga Haan, was standing in front of her teacher, Hakuya. He looked at the piece of paper she had handed him, then sighed.

“With your current grades...” Hakuya said, returning Yuriga’s test paper to her. “It’ll be difficult for you to get into the same class at the academy as Little Sister and Sir Ichihia.”

“I... see.”

With the academy’s entrance examination, which would determine their class assignments, fast approaching, Yuriga was gauging her placement with a mock exam that Hakuya had put together. Because classes at the academy were divided by their results, Tomoe and Ichihia were seen as shoo-ins for the class for students with excellent grades. For Yuriga, though, it was uncertain whether or not she would be able to get into that class with them.

“There’s really no need to strain yourself to get into the same class, is there? You’ll be together at the castle either way, so you’ll only be separated during class time.”

“I-It’s not like I don’t want to be separated from them!” Yuriga turned her head to the side peevishly. “...Sir. I just can’t accept Tomoe and Ichihia getting ahead of me.”

“Is that so?” He could sort of tell that Yuriga was putting up a strong front from her tone, but he knew she would stubbornly deny it if he pointed that out, so Hakuya decided to let it slide. “But if you want to raise your grades any more than this in such a short time... it’s going to be a lot of trouble, you know?”

“I am prepared for that.”

“...Very well. Let’s increase the amount of studying you’ll do,” Hakuya said, as he plopped his hand down on top of Yuriga’s head. “But you mustn’t push yourself too hard. If you ruin your health, Little Sister will be sad.”

“I-I don’t really care how Tomoe feels about it, but... Okay,” Yuriga responded, sounding a little like a tsundere.

After that, Yuriga studied like mad, even late into the night—to the point where Tomoe and Ichiha were worried she was straining herself too much.

Yuriga was once again sitting at her desk studying away, when a sudden knock came at the door, breaking her concentration.

“Y-Yes?” Yuriga called out, slightly shocked. “Come in.”

The door opened, and Souma and Liscia came in.

“Sir Souma? And Lady Liscia, too? What brings you here so late at night?”

“Well, Hakuya tells us you’ve been studying hard,” Souma responded to the suspicious Yuriga with a smile. “That’s why I’ve fixed you a late-night snack. You know, to help encourage you. But I felt like a man shouldn’t be visiting a girl’s room late at night, even if she is just a child, so I had Liscia come, too.”

Souma showed her a tray with a rice ball on it. *That must be the midnight snack*, Yuriga thought.

Standing next to him, Liscia let out an exasperated sigh. “Souma always worries about the strangest things.”

“I mean, Fuuga entrusted us with caring for her. I’d be in real trouble if any untoward rumors started going around.”

“Well, sure, but...”

“Um... Thank you for your consideration, Sir Souma,” Yuriga cut in. It was going to be a bother for her if they started having a marital spat in her doorway, after all. Liscia shut her mouth and Souma smiled, bringing the tray over to Yuriga’s desk and leaving it there.

“This takes me back,” Souma commented. “When I was studying at night, my grandma would bring me snacks, too. It feels a bit different from dinner, doesn’t it?”

“You studied at night, too, Sir Souma?”

“Yeah. Because this world’s only source of stable light is lightmoss, studying at night isn’t all that common, but in my world, it was bright even in the dead of night. Besides, the year before being summoned here I had entrance exams, too... That’s why, well, even if this is all I can do, I wanted to say, ‘Keep it up,’ Yuriga.”

“...Right. Thank you.”

Once Yuriga thanked them, Souma and Liscia left the room.

When they came out of the room, Tomoe was standing next to the door.

Patting Tomoe on the head, Souma said, “I gave her the rice ball you made.”

“Thank you, Big Brother.”

Tomoe had wanted to do something for Yuriga who was working so hard, and she turned to Souma and the others for advice. Making this late-night snack was Souma’s suggestion.

And so, she made the rice ball. If Yuriga knew it was Tomoe who made it, she might be too stubborn to accept it, so Souma and Liscia,

the king and queen, gave it to her instead; that way she couldn't refuse.

I want us to be in the same class, too, Yuriga, Tomoe thought as she looked at the closed door.

Those Who are Nameless Have Stories, Too

In a dark room, inside a building, within the Royal Academy, a number of people were gathered.

