

**H
O
W
A
R
E
A
L
I
S
T
H
R
O**

REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

XIV



Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
 Prologue: The Young Tiger Awakens	12
 Chapter 1: The Wavering States	20
 Chapter 2: Assassin and Ripples	35
 Chapter 3: The Wavering Nations.....	53
 Chapter 4: A Family Divided	67
 Chapter 5: Battle of the Sebal Plains	77
 Chapter 6: Turning Point of History.....	96
 Chapter 7: Groundwork.....	125
 Chapter 8: A Large Skirmish.....	148
 Chapter 9: The Defectors Volunteer Their Services	162
 Friedonian Terminology Explainer: The Five Great Colored Retainers	178
 Chapter 10: Those Who Were Reunited.....	179
 Chapter 11: A Meeting and a Request.....	197

	Chapter 12: The Lunarian Exodus	207
	Chapter 13: Welcoming All Who Come, Chasing None Who Leave.....	217
	Epilogue: The Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan	232
	Afterword	238
	Bonus Short Stories.....	240
	Chronicles of the Great Tiger Kingdom: The Legend of Moumei	240
	Chronicles of the Great Tiger Kingdom: The Legend of Gaten	243
	Chronicles of the Great Tiger Kingdom: The Legend of Kasen	246
	Loading Up the Secret Weapons	249

*Download all your fav Light
Novels at*

Just Light Novels

**H
O
W
A
R
E
A
L
I
S
T
H
R
E
B
U
L
T
T
E
K
I
N**

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

XIV



"ANYWAY,
FUUGA,
JUST HOW
FAR DO
YOU PLAN
TO GO?"

Shuukin Kou

Fuuga Haan

"AS
FAR AS
I CAN."



**HOW A REALIST HERO
REBUILT THE KINGDOM**

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

"FUUGA
HAAN!
I WILL
AVENGE
MY MEN!"

Sill Munto

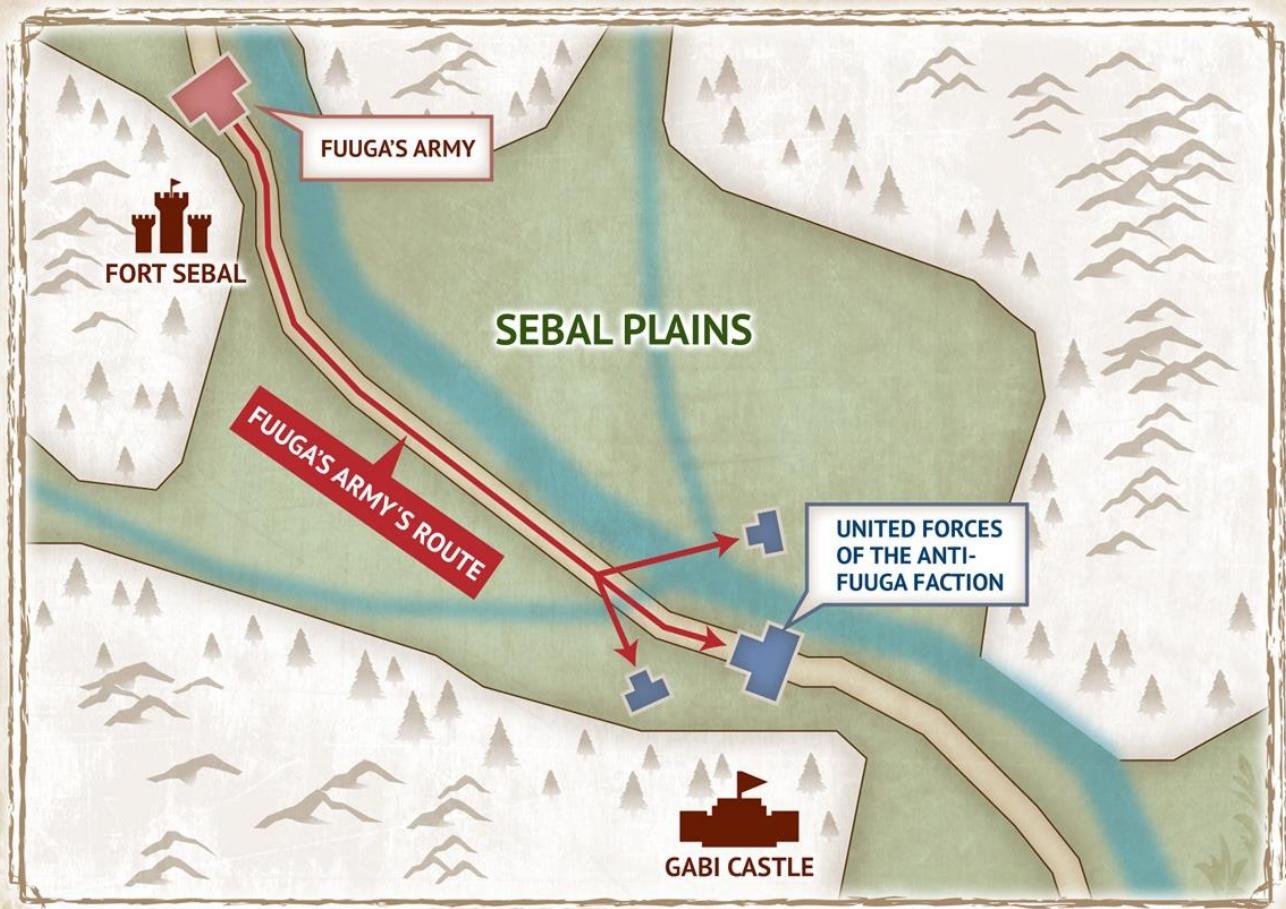
Pai

Durga

"NOT BAD. I
GUESS THEY
PUT YOU IN
CHARGE OF
THE DRAGON
KNIGHTS FOR
A REASON."

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.



Mutsumi Haan

Eldest daughter of the House of Chima, who rule the Duchy of Chima. Married Fuuga, king of Malmkhitan, and supports him on his path to supremacy.



Fuuga Haan

King of Malmkhitan. His quest for world domination makes Souma view him as a threat.



Ichiba 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.



Yuriga Haan

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



Hakuya Kwonmin

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



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.



Tia Lastania

Princess of Lastania. Fell in love with Julius, the former crown prince of Amidonia, and changed his life.



Julius Lastania

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



Mary Valenti

A saint from the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State. Requests that Friedonia protect the saint candidates and members of the moderate faction in the event of a crisis.



Kuu Taisei

Son of the Republic of Turgis's head of state. Is staying with his ally Souma as a guest, in order to learn from his rule.





Contents

Prologue

The Young Tiger Awakens

Chapter 1

The Wavering States

Chapter 2

Assassin and Ripples

Chapter 3

The Wavering Nations

Chapter 4

A Family Divided

Chapter 5

Battle of the Sebal Plains

Chapter 6

Turning Point of History

Chapter 7

Groundwork

Chapter 8

A Large Skirmish

Chapter 9

The Defectors Volunteer Their Services

Chapter 10

Those Who Were Reunited

Chapter 11

A Meeting and a Request

Chapter 12

The Lunarian Exodus

Chapter 13

Welcoming All Who Come, Chasing None Who Leave

Epilogue

The Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan

Afterword



Prologue: The Young Tiger Awakens

— Summer of the 1543rd year, Continental Calendar —

Approximately three years before Souma was summoned to this world, in the steppes northeast of the Union of Eastern Nations...

Above the broad blue sky and the towering cumulonimbus clouds; below the vast carpet of grass that seemed to stretch out forever. With no great mountains, only gentle hills, if you strained your eyes, you could see far into the distance. Four mounted knights raced across those steppes like the wind.

The four knights all bore arms and wore armor. The orange-haired mounts they rode were like a cross between a mountain goat and an oryx. These animals were called temsbocks, and they were raised to serve in place of warhorses. A temsbock could leap to great heights with a rider on its back, giving birth to the leaping cavalry, a type of troop that only existed on these steppes. Riding at the lead of the group was a big man who was a little over the age of twenty.

The big man turned back to shout, “Ha ha ha! You’re falling behind, Kasen!”

“H-Hold on!” the youngest of the group, the boy riding at the very rear, practically screamed in response. “Lord Fuugaaa!”

The one leading the group was Fuuga Haan. He was the twenty-two-year-old son of Raiga Haan—the unifier of the steppes. This was before he met Durga the flying tiger, so he rode a temsbock like the others. But even at this time, he already had the appearance of a general.

The boy at the rear, who had a quiver and bowgun on his back, was Kasen Shuri. At thirteen years of age he was the youngest of Fuuga’s

cohorts, but his skills as a mounted archer were good enough to leave any of the others speechless.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! If you keep whining, we’ll leave you behind, Kasen,” said one man in the middle of the group. He rode atop a saddle with decorations that could have competed with those of the Polish Winged Hussars for showiness.

Kasen frowned. “The way those wings jangle is too noisy, Gaten!”

“Ha ha! Too bad! These wings are my trademark!”

His name was Gaten Bahr. He was the only human present, thus having no wings. He was vain and superficial, but a talented commander who used the iron whip he kept at his waist to fight using a highly variable style of combat.

“Heh heh, Lord Fuuga doesn’t need laggards following him.”

“That’s what you said when you left Moumei behind...”

Kasen glared resentfully at Gaten who shrugged.

“There was nothing else to be done about Moumei. He rode on a steppe yak.”

Moumei Ryoku, the man they were talking about, was even larger than Fuuga. He was a powerful warrior who wielded a big hammer. However, due to his massive size, he was unable to ride a temsbock. Instead he rode a steppe yak—a large, woolly cow-like creature raised on the steppes. That left him unable to keep up with Fuuga and the rest, so he would have to catch up with them at his own slow pace later...

“If you two keep blathering, you’re going to bite your tongues,” Shuukin Tan, Fuuga’s childhood friend, warned. Being the same age as Fuuga, he was a superb warrior and strategist. It was expected that he’d become Fuuga’s closest aide the day Fuuga took his father’s place as king.

Shuukin brought his temsbock up alongside Fuuga's.

"Anyway, Fuuga, just how far do you plan to go?"

"As far as I can."

"Huh?"

"Don't you think it'd be fun to keep going until we run out of land?" Fuuga said, looking at the horizon with a laugh.

Shuukin pressed his fingers into his forehead, shaking his head with dismay. "We're heading north right now. If we keep going, we'll end up in the Demon Lord's Domain, you know?"

"So? We'll make the Demon Lord's Domain part of our domain too."

"Are you insane?! Even your great father was pushed to his limits just unifying the steppes," Shuukin said, but there was a glint in Fuuga's eye.

"My old man had to start with just a single tribe. That's why unifying our homeland into the single nation of Malmkhitan was all he could manage. But I'm starting with Malmkhitan. Shuukin, my friend, do you think me a lesser commander than my father?"

"No... You are greater than he."

Knowing Fuuga as well as he did, these words were not mere flattery, but something he genuinely believed. Martial prowess, strategy, command—Fuuga lacked in none of them when compared with King Raiga—and he had a greater charisma that drew others to him.

Fuuga smiled widely and thrust his fist towards the heavens.

"I'll race from this steppe and go as far as I can. The routes we take will become our roads; the things we see will become our land. We'll expand our country to the utmost limit!"

"....."

It was a bold claim. And yet, Shuukin didn't think it was impossible. Ever since the Demon Lord's Domain appeared, the people of the continent had tended to look down. They stopped hoping for things to become better, and instead prayed that they could face a tomorrow no worse than today. Despite that, Fuuga had his eyes set on a bright, distant future. This was how a leader ought to be.

"Lord Fuuga! I will follow you anywhere!" said Kasen.

"Ha ha ha! It's fun to run with a commander, after all!" agreed Gaten.

The two had been listening to their conversation.

Fuuga and Shuukin looked at one another then laughed at their reaction.

"Of course. I'll be with you too, my friend!"

"Yeah, Shuukin! Come on the endless journey with me!"

The two of them drove their temsbocks to run even faster.

◇ ◇ ◇

However, that winter, the moment of destiny arrived: Raiga Haan, founder of the steppe nation Malmkhitan, suddenly passed away.

The cause was an epidemic disease, but his death came so suddenly that rumors spread saying it was the work of an opposing political faction. The fact that every tribe began making disquieting moves shortly afterwards only poured fuel on that fire.

The day of Raiga's funeral came. The tradition of his tribe was to dig a hole in the open steppe, lay the body and funerary accessories to rest, then finally slaughter a horse and bury it with the deceased. Raiga had asked for that kind of traditional burial when he was still alive.

Old man... Is this as far as you could go...? Fuuga thought as he looked down at his father laid in the ground. You unified the steppes and became king. You, a man like none before, unfettered by tradition. And yet...you still chose to be buried in the old ways. What will I do? Will there be a time when I, too, entrust myself to our customs? I want to live a more glorious life and meet an end I can be satisfied with...

As Fuuga contemplated, his ten-year-old sister Yuriga clung tightly to his side. He put a hand on her shoulder, pulling her even closer...

Suddenly, a messenger arrived, shouting, “I bring a message! The tribes hostile towards Raiga have banded together and are headed this way now!”

Given their words, it was likely another messenger would rush in before the funeral ended.

“Damn! They must see Lord Raiga’s passing as their chance to strike!” Shuukin said, his voice full of distaste.

Yuriga squeezed Fuuga tight. “Big brother...”

“Don’t fret, Yuriga...” Fuuga gently placed a hand on her shoulder to push her away, then called out to an old muscular wolf-eared soldier nearby, “Gaifuku!”

The man’s name was Gaifuku Kiin. He was of the mystic wolf race, but unlike Tomoe, he had not left as a refugee, having served the House of Haan under Raiga.

Gaifuku crossed his arms and said, “Sir!”

“Gather the men at once. Just the ones who can come.”

“Yes, sir. Should I put out the call to our allied tribes as well?”

“No need. They’ll want to stay out of this until a victor is made clear. I’m sure they’re waiting to see if I’m a worthy heir to Raiga Haan. And that’s exactly what I’m gonna show them.”

Next Fuuga looked to his young friends.

“Shuukin, Moumei, Gaten, Kasen!”

“““Yes, sir!“““

“Each of you, gather the men you’ve trained for this day. We will show our prowess. Those who oppose us and those who choose to wait and see shall come to kneel before my feet.”

“““Yeah!“““

The enemy had rounded up around three thousand men. Fuuga’s personal forces numbered a thousand. And yet, this did nothing to erase his indomitable smile.

“Gaten, take a hundred riders to attack their right flank! Make it showy and draw their attention!”

“Understood, Commander.”

“Kasen, take a hundred mounted archers to shoot at their left flank. Make them break formation!”

“Yes, sir!”

Having received their orders, Gaten and Kasen went to attack the flanks. Taking advantage of their swift temsbocks, they stuck to tactics that damaged the enemy while limiting their own casualties. It was similar to flies swarming around the mass of enemies that all rushed towards them in one group.

The enemy that had tried to overwhelm them with numbers was caught off guard and broke formation.

Seeing this, Fuuga put on his helmet, and said to Shuukin, “Okay, Shuukin! We’re going straight in.”

“To disrupt the enemy and spread chaos, right?”

“Exactly,” he replied. Fuuga turned and called to a huge man riding a steppe yak, “Moumei! You take the infantry. Once the enemy is confused, charge in!”

“Right! Understood!” Moumei bellowed, thumping his chest with one hand while the other held his large hammer. Fuuga nodded.

“I’m leaving the defense here to you, Gaifuku. Take care of everyone.”

“Leave it to me, young master—no, my lord!” Gaifuku said, crossing his arms in front of him.

Turning to face forward once more, Fuuga gave the order, “All right, let’s move, Shuukin!”

“Yeah!”

The two of them led the leaping cavalry into the middle of the enemy.

As they approached the enemy’s front line, they bounded over the soldiers who were holding their shields ready, easily clearing the defensive line to attack the archers behind them. The archers, who had relaxed their guard, assuming they were safe behind the shield bearers, were put to the slaughter by Fuuga and his men’s blades.

“We have the numerical advantage! Regroup!” One commander in an especially impressive suit of armor tried to recover from the chaos, but...

“You’re in the way!”

“Wha...!”

With one slice of Zanganto, the rock-rending blade, Fuuga parted the man’s head from his shoulders. The man must have been a major commander in the enemy force, because the chaos accelerated. By the time Moumei arrived with the infantry, the enemy had

completely collapsed. The leaping cavalry pursued their fleeing enemy and showed no quarter.

When all was done, the steppes were slick with the blood of their foes. Fuuga and his men had defeated their attackers despite facing superior numbers.

With this victory, Fuuga proved himself a worthy successor to Raiga. No... In fact, he proved he might be even greater. The steppe tribes all submitted to him. Even the tribes that Raiga had only been able to bring under his sway as allies submitted, making Fuuga the true king of the steppes.

The young tiger's road to hegemony began here.



Chapter 1: The Wavering States

— Start of the 1549th year, Continental Calendar - Souma defeats the giant sea monster, Ooyamizuchi —

The report of the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Archipelago Union's conjoined effort to slay the monster which terrorized the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago was greeted with great excitement in their respective homelands.

One reason for such excitement in the Kingdom was that this was the first time the summoned hero Souma had done something so heroic. Souma's only victorious campaigns before this point had been in the war against Amidonia, and the expedition to the Union of Eastern Nations.

The war with the Principality of Amidonia had hurt both sides, and any gains had nearly been nullified. It was only thanks to the efforts of one Roroa Amidonia that the Kingdom and Principality had been peacefully brought into a union, and neither country was declared the victor or loser. As for the expedition to the Union of Eastern Nations, he had made a big show of that being done at the request of the Gran Chaos Empire. Although Ichiha had joined them there, along with other personnel who would make the country stronger, that was hard for the common people to see. Many of them believed it had been a whole lot of effort for nothing. However, with a growing awareness of how important Ichiha was, Souma's foresight was being proven. Still, what he had done there wasn't seen as an especially heroic act.

Nonetheless, this time Souma had sent the fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, slaying the kaiju Ooyamizuchi that had wreaked havoc on the land. It was a clear show of military prowess. And to top it off, he had brought the fleet of the Archipelago Union, up until now believed to be a hostile nation, back with him. For the common

people who were not privy to what went on behind the scenes, it looked like “Souma defeated the monster that was tormenting the Archipelago Union, and made them submit to him out of admiration.” Those rumors had the people ecstatic about Souma’s glorious victory.

Meanwhile, in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, they had heightened regard for the Kingdom of Friedonia which had helped them to slay Ooyamizuchi, and King Souma and Princess Shabon were lauded for the key roles they played in that victory.

Souma was now being praised by the population of two nations, but news of his exploits had not yet reached the people of other states (excluding the rulers, and other people of importance). That was because of another, greater accomplishment.

Fuuga of Malmkhitan has retaken a portion of the Demon Lord’s Domain!

Reclamation had been the goal of mankind for more than a decade, and it had raised Fuuga and Malmkhitan’s profiles both inside and outside the Union of Eastern Nations. The fervor of the people inside was especially intense. Voices calling for the reorganization of the Union to make Fuuga their supreme leader—or a unified state with Fuuga as their king—were growing by the day.

The Union of Eastern Nations had a history of its many small- to medium-sized states annexing one another and breaking apart. The whole area was a mess of familial alliances. It had been hard for any one state to stand out in the middle of all that. Even though the Kingdom of Friedonia on their southern border was gradually growing in power, this state remained unchanged.

The people had waited many long years for someone to come and break the deadlock. Now, Fuuga had arrived. The great man they had been waiting for.

They saw the light of hope in the way Fuuga charged blindly towards his ambitions.

◇ ◇ ◇

However...the stronger the light, the deeper the shadows it casts.

As his admirers increased in number, so did the number of people who viewed Fuuga as a threat. Mathew Chima, father of Ichiha and Mutsumi, and ruler of the Duchy of Chima, was one of them.

“This is bad... Very bad...” Mathew murmured to himself as he paced around the office.

A sharp-eyed man in his late twenties watched him.

“Father. What has you so agitated?”

In response to the sharp-eyed man’s question...

Slam!!!

“You know *what*, Hashim! Fuuga Haan!” Mathew shouted, slamming his hands down on a nearby desk.

The man he called Hashim was his eldest son, Hashim Chima. He was the one who had most strongly inherited Mathew’s talent for scheming.

During the recent demon wave (an outbreak of monsters), Mathew had come up with the unorthodox plan to secure allies and increase his own influence. He offered his famously talented children, with the exception of Hashim, the oldest, and Ichiha, the youngest, as rewards to those who came to their aid.

Because Hashim was heir to the House of Chima, he had not been included as one of the rewards. However, if you were to ask someone—at least, someone who didn’t have unique standards like Souma—who the most talented of the siblings was, then even the siblings themselves would tell you that it was Hashim.

Mathew told Hashim, “Lately, not a day goes by where I don’t hear that man’s name.”

“That’s to be expected. He is reclaiming the Demon Lord’s Domain, even if it was only a part of it. Not even the Empire could do that. It’s not surprising that the people would support him fervently.”

“I’m telling you that’s a problem!” Mathew glared at his aloof son. “Should this continue, his voice within the Union will grow too strong. There are already those calling for him to be made king of the entire Union.”

“I see... But is that not inevitable? His charisma must be powerful enough to draw all of those people to him,” Hashim said coolly, to which Mathew let out an angry snort.

“The ignorant masses know not the danger of the man! His eyes are focused far in the distance, beyond the Demon Lord’s Domain. Retaking that wasteland will likely not be enough for him. I am sure he will swallow every state in the Union.”

“You believe he seeks to unify the Union of Eastern Nations?” Hashim asked, but Mathew shook his head.

“It could be even worse. That sort of man is not satisfied if he is not first in everything. He may even seek to compete with the Kingdom of Friedonia in the south and the Gran Chaos Empire in the west.”

That comment made Hashim stroke his chin thoughtfully.

“A Union of Eastern Nations that can compete with the Kingdom and Empire for hegemony... I might like to see that.”

“Don’t be a fool. The entire organization and structure of the Union of Eastern Nations will be gone by that point. All that will be left is a country of Fuuga worshipers,” Mathew spat, practically disgorging the words in distaste. “He will destroy everything. The blood ties built between our countries, and the diplomatic network our house

has worked so hard to create... If that man sees them as an obstacle, he will eradicate them completely. If we don't stop him before he grows to his fullest...it will be too late."

"Please, father... Don't tell me you mean to join the anti-Fuuga faction. Sir Fuuga is married to Mutsumi, remember?"

The reproachful look Hashim was giving him made Mathew sigh.

"I welcomed their marriage because of what an extraordinary man he was, but...that man was far *too* extraordinary. If only Mutsumi would keep him in check...no, if it comes to it, kill him..."

"Father!"

"Mutsumi... She seems to adore Fuuga. I doubt she'll do anything to stop him. That is why I need to take the initiative!" Mathew looked resolute as he spoke. "Now is the time. Already a third of the countries in the Union of Eastern Nations swear loyalty to Fuuga. The rest are either wary of him or confused. He must be stopped before his faction grows and the anti-Fuuga faction sees further attrition."

"....."

As far as Mathew Chima was concerned, or rather, as far as small nations like the Duchy of Chima were concerned, Fuuga was a threat to the web of diplomatic ties they had worked so hard to build up. Maintaining balance inside the Union through diplomacy was how the past dukes of Chima had survived. That was why Mathew couldn't suffer Fuuga's existence.

Mathew rose and walked towards the door.

"I must contact my children scattered throughout the nations. It would be reassuring if we could receive support from the Kingdom of Friedonia where Ichiha is, but I heard that Fuuga's younger sister is also with King Souma. If Fuuga sent her with the intent of making her

King Souma's bride, it may be *more* dangerous to call in the Kingdom's forces..." He left the room talking to himself like that.

As Hashim watched his father go...

"I'll have to caution him against rash and delusional actions," he said to himself in a quiet voice.



◇ ◇ ◇

Around the time that Mathew Chima was making contact with the anti-Fuuga faction...

Far from the Duchy of Chima, in the governmental affairs office in the Kingdom of Friedonia's Parnam Castle, Souma was reading a report from the Black Cats, as well as a routine update from Julius. Both of them essentially said: "The anti-Fuuga faction inside the Union of Eastern Nations is growing more active than ever before. In the not too distant future, the anti-Fuuga faction will take some sort of action against the pro-Fuuga faction."

"Whew..."

When Souma finished reading the reports he laid them down on his desk, leaning back in his chair with a sigh as he looked around the room. The only ones in the office aside from him were Liscia, the first primary queen; Hakuya, the prime minister; and Kagetora, who had brought him the Black Cats' report.

Souma told them, "The Black Cats and Julius are in agreement that the anti-Fuuga faction will act soon. Julius notes the anti-Fuuga faction has been maintaining contact with one another across a wide area inside the Union of Eastern Nations. Despite this, it's been done in a way that keeps the ringleader hidden. We can assume someone rather sharp is on the move."

"Yes, sire," Kagetora agreed. "My men have also failed to find whoever is directing the anti-Fuuga faction."

Souma nodded. "I can't blame them. That whole country is a mess of marital alliances, after all. Their ability to coordinate their actions internally is incredible, but they're closed off to the outside. Even for the Black Cats, that has to make gathering intel hard."

“Indeed...”

“So just how many people are in this anti-Fuuga faction?” Liscia asked, and Souma checked Julius’s report for the answer.

“At least twice as many as the pro-Fuuga faction, apparently.”

“That’s surprisingly large. Hasn’t he made a name for himself retaking part of the Demon Lord’s Domain?”

“Among the people of the Union he has, yes. But the ones that command the troops are the rulers who stand above those people. As far as they’re concerned, the way Fuuga has focused the expectations of the public upon himself is intolerable. If their own people want to be ruled by Fuuga, that makes their own positions pretty tenuous, after all.”

“I see... So even if the people back Sir Fuuga, there are a lot of states that are against him,” Liscia said, clapping her hands together as she figured it out. Souma nodded.

“And the larger the country, the stronger that tendency is. Malmkhitan is a steppe region that was first unified as a nation under Fuuga’s predecessor, Raiga. Being forced to play second fiddle to an upstart nation like that is going to rub a lot of people the wrong way. The longer their traditions and the more pride they have in their position as a powerful country within the Union, the more they’re going to push back against it. In fact, the most powerful nation inside the Union of Eastern Nations, the Kingdom of Sharn, has already declared themselves part of the anti-Fuuga faction.”

The Kingdom of Sharn was a medium-sized state with the largest territory and the greatest power inside the Union of Eastern Nations. They also provided the largest number of troops to the Union Army, a military composed of forces provided by all the member states, giving them the greatest clout in that organization.

They had also provided reinforcements to the Duchy of Chima during the demon wave, and (due to Souma's withdrawal) been recognized as having made the second largest contribution after Fuuga and Malmkhitan. For this they were awarded the brawny second son of the House of Chima, Nata.

The current King of Sharn was Shamour Sharn. If you were to compare him to someone in the Kingdom of Friedonia, he was a muscular old warrior like Owen or Herman. The country valued strength in a way similar to Mercenary State Zem, so Shamour had welcomed Nata, who could swing around a big ax, as his own son.

Liscia cocked her head to the side and asked, "Then is King Shamour the head of the anti-Fuuga faction?"

"No... 'Looking at the secrecy in the way the anti-Fuuga faction communicates, I can't imagine King Shamour is directing them,' was Julius's reading of the situation."

In the same way that the Western Army at the Battle of Sekigahara had Mouri Terumoto as their supreme commander and Ishida Mitsunari as operational planner, there might be another man pulling the strings behind the most powerful member of the faction. *The Western Army at Sekigahara...* When that thought crossed his mind, the face of a man who probably excelled at this kind of scheming did too. *Don't tell me it's him...* It was none other than Mathew, who he had thought of as being similar to Sanada Masayuki, a supposed two-faced man. But Souma didn't say anything.

This was just baseless speculation. Besides, considering that Mathew had sent his daughter Mutsumi to marry Fuuga, Souma couldn't be confident he was in the anti-Fuuga faction. Obviously, that wasn't out of concern for his daughter. If Fuuga rose to the top, Mathew already had a marital tie to him, so Souma had assumed it was unlikely he would join the anti-Fuuga faction. However, Souma's

reading of the situation could be incorrect. Due to his refusal to use his family as political tools, Souma had put out of his mind the fact that there were people who could. If he had realized Mathew's scheming at this point, Souma would definitely have tried to stop him—whether he was able to or not. Because all this was doing was feeding the tiger they called a great man.

"There are more in the anti-Fuuga faction than we expected. Enough that it's possible the pro-Fuuga faction could lose."

"But you don't actually believe that, do you, sire?" Hakuya asked, sounding certain, and Souma nodded.

"If Fuuga was an opponent they could beat with mere numbers, I wouldn't see him as a threat. Even if Fuuga took over all of the Union of Eastern Nations, he would still have less land and power than we do. The thing that makes Fuuga dangerous isn't numerical superiority or the power of his nation—it's that he's riding the flow of things."

"The flow, you say?"

"Yeah. Of the times... The atmosphere of the era we live in, you could say. Those who join a great man like Fuuga are considered just, and those who oppose him are evil. It's an atmosphere that naturally assigns roles like that."

In the final stage of the Warring States period, the actions of great men like Oda Nobunaga, be they good or evil, were largely approved of, or at least tolerated. It's like how people defend Machiavelli's *The Prince* by saying "You can't see its true value without first understanding the scheming nature of the Italian Peninsula during his time." The houses of Asakura, Azai, and Takeda which stood in the way of Oda Nobunaga's conquest were destroyed as they tended to be seen as stubborn fools who couldn't adapt to the new era. This was especially true for the kind of people who only see them as winners and losers written about in the textbook.

Unless you're a real history buff, you don't go around thinking about the situations of those sorts of destroyed houses. Souma sensed that Fuuga was the same sort of great man.

"There are people who are praising Fuuga as some kind of savior. Those who stand in his way will be deemed fools, and if they try to harm him, they'll be derided as enemies of mankind. No matter how powerful the country, that would be difficult to overturn."

"Similar to the way people in the Empire venerate Madam Maria as a saint?" Hakuya asked, and Souma nodded deeply.

"Yes, that's right. The anti-Fuuga faction must not understand that."

"He's that much of a problem, huh..." Liscia said with a sigh.

Kagetora quietly stepped forward. "If he disturbs your heart so, my liege, then perhaps we should—"

"Absolutely not!" Souma shouted, cutting off Kagetora's suggestion of assassination.

"Fuuga is dangerous because he's riding on the flow of the times. We could call his intentions the will of the times itself. And...this is said frequently, but you can't change the times with assassinations and terrorism," Souma said, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed.

"Great men are monsters that give birth to eras. This era of confusion longs for the great leaps of a man like Fuuga. So even if someone did manage to assassinate him, the next Fuuga would simply appear to follow in his tracks. No, if anything, after seeing what happened to Fuuga, whoever came next would be even more extreme."

Even after Oda Nobunaga died in the betrayal at Honnouji, Hashiba Hideyoshi immediately took up leadership of the attempt to unify the country. It didn't lead to a return to an era of rivalry between warlords. And when Hideyoshi fell, Tokugawa Ieyasu took his place. If you look at it as a transition from an era of rival warlords to that of a

single great power, you could say that while the rulers changed, the flow of the era remained unchanged. Great men create eras. To look at that another way, you could also say that eras choose and give birth to great men. That was the sense Souma had gotten from studying history in the world he came from.

For instance, in the world Souma came from, there was a dictator whose name was synonymous with evil. The dictator faced many assassination plots and attempted coups d'état throughout his life, but had any of them succeeded, would the history that followed have changed somehow? This has been said many times, but it was the people of that era who created the dictator. So long as the will of the people and the situation they find themselves in do not change, another similar dictator—or perhaps political party—will simply rise to the top. And won't the new dictator seek to do what he feels the dead one should have? In a more extreme fashion.

Sima Qian lamented in Records of the Grand Historian that sometimes excellent men die unfairly due to the flow of the era by saying, “The power of Heaven is small.” But if the “Heaven” he was talking about is the flow of the era, then I'd have to say what's truly small is the power of man, thought Souma.

Machiavelli spoke of the concept of Fortuna, the goddess of chance, in opposition to virtù, or individual initiative, as the fate that could not be changed. Or that could, perhaps, have its flow made more gentle, if only slightly, through virtù.

Right now, Fuuga had to be the man best loved by Fortuna.

Anyone who confronted him directly was in for a world of hurt. That's why Souma said, “If the times have chosen Fuuga, what we need to change is not him, but the times themselves. If the times have no need of Fuuga, then men like him will cease to be born.”

“Sorry... That was all a little too abstract for me to understand,” Liscia said apologetically. “What exactly are you thinking we should do?”

“I still don’t know yet... But I have the key.”

Souma rose and walked over to stand in front of the map of this continent, slamming his hand on the north of it.

“It’s the Demon Lord’s Domain. The majority of people’s unease now comes from the existence of the Demon Lord’s Domain in the north. If this issue can just be resolved, great men like Fuuga will no longer be needed the way they are now.”

“Huh? But isn’t Fuuga gathering support by doing something about the Demon Lord’s Domain? Isn’t that a contradiction?” Liscia asked.

“Yeah,” Souma nodded in response. “It does look like a contradiction. But I think that’s the essence of what a great man is. They are needed in times of chaos, but not in times of peace. When the great man races to end the times of chaos, he is heading towards the world where he will no longer be needed.”

The great man created by the era transforms the era by his own power and then fades away. Or, because of the changing times, the era chooses a new leader, and the great man is cast aside. That had to be one of the more tragic aspects of the great man.

Then Hakuya said to Souma, “So, to sum up, what you are saying is that we should avoid opposing Sir Fuuga for the time being, Sire?”

“Yeah. We have no choice but to avoid fighting Fuuga while figuring out how to handle the Demon Lord’s Domain, and also strengthening the country in preparation for the conflict... I do see some small hope in regards to the Demon Lord’s Domain.”

Back in the Star Dragon Mount Range, he had encountered a mysterious cube. He’d heard it ask him to “go north.”

If Souma could encounter the being called the Demon Lord with sufficient preparation, he might be able to gain something that would let him move the era. There existed a slight hope of that.

"And if Fuuga attacks us with the Union of Eastern Nations before then?" Liscia asked.

"That is easy to deal with," Hakuya responded, rather than Souma. "The Fuuga faction's new country will have no one who has experience running a state of such a large size. He will lack bureaucrats too, so if we simply turn it into a war of attrition, our opponents will be the ones to expend themselves first... That said, Sir Fuuga must know that, so he will not make a move against us until he has the overwhelming advantage, or he finds himself in a desperate situation."

"What a troublesome opponent..."

"Yeah, you said it." Souma had to agree.

I'll have to tell Julius to stay out of the Anti-Fuuga faction, Souma thought as he looked at the map of the Union of Eastern Nations. And also, if it comes down to it, he should flee to the Kingdom with the Lastanian royal family.



Chapter 2: Assassin and Ripples

— Start of the 5th month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar —

Fuuga was leading a Malmkhitan military procession as it advanced through the ruins north of the Union of Eastern Nations, in the Southeast of the Demon Lord's Domain. They marched in a long, undefended, snakelike column as if to boast there was no enemy that could defeat them. In fact, the monsters that had long infested this area had already been exterminated by Malmkhitan. The road the troops were traveling along was now stable enough that traveling merchants could use it.

Here, in this land where it never snowed, they had been able to fight properly even in winter, but the summer heat made it hard to fight for any length of time. For that reason, the battle to reclaim the Demon Lord's Domain would have to take a break during the seventh and eight months of the year, when the region was hottest.

However, in order to stay on the offensive right up until that point, Fuuga had decided they needed to let the troops rest. He was currently pulling them back to the safe zone.

Standing out in the middle of the column was the great white tiger, Durga. Fuuga was lying on the tiger's back, his armor removed. He was using this opportunity to nap as Durga walked along at a relaxed pace.

“Zzz...”

Audible snoring could be heard. Although they had returned to safe territory, there were still violent creatures that lived in the area, and he was surrounded by armed soldiers. That he could sleep in this situation spoke to Fuuga's strength, and the bold personality underpinned by that strength.

A single temsbock rider approached Fuuga.

“Please wake up, Lord Fuugal!”

“Hm...? What is it?”

Waking to the sound of his name being called, Fuuga sat up and scratched his head.

Noticing that it was Shuukin who'd roused him from his slumber, he asked, “What's up, Shuukin? Did something happen?”

“No, nothing in particular. We're about to arrive.”

“Hmm? Oh, we're finally there, huh?” Fuuga said, stretching.

“Traveling with an army's always so slow. I could've been here with Durga in no time.”

“You're our commander-in-chief. Who could lead the men if not you?”

“Sheesh. The bigger the military gets, the more people care about stuff like rank. Even you've gotten used to calling me ‘Lord Fuuga’ now.”



