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Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

XIII



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Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

XVIII





Sha Bon



"I...
**KNOW
YOUR
RESOLVE,
LADY
SHABON."**

Ki Shun



HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki



IT WASN'T WIND THAT OYAMIZUCHI SPEWED AT US; IT WAS A THICK PILLAR OF WATER ACCOMPANIED BY A SOUND AKIN TO A JET ENGINE FIRING.

Juna Souma



Souma A. Elfrieden

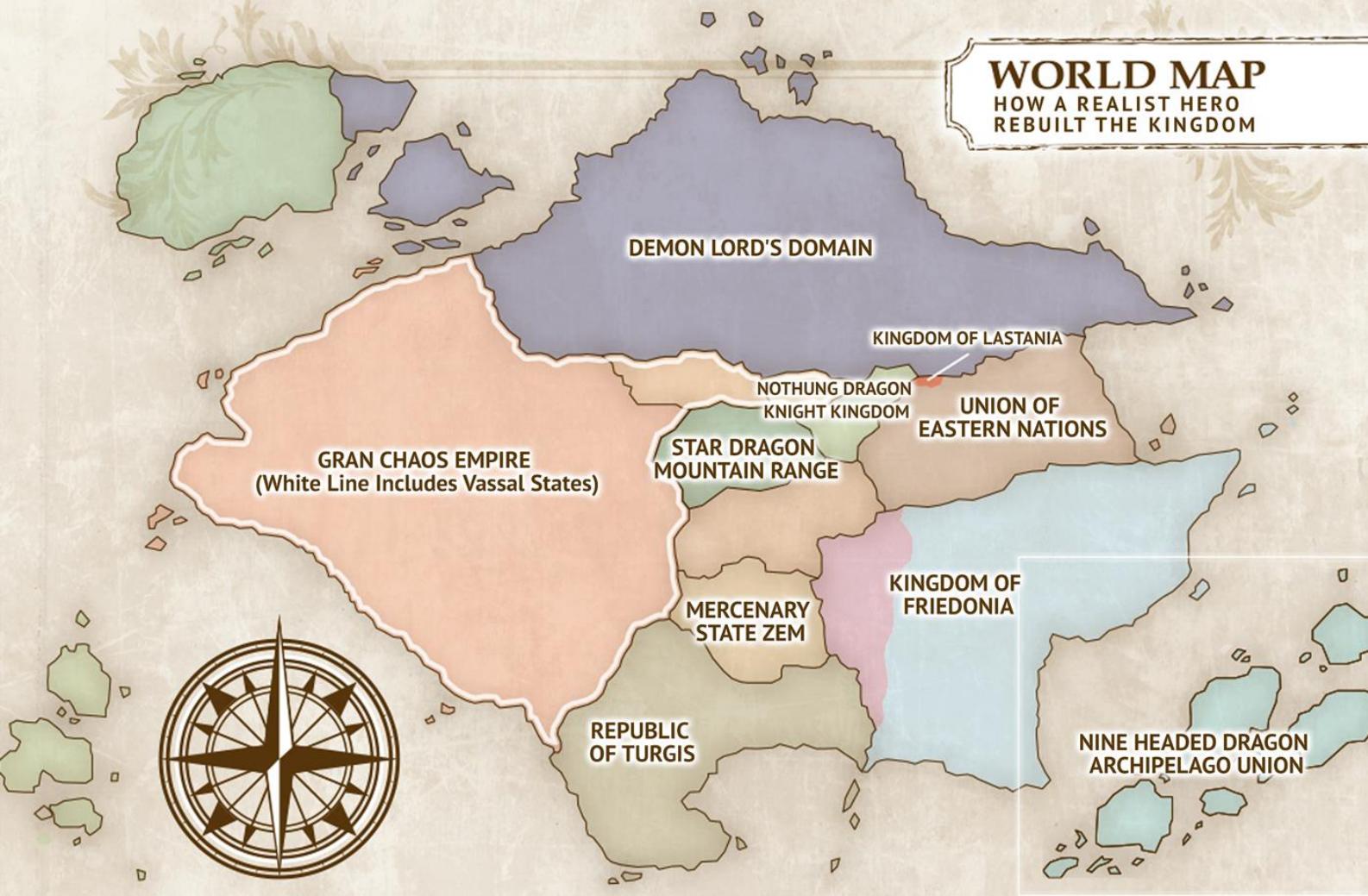


Excel Walter



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.



Ki Shun

One of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union's island chiefs. Escorts Sha Bon to the Kingdom of Friedonia.



Castor

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



Ruby Magna

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



Yuriga Haan

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



Maria Euphoria

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



Sha Bon

Daughter of Shana, the king of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. Seeks an audience with Souma, prepared to offer herself up to save her people.



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.



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.



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.



Ichihha 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.



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Prologue: Storm -enemy attack-

That night, an island in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago was assaulted by an intense storm. Though not as strong as a typhoon, the island was still pounded by heavy wind and rain. The island folk took shelter in their wooden houses, listening to the sound of the buildings creaking under the strain of the wind and the rain beating on their doors. It was a sleepless night filled with worrying their homes might collapse.

“Daddy, I’m scared...”

A family of two parents and two children were huddled together. Holding his youngest tight, the man who was master of the house said, “It’ll take more’n this wind to blow our house away.”

“Come now, don’t be scared. Go to sleep,” said the children’s mother, trying to put them to bed, and then it happened.

Whoosh... Thud! Ker-crack! Wind howled, and a sound like a violent crash shook the island. Almost like the impact from being shelled by a warship.

“Wh-What was that sound just now?” Even the man was scared by that impact. “That weren’t no natural sound.”

“Dear, you don’t think it’s... *that*, do you?”

The blood drained from the man’s face at his wife’s question, and he hugged his children tighter, unable to respond. This family’s battle against terror would last until dawn.

The rain and wind let up as morning approached. With the quiet breaking their sense of tension, the man and his family fell asleep. Later, as the light streamed in, the man woke and went outside to find skies so clear that yesterday’s storm seemed like it was all a lie.

As he was still feeling relieved to have made it through the night, he noticed there was a disturbance down by the shore. Hurrying to the beach where people were, he found other islanders gathered together, murmuring among themselves.

“Did somethin’ happen?”

As the man approached, one of the other men who were already there turned around. “Oh, did somethin’ ever. Take a gander at this.”

He was pointing at a large hunk of stone, which was more than twice the height of a grown man, sticking straight up out of the beach. The man cocked his head to the side as he looked at it.

“There weren’t nothin’ like this here yesterday, right?”

“Mm-hm. Mm-hm. There’re chunks scattered all over, too.”

Looking around, he could see more pieces made of the same kind of rock lying around on top of the sand. What was more, the ornamentation on them made it clear that they weren’t just hunks of stone. They were clearly man-made.

The man felt like he recognized this hunk of rock.

“Could this be... a stone bridge?” he asked.

Looking amongst the rubble, he could make out what appeared to be remnants of an arch structure.

“Mm-hm.” The other man nodded. “We was all sayin’ it looks like a stone bridge.”

“But there weren’t nothin’ like a stone bridge on this island, right?”

“There weren’t. A little island like ours never needed a big, impressive bridge. A wooden one’s been good enough.”

“Well, what’s this stone bridge doin’ here, then?”

“We dunno. That’s why we was all talkin’ about it.”

If this were just an ordinary boulder, they might have imagined it being brought by the storm or a landslide, but what were they to make of a stone bridge, something they didn't have on this island, stabbing into their beach?

The islanders all cocked their heads to the side in confusion.

"This is terrible! Terrible!" a young man ran over shouting.

"Oh, what's terrible now? You've gone right pale," the man asked him.

The young man caught his breath, then explained, "They say... 'it' appeared on the neighboring island, last night."

"""?!"""

Immediately the air grew tense, and the islanders pale. People in the archipelago were so terrified of this dreadful being that just saying the word 'it' was enough to send fear down their spines. Had he said it was the neighboring island? Was that the slightly larger island, visible from this one?

In the dead of night, during the storm, it appeared close to this island. If things had gone just a little differently, they might have been attacked instead.

The young man said, "Things are a real mess over there. They say it leveled half the island."

"No way..."

"What're we gonna do...?"

The islanders seemed dejected.

"H-Hey..." the man, who was still looking at the bridge, said. Everyone turned to look at him. He pointed at the bridge. "Isn't this the bridge from the neighboring island?"

"....."

It can't be... said no one. They started to think it looked like the bridge on the neighboring island. But still. Even if the other island was only a stone's throw away, what was their bridge doing stabbing into this island's beach?

"Now that I think of it, there was this wooshin' sound, and a loud impact durin' the storm last night," the man said, recalling the night before.

When they thought about what his account meant... they all shuddered as one.

"You're not tellin' me it threw it?"

"This huge thing, over the sea?"

"No, no... I can't believe it..."

However, none of them could completely deny it.



Chapter 1: Wrath -anger-

Meanwhile, around that same time, in the Kingdom of Friedonia, a girl who looked like a mermaid princess, and a young man who looked like a samurai with white fox ears, were bowing before Souma.

The girl was Shabon, daughter of King Shana, who ruled the hostile state known as the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, while the young man with the white fox ears was her bodyguard, Kishun.

Souma couldn't believe what Shabon had just said to him.

"Please, use me as your 'tool.'"

Whaa? My tool? he thought. For a moment, he didn't even understand the words. He was doing his best not to let it show, but internally, he was confused. *Normal girls don't tell you to use them as your tools, right?* She probably wasn't some kind of total masochist, and even if she was, she wouldn't be asking him for it with such lifeless eyes.

It was a problematic statement from a girl in the troublesome position of being the daughter of the Nine-Headed Dragon King. What was he supposed to do about this?

He glanced at Hakuya, who looked back at him with a serious look on his face.

"I sympathize with what you must be feeling, but please restrain yourself for now." was what his eyes said.

I exhaled, trying to calm myself, then rested my elbow on the armrest of my throne to look intimidating as I asked Shabon, "...What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean it literally. You may use me however you please," Shabon answered, placing her hand over her heart. "My existence should be of use to you who are about to fight my father... to fight the Nine-Headed Dragon King. When you declare war, when you conquer him, and when you need to administrate the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago after the war, I will provide you the justification you need. I will act however you request. If you do not wish to become an invader, please, put my head on a pike. You can say that I came to you for assistance to fight the Nine-Headed Dragon King."

I stared at her, my mind trying to assess what she just said.

"If you wish for the Nine-Headed Dragon King's throne, I will marry you. In that event, my body... will be yours to do with as you will. It will be a political marriage, but... if you wish to use me as your concubine, then..."

"...What is this nonsense?"

No, seriously... What was this girl even saying? Not only had she suddenly come to the country that was about to fight hers, but she was talking about tools, justifications, political marriages, and concubines. I didn't get it... Well, no, there were other girls who had said similar things to me before: Roroa, and Saint Mary of the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State.

But Roroa hadn't had this tragic air about her, and even the doll-like Mary had been doing it for her beliefs and her duty. They didn't have a look on their faces like they had given up on everything like Shabon here did.

"From what I'm hearing, it sounds like you approve of our country invading yours. I had expected you were here to make a direct appeal to me to stop the war, but that's not the case, is it?"

Shabon shook her head sadly. “I am well aware that war is inevitable at this point. Because you all must have put a considerable amount of work into preparing for the battles to come.”

“...What made you think that?”

“The actions of the Gran Chaos Empire,” Shabon stated clearly with sadness in her eyes. “Recently, we have received frequent envoys from the Empire. When they meet our island chiefs, they say, ‘It won’t be long before the Kingdom sends a fleet to this country,’ and press us to sign the Mankind Declaration.”

...But I know all that. We were the ones who’d asked them to do it, after all. Well, it sounded like Maria had kept her word. But I put my hand on my chin and looked thoughtful to hide the fact that I was thinking about that.

“The Empire, you say... And? Are there islands that have agreed to that?”

“No. The island chiefs are ill-tempered and fiercely independent. They will not submit to anyone. The more the Empire tries to impress upon them the danger of the Kingdom, the more they unify to resist you without Imperial assistance. They have been sending boats to the Nine-Headed Dragon King.”

All according to plan so far, huh? I thought, but...

“However, I believe there is some sort of plot at work.” Shabon lowered her eyes and shook her head. “The Empire is sending their envoys to every island that might have an island chief, regardless of size. An island’s size is reflective of its population, and therefore its military power. Even if the chief of a small island wanted to sign the Mankind Declaration, it’s simply not possible if the chief of a larger nearby island is against it. Because there is the risk of them being attacked. Basically, attempting to persuade smaller islands when they cannot persuade the bigger ones is doomed to failure.”

Ah, so some islands are small enough that they are ruled by another island's chief?

“Despite this, the Empire is sending envoys to every island chief at the same time. Why would they do something that they must know is futile...? In my view, they aim not to have us join the Mankind Declaration, but to inflame a sense of crisis about the Kingdom, and gather all the Archipelago’s forces under the Nine-Headed Dragon King. And yet, there is no benefit to the Empire in doing that. If anyone has something to gain, it’s either the king, who gains more forces, or... Sir Souma. It is your kingdom,” Shabon said, looking straight at me. “The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago has many small islands and straits, and an abundance of places to hide soldiers and warships. Even if you were to defeat the king in the first battle at sea, if the remaining forces went into hiding, it would take time to subjugate them.”

“I see... And?”

“From your perspective, you want to catch as many of the soldiers and ships in the first battle, and destroy them. Perhaps you had the Empire help inflame a sense of crisis, in order to gather as many of our forces under the king as possible. Because you are confident in your ability to defeat the amassed forces. Am I wrong?”

“...Hmm.”

I was genuinely impressed. It looked like this princess wasn’t just some Pollyanna who had stupidly come to visit a country that hers would soon be at war with. I couldn’t give her anywhere close to full marks for the answer, but she had managed to discern some of our intentions.

But... that made this make even less sense.

“If we assume your deduction is correct, I’m a villain seeking to ensnare the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago in my trap. Why would you ask a man like that to use you as his tool?”

“Because... This is the last way I can think of to protect my people. I’ve seen how the people of the islands have suffered all this time.” Shabon clasped her hands in front of her chest as if she was praying. “The poor catch and inability to send the boats out, the way the Nine-Headed Dragon King raised taxes, the shadow of impending war with the Kingdom... All these things have sent the people into depression; particularly the lack of fish catches and inability to send boats out. Our connection to the sea is so deep that they say we live with the sea, and our souls return to the sea in death. Now, we find ourselves cut off from it. Most of us spend our days not filled with anger or sorrow, but emptiness.”

The grip of Shabon’s interlocked fingers tightened, as though she were trying to restrain herself.

“I have no power. I warned my father repeatedly, as his daughter, to at the very least avoid war with the Kingdom, but he would not hear me out. I believe my father... the Nine-Headed Dragon King is heading in a progressively worse direction. However, I lack the power to stop him, or to save the people from their suffering.”

“...And that’s why you came to me?”

“Yes.”

I see... If I compared what I knew of the situation inside the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago with Shabon’s statements, I could get a vague sense of what she was trying to accomplish. She probably had no ulterior motives. She had told me everything. She had come to seek salvation... Not for herself, but for the people of her country. For that, she was willing to become my tool. She was prepared to be a sacrifice.

This really is... troublesome. Even as I was thinking that, Shabon continued with her plea.

“I believe one of your wives is the former Princess of Amidonia.”

Huh? Why bring Roroa up?

“I have heard that after making Lady Roroa your fianceé, you took care of the lives of the people in the former Principality of Amidonia. If my life alone is enough to quell your wrath towards the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union... *I will offer myself up to you, just as Lady Roroa once did.*”

“...Eh?”

“So, please... I do not care what happens to me. I would like you to take care of the people—my people...”

What did this girl just say? Just like... Roroa?

“**Don’t you dare make light of my wife,**” I bellowed.

Shabon shuddered at my words. Even I was surprised by how much anger there was in my voice. *Anger... Yeah, I was really pissed.*

Normally, I wouldn’t let my emotions show during an audience like this, but it had caught me by surprise, and I wasn’t able to control myself. Hakuya, Aisha, and Kishun all stared at me wide-eyed. The silence in the room was oppressive.

“S-Sorry! I apologize if I said something to offend you!” Unable to bear the silence, Shabon took a knee and bowed her head. Kishun followed his master’s example and did likewise.

Augh... Damn it! This wasn’t an environment conducive to talking anymore. I mean, I hadn’t fully suppressed my anger yet, either.

“Madam Shabon.”

“Y-Yes.”

“Return to your country,” I said, rising from my throne. When Shabon looked up, her face was filled with despair, as if the ground had just crumbled beneath her.

“N-No... Sir Souma—”

“We have nothing more to discuss. You should return to your country.”

Interrupting Shabon as she tried to continue, I turned around to make clear this talk was at an end, and walked out of the audience chamber.

“Please, see these two out of the castle,” Hakuya ordered the guards, then came after us, too. When he caught up to us in the hallway, he immediately protested, “Sire, it is completely unacceptable for you to become so emotional during an audience with a foreign dignitary like that.”

“...Sorry. The blood rushed to my head when I thought she was insulting Roroa,” I stopped walking and apologized. I knew I had blown up way too easily back there.

It probably had something to do with my exhaustion and Shabon’s lack of malice. If she held some ill-will towards us, then no matter how much my blood was boiling, I would never have let it show. Even if I was thinking, *I swear I’ll get you for that later.*

But Shabon had no malice, she had simply misunderstood. That made it all the more galling.

Hakuya sighed and shrugged. “...Though, I can’t imagine the result would have changed considerably even if you hadn’t gotten angry.”

“Well, it wasn’t a proposition we could possibly accept.”

“Still, there are better ways to express that.”

“I already acknowledged I was wrong, okay? So, what do you think?” I asked Hakuya. “Will those two go back to their country quietly?”

“It would make things less troublesome if they would, but... I doubt it.”

“Go figure... From the look on her face, she must feel pretty cornered. I just hope what happened doesn’t push her to do anything weird...”

Like ending her own life, or making that beastman with the white fox ears commit seppuku to atone for his master’s indiscretion... If something like that happened, it could impede our plans.

“Hakuya, you have the Black Cats watching them, right?”

“Two of them, at all times. If they try to do anything strange, they’ll be stopped. I will speak to them personally and smooth things over in regards to your anger, too.”

“...Sorry.”

“It’s my job as prime minister to support you, sire. I know you must be tired from the ongoing preparations. Why don’t you take the rest of the day off?”

“Yeah... I think I’ll do that.” With that, I was finally able to smile. “I think it was Roroa’s turn tonight. Maybe I’ll burn off this frustration by spoiling her rotten.”

“Ohh... Sire, it’s my turn tomorrow night! Give me some of that, too!”

While Aisha and I were talking about that...

“...As you please,” Hakuya said, sounding absolutely done with us, and then left.

Incidentally, Roroa heard I got mad on her behalf and was really happy about it that night. She said, “Thanks, Darlin’,” and really let me pamper her.

◇ ◇ ◇

“How could I have been so foolish...?”

Shabon was lying on her side in bed, her eyes filled with tears, in a high-class room she was occupying in Parnam’s castle town. The teardrops streamed sideways across her face to stain the clean white sheets.

Having been rushed out of the castle by the guards, Shabon and Kishun slumped their shoulders and returned to the inn they were staying at. This lodging had been arranged for them by the Kingdom. They had come to the capital in secret, so that the Nine-Headed Dragon King wouldn’t find out, and requested an audience with Souma. Because it would be bad if outsiders discovered they were in this country, they were assigned this inn, which was well-equipped to preserve the secret, as a place to stay.

“I absolutely had to make the negotiations a success... In order to avoid the worst possible outcome... That is what I came to this country for, but... my careless remark angered Sir Souma... Honestly, I am such a fool, and so powerless... I...”

Shabon pounded the bed as she sobbed. How vexing and mortifying her own powerlessness must have felt. Kishun watched Princess Shabon with a pained look in his eyes.

“Lady Shabon... If this is too painful for you, should we return to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago?”

“...Ngh, we cannot do that.” She looked up at him with her tearstained face. “There is not a moment left to lose. We came here to prevent the worst outcome, after all.”

“In that case, all we can do is meet with King Souma and speak with him once more.”

“Do you... think he will be willing to meet us?”

“That will likely depend on how angry he is. Do you understand why King Souma was angry, Lady Shabon?” Kishun asked, and Shabon shook her head limply.

“It embarrasses me to admit it, but I do not know why he was so angered. I know that I said something inappropriate, and it was in reference to Lady Roroa.”

“I have heard that after the war with the Principality of Amidonia, Queen Roroa betrothed herself to Sir Souma along with her country in order to protect her people. This is just a rumor, but they also say King Souma is lustful, and invaded the Principality out of his desire for her. Though, from the way he reacted, I suspect that rumor is nothing but meaningless gossip.”

“...I must have shown too little understanding of his feelings. The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago is a secluded country. I let the rumors I heard lead me astray. And that angered Sir Souma... I am truly... a fool.”

Shabon lowered her face and clenched the sheets tightly. Seeing her look so weak, Kishun felt driven to do something, anything to help.

“...I will head to Parnam Castle, and seek another audience with King Souma, no matter what it takes. Lady Shabon, please wait here.”

“Kishun!” Hearing the resolve in his voice, Shabon shot to her feet and grabbed him by the clothing. “You’re not going to risk your life, are you? You can’t die for me!”

“If I could show our contrition through my death, and so grant your wish, I would do it. However, I doubt that would quell Sir Souma’s anger. If anything, it would worsen your position. I can only make a sincere request that he hear us.”

“Kishun...”

“I... know your resolve, Lady Shabon.” Kishun placed his hand on Shabon’s, which quivered with unease. “And I have sworn to protect you. I will bring you before King Souma again, without fail.”

With that, Kishun left Shabon’s room. All Shabon could do was clasp her hands in front of her chest and pray.

◇ ◇ ◇

Kishun left the inn and headed towards Parnam Castle once more, but as Shabon’s attendant who had come to the country in secret with her, he obviously had no contacts in the Kingdom. That left him with nothing to do but throw himself on the mercy of Souma and his retainers.

He sat down on the side of the road and pressed his hand to the ground, bowing his head towards the direction of the castle. He stopped in that position, as if frozen solid. The people going to the castle glanced at him as they went by, but Kishun did not move in the slightest. Obviously, if a suspicious individual was near the gates, the guards couldn’t just leave him alone. First, they would speak to him gently, and if that failed, they would resort to force. The guards approached Kishun to tell him to remove himself.

“If you have business in the castle, you are to submit a request, and then leave for the day. You may return if permission is granted.”

However, Kishun did not listen.

“I come out of a desire to apologize to His Majesty! Please! Please allow me to see him just once! I am resolved to stay here until the day that I am allowed to!”

He could say that, but it was the guards’ job to protect the gates. Normally, someone like this would be removed, no questions asked, but the guards apparently had orders from above. One of them went inside the castle to check, and returned some time later with another person.

That person bowed his head and spoke to Kishun, “This is not going to do anything to improve his impression of you.”

“...Prime Minister.”

Kishun looked up to see Hakuya, the Black-robed Prime Minister. Kishun promptly slammed his palms on the ground again, and lowered his forehead to the dirt.

“I wish to profusely apologize for the offense Lady Shabon has caused! Lady Shabon also feels shame for her carelessness! If you wish us to take responsibility for what we did, let me offer up my head! So, please... allow her just one more opportunity to speak with Sir Souma!” Kishun pleaded desperately.

“Taking your head would be of no benefit to us, you realize,” Hakuya said with a sigh. “Besides, do you even understand why His Majesty was so upset?”

“Well...”

“An apology is meaningless if it’s only surface level,” Hakuya told him quietly. However, Kishun was not going to back down.

“Despite that, Lady Shabon’s resolve is genuine. She truly is prepared to offer herself to Sir Souma to protect the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago and its people,” Kishun pleaded sincerely, clutching the dirt with his hands.

It was probably true. Hakuya shook his head in dismay.

“That spirit of self-sacrifice... may be beautiful. However, I think self-sacrifice on the part of one who stands above others can also, at the same time, be a dereliction of duty. I would also say that is the definitive difference between Her Majesty, Queen Roroa, and Madam Shabon.”

“Huh?! What do you mean...?”

As Kishun remained on his knees, pleading to learn more, Hakuya said quietly, "...There are too many eyes here. Please, come to my room first."

"I will. Thank you very much."

The two of them relocated to Hakuya's room.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Please, try it."

"Oh, how kind of you... I will."

Hakuya offered tea, and Kishun politely accepted it. Hakuya took a seat, and once he had relaxed a moment, said, "Now, as to what I was saying before..." and began to explain.

"I believe it's fair to say that both of them have put their lives on the line for their country. However, it looks to me as if Madam Shabon is in no position to do anything about the situation, and is merely clinging to His Majesty. To put it briefly, she has given up on solving the problem herself. Could we not say that she has run away from her responsibility as the daughter of the Nine-Headed Dragon King?"

"...!"

Kishun wanted to shout "*You're wrong!*" but the words would not come out. That was because he thought, *If I change my perspective, I can see how it might look that way.* He hung his head limply, gazing down at the ripples on the tea in his cup.

Hakuya continued in an admonishing tone.

"Roroa, on the other hand, was incredible. The Kingdom had won the war with the Principality of Amidonia, and held an overwhelming advantage. Yet, despite that, Roroa used her own connections to drive her political opponent and brother, Julius, out of the country, and requested the complete annexation of the Principality."

"That's... incredible leadership. It's as if she were commanding an army."

"Yes. The Kingdom was attempting to absorb Van, the Principality's capital, without violating the Mankind Declaration at the time, so we were in no position to reject her request. If we refused, we would be condemned for the inconsistency with how we'd handled the annexation of Van. Her Majesty, Queen Roroa, appeared before Sir Souma just after the complete annexation of the Principality. To ask His Majesty to take her as his queen."

There was a bitter smile on Hakuya's face as he remembered it.

"...She sure got us. If he had refused at that point, the people of the recently acquired Principality were sure to get violent. She upended the game board. The Kingdom, which had been set to profit at the Principality's expense, instead had to guarantee their protection. His Majesty himself said, 'I thought I'd beaten the Principality, but then, at the very end, I lost to Roroa.'"

Hakuya set down his cup and looked Kishun in the eye.

"That is the difference between Queen Roroa and Madam Shabon. Madam Shabon gave up on everything. Queen Roroa did the opposite. She risked her life to win. Yet Madam Shabon said, 'just as Lady Roroa once did.' His Majesty cares deeply for his family. Madam Shabon's words felt like an insult to Roroa, who defeated the Kingdom all on her own. That was what got him so angry."

Once he heard everything Hakuya had to say, Kishun clenched his teacup.

"Don't you dare make light of my wife."

He had come to learn what had made Souma so upset. It was true, Shabon and Roroa's resolve had been different. He couldn't blame him for being angry when she equated the two.

Seeing Kishun completely deflated, Hakuya told him, “His Majesty said, ‘If Shabon will not return to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, I am prepared to meet her just once more tomorrow.’”

“...?!” Kishun looked up in surprise, and Hakuya stared straight back into his eyes.

“He also said, ‘If she comes to the meeting without the proper resolve again, I will have her deported this time.’ Please, impress what I just told you upon Madam Shabon.”

“...Yes, sir! It will be my pleasure!” Kishun bowed repeatedly, and then the guards led him out of the castle.

Having seen Kishun off outside the door to his room, Hakuya sighed.

I can't see them packing up and going home quietly. It's troublesome, but we may need to rework our plans to take Madam Shabon and Sir Kishun into consideration...

This was going to take a lot of contemplation. Hakuya felt daunted by what was to come.



Chapter 2: Cause -unknown-

The next day, having made the decision to start over on talks with Shabon, nearly the exact same group of people were gathered in the audience hall as the day before. If there was one difference, it was that Liscia was sitting in the queen's throne beside mine. I chose not to have her participate last time because we didn't know what our guests' intentions were, but now that we knew for sure that Shabon and Kishun had no hostile intent, I wanted her present. Carla was watching the children.

Liscia's presence seemed to have deflated Shabon even more than she had been before. That was likely because of what she had said about me using her as my tool, and that if I wanted the crown of the Nine-Headed Dragon King, she would marry me. Those statements ran the risk of upsetting Liscia, and if she offended the first primary queen who managed the household, it wasn't hard to imagine the difficult life that might await her here even if I did marry her.

Liscia smiled at Shabon. That was probably her way of trying to say, "You don't have to be so scared," but Shabon seemed even more frightened when she saw it... *What a headache.*

Anyway, with everyone present, the meeting began with Shabon bowing her head apologetically.

"Kishun relayed the Prime Minister's words to me, and I have learned just how inappropriate what I said was, and why it displeased Sir Souma. Such ignorance brings shame on me. I am terribly sorry."

"No, I let my anger get the best of me and was too harsh, Madam Shabon. I'm sorry, too," I apologized for my short temper. With that settled, we decided to continue the discussion that got interrupted the day before.

"Now... Madam Shabon, you said you were prepared to be my tool; is that still the case?"

"Yes. That is why I came."

No change of heart, huh? It wasn't the kind of thing where she could just say, "Yeah, no, let's forget I ever said that..." and the two of them must have had considerable resolve to come all this way, so that probably should have been obvious.

So... that left the problem of how to handle her.

"I heard about your offer from Souma... I mean His Majesty, but are you sure you're okay with that?" Liscia asked, looking at Shabon with concern.

The sudden question made Shabon jump a little, but she still looked up at Liscia from the bottom of the stairs and timidly nodded her head. "...Yes. Because this is the only way I have left to save my people."

"I can understand, as a fellow royal, how you could put your people before your own feelings. What first got me interested in His Majesty... my husband was that he had greater potential as a ruler compared to me or my father, and I thought he would be good for the country. Then, as we supported each other through difficult times, we were drawn to one another. It did start as a political engagement, but I think of my marriage with Souma as one for love. I'm sure the other queens feel the same."

Liscia looked over to Aisha, who gave a big nod. ...*It's kind of embarrassing hearing them fawn over me like this.*

Shabon looked a little bewildered. "Is... that how it was?"

"Yes. But from the look I see on your face, I can't imagine you being able to build a relationship like ours."

"Huh?!"

Liscia's rejection made the eyes of everyone in the room, including mine, go wide.

Ignoring our surprise, Liscia continued, "Political marriages are a fact of life for royalty. However, Madam Shabon, the sense of woe in your expression is palpable. I understand you must feel strained by the current situation, but if you come to us as a bride like this, you'll only cause the people of the Kingdom, as well as your own, to feel uneasy. Even if it is a political marriage, with all thought of romance set aside, the people involved need to be smiling—so that everyone knows it is a *happy* marriage."

Shabon lowered her eyes unable to find the words to respond.

"I can sense your woe even though you wear that fake smile on your face. Who do you think would be happy to marry someone with an expression like that? ...There's no happiness to be had there. Not for His Majesty, not for the children born to a loveless couple, not for the people of our two countries... and, most of all, not for you yourself... Just sadness for everyone involved."

"...Still!" Shabon clutched her own front collar as she shouted. "Still, this is the only way I have! I am the only payment I can offer you in exchange for saving the people of the archipelago! I know I'm the daughter of the Nine-Headed Dragon King, but when I'm working in defiance of my father, all I have is... my own body..."

She struggled to get those last words out. I'm sure that she felt cornered, and this was a decision she had come to after struggling considerably. But like Liscia said, her methods would leave too many people unhappy.

"Hey, Madam Shabon?"

"...What is it?"

"Is there not more to your story? I find there is something amiss with your words."

Shabon's shoulders quivered at my inquiry.

"During our meeting yesterday, you said this multiple times: What's causing the people in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago's suffering is 'The poor catch and inability to send the boats out.' Now, that makes it sound like the poor catch is what's keeping them from sending the boats out, but... that can't be right."

In the world I came from, there were fishermen who couldn't take their boats out because coming back empty-handed meant they couldn't afford to pay for gasoline. But in this world, the fishermen either used sea creatures to pull their boats, or rowed them by hand. In other words, the poor catch couldn't lead to a situation where they couldn't take the boats out. You'd think whether there was anything to catch or not, they should be able to take the boats out anytime they want.

When we talk about a poor catch, we're talking about not being able to catch much of anything while fishing. If the boats couldn't go out at all, they couldn't fish, so there was no catch to be poor. *Now, is that just Shabon misspeaking...?* Probably not.

"If what you've told me is true, here's what it means: There is a poor catch, and you are unable to take out the boats, and these things are both happening at the same time."

"....."

"Hakuya, show me the minutes from yesterday's talks."

"Yes, sire." Hakuya bowed, then presented me with a sheet of paper. On it was my conversation with Shabon yesterday. Though it was an unofficial meeting, we still kept records. I accepted the piece of paper and looked over it.

"Here's what you said. 'The poor catch and inability to send the boats out, the way the Nine-Headed Dragon King raised taxes, the shadow of impending war with the Kingdom... All these things have

sent the people into depression.' You could interpret those words as you seeking my help to end the Nine-Headed Dragon King's tyranny. However, it's hard to imagine he's responsible for all of what you say. The poor catch is a natural phenomenon, and it would be impossible for him to prevent people across the entire archipelago from being able to take their boats out."

I paused for a moment to let it sink in.

"If, as you say, the people of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago live as one with the sea and hate to be separated from it, they would resist if anyone tried to keep them from taking their boats out. Each of the islands has a lot of independence to begin with, so there's no way the island chiefs would obey. On top of that, there's also the situation with boats coming into the Kingdom's waters. They seem to come with military escorts." I took a deep breath and then, resting my chin on my palm, told Shabon my conclusion. "If I consider all of this, there must be something going on in the archipelago that means *ordinary people can't take their ships out*. ...Or am I wrong?"

Shabon bowed her head deeply. "Your keen insight is most impressive. It is exactly as you say, Sir Souma."

She sounded impressed. *Keen insight, huh?* She was praising me for it, but it wasn't true. I acted like I had inferred that from what she said, but I already knew about the situation. However, if I told her that, it was possible they would search for the source of my information, and that was likely to affect my plans, so I acted like I just figured it out. I had already told the other people on our side, too.

Making sure not to let those thoughts show on my face, I said, "Madam Shabon, isn't it time you told me? What it is you're really asking me to do."

“...Very well.” Shabon raised her face, and looked directly into my eyes. “There is, indeed, something we have not yet told you, Sir Souma, but we did not mean to hide it. I intended to tell you if you accepted me... But before we talked about this, I needed to know just how set this country was on going to war with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. If you changed your plans based on what I’m about to tell you... everything would be in vain.”

“...Let’s hear it.”

I more or less knew the situation the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago was in. So, I knew what she was saying was correct.

“Thank you,” Shabon bowed, and then quietly spoke a name.
“Ooyamizuchi.”

In that moment, there was clear hostility in Shabon’s eyes.

“Though that is simply the name we have given it, it is the cause of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s troubles.”

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It all started before Sir Souma was entrusted with the throne. The first changes appeared in the sea.

One day, the number of large sea creatures in the waters around the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago dropped. Everything from the docile sea dragons, treasured for their utility in pulling warships, to large carnivores like megalodons (supermassive sharks) and giant squid that were the enemies of fishermen out at sea gradually disappeared. It is common when a predator experiences explosive growth in its population for their prey to rapidly decline. However, in the case of this phenomenon, there was no growth noted in any kind of animal.

No, all that happened was that the number of large sea creatures vastly decreased. There was no sign of other conceivable causes like

a red tide or undersea volcano eruption, so the reasons for it were a complete mystery. Then, after less than half a year, the large sea creatures vanished from the open sea, too. However, at this point, the islanders were still taking an optimistic view of the situation, because they were still able to catch fish.

Anyone who's been fishing long enough knows there are times when catches are good, and when they're bad. No matter how poor it was, though, if they just sat and waited, the fish always came back. The large sea creatures would only be gone temporarily... or so they thought. In fact, some of the fishermen welcomed these developments, because it was safer to fish without the dangerous carnivores around... Unbeknownst to them that the threat which had struck the large sea creatures would eventually come for them, too.

...The next change appeared in the fish.

They stopped being able to catch large ones. The fishermen were perplexed to find when they pulled in their nets, all they would catch were small fry. That was around when the incidents of fishermen who went out to the open sea vanishing started. At first, they thought it was an accident, or they had been captured after entering another island's "turf." However, on the day after a storm, the remains of a ship washed ashore and blew away any remaining optimism.

It was a large mercantile vessel, but it had been broken in half. Signs pointed to it not being the result of an accident or battle. The ship didn't seem to have any collision damage or been bombarded, but had been crushed with incredible force. Once they saw damage that couldn't have been caused by people, the islanders began to sense the existence of something out at sea. From then on, ships sent out from the archipelago caught small fry, and among them some would disappear, so the fishermen could no longer go out to sea.

That is why I spoke of the poor catch and the inability to take the boats out separately. Then, after more than a dozen ships were lost, a single survivor appeared. The man was a thief who had smuggled himself aboard a trade ship, hiding inside a large barrel to steal its cargo. When the ship went down, the man heard the screams of the crew from inside the barrel, and the sounds of the ship being destroyed.

Eventually, realizing his barrel had landed in the water, he opened the lid to see... Something the size of an island devouring the crew.

◇ ◇ ◇

"That is the first record of a person from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago encountering Ooyamizuchi," Shabon concluded, lowering her eyes sadly. "There have been more sightings since then. The name 'Ooyamizuchi' comes from an ancient legend handed down in the islands. I am told it means 'great dark god,' or perhaps, 'the serpent with eight large heads'..."

Okay... So, it was either Oo-yami-zuchi (big darkness god) or Oo-ya-mizuchi (big eight water serpent), huh?

I put my hand on my chin and asked Shabon, "You said a serpent with eight heads, but is this Ooyamizuchi really shaped like that?"

"There are reports that say so. But in most cases, they have only seen a silhouette in the fog. It is much too large to understand the whole form up close, so no report has had a full and clear understanding of its full form. Some say it is, 'Like a long-necked sea dragon,' while others say it is, 'Like a many-headed serpent with long necks.' The only thing we know for certain is that it is, 'Massive enough to be confused for an island.'"

"A creature the size of an island... huh?"

In my old world, we'd have called something like that a kaiju. What Shabon was saying matched the information we'd already gathered.

We had been aware there was something big and unknown in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, but could only speculate as to its form. I'd had Ichiha, our monster specialist, draw a number of sketches based on the rumors and then apply his monster identification system to them, but...

"You're suggesting that the disappearance of fish and large sea creatures is this Ooyamizuchi's fault, too?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Yes. It has the power to break ships in half. For Ooyamizuchi, the large sea creatures must have been a way to sate its appetite. It either consumed most of them, or they fled its range. We think that is why we stopped seeing large sea creatures in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago."

"That makes sense... So, once the large sea creatures were gone, it turned to fish, and then even fishermen, huh?"

From what I was hearing, it was much larger than Naden or Ruby in their dragon forms. Maybe it was even as large as Madam Tiamat in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. If so, I could see how it might eat all of the large sea creatures to extinction.

Then a pained look came over Shabon's face. "With a being like that out at sea, the people cannot take their boats out, and cannot fish. That is painful for our country... Probably more than you in the Kingdom would imagine."

"Do you mean not being able to fish is causing a food crisis?" Liscia asked, but Shabon shook her head.

"No. Though we do not have an abundance of food, no one is starving just yet. We grow grain and vegetables on land, and have chickens and their eggs, too. We can also catch small fish and seashells in the shallows."

"Huh? Then what is so painful for you?"

“Our hearts.” Shabon placed both hands over her chest. “The people of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago are blessed with the sea’s bounty, play in the waters, and our souls are said to return there when we die. That is how close our bond with the ocean is. For most of us, when we wake up in the morning, the first thing we see when we go outside is the sea. From their earliest days, children play in the water near their houses, and learn to swim there. Once they’re a little older, they take little boats out to go play on other islands. Many of the islands in the archipelago are close to each other, and the sea between them looks more like a river.”

Shabon’s descriptive scenes of her homeland with the peaceful sea and islands called a song to mind. It was called *The Bride of the Seto Inland Sea*, which my grandmother used to hum.

“The islanders take their boats out on joyous occasions like weddings, and at sorrowful times like funerals. The boat that carries the bride is decorated lavishly and circles the island where the shrine is rightward between morning and noon. Conversely, the boats that carry the dead are lit with lanterns and circle the island leftward by night. We share life and death with our boats. That is the way of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.”

“Hmm...”

It was interesting hearing about other cultures like this. Though I couldn’t think of one, there was probably a culture back in the world I came from that did something similar.

Then Shabon lowered her eyes with sadness.

“Despite that... Because of Ooyamizuchi, it is difficult to take the boats out, and we cannot fish. When we do go out to sea, we need to bring a military escort or to simply pray we are not attacked. The sea has been stolen from us. To the islanders, this situation is like...”

“...Like they can’t breathe?” I offered, but Shabon shook her head.