"Everyone, tomorrow is the day that *he* will grace our academy with his presence."

"President! Has the day come at last?!" one of the individuals asked excitedly.

The young man in glasses whom they had called "president" gave a big nod and replied, "Yes, our Monster Research Society is about to make a giant leap!"

These were the students enrolled in the Monster Research Society, MonSoc for short.

As the name would indicate, this was a campus group dedicated to the research of monsters, but because of how creepy their subject of choice was, they were often looked at with disdain by other students. In the caste structure of this school, it was fair to say that they were at the very bottom. However, with the publication of one book in the royal capital, that had begun to change greatly of late.

Hakuya, the prime minister of this country, had worked with Ichiha Chima, an exchange student from the Duchy of Chima in the Union of Eastern Nations, to make major waves in the field of monster research. Their result: The Monster Encyclopedia. Before now, the research of monsters had been taboo. But because of the direct connections to national defense and the economy, this book, which included drawings by Ichiha that even a layman could understand,

became an overnight bestseller (but not really, because it was mostly being lent out, not sold).

With the importance of monster research having become widely known thanks to the Monster Encyclopedia, MonSoc had seen its own existence reevaluated. The fact that this club, which had only been joined by nerdy guys before, now had female members, was one sign of that... Incidentally, those female members watched the president and the other excitable guys with exasperation.

“Tomorrow is the entrance ceremony, and they say that our god, Sir Ichihia, will be there! We must invite him into our society, no matter what it takes!”

“But President, the competition between clubs and societies for new students is intensifying. How can an indoorsy group like us compete?”

Ever since Souma took the throne, the knightly and noble classes had changed their values, upsetting the basis of authority at the academy that had existed up until that point as demand grew for personnel who were specialized in one particular art. This applied to the clubs and societies as well, and was exactly why female students had joined MonSoc.

“...Yes. That certainly is a problem,” the president said, crossing his arms and groaning.

One girl who had been watching them up until this point raised her hand. “President, if I were to talk to him, I think I could manage it.”

The president adjusted his glasses and asked, “What do you mean to do, Sara?”

“There are some kids from my house who are on the athletics teams. With their help, I believe it would be easy to secure one new student.”

The female student known as Sara was the daughter of a noble family of middling importance in this country. Based on her blonde hair, slightly gaudy clothes, and her lineage, it was honestly a mystery what she was doing in this club.

“Hmm, but are you certain? I’m sure the athletics clubs want new members, too,” the president said, concern rising in his voice. “Is it all right for their members to support us? Besides which, relying on influence like that is frowned upon at the academy now. Won’t this be trouble for you?”

“The athletics clubs want people who are actually athletic,” Sara replied, waving her hand. “He may be highly capable, but like the rest of you, Ichihā’s not that good at physical exercise, right?”

“Yes, most likely.”

“In that case, the athletics clubs shouldn’t want him. If I let them know I’ll be borrowing their members in advance, I think it should be fine.” Sara stood up. “That being the case, President, I’d like to go negotiate immediately, so please come with me.”

“N-Now? I’m, um, not emotionally prepared for this...”

“You want to bring Ichihā into the club, no matter what, right?”

“...Yes, okay. Let’s go.”

And so, the two of them left the room. As they were walking down the hall together, the president tried talking to Sara, “You know, I’m quite happy to see a talented person like you joining MonSoc.”

“No, no. I joined for my own benefit, so don’t worry about it.”

“Your own benefit? Are you aiming for Sir Ichihā, perhaps?” the president suggested.

“Ahaha. I may come from a noble family, but I’m not about to do something as above my station as going after a VIP from another

country,” Sara said, wiping the corner of her eye. “Though, I do have instructions from the family to stake my claim on any gentleman I find interesting.”

The president crossed his arms and groaned. “Hmm. I wonder if anyone has been up to your standards.”

“...Yes. Well,” Sara said with a suppressed chuckle. “Have no worries, I’m marking my territory *now*.”

Those without names have their own stories, too.

Roroa and Mini Roroa

“Squeee! Lady Roroa! You’re Lady Roroa, aren’t ya?!”

“Wh-What, why’re you shoutin’ all of a sudden?”