Because of their close age, Fuuga and Shuukin had once treated one another casually, like friends. And it wasn't just Shuukin; there were many others in the army like Moumei, Gaten, and Kasen, who had long been his partners in mischief. Ever since Fuuga took the throne, though, Shuukin had begun showing him the proper respect as a retainer so as to keep his other subjects from disrespecting him. It must have made Fuuga feel a little lonely.

Shuukin shrugged his shoulders with a look of exasperation on his face.

"You're the sovereign of a nation. Of course I'd pay you due respect. Anyways, we're on the march, so please wear your armor and helmet. You're setting a poor example for the troops, and more importantly, it's careless."

"Don't be so stiff. We've pretty much wiped out all the monsters around here, haven't we?"

Shuukin shook his head, a stern look on his face. "You're right that we won't see an attack by monsters. However, there are some who have not taken kindly to your profile rising inside the Union of Eastern Nations. There could be assassins along the road, Lord Fuuga. I've sent out scouts, of course, but..."

"Human jealousy's scarier than any monster, huh? What a nuisance," Fuuga said, digging the wax out of his ears as he listened.

Shuukin furrowed his brow at his liege's incaution. "How can you talk like this has nothing to do with you? Your life is in danger."

"Hey, Shuukin... Wouldn't you say our country has grown?" Fuuga asked, suddenly changing the topic.

"Hm? I suppose it has..." Shuukin cock his head to the side quizzically. "We've expanded outside the steppes, and we have a lot

of protectorates. It's fair to say we have the greatest momentum of any country in the Union of Eastern Nations."

"Yeah. It's like this was fate. If there's a will of the heavens, it's apparently on our side," Fuuga replied, with a suspiciously calm tone.

"Don't tell me...you're saying because the heavens are on our side, we don't need to worry about assassins?"

Shuukin gave him a pointed look, as if to say, *That's not how things work*. Fuuga shook his head with a wry smile, looking up to the sky.

"We've overcome all the trials we've faced to grow our country. So, maybe that's why...when things are going too smoothly, it actually makes me more uneasy. Am I moving forward of my own will? Or is there some unseen force pushing me?"

"Lord Fuuga..." Shirin muttered, hearing his sentimental words.

"Well, it's not a bad feeling. If I keep riding this current, it will take me further—higher. And if I fall along the way, I'll be able to accept it means I was never cut out for anything more than that. It's fulfilling, in a way."

"You shouldn't talk about falling like that... It's ominous."

"Ga ha ha! It's fine, Sir Shuukin!" said a wolf-eared warrior as he approached.

It was Gaifuku of the mystic wolf race. He flexed his pecs and biceps, striking a pose as he shot the two of them an overbearing smile. He was still a mass of muscle despite having passed middle age.

"If a vile assassin comes anywhere near my lord, my well-toned body will be your shield! I have built this strong back and these abs all for the House of Haan!"

"".....""

Hah! Hah! Gaifuku continued striking poses like a bodybuilder as he spoke. He was sweaty, and the temperature around him had probably risen a good five degrees Celsius from his body heat.

Fuuga and Shuukin did their best not to look at him and kept talking.

“By the way, where’s Mutsumi? I don’t see her around.”

“If you’re looking for Lady Mutsumi, she went on ahead with the vanguard to the city where we will be staying starting today... I believe she was just as bored with the slow journey as you are, Lord Fuuga.”

“She’s such a free spirit. I’m jealous.”

“You’d better not both disappear on me at the same time,” Shuukin said out of exasperation, earning him a shrug from Fuuga. Then...

“Behold these roaring biceps—” *Thock!*

“Urgh?!”

““?!””

As Gaifuku approached to give them a closer look at his muscles, something suddenly sprouted from his arm. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be an arrow. If Gaifuku hadn’t raised his arm just then, the arrow would have flown straight at Fuuga.

They instantly grabbed their weapons, looking around the area.

“Weren’t you supposed to be watching out?”

“We were, over a broad area. We used your effective range as a guideline.”

“Which means they’re shooting from outside it. Must be someone skilled.”

Firing such an accurate shot from beyond the scope of their marching procession was no small feat.

“Gaifuku! You okay?” Fuuga asked.

“Th-This is nothing. If I was able to serve as your shield, I could ask for nothing more,” Gaifuku said, tearing the arrow from his arm with a grunt of pain. The wound was shallower than they had thought, causing Fuuga to smile a little.

“Yeah, you saved me. It could be poisoned. Get to a medic immediately.”

“Surely the enemy must still be aiming for you,” Gaifuku protested.

“Don’t worry about it. You prevented their surprise attack. And without the element of surprise...!”

Whoosh... Smack! Another arrow flew in, only to be deflected by Fuuga’s Zanganto.

“That’s how it’s gonna go. If I know the arrow’s coming, then cutting it down’s easy. And that shot just told me roughly where they are. Shuukin, the soldiers who noticed the assassin are starting to make a fuss. Get them to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me you’re planning to go after the sniper yourself! It’s too dangerous!” Shuukin warned him, but Fuuga was having none of it.

“The enemy’s a good distance away. Without Durga’s speed, it’ll be hard to catch them.”

“But that doesn’t mean...”

“Besides, I’m going to make them pay for hurting one of my men. Personally.”

With ferocity in his eyes, Fuuga drove Durga onwards. Having lost the will to argue anymore after seeing those eyes, Shuukin could do nothing to stop him from going.

Then, once Durga had leapt into the sky, Fuuga placed a hand on the flying tiger's back and said, "I know you can sense the enemy, partner. Lead me to them, would you?"

"Gworghhhh!" Durga roared and they picked up speed.

As they did, Fuuga spotted a figure on top of a distant hill, in the middle of a thick copse of dead trees. This discovery was quite exciting to him. If someone could take a shot at him from that far away, the world still had surprises left to throw.

Then another arrow came flying. *Whoosh!*

"Ah!"

Because he was closer now, the arrow arrived quicker, and Fuuga twisted out of its way rather than try to cut it down. The closer he got, the faster they would be coming. Despite the increasing danger, Fuuga still smiled.

"I like this! It's tense! Haven't felt this pumped up in a long time!"

He soon closed the distance to his enemy. Neither of them would miss at this range.

Fuuga jumped from Durga's back and spread his wings to glide, taking aim at his enemy in the treetops. The enemy was doing the same. They got the shot off before him. Its aim was true, hurtling straight towards the center of his face.

"Guh...!"

Fuuga instinctively twisted his head to the side, but couldn't get completely out of the way, and it struck the gap between his helmet and cheek. The arrow must have been magically enhanced; he felt it tear through his cheek's flesh inside the helmet. But despite feeling his own blood splatter inside the helmet, his eyes never left the enemy.

Twang! Fuuga loosed an arrow from his own great bow. It flew straight, impaling the sniper through the chest. They fell headfirst, like a puppet with its strings cut.

At that moment, either of them could have fallen. The deciding factor had to be where they'd aimed. The sniper, confident in his own abilities, had aimed for the head, certain he would make the kill. Meanwhile, Fuuga knew that even if he messed up the shot, he could still win if he closed the gap, and so had aimed for the center of mass.

"Urgh... Tch!" Fuuga tore the arrow from his helmet as he touched down on the ground.

Having escaped the threat to his life, and with the adrenaline from slaying a powerful foe fading, the gouge in his cheek started to throb with pain. Fuuga took off his helmet and walked over to the sniper. He'd been a young man, no more than twenty years old. The arrow Fuuga fired had taken him in the heart.

Hm? This guy's... Fuuga had a feeling he knew the man, but couldn't remember from where.

Not long after, Shuukin and the temsbock riders caught up with him.

"Lord Fuuga, are you all right?!" Shuukin asked, sounding concerned.

"I'm fine," he replied with a wave. "I took a minor wound, that's all."

"You're bleeding! Please, don't be so reckless!"

"I'll be more careful next time. We've got more important stuff to talk about now." Fuuga wiped away the blood running down his cheek, indicating to the sniper with his chin. "This was the sniper. I think I've seen him somewhere before."

"Huh...?! But this is...!"

"You know him?"

"You should too. This man is Gauche Chima. Lady Mutsumi's younger brother."

"Wha?!" Fuuga's eyes bulged as he looked at Gauche's corpse. He'd seen Gauche at the awards ceremony, but had only had eyes for Mutsumi, and so he hadn't remembered him.

"My brother-in-law tried to kill me, and I struck him down...?"

Gauche had been a simple warrior. This couldn't have been something he'd decided to do on his own. Someone must have directed him to make an attempt on Fuuga's life.

The image of a man flashed through his mind. It was the face of the man who was the father of his darling wife, and who had always seemed suspicious somehow. *This is what happens the moment I start moving towards my ambition, huh?* His grip on Zanganto tightening, Fuuga looked up to the sky.

At some point, solitary raindrops had begun to fall.

I guess...I'm gonna have to tell Mutsumi about this... Fuuga thought before walking back to Durga, a feeling of hesitation gripping his heart.

◇ ◇ ◇

It was a silent night.

Mutsumi sat at the window of a dimly lit room, idly staring outside. The earlier rain had let up, and a round white moon had shown its face through a gap in the clouds.

I wonder what kind of face I must be making right now... Mutsumi thought to herself.

She had certainly been shocked when she heard about the death of her brother Gauche, and that Fuuga had been the one to kill him. Yet, despite this, she was not as torn up about it as she'd expected to be. That confused her. From the moment she decided to join Fuuga

on his road to dominance, she had known this was a possibility. She'd sensed her scheming father might try something. Perhaps that was the reason. It wasn't that she didn't feel sadness and anger, but that at some point she had resigned herself to this happening.

She didn't want to see herself in the mirror now. Because, probably, her face wasn't that of an elder sister mourning the loss of her younger brother.

As she stared vacantly out the window, there came a knock at her door. It was Fuuga.

"...Can I come in?"

Normally, he would have strode in without asking, but this time he did. Taking note of the consideration he was showing her, Mutsumi smiled a little.

"Yes, please do, darling."

"Yeah... I will."

Fuuga closed the door behind him and walked over to Mutsumi.

"Sorry," he continued, "for shutting you up in your room like this."

"Have I been shut up in here...? Really?" Mutsumi cocked her head to the side a little. "There are no guards. And the door wasn't locked."

"It's just a temporary measure anyway. My retainers all know what you're like. They know you wouldn't do something short-sighted out of anger. But some of the newcomers are worried you might try to avenge your brother. Just try to think of this as us protecting you from them doing anything malicious."

"Yes. I understand," Mutsumi said, pressing herself tightly against Fuuga. When she did, his body stiffened a little. "Do you think...I would try to avenge Gauche, darling?"

“No, not really, but...I’m ready to accept your anger and grief. I’m ready to get slapped...no, punched for what I did. I’ll stand here and take it for ten or twenty hits.”

“If I were to punch your brawny body that many times, I think my hands would come off the worse for it.”

Mutsumi smiled a little, but it was short lived.

“I’ve been thinking. What would I be doing now if you were the one who fell? I doubt I’d be nearly as calm.” She stroked the fresh wound on Fuuga’s cheek as she continued. “If the arrow had been a little closer, I might have lost you. If you had died, I don’t think I would have been able to forgive Gauche or my father who no doubt instigated this. I am certain I would have sought revenge.”

“That’s pretty intense. I like that about you though.”

“And yet, I cannot even resent you for what you did. When I think about how little my bond to the House of Chima meant to me, I feel a sense of loneliness.”

Her house had survived in the Union of Eastern Nations with its mess of small- to medium-sized states through subterfuge. In their history, they had repeatedly taken advantage of their own parents, siblings, and children. That was partly why Mutsumi felt a bit of a disconnect with Mathew, obviously, but also her own siblings. The twins, Yomi and Sami, were close, but the other siblings all had their own areas of expertise, and that left little in common for them to talk about.

Mutsumi had really cared about her youngest brother, Ichiha, who had been seen as talentless at the time. If he’d been the one killed, she might have bawled her eyes out. Ichiha had left her side to go to Friedonia, where his gift had been given the chance to blossom. Mutsumi’s only place now was here with her husband Fuuga, surrounded by the men of Malmkhitan’s army.

“I know you just said he instigated it, but...you’re sure it was Duke Chima pulling the strings?” Fuuga asked and Mutsumi nodded.

“It has to have been. Although the plan feels too sloppy to be one of father’s.”

In light of the haphazard nature of the plan, Mutsumi suspected something had gone differently from how Mathew envisioned.

“Nata and Gauche both had a tendency to overestimate their own strength and ability. He may have struck before my father intended him to.”

“Oh, yeah...?”

“I’m a cold woman, aren’t I...? Calmly analyzing my own brother’s death like this.”

“No, I can tell how hurt you are,” Fuuga said, hugging her from behind. “You were betrayed by your own family. There’s no way you wouldn’t be sad. You’re just telling yourself it was inevitable because of the kind of house you were born into.”

“Darling...?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m your darling husband. Your family. Tch, these sorts of lines suit that guy better... Well, whatever, just for today, I’m gonna say them. As your husband, I’ll accept all of the sadness and anger you feel towards your family.”

Mutsumi buried her face in Fuuga’s chest, clutching his clothes.

“I...can’t forgive my father.”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t forgive the way he uses us for the stability of the house, and then throws us aside for the same reason. I-I can’t allow him to obstruct your path, darling.”

“Yeah.”

“I want to cry! I never wanted it to come to this!”

“Go ahead and cry. You don’t need to hold it all in.”

Mutsumi let out a little sob, and then a much louder wail. Her complex feelings had left her unable to cry, but now she finally did. The tears flowed ceaselessly like a dam had broken.

Fuuga seethed with anger as he held the bawling Mutsumi.

You made her cry, Mathew Chima. You made Mutsumi cry.

His arms tightened around Mutsumi.

You made my woman cry! That’s gonna cost you! Big!

On this day, Fuuga decided that Mathew was his enemy.



◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile...

Slam! On hearing the report of Gauche's death, Mathew Chima kicked over the chair of the desk in his office.

"Why?! Why did Gauche die?!"

He'd just been told that Gauche had attempted to assassinate Fuuga, which resulted in his death. As Mathew threw a fit, his eldest son, Hashim, watched him with an impassive look on his face.

"Was this not your plan, father...?"

"No! When we gathered the kings of the anti-Fuuga faction for a conference, we talked about a plan to assassinate Fuuga when he was returning from his campaign. We assumed that after eliminating the monsters, he would let his guard down, and it might be possible to slay him."

Mathew slammed his hands on the nearby table.

"But I never proposed anything this sloppy! Gauche's skills were suited to the task, so I did discuss an assassination plan centered around him. But the idea was rejected because, if we were to fail, it would put Fuuga on high alert."

"Yet Gauche carried out the assassination plan," Hashim pointed out.

"And I don't know why! What was Gauche doing there alone in the first place?!" Mathew clutched his head. "The proposed operation had him leading a unit, or possibly an even larger force, not going in by himself. That would have lowered the risk of Fuuga escaping. And yet Gauche goes and tries to assassinate him on his own."

He released his hands and raised his head up.

“It’s also strange that he stayed there and let himself get killed. When you consider his long range, Fuuga shouldn’t have been able to pinpoint Gauche’s location after the first shot. Had he run and hidden when his first attempt failed, he should have been able to get away.”

Mathew looked utterly baffled. Hashim sighed at him.

“I can think of only one possibility. Gauche was acting on his own initiative.”

“What?!”

“Of all my siblings, Nata and Gauche have always been the most confident in their abilities. Overconfident, you might say. And he had been waiting for a chance to put those skills to use and make a name for himself.”

“N-No...” Mathew’s eyes widened with surprise. Hashim nodded.

“It seems probable that Gauche heard about the ambush plan from the King of Gabi, who he served. He then thought that, with his skill at archery, he could definitely slay Fuuga... If this was, indeed, Gauche acting on his own initiative, it would explain why he didn’t bring anyone with him. Knowing his personality, he would have thought that a large group increased the risk of him being found, and they would only get in his way.”

Hashim sighed as Mathew’s jaw hung open.

“And so,” Hashim continued, “the reason he didn’t flee after missing his first shot is that he knew he would have several more as Fuuga closed in on his position. He only needed one of them to hit, and so was certain he could kill Fuuga. That is just how highly he overrated his own abilities.”

“That fool!” Mathew punched the table again. “That damned, overconfident fool!”

Hashim watched his raging father with cool eyes.

You are the one who raised him to be that way, he thought, but he didn't say it out loud. You praised our abilities far more than we deserved in order to raise opinions of us abroad. That was what made Nata and Gauche arrogant, and they came to look down on those without talent. They were especially harsh to Ichihha, and our sisters hated them.

Nata and Gauche had belittled and tormented Ichihha because, at the time, he was believed to be without merit. Their younger sister, Mutsumi, stood up for him, but Hashim had been uninterested in their quarrels. Later, when Ichihha developed an unusual talent in the Kingdom of Friedonia, Mathew and the other rulers of the Union had deeply regretted letting go of him.

If we consider this most recent outrage, I think it's clear to see who was truly the talentless one, Hashim was thinking as Mathew suddenly looked up, as if realizing something.

"This is bad. Fuuga's anger will turn towards us and the Kingdom of Gabi. We can't afford to sit around. We have to unite the anti-Fuuga faction before he makes his move!" Mathew said, hurrying out of the office.

With a cold look on his face, Hashim snorted as he watched Mathew go.

"I cautioned him against acting rashly, but he goes and embarrasses himself like this, overconfident in his own abilities." Crossing his arms, Hashim stroked his chin as he thought about it. "Still, this Fuuga Haan... He managed to escape Gauche, did he? No matter how excellent a man is, without the love of the heavens, he will fade away all too easily. I suppose this means that he has the makings of a great man, loved by the heavens. In which case..."

Hashim smirked to himself.



Chapter 3: The Wavering Nations

The failed attempt on Fuuga's life broke the Union of Eastern Nations. While there had already been signs of it coming, the botched assassination made the anti-Fuuga forces move more proactively, resulting in a clear division into two camps. In terms of the number of people, there was nearly no numerical difference between the pro- and anti-Fuuga factions. However, if counted by the number of states, the anti-Fuuga faction had nearly double the number of nations in it. This was because even if an individual supported Fuuga, if the rulers of the state they belonged to were a part of the anti-Fuuga faction, they were forced to be anti-Fuuga as well. In fact, the more pro-Fuuga the people of a state were, the more likely their leaders were to join the anti-Fuuga faction. They hated that their own power base was waning, and it was affecting their ability to govern.

All of this meant that the leaders of countries that were confident in the power of their military and nation tended to oppose Fuuga, feeding the growth of the anti-Fuuga faction. The anti-Fuuga faction had three leaders: King Shamour Sharn of the Kingdom of Sharn, the largest nation in the Union of Eastern Nations; Mathew Chima of the Duchy of Chima; and Bito Gabi of the Kingdom of Gabi.

Shamour, in particular, was well aware that his country was the most powerful in the Union of Eastern Nations, and he could not allow a situation where only Fuuga's accomplishments were acknowledged to continue. This was not solely Shamour's own decision, but also the will of the people of the Kingdom of Sharn. The people of Sharn saw themselves as the center of the Union of Eastern Nations. They were not happy to see the Fuuga faction's forces succeeding, and supported King Shamour in his opposition to them. Even if Shamour

had not intended to oppose Fuuga, the people beneath him might have forced him to do so anyway.

Duke Chima and King Gabi, on the other hand, were taking proactive measures because of their connection to Gauche Chima, the man who had attempted to assassinate Fuuga. Mathew was Gauche's father, while Bito was the master Gauche had served. They were both assumed to have been involved in the plot. In regard to that matter, each had released a statement declaring, "Gauche acted alone. He was not given any orders to act." This was partially true, as Gauche had gotten ahead of himself, but now that Fuuga had determined they were his enemies, the truth of the matter was no longer an issue.

Once a confrontation with Fuuga was inevitable, Mathew moved proactively, using his web of diplomatic entanglements to grow and unite the anti-Fuuga faction. However, in a surprising turn of events, of all the countries Mathew's children had gone to serve, the only ones that openly joined the anti-Fuuga faction were the Kingdom of Shamour, where his second son Nata served, and the Kingdom of Gabi, where his third son Gauche had served.

◇ ◇ ◇

In the south of the Union of Eastern Nations, near the border with the Kingdom of Friedonia, was a small state known as the Kingdom of Roth.

In a castle within the capital city of Roth, King Heinrant Roth stroked his white beard as he held a meeting with King Lombard Remus, the young monarch of the neighboring Kingdom of Remus. Heinrant was of a gentle disposition, while Lombard was young and full of promise for the future.

Two girls had joined the kings at the table. Aside from the fact that they tied their hair on opposite sides, the girls were almost identical.

Next to Lombard was Yomi. She was an excellent mage, and a literate girl with an abundance of knowledge. To Heinrant's side was Sami. Like her elder sister, she was also an excellent mage and a lover of books, and she also excelled at arithmetic.

These twin sisters had been won by Lombard and Heinrant at the awards ceremony. The elder of the two, Yomi, had received a proposal from Lombard soon after offering her services to the Kingdom of Remus. While they had yet to be wed, she was his fiancée. King Heinrant, meanwhile, had taken a liking to the younger sister, Sami, and adopted her as his daughter. Today, the four of them were seated around one table, discussing what they would do going forward.

"But is this really okay?" Lombard began. "Duke Chima is in the anti-Fuuga faction, right? Shouldn't we side with him...?"

"“Absolutely not,”” Yomi and Sami said in unison, causing Heinrant's eyes to widen in surprise.

"He's your father, isn't he? You aren't conflicted about this?"

"“We do feel conflicted. But the answer is still no,”” Yomi and Sami spoke as one, their faces serious.

"I received a letter from Big Brother Hashim."

"It said, 'You don't need to follow father's wishes.' And..."

Then, speaking in unison again, they said, "“Join Fuuga’s faction if you can, but if not, at least remain neutral.””

"What?! Sir Hashim supports Sir Fuuga, then?!" Lombard said in surprise, but soon shook his head. "No, but Sir Hashim is Duke Chima's eldest son. He must be working together with him even now. I can't believe he would tell us to join Sir Fuuga despite that."

"Could it be that Sir Hashim has some plan in mind?" Heinrant asked, but Yomi and Sami shook their heads simultaneously.

““We don’t know.””

“Big Brother Hashim is the most prudent of all us siblings.”

“We can’t predict what he’s thinking. That’s what makes him so frightening.”

The looks in Yomi and Sami’s eyes told Lombard and Heinrant that their brother Hashim was no ordinary character. In light of that knowledge, Heinrant asked, “But Sir Fuuga struck down your brother, Gauche. Don’t you hate him?”

““Don’t worry about our feelings. We weren’t that close,”” Yomi and Sami said in unison again.

“Big Brother Nata and Big Brother Gauche were proud of their strength. They looked down on us for being bookworms.”

“They told me math was a depressing hobby.”

“They were especially harsh on our youngest brother, Ichiha. We didn’t want to get involved, so we stayed out of it though.”

“Mutsumi was always defending him. I like Mutsumi.”

“Sir Ichiha who went to the Kingdom of Friedonia, huh...?” Lombard said with a sigh.

Word of Ichiha’s accomplishments in the Kingdom of Friedonia had made its way back to the Union of Eastern Nations. He had written the Monster Encyclopedia together with the Black-robed Prime Minister, distinguishing himself as the foremost expert in the study of monsters. Thanks to Ichiha, they had become more efficient at gathering and using monster parts, which had produced untold wealth for the Kingdom. This was all rumors, though, so it could have been somewhat exaggerated. The fact that Ichiha, once known as the only Chima sibling without any talent, had undergone such a drastic transformation must have galled all the elites who had been at the award ceremony that day.

"It's a shame to have let such a valuable resource get away..." Lombard lamented.

"They say it was King Souma's younger sister who recommended him. We should praise her insight."

"I suppose she lives up to her other name as the Wise Wolf Princess."

When they heard the two kings were talking about that, the sisters puffed up their cheeks.

"Lord Lom, do you regret choosing me?"

"Father, would you have preferred to adopt Ichihia?"

Seeing the girls' anger, Lombard and Heinrant both smiled.

"Of course not. I couldn't imagine marrying anyone but you, Yomi. Even if I was given the chance to choose again, I am sure you are the one I'd pick," Lombard said, throwing his arm around her shoulder.

"I feel the same, Sami. Having a daughter like you, at my age, is the greatest happiness I've ever known," Heinrant said, patting her on the head.

Yomi and Sami took on contented looks, like kittens who had just gotten scratched under their chins. They all relaxed for a little while before Lombard found his resolve and said, "If you can accept it, Yomi, then I would like to side with Sir Fuuga. He is a man of rare caliber. I aspire to be more like him; not as a king, but as a warrior. I'd love to fight alongside him."

"I accept it. Do as you feel is right, Lord Lom."

Lombard nodded and said, "Thank you."

Meanwhile, Heinrant said, "I think...I'll remain neutral. We have relations with many states and houses that belong to the anti-Fuuga faction. I have no intention to oppose him myself, but I cannot attack

them. Ha ha ha... I must be getting old. If I were just ten years younger, I might have been able to make a decision like yours, Sir Lombard..."

As he let out a self-deriding laugh, Sami cupped his hands in her own.

"I think that's good. I love this side of you, father."

"Because it's so unlike our real father?" Yomi asked teasingly, and Sami laughed.

"You got it."

And so, the Kingdom of Roth chose to remain neutral, and the Kingdom of Remus sided with Malmkhitan. Mathew was intensely disappointed to find that, despite sending his daughters to serve there, he could not secure them as allies. While the number of states in the anti-Fuuga faction grew, the repeated rejections by his own family made Duke Chima feel a sense of urgency, and he even sent a letter to his youngest, Ichiha.

However, Ichiha was not the only child to have gone from the Union of Eastern Nations to the Kingdom. Fuuga's younger sister, Yuriga, was also staying there as an international student. And Fuuga had sent her a letter too.

◇ ◇ ◇

The weather had been unstable for the past few days. I was in the governmental affairs office with Liscia and Hakuya when we called the three kids, Tomoe, Yuriga, and Ichiha in. Once they arrived, I informed both Yuriga and Ichiha that they had received letters from their homes.

First, in Fuuga's letter to Yuriga it said:

"Duke Chima's third son, Gauche, came for my life, and I killed him."

It was straight and to the point. Further, he also wrote:

“In the near future, I will raise troops to defeat the Kingdom of Gabi and Duchy of Chima which tried to kill me. Things in the Union of Eastern Nations are about to get violent, so don’t come home. Talk to Souma and have him protect you from any anti-Fuuga elements inside the Kingdom that might take you as a hostage.”

Once I had read the letter, I sighed and looked at Yuriga.

“It’s so like Fuuga to only write the facts, and about his concern for your well-being. Normally, you’d expect him to ask you to probe into whether or not I was going to intervene.”

“He’d never write something like that in a letter you were clearly meant to read...” Yuriga replied. “If you had been planning to act, I intended to send him the message subtly—in a way you wouldn’t notice. I’m sure my brother was counting on that when he sent this sort of inoffensive letter.”

“You know, I think I like this girl,” Liscia said, seemingly impressed by Yuriga’s forthrightness.

They had similar personalities, so she must have felt a certain sympathy for Yuriga. If their positions were reversed, Liscia would likely do the same things.

“A subtle message? Were you going to send your brother a sack of beans tied at both ends?”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself...”

There is a legend that says before the battle of Kanegasaki, Nobunaga’s little sister Oichi sent him a sack of red beans tied at both ends as a way to subtly inform him that the house of Azai, which she had married into, intended to betray him. Well, in this world, they didn’t have the Battle of Azukizaka, which the sack of red beans was an allusion to, so there was no way she’d get it. Besides, if

Yuriga was Oichi in this analogy, then as the people who were holding on to her, we'd eventually be destroyed...

Getting back on track, I read the letter from Mathew to Ichihia next. It said:

"The attempted assassination of Fuuga was Gauche running off on his own. Fuuga has started making moves to use the assassination attempt as a pretext to purge anti-Fuuga elements in the Union of Eastern Nations. That man is finally revealing his hidden ambitions. We will unite the anti-Fuuga faction around the Kingdom of Sharn, the largest nation in the Union, and strike down Fuuga's ambitions before they swallow us whole. Our forces now number three times Fuuga's."

That was likely an exaggeration, but he had grown the number of allies on his side considerably. It just showed how many rulers felt threatened and offended by Fuuga.

And at the end of his letter it said:

"Once Fuuga's ambition has covered the whole of the Union, he will no doubt turn his fangs towards the Kingdom of Friedonia. That is just how dangerous of a man he is. When we have wiped the Fuuga faction from the Union, we would like to form a cordial alliance with the Kingdom."

Well, basically, he was saying, "We'd love it if you'd join us, but please just don't side with Fuuga," I guess. I agreed that Fuuga's ambitions wouldn't end with uniting the Union, but still...

"He wrote this letter to you, didn't he? Isn't he concerned for his son?"

"That's just how father is..." Ichihia said with a sigh.

Hakuya took both letters.

“Between both of these and the intel we gathered ourselves, I can more or less see what happened. Most likely, Duke Chima and King Shamour were secretly working to bring together the anti-Fuuga faction to assassinate Fuuga. However, Duke Chima’s third son, Gauche, was too eager for glory, and moved alone in a failed attempt to assassinate Fuuga. Instead, he was killed. Fuuga decided to take revenge on the anti-Fuuga faction, forcing Duke Chima to speed up his plans...”

“You’re probably right,” I agreed. Things were moving faster than I’d anticipated, and it was giving me a headache. This Gauche guy had definitely moved the clock forward on this era in a big way.

The two letter recipients had no responses. They stood quietly, absorbing the information.

“Yuriga, Ichiha...” Tomoe looked at them both, her eyes full of concern.

Speaking of headaches, I had to consider how this was going to affect the relationship between these two.

Yuriga’s brother had killed Ichiha’s brother. But that was brought on by Gauche’s attempt to assassinate Fuuga, and contrary to my expectations, Ichiha’s father Duke Chima was involved. On top of that, the one that Ichiha loved most, his big sister Mutsumi, was Fuuga’s wife. If she hadn’t left him by now, that had to mean Mutsumi supported Fuuga.

Collectively, the situation was a real mess... With all the crisscrossing familial and hostile relationships, they must have been confused how to act towards one another.

“For as long as you’re in this country, I’ll guarantee safety for both of you,” I said, breaking the tension.

They both looked at me in surprise.

"It's already been decided that Ichiha will be serving here. As for Yuriga, she's been entrusted to us by Fuuga. That's why I want to make your safety our top priority," I imparted. "With that in mind, I want to hear both of your thoughts. Do you harbor any hostility or resentment towards each other?"

"I..." Ichiha was the first to speak. "...don't hold this against Fuuga. Gauche never treated me well... When you told me he died, it felt like it had nothing to do with me. If anything, I resent my father more. The way he didn't hesitate to attack the man Big Sister Mutsumi married... It's just horrible."

"I see... And you, Yuriga?"

"I can't forgive this Gauche or Duke Chima for trying to assassinate my brother," she said, crossing her arms and looking away. "But I don't feel anything towards Ichiha. My brother made it out fine, and Big Sister Mutsumi, who likes Ichiha, is still on my brother's side. If he says he doesn't hold a grudge over my brother killing Gauche, then I'm not going to say anything about it."

Though she said it that way, I felt like I detected a hint of stubbornness.

"Liscia. How would you interpret what Yuriga just said?"

"I didn't know how I should act towards Ichiha after hearing my brother killed his. I'm relieved to hear he doesn't hold a grudge..." sounds about right."

That hit the nail on the head, and Yuriga blushed. "H-Hey!"

Nice one, Liscia, I thought. You understand her because you're so similar.

"Thank goodness..."

Tomoe, who had been quietly watching as things played out, started to cry. She must have been worried about her two close friends all this time.

"I'm so glad," she said between sobs, "you two don't hate each other..."

"I-I'm not going to end up hating you two!" Yuriga stammered.

"Y-Yeah," Ichihara fretted. "We're going to be just fine, so please, don't cry."



Yuriga and Ichiha panicked as they tried to console a bawling Tomoe. Tomoe really had been blessed with such good friends.

While I was busy being happy for her as a member of her family, Hakuya said, "Now then, sire. What do you want to do about this?"

"What do I want to do? We'll stick to our original policy and not get involved."

No, I guess that's not gonna be good enough, huh?

"However, the assassination plot that was the cause of all this was an act of terrorism, and must be decried. I want to release a statement saying we cannot accept changes to the status quo brought about by terrorism."

"Is that okay? Won't you be seen as pro-Fuuga?" Licia asked, sounding concerned, but I shook my head.

"We have to do it. Because this incident started with an act of terrorism, whether Duke Chima and his people intended for it to happen or not, we can't justify Gauche's actions. Whether Fuuga ultimately wins or loses, that remains unchanged."

If I were to bend my principles on this out of fear of Fuuga, it would leave a lasting effect on my ability to rule.

"That's the way it is, Ichiha. Are you okay with that?"

"Ah! Yes. I can't approve of what Big Brother Gauche did either."

With Ichiha on board, we proceeded as we had discussed. But if...someday, the Kingdom of Friedonia is destroyed by Fuuga, I might come to regret this decision. I might think, *If only I had banded together with Duke Chima and the rest to put him down...* But that was only one of many possibilities.

Seen from the past, the future is always a series of coincidences.

Seen from the future, the past always looks like it was inevitable.

Then what of the present?

For that...we just have to trust in our own choices.



Chapter 4: A Family Divided

The Kingdom of Friedonia released a statement denouncing the attempted assassination. This caused a huge shock in the Union of Eastern Nations.

Fuuga's supporters loudly crowed that, "The Kingdom of Friedonia has recognized the legitimacy of our claims," and further stretched to claim, "King Souma is our ally."

In response to this, the countries of the anti-Fuuga faction said, "King Souma denounces the attempted assassination, but has not declared his support for either side," and, "The Kingdom of Friedonia remains neutral."

Of these two claims, the anti-Fuuga faction's was closer to the truth. It was a fact that Souma's statement did not directly support either faction. However, the pro-Fuuga faction's claims had a greater effect.

Between "Souma is pro-Fuuga!" and "Souma does not necessarily support Fuuga!", if we look at which of these claims is more powerfully worded, it is obviously the former. Even if the interpretation is a stretch, they have stated it definitively, making it easy to reach people.

The latter claim, "Souma does not necessarily support Fuuga!" leaves Souma's intentions unclear. This is because they could not say, "Souma does not support Fuuga." or "Souma is anti-Fuuga."

The result was something Souma had predicted. He had thought of Machiavelli's words, "If you choose to remain neutral, you will fail most of the time," firmly drilled into his head, so he had been hesitant to remain neutral when it came to Fuuga. That was why he chose a method that indirectly made it appear that he supported Fuuga. Souma was still wary of him though.

At the same time, he sent a letter to Julius who, due to the Kingdom of Lastania's alliance with the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, was forced to remain neutral. It said, "If it becomes necessary, our country will shelter you, so flee to the Kingdom of Friedonia with Princess Tia and everyone else."

Hakuya the Black-robed Prime Minister warned against the dangers of welcoming a former enemy like Julius, but it was strictly a warning. He never thought that Souma would do something that would sadden Roroa the way abandoning Julius and Princess Tia would. Hakuya believed that as long as Julius cared for Princess Tia, he wouldn't get ambitious again, but he needed to raise the complaint so that Souma would always keep the possibility in the back of his head.

Releasing a statement denouncing the attempted assassination also caused Duke Chima and the anti-Fuuga faction's attempts to recruit neutral states to their cause to stagnate. While, ultimately, the anti-Fuuga faction did grow to three times the size of the pro-Fuuga faction, they were not able to gather any further allies. The Kingdom of Friedonia's actions were more than enough to disappoint Mathew.

Mathew was in Wedan Castle in the Duchy of Chima griping to his eldest son Hashim.

"King Souma didn't have to do that. If he wasn't going to side with either of us, he should have just stayed quiet. I didn't expect him to denounce us."

"Calm down, father," Hashim chided the grumbling Mathew. "The Kingdom of Friedonia must have been uninterested in intervening in the conflict all along. It's important that we've been able to confirm that King Souma won't send reinforcements to Fuuga and will stay out of this fight."

“Well, yes, but...” Mathew still seemed unconvinced. “Of all the children I sent abroad, the only ones to join the anti-Fuuga faction were Nata in the Kingdom of Sharn, and Gauche who went to the Kingdom of Gabi. The others are all either pro-Fuuga or neutral. What did I even send my children abroad for?”

“Gauche’s rash actions have brought harsh eyes down on the entire House of Chima... However, although the state we sent him to has joined the Fuuga faction, Nike has returned to us,” Hashim said in an attempt to pacify Mathew.

It was true that Mathew’s fourth son, the beautiful boy who was a master of the spear, Nike, had been dismissed from the country he had been sent to when they joined the Fuuga faction. They must have been scared to shelter a relative of Gauche, even if he was a relative of Fuuga’s wife Mutsumi as well.