“No, I cannot say it is that serious. However, if I were to make an analogy... perhaps it is like when the rain continues for days, and you cannot see the sun. You look up to the sky, and slump your shoulders, saying, ‘Oh, I suppose I will not be seeing the sun today, either...’ That has continued for years now.”

“I can see how that would be... maddening, yeah.”

It might be better than no rain at all, and too much sunlight could be annoying, too, but never being able to see the sun through the clouds would be depressing. I could sort of understand... To think being unable to go out to sea was this important to those of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.

“Is that why your people are coming all this way to fish?”

I hadn’t understood why the islanders would cross the dangerous waters full of large sea creatures to fish near the Kingdom, but now that she told me the significance of taking the boats out, and of fishing in their culture, I got it. There were no reports of anyone from the Kingdom encountering this Ooyamizuchi yet. I didn’t get the sense that the Empire had received these sorts of reports when I was talking to Maria, either. That had to mean Ooyamizuchi’s territory was in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, and it wasn’t leaving it. That was why the islanders had come to safer waters near the Kingdom to fish.

In more distant waters, there was no Ooyamizuchi to attack them, but there could be large sea creatures. There was also the possibility of being arrested by the National Naval Defense Force for fishing illegally in our waters. They came despite those risks. That was just how significant fishing was to them.

“Because the Nine-Headed Dragon King knows that, he provided armed ships for their protection, you’re saying?”

“I believe that is the case, yes.”

“I see...”

Taking the ships out meant enough to the Nine-Headed Dragon King that he was even willing to have them fish illegally?

“Well, I still can’t approve of the current situation... So, when you said that you wanted me to use you as my tool before, was that supposed to be to oppose Ooyamizuchi?”

“Yes,” Shabon nodded. “If the Kingdom aims to bring the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago under its dominion, Ooyamizuchi will inevitably be a problem for you. One that I expect you will have to deal with in the not so distant future, Sir Souma. ...Even now, my Father stubbornly refuses to abandon his hostile stance against the Kingdom. If war is unavoidable, I hope to at least work with you to end it quickly, put the people at ease, and then use the power of the Kingdom to slay Ooyamizuchi...”

“Isn’t that all a bit convenient for you? Did you never consider that I might use you to dominate the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, and then just leave Ooyamizuchi alone?”

“I had heard you took good care of Lady Roroa and the people of Amidonia, so I believed you would not tyrannize an occupied territory like that.”

“...Should I be happy you have such a high opinion of me?”

“Though, even if I could not be certain of that, it was also true that this was the only way I could get the Kingdom’s military to take action...”

“You seem to have some awfully big expectations of Souma and the Kingdom’s fleet, Madam Shabon.” This time it was Liscia’s turn to ask a question. “Couldn’t you handle it with just the archipelago’s military? I’ve been led to believe that the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union is supposed to be a significant naval power.”

"If we could bring all of our forces to bear against it... perhaps. However, even now at this late date, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago is still unable to come together," Shabon put her hands together in front of her chest as she made her plea. "The islands are fiercely independent. For each of them, their island's problems are theirs, other islands' problems are not, and they are loath to intervene. Ooyamizuchi is an incredible threat, but is not an invader that threatens the islands' independence. That is why even the Nine-Headed Dragon King could not bring all of the islands together."

Which was why Shabon gave up on their ability to address the problem, and was prepared to offer herself and her country to me in exchange for the Kingdom's military putting down Ooyamizuchi. So that, at the very least, the people of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago would be preserved. It was a pessimistic approach, and she had a sense of woe about her, but she'd had some degree of resolve when she crossed the seas to come here.

I scratched my head awkwardly as I addressed her. "Madam Shabon."

"Yes."

"I can tell you right now, the decision you're making will lead to regrets later."

"...I came prepared for that," Shabon said, bowing deeply.

She really is troublesome. I glanced at Liscia and Hakuya. They both just nodded. That had to mean they were leaving the decision to me.

"I understand. If you're that insistent, then I'll cooperate with you."

"Th-Thank you so much!"

"But I'll only be using you for political ends. Not as my wife or concubine."

"That's...!" Shabon looked bewildered.

She had to know how strong my attachment to my family was by now; that was why she wanted to enter the family structure, even if it was as a concubine. Even if it meant giving her body to a man she didn't love. She thought that would guarantee the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago islanders' protection. But I wouldn't allow it.

I raised my hand, stopping Shabon from saying any more. "I promise you that, ultimately, I will fight Ooyamizuchi. However, until then, you are to obey all of our commands. Is that acceptable to you?"

"...Understood." Shabon lowered her head. I nodded, then looked at Kishun.

"Now, Kishun, was it? Seeing that you have accompanied Madam Shabon, can I assume you are all right with me using you and your island, as well?"

When I asked that, Kishun knelt, and put his hands together in front of him, above his head. "I have always been prepared to give my life for Lady Shabon. If she says she will serve you, then my life and land are yours to do with as you see fit."

He came prepared for that then, huh? This was how I gained the princess of an enemy country, and her servant, two pieces that were going to be a little awkward to use.



Chapter 3: Preparation -policy-

Once Shabon and Kishun were sent back to their inn, Liscia, Hakuya, and I headed for the castle's strategy room. When we arrived, the commander-in-chief of the National Defense Force, Excel; her second-in-command, Ludwin; the general of the National Land Defense Force, Hal's father Glaive; and finally Castor, the captain of the island-type carrier *Hiryuu*, were there. The highest authorities in the Kingdom's National Defense Force had gathered.

I put up a hand to stop them as they were about to stand and greet us, then took a seat myself.

“Sorry. Did we keep you waiting?” I asked.

Playing with her fan, “No, no,” Excel shook her head, “I’m sure it couldn’t be helped, considering our *unexpected guest*. You have my sympathies.”

“Ahaha… It’s true, I didn’t expect Princess Shabon.” I could only laugh weakly. “This despite thinking I was preparing for every eventuality, and eliminating all risks to the plan. Why is there always some unexpected trouble that comes along…?”

“That’s just how people are. Not everyone will act the way you think they will. We each have our own feelings, interests, and beliefs. What we place the most importance on among them differs, so of course there will be people who don’t do what we hope they will. Isn’t that right, Castor?”

“…Please, don’t make me answer that, Duchess Walter.”

Excel gave him a mischievous smile, and Castor looked like he had just bitten into something unpleasant. During Georg Carmine’s farcical rebellion, Castor had opposed us, prepared to martyr himself for his friend Georg, despite Excel’s attempts to persuade him not to.

Well, that was partially our fault for keeping him in the dark, so he wasn't alone in his responsibility for that.

Excel snapped her folding fan shut. "Now, sire, what will happen to our plan?"

"It will need some fine-tuning, I'm sure, but the overall outline won't change." I looked to Excel and Castor as I spoke. "Excel will act as the commander-in-chief of the fleet dispatched to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago and will ride aboard the *Albert II*. You will also take command in the expected naval battle, so I'm counting on you there."

"Understood."

"Captain Castor will manage the island-type carrier *Hiryuu*."

"Ohh, it's finally being deployed in battle, huh?" Castor said excitedly, and I nodded.

"Because I don't think we can afford to hold back. The second and third carriers, *Souryuu* and *Unryuu*, weren't ready in time, unfortunately."

"I can't wait. What equipment should we load on the wyverns?"

"We'll load them with the Little Susumu Mark V Light (a Maxwell-type propulsion device), but we aren't anticipating an air-to-air battle. Don't use them if you don't have to."

"Understood!"

I nodded to the two of them, then turned to Glaive next. Since he was a general in the army, he wouldn't be involved in a naval battle like this one. I had him come here because I had another mission for him.

"Glaive. Your son Halbert and his wife Ruby will be aboard the *Hiryuu*, but I want you to take a force north, and guard the border with the Union of Eastern Nations."

“The Union of Eastern Nations... You’re sure? Not the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago?”

Glaive seemed dubious, but I gave him a big nod.

“The reports from Julius and the Black Cats indicate something fishy is going on there. Mainly involving Fuuga Haan of Malmkhitan.”

“By Fuuga Haan, you mean the one who took back a portion of the Demon Lord’s Domain?”

“The very same. Because of that accomplishment, his fame inside the Union of Eastern Nations seems to have risen massively...”

On top of being an amalgamation of many medium to small states, the Union of Eastern Nations was also a complicated mess of marriages and alliances. There had been no way for any of them to grow larger before now, but... then Malmkhitan, led by Fuuga, appeared. He welcomed the refugees back into the land he reclaimed from the Demon Lord’s Domain. In turn, the refugees tried to rebuild their villages, towns, and countries, but it proved impossible for them to counter the threats of the Demon Lord’s Domain alone. In their situation, they couldn’t declare independence, and had no choice but to turn to the man who had reclaimed their territory for protection.

Basically, Fuuga had gained the countries and people whose land he reclaimed along with the territory. Because of that, Malmkhitan was now the largest country inside the Union of Eastern Nations. When people inside the union saw how Malmkhitan had grown, they were excited. Perhaps they could be the country to break out of their defensive posture, and confront the threat of the Demon Lord’s Domain. Maybe the Union of Eastern Nations could become the equal of the Kingdom in the south, or the Empire in the west? There were apparently more and more people inside the Union of Eastern Nations who thought that way.

“Those of the union found their hope in Fuuga; believing he might shatter the status quo, and open up a new world for them.”

“And... What do you think?” Liscia asked, but I could only shrug.

“If you’re asking whether I think that’s bad or good... I don’t know. For people like us on the outside, it may just look like they’re projecting their ideals onto him, but they may feel differently. I doubt it bothers Fuuga. Because they’re all praying for his rise. With the people lifting him up, he’ll feel like the times are pushing him to act, and may eventually start to think his actions are the will of Heaven. And so, a great man is born.”

“Now that you mention it, the Lunarian Orthodox saint said, ‘Living the way others want you to is wonderful, and something to be proud of’... or something like that.”

“Oh... She did, yeah. I’m impressed you remember, given how long ago it was.”

“Well, that was the day we, um... You know...” Liscia trailed off at the end there.

Oh! Come to think of it, that was our first night together. The reason I was even able to cross the line with Liscia was seeing Mary acting as a saint. Personally, I thought I wanted to be a person, and to be loved as a person. But I doubt Fuuga even worries about which he is.

“So, is this man, Fuuga, the one acting suspiciously?” Glaive asked, a serious expression on his face.

“Oh, no, no.” I waved my hand back and forth. “What’s suspicious is the people around him. Hakuya, explain, please.”

“As you wish. According to reports from Sir Kagetora of the Black Cats and Sir Julius of the Kingdom of Lastania, there are more and more people inside the Union of Eastern Nations who view Sir Fuuga as dangerous. Let us call them the anti-Fuuga faction.”

"Hm? But wasn't His Majesty just saying that people there view him as some sort of great man?"

"Yes," Hakuya nodded in agreement. "It's true that Sir Fuuga is seen as a great man by some in the Union of Eastern Nations. However, that is exactly what's earned him the ire of some of the kings and lords who belong to the union. Retaking territory from the Demon Lord's Domain is an incredible feat, and all the credit has gone to Fuuga. They can't be happy to know that their own subjects love, fear, and respect Fuuga even more than their own rulers."

"It's a case of, 'The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.' I guess that's true in any world..."

"Is that a proverb from your world, sire? I think it's quite apt," Hakuya said, sounding impressed, and then moved on. "Most likely, from here on the Union of Eastern Nations will be divided between those who support Sir Fuuga, and those who oppose him. The opposition will use the historical connections they have built between countries and drag many states into a war to contain him."

"I guess that's going to be his ultimate test, huh...?"

"Yes. Conversely, if Sir Fuuga wants to declare his supremacy, the current state of the Union of Eastern Nations, with its intricate web of marriages and interests, must be irritating to him. You could say these two factions are destined to collide in the not so distant future."

"Who has the upper hand?" Liscia asked, but Hakuya shook his head.

"I couldn't say. It's fifty-fifty. In terms of numbers, the kings and lords should hold the advantage due to their ability to pull in more allies, but Sir Fuuga should have the fame and momentum he'll need to overcome that disadvantage now."

"So either side could win, you're saying? Do you agree, Souma?"

"Well... It will be troublesome no matter which side wins, but Fuuga's the one I don't want to fight. He's got the vigor to kick reason to the curb. So, if we're going to prepare for the worst possible outcome, we should work under the assumption Fuuga will win."

"Will you assist the anti-Fuuga faction, sire?" Excel asked.

"Nah. I'm not going to do that," I replied, firmly rejecting the idea. "Making an enemy of Fuuga is making an enemy of the people who idolize him. Hero worship is like religion. In the same way that we'd have to watch out for a rebellion by followers of Lunarian Orthodoxy if we picked a fight with the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, if we're hostile to Fuuga, we'll have to be cautious of his worshipers, too. It's one thing if he invades us, but if we act against him before he's shown us any hostility, we'll be condemned for getting in the way of a great man, and trying to rub out the hope of mankind. If we do that, we'll have trouble ruling our own country."

"You're right... That does sound troublesome. Even the difference in power between our countries doesn't seem like it would help there."

"I know, right? Until people can clearly see that Fuuga is a threat to this country, we won't take action against him, and we can't. We have his little sister Yuriga here as well. We have to act wary, but friendly."

Liscia frowned. "Souma. If things in the Union of Eastern Nations get nasty, will the Kingdom of Lastania be all right?"

She must have been worried for Roroa's brother, Julius, who was in the Union of Eastern Nations.

"Julius knows the dangers of opposing Fuuga. He probably won't join the anti-Fuuga faction. If things get dicey, I've told him to take Princess Tia and her folks, and flee here to the Kingdom."

“I, for one, am anxious about letting Sir Julius return to the Kingdom,” Hakuya raised his objections. It was a reasonable opinion, but I decided to be selfish here.

“If he cares about Princess Tia, Julius won’t harbor any ambitions towards us.”

“...I understand. If you say so, sire.”

“Sorry. Oh, but we’ve gotten pretty far off track. So, anyway, Glaive, you guard the northern border.”

“Yes, sire. Consider it done.” Glaive put his hands together in front of him and bowed his head. That was more or less all of the orders.

Now it was just a question of what I was going to do until the fleet set out.

“You’re goin’ to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union?!” Roroa shouted incredulously.

That was the immediate reaction I got once I gathered my five wives, Tomoe, and Ichihha in the governmental affairs office.

Liscia apparently was in agreement with Roroa. She looked worried.

“I know you, Souma, so I’ll assume you haven’t gone insane, but you are going to explain why, right?”

“Of course,” I replied with a nod. “Everyone here understands the situation in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, right?” I asked, looking at each of them, and everyone nodded.

Everyone here knew about the unidentified massive creature attacking the archipelago, and why people from there had been fishing illegally in our waters. I was careful with keeping our plans a secret, so only a select few were privileged with this information. Not even Hal and Ruby, who were scheduled to be aboard the *Hiryuu*, had been told yet. Ludwin’s assistant Kaede was on maternity leave,

so there was no way for the two of them to find out through her this time. The vast majority of our soldiers believed that they would only be facing the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union's fleet.

"To be frank, it sounds like the unidentified massive creature—I believe they call it Ooyamizuchi—is going to be more trouble than the Archipelago Union's fleet. We'll be setting sail in roughly a week. I want to gather what information I can on the creature before then."

"And that's why you're going to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, Souma?"

"Yeah. Because there's a sea between us, it's hard to get information from them. Looking at Shabon's actions, it seems like they have trouble gaining information on us, too, though. Take a look at this." I spread out a rough map of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago on the desk. "These two islands that are the closest to the one we used as a dock when building the *Hiryuu* are the domain of Kishun, who came here as Shabon's bodyguard. They're also the closest to National Naval Defense Force HQ in Lagoon City. Negotiations have opened up these islands for our use."

The two islands, one large and one small, ruled by Kishun were collectively known as the Twin Islands. The larger was known as Big Island, and the smaller as Little Island, though people from outside the islands called them Big Twin Island and Little Twin Island. These two islands were close enough together that you could swim between them, so Kishun's mansion was on Big Island.

"We'll use the ship Shabon and Kishun came in to travel to Big Island in secret. Because there's a risk of someone seeing us if we use one of the Kingdom's ships or with Naden. I don't want it known that I'm staying there. I intend to use Kishun's mansion as a base of operations and gather information on Ooyamizuchi. To that end, I'd like to ask Tomoe and Ichiha to come with me."

“Us as well?”

“I-If that’s your order, I’ll follow it...”

They both seemed bewildered.

I was asking them to follow me to a country that we had deteriorating relations with, so I couldn’t blame them. I didn’t want to bring two children into such a dangerous place if I didn’t have to, but I absolutely needed their abilities to investigate Ooyamizuchi. Tomoe’s ability might let her understand Ooyamizuchi’s thoughts. Ichihha might use his monster identification system to identify Ooyamizuchi’s parts and come up with a valid method of attacking it. He had already come up with a number of potential compositions, and with more information, they would only get more precise.

Excel was formulating a plan based on them right now.

“However, you would be sneaking into a country that we have deteriorating relations with, would you not? Then there is also this monster being to consider. Is it not dangerous?” Aisha looked concerned, but I stuck to my guns.

“If I decide it’s getting too dangerous, we can hop on Naden’s back and come home. I don’t have to care if anyone sees me once we’re high-tailing it out of there. You can cross the sea without the *Hiryuu*, right, Naden?”

“Sure. Just leave it to me.” Naden thumped her chest with one hand proudly. I nodded.

“That’s why I intend to go with a small group, so it’s easy for Naden to carry us in an emergency. I’d like Naden, Tomoe, and Ichihha to come with me—with Aisha and Juna, who knows a lot about the sea, as my bodyguards.”

“Yes, sire. Understood.”

“...Me, too?”

Aisha instantly accepted it, but Juna took a little longer to respond.

“Huh? Is there something bothering you?”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I understand. I’ll go there to protect you.”

“I’m gettin’ jealous of all of ya. I always get stuck holdin’ down the fort at times like this.” Roroa pouted, but I had another task in mind for her.

“I’d like you to stay in the capital and keep in contact with Julius in the Kingdom of Lastania.”

“With my brother?”

“There’s something fishy going on inside the Union of Eastern Nations. It feels like the Fuuga and anti-Fuuga factions are about to collide. I’ve asked Glaive to lead a portion of the National Land Defense Force to the border for now, but depending on the situation, they may need to take action.”

“...You’re sayin’ my brother and Big Sis might be in trouble?”

“I’ve told him to take the Lastanian royal family and run if things get too dicey. If it does come to that, having you on hand to deal with it is the best way to make sure things work out.”

Julius was difficult enough for our country to deal with as is, after all. There were sure to be people wary of letting him into the country. In order to keep those voices in check, it was best to have Roroa, the third primary queen, mediate.

“Okay.” Roroa nodded, seeming to understand. “I’ve gotta do what I can for my Big Sis. I’ll keep in close contact with my brother.”

“By all means. And let me know if anything happens. Depending on the situation, I can come right back.”

“Roger that.”

"Hey, that's my—wait, isn't everyone stealing my favorite line too often?!" Naden objected. It was just too easy to use, you know?

"But without you in the castle, I won't have any work to do," Liscia said, bringing a finger to her lips thoughtfully.

Recently, Liscia had been acting as my assistant while Carla, one of the other maids, or occasionally Lady Elisha was looking after Cian and Kazuha for us. If I wasn't in the castle, she had no one to assist, and that left her with a lot of nothing to do. I think it would be fine for her to kick back and relax, but diligent as she was, Liscia couldn't stand to have too much free time. But that said, I couldn't take her with me.

Cian and Kazuha were still only one year old, so we couldn't take our eyes off them. It wasn't possible for both me and Liscia to leave their side for days at a time, and there was no way I was taking them to the dangerous Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.

"Do you want to take the kids to your father's domain, maybe?"

"That would be nice, too, but... Can't I go to the island where the *Hiryuu* has its dock? With the children."

"What? To that island?"

"I was thinking it would be good to let the children experience the roar of the sea and see how big it is."

"Uh, I don't think it's the season for swimming."

It was still only January, and—*Hey, wait, they're still babies, so they can't swim at all, huh?* Besides, in a world with massive sea creatures like this one, the idea of swimming wasn't all that widespread. It was probably only the people who lived by the water's edge who could swim freely whenever they liked. *I know Parnam is inland, and it would be good to let them feel the immensity of the sea from a young age. But still...*

“Since it’s the closest island to the Twin Islands, it’s also close to Ooyamizuchi’s range, you know? I know there’s a lot of open sea between us, but we can’t rule out the possibility of that thing coming to our shores, so I’m worried about you and the children being there.”

Hearing my explanation, Liscia sighed in exasperation. “What are you talking about? That island is where the fleet you’re sending to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago is gathering, right? Even if the monster did come, the National Naval Defense Force would give it a violent welcome.”

“Well... Yes, that’s true, but...”

“If it gets dangerous, I can run away in a wyvern gondola. Besides, when you go to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, you’ll be taking a broadcast jewel with you to keep in touch with the fleet, right? You’ll have to send back the information you gather, after all.”

“...You understand me well.”

“I’m your wife. Besides, if I’m on the island, you’ll be able to see the children’s faces when you make your regular reports.”

“Urgh... Oh, geez, fine. I give, I give,” I said, raising my hands in surrender. “You can go to the island. But be careful, will you?”

“I know. Make sure you come home safely, too, Souma. The children will be waiting.”

“Of course I will.”

With that, our policy was decided. *Okay, let’s go to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.*



Chapter 4: Going Ahead -leading force-

“Mmm, the sea breeze feels great... is something I could have said if this was summer.”

“It sure is cold, isn’t it? We’re still in the first month of the year, after all.”

We were aboard Kishun’s ship, with Juna and me standing close together, looking out over the vast open sea. *Whew, it sure is cold.* Despite clear skies, the sea breeze was strong, and freezing.

Naden, never one for the cold, was cooped up in her cabin, wrapped in a blanket. This wasn’t as chilly as the Republic of Turgis, but it was still too harsh for her. When a concerned Tomoe went to check on her, Naden dragged her under the blankets to use as a living hot water bottle. Not sure what else I could do, I was going to dispatch Aisha to rescue Tomoe, but she had been laid low by seasickness. Having lived in the God-Protected Forest for most of her life, she had never experienced a swaying ship like this before. Ichihha was looking after her now.

But still... It was cold. Maybe I should have brought a real hot water bottle. The rest of us might not have had it as bad as Naden, but not many people were going to want to spend long out on the deck in this chill air. For me and Juna, staying inside the whole time was too boring, so we had popped out for a brief look. We fully intended to head back in after a little while.

I stretched, hoping to loosen up my body which was a little stiff from the cold.

“Ungh... I think it has been a while since I was last on a ship,” I said with a sigh.

“Haven’t you visited the *Hiryuu* a number of times?”

"That's more of an island or a base; it doesn't feel like a ship. Are you accustomed to traveling by boat like this? You were raised in a port town, correct?"

"I did, but... Darling, we're alone right now, you know?" Juna whispered, and I jumped a little.

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered we'd agreed to be a little more relaxed and less formal with each other when we were alone.

"Sorry about that... Juna."

"Hee hee. Don't worry about it, Darling." Juna smiled with satisfaction and pressed up close to me. It was a bit embarrassing.

"...Uh, anyway, I was surprised Kishun's ship was an occidental one."

"Occidental?"

"Ohh, just a thing from my world."

Because Kishun dressed in a manner I associated with Japan, I had imagined an atakebune, the large warships used by the Japanese military in the 16th and 17th century, or perhaps the ironclad variant of them, the tekkosen, so I was surprised to find that his ship looked a lot like a carrack. It had been designed to be pulled by sea creatures, so the front section wasn't as pointy as a galleon's. There were also iron plates covering all the important parts to protect against firearms. In a way, you could have called this ship an ironclad.

Well, I'd heard the atakebune was unsuited to the open sea, so maybe it was inevitable his ship would be shaped like this. The reports said they did have some that resembled kohayabune, the small warships used by the Japanese military in the same period, so maybe it was just a matter of using the right ship for the right task.

Because this ship resembled a carrack, it had sails, but they were folded now because we were being tugged by a sea dragon. It was pretty surreal seeing a sailing ship with its sails furled up, being

dragged by a creature that looked like a plesiosaur like an ox might pull a cart.

“If it’s going to be pulled by a sea dragon, why even have sails to begin with?”

“They’re for when there’s trouble with the sea creatures,” Juna explained in response to my question. “If they’re no longer able to pull as a result of an accident or battle, then the ship can’t move without sails or oars as a backup. That’s why they have sails. It also costs a lot to feed sea creatures, so some trips are done using just the wind and currents.”

“I get it... But by that logic, what’s an iron battleship like the *Albert* supposed to do? When there’s a battle at sea, the sea creatures might get hurt, right? Wouldn’t a warship without a propulsion device like the Little Susumu Mark V be stuck when that happened?”

“There is equipment to raise sails on warships like the *Albert*, too, you know?”

“Huh? There is?”

Because the *Albert* had been modified to transport things and fire cannons on land during the battle with Castor, I didn’t have a full grasp of what it was like before.

“That’s only for emergencies,” Juna added. “They’re not fast, and you’re drifting at the mercy of the wind. Normally, warships don’t sail alone, so they’ll be towed by the surviving ships once the battle ends. Whether those ships are friend or foe, however, will depend on how the battle went, though.”

They’ll be rescued if it’s the former, or captured if it’s the latter, huh?

Just then, a voice called out to me, “So this is where you were, Sir Souma.”

I turned towards the direction I'd heard it to find Shabon and Kishun approaching.

"That outfit... really suits you. Anyone who sees it would think you were from Yaeda Island."

"It's not bad, hearing that from one of the locals."

Because I was going incognito, I was wearing my Kitakaze Kozou-esque outfit with the conical straw hat and traveler's cape for the first time in a while. I had used this occasionally after I heard my hair color and facial features resembled those of the people in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, but to elaborate a little further, a race of black-haired humans was the second or third most common in the region, and there were a lot of them on Yaeda Island, which had a large human population.

Hakuya has black hair, so maybe he could trace his roots back to Yaeda Island, too?

As I was thinking that, Shabon hesitantly asked, "Um... Is there anything inconveniencing you, perhaps?"

"Nah, I'm pretty comfortable. It's nice to travel aboard a ship every now and again," I said, smiling at the worried-looking Shabon.

Her expression relaxed a bit. "I am glad to hear that."

"I guess if I had one thing on my mind, it's the sea creatures pulling this ship. I hear that the creatures pulling your ship when you came (horned doldons, which resembled dolphins) ran away, so we're using sea dragons from the Kingdom. Won't people in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago find that suspicious?"

"It should be all right. We use sea dragons to pull large ships in the archipelago, too, after all," Kishun explained. I guess it was all right then.

"So, how much further is it to your island?"

"We can already see the mountains of Nine-Headed Dragon Island—the largest island of the archipelago, and the one ruled by the king—which is even more distant than the Twin Islands, so I expect they should come into view soon. ...Ah, I just spotted them now, in fact," he said pointing forward.

When I looked in the direction of his finger and I could see something sticking up out of the sea. It seemed to grow as the ship approached, eventually taking the form of two islands. *That's the Twin Islands, huh?*

"When I look at them like this, we're pretty close to the island where the Nine-Headed Dragon King is, huh?"

"No, sire," Kishun shook his head. "The mountains of Nine-Headed Dragon Island are quite large, so while it may appear that way, in reality, they are still quite far away. It would still take more than an hour by boat."

"I know it can be hard to tell the distance between islands. There was a young man from a race especially gifted at swimming who boasted, 'I could swim to that island.' He tried to, but was surprised to find that it was further away than he thought, and drowned... or so the old story goes," Shabon added.

Hmm, that's a neat story, I thought. It was common for the old stories people passed down to reflect taboos and lessons, as was the case with old man Urup's tsunami legend. *That story probably had a factual basis. Maybe they handed down the story because someone actually drowned like that? To prevent anyone repeating his mistake.*

"Ah!" Kishun exclaimed, breaking my train of thought.

"What's up?"

"Now that we can see the islands, please, be careful."

"Come again? ...Wait, woah?!"

The ship heaved. Then... *Slam!* There was the sound of something striking the keel of the ship.

“What was that?! Did we hit a rock?!”

“It’s nothing to worry about. The intense tidal currents around here mean that when the ship cuts across the waves, the bottom of the ship strikes the surface of the sea, producing a loud noise. There is nothing actually being hit here.”

“Is that how it works?” I asked Juna despite myself, and she nodded.

“Yes. It’s something that happens when you go over a certain speed in places where the tide is fast.”

“I-I see. I’m relieved to hear that—”

Slam! Ker-slam!

“—is what I’d like to say, but there’s no way I can feel relieved hearing that sound.”

“...Yeah.”

Some wooden planks were all that separated us from a watery grave. I felt like I was experiencing the terrible power of the sea first hand.

“Okay, now that we are riding the tide, it shouldn’t be long before we reach the islands,” Kishun said, as if trying to reassure us. I was feeling awfully eager to get back on dry land now, so I just hoped he was right.

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“Ohh, it’s Lord Kishun!”

“Everyone, Lord Kishun has returned!”

“Lady Shabon is with him!”

Once the ship arrived in port, the islanders greeted us with enthusiasm. Those who saw the ship arrive called in others, and in no

time the harbor was full of people. It looked like the people of this island truly loved Kishun and Princess Shabon.

I subtly approached Kishun. “The islanders don’t know you’re under our command, right?” I asked in a whisper.

“That is correct. You are free to use this island as you see fit, but that is solely by my will. The islanders know nothing of it, and are simply obeying their chief.”

So, basically, if they were criticized for siding with the Kingdom later, all the responsibility would fall on Kishun. He was making sure that, should the worst happen, he could offer up his own head, and the islanders wouldn’t be punished. I respected his resolve.

A gangplank was lowered from the ship, and we were able to stand on dry land for the first time in far too long.

“Ohh... Even now that I am back on land, it still feels like it’s swaying underneath me.”

“...I just want to get indoors quickly.”

Seasick Aisha and cold-averse Naden both looked unenthused by their current situation.

I worried if my two strongest fighters could play their roles as bodyguards in their current state, but well, if it came to it, I was sure they’d be fine. They’d do a bang-up job of it.

Meanwhile, Tomoe and Ichihia seemed to be full of energy.

“Lookie, lookie, Ichihia. The houses are packed in tight.”

“You’re right. The alleyways are so narrow.”

“It’s common to see houses built like this on islands,” Juna, in educational program mode, explained to the curious pair. “Because they have limited space to build, they’re forced to pack things in

tightly. The narrow alleyways form a maze, so they can be fun to explore.”

“““Wowwww,””” the kids and I beamed, impressed by the sight.

This was something that occurred to me when we visited the Republic of Turgis too, but it was interesting to see how the landscape shaped the culture and lifestyle of its inhabitants.

An older, muscular man with beast ears wearing a twisted headband, a *happi* coat, and loose-fitting pants walked up to Kishun. *Judging by his tail, is he a tanuki beastman?*

The tanuki guy asked Kishun, “So, Island Chief, how did it go?”

“Yeah. I was able to get fish from the Kingdom safely,” he replied.

So, the story was that Kishun had gone to the Kingdom to negotiate with knights and nobles whose domains were on the coast in order to get his hands on fish. Because of that, Kishun’s ship was loaded with fish caught in the Kingdom... The smell had done nothing to help Aisha’s seasickness, though.

The tanuki man slapped his bulging abdominal muscles. “That’s excellent.”

“Yeah. I’d like to ask you to begin unloading immediately. Take the sea dragons around to the bay, too, if you would. We don’t want Ooyamizuchi sniffing them out.”

“Leave it t’us! Hey, you louts! We’re unloading the ship!”

“““Right!”””

With that, a group of men wearing the same *happi* coat as the man boarded the ship. I was surprised to see that the only things they wore other than those coats were a loincloth and socks. It was the middle of winter and here they were working half-naked.

“Aren’t they cold...?”

“Of course we are. That’s why we’re wearing *happi* coats, isn’t it?” the tanuki guy, having heard me mumbling to myself, said with a hearty laugh.

No, I couldn’t see wearing a *happi* coat without even doing up the front doing much to ward off the cold... and hold on, reading into what the guy just said, did they not even wear *happi* coats when it wasn’t cold? Were they really a group of buff macho men in loincloths? *I bet they make an imposing sight in the middle of the summer heat...*

While I was thinking about that and watching them unload the ship, one of the macho men called out to the tanuki man, “Hey, boss! There’s something weird in the luggage?”

“Oh, what is it?”

The men carried out a wooden box which was just large enough that an adult would still struggle to fit inside it.

“There’s no label, and it felt strange carrying it.”

“Hmm... Any idea what it is, Island Chief?”

“No, I don’t remember a box like this...” Kishun said, looking to me for an answer.

We all shook our heads. I didn’t remember bringing anything like this aboard.

“Well, once we pry it open, we’ll know what’s up.”

The tanuki guy opened the lid of the wooden box, and...

“““Whaa?!””” we all cried out in surprise.

Inside the box was a twintailed girl with wings like a crane’s.

“““Why’s Yuriga here?!””” Tomoe and I cried out in unison, but...

"Urgh... Blech..." Yuriga just vomited, her face pale.

"...So, what exactly are you doing here?" I asked after Yuriga had recovered.

She puffed up her cheeks and said, "When I heard Tomoe and Ichihara were both taking time off from the Academy, I wondered where they were going. They wouldn't tell me a thing when I asked. So, I stowed away in the luggage on the gondola to find out... I never expected to be loaded onto a ship. To think I spent all this time cramped up in a cargo room that stank of fish... Ulp..."

Yuriga gagged, probably feeling sick again, and Tomoe patted her on the back.



“What did you eat and drink?” I asked.

“...I borrowed some fruits and water from the cargo. I intend to pay for them later.”

“Sheesh. If it was so bad in there, you could have come out and shown yourself, you know?”

“I could never! I found myself on the ship before I knew it! A total stowaway! I’ve heard that stowaways are usually fed to large sea creatures. I was pretty sure you people were aboard the ship, too, but I couldn’t be certain. I couldn’t come out until I was positive that it was safe... Though, that meant I ended up half-delirious with seasickness.” Yuriga shuddered as she remembered her time aboard.

Well, if she was stuck in a tiny space that smelled of raw fish, fighting her fear of being caught, as well as seasickness, I couldn’t blame her for feeling unwell.

The tanuki guy looked down at Yuriga. “You’re right. Anyone nervy enough to stowaway aboard a ship deserves to be megalodon chow.”

His tone was threatening. I’ll bet that the reason Yuriga just got even paler wasn’t just because of seasickness. Oh, but she was, technically, a princess from another country, so I didn’t want him frightening her too much. If anything happened to Yuriga, Fuuga would be an absolute nightmare to deal with.

Kishun bopped the tanuki man on the head with his sheathed katana.

“You’re a grown man. Don’t intimidate a child like that.”

“Oww...! No, boss. I’m telling you, you’ve gotta teach brats like this a good lesson.”

“This is my ship, so it is not your place to get angry. She is a friend of my guests, so I will not do anything to punish her.”

“G-Guests, you say?”

The tanuki guy looked at me. I tipped my conical hat to him.

“I’m a merchant who trades in the ports of the Kingdom of Friedonia. I helped with the purchase of the fish, and Sir Kishun invited me to come stay on this island as thanks.”

“The Kingdom of Friedonia? You’re not a Yaeda Islander?”

“I am by blood. I’m told my great grandfather came to the Kingdom from there.”

That was a lie, of course, but I couldn’t let who I really was come out, so I needed a backstory. I grabbed Yuriga by the head and forced her to bow, then lowered my own head, too.

“I’m sorry. I should have kept a closer eye on her. I’ll be sure to give my *little sister* an earful later.”

“Wait, little sis—”

“Yuriga! When you apologize, do it properly!”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Once we had both apologized, the tanuki man awkwardly scratched his cheek. “Oh, no, if she knows she did wrong, it’s fine. I wasn’t being as mature as I should have, either.”

“It helps a lot to hear you say that,” I said.

“Still, for siblings, you don’t look much alike.”

“We’re half celestials. My little sister takes after our mother.”

“...You’ve got a complicated family, huh? Well, be a good brother and take care of your little sister.”

“Yeah. I will,” I replied with a small wave.

...Whew, it looks like I managed to get through that. Once the tanuki guy had returned to work, I crouched down in front of Yuriga and looked her in the eye.

“Yuriga,” I whispered.

When she heard her name, her shoulders tensed. It seemed she was trying to defend her actions, but she couldn’t find the words, and ultimately just deflated.

“Um... I’m sorry,” she replied, also whispering, then let out a sigh. I might not have been very good at this sort of thing, but I needed to tell her off.

“...If even one thing had gone wrong, this could have turned into something major. That risked an international incident, obviously, but it put you in danger, too. I hear seamen can be a rowdy bunch. If they’d caught you when we weren’t around or you’d been loaded onto a different ship... there’s no telling what they might have done to you.”

Yuriga hung her head in defeat. Part of that had to come from the way the tanuki man had intimidated her. She could act tough, but she was still just fourteen years old—or in my world, she’d only be in her second year of middle school.

I rested a hand on her discouraged head. “Well, I can see you’re reflecting on your actions, so I won’t press the issue any further, but don’t ever do this again. Also, report what happened to Fuuga yourself.”

“Yes...”

Giving Yuriga a pat on the head when she nodded, I turned to Kishun and said, “Sorry for the trouble. Could you show us to the mansion now?”

“Very well.”

And so, we followed Kishun.

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“Whoa, the alleys really are narrow, Ichiha.”

Tomoe and Ichiha, who were following Souma and the others through the alleyways of the Twin Islands, were surprised how close together the houses were. They were packed so tightly that, even in the middle of the day, the alleys were a bit dark.

“The gaps are so small that two adults couldn’t stand side-by-side. There’s nothing like this in the Duchy of Chima or the Kingdom of Friedonia.” Ichiha gulped at what he was seeing.

“It’d be real bad if there was a fire, huh? The walls look like they’re made of wood, too.”

“Maybe they’re made of wood so they can be rebuilt quickly when there is a fire? The houses are rather simple... But that makes me worry about burglars instead. Even the doors are wooden.”

“I think they’ll be fine on a small island like this, right? They all must know each other here.”

“That makes sense. With the houses so densely packed, it’s easy to notice something’s wrong in the neighbor’s house.”

Seeing the new surroundings of the island, Tomoe and Ichiha discussed what life must be like here. This was something instilled into them by their teacher, Hakuya.

“When you look at the scenery of another country, you can see how the people of that land live. Things and culture are born of necessity. The way people build their houses, for example, tells us quite faithfully how they live. If you wish to expand your perspective of the outside world, you can start by closely observing those details.”

They did as they were taught, and imagined the lives of the islanders as they looked around. Whenever the things the islanders did

matched their imaginations, Tomoe and Ichiha felt giddy, like they had solved a puzzle.

"This is like one of those games where you find the matching pictures, huh, Ichiha?"

"You're right. Though, I'm not sure we should be having so much fun when we're here on official business."

"Hey, what do you think, Yuriga?" Tomoe asked, turning to the silent Yuriga.

"....."

"Yuriga?"

But Yuriga was present in body only. Her mind had clearly wandered off someplace else.

"Is she still feeling bothered by the way Big Brother and the old tanuki man got angry at her?" Now worried, Tomoe leaned in and looked at Yuriga's face. "You okay, Yuriga?"

"Huh?! Uh, what?"

Yuriga's head snapped up as she suddenly returned to reality. It looked like she hadn't been listening.

Tomoe looked at her with concern. "You were quiet all this time, so I got worried. Is what happened earlier still bothering you?"

"Not really... I was thinking about it, though."

"About what?"

"Is your brother, um... always like that when he scolds someone?" Yuriga asked Tomoe awkwardly. "You know, the way he spoke to me and then bowed his head to the people I inconvenienced together with me. Like that, I mean."

"Hrm... He has scolded me before. I've never done anything that would require bowing my head and apologizing, but I think if I did, Big Brother would bow his head with me just like he did for you."

"I see..." Yuriga replied, before lapsing back into thought.

Seeing this, Tomoe cocked her head to the side and asked, "Hasn't Fuuga ever scolded you?"

"Of course he has! You've even seen him drop a fist on my head, haven't you?"

"Ah, I do remember that..." Tomoe said, recalling a similar event from when they were in the Union of Eastern States.

"If it were my brother, I would have gotten hit, I'm sure." Yuriga sighed. "And I doubt he'd have bowed his head to a common laborer, either. I'd have received ample punishment, so the other side would leave it at that... That's how it would probably go."

"Ah..."

I can see it, thought Tomoe. That was definitely what Fuuga would do—punish her then insist she be forgiven. The other side would be forced to accept it. In exchange for a headache, Yuriga would gain forgiveness.

Yuriga sighed again. "My head always hurts after my brother drops his fist on it. But when Sir Souma scolded me, and I bowed my head with him... there was no physical pain, but..."

She seemed to be struggling for the words, but Tomoe understood.