It was the day Tomoe had brought her friends to the castle. When Lucy saw the object of her admiration, Roroa, she started bursting with excitement, and immediately took Roroa’s hand.

“I’m a big fan! Let me shake your hand!”

Then, without waiting for a response, she began vigorously shaking Roroa’s hand. There were a number of things that happened afterwards, but once it had all settled down, Souma and his five queens, and Tomoe and her four friends, all had tea together in one big group of eleven.

Naturally, Lucy sneakily grabbed a seat next to Roroa.

“Ohhh, Big Sister Roroa.”

The way Lucy was fawning over her put an uncharacteristically troubled look on Roroa’s face.

“Nobody’s ever called me Big Sister before. It feels kinda funny.”

“Then how about Big-Sister-in-Law Roroa?”

“Who’re you plannin’ on marryin’?! Neither me or Darlin’ have a little brother, y’know?”

“Well, how about Momma Roroa?”

“You’re gonna marry my kid?! How big an age gap is that gonna be?!”

“I figure I’ve got a pretty wide strike zone.”

“I don’t care! I’m not givin’ my kid to just anybody!”

“I’m not just anybody. My family runs The Cat’s Tree.”

“I know that much!”

“Oh, yeah, come to think of it, you have an older brother, right?”

“Huh? Well... Yeah, I do.”

“If I were to get hitched with him, maybe I couldn’t be your little-sister-in-law, but you’d be mine, huh? Lady Roroa as my little sister... I could go for that, too.”

“No, you couldn’t! Nuh-uh... Maybe I oughta take this girl down, here and now, for my big brother and big-sister-in-law’s peace of mind?”

“I’m just kiddin’ about all of this. I’d really rather you be my Big Sister.”

“Urgh... After all this back and forth, I’m thinkin’ maybe I’m ready to just accept that.”

“If it means you’ll let me call you Big Sister, I don’t mind bein’ your little brother!”

“You’re gettin’ a sex change?! Do you really need to go that far?!”

“Hey, now, ya never know. I know how I look, but maybe I’m actually a boy in girls’ clothin’.”

“A cross-dressin’ boy?! Those exist?!”

“The opposite does, too, y’know? Ichiha has a cute face, doesn’t he?”

“Ichiha’s a cross-dressin’ girl?! You know... I’d buy it.”

“Hold on, you two!” He hadn’t been able to get a word in edgewise up until now, but when they started calling him a cross-dressing girl, Ichiha finally couldn’t take anymore and spoke up. “Who are you calling a cross-dressing girl?! I’m a boy!”

“Oh, but Ichiha would look good in some of my clothes...” Tomoe muttered.

“Even you, Tomoe?!”

Being that she was someone who he got along with, Ichiha became visibly depressed. When she saw that, Roroa gave Lucy a light poke in the head. “Hey, your joke went and got Ichiha real sad.”

“Nyahaha! Soooo-ryyyy.”

“Are ya really? I dunno, I’m not convinced.”

“I am, okaaaay? My regret runs higher than the mountain fold, and deeper than the valley fold.”

“Origami folds?! That’s some paper-thin regret!”

“I’m just tryin’ to paper things over here.”

“See, you’re not really that sorry at all!”

“Jeez, Big Sister Roroa, you’re so needy.”

“Me?! I’m the bad one here?!”

“...You two really are in sync,” Liscia cut-in with an exasperated sigh. Everyone nodded in agreement.

“If you told me she was Roroa’s sister, I would believe it,” Aisha said. And Souma followed up with, “She’s like a mini Roroa.”

Roroa's eyes widened in surprise. Then, slamming her hands down on the table as she stood up, she jabbed a finger in Lucy's direction. "Huh? I'm like this?"

"You didn't realize? Well, I do find that part of you annoyingly cute, you know?" Souma said.

"Drop the annoyin' bit! I thought I was the lovable type!"

As Roroa was reeling in plain shock, Lucy moved up right next to her. "I love ya. I even keep a tiny shrine to Lady Roroa on the shop's premises."

"That's some overbearin' love! It's already turnin' into a religion!"

"Oh, is Lady Roroa a cute goddess?"

"~~~~~" "She's a queen!" "~~~~~" everyone there retorted in unison.