“One powerful warrior returning to us will have no great effect on the larger picture,” Mathew said, slumping his shoulders and resting both hands on his desk. “Our negotiations have grown the number of countries in the anti-Fuuga faction. However, that doesn’t mean that all of their people are now opposed to Fuuga as well. There will be those that go to join the Fuuga supporters, and others who divert supplies to them at all levels of society. Even if we clamp down on it, they’ll risk their lives to join him. It’s like dealing with zealots. Fuuga is practically the founder of a new religion called Fuugaism.”

“That must be Fuuga Haan’s potential,” Hashim said after a pause. Mathew snorted.

“It’s an abomination. The way things are, we cannot use our numbers to strategically encircle him until he runs out of supplies. The longer we take, the more countries will switch sides to join the pro-Fuuga faction... It seems we truly have no choice but to end it all in one decisive battle.”

Mathew stood up straight and walked towards the door.

“Fortunately, we have an overwhelming numerical advantage. Now, it’s simply a matter of how we invite Fuuga to the field of battle. It would be a nuisance if he were to hole up inside the castle and force us to fight a battle of attrition...” he mumbled to himself as he left the office.

Hashim let out an exasperated sigh as he watched Mathew go. Then, once his father was gone, a slender and attractive young man entered to take his place.

“Nike?”

“Brother. I passed by Father mumbling to himself in the hall,” the fourth son of the House of Chima said to Hashim, resting his spear against his shoulder as he spoke. “He seems rather agitated.”

“He is. Gauche’s overeagerness must have messed up all his plans.”

“And yet...you still plan to follow him when he acts like that?” Nike asked, suspicion in his eyes.

“What do you mean...?”

“What I’m saying is that playing along with a gamble like this doesn’t suit you. The brother that I know doesn’t take losing bets, or even ones with even odds.”

Hashim shrugged his shoulders at this.

“Who can say? Aren’t you the same way?” Hashim replied, staring straight into Nike’s eyes. “Although, even if you were dismissed by your master, I had expected you to go to Mutsumi instead. You like her more than Father, don’t you?”

This time, it was Nike’s turn to shrug. “Well, yes, but...I had my own reasons for coming. I’m here of my own will, okay?”

Hashim looked at Nike for a time, but Nike had always been aloof, and Hashim couldn't read his thoughts. It might be more accurate to say that Nike wouldn't allow him to. Hashim gave up.

"That is fine with me... As I wrote in my letter, so long as you refrain from any *rash actions*."

"*I understand*, brother. I'll be going now," Nike responded and left the office. As he walked through the halls of Wedan Castle, Nike sighed. He'd sensed something unsettling about Hashim. *Our brother has something in mind...Big Sister Mutsumi.*

Just as Hashim had said, Mutsumi was the only one in the House of Chima that Nike felt any affinity towards. Up until Ichihia was born and branded the talentless one, it had been Nike who'd been the brunt of Nata and Gauche's bullying. Mutsumi was the only one to protect him then.

With time, once Nike awakened to his gift for the spear, and his abilities grew, Nata and Gauche stopped saying anything about him. Instead, they moved on to tormenting Ichihia. That was why Nike had no attachment to the House of Chima. The reason he had returned here at all was because of a request from Mutsumi. A secret entreaty that she had kept secret even from her beloved husband Fuuga. *Our house really is divided, huh...?*

Mathew and the eight siblings were each acting towards their own ends. Their hearts were so far apart that they each had to make their own decisions. One result of that had been Gauche's attempt to assassinate Fuuga. Even their youngest brother, Ichihia, had found a place for himself in the Kingdom of Friedonia where he was growing in prominence.

I'm glad Ichihia went to the Kingdom. Mutsumi would have been devastated if he'd been caught up in all this. Out of all his brothers and sisters, in a way, Mutsumi was the only one who had tried to

stay connected to him. Nike wanted to respect those feelings, if nothing else.

◇ ◇ ◇

The anti-Fuuga states in the east of the Union of Eastern Nations were the first to rise up. The main force that Fuuga was leading to retake the Demon Lord's Domain was north of the Union of Eastern Nations. They formed a wedge that separated that main force from Fuuga's base in Malmkhitan. Fuuga had left half of his elite soldiers behind to defend his home country. The anti-Fuuga faction believed that by keeping those elites from rejoining the main force, they would be reducing Fuuga's strength of arms.

In addition to this, the operational planner of the anti-Fuuga faction, Mathew Chima, had closely studied the Elfriedenian-Amidonian War of 1546.

The (then provisional) King of Elfrieden, Souma Kazuya, had made a show of attacking the capital city of the Principality, Van. This allowed him to lure the Principality forces led by Sovereign Prince Gaius VIII to a favorable battlefield where he destroyed them. Mathew decided to use these events as a reference. By using Fuuga's homeland of the steppes as bait, he would keep Fuuga from settling in for a siege, and instead settle things with a short, decisive battle on favorable ground while they still had the numerical advantage.

With Fuuga's supporters spread throughout every country, it was effectively impossible for them to encircle Fuuga's company and cut off their supplies. And the longer they took, the more nations would switch to Fuuga's side. This demanded a swift and decisive victory in battle. In fact, Mathew had already received reports that Fuuga's forces were marching towards Malmkhitan. With the Kingdom of Sharn at their center, the forces of the anti-Fuuga faction headed for the grain-producing region, the Sebal Plains, where they had set up their defensive line. This region was part of the Kingdom of Gabi.

It was as if a tiger was heading towards many layers of traps.

As the final confrontation with Fuuga drew near, inside Gabi Castle, which looked down over the Sebal Plains, Mathew was in the room that had been assigned to him, enjoying a drink alone. As he did, his fourth son, Nike, came to visit him.

When Nike entered and saw the glass in Mathew's hand, he furrowed his brow. "Father... Is this really the time to drink?"

"Now is *exactly* the time to drink. I've already made every move I can. Now we simply wait to see which side the heavens favor. If all I'm doing is waiting, what better way than with a drink?"

The calmness in Mathew's voice made Nike feel uneasy, and he subconsciously clenched his fists. Mathew had seemed to suffer from intense mood swings lately, but now he seemed awfully calm. Nike had thought he would be showing more excitement or trepidation before the battle with Fuuga. It didn't feel like he was using alcohol as an escape either.

"The battle with Fuuga...with Mutsumi's husband is almost upon us. Doesn't that make you feel anything?" Nike asked, his anger bleeding through into his tone slightly.

And yet, Mathew didn't bat an eye.

"I've long since run out of such hesitation," Mathew said in a relaxed tone as he looked at his glass of red wine. "Look back on the history of our country—of our house. Here in this land where so many nations have been born and then perished, why is it that our petty state has maintained its independence using every means available to it? It was solely to keep our line going. In order to maintain the House of Chima's independence, there were even times when we had to fight against our own family. Only one side needed to survive."

Mathew paused, taking another sip of his wine before continuing.

"We fought among ourselves, and after the war, the winners would plead for the losers to be spared. If that was not granted, they were cast aside... We stand on top of many such sacrifices. You and I both."

Hearing his father's words, Nike felt as if his feet were giving out from underneath him. *I'm intimidated? Me? By father?* Nike was confident that, in purely martial terms, he had surpassed his father long ago. In fact, if they were to fight here, Nike would surely have won. Mathew wouldn't stand even a remote chance of winning. Yet, in spite of that, and despite Mathew not placing any particularly strong emphasis on his words, Nike was overwhelmed by his speech.

"And now it's your turn to fight with my sister, you're saying?" Nike somehow forced himself to ask. Even he thought he sounded like a petulant child.

Mathew laughed scornfully at himself. "After Gauche's recklessness, this became inevitable."

"And it's not your fault that he acted so recklessly, father?"

"In order to spread you all across many countries, as a means of preserving our line, I talked up your gifts too much. Planting the seeds of the arrogance that would destroy him was certainly my own failure."

You sound so detached from all this, Nike nearly said. But he didn't. Regardless, Mathew seemed to be cognizant of his words here. Through this conversation with his father, Nike had learned that this was how their house had preserved their bloodline.

"If we win this battle, then even in the worst scenario, the House of Chima will only lose Mutsumi," Mathew told the now silent Nike. "The Kingdom of Remus, where Yomi is betrothed to the king, is part of the Fuuga faction, but they are far from Fuuga's main force and Malmkhitan, so they will focus on defending their own borders. They

won't be directly involved in this war. Even Mutsumi, provided she doesn't die in battle, might be able to be saved after the war."

"Knowing Mutsumi, I think she'll follow Fuuga to the end, though..."

"That is her decision. If she chooses life, there are still ways to save her."

"....."

"Conversely, if we are defeated here, I am the only one who must die."

"Wha?!" Nike's eyes widened in shock. Mathew, however, still spoke in a relaxed tone.

"Lay all of the blame on me. If you say that you were only following my orders, I am sure Mutsumi will plead for your life. It seems Hashim is well regarded by Fuuga too. I'm sure he'll manage the House of Chima well."

"Father! What are you saying?! Do you not care for your own life?!" Nike protested, and Mathew smiled a little.

"I do only as our family has for all this time. At the very least, our line will live on."

Once he had said that, Mathew drained the rest of his wine.

"That man...will drag everything in. He'll destroy all the bonds our house has created, swallowing us whole. If we ever side with him, the lives of our entire clan will be in his grasp. As head of the House of Chima, I couldn't bear that."

"Father..."

"If you think about it, Ichihia leaving for the Kingdom may have been divine providence. Now, no matter how chaotic the Union of Eastern Nations becomes, our blood will survive."

"Divine providence...? It's not like you to say that, Father."

He was supposed to be more calculating. To plan for every eventuality, doing whatever was necessary to avoid the worst outcome, that was how Mathew—how the House of Chima—was supposed to operate. It was almost as if Mathew had decided that his own death wasn't the worst outcome.

"No, father... Don't tell me you..." Nike started to say, but didn't finish. Mathew chuckled.

"You may be right. So, Nike, my boy... Don't waste your life."

"I wish you had said that to me sooner, and in a different way..." Nike turned to go, unable to face his father any longer. "Big Sister Mutsumi probably understands how you feel better than any of us, father. That's why...I didn't want the two of you to end up opposing each other."

"I see..."

"I don't need you to tell me not to throw away my life. I will act...according to my own will."

With that said, Nike took his leave.

Alone in the room once more, Mathew poured himself a fresh glass, and slowly sipped away at it.



Chapter 5: Battle of the Sebal Plains

— 15th day, 6th month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar —

On this day, a force of seven thousand men led by Fuuga entered the Sebal Plains—a grain-producing region inside a valley surrounded by mountains inside the Kingdom of Gabi. Overlooking the plains was Gabi Castle, home to their king.

Once they passed through the Sebal Plains, they would enter an area that was a wild mix of pro- and anti-Fuuga groups. There was nowhere for the anti-Fuuga faction to mass their troops, so they desperately wanted to force Fuuga into a final showdown here. On the other hand, Fuuga's forces would be able to join up with the rest of the troops in their home country if they could just get through the plains. That was why a united force of groups from the anti-Fuuga faction (hereafter the United Force) arrived first and were waiting for Fuuga when he arrived.

The United Force had seen what Malmkhitan's elite warriors could do during the demon wave and realized they would be defeated in detail if they didn't fight with cohesion. To that end, they didn't indulge in any unnecessary delaying maneuvers along the road—instead concentrating their manpower in the Sebal Plains where they would confront Fuuga's main force.

Fuuga and his men knew of the United Force's intentions, but daringly walked into the trap, seeing it as a good opportunity to wipe out all those who opposed them. Without anyone planning it that way, both forces had decided that this was the place for their final showdown.

◇ ◇ ◇

Fuuga's first order was to take Fort Sebal at the entrance to the Sebal Plains.

“We can’t take a lot of time. We’ll take it quickly with a total offensive. Moumei!”

“Yes, my lord. I am here.”

“Lead the foot soldiers in a charge!”

“Understood! Let’s go!”

Moumei, the giant man with a massive hammer, rode in on his lumbering steppe yak, and the men chased after him on foot. Once he finished watching them go, Fuuga gave orders to the remaining troops.

“Shuukin, Gaten. Have your cavalry run around and throw the enemy into disarray! Kasen, your archers will support the other forces! They can only have so many men holed up in a fort of that size. Crush them quickly!”

“““Yes, sir!“““

Now that they had their orders, the commanders moved into action.

Shuukin and Gaten’s groups circled around the fortress, making it look like they were going to attack points that were lightly guarded, forcing the defenders to spread out. Meanwhile, any enemy archers who leaned out to take aim at them were shot down by Kasen’s bowmen. All of this reduced the pressure on Moumei’s infantry that were attacking at the front.

“Now’s our chance! Let’s go!”

Moumei held his shield up against the arrows pouring down on him from the fortress as the infantry arrived in front of the main gate. Getting down off his steppe yak, Moumei wound up with his massive hammer and slammed it into the gate made of thick logs.

“Haaah!”

Crack! Two of the logs snapped clean in two, creating a gap.

“I’m not done yet!”

A second, then a third swing widened the gap. Seeing this, the defending leader decided it was impossible for them to resist any longer.

“We can’t last any longer... Retreat! Retreat!”

The defenders lowered rope ladders from the walls, scattering in all directions. There had been five hundred men in Fort Sebal, but that wasn’t nearly enough to defend it against an army of seven thousand. They had also been told by Duke Chima to abandon the fortress quickly so as to lure Fuuga’s forces deeper in. Because of that, the defenders retreated without putting up a proper resistance.

Having taken the fortress without significant losses, Fuuga stationed five hundred troops and the commander Gaifuku there to defend it. Gaifuku had not fully recovered from the wound he took protecting Fuuga during the attempted assassination.

And so, the preliminary battle was won by Fuuga’s forces.

◇ ◇ ◇

After reorganizing, Fuuga’s force of sixty-five hundred men headed into the Sebal Plains.

“It’s hot...” Fuuga muttered to himself as he rode on Durga’s back, advancing along the road with his troops. “I feel like it’s only gotten hotter since we entered the plains.”

“That’s how these mountain basins are,” Mutsumi, who was riding beside him, said, pointing to the mountains. “The hot wind blows down from the mountains. I suppose you wouldn’t see much of this sort of terrain on the steppes of Malmkhitan though.”

“It’s unfamiliar to me, yeah. The rocky desert was already too hot for my tastes, but the humidity here makes it even worse. I almost miss

the dry heat of the desert,” Fuuga grumbled as he loosened his collar.

“Oh, my,” Mutsumi chuckled. “You wouldn’t hesitate to face thousands of soldiers, and yet a little heat like this is enough to make you cry?”

“Ha ha ha! Well, I can’t change the weather with brute force, after all.”

“Could you two please act a little more aware of the danger we’re in...?”

Shuukin rode up alongside the two of them to complain about the way they were bantering in the middle of what would become the site for the final battle. He pointed down the road in the direction their forces were headed.

“Even from this distance, you can see it. The enemy intends to meet us here.”

On the road up ahead, they could see the banners of the anti-Fuuga faction. Even just eyeballing it, there had to be between ten and fifteen thousand eagerly awaiting Fuuga and his men.

If Fuuga’s forces made it past Gabi Castle and could join up with the elite troops from his homeland, it would be no easy task to take them down. Once that happened, with the support of the pro-Fuuga states, he would devour the anti-Fuuga countries in the Union of Eastern Nations starting in the east.

That was why the United Force’s victory condition was: do not let Fuuga’s army get past Gabi Castle.

Even if they let Fuuga himself get away, so long as they managed to chase his army back north, it would kill the pro-Fuuga faction’s inertia. If the people who were lionizing Fuuga saw him suffer a crippling defeat, it might disillusion them into leaving his side. If that

happened, it would be Duke Chima's time to shine. He'd use every diplomatic trick available to dismantle the pro-Fuuga faction.

Meanwhile, what the United Force believed *the pro-Fuuga faction's victory condition* was: get Fuuga past Gabi Castle and back to his home country no matter the cost.

They didn't necessarily need to eliminate the United Force here in this battle. If Fuuga could just break through the United Force's encirclement, he would be able to win in the long term. They believed that, as the smaller force, Fuuga's army would head straight for their victory condition and recklessly attempt an attack through their center.

That is why, of the fourteen thousand troops—including Zemish mercenaries—the United Force had scraped together, six thousand were placed in the center to block the exit to the Sebal Plains, while the rest were divided into four thousand on each flank in order to surround Fuuga.

It was clear to see that they meant to stop Fuuga's forces from attacking down the middle, then pick him apart from the sides. If both factions followed established tactics, that's no doubt how it would have played out. However, Fuuga would never fight using established tactics. He hated it when people tried to place him into a box. The United Force had misread his intentions.

With a swing of his arm, Fuuga gave the orders.

"Position a thousand men on our right and left flanks. We'll have them hit the enemy's left and right opposition. Shuukin and Gaten will take the right, while Moumei and Kasen will command the left."

Established tactics said the smaller force needed to keep its fighting strength concentrated. However, Fuuga chose a formation that seemed to challenge the anti-Fuuga faction head-on.



“Have they gone mad?!” King Shamour Sharn said in astonishment as Fuuga’s army got into formation in the distance. He’d been watching from the United Force’s main camp. Because the Kingdom of Sharn had provided the largest portion of the United Force’s fighting strength, Shamour was their commander-in-chief. “They mean to fight us head-on when they have only half our number?”

“Does that just show how confident they are in their own strength?” King Gabi, who had become vice commander, cocked his head to the side.

“No, their army is a mixed force,” Shamour spat. “Fuuga’s own men can’t account for even two thousand of their number. The rest have to be mercenaries, volunteers, and refugees. It’s an insult that they think they can face us head-on like that.”

“Calm yourself, King Sharn. And you too, King Gabi,” Duke Chima, who had been standing by their side, tried to mollify them.

Mathew had been staying close to Shamour as an advisor in the United Force.

He pointed to the flanks of Fuuga’s army. “From what I can see, Fuuga separated off a thousand men to each flank, but that leaves more than four thousand in the center. Our own center has six thousand troops. He likely means to use the two thousand on the flanks to prevent us encircling him, then break through the center where the difference in our strength is not so great.”

“I see. So the armies on his flanks are sacrifices, then,” King Gabi replied and Mathew nodded.

“It’s a heartless plan, but an effective one, I surmise. They only need their main force to get past us, after all.”

“And there is no shortage of fanatics who would throw their lives away for Fuuga, huh? Hmm... His army was always incredible at charging through the enemy, after all,” Shamour said, recalling how

the soldiers of Malmkhitan had repeatedly torn apart hordes of monsters during the demon wave.

If the United Force faced that head-on, they would no doubt take considerable losses on their own side.

After some time stroking his goatee, Shamour finally came to a decision. “Very well. We’ll call back a thousand men from each flank in order to strengthen our center. No matter what else happens, we cannot allow Fuuga to get past us.”

“I believe that would be a good idea.” Mathew nodded in agreement.

And with that, the formation of each army had been decided.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Chaaarge!”

“““Yeahhhhhh!“““

Finally, Fuuga’s army collided with the United Force.

The planners on the United Force’s side thought that, as the smaller force, Fuuga’s army would focus their power in the center and attempt a breakthrough. They had strengthened their own center, anticipating the forty-five hundred troops in the center of Fuuga’s army would desperately charge the eight thousand in theirs.

However, contrary to their expectations, the forty-five hundred troops in the center of Fuuga’s army advanced slower than the two flanks, and actually stopped short of the United Force’s own.

Then, following established tactics, they began their attack at range with arrows and magic. Not a single unit charged the United Force’s center. Instead, there was a shootout as the United Force returned fire.

As they watched from the United Force’s main camp, Shamour and Mathew grew suspicious.

“What is going on?” Shamour asked. “Are they not planning to attempt to attack through the center?”

“They’ve come to a total stop. Although that is what established tactics would dictate...”

“They can’t be sane, challenging us head-on with inferior numbers.”

Mathew nodded. “I agree. Malmkhitan’s strength lies in the mobility and penetrative strength they have as a people of the steppes. I remember quite well just how fearsome their charges were during the demon wave. That’s why we did more than enough to prepare for it...”

As he said that, Mathew looked towards the anti-air repeating bolt thrower. They had carried it down from Gabi Castle and installed it here in preparation for a charge by Fuuga’s army. If one considered Fuuga’s reckless courage, it was entirely possible he would rush in alone on Durga’s back, so this was a measure against that. Yet, despite their careful preparation, there was no charge from Fuuga’s army, leaving Mathew and the others disappointed.

“It would seem Fuuga hasn’t focused his strength in the center...”

Shamour said, pointing to the left side of the battlefield.

That was where one thousand of Fuuga’s men were fighting three thousand of the United Force’s. Despite being outnumbered three-to-one, Fuuga’s army had the United Force on the back foot.

Squinting a little harder, they could see something jumping around like fleas on the battlefield. It was Malmkhitan’s leaping cavalry.

“If we can see so many leaping cavalry, that thousand must be Fuuga’s most powerful force. And...while it’s too far for us to see from here, they must have stopped our attack on the right side as well. The thousand on Fuuga’s left flank must be elite warriors too.”

“That means Fuuga placed his strongest forces on the flanks, then...”

Shamour nodded in agreement with Mathew, stroking his goatee. “Was his goal not to break through the center, then? Does he mean to defeat our flanks and surround us on three sides? Or perhaps he means to crush one of the armies on our flanks, then attack from the side...?”

“The side attack seems most likely, but...if he was doing that, he would have concentrated his strength on one flank. That is what I would do. A successful encirclement or a side attack would depend on how quickly you can defeat your opponent.”

“I agree. If he takes too long, reinforcements will arrive from the center... Fine, send a message to the units in the rear of the center!”

Shamour ordered his subordinates to take one thousand men from the center to each of the flanks because of the protracted shootout. Now that they knew Fuuga’s elites were to their flanks, there was no longer any reason to make their own center unnecessarily thick.

Mathew stroked his chin as he watched. “It could be that Fuuga’s aim...is to attack our flanks today in order to thin out the center. Then, tomorrow or later, once we are predisposed to believe that the majority of his strength is in his flanks, he’ll place his elites in the center, and attempt a rapid breakthrough.”

“Hmm... In that case, we need simply be cautious in our troop deployments, the same as today. The biggest headache will be if he has some other plan in mind,” Shamour said, looking to the castle behind them. “Gabi Castle has hardly any defenders now. Fuuga left five hundred men at Fort Sebal near the entrance to the plains, right? What would you think of a plan to secretly move that five hundred to take our castle?”

“If they’ll come to Gabi Castle...that makes things easier,” Mathew said with a wry smile. “In fact, we should let all of Fuuga’s army in.”

“What!?”

“I have told the defenders to set fire to their provisions if the castle seems likely to fall. This is enemy territory for Fuuga. If he attempts to settle in for a siege here without resupply or reinforcement, how long can he last? We, on the other hand, will continue to receive supplies so long as we hold the southeast exit to the Sebal Plains.”

“I see. That would make it easier if we gave them the castle, yes,” Shamour agreed heartily, slapping the sword at his waist. Mathew smiled wryly.

“Well, given Fuuga’s wild nature and his nose for danger, I doubt he would fall for such a ploy. I think it’s best that we try to make him drop his guard and attempt an assault through the center.”

“Then it’s a battle of endurance today... What a headache.”

The two of them watched as the battle bogged down to a stalemate.

◇ ◇ ◇

In the southwest corner of the battlefield which Shamour and Mathew had been watching, Fuuga’s commanders Shuukin and Gaten were going wild with their leaping cavalry.

In comparison to the wise and brave Shuukin, Gaten was callow and attention-seeking, but could show resourcefulness in a tight spot, and was a good commander capable of thinking flexibly.

“Haaah!”

As his leaping temsbock touched down, Gaten cracked his twin iron whips, wrapping one around a man’s neck and breaking it, while the tip of the other pierced through another man’s throat. His versatile fighting style and the whooshing sounds of his whips terrified the soldiers around him.

“What’s this? None of you dare approach me? But you opposed Lord Fuuga. And I was so looking forward to seeing what brave generals the United Force had too!”

Despite his taunting, the soldiers of the United Force were too scared to get within range of Gaten's whips.

"Honestly... You people aren't even worth my time. Moving on..."

Once he had confirmed no one was going to be coming at him, Gaten started busily looking around the area. A short distance away he saw Shuukin lop the arms off a mounted soldier and impale the man's throat. Gaten rushed over to his side.

"It's irritating, having to stay in one place while fighting. Wouldn't you agree, Sir Shuukin, right hand of our lord?"

"Gaten. There's no time for idle chatter on the battlefield," Shuukin said without so much as looking at him. Gaten shrugged.

"I don't see why not. We're having an easy enough time. If, instead of this mixed force of five hundred horsemen and five hundred leaping cavalry, we could call Moumei or Kasen over here from the north side and get together a group of a thousand leaping cavalry, we could break through these pitiful soldiers with ease."

"Our orders were to delay them..." Shuukin said as he swung his blade down on an enemy soldier who approached him. "I'm sure Lord Fuuga has something he's thinking of. We just have to trust in our lord, and put our martial prowess to work. Or am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong," Gaten said as he swung his whip. *Crack!* It traced a low arc, sending three enemy infantrymen flying at once.

Then, catching the tip of his whip as it returned, Gaten chuckled.

"For me, it's been surprising to see our lord starting to give us such precise orders. He's always been better at just charging in and crushing his enemies."

"He must have realized that wasn't enough on its own, wouldn't you say? Lord... Fuuga Haan has his eyes set on something beyond this sort of internal conflict, a more distant conquest." As he said that,

Shuukin looked up to a sky that was yellow with all the dust that had been kicked up.

How far would Fuuga climb from here? It didn't matter where he was going. It didn't matter how far it was. They wanted to follow him. They wanted to chase after Fuuga's dream together. That was what all Fuuga's followers wished for.

Suddenly...Gaten's temsbock leaped. As it did, the tall grass where Gaten had been was instantly mowed down to less than half its former height. If he had still been there on the ground, Gaten would have lost his feet along with the bottom half of his temsbock.

"Hey! Nice dodge!" A big man carrying a huge ax walked towards them with heavy steps. "I'd expect no less from one of Fuuga's commanders. You're well trained."

Surprised, Shuukin asked, "Who goes there...?"

"Nata Chima, commander for the Kingdom of Sharn," the man with the big ax introduced himself.

He was the second son of the House of Chima. Although he was younger than Hashim, the eldest son, his stern expression made him look older than Hashim who was in his mid-twenties.

Lifting his ax, Nata seemed to be sizing up the two of them as he spoke. "From the lackluster fight going on in the center, it seemed like Fuuga wasn't around. I was hoping I could fight him if I came to this side, but...he's not here, huh?"

"We have no reason to tell you that!" Gaten shouted as he drove his temsbock into a big jump.

Then, swinging both whips, he tried to pierce Nata's neck from both sides. However, Nata dropped his ax to the ground, catching both whips in his hands.

"What?!" Gaten cried out in surprise. Nata smirked.

“An interesting trick! But I saw it coming!”

Nata pulled on the ends of the whips he was holding, twisting his body around like he was doing a hammer throw. Gaten was sent flying along with his temsbock, but let go of his whips in midair, and used the reins to pull off a landing somehow.

“Urgh... Damn your idiot strength!” Gaten struggled for a response to the incredible power that had thrown both him and his mount.

Then, as Nata hefted his ax and was about to go finish off Gaten once and for all...

“Hah!”

“Urgh!”

Shuukin charged straight at him, catching Nata by surprise. Shuukin’s sword aimed to mow through his torso, but Nata caught it with the handle of his ax.

Clang! The sound of metal striking metal echoed.

“Guh! Don’t get in my way!”

“Whoa!”

With a powerful swing of his ax, Nata sent Shuukin flying several meters, temsbock and all. Shuukin recovered in midair, and landed his temsbock.

As he did, Gaten rushed over to him, having picked his whips back up.

“He’s got one hell of a throw.”

“Yeah. Moumei’s probably the only one on our side who could match him in pure strength.”

“That’s trouble... Let’s work together and finish him off quickly. I’ll make an opening...”

“Hold on, Gaten,” Shuukin said, holding out his sword to stop Gaten from rushing off again. “Our mission is to keep the fighting at a stalemate here. We have no time to deal with this savage. Let’s leave him be and head to the next place.”

“But—”

“Oh, come on! You’re running away? You’re supposed to be Fuuga’s men.” Nata tried to provoke them, but Shuukin didn’t pay it any mind.

“I’ve seen your strength. Yes, you’re far stronger than any ordinary man, but...you’re still no match for our lord.”

“What’d you say?” Nata grunted. Shuukin could sense his anger.

Even if this man were to stand before Fuuga, their lord would not see him as anywhere near the threat that King Souma was. Nata’s strength was the simple sort, reliant only on his martial prowess.

“Let’s go, Gaten!”

“Right!”

The two of them left Nata and rushed off to find the next place where their allies were struggling.

“Wha...! Damn it!”

Left behind, Nata ground his teeth, slamming his giant ax into the ground in frustration. It dug a trench rut in a corner of the battlefield.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, at the same time...

“Don’t push too hard! Move the line up slowly and steadily!”

In the center army, Hashim, the eldest son of the House of Chima, was carefully commanding his troops. As he did, the fourth son, Nike, came over to him.

“Big Brother Hashim... Big Brother Nata seems to have rushed off to the left side of the battlefield on his own.”

“Let him go. The only cure for stupidity is death.”

Nike didn’t rebut his elder brother’s words.

On this first day of fighting, they all kept their intentions hidden. Nothing was concluded, and both armies withdrew to their camps with the setting sun.

◇ ◇ ◇

That night, once the fighting of their first day on the Sebal Plains was finished, Shamour, King of Sharn, invited his commanders to the main camp for a war council. Among them were his advisor, Duke Mathew, as well as King Gabi.

“We’ve taken heavy damage to both of our flanks,” Shamour said, pointing to the sides of the United Force on the map spread out across the table the commanders were standing around. “Fuuga had most of his strengths in the flanks, as we suspected. We were able to repel their attacks with the reinforcements we sent, but we took considerable losses in the meantime.”

“Hmph! How irritating,” spat King Gabi.

“But we must have cut down Fuuga’s main fighting force in return. If you look at the number of casualties, our forces indeed had the worst of it. However, we hold a geographical advantage here,” Mathew said in a calm tone of voice. “This is the Kingdom of Gabi. We can pull our wounded back and give them time to recover, filling the vacancies with fresh troops. Fuuga’s army, on the other hand, cannot contact their homeland so long as the southwest exit to the

Sebal Plains remains sealed. They cannot rest their men or replace them with new ones.”

“Hmm... You’re right. The enemy can’t get reinforcements,” said Shamour.

“Yes.” Mathew nodded in agreement. “And those troops that report directly to Fuuga are currently the core of his army. If we whittle them down, he cannot replace them immediately. If battles like today’s continue, Fuuga’s army will die the death of a thousand cuts.”

“““Yeah!“““ the assembled commanders cheered at Mathew’s analysis.

Gratified now that he understood his side held the upper hand, Shamour plopped himself down on a camp stool and crossed his thick arms.

“I understand our advantage, but then why is Fuuga fighting the way that he is? This is a battle of attrition.”

“Indeed. I cannot understand why Fuuga’s outnumbered army would choose to fight like this.”

When one of the commanders shared that same opinion, Mathew brought a hand to his chin and got a pensive look on his face.

“I have been questioning that myself. If we try to explain their actions logically, it would be to convince us that ‘Fuuga will place his best forces in the flanks again today,’ so that we also focus our forces there from the beginning. Then he would instead place his main force in the center, and rapidly break through ours...”

“Hmm. In that case, we need to simply continue fighting as we did today,” Shamour concluded.

"You're quite right," Mathew nodded. "If we keep constantly aware of where Fuuga's main force is and position an appropriate number of troops in response, we should have no problem. But..."

"But what?" Shamour asked, responding to Mathew's uncertain tone.

Mathew seemed to hesitate for a moment, but found his resolve and answered, "It's just...this isn't Fuuga's preferred style of fighting."

Fuuga was not this tactical. If an enemy rose up before him, no matter who it was or how great the threat, he would keep pushing forward. And that stance was shared by his army. Mathew questioned whether Fuuga would really adopt this sort of thoughtful troop deployment.

"With the refugees lifting him up as some sort of great man, and a grand army assembling beneath him, perhaps he's changed? How impertinent," Shamour said dismissively.

"Yes, that could be it..." Mathew nodded. "Whatever the case, if Fuuga wants to join us in a battle of attrition, we could ask for nothing better. I just ask that you all remain cautious."

The commanders all nodded in agreement.

◊ ◊ ◊

— 16th day, 6th month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar —

As the battle entered its second day, the moves they made were exactly the same as on the first.

Fuuga's army positioned their strongest fighters on the flanks, and the United Force sent reinforcements to their own flanks, bringing the fighting to a stalemate. However, unlike the United Force which could afford to change out their side units, Fuuga's forces were still exhausted from the previous day's fighting and found themselves a little pressured.

As for the center, they were engaged in a shooting match like the day before, and there were no intense clashes there on this day either.

“Tch...”

Fuuga watched from his main camp with a sour look on his face. He sat on a camp stool, stomping his feet repeatedly. It had left a clear imprint of his foot in the ground.

Mutsumi, who was beside him, let out a sigh. “Why don’t you calm down a little, darling? Acting irritated here won’t do anything to bring us victory.”

“I know. I know that, but...it hurts, staying here in the main camp while everyone else is out there fighting.”

Mutsumi sighed once more and shrugged her shoulders. “That is what it means to be commander-in-chief.”

“Sitting put like this doesn’t suit me. Going wild with all our strength, racing around, and seizing victory with our own hands, that’s how we’ve always fought before now.”

“But you know they’ll take your head in no time if you do that, right?”

Mutsumi’s chiding left Fuuga speechless.

“If you are going to seize hegemony on this continent, you need to change your simplistic way of fighting. The Gran Chaos Empire is massive, and Yuriga’s letters warned you not to take the Kingdom of Friedonia lightly either, didn’t they? If you are going to face those nations on equal terms, your army needs to evolve even more.”

“I know... That’s why I’m staying put now, isn’t it?” Fuuga responded, sounding unamused.

Mutsumi smiled at the sour look on his face.

“I believe that Sir Souma would trust his followers to handle things at a time like this, you know?”

“Yeah, I’ll bet *he* would...”

Souma understood that he had no martial prowess or gift for commanding troops, so he would trust his subordinates to handle things at times like this. Because he was the type that preferred not to be on the front lines, he could sit in the main camp without getting agitated like Fuuga.

Because he could imagine it so easily, Fuuga stopped stamping his feet.

“Believe in my people and wait? It pisses me off that he can do that and I can’t.”

“Hee hee. That’s right. Let’s trust in the people who are chasing your dream with you.”

With that said, Mutsumi walked around behind Fuuga and rested her hands on his shoulders.



Chapter 6: Turning Point of History

— Sebal Plains — Night After the Second Day of Battle —

The battle remained at a stalemate throughout the second day, and after a meeting with the other commanders, Mathew was visited by his eldest son, Hashim.

“Father.”

“Hashim...? What is it?”

“I wanted to hear your opinion on the way Fuuga’s forces fight.”

“Hmm. You find it odd too, then?” Mathew asked, crossing his arms. “They went along with our battle of attrition, just like on the first day. Fuuga wasn’t the type to fight like this. I can’t understand why.”

“Does he have a plan of some sort...?”

“Either he’s gained the capacity to command a large army, or his men have inflated his ego to the point where he believes he is acting strategically...”

“If it’s the latter, that would make our lives easier.”

“Whatever the case, it’s unsettling not being able to read our opponent. Especially when Fuuga hasn’t shown himself on the field of battle...”

“That is worrying, yes... Then why don’t we try giving him a kick in the butt?” Hashim suggested as Mathew was pondering.

Mathew looked up. “Do you have an idea?”

“Our scouts report that the fortress near the southwest entrance to the plains is now defended by five hundred of Fuuga’s men. We will raid it stealthily so that his main force doesn’t notice. With the fort taken, his retreat will be blocked. Once we light a fire under his

behind, Fuuga will be left with two choices; retreat or try to force his way through.”

“I see... We prepare thoroughly and wait, then if he attempts a breakthrough, we pincer him with the troops from Fort Sebal, and if he retreats we simply launch a pursuit.”

Mathew ran some quick mental calculations and decided the plan would work.

This battle closely resembled the Battle of Nagashino from Souma’s old world where, before the final battle at Shitaragahara, a unit led by Sakai Tadatsugu took Tobigasuyama from the Takeda. The loss of the fortress threatened the Takedas’ retreat, and they lost many important vassals as they withdrew. It was the decisive cause of their defeat. Hashim’s plan had parallels to this.

Having gotten a positive response, Hashim continued his explanation, “We will send five hundred of our own men, and borrow a thousand familiar with the local terrain from King Gabi. If they travel through the mountains from Gabi Castle, they won’t be discovered.”