"Your heart hurt?"

"...Something like that. This is actually harder on me."

Because of what she'd done, someone who had nothing to do with it was forced to apologize with her. That 'hit' pretty hard. Even if someone didn't feel bad about what they'd done, they'd still feel a

sense of guilt. Because, at her core, Yuriga was a serious person, which only amplified the result.

“Is this what Sir Souma means by a difference in values?” Yuriga asked, rubbing her head in the spot Souma had touched earlier during the apology.

“Murgh...” Tomoe got a little grumpy and pinched Yuriga’s cheeks.

“Hey... Shtop it! What are you doing?!” Yuriga exclaimed, batting her hands away.

Tomoe snorted angrily, “Big Brother is *my* big brother. I won’t let you have him.”

“He’s only your *honorary* brother! Besides, it’s not like I want him anyway! The strong and cool Fuuga is the only big brother for me!”

“My big brother is cool, too!”

The two glared at the other. Hesitantly, Ichihha put himself in the middle between them.

“Hey now, you two, don’t fight here. If we’re separated from the others and get lost, we’ll be scolded again, you know?”

““Ah!””

The mention of being scolded by Souma snapped both Tomoe and Yuriga back to their senses.

“Uh, oh! They’ve already gotten away from us a little.”

“Because you’re a slowpoke, Yuriga.”

“Don’t make this my fault, you little kid! You were talking, too!”

“Come on, you two! I said this isn’t the time to fight!”

“Oh, right, you did. Anyway, let’s run!” Yuriga said, looking at Tomoe and Ichihha.

““Roger!”” Tomoe and Ichihia snapped a salute, and then the three took off running.

They ran as hard as they could and managed to catch up before the adults noticed they had been lagging behind.

Souma turned around, only to see the exhausted looks on their faces. “Hm? What’s up, you three? You’re out of breath.”

“I-It’s nothing, Big Brother.”

“Eh?” Souma cocked his head to the side in confusion, then turned to face forward. The three quietly sighed in relief.

“Whew... I’m glad we made it,” Tomoe said.

“I-It was tough with the incline here, huh? Even though it’s winter, I still worked up a sweat.”

“Geez, and whose fault is that, Yuriga?”

“Yours, too, I’d say, Tomoe.”

“*Huff... Huff...*” Ichihia was too winded to mediate in their squabbling.

Tomoe smiled wryly, then glanced at Yuriga. *We just got to the Twin Islands, and things already feel hectic...* she thought.

“...What? What’re you staring for?”

“No reason.”

But if Yuriga’s got her spirit back... Well, I guess that’s okay. Tomoe chuckled as she thought about it.



Chapter 5: Encounter -enemy-

Passing through the narrow alleyway and onto the path that leads to the plateau, white walls could be seen constructed on top of the cliff face. I presumed this to be Kishun's mansion. Now that I got a look at it, I could see semblances of a Japanese-style castle, like one of the ones from the early-to-mid Sengoku period that didn't have a tower.

Tomoe blinked repeatedly as she looked up at the building. "The walls are a lot lower than the ones at the castle in the Kingdom, huh?"

"It's because they don't have to protect the surrounding town, too. Being built so far up the plateau makes it hard to shell it, so they're probably high enough," Ichiha explained.

"But what if wyvern cavalry attack?" Tomoe asked, cocking her head to the side. "I don't see anything like an anti-air repeating bolt thrower."

"They have that covered, too. Because there are no wyverns living in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago," Ichiha said, pointing towards the sea. "Wyverns hate flying out so far that they can't see land. Eventually, their wings will get tired and without some place to settle down, they'll eventually crash into the sea. Thanks to the high mountains, the islands of the archipelago look closer together than they actually are. It's tough to fly from island to island on a wyvern, so there was never enough benefit to bring them in from the mainland and breed them here."

"Right..." Yuriga groaned.

"That was amazing, Ichiha," Tomoe said, clapping her hands. "You made that really easy to understand."

Ichiha smiled shyly at the praise.

The kids have a healthy desire to learn, I thought as we passed through the gate at the top of the stone steps. They must be steadily absorbing all sorts of new information from the foreign scenery around them. That's a good trend.

Once Kishun led us into the mansion, the servants turned and bowed their heads at our arrival. It looked like it had been explained to them that we were guests.

"This way, please," Kishun said, leading us to a large tatami room.

The building had shouji screens and fusuma panels, making it feel very Japanese. Because the garden was nearby, it felt less like the banquet hall at an inn and more like a dojo.

"This room should be big and easy to use. I have already had the materials that we prepared brought to this room. Please, use the things and people in this mansion as you see fit."

"P-Please, give me your orders as well," Princess Shabon added, bowing her head along with Kishun. It seemed like they were doing everything they could for us. That just showed how serious the two of them were about this.

Looking around the room, there were piles of papers. Those had to be the materials Kishun had mentioned.

I nodded, then quickly began giving directions to everyone, "Okay. Let's get right to work. Ichiha and I will look through the information on Ooyamizuchi. Juna, I'd like you to assist us."

"Understood."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Juna and Ichiha saluted.

I issued directions to the others, "Princess Shabon and Kishun, I'll have you help classify the materials you've got gathered here. You were saying we could 'use the servants,' but I'd rather not let a large

number of people come into contact with important information. Would you two help us instead?"

"Very well. Give the word, and it will be done."

"Yes. Understood."

Shabon and Kishun accepted my request.

"Okay. Aisha... are you recovering?" I asked.

Aisha thumped her chest, despite looking a little sickly. "Yes. The world is still shaking a little, but that should not pose a problem."

"You don't need to strain yourself, but... if you can manage it, please stand guard inside this room."

"Yes, sire! Understood."

"Tomoe and Yuriga, you can just do whatever. This is a good opportunity for you, so go see the island. Naden, watch over them for me."

"Roger that."

"Um, Big Brother? I was hoping to help, too, you know?" Tomoe said.

I beckoned her closer, then, plopping my hand down on her head, I whispered in one of her little wolf ears, "I'll be needing your ability eventually. But I don't think it's time for you to do anything just yet. Until it is, I want you to keep an eye on Yuriga and keep her from doing anything crazy."

"Yuriga?"

"Yeah. Look at the way she stowed on board. She's like a bundle of potential energy. If we leave her bored and without someone to chat with, there's no telling what nonsense she might pull."

"...I see. That makes sense." Tomoe snapped a salute as if to say "*Leave it to me!*"

Tomoe can get up to her own antics sometimes, too, though. Well, with Naden protecting them, they won't be in any danger. Once Tomoe went back over to Yuriga, who was giving us a suspicious “What are those two talking about?” look, I clapped my hands.

“Okay, everyone, I’m counting on you.”

“These materials were brought to us by the spies that the princess and I sent out, and include witness reports of Ooyamizuchi as well as materials on the Archipelago Union fleet,” Kishun explained, indicating the mountain of papers on the table in front me.

I should have known the locals would be able to gather a lot of information. Though we had sent in the Black Cats, we couldn’t send many of them because this place was quite far away and across the sea. Because of that, they had limited ability to gather intel, and it often arrived late.

“I’m grateful for this. Now, diving right in, I’d like Princess Shabon and Kishun to categorize these materials. Divide them into information about Ooyamizuchi and everything else, then bring just the Ooyamizuchi materials to us.”

When I said that, Shabon’s eyes widened in shock. “Does that mean... the information on the Nine-Headed Dragon King and the fleet do not matter to you?”

...Ahh, I guess I phrased that poorly. I could see why that might make it sound like I was taking the Nine-Headed Dragon King and the Archipelago Union’s fleet lightly. Though they had parted ways with them, she and Kishun had come to us out of a desire to help the islanders, so it was natural that they would still feel some affection for their country. It must have been unpleasant to see me seemingly disregard them.

“Sorry. That’s not how I meant it. I don’t know much about navies and battles at sea, so I want to focus my attention on Ooyamizuchi. Pass the materials on the Nine-Headed Dragon King and the fleet to Aisha, if you would. She’ll send the information to our expert back in the Kingdom (Excel), who will come up with effective countermeasures.”

“O-Oh, I see... Excuse me,” Shabon said, bowing her head apologetically.

That seemed to have satisfied her, so I immediately moved on to examining the task at hand.

Juna and I took the materials that Shabon and Kishun had classified for us and further divided them into witness testimony and damage reports before passing them to Ichihia. He then analyzed the information and narrowed down the creature’s possible forms.

“Th-This is...! Oh, my...” Princess Shabon, who was sorting through papers, suddenly cried out.

I turned to see what was up, and Princess Shabon came over, a pained look on her face as she handed me a single document. I accepted the papers and looked over them.

“A whole island, destroyed, huh...? That’s awful,” I muttered despite myself.

The document was a damage report from a few days ago. Dozens of people and their livestock had vanished from a single island overnight. Judging by the destruction and the “scraps” left behind, it had been determined that Ooyamizuchi must have been responsible. Looking at the date, Shabon and Kishun would have been in the Kingdom when it occurred. In other words, the damage had continued to spread while they were away.

Images of the hellish scene outside the walls of Lastania flashed through my memory. Things like that could happen anywhere in this

world. I would need to keep that in mind at all times. For now, though, I had to figure out how to deal with Ooyamizuchi.

“Based on the witness reports, we’re assuming that Ooyamizuchi is a single creature. If it was able to devour all those people in one night, it must be pretty huge, right?” Ichihai asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah. There’re some discrepancies in the testimony, but it seems to be the size of a small island. Its body must be over 30 meters high.”

“About as long as Naden in her ryuu form if you stretched her out, then.”

“...I know it’s inappropriate, but it’s a bit funny to imagine that,” Juna said with a wry smile. We were using Naden like a ruler, after all.

“Hey, Ichihai, if it’s 30 meters tall, it’s got to be even longer than that, right?”

“Correct. We have reports of people who saw it crawling like a turtle. If we think of it that way, it might be two-to-three times as long.”

“At that size, it’s a real kaiju...”

I mean, I had seen a number of creatures you could call “kaiju,” including Naden and dragons like Ruby, as well as rhinosauruses and sea dragons, but this Ooyamizuchi was massive even when compared to them. The only one that didn’t lose in a competition of size was Mother Dragon, but she didn’t insert herself in the affairs of mankind when they didn’t involve dragons, so she wasn’t going to be helping us. We had to take care of our own problems.

“What do we know about its form? There were reports of it being a many-headed snake, too, right?”

When I asked that, Ichihai looked through the documents, cocking his head to the side a little.

"That's not clear. Many of these statements say that they weren't able to make out its form clearly through the fog at a distance. Though, many do mention seeing something long and serpentine."

"At a distance, huh...? Do we have any up-close witness reports?" I said, digging through the pile, and Ichihai groaned.

"The only ones who've seen it up close are the victims. They've all been injured, traumatized, or..."

"...Digested by now?"

"Though, we can't be sure it has a digestive tract like normal creatures."

Not much hope of getting information there, huh? I was thinking, when...

"Oh, sire. How about this?" Juna said, presenting me with a piece of paper. "It looks like a written report from the sole survivor of an attack by Ooyamizuchi. Despite surviving, they were badly injured and had to be moved to another island for treatment. They appear to have been in a fairly unstable state of mind, so we can't be sure how accurate their testimony is, though."

"Let me see?" Ichihai took the paper and looked over it.

— The Testimony of a Fisherman —

It was a snake. The head of a snake. Stretching out from the fog. We hid in the boathouse, but this huge, long snake tore the roof open, and picked Raishi* up with its mouth. We were terrified, just terrified... Couldn't do anything but watch.

Moments pass, and then there's this sickening thud... We look out and there's Raishi, split clean in two—his upper half and lower half.

We were confused, and all ran off in different directions.

I don't remember where I ran, or how... but I tripped over something, took a tumble... and must have lost consciousness, because when I came to, it was morning. I clutched my aching head, and... and went searching for my buddies, but... I didn't find them.

I went back to the boathouse and Raishi's body was gone, too. Even though his blood was still there...

Where did everyone go?! Where... Where...

* Addendum: One of the other fishermen

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"That was intense..."

Ichihia had gone pale as he read through it. Because they had written down his words verbatim, the narrator's feelings were palpable.

"...But there's one thing that catches my interest." Ichihia managed to force himself to say after taking a moment to recover.

"Hm? What's that?"

"The way the one man was split into his upper and lower halves. Just before this, the witness stated the man had been lifted up by a snake."

"Yeah. It did say that."

"If a snake with the power to tear the roof off of a building and jaws powerful enough to bite through a person were to do so, what do you think would happen to that person's body?"

"It'd bite them in half, right?" I asked.

"Sire. Are you aware of how snakes eat?"

"What are you... Ah! They swallow things whole!"

I had seen a snake eating on some nature program a long time ago, so I recalled this image of them swallowing their prey whole. Having a man be cut in half definitely seemed strange here, then.

Ichihai nodded. “I’m questioning the statement that it was a snake. Even if we assume it was some kind of toothed snake, if it bit down on him from above, his upper body should have remained inside its mouth. Only the lower half should have fallen to the ground. Also, if it bit down on his torso, considering its size, the severed arms and legs should have fallen down separately.”

“It shouldn’t have split him so cleanly in two... Is what you’re saying?”

Ichihai nodded in agreement. “It’s almost like he was cut with a sharp blade. That’s not something that happens when you’re bitten.”

“So, is it a mistake to say it was a snake?”

“I can’t say that much, but... It may have been something that just looked like one.”

“Right...” I laid down the paper and let out a sigh. “Still, even someone who saw it up close couldn’t clearly grasp what it looks like, huh? The fog around it must be pretty dense. Does it ever appear under clear skies?”

This was like something out of an old tokusatsu film. I hear that back when CG wasn’t so well developed, they used a lot of scenes set at night to hide the rough spots in the techniques they used. That’s what this felt like.

“Fog... Thick fog... And it’s always there?” Ichihai looked like he was thinking about something. “With so many of these accounts mentioning fog... it’s possible that it’s not naturally occurring. Could it be that Ooyamizuchi is producing the fog itself somehow?”

“The fog? To hide itself?”

"No, that can't be it. From what these reports show, there's no record of a serious battle against Ooyamizuchi. Isn't that right, Princess Shabon?" Ichiha asked her, Shabon nodded.

"Yes. Ooyamizuchi moves through the sea and is hard for a ship to follow. We cannot even fight it properly. Not that I am convinced we could win if we could..." Shabon ground her teeth in frustration.

Ichiha continued speaking, "If there's no record of battles, then that means Ooyamizuchi doesn't see mankind as a threat. We're probably no more than prey that crawls on the ground. There's no point to hiding from an opponent you're not scared of, is there?"

"That's true. But then what is it making fog for?"

"Could it be that, because it is a creature of the sea, there are some limitations to its ability to operate on land? To give you an example... if you leave a giant octopus on land, it'll dry out eventually, right? Maybe it's the same for Ooyamizuchi, and its body dries out quickly on land, slowing its movements. And that's why it makes fog, to help maintain its moisture... maybe?"

That made sense. If you dried out a sea cucumber, it shrank down to a small portion of its original size. Though, it got big again quickly when you put it back in the water...

"A creature that produces fog? It doesn't seem like a whale's spout, though... Oh! Come to think of it, there was a legend of a large shellfish monster called a 'shen' that produced mirages..."

"A shellfish that produces fog, you say...? I'll try drawing it," Ichiha said, then went to work using the charcoal and drawing board he had brought with him.

He was trying to draw Ooyamizuchi using the fragmentary information we had been able to piece together. Ichiha was the foremost expert in monsterology. I was sure he'd produce something even more accurate than he had been able to back in the Kingdom.

Juna and I hurriedly got him all the materials he needed.

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While Souma and his people were examining the information on Ooyamizuchi, Shabon and Kishun were sorting through the materials that had been haphazardly piled up. As they separated the information by category, Shabon let out a little sigh.

“...Lady Shabon?” Kishun asked when he noticed, and Shabon shook her head.

“I apologize. I was thinking.”

“Is something bothering you?”

“Ah... Yes. Sir Souma seems to view the information on Ooyamizuchi as important, but he left the information on Father and the fleet to his subordinate. I know he said he is not familiar with the navy, but I find it surprising that he would not even be remotely interested...”

“You think he takes the Nine-Headed Dragon King too lightly, then?”

Shabon nodded. “I am grateful that he sees Ooyamizuchi as a threat and is working on a method of dealing with it. However, my father is the stalwart ruler of an archipelago full of ruffians. I cannot imagine he can beat him without taking it seriously.”

“Does Sir Souma have absolute confidence in his ability to defeat the Nine-Headed Dragon King? Like a weapon we could never imagine here in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago?”

“He might. However, if he lets his guard down, I worry he may get tripped up. Knowing my father, I am well aware of how fearsome an opponent he can be.” She looked at Souma and sighed. “Still, all I can do now is believe in Sir Souma. Because I have already parted ways with my father... Because this is the path I chose...”

“Lady Shabon...” Kishun said, concern in his voice. Shabon slapped her cheeks.

“I need to do everything I can, too. For it to be as easy as possible for Sir Souma’s subordinates to come up with a plan.”

“Yes, my lady... Ah! Come to think of it.”

“Hm? What is it, Kishun?”

“There was one thing that caught my attention while we were going through the materials here.”

“Something that caught your attention?”

“Yes. A report on the military equipment of Nine-Headed Dragon Island.”

Kishun handed a piece of paper to Princess Shabon to look over. It was a report on the Nine-Headed Dragon King’s expenditures on military equipment to prepare for the battle with the Kingdom’s fleet. Shabon cocked her head to the side.

“My father’s confrontational stance remains unchanged then. What about it?”

“His expenditures are lower than I expected. You’ll recall that the king raised taxes ‘to prepare for the coming invasion by the Kingdom.’ He ought to be able to spend more than this.”

“Really?... That *is* strange.”

If what Kishun was pointing to was true, then most of the funds that had been gathered through taxes weren’t going to the military.

“Lady Shabon. Was the Nine-Headed Dragon King the type to waste money?”

“Never! Father was a militarist who would not hesitate to spend on equipment, but he never wasted money on anything else. Instead of luxuries, he would always choose to have one more boat for his fleet.”

“In that case, where in the world is the money going...?”

“...I am not sure.” Shabon’s eyes quivered with unease as she looked in the direction of Nine-Headed Dragon Island. “What is happening in this country that we do not know about...?”

Kishun had no response to Shabon’s question.

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Meanwhile, around that same time, Naden, Tomoe, and Yuriga were looking around Kishun’s mansion. They examined everything from the hanging scrolls in the alcoves to foreign furniture with great interest.

“Hey, check this out. The head on this tiger ornament bobbles.” Yuriga pointed out. Tomoe leaned in for a closer look.

“You’re right... That’s pretty neat, huh?”

Naden, wrapped in a thick coat, shivered as she watched them. The coat was from The Silver Deer. Normally, Naden was fine with an outfit made of her own transformed scales, but that couldn’t warm her up on its own, so she was wearing some extra layers.

“Urgh... So cold... This mansion is too drafty. Ohh, I want to go back to the brazier in Souma’s room.”

“A-Are you okay, Naden?” Tomoe asked, sounding worried, and Naden hugged her tight.

“Wahh?!”

“...So warm. Children have such delightfully high body temperatures.”

“You look like a kid, too, you know?” Yuriga said in exasperation as Naden used Tomoe to warm herself.

“Hey now, Yuriga! Naden’s a queen!”

"I don't mind. I know I'm the least regal of all the queens. The people of Parnam keep treating me like a normal girl, too," Naden said with a wry smile as she patted Tomoe's head.

Even now that she was a queen, Naden still went into town when she had free time. The female shopkeepers adored her and would ask her to go buy things for them or to sing lullabies for their children.

"I'm a queen you know!" ...she would protest, but Naden always did those favors for them, so they kept relying on her. If you did a popularity poll for the queens, but limited it to just Parnam, the nobles and knights would go for Liscia, but the overwhelmingly larger vote of the common people would probably be split between Naden and Juna. If you limited that further to just female voters, Naden had a definite lead. They rewarded her with products from their shops, so she was always bringing fresh produce home and delighting Souma with her home cooking.

"That's why I won't complain about the disrespect... But in exchange..."

"Huh?! Eek?!"

Naden circled around behind Yuriga and grabbed her from behind.

"Warm me up with your wings for a bit."

"Wha?! Whoa, don't go feeling up my wings! They're sensitive!"

"Ohhh. I love your plumage." (Touchy, touchy.)

"N-No... Stop...! Ahhh!"

Maybe because of the cold, Naden was getting excessively touchy.

"Wh-What's this exciting scene? Maybe it's a good thing Ichihā's not here." Tomoe blushed as she watched Naden accost Yuriga.

Once they had play wrestled for a little while, Naden must have warmed up a bit and let Yuriga go. Finally set free, Yuriga glared resentfully at Tomoe.

“Don’t just watch! Help me!”

“Oh, I couldn’t do thaaaat. I mean, look, I don’t even have wings.”

“You’ve got a wolf’s tail, don’t you? Look, Naden, wouldn’t it feel so warm if you could cuddle this kid’s fluffy tail?”

“...Hey, you’re right.”

As Naden stared at her with the eyes of a predator, Tomoe instinctively covered her tail with her hands.

“U-Um, we should really move on to the next place. The servants were saying the warehouse is full of interesting stuff.” Tomoe urged the other two to move along, trying to get the subject off of her tail.

The warehouse they came to in the corner of the garden had white walls and a tiled roof. If Souma were there, he would have described it as, “The kind of place an evil magistrate in a period piece would stash gold coins to later be stolen by the virtuous thieves.”

Kishun had already given them permission to go inside, so the door was open wide. When the three went in, the air smelled faintly of mold, and a variety of objects were stored there, seemingly at random.

“Is this... a tool for farming? It looks pretty old.”

“Yuriga, there’s a throwing net for fishing over here.”

“Is that a taxidermied giant boar...? It’s smaller than the ones in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Did they catch it in the mountains here? Oh, and those jawbones come from a shark, right?”

It looked like this warehouse was where they stored things that were no longer in use. There were various tools used for farming, fishing, and hunting, as well as trophies made from what they had caught.

“...Huh?”

Something in the storehouse caught Tomoe’s eye.

“Woah?! What’s this? It’s cute.”

“What are you on about? Wait, what is this?”

“A dog... No, a wolf?”

Yuriga and Naden came over to look at what Tomoe had come across. It was an object maybe 30 centimeters long, resembling a wolf, and it was fixed to a wooden base. The mouth had a round opening in it, leading into a cylindrical hole.

Curious, Yuriga tried to pick it up.

“Ngh...! It’s heavier than it looks.”

It seemed to be made of iron and weighed on Yuriga’s slender arms. Tomoe would have struggled to even lift it.

Looking at the iron wolf, Tomoe cocked her head to the side. “Hmm. From the shape of it, it looks like a cannon, but...”

“Aren’t cannons a little bigger than this?”

“Maybe it’s a little cannon?”

While Tomoe and Yuriga were struggling to figure out what it was...

“Wouldn’t it be faster to just ask someone who knows?”

““Ah!””

Naden casually hoisted the iron wolf with one hand. Being a ryuu, she was strong even in human form. Tomoe and Yuriga gaped at her. With it in Naden’s hands, the three of them headed off back to Souma and the others.

When they got back, Souma and Juna were taking a break, drinking tea that Shabon had prepared for them, while Ichiha drew a picture based on the information they had put together.

“Do you have a moment, Big Brother?”

“Hm? What’s up, Tomoe?”

“We found this thing in the warehouse.”

She showed Souma and the others the iron wolf they had brought.

“Is this... a cannon?” Juna looked at it, mystified. “We use cannons in the navy, but this one is awfully small. It has a caliber of 60 millimeters... and wouldn’t hold much powder, so it couldn’t punch through a ship’s hull. Though, here in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, they use wooden ships with iron plates bolted on, so if you targeted the wood, I think this would still be effective.”

Tomoe was impressed by Juna’s explanation.

Meanwhile, Souma was thinking, *The animal looks like a komainu lion-dog, but could this be a Crouching Tiger Cannon?* He remembered the Chinese units in a civilization simulation game he had played in the world he had come from using weapons like these.



"That is a lion-dog cannon," Kishun said. "As Madam Juna explained, it is a gunpowder weapon used in naval battles. Because they are not very heavy, we can load them onto even our smallest boats, and then take advantage of their speed to target the enemy's weak points."

"I see... Expect a maritime nation to have interesting weapons." Souma crossed his arms and groaned with approval.

It's somewhere between a cannon and a rifle, I guess. We couldn't use rifles because the low mass of the bullets meant they couldn't be enchanted, but this sort of hand cannon might be usable... It'd be heavy, and difficult to maneuver with, but maybe I'll have the military research it when I get back to the Kingdom.

While Souma was thinking about that...

"Souma... Er, I mean, sire! I'm finished drawing!"

Ichihira came over and spread out his drawing on the table. Everyone crowded in to look, then gulped.

"Is this Ooyamizuchi?" Tomoe murmured despite herself.

This was still only an imaginative sketch, but it had the power to convince all of us that this must be what the creature looked like.

◇ ◇ ◇

With the sun setting in the evening, you could see a faint red line along the mountain ridge. We were in the garden with a campfire and a massive pot that made me think of an imoni-kai hot pot party in Yamagata.

"Now, dig in everyone." The tanuki guy standing in front of the pot said, offering a bowl with one hand while the other held a ladle.

I was told that the locals used the excess bits that were left over when they prepared the fish from the kingdom for preservation, and

combined those with local vegetables to make soup, which was being offered right now. With warm food in hand, we went up onto the veranda to eat.

“Whew... That really warms you up.”

“Hee hee, it certainly does. It’s such a comforting flavor.”

Juna and I smacked our lips with satisfaction.

Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago cuisine was apparently quite close to that of the world I came from, including its use of miso. The root vegetables steeped in fish broth and miso were really delicious. Close to the pot, Aisha and Naden were indulging themselves with delight.

“This feels similar to His Majesty’s cooking. Oh! I’d like another bowl, please!”

“The taste of our husband’s cooking, huh? I’ll have another bowl of that, too!”

So, it’s not the taste of their mother’s cooking, huh? Well, not having any memories of my own mom, it tasted like my grandma’s cooking to me. Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga seemed desperate to show they could eat just as much as the other two gluttons.

“This familiar miso flavor is delicious. It goes well with the umami of the fish.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re also from the north, aren’t you? We have similar dishes in Malmkhitan.”

“Same as in the Duchy of Chima. It’s fascinating to learn that the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union has a culture around food that’s similar to the Union of Eastern Nations. Did a group with that culture migrate from one to the other, maybe...?”

As Ichiha pondered that, Tomoe smiled and poked him in the cheek.

“Come on, Ichiha. If you keep thinking about it, Aisha and Naden will eat it all, you know?”

“Oh! Time to eat, then... Ow! That’s hot!”

It looked like the food had been too hot for his hurried attempts to eat it. Ichiha stuck his tongue out and fanned it with his hand. Tomoe watched with concern.

“A-Are you okay, Ichiha? I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have rushed you.”

“N-No, I just wasn’t careful enough...”

“What are you two doing?” Yuriga asked with a sigh. “Geez. Here, have some water.”

“S-Sorry...” Ichiha accepted a ladle full of water and gulped it down.

Things seemed to be fine, so there wasn’t any need for the adults to get involved. As we watched the three kids being adorable, there were voices somewhere off in the distance. I perked up my ears to listen, and it turned out to be a song.

We take our boat on the mother sea.

To the waves rich with fish and life.

Under the seabird’s eye there treasure be.

If we’re too slow, the big’un will strike.

Pull in the nets! Heave, ho! Heave, ho!

Let the port hear our song of triumph.

“This is...”

“A sea shanty. The islanders must be singing it,” Kishun replied in response to my murmuring. “I am sure they must be celebrating in port today for the first time in far too long.”

Kishun had come by holding a bottle of sake in his hands; behind him was Shabon with cups. Kishun sat next to me and Shabon took a seat next to Juna, putting themselves between the two of us before passing out the cups.

“This is dragon sake, made with Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago rice,” Kishun explained, pouring the drink into my cup. It smelled exactly like Japanese sake.

“For you, too, ma’am.” Shabon tried to offer Juna the dragon wine, too, but...

“I’m sorry. Could I ask for tea instead?” she politely refused it. Juna could hold her liquor pretty well, but she must have thought it best that we didn’t both end up inebriated at the same time.

I clinked my cup against Kishun’s and took a drink... *Yeah, this really does seem like sake.*

I had left Japan before I reached the drinking age, so the only Japanese alcohol I had experienced was the cooking alcohol mirin, but I felt like this had to be the same as Japanese sake.

“How do you like it? Does our country’s sake suit your tastes?” Kishun asked and I nodded in response.

“Yeah, I think it’s good. It pairs well with the rich flavors of the soup.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

And so we drank, listening to our noisy companions and the sea shanties from port. From what I could see here, it was hard to imagine there was a monster called Ooyamizuchi out in the waters, and we were about to fight an intense battle against it. In more peaceful times... I might have been able to enjoy drinking with Shabon and Kishun more—together with Liscia and Roroa, who we’d left behind in the Kingdom.

“This really is good booze.”

I swallowed the drink along with those bitter feelings.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Halfway through that night, an alarm bell began ringing.

“It’s here! It’s here!”

“Men, hurry to the island chief! Women and children, don’t go outside!”

Hearing the hubbub, we rushed to our feet in the large room where we had been taking a nap.

Looking at Souma, Kishun said, “Sir Souma. Head to the watchtower. You will be able to see it from there.”

“Got it.”

Following his suggestion, we hurried to the mansion’s watchtower. I squinted at the sea and could make out a massive object moving near the Twin Islands at a relaxed pace.

“Use this, Your Majesty,” Aisha said, offering me a telescope.

“Thanks.”

I brought it up to my eye and peered into the distance. Fortunately, the moon was bright that night, and the moonlight reflecting off the surface of the sea gave me a full picture of the creature.

Looking away from the telescope, I asked Shabon, “Is that Ooyamizuchi?”

“Most likely. It is difficult to imagine any other creature being so massive,” she confirmed with a nod.

I passed the telescope to Ichiha. “I knew we could count on you,” I told him. “It looks exactly like your drawing.”



Based on the fragmentary witness reports, Ichiha had come up with a sketch. It looked similar to a sea dragon from its head down to its neck, with a bivalve shell on its back, and thick, octopus-like tentacles for arms with crustacean-like pincers on the end. The key point here was the theory that the reports of a “many-headed snake” came from misidentification of the tentacles and pincers. The accounts of victims being cut in two didn’t indicate being bitten by something with the head of a snake, but rather were the result of being snipped in half by pincers the witnesses mistook for heads.

In addition, the supposition that, “It might be releasing mist to keep its body moist,” led to the idea that some part of its body might be a mollusk. The reports of it being “like a little island,” and me telling him, “there’s a legend that mirages are created by a bivalve-like monster,” led him to depict it as having a bivalve shell on its back. There were some parts that only matched by pure chance, but to be able to draw it so accurately based on what little info we had showed what a genius Ichiha was. *They say innocent children always see the truth, after all...*

“I’m glad you’re here, Ichiha.”

“Y-You flatter me,” Ichiha said humbly as he looked through the telescope.

I plopped my hand down on top of his head.

“Take pride in it. Thanks to you, we can prepare countermeasures.”

“Huh?! Okay!” Ichiha responded enthusiastically.

I hope repeated successes like this can help the shy kid develop a sense of confidence, I thought. If it did, he would grow into the sort of person who could help lead our country in the future.

The other members of the group took turns with the telescope, each of them gulping when they saw it.

"It doesn't seem to be putting out mist now," Aisha muttered.

"That's likely because it doesn't plan to attack," Ichiha replied.
"Maybe we should think of the mist as something it emits right before it goes ashore to catch prey?"

I asked him the most important question: "It won't come ashore on the Twin Islands, then?"

"That's right. Considering how unalert it appears, I think it's 'just passing through.' Though, if any small island or boat were to cross its path, I'm sure it would still be a disaster."

"It's big, after all. Bigger than even the largest ships the Kingdom has."

"Even in my ryuu form, I'm nothing next to that."

Juna and Naden let out sighs of awe. You could tell, even from a distance, that it was massive. Like something out of a kaiju movie. *It just had to be what we're up against, eh?*

~~~~~!

There was a sound like the wind rushing between the buildings, only amplified several times. Was this Ooyamizuchi's cry?

I backed away a little, then whispered in Tomoe's ear, "Can you tell what Ooyamizuchi is thinking, Tomoe?"

"I could only pick up a little, but..." Tomoe whispered back. "It's looking for an 'enemy' and 'food'... is what it sounded like."

"An 'enemy,' and 'food'?" I whispered back, and Tomoe nodded.

"It seems like they're one and the same to Ooyamizuchi. Big enemies are big food, and will make it even bigger... It's a little different from

the feeling of starvation the lizardmen from the Kingdom of Lastania had. It's like this is what Ooyamizuchi lives for... Or so I understand."

Devouring enemies to grow... Was that what it did every day? This was definitely different from the lizardmen and their starvation. If anything, it made me think of a battle junkie, obsessed with proving their existence by defeating powerful rivals.

When I passed what she'd told me on to Ichihai, he got a pensive look on his face. "Maybe... This is a monster that grew up in a closed space like a dungeon, eating other monsters to survive? Normally, once it grew to a certain degree, it would leave the dungeon on its own, but for some reason... like perhaps because the dungeon was underwater, it was forced to keep feeding on other monsters..."

"So the monsters fed on each other, and this Ooyamizuchi was the last one left? I could see why that would make it see enemies and food as the same thing... I guess."

Though this was just speculation from Ichihai, it was just like the ancient Chinese practice of creating *gu*: they stuffed a bunch of disgusting creatures in a pot, and the last survivor was used as a tool in black magic. If that was how Ooyamizuchi came to be, that meant it was a voracious eater, emerging as the most powerful thing inside the dungeon it came from.

Ichihai frowned and said, "If the creature was born inside a dungeon it couldn't escape from, then normally it would have died inside it. But if the dungeon was destroyed, or maybe Ooyamizuchi happened to gain an ability that let it escape... Whatever it was, I believe this is an incredibly rare case of such a monster appearing on the surface."

"...That makes sense, yeah."

I had witnessed first-hand what sort of mess an undiscovered dungeon can cause back in the Republic of Turgis, but there was no telling when a monster like this might appear.

~~~~~!

Feeling Ooyamizuchi's cry resound deep in my gut, I became newly aware of the dangers lurking in this world.



Chapter 6: Into Battle -fleet-

It had been a day and a half since we saw Ooyamizuchi. I was standing in front of the broadcast jewel we had brought to Kishun's mansion. Projected on the simplified receiver placed slightly ahead of me was an image of Liscia, currently at the secret arsenal on an island near Lagoon City. We had one of our regular calls scheduled for today.

"How are Cian and Kazuha, Liscia? I'd like to see their faces," I asked her, but she told me I was out of luck with a shrug.

"They're napping now. Carla's looking after them."

"That's too bad. Here I was, thinking I'd get to see their faces after far too long."

"You only left the Kingdom a week ago, didn't you?"

"For a father, that's *too long*. What if they forget my face?"

"You're overprotective... I'm starting to wish you'd hurry up and have babies with everyone else, too. It'd be better to have your attention divided across a lot more children," Liscia said, sounding a little fed up with me. I wasn't sure how to respond.

"So, you were going to show them the sea, right? How did they react?"

"They didn't really get it yet. They weren't particularly excited or scared."

"Well, they're only a year old, after all."

"If they could walk a little better, and we weren't in the middle of winter, I'd have let them play in a tidal pool, but... I think that's probably too dangerous, so we just looked at it from a distance while I held them."

“That makes sense. When they’re older, I’d like to go beachcombing as a family.”

“Hee hee, that might be nice. But we need the sea to be safe for that, right?” she said with a smile. Seconds later, her face became serious and she asked, “...You saw Ooyamizuchi, correct? How did it look?”

“Huge... Incredibly... huge.”

For a moment, I considered making light of the situation so as not to scare Liscia, but she’d already seen the reports, so that wouldn’t work. I decided to be honest.

“It was akin to a moving island, just like the witnesses said. It makes me shudder to think something that massive could appear closer to the Kingdom.”

“I read the reports. That thing is way bigger than Naden or Ruby, right? ...Can you beat it?”

“We have to—for the sake of securing safety out at sea. Fortunately, thanks to Ichihā’s analysis, it should be easy to come up with countermeasures. I’ve already sent his conclusions to the relevant parties, so I’m sure they’ll think of something that will work. We’ve got him going through witness reports to figure out Ooyamizuchi’s route now, too.”

“Sounds like you’re going to hit it with everything you’ve got. But aren’t you too focused on Ooyamizuchi? What about the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s fleet?”

“That’s Excel’s job. I’ll leave it to the experts.”

“That’s so like you... but it must be frustrating not being able to do anything about it yourself.”

I could hear Liscia was itching to get involved, too. If the children were a little bigger, she’d have been on a ship immediately.

I gave this gutsy mom a wry smile and said, “Look after the kids, okay? Liscia.”

“...Okay. Take care, Souma.”

And with that, we terminated the call.

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Some days later, I decided to gather my companions in the living room and explain what was going to happen.

“Excel’s sent us an outline of the plan,” I said, unfurling the map we had been sent.

“Wh-What is this sea chart?!”

“Even the currents are indicated here. How does the Kingdom have a chart like this...?”

Shabon and Kishun’s eyes widened in shock when they saw it.

The chart only showed a portion of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, but with enough careful detail to show the course from the Kingdom to Nine-Headed Dragon Island.

With a wry smile, I told the two of them, “It means you’re not our only source of information inside the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.”

““.....””

They were at a loss for words, which was expected, really, since us having a sea chart like this proved we had other informants.

I ignored them and went on, “The Kingdom’s fleet, which is gathered at Lagoon City, will head southwards, making a close pass east of the Parent and Child Islands before setting course for the port on the west side of Nine-Headed Dragon Island.”

The Parent and Child Islands, south of Lagoon City, were a pair of two islands, much like the Twin Islands. Child Island was about the same size as the Twin Islands, but Parent Island was much larger. This served as the origin for its name.

Next, I pointed to the sea between Child Island and Nine-Headed Dragon Island. “Here is where Excel expects our fleet to face the archipelago’s fleet.”

“Huh?! You mean to fight there?!” Kishun cried out in surprise, having come back to his senses. Continuing his thought he said, “It is certainly true that this is the most direct course to the port on the west side of Nine-Headed Dragon Island, but the area between Child Island and Nine-Headed Dragon Island is filled with many small uninhabited landmasses. That will make it difficult for the Kingdom to deploy its fleet, which I can only assume contains many large warships, while the smaller boats used by the archipelago will be able to move around more easily... The Nine-Headed Dragon King may even be eagerly lying in wait.”

Due to his weak position, he couldn’t voice his opinion too strongly, but it sounded like Kishun wanted us to reconsider. Shabon looked at him uneasily.

I shrugged my shoulders at the two of them, saying, “But it’s still the shortest route, right? Excel must have chosen this course because she determined that even if the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s fleet is waiting for her there, she can handle them. As king, all I can do is trust my Commander-in-Chief.”

“Are you certain you are not underestimating the Nine-Headed Dragon King and the archipelago’s fleet?”

“You say that, but are you sure you’re not underestimating *my* fleet?” I asked Kishun, who had a look on his face like he’d just bitten into something unpleasant.

He seemed ready to press the issue, but Shabon tugged on his sleeve and shook her head silently. In a quiet voice, she said, “Let us believe in them, Kishun. We have placed our bets on Sir Souma and his people.”

“Lady Shabon... I... I understand.” Kishun backed down.

With that settled, I told everyone, “We’ve finished gathering information. Now it’s time to meet up with the fleet.”

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Around the same time...

In the main room of Nine-Headed Dragon King Shana’s mansion on Nine-Headed Dragon Island, the chiefs of the largest islands had gathered to prepare for an invasion by the Kingdom of Friedonia. They sat around a map of the archipelago that had been unfurled on the wooden floor—with frowns across all their faces.

“To think the Kingdom would attack when we’re already menaced by Ooyamizuchi...”

“He strikes when we’re at our weakest. The King of Friedonia is a cowardly scoundrel.”

“He must have been awfully upset about our people fishing in the sea near the Kingdom.”

“The fishermen are desperate. For those who live with the sea, not being able to go out to fish is like not being alive at all.”

“It’s a little much to ask him to understand that, though...”

As they each voiced their own opinions...

The man seated at the head of the group, listening in silence until now, said, “People, that’s hardly what we should be discussing now.”

This was the ruler of the islands, Nine-Headed Dragon King Shana. He belonged to the race of mermen, the same as Shabon, but unlike her,

he had a body that radiated strength, a topknot, and a stern expression. The picture of a warrior.



Hearing the grave tones in the ruler of the rowdy Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago's voice, the island chiefs fell very quiet. King Shana looked to each of them before speaking.