Incidentally, because this exchange was so funny, Souma would later decide to start this world's first comedy program featuring Roroa and Lucy, but... that's another story.

In Velza's Room

Velza had a room in a girls' dormitory on the grounds of the Royal Academy.

"So you've been living in the dorm, huh, Vel?" Tomoe asked.

"Yes. My family home in the God-Protected Forest is quite far from here, after all."

Today, Velza had invited three of her friends: Tomoe, Yuriga, and Lucy, to come and visit her room. This was because, when they found out Velza lived in the dorm, Tomoe and the others had said they'd like to see her room there. Incidentally, because there was a strict "no boys allowed" policy in the girls' dorm, Ichihia had been unable to come.

Lucy chuckled. "Well, knowin' how pretty Ichihai is, if we tried dressin' him up in girls clothes, I'd bet he could've gotten in, wouldn't you?"

"Ahh, that's for sure. I think he'd make a real beauty."

"...Give the poor kid a break."

Tomoe ended up agreeing despite herself, but Yuriga played the straight man role.

Looking around the room, Lucy said, "Still, it's more normal than I'd've expected."

"So, what kind of room were you imagining?"

"Weeeeellll." Lucy snickered. "Seein' as you're a dark elf, Velie, and they're famous for bein' incredible archers and all, I was expectin' to see a bow and arrow, along with heads from all the animals ya hunted."

"Honestly. This isn't the officers' academy. There are rules banning weapons here, so I left my favorite bow and quiver at home."

"...So ya do have them then." Lucy smiled wryly at the matter-of-fact way Velza mentioned it.

Now it was Tomoe's turn to ask a question, "I don't see a kitchen. How do you eat?"

"In the cafeteria. Meals are prepared for students who live in the dorms."

"Hmm. The same as Ichihai and me then, huh?" said Yuriga.

Since they lived in Parnam Castle, it was common for them to eat at the cafeteria there. Because they were foreign guests, they could have asked for room service, but it was boring eating alone, so they went to the cafeteria. Tomoe and her family occasionally joined them, so dinner could get quite lively there.

"Hey, that sounds like it could end up bein' fun, too," said Lucy, who had decided to lie down on Vela's bed at some point. Out of everyone present, she was the one living the most normal life.

"Isn't it easier being able to commute from home every day?" Velza asked.

"No, no," Lucy replied, waving her hand at the idea. "If I'm at home, I get dragged into helpin' at the shop, and that means havin' to be the lovable poster girl for all our customers, y'know? ...Well, I do get an allowance for doin' it, so I don't really mind."

"Well, aren't you crafty?" Yuriga shrugged.

"You wanna try workin', too, Yurie? I think ya'd be popular."

"...Training for club is too much already. I can't do work on top of that," she replied with a serious look on her face. Members of the Mage Soccer Club were often subjected to harsh training.

"Oh, uh, sorry." Lucy backed down.

Tomoe clapped her hands and said, "But it's great being able to earn money for yourself. I think it'd be lovely if I could give Big Brother and my big sisters birthday presents with money that I earned myself."

"If you started working, a third of the customers at the shop would be your bodyguards."

"Ohh, you've got a point there, Yuriga."

Tomoe smiled wryly as she imagined the faces of the guards who were always so concerned for her. They wouldn't just be watching from the shadows, there would likely be plainclothes bodyguards mixed in with the customers, too.

"If they're payin' customers, I'm more than happy to welcome her bodyguards."

“You really are a crafty one,” Yuriga retorted again with a shrug.

Velza quietly raised her hand. “In that case, I would like to try working. It seems the Cooking Society doesn’t meet every day.”

“Do you mean it? We’d be thrilled to have ya, Velie,” Lucy said gleefully and hugged Velza’s arm. “We can be the poster girls for The Cat’s Tree. We’ll take the world by storm.”

“I don’t really want to take the world by storm... just make money.”

“Is there something you want?” Tomeo asked.

“I want to give a present to the people who’ve taken care of me, too,” Velza responded shyly.

Who was she imagining? The way her cheeks flushed and she smiled a little made the other three curious.

“A present? Who for? Who for?”

“Could this be for the person you were saying you wanted to serve?”