“Hmm... But you realize I can’t leave the main camp while we’re dealing with Fuuga, yes?”

“Of course. That is why I will lead this raid. I will take Nata and Nike with me as well. You stay with King Shamour, father.”

“When will you carry it out?”

“This very night. I have already made the proposal to King Gabi, and he was in favor.”

“Heh, you move fast.” Mathew laughed. Hashim lowered his eyes and laughed too.

“I am your son, after all.”

“Godspeed, then... Don’t mess this up.”

“Yes. You too, father.”

With that said, Hashim turned around and left the main camp.

Mathew watched his son go in silence.

◇ ◇ ◇

— 17th day, 6th month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar —

On the third morning after fighting began on the Sebal Plains, Mathew received a report saying a combined Chima-Gabi force of fifteen hundred men had retaken Fort Sebal.

“Hashim’s done it then, has he?”

Mathew let out a sigh, moved by his son’s success. The report said that very few of the five hundred soldiers there escaped, but those that did likely rushed to Fuuga to report that Fort Sebal had fallen. If Fuuga sent soldiers to retake Fort Sebal, the United Force would launch an all-out offensive against his weakened main force. Surely they could overrun him with sheer numbers then.

Mathew stayed at Commander-in-Chief Shamour’s side throughout the night, watching Fuuga’s forces closely.

And yet...dawn came without any movement.

“Do they mean to do nothing even after losing Fort Sebal?” Shamour crossed his arms, groaning.

“They can’t move,” Mathew replied. “Because if they do, we’ll push into them.”

“Hmm... Regardless, we’ve set a fire under them now. The fall of Fort Sebal has completely severed Fuuga’s supply lines. If they fight the way they did yesterday, we need only wait until their provisions dry up. Or rather, if we press them even sooner, some of Fuuga’s devotees will flee. His army will collapse upon seeing the legend stripped from him.”

"Indeed. That is why we must end this today." Mathew looked at the quiet camps of Fuuga's forces. "He has two options available to him. Fuuga can attempt to break through the United Force to reach Malmkhitan, or retreat to the north to reorganize. Although, should he choose the latter, he faces a pincer motion from us and the soldiers at Fort Sebal."

"Heh! No matter how powerful his men are, they'll be exposing their vulnerable backs as they retreat. Our men will slaughter them."

Shamour had the hungry eyes of a warrior. Mathew nodded.

"Yes. That is why I expect our enemy to choose the breakthrough option, where there is still some hope of victory... But when I recall the illogical way his forces fought yesterday and the day before, I have to consider that he may not make the straightforward decision."

"It makes no difference. If they come at us, we surround and crush them. If they flee, we chase down and devour them. Our advantage will be unchanged. It's simple and easy to understand."

"Yes, I suppose it is..."

In contrast to Shamour's optimistic grin, Mathew felt a subtle ominous unease taking root in his heart. This was because despite Fort Sebal supposedly having fallen, Fuuga's camp was too quiet. *What are you thinking, Fuuga...?* he thought. He glared at Fuuga's army, but he could find no answer.

In order to prepare for an attempted breakthrough, the United Force hardened their defenses, not sending their flanks forward like yesterday. If the enemy were going to recklessly charge in, there was no need to encircle them, and thereby thin their own center. If the United Force kept their defenses hard to absorb the charge, they would be free to strike from the side or behind after that. *Bring it on, Fuuga*, the United Force seemed to say as they waited eagerly.

However, as for what Fuuga's forces chose to do...

"I bear a message! Fuuga's forces have begun to retreat!" the messenger rushed into the United Force's main camp to report.

Shamour's eyes bulged after hearing the message, and he kicked aside his camp stool as he rose to his feet. Looking out, the message was true. Fuuga's forces were hastily retreating along the road to the northwest.

"Are they mad?! Even if they retreat here...do they think they can recover up north?!"

"Perhaps they do..." Mathew said, furrowing his brow. "If their only goal is to get Fuuga away from this battlefield, there is some logic in fleeing northwest where we have fewer troops. But at the same time, it means making his men pay a heavy price in casualties... What do you want to do?"

"There's no question," Shamour responded, drawing his sword and pointing it towards Fuuga's army. "We pursue! Fuuga may escape, but we must strike down as many of those who follow him as we can. This is the decisive battle, men! Here we eliminate any chance of Fuuga's recovery!"

""""Yeahhhhh!"""" the soldiers of the United Force cheered in response to Shamour's speech. The horns were sounded to signal an advance, and the United Force moved to chase Fuuga's forces.

As Shamour mounted his horse to join the march, he told an approaching Mathew, "You're ill-suited to violence. I leave defending the main camp to you."

"Yes. Godspeed to you," Mathew said, placing his hands together in front of him. Shamour nodded before riding off.

Mathew gazed at the battlefield as he watched him go. *The important thing is that the Chima blood and name live on. So...don't waste your lives in vain.*

◇ ◇ ◇

Normally during a retreat, an army leaves rear guards behind it. The troops chosen for a rear guard are elites, and they must be led by a loyal commander. The longer the rear guard holds off the enemy's pursuit, the higher the chance of their lord, and by extension the rest of their allies, surviving. In short, the rear guard is expected to be completely annihilated. That should tell you just how amazing it was that Kinoshita Toukichirou led the rear guard in the retreat from the Battle of Kanegasaki, yet still returned alive.

And yet, the odd thing is, Fuuga's forces *had no rear guard*. Despite the fierce pursuit of the United Force, the rear units of Fuuga's army appeared to be fleeing in disarray.

"Gwah!"

"Tch... Fuugahhh!!!"

As he cut down fleeing soldiers, Shamour shouted, "I misjudged you, Fuuga Haan! What is this disgrace?! You leave your men and flee? How are you supposed to be the great man of the Union of Eastern Nations?! How are you humanity's hope?!"

For Shamour, who had anticipated a stirring battle, this one-sided massacre irritated him.

Looking past the common soldiers he was venting his frustrations on, Shamour saw Fuuga's forces were already passing by the foot of Fort Sebal. The vanguard was much faster than the disorderly rabble at the rear. Fuuga's army must have placed their best fighters at the lead during the retreat.

If so, Fuuga may get away... he thought. Assuming Fuuga had his best men at the front, their ability to break through would be

considerable. The plan had called for the men who took Fort Sebal to seal the exit to the plains, but it was difficult to delay the enemy, and they might be able to break through. *Then let me bury as many of the fools who followed Fuuga here as I can! Without his followers, Fuuga will be a man with his arms and legs torn off!*

Swinging powerfully as he sliced through enemy soldiers, Shamour glared ahead of him.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, at the other end of that glare, Fuuga clenched his fists as he rode on the back of Durga the flying tiger. Gritting his teeth as he heard the faint dying screams of his own men behind him on the wind, his shoulders trembled.

“Darling...” Mutsumi, who was riding along with him, said with a voice full of compassion.

Fuuga opened his clenched fist and held the open hand out towards her.

“I know, Mutsumi.” Fuuga put his hand on Durga’s back. “I can’t stop anymore. Or turn back. Only race in the direction Durga is facing.”

“Darling... No, Lord Fuuga. I will follow you wherever you go.”

And so, Fuuga and his people escaped from the Sebal Plains.

◇ ◇ ◇

It happened as the United Force pursued Fuuga’s army past the foot of Fort Sebal.

This is strange... Shamour thought, sensing something was off. Why are all of the fallen here enemy soldiers?

Most of the soldiers lying along the road were Fuuga’s men. Normally, a lack of one’s own dead comrades would be a thing to welcome, but they were taking far too few casualties. The plan had

called for a combined force of fifteen hundred from the House of Chima and Kingdom of Gabi to block Fuuga's retreat. These forces, which were to collide directly with Fuuga's vanguard, should have taken considerable losses. And yet, there were no corpses from that combined force along the road.

Did they abandon the attempt to block Fuuga's forces out of fear? They'll have to be called to account for that later.

As Shamour was pondering, suddenly his own pursuing forces came to a stop.

"Why?! Why have you stopped?! You'll let Fuuga escape!"

A messenger ran over to him and said, "I bear a message! Fuuga's army has come to a stop outside the Sebal Plains!"

"What?!" Shamour exclaimed.

In response, the messenger relayed even more startling information, "Furthermore, Fuuga's army has split to the sides, revealing his cavalry were marching in formation in the center. At the head of them is a massive tiger!"

"Fuuga Haan?! It's his main force of two thousand then!"

Why turn around here? Wasn't their goal to let Fuuga and his most powerful warriors escape? As Shamour was wondering that, he noticed the terrain around them. This was the valley leading into the Sebal Plains. It was a narrow road surrounded on both sides by mountains, drawing the thirteen thousand men of the United Force out in a long line. No, it can't be! Have we been lured in?!

Just as Shamour correctly appraised the threat, and was about to order his troops to halt, a messenger rushed up to him from behind, out of breath...

"I-I bear a message! The forces of the Kingdom of Gabi and the Duchy of Chima in Fort Sebal..."

“What?! What about them?!” Shamour demanded.

“Th-They appear to have turned on us! They’re sealing the entrance to the Sebal Plains!”

Shamour was dumbstruck by the messenger’s words. His troops were stretched out along the narrow valley. Now their retreat was cut off, and Fuuga’s forces had turned to face them. *I see it now... You were aiming for this all along, Fuuga. We had assumed you meant to join up with the rest of your forces, but from the very beginning, you intended to settle things here.*

Fuuga stood at the front of his army, glaring at the United Force.

“Finally... Finally, I can let loose.”

“Yes. Things have worked out just as Big Brother Hashim said they would,” Mutsumi, who stood at his side, agreed.

Her face was the picture of calm, but her arms trembled a little as she held the reins. For Fuuga, this was a once in a lifetime chance. For her, however, this situation was incontrovertible proof that her elder brother Hashim had betrayed their father Mathew. Although she would never say so, that must have shaken her up badly. But she was doing her best to hide it. That being the case, Fuuga chose to pretend not to notice out of consideration towards her.

Fuuga pointed Zanganto towards the United Force.

“I’ve made you endure a lot! But that ends now! They’ve formed a neat little line, waiting for us to cut them all down! Come on, men! Cut them down, leave them to bleed, and race onward! What you see there is the road to our time!”

“““Yeahhhhh!“““

The men who had been forced to endure let out a cry that vented all their frustrations up until this point. It was a roar that seemed to shake the earth itself.

Then, holding Zanganto ready, Fuuga gave the order...

“Chaaarge!”

◇ ◇ ◇

“Archers, loose your arrows!” Bito, King of Gabi, gave the order, and the famed longbowmen of Gabi rained magic enhanced arrows on the rear of the anti-Fuuga faction’s United Force.

“Wh-What?!”

“An attack from the rear...?! Gah!”

The sudden rain of arrows from behind knocked the soldiers of the United Force from confidence in their assured victory to feverish confusion. Some tried to flee in the opposite direction of the arrows in their bewilderment, but for some reason the troops ahead of them had stopped advancing, resulting in congestion. They couldn’t run away.

“Damn you, King Gabi! You traitorous wretch!”

The soldiers that learned of the betrayal were enraged, and men were sent to deal with those infuriating longbowmen. However, they were blocked by infantry from the Kingdom of Gabi, the Duchy of Chima, and the five hundred men from Fuuga’s army who had been holding the fort.

With heavy infantry sealing the tight passage, the soldiers of the United Force could not break through, and all the while a rain of arrows had them dropping like flies.

In the middle of the infantry desperately trying to hold back the United Force...

“Hahhh!” Only the section led by Nata was blowing away the onrushing soldiers like they were nothing. Resting the large ax he had been swinging around on his shoulder, Nata clicked his tongue in

irritation. “Tch! I took this side because my bro said I should, but all I’m getting to fight here are small fry.”

Nata, who had been in the service of the Kingdom of Sharn, had ended up betraying his father Mathew and his liege Shamour due to Hashim’s persuasion. Originally, he had been looking forward to his battle with Fuuga, who was seen as the most powerful in the Union, more than anything.

Hashim had told him, *“Even if you stay with the Kingdom of Sharn, you’ll only ever face enemies from inside the Union of Eastern Nations. Perhaps you would enjoy a once in a lifetime battle with Fuuga under Sir Shamour’s command. But don’t you want to fight the warriors from outside this country? Don’t you want to fight countries larger than any nation in the Union?”*

Then, Hashim extended the invitation, *“Nata, come to Sir Fuuga’s side with me. His ambition is too great for the Union to contain. He’ll show you battles the likes of which you’ve never seen.”*

The irresistible allure of those words brought Nata into Fuuga’s camp. However, as things stood, he was currently insatiable.

As if to vent his frustration, with a swing of his large ax, Nata bellowed, “You had best not bore me, brother! Or I’ll tear into you and Fuuga too!”

In a place somewhat more removed from the front line, the remaining Chima sons, Hashim and Nike, watched him.

“He’s like a wild beast,” Hashim said of his brother. “High maintenance, but...just as easy to manipulate.”

“Brother... I see you really do take after our father,” Nike said with a harshness in his eyes, but Hashim smiled faintly.

“Heh! I’ll take that as a compliment.”

There was no sarcasm in his tone. Even as he parted ways with his father, he was not entirely unhappy to be compared to him.

“Big Brother Nata is simple, so I can understand him, but...how did you convince King Gabi?” Nike asked, shaking his head.

“It was easy. The reason King Gabi is at the center of the anti-Fuuga faction now is that people believe he masterminded the failed assassination.” Hashim let out a throaty chuckle. “He thought that, with the suspicion of being the one behind Gauche’s attack hanging over him, even if he joined the pro-Fuuga faction, he would never be forgiven. I revealed to him I had ties to Sir Fuuga, and told him that if he were to betray the United Force and distinguish himself in battle, he would not be held responsible for the failed assassination. Once I showed him a written promise to that effect from Sir Fuuga, it was easy to push him into going along with it.”

“It all came together just like that? What would you have done if he hadn’t agreed?”

“If persuasion wasn’t an option, I would simply have worked with Fuuga’s forces to eliminate him during the attack on Fort Sebal. It would have been a bit more of a hassle, but that’s for another time.”

“Right...” Nike felt newfound fear at how easily Hashim could say such incredible things.

“I thought the commands seemed out of character for Fuuga. So this was all your planning then, brother.”

“In order to wipe away all the anti-Fuuga elements in the Union with this one battle, I needed events to play out like this. The test was whether or not Fuuga could control himself until now...and, as I had expected, he is fit to rule. Even as his own comrades were sacrificed, he endured and did as I had advised him. He is deserving of every ounce of wisdom I can support him with.”

The sparkle in Hashim’s eyes told Nike all he needed to know. Nata wasn’t the only one who had been waiting for the moment he’d take flight. Hashim, too, had been looking to cast aside the tiny birdcage

of the Union in favor of a place his talents could be put to use, and a master who would use them.

Hashim stared at Nike.

“But not everything went as planned. I was sure that, even if your pro-Fuuga master cast you out, you would go to Mutsumi’s side.”

Nike stared straight back at Hashim.

“You can’t count on everyone to move as you expect, brother. I’m a flesh and blood human. I’ll act according to my own will. Now then...” Nike shouldered his spear. “So long, brother, I’ll be taking my leave.”

When he heard that, without any change in expression, Hashim placed his hand on the hilt of the sword at his waist.

“I appreciate your cooperation in the plan. However, if you mean to go save father at this late stage...”

“Could you cut me down, brother?” Nike asked, glaring at Hashim.

If you were to simply compare their martial abilities, Nike had the upper hand, but Hashim was an above-average warrior in his own right, and depending on how he applied his skills, he might still come out on top.

The air grew tense for a moment, but Nike waved his hand to show he had no hostile intent.

“Don’t worry. I’m not planning on going to father.”

Actually, I get the feeling he wouldn’t want me to... Based on their conversation the other day, Mathew seemed to have accepted the current situation. If Nike went to save him, he’d only get angry and drive him away, he was sure of it.

“I’ll escape by following the swamp to the southwest. I have...some objectives of my own I want to accomplish. Ah! If you tell Fuuga’s

soldiers the fourth son of the House of Chima is on their side, and they should let me go, that'd be a big help.”

“I see...” Hashim removed his hand from the hilt of his sword. “That is unfortunate. I had hoped you would join me in supporting Sir Fuuga. If possible, I’d ask you to avoid becoming his enemy in the future. It would sadden Mutsumi, I’m sure.”

“I have no desire to become Big Sister Mutsumi’s enemy...”

Not that I have any desire to work with Big Brother Hashim or Big Brother Nata either... Nike felt like he and Hashim were incompatible. It might be similar to the way he’d felt about his father Mathew.

Still keeping those feelings hidden, Nike lowered his head. “Well then, brother... I’ll pray for your success.”

“Yeah. And I’ll pray for your safety.”

And with that, Nike left the battlefield without turning back.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, Shamour had found Fuuga on Durga’s back in front of the United Force, crushing soldiers under the flying tiger’s paws.

Dismounting, he shouted, “I take it that you are Fuuga Haan! I challenge you to a duel!”

Hearing him, Fuuga’s advance slowed. Then he turned to Shuukin and Kasen who were with him and said, “Shuukin! Kasen! You lead the cavalry to keep on crushing the United Force! I’ll take care of this guy!”

“Huh?! Lord Fuuga?!” Kasen was confused.

“Lord Fuuga! If you simply ignore him, someone else will strike him down!” Shuukin said with a harsh look in his eyes, but Fuuga had a fierce smile on his face.

"Their commander-in-chief chose to get down off his horse and face me rather than run away! It wouldn't be right to just let any ordinary soldier be the one to slay him. I'll strike him down myself and seal our victory."

"But..."

"Go. That's an order."

"Ah...! Yes, sir. Let's go, Kasen!"

"Huh? You're sure?!" Kasen sounded surprised.

"There's no reasoning with him when he gets like that," Shuukin explained, his face warping into a grimace. "We don't have the time right now. If we dilly-dally, the ringleaders of the anti-Fuuga faction might escape."

"U-Understood. Follow us, men!"

The duo led a mixed cavalry unit of horse and temsbock riders to strike the overstretched ranks of the United Force from the ends, crush them underfoot, and reap their lives. Shuukin cut down a fleeing soldier, while another who held his ground—hoping to land at least one blow before he fell—took an arrow through the throat from Kasen and collapsed. It was like an avalanche, wiping everything away.

The United Force fell into a state of panic, unable to advance or retreat, many of them being trampled by their own comrades. In the middle of all this, as victory was more or less certain, Fuuga approached Shamour and leapt down from Durga's back.

"Shamour, King of Sharn! It would be a shame to trample such determination under Durga's paws! I'll take your head myself!"

"Then come for it, you whelp!"

Fuuga and Shamour's battle began. Initially, Fuuga was entirely on the defensive.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Fuuga used Zanganto to repeatedly block Shamour's pounding blows.

"It feels good and weighty... Truly the sword of a man with a kingdom on his shoulders."

"What nonsense! Do you have nearly the determination I do, Fuuga Haan?!"

"Of course!" With that, Fuuga's Zanganto flashed, slicing Shamour's raised right arm off below the elbow. Seeing the shocked look on Shamour's face, Fuuga told him, "I'm prepared to carry that weight and more."

"You are, are you...?"

Shamour's calm expression made it hard to believe he had lost his right arm and a considerable amount of blood as he sat down on the spot.

"To think a man like you would be born in these lands... These lands where there are too many nations, all of them medium-sized or smaller, none able to stand head and shoulders above the rest..."

Shamour looked up at Fuuga, laughing at his own expense. "What do you think? Of me...? Was I a foe who made you struggle...?"

"Yeah... It wasn't a small number of my men who died to pay for this victory."

Hearing Fuuga's words, Shamour smiled despite the pain in his right arm.

"Heh heh heh... If I blocked your path even a little...I could ask for no more."

"Oh, yeah...? So long. You were the first great wall in my way."

With that, a flash of Zanganto parted Shamour's head from his body. His face showed not a hint of fear as he died. He left for the next world without anguish or regret.

Fuuga closed his eyes and offered just a moment of silence, then raised his voice to declare, “I, Fuuga Haan, have slain the enemy commander, Shamour Sharn!”

◇ ◇ ◇

The death of Shamour caused even greater chaos among the anti-Fuuga force who, unable to advance or retreat, lost many men to another charge by Fuuga’s cavalry. Even if they escaped the charge, the recovered infantry came in for revenge, adding to the pile of corpses. And so, at the same time as Fuuga’s forces had fully dominated the United Force, Shuukin and Kasen were rushing down the highway across the Sebal Plains. Their goal was the United Force’s main camp.

Now that King Gabi had turned traitor, it was safe to assume Gabi Castle was already in Fuuga’s hands. All that remained was to take the lightly guarded main camp, and capture the remaining mastermind, Mathew Chima, thereby ending the war.

“Kasen! You lead the cavalry and run down the fleeing members of the United Force. I’ll lead a unit to take the enemy’s main camp.”

“Understood! Be careful, Sir Shuukin.”

“Right. You too.”

Each wishing the other success in battle, the duo parted. When Shuukin left the pursuit to charge into the enemy’s main camp, he found it strangely deserted.

“This is odd... Have the defenders already fled?”

Walking past the chevaux-de-frise, Shuukin and his men cautiously advanced deeper into the main camp. There they found a single man inside the curtains where the former commander-in-chief, Shamour, had once been.

"You're...Duke Chima?" Shuukin asked, recognizing him, and Mathew crossed his arms and lowered his head.

"Indeed I am. I assume you must be a commander of some renown."

"I am Lord Fuuga's subordinate, Shuukin Tan."

"A close associate of Fuuga's, then... That's good."

Mathew's cool expression made Shuukin suspicious.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wanted to have a little talk before I take responsibility for my actions as a commander of the defeated army. And if it was the common soldiers who charged in here, I'm sure they would have beheaded me before I could say another word."

Those words, "*Before I take responsibility.*" Shuukin realized Mathew was prepared to die.

As a warrior, he could mercilessly cut down men who opposed him, or those who turned their backs and fled. However, when he encountered someone who had accepted death, it was in his nature as a warrior to want to pay his respects.

Shuukin dismounted and stood before Mathew, who smiled wryly at Shuukin's forthrightness.

"So? What is it you wanted to talk about?"

"Have a seat first..." Mathew gestured towards the camp stools.

Shuukin took a seat, and Mathew sat across from him.

"You're the only one in the main camp now, Duke Chima?" Shuukin asked and Mathew nodded.

"Yes. When they saw the main force broken, the defenders fell over themselves in their hurry to flee. But this is King Gabi's domain. Now that he has sided with Fuuga, I cannot imagine they'll get far..."

“And that’s why you haven’t fled? Because it would be pointless?”
Shuukin asked and Mathew chuckled a little in response.

“I need to take responsibility as the one who started this war.
Besides, I had something to leave with you. I prepared it while I was
waiting for you to arrive.”

“Something to leave with me?”

At that, Mathew produced two letters from his pocket.

“One is to Fuuga’s wife, Mutsumi. The other is to Hashim, who has
joined you. You’re welcome to check the contents, but, well, they’re
a will of sorts.”

“A will... And you want it given to Hashim too? After he stabbed you
in the back?”

It was Hashim who had been corresponding with Fuuga and had
caused Mathew’s strategy to fail. Shuukin, who had assumed
Mathew would resent him for that, found this request suspicious.

“You think I would resent him? Ha ha ha!” Mathew laughed at the
idea. “Why would I? He demonstrated more than enough talent in
this war. There’s no question he’s fit to take over the House of
Chima.”

Then, his expression relaxing, Mathew continued.

“Here in this land, where so many powers rise and fall, there are
times when a small nation must do questionable things in order to
survive. What Hashim did here is what our family has always done all
this time, and what I myself have done too. He truly has inherited my
blood.”

His eyes showed no indecision, he fully believed his words.

“I cannot understand...” Shuukin replied.

“Of course not. You’re not a member of our house, after all.” Having said that, Mathew asked Shuukin, “By the way, what became of Nata and Nike who took part in the battle?”

“I believe Sir Nata joined our side along with Sir Hashim. Sir Nike cooperated with Sir Hashim for some time, but I’ve received reports that he’s since withdrawn from the battlefield.”

“Hmm. If we started a war of this scale, and I am the only Chima who needs to lose his life for it, then that is an excellent result.”

He spoke as if his own life meant nothing. It showed just how long his family had been doing arithmetic with their own lives, deciding who would live and who would die.

Still, Shuukin couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Duke Chima… Have you no mind to surrender? It’s not too late. You are Lady Mutsumi’s father. That makes you Lord Fuuga’s father-in-law. I am sure even my lord must respect your ability to have gathered so many against him...”

“I cannot,” Mathew refused firmly. “If I were to shamelessly cling to life, it would weaken Mutsumi’s position and lessen Hashim’s value as ‘a man who abandoned even his own father to join Sir Fuuga.’ That is the one thing that I, as head of the House of Chima, cannot do.”

With that, Mathew rose from his seat and handed the two letters to Shuukin.

“I am satisfied. Hashim has grown to the point where he can carry the House of Chima, and I was able to face a great man in a grand battle at the very end. It’s a shame I couldn’t win, but I have no regrets.”

“Duke Chima...”

Mathew turned his back to Shuukin, and sat down on the ground.

“Now, take my head back with you. I’m counting on you to deliver those letters.”

“I swear it will be done.”

Shuukin rose and drew his sword. He lifted it up high, then swung down.

The conniving Mathew Chima. A man who suffered ignominy, giving everything to preserve his house and bloodline, died a death far more noble than the life he’d lived.

◇ ◇ ◇

One battle had ended. The valley leading into the Sebal Plains was littered with the corpses of the United Force’s soldiers, and the river ran red with their blood. The survivors fled in all directions, or surrendered and became prisoners. It was safe to assume that eighty percent of the anti-Fuuga faction inside the Union of Eastern Nations were wiped out on this day.

As Fuuga’s forces were cleaning up after the battle in the middle of the Sebal Plains, three individuals came to his tent in the main camp and bowed down in front of him. They were the ones who had switched sides in the middle of the battle: King Gabi, Hashim Chima, and Nata Chima. Shuukin and Mutsumi stood on either side of Fuuga.

“Well done, I guess I should say,” Fuuga said, looking down at them from the camp stool he was sitting on. “Will you swear loyalty to me now?”

“Yes, sir!” King Gabi said, bowing so low his forehead nearly scraped the dirt. “While Gauche acted alone, it is my fault that I was unable to keep one of my people under control. I also went down the wrong path and joined the anti-Fuuga faction. Yet you accepted me, my lord, even though I once opposed you. In order to repay this debt of gratitude, I intend to work myself to the bone on your behalf.”

"We feel the same as King Gabi," Hashim said, bowing his head.

Fuuga rose from his camp stool, taking his Zanganto from Shuukin, and laying the blade against the side of Hashim's neck. The look in Fuuga's eyes made King Gabi break into a cold sweat.

"You have my thanks for what you did, but I have no love for those who stab others in the back," Fuuga said as he looked down at Hashim. The cold blade touched Hashim's neck.

If Fuuga pulled it just a little, the sharp Zanganto would slice through his flesh, and a crimson shower would burst forth.



A long silence passed between them. It was so quiet that the racing hearts of all those who were watching this tense scene unfold sounded noisy.

Once the painful silence passed, Fuuga withdrew his blade from Hashim's neck, Then, sitting once more, he struck Zanganto's pommel on the ground.

"It is not to happen again! I want all three of you to remember that!"

"""Yes, sir!"" The three bowed their heads in unison.

Fuuga continued, "Hashim, stay. The other two, leave. The rest of you are dismissed."

Nata and Gabi took their leave at his command. Once they had left the tent, a short time passed, and then Fuuga handed his Zanganto back to Shuukin before putting his hands on his knees.

"Was that good, Hashim?"

"Yes, sir. An admirable performance," Hashim said, raising his head with a nonchalant expression on his face. Fuuga smiled wryly when he saw it.

"You were on our side all along. In fact, we were following a plan you dreamed up. I never thought I'd have to call you a traitor."

As Fuuga said, despite remaining with Mathew and the United Force, Hashim had been leaking information to Fuuga. He had also been the one to suggest using a fake retreat to draw their enemies into the narrow valley where they could eradicate them with a counterattack. This war could largely be considered Hashim's strategic victory.

Hashim smiled. "The rest of the commanders will hear about the look in your eyes when you told me never to betray you again from King Gabi. That will give them the impression that while you are

generous enough to take in your former enemies, you are also frighteningly merciless to those who oppose you.”

Though Hashim could not have known this, what he was saying was remarkably similar to Chapter 18 of Souma’s favorite book, *The Prince*, which said, “It is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man.”

The law is to be used with men, and force with beasts. This is because in the real world a ruler must at times confront men who will abandon their beliefs like wild beasts, and at those times the ruler must not hesitate to use force to make them submit as beasts do. The lesson is that a ruler must have two faces.

Hashim continued, “Also, if we create the impression that I was the leader of those who switched sides to join you, then every time you recognize one of my accomplishments, you will look like a big man who is not prejudiced against people because of their backgrounds. Most of the soldiers captured in this battle were just following orders. If they see me being treated well, they will feel safe joining you.”

“I see...”

“At the same time, if anyone hopes to conspire against you in future, they will attempt to win me to their side first. When they do, their plans will be exposed, and we can deal with the rebellion before it even begins.”

“Ha ha ha! Wonderful!” Fuuga slapped his knee as he cackled. “I’ve always wanted a man like you—someone who’s always thinking two steps ahead. My followers are all strong, but they’re only a step or two removed from barbarians who think you can solve any problem with fighting. Only Shuukin, Mutsumi, and Kasen would be of any use at political dealing. Although, with Kasen’s young age, no one would follow him.”

“Surely you don’t need to belittle your own followers...” Shuukin chastised him with a sigh.

“It’s the truth. When I think about what’s to come, I know we’ll need to gather people with different abilities that we don’t have, and put them to work. Luckily, there’s someone who’s given us an example of how to do that.”

Fuuga spoke with Souma in mind. He was confident he would never lose to Souma in martial prowess or charisma, but when it came to knowledge and the ability to use people, Fuuga had to acknowledge he was no match.

“That’s a good way of thinking.” Hashim nodded. “To that end, we must take control of the Union of Eastern Nations swiftly, and find the talent hidden there. In particular, our lack of bureaucrats to handle domestic affairs could prove deadly. If we mean to expand our territory, we will need to gather enough administrators to manage all of it.”

“Knowing that’s the truth just makes it more painful to hear...” Fuuga shrugged his shoulders in exasperation. “But of course. I plan to bring in more people and expand. You’ll lead them, Hashim. In your eyes, though...is King Gabi someone we can use?”

Hashim smiled slightly. “My brother Nata fights like a wild beast, and that is all he has in his head, so he is easy to manipulate. King Gabi, however, is the sort of person who puts his own self-preservation before the benefit of the group as a whole. There is a high risk he will turn again, so we cannot give him any important task.”

“I knew he was untrustworthy... Then, what do you think we should do with him?”

“From here on, you will no doubt work to mop up any remaining anti-Fuuga elements, Lord Fuuga. There will eventually be a difficult battle, and when there is, he should be placed on the front lines with

orders to ‘Keep our losses to a minimum.’ Then, afterwards, we can hold him responsible for his poor performance. His bowmen are powerful, so let’s place them under your direct command when that is done.”

There was a coldness in Hashim’s eyes, and the look on the honest Shuukin’s face made it clear he didn’t like it. Fuuga, however, laughed raucously.

“Well! It looks like I’m going to need guys who can make suggestions like that from now on... You’ll help me, of course, won’t you?”

“That has been my intention all along. Please, keep marching on through the light of day, Lord Fuuga.” Hashim’s words showed his determination to be the one who would handle all of the work in the shadows.

As he looked at Hashim, Fuuga asked something that had been bothering him. “Tell me one last thing. Did you not feel hesitant to betray Duke Chima...Mathew Chima?”

That question made Mutsumi, who had been quiet all this time, shudder a little. She must have had her own thoughts about her brother who had betrayed their father in order to join them.

Here, for the first time, Hashim’s eyes grew harsh. He looked straight at Fuuga, almost as though he were glaring at him.

“No one, not even you, Lord Fuuga, could possibly understand what we had between us as father and son.”

“Oh...?”

“It was father himself who raised me into the kind of commander who could make a decision like this. You are a great man, known throughout the world, and I determined that you would be able to put my talents—talents which were wasted here in the cage that is the Union of Eastern Nations—to use. Were my father younger, and

not as constrained by his position, no doubt he would have taken the same path I have. I am sure that my father understood my actions, just as I understood him.”

Fuuga was overwhelmed for a moment, but soon let out a sigh.

“You really were father and son... Shuukin.”

“Yes, sir.” Shuukin walked before Hashim and dropped to one knee, producing a letter from his pocket which he offered to him. “I am the one who cut down Sir Mathew. I was there for his final moments.”

“I see...”

“This is the letter that Sir Mathew asked me to deliver to you. There was another, that one addressed to Madam Mutsumi.”

When Hashim accepted the letter, Shuukin bowed his head and then returned to his original position.

Mutsumi pulled out her own letter so that Hashim could see it.

“In mine he apologized for opposing Lord Fuuga, worsening my position, and said that he was satisfied with his life. He also wrote that I shouldn’t resent you. It seems...he understood you just as well as you said.”

Mutsumi lowered her eyes in sadness. Hashim closed his.

After some time, Fuuga spoke, “I looked through his letter to you. You should read it.”

“Yes, sir... If that is what you wish.”

Hashim opened the letter, looked through it, then...

“Huh?!”

His eyes went wide.

Unlike in Mutsumi’s letter, there was not one word of apology, not one request for forgiveness, let alone a word of grievance. It only

said how things were to be handled after his death. Included were a list of names, and the countries those people were presently attached to. As Hashim processed everything, he held the paper so tight that it crumpled. It was a list of all the human resources that Mathew could think of.

When the main unit of the United Force was destroyed, Mathew had spent all the time he had left before death came for him writing out the names of people they could hire to support Fuuga's domination. There was not one unnecessary word there. However, that showed that Mathew recognized Hashim's abilities, and went to the afterlife knowing the family was in good hands.

"What happened...to my father's remains?"

"They've been carefully preserved, and no one will touch them. Mutsumi will hold a funeral for him later."

"I see..." Hashim hung his head, not looking up for some time.

Tears streaked down Mutsumi's cheeks as she looked at him, almost as if she were crying because he could not.

Seeing the tears on her cheeks, Fuuga thought, *You made her cry twice... You damned fool*, as he thought of the late Mathew Chima.



Chapter 7: Groundwork

In the Battle of the Sebal Plains, the anti-Fuuga faction was greatly weakened by the loss of the majority of its fighting force, as well as the central figures, Shamour Sharn and Mathew Chima. The anti-Fuuga states were destroyed one after another by Fuuga, the states that supported him, and even rebellions by the Fuuga supporters among their own citizens.

As this unfolded, there were those like Hashim Chima, who led an army and distinguished himself in battle, quickly earning his place as Fuuga's advisor; as well as those working hard out of a desperation to prove their loyalty, like Bito Gabi. Among those who swore loyalty to Fuuga after the war, some were cast out for failing to live up to expectations, while others were found to have been plotting against him, and were cut down.

There were those who rose during the chaos, those who were destroyed, and those who could only watch it all happen. In the midst of all these conflicting emotions, blood was shed all across the Union of Eastern Nations.

◇ ◇ ◇

— Three months after the Battle of the Sebal Plains —

The Union of Eastern Nations was in the process of being reorganized with Fuuga as the sole power. With so many different forces, it had been hard for any one country to stand out in the Union of Eastern Nations before, but a centralization around Fuuga was now underway— That was the report I had just heard from Hakuya in the governmental affairs office in Parnam Castle.

“He’s moving faster than I expected...” I said, giving my honest reaction. “I was scared of his potential as a great man, and the charisma that pulls people to him as he blindly chases his dream. The

way he seems so innocent, without any dark side, and only grows larger and larger.”

“Yes, I agree...”

“But on the flip side, because he has no dark side, there is a certain naivety about him. Because of his great generosity, he would even welcome outsiders who couldn’t share his dream into the fold. I thought that would eventually cause friction and discord which would pull the rug out from under him.”

If Fuuga had the kind of charisma that drew everyone to him, and a willingness to accept anyone, then that would include those interested only in preserving themselves, or who secretly harbored hostility towards him. The great men of history often were tripped up by mediocre commanders who could not appreciate their vision, and those who rebelled against them. I thought Fuuga would be the same.

“But the way that he’s treated those who were late to join him isn’t like Fuuga. Basically, he’s bullied them and driven them out, or framed and killed them. He wasn’t the type to do that.”

“At times, a ruler must be prepared to do both good and evil. Sir Fuuga must have found himself someone who can advise him when it is time to be evil,” Hakuya responded, wariness creeping into his voice. “His handling of the anti-Fuuga faction has been logical and cruel. His advisor must be a good one.”