"Our spies report that the Kingdom's fleet has already set sail. They'll be arriving within the week to invade us."

"What do you think their goal is? To take some island or another?" a young island chief asked, but King Shana shook his head.

"Hardly. They can't possibly want to hold land where Ooyamizuchi resides. It would be difficult for them to rule this region when we're so far from the Kingdom, and so different culturally. Their more likely objective is to deal a blow to our fleet. We have been using it to support our fishermen in waters near the Kingdom, after all. Without escorts, it will be impossible for them to go out that far."

"Damn it! They mean to trap our fishermen here—where that monster is running rampant?"

A swarthy island chief who was a mountain of muscle punched the floor. The other island chiefs nodded.

"If only Ooyamizuchi would move into the Kingdom's waters."

"You said it. Why does it stay here?"

"Why don't we ask the Kingdom for help slaying Ooyamizuchi? If we could just get rid of it, the fish would return, and then we wouldn't have to squabble over who can fish where, you know?" one of the young island chiefs said, but an elderly island chief shook his head.

"Not possible. We're not even united on what should be done about Ooyamizuchi ourselves. If not for this 'foreign threat,' there wouldn't even be this many island chiefs gathered here."

The independent spirit of each of the islands in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago was the result of a long history of conflict over

who would rule the waves. Because of that, without any sort of impending foreign invasion, the islands would never fight as one. Though Ooyamizuchi was a threat, it was not an invader, so each island prepared for it independently, leading to none of them joining forces to resolve the issue. That was one of the reasons Shabon had gone to plead for the Kingdom to slay it.

“We can come together against the Kingdom, but not against a single beast. Could you ask someone to fight with us when we act like this?”

“We’ve already provoked the Kingdom’s ire, too...”

“That doesn’t mean we can just let them invade us!”

“Indeed. If they come, then we must crush them. We’ll show them the power of our maritime nation.”

That earned an enthusiastic, “Yeah!” from the militaristic island chiefs, but then a one-eyed island chief with an impressive physique and magnificent black beard spoke, “Hmm, I respect your enthusiasm, at least.”

His name was Shima Katsunaga. He was chief of Yaezu Island, the second or third largest of the islands in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. He was also the mononofu warrior who was renowned as the greatest military man in the archipelago’s history.

“However, we are the defenders. Not knowing where the enemy will strike, we are forced to move second. Don’t you think you’re all underestimating the Kingdom a little?”

“I would not have expected to hear such words from ‘the greatest military man in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago,’” one chief scoffed. “Do you suggest we would lose a battle at sea?”

“The Kingdom’s navy has the masterful Excel Walter. They even say she leads their entire military now. I can’t imagine she would start a

fight she had no chance of winning. If she's coming despite knowing our advantage at sea... does that not mean that the Kingdom has a chance?"

The island chiefs gulped at what Katsunaga said, but one young island chief dispelled their fears with his energetic voice.

"Their new king has fought a land war before, but he shouldn't have any experience with fighting at sea. Doesn't this just mean that Excel couldn't stop the callow hothead?"

"...Entirely possible. But that may not be the case. In war, you always have to consider the worst-case scenario," Katsunaga replied gravely.

The young island chief had no counter to his words.

King Shana spoke once more, "We know the course the Kingdom will take," he said, pointing to the map with his fan. "Their fleet will almost certainly pass between the Parent and Child Islands and Nine-Headed Dragon Island, attempting to take the port on the west side of Nine-Headed Dragon Island."

He had declared this so confidently that Katsunaga furrowed his brow.

"How can you be so certain?"

"The currents of our archipelago are swift and complicated, easily sweeping iron ships away. There are many reefs, too. We can navigate them with our many years of experience living here, but outsiders from the Kingdom can't possibly do the same. That forces them to take a known course."

"Known? You're saying that the Kingdom knows a safe course?" Katsunaga asked, and King Shana gave him a big nod.

"Yes. The course I just mentioned was one I intentionally leaked to them, after all."

“What?!” Katsunaga exclaimed, and then all of the other island chiefs began grumbling. King Shana had leaked what might be called the greatest of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s secrets, its sea routes, to the Kingdom.

King Shana raised a hand to silence them. “I’ve only taught them a course here, to Nine-Headed Dragon Island. Not to any of the other islands. I’m sure they believe an insider leaked this information to them.”

“...I see. And you’re suggesting we could ambush them in an area that works to our advantage?” Katsunaga pointed out.

“That’s right,” King Shana declared, slapping his knee. “The battle will be joined over the rocky reefs between Nine-Headed Dragon Island and Child Island. It will be hard for them to deploy many large ships because of the many small islands there, and our more maneuverable fleet will have an advantage. We’ll aim to pull the Kingdom’s fleet in and eliminate them in a decisive battle.”

“““Ohhh!“““

The island chiefs let out a cry of admiration, having heard King Shana’s careful plans for the coming battle.

“If we know the enemy’s course, then how about we lay mines in the area around the reefs?” a young island chief suggested, but King Shana shook his head.

“Our mines can destroy wooden ships like the ones we use, but they lack the power to have any real effect on iron ships pulled by sea dragons. Even setting that aside, I expect they’ll send out scouts. We risk them changing course if they learn we’re ready and waiting.”

“I see... You’ve got a point there.”

“If we can lure them in, they’re as good as ours. If we send in fire ships (unmanned ships loaded with a large quantity of gunpowder

that collides with, and explodes against, enemy vessels) from upstream to kill their sea dragons, their fleet will be stranded.”

“Hmm... It could work,” Katsunaga gave an approving grunt. With the greatest mononofu in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago satisfied, the rest were convinced of victory.

King Shana stood up and said to them, “We have the terrain on our side! Now let’s teach them a lesson for underestimating us!”

“““Yeah!“““

The island chiefs rose, crossing their arms in front of them.

They each left separately to prepare for war, leaving only King Shana and Katsunaga in the room. Now that they were alone, Katsunaga let out a sigh.

“I didn’t say it in front of the others, but isn’t this uncharacteristically rushed for you?”

“...I am confident of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s victory.”

“Well, I’ve known you for a long time. I know quite well you’re a hard man to fight, and a reliable ally.” Katsunaga put a hand on his shoulder, then spun his arm around. “I know you don’t fight battles you can’t win, too. You have some other plan in the works, don’t you?”

“Do I now?”

“Ha ha ha, I knew you wouldn’t tell me. I’m a warrior, not a diplomat, after all. I can only trust in you, my king, and fight my hardest.”

“...I’ll be counting on the strength of Yaezu Island’s mononofu.”

“And you’ll have it,” Katsunaga said, then left.

Now that King Shana was left on his own, a servant came in to deliver a message.

“Lord Shana. Word has come in that everything has been prepared on Ikatsuru Island.”

“Yes. Very good, then.”

“Um, shouldn’t you have told the other island chiefs?”

King Shana smirked. “They say that to fool your enemies, you must fool your friends first. The ultimate victory will belong to us.”

“Yes, sire... and what would you have us do about Lady Shabon?”

The servant’s question wiped King Shana’s smile from his face, and he turned away from the man and replied, “Let her go. She’s a grown woman now. She takes responsibility for her own decisions.”

“...Yes, sire!”

The moment of confrontation drew closer by the hour.

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The weather was fine and the waves calm as thirty Friedonian warships sailed across the sea. The sunlight reflecting off the water onto the steel ships gave them a dull shine. Of this fleet, one was markedly larger than the others. The *Albert II*, a similar model to the ship used against Red Dragon City, would serve as the flagship carrying Excel and me in the coming battle.

Naden had carried us back to the Kingdom. After dropping off the three kids in Lagoon City, we changed into our uniforms and met up with the ships. Excel, Castor, and the marines greeted us as Naden set down the gondola on the deck of the *Albert II*.

Folding up her fan, Excel smiled and said, “Welcome to your fleet, Your Majesty.”



"Yeah. It's quite a sight seeing so many ships together like this," I responded, looking around and taking it all in. It appealed to my masculine soul seeing them all sailing aside the *Albert II*. The group even included the island-type carrier *Hiryuu*.

I turned to the *Hiryuu*'s captain, Castor, and asked, "I thought I put you in charge of the *Hiryuu*? Is it all right for you to be here?"

Castor stood up straight and replied, "My XO is handling it now. I wanted to be here to see you."

"Oh, yeah? The *Hiryuu* is going to be the star of this battle. I'm looking forward to seeing your work."

"Yes, sir. I will give my all to meet your expectations, Your Majesty." With that said, Castor saluted me, then returned to the *Hiryuu*.

It felt a bit stiff, but formalities were important. Turning to Excel, I asked, "Have you explained the reasons for this deployment to the marines?"

"I've handed written commands to each captain. They're under strict orders to open them when you give the command to go into battle, sire. The marines will hear the details from them, I'm sure," Excel said then gave me an elegant bow. "However, before we go into battle, I would like you to make a speech yourself. It would help to reconfirm our objectives, and to improve morale."

"...Got it."

A speech, huh...? I thought. *I've given so many now, but I still can't get used to it.* Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Shabon and Kishun, who we had brought with us, were staring at something in wide-eyed disbelief.

"What is that, Kishun? That ship, the size of an island..."

“...I do not know. But Sir Souma seems to have absolute confidence in his fleet. If that island-like ship is not the product of mere playfulness and whimsy, then what secret power does it harbor...?”

“I find it startling that it moves without sea dragons to pull it, too. How...?”

They were apparently surprised by the *Hiryuu*. Not having any concept of what an aircraft carrier was, they couldn’t hope to understand why it was shaped the way that it was. It ought to scare the Nine-Headed Dragon King’s fleet senseless.

Next, they pointed to another ship.

“That ship is big, too. Though it does not appear to be armed.”

“A transport ship, perhaps? It looks like it could carry tens of thousands of men.”

They were pointing at a ship that looked like a massive tanker. Like Kishun had guessed, that was a newly constructed transport ship. It was dubbed the *King Souma*.

Yep... It was named after me. I’d said before, “I don’t want my name on a warship. If you have to name a ship after me, make it a transport vessel.” And so the engineers had done just that—slapping my name on a new model of transport ship. From now on, transport ships of that model would be referred to as Souma-class transport ships. *Seriously? Well, there was no fixing it now...* Incidentally, the *King Souma* used a Little Susumu Mark V, and could sail without sea dragons to pull it. A transport ship had plenty of value even during peacetime, so we had prioritized funding and equipment for the project.

As I was thinking about that, the jewel for the Jewel Voice Broadcast was brought up on deck. Excel raised her hands up high and began gathering a great amount of water from the sea to create a massive ball above the *Albert II*.

“It’s a little different from using freshwater, but... it’ll do.”

This was the same sort of ball of water as she had shown off at Altomura during the war with the Principality. Once she had finished creating it, Excel, who was sweating profusely, said, “Go on, sire. This takes a lot out of me, so please keep it brief.”

“Got it.”

I stood in front of the broadcast jewel, swishing my cape, and thrusting my fist into the air.

“This is an announcement for the soldiers of the National Naval Defense Force. We will now head to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.”

My voice emanated from the ball of water above so that the entire fleet could hear it.

“We have but one mission—to bring stability to the seas. That is because safe waters are required for the people who live on the coast to be able to fish, and for stable trade with other countries. This must be done to protect the nation’s development and the people’s livelihoods. To that end, there are two targets we must deal with.”

Raising my arm, I gestured my hand up with my index raised.

“The first is the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s fleet. We will subjugate this fleet which has aided and abetted illegal fishing in our country’s waters, and secure safety for our country’s merchant vessels,” I said before raising my second finger. “The other target is Ooyamizuchi, said to be rampaging around the archipelago. The creature has been strictly their problem up until now, but we have no guarantee that it will not appear in our own waters as well.”

Curling my fingers into a fist, I then thrust it forward.

“I have shared the information we have on this Ooyamizuchi with you. It’s a creature far more massive than any rhinosaurus or dragon. I’d like to designate it not as a ‘monster’... but as a ‘kaiju.’ If a kaiju like this ever attacked our kingdom, there’s no telling how much damage it might cause. In fact, there are even islands in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago that saw their population completely wiped out by the creature.”

There were murmurs from the marines as my words reached them. Though they had been given information on Ooyamizuchi, this report of the actual damage it could cause must have made them tense. I kept speaking.

“Ooyamizuchi is more dangerous than the archipelago’s fleet. In some ways, we ought to prioritize slaying the beast over defeating them. Hear me now! The goal of this expedition is not to invade the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago! Our mission is to eliminate the threat of Ooyamizuchi, make the illegal fishing ships leave the Kingdom’s waters, and bring stability to the sea! Who can call our actions unjust?! I call upon all of you to lend me your power, and serve our country!”

As I raised my fist into the air, a war cry went up from the marines on each ship. I gave Excel the signal, and she dispelled the ball of water. The image of me projected in it vanished, and the light shining through the mist it left behind made a rainbow.

“I think that was a good speech, Your Majesty,” Juna said as she came over to me. I just shook my head quietly.

“...No matter how many I give, I can never get used to it.”

“Hee hee, that’s not true at all.”

As we were talking and smiling, Shabon and Kishun came over.

“Um... Sir Souma...”

"What is it, Madam Shabon?" I asked.

Shabon looked at me with eyes full of resolve. "Was it true what you said just now, that 'invading the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago' is not your goal here?"

She had broken ties with the Nine-Headed Dragon King and came to work with me in order to bring down Ooyamizuchi. Slaying Ooyamizuchi was in line with her hopes, but she must not have known what to make of my denial to invade the islands. Our targets were Ooyamizuchi and the fleet led by the Nine-Headed Dragon King, and we wouldn't be laying a hand on the people of the archipelago, which is exactly what she was hoping for. Though, it must have made her uneasy, wondering if such a thing were really possible.

With a serious look on my face, I told her, "There was no lie in what I said. I'd like for you to believe that."

"...Understood," Shabon said, then quietly withdrew.

Well, that was my preparation complete. Now... it's just a matter of timing.

I glared at the sea ahead of us.

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If you were to ask future historians what naval battle had left the greatest impression on them, the Battle of the Parent and Child Islands fought by King Souma and King Shana was guaranteed to come up. This battle, which went by many other names, was anything but normal.



Chapter 7: Naval Battle -aircraft carrier-

—One day in the 2nd month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar.

A fleet belonging to the Kingdom of Friedonia, under the command of Souma A. Elfrieden, confronted a fleet belonging to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union off the coast of the Parent and Child Islands in a region of the sea dotted with islets.

This battle was unusual from the outset. In a large naval battle, it's normal to attempt to beat the enemy to favorable ground. However, the fleet commanded by Souma slowed down just before entering the area where the battle was expected to occur. Under the common sense of naval tactics, this was unthinkable. Moving slowly increased the risk that the enemy's scouts would discover the fleet, and give them time to prepare. Despite that, for some reason, the naval expert Excel had accepted Souma's direction to slow down, which made the marines participating in the operation feel very uneasy.

At this moment, there were five people gathered in the captain's room aboard the *Albert II*: Souma, Aisha, Juna, Naden, and Excel, enjoying a spot of tea. Shabon and Kishun had excused themselves from the room, unable to bear the out-of-place sense of relaxation.

"Hee hee, Madam Shabon, Sir Kishun, and the marines are all on edge," Excel said between graceful sips of her tea. "Well, we are going at this slow speed right before entering an area where we expect to meet the enemy, after all. I'd be more surprised if they were going on as normal."

Souma put down his own cup and nodded. "I don't blame them. This will all come down to a single gambit. The timing's going to be

important. We can't afford to arrive earlier than we planned for. There haven't been any reports yet, right?"

"None at all," Excel replied.

"Even someone like me who knows the plan can't help but feel on edge," Aisha sighed, having been listening to us. "How should I put this? It's like I don't know what to stress over..."

"This is more than just a matter of beating the enemy, really," Naden said, agreeing with her.

Juna smiled wryly and tried to calm them down. "There's really nothing we can do about it. Though it will be more difficult than winning, we can expect to see commensurate results. We have to pull this off no matter what."

"Juna's right. I know this feels like walking a tightrope, but we need to endure it for now in order to achieve the best possible outcome," Souma said, and everyone nodded.

Then, as the fleet entered the island-littered area between Child Island and Nine-Headed Dragon Island, the archipelago's fleet was finally sighted up ahead. It was here that Souma once again did something unbelievable: The Kingdom's fleet came to a *complete stop* while in visual range of the enemy fleet.

With the battleship *Albert II* slightly ahead of the rest, they created a giant ball of water and projected Souma's image on it.

"This is a message for the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union's fleet."

Incredibly, even moments before the battle was to be joined, he was using the Jewel Voice Broadcast to call out to the enemy. The giant image of Souma addressed the opposing naval force.

“I am King Souma A. Elfrieden of the United Kingdom of Elfrieden and Amidonia. Here and now, I issue my ultimatum to the Nine-Headed Dragon King, as well as your fleet. You should have received a message telling you to communicate with me in the same manner. Show yourself, Sir Shana, the Nine-Headed Dragon King!”

Normally, no one would play along with this... And yet, on the other side, a ship larger than the others came forward, manifested a ball of water directly above it, and projected the image of a great merman. The Nine-Headed Dragon King’s daughter, Shabon, stared wide-eyed at the image from the deck of the *Albert II*.

“No way?!”

The projection was that of Nine-Headed Dragon King Shana himself. Incidentally, though the Kingdom’s water ball was sustained with Excel’s magic power alone, the Archipelago Union’s required more than ten water mages working together to barely manage to pull off the same feat.

When she saw her father projected on that water ball, Shabon covered her mouth, unable to process what she was seeing.

“I thought it was absurd for Souma to call out the enemy fleet at this point, but Father actually answered... What in the world is going on here...?”

“...I do not understand. Why would they both do this?” Kishun, who was standing close to her, murmured.

The majority of the sailors in both fleets likely felt the same way. But the two kings carried on their conversation with no regard for anyone else.

“O King Shana. In my position as king, I have repeatedly warned you to cease illegally fishing in the waters near the Kingdom. Despite that, you people have refused to heed my words, and have even sent armed ships to support the criminals. It has come to the point where

no more can be tolerated. In the name of peace for my people and at sea, I have come to strike down you and your fleet. If you do not desire that outcome, I encourage you to surrender quickly!"

Souma opened up with a demand that his opponent surrender. That must have shocked the sailors on both sides.

Shana didn't hesitate for a moment before replying, "My people find themselves in a situation where they must cross the hazardous seas in order to fish in distant waters. You people arrest them and make no attempt to understand their plight. We simply sent out warships to protect our own people. We've done nothing to justify this sort of invasion!"

When Shana finished, Souma countered, "I have no intention of invading! If you say you won't stop the illegal fishing, then we will fight until I rule the waves. That is what we've come prepared to do."

"I won't trust those words from someone who comes with a fleet!"

"I no longer seek your trust!"

The sailors gulped as they watched the two argue.

Souma continued, "We are well aware of the state of your country, and the damage caused by the great sea creature Ooyamizuchi."

"If you would invade us knowing that, then the Kingdom of Friedonia is no better than a burglar who strikes when his target's house is on fire!"

"I have no intention of doing any such thing! If Ooyamizuchi troubles you, then you have all the more reason to submit to me! The Kingdom's fleet will put down the creature in your place!"

"Do not try to trick me with sweet words! If I lend you a sea route, you'll seize an island! How do you expect me to believe that if I let your fleet pass you won't move to occupy one of our own? We can slay Ooyamizuchi without your help!"

The two of them traded a few more arguments after that. Shabon clutched her head as she watched.

“A naval war of words? I am not even sure what I’m seeing anymore. What in the world are Sir Souma and my father thinking!?”

“That is the question, isn’t it? Why, it’s almost as if... Hm?”

“What is it, Kishun?” Shabon asked, tilting her head.

Kishun stroked his chin as he thought through his answer. “I was thinking it was as if they were stalling for time...”

“Stalling for time? Who is, and why?”

“Both of them, in fact. Though, I could not tell you why just yet...”

Even as Shabon and Kishun were talking about it, Souma and the Nine-Headed Dragon King continued their war of words. However, it seemed to be coming to an end.

Souma shook his head. “This is going nowhere. It would seem we have no choice but to settle this in battle.”

“I see an odd ship that looks like an island, but you had best not think a fleet that is all appearances is going to be able to defeat a fleet of men who live for the sea.”

“...You’ll see for yourself whether this fleet is ‘all appearances.’”

The two of them vanished, and both fleets prepared for battle. It would be Shana who made the first move.

“Loose half the fire ships towards the Kingdom’s fleet,” the Nine-Headed Dragon King ordered.

His subordinates questioned the command.

“Already?! We’re still a long way from the Kingdom’s fleet...”

“Indeed. Would it not be better to wait until they were closer?”

The king shook his head at his hesitant commanders. “I know I just said it was all appearances, but that island ship in the middle of their fleet concerns me. I want to send unmanned fire ships against them in order to learn what that weapon can do.”

“I see. Understood.”

And so a large number of ships laden with explosives were set adrift from the main fleet. The currents and the wind in the fire ships’ sails would carry them towards the Kingdom’s side. Castor, who was watching their approach from the bridge of the island-type carrier *Hiryuu*, adjusted his captain’s hat and steeled himself. *If everything goes as the written orders said, then these are most likely...*

Taking his cue from Commander-in-Chief Excel, Castor immediately gave the order, “Those are probably fire ships. Give the order for the wyvern cavalry team to sortie! I want them to bomb every last one of them!”

“Yes, sir! Wyvern cavalry team, all knights, take off! I repeat, all knights, take off!” the XO shouted through the speaking tube. The order went to the wyvern cavalry team, who had been waiting impatiently for it to arrive.

“Okay, people, let’s go!”

The sole dragon knight in the group, Halbert, got on Ruby the dragon’s back and ordered the wyvern cavalry to follow him. When they saw the wyverns lift off from the island-type carrier one after another, the officers in the Archipelago Union’s fleet started shouting.

“Wyverns at sea?!”

“Absurd! Wyverns hate the sea!”

“But they are clearly using wyvern cavalry!”

As chaos enveloped the island fleet, Halbert and his wyvern cavalry descended upon the fire ships and dropped their explosive barrels while maintaining enough distance not to be caught in the resulting blast.

Booooooooom! The explosive barrels triggered the fire ships, causing a massive explosion at sea. Because they had been drifting along in a line, the flames created a wall of fire dividing the two naval fleets.

Souma stared straight ahead with a stern look on his face.

“Whew, that was one hell of an explosion, huh?” one of the young wyvern riders excitedly said to Halbert. “But the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s fleet have to be scared stupid about now, right? Couldn’t we take down that fleet by ourselves?”

“...Don’t underestimate the enemy,” Halbert told the young wyvern rider, a calm look on his face. “They know these waters like the back of their hands. There are a lot of islands and a lot of places to hide. If we rush in recklessly, the *Hiryuu* could be ambushed. We have to remain cautious.”

“Y-Yes, sir! I’m sorry!”

Halbert smiled at the apologizing wyvern rider. “Don’t worry, as long as you get it. Okay, we’re heading back closer to the *Hiryuu*!”

“““Yes, sir!“““

With that, Halbert and the wyvern cavalry team returned to the *Hiryuu*. Along the way, Ruby chuckled in a voice that only Halbert could hear.

“...What is it, Ruby?”

“Hee hee, you learned everything you just said from Kaede, right?”

“H-Hey, you’re not supposed to say that.”

It was true, though. The words Halbert had just used had originally been said to him by Kaede, who was away on maternity leave.

Halbert awkwardly scratched his cheek. “Uh... Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Ehe. Well, a wife has to make her husband look good, after all.”

Seeing Ruby enjoy herself at his benefit, Halbert was reminded that he was no match for either of his wives.

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By the time Halbert and his men had returned to the *Hiryuu*, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s fleet was in total disarray.

“This is ridiculous! How can the Kingdom be using wyverns?!”

“It’s impossible! I’ve never heard of an aerial bombing at sea before!”

“Well, it can’t be impossible! They just burned our fire ships to nothing!”

“This is bad! If they come at us, we have no way to fight back!”

Having witnessed the power of a carrier for the first time, the sailors from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, regardless of their rank, were losing their heads. The commanders had no idea what commands to give, and the sailors ran around willy-nilly, unable to wait for orders.

“Shouldn’t we retreat?”

“No, if anything, we should rush in and turn this into a chaotic melee. They won’t be able to bomb us then.”

“We should bring out all the hidden ships, too.”

“But there’s still been no orders!”

“Damn it! What’s taking the brass so long?!”

While things devolved into chaos without a policy in place, King Shana's ship was swamped with messages from the commanders of each of his fleets. However, Shana effectively ignored them with, "You are not to go in until the wall of fire clears."

As for what Shana himself was doing at the time, he was staring at one tiny island.

"Your Majesty..."

"Endure."

One of his worried subordinates tried to talk to him, but Shana silenced him with a stern look.

"We must endure. Until the tides change."

"...Yes, sir."

The other man lowered his eyes, and Shana continued impatiently staring at that one point.

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Meanwhile, in the Kingdom's fleet, Souma was feeling irritated, too. He was sitting in his chair, tapping his fingers on the armrest.

"...Excel."

"Not yet," she replied before he could ask the question. "This is a time for patience, sire."

"I know, but... This feels a little clumsy."

"...I know," Excel said, eyeing the fall of fire with concern. "Once those flames burn out, we'll have to resolve ourselves to do it."

"There'll be no other choice, then..." Souma trailed off.

Juna, who was standing next to Souma, placed her hand on top of his. "Let's believe, sire. In the gift you discovered."

Her smile made Souma's heart feel a little lighter. Noticing that, Excel covered her mouth with her fan and smiled. She must have been thinking men were so simple. She was right.

Not long after, the wall of fire burned out. Now the two fleets, Kingdom and Archipelago Union, each prepared to make their next move.

—Then it happened.

“Report! There is a smoke signal rising from a nearby island!” The voice of one young marine who had been watching the surrounding area came echoing into the bridge through the speaking tube.

Souma stood at once and used the tube to double-check with the marine. “Can you decipher it?!”

“Yes, sir. It’s the international signal for distress.”

“Okay. Excel!”

“I know,” she said, standing up.

Around the same time, over in the Archipelago Union fleet, Shana saw the smoke and rose, too. Then, in unison, they uttered the exact same words.

“Send this message to all ships! ‘Stop all ships!’ I repeat! ‘Stop all ships.’”

There was some confusion in both fleets, who were on the verge of colliding, as their commanders gave them the order to stop, but stop they did. Then, some time after, balls of water appeared above each flagship, and Souma and Shana were projected on them.

“Did you see the smoke signal, King of Friedonia?” King Shana asked.

“I did. That’s a distress signal, right?” Souma answered. “Do you know the reason for that signal, Nine-Headed Dragon King?”

“I do. When an island in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago is assaulted by Ooyamizuchi, we use smoke signals to alert other islands of the danger. Which means...”

“There’s an island being attacked by Ooyamizuchi right now, correct?”

Seeing the two kings, who were at each other’s throats moments before, suddenly began exchanging information about Ooyamizuchi left the soldiers in both fleets agog. Then the image of Souma looked straight at the image of Shana as it pointed towards the island.

“Okay, Nine-Headed Dragon King. There’s a distress signal rising over there. What are you going to do?” Souma said as the soldiers on both sides looked on. “Flags, smoke signals, special cannonballs... ‘Any ship that sees a distress signal is obligated to provide help, no matter what country the other is from, and no matter what kind of position they themselves are in.’ ...Was that it? Even if their countries are at war.”

“Of course. That is the Law of the Sea which binds all of us,” Shana replied, crossing his muscular arms.

It was the ironclad rule that said sailors needed to help one another when unexpected events happened at sea. Guaranteeing to aid others in times of crisis also guaranteed that they would help you in an emergency, too. People who ignored a distress signal would be turned away from ports in every country.

Shana spoke, “However, the law states that you can ignore a distress signal from someone you have entered hostilities with.”

“Hmm. I could certainly interpret this as a signal that you sent,” Souma said with a shrug. “By the way, have we *entered hostilities*?”

“...No, I don’t believe we have. Our ships simply *drifted away by accident*,” Shana replied, also shrugging. Souma nodded.

“Sounds about right. And we simply *burned some drifting ships that were blocking our course*.”

“Then I don’t think you can say we’ve entered hostilities.”

“In that case, I guess I can’t ignore the distress signal, huh? It’s the Law of the Sea.”

“...You have my gratitude. King of Friedonia.”

This was when the soldiers in both fleets started to figure out what was going on. That the enemy they were meant to fight wasn’t the fleet in front of them. As well, the soldiers of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago had a strong sense of one thing: These two kings had played them.

However, this realization did not create any resentment. That was because the kings’ goal was to unite and slay Ooyamizuchi, something that they themselves had longed to do. And so, Souma and Shana spoke.

“In accordance with the Law of the Sea, we will now cooperate with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s fleet...”

“In accordance with the Law of the Sea, we will now cooperate with the Kingdom of Friedonia’s fleet...”

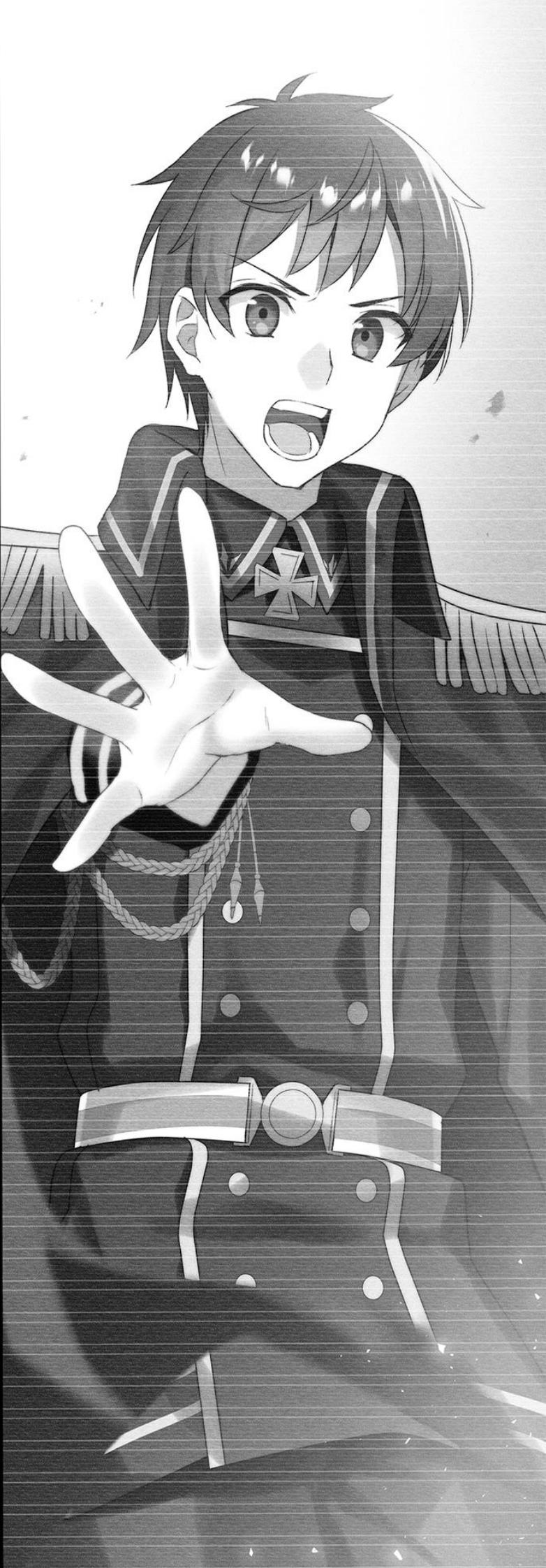
“...and go to slay Ooyamizuchi!”

As the two of them said that in unison, a cheer went up from both fleets.

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In later years, this naval battle would come to be known by many names, but the most common of them was the Battle of the Farce.

Incidentally, historians of the Elfrieden Region don't even count this battle among the wars that Souma fought.





Chapter 8: Meeting the Enemy - monster-

While the Kingdom's fleet and Archipelago Union's fleet were staring each other down across a wall of flames, far away in her office in Valois, the capital of the Gran Chaos Empire, Empress Maria was standing by the window, looking outside.

Jeanne, the Little Sister General, called to her, "Sister. Is it around time for the Kingdom's and the Archipelago Union's fleets to be facing one another?"

"Hee hee, yes, it is. I'm sure everyone will be quite surprised by the result."

Hearing her response, Jeanne clutched her temples and let out a sigh. "It surprised me, too, during that meeting. I never thought I'd ever hear you support King Souma sending a fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. The idea of you endorsing an invasion was unfathomable."

"Oh, I don't recall Sir Souma or I ever mentioning an 'invasion' or anything of the sort, you know?" Maria gave a mischievous chuckle, irking Jeanne a little.

"That's certainly true, but... he said that if he didn't strike at the root of the illegal fishing problem, he'd just be playing whack-a-mole, didn't he? From the way he was talking, isn't it natural to assume he was referring to the Archipelago Union's fleet as the 'root of the problem'?"

"We received information that the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago was troubled by attacks by a massive sea creature... I believe they call it 'Ooyamizuchi' there. Because it prevents the islands' fishermen from catching fish, or even taking their boats out in the nearby

waters—forcing them to go out to regions where they aren’t welcome—I think you may be right.”

“You’re saying that King Souma was after Ooyamizuchi from the beginning, then?”

“Yes, and so was Nine-Headed Dragon King Shana.” Maria placed her silk-gloved hand on the windowsill. “That’s why he came to us to help broker peace, too. In order to bring the fleets of the fiercely independent island chiefs together, there needed to be an external threat. He believed that even if they didn’t unite in the face of Ooyamizuchi, they would have to if they sensed an imminent invasion by the Kingdom’s fleet. Our calls for peace must have helped drum up a sense of urgency, which led to them working together.”

“...And you cooperated because you understood all that, Sister.”

Jeanne let out a sigh that was half admiration, half exasperation, and Maria smiled happily.

“Oh, I hadn’t seen through all of it. This is what we get for believing in the sincerity of our ally.”

“I think a large part of what makes you so incredible is your ability to find the people you ought to trust, and to believe in them so earnestly.”

“My, you’re certainly heaping on the praise today,” Maria said teasingly, and Jeanne blushed.

“N-Not really. I always have a great deal of respect for you. It’s just that you have a tendency to slack off, and then I’m forced to nag...”

“Hee hee, sorry about that.” Suddenly, Maria’s smile vanished.

“However, the real trouble is yet to come. Ooyamizuchi is such a threat that Sir Souma and Sir Shana each felt the need to bring the might of two nations to bear against it, after all.”

“Ah...! You have a point. It’s a threat to us as well. It would have been better if we could have helped, too.”

“That wasn’t an option, I’m afraid. If we’d mobilized our forces, the island chiefs caught in the middle between us would grow unduly cautious. If we couldn’t coordinate our actions when the time came to actually fight together, it would defeat the purpose.”

“Then we have no choice but to leave it to Sir Souma and his people, I suppose,” Jeanne said, sounding frustrated, and Maria smiled.

“Let us believe in the victory of our allies.”

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Around the time that the Kingdom’s and Archipelago Union’s fleets had joined up and moved into action under the direction of Shana, Shabon and Kishun came to visit us on the bridge.

“Sir Souma...” Shabon said, a pained look on her face.

Seeing her expression, I told Excel, “We’re stepping out for a while. Look after things in the meantime.”

“Understood, sire.”

Having left Excel in charge, I headed to the captain’s quarters with everyone else. Juna and I sat on a sofa in the reception room while Shabon and Kishun sat across from us, with Aisha and Naden standing inside and outside the door to keep anyone from listening in.

The moment we sat down, Shabon was the first to speak, “You were connected to my father, were you not, Sir Souma?”

Given the confidence in the way she said that, it was safe to assume she already knew what was up to some degree. When I nodded, she looked shocked.

“...Since when?”

“Since long before the two of you even arrived in my Kingdom. It was a little after we caught one of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s armed ships, so that would put it just before my coronation ceremony, I guess.”

“That long ago...”

We had been able to find out about Ooyamizuchi and the predicament the archipelago was in from the crew of the ship that Castor captured. Back then, I still had no idea what the Nine-Headed Dragon King’s intentions were, but a little after that, I received an unofficial emissary from Shana.

“I thought he would be demanding the return of his armed ship, but instead, his messenger delivered an apology for the illegal fishing of his countrymen, and payment for our losses. That’s when he brought this plan to us as well.”

“...My father paid compensation for your losses? Truly?”

“Yeah. That’s likely what the tax hike you mentioned went to. And the Kingdom used that money to compensate our own fishermen who had been harmed. To make this quick, Sir Shana was paying the Kingdom to let your people continue fishing illegally.”

Well, when you consider that he was paying for it, I’m not sure it was fair to call it “illegal” anymore. Once we started receiving the money, the Kingdom’s patrol ships shifted to a policy of allowing them to fish for whatever seemed like a reasonable amount of time before driving the foreign boats off—though, only the brass were in on it.

Shabon stared at me in wide-eyed disbelief.

“Why would father do things in such a roundabout manner?”

“I’m sure it was Sir Shana’s last resort. The fishermen of the archipelago attach special significance to going out to sea to fish, so it would be humiliating for them to ask another country to let them

do it, right? That would have made their lowered spirits, from the ongoing Ooyamizuchi problem, sink into an even worse place. Also, if he was going to request our assistance in slaying the kaiju, he needed to make sure it wasn't opposed by fishermen inside the Kingdom. This was the way he chose to thread that needle."

Having explained all this, I sighed and shrugged my shoulders.

"I think you already understand the rest, right, Madam Shabon? In order to bring together the fleets of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago—which wouldn't unite without a foreign threat—we set the Kingdom up as a fictitious enemy and agitated the island chiefs. Once all the ships were gathered in that region of the sea, we sent up a smoke signal and used the Law of the Sea, which no seaman can ignore, to bring everyone together."

"It was all calculated... Then why do you suppose Father would not tell me about it?"

"He probably didn't want to get you involved. Right now, the soldiers of the Archipelago Union's fleet are excited by the fact that their enemies have just become allies, but once they calm down, some of them are going to feel that Sir Shana played them. In order to mollify those people, I suspect that Sir Shana likely plans to abdicate the throne once this battle is over."

"Father..." Shabon lowered her eyes in sadness.

Kishun leaned closer and said, "Then why did you not tell Lady Shabon that?!"

"As if I could. The plan was in motion since before the two of you came to me. I had to take Sir Shana's intentions into account, even if that meant Madam Shabon would be saddened as a result."

"But still... this is... It is simply too cruel, is it not?" Kishun protested.

“...I did warn you, you know? I said you were guaranteed to regret it.” I looked him straight in the eyes. “I knew because it was a regret that we had experienced ourselves.”

“You had, Sir Souma?”

“Yeah. I can’t go into details, but I know how Madam Shabon feels now. When I think of a certain man’s incredible sacrifice... even if it was all for our benefit, I can’t help but lament it. I still question if there really wasn’t another way. Though, I’m sure the man himself would tell me to let these conflicted feelings spur me onward... I don’t know whether that’s in kindness or in scorn,” I said, thinking back to Liscia’s tears that day.

Kishun fell silent. He must have sensed that I was speaking nothing but the truth.

Hearing this, Shabon spoke up, “You were aware of Ooyamizuchi before I told you, and already working on countermeasures. Does that mean everything I did was in vain?” There was a pathetic look on her face.

“That’s not true,” I replied, shaking my head. “Your independent actions let me and my retainers get into the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago ahead of time. That allowed us to gather information on Ooyamizuchi, refine our understanding considerably, and improve our plans. That’s not something Sir Shana could have done with the restrictions he faced. I think your direct appeal to me will be important in helping to justify everything after the battle is over, too. You definitely were able to support Sir Shana.”

“I was... helping my father?” Shabon blinked, and I gave her a firm nod.

“This all happened because of everyone trying to bring about the best result they could. And now...”

"We just have to put down Ooyamizuchi, and make that best result a reality, yes?" Shabon concluded, some strength having returned to her eyes.

The way she could accept things and move on spoke well of her as the princess of a nation. *Shana's determination, Shabon's sadness, and all the victims of that creature...* We had to slay Ooyamizuchi to make sure it wasn't all in vain.

We steeled ourselves for what was to come.

◇ ◇ ◇

A little earlier, around the time when the Kingdom's and Archipelago Union's fleets came into visual range of one another, a group of men on nearby Ikatsuru Island wearing *happi* coats and loincloths were busy at work. They were dressed like fishermen, but were actually soldiers from Nine-Headed Dragon Island. From the air, Ikatsuru looked like a crescent moon, and there was an inlet on the inside of the crescent. The men unloaded cargo from a ship in that inlet, and loaded it onto a cart, then carried it inland.

"Aww, damn it, this place *reeks*," the human man pushing the cart grumbled.

Like he said, the usually uninhabited Ikatsuru Island currently had a bizarre smell to it.

The wolf-faced beastman beside him grimaced. "You've got it easy. It's really tough on those of us with sensitive noses."