“I’m not lettin’ go of this arm until you tell us.”

“I-It’s a secret.”

As the three pressed in closer, Velza turned her head to the side. They kept at it until Velza could take no more and exploded, and the girls’ talk continued from there.

Making Goods for the Ghost Festival

“Your Majesty, I have come at your behest,” Sebastian said with a reverent bow upon arriving.

I had called Roroa and Sebastian to the governmental affairs office today. In putting on the Ghost Festival, I was going to be leaning on Roroa’s company, which Sebastian was the public face of, so I needed to talk to the two of them quickly.

“I want to create some things that will make it easy for ordinary people to dress up for the Ghost Festival.” I laid a piece of paper out on the desk where it was easy for them to see. It was a simple sketch of a hairband with cat ears on it. “I’d like for your company to develop and mass-produce items like this one, which lets people dress up with just one part of their body.”

I was thinking of something like the mouse ears sold at a certain “land of dreams” in order to help guests enjoy the park. (Or was it to subject them to peer pressure from their fellow guests?)

“We don’t have much time before the event, but could I ask you to take care of it?”

“Let’s see...” said Sebastian, who looked like the sort of gentleman who should be drinking Earl Grey tea and stroking his mustache. “If we can gain the cooperation of companies with the right connections, mass-producing simple things should be possible. Though, that assumes we have decided on what will be produced from the start.”

That meant we wouldn’t make it in time if we started by just rattling off ideas. That was within the realm of expectations.

“I want to narrow down the number of items, and decide what we are going to do here. I plan to put a lot of detail into the loreleis’ outfits, but for the people’s costumes, cheap, simple, and plentiful is what we want.”

Besides, there would be a sense of taboo around dressing up in any monster costume that was too involved. I had talked this over with Bishop Souji and the higher-ups of the other state religions, but it was the first time we were doing this, so I needed to carefully watch the people’s reactions.

“I’ll be having the loreleis wear demon-like costumes, but we’ll need other ghost costumes, too.”

“Ghosts, huh...? I can’t think of any.” Roroa crossed her arms and cocked her head to the side.

...Oh, right. This world doesn't have a lot of different ideas of what ghosts are like. There was just the traditional ghost, and the will o’ wisp. Because zombies and skeletons actually existed, they were categorized as monsters instead. The flame pierrots I had invented had been treated like a new kind of monster, too. It had to be the fact that you couldn’t see them that gave ghosts and youkai their flavor.

“So, I was thinking I’d fill in the gap with ghosts from my world. Using the ones that can be made the cutest... For a start, there’s this.” I showed them a cutesy drawing of a ghost I’d drawn from memory.

“Darlin’, what’s this?”

“It’s a jiangshi. They’re a type of ghost from my world.”

“What kind of youkai is it?”

“It’s a reanimated corpse... I guess. Some sort of mage puts a talisman on them, and then is able to control them freely... Basically, it’s like a remote control zombie. This one’s foreign to me, too, so I couldn’t go into detail about the origins of it and whatnot.”

“Hmm... Is there anythin’ a bit more distinctive about it?” Roroa asked.

“Well...” I wracked my brain. “Because of rigor mortis, they can’t bend their arms and legs, so they hop along like this, with their arms outstretched.”

I stood up and imitated the child jiangshi from an old movie my grandpa had, doing the jiangshi jump in time with a children’s song about pigeons. That caught Roroa’s attention, and her eyes sparkled.

“What’s that all about?! It’s an awfully cheerful ghost.”

“No, scary jiangshi are properly scary, though...”

Hrm... I feel like I'm not communicating this right. The only image I had of jiangshi was that movie, and I lacked the information to correct it. Maybe this was what it was like when foreigners got the wrong idea about samurai.

“Got anythin’ else?”

“Well, there’s this one ghost that’s a giant single eye that says, ‘You damn lolicons’...”

That was how I ended up explaining the ghosts of my old world to Roroa. Because my tastes were a tad eccentric, I may have gotten riled up and given her some wrong information, too. The result of all this was some simple costumes for the jiangshi, tengu, wolf man, wolf woman, among others. But in addition to those costumes, Roroa’s company also sold an encyclopedia of Earth’s youkai, which was well-received. That caused a ghost story boom in the castle, and...