“You mean Hashim Chima from your report?”

“I believe so. The man seems to have inherited much of Duke Chima’s aptitude for diplomacy and scheming.”

“That’s troublesome. He’s the kind of person I least wanted Fuuga to have at his side.” I let out a sigh, tapping my temple. “I guess I’ll need to assume Fuuga has someone close to him who can operate on the

same level as you, huh? Hakuya, if you were serving Fuuga, what would your next plan be?”

“More groundwork, of course. With the many members of the neutral faction remaining, we cannot say that he’s taken control of the Union of Eastern Nations just yet.”

“The neutrals, huh...?” I rose and walked over to stand by the glass door that led out onto the balcony. “Knowing Fuuga, he’ll try to bring the neutrals to his side. He has the charisma to do it, after all. That would be the fastest way to bring the Union of Eastern Nations together, and would avoid earning him a lot of unnecessary enmity.”

“But that would weaken their internal unity. If he brings in people whose stance is uncertain, it will only serve to harm him in the long run. If you look at things practically, he shouldn’t do it... If I were his adviser, I would tell him that.”

“Then I’m sure Hashim will do the same. And we’ve seen Fuuga has the capacity to listen to advice... We’ll see more blood spilled yet. It looks like we can’t expect all news to be good news.”

In this case, the good news was that Roroa had discovered she was pregnant some months ago.

“Now I’m gonna be a momma too! You keep on treatin’ me right now, darlin’.”

I remembered the gleeful but slightly shy look on her face when she told me. I’d usually been abroad when I found out about these things before now, but this time I was in the castle, so we were able to have a big family celebration. Juna was due soon too, so I had been savoring the joys of family.

Speaking of family... I looked up at the sky through the glass windows. Lastania was neutral too. Will Julius and Princess Tia be all right?



— Meanwhile, in Lastania —

In the royal manor where the royal family lived, the king's agent Julius was sitting beside his wife Princess Tia, who had grown her hair a little longer, and across from her parents, the royal couple.

He presented two letters to the king.

“Father, I would like you to take mother and Tia with you on a diplomatic mission.”

“Lord Julius!” Tia shouted, gulping at what he had just proposed.

However, Julius paid no mind to her, continuing to say, “First you will visit Queen Sill of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, and deliver this letter. Then I want you to travel to the Kingdom of Friedonia with an escort from the Dragon Knight Kingdom where you will meet King Souma and deliver this letter. With a dragon knight escort, I am sure you should be able to pass through the Star Dragon Mountain Range.”

“You’re asking us to leave the country...?” King Lastania asked, looking Julius in the eye. Julius nodded. Then he opened another letter and showed it to the other three.

“This is a letter from Fuuga Haan. Or an invitation, rather. He is holding a banquet for all the rulers who neither supported nor opposed him. It’s meant to get to know us and win our support. But...”

Having said that much, Julius narrowed his eyes. They were so cold that they made Princess Tia jump. It was almost as if he had gone back to being the man he was when he lived in Amidonia.

“...That is only for public consumption.”

“There’s more to it, then?” King Lastania asked and Julius nodded.

“It’s the way he treats those who were slow to join him. Punishing them to set an example to others is at odds with how Fuuga always

was before now. It's very pragmatic; the sort of thing a man like me would prefer."

"No..."

His father Gaius had once told him their royal family had the blood of venomous snakes running in their veins. And a snake knows how a snake thinks.

"It's likely a plan from that newcomer, Hashim. Which makes it highly likely this banquet is also his idea."

"If so, won't failing to attend worsen our position?"

"Yes. He will likely see anyone who doesn't attend as having the intent to oppose him, and use that as a pretext to attack. Whether we go or don't, only ruin awaits us."

"So we run...?"

Julius nodded again. "If Fuuga attacks with the full might of the Union of Eastern Nations, then even our alliance with the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom cannot protect us. Even if we could hold them off for a time, the land would be laid to ruin, and the country would no longer be able to support itself."

"But a king mustn't abandon his people..."

"My greatest worry is that the people will abandon their king." Julius forced the good-natured King of Lastania to look at reality. "There are many in our own land who would like to see themselves under the protection of Fuuga. After all the suffering they experienced in the recent demon wave, it's somewhat natural they would look for someone strong to defend their lives and property. For those people, the old royal family will only be in the way."

Julius had experienced this once before. When the people of Amidonia only had Gaius to cling to, they were loyal. However, because of the liberal rule they experienced under Souma's

occupation of Van, and the death of Gaius in battle, the people were quick to accept rule by the Kingdom. Even when Julius regained power, many of the people supported Roroa, who was closer in temperament to Souma, and they threw Julius out.

King Lastania has no counterargument to these words born from personal experience. Instead, Tia pressed closer to Julius.

“Just now, you said the three of us should go. Do you mean to stay here, Lord Julius?”

Seeing the look of concern on her face, Julius gently stroked Tia’s hair.

“I need to buy time so that our escape goes unnoticed... Besides, while I did say that many want to be protected by Fuuga, Jirukoma and Lauren also love and respect the royal family as well. I need to arrange for their escape.”

“Then I will stay too!”

“Tia...” Julius looked her straight in the eye. “I’ll be fine. I won’t miss the right time to escape. In fact, the worry caused by you staying would make it harder for me to focus on my task.”

“Lord Julius...”

“Besides, your belly grows larger by the day.”

“Ah...!” Tia subtly laid a hand on her own stomach.

Inside, a new life was growing. A child bearing the blood of the royal families of Lastania and Amidonia. Julius pulled Tia, who now bore his child, and would soon be a mother, close to him, stroking her hair gently.

“You understand, right, Tia? What we need to defend most of all.”

“Our child...”

“Of course. I won’t throw my life away before finding out if it’s a girl or a boy.”



Julius looked at the royal couple.

“So, father, mother, I’m asking you to take care of Tia.”

“Okay... We will do everything as you say, son-in-law.”

“Sir Julius, please stay safe.”

The next day, the Lastanian royal couple and Princess Tia quietly escaped the country with an escort from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom. The people were told they were on a diplomatic voyage to improve relations with the Kingdom of Friedonia.

◇ ◇ ◇

A few days before the invitation arrived in Lastania...

The word “Machiavellianism” takes his view that sometimes, when pursuing political ends, you cannot be picky about the means, and extends that to refer to an ends-justifies-the-means philosophy. Such ruthless people are criticized as being Machiavellian. This was primarily used by the Christian church, with its philanthropic beliefs, to reject Machiavelli’s views, and largely a misconception.

Whether Machiavelli himself was Machiavellian or not is beside the question. However, Hashim Chima, who came into the service of Fuuga Haan, was most definitely Machiavellian. He proposed that Fuuga invite the lords who had been members of the neutral faction to a banquet in his new base, a castle in the former Kingdom of Shamour, then massacre them under the guise of a terrorist attack by the anti-Fuuga faction. Fuuga, who was sitting on the throne, frowned at this, while his wife, Mutsumi, who was standing at his side covered her mouth and gasped.

Fuuga glared at Hashim. “You’re telling me to do that?”

"No. I will do it myself, without your knowledge," Hashim replied, unfazed. Fuuga rested his cheek on his palm.

"If you're asking me to turn a blind eye, then that's no different... Is this necessary?"

"If your goals go no further than unifying the Union and expanding into the Demon Lord's Domain, then no. However, if you intend to compete with the Gran Chaos Empire and Kingdom of Friedonia for supremacy, it definitely is. There are too many things we lack," Hashim explained, his eyes serious. "Even if you add up the populations of every country in the Union of Eastern Nations, it is less than half that of the Kingdom of Friedonia. The comparison with the Empire is even worse, with us only having a third, possibly a quarter, of their population. No matter how we expand into the Demon Lord's Domain, that is not a thing we can overturn. On top of that, both the Empire and Kingdom are stable, with excellent rulers. If things continue as they are, the gap will only continue to widen."

"Which is why...you want me to hurry along with the unification?"

"Yes. The only area in which we are definitely ahead of them is that we are in an era where people seek great men such as yourself, and you provide a centralizing force."

"You don't mince words..." Fuuga shrugged.

Hashim had spoken the truth. A large part of the reason that Malmkhitan, only one country in the Union of Eastern Nations, had been able to expand so much, so quickly was that they were in the right place at the right time. Ever since the Demon Lord's Domain expanded, the people of the Union had felt closed-in. They saw Fuuga as a leader who could break free from that, and that hope drove them to support him.

"But, at the same time, that is a precarious thing. Because you have gathered the people's hopes unto yourself, Lord Fuuga, you must

always produce results. If you grind to a halt, their disappointment will be the end of you. You will lose the support of your people, and the nation will crumble in no time.”

“So you’re saying, if the people lose their fervor, I’m done.”

“Yes. And we can’t be sure that this era will go on for years.”

“It could happen any time...so hurry up with the unification?”

“Precisely.”

“Brother!” Mutsumi interjected, unable to simply watch any longer.

“The neutral faction includes—”

“King Heinrant of Roth and his adopted daughter Sami, right?”

Hashim asked, finishing her sentence.

The calmness of Hashim’s response left Mutsumi at a loss for words.

“It still must be done. Even if we are to be divided into friend and foe, the blood and family name must live on. That is how father taught us the head of the House of Chima must be. Besides, we’ll only kill the king. I won’t harm Sami as long as she doesn’t resist.”

“Brother...”

“As Lord Fuuga’s queen, you should be prioritizing the House of Haan, Mutsumi.”

“Yes... I understand that.”

If this was for Fuuga’s benefit, Mutsumi had to back down.

Seeing Mutsumi’s reaction, Fuuga asked Hashim, “This will mean less blood is shed, right?”

“Yes. It will be criticized as a conspiracy for some time. But, if we take the long view of things, this is the method that will have the least sacrifices. People of future generations will understand.”

“Not that I care what some people who aren’t even born yet are gonna think...” Having made up his mind, Fuuga slapped his knee. “Fine. You do what you think is right.”

“By your will.” Hashim bowed his head. Mutsumi lowered her face in frustration.

With Fuuga’s permission given, the plan went into motion.

◇ ◇ ◇

Hashim sent those lords who’d remained neutral in the conflict invitations to a banquet where they would have the chance to better understand one another. There were a small number of countries, like the Kingdom of Lastania, which decided not to participate, but many of the leaders of the neutral faction gathered in Shamour Castle. And then...

Everyone who came was massacred.

Anti-Fuuga faction remnants who had infiltrated the gathering carried out a terrorist attack using gunpowder, and it was announced that everyone present had been caught in the blast. The news caused short-lived chaos throughout the Union of Eastern Nations, but it subsided when it was announced that Fuuga, who “coincidentally” happened to be out of the room at the time of the attack, had survived.

Naturally, some voiced their suspicion that this was all a plot by Fuuga. However, they were drowned out by the cheering of his supporters. The Union of Eastern Nations was an agglomeration of many small- to medium-sized states. Because of their size, the kings had a lot of influence, and with them gone many countries lacked anyone who could make final decisions. Those sorts of countries joined the Fuuga faction without considering revenge. However, a small number of nations fought back after their king was killed.

Such nations fell at the hands of the Fuuga supporters inside them, with one of them being the Kingdom of Roth.

King Heinrant had been killed in the plot. The third daughter of the House of Chima, Sami, issued a statement denouncing Fuuga, and closed the gates of their capital. Lombard, King of Remus, who was a friend of King Heinrant and a supporter of Fuuga led his troops to the gate. The soldiers did not draw their weapons and simply stood in formation. Lombard had not come to attack the city, but to persuade them to open the gates.

“Madam Sami! We have no desire to fight! Please surrender peacefully!”

“Sami! Please! Open the gate!” Yomi called out, desperate to save her twin little sister.

With the Union of Eastern Nations having almost entirely fallen into Fuuga’s hands, one small nation resisting him would have no future. It was clear that his supporters would raze the entire country.

“Yomi, look out!”

“Huh?!”

Lombard grabbed Yomi by the arm, pulling her back. When he did, a mass of ice thudded into the ground right in front of where they had been standing and exploded. The two of them looked up to see Sami atop the walls, her raised hand pointing towards them. The soldiers of the Kingdom of Roth stood with her, bows drawn, keeping the men of the Kingdom of Remus in check.

“Sami...”

That had been a warning shot. If she were serious, Sami had magic that could freeze a wide area.

Looking down at them, Sami said, “Go home, Yomi.”

“Please, Sami! Listen to us!”

“We have nothing to talk about,” Sami told her with eyes as cold as ice. “My father Hein is gone. He treasured me like I was his own daughter, and reminded me of what a warm, loving family is supposed to be like...and then Fuuga Haan murdered him.”

“I’m telling you, that was a suicide bomber from the anti-Fuuga faction...”

“You know that’s a lie, Yomi! This is how Big Brother Hashim operates!”

Yomi had no response to that as she’d figured it out herself.

Lombard stepped forward in her stead. “Even if we go home, Sir Fuuga’s forces will be here in no time. If that happens, the Kingdom of Roth and all its people will be wiped out... I’m disappointed about what happened to Sir Heinrant too. But now that it has, I don’t want to let the ones he loved, you and the people of his country, perish!”

“.....”

“Please, surrender! I’ll defend you and the people even if it costs me my life! Knowing gentle Heinrant, I can’t imagine he would have wanted you to seek revenge!”

“Despite that kindness, brother killed him! My own...brother...” A large tear rolled down Sami’s face. “I had a sneaking suspicion that the banquet was his plot. I told father not to go. But...he said he was worried that would draw suspicion, and he couldn’t put me or his people in danger, so...he went alone...”

“Sami...”

“Madam Sami...”

“I will never forgive our brother—Hashim Chima!”

As Sami declared that, the air chilled around them. Its moisture froze and sparkled. She was likely about to use some serious ice magic. Sami raised her hand and pointed towards Yomi and Lombard.

“Yomi, if you’re siding with Hashim, I won’t hesitate to...”

“Stop it, Sami!”

“So this is how it goes, after all...” said a voice.

“Huh?!” Shocked, Sami turned to the direction of the voice.

At some point, a man wearing a hood had appeared and was standing behind her. It surprised the men of the Kingdom of Roth and Kingdom of Remus too. As Sami reflexively attempted to use magic, the man closed in faster than she could, and delivered a body blow. Sami groaned as she was knocked unconscious.

The defenders turned their bows towards the hooded man with murderous intent, but he held up a hand to stop them as he slowly drew back his hood.

“Put your weapons away. I’m Nike Chima. Little brother to Big Sisters Sami and Yomi.”

Yomi’s eyes widened as she saw him from outside the walls. “Nike?! What are you doing here?!”

“Big Sister Mutsumi’s orders. She saw this coming, so she had me lie low in the Kingdom of Roth to protect Sami because they were in the neutral faction.”

With that explained, Nike hefted the unconscious Sami over his shoulder, and turned to the soldiers of the Kingdom of Roth.

“I will take responsibility for ensuring Big Sister Sami’s safety,” he said. “So you open the gate, and surrender to Sir Lombard.”

There was much chatter among the soldiers. However, after some time...

“Okay...”

...The men put away their weapons. They had been obeying Sami out of a desire to at least protect the girl who King Heinrant had loved so

much. Now that Sami's safety was assured, there was no need to fight.

Seeing the soldiers of the Kingdom of Roth calm down, Nike carried Sami through the open gate on his shoulder. As he did, Yomi and Lombard rushed over to him.

"Nike..."

"Big Sister Yomi. I'll be taking Big Sister Sami with me."

"You...can't stay in this country any longer?" Yomi asked.

"As long as she stays here, Big Sister Sami will only continue to resent Big Brother Hashim and Sir Fuuga. Brother isn't so soft that he would let that go. He'd kill her eventually."

"And Big Sister Mutsumi asked you to stop that from happening?"

"Yeah. 'I don't want to lose any more family,' she said."

"I see..."

Realizing that things were out of her hands at this point, Yomi backed down. Because even if this ended up being the last time the two of them would ever meet, that was still preferable to Sami being killed.

On her behalf, Lombard asked, "Where will you go, Sir Nike?"

"First, I'll leave Big Sister Sami with Ichihai in the Kingdom of Friedonia. If she's there, not even Sir Fuuga or our brother can touch her easily. As for myself... Well, I'll figure that out in time."

"But didn't King Souma support Sir Fuuga?"

"When it came to the assassination, yes, but who knows how he really feels. That's probably why Big Sister Mutsumi specified I should leave Sami with him."

Nike loaded Sami onto a horse near the gate. Then, mounting it himself, he said his goodbyes.

“Farewell, Big Sister Yomi, Sir Lombard. Take care.”

“You too, Nike. And...tell Sami to ‘stay well’ for me, would you?”

“Sure.”

Nike’s horse started running, carrying Nike and Sami south. Yomi and Lombard watched them until they were out of sight.

◇ ◇ ◇

“The country’s finally in order, huh?” Fuuga said to his advisor Hashim who stood before him as he sat on his throne in Sharn Castle.

Hashim had his arms crossed, and his head lowered.

“Indeed. The anti-Fuuga faction has been wiped away, as have the neutrals who were not clear in their intent to join us. There is no one left in the Union of Eastern Nations to oppose you now, Lord Fuuga.”

“But we made Mutsumi sad to do it...” Fuuga said, resting his elbow on the arm of his throne, and his cheek on the palm of his hand as he stared at Hashim.

“It was our only choice,” said Hashim, lowering his head once more. “If you are going to rule the continent, the country had to be unified as soon as possible. I am sure Mutsumi understands. And besides, Yomi reported that Nike took Sami away unharmed.”

“Yeah... It sounds like Mutsumi gave him his marching orders knowing things would turn out this way. ‘I’m sorry for taking matters into my own hands,’ she said to me. Well, we were able to take the Kingdom of Roth without a drop of blood spilled as a result, so I let it slide. Looks like you were outwitted by your own little sister, huh, Hashim?”

Despite Fuuga’s teasing, Hashim simply shrugged.

“If your wife is a clever woman, and also my younger sister, then surely that is something to be welcomed. However, it does seem that

Sami has gone to be with Ichihia in the Kingdom of Friedonia. I can't say I approve of capable people passing into their hands."

Hashim didn't seem to think much of it. Fuuga snorted.

"Hmph. Yuriga's already there. If Sami still has it out for me, do you think it's possible she'd do something to Yuriga? Should I ask Souma to protect her?"

"It should be fine, I think. Sami's a smart girl. If there's anyone she's going to target for vengeance, it would be me."

Hashim seemed unfazed by the fact his own little sister now hated him.

Is this the blood of the Chimas, who had survived through subterfuge? Fuuga thought, narrowing his eyes.

"So, with no enemies left in the country, what now?"

"With the Union of Eastern Nations unified under you, we will announce the creation of a new state. That will show that this is no longer a union of nations, but a unitary state. We will also formally move the center of government here to Castle Sharn, which will receive a new name. With that, the largest city in the country will become the capital of a new nation that you will create, Lord Fuuga."

"Make the capital of the Kingdom of Sharn our capital? Is my homeland, Malmkhitan, not good enough?" Fuuga asked, but Hashim firmly shook his head.

"No city on the steppes is suited to be the capital of a whole country. If we were to create a new one, and gather people to it, that would be a waste of effort. If we did create a capital in Malmkhitan, the steppe folk and your long-serving commanders would be elated, but far more people would look down on you for it. We have a fine city here, so we should put it to use."

“Oh, I see...” Fuuga sounded a little disappointed, but he accepted the proposal.

Were Souma here to hear this exchange, he would have been impressed but also troubled, thinking, *So Hashim didn’t let him make the same mistake as Xiang Ji.*

Xiang Ji, also known as Xiang Yu, succeeded in destroying the Qin, but rejected his vassal’s suggestion to take their capital, Xianyang, with all of its geographical advantages, as his own.

“To succeed and not return home is like dressing up in fine clothes on the road at night. Who will even know?” he said, and moved his capital to Pengcheng.

As a result, the populous and important Guanzhong fell easily when Liu Bang advanced east. This gave Liu Bang an advantage they couldn’t roll back no matter how many victories they won on the battlefield.

In regards to the way to govern cities or principalities which lived under their own laws before they were annexed, Machiavelli offers three options. The first is to destroy them utterly, the second is to reside there, and the third is to install a puppet regime to rule them. Hashim’s plan was the second of these.

Fuuga scratched his cheek, feeling this was all too much trouble. “A new name, huh? Won’t the Kingdom of Malmkhitan do?”

“It will only create a rift between your old and new followers. Although it is only a matter of appearances, it will look as though you’ve extinguished the countries that supported you as well. It would be better to have the people of Malmkhitan continue to serve you under a new name. If it’s too much trouble to think of something, we could simply call it the Kingdom of Fuuga Haan.”

“If I gave it a self-aggrandizing name like that, Shuukin and the others would laugh at me pretty hard.”

"The soldiers and people have gathered to your side. I don't think it's strange to call it that, but... There is something we must do first."

Hashim's face grew serious. "We must handle the last of the neutral countries inside the Union of Eastern Nations, the Kingdom of Lastania. If we leave them as they are, we cannot start a new country."

"That country on the western edge, huh...?" Fuuga crossed his thick arms and groaned. "That country's a pain to deal with. They're allied to the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, which has a lot of powerful dragon knights. And Julius, the man eyed as their next king, is the big brother of Souma's third primary queen, Roroa. That makes him his brother-in-law. If we lay a hand on him, we run the risk of making an enemy."

"Yes. Which is why we left him to the end," Hashim said, pulling out a letter. "This list from father has two meanings. The first is 'Hire these hidden talents inside the Union of Eastern Nations.' And the second is 'If you cannot, then dispose of them before they become your enemies.'"

This was exactly how Fuuga and Hashim had operated thus far. Those on the list who submitted were placed in positions of importance, and those who adamantly refused were killed by subterfuge.

That said, with Fuuga's fortunes clearly on the rise, the number of people who would refuse to serve was small enough to count on your hands. If he were as obsessed with gathering personnel as Souma, he might have desperately tried to persuade them, but the more pragmatic Hashim was loath to go to such effort.

Hashim slapped the letter shut.

"And the last name on the list is Sir Julius of the Kingdom of Lastania. Father believed he was the most valuable talent in this country. It

would be reassuring to have him on our side, but frightening to see him become our enemy.”

“That’s Souma’s brother-in-law, the same guy we were just talking about, huh?”

“Yes. He was the crown prince of the former Principality of Amidonia, and his father Gaius fell in battle against King Souma. After that, his little sister, Princess Roroa, stole the country out from under him and sent him into exile. That’s why I thought we might win him to our side with the promise of revenge against the Kingdom of Friedonia, but...”

“It wasn’t meant to be, huh?”

Hashim nodded.

“During the demon wave, Sir Julius sent his own request to the Kingdom of Friedonia for reinforcements. I approve of his willingness to bow his head to a former enemy when it’s to his own benefit, but they may have become friends at that point. Princess Roroa sent him a wedding gift when he married the crown princess of Lastania, so their relationship has likely been mended too.”

“That means Julius is close to Souma.”

“Yes. So much so that we can’t leave him be. He’s a perceptive one too. He didn’t participate in the banquet where we plotted to wipe out the neutral faction.”

“What a headache...”

If they laid a hand on Julius, they risked stirring up the Kingdom of Friedonia. For Fuuga, who found something inscrutable about Souma, it seemed too soon to be picking a fight with that country. However, Julius was too talented for it to be safe to let him stay in the Union of Eastern Nations. They might be keeping a traitor in their midst.

“I guess we can’t leave the Kingdom of Lastania alone, then...” Fuuga came to a decision. Hashim gave him a big nod.

“Indeed. If we leave Sir Julius alone, every move we make will be leaked to the Kingdom. Besides, Sir Julius is their former enemy. Even if he’s killed, they’ll have no choice but to stay silent. Regardless of how King Souma or Queen Roroa may feel.”

“How do we do it? Have the neighboring states attack?”

“No, when we attack that country, the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom will ride to their aid. The Dragon Knight Kingdom was even able to fend off the Empire when it was at its peak... Although, it seems the Empire simply decided to change their policy and ignore them after seeing the heavy casualties.” Hashim shrugged, but immediately took on a serious expression and said, “If we don’t send a credible force, it won’t even put pressure on the Dragon Knight Kingdom. I believe you should lead your best men in the attack, Lord Fuuga.”

“Me, personally?” Fuuga asked and Hashim nodded.

“This is a battle against time. If they face the whole Union of Eastern Nations, then even with the Dragon Knight Kingdom’s help, the Kingdom of Lastania won’t be able to sustain themselves. Their land will be laid to waste, and supplies will dry up. So, if Sir Julius senses the invasion coming, he will likely attempt to flee the country. If he does, that will cause trouble for us.”

“Yeah, you’re right. If he goes to join Souma...that’d be a pain.”

“Indeed. And when the dragon knights come out to fight...”

“Only me and Durga are gonna be able to handle them, yeah.”

Fuuga had seen the Kingdom’s dragon knight Halbert and his partner Ruby once before.

In Fuuga's entire military, only he and Durga stood a chance against them in a straight-up fight. They were gathering the Union of Eastern Nations' wyvern cavalry and reorganizing them, but the dragon knights would tear them to pieces.

"Got it... Round up our best men. We'll attack the Kingdom of Lastania."

"By your will."

Fuuga hurriedly gathered his best men, and set out for the Kingdom of Lastania.



Chapter 8: A Large Skirmish

Word that Fuuga and his forces were marching towards Lastania had reached Julius. He sent a request to the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom for aid, while also planning to escape there with Jirukoma and anyone else who wanted to join them. Julius already laid the groundwork, so Queen Sill Munto was able to make the decision to dispatch the dragon knights immediately and lead them herself to ensure Julius's escape.

However, with only his best men joining him, Fuuga's forces moved faster than Julius anticipated. Fuuga's elites found Julius's party before they could cross the border, and were almost upon them. As the dragon knights came to support Julius, a clash with Fuuga was imminent.

You could say this battle was brought about by two geniuses—Julius and Hashim—each correctly assessing the other's abilities.

Julius understood how decisive Hashim was, and planned to make his escape with plenty of time to spare. He had predicted that Fuuga's forces would take the time to carefully prepare out of a wariness towards reinforcements from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom.

Meanwhile, Hashim believed that if he sent in only the elites, they might capture Julius's group before they could escape. If they could catch them before the Dragon Knight Kingdom could send reinforcements, he could avoid an unnecessary battle against the dragon knights.

In the end, Fuuga, with his highly mobile unit, finally came into contact with Julius's party, but not until Julius was already close to the border. If either party had been better at predicting the other, this battle wouldn't have happened. You could say it was the result of two closely matched opponents.

◇ ◇ ◇

Horsemen and carriages raced across a field near the border with the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom with Julius and Jirukoma at the lead.

Jirukoma specialized in fighting on foot, but today was not the time for that, so he was riding a horse. He struck up a conversation with Julius, who was riding alongside him.

“Still, I wouldn’t have expected this, Julius.”

“Wouldn’t have expected what?”

“The number of people who’ve joined us. We asked all around the country, but only about forty noncombatants were willing to come?” Jirukoma said, looking at the horsemen and carriages behind them.

“The people loved Princess Tia and the royal family, didn’t they? I would have thought more would have chosen to escape together with them...”

“Right now...the people want a strong king, not a lovable one,” Julius said, looking just a little sad.

It was not out of anger or discontent towards the people, but almost out of sympathy for those who chose to stay.

“You can’t blame them. The people shed so much blood during the demon wave. We managed to eke out a victory with the help of the Kingdom of Friedonia, but many of them still lost friends and family.”

“Yeah. But it was the House of Lastania that protected them, wasn’t it?”

“They were grateful, I’m sure. But...what will happen to us in the next demon wave? Will Friedonia send reinforcements again? Even if they do, what if they arrive too late? We can’t defend ourselves alone, can we...? Those are the kinds of worries our people always had. Which is why...”

"They came to welcome Fuuga, a symbol of power. That's just...kind of depressing."

"I told you, you can't blame them." Julius smiled a little. "We all put our own families first. Look at me, I had Tia and her parents get out early because I knew that this would happen."

"Ha ha ha, you have a point there. I mean, I had my own family join them in the name of defending the royal family."

Captain Lauren, who was now Jirukoma's wife, had already left for the Kingdom of Friedonia along with Princess Tia and the others. Jirukoma and Lauren already had multiple children, and because they were still small he'd gotten them out early. Initially, Lauren had been frustrated that she couldn't be there in the country's moment of need, but Jirukoma persuaded her of the importance of guarding the royal family.

"This is my second time being run out of the country..." Julius mumbled to himself. Jirukoma looked at him sympathetically.

"Does it hurt, Julius?"

"No... Much as I lament my own powerlessness, strangely, I'm not feeling all that depressed about it. Though, I must admit...I felt some dark feelings creeping into my heart when I fled the Principality."

Suddenly, Julius looked up to the sky. It was clear, without a single cloud.

"I felt betrayed by my own country then, but not now."

"That's only natural. A country is a place for us to belong," Jirukoma said, looking up to the sky as well. "It's a place where we feel a sense of comfort and belonging. It's that way because we're there, and the people we care about are too. That's what a country is. That's why we love and want to defend it. When I took Lauren as my wife, and

we had children together, I stopped feeling that lingering attachment to my homeland.”

For Jirukoma, having lost his country and become a refugee, he could understand why Julius had changed.

Julius let out a small laugh. “You could be right... For me, my country is wherever Tia is now.”

“Yeah. Which is why we must survive.”

Suddenly, a single dragon knight dropped out of the sky they were looking up to. The white dragon, shining in the sun, was Naden’s best friend, Pai Long. On his back was Pai’s partner and queen of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, Sill Munto.

There was urgency on her gallant face as Sill shouted, “Sir Julius, hurry! Malmkhitan’s forces are almost here!”

“Madam Sill! Thank you for your support!” Julius shouted without stopping his horse. “You didn’t need to honor the alliance when we’ve as good as lost our country already...”

“Think nothing of it. We only did what is natural when you consider our long friendship with Lastania’s royal family and how it’s benefited us both.”

“I understand the friendship, but was there benefit for you?” Julius asked, cocking his head to the side.

“Yes. Without the Kingdom of Lastania, we lose our window to the world outside. If Fuuga’s power keeps growing, our country will be surrounded. Because our pact with the dragons keeps us from invading other countries, we’ll be left to starve, I’m sure,” Sill said bitterly.

If they were going to trade with Fuuga’s country, Fuuga would no doubt make them swear loyalty to him. But because their pact forbade them from using the dragons to take hostile actions against

other countries, Fuuga had no use for the dragon knights. If he tried to use them to fight other humans, the pact said that the dragons would all return to the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Fuuga wasn't the type to show them any consideration, so he might stop the flow of supplies, and try to have the Dragon Knight Kingdom collapse from within.

"So, Sir Julius, once you get out of here safely, we want you to be our go-between with the Kingdom of Friedonia." Sill winked at Julius.

"We can have our dragon knights carry supplies back and forth through the Star Dragon Mountain Range."

"You'd use dragon knights as couriers?"

"Indeed, I would. Perhaps we should rename ourselves the Nothung Courier Kingdom?"

"It doesn't have any of the same grandeur..."

It's not a bad idea though, Julius thought. Smart as he was, even in this urgent situation he was quickly thinking through the idea of a shipping company the size of a nation.

The pact only forbade them from using the dragons for hostile actions against other countries. Shipments of supplies wouldn't violate that—although they might have to be strictly non-military in nature. With their massive size, a dragon could likely carry a large wooden ship. But with the dragons being the symbol of their country, and everyone aspiring to become a dragon knight, there might be those opposed to the idea of dragon knights becoming couriers.

It was like using a sword that was a national treasure to mow the grass. That was probably why the idea never came up before now... Now that Fuuga was pushing them into a corner, even old-fashioned countries were going to have to change.

It's the kind of idea Souma would implement with glee... Julius thought to himself, smiling.

"Understood. I'll see to it that King Souma gets the message."

"I'm counting on you... Now then, to make sure our first *delivery* gets to the Kingdom intact, I'm going to spar a little with Fuuga's forces."

"Be careful... Fuuga's fiercer than you imagine."

"We know," Pai answered telepathically on Sill's behalf. "Naden and Ruby's letters told us all about him. When you pair Fuuga with Durga, he's on the same level as a dragon knight, maybe even better."

"There you have it. We won't let our guard down. We're going to give him everything we have," Sill agreed.

"Godspeed..." Julius nodded.

"You too."

With that said, Sill and Pai danced up into the sky, joining up with thirty dragon knights who were waiting there and heading off to face Fuuga's forces.

◇ ◇ ◇

Half an hour had passed since Julius and Sill exchanged words. Near the border, the dragon knights of Nothung stood in the path of Fuuga and his air force pursuing Julius.

"Out of the way! You're starting to annoy me!"

Roaaaaar! One swipe of Durga's paw tore into a dragon's chest, making it rear back in pain. As it did, Fuuga's arrow struck the dragon knight in the breast.

"Guh..."

The dragons fell from the sky one after another, along with their knights.

Sill and Pai trembled with rage as they watched the scene unfold.

“Damn you, Fuugaaaaa!” Sill bellowed.

“How dare you do that to our comrades!” Pai shouted telepathically.

I never expected him to be so powerful... Sill thought. When they first collided with Fuuga’s forces, Sill divided the thirty dragon knights she had brought into groups. One was sent to attack and delay the soldiers on the ground, while another guarded Julius’s group from the wyvern cavalry that was closing in on him. The final group, led by herself, would confront Fuuga, the biggest threat of all.

He turned the tide on his own... He’s like some sort of epic hero from the storybooks. Sill had taken every caution. In fact, the units she had sent after Fuuga’s forces on the ground and in the air were overwhelming them. But Fuuga’s own abilities had far exceeded her expectations. Fuuga and the small number of wyvern cavalry guarding him had forced Sill and her men into a disadvantageous position.

To be more precise, the wyvern riders had desperately tried to buy time while Fuuga and Durga fought and won one-on-one duels. By the time Sill and Pai had exterminated the meddlesome wyvern cavalry, they had already lost five dragon knights. Never in the history of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom had they ever lost so many against one man before. The only ones able to fight against dragon knights had been other dragon knights.

Unable to believe what they were witnessing, the dragon knights cowered in fear.

“Hahhhh!”

Rushing towards a stopped dragon knight, Fuuga leapt from Durga’s back, his Zanganto sparking with electricity, and swung down at the man. The dragon knight instinctively raised his sword to block, but...

Bzzzap!!! The moment Fuuga's Zanganto slammed into it, a thick bolt of lightning tore through both the knight and the dragon. It was the same move he'd once used to tear a big hole in a massive zombie rhinosaurus.

The knight was vaporized, and the dragon fell with a great hole in its body. Only Fuuga remained, using the wings on his back to hover.

Pai gulped at the sight. "I can't believe a human can wield lightning like Naden's..."

"Grr! If the tiger's monstrously powerful, then the man is too, huh!"

Sill ground her teeth as she watched Durga pick Fuuga up out of the air.

"We can't let him take down any more of our men. Let's do this, Pai!"

"Yes, Lady Sill!"

Pai the white dragon attacked before Fuuga and Durga fully recovered. As Pai spat fire, Durga turned in order to protect Fuuga. When the flames struck, Durga was sent flying.

When Durga recovered in midair, the tiger's left side had its fur burned in some places and was injured in others. Considering how little damage was sustained from the dragon's breath, it showed just how incredible a creature Durga was.

Seeing his partner's injuries, Fuuga's face lost its usual calm.

"Tch. They're good. This won't be as easy as it was with the others."

"Fuuga Haan! I will avenge my men!"

Sill swung her lance while on Pai's back. Fuuga instinctively leaned right and it grazed his face, tearing a shallow gash in his cheek. He wiped away the blood with his bracer, glaring at Sill.

“Not bad. I guess they put you in charge of the dragon knights for a reason.”

“Enough talk!”

Sill and Pai attacked with blades of wind and flaming breath at the same time. Fuuga had Durga rush in, dodging as they approached, then leapt from the tiger’s back as before. He wreathed his Zanganto in electricity, swinging downwards at Sill.

“I won’t let you do that!”

Whoosh— Bash! Pai spun around like a windmill, batting away Fuuga with his wings. After being hit with a force akin to that of a charging rhinosaurus, even Fuuga looked like he was feeling the pain.

“Guh... Durga!” Fuuga shouted as he was sent flying, and Durga answered his call, swinging a paw at Pai who had not recovered yet.

Pai tried to lean back and out of the way, but Durga’s claws were rushing towards his face. That strike, too sharp to call a cat punch, tore into him.

“Gwah!”

“Pai?!”

There were distinct, bloody claw marks on the left half of Pai’s head. He’d probably lost sight in that eye. But if he fell, his partner Sill would die too. Knowing this, Pai struggled to stay aloft through the pain.

“It’s okay... I can still fight.”

“Pai...”