"Come on, this is pretty bad for us, too. I'm never gonna get it out of my clothes."

"The wife's gonna give me hell when I get back..."

"Hey, less chatter, more work," their merman mononofu overseer cautioned them. But they both complained.

"The stench of fish and blood is driving us crazy here!"

“It’s a depressing sight, you know?”

The two of them were looking at the little mountain that was the source of the unpleasant smell: a mountain of fish. This was more than what could be caught in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s waters at this time, which meant it had to have been brought in from another country. The fish was surrounded by a pool of blood from freshly slaughtered livestock, all of which permeated into the ungodly stench surrounding them.

“It’s such a waste... These fish could have fed so many people.”

“You must know what this operation is for,” the mononofu chided the man. “If we ate them, nothing would change. However, by using them here, we can solve the problem and change our fortunes. After this, we’ll catch far more fish in the long run.”

“...That’s true. If we can solve the problem, that is.”

As the two conversed, the watchtower up on high ground began to pound on the wooden alarm bell.

“The fog’s come out!”

“The fog’s come out!”

“The fog’s come out!”

Three men shouted one after another, as if playing a game of telephone.

“...It’s finally here, huh?”

The mononofu looked in the direction of the sea.

“Raise the smoke signal at once! Send a message from island to island for Lord Shana! Everyone else, retreat at once! We’ll abandon the ship in the inlet and escape in the boats on the opposite side of the island!” he ordered immediately. As the men ran around

hurriedly, the mononofu glared into the fog and said, “Keep on coming. This is where *you* meet your end.”

◇ ◇ ◇

This was the hardest problem when it came to slaying Ooyamizuchi: It was an amphibious creature. Dealing with it on land was one thing, but if it dove underwater, the forces of mankind could do nothing to it. Magic was less effective at sea, and with the gunpowder available in this world, even if we built depth charges, they probably wouldn’t be able to hurt it. There were no submarines or heat-seeking torpedoes in this world, either.

Because of this, King Shana had sought to lure Ooyamizuchi ashore, then rapidly eliminate it with the combined might of the Kingdom’s and Archipelago Union’s navies.

To be specific: he piled a ton of bait on Ikatsuru Island, which was along Ooyamizuchi’s route, and then used both fleets to surround the island. Then, with the creature trapped in a shallow inlet, they would attack until it was dead.

“The time has finally come,” Excel said with a pensive look on her face. She, Juna, and I were watching the Kingdom’s and Archipelago Union’s fleets cruise together from the deck of the *Albert II*.

“Indeed. The timing only just barely worked out. I was sweating for a moment there...”

“Hee hee, I’m sure you were, but the boy you discovered is really something. Sir Ichihia, was it? He predicted Ooyamizuchi’s actions perfectly. I’ll look forward to seeing what he does in the future.”

“You said it. Now if only he had a little more confidence in himself... Then he’d make a reliable big brother figure for Cian and Kazuha.”

If I was going to name an MVP for this operation, it would have to be Ichihia. He managed to come up with an effective plan of attack after

reviewing the intel and seeing the creature, then also worked out its route, which allowed us to settle on Ikatsuru Island as the location for the operation. This was all possible because we were able to come to the islands in advance, so you could say that Shabon and Kishun's efforts had some importance, too.

As I was thinking about that, Excel stopped smiling and said, "But, sire, the real battle starts here. We can't afford to fail."

"...I know. If we do, then everything will have been in vain. There's no hope of negotiating with this enemy. It's a kaiju. We have to fight until either it's dead, or we are."

"Um... you keep calling Ooyamizuchi a 'kaiju,' right, sire?" Juna, who was standing next to me, asked with an uneasy look on her face.

"Can we beat a kaiju?"

"Well... I feel like back in the world I came from, or at least my country specifically, most of the kaiju that appeared in our stories were immune to human weapons," I said, thinking back to all the kaiju movies I had watched. "That had to be because in my country the kaiju usually symbolized God, nature, or a natural disaster. Like, humanity is tiny next to the immensity of nature. Oh, and some were symbolic of the sins of the civilization that created them."

Pollution, weapons of mass destruction, genetic manipulation... just to name a few. I think the kaiju that came out of that country were a projection of people's sense of guilt for those negative products of civilization. While monster movies from other countries tended to end with the creature yielding to the power of human civilization, that country's kaiju were so strong they couldn't be defeated without the power of the giant of light... and they were sad, too. I feel like, to them, kaiju were something that "should not be defeated."

Because they believed the sins of civilization could not be erased, but... I shook my head.

“The people of this world didn’t create Ooyamizuchi. It’s not their sin. That’s why I believe we can overcome it.”

When I said that, Juna replied, “Yes,” with a smile.

◇ ◇ ◇

Up out of the sea, a mountainous form crawled onto Ikatsuru Island. Its head had a mixture of the features of both a dragon and sea dragon, while its back was a massive bivalve shell resembling a giant clam. Underneath it, eight thick tentacles covered in a crustacean carapace wriggled like an octopus’s as it slid forward.

Ooyamizuchi.

The kaiju (or at least that’s what Souma called it) that had been tormenting the people of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. Wrapped in the mist that came from the bivalve shell on its back, Ooyamizuchi crawled across the island on long, writhing tentacles. Due to its incredible weight, there were earthquake-like tremors each time one of those tentacles struck the ground. Ooyamizuchi had been drawn to this island by the intense stench of the bait left here.

The creature pressed forward, mowing down any tree that got in the way as it went. Once it reached roughly the center of the island, Ooyamizuchi spotted the bait—a mountain of fish and livestock that had been bled out. There had been no large creatures in this area of late, so this was hardly going to be enough to sate Ooyamizuchi’s appetite, but it was still a feast. It stretched its head out to tear into the mountain of fish. Then, using the crustacean pincers on the end of its tentacles, it lobbed one of the livestock into its mouth.

It had taken some time for it to get ashore due to the nature of its body, but it was less than five minutes before it had consumed all of

the bait. With its feeding frenzy finished, Ooyamizuchi noticed a presence approaching the island. Many “blood-like scents” were coming towards it.

Ooyamizuchi couldn’t have known it was the smell of iron, but it could tell instinctively that the things were a threat to it. With a rumbling turn, Ooyamizuchi headed back the way it had come, but by the time the kaiju had reached the shallows, the Kingdom and Archipelago Union’s fleets had encircled Ikatsuru Island. In the middle of that fleet, the captain of the *Hiryuu*, Castor, couldn’t help but let out a sigh of admiration when he saw how gigantic Ooyamizuchi was.

“What is that thing? It’s beyond massive.”

“It really is. Rhinosauruses look small and cute in comparison,” his XO agreed in an exasperated tone. “I shudder to think there’s a beast like that out at sea. It’s going to take no small amount of naval might to deal with it.”

“I can see why my lord and the Nine-Headed Dragon King wanted to work together. I doubt any country’s navy has records of battling a creature like that before.”

“Slaying a monster of that size is the stuff of legends,” the XO said with complete seriousness and Castor smiled wryly.

“Legends, huh? Well, good. They’ll be telling tales of our battle for a long time to come.”

“...They certainly will. I’d rather it not be with us as the losers.”

“Naturally. Being the commander of a defeated army once was enough for me. So... we’re gonna win this.”

Castor adjusted his captain’s hat, and gave the order.

“This is a message for all ships! The operation to slay Ooyamizuchi starts now!”



Chapter 9: Duel -total war-

Meanwhile, Ichiha and Tomoe were standing on the beach of the faraway island in the Kingdom that housed a secret arsenal.

“If Ooyamizuchi’s route is as I predicted, His Majesty and the others could be fighting it right now... I hope my prediction was right... Please let it be right.”

“Geez, don’t look so glum.” Tomoe pinched Ichiha’s cheek as he was gradually losing confidence. “You’re the foremost expert on monsterology, and everyone worked together to put together the plan. It’s sure to work. You need to believe in yourself and everyone else more.”

“Tomoe...”

“Big Brother will definitely win. I bet Yuriga’s frustrated she can’t watch,” Tomoe said with a chuckle.

Unlike Tomoe and Ichiha, who had been given time off from the Royal Academy at Souma’s request, Yuriga was a stowaway on their voyage, and had been sent straight back to Parnam when they all returned. She was probably buried under a pile of extra homework as a penalty for skipping school right now.

Imagining Yuriga going through that, Ichiha felt some of the tension drain out of his shoulders.

“Yeah... You’re right. They can definitely take out Ooyamizuchi.”

“Yep!”

And so, the two of them prayed for Souma and the others’ success.

◇ ◇ ◇

Castor thrust his arm forward and ordered, “All hands, prepare for battle! The *Hiryuu* will now enter phase one of the operation. Our first task is to blow away that meddlesome fog. Send the wyvern cavalry team back out with explosive barrels! Their target is Ooyamizuchi and the area around it!”

“Roger! All hands, prepare for battle! Wyvern cavalry team, head out with bombing equipment! Your target is Ooyamizuchi and its immediate surroundings! I repeat! Your target is Ooyamizuchi and its immediate surroundings! Wyvern cavalry team, head out with bombing equipment!”

Halbert and the others heard the XO’s voice through the speaking tube.

“Okay, men! Let’s do this!”

“““Yeah!“““

The wyvern cavalry team led by Halbert and Ruby took off carrying explosive barrels. They flew in formation as the two fleets watched, heading straight towards Ikatsuru Island.

Ooyamizuchi noticed the incoming fliers, too.

Telepathically, Ruby asked Halbert, “That thing has a dragon-y face. Do you think it can breathe fire?”

“The brass say, ‘probably not.’ A creature needs a certain kind of torso to breathe fire. But, apparently, that thing has an aquatic body,” Halbert explained, mentally reviewing the briefing.

“Then it doesn’t have any attacks that can reach the sky?”

“Dunno... It’s shaped weird, so I wouldn’t be surprised if it has some unexpected way of attacking us.”

That’s when Ooyamizuchi began stretching its head towards the wyvern cavalry team, for some reason.

Noticing it, Halbert got a bad feeling and immediately ordered, “Circle around to the left!”

Following his command, the formation tried to divert to the left, but as they did, Ooyamizuchi opened its mouth and emitted a high-pitched shriek, sending the right side of the wyvern cavalry team flying backwards, as if they had been blown away. A fifth of the team dropped in an instant.

The tailspinning wyverns showed no sign of external injuries, and Halbert could see the riders who had been thrown from their mounts.

“Captain! The right wing is down!” one wyvern rider shouted at Halbert, but Halbert didn’t stop.

“Continue the operation! They’ve all got parachutes!”

He looked down to see the men’s parachutes opening one after another. With that confirmed, Halbert held up his spear and barked orders. Obviously, even if they did land safely, it was in the winter sea down below. If help came too slowly, their lives could still be at risk. However, Halbert and his men couldn’t afford to stop for them.

“Leave rescuing them to the guys down below! We’re going in! We can’t afford to let this operation stumble in the very first stage!”

“Yes, sir!”

The wyvern cavalry headed towards Ooyamizuchi once more.

In a quiet voice, Halbert asked Ruby, “That attack just now, what do you think it was?”

“Extra large-scale wind magic... No, perhaps it was a shot of compressed air. If I were to give it a name, I’d call it an ‘air cannon.’”

“I don’t care what you call it... It’s bad news that it can do it.”

“But it must take a lot of time to suck that much air in.”

“So we should bomb it before it can get off another shot?”

While they were having that conversation, the wyvern cavalry team reached Ikatsuru Island where Ooyamizuchi was.

“Okay, drop your barrels! Our mission is to blow away the obscuring mist! There’s no need to take risks trying to hit Ooyamizuchi!”

Following Halbert’s orders, the wyvern cavalry team dropped their explosive barrels one after another. The explosives whooshed downwards, detonating close to the ground. This gave rise to a chain of massive fires across the island, replacing the mist with black smoke.

~~~~~!!

That must have surprised Ooyamizuchi, because it let out an ear-piercing shriek. The wyvern riders all covered their ears, trying to block it out, but Ruby and the wyverns were unable to and staggered from the aural assault.

When the beast finally finished roaring, Halbert asked, “You okay?! Ruby!”

“S-Somehow... My head is pounding, though...”

“Damn it...! The mist looks like it’s clearing...”

Determining that they had achieved the minimum they needed for their mission to be considered a success, Halbert issued new orders, “Men, once you’ve dropped your payload, withdraw at top speed! Don’t worry about formation! Stay spread out so we don’t all get hit by that air cannon. Withdraw to the *Hiryuu* for now!”

“Roger!”

The wyvern cavalry unit scattered, heading for the carrier. Halbert waited until he could see Ooyamizuchi through the flames, then did the same.

"You think those explosions did some damage?" Ruby asked him telepathically as they pulled out, but Halbert shook his head.

"...It looks like the shell on its back, and the carapace covering its tentacles, are incredibly hard. I doubt a gunpowder explosion could do anything to it. Our mission was just to clear the mist anyway."

"What a monster."

"Coming from a dragon like you? That means somethin'. I'm starting to see what that 'kaiju' word Souma was using means."

"...But we're not going to lose."

"Damn straight!" Halbert said with a sharp glint in his eye, holding his two spears at the ready. "We're backing off now, but I swear we'll get it next time!"

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, on the flagship of the Archipelago Union's fleet, the *Dragon King*, Nine-Headed Dragon King Shana watched Ikatsuru Island burn with his arms crossed. The form of Ooyamizuchi had emerged from the rising smoke. It was so gigantic that he could make out all the details even at this distance.

*You finally show yourself... he thought.*

One of his subordinates came to deliver a report.

"The Kingdom's wyvern cavalry team has succeeded in clearing the mist!" he said. "However, it seems that some unknown attack knocked a number of them from their mounts."

"The ones who fell slowly, huh? The Kingdom has some odd equipment..." Shana sounded impressed, but immediately ordered, "Send out a fast boat! Have the ones who fell into the water rescued at once! They'll not last long in the winter sea. Save as many of our comrades as you can!"

“Yes, sir!”

As the man ran off to do his bidding, another subordinate raced in as if to take his place.

“Reporting! The Kingdom’s fleet sends a message: ‘Moving to stage two of the operation’!”

“Okay. We will now move to stage two. Stop Ooyamizuchi when it tries to escape from the island. Send a message to all ships! Loose all remaining fire ships at Ooyamizuchi!”

“““Yes, sir!”””

At Shana’s command, the fire ships that had been conserved during the battle between the two nation’s fleets were sent towards Ooyamizuchi. Fire ships were a weapon that took only a small crew to control, and once they were set on their course, the currents could do the rest, so the men could abandon ship.

Recognizing the two fleets surrounding the island as enemies, Ooyamizuchi began heading out to sea to fight back. The timing worked out so that a large number of fire ships rushed into the shallows that were the entrance and exit to the island just as the creature was trying to leave.

*Snap! Crack, crack...*

The tentacles smashed a number of the incoming vessels, but there were more than its eight legs could hope to sink. Soon there was a pile of fire ships built up from the base of Ooyamizuchi’s neck to its chest. That’s when the fire ships, rigged with the same sort of fuse as the explosive barrels, went off.

*Boooooooooom!*

There was an even larger explosion than the last one, and Ooyamizuchi’s head was knocked back. The fire ships had a greater amount of explosives in them than the barrels, and the explosion

struck the creature's exposed front—it wasn't going to get away unharmed this time.

"It's working! It's working!"

"I can't believe *the Ooyamizuchi*'s hurt..."

"Suffer our wrath! This is for all our friends you devoured!"

The incredible sight had the soldiers of the Archipelago Union's fleet roaring.

The subordinates near Shana were ecstatic, too.

"Your Majesty, do you think this might just work?!"

"...If this was enough to stop it, we wouldn't have had to turn to the Kingdom for help."

"Huh?!"

~~~~~!!

Ooyamizuchi's face emerged from the explosion, and it roared so loud the air shook, as if it was warning them the battle had just begun.

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When Ooyamizuchi's face emerged from the flames, I was alongside my wives and Excel watching from the bridge of the *Albert II*. I'd already thought this when I saw it in the mist, but damn that thing was huge. *It has an overwhelming presence, like I'd expect from a kaiju.*

Excel, who was next to me, said, "Sire, we will now begin the third stage of the operation."

"Have the men who fell into the sea been rescued?" I asked, snapping back to my senses, and Excel nodded.

"We're sending out rescue ships. The Archipelago Union has sent out their fastest boats as well, so we can count on them to handle it. Our fleet will now advance and tighten the encirclement. Is that acceptable?"

"...Got it. Get started."

"Understood." Raising her voice, Excel ordered, "This is a message for all ships! Close to a fixed distance, then turn in sequence!"

The Kingdom's fleet began moving to follow her directive. They spread out in an arc to seal off the inlet, and once in position, they turned their broadsides towards Ooyamizuchi. They did this in order to focus the fleet's firepower.

Once reports came in that the fleet had all reached the fixed distance, Excel gave the next order.

"All ships, open fire!"

"Roger. Main cannon, open fire!"

Juna, who was serving as the XO, shouted into the speaking tube,

and then there was a blast I could feel resounding in my stomach.

The *Albert II* had begun firing.

This was the start of a bombardment by the Kingdom's entire fleet. The shells they were using weren't the explosive type, but the armor-piercing type that were used to smash through walls in siege battles. Ichihā's analysis had suggested that Ooyamizuchi's carapace would be unfazed by mere gunpowder explosions. Because there was no explosion on impact, I could only hear the sound of the cannons firing, but Ooyamizuchi was undoubtedly being pummeled with huge masses of metal.

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The kaiju howled, which showed it was working.

“All ships, keep firing, and don’t let up. Sire, the target was that shell on its back, right?” Excel checked with me after directing the fleet to continue the bombardment. I nodded.

“That shell on its back is the hardest part of Ooyamizuchi, but we expect that means that the vital organs necessary to keep it alive are inside there. No matter how much we damage the tentacles, there’s the risk that they can grow back like a lizard’s tail, so Ichihai said we should prioritize destroying the shell.”

“That makes sense. Hee hee, you’ve really found yourself a good recruit.”

“Yeah, you can say that again.”

Then Aisha raised her voice, “Sire! Ooyamizuchi seems to be doing something!”

Taking a look, I noticed Ooyamizuchi’s tentacles writhing. Moments later, something came flying towards us at an incredible speed. *Is that a tree? No, maybe a boulder?* There were a number of trees *and* boulders coming at us. It looked like Ooyamizuchi was picking up anything it could get a tentacle on and hurling it towards us.

“Can we evade?!” Excel asked.

“No! We’ll just have to pray it doesn’t hit us!” came the helmsman’s panicked response.

*Splash! Splash!* It probably wasn’t taking careful aim. The vast majority of the trees and boulders either fell short of our ships, or went off in the completely wrong direction. However, perhaps because the fleet was arrayed so as to block the inlet, some of it did strike the deck, and there was smoke rising from a number of the ships.

Throwing whatever came to hand was common for kaiju from the Showa Era, but it looked stupid, and seemed ineffective. Now that I

was on the receiving end of it, though, I was finding out just how awful it was. *There's a lot of pure mass being thrown our way at incredible speeds, after all.*

Even Excel, as amazing as she was, grimaced in the face of this assault.

“...Sire, will you move to one of the ships in the rear?”

“I don't think we have time for that. Aisha, get out on deck and cut down anything that looks like it's going to hit this ship for me.”

“Yes, sir! Understood!” Aisha rushed out on deck carrying her greatsword.

Wind magic was weakened at sea, so I was a little worried knowing that Aisha couldn't use her Sonic Wind at its usual power. Still, we couldn't let up on the assault just so I could evacuate. Now was the time to be aggressive. *We've got to fire until the guns melt...* or so I was thinking, but...

“Reporting! It's about Ooyamizuchi!” one of the marines shouted.

“What is it now?!” Excel demanded.

“It's turned its mouth towards our fleet and opened wide!” the marine answered.

I looked, and Ooyamizuchi had extended its head towards the fleet, its maw gaping. I felt a cold sweat drip down my back... If this was one of those kaiju movies I watched back in the world I came from, that would be the sign an incredible attack was coming. *Don't flinch. Ichiba's analysis said it shouldn't be able to use fire attacks.*

Was the attack that blew away some of the wyvern riders coming? From sea level, it had looked like a sudden blast of wind, but while wyvern cavalry were easily affected by the gusts, was it going to be able to hit iron warships with a wind attack?

“...Here it comes!”

*Bwiiiiiiiiiiing!*

It wasn't wind that Ooyamizuchi spewed at us; it was a thick pillar of water accompanied by a sound akin to a jet engine firing. It had likely taken in seawater, compressed it, then spat it back out.

A shot of water like something fired out of a gigantic pressure washer struck the fleet sideways. The massive *Albert II* heaved. I instinctively grabbed onto the railing and put my hand around Juna's waist to support her as she lost her balance.

"Are you all right, Juna?"

"Th-Thank you. I got careless."

"...I wish you'd have supported me, too. Have a care for your mother-in-law, would you?" said Excel, who had fallen flat on her backside.

I didn't have time to remind her she was actually my grandmother-in-law.

Looking around the bridge, there were other marines that had fallen over or had their chairs knocked over. If this ship were wooden, it would have been blasted to wood chips. I had thought of it as a pressure washer, but at this size and power, it functioned as a ranged attack.

"Get me a situation report!" Excel shouted into the speaking tube.

"O-Our ship and the carrier *Hiryuu* are undamaged! However, a number of cruisers were knocked over by that attack! It's only a matter of time before they sink!" came the reply from the lookout, his voice filled with urgency.

There had been a lot of power behind that jet of water. The spray it kicked up was still raining down on us like a squall. If it had scored a direct hit, even this iron ship might have flipped over.

I made up my mind and told Excel, “I’m heading out with Naden to rescue them.”

“Sire?! That’s way too dangerous!”

“Since Naden can swim through the sky and sea, maybe she can put those ships back upright with brute force.”

The overturned ships might have lost any further utility to the operation, but if they were turned upright again, we wouldn’t need to worry about them sinking. Even if they couldn’t be completely flipped back, even a little assistance ought to make escaping from them easier.

Turning to Naden, I asked her, “Can you do it?”

“They look heavy, but I guess I’ll have to, huh?” Naden spun her arms around as she spoke. She looked more than ready to give it a shot.

“I’m only needed here when there’re political decisions to make. If I’m just a figurehead, let me go out there and help people. Naden will be with me, so I’ll be safe even if I fall into the sea.”

Excel seemed to think about it for just a moment, but immediately came to a decision.

“It puts you in danger, but you’re already in danger here. We’re short of rescuers, too, so, please, help us.”

“Roger that!”

“Okay. Once we’re done with the rescue, Naden and I will rise up into the sky. Juna, I’ll let you decide how to handle *that*. Keep an eye on the situation, and deploy it if necessary.”

When I said that, Juna put a hand to her breast and bowed her head to me.

“Understood. Please, take care.”

“You, too, Juna.”

I jumped off the bridge and dove into the sea with Naden in her ryuu form.

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“Captain! A black ryuu presumed to be Queen Naden has taken off from the *Albert II*!”

“We have a message from Duchess Walter! His Majesty is heading to rescue the capsized ships!”

“It’s so bad we even need the king to come out and help...?” Castor whispered to himself without meaning to.

Seconds later, another subordinate came and spoke, “Reporting! There seems to be activity from the Archipelago Union’s fleet!”

This took Castor by surprise and he looked to the east. “What happened?!”

“They’re sailing in formation as they pass beside us! They are rapidly closing the distance with Ooyamizuchi, and appear to be attempting close quarters combat!”

“Wha?! That’s sooner than planned, isn’t it?!”

The operation had called for the Kingdom’s fleet to bombard Ooyamizuchi until the carapace covering it was thoroughly destroyed. Then, once the enemy was robbed of its defenses, the Archipelago Union’s fleet, with their superior capacity for close-quarters combat, would charge in and quickly finish it off. However, Ooyamizuchi’s carapace hadn’t been pulverized yet. It was much too soon for them to be acting.

“This is likely because they saw the water jet attack. Unlike our warships, most of theirs are made of wood. If that burst of water hit them, they wouldn’t last a second.”

“Because their ships are lightly armored... specialized for mobility.”

"Yes. That country's gunpowder weapons also have a short range, so they don't stand a chance in a long-range shootout. Maybe they want to get in before there's a second shot? If they get in close, then even if the boats are destroyed, they can still go ashore to fight."

Castor ground his teeth as he listened to his subordinate's analysis.

"He accepted his ships sinking as inevitable? I can see how determined the Nine-Headed Dragon King is." Castor corrected his posture and ordered, "Send this message to Duchess Walter. I'm requesting she support the Archipelago Union's fleet."

"Yes, sir!"

"We're sending the wyvern cavalry team out again! This time, their mission is to distract and confuse Ooyamizuchi! Fly around and attack it! Don't give it time to attack the Archipelago Union's fleet!"

"Yes, sir!"

Castor's orders were relayed to Halbert and the wyvern riders, who were standing by in the air above the *Hiryuu*, using mirrors to reflect light. That was the signal for another attack.

Meanwhile, the most fierce commander in all of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, Shima Katsunaga, was aboard the lead ship of the Archipelago Union's fleet.

As he stood at the bow, glaring at Ooyamizuchi, one of his nearby associates asked, "Aren't we heading in too early? I was only told just before we headed out, but weren't we supposed to approach Ooyamizuchi after its carapace was destroyed?"

"The enemy has long-range attacks, too, so we've been left with little choice in the matter. You must have seen the jet of water it spat flip over the Kingdom's ships, right?" Shima said in a gruff voice, his thick, burly arms crossed in front of him. "That attack would reduce

our ships to splinters. That must be why the Nine-Headed Dragon King intends to approach while the creature is still distracted by the Kingdom's bombardment. While our ships have superior mobility, they lack when it comes to firepower and range."

"I see..."

"Heh, but what does it matter? If we let the Kingdom's bombardment do all the work, that would be a black mark on our reputation as mononofu of the sea. After everything that beast has put us through, we need to settle things with it ourselves. If we don't, the souls of the comrades it's eaten will never be able to move on."

"Yes, sir. I agree entirely."

Shima drew the Nine-Headed Dragon odachi that hung at his hip.

"The Nine-Headed Dragon King's played me for a fool, but still, what a feast this is he's presented me with. A chance to face the hated Ooyamizuchi head-on. Men, find your courage and rise to the challenge! This battle will be told for generations to come!" Shima raised his odachi into the air.

""""Yeahhhh!"""" the men cheered in response, and stomped their feet on the deck. Similar voices and noises could be heard from all the ships around them.

Every ship must have been trying to raise their morale and rouse the courage to fight the gigantic enemy before them.

Shima thrust his odachi straight forward and ordered, "Listen up! When we approach the beast, we take care of those meddlesome tentacles first! Target the spot where they meet with the torso! That's where they're softest and their movement is slowest! Slip past the beast's attacks and get in close, then focus your attacks there!"

""""Yeahhhh!""""

In the middle of the crew's raucous cheering, the associate from before stood next to Shima.

"My lord... Is that method of fighting Ooyamizuchi based on information from the Kingdom, too?"

"I reckon it is. They do say they have the foremost expert in the study of monsterology, after all."

"After seeing that great island-sized ship full of wyverns, the Kingdom seems so far beyond our understanding. I'm truly glad we didn't have to fight them here."

The man spoke with a mix of admiration and awe, but Shima responded with a wry smile.

"Well, they're a reliable ally now, so we'll leave that matter be. We must focus on the enemy in front of us first."

"Yes, sir. But its tentacles move so freely. It won't be easy to get close."

"And yet we must—no matter how many ships are sunk in the process."

Just then, another lookout reported, "Sir! The Kingdom's fleet has ceased its bombardment! The wyverns are flying in this direction again, too!"

Looking out, they could see the wyvern cavalry team flying over the Archipelago Union's fleet towards Ooyamizuchi. This time, they didn't seem to be carrying explosive barrels. They were led by a red dragon, much larger than any wyvern. The team of wyverns closed the distance to reach Ooyamizuchi in no time, and circled around the beast while scorching its tentacles with fire attacks. The creature's carapace seemed to be preventing any significant damage, but Ooyamizuchi swung its tentacles around in irritation, like a cow trying to swat a fly with its tail.

Some of the wyvern riders were struck down, but the others still continued evading the tentacles and attacking. Seeing this, Shima had a realization.

“It looks like the Kingdom’s fleet is supporting our attack.”

The Kingdom’s wyvern cavalry team was drawing Ooyamizuchi’s attention so that the Archipelago Union’s fleet could get closer.

“How reliable. We’ll have to match their spirit.”

“Yes, sir!”

The Archipelago Union’s fleet began closing in on Ooyamizuchi. It was only once they got so near that they were reminded how utterly massive the beast was. He seemed dwarfed next to it, but Shima lifted his odachi up high and gave orders.

“All hands, open fire! Fire the lion-dog cannons—hit it with everything we’ve got! Fire, fire, fire!”

The approaching ships began unloading on Ooyamizuchi one after another. The cannons along their broadsides spewed fire, and the lion-dog cannons mounted on their decks kept shooting fist-sized hunks of lead into the sensitive point where the tentacles were connected to the body.

It was then that Ooyamizuchi finally realized that it wasn’t just wyverns around it, and swung down a tentacle to snap a large ship in half. Shima’s ship lurched with the waves and sea spray kicked up by the attack.

“Urgh! Don’t falter! Send out the ram ships!”

With that, about eight medium-sized ships with pointed bows rushed forward. These ships specialized in ramming their sharp bows into the enemy. Tugged by horned doldons, the ram ship rapidly rushed towards Ooyamizuchi’s tentacle roots. Once they got up to speed,

the horned doldons were cut free to escape, leaving just the ships to collide with the enemy.

The lower part of Ooyamizuchi's tentacles was similar to an octopus's, and the ram ships cut deep into the roots of them. In human terms, it would be like if someone stabbed a pencil into your shoulder. It wasn't going to be lethal, but if there were enough of them, it was going to hurt like hell.

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Ooyamizuchi roared, flailing its tentacles about. The rampaging appendages grazed the ship Shima was on, snapping its mast. Despite this, Shima and his men kept pressing the attack. It wasn't just gunpowder weapons. There were some who fired bows, other slinging magic, and when the tentacles got close enough they even used spears and katanas. Anyway, the all-out assault continued.

The scene looked like a swarm of ants clinging to a cow's tail, hoping to defeat it. But in the same way that army ants can strip larger creatures down to nothing but bones, eventually, one of the tentacles fell limply and ceased to move. However, the soldiers had no time to be jubilant. They had merely neutralized one of the eight. Looking back up at the remaining seven, they gulped.

Even the ferocious Shima himself was exhausted and starting to get a little worried.

"This absolute piece of shit... It's a genuine monster. Ugh, I'm starting to hate this."

Suddenly, they heard a sound from the Kingdom's fleet.

*We take our boat on the mother sea.
To the waves rich with fish and life.*

It was a woman's voice, singing a fishing song from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.

Under the seabird's eye there treasure be.

If we're too slow, the big'un will strike.

Pull in the nets! Heave, ho! Heave, ho!

Let the port hear our song of triumph.

As he listened to that beautiful, powerful voice, Shima looked at Ooyamizuchi again. He would never find a bigger target than this. Finding such a large catch should have been an unparalleled joy for a man of the sea.

The fire returned to the exhausted men's eyes.

"What man of the sea would hesitate in the face of such a great catch?! Come on, men! Let's get back to fishing!"

""""Yeahhhh!""""

On Shima's order, the men rallied to challenge Ooyamizuchi once more.

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"Heave, ho! Heave, ho! Let the port hear our song of triumph."

On the deck of the *Albert II*, the cat-eared lorelei, Nanna, was singing the fishing song of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, her homeland, in front of a broadcast jewel. There couldn't have been a better choice to sing this song that would raise both the morale and magic power of the Archipelago Union's fleet. Nanna's family had drifted to a fishing village in the Kingdom eight years ago and taken up residence there, so she had been singing this song for the men of the sea there since she was just a little girl.

Eight years ago would be before Ooyamizuchi's rampage began, so she had come to the Kingdom before the fish catch in the archipelago became so poor. Because they had always seen a lot of small scale conflicts between the islands, her family was probably driven out during one of them—though she was likely too young to remember. To Nanna, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago was just a place where she was apparently born, and she had no strong feelings for or against it. She was here because she felt it was only fair that she returned the favor to King Souma and Queen Juna, who had done so much for her, and besides, she liked singing the song anyway.

Hearing her innocent voice, free of any sort of darkness, Excel, who was raising a ball of water into the air to spread Nanna's voice, let out a sigh. “Is it youth that lets her see her homeland without getting sentimental about it?”

Having drifted to the Kingdom from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago herself, albeit several centuries earlier, Excel’s feelings about it were complicated. This was a country that had driven out the sea serpent race, and she couldn’t help but think about that while fighting alongside them. Juna, overhearing her, shrugged her shoulders.

“You’re always trying to act youthful, aren’t you? Despite your age.”

“...When did you learn to talk like that?” Excel gave her a reproachful look.

“*I am His Majesty’s first secondary queen, after all,*” was Juna’s nonchalant reply.

When Nanna finished her song, Juna took the next turn, and then Nanna again. Excel smiled wryly, wiping the sweat from her brow.

“Goodness me. It takes a lot out of you performing magic like this out at sea, you know?”

“...Sorry, but please continue. We’re at the operation’s most vital point.”

“I know that,” she replied, refocusing herself.

Suddenly, Aisha came rushing over from the bow of the ship.

“Ooyamizuchi is on the move! It seems to be heading forward!”

Now that she mentioned it, Ooyamizuchi’s body did look a little bigger than it had before. It must have been slowly advancing towards the Kingdom’s fleet which was massed around the way out of the island.

“That’s not good. It’s trying to flee out to sea,” Excel said contemptuously.

Ooyamizuchi didn’t seem all that intelligent, but it must have figured out that fighting on land wasn’t to its advantage—either that, or its survival instincts kicked in. If it dove underwater, there were limited options for attacking from the surface, and Ooyamizuchi would be free to attack or flee as it pleased. This needed to be prevented from happening at all costs.

“Send a message to all ships! Begin closing distance and tighten the net! Stop Ooyamizuchi’s advance! Lay down fire on Ooyamizuchi’s path, too! That’s only to intimidate—you don’t need to hit! Whatever you do, do *not* hit the Archipelago Union ships that are fighting!”

“Yes, ma’am!” One of the marines ran off to relay Excel’s orders.

Juna rushed to Excel’s side and said, “Grandmother, let’s send out *that*. It should slow it down.”

Excel’s brow furrowed. “By *that*, you mean... That ship?! Wouldn’t His Majesty have to make that call?”

As Excel thought about it, Juna closed in, bringing one hand to her own chest.

“When His Majesty headed out with Naden, he left responsibility for that with me. He said if I decide it needs to be deployed, I could.”

Excel suddenly seemed to remember that exchange and nodded her head.

“...Right, he did, didn’t he? But will His Majesty be able to coordinate with it properly?”

“If we send the ship out, I’m sure he’ll notice. I believe we can trust him to handle the rest.”

“...All right.” Excel firmly nodded, smiling to Juna. “His Majesty entrusted the ship to you. You give the order.”

“Okay!”

Juna stretched her arm out in front of her and ordered, “Send a message to all ships! The transport ship *King Souma* will now begin advancing towards Ooyamizuchi. Please, tell all the other ships to make way!”



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Meanwhile, at that same time, Souma and Naden were busily working to turn the capsized ships upright. Naden wrapped herself around the ones that were sinking, like a scene in an old kaiju movie (though, twice around was all she could manage at her length), letting out a psychic, “Hahhhhhh!” as she forced them back into the correct position.

As the ships gushed water from everywhere, sailors who had failed to escape came crawling out. It was hard to know if everyone was all right, but Naden was feeling relieved to see that she had been able to be of at least some help.

Emerging from the water once more, Naden heard a sputtering from her back. She hurriedly turned her head around to look. “A-Are you okay, Souma?”

“S-Somehow...”

He had been riding on her back as she worked both above and below water to rescue the ships. His pact with her as a dragon knight protected him from the cold of the winter sea, and he wouldn’t be thrown from her back, but he still couldn’t breathe underwater. It didn’t change the fact that the water that got into his mouth was unpleasantly salty, either.

“At times like this, I wish I had gills like Princess Shabon...”

“Sorry to put you through that, but I don’t think wishing for things that you’ll never have is going to help,” she replied, raising her head to look around. “...Though, I think I’ve got all the ships flipped back over now.”

“W-Well, anyway, as long as the ships are floating, it should be easier for people to escape... and to rescue the ones who fell into the sea, too...”

“But what if the section of the ship they’re trapped in is filled with water and they can’t get out...?”

“This is all we can do from outside. We have to trust in them to handle the rest,” Souma said, looking down below. The soldiers on the deck of the ships that had been set upright were shouting words of gratitude and waving their hats. The two were relieved to think they had at least been able to save some small number of lives.

Naden asked Souma, “What now? Do you want to go back to the *Albert II*? ”

“Yeah, I think that... Hm?”

An image flashed through Souma’s mind.

“What’s wrong?” Naden asked, tilting her head to the side.

Souma closed his eyes and covered both his ears with his hands, trying to focus his mind. He was trying to get a grasp of the situation using the consciousness he had left inside that thing using Living Poltergeists.

After some time, Souma slowly opened his eyes.

“It really is moving... Did Juna move the transport ship? ...Does that mean Ooyamizuchi is on the move?”

“On the move...? Ah! Ooyamizuchi is moving! It might be trying to escape from the island!” Naden shouted, having spotted it in the distance. Souma clicked his tongue in displeasure.

“It’s trying to escape out to sea, huh? As if we’d let it get away.” Souma adjusted his sitting posture on Naden’s back. “Naden, get me into the airspace above Ooyamizuchi!”

“Roger that!”

Souma and Naden danced up into the sky together.

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The Kingdom’s wyvern cavalry team and the Archipelago Union’s fleet were still fighting hard in the area around Ooyamizuchi where Souma and Naden were headed. For its part, Ooyamizuchi was using its tentacles to slap down wyvern riders or wrap around and break warships. Each swing let out a low whistling sound, and at this very moment, another wyvern rider was about to be smacked down.

“Wahhhh!”

About to be hit with the force of a truck, the wyvern rider sensed his coming death, letting go of the reins, and covering his head. There was a loud slapping sound, but for some reason, the anticipated impact hadn’t arrived. Hesitantly opening his eyes, the wyvern rider saw a red dragon interposed between him and Ooyamizuchi, blocking the tentacle.

From the dragon’s back, Halbert shouted at the dazed wyvern rider, “Use this chance to recover!”

“C-Captain?! Thank you!”

Once he saw the man had gotten himself back together and withdrawn, Halbert asked, “Ruby, you okay?”

“Th-This is no big deal!” Ruby replied, squeezing the tentacle with both of her front legs, and throwing in a bite for good measure. “One of these tentacles is about the size of Naden! After all the times I’ve tussled with her, a hit like that is nothing to me!”

“You sound confident, but don’t be reckless! There’s only one of Young Miss Naden, but there’s more tentacles where that one came from.”

“Oh, I know that quite... well!”

Ruby let go of the tentacle she had seized as another one came at them from behind. Just after she did, the new tentacle slammed into the spot she had been holding. The sound of two carapaces striking each other was incredible. It was a hard enough impact that some of it was stripped away, so if Ruby had been caught between them, it might well have broken some bones. As for Halbert, he'd have been crushed flat as a pancake.

A cold sweat ran down both their backs.

"Damn it! Those tentacles are way too much trouble!" Halbert complained.

"But if we don't do something about them, that thing is going to keep fleeing!"

Even now, Ooyamizuchi was sliding along on its tentacles. It moved slowly for its gargantuan size, but was still making steady progress towards the deep sea. The Kingdom's fleet was laying down suppressive fire along its path, but it didn't seem to be terribly effective. At this rate, Ooyamizuchi was going to get away.

Halbert slapped his own thigh. "Damn it all! Isn't there some way to stop it?!"

"...Huh?! Hal! Look at that!"

Halbert looked up in response, and saw one ship, larger than the others, closing in on Ooyamizuchi.

"That's... the Souma-class transport ship? Don't tell me they're planning to ram it?!"

"It's certainly big enough to have an impact, but I doubt it would slow it down much. Do you suppose they would really throw away a new ship just for that?"

“What is that thing transporting, anyway? I thought it would be a unit from the army to fight on the island, or supplies, but maybe it’s not.”

“Explosives, perhaps? Like the fire ships the Archipelago Union was using.”

“Nah, gunpowder has the power to blow up a barrel or wooden ship, but not an iron ship. All it would do is start a fire on board.”

As they were talking about it, the *King Souma* stopped a few hundred meters in front of Ooyamizuchi, then a hatch on the deck slowly opened. Once it was finished, something jumped out and landed in the sea with a big splash. Everyone stopped for a moment, unsure of what had just happened.