“Souma! Would you stop trying to turn the royal capital into a den of demons?!”

In the end, I ended up getting another lecture from Liscia.

The Ghost Festival (The Republic Team’s Perspective)

“Ookyakya! This is getting exciting!” Kuu was enjoying himself as he looked around at all the hustle and bustle of the festival.

The trio of Kuu, Taru, and Leporina had come to the first Parnaam Ghost Festival, which was being sponsored by Souma, as regular attendees. Leporina, who was wearing a short black dress with bat wings growing out of the back of it spun around in front of Kuu.

“Hey, hey, Master Kuu, does this suit me?”

She was wearing a devil girl costume. The thin dress accentuated her figure, making Kuu avert his eyes awkwardly.

“W-Well... I guess it’s okay?” *Thump!* “Ow!”

He turned around in the direction of the blow to his head, and there, wearing a pointy witch’s hat and black cape, looking a little dissatisfied, was Taru.

“Wh-What’s the big idea, Taru?!”

“You don’t understand how women feel, Master Kuu. You have to look at her properly.”

“You can say that all you want, but Leporina’s...”

“Not just your bodyguard anymore?” Taru asked him with unswerving eyes. Kuu was speechless.

A little before Souma’s wedding ceremony, Kuu had gotten engaged to his childhood friends Taru and Leporina. Basically, that meant that this Ghost Festival was his first festival date with his two fiancées. Up until now, because of his feelings for Taru, even if he noticed his own affection for Leporina, he had done his best not to look at her as a woman. But now that he had accepted her as a fiancée with Taru’s blessing, he had to see her as a woman.

I tried to ignore her all this time... Can you blame me for being confused?

Leporina smiled, as if she could see right through what Kuu was thinking. “I get it, Master Kuu. You’re feeling shy, right?”

“D-Don’t be stupid. Why would I feel that way towards you...?”

“Hee hee, you can look more, you know? I dressed up to get you to compliment me, after all,” Leporina said, striking a pose.

“Oh, yeah? Bring it on! In that case, I’m gonna look!”

Kuu stared hard at Leporina. She had the beauty of a model, with her arms and legs being long and slender, but the rest of her body sticking out in all the right places...

“Take that!”

“Ow! Again, Taru?!”

Taking another smack upside the head, Kuu’s eyes watered a little as he protested the abuse, but Taru held her staff tight as she looked away peevishly.

“When you only look at Leporina... it kind of makes me mad.”

“Isn’t that kind of unreasonable?!”

“...I dressed up today, too.”

“You dressed up, huh?” Kuu said as he rubbed his head. “Yeah, I think you look cute, too, of course. You usually dress like a boy, but today you’re dressed up as a girl, even if it’s as a witch. There’s no way you wouldn’t look cute.”

There was a moment of surprise, then, “...Thanks.”

Taru remained expressionless, but there was something not unpleasant about her expression as she thanked him. When she saw the look on Taru’s face, Leprina’s cheeks puffed up with dissatisfaction.

“Murgh... How is it you can be so forthcoming with praise for Taru? You didn’t even hesitate.”

Kuu let out his trademark monkey-like laugh. “Hey, I’ve been trying to woo her for way longer. How could I be embarrassed about it now?”

“Whaaaa, is that how it works?”

“Yeah. Complimenting you, on the other hand... I feel like you’re going to give me a smug look, so it feels complicated doing it.”

“Wait, what does that mean?!”

“...I kind of get where you’re coming from.”

“Even you, Taru?!”

The unexpected betrayal from Taru left Leporina the one on the verge of tears this time. But seeing Leporina with tears in her eyes, Kuu and Taru both agreed that it was kind of unfair how cute she looked.

They looked at one another, then each offered a hand to Leporina.

“Come on, don’t mope forever. Let’s go, Leporina.”

“We don’t get to have a festival every day. We’ve got to enjoy it.”

Looking at the hands she’d been offered, Leporina wiped her tears and smiled.

“Okay! I wouldn’t want you leaving me behind, after all!”

With that said, she grasped both their hands firmly.

The relationship between the three childhood friends seemed unchanged, and yet maybe a little different... Well, that was about how it was.



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by Dojyomaru

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