“Heh, I see we’re both blessed with good partners,” said Fuuga, who was using his own wings to float in midair at the spot he’d been knocked to.

Durga rushed to his side, and Fuuga mounted the tiger again. He was a little worse for wear after being buffeted by Pai's wing, but Fuuga was still full of energy. Pai, meanwhile, was only staying in the air by sheer force of will.

Fuuga pointed his Zanganto towards them and said, "But Durga and I will win."

"""Princess!"""

The four dragon knights who had been unable to join the battle got in between them to act as Sill's shield. Even if they had to launch a desperate suicide attack, they were ready to take Fuuga down with them.

Fuuga gave them a fierce grin. "Bring it on. I'll gobble up as many of you as I have to."

"Urkh!" Sill grunted, her face twisting in pain.

In the midst of all this, a single wyvern approached.

"Lord Fuuga! Lord Hashim is proposing a truce!"

"He wants me to stop fighting? We were just getting to the good part..." Fuuga grumbled as he looked down below.

The ground force had been totally stopped by the dragon knights' attack. It was hard to blame them, given they were defenseless against fire attacks from the air.

The group led by Julius of Lastania was also out of sight, having no doubt crossed the border into the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom now. If he pursued them across the border, that would mean total war against them.

With six dragons down, the Dragon Knight Kingdom had lost twenty percent of the forces they'd brought. Fuuga's own forces likely had lost a similar percentage, but having failed to capture Julius, this was a strategic loss.

“It looks like it’s not enough for me to win on my own.” Fuuga’s shoulders slumped and he lowered his Zanganto before calling out to Sill. “You heard the man, Dragon Knight Princess. Our target’s escaped into your country. If we keep going, it’ll mean war. I’m pretty sure that’s not something you want either. I’ll pull back my troops, so go back to your own country.”

“Urgh...”

Sill’s face distorted with frustration at the sudden offer of a truce. She wanted to avenge her comrades, but if they continued fighting, there would be more sacrifices. They had already succeeded in their goal of aiding Julius’s escape. To continue fighting now would be an entirely personal battle. If she wasn’t careful, it could violate their pact with the dragons.

As the leader of the dragon knights, she couldn’t afford to be a fool.

“Very well... But you will allow us to collect the dragons and their knights’ remains. We must return them to the Star Dragon Mountain Range. This is to prevent them turning into monsters like skull dragons.”

“Hmph, fine by me.”

“Signal the retreat,” Sill ordered.

The dragon knights blew their whistles. Her forces near the ground stopped when they heard it. With their battle over, they all gathered to Sill’s side. From there, she directed them to collect the remains of the fallen. When that was complete, the dragon knights organized in a defensive formation around Sill and Pai. She took one last look at Fuuga before turning to go.

“They’re damn well organized... I could use an air force like that,” Fuuga thought aloud as he landed, watching the dragon knights go.

Then, riding Durga down to the ground forces led by Hashim, he dismounted as his advisor welcomed him with a bow.

“I almost had the enemy queen too...”

“I believe I have told you repeatedly that war against the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom would be pure folly,” said Hashim, raising his head and shrugging his shoulders in exasperation.

Then, with a sharp look in his eyes, he told Fuuga, “The battle just now made me sure of one thing. If our two countries went to war, we would undoubtedly win. The dragon knights are powerful, but their numbers are limited. If we attack from multiple fronts, and retreat whenever the dragon knights appear, their country will be laid waste, and war-weariness will spread throughout the majority of the population that are not dragon knights.”

“You were saying that the common people would choose us over their pact with the dragons.”

“Yes. And that would be the ruin of the Dragon Knight Kingdom. However, if that happens, we risk the dragon knights all defecting to other countries. That would be incredibly bad for us. So...”

“If we’re going to destroy them, we save them for last, right? I know,” Fuuga said, putting a hand on Hashim’s shoulder and nodding. “Still, it’s a shame about Julius.”

“Yes... He was able to make decisions faster than I’d thought. That makes him exactly the sort of person I want for your country, and a dangerous man to make an enemy of. That’s why I wanted to secure him for ourselves...”

“It wasn’t meant to be. But we managed to accomplish our other objective, right?”

“Yes. We caught up, and were able to fight the Dragon Knight Kingdom.”

In Fuuga's dispatch of troops to Lastania, the primary objective was to capture the Lastanian royal family (especially Julius), but there was also a secondary objective of putting up a good fight against the dragon knights of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom who would be coming to assist. And if they fought well against the Dragon Knight Kingdom, whereas the Empire could only fight them to a standstill in their heyday, the people's hopes for Fuuga would grow.

Fuuga and Durga had slain six dragon knights. This news would not fail to excite the people's zeal. Fuuga and his men had accomplished this not in a full war against the Dragon Knight Kingdom, but in what was still a skirmish.

Hashim crossed his arms and told Fuuga, "Up until now, the people knew we would retake the Demon Lord's Domain. However, after this battle, they will think it's no dream for you to conquer the entire continent. Please, ride that wave of popular sentiment as far as it will take you."

"Yeah. But first, we'll need to bring together this country that no longer has any enemies in it. If we're going to rise up, we need to make sure the ground beneath our feet is steady first."

Fuuga and his men headed into the capital of the Kingdom of Lastania to sort out what would happen after the war.

◇ ◇ ◇

With this battle against the Dragon Knight Kingdom, Fuuga earned himself the moniker "the tiger who eats dragons" from his people, and the tiger became the symbol of his forces.

Fuuga would go on to be called the Great Tiger King, and his followers would earn monikers of their own like "the tiger's X." His wife, Mutsumi Haan, was "the tiger's partner," his advisor, Hashim Chima, was "the tiger's resourceful schemer," his right-hand man,

Shuukin Tan, was “the tiger’s sword,” and the old commander who took an arrow for him, Gaifuku Kiin, was “the tiger’s shield.”

But it would still be some time before that happened.

Chapter 9: The Defectors Volunteer Their Services

In the royal capital of Parnam...

“Your Majesty. We just received word. It seems they will be coming,” Hakuya said as he entered the governmental affairs office.

“Oh! So they’re coming, huh?” I said, rising from my chair. I had been waiting for this report.

It had been ten days since they’d received news of a skirmish between Fuuga’s forces and the dragon knights of Nothung near the border between the Kingdom of Lastania and the Dragon Knight Kingdom.

Under guard by a force of dragon knights led by Queen Sill herself, the Lastanian refugees, including Julius and Jirukoma, set down in the courtyard of Parnam Castle.

Having received advance word of their arrival, I met their representatives, Queen Sill and Pai for the Dragon Knight Kingdom, and Julius and Jirukoma for the Kingdom of Lastania, in the audience chamber. With me were Prime Minister Hakuya, my bodyguard Aisha, and Roroa and Naden who had ties to our guests.

“Whoa, Pai?! What happened to your eye?!” Naden cried out when she saw Pai standing next to Madam Sill.

Pai had an androgynous-looking face in his human form, but the area around his left eye was covered with a mask now. It was very stylish, looking almost like a Venetian mask.

“A-Ah ha ha...” Pai laughed awkwardly, pointing to the mask. “The tiger got me during our fight with Fuuga.”

“Durga did...? Are you okay?”

"Yeah. I got to a healer quickly, so I didn't go blind. The scar won't go away though."

"A warrior's wounds are badges of honor. As your wife, I couldn't be more proud," Madam Sill said, throwing her arm around Pai's shoulder.

He blushed and thought, *Madam Sill calls herself the wife, but she sure is manly.*

At the same time, Julius and Roroa were meeting again for the first time in a while.

"Big brother..."

"Roroa... I don't think we've met since the demon wave."

Taking note of her swollen belly, Julius said, "It sure has grown. Are you due before Tia?"

"Yeah, I reckon I am. Looks like big sis's kid is gonna be the little sis."

"Oh... How has Tia been, by the way?"

"She's been doin' great, aside from bein' worried sick about you."

"Thank goodness..."

Once everyone had the chance to check that their friends and family were doing all right, I cleared my throat loudly.

"All right... I'm sure you all have loads to talk about, but I'd like to handle the formalities first. Welcome to the Kingdom of Friedonia, Queen Sill and Sir Pai of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom."

"Thank you for greeting us, Your Majesty."

"Th-Thank you."

Queen Sill and Pai bowed their heads in unison. I nodded.

"And I'm glad you could make it, Sir Julius and Sir Jirukoma. You are welcome here."

“Thank you. You have my gratitude for taking in the members of Lastania’s royal family.”

“This is a greater honor than we deserve.”

Julius and Jirukoma bowed their heads too.

With that, I clapped my hands. “Okay, I think that’s enough of me in king mode. Julius, I’m sure you must be tired from the long trip, but could you explain what’s happened?”

“Very well.”

Julius explained all the details of what had happened inside the Union of Eastern Nations. The vast majority of it matched what our agents had reported, but having been there himself, Julius knew more about the general atmosphere inside the Union of Eastern Nation. It was a shock that the people of Lastania welcomed Fuuga becoming their new ruler.

I had sensed that the people of the Kingdom of Lastania felt especially close to their royal family. I thought they loved and respected them. And yet, only a small number chose to flee the country with Julius. Everyone puts their own family first. After experiencing the demon wave, the people of the Union of Eastern Nations must have felt safer under the umbrella of a powerful figure like Fuuga.

Hakuya let out a sigh as he listened to the story. “We knew it would be like this, but the man certainly is trouble, isn’t he?”

“Yeah... And now he’s got a schemer like Hashim with him. He’ll do things that aren’t like him if he has to, which is going to make predicting what they’ll do even harder...”

“I’m sure you’re right.” Julius nodded. “The Union of Eastern Nations is Fuuga’s country now. They’ll be able to launch a major expansion into the Demon Lord’s Domain. With the Empire’s more subdued

approach, he may be able to become the largest nation by landmass on the continent.”

“However, while he can expand his territory, he cannot grow his population with the same speed. There will still be a large difference in power between us...” Hakuya added in response to Julius’s bitter words.

“And yet, the current atmosphere in the world is giving Fuuga the momentum to overturn that difference.”

“I learned just how strong that man is by fighting him,” Sill said, crossing her arms. “He’s a monster on a scale like no other.”

Even if it was just a skirmish, I was impressed that Madam Sill had fought Fuuga and lived to tell the tale. Still, it was terrifying that Fuuga could make a dragon knight talk about him that way.

“I couldn’t do anything...” Julius said, lowering his eyes. “I was right there, and could only watch as Tia’s country was stolen from us.”

“Julius...”

“But I am alive; Tia as well, along with her parents. The old royal family’s survival will be an eyesore to Fuuga’s camp. Even if he doesn’t care much himself, Hashim will.”

“You could be right...”

From what the Black Cats told me, Hashim would not hesitate to employ cruelties in service to his goals. He might be a naturally Machiavellian (in the sense that word is used by people who didn’t really understand Machiavelli’s *The Prince*) actor. If so, he wouldn’t be able to overlook the existence of the old royal family when it threatened Fuuga’s rule.

“Fuuga may send a demand that you turn us over to him,” Julius said, looking me straight in the eyes. “What will you do? If you refuse, it

may harm your relations with Fuuga's camp. Will you still let the Lastanian royal family stay in this country?"

His eyes were serious. That's why I returned his gaze without looking away.

"I will. And I'll be rejecting any requests to turn you over, of course. I'll use your position as my brother-in-law to soften the blow. I don't think Fuuga will push the issue. Hashim may not like it, but Fuuga won't want to do anything to stir up hostility with us yet either."

I was trying to comfort him, but Julius shook his head.

"You may be right about Fuuga, but Hashim will probably send assassins, at the very least."

"I intend to give you bodyguards, you know?"

"That's not enough to assuage my concerns."

Then Julius dropped to one knee. Ignoring our surprised reactions, he bowed his head with his right hand on the floor.

"Sir Souma A. Elfrieden, King of Friedonia. I wish to offer you my services."

Offer his services... He's gonna work for me?! As proud a person as Julius is?!

"You don't need to push yourself... I'll welcome you as a guest either way."

"I told you. I'm worried."

Julius looked up. I could see a shadow hanging over his face.

"A royal family with no country has no place. Depending on how things develop going forward, Tia may find herself in a dangerous predicament. That being the case, I want to give my all to serve this country, and carve out a position for us that makes it harder to be disposed of."

“I understand where you’re coming from, but...” I crossed my arms and groaned. “I’m the man who killed your father...”

“He was Roroa’s father too. I chose to let old grudges go during the demon wave.”

“We’re former enemies. You left a bad impression on some people in the Kingdom and Principality. You’ll struggle to gain their trust. You’re starting with less than none.”

“I’ll work hard enough to convince the people of this country.”

“Brother...” Roroa murmured, looking concerned.

I didn’t know what to do, so I looked at Hakuya and asked, “What do you think, Hakuya...?”

“I believe it would be acceptable,” Hakuya replied bluntly. “I expressed my formal opposition to taking them in at all. However, sire, you made the decision to do so. At this point, I see little difference between accepting him as a guest and accepting him as a retainer.”

“Oh... That’s what you meant.”

“Sir Julius is most certainly gifted. I have confidence in my ability to make preparations in advance and come up with a larger strategy, but taking tactical control on the battlefield is beyond me. Our reports suggest that Fuuga’s advisor, Hashim, can do just that. I worry that the difference in our ability to head out to the field of battle may someday prove the difference between victory and defeat.”

In regards to taking tactical control, we had advisors out in the field like Kaede. However, she was a mage and mainly operated as rear line support, so she wasn’t suited to leading on the front line. In contrast, Julius could put his strategic aptitude to use in the middle

of the fray. He had the martial prowess to lead troops while fighting himself too. It wouldn't be a stretch to call him a field commander.

If Hakuya handled strategy and Julius took care of the smaller tactical decisions, it would be possible to operate the National Defense Force more efficiently.

I looked at Julius. "Even if you enter my service, I can't give you the Amidonia region as your domain, you know?"

"I am already Julius Lastania. If I am to return anywhere, it will be there."

"I want to do everything I can to avoid a confrontation with Fuuga. Do you understand that there may not be a home for you to return to?"

"So long as Tia is fine, I can live with that. But if someday war with Fuuga comes, I will devote all my strength to the battle."

"I see." Sensing his determination, I made up my mind too. "Serve me, Julius."

"I will. Thank you, Your Majesty."

Hearing him call me "Your Majesty" feels...weird. Well, considering he was the elder brother of my third primary queen, and a former enemy too, we probably had to keep a certain professional distance. I was just going to have to get used to it.

"But when we're not in public, I want you to treat me the same as always. It's too awkward otherwise," I said, taking his hand, and Julius smiled wryly.

"Heh heh, understood. Now then, Souma, I know this is sudden, but I'd like to propose a plan for how to deal with the Union of Eastern Nations going forward..."

Julius was eager to put his cunning to work for me, but...

“You idiot!”

“Wha?!”



Roroa walked up and suddenly slapped him across the face. He looked at her in shock as she pointed at him.

"You've got somethin' else to do before you start offerin' suggestions! Have you got any idea how worried big sis has been about ya?!"

"But..." Julius started to argue as he rubbed his cheek, but...he must have decided Roroa had a point, because he relented. "Sorry, Roroa..."

"As long as you get it," Roroa said, crossing her arms and snorting.

Julius showed honest contrition, while Roroa demonstrated her dignity as a soon-to-be mother.

I couldn't help but laugh at the contrast.

◇ ◇ ◇

A few days later, it appeared that not only the Lastanians had drifted to our land as a result of losing their own to Fuuga and his forces. The third daughter and fourth son of the House of Chima, Sami and Nike, had arrived at the royal castle.

As far as these two were concerned, they had actually submitted an application to enter the country to the border guards before Julius arrived. I gave my permission immediately, but because they were traveling overland, Julius and the others who were coming by air beat them here.

When I received word they had arrived at Parnam Castle, I met them in the audience chamber with Hakuya, Aisha, and their little brother Ichihia. They weren't acquainted with me like Julius, and didn't have a position of importance like Queen Sill, so I sat on the throne during the audience while I tried to discern their intentions.

“Madam Sami, Sir Nike. Welcome to the Kingdom of Friedonia,” I said to them in king mode, and Nike was the one to bow his head and respond.

“Thank you for meeting us on such short notice.”

Sami on the other hand, with a vacant expression on her face, said nothing. She just bowed her head at the same time as Nike. It didn’t feel like that was out of disrespect, or because she was plotting something. If anything, she had no plans at all. She felt lifeless, lethargic, like an empty shell.

While that concerned me, I moved the conversation along.

“Think nothing of it. Ichihia offered his services to me. If you’re his siblings, you are welcome here too.”

“You are too kind.”

“So...what exactly happened?” I asked, looking at Sami, and Nike raised his head.

“Sir Souma... Are you aware of the present situation in the union of Eastern Nations?”

“I’ve received reports, yes. Fuuga has taken total control, correct? I heard that your father Mathew was struck down in the war.”

“Yes. If you know, then that makes things quicker.” Nike placed a hand on Sami’s shoulder. “During the conflict, my sister Sami’s adoptive father was murdered in a plot by our elder brother Hashim, and she was driven out of the country.”

Nike went on to explain the events that led to their coming here.

Sami had been adopted by King Heinrant of the Kingdom of Roth. He had loved her like a father, but because he was part of the neutral faction he was killed in a plot by Hashim. Sami had been attempting to fight back and avenge him, but Nike stopped her. I already knew how Fuuga had seized power from Julius’s report. But it felt heavier

hearing about it from an actual victim than it did just reading words on paper.

I'm sure...when they write the history books, all it will say is, "Fuuga won the Battle of the Sebal Plains and took control of the Union of Eastern Nations." I think there was a commentator in the world I came from that said what is left once you remove all interpretation from the facts is history. There was likely more bloodshed than I imagine, and more tragedy.

A purge of those with uncertain loyalties... I had done the same thing. Convincing myself to do it with the justification of rebuilding the country. But while I had that pretext, I'd still struggled with it. *Fuuga... How about you?* For the dream he races blindly towards. For the dreams others had entrusted to him.

What did that great man think when blood and tears flowed? Did he struggle with it? Did he not care? Was he too dense to notice? Was he prepared for it? Or even drunk on the blood? He was too different for me to even hazard a guess.

But... No matter how he feels about it, I feel like he'll stand there, facing it head-on.

I was weak, so I needed others to help me. When the guilt of the cruelties I had stained my hands with was about to crush me, Liscia and the others supported and consoled me. That was how I was able to just barely stay on my feet. Fuuga was so strong he wouldn't need Madam Mutsumi to support him.

That was what I was thinking about while Nike told the story.

Once most of the details were made clear, I asked him, "And? What are you doing here in my country?"

"I wanted to leave Big Sister Sami here, where Ichihai is."

“Madam Sami?”

“Right. If I leave her in the Union of Eastern Nations now, she’ll spark conflict. Big Brother Hashim isn’t one to let that happen. Which is why Big Sister Mutsumi asked me to get her out of there in order to keep our family from spilling any more of our own blood.”

“This was at Madam Mutsumi’s direction...?”

“Yes. I have a letter from her here.”

Aisha took the letter Nike pulled out of his pocket and brought it to me. It spoke of Mutsumi’s feelings, unable to stop Fuuga because she was his wife, but wanting her sister Sami to be well. It ended saying, “Please take care of her and Ichihha.”

When I finished reading, I passed it to Hakuya and Ichihha to look through.

“Big Sister Mutsumi...”

Ichihha seemed especially pained by what he read there.

I guess Fuuga won’t be demanding that she be handed over, then... I thought.

If he tried, Madam Mutsumi would push back with everything she had. Fuuga wasn’t the type to disregard Madam Mutsumi’s feelings like that. Hashim would probably scowl, but unlike Julius, he wouldn’t go so far as to make an enemy of Mutsumi in order to get his hands on Sami.

I faced Nike and Sami. “We have no intention of stirring trouble with Sir Fuuga’s country. If you’re looking for us to help you with your vengeance, we can’t do it, okay?”

“That is fine. I think what Big Sister Sami needs now is time.”

“Fair enough... And you’re all right with that too, Madam Sami?”

Sami nodded, no emotion showing on her face.

Yeah... The emotional scars are going to take some time to heal, I thought. Then I turned and said, “Ichiha, would you show Madam Sami your room?”

“Okay! Come on, Big Sister Sami.” Ichiha called out to Sami hesitantly, and her eyes widened.

Then, as she looked at his face, massive tears began to stream down her face.

“Ichiha... Ichihaaaa.” She hugged him tight, bawling. “My father... Hein... Hashim, he... he... Wahhh!”

“Yes. I’m listening. You can tell me all about it.”

“Wahhhhhh!”

Sami wailed as she clung to Ichiha. He gently stroked her back, like you would a crying baby. For the rest of us present, all we could do was watch.

Some time after that, when she had settled down a little, Sami left the room with Ichiha. It hurt to see her go, leaning on his shoulder like that.

“We probably shouldn’t let her meet Yuriga for a while...”

“A good point,” Hakuya replied. “I’ll tell Madam Yuriga to be careful not to run into her too.”

Looking at Nike, I said, “You can trust us with Madam Sami. So? What will you be doing from here on, Sir Nike?”

“I wonder that myself... I’m pretty sure I can’t return to the Union of Eastern Nations anymore.”

He was talking a little more casually now, probably out of relief that he had been able to hand Sami off to us. This was probably what he was normally like.

“Will you live here in this country? It’s not much different to me, sheltering two of you instead of just one.”

“Ah ha ha... I appreciate the thought, but this place is too close to the Union of Eastern Nations. Even if you have no intention of instigating anything, we can’t be sure Sir Fuuga won’t start a war with you... If I placed myself in your care, I might end up having to fight against Big Sister Mutsumi. That’s...the one thing I want to avoid.”

“I see...”

He must have really loved his sister. He’d brought Sami here, even at the cost of not being able to return himself, all at Mutsumi’s request.

As I thought, *Guess I can’t get him to stay...* a familiar voice spoke out.

“Ookyakya! Then how about you come to my place?” Kuu said as he entered the audience chamber. I looked at him with exasperation.

“Kuu. You were listening?”

“Only to what you were saying just now. When I saw Ichihira leaving the audience chamber, I figured you guys were done.”

With that said, Kuu crouched down in front of Nike.

“I remember you from the demon wave. The third or fourth son of the Chimas, right?”

“The fourth. And you are...?”

“I’m Kuu Taisei, future head of the Republic.”

“The Republic of...Turgis?”

“Yeah. On the southern tip of the continent.” Kuu slapped Nike vigorously on the shoulder. “It’s out of the way, and damn cold, so even the Empire hesitated to invade us back in the day. If Fuuga’s

gonna expand south, we'll probably be left until last. That makes us a pretty good fit for you, don't you think?"

"It does, but...I hate the cold."

"Ookyakya! It might be a bit tough on a human like you, but you'll do just fine if you bundle up. Although, even the traveling merchants stop coming in the winter."

"Whaa..."

"It's not like you've got anywhere else to go, right?" Kuu grabbed Nike by the lapels and pulled him to his feet. "So come to my place. You seem tough, so you're more than welcome."

"Aah... It's already decided?"

"Sure is. You heard that, bro? I'm taking this guy."

"Hey, wait, Kuu."

Before I could stop him, Kuu dragged a still-reluctant Nike out of the room... *Is this really okay?*

"If he has no intention to offer us his services, I believe this is acceptable," Hakuya said, unfazed. "Sir Nike is an accomplished warrior and a sharp-minded commander, so it's preferable to him returning to the Union of Eastern Nations to serve Sir Fuuga."

Oh, that makes sense. I could see Hakuya had a point.



Friedonian Terminology Explainer: The Five Great Colored Retainers

Known for his obsession with collecting personnel, Souma gathered many capable retainers to his side. Because of this, rather than use common groupings like the three dukes, the big four, the twelve divine generals, or the twenty commanders, people came up with their own groupings.

One of these was the five great colored retainers. This was because a number of Souma's retainers had aliases that involved a color.

The four who were universally agreed to belong to this group were Liscia, the Golden Fortress of Ice, who was his devoted wife; Hakuya, the Black-robed Prime Minister, who supported his policies; the Red Oni, Hal, who distinguished himself on the battlefield; and the White Tactician, Julius—so-called because of the white clothes he wore, which contrasted with Hakuya's black, who supported him with military strategies. As for the fifth, opinions were split on whether it should be Excel the Blue Sea Princess, or Sebastian the Silver Deer.

Incidentally, Liscia's moniker, the Golden Fortress of Ice, came from her days in the military academy where she'd coldly rejected all men who approached her.

It is said that when she learned of this nickname, she nearly died of embarrassment.



Chapter 10: Those Who Were Reunited

The story turns back to after the meeting with Julius...

“Tia...”

“Heh heh, you’re in that much of a hurry to see your darling wife, huh?”

“Of course I am. Who wouldn’t be?” Julius responded to me with a shrug.

After Julius’s audience, I went with Roroa and Aisha to guide him to where Princess Tia and the former Lastanian royal couple were waiting. The exiled royal family had been given a mansion in the nobles’ quarter of Parnam.

When we had shown Princess Tia the house, she’d said, *“Oh, this is too much! I know we’re imposing on you, so a small house would be plenty!”* But it would have been a lot more trouble to guard them if they lived among the common people where anyone can come and go, so I made her accept it. They were related to Roroa, the third primary queen, after all.

The mansion wasn’t so far that it was worth making Naden take us, so we took a carriage instead. Jirukoma, who was now treated as Julius’s servant, volunteered to act as our coachman. Jirukoma’s wife, Lauren, the former captain of Lastania’s soldiers, had a live-in job at the mansion where they were hiring Lastanian exiles as guards and servants. He probably wanted to see his beloved wife and children in a hurry too.

Inside the carriage, I sat across from Aisha, and Roroa sat across from Julius.

"Still, I never imagined you would become a mother..." Julius said, looking at her swollen belly. "Grandfather Herman must have been quite pleased."

"And Sebastian too. It's a load off my shoulders," Roroa said, chuckling as she patted her abdomen. "Ever since she had the twins, Big Sis Cia's been pushin' me to have a kid of my own. She only got more insistent when we found out Big Sis Juna was pregnant before me."

"I'm jealous, though..." Aisha said with a somewhat pained smile.

As members of long-lived races, Aisha and Naden had a harder time getting pregnant. They both wanted children eventually, but they were going to have to take the long view of things.

"Speaking of children... What really surprised me was Jirukoma's family."

"I'm sure," Julius agreed, nodding.

Jirukoma's wife had come to the Kingdom together with the Lastanian royal family as a bodyguard. At the time, she had brought Jirukoma's children with her. Three of them. Apparently, after their first, she had immediately gotten pregnant with twins. That meant she'd given birth to three children in the span of a year. And she was pregnant with their fourth on top of that.

"Kuu's servant, Leporina, is a member of the white rabbit race, which were famous for their fecundity. Perhaps Lauren has some white rabbit blood in her too? Or is Jirukoma just that virile?"

As I was cocking my head to the side, Julius sighed.

"I'm sure it's the latter. You should have seen how those two were all over each other after the wedding."

"It was that bad, huh...?"

"Tia got a little upset, seeing the way they were constantly going on about how much they love each other."

Well, yeah... She would. You all got married at almost the exact same time, I thought.

"Well, now you two have a house where you can flirt to your hearts' content."

"A house...huh?" Julius got a slightly troubled look on his face.

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

"When you said the word house... It made me think—if I'm coming home now, what kind of face should I be making? I...wasn't able to defend Tia's country, after all."

"I'm...not sure there was anything you could have done, was there?"

There was no way a tiny state like Lastania could have handled Fuuga's forces. If anything, Julius deserved praise for foreseeing the conflict and getting the royal family out safely. However, despite this, Julius was having a hard time processing it.

"The joy of being able to see Tia, the relief that she's safe, the shame at having our country stolen, the guilt I feel towards her...all of those things are inside of me. What sort of face should I make?"

"Julius..."

"Ya meet her with a smile, of course!" Roroa said with a grin. "Big sis's been worried about you all this time, y'know? All you need to do is say, 'I'm home,' with a smile. And try huggin' her too!"

"Oh... Yes, I suppose you're right." Roroa's encouragement made Julius smile a little. She was always good at bringing people's spirits up like this.

While we were talking about it, we reached the mansion where Princess Tia and the others were waiting.

This mansion, which had a rather impressive garden, was one of the ones that had belonged to a corrupt noble who had opposed me when I was given the throne. It would have been a shame to demolish them, so there was talk of giving them to people who distinguished themselves. But because of who the previous owners were, no one, aside from newcomers like Poncho who had no house in the capital, had really wanted to live in them. They said they were bad luck. Because of that, they had been used as museums, or to house guests like Kuu and his entourage.

Once we had tied up the horses, Princess Tia emerged from the mansion.

“Lord Julius!” she exclaimed, rushing over to gently hug him.

“Tia...! Be careful you don’t trip.”

“I’m so glad you’re all right. I’ve been so, so worried...waiting for you, with the baby.”

“Yeah... I’m home now, Tia.” Julius gently stroked her head as she cried on his chest.

Their long-awaited reunion was finally here. Roroa, Aisha, and I all had the decency to give them a quiet moment together... We were the king and queens in this country, though. Our coachman, Jirukoma, rushed into the house as soon as he was done cleaning up the carriage. He must have been going to see his own wife and children.

Some time after, the former royal couple of Lastania came out to greet us, then showed us to the living room. We all sat down at a table by the fireplace.

With everyone gathered, Julius told Princess Tia and her parents what had happened since they left. The Kingdom of Lastania had already been absorbed by Fuuga’s forces, and no longer existed as a distinct entity.

Julius bowed his head to the former king. “Father. We lost the country due to my lack of power. I cannot apologize enough.”

“You don’t have to. Raise your head, son-in-law,” the former King of Lastania said, placing a hand on Julius’s shoulder with a peaceful smile. “Without your efforts, we would have lost not only our country but our very lives. It is thanks to you that our family could be reunited like this, Sir Julius.”

“Father...”

“While it is a shame we lost the country, what my wife and I truly wish is for you, Tia, and the children you’ll give us to be healthy. So please, don’t push yourself too hard. You don’t need to try and get the country back for our sake.”

The former Queen of Lastania nodded in agreement.

Julius’s eyes seemed to be watering at those words, but after some time he said, “Yes...” and nodded. With his report concluded, I opened my mouth.

“Julius has decided to offer his services to me now. Our country will defend you with all its might, so please enjoy a relaxed life here in the royal capital.”

“And come around to the castle to play sometimes, will you? I’ll be sendin’ you invitations, big sis,” Roroa said, grinning. “But lookin’ at these bellies, I reckon that the first place we’ll be goin’ together is Dr. Hilde’s clinic.”

“Hee hee, you could be right. Please come with me.”

“You’re going with Roroa? That’s worrisome...”

“Hey now, big brother!” Roroa got really mad at the way Julius was frowning, but...I knew how he felt.

“You can take time off on the days she goes, Julius,” I said.

Aisha followed up with, “Yes, that would be wise. I would feel more at ease if Sir Julius were to accompany you.”

“You’re gangin’ up on me with him, darlin’ and Big Sis Ai?!”

“Well, when I see how you run around with that belly, I worry...”

Hilde had explained that a certain amount of exercise was needed as part of prenatal care, but I still felt like she was moving around too much. It made my heart race when I thought she might fall down the stairs. You can assume everyone in our family, except for Roroa herself, felt the same way.

While we all laughed at the sulking Roroa, the maids came in with a tea set and said, “Tea is ready.”

As they were passing around the cups, Julius’s eyes went wide.

“Wha?!” He stared at the dishes. “What’s going on?! Why are these dishes here?”

““.....””

When we realized what Julius was surprised about, Roroa and I looked at one another.

Then, nodding, I told him, “Julius, those are exactly the dishes you think they are.”

“Ah! Then these are the ones we left in the house in Lastania?”

Princess Tia’s family and Julius had all had to flee the country without time to pack all their things. Only a handful of their belongings had made it out of the royal manor in Lasta. And yet, most of the things that had been in that manor were now found in this mansion. That was because...

“After annexing Lasta, Fuuga was kind enough to send your belongings to us.”

“Fuuga Haan did? Why?”

“Probably...as a warning.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Around the time the dragon knights and Fuuga’s army collided...

Having called a truce with the dragon knights who had come to rescue Julius, Fuuga entered the capital of the Kingdom of Lastania, together with Hashim and a subsection of his army. When they passed through the gates, his wife Mutsumi, who had come to Lasta ahead of the others to calm the people there, rushed over to him.

“Lord Fuuga! Are you all right?!”

“Hey, Mutsumi. I just got back.”

Fuuga dismounted from Durga and gave Mutsumi a hug. As he held her, he touched her body all over, verifying for himself that she was real and there.

“You fought the dragon knights, right? You’re not hurt anywhere, are you?”

“I’m fine... I just hurt my shoulder a little. It’s no big deal.”

The truth was that a good half of his body was aching from getting slapped by Pai’s wing, but Fuuga laughed it off because he didn’t want to worry Mutsumi.

She took his helmet off and touched his cheek. “The wound on your cheek still hasn’t healed. Don’t be reckless.”

“Sorry... I’ll be more careful from now on.”

While Fuuga and Mutsumi were talking, Shuukin, Kasen, Gaten, and the others who had been fighting on the ground came back.

“Ha ha ha... It’s not fair the way they can use dragons like that. We couldn’t lay a hand on them,” Gaten grumbled, upset that the iron fan he was so proud of was ineffective against the dragon knights.

"We tried shooting at them when they descended to spit fire, but their hides are thick, so we couldn't deal lethal blows. It was all we could do to keep them at bay," Kasen agreed, his shoulders slumping in dejection at the fact his archers had been equally unsuccessful.

Behind the two of them, the tough guys, Nata and Moumei, glared at each other as they walked over.

"Damn it, I haven't been able to let loose anywhere near enough," Nata carped. "Hey, Moumei, come see me after this."

"Another test of strength? Don't you know how to do anything else, you barbarian?"

"I don't wanna hear crap like that out of a guy who swings around a giant hammer. Today's the day we settle things."

Maybe because they both prided themselves on their strength, Nata had been testing his strength against Moumei's constantly since joining Fuuga. They usually wrestled, but were an even match, and neither had been able to claim victory yet.

Leaving the muscle heads to themselves, Gaten put an arm around Shuukin's neck.

"Hey, Sir Shuukin, don't you think we should work on our air force? The current wyvern cavalry was soundly defeated."

"We should, but it's not something that's going to happen overnight," Shuukin said, sounding irritated as he shook free of Gaten's arm. "We've only just stepped onto the stage, so there are still far too many places where we're lacking. We have to expand our territory, gather people, and build a solid base for ourselves before we'll be able to strengthen our air force. We need to take care of the things we can do one by one."

"Ha ha ha! Shuukin's got it right!" Fuuga said, looking around to each of his retainers. "But you put up a good fight against the dragon knights today. Take a good rest here. You've earned it."

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

Shuukin and the other retainers bowed, then left. Fuuga, Mutsumi, and Hashim watched them go, then headed to the fortified royal manor. The people of Lasta fell to the ground in prostration when they saw them; a show of deference to their new ruler.

Casting a sideways glance at the people, Fuuga asked Mutsumi, "So, how does it look? Will the people follow me loyally?"

"Yes. The fear of the demon wave still lingers. Those who've remained want a strong protector. Many of them are still emotionally attached to the royal family, but they realized it was more realistic to choose you, Lord Fuuga."

"Sounds great to me."

While they were talking, the three reached the fortified manor. Seeing what only looked like a large house because the city was small, Fuuga muttered, "This is the former ruler's house, right? Should we put the torch to it to send a message?"

"I would advise against it," Hashim replied.

Surprised, Fuuga cocked his head to the side. "Didn't see that coming. I thought you'd tell me to raze the whole city to show how severe I can be."

"If it were to your benefit, I would tell you to do just that. However, burning this manor will change nothing. I will not recommend doing something I know is meaningless," Hashim said with a shrug. "Had you succeeded in eradicating the Lastanian royal family, I might have considered burning the manor so that they would not be remembered, or even destroying the city. However, the royal family

and Julius are still alive. Even if you burn the manor, the people will remember their former masters. It would only spark resentment.”

“Hmm... What do you want to do, then?”

“It would be a shame to waste the manor, so let’s use it as is. We’ll take one more measure at the same time.”

“And what would that be?”

Hashim smiled coldly in response to the question.

“Gather up all the personal effects left in the manor, and send them to the Kingdom of Friedonia. Have the people assist in that process as well.”

“We’re going out of our way to send their stuff to them? Trying to do them a favor?”

“I wouldn’t count on any gratitude for such a small favor. It’s simply to our own benefit. By having the people gather up the royal family’s things and send them away, it will impress on them that their former rulers will not be returning. They’ll be helping them with the move, after all.”

Fuuga was half impressed and half appalled by how Hashim could discuss the nasty moves he was going to make with such a tone of indifference.

“I get it... They’ll feel like they chased them out themselves.”