As Halbert, Ruby, the wyvern cavalry team, and the soldiers of the Archipelago Union’s fleet turned in the direction of the splash, a massive object rose from the sea, scattering water everywhere.

“Wh-What the hell is that?!”

“Another monster?! Nobody told us there’d be something like that!”

The soldiers of the Archipelago Union’s fleet went into a panic at the appearance of a second monster. The soldiers of the Kingdom, on the other hand, stared in disbelief, unable to accept the reality of what they were witnessing. The massive object stood in Ooyamizuchi’s way, its surface shining silver in the sun. It had the silhouette of a dragon, the mightiest creature on land, yet its body was entirely made of machinery.

“M-Mechadraaa?!” Halbert, the first to come to his senses, shouted incredulously.

It was Silvan’s massive mechanical dragon partner that appeared in the Kingdom’s broadcast program Overman Silvan. Standing on its

hind legs, Mechadra let out a roar, then raced towards Ooyamizuchi, kicking up waves behind it.



Chapter 10: Mechanical Dragon -final battle-

The dragon skeleton that had been used as a base to create Mechadra came from a specimen much larger than Ruby, and it was designed for bipedal, not quadrupedal, movement (like Mecha Go**illa), so the mechanical dragon looked way larger than Ruby. On top of that, Mechadra was armed to the teeth today. The added mass from those parts made its movement more weighty than usual, but Mechadra stood in Ooyamizuchi's way, putting the creature's head in a firm lock.

In terms of size, it was like the difference between a boar and a Shiba Inu, but this was the same Mechadra that had the power to casually toss aside a rhinosaurus on Overman Silvan. Ooyamizuchi's forward movement was obviously slowing.

"Mechadra has made contact with the enemy, Grandmother!" Juna, who was watching from the *Albert II*, said to Excel. "Let's send out the other boat. We need to get it to Mechadra."

"That weird boat, you mean? Okay."

"Yes. Send a message to all ships! We are sending a ship through from the rear! Please, clear its path!"

With Excel's permission, Juna gave the order through the speaking tube. Once she was finished, Excel placed a hand on Juna's shoulder.

"We've deployed everything we have at our disposal now."

"...Yes. Everything is out on the table now," Juna nodded, laying her own hand on top of Excel's. "This really is our last trump card."

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Ooyamizuchi howled. It bashed Mechadra with its tentacles, trying to get the mechanical dragon off of it, but Mechadra didn't let go of the beast's neck. Instead, it fought back with its iron bite. Soldiers from the Kingdom and Archipelago Union watched with bated breath as they witnessed the sudden battle between sea beast and mechanical creature unfold.

"A-Awesome! Damn, that silvery dragon is cool!!"

"What is this...? Is this reality I'm seeing...?"

"Ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha..."

Some cheered, some stood there in disbelief, and some simply laughed dryly—their brains unable to keep up with what was going on in front of their eyes. There were a variety of reactions, but the men didn't have time to just stop thinking forever.

"Huh?! Keep your hands moving! Resume the attack!"

"Find some way to finish the beast off while that silver dragon is stalling it!"

The commanders on the Archipelago Union's side were shouting. When he saw the Archipelago Union's fleet had resumed the attack, Halbert gave orders to the wyvern cavalry team.

"We're going to start attacking again, too! But, while I'm pretty sure you know this, that silver dragon, Mechadra... is on our side! Make sure you don't hit it!"

"""Yes, sir!"""

Mechadra and the Archipelago Union's fleet handled the up-close attacks while the wyvern cavalry team ran distraction, as well as launching flame attacks, and the Kingdom's fleet provided supporting fire. No matter how great Ooyamizuchi was, it was still getting hurt by this focused attack, and a number of its tentacles no longer moved.

Ruby decided it was her time to shine, and spewed her flames at full force to burn a tentacle right off.

“How’d you like that?!”

“Don’t let your guard down, Ruby! There’s another tentacle coming!”

“Augh! It’s just one after another!”

Ruby prepared to intercept the incoming tentacle, but there was a tearing sound as a flash of blue light pierced through it. The appendage flopped around, convulsing, before ultimately collapsing into the sea. Halbert and Ruby looked up in the direction the light had come from, only to see Naden with Souma on her back, floating in the air as pale blue sparks of electricity shot off of her.

“Souma?! What’re you doing on the front line?! It’s dangerous here!” Halbert shouted after having Ruby fly next to Souma and Naden.

“I didn’t have much choice,” Souma countered, pointing at Mechadra. “Mechadra’s neck is long, and the field of view is shaky, so it’s hard to see the surrounding area with just the consciousness I’ve transferred to it. It’s a lot easier to control if I’m somewhere that gives me a top-down perspective.”

“But you’re here without a guard. You’re gonna get your wives mad at you again, you know?”

“I’ve gotten used to that... Anyway, Hal, I had a question for you,” Souma said with a serious look on his face. “Was there anywhere that Ooyamizuchi’s shell seemed like it was weakening?”

“Weakening? You mean, like, somewhere it’s damaged?”

“If I’m remembering correctly, I think the Kingdom’s bombardment ruptured Ooyamizuchi’s shell on the opposite side from the one we’re looking at—that would be the right-hand side from

Ooyamizuchi's perspective. It's shallow, and I doubt it caused any internal damage, though," Ruby chimed in.

"Okay," Souma replied, closing his eyes to focus. Halbert was shocked.

"H-Hey. What do you think you're closing your eyes for?"

"I'm going to use Mechadra's extra equipment on that rupture to bust that shell open."

"Extra equipment?"

"Sorry. I need to focus, so support me, would you?"

Down below, Mechadra put some distance between itself and Ooyamizuchi, kicking up waves as it circled around to the left side of Ooyamizuchi. Despite being slapped around by the writhing tentacles, Mechadra forced its way through them to get closer and pressed up against the side of the beast. Its head was moving around a lot, presumably to look for the rupture that Ruby had mentioned.

"...Found it! Here's the spot!" Souma declared, his eyes still closed. Then Mechadra reached out with its right arm (front leg), and placed its hand near the rupture. As Halbert and the others watched, wondering what it was trying to do, the mechanical dragon placed its left hand on its extended right arm (front leg).

"Um, if I remember this right... I think this is how I do it... Okay!" Souma's eyes snapped open, and he shouted, "Gooooo—"

*Kaboom!* The roar of the blast covered up Souma's shout. It sounded like an explosion, a metallic noise, and a crushing noise all overlapping, and Halbert couldn't help but cover his ears.



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It howled as it twisted around. *Is Ooyamizuchi in pain?*

“Wh-What was that noise just now?!”

“Here, have another! Take thiiis!”

Souma shouted without stopping to answer Halbert’s question, and Mechadra reached out with its left arm (front leg) this time, and placed its hand on the same spot. Then, after it held its left arm with its right hand, and did something to manipulate it, there was another explosion. Ooyamizuchi groaned as it writhed about, swinging its long, thick neck to hammer Mechadra, causing it to stumble backwards from the impact.

Noticing something sharp protruding from Mechadra’s arms, Halbert asked, “What are those iron stake things?”

“They’re the first piece of extra equipment we devised specifically for fighting Ooyamizuchi—a gunpowder-fired pile driver,” Souma responded.

Allow me to explain...

Because dragon bones were used in its construction, for diplomatic reasons, there had been limits placed on the military use of Mechadra, but thinking that the mechanical dragon would be an effective tool against a giant monster, Souma had enlisted Genia, the Overscientist, and Trill, the Drill Princess of the Empire, to produce some powered-up parts for it.

However, while Souma’s ability, Living Poltergeists, allowed him to move dolls or puppets as if they were the living creatures, he wasn’t able to manipulate the internal parts separately. To give a human analogy, it was like how you can move your body, but you can’t freely control your internal organs. Even if they put a cannon on

Mechadra, he wouldn't be able to fire it, or load it internally. Those sorts of armaments had to be attached externally, so that Mechadra could manipulate them itself.

One of the pieces of extra equipment they had come up with was the pile driver. The explosive force of gunpowder was used to fire a massive metal stake, creating a close-range weapon that could be used for single penetrating attacks. They were installed in both Mechadra's arms, and required the opposite arm to push a button to fire them. Also, because Mechadra couldn't rearm the pile driver itself, it was a weapon that could only be used once per sortie, for a total of two times, counting both arms.

It was a tough weapon to use, but it was like firing a cannon at point-blank range, so it was incredibly powerful. From the look of it, the small rupture had expanded after taking two shots from the pile drivers. A little more, and it would break through to the inside.

"Just a little more! If she's sent out Mechadra, that means..." Souma turned to look at the sea behind him.

There was a boat coming towards Mechadra, cutting through the water like a knife, yet there was no sea creature pulling it. Instead, two conical objects were attached to the front, spinning as they parted the waves. *That's Juna for you. Her timing is impeccable.*

"What is that?" Halbert asked Souma, blinking.

"It's an icebreaker—a ship that breaks the ice in front of it as it moves forward. The product of Kuu's wishes, and Trill's tenacity."

The Kingdom, Empire, and Republic had been working together to develop a drill. By applying its rotational mechanism in two places, they were able to devise a prototype for an icebreaker with drills attached to the front to smash through ice, and a propeller on the back to provide thrust. It was like the Garinko from Souma's old world, only with the drills sticking out of the front.

“Hal, I just need a moment, so draw Ooyamizuchi’s attention!”

“R-Right. Got it. Okay, you louts, let’s do this!”

Halbert led the wyvern cavalry team to attack Ooyamizuchi.

During that time, Souma had Mechadra retreat and head towards the icebreaker. Once it got close, Mechadra lowered itself to the point it was hidden beneath the surface of the water, then the icebreaker rode on top of it. The crew rushed out of the ship and quickly moved to get it fixed in place, as Souma and Naden watched from afar.

“I never would have guessed we’d be installing a drill on it...”

“I know that dragon is dead, but I’m sure they never thought they’d end up like that, either...”

We both had to take our hats off to Trill’s tenacity. When she had first seen Mechadra in the dungeon workshop, she had been excited by the size of it.

Then, because Mechadra was created by Genia, who she loved and respected, Trill decided she wanted to add her own creation—the drill—to it. Naturally, because there were limits to what we could do to Mechadra in light of our relationship with the Star Dragon Mountain Range, Genia had been hesitant, but Trill kept on asking. In the end, Genia apparently got on board with the idea, too, and they started thinking of ways to load it with a drill.

When Souma asked them for additional equipment to fight Ooyamizuchi with, they had already come up with the plan of attaching the icebreaker to it. Because the icebreaker was still a prototype, it couldn’t travel far, but the duo of deviant scientists went and redesigned it as a piece of add-on equipment for Mechadra.

Once the crew had installed the icebreaker on Mechadra's back, they turned the drills on and abandoned ship, then they gave the all-clear signal to Souma and the others. When he saw it, Souma raised his right hand to the heavens and made Mechadra stand up.

"Okay, this is the piece of equipment that Trill's willfulness got us! Let's see it put a hole in that big old shell!"

Mechadra walked towards Ooyamizuchi with heavy steps, carrying the drills on its back. Then, circling around to Ooyamizuchi's side as the beast was distracted by the wyvern cavalry team, the mechanical dragon lowered its head and stuck its shoulder out like a rugby player, then slammed the spinning drills into the rupture in Ooyamizuchi's shell.

An instant later, there was a mechanical whine, and a chipping sound that was like nothing before.

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Ooyamizuchi thrashed around, crying out in anguish. Shards of its broken shell fell into the sea with loud splashes. Its shell was steadily being chipped away.

"...Is this going to work?" Souma whispered to himself.

Soon enough, the spinning of the drill gradually slowed and then came to a complete stop. Because it was a weapon that had been thrown together in a hurry with no time for a field test, it must have broken down due to the hardness of Ooyamizuchi's shell.

Then Ooyamizuchi bit onto Mechadra's head, and pulled. That threw Mechadra off-balance, and it tumbled into the sea with a huge splash.

"Damn it! We were almost there!" Souma slapped his knee in frustration.

"Look, Souma! There's a big break in its shell, and you can see the meat inside!" Naden said, pointing to the rupture with her snout.

Looking, Souma could see there was a large hole in the shell, and the creature's flesh was visible through it. It wasn't a fatal wound, but Mechadra's attack had come just short of finishing Ooyamizuchi.

Halbert brought Ruby up alongside Souma and Naden.

"You were saying its most vital parts are inside the shell, right? Let's focus our attack there and finish it for good this time!"

"...Yeah, that makes sense, Hal." Souma decided to change gears.  
"Let's focus our firepower. I'll bring Mechadra around to Ooyamizuchi's left side and keep the beast from moving, so you lead the wyvern cavalry team to attack that exposed section. As for Excel... if she's been watching this through a telescope, she should focus her attacks on that spot, too."

"Gotcha. What are the two of you going to do? Head back to the *Albert II*?" Halbert asked, but Souma shook his head.

"Nah. From here, it'll be faster to head straight to the *Dragon King* rather than back to the *Albert II*. Naden and I will go to the Nine-Headed Dragon King and ask him to attack that exposed section as well. Give us some of your wyvern cavalry as an escort."

"All right... Be careful, you hear? Your kids are still young."

"Right back at you. You don't want to die before seeing your own kid's face, right?"

Having blown off some of the tension with that lighthearted banter, Souma and Halbert each flew off in their own direction to carry out their next tasks.

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The battle with Ooyamizuchi was finally entering its final stages.

Mechadra held Ooyamizuchi in place while the Kingdom's fleet fired their cannons; the Archipelago Union shot their lion-dog cannons, bows, and magic; and the wyvern cavalry team unleashed their fire attacks at the rupture in the shell, all of them opening the wound further. It was a general offensive.

The rupture was bleeding constantly. Its once thrashing tentacles had lost their vigor, proof that Ooyamizuchi was steadily weakening.

"Hmm. This must be our chance."

With the tentacles' strength gone, it was now possible for the soldiers to climb Ooyamizuchi. Shima Katsunaga, the fierce commander of the Archipelago Union's forces, held his odachi up high and gave orders.

"Enough with the tentacles! Now we strike at the main body! After me!"

""""Yeahhhh!""""

On Shima's orders, the men of the sea jumped onto Ooyamizuchi's body. Those with a high level of jumping ability bounded up the shell, while those without used grappling hooks to climb. This style of fighting was a specialty of the Archipelago Union's soldiers, who had used these sorts of pirate-like tactics when boarding enemy ships.

The ferocious warriors of the Archipelago Union climbed over one another, like besiegers competing to be the first over the wall as they scaled Ooyamizuchi's back. Seeing this, the Kingdom's fleet stopped firing, and sent out the Marine Corps. The wyvern cavalry team supported the climbing team while also launching their own attacks against the rupture.

Having reached the top first, Shima headed for the rupture and swung his odachi. It caused a slight wound, but was deflected with a clang.

“A blade won’t do the job, then...? Hey. You brought a metal rod, right?”

“...Yes, sir! Here it is.”

Shima took the metal rod that it had taken two of his subordinates to carry all this way, and wound up before swinging it into the shell with all his might.

“Hahhhhhh!”

There was a resounding crack. Ooyamizuchi’s shell gave way under the force of an attack that left his hands numb. A huge chunk came off and fell into the sea. Shima wiped the sweat from his brow as he watched it drop.

“Whew... Ga, ha, ha! I knew this would be more effective,” he said with a laugh.

Then a spear of fire flew down from the sky to strike the center of the rupture some tens of meters away. The moment it hit, the spear of fire burst, gouging the flesh, and causing a spurt of bodily fluids. That one attack made Ooyamizuchi writhe in anguish once more, and it felt like an earthquake to Shima and his men. When the shaking subsided, they looked up into the sky and saw a young man with red hair who was riding a red dragon with a spear in his hands.

“...That looks even more effective,” Shima mumbled to himself, his jaw hanging open.

Meanwhile, Halbert was holding a standard throwing spear with a sour look on his face.

“Fuuga could’ve finished it in one blow...”

“Don’t whine!” Ruby chided him. “Finishing this thing off comes first right now!”

After telling Halbert off, she launched an extra-large fireball at Ooyamizuchi's open wound. The flames scorched flesh, deepening the injury.

The fierce assault continued from there, and the rupture was expanded until it was a fatal wound. The deeper they went, the less it felt like they were slaying a monster, and the more it was like they were digging holes in a cave made of flesh, but their efforts were finally about to be rewarded.

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When the soldiers of the Archipelago Union set off the explosive barrels placed inside its body, there was a gout of blood larger than any before, and Ooyamizuchi's head fell into the sea. The beast was still twitching, but it no longer had the strength left to resist. It was only a matter of time until it died.

I was with Naden, who had returned to her human form, watching from the flagship of the Archipelago Union's fleet, the *Dragon King*.

"It's done now, right?"

"Yeah... It's over." I nodded. Then, letting out a big sigh, I said, "I dunno, this feels sadder than I expected it to."

I was talking to Nine-Headed Dragon King Shana, who was standing next to me.

"I know that countless civilians were lost to that kaiju, and there were casualties in this battle, too, but... I just don't know how to describe how it makes me feel watching it die like this. Though, I do have a sense of accomplishment, and relief, now that this incident is finally resolved."

“...That must be what it’s like to watch as a living being dies. That thing was eating people to live. We destroyed it to live. It was for the sake of survival. There’s no good or evil in that.”

King Shana pulled what looked like a set of prayer beads from his pocket and rubbed them between his hands as he faced Ooyamizuchi. *Is he praying for the creature as it dies?*

The Archipelago Union was like a mix of Japan in the Edo Period and China under the Tang Dynasty, so maybe it had a similar religious perspective to the country I used to live in. This was my first time meeting King Shana in person, but despite the stern face, he seemed to understand sentimentality.

“...I’ll pray, too. Wouldn’t want to get cursed by that thing.”

I put my hands together, and Shana chuckled.

“You have a point. Let’s build a small shrine on that island and perform rites there once every year. With that, we can quell Ooyamizuchi’s violent spirit, and give comfort to the souls of those who died in battle.”

“...I’ll put up the funds to build it, so could you erect a monument to the people from the Kingdom who died, too?”

“Of course.”

A *shrine*... huh? When I heard the word, a thought occurred to me about the name “Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.” It came from a creature like a sea serpent that had nine heads and lived in these islands long ago, which people had come to worship as a god.

Ooyamizuchi had a head like a sea dragon, as well as eight tentacles with crab-like pincers on the end. Those tentacles with crab pincers on them had looked like great serpents through the fog. Basically, depending on how you looked at it, it might have appeared to have nine heads. *If Ooyamizuchi had appeared in the distant past, and the*

people mistook it for a sea serpent with nine heads, then this country's name could've come from...

Once I thought that far, I shook my head to dispel the idea. This was just a supposition on my part, and trying to connect Ooyamizuchi to the Nine-Headed Dragon they worshiped as a god would not be taken well by the people in this country. *If it had existed before, could there be a second, or a third... It wouldn't be funny if there was.*

“...It looks like it’s over.” King Shana said.

The collapsed Ooyamizuchi had finally stopped moving. Having confirmed the death of the target, the men who had climbed up onto its back cheered, and linked arms to sing the fishing song. The sun was starting to go down. Hearing the fishing song at the end of the long day we had just been through left me feeling lonely, somehow.

In the middle of all that, I clapped my hands against my cheeks.

“...It’s too early to relax. We haven’t finished cleaning up yet.”

“We can’t very well just leave that thing there, after all,” King Shana said, crossing his arms.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “If you leave something that big to rot, there’s no telling what effect it might have on the surrounding area. We need to dismantle it quickly.”

Back in my old world, when I was watching a program that showed shocking videos, one of them was of a dead whale on the beach that had been left for too long, allowing gas to build up inside it, that exploded when they tried to dismantle it. If we left a massive pile of meat like that to decompose, who knew what kind of gasses it might produce? It could sicken people, and pollute the sea. It needed to be rendered harmless as soon as possible, and preferably in a way that it could be put to good use.

“I have a specialist on this stuff.”

“Souma!” Naden shouted, pointing towards the Kingdom’s fleet.

I looked in the direction she was pointing, and there was a massive ball of water above the *Albert II* again. Excel must have made it for a broadcast. The image of a paunchy man was reflected in the aqueous sphere.

Coughing to clear his throat, the man said, “Erm... C-Can everyone hear me...? Th-This is the Kingdom of Friedonia’s Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Poncho Ishizuka Panacotta, yes.”



Chapter 11: Big Pot -banquet-

“First, let me congratulate you on slaying Ooyamizuchi, yes. This victory was possible thanks to the cooperation between Their Majesties, and by extension, our two countries. However, the situation has not been fully resolved yet—there can’t be peace in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago unless we deal with the remains of Ooyamizuchi, post-haste.”

In his hands, Poncho held Ichiha’s drawing of Ooyamizuchi. He pointed to it as he continued explaining the dangers of leaving Ooyamizuchi’s body untouched.

“Now that the fearsome beast is defeated, what remains is a mound of meat. Meat *rots*. If we leave it be, it will bring about insects which will be fed on by wild animals. As it decomposes, it will release a terrible stench, and become host to various illnesses. Should that rotting meat come into contact with the water, it will contaminate it. There is also the case of dragon remains, which reports have indicated can become a skull dragon if left alone, too.”

The soldiers who had been elated, thinking the battle was over, listened to him in sober silence. This situation wasn’t fully resolved yet.

“As I’m sure you can infer, we must dispose of Ooyamizuchi’s remains as soon as possible. I know you must all be exhausted, but I’d like for you to start work immediately. This is His Majesty Souma’s wish as well, yes.”

Soldiers from both sides slumped their shoulders as they heard they were about to be assigned clean-up duty. Everyone was exhausted from the intense battle they had just fought, so the response was expected. Announcing that there would be physical labor post-combat wouldn’t up morale.

Poncho broke into a cold sweat as he continued with a smile. “I know how you must be feeling, yes. But, everyone, this is good news! The foremost expert in monsterology, Sir Ichihha Chima, has investigated the various parts of Ooyamizuchi’s body, and everything but the shell and carapace is made of *edible materials*. I hear they’re quite delicious, too, yes.”

Hearing the word “delicious,” the soldiers perked up. After such an intense battle, they were all famished. With the potential of eating well, self-interest took over, and the remains in front of them suddenly began to look like a giant pile of treasure.

“I’ll explain how to dismantle it now. I know you must all be tired, but please take care of it for us, yes.”

Once the projected Poncho bowed his head, a water ball was created over the *Dragon King*, and Shana and Souma’s images appeared in it. They each gave the order to their own camps.

“You heard him. We’re men of the sea here in the Archipelago Union. We give thanks to the mother sea, wasting nothing of the fish we catch or the beasts we hunt. That is our way of life!”

“We’ve come this far, so let’s see this through to the end. Once the missing have been accounted for and the wounded are treated, follow Poncho’s directions, and get to work on it!”

With both kings having given the order, everyone got themselves worked back up with a half-desperate, “Yeahhhh!”

What had started as a farcical fleet battle developed into a monster hunt, and now it was time for Cooking with Kaiju. Simultaneously, it was also the beginning of the longest period of work for the soldiers of both nations.

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"First, please take off the head and tentacles. They'll be in the way of dismantling the body until they're removed, which will make this inefficient, so I'd like you to divide yourselves into one team for the head, eight for the tentacles, and one for the body, yes," Poncho said, relaying directions through the simple receiver to her.

Hearing this, Excel shouted through the microphone on the *Albert II*, "He says he wants the head and tentacles removed!"

It took considerable effort from the caster to maintain the water ball, so they had switched to this method of corresponding. Now, the soldiers of both countries were desperately hacking at the roots of Ooyamizuchi's tentacles with their swords.

"Hahhhhhh!" Aisha swung with an ear-splitting shriek, and her slash created a big trough in the root of the tentacle. However, though the feelers were five meters across at the tips, they were twice that at the base, and even Aisha couldn't cut through that in a single slice.

On one of the other tentacles, there were multiple men working together to dig a hole in it. They filled the gap with gunpowder, then blasted it before digging another hole to repeat the process. It was slow work. Even if they managed to sever it that way, they still had a tentacle that was as long as Naden's ryuu body to contend with. It needed to be broken up, and have the carapace pulled off.

Realizing this wasn't a one-or-two day job, the soldiers started to feel fed up with it.

Wiping the sweat from her brow after she finished severing a tentacle, Aisha sighed, and said, "...Whew. I think I'll take a little break."

Noticing her, Souma called out, "Oh, hey, good work over there, Aisha."

There were more than ten big pots sitting atop stoves, and Souma and Juna were busy stirring one of them.

“Siiiire, I’m hungryyyy,” Aisha whined.

“Gotcha. What flavor do you want?”

“I’d like a heaping bowl flavored with miso.”

“...You know, if you eat too much, you’ll get sick of it. We’re going to be having the same sort of thing for days.”

“That is but a secondary concern. For now, I just want to get something in my belly.”

Souma winced a little at the hungry look in Aisha’s eyes. “Ah ha ha... Right. Juna, give her a heaping bowl with miso flavor.”

“Coming up!”

Juna scooped some of the contents of the pot into a wooden bowl and handed it to Aisha, who then went and sat down on the beach and started devouring it.

Once her appetite was somewhat sated, between mouthfuls of food, Aisha asked Souma, “Mmph... It tastes good, but what part is this?”

“Right now, we’re stewing the scraps that came off during the dismantling process,” Souma explained, taking a seat next to Aisha. “This is from the tentacles and head.”

At the moment, they were collecting and boiling parts removed from the octopus-like tentacles and sea-dragon-like head. It was being stewed in these pots together with local produce from the Archipelago Union, or vegetables and rice brought from the Kingdom.

The soldiers continued with the butchering process until they were exhausted. When they got hungry, they took breaks to eat. Once they were full, they went back to work. Rinse and repeat. In order to keep it from getting too boring, they switched up what parts they were using, and flavored the soup with miso, soy sauce, and other

things from the Kingdom. Because there weren't enough cooks, Souma was also helping.

"We're using the scraps now, but the tentacles and meat can largely be dried and preserved. In a little while, we'll mostly be cooking the organs. Poncho says they should be tasty, too, though."

"But Ooyamizuchi ate people, right?" Juna interjected, sitting down next to Souma. "Is it still safe to eat?"

"Yeah. That's why we're incinerating the oral and digestive organs. I like tongue and tripe when I go for yakiniku, though..."

"Tongue? Tripe?"

"Ahh, you can disregard that. Just talking about my old world. Anyway, I considered extracting oil from the parts we couldn't eat, but considering they're at least partially made up of digested humans... I decided cremating them seemed appropriate."

"I can see why..."

While they were talking, Halbert came over with Naden and Ruby in tow.

"Souma, looks like we're up," Naden said. "They want you to move Mechadra."

"...Right. Well, I'll be going then, I guess."

"Oh! Sire. I'll go with you, then..." Aisha proposed, quickly getting to her feet.

"You've worked hard enough, don't you think? You should rest a little longer."

Getting up himself, Souma dissuaded Aisha from coming along as his bodyguard and then left with the other three.

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“Now, when it comes to the body, I expect the shell will get in the way.”

“With a living mollusk, you can boil or fry it to get the shell to open up, but according to Ichihā’s analysis, that thing isn’t designed to open. I expect it’ll take considerable effort to force it.”

“That’s why we’ll start by laying Ooyamizuchi’s body on its side, and removing the bottom of the shell, the part that’s like a turtle’s plastron. The plastron and the fleshy parts that the tentacles were growing out of should be cuttable. I believe Mechadra and the dragons should be large enough to handle the task.

“Once that’s done, please scoop out all the organs, yes.”

Following Poncho’s directions, I was riding on Naden’s head—because I couldn’t see in front of me when she stood on her hind legs if I was on her back—and Halbert was on Ruby. Simultaneously, I was also calling and controlling Mechadra, so there were now a ryuu, a dragon, and a mechanical dragon lined up and approaching Ooyamizuchi. It was quite a sight to behold.

“Poncho was saying he wanted us to knock it onto its side, but that’s going to be pretty tough,” I grumbled, and Hal nodded.

“This thing’s like a mountain. But we’ve still gotta do it, right?”

“Geez. We’re the ones doing the real work here.”

“I certainly hope you’ll be doing something to make this up to me later.”

Naden and Ruby were both complaining.

“I’m moving Mechadra, and the sea dragons will help pull as well, okay, Naden?”

“I know that, but where’s the harm in letting *me* grumble a bit?”

There were chains stretching from Ooyamizuchi's back out towards the water where the sea dragons that had been pulling warships before were bound to the other end. When we pushed, they would pull from the other side.

Looking down, I spotted a soldier below waving flags at us. "Seems like it's all clear down there. Okay, let's get started."

"Roger that."

"Yes, sir!"

Naden, Ruby, and Mechadra placed their front legs against the now headless and tentacle-less Ooyamizuchi's shell.

"Ready... Go!"

Ooyamizuchi's body lurched as the three put their weight against it. At the same time, the sea dragons in the water started pulling.

"Ready, go!" *Thud.*

"Heave, ho!" *Thud.*

"Give it some oomph!" *Thud.*

"Once more!" *Thud.*

As I was shouting orders, the body slowly began to tilt.

"Huh?! It's falling doooown!" I knew they had checked that there was no one in the way, but I shouted just to make sure.

Soon there was a great thud, and Ooyamizuchi's body fell onto its side, kicking up seawater and sand. In that instant, the soldiers started clapping and cheering for no well-explained reason. They were probably excited to see this gargantuan object keeling over. Maybe it was like when you watched a video of a massive volcanic eruption, and you couldn't help but say, "Whoa, that was awesome."

Okay, now the plastron-like part was exposed. We followed Poncho's instructions to remove it. It was massive, and it would take forever to do it the same way as we had the tentacles, so instead, Naden and the others would tear into the fleshy parts with their claws and then pull it off. This was where Mechadra's claws, which had been sharpened into a blade-like shape, came in handy. They were even more efficient than Naden's at tearing through flesh.

"Mechadra was supposedly going to be tough to use, but it sure is coming in handy now, huh?" Naden commented, half out of exasperation. *You can say that again*, I thought in response.

With the plastron removed, they tore apart the soft flesh inside, and pulled out the internal organs. It felt a bit harsh to make Naden and Ruby handle this part, so I decided to have Mechadra do it. That thing sure was useful for dealing with gargantuan creatures. However, Mechadra had my own consciousness inside it, and I felt sickened, like I was constantly looking at gore pics. I needed to take a number of breaks as I worked, so it took a long time. Regardless, I finished pulling out every organ I could.

I slumped to the ground and sat there due to the psychological toll. Naden looked at me with concern.

"You okay, Souma?"

"...This may have been the most exhausting part of this whole battle."

"You should rest. Come on, stand up."

Naden helped me back to the area where the others were. I considered that the grotesque sight I had just witnessed would put me off from looking at meat for a while, but my head and body needed the nutrition, so I dug into a bowl of Ooyamizuchi soup.

"Mmm! Juna, what part did you use for this?"

“We’re prioritizing the non-digestive organs. I’m told that was the heart.”

“Heart, huh? ...Damn, that’s good,” I said begrudgingly. I couldn’t beat my appetite.

This was how we carried on. We would work, eat, then work and eat some more—doing each in turn until, three days and three nights later, Ooyamizuchi’s remains had been fully dismantled. By that point, I was so sick of seeing organ parts that I never wanted to see them again. With the exception of some samples kept for research purposes, Ooyamizuchi’s meat was processed for consumption; its scales, bones, and carapace were processed for use as construction materials, and the organs were either eaten or had their oil extracted.

Once all the work was done, the Kingdom and Archipelago Union held a banquet to celebrate the slaying of Ooyamizuchi and amicable relations between the two countries. However, with a whole lot of organ meat left to consume, the menu was still more offal soup. This time, though, there was alcohol served as well, so there was minimal complaining from the soldiers.

Halbert and Ruby were taking part in the feast, too, sitting around a bonfire on Ikatsuru Island. They were joined by Shima Katsunaga and his group.

“Hey, you drinkin’ there, Red?” Shima asked as he vigorously slapped Halbert on the back.

“Ow...! Hold back a little, would you?”

Shima must have been inebriated already, because he shook it off with a hearty laugh, his face a bright shade of red.

“I was watching the exploits of the red dragon and her knight from down on the ground! I never would have guessed you two were such a young couple!”

“...We were watching, too. We saw how manly the men of the Archipelago Union are.”

“Ga ha ha! I’ll bet, I’ll bet! Go on, have another drink!”

“Fine, fine...”

“Hey, now. Don’t drink too much, okay?” Ruby warned as Halbert and Shima clacked their glasses together. “If you go wild while I’m watching you, I won’t know what to say to Kaede.”

“I-I know that, all right?”

“Ga ha ha! What, Red? Your wives got you whipped! If you call yourself a man, you’ve gotta have the balls to tell ‘em, ‘Shut up and follow me!’”

Shima followed that comment up with a hearty laugh.

“Halbert. Don’t go and take what he just said seriously,” came a voice.

Turning to see who the sudden interjection came from, Castor had come over, cup of sake in hand.

“Mind if I join you?”

“S-Sure! Go ahead.”

Castor sat in the space Halbert moved to open up for him, then stared hard at Shima.

“Strong words have strong emotions hiding behind them. Many of the guys who’ll tell you they’re not afraid of their wives are more frightened than anyone. I saw my fair share of that in the Air Force.”

“...Hmph! What makes you say that?”

Shima puffed his chest up, but Castor just silently pointed behind him.

“Your men are smiling, you know?”

“Whaa?! Ya louts!”

Shima turned around, his face still flushed red, but his men hurriedly shook their heads in denial. Realizing from their reaction that they had not, in fact, been smiling, Shima realized he’d fallen for the trap.

“Looks like I was right,” Castor said with a smug look.

“Tch...”

“Don’t glare now. I just recognized someone with the same smell as me,” Castor said in a self-mocking tone. He used to be the master of the house, or at least a little closer to it, but ever since Accela went to live with Excel, he hadn’t been able to stand up to his wife at all.

Having more or less picked up on this, Shima scratched his nose, embarrassed. Were Souma around, he’d have thought, *If an illusionist were to show these guys the thing that scared them the most, I bet it’d be their wives.*

The men who were brave except when it came to confronting their wives all hit it off, and Castor and Shima shared a large number of drinks. Having been freed from the pressure, Halbert breathed a sigh of relief and turned his head to Ruby, who was next to him.

“Geez... These Archipelago Union guys are nice and all, but they let way too loose, don’t you think, Ruby?”

“Yeah. But doesn’t this sort of atmosphere suit you, Hal?”

“Ha ha ha, well, yeah... But when it gets like this, Souma gets dragged into it, and... Oh, wait, Souma and all of them aren’t here now, huh?”

When he said that, Halbert looked out towards the *Albert II*. Ruby nodded.

“Yes. Naden and the others are on the ship having a get-together with the members from the House of Sha.”

"A get-together... Right." Halbert downed the rest of his glass. "I bet they're not going to be having an easy-going time, feasting and drinking like us?"



Chapter 12: Negotiations -ocean league-

The wardroom aboard the *Albert II* had a large carpet and was decorated with paintings. It looked like an expensive restaurant. The only thing missing was the chandeliers. Because it was a battleship, thus prone to shaking, the room's lighting was all done with lamps.

Juna, Excel, and I were there representing the Kingdom, sitting across a long table from Nine-Headed Dragon King Shana, one man who was presumably a close associate of his, and his daughter Princess Shabon, who were representing the Archipelago Union. By the way, though Shana and Shabon had been able to meet again here on the ship, they had both frozen, unsure what to say, when they saw one another.

The daughter hadn't understood her father's resolve, and the father had tried to keep his daughter from getting involved, only for that to backfire. It resulted in them going into the battle in different camps. There was a lot to unpack there.

"Father..." Shabon managed to force herself to speak in this awkward situation.

However, Shana waved a hand to silence her, and shook his head.

"I'm sorry... There are things I must tell you, and I am sure you have much to say as well. However, for the people's sake, I want to prioritize talks with Sir Souma for now. I promise to make time for you later."

"...Yes." Shabon backed down, perhaps understanding how her father felt.

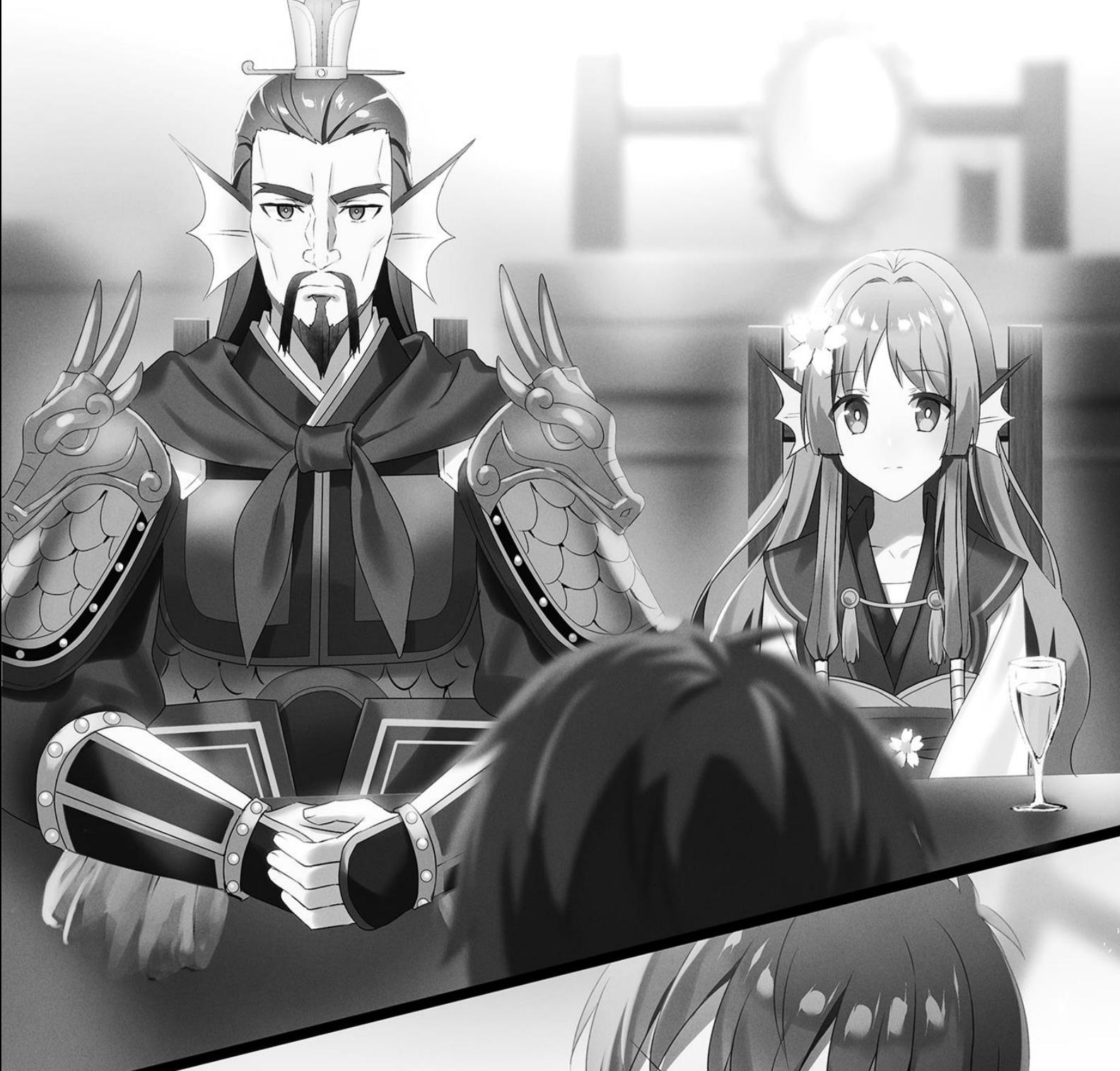
I was grateful to them for postponing it, too. I couldn't butt into a foreign nation's affairs, especially not when it was between a father and his daughter, after all.

Behind us stood our bodyguards Aisha and Naden, while Kishun was behind King Shana. There was no hostility here, no need to brace for potential violence, but the air in the room was still a little charged. To give you an analogy, it was like the tension in the air before someone gave an important presentation—even the glasses in front of us were all filled with water, not wine.

"Okay, let's get started," I said, and everyone nodded.

We had explained to the soldiers outside that this was a friendly get-together, but we were actually discussing what would happen after the battle. Even in light of the circumstances, our fleets had been only a half-step away from going to battle. If someone had gotten hasty during my farcical war of words with King Shana... I was frightened to think what might have happened.

People were in an amicable mood in the wake of a shared battle against a common enemy, having sweated together during the clean-up work, and having eaten from the same pots, but if we charted the wrong course from here, things could get tense again.



“Let me start by asking how you want to resolve this, Sir Shana.”

“I will take all the blame, and give Shabon all the credit.”

Shabon’s eyes widened. I asked a direct question, and Shana gave me a straight answer.

“Father?! What are you...?”