“Indeed. It will also force the departed royal family to contend with the reality that there is no place for them to return to here. We’re saying, ‘We’ve sent you all you need to live, so spend the rest of your lives in Friedonia.’”

“Makes sense...” Fuuga stroked his chin as he thought about it, then nodded. “I like how you’re always so pragmatic about everything. We’ll go with your idea.”

“By your will.”

And so, Fuuga rounded up the people of Lasta, and had them send back all the personal effects left in the manor. The belongings in question were delivered to the Kingdom of Friedonia before Julius, who was staying in the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, could arrive.

◇ ◇ ◇

That was what we found out from a letter Yuriga received from Fuuga. When he heard this explanation, Julius crossed his arms and groaned.

“Fuuga and Hashim seem to get on better than I’d expected.”

“Yeah. I was surprised too.”

The method of gathering the neutral faction together to wipe them out had seemed too vicious for Fuuga. And as for the way he’d sent them their belongings, it seemed too subtle for him. Both were likely Hashim’s schemes. The way Hashim could be firm or flexible as the situation demanded was frightening, as was the fact that Fuuga had the capacity to accept the plans he was offered.

I had thought that, strong as Fuuga was, he would find using crafty plans annoying.

I had been hoping that his strength would give us an opening, like how Xiang Yu failed to heed the advice of his advisor Fan Zeng, and was destroyed when enemy rumors tricked him into becoming suspicious of his own subordinates—or how Lu Bu was unable to take proper advantage of his strategist Chen Gong.

But Fuuga was surprisingly open to accepting ideas from Hashim. I considered Fuuga to be like Xiang Yu, but he seemed to have the open-mindedness and popularity of Liu Bang. If he was Xiang Yu and

Liu Bang combined...that worried me, as someone who lived in the same era as him.

Did Fabius feel this way about living in the same era as Hannibal the Barcid...? I thought, frowning, and Julius laughed.

“There’s no need to be so pessimistic. Fuuga only has one Hashim, but you have the Black-robed and me. He won’t get his way easily.”

“Ah ha ha...”

Hearing Julius say that so confidently, all my worries were blown away.

“I told you this during the demon wave too, but I’m counting on you, Julius.”

“Yeah. Leave it to me.”

With that, we nodded to one another, and I shook Julius’s hand. Roroa and Tia watched us, smiling.

◇ ◇ ◇

Some days later, Colbert, Julius’s former Minister of Finance, came to visit him at his new house.

He was shown into the living room where he met Julius and Tia.

“Julius!”

“Colbert, it’s been a while.”

The two of them exchanged a firm handshake.

“I heard everything that happened in the Union. I’m just so, so happy you were safe... Thank goodness...” Colbert said, overjoyed to see his old friend that he was tearing up a little. “I was a little worried about whether you would be willing to rely on this country.”

“Sorry to worry you... I’ve formally entered King Souma’s service now.”

"You have...? But, um... Are you okay with that?" Colbert asked, concerned, but Julius nodded.

"I bear no grudge against Souma or Roroa at this point. What matters to me now is Tia, her parents, and our unborn child. If this country is going to protect them, then I'll do everything I can to ensure that continues."

"You've really changed, Julius..."

"I get that a lot. I look forward to working with you."

"Yeah. It'll be reassuring to have you with us."

The two men shook hands.

While they were having an emotional reunion, Tia introduced herself to Colbert's companion. "It is nice to meet you. I am Julius's wife, Tia Lastania."

"Oh, how polite. I am Sir Colbert's self-proclaimed fiancée, Mio Carmine."

When Colbert, who was helping with Mio's administrative duties, told her, "An old friend of mine escaped to the Capital, so I'd like to go check in on him," she said she would come along with him.

Today, Mio wasn't wearing her armor or helmet, instead choosing an outfit similar to a dirndl that accentuated her figure.

"Self-proclaimed...?" Tia cocked her head to the side.

"Madam Mio is just calling herself that. It hasn't been officially decided yet."

Mio puffed her cheeks up at Colbert's interjection. "Isn't it about time you found your resolve? I and the people of the Carmine domain eagerly await the day when you come to be my groom, Sir Bee."

It had been quite some time since Colbert went to Randel to assist Mio in governing the Carmine Duchy and its surrounding area. Thanks to his passionate instruction, Mio had done a passable job as an administrator, but Colbert's own, greater talents had seen a rapid rise in his popularity there. He skillfully handled all the work put before him while teaching Mio.

There was no way she wouldn't rely on such a capable man. The bureaucrats of the House of Carmine, whose skills were beginning to develop, earnestly hoped that Colbert would marry into the family. Their calls for it grew by the day.

"Do you hate me, Sir Bee?" Mio asked, looking at him with teary, upturned eyes.

Colbert grunted, then said, "Um... N-Not at all..."

Mio was wearing especially girly clothes today, and it suited the way she was acting. Her attempts to boost her femininity in an effort to get his attention were working. Because of that, Colbert couldn't respond immediately, but he loudly cleared his throat in an attempt to hide that.

"I don't hate you, but...I'm not sure how I feel about being married for my administrative acumen."

"That's perfectly normal among knights and nobles! And I love you, Sir Bee!"

"Well...that's a whole problem in itself."

"Heh heh... I see things have gotten interesting," Julius said, smiling, as he watched Mio and Colbert go at it.

"This is no laughing matter, Julius."

"Hey, why don't you sit down and tell me all about it."

Julius had them take seats on the sofa, and called the maids to bring tea. Then, sitting across from them with Tia, he asked, "Now, Madam

Mio, you said your name was Carmine. Would I be wrong in assuming that..."

"Oh, yes. I am the daughter of Georg Carmine, former General of the Army."

"The daughter of that lion general, huh?"

When Julius was still in the Principality of Amidonia, there had been a standoff along the border with the Carmine Duchy. While it didn't develop into full-blown war, there were frequent clashes between border guards from the two sides. Georg, Gaius VIII, and Julius would sometimes go to sort things out after the fact, and they had to occasionally meet each other while doing so. Julius was quite familiar with Georg, albeit as an enemy.

"Come to think of it, I believe the general had a pretty female knight along with him one time we met. Was that you?"

"Oh, um, I'm not sure I'd say that..."

"Lord Julius...?" Tia called his name, seeming upset, but Julius smiled wryly and petted her on the head.

"Of course, you're the prettiest to me, Tia."

"Hee hee."

Seeing the satisfied smile on Tia's face, Mio's expression changed to one of jealousy.

"Sir Bee, I want to be treated like that too."

"If you're looking for that from me, we're going to have a problem..."

For a long time, and without realizing it, Julius had been something of a ladykiller. That, paired with how beautiful he was made him popular among the female bureaucrats in the castle. His father Gaius had been the same way, but was so focused on his military exploits that he never responded to their affection.

But seeing the way he acted with his wife, it looked like Julius was the type who fell deeply in love once smitten.

"Still, Colbert, you've gotten to a ripe old age yourself, haven't you? You're almost thirty, and still single. Isn't it time you settled down?"

When Julius said that, Mio loudly agreed. "It's time for you to make up your mind. Are you going to take me as your bride, or am I going to take you as my groom?"

"Those are the same thing!"

"Seriously, what are you so dissatisfied with? I've told you that I love you for both your personality and your talents."

"Guh... Well, that's...that's, uh, you see..." Colbert couldn't find the words.

As he watched, Julius came to a realization.

"I see how it is..."

"Did you figure something out, Lord Julius?" Tia cocked her head to the side.

"Madam Mio. My friend Colbert has a truly troublesome personality."

"Julius!"

"Um, what do you mean?" Mio asked and Julius smiled wryly.

"Maybe it's because he's always dealing with numbers, but he can't handle things that are vague. It's all or nothing with him. He likes to make clear distinctions—or something like that. The reason he's rebuffing your proposal is likely that he can't decide whether it's because you love him, or because you need his abilities."

Colbert became very quiet as Julius hit the nail on the head.

Mio cocked her head to the side. "Huh? But they're both true..."

"See, that's just the problem for him. If, for example, you had simply said, 'I love you, let's get married,' Colbert would likely have given you a positive response." Julius said, raising his index finger. He then raised his middle finger. "Alternatively, if you had gone to him and said, 'I want to marry you for political reasons,' Colbert would likely have accepted the inevitability of it and acquiesced. Though he would accept in both cases, his treatment of you afterwards would have differed, I suspect."

Basically, Colbert couldn't tell if Mio's proposal was for love or out of pragmatic concerns, and was hesitant because he didn't know whether he should repay her with love or service.

Julius's explanation made Mio's eyes widen.

"Well, that's...certainly a troublesome personality, yes."

"Ha ha, he's an awkward man. It's why my father kicked him so often."

"J-Julius!"

Unable to take it anymore, Colbert flushed red. Seeing him get so flustered, Julius told Mio, "Madam Mio. This is what Colbert is like. So, if you truly want to be with him, you'll need to think about how you want to propose."

"I see..." Mio thought for a while, then finally stood up.

"Sir Bee... No, Sir Colbert!"

"Y-Yes!"

"I had thought if you had no interest in me, I would be fine with a political marriage. Even if you believed I only wanted your abilities, that was fine as long as you would be with me."

"....."

"Listen, I want to be loved too! I envy Lady Liscia and Madam Tia! I mean, Lady Liscia's husband has multiple wives, and they still get along amazingly! And she's got adorable kids too! She was just like me, a warrior who admired my father, but the gap between us is only growing larger!"

There was a little selfishness creeping into her words, but that was how you could tell they were earnest.

"I love you so much, Sir Bee! I want you to love me back!"

"....."

"Can I get a response?!"

"Y-Yes!" Colbert stammered, then, realizing what he said a moment later, "Ah!"

He'd practically been forced to, but Colbert had certainly given a response.

"Con...gratulations?"

Tia cocked her head to the side and clapped. Mio was utterly verklempt, looking like she might fall backwards, while Colbert hurried to support her. Given how fast he was to react, Colbert no doubt felt something for Mio as well.

It's only a matter of time now, Julius thought, sipping his tea.



Chapter 11: A Meeting and a Request

— Evening of the Day Julius and the Others Came to the Kingdom —

“Are your injuries okay now, Pai?” Ruby asked, sounding worried.

“Yeah. The doctor examined me and said I’d be fine,” Pai replied with an awkward laugh.

“But I heard it was going to leave scars.”

“Uh, yeah. Look.”

Pai removed the mask which covered the area around one of his eyes, and there were clear scars that looked like cat scratches there. They were small marks that only covered the area around his eye, but that was because the wounds he had taken in his draconic form had shrunk down with him in his human one.

Naden and Ruby gulped when they saw the scars.

“That big tiger did that to you, right? It makes me shudder,” Ruby remarked.

“I guess the one good thing is that it didn’t affect your vision,” Naden added.

“Ah ha ha... But Lady Sill told me the scars look cool.”

Naden and Ruby looked at one another in the face of this blatant flaunting of a loving relationship before both poking Pai’s cheeks. Then, to get things back on track, Naden took hold of a wooden goblet.

“Anyway, we’re all here and well, so let’s drink a toast.”

Naden raised her wine-filled goblet, and Ruby and Pai followed suit.

“Now, let’s drink to our reunion! Cheers!”

““Cheers!””

They clacked their cups together and then gulped down the wine.

Today, the three dragons from the Star Dragon Mountain Range were having a “girls’ party” at the experimental restaurant in Parnam, Ishizuka. It all happened because Souma suggested, “You and Pai haven’t seen each other in a while, so why not invite Ruby and have a party at Ishizuka? I’ll let Poncho know you’re coming.” He was likely trying to show some consideration to Naden, whose only compatriot in this country was Ruby. He felt she should value her time with her friends. Naden had gratefully accepted the idea, and invited the two of them.

“The last time we were all together like this was in the Kingdom of Lastania, right?” Naden said after finishing her wine, and Pai nodded.

“During the demon wave, yeah. It’s been years, huh?”

“When you say it like that, it doesn’t feel that long since we’ve seen each other, but a lot of time has passed, hasn’t it?” Ruby said, getting emotional as she stared into her cup.

“We never felt the flow of time this way in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.”

“Well, yeah... We must have spent an exhaustingly long time in our homeland, but the time we’ve spent since meeting Souma feels longer.”

“Yeah, I kind of get it. It’s the density of memories,” Naden said before scarfing down a piece of chicken tatsuta.

Pai nodded. “Every day in the Star Dragon Mountain Range was the same, so none of them stuck in our memories. It was just eating, sleeping, studying, and breaking up fights between the two of you, over and over.”

““Urk...””

Maybe because they'd just remembered that awkward time in their lives, Naden and Ruby both gulped down their drinks. To drown out the bitter memories. Pai sighed and smiled wryly at their reaction.

"Compared to that, every day feels special now. I have someone precious to me, and the time I spend with her is invaluable... I love her so much."

"I get it. Every day I spend with Souma and the others is special."

"It's the same for me with Hal and Kaede." Naden giggled. "I think I'll remember these days for all of my long life. If days spent without someone precious to you don't stay in your memories, then I'm sure most of my life is happening *now*."

"Hey, you *can* say something good once in a while."

That quip from Ruby made Naden flush red with embarrassment.

"Y-You're embarrassing me. Wahey!"

""Wahey!""

In order to mask their embarrassment, the three dragons clacked their cups together once again. Then, after some time drinking and having a raucous good time, Ruby spoke up.

"Oh, right..." Ruby said, "The people who are precious to you two are in a meeting now, aren't they?"

Pai stared blankly at her for a moment before nodding.

"Oh, yeah. I thought I should be at her side, but Lady Sill told me to 'take this opportunity to enjoy yourself.'"

"Well, there's not much we can do during the negotiations anyway." Naden shook her head in dismay. "Knowing Souma, though, he won't treat her badly."

◇ ◇ ◇

Around the same time in Castle Parnam...

“Good evening, Queen Sill.”

“Pardon our intrusion.”

Liscia and I had come to visit Queen Sill while she was staying at the castle.

“Good evening, King Souma, Madam Liscia,” Queen Sill greeted us with a smile and a handshake.

If the queen of a nation came to visit us, she couldn’t just drop off Julius and then say, “Okay, bye now.” This room was the former royal couple’s bedroom, but Queen Sill and Pai were occupying it for now.

Queen Sill put her left hand over my hand which she was holding and bowed her head.

“I must thank you for treating Pai.”

“Think nothing of it. I’d feel terrible if we couldn’t do at least that much for you.”

We needed to welcome her as an honored guest, but because the dragon knights are chivalrous, or rather, have a tendency towards austerity, she politely declined a banquet in her honor.

Instead, because she had heard about our country’s medical reforms, she asked that our doctors look at Pai’s injuries. I called in Hilde and Brad to do the examination. They concluded, “It’s a painful wound, but not deep, and of no threat to his vision.”

“I heard you wanted to have a meeting today...” I said, and Queen Sill’s expression quickly grew serious.

Normally, when I meet with foreign royals, it’s done in the audience chamber or a reception room, but my wife Naden was friends with Madam Sill’s husband Pai, and she wanted to keep it more casual, so I met with her in the room we were letting them stay in. Pai still had

an androgynous, or rather an otokonoko, look going on, so I felt weird calling him her husband though.

“Yes. Let’s sit down.”

I settled into a seat near the table Sill gestured to.

“Has anything inconvenienced you during your stay in the castle?” Liscia asked Queen Sill, and Queen Sill laughed and shook her head.

“Nothing at all, Madam Liscia. I am humbled by the kind treatment we’ve received. You even looked at Pai’s injuries for us.”

“That’s good to hear. Have you been to the castle town yet?”

“Yes. I looked around with Pai. Those broadcast programs of yours were interesting.”

I had given the two of them free run of the capital while they were here, albeit with the Black Cats watching and protecting them in the shadows, of course. Naden and Ruby would want to catch up with Pai, so the four of them went out to have fun together. Though, the draconic trio were all at Ishizuka drinking now.

Suddenly, Sill got a serious look on her face, and looked at me, saying, “However, if I’m out there playing around all the time, it would set a bad example for my knights, and now is a good opportunity. I’d like to talk to you on behalf of my nation.”

That had been my intent all along, so I nodded.

“I understand. Julius spoke to me about it too. This is about trade with our country, correct?”

“Yes. Having lost the Kingdom of Lastania, our window to the outside world, we will also lose our ability to procure supplies. I expect we will start to run into shortages of food and resources, so I would like the Kingdom of Friedonia to take over the Kingdom of Lastania’s role in providing supplies to us.”

With Fuuga taking over the Union of Eastern Nations, half of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom's border was now shared with his camp. If he got it into his mind to do so, he could put limits on the supplies that could pass that way, placing a heavy burden on the Dragon Knight Kingdom's people. Sill wanted to open new trade routes to avoid that; likely through air routes high over the Orthodox Papal State, where wyverns couldn't reach.

I crossed my arms and groaned.

"For my part, I have no problem with it, but there is a great distance between our countries. Even if you use dragons, they can only carry so much at a time. Won't prices be higher than when you were trading overland with the Kingdom of Lastania?"

They couldn't count on traveling merchants like before. That said, the only nations of mankind that the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom bordered were Fuuga's country, the vassals of the Empire, and part of the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State. The Lunarians saw the Star Dragon Mountain Range, which was the center of Mother Dragon worship, as well as the deeply entwined Dragon Knight Kingdom as their enemies. They had fought with both Fuuga's camp and the Empire before, and relations had not recovered still. They were pretty isolated.

"If it were me, I'd consider this a good reason to mend fences with the Empire... How about it? Their empress, Madam Maria, is a trustworthy individual. Considering the growth of Fuuga's country, I think it's worth considering."

Queen Sill and Maria can both be flexible in their thinking. I'm pretty sure they'd get along...

But Queen Sill silently shook her head.

"Madam Maria can be trusted, I'm sure. But the Empire is far too large. It seems Madam Maria has things under her control for now,

but that may not be true of the next ruler. If someone ambitious rises to the position again, hostilities will come easily.”

“Because we don’t share a border, you have an easier time trusting us... Is that it?”

“Yes. I am prepared for the cost of acquiring goods to be higher. We will, of course, continue trading with all countries so long as shipping is not cut off. Think of this as us preparing for a situation where we have no other choice.”

“And can you pay a price that makes it worth my time?” I asked and Sill chuckled.

“Of course, we intend to make up the difference with our bodies.”

““.....!””

When Sill said that, Liscia’s shoulders twitched a little. *Uh, she didn’t mean it that way...* I thought.

“I’ve heard from Julius. You want to use the dragon knights as couriers?”

“Oh! That’s what she... *Ahem,*” Liscia cleared her throat, trying to cover her embarrassment. Queen Sill smiled wryly before continuing.

“I thought it might provide a source of funds with which to buy the supplies we’ll need. A dragon can carry a large amount in one trip, and so long as they aren’t military supplies, it won’t infringe on our contract with the dragons. I expect there will be demand, but what do you think?”

“Well...I’m sure there will be, both at the national and civilian level.”

“Then...!” Sill leaned in eagerly, but I raised a hand to stop her.

There would be demand, yes. Dragons had the power to carry as much as two, maybe even four wyverns. They also had human intelligence and could assume human form, so they were able to

enter any tight place, and didn't need a wide landing space. If they opened for business here, they'd have any number of customers. But...

"If I were to allow the dragon knights to fly as couriers for private individuals, those dragon knights would have to belong to this country. I cannot allow a foreign air force to fly around my country willy-nilly."

Considering how powerful dragons were, they were less like transport planes and more like large bombers.

Think about it. No matter how much they could carry, would *you* let fully loaded enemy bombers fly around your country to make deliveries? The dragons could burn a town or city down in an instant, so it wasn't like they had the option of flying without their bombs loaded. They would always be flying with a certain amount of firepower.

"Yes... You have a point."

Sill had no response to my objection. I let out a sigh.

"I trust both you and Pai. But I don't know what each of your individual dragons and knights are like. If even one of them commits an act of indiscretion, or perhaps accidentally drops their heavy load, it would be a disaster."

As an example, Naden sometimes acted like a courier as part of the odd jobs she did around the capital, but if anything happened when she was doing it, the royal family would be held responsible. But if a dragon knight belonging to the Dragon Knight Kingdom were to cause an incident, it would not be so easy to make them take responsibility. It would definitely require international negotiations.

When I explained that, Queen Sill slumped her shoulders.

"It's a valid complaint... Was I too short-sighted?"

“No, I think you’re on the right track.”

“Still...this is a problem. We won’t have any way to acquire the supplies we need like this,” Sill groaned.

“It’s fine,” I said, smiling at her. “I can’t let them fly around freely, but it’s possible for just the state to hire them. We’ll establish flight paths and timetables, and manage their freight contents and weight. When private entities want to use your services to...transport a large volume of supplies, for instance, the state can make the order on their behalf, and then you will fulfill it.”

In my mind, it was similar to having a national space program that rents equipment for experiments from private companies.

“If the requests are made strictly by the state, not private citizens, it’s possible.”

“Really?!” Queen Sill was visibly elated.

I nodded. “Yes, with proper flight plans. You won’t be making money hand over fist, but you should earn enough profit to buy your supplies.”

“Ohhh! Thank you.”

I’d let Roroa, Colbert, and the Ministry of Finance work out the finer details. They would determine the appropriate compensation. *This is going to mean more work for Colbert... Sorry, just do the best you can.*

There was actual demand. It would also help bring together the maritime alliance we had formed with the Republic of Turgis and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. *Well, with how cold the Republic is, flights would have to be canceled starting in the beginning of autumn, I’m sure.*

I leaned in a bit closer to Sill, lowering the tone of my voice to say, “Now, getting right to it, I have a delivery request for you on behalf of my country.”

“Hmm... Let’s hear it.”

I decided to tell Queen Sill about a certain transport mission that was being planned. When she heard about it, she stared at me for a moment in shock, then got a big smile on her face and slapped her knee.

“Sounds interesting! Let us handle it for you.”

“Thank you, Madam Sill.”

“We have a contract, then!”

Queen Sill and I exchanged a firm handshake. We were the first to form an official contract with the Nothung Courier Kingdom.



Chapter 12: The Lunarian Exodus

A little after Souma and Sill's meeting, there was a major move underway in the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State...

The hardliners who wished to join with Fuuga's new faction won the political battle, and began suppressing the moderates. The hardliners opposed Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire who had wrongfully assumed the title of saint. Fuuga's burgeoning fame following his unification of the Union of Eastern Nations worked in the favor of the hardliners. Because this was a struggle among the higher-ups of the church, most of the individual believers who made up the general populace never knew about it.

As a result, the suppression was done quietly, in the shadows. Moderate bishops were taken in as heretics one after another. One night, as all this was happening, the time came for an old moderate cardinal and the saint candidate under his protection, Mary, to say their farewells.

"You're certain...you can't come with me?" Mary asked sadly, and the old cardinal nodded.

"I have always intended to stay in this country to the bitter end."

"But if you stay, you'll be..."

"Hoh hoh hoh... I'm getting on in years. I wait only for Lady Lunaria's guidance now, so I have no lingering attachment to the mortal realm." The old cardinal placed a hand on Mary's shoulder and continued. "But you are all still young; still with many things to accomplish. You must live, and keep the faith, no matter what. May the blessings of Lady Lunaria be upon you."

"Yes..." Mary said, tearing up. The old cardinal smiled at her.

"Ahh, I do have one worry though. That rotten bishop Souji is in the Kingdom of Friedonia. I couldn't bear to see the believers in that country fall into depravity because of him. Mary, watch him closely, and see to it that he attends to his duties seriously."

"I most certainly will..." Mary said, nodding, and placed a kiss on the old cardinal's hand. Then, rising, she said, "I'll take my leave now."

Bowing once, Mary left the cardinal's room. Wiping her tears as she walked through the halls of the church, she passed another girl. She was a cute little thing with a baby face and short black hair.

Mary bowed, thinking to walk past her without saying any more, but...stopping and turning to look back, she called the other girl's name.

"Anne."

The girl she'd called turned to face Mary. There was no light in her eyes, making her look almost like a puppet.

"Anne, I heard you were chosen as Fuuga's saint," Mary said.

"It is a greater honor than I deserve..."

Anne pressed her hands to her chest and bowed her head. Mary was worried, seeing her like this.

"Do you understand the fate that awaits you?"

"To support God's chosen king, Lord Fuuga. That is the mission heaven has bestowed upon me."

In Lunarian Orthodoxy, saints were tools that connected the Lunarian Orthodox Church to influential figures of the time. In order to please these figures, they had to accept anything that was done to them. They were like puppets at the whims of their owners. This duty was taught to them, and they were raised solely to carry it out.

It had been the same for Mary, who was chosen as Souma's saint. Now, however, Mary understood how warped it all was. And precisely why she couldn't help but extend a hand to the girl in front of her.

"Anne. Will you...come with me?"

"I do not understand what you speak of."

"Once you see the broader world... In the Kingdom, you'll be able to find a life other than as a saint."

"Whyever would I do that?" Anne looked completely mystified. "I have been blessed with a mission from Lady Lunaria. Why should I need to abandon it? Why now, when I have at last been able to discover the reason I was born?"

"Well..."

Saints were often orphans. This was because it's easier to instill faith into a person who has nothing to cling to. In doing so, they became loyal to authority figures, and willing to give their lives for the faith.

Mary had tried to warn the nearly one hundred saints of the danger of their predicament, and urged them to flee the country, but roughly half of them chose to stay. Were Mary the same person she once was, she might have made the same decision.

Obedience to the teachings of the Lord is a virtue. However, when people speak to you of the Lord's teachings, if you do not consider that they may be giving you a warped interpretation, that is not obedience but blindness. The higher-ups, in particular, are prone to infighting, and corrupt easily, after all.

However, even if she invited her, Anne would likely not give up on being a Saint. Knowing that so well that it hurt, Mary closed her eyes.

"May Lady Lunaria's blessing be upon you, at the very least..."

"Yes. And upon you, Lady Mary," Anne responded without a hint of irony.

She had nothing but the purest of faith, and no malice for those she dealt with. That only made it all the sadder, but Mary turned and walked away quickly. She didn't have that much time left.

Mary headed for a disused chapel near the eastern gates of the city walls. When she arrived and headed in, she was surrounded by a number of girls and priests. They numbered nearly eighty in total.

"Lady Mary!"

"Lady Mary, what will become of us now?"

They were the saint candidates who had agreed to escape with her, as well as priests of the moderate faction. Many of the candidates were younger than Mary. They had likely been willing to listen to her because their indoctrination was not yet complete.

In an attempt to calm them, Mary said, "It's going to be okay. Everything should be organized already."

Then, looking around the gloomy church, she said, "You're there, aren't you? Come out, please."

When Mary called out, the very next moment a large man clad in pitch-black armor emerged from the darkness. He wore a terrifying black tiger mask over his head.

""Eek!"" That bizarre appearance made a number of the saint candidates cry out.

"It's okay," Mary stepped forward as if to shield the other girls, then spoke to the big man with the black tiger mask. "You're Sir Souma's agent, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am," the big man with the black tiger mask put his hands together in front of him and bowed his head. "I am Kagetora. I will

take all of you to the Kingdom at the behest of my master, His Majesty Souma Kazuya, who received a request that we do so from Bishop Souji Lester.”

“I see. We’re sorry to trouble you.”

Hearing Mary’s words, the girls finally realized this person was an ally, and calmed down.

Seeing that, Kagetora said, “I must urge you to make haste. When they learn that the saint candidates have disappeared en masse, pursuers will come after you immediately.”

“We know. Please, lead the way.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Kagetora led Mary and the girls to the city walls, not far from the disused church.

Ten carts awaited them there, and men dressed in disguise to look like traveling merchants. They were all members of the Black Cats.

“These are our comrades. We will have you escape in those carriages.”

“Understood. Please hurry aboard, girls.”

Hearing Kagetora’s explanation, Mary nodded and gave the order.

The saint candidates and priests split up across the ten carts. They were loaded with empty casks of wine which they hid inside. Then they headed for the gates, masked as a merchant caravan.

When they arrived...

“Halt! Where are you going at this time of night?!” the gate guards called out to stop their caravan. One of the men dressed as merchants responded as representative of the group.

"Yessir. We are from the —— Trading Company, and we came here carrying offerings of some condiments called soy sauce and miso from the believers in the Kingdom of Friedonia to Lord ——. Now we're returning with his gift of blessed wine."

They called it blessed wine, but it was really just wine. The Orthodox Papal State had branded their own country's wine this way to present it as something people should appreciate as part of their preaching.

"Is that true?" the soldier asked while peering inside the cart. The traveling merchant bowed his head.

"Yessir. I have a note from Lord —— right here too."

"Hmm... Everything seems to be in order."

The soldier nodded after checking the note. The —— Trading Company was fictitious, but Queen Roroa's company did, in fact, ship condiments. As for the note he presented to the guards, it was a genuine one, provided with the help of the old cardinal.

The Kingdom and Mary had both been thorough in preparing for this day. Thanks to that, the carts were not searched.

"Very well, you may pass. May the blessings of Lady Lunaria be upon you in your travels."

"Thank ye kindly. All right, we're going."

And so, Mary and the girls were able to escape the city. When they had traveled some distance away, Mary emerged from her cask, and poked her head out of the cart to talk to Kagetora who was sitting in the driver's seat.

"Where to now?" she asked.

"Under the original plan, we were to follow a poorly guarded route to the border, but...shortly before time came for the operation, we secured a reliable ally. We are going to meet with them."

“A reliable ally?” Mary echoed, but Kagetora did not answer. The carts moved a little further, then when they crested a hill Kagetora pointed ahead of them.

“There they are.”

Mary squinted at the figures in the distance.

It was gloomy because of a cloud passing in front of the moon, so she couldn’t make them out with any clarity, but as she drew closer she realized there were a number of knights, as well as women with horns and reptilian tails.

One of the knights approached the carts as a representative of this group. “You are Madam Mary and her party, yes?”

From the voice, Mary could tell the knight was a woman.

“Yes...and you are?”

“I am Queen Sill Munt of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom.”

Mary gasped as her eyes widened with surprise. She couldn’t believe a knight of Mother Dragon’s religion was in the Orthodox Papal State.

The Dragon Knight Kingdom was known to have a contract with the Star Dragon Mountain Range, the center of Mother Dragon worship. Lunarian Orthodoxy and Mother Dragon worship were the two largest religions on the continent, and Lunarian Orthodoxy rejected Mother Dragon worship as heresy.

“What is a person from the Dragon Knight Kingdom doing here?”

“I have come to collect you at King Souma’s request.”

“King Souma’s?”

“Yes. Because our partners, the dragons, can carry carriages higher than even an anti-air repeating bolt thrower can reach, and fly directly to the Kingdom.”

Mary was dumbfounded. Partially by the fact that Souma had moved the Dragon Knight Kingdom to aid them, but also that a country belonging to their religious rivals had come to their rescue. She had been surprised by how the different faiths of the Kingdom happily coexisted, but this was an even greater shock to her.

Sensing her internal turmoil, Sill smiled at her and said, “Do you hate accepting the help of your business rivals like this?”

“No... Faith is not a business.”

The tension slipped out of Mary’s shoulders and she smiled back.



“Thank you for doing this for us. We’re in your care.”

“Ha ha ha, understood. I promise you a safe journey through the skies.”

Sill lifted her hand, signaling Pai and the others to transform into their dragon forms. The dragons each picked up a cart with their horses detached, then the knights climbed onto their backs, and up into the sky they flew. From there, it was straight to the Kingdom.

The dragon knights of Mother Dragon worship saved the saints of Lunarian Orthodoxy. This story would be slightly embellished and spread by those like Souji and the adherents in the Kingdom who did not desire religious strife. Later, when rumors that a large number of moderate bishops had been purged reached the Kingdom, the saint candidates and priests who escaped said, “The true saint was Mary, who moved the dragon knights’ hearts.” While this may not have been true, it did lead them to revere her.

“Why do they try to make me a saint when I’ve already quit being one...” Mary was reported to say, troubled.



Chapter 13: Welcoming All Who Come, Chasing None Who Leave

The 1549th year, Continental Calendar was a year of intense changes.

It began with the Kingdom of Friedonia and Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union's joint slaying of Ooyamizuchi, and the creation of a maritime alliance based on bonds formed during that operation. This meant the creation of an alternative force that could compete with the Gran Chaos Empire and the Mankind Declaration in the west, and people must have expected an era of East-West conflict was on the horizon.

However, that was forestalled by Malmkhitan and their leader Fuuga.

Fuuga went wild in a way that blew the slaying of Ooyamizuchi out of the water. Externally, he invaded the Demon Lord's Domain to retake territory, and internally, he wiped out opposing factions inside the Union of Eastern Nations. As the world appeared to be heading towards an era of two factions, he created a third.

Obviously, we weren't idle as that was happening.

There was the development of the new academic field of Monsterology, the medical reforms led by Hilde, and the research undertaken by Trill and Genia, all of which greatly increased our national power. There was also the East and West Real Song Battle which pushed forward research into the effect songs could have on visualizing magic, and this had a demonstrable effect on increasing magical efficiency at an individual level. It was maybe only a ten percent gain on average, but a ten percent gain in magic across the whole nation was still a big thing.

Our population was also steadily rising, consequently increasing the available personnel. The baseline for the common people's lives was rising too. If the people who supported Fuuga, due to the harsh conditions of their lives, were to try living in the Kingdom, they wouldn't want to return to Fuuga's country. While his vision seemed very idealistic, the country itself was by no means prosperous.

Still, it was hard for these kinds of results to be noticed, and Fuuga's more showy accomplishments inevitably drew people's attention.

◇ ◇ ◇

It was now the end of the 11th month of that consequential 1549th year.

Kagetora's team sent a messenger kui to inform me that the dragon knights had brought a total of about eighty asylum seekers from the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State to the Kingdom. Of them, around fifty were saint candidates.

I asked Queen Sill and her people to deposit them in the city of Randel, which was the domain of Mio Carmine, situated in between the border with the Orthodox Papal State and our capital Parnam. Mio and her aide Colbert would take care of them for a time while I called Mary to speak with me about what would happen from here. I had also summoned Souji Lester, our bishop from the Orthodox Papal State.

With that arranged, I was meeting with them today, accompanied by my first primary queen, Liscia; my prime minister, Hakuya; and my new general, Julius.

I chose not to hold the meeting in the audience hall because I detest the formality of it. Rather than waste time on pointless greetings, I wanted to get right down to determining our policy. We sat at a long table, with the people from the Kingdom on one side, and the two from the Orthodox Papal State on the other.

“It’s been a while, Madam Mary.”

“Yes, it has...Lord Souma.” Mary sat up straight and bowed her head. “I must apologize for putting you through such trouble. Also, I could not be more grateful that you have taken us in. I thank you on behalf of all my companions.”

Mary very politely expressed her gratitude. I shook my head.

“You don’t need to be so reserved. This isn’t an official meeting. We’re the ones who decided to take you in after hearing the story from Souji. Our country guarantees your safety.”

“Thank you.” A weight seemed to have been lifted from Mary’s shoulders as she looked at Souji, sitting next to her. “Thank you as well, Sir Souji, for speaking on our behalf.”

“Well...saving those who are lost *is* part of my job, y’know.”

Maybe because of how lackadaisical he was usually, it made Souji feel awkward to get a straight compliment, and he scratched the back of his head in dismay. I looked at Mary.

“Now then, Madam Mary, if you’re here, that means...”

“Yes. They have decided to form an alliance with Fuuga’s country. A saint has already been chosen.”

“Of course that was going to happen...”

I knew it was coming, but... My shoulders slumped and I let out a sigh.

Then, I asked my advisors Hakuya and Julius, “Do you think Fuuga will accept the offer?”

“Without a doubt, he will.” Hakuya was the first to answer. “Fuuga Haan’s expansion is supported by his own personal popularity. His country will benefit from the backing of an authority like the

Lunarian Orthodox Church. It will help him to unify the Lunarian Orthodox adherents inside the territories he's annexed."

"Ahh... If it helps him to pacify the people after the war, that's definitely advantageous."

"Yes. On top of that, his rapid growth has led Sir Fuuga to be labeled an 'upstart.' With the recognition of the god Lunaria, he will be able to silence all the people who sneer at his nation for having been a 'backwater minor power.'"

"I see..."

"I agree with the prime minister," Julius concurred. "If I might add, it comes with considerable military advantages as well. This country has declared a maritime alliance with the Republic and Archipelago Union. If Fuuga intends to expand his faction going forward, he'll want to prevent us from working with the Empire at all costs. That means he'll most definitely want the countries that form a wedge between us, the Orthodox Papal State and Mercenary State Zem, as his allies. That is what I'd do, and he has a sharp man like Hashim at his side. He must be thinking the same thing."

"True... I guess that settles it, then."

My two brains had come up with the same prediction. It was more or less a sure thing that Fuuga would strengthen ties with the Orthodox Papal State. *I didn't really want their predictions coming true, though...*

"Souma." Liscia pulled on my sleeve under the table. "I know it's important to think about the future, but you need to decide what we're doing with Madam Mary and her people first."