“You are saying you will take responsibility for creating tension with the Kingdom, and bringing us to the brink of war, while Madam Shabon gets the credit for our successful joint front against Ooyamizuchi?” I asked.

Shana nodded silently. So, that basically meant...

“By taking responsibility, do you mean to abdicate yourself and have Madam Shabon assume the throne, then?”

“No! Father should not have to abdicate! Not when I was unable to accomplish anything!” Shabon covered her face with her hands.

“That’s not it. This was the plan all along,” Shana explained in a calm voice, placing his hands on Shabon’s shoulders. “I meant to finish this without you knowing anything, but you acted on your own ideas, for the good of the country, and made contact with Sir Souma. That made it easier for Sir Souma to bring the Kingdom’s fleet to our land, which enabled us to fight as one. Our people will have a more positive attitude towards the Kingdom now than what my own script would have produced. I’ve put you through a lot.”

“Father...” Shabon raised her face, only to see Shana smiling at her.

It was true that the original reason for me sending out the Kingdom’s fleet was going to be “to slap down the Archipelago Union’s fleet for constantly defending illegal fishing vessels.” Even if we used the Law of the Sea to force us into a joint front, that justification was going to leave behind hard feelings. Because Shabon came to me, though, we

could rewrite the script to say that “the King of Friedonia came at the request of Princess Shabon.”

Excel snapped her folding fan shut.

“Then how does this sound for our shared script? ‘In order to save the people of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, Princess Shabon risked life and limb to beg King Souma to dispatch his fleet. Inspired by her resolve, King Souma happily agreed to send troops. However, when the Kingdom’s fleet arrived upon the archipelago islands, they were mistaken for invaders. They nearly ended up fighting the Archipelago Union’s fleet, but after a coincidental distress signal, both fleets followed the Law of the Sea and fought together to eliminate Ooyamizuchi.’ ...I think that should be about right.”

“Yeah...”

If we made this a tale that glorified Shabon, the people would have an easier time accepting it, and it would help to justify her reign later. Some of the soldiers who took part in the operation might think there was something fishy about the story, but while we had massaged the timeline, more than half of what we would be telling them was true. Since this version of events didn’t humiliate the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, no one was likely to object to it.

Seeing the way Excel came up with a satisfying answer so quickly, you could really see that with age comes wisdom.

“Sire, were you thinking something strange just now?”

“...Perish the thought.” I averted my eyes from the intense smile on Excel’s face.

“Me, ascend the Nine-Headed Dragon throne...? Am I even qualified to do that?” Shabon said, hanging her head.

Having been in a similar situation, it hurt how bad I knew how she felt.

“Madam Shabon, you came to the kingdom to stop Sir Shana and to fight against Ooyamizuchi, correct? Weren’t you prepared to shoulder the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago in his place in doing that?”

“I was then, but... I failed to see Father’s true intentions...”

“I had my throne handed off to me by the former king, too, so I can understand how you feel. Even if it feels like a burden, if you don’t keep walking, the things left behind by the people before you will all go to waste. You must inherit all of that, and carry it forward.”

“Inherit, and carry it forward... That is what I must do, then.” Shabon raised her face, seeming to have found her resolve. Shana regarded her with satisfaction.

For now, at least, we had a common story we could tell. Now it was time to negotiate.

“Now then, the Kingdom worked with your country to fight Ooyamizuchi. With the exception of research samples, Ooyamizuchi’s components are to be considered property of the Archipelago Union, and used to aid in the reconstruction. That makes it look like the Kingdom is running a charity here. I know there’s the argument that if we left Ooyamizuchi to rot, it would cause harm to our country, too, but we took casualties. I’m at risk of looking like I stuck our necks out just to do a good deed. I’d like to avoid that.”

I came straight out and explained it to Shabon, who had a dubious look on her face.

“...Is there something you are trying to say?”

“I’m saying I want some kind of profit for the Kingdom. If I can show there was good cause for helping the Archipelago Union, it will be easier to persuade the soldiers and my people, and in turn aid in building friendly relations between our two countries.”

“Profit, is it? My country doesn’t have much in the way of financial leeway, though...”

“I won’t ask for money, of course, that would only harm people’s opinions of the Kingdom here. Instead, I want you to accept a few of our requests. Though, I do believe I already brought one of them up with you before, didn’t I, Sir Shana?”

I looked at him, and Shana nodded.

“You wanted to formalize the Law of the Sea and form a maritime alliance based on it, correct?”

“That’s right,” I said with a big nod. “When we were resolving this matter, we brought up the Law of the Sea to force the two fleets to work together. Right now, however, what we call the ‘Law of the Sea’ is just an oral contract. It may seem ironclad to the men of the sea, but for everyone else, it’s easily broken. I’d like it formalized as an international treaty.”

The Law of the Sea was merely customary. If someone didn’t care about their reputation, they could break it easily. I wanted to make it a formal treaty between the Kingdom and the Archipelago Union in order to prevent that. Once we had concluded one such agreement, we could use it as a precedent to convince other countries to recognize it as international law. The Empire and Republic would join in, at least.

“The other reason that both fleets were able to form a joint front was that you and I, the heads of both countries, were present. How would it have played out if it was just our commanders? They would have had to contact us to confirm what to do, and it would have taken even longer. We have to assume that ships from both countries will run into incidents we won’t know about, and I want to have agreements in place for how to handle them.”

“I see. I understand that now, but what do you mean by a ‘maritime alliance’?”

When Shabon asked that, I weaved my fingers together and leaned in a bit closer.

“I intend to expand the maritime trade between our countries in future. Obviously, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago will want to take advantage of this improvement in relations to trade, too. Sir Shana, based on your development of the lion-dog cannon and other gunpowder weapons for use at sea, does your country produce a large amount of saltpeter, perhaps?”

“Indeed. The southern islands can produce high-quality saltpeter.”

“From my country’s perspective, that saltpeter, as well as your high-quality rice and local specialties such as swords, are appealing. Is there anything from the continent you would want to trade them for?”

“There is. In particular, I’ve heard there are some impressive advances in medical technologies on the continent. Having been self-sufficient with our islands all this time, things from the continent all seem stunning to us.”

Because this country was founded by those driven off the mainland, xenophobia had deep roots here—much like in the dark elves’ society around the time I took the throne. Glancing at Aisha beside me, I thought, *Now, those dark elves are reliable comrades.*

In order to expand our maritime trade, I was going to have to build a similar relationship with the Archipelago Union.

“If there is anything you want from the continent, let my country act as your go-between. We will need to work out the details of tariffs and such later, but if merchant fleets can travel freely between our two countries, I think we can expect not only major economic advances, but cultural ones, too.”

I pointed towards the beach where Ooyamizuchi's bones still lay.

"However, one thing this incident brought to light is that creatures like that can appear in this world. I hear that Ooyamizuchi prevented the Archipelago Union from sending their ships out. That's a deathblow for commerce. It's not just creatures, though. I imagine major storms, piracy, or interference and sabotage by other countries could also harm trade."

Everyone nodded in agreement. I continued.

"If we're going to promote maritime trade, we need to secure safety along the trade routes. That's what the maritime alliance is for. In the event that a ship from a member country encounters one of the threats I just named, the navies of each member country would move quickly to assist them... No, in the case of human-caused interference, the maritime alliance would secure the trade routes so that it doesn't happen in the first place."

The ideal would be trade that doesn't require escort ships, but it was a little early for that in this world. There were giant creatures other than Ooyamizuchi on the high seas, after all. It would be one thing if they had something like a sonar that could detect hazardous creatures approaching, but they didn't. Still, if we could eliminate human interference, that had to make trading easier than it was now.

"If the Archipelago Union will participate in this alliance, I would like to bring the Republic of Turgis into it as well. Their blacksmiths are top rate. Looking at the Nine-Headed Dragon Katana, I can see that the archipelago's smithies are highly advanced, too. Wouldn't bringing two nations with a dedication to craftsmanship together help make new techniques bloom?"

"Hmm. That would be wonderful, but... my country has no diplomatic relations with the Republic. That place becomes

inaccessible when the seas freeze in winter, after all. Would they really agree to it?"

"The Kingdom will act as your intermediary, of course. We have connections there, you see."

I hadn't told Kuu anything about this strategy because of how much had to be kept secret about it, but if I explained the situation, knowing him, he'd bite at anything that looked interesting. *Well, even if he's hesitant, I'll just have to show him the profit in it, and then persuade him...*

Shana crossed his arms and arched his back. "I can see the profit in it for my country, but here in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, each island chief has their own territory they control at sea. We would need to get them all to agree."

"I have to leave it to you to handle that, but don't you think you can use the current situation?"

I turned towards the beach. You could hear the raucous good time they were having from here.

"Having just fought together to overcome a powerful enemy, the soldiers probably feel a stronger sense of common purpose than ever before. Furthermore, the appearance of Ooyamizuchi must have demonstrated the importance of overcoming the boundaries between the islands in order to fight together."

"Indeed, if we take advantage of the current climate, we likely can find the will to unify, but if that is to happen, it's all the more reason I should step down now. Shabon is beloved by the people of the islands and has worked on their behalf; she will make a more fitting sovereign for the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago."

"Father... I understand," Shabon said, clasping both hands together in front of her chest. "I will protect the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago's islands and their bond to the Kingdom with my life."

It looked like Shabon had made up her mind.

She turned to look straight at me and said, "With that decided, I have something to ask of you, Sir Souma."

"Hm? What's that?"

"For one as young as myself to rule the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, I am sure I will require more than just my father's assistance. In order to make this alliance a reality, I would like to have your support, as well, Sir Souma."

"Hmm... What exactly do you want from me?"

"To form familial relations by means of a marriage."

My eyes widened at her words. *Marriage... Are we back to the beginning again?*

"Won't you be assuming the role of Nine-Headed Dragon Queen?"

"Yes. I will not be the one marrying, of course."

With that, Shabon smiled.

"Once I become the Nine-Headed Dragon Queen, I intend to have a child. It is my hope to deepen the ties between our countries by having that child marry one of yours, Sir Souma. I believe you had a son and a daughter. If my child is a girl, I wish to send her to you as a bride for your prince, and if my child is a boy, I would like to welcome your princess into our family as his wife."

Marriages for Cian and Kazuha?! I mentally exclaimed. They're still just infants!

We weren't the only ones taken aback by this, Shana and Kishun seemed dumbstruck, too. Excel was the only one who seemed to be thinking, *Oh, my, now this is interesting*, as she hid a smile behind her fan.

It took me a while to recover, but once I did, I told Shabon, "...It's clearly a bit early for that. I can't just decide on my own."

Whoops, in my confusion, I just blurted out what I was thinking. Still, even though I had dodged giving her an immediate answer, Shabon said, "Yes," still smiling as she nodded. "For now, that is fine. The child has not even been born yet. However, just the knowledge that the two of us have discussed the matter will provide me with support."

"...Ha ha ha, you're really something, you know that?" I was honestly impressed.

When she was down on her luck, I had seen her as a tragic princess, but she had this tough and nervy side to her, too. No, maybe she grew through coming into contact with all the different people and intentions involved in this incident. Whichever it was, she might make a surprisingly good ruler.

I cleared my throat loudly, trying to change gears. "Now, Sir Shana, may I assume you will seriously consider the maritime alliance?"

"Yes. You may."

"Now, as for the Kingdom's other request, we would like an island."

"An island... you say?" Shana furrowed his brow. "I may be the king of the archipelago, but I am only free to do what I please with Nine-Headed Dragon Island and the small islands around it. I do not have any authority to cede another island chief's island."

"Yes, of course. The island I am requesting does not belong to you, yet, but it is one of the islands close to yours. I believe that we should be able to negotiate the matter here."

"...What island is it?" Shana asked, and I looked at Kishun, who was standing behind them.

“I would like to have Little Island, of the Twin Islands, which Sir Kishun rules.”

Little Twin Island was the island opposite Big Twin Island where we had stayed.

During our stay on Big Island, I had heard rumors that there were military ships moored on Little Island, and that in the event that the islands were attacked by a force too big to defend Big Island against, they could still hold out on Little Island. They said that because it was smaller, fewer troops could land there, making it easier to defend.

Shana had a dubious look on his face. “Little Twin Island? You want that tiny thing?”

“Yes. It’s close to Nine-Headed Dragon Island, and along the route to Lagoon City, so I couldn’t ask for a better place to put a supply depot. In the interest of securing the sea lanes, and encouraging trade, I’d like to establish a base and permanently station a portion of the Kingdom’s fleet there.”

“A permanent station for the Kingdom’s fleet? That would be...”

Just as Shana started to frown, Shabon slammed her hands on the table and rose to her feet.

“Hold on a moment! The Twin Islands’ chief is Kishun. Even if you are the Nine-Headed Dragon King, it is unacceptable for you to make a deal involving someone else’s island! Can you not take one of the islands attached to Nine-Headed Dragon Island instead?!”

“...Please, calm down, Madam Shabon,” I said to pacify Shabon, who was getting a little worked up. “That would be fine as far as the Kingdom is concerned. Our goal is stable sea lanes and trade.”

“In that case...”

“But what are you planning to do after this, Kishun?” I asked.

Kishun got a difficult expression on his face. Shabon turned around, and then blinked when she saw it.

"Kishun?"

"....."

Kishun didn't answer her, just looked down, clenching his fists. That had to be because he knew what was coming. Shabon, meanwhile, seemed unaware.

With a sigh, I said, "Madam Shabon, you will become the Nine-Headed Dragon Queen. Once you are, you will be based out of Nine-Headed Dragon Island, limiting your ability to move around as freely as you did before. You understand that, right?"

"...Yes. I am prepared for that."

"If Kishun carries on as the island chief of the Twin Islands, he won't be able to meet with you as easily or as frequently as before.

Kishun's job is to rule the Twin Islands, and to protect the people who live on them, but he is also the man who accompanied you on what anyone would have had to conclude was a reckless journey to the Kingdom. He must have strong feelings for you indeed, wouldn't you say?"

I didn't know whether those feelings were of loyalty or love, but when Shabon angered me before, it was Kishun who came and did a sit-in at the castle in an attempt to fix things. *You know, now that I think about it, he could have been cut down by the guards for that, huh?* Everything he did, he did for Shabon.

Blinking at what I had just said, Shabon looked at Kishun again.

"I was just thinking that when Kishun sees you struggling as the Nine-Headed Dragon Queen, he wouldn't be able to leave you alone... and that maybe, he might leave his island unattended. Or am I wrong?"

"Well... I do want to support Lady Shabon, but the islanders rely on me as their chief. I couldn't abandon them..." he replied, a pained expression on his face.

"Then why not appoint a relative as a magistrate? That is what the chiefs of many of the small islands do when they come to Nine-Headed Dragon Island," Shana suggested, but Kishun shook his head weakly.

"I have no relatives... and I couldn't leave the job to an outsider..."

"Hm... In that case, would I do?"

"Huh? You, sire?"

Shana rose and put a hand on Kishun's shoulder.

"I know very well how dedicated you are to Shabon. If a mononofu like you were at her side to support her, as her father, that would bring me unexpected happiness. I am sure you would make a fine husband."

"F-Father!"

"No... I am undeserving of such kind words."

"If possible, I would like for you to keep supporting Shabon. As I will be abdicating my throne, I would be in the way if I were to stay too close to her. Why not entrust your people to me as your magistrate? Though, from your point of view, we would be trading where we rule."

When Shana said that, Kishun took a knee and placed his hands together above his head.

"Yes. You, I could trust, Lord Shana. I intend to give everything I have for Princess Shabon from now on."

"Father... Kishun..." Shabon's eyes were watering. It looked like the group from the Archipelago Union had come to a decision.

Once they had all returned to their original positions, I coughed politely to try and get back to the discussion at hand.

“Now then, about Little Twin Island...”

“I will leave the decision to His Majesty,” Kishun said, and Shana nodded.

“Very well. In light of the great assistance that your country has provided us on this occasion, I do believe we can accept your request,” Shana spoke. “However, were the people to see this as one of the islands of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago being ‘taken,’ the other island chiefs will likely resist it. Our people detest outside interference, you see. That is the problem here.”

It was true. The people of this country were like the samurai of long ago who would fight to protect a single piece of land that they relied on for their livelihood. Even if it was just a small island, they wouldn’t be able to accept any of the land they had fought to protect falling into the hands of an outsider. ...*But, well, I had anticipated this reaction.*

“Then why don’t we set it up so that we’ve exchanged bases?”

“...Exchanged them?”

“Yes. Juna, get us a map.”

“Here, sire.”

Juna unfurled the map we’d prepared before on the table in front of us. Then, as everyone looked at it, I pointed to a spot a little east of Venetinova along the coast.

“It’s small, but there’s a military port here. How about we ‘loan’ it to you as compensation for you ‘loaning’ the base on Little Twin Island to us? Basically, it’s an exchange of naval bases. Naturally, the same terms would apply here, and we would allow you to permanently station a fleet under the flag of the Nine-Headed Dragon King or

Queen at the port. I'm sure you'll be wanting supply depots for your trading goods, too."

"Hmm, I think that would satisfy the island chiefs, but... Is this what you want? You realize we would be stationing our warships inside the Kingdom."

"If it's just at this one port, then this sort of exchange of bases will require a certain degree of friendly relations between the two countries. If either side betrays the others' trust, these bases will have to be abandoned immediately, I'm sure. If you truly understand the importance of maritime trade, you will see why we must never betray one another. I intend to make this same proposal to the Republic."

"...I see. This is tied into the maritime alliance and strengthening of relations you were talking about before, then."

Shana crossed his arms, grunting, and then looked at me.

"It's an easy plan to buy into, with no losses for us. I appreciate that you take our situation into consideration, but... it also lets me see just how carefully this has all been planned out. If we set aside the matter of exactly which island you chose, the general outline isn't something you came up with yesterday. Have you been planning to ask me for this as payment ever since I first came to you about fighting together?"

"...I'll leave that to your imagination."

Well, it was actually something else that led me to think of this maritime alliance, but I didn't need to bring that up here.

Sighing, Shana said, "Your country makes for a more fearsome opponent than I had imagined."

"I don't think that's true, though? We honor our alliances."

"That's what makes the idea of making an enemy of you frightening," Shana said, then looked to Shabon. "What do you say, Shabon? This is a man you will have to deal with from now on."

"I would like to trust him... I doubt Sir Souma will betray us as long as we do not betray him."

"Hmm... Then join hands with him."

"Yes."

With that, Shabon stood up. I rose, too, and we each extended our right hands.

"In the interest of my own country's development, I will take this alliance under serious consideration, King Souma."

"I will be waiting for a positive response, Queen Shabon."

We exchanged a firm handshake.

The details still need to be ironed out, so the alliance couldn't be concluded here and now, but it was good enough for the interim that we had shared our intentions to strengthen ties in future.

Addressing everyone, I said, "And with that... I think it's time for some long overdue celebration. With all due apologies to the soldiers on the beach, we'll be serving something other than offal dishes here on this ship."

"Ga ha ha! Good. I was getting tired of offal soup, you know," Shana said with a hearty laugh.

...Yeah, I am seriously sick of offal soup.

"I could eat endless amounts of anything His Majesty makes," Aisha beamed.

"I'm sure *you* could, Aisha, but I want fish."

"I miss raw fruits and vegetables."

Aisha, Naden, and even Shabon were chatting about that.

Meanwhile...

“For me, I think it’s all about liquor,” Excel said. “I’d like to try all sorts of dishes to see what pairs better with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s sake, and what is better with the Kingdom’s wine.”

“Allow me to prepare the archipelago’s finest sake for you.”

“Ga ha ha! Nine-Headed Dragon sake goes well with meat or fish!”

Excel, Kishun, and Shana were talking about that. They were cleanly split into the food team and liquor team. I decided to strike up a conversation with Juna, who was watching from the sidelines.

“Which are you looking forward to more, the liquor or the food?”

“Well... considering I can’t drink right now, I suppose I’d have to say the food.”

“Hm? Now that I think of it, you weren’t drinking when we were at the Twin Islands, either, right? There’s no need to be on edge now, so why not relax with the rest of us?”

Juna hurriedly shook her head. “Oh, no, that’s not it! I’m abstaining right now.”

“Huh? I thought you could hold your liquor, though.”

“I can, but... Dr. Hilde has told me to stop right now.” As she said that, Juna covered her belly in embarrassment.

The mention of Dr. Hilde, covering her belly, and Juna’s bashful expression all told me the reason she couldn’t drink right now.

“Eh...? Erm, when did you find out?”

“I guess it was a little before we came to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.”

“Wh-Why did you keep quiet all this time...?”

“Because if I told you, you would never have let me come, right?” Juna chuckled to herself as she explained. “My condition was stable, and I didn’t want to pass up a chance to be of use.”

I clutched my head, not even sure what to say. There were so many emotions swirling through my mind, and I didn’t know where to begin. So, for now, I decided to express the biggest of them...

“Aww, yeahhhhhh!”

Everyone was shocked by my sudden outburst, but I paid them no mind as I cried out in glee and scooped Juna up into my arms.

Oh, Cian and Kazuha, waiting back in the Kingdom. You’re going to be a big brother and sister soon.



Epilogue: Return -I'm back-

“...My head hurts.”

“Yeesh, what are you even doing over there?”

It was the morning after our celebration banquet, and I was nursing a hangover while Liscia regarded me with exasperation. I was using the jewel aboard the *Hiryuu* to talk with her while she was currently at the Kingdom’s secret arsenal. Between the twin joys of having slain Ooyamizuchi and finding out Juna was pregnant, I had gotten excited, let loose, and drunk a little too much. *I must have passed out somewhere along the way...*

When I came to my senses, I was in bed still wearing my military uniform, with Aisha and Naden, who must have carried me there, both hugging me. They’d clearly had their share of drink as well, and were sound asleep. Juna had apparently taken leave early on when the party got hectic. A good call.

When I told Liscia about Juna’s pregnancy, her response was, “Of course...”

“You knew about it, Liscia?”

“I had an inkling. Based on the changes in her behavior, I thought that she might be.”

“I didn’t have the slightest idea... Makes me feel like I’ve got a long way to go as a husband, and a father.”

“Well, I think that’s just the gap in *experience* here.” Liscia puffed her chest up with pride and smiled.

Yeah, I can’t beat that, I thought, then replied, “But... Oh, I never told Juna this, but maybe I shouldn’t have let her come. I get chills thinking about what might have happened to her.”

“I understand the feeling, but even if I knew, I couldn’t have stopped her.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I were in her position, I’d have hidden it so I could go with you, too. Yeah... If I hadn’t been in poor health when you went to the Republic, I can pretty much guarantee I’d have been accompanying you there. I was worried, you know?”

“You have so little faith in me... I had Aisha and the others there to protect me, you know?”

I smiled wryly, and Liscia chuckled.

“It’s pretty irritating, being the only one left behind where it’s safe, too. Besides, once her belly grows a little more, she won’t be able to move around so freely, so it’s only natural she would want to do as much as she can now.”

“...Fair enough. I appreciate the sentiment, but it still worries me.”

“Hee hee, hurry back home, okay? I want to see your face again, in person.”

“Ha ha ha, we’ll all head home when things are cleaned up... Oh, right. Could I get you to call Kuu to Lagoon City? You can probably get in touch with him faster from there.” I said, and Liscia’s expression grew serious in response.

“This is about that maritime alliance, right?”

“Yeah. I want it settled before the generally friendly atmosphere brought on by us having fought together fades. The sooner it’s finalized, the better.”

“I get it. You seem to be in an awful hurry, though.” At this point, Liscia seemed to realize something, and brought her hand to her mouth. “Hold on... Could this be the real reason you dispatched troops?”

“...What makes you think that?”

“I was just thinking that a maritime alliance and exchanging bases seemed weak as compensation for the support you gave them. Since you didn’t ask for something concrete like an island or money, I’m assuming whatever you really wanted was hidden in what you asked for. Well, that’s just intuition born from how long I’ve known you.”

“You really get me there.” I gave up, and shrugged in resignation. *My wife’s pretty sharp, huh?*

“It’s true that my main motivation for cooperating was to secure this maritime alliance. It wasn’t a purely humanitarian measure; I had also calculated that if I could ingratiate the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago to me, I could make the alliance happen.”

“You really thought that far ahead... So, it’s that big of a deal, then?”

“Obviously, since it will affect the Kingdom’s future.”

“I-It’s that important?” Liscia asked dubiously, and I nodded.

“I’ve already told Hakuya and Excel this, but the Kingdom will be working to boost its maritime trade and naval prowess going forward. In my world, we called it sea power.”

“‘Sea power’... I don’t really get it. I was in the Army, after all.”

“Well, when you’re a continental power, most of your battlefields and trade routes are going to be on land.”

I couldn’t blame Liscia for thinking the way she did. In the Kingdom, the Navy’s role had been to prepare to deal with incursions or an outright invasion by the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. Their main enemy, the Principality of Amidonia, shared a land border with them, and when it came to the Republic of Turgis, which had made attempts to expand northward in the past, their seas froze over so they didn’t have a proper navy.

Because of that, they thought the important battles were fought on land, and didn't really understand the importance of naval prowess. That seemed to be true of other countries as well. Despite their great size, the Gran Chaos Empire didn't have a thriving navy. Land power over sea power—that was the common view on this continent. Fuuga, who lived on the steppes, thought the same way, which was exactly why I was focusing on it.

"Freedom to navigate the seas is tied directly to a state's strength. Think about it. Our country has an island-type carrier. If nothing obstructs its navigation, we can bombard any place on the coast at our leisure. On top of that, if we use the *Roroa Maru*, we can even send troops across the frozen sea."

"When you put it that way, yeah, I can see it. So we're a real threat to other countries now, too, huh?" Liscia let out an impressed grunt.

I nodded. "Obviously, just because we can do something doesn't mean we're going to declare a whole bunch of wars and make enemies. I don't want to be designated as an enemy of mankind."

"You're damn right you don't."

"Besides, there's also economic reasons to do it. Though, if we increase our sea power like this, it'll be hard for anyone to really grasp the results. That's why we'll be able to do it quietly, without alerting other nations. I suspect only a maritime nation like the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union would properly understand the threat."

The Spirit Kingdom of Garlan was an island nation, too, but they were so xenophobic they had closed off their country. It'd be fine. They didn't seem to get much in the way of information from outside anyway.

Suddenly, Liscia clapped her hands together. "I get it. That's why you brought them into the alliance. If the countries that would

understand the threat are our allies, it's harder for them to see us as a danger."

"You've got it—and if we can move freely through their waters, it'll be even easier to coordinate with the Empire. It means we can move supplies and people back and forth."

I hadn't brought this up before since the opportunity hadn't arisen, but this world was *probably* a globe, the same as Earth. Because the Empire was west of us by land, they could also be reached by crossing the sea east of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. The people in this world, with their ability to fly on wyverns, likely realized this at an early stage. The curvature of the horizon would be visible from the air, after all.

The reason I only say *probably*, though, is that despite the world having been transited from east to west, the same had not been done from north to south. The continent of ice that I had seen south of the Republic of Turgis was unconfirmed territory, so it wasn't included on maps, and we knew even less about the far north.

When I consider that the north of the continent had been a desert, where the Demon Lord's Domain first appeared, our continent seemed like it was in the southern hemisphere. That's why, for the people of this world, they apparently thought it was shaped like a map rolled up so the east and west sides touched, almost like a cylinder. There were still a lot of things I didn't know about this world. Thinking about it was aggravating my hangover, so I tapped my temples and let out a sigh.

"...It sounds like Fuuga's been steadily expanding up north."

"The guy you're cautious of, right?"

"Yeah. It sounds like there's resistance forming against him, too. I expect the pro- and anti-Fuuga camps will collide in the not-so-

distant future. The result of that conflict could shake the continent. We need to be prepared for it.”

“I see... Do you expect Fuuga will win?” Liscia asked, and I shrugged.

“That, I don’t know. Well, it’s true I can’t imagine him losing. The thing is, the least desirable result for our country would be if Fuuga were to win, and then become a heroic figure that people invest their hopes and dreams in. If that happens, it’s guaranteed to send sparks flying in the neighboring countries, too.”

“I’ve never met this Fuuga, but... he seems scary. We’ll have to do everything we can to protect our country. For the children’s sake.”

“Yeah. For Cian, Kazuha, and all the children yet to be born.”

Liscia and I nodded at one another. Then Liscia smiled at me.

“All of that aside, do come back in one piece, okay?”

“Yeah. It may be a bit of a *flashy* return, though.”

“...Are you plotting something again?”

“Heheh, just you wait and see.” I smirked as Liscia gave me a look of exasperation.

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— 15th day, 2nd month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar

“Sire, it’s almost time,” Juna, who was standing by my side, told me, and I nodded.

“Okay... Well then, get started!” I shouted, holding my right hand up so that people on the bridge could see. When I did that, bugles sounded and flag signals were sent from the front and back of the ship. Soon after, it was followed by countless bugles sounding on all sides.

I looked out over the combined Kingdom and Archipelago Union fleets; there were a total of more than sixty warships. They all flew the flags of both the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union side-by-side. When the bugles stopped, the ship in front of us fired a blank artillery round—that was the signal for both fleets to move.

The *Albert II* began slowly advancing. I put my hand on Juna's lower back so she wouldn't fall over.

"Thank you, sire," she said, smiling faintly.

"No problem. I wish you'd stay inside where it's warm, though."

"I don't want to. You don't see a major performance like this every day, after all," Juna replied, looking around. "I've never seen such a large fleet. It's breathtaking."

The fleets of both countries sailed in formation.

"This plan was just something I came up with on the spur of the moment, but they're managing to coordinate."

"Of course they are. Both countries' fleets are well trained."

"We've got Excel to thank for that on the Kingdom's side. We'll have a great naval review thanks to her."

This was the idea I had come up with: a naval review—basically a military parade for the fleets—with the Kingdom's and Archipelago Union's fleets.

The two fleets would sail close to the islands together, and:

- 1) Declare the threat of Ooyamizuchi was gone.
- 2) Explain it was the work of the Kingdom and Archipelago Union working together.
- 3) Show that the Kingdom and Archipelago Union had formed a maritime alliance.

4) Demonstrate that relations between the two countries were good.

Each island had already received messenger kuis relating all of this information, but seeing the two fleets moving in tandem would make them understand. While it had been to help unify the people inside the Archipelago Union, our country had been set up as a virtual enemy of theirs, so just seeing that we now had “cordial relations” in print wasn’t going to be terribly convincing. Seeing is believing, they say.

In order to heighten the believability of it, the *Hiryuu* led the procession with its escort ships. The skull of Ooyamizuchi, with the lower jaw removed, was displayed on deck. Because all of the meat had been removed from the skull to prevent decomposition, and the *Hiryuu* had been modeled on an island, it made for quite a surreal sight.

“Depending on your perspective, it might have looked like a new type of monster,” I mentioned, and Juna chuckled.

“Seen from above, I’m sure you’re right, but from below, it’s obviously a ship.”

These actions were being taken to show the islanders that Ooyamizuchi was slain and the threat was now gone, but I had complicated emotions about it. I felt like I was parading through the street with someone’s head on a pike—though, usually you’d parade the prisoners before they were executed. It reminded me of the skull chalice made by Oda Nobunaga. I wouldn’t want to be cursed, so I was going to offer my respects with Sir Shana once this naval review was finished.

“Anyway, once this is done, we can finally return to the Kingdom.”

“Yeah...”

After this, the two fleets would travel around the archipelago, then head to the Kingdom. After that, they'd go from Lagoon City to Venetinova to notify people that the fighting had come to an end. Finally, the fleet would disperse at Venetinova, and they would return to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.

"...I'll have to talk to Liscia about the children when we get back."

I hadn't mentioned it during the call, but I needed to explain Princess Shabon's betrothal offer for Cian and Kazuha to Liscia. It wasn't decided yet, but as members of the royal family, there was no avoiding talk of marriage to other royals, so Liscia would understand. Though, honestly, I didn't want to do anything that would make her the slightest bit sad.

Juna placed her hand gently on top of my own. "Now that I'm pregnant with a child of my own, I can understand how you feel about family better than I did before, sire."

"Juna..."

"It remains to be seen if Madam Shabon's daughter will come to marry Cian, or you'll send Kazuha to marry her son, but it's vital that we keep positive relations between our countries so that the marriage doesn't become a source of sorrow. Conversely, so long as our relations stay good, their marriage can't end up too bad."

"You certainly have a point there..."

If relations between the countries were amicable, then whether we were receiving a bride or sending one out, both countries would take good care of them. Also, if the marriage was against the involved parties' intentions, then if relations were good, it would be easy to break the betrothal. So, basically...

"It's up to us to make it work."

"Right. You'll have to do your best for the children, *Father*."

I gave a big nod in response to Juna's soft smile, and looked out to sea.

Midword

Thank you for purchasing the thirteenth volume of The Great Kaiju Sea War: Ooyamizuchi vs. Mecha... erm, I mean Realist Hero. This is Dojyomaru whose favorite Mothra song is the Cosmos version from VS Series.

This volume features the island carrier *Hiryuu*'s first deployment, and a fleet battle... or not, because we immediately shift to kaiju slaying. I think the tastes of the author, who has watched every Godzilla and Gamera movie, both Showa and Heisei, are on full display here. No, but seriously, out of all the volumes so far, this was the one I had the most fun putting together.

In writing this volume, I tried to evoke the feeling of the first film in a kaiju movie series. Because it's the first one, the characters have no idea what attacks the enemy is going to use.

For instance, in *Gamera, the Giant Monster*, when Gamera flips over, the scientists say that a turtle can't get up off its back, but then it takes flight by spinning around, and they're shocked. That's why even though Souma and the gang could predict Ooyamizuchi couldn't spit fire, they were caught by surprise by it firing blasts of compressed air and pressurized water.

People also talk about the importance of building up to the kaiju's appearance. First, you show just a part of its body, then the aftermath of destruction, and let the characters discuss their theories about the creature to stir up expectations about what kind of creature it is. Though, since the audience has seen the movie poster, or the trailers, they already know... (Except in cases like VS Mecha Godzilla, where the design changed between the poster and the film.)

I love how they wreck famous tourist destinations to show off the kaiju's power without showing off its true form. In the case of this

novel, that was the stone bridge. I put in a number of other elements reminiscent of kaiju movies, too. If you're a fan of them, maybe you'll read it with a smile.

Now then, I give my thanks to the artist Fuyuyuki, to Mr. Satoshi Ueda of the manga adaptation, to my editor, to the designers, to the proofreaders, to the people involved with the anime version, and to all of you who now hold this book in your hands.

This has been Dojyomaru.



After Story 1: Victorious Return - welcome back-

In a classroom at the Royal Academy in Parnam...

“I’m beat,” Yuriga groaned, collapsing on top of the desk.

Having been deported and sent back to the Royal Academy before the battle with Ooyamizuchi, Yuriga was subjected to two hours of supplementary lessons with her professor as punishment for having skipped class. In addition, though the eight-day week normally included two days off school, she was forced to come in on her days off to study.

“That woman with the glasses is merciless. She even made me write a letter of apology.”

“Ha ha, you’re lookin’ mighty tired there,” Lucy said with a wry grin as Yuriga grumbled to herself.

Lucy, the girl who was like a miniature Roroa, took a bottle filled with all sorts of colorful round things out of her bag.

“Well, you’ve been workin’ hard. Here, want a candy?”

“Give me one. I really need something sweet right now.”

Yuriga opened her mouth like a baby bird, and Lucy hurled the candy in. At the same time, their friend, the dark elf girl Velza, let out a sigh.

“You’re too sweet, Lucy. Yuriga needs to reflect on her actions more.”

“I-I have been, okay? I even wrote that letter.”

“Of course you have. I’m saying you need to reflect *more*. Now listen here,” Velza thrust a finger towards Yuriga. “They only took issue

with your absence, but you also stowed away and illegally entered another country, right? Normally, that would be a major incident.”

“Urkh...”

“I doubt that any other student has ever come so close to sparking an international incident before. The school has to be strict with you. Normally, you’d be expelled. I’m sure the only reason you’ve been let off with just supplementary lessons is because His Majesty is showing you mercy.”

“Well... Yeah.”

The fact was, the only reason her stowing away aboard the ship and illegally entering the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago didn’t also lead to trouble was because it had actually been covered up by Souma and his people. If Yuriga, who Fuuga had entrusted them with, got expelled from school, it might escalate to a dispute between nations. Velza and the others knew the details because Yuriga had told them, but the school itself remained in the dark about it.

“You should be more aware of how much trouble you caused for everyone.”

“...I’m reflecting on it, okay? Sir Souma got really mad,” Yuriga said, dejectedly this time.

It seemed she really did understand the severity of her actions. There was an oppressive silence in the room... Then, Lucy broke it by lobbing a candy in Velza’s mouth, too.

“Mmph... It’s sweet.”

“They’re our newest product. Made with ginger and honey, so they’re good for your throat, too. Anyway, Yuriga seems contrite, so how about lettin’ it go for now?”

“...Very well. I’m sorry. I was taking my frustration out on her.”

“Frustration?”

“If I’m being honest... I wanted to go to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, too.” Velza said, looking slightly deflated.

Yuriga blinked. “You did? Why?”

“Um... Ooyamizuchi, was it? Someone important to me was taking part in the mission to slay that creature. I’m well aware that my presence wouldn’t have helped at all, but... I was worried...”

“Oh! Is this about that Hal guy you like, Velie?” Lucy asked, looking excited.

During the recent costume event, they had seen how fannish Velza acted in front of Halbert. It was easy to see she had feelings for him.

“You sly dog.” Lucy playfully elbowed her in the ribs. “You’re attractive, and I hear that ya get all sorts of offers from the sons of knights and noblemen, but ya shoot them all down, sayin’ you’ve already got someone in mind.”

“Urgh... People talk about that...?”

“Ya must really be head over heels for him, huh?”

“Oh, absolutely. He’s so strong and cool.” Velza clasped her hands together in front of her chest, imagining Hal’s image as she spoke. “He holds a spear in each hand, wreathing them in flames, as he fearlessly takes on hordes of enemies. That horned headband must remind his foes of his sobriquet. It’s fitting for the ‘Red Oni’ who rides his red dragon partner into battle.”

“O-Okay...?” Lucy seemed a little weirded out as Velza waxed poetic about her intended. Granted, Lucy would have sounded pretty much the same if you got her talking about Roroa...

“He’s so strong, and yet usually so gentle. When I go to play with him on my days off, he takes the time to dote on me... Though, only as if I were his little sister.”

Suddenly, Velza seemed depressed. She was prone to intense mood swings where her intended was involved. The gap between this and the usual cool-head Velza made Lucy snicker.

“You’re a real maiden at heart, y’know that, Velie? Here, have another candy.”

“*Nom, nom.*”

Hal the Red Oni, huh...? As she listened, Yuriga was reminded of events not too long ago. “He was definitely a strong, brave warrior. His red dragon was tough, too.”

“Oh, have you witnessed Hal fighting, Yuriga?”

“Yeah, when the Union of Eastern Nations was facing the demon wave. He was definitely strong.”

“Wasn’t he though?”

For some reason, Velza puffed up her chest, her nostrils flaring with pride. Her attitude rubbed Yuriga, who had a competitive streak, the wrong way.

“Well, be that as it may, my brother is strong—wha?! ”

Yuriga was about to launch into one of her usual boasts about her brother, like she always did around Tomoe, but the flash of sheer murderous intent that came her way from Velza stopped her in her tracks.

What?! This is kind of scary, you know?! Yuriga screamed internally. Instinctively sensing it was dangerous to carry on with this topic, she said, “I-I think my brother is strong, too, but Halbert is a good fighter. Yeah...”

“Ah. Heheh, of course he is,” Velza smiled, carrying on as if nothing had happened.

Yuriga turned to Lucy, who seemed as taken aback as she was, and whispered in the girl's ear, "I've heard that the second primary queen, Madam Aisha, has a tendency to lose her composure when King Souma is involved, too. Tomoe told me about it, but... I'd forgotten."

"...They say love can make a person blind. That's gotta be it."

As the two of them were receiving a lesson in just how terrifying a dark elf in love could be, a familiar face came by.

"Oh, there you are, Yuriga."

"...Huh? Tomoe?"

Tomoe rushed over to them. She wasn't in her uniform, but instead wore one of Souma's handmade outfits.

Yuriga cocked her head to the side and asked, "What's up? Weren't you off school today?"

"I came to pick you up. I figured your supplementary lessons would be ending around now," she explained and extended a hand to Yuriga.

"To pick me up?"

"Yeah. I thought you'd want to see what happened afterwards, even if it was just the final result."

"Afterwards? The result? What are you even talking about?"

"It's okay. I made sure to get permission from Big Sister and the school. Come on, let's go."

Tomoe took Yuriga by the hand without waiting for a response.

"Huh? Wait a second!" Yuriga protested.

"See you later, Lu, Vel." With a bid farewell, Tomoe dragged Yuriga out of the classroom.

“...Our friends sure are free spirits, huh?”

“...They sure are.”

Lucy and Velza watched in surprise as the pair left them behind in the classroom.

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The following morning, the wyvern gondola carrying the kids had lifted off from Parnam in the evening, and after a number of stops to rest at cities along the way, arrived near Lagoon City.

“We’re almost at Lagoon City, you two.”

“Nnghhhh, we’re there?”

Shaken awake by Ichiha, Yuriga, who had been sleeping in the gondola, let out a big yawn.

“Mmph... Looks like it. Yeah,” Tomoe replied as she rubbed her sleepy eyes.

It had been a long flight, so they had all been napping. Then... *Bang!*

“Eek!”

“Tomoe?!”

It looked like the gondola had set down. The impact had made Tomoe fall into Ichiha’s arms.

“A-Are you okay?”

“Th-Thanks, Ichiha.”

Yuriga watched the two of them with exasperation.

“What’re you doing? You’re as slow as ever.”

“Murgh... That’s not true.”

“Come on, stop fighting, and let’s get out of the gondola, you two,” Ichiha urged.

As the kids stepped outside, the sea breeze tickled their noses. The gondola had been set down on a beach next to Lagoon City. Disembarking from the gondola, they realized they weren't the first to arrive. Surrounding them were guards, well-dressed noblemen; a woman in a red military uniform and a dragonewt in a maid dress were there, too, each holding a baby.

"Oh! Liscia. It looks like Tomoe and the other children are here," Carla said, nodding her head towards the gondola.

"You're right. I'm glad they made it."

Liscia and Carla waved to them, and the trio rushed over.

"Big Sister! Is the ship here?!"

"Not yet. I think it should be coming into sight soon, though." Liscia said, and Tomoe's shoulders relaxed.

"The ship...? Oh, I get it now," Yuriga commented. "This is the day Sir Souma returns, huh?"

Souma had been away with the Kingdom's fleet on an expedition to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. News had already spread that the kaiju Ooyamizuchi, which had been attacking the Archipelago Union, was recently put down by a combined assault by the Kingdom and Archipelago Union's fleets. However, cleaning up after the battle—which primarily involved butchering Ooyamizuchi's remains—had dragged on, keeping Souma from returning. Today he was coming back.

When Tomoe talked about "what happened afterwards," she had been referring to the battle in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. Yuriga had been able to see Ooyamizuchi, but was deported before the battle itself, so she was curious what had happened next.

Tomoe blinked repeatedly. "Huh? Didn't I say?"

"No, you did *not*! Not one thing I would have wanted to know!" Yuriga exclaimed before pulling on Tomoe's cheeks.

"Shtop, thah hursh!" Tomoe protested.

Liscia watched the two kids go at it with a little laugh. "I see you two are getting along, Yuriga."

"Huh?! Y-Yes. We are, Queen Liscia... Your Majesty," Yuriga replied tensely after unhanding Tomoe.

"Just Liscia is fine. You're a princess yourself, aren't you?"

"I... don't think I can do that."

"...Does being around me make you tense? Am I that intimidating?" Liscia cocked her head to the side questioningly, and Yuriga vigorously shook her head in denial.

"N-No... I feel a certain similarity to you, Lady Liscia. It's like you can see right through me. How should I put this...? I don't have an older sister, but I feel like a little sister when I'm in front of you... I guess?"

Liscia had been a tomboyish princess like Yuriga, and they shared some personality traits, like a stubborn streak that was ameliorated by flexible thinking. Sharing a lot in common put Yuriga somewhat on edge.

Tomoe, who was watching this exchange, puffed up her cheeks angrily. "Big Sister is *my* big sister!"

"I-I wasn't saying I want to become her little sister."

"Oh, why don't you? I'll bet Father would be delighted to have another daughter," Liscia said, smiling.

"P-Please, don't tease me!"



They say women are noisy, and this is why. Ichiha, who, being a man, felt he couldn't keep up with the conversation, was gazing out towards the sea. He saw something rise above the horizon and pointed it out.

Yuriga squinted in its direction. "Is that a mountain? No, an island?"

"Heheh, that's the island-type carrier *Hiryuu*. Souma and the others are back," Liscia told Yuriga.

Once the thing that rose above the horizon approached, Yuriga was able to tell it was a ship shaped like an island. This was her first time seeing the *Hiryuu*, and she was dumbfounded by the shape of it. The other warships surrounding the *Hiryuu* came into view, too. The splendor of the ships gave off a feeling of a "grand fleet." Some of them were iron ships pulled by sea dragons, while others were wood reinforced with iron and pulled by horned doldons. They varied in size, so it was like a trade fair for nautical vessels. Looking at the flags, some flew the standard of the Kingdom of Friedonia, while others carried that of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. Based on the number of ships, almost all of both countries' fleets must have been gathered here.

Yuriga stared intently at the sight before her. Her mind was a whirling vortex of question marks right now.

The grand fleet she was seeing in front of her was something that Yuriga, as the only one who hadn't been told about the series of events that unfolded in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, could not understand. First of all, it had been her understanding that relations between the two countries had been stormy. She had witnessed the threat known as Ooyamizuchi, but believed the diplomatic situation was a powder keg. That was why she assumed the reason Souma had sent in the fleet was not just to slay

Ooyamizuchi, but to destroy the Archipelago Union's fleet, and gain control of the sea. But now, before her very eyes, the Kingdom and Archipelago Union's fleets were sailing together like they were long-standing allies. Yuriga was confused.

What? How did things end up like this? she thought. It was like being presented with a math problem, and then shown just the solution. The answer was one she didn't expect, too. Yuriga had no idea what kind of arithmetic could lead to the result she was seeing. *And...*

What in the world is that?

Yuriga looked at the island-type carrier *Hiryuu* in the middle of the group leading the fleet. This was her first time seeing it. *Why did they build a giant battleship shaped like an island? How is it moving without any creatures pulling it?* As questions that Liscia and everyone else had long since learned the answers to popped into her head, the biggest thing was...

“What’s with those bones?”

There was a massive skull occupying the very front of the *Hiryuu*. The carrier looked strange enough already with its island-like shape, but this only made it seem weirder.

“I don’t know what to say... It looks like some new kind of monster.”

“It’s like the Great Island-type Kaiju, *Hiryuu*.”

Even Liscia and Tomoe, who knew Souma well, were a bit dumbfounded by the gargantuan skull on top of the *Hiryuu*. Ichiha, a specialist in the monster identification system, however, knew exactly what Souma’s intentions were.

“That’s Ooyamizuchi’s skull,” he said. “It’s massive, but its shape is a match with the type sea dragons have. He likely mounted it there to show Ooyamizuchi was slain successfully.”

“I knew that, but... it’s bound to spark weird rumors,” Liscia slumped her shoulders in exasperation.

There had been plenty of strange rumors, like “the kigurumi adventurer” (Little Musashibo), and “the great black shadow that descends on the castle at night” (Naden), thanks to Souma and those involved with him. Liscia always gave Souma a lecture when it happened, but this great island-type kaiju might give rise to another one. It had kaiju-like fins on it, too.

“Your father just can’t help himself, can he...?” Liscia smiled wryly and said to Kazuha, who was reaching out and cooing happily. Looking beside her, she noticed Yuriga was clutching her head.

“What’s wrong, Yuriga?”

“...I don’t know how I’m supposed to report what I’m seeing to my brother.”

“Hm? We haven’t put any limits on your ability to send letters, have we?” Liscia said, giving her a blank look.

No one had forbidden Yuriga from contacting Fuuga. They kept her away from places with classified information, and had decided that letting Fuuga see the Kingdom through her eyes would act as a check against him without making him feel threatened. The reason she was being allowed to see the *Hiryuu*, which had been concealed from her until now, was because it stopped being a secret when it was deployed into battle in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. Even if they didn’t show it to Yuriga here, Fuuga would eventually hear rumors, so they decided it was better to let her see it properly and give an accurate report. That way things wouldn’t get unduly exaggerated.

Yuriga let out a little sigh. “I know that, but... I don’t feel like I can explain this...”

Would Fuuga be able to properly understand it when the person who was standing right here couldn't? The same could be asked about the two fleets moving together. It seemed likely that there was some kind of complex negotiation beyond Souma and his people just fighting and winning that led to this situation. Would Fuuga and the steppe state Malmkhitan, who had repeatedly subjugated their enemies, be able to fight and defeat an opponent who had other options?

I can't imagine my brother losing to King Souma, but... I feel like it would be better not to fight this country. I don't know if I can convey that, but I need to caution him...

That was what Yuriga, who was a wiser, more flexible thinker than Fuuga, resolved to do.



After Story 2: Waves -new chapter-

— End of the 2nd month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar —
Imperial Capital, Valois

Empress Maria Euphoria was standing in front of a Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel. The simple receiver placed nearby showed the image of King Souma A. Elfrieden of the Kingdom of Friedonia.

“King Souma, first, allow me to congratulate you,” Maria said, lowering her head slightly to him. “I hear you put down a great monster in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. I bow my head to you.”

“No, no, it was only possible with the Empire’s assistance. Thanks to you spreading word of the danger posed by the Kingdom, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s islands unified, and we were able to pull them into a final showdown with Ooyamizuchi. You have my gratitude,” Souma said, bowing his head.

Maria smiled. “Jeanne was sulking about that, you know? She said things like ‘If they were sending their fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago to slay a monster, I wish they would have told me so,’ and ‘I look like a fool for suggesting they were going to invade.’”

During the negotiations in Zem, unlike her sister Maria, Jeanne had been furious about her inability to discern Souma’s intentions from the limited information available. Though, her anger had been directed more at herself than at Souma and his party. Obviously, the reason things turned out that way wasn’t because Jeanne was lacking, but because Maria was just that incredible.

“There was just... no way I could have told you at that point. I needed to set the Kingdom up as a potential enemy. If the information leaked, all of the preparation that the Nine-Headed Dragon King and I did would have been for nothing. In that sense, I’m really grateful that you picked up on what was happening.”

“Hee hee, do you think I was able to show my dignity as the big sister? I know Jeanne sulked about it at the time, though. If I recall, Sir Hakuya had to console her, didn’t he?”

“In that case, I’ll tell Hakuya to let Madam Jeanne air her complaints to him again in the future.”

“Please do.”

Maria decided to move on and change the topic.

“Setting that all aside, I want to hear about this Ooyamizuchi that attacked the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. They say it was as big as a mountain. It sounds almost like a monster out of the storybooks. What was it like in reality? I’d love to hear.”

“Ah, ha ha... That’s true, huh? Ooyamizuchi was...”

Maria’s eyes shone like those of a little girl asking to be read a picture book. Smiling wryly, Souma described what he had seen of Ooyamizuchi, and related the story of how it confounded the Kingdom and Archipelago Union’s fleets in battle. Maria listened intently with childlike reactions of awe as she heard how the creature shot water from its mouth to capsize several ships, and slapped ships and wyvern cavalry down with its writhing tentacles.

“Whew.” Maria put her hand to her cheeks and exhaled. “It’s a big world out there. I never imagined there was a creature like that. Dangerous and gargantuan... I believe your word for them was ‘kaiju,’ Sir Souma? I know this must have all been a lot of trouble for you, but I wish I could have seen it before it was slain.”

“...I can relate. It felt like I was witnessing one of the wonders of this world. I think Ichihia will be compiling an illustrated report for the encyclopedia soon, so I’ll have it sent to you when it’s finished.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.” Maria smiled happily. Seeing her like this, she was like a cheerful woman you might find anywhere. Though, beauty like hers was anything but commonplace. “While we’re on the subject, our informants tell me that you used an island-like ship, and controlled a mechanical dragon. I’d love to see those as well.”

Maria brought these things up like it was a casual extension of the previous conversation, but Souma stiffened the moment he heard her. *Hiryuu and Mechadra, eh?* he thought. Those were weapons the Kingdom didn’t want to fully open up about yet. Having used them as bombastically as he had, he’d been prepared for other countries to find out about them in time, but counted on the Empire—or Maria, rather—to be on top of gathering intelligence.

Souma slumped his shoulders in resignation. “...Those are still secret. They’re our tiger cubs, you could say.”

“Oh, you raise tigers, Sir Souma?”

“No, Fuuga’s the one with a tiger. It’s a figure of speech from the world I came from... It means a secret weapon.”

“A secret weapon, hm? Sounds exciting. It certainly has our navy feeling antsy, though.”

“Antsy... you say?” Souma asked, and Maria let out a faint laugh.

“You used wyvern cavalry at sea, didn’t you? Now, I’m no expert on naval combat, but judging by how the navy is panicking, I have to assume it’s revolutionary. They’ve been busily coming up with countermeasures like, ‘We must load anti-air repeating bolt throwers on all our ships at once!’”

Against a crazy weapon like an island-type carrier, that was likely the only thing they could do at the moment.

"They would think that, huh...?" Souma replied, awkwardly scratching his cheek. "Well, if they do come up with countermeasures, we'll just counter their countermeasures."

"I'm sure you will. I can believe the Kingdom won't suddenly invade my country, but the people who serve me don't have that luxury. If working on countermeasures helps put them at ease, I think that's fine."

"Yes. I don't intend to use them to invade other countries, obviously, but I think our country needs to have its military equipment prepared so that we can respond to the predicted change in the situation up north."

"...This is about Sir Fuuga Haan, right?" Maria stopped smiling and looked at Souma. He nodded.

"He's been increasing the territory under his control by steadily carving land off the Demon Lord's Domain. He lets the refugees return, while also becoming their protector. More and more people have been praising him for his great accomplishments."

"I am aware. I have a number of my retainers urging me to retake land from the Demon Lord's Domain as well. They worry that Sir Fuuga's actions will shake people's impression of me as a saint, and that it would be terrible if that happened."

"...I sense you're not enthusiastic about this."

"The Empire is already too large for me to manage," Maria said with a slight laugh at her own expense. "It would only be more territory I couldn't oversee."

"I understand the feeling, but... will that satisfy your retainers?"

Unlike in the Kingdom, where there were many talented personnel working to support the country, Maria's charisma was a major factor in how the Gran Chaos Empire controlled its vast domain. Her retainers must have been concerned that some of that charisma might fade. *That's why it won't be easy to convince them...* Souma thought.

Maria lowered her eyes and quietly replied, "If I can't satisfy them, then it just means I was never that special."

Souma didn't know what to say. Maybe it was the weight of what she carried on her shoulders, but Maria had an air of enlightenment about her that belied her age.

Then, as if to wipe all the doom and gloom away, Maria clapped her hands. "Come to think of it, I heard something about you forming a maritime alliance with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union."

"...You do hear a lot of things. I plan to bring it to the Republic, too."

"Oh, goodness, and you're not going to offer it to my country?" Maria said mischievously, and Souma shrugged his shoulders.

"You're saying that knowing the Empire can't join, right? If we were to add the chief signatory of the Mankind Declaration to the maritime alliance, it would be thought of as a practical extension of the Declaration. In order to keep our strong ties a secret, we can't let the Empire join, yet."

"Not yet... you say. I expected that, but it's still unfortunate. If possible, I would have liked for you to become the leader of all the nations of mankind, Sir Souma."

"...Please, don't push the Empire's load off onto me." Souma sighed, then looked at Maria with a serious expression. "The maritime alliance was organized to be a different framework from the Mankind Declaration, which is primarily based on land. If we let them

think of it as another faction in opposition to the Empire, then third nations won't be as wary."

"Yes. I understand that."

"Besides, even if we're in different factions, I think the Kingdom and Empire can still work together when we need to, and wield considerable power."

"That's true. I suppose it's all the more reason I need to maintain the Mankind Declaration." Maria nodded to herself.

"What is the scale of the Mankind Declaration at this point?" Souma asked her. "I know we're partially at fault for this, but... I suspect you lost some members after we annexed the Principality of Amidonia. Has that affected your influence in any way?"

"Hee hee, you don't need to be concerned. It's true that with the Principality of Amidonia's withdrawal, the Declaration's membership was reduced to my country and its two vassals, Mercenary State Zem, and a number of countries in the Union of Eastern Nations," Maria said without sounding concerned. "However, during the demon wave, you sent reinforcements to the Union of Eastern Nations 'at the request of the Empire.' That was interpreted as the Kingdom of Friedonia recognizing the validity of the Mankind Declaration even if you won't join it yourselves. It's helped guarantee my position as the leader of the alliance."

"...I see. I'm glad to have been of service, then."

"Yes, I'm glad, too."

Then we both laughed.

Once she was done, Maria said, "But with two large camps having formed like this, it's likely to confuse the countries that belong to neither of our factions. I don't expect it to affect the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan or the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom because of their

closed-off nature, but there's the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, the countries in the Union of Eastern Nations that aren't part of the Mankind Declaration, and..."

"And Malmkhitan, which is expanding its influence under Fuuga." Souma finished her thought.

"Yes. It will shake those countries."

Which would they side with? Or would they side with neither? If they wanted to stay independent of both, they would need to build up the strength to make that possible. They would shake under the influence of many crossed intentions.

Souma let out a little sigh. "That us remaining cautious of Fuuga's actions and preparing ourselves might be what stimulates him to act... is awfully ironic."

Maria silently nodded in agreement.

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At the same time, in a dry region of the north...

On this day, the forces of Malmkhitan led by Fuuga had retaken a walled city. The city had prospered thanks to an oasis that sat in the center. The walls were a little on the low side, so they may have served less to protect against attackers and more to keep out sandstorms on windy days. Fuuga and his men had swept away the monsters infesting the city in no time. The battle to retake it had been less of a siege and more of an extermination of some monsters that wandered into the abandoned houses.

As Fuuga had predicted, it seemed the demons who had broken the combined power of mankind were only deep inside the Demon Lord's Domain. His forces had already retaken a number of cities and villages of this scale before now. They would settle the refugees that

wanted to remain in the towns and villages, then, after securing their supply lines to the Union of Eastern Nations, would head for the next settlement to repeat the process. This resulted in a rather relaxed march.

Though they had taken back land that was part of the Demon Lord's Domain, they didn't so much control the territory as points inside it, connected by supply lines. These cities and villages were in no state to support themselves yet, and Fuuga and his men had to use some of their own numbers to guard the supply lines, so they were under the protection of Malmkhitan. The highly mobile temsbock cavalry were vital to supporting these supply lines. Because of all of this, you could see the recaptured cities and villages as being effectively under Fuuga's control.

“...Whew.”

Fuuga was sitting on the edge of the walls of one such recaptured city, looking at the evening sky. By now, they would no doubt be preparing a feast near the oasis to celebrate retaking the city. Fuuga was the leading actor in the reconquest, but he found himself exhausted with constantly being surrounded by people lately. He didn't see his comrades as a nuisance, but sometimes he wanted a quiet place where he could relax on his own.

“Is this where you've been, Lord Fuuga?”

“...Oh, it's you, Mutsumi,” he replied to her.

“It worries your followers when you wander off like this,” Mutsumi complained as she sat next to him, and Fuuga scratched his head.

“Even I want some time to myself.”

“Oh, my. Should I have left you alone then?”

“You're different. Having you at my side helps me relax... Mind if I borrow your thigh?”

“Go ahead.”

Fuuga removed his helmet and lay down, resting his head on Mutsumi’s thigh.

“It’s pretty tough living up to other people’s expectations, huh?”

“Because you always go beyond what anyone imagines, Lord Fuuga. It must be difficult, seeing how large their expectations grow.”

“...Could you talk normal when we’re alone?”

“Oh, are you sure? I quite enjoy acting like a virtuous wife.” Mutsumi stroked Fuuga’s slightly spiky hair with a chuckle.

When his followers couldn’t see them, Mutsumi spoke more casually with Fuuga. She was an important figure who he could just be himself with.

“Your followers respectfully refer to me as ‘My Lady.’ They bow when I pass, too. It makes me feel like I’ve become the queen of some great country.”

“That’s bound to happen eventually.”

“You sure are confident. That’s one of your strong points, though.”

“I’m more than just talk. Malmkhitan is growing bigger by the day.” Fuuga pulled a book from the bag sitting next to them. “...Well, it’s a bit upsetting that what’s supporting Malmkhitan’s control is this book that Souma sent us. It makes me feel like I owe him.”

“The Monster Encyclopedia, right?”

The book Fuuga was holding was co-authored by Mutsumi’s younger brother Ichihha Chima, and Prime Minister Hakuya of the Kingdom of Friedonia. Souma and Maria suspected that demons and monsters were different. Because of that, Souma had made the contents of this encyclopedia public, and was working to spread it so that countries neighboring the Demon Lord’s Domain wouldn’t conflate

the two when they made contact with them. In particular, he'd sent a copy to the Gran Chaos Empire, Malmkhitan, and the Kingdom of Lastania where Julius was.

Fuuga grunted as he flipped through the Monster Encyclopedia. "It sure is well put together, though. With this book, we don't have to just rely on supply lines to the cities we've retaken; we're also able to collect edible meat and usable components from the monsters we kill."

Because this was the Demon Lord's Domain, it was swarming with monsters that needed to be hunted to protect the supply lines. Thanks to being able to obtain food and components, merchants who wanted monster components sent adventurers along the supply lines, and it was providing a precious source of resources and funding to restore the recaptured cities to their former lifestyles. Basically, it was no exaggeration to say that Fuuga's territory was being supported by the encyclopedia.

"I was surprised to hear this thing was written by that little brother of yours who Souma took back with him."

"Me, too. I thought he saw things differently from other people, but not even I, his sister, suspected he had a gift like this. Hee hee, Father must be beside himself with frustration right about now."

Souma had made the Monster Encyclopedia public to accomplish a larger goal, but he could have made a fortune selling the information it contained piecemeal. In other words, Ichihia, who many had assumed was the only one of the siblings with no talent, had in fact been a golden goose. Duke Chima would be mortified to know he'd let it get away—even if he'd never have discovered the boy's gift himself.

"Even once he graduates, I doubt Ichihia will return to the Duchy of Chima. I'm sure he'll be happier that way, too."

When she said that, Fuuga roared with laughter.

"I'll give the kid a warm welcome if he comes to us. Though, if he's with someone who'll publish this information instead of hiding it, then that's good enough. But still... Souma's eye for people is scary." Fuuga's smile vanished and his expression grew serious. "It's like he sees things I can't."

"That's true. As a sister, I'm grateful to him for accurately assessing Ichihā's value."

"Hey now, you're *my* wife, okay?"

"Yes, but I'm also Ichihā's sister."

"*Sigh...* Yeah, I just get the feeling me and Souma aren't gonna get along."

In the same way that Souma was wary of Fuuga, Fuuga was cautious of something he found inscrutable about Souma.

"...Just the other day, I got a report from Yuriga on what Souma's been up to."

"And what has he been doing?"

"Apparently, he sent a fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago," Fuuga replied.

Mutsumi blinked. "You mean the Kingdom went to war with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago?"

"Nah, that's not it. It sounds like the reason he sent the fleet was so they could cooperate with the Archipelago Union to slay some massive monster. She says it was the size of a mountain."

"...To slay a monster? It wasn't a war, then."

"Yeah. The Kingdom didn't seize so much as a single island. You think a guy like him'd work for free like that? Then there was that 'island-like ship' and 'mechanical dragon' in Yuriga's report, too. She didn't

see the mechanical dragon herself, but there were rumors.
Honestly... I don't get any of this."

Fuuga let out a big yawn.

"Malmkhitan is a steppe country. I'd never seen the sea until just recently. I thought that was fine. My goal was to make Malmkhitan strong enough to become the dominant power on this continent, that's why I didn't take an interest in the world beyond, but... if Souma is actively going out to sea, that got my attention. Well, not that it makes a difference. We don't know anything about the sea. I'm not interested, either."

As Souma had hoped, Fuuga didn't place much importance on naval activity. He might think it was suspicious that Souma was striking out to sea, but the countries of the continent were connected by land, so he figured a superior army would let him dominate the continent.

Fuuga reached towards the sky, forming his hand into a fist, and said, "I believe the ones who can run around this land the best will rule this era. That's why I'll use all my strength to run as far as I can."

"Yes. That's why everyone follows you. Myself included, of course."

"Damn straight! ...But, well, let me rest a bit for now, would you?"

And so, with his head resting on Mutsumi's thigh, Fuuga closed his eyes.

Bonus Short Stories

In Lagoon City, Before the Dispatch of Troops

With the Kingdom of Friedonia about to dispatch their fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, Juna departed to Lagoon City, ruled by her grandmother and Commander-in-Chief of the fleet, Excel, to assist her and represent King Souma. It was the first major fleet mobilization in a decade, and Excel had a mountain of related paperwork to handle.

“Ugh, this is such a drag... I got all excited when I heard it was going to be an operation unlike any before it, but I’m sick of all this red tape.”

As Excel grumbled at her desk, Juna, who was standing next to her said, “Stow the complaints and stamp those forms, Grandmother.”

With that, she dramatically dropped a fresh bundle of papers in front of Excel, who picked up the top page and held it up to inspect it.

“Sealed orders for each captain... Do I really need to sign off on all of this? Isn’t stamping them enough? If we both work on this paperwork, then...”

“That’s obviously not allowed. These are important documents which carry a heavy penalty for unsealing them before the designated time.”

For this operation, captains had public orders that they were to give their crew until just before arriving, and then real orders which would be unsealed upon reaching the site. Right now, only the higher-ups knew the true outline of the mission.

“The real reason for this dispatch can’t get out.” Juna laid her hand on top of the documents. “Not to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, and not to our own troops, either. That’s why

we're having you sign these here, where you're the only one present."

"...I know," Excel grumbled before signing the paper she was holding, then stamped it. Juna took the completed document and carefully sealed it. They kept doing this over and over for the next hour or so. Eventually, with the last orders signed, Excel let out a big yawn.

"...Whew, that's all of them."

"Good work."

"You, too. Let's take a little break."

Excel and Juna sat down on the office couch for tea. After relaxing with a cup of sweet black tea with milk, Excel broached the issue.

"So, have you told His Majesty yet?"

"Hm? About what?"

"The baby in your belly. What else?"

"Bwuh!" Juna spewed her tea. "G-Grandmother?! How did you know?! I only found out myself the other day."

"Hee hee, you shouldn't underestimate the Commander-in-Chief of the National Defense Force's ability to gather intelligence," Excel said with a smile. "You told your parents as soon as you found out, didn't you? By then, I already knew."

"Wow, you're fast..."

"I expected to get a message of my own, but... nothing. You haven't shown any indication of bringing up the subject since you came here to help me, either. Am I being snubbed? I'm sad my own granddaughter would keep this a secret from me." Excel rubbed her eyes with her sleeve in an exaggerated display of grief. Blatant crocodile tears.

Juna pressed on her temples, shook her head, then sighed. “I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d play around like this.”

“Oh, play around? I’m genuinely concerned for you,” Excel replied, turning her frown into a smile.

“I can’t trust you when you say that with a grin.”

Excel chuckled as Juna’s shoulders slumped.

“So? Have you informed His Majesty? He must have been delighted.”

Souma was more emotionally attached to his family than most people. If he heard that a new member was on the way, he was sure to be absolutely giddy. Excel assumed that to be the case, but Juna turned and averted her eyes. Excel was nonplussed.

“Huh? Don’t tell me you haven’t told him?”

“...Yeah.”

“Why not? His Majesty will be thrilled.”

“I know... But now isn’t the time,” Juna said, her face darkening a little. “The mission to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union is drawing closer. This is going to be his first battle at sea. I expect he’ll be relying on me having trained in the Navy and being your granddaughter. He should ask me to join him. I know the sea better than any of his other queens. I’m confident of that.”

“Yes... I’m sure you do.”

Liscia was trained in the Army, Aisha had only just recently left the God-Protected Forest, and Naden was strong individually, but lacked a military background. There was no question that Juna was the one Souma would turn to for help in naval combat.

“If he knew that I’m with child, he could never ask me to come to the battlefield with him. Fortunately, I’ve been told my condition is

stable. If I have the opportunity to help him, I don't want to let it slip away."

"I understand how you feel, but..." Excel looked at her granddaughter's face which was filled with determination. "...You're not going to listen. Maybe you get that from me."

"Grandmother."

"I know. I'll keep quiet about it for now." Excel shifted in her seat, putting a gentle arm around Juna's shoulders. "But you mustn't strain yourself. His Majesty would be devastated if anything were to happen."

"...Of course."

"Don't worry. I'll always protect my grandchildren and great-grandchildren." Excel gave Juna a soft smile, placing a hand on her belly. "So, when the child is born, let me hold it."

"Huh? Erm..."

"Wait, why do you seem so troubled by that?"

"Oh, no... Um..."

I hope the baby doesn't take after her too much... Juna thought. When she imagined how her father, Excel's son, must have felt the same way when she was born, Juna couldn't help but smile wryly.

A Certain Father and Daughter's Reunion

"Father! It's been too long!"

"Carla! It has!"

On this day, Castor and Carla were seeing each other again for the first time since the day they were tried for treason. With the decision to dispatch the fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union made, Castor would be departing for the archipelago. He had been

called to Parnam to prepare, and been allowed to visit his daughter Carla, who worked as a servant in the palace.

Overcome with emotion, Carla threw herself into her father's arms.

"I'm just... so glad to see you alive and well."

"I'm the one who should be saying that," Castor said as he hugged Carla. "I'd heard from Accela that you were doing well, but I'm still relieved now that I can see so for myself. I got you caught up in my stubborn foolishness... I'm so sorry."

"No... I was also blinded by my own stubbornness."

Carla drew away from Castor, taking a close look at him. Today he was dressed in his naval officer's uniform.

"That Navy uniform really suits you."

"Ha ha ha, thanks. That, um... servant outfit looks surprisingly good on you, too."

"Ah ha ha... Thanks."

Carla, meanwhile, was wearing her usual frilly maid dress. She had gotten pretty used to it by this point, but wearing it in front of her own father was still embarrassing. Blushing, she squirmed and fidgeted with the hem of her skirt.

Castor smiled at his daughter, then, suddenly shook his head.

"But why was I suddenly allowed to see you, I wonder?"

"His Majesty and Liscia must have arranged it," Carla said with a wry smile. "Now that Duke Carmine's daughter Mio returned and the truth behind his rebellion was made public, it's created sympathy for you since you only participated out of loyalty to your friendship with him. In fact, His Majesty even told me, 'Taking the circumstances into consideration, there's room for me to liberate you from your status as a slave now.'"

“He did? Then you can come back to the House of Vargas?”

“No, I refused.”

“Huh?! Why?!”

“I know he said he’d liberate me, but I’m not being treated like a slave to begin with, and what I did hasn’t changed. In order to repay his kindness, I want to continue serving the royal family a little longer. I’ve gotten quite used to my duties as a servant, too.”

“...I see. Well, if that’s what you want, then the decision is yours to make.”

“Right!”

Sensing his daughter’s determination, Castor decided to respect her choice.

“Besides, the twins Liscia gave birth to—that’s Prince Cian and Princess Kazuha—they’re absolutely adorable. They look at me with cherubic smiles, and reach out with their little hands...”

“Uh... huh?”

“I could just stare at the little darlings all day.”

Seeing the goofy grin on his daughter’s face, Castor wondered, *Could it be that she rejected freedom because she doesn’t want to be separated from the royal twins?* But, well, if she was happy with her situation, he wasn’t going to press the issue.

“Anyway, that’s enough about me,” Carla said, coming back to her senses. “You’re going to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, right?”

“Yeah, as Captain of the carrier *Hiryuu*.”

“...I’m a servant now, so I don’t get told about military things, but I can tell from the looks on everyone’s faces that it’s going to be a difficult battle.”

“Yeah. I’d say so...”

Castor could feel it in the air as well. The island-type carrier *Hiryuu* with its ability to deploy Dratroopers was a revolutionary new weapon that would change everything people thought they knew about naval warfare. If the conflict were limited to battles at sea, Castor believed the Kingdom’s fleet was now stronger than any other country’s. And yet, for this engagement, Souma and the higher-ups were being beyond cautious with how they prepared. That likely meant they anticipated a difficult battle.

“But... we won’t lose.”

“Father?”

“I believe in my ship and in my crew. I’ve seen the shipbuilders who worked on the *Hiryuu*, the crew that mans her, and the Dratroopers training to deploy from the ship. Effort doesn’t always pay off, I know, but if there’s one thing that helps bring victory at the end of the day, I believe it’s that.”

“...Yes, sir!” Carla gave Castor a military-style salute. “Good luck out there.”

Castor returned the salute.

“I’ll be back.”

Harmony in the House of Magna

The fleet would soon be dispatched to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. Hal and Ruby weren’t at the Magna’s domain, but at their mansion in the capital, Parnam.

“...Have I made myself clear, Hal? Ruby?”

“Y-Yeah. I get it, I think...”

“I do, too. Somewhat.”

In the living room, Kaede, her belly swollen with child, was sitting across from her husband, Halbert; and his second wife, Ruby. She was teaching them about the history of the Archipelago Union, and points of note about that country's fleet. There was a pile of relevant books and maps on the table.

They were a part of the air force that would be boarding the island-carrier *Hiryuu* as it headed to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. Kaede was on maternity leave and couldn't join them, but she was at least going to drill into them the information they'd need to minimize the risk to themselves.

"Sigh... Anyway, you need to remember that the place you're fighting is effectively the enemy's backyard," Kaede explained to the two, who didn't really seem to get it. *"The currents and terrain will be their ally. They're experts at naval combat, too. There's no telling what islands they may have troops lurking on, where they may be hiding ships, and how quickly they could close in. It's true, the *Hiryuu* overturns all established logic when it comes to battles at sea, but you still can't afford to underestimate the Archipelago Union's fleet."*

"So, basically, don't let our guards down, right? I get it."

"I'll stop Hal if he decides to do anything too crazy. Count on it."

Kaede nodded with satisfaction as the two finally seemed to clue in. Meanwhile, she had a sneaking suspicion that just not letting their guards down wasn't going to help a lot on this mission. *There's just so much about all of this that feels off to me...*

Being on maternity leave, Kaede didn't know the outline of the Kingdom's operation. However, for someone as skilled as she, who had been the right hand of Ludwin, the National Defense Force's second-in-command, it was easy to sense something was unnatural about the way the military forces were acting.

Though Souma is more of a bureaucrat, depending on the situation, he can make decisions involving war, too, she contemplated. He's incredibly averse to conflict, but the Kingdom's forces seem excessively bellicose this time. It's as if they have no intention of avoiding war. There's something to it... Something big that's not been made public at work here... That's what it feels like.

"What's wrong, Kaede? You seem lost in thought."

"...Oh. It's nothing, you know, Hal."

However, she didn't tell Halbert and Ruby about her misgivings. They were no more than speculation, and if something was going on behind the scenes, and Halbert's tongue slipped, it could jeopardize the plan. *I'll have to keep it to myself for now. Knowing His Majesty, it's nothing to worry about.*

While Kaede was thinking this, there was a knock at the door.

"You can come in, you know," Kaede responded.

"Excuse me," Velza, the dark elf girl, said as she entered with the servants. They were carrying a tea tray.

"Lord Hal, Lady Kaede, Lady Ruby, why don't you take a short break?"

"Oh! Nice. I was just thinking we could use a rest."

"Agreed. I've been thinking too much, and I'm all tired out."

"Good grief, you two..."

Kaede took a teacup with a wry smile at her husband and fellow wife.

"Here, Lady Kaede."

"Thank you, Velza," Kaede said as Velza poured her a cup of tea.

Velza was staying in the dorms at the Royal Academy, but made frequent visits to the Magnas' mansion. They adored her like a little

sister, and she had been learning to cook from the servants. Halbert was about the only one who hadn't figured out that it was so she could serve him better when she became his wife one day.

Once everyone had relaxed a bit, Velza joined them at the table.

"I won't be seeing you for a while, will I? I'm sad."

Halbert certainly minded hearing that from a girl he thought of like a little sister, and he gave her a pat on the head.

"I'll go distinguish myself and come back. Look after Kaede and the baby she's carrying while we're away, will you, Velza?"

"Lord Hal... Yes! Leave it to me!"

Velza's reply was brimming with energy. Kaede and Ruby smiled as they imagined a dog's tail wagging furiously on her butt.

Kaede turned to Ruby and said, "Ruby, you take care of Hal for me."

"I give you my word. I'll do it even if it kills me," Ruby said, thumping her chest with one hand, but Kaede shook her head.

"No, you're not allowed to let it *kill* you. Come home safe. I'm sure the baby will want to see you, too."

Kaede placed a hand over her belly. Ruby was shocked for a moment, then nodded.

"You're right! I want to meet the baby, too!"

"Hee hee, I'll be waiting, you know. With this child."

They smiled at each other. It was another harmonious day in the House of Magna.

Testing the Lion-Dog Cannon

While we were at Kishun's mansion on reconnaissance...

Feeling a little tired from the constant work, we decided to take a little break to enjoy a spot of tea with biscuits. The tea in question was a bit like roasted green tea, and it brought back memories for me. It would have been great to drink it on the veranda in summer, but sadly it was winter now, so we enjoyed it while looking out into the garden from a room with a brazier.

During that break, we got talking about the lion-dog cannon—which consisted of a small, iron cannon modeled on a crouching animal that looked kind of like a wolf on top of a slanted platform—that Tomoe and her friends had found.

“That lion-dog cannon is fascinating. Are they commonly used in the archipelago?” I asked Kishun, who groaned as he thought about it.

“If you are asking whether every island has them, that might be the case. However, if we consider their range and power, they do not have an advantage over magical attacks, so they are not our primary weapons of war. I suppose they see sporadic use at sea, where it is difficult to use magic.”

“Hrm... I’d think they’d be pretty powerful if you fired a bunch of them in a synchronized volley.”

I had considered in the past that the wealth of options for magical attacks and the ability to reinforce armor with enchantment magic had made the development of the gun largely irrelevant in this world. However, cannons, which could fire much greater mass, saw use even on land. This lion-dog cannon was a little under halfway between the two, so I thought maybe an attack in unison would be powerful, but Kishun shook his head.

“It would be cheaper and more powerful to gather a number of mages to attack instead.”

“But at sea? Magic is weaker there, right?”

“It is a matter of how many you can load on a ship. One large cannon is more likely to sink an enemy vessel than even ten lion-dog cannons.

“Is that so...”

It didn’t change the fact that there had to be certain circumstances at play before they could be used, but... on the other hand, if those circumstances could be arranged, it seemed like they could be a viable weapon.

“...Kishun, why not fire it for them?” Shabon, who had been listening to us, suggested while I was staring intently at the lion-dog cannon. “Sir Souma seems quite interested in it,” she added with a chuckle.

Was I that obvious?

“They’re going to fire the iron wolf? I want to see it, too, Big Brother!”

“I’d be interested as well.”

Tomoe and Yuriga, who had also been listening, leaned in enthusiastically. Behind them, Ichihira was watching apologetically, but seemed just as intrigued. If the kids’ eyes were sparkling like that, I wasn’t about to disappoint them.

“Kishun, would you mind giving us a demonstration? Just one shot is fine.”

“Of course. It will be done.”

Kishun stepped out into the yard and set to work. He placed straw training dummies in front of a white wall, then planted the lion-dog cannon across from them.

“The cannon is placed at an angle to extend its range, but I worry that a stray shot might leave the mansion’s grounds, so I will put rocks under it for support instead, and fire it horizontally. The aim can be quite erratic.”

“Hmm...”

“I should mention, sometimes it fires a projectile a little smaller than a child’s fist, while other times we load it with small marbles that scatter over a wider range.”

“I see.”

Armor-piercing rounds or grapeshot, huh? In the case of the latter, if the enemy was wearing enchanted armor, it seemed unlikely to cause a fatal wound, but might be useful to intimidate them. As I was considering the possibilities, Kishun loaded gunpowder into the lion-dog cannon, put in a bead the size of Tomoe’s fist, and prepared a fuse.

“Okay... Here goes.”

With that declaration, he placed the fuse in the back of the lion-dog cannon, and...

Pom!

...It made a kind of silly noise, followed by a much louder crash. Looking over, the projectile had torn through a straw doll and buried itself in the wall behind it. The louder noise must have been the impact. The children were staring, wide-eyed.

“That surprised me! It seems pretty strong.”

“The sound when it fired was goofy, though.”

Once Tomoe and Yuriga each gave their opinions, Kishun smiled wryly.

“It gets its other name, the Pom-Pom, from that sound.”

“Huh?! The Pom-Pom?!” I cried out in surprise, and Shabon cocked her head at me in confusion.

“Is something the matter?”

“Uh...! Um, nah... Forget it.”

The Pom-Pom. I know there was a British autocannon that was called that, but as a Japanese person, the Pom-Pom I immediately thought of the 24 Twin Rocket Car from *Godzilla Raids Again*.

“Do you think this weapon could be useful in the battle against Ooyamizuchi?”

“...I did until I heard its nickname.”

The 24 Twin Rocket Car in Toho’s kaiju movies was a combat vehicle that shot fireworks at the kaiju to minimal effect. If this thing had the same name... I couldn’t help but feel uneasy about using it.



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How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom: Volume 13

by Dojyomaru

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