"Oh... Right."

Mary didn't say anything, but I saw a look of uncertainty on her face. She was a lot more human than last time we met, and I found myself wanting to do something for her.

"It's going to be okay. I won't treat the saint candidates or the priests badly. We will have to check for any spies hiding among the group, though. Once that's done, I think I'll split you up to work at churches around the Kingdom..."

"U-Um! It's hard for me to say this, but..." Mary interrupted me.

"Hm? Do you have something to say?"

"Well... The priests will be fine, but the saint candidates have been educated to be loyal to the kings that Lady Lunaria sends them to. Because of how they were taught, they know little of the world, and I cannot imagine them being able to form ordinary human relationships."

"Oh, there was that kind of problem too, huh?"

"Yes. In fact...there were especially zealous candidates who wouldn't listen to a word I said when I tried to warn them of the dangers of staying in the country. I...wasn't able to bring them with me..."

"Oh..."

She probably wasn't able to just write that off as their own choice, and their own responsibility...

Mary shook her head, as if trying to muster her courage, and looked straight at me. "I worry that if we split up they will be isolated. If possible...could we not separate the fifty saint candidates? Please."

Mary bowed deeply again.

The people from the Kingdom all looked at one another. We all smiled wryly.

“Raise your head,” I told Mary. “It’s true we planned to split you up, but there was that story about you singing hymns while casting Area Heal, right? I’d like you to help with our research on that.”

“On Area Heal...?”

Lunarian Orthodoxy had a magic spell known as Area Heal which could heal a large number of wounded people at the same time. When they used it, the casters and targets all sang hymns. It seemed that they were increasing the efficiency of it by having both the healers and healed visualize the effect. Our experiments during the Real Song Battle had shown that songs other than hymns could have an effect too.

“I want to study Area Heal in our country too. I had been planning to put together a choir for that, but... What about the saint candidates, can they sing? I have this mental image of nuns singing love songs to angels.”

I was reminded of a movie my grandpa liked with some powerful nuns, but obviously, there was no way Mary would get the reference, so she just looked at me in confusion.

“Um... I don’t know about love songs, but...” She placed her hands over her chest and smiled. “We have been trained in the arts in order to make rulers like us. I believe we can live up to your expectations.”

Mary took the job. She sounded awfully confident despite her humility, so it sounded like I could look forward to the results. It might be good to have Juna direct the choir.

I smiled and nodded. “That should be good, then. I’ll arrange for the saint candidates to do that.”

“Yes.”

“Ha ha ha! Good for you, Little Miss Mary,” Souji replied with a cheerful cackle. He wouldn’t be laughing for long, though...

“Now then, with the saint candidates taken care of... Souji.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

“You are to become an archbishop.”

“Come again...?” Souji looked at me slack-jawed, as if he didn’t understand what I was saying.

“This was Hakuya’s idea. Explain it to him, would you?”

“Understood.” Hakuya nodded. “With the Orthodox Papal State having joined with Fuuga Haan, and us sheltering Mary and her associates, relations are bound to deteriorate. It will get bad enough that we can’t just have Sir Souji lazily dodge the issue.”

“You...could be right...” Souji said, coming back to his senses.

“Now that things have come to this point, I want to completely cut off the believers in the Kingdom from the Orthodox Papal State. If they were to go over your head and incite their adherents to action, it would be real trouble, after all. To that end, I want you to become an archbishop leading a new sect of Lunarian Orthodoxy.”

“You’re telling me to go independent...?”

“Ah! It’s not like we’re telling you to change what you worship. There’s no need to stop worshiping Lunaria or alter how you carry out services. Only the person at the top of the organization will change,” I added for the frowning Souji’s benefit.

The idea was to imitate the Church of England from my old world. They created a new denomination, Anglicanism, to shut out the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. I think we learned in school that, “The king created a new religion because his old one wouldn’t let him get a divorce.” There are a lot of popular embellishments that make their way into that kind of story, so I don’t know how true it is.

“Still, I don’t know about calling myself an archbishop...” Souji sounded reluctant, but I needed him to make a decision.

Hakuya turned to Souji with a cold expression. “Now that they have escaped here to the Kingdom, the Orthodox Papal State will no doubt condemn Mary and the others as heretics. If the connection to the Orthodox Papal State remains strong, they will still be in danger. We can’t be sure that they won’t have their adherents in the country attempt to assassinate them. I believe, as the one sheltering Madam Merula, you should understand that well.”

“Merula... The high elf they say snuck into the temple...” Mary’s eyes widened in surprise.

Souji scratched his head, but eventually gave up and let out a sigh. “Well...if I become archbishop... You’ll protect the little miss and the rest, right?”

“Of course,” I said with a firm nod to show I was not taking on the task lightly.

“As far as our country is concerned, this will be a new Lunarian Orthodox religion... Let’s call it Kingdom Lunarian Orthodoxy for now. If Kingdom Orthodoxy will not incite its believers, carry out festivals, and work to provide emotional support for the people, then I think we can build a good relationship.”

“*Sigh.* It’s a pain in the butt, but I’ll have to do it.”

“You’ll take the job, then?”

“Yeah,” Souji reluctantly accepted. “So don’t you go back on your word to protect the little miss.”

I gave him a big nod. “I’ll take on that task as king of this nation. But I don’t think this will be all that bad a deal for you. If you become an archbishop, you can nullify Merula’s status as a heretic. She’ll be free to walk the streets in Parnam, where public order is maintained, at least.”

“Ha ha ha, that’s just great. She’d better be grateful.” Souji cackled.

I looked at a bewildered Mary.

“Madam Mary.”

“Y-Yes.”

“Though things have turned out this way, as you can see, Souji doesn’t have a shred of dignity. If we let him act as archbishop, there’s going to be people who take him lightly. I’d like you to watch him and ensure he acts with dignity.”

“Ah! Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!” Souji cried out hastily.

Having been chosen as a saint once, Mary seemed to have the respect of the devout followers, and she could make up for Souji’s lack of dignity and charisma. If anything, it seemed likely that Souji would be leader in name only, while she took control of the church internally. Effectively, the secret boss of Kingdom Orthodoxy.

Mary seemed dazed for a moment, but soon started to chuckle. “Hee hee, that was my intention all along. I will keep a close eye on Archbishop Souji and ensure that he acts in a manner befitting one addressed as ‘His Holiness’ from now on.”

“You heard her. Good for you, Souji. You’ve got a reliable right hand.”

“Now I’ve got another woman on my back, nagging me! It’s not good at all!”

“Your Holiness. If you do not speak with the proper deference to those who stand above you, it will set a poor example for those beneath you.”

“And she’s super into it already! Damn it all!”

Souji’s shouting made everyone else laugh out loud.

◇ ◇ ◇

— One day in the 12th month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar —

It had been about a month since Mary and her people arrived.

On this day, I had come to the mountains in the southwest of the Kingdom, along the border with the Republic. I was together with Liscia, Aisha, and Juna with our newborn child. Roroa was still pregnant, and Naden couldn't handle the cold, so they were holding down the fort back in the capital. With us, we had also brought the science team consisting of Overscientist Genia, Merula the high elf, and Princess Trill of the Empire. The Republic team of Kuu, Taru, Leporina, and his newest servant Nike Chima, were tagging along as well.

"Watch your feet, sire, Lady Liscia."

"Thanks, Aisha," Liscia said, taking the hand Aisha offered her.

We were currently walking through a large tunnel that had been built in this mountain. This tunnel, reinforced with Roman concrete and magic, had a road running partway through it, so we had been able to come that far in carriages. However, the path was unpaved from there on, so we had to disembark and walk.

Liscia let out a white breath. "Ah... It's warmer here in the tunnel than outside, isn't it? It's still cold, though."

"It's so cold this time of year that Naden refused to come with us, after all. But...it sure is dark in here, huh?"

"Well, we do have lamps," Aisha said in front of us, helpfully holding up a lantern.

The tunnel didn't have lights that were on at all times like a modern one would. The lightmoss we used in the streetlights in town stored up energy during the day, so it couldn't be used to light the inside of a tunnel. But if we tried to keep campfires or oil lanterns going, that would end badly. We'd have to light our own way, like an old steam engine going through a tunnel at night.

While we were talking about it, Kuu came up to us with a laugh.

“Well, you just have to live with it in this season,” he said. “If we’re going from the Kingdom to the Republic in winter, there’s going to be snowy mountain passes to cross. Even with the right preparations, it’s a risky business.”

“That’s true...and the Roroa Maru hovercraft that we have traveling along the coast is full of supplies. It’d be rough for ordinary people to get a ride.”

“Ookyakya! Hence the tunnel, right?”

This tunnel ran several hundred meters, and was a joint investment by both the Kingdom and Republic. This was done in order to make travel between the two in winter just a little more possible.

Although, because of the difference in financial strength, Kuu haggled me down a lot. Ultimately, the Kingdom paid a much larger share of the cost, but...I would just consider it as official development assistance.

Now, for constructing the tunnel, we were finally able to put the complete drill to work.

“Trill’s obsession can pierce mountains... That’s pretty incredible, huh?” Genia remarked.

“Heh heh heh, when we loaded the drill on Mechadra and tested it against Ooyamizuchi, that helped us find some points for improvement. It really cut down the time it took to complete,” Trill responded gleefully.

This tunnel was built by boring with the drill machine, reinforcing it with enchanted steel arches and Roman concrete. Honestly, I had left the design entirely to the engineering team, so I had no idea how this tunnel compared to the technologies in my old world. From the look of things, it seemed solidly built, though.

"At this size, you could take a rhinosaurus through," Aisha said, looking up at the high ceiling.

"Yeah. It will only fit one for now, but I'd like to lay another tunnel beside this so that rhinosaurus trains can run back and forth."

"Mm-hm," Kuu agreed with me, smiling. "There's only one line back and forth now."

As we were walking, we came to a place deep inside. There was rock blocking the way ahead, but a chill air blew past it. There was a drill with a tunneling shield nearby, and the engineers were close. We seemed to have reached the end.

"Now, let us put on the final touches, Big Sister Genia."

"Yeah. Okay, I'll leave that to you."

Genia raised her hand, and the waiting engineers moved into action. They activated the drill and made the shield portion spin, then the rhinosaurus tied behind it started walking to push the drill forward.

Rummmbmmmbble!!! The drill loudly chewed through the bedrock.

We watched it move forward a while before eventually a cold wind blew inside, and a light flooded into the tunnel. The drill had pierced through the mountain, and we could see vast fields of snow on the other side.

"A long tunnel across the border into snow country..." I said.

"Yeah. It's our homeland, the Republic of Turgis!" Kuu rushed towards the exit. "Taru! Leporina! Nike! Come on!"

"Good grief..."

"Wait for me, Master Kuu!"

Taru and Leporina raced out onto the snow after him. Nike followed behind, spear resting on his shoulder, filled with dismay.

“Cold! Do I really have to live in this country from now on...?”

Nike shrunk into himself, and Kuu slapped him heartily on the back.

“You’re my retainer now, so duh. Snow country’s nice once you get used to it.”

“I’m starting to miss the northern heat...” Nike grumbled as Kuu made a nuisance of himself.

From now on, huh...? I thought before asking, “You’re going home, Kuu?”

“Sure am. Thanks for taking care of me for so long, bro!” Kuu said, rubbing the end of his nose.

Sir Gouran, head of the Republic, had already finished laying the groundwork inside his country, and was awaiting his son’s return. With the tunnel to the Republic completed today, it was decided Kuu and his crew would be going home. Incidentally, before he left the capital, I’d gotten my family and comrades together to give him a big going away party, so today he was just leaving.

Kuu walked over to me and extended his right hand.

“I’ve learned a lot from you in the last few years, bro. Like that there are all sorts of ways to rule, and policies that seem pointless may have hidden purposes. Thanks to that, I feel like I know the kind of head I want to become for the Republic.” Kuu sounded a little embarrassed.

I extended my own hand and took his.

“I think you’re way more suited to being a ruler than I am, you know that, Kuu? I always have.”

“Ookyakya! You just don’t seem like much of a ruler, that’s all, bro.” And with that, we exchanged a firm handshake.

Next to us, Liscia and Aisha were saying their goodbyes to Leporina.

“So long, Lady Liscia, Lady Aisha, thank you for everything.”

“Having you all leaving at once feels sad.”

“Were you able to make fun memories in the Kingdom?”

“Yes. But...when I look at the two of you...”

““Hm?””

“I remember you chasing me around during the song battle.”

““Pfft! Ha ha ha ha!”” the two laughed.

“It’s nothing to laugh about! You traumatized me!” Leporina protested with teary eyes.

They look like they’re having fun, I thought.

Meanwhile, Taru was parting with Genia and the engineers. It made me realize all over again how deep the bonds we’d all formed were.

“I’m going to miss you all...”

“We’ll be talking weekly over the Jewel Voice Broadcast to share reports, won’t we? Besides, you’ll come to our wedding, right? I’ll send an invitation.”

“Of course, but try to choose some time a little warmer. Winter’s pretty rough.”

Even just standing here chatting I could feel the chill. *The Republic sure is cold.* Kuu couldn’t help but chuckle at my shivering.

“Yeah, I know. See ya.” Kuu lifted his cudgel with a grin. “Until next time, bro! No, my friend, King Souma of Friedonia!”

“Yeah, take care! My friend, Kuu Taisei!”

Kuu didn’t turn back again after that. They faced forward, returning to their homeland. We watched them go, waving to their backs.





Epilogue: The Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan

— 1st day, 1st month, 1550th year, Continental Calendar —

Fuuga made his move right at the beginning of this year. Sharn Castle in what had once been the Kingdom of Sharn, the mightiest country in the Union of Eastern Nations, was now known as Haan Castle, the new home of Fuuga. In the audience hall there, with the flag of his ancestors hanging behind him, Fuuga stood before his commanders—brave, cunning, and fierce—in front of a throne that was raised several steps above them.

“I hereby rename the Union of Eastern Nations the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan!”

It was a declaration of the end of an old state, and the birth of a new one.

“This country will continue liberating the Demon Lord’s Domain with one unified will! Lend your strength to me, Fuuga Haan! I will build a strong nation that no one, man or demon, can tread on!”

“““Yeahhh!””” Fuuga’s followers cheered with throaty voices.

On this day, Fuuga finally announced the founding of the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan, and took the throne as the first Great Tiger King. With the extermination of his political rivals inside the Union of Eastern Nations the previous year, he had already effectively made the country his own, but this was a declaration to everyone inside and outside the country that he was king here now.

During his speech, he was flanked by his wife Mutsumi and advisor Hashim.

In his role as master of ceremonies, Hashim declared, “In celebration of our king’s ascension to the throne, a messenger has arrived from another country. Step forward, Saint Anne.”

A young girl in a white habit stepped forward from the line of people in attendance. She walked to stand before Fuuga, sinking to her knees, and putting her hands together in front of her chest as if in prayer. Then she spoke in a quiet but clear voice.

“The Lunarian Orthodox Papal State recognizes Lord Fuuga as the holy king chosen by Lady Lunaria. May your hands protect the faithful, and your words lead the devout. The Orthodox Papal State swears to walk by your side.”

“That so...?” Fuuga said simply.

Originally, religion was something Fuuga could do with or without. He found it better to act himself than to beg for divine intercession. The way he saw it, doing so would likely turn his fortunes, and God would probably side with him anyway. That’s why being recognized as a holy king by a theocratic state didn’t evoke any strong emotions in him, but Hashim had insisted that an alliance with the Orthodox Papal State would be indispensable to their further expansion.

“Let me be a king worthy of the honor you have given me,” he said, hiding his true feelings.

Anne bowed her head. “My life is yours to command, Lord Fuuga. I will serve you as I serve Lady Lunaria. I offer my body and soul. Use me as you see fit.”

“Oh, yeah...? Thank you for your trouble.”

Fuuga had heard from Hashim that the Orthodox Papal State sent beautiful and submissive young girls to influential figures of the time as saints. He preferred a woman like Mutsumi who had a mind of her own, and felt no attraction to one like Anne who left herself to the

whims of fate. Still, he felt some pity for her, so he meant to treat her well.

I hope that by living in this country, she'll be able to smile like Yuriga one day, Fuuga thought, compelled by his nature as an older brother.

Anne stepped back, and Hashim took a piece of paper presented to him on a tray by some bureaucrats.

“Yet another country sends us congratulations on this auspicious day. The king of our neighboring country, Sir Souma A. Elfrieden, has sent kind words through Lord Fuuga’s younger sister Lady Yuriga. I will read them now.”

Hashim read off an inoffensive statement from Souma celebrating the founding of the Great Tiger Kingdom and wishing for amity between their two countries.

As he did, Mutsumi, who was standing beside the throne whispered, “Couldn’t Yuriga make it today?”

“I told her in advance not to...” Fuuga whispered back.

Mutsumi cocked her head to the side. “Why is that? It’s your big day.”

“If she comes home, Souma’s people may get wary and refuse her reentry. Foreign royalty who haven’t sworn loyalty to you are just a source of trouble, after all. As long as we’re expanding, he won’t know what to do with her.”

“Is that right...?”

Fuuga smiled wryly at the disappointment in Mutsumi’s tone.

“Yeah. But it sounds like Yuriga had no intention of coming anyways, you know?”

“Huh? She didn’t?”

"When I told her she didn't have to, she told me she couldn't anyway because, 'she has school,' and, 'she wouldn't get off with just supplementary lessons if she took off for another extended leave now.' Do you think school's really more important than her brother's moment of glory?"

"Hee hee. It sounds like she has a lot of friends, so she must be enjoying life in the Kingdom."

"It wouldn't be good for her to get too influenced though." Fuuga shrugged. He seemed unconcerned, but sensed that Yuriga might decide to settle down in the Kingdom.

Yuriga was clever. She was also the kind of person Fuuga liked; one who could think with her own head. If, having thought things through herself, Yuriga took a different road, that could be interesting in its own way for Fuuga.

◇ ◇ ◇

Fuuga Haan's ascension to the throne as the Great Tiger King, and the founding of the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan would have a massive impact on the situation on the continent.

For one thing, it essentially rendered the Gran Chaos Empire's Mankind Declaration toothless. The unification of the Union of Eastern Nations resulted in the loss of many signatories, leaving the Empire's two vassal states and Zem as the only other remaining members. Furthermore, because of the Great Tiger Kingdom's conquest of the Demon Lord's Domain, its purpose had also been lost.

However, thanks to Empress Maria's charisma, they were still the largest and most powerful country on the continent. There was also another large faction, overshadowed by the Great Tiger Kingdom, the Maritime Alliance consisting of the Kingdom of Friedonia, the Republic of Turgis, and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union.

This alliance was founded on the “Law of the Sea,” which said they would each help the others in times of trouble on the waters, and was designed to let them immediately form a unified fleet—essentially a shared one—in the event that any of these countries was in danger. The Kingdom of Friedonia and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union combined had the largest maritime force in the world, obviously overwhelming the Great Tiger Kingdom with its almost nonexistent fleet, but also the Empire, which was always a country with a heavy focus on land.

While the Great Tiger Kingdom and Empire competed for supremacy over the land, the Maritime Alliance was growing at sea.

The Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan. The Gran Chaos Empire. The Maritime Alliance.

In the 1550th year of this world’s Continental Calendar, these three forces would struggle for supremacy. And...it would also be the year when an event would happen that shook all three.



Afterword

Thank you for purchasing Volume 14 of *Realist Hero*. Dojyomaru here, and we have a proper afterword, not a midword, this time.

The theme of this volume is the expansion of Fuuga's power. The great man chosen by the times moves his allies, and his enemies too.

For those of you who have a hard time imagining the charisma that draws people to Fuuga, please try listening to songs like "Guren no Yumiya," "Shinzou wo Sasageyou!" and "Gurenge." That propulsive feeling of... *Move! Fight! Burn your life away!* Fuuga's charisma is like a concentrated version of that. Those drawn to him burn their lives away with a sense of intoxication. That's why his road to glory is stalked by death. His allies will give their lives for him, and his enemies die satisfied to face a foe as strong as Fuuga.

This point is in contrast with Souma.

Souma's camp tends towards pragmatic compromise. The way they see it, if they die, there's no point in any of it. What glory is there in death? They are willing to put their opinions aside and use whatever they can. That's why they can hire former enemies like Julius. It's an environment where someone like Julius can say, "I guess I'll have to do it," and help out. It's also part of why so few named characters die in Souma's story.

From a storytelling standpoint, the former is probably more exciting. The popular figures in history aren't the conservative but the revolutionary ones. However, if you look at it from the perspective of the many who lived in the same era, I have a feeling that opinion might change.

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, and to all of the people involved in the anime

adaptation, as well as all of you reading this now. This has been Dojyomaru.

I also have another new series going on sale in Japan at the same time as this volume, *Yashiro-kun no Ohitori-sama Kouza*. It's a school series, completely different from *Realist Hero*'s fantasy, with a touch of SciFi.

I started writing it with the thought, "What kind of story can I tell in this sort of world?"

However, as I'm sure *Realist Hero* fans will know, I love oddly detailed world settings, and planting certain gimmicks in what I've written. It may read like a common story in a school setting at first, but if you can read into the character's actions, you may find something feels off.

If that caught your attention, then please check it out as well as *Realist Hero Volume 15*.

Bonus Short Stories

Chronicles of the Great Tiger Kingdom: The Legend of Moumei

The Hammer of the Tiger, Moumei Ryoku, human commander of Fuuga's infantry. Because he was a huge man who fought by swinging a massive iron hammer, he couldn't ride a horse or temsbock. Instead, he used a steppe yak as his mount. However, despite his rough appearance, he was a learned man and one of the more intellectual members of Fuuga's men.

This happened when the Union of Eastern Nations was beset by the demon wave...

It was just after the monsters attacking the Duchy of Chima were exterminated by the combined forces of the Union of Eastern Nations and the Kingdom of Friedonia, and it was decided Yuriga would be going to the Kingdom.

A banquet was being held in Wedan Castle, the home of Duke Chima, to celebrate victory with the kings, dukes, and commanders who had been invited. Moumei had attended as one of Fuuga's commanders, but he was not a gifted conversationalist and found these sorts of gala affairs to be stifling and awkward.

I'm...not so good with events like this.

His fellow warriors might praise him for the way he wielded a great hammer on the battlefield, but he couldn't even manage a polite smile in response. (Even if he attempted one, the people he talked to never picked up on it.) This made people think he was in a foul mood, and anyone who passed by to converse him beat a hasty retreat. Moumei's comrades in Fuuga's forces understood his personality, but as one of the people who'd distinguished himself in battle, he wasn't going to be able to hang around only with those he

knew. In truth, Moumei was the shy, sensitive type who preferred to keep to himself.

He felt awkward, and left for the terrace with a drink and some food. Once outside, he found someone else had gotten there first.

“Little sister...?”

“Oh...! Sir Moumei.”

It was his master’s younger sister, Yuriga. She seemed distracted, leaning on the ledge of the terrace and looking absently into the distance. Normally, Moumei would have simply paid his respects and moved on, but there was something lonely about the way Yuriga looked, and so he resolved to talk to her.

“Is something the matter, little sister?”

“Oh, um, I just wanted to be alone for a bit.”

“You... You did? Should I leave?”

“No...this is good timing. Could you hear me out for a while?” Yuriga beckoned him, so Moumei sat down next to her.

“So... What did you want to talk about?”

“You know how my brother told me to go to the Kingdom?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I can see his reasoning, and I accept it. With Tomoe and Ichihara there, I doubt I’ll be lonely. My brother says he’ll be busy from here on, so this may be a good time.”

Moumei struggled for the right words to say.

Turning to face him, Yuriga said, “But I’m a little wary. This is my first time leaving the steppes. Will I be able to make it in the Kingdom?”

Yuriga rested her back against the ledge and stared up into the sky. Moumei thought about it for some time, but eventually resolved to speak.

“I must admit...I’m a little jealous,” he said.

“Jealous? Of what?”

“There’s not much to be learned on the steppes, after all.”

Due to the physique he had been blessed with, Moumei had been successful as a warrior, but he also enjoyed getting in touch with how things were like beyond his homeland.

“If I’d had the chance, I would have liked to learn in a larger country too.”

“But you’re a gifted warrior, Sir Moumei...”

“Well...with the way I look, it’s expected of me, and I do find my life’s purpose in fighting. But if I were in the world outside the steppes, I suspect there are other livelihoods I could have found as well.”

“Hmm... I can’t imagine you *not* swinging around a giant hammer...”

Yuriga cocked her head to the side. “What kind of life would you have liked to live?”

“Ah, yes, well... I might have enjoyed raising beautiful flowers.”

“Pfft!” Yuriga burst out laughing at the thought of Moumei as a florist.

Imagining this mountain of a man, who could smash through boulders and fortress gates alike with his giant hammer, taking care of little flowers was so surreal she couldn’t contain her amusement. *Oh, but maybe it does suit him...* she thought.

She had dismissed it out of hand at first, but when she considered it again with his gentle nature in mind, it seemed oddly appropriate. Like a big bear rolling around a ball.

“Maybe you’d surprise us and it would suit you even better than being a warrior.”

“Ah ha ha... You’re embarrassing me.” Moumei laughed bashfully, not expecting her to approve.

When she saw him like that, the unease in Yuriga’s heart melted away. “That’s right, huh? This is an opportunity... I need to enjoy it or I’ll be missing out.”

“Ha ha... That’s the spirit, little sister.”

“Thanks, Sir Moumei,” Yuriga said, extending a hand to him. “If I find anything interesting in the Kingdom, I’ll send it to you.”

“I-I’d appreciate that. Please do.”

Moumei took Yuriga’s hand gently, so as not to crush it, and shook it.

Chronicles of the Great Tiger Kingdom: The Legend of Gaten

The Flag of the Tiger, Gaten Bahr. Fuuga’s charge commander. He skillfully rode both horses and temsbocks using a feathered saddle reminiscent of Poland’s winged hussars. This man competed with Shuukin to be Fuuga’s best warrior and was a rare human among Fuuga’s mostly celestial retainers.

This is a story that happened while Fuuga was on the march with an army to liberate the Demon Lord’s Domain...

As Gaten was at the head of the procession, his feathers ruffling in the wind, Fuuga’s wife Mutsumi rode up alongside him.

“Sir Gaten.”

“Yes, madam? Is something the matter?”

Mutsumi smiled wryly and replied, “My husband is taking a nap on Durga’s back, so I have nothing to do. The scenery around these

parts is as uninteresting as ever, so would you mind talking with me for a little while?"

"Bwa ha ha! Leaving his pretty wife alone to take a nap? Our boss has a lot to learn!" Gaten said with his usual raucous laughter. "Of course, if you want to talk to me, I'll gladly play along!"

"Thank you. Now, let's get right to it..."

Mutsumi decided to ask something that had been nagging at her for a while.

"I've been wondering, but why is it you maintain such a showy appearance, Sir Gaten? Those...feathers you have attached, for instance?"

"To stand out, of course!"

"I know that much. It's in your personality."

That wasn't what Mutsumi meant to ask exactly.

"I believe you have a rare aesthetic sense. My husband is, in some respects, the same way. But...while I understand it in your personal life, isn't standing out so much a disadvantage on the battlefield? For one thing, if you try to launch a surprise attack, you're more likely to be spotted. And it must attract enemy soldiers who want to make a name for themselves by taking the head of a commander too."

"Bwa ha ha! I have all the ladies and the enemies coming right to me!" Gaten replied with a laugh, but it didn't seem funny to Mutsumi.

"Um... Don't the people around you tell you you should stop?"

"They do, yes..." Gaten said before grinning. It wasn't to laugh off her comments like he had until this point, but it was a wry or perhaps self-derisive smile. "Let me ask you a question in turn. What do you think of members of the celestial race like Fuuga?"

“What do you mean by that?”

“Aren’t they super showy?!” Gaten’s eyes snapped wide open. “They’ve got wings! Not like the dragonewts who clearly exhibit their dragon blood, but ordinary humans with wings! That’s more impactful than a lot of beastmen!”

“Well, yes...that’s certainly true.”

In Fuuga’s forces, which included many members from a lot of different races, humans like Mutsumi and Gaten were actually in the minority. That was one reason why he felt this so strongly. Beastmen and dragonewts had such distinctive features that they gave the impression of being descended from animals or dragons. But celestials didn’t feel like they were descended from birds; instead, they were like beings that had transcended humanity. It might have been hard for anyone not of the human race to understand how this felt.

Gaten shrugged. “The boss and people who look like him gather everyone’s attention while fighting normally. Their appearance stands out, and they fight in a showy way. I’ve lived surrounded by people like that. If I don’t put in the effort, I’ll get ignored.”

“I see. That’s the origin of your fighting style, then.” Mutsumi sounded strangely convinced of this.

Gaten wasn’t merely a show-off—he was desperate to be noticed in a force full of commanders with great presence. That’s why, even if it put him at a disadvantage by becoming a target, he kept demonstrating “I am here!”

When you consider how Gaten often tries to show young Kasen that he has a sort of mature composure, it’s just adorable, Mutsumi thought.

“But, well, once I started doing it, I found it felt good too,” Gaten said jovially. “The more you show off, the more the men talk about you,

and the more stories spread of your accomplishments when the war is over. Also, women who hear them look at me with respect. I just can't stop now."

Mutsumi's shoulders slumped. "Sir Gaten...you just ruined it."

"Bwa ha ha!" Gaten laughed the same as ever, even though it exasperated Mutsumi.

He's not a bad guy, but... Mutsumi let out a small sigh.

As usual, it was hard to tell just how serious this show-off was.

Chronicles of the Great Tiger Kingdom: The Legend of Kasen

The Crossbow of the Tiger, Kasen Shuri. The youngest of Fuuga's commanders and an expert bowman who led the mounted archers. Because he was a celestial like Fuuga, and that they had all known each other for a long time, Fuuga and Shuukin treated him like a little brother. He had the potential to become a wise and powerful commander like Shuukin, but the other commanders treated him like he was still not fully one of them yet.

On the night of the banquet after they finished defending the Duchy of Chima from the threat of the demon wave, he was grumbling to Tomoe and Ichiha for some reason...

"Lord Fuuga and Lord Shuukin still treat me like I'm just a kid. I lead the mounted archers, you know? It sets a poor example for the men."

"R-Right..."

"I-I see."

Tomoe and Ichiha smiled politely and nodded along as Kasen complained, his face perhaps a little red from drinking. The people invited to this event were all important figures from other countries,

so the average age was on the higher end. It was only natural that the younger guests would cluster together, and that's how Tomoe and Ichiha had been caught by Kasen.

"*Pwah!* Besides, I'm in a boring position," Kasen grumbled, knocking back his drink. "I'm confident in my ability to shoot while riding a horse or temsbock. But Lord Fuuga's a powerful archer himself, and if our feet are on the ground, he's better than me. And when we're mounted, he rides that super strong mystery tiger, Durga, which puts him on another level entirely from other mounted archers."

"Yeah...you're right, Yuriga's brother did seem strong," Ichiha said. Kasen nodded emphatically.

"Yeah, yeah, that's it. I'm no match for Lord Fuuga martially, so I try my best in other ways. But we've got a lot of really distinct guys around. Sir Shuukin is both wise and brave, and I can't compete with Sir Gaifuku's experience. And Sir Moumei looks like a berserker but is actually a learned man. It's not fair. I could try to stand out on the battlefield, but with a guy as showy as Gaten around, I'll always be plain by comparison."

"They sure are a lot of different people in Malmkhitan, huh?" Tomoe said, sounding impressed. Having seen the way Souma obsessed about finding talented people to recruit, Tomoe could see how many capable people were gathered around Fuuga, even if their talents were slanted towards the military side of things.

Kasen let out a long sigh. "Well... If there's one thing we're missing, it's a strategist or a military advisor, but honestly, I'm not cut out for that kind of scheming... I just want to find some way to make myself useful, have a little more presence, and stop being treated like everyone's little brother..."

Tomoe cocked her head to the side. "Is being treated like a little brother so bad?"

“Huh?”

“I was adopted by the former king and queen and became Big Sister Liscia’s stepsister, which also makes me her future husband’s sister-in-law. She and Big Brother Souma both treat me like a little sister, and so do big brother’s other fiancées. It makes me happy, and I don’t think I deserve it, but...I’ve never been upset about it,” Tomoe explained, and this time it was Ichihā’s turn to nod.

“I’m the youngest of eight brothers and sisters, and I get bullied by two of my older brothers for being weak. It’s only Big Sister Mutsumi who’s nice to me. I’m their real sibling and they treat me like this, so maybe you should just be glad everyone doesn’t mistreat you.”

“Urkh...” Kasen was unsure how to follow up Ichihā’s story, which was heavier than he’d expected. “Uh...sorry. I guess you’ve got it hard too, huh?”

“Ichihā...”

“Ah ha ha... I’m already used to it. And besides...” Ichihā smiled at Tomoe. “I’ve met people who recognize me for who I am now. I’m going to try to do my best in a new environment from here on.”

“Yeah! That’s right, Ichihā!” Tomoe grinned at Ichihā’s positive attitude.

“Ohh...you’re such good kids.” Kasen cried manly tears as he watched the two of them. “I’m embarrassed at myself for having complained.”

“Oh, no, please don’t cry.”

“Um, um, um...” Kasen raised a glass to the two of them as they got all flustered. “I’m going to do my best where I am now, just like you both! I’ll strive to make Lord Fuuga and all the others I respect recognize me not as a little brother, but as a man!”

“G-Good luck with that.”

“We’ll be cheering for you!”

Ichihia and Tomoe offered words of encouragement as Kasen knocked back his drink again, tears streaming down his face.

“What’re you guys doing...?”

This went on until Yuriga came along and exasperatedly put an end to it.

Loading Up the Secret Weapons

It was around the time Souma and the others had gone ahead to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago and were gathering information on Kishun’s island.

On this day, four women were visiting the Kingdom’s secret arsenal on an island near Lagoon City: Overscientist Genia of the Kingdom, Merula the high elf of the Spirit Kingdom, Third Imperial Princess Trill, and Taru the blacksmith from the Republic. These four were, without question, at the forefront of the Kingdom’s technological development now. The reason they had come to the island was to deliver Mechadra, which had been stored (more like abandoned) in Genia’s dungeon laboratory.

In order to slay Ooyamizuchi, the kaiju currently devastating the Nine-Head Dragon Archipelago, the Kingdom had decided to go all-out and deploy Mechadra into the fray. That was why, despite many of the marines not hearing of the reason they were being dispatched, these four had been informed of the situation.

“Who would have thought this thing would be used for something so important?” Merula murmured, her voice half-filled with awe and half with dismay. “I figured it would just keep taking up space in the lab forever.”

Even its creator, Genia, was laughing. “Ah ha ha, I never expected it to be deployed in a real battle either.”

"Why would you make something you have no plan to use?" Merula asked with dismay.

"You sure are strange, Genia..." Taru agreed.

Merula and Taru believed it was important to focus on developing things that were feasible and actually useful to others. Meanwhile...

"Wow, Big Sister Genia! You come up with ideas that ordinary people never could without batting an eye! What a genius!" Trill squealed, wrapping herself around Genia's arm.

Genia seemed a little weirded out over the way Trill, who was taller and shapelier than her, was touching her. After a sideways glance at the two of them, Taru looked up at Mechadra.

"But His Majesty had us make additional equipment because he thought he could use it."

"Oh, geez... Well, it does have the power to go up against large animals," Genia replied as she tried to peel Trill off of her. "When they were shooting an episode of Overman Silvan, it was able to throw that massive rhinosaurus, even if they were just acting. He must have thought that with the right equipment it could go up against the kaiju in question."

"I'm...not so keen on the idea," Merula said, crossing her arms.

Genia cocked her head to the side. "You're opposed to Mechadra being used as a weapon? I hear we got permission from the Star Dragon Mountain Range, though."

"It's not that. I'm worried about deploying an untested weapon into a battle where people's lives hang in the balance. People are relying on our technology, so when I think about what might happen if anything were to go wrong... Well, you know?"

"I totally get that." Taru nodded in agreement. "We were given ample funding for development. I think that shows just how much

the king is counting on this. You can't help but worry whether our baby will be able to live up to expectations."

"GJeez, you're too easily dispirited! Lady Merula! Lady Taru!" Trill tried said, trying to encourage them. "An engineer has to trust in her own abilities! That's why we spent so long talking things over, checking to make sure there were no malfunctions! This new Mechadra is what we have as a result of all that! I believe in it!"

"She's right, you know?" Genia said, placing a hand on Trill's shoulder. "We've built the best thing we can with the technology available to us. Both hands are loaded with gunpowder-fired pile drivers, and improvements were made to even the finer details like its claw blades. Then there's the additional equipment on top of that."

"Like the drill, big sister!"

"Ah ha ha, that's right. It can carry the drill that Trill's so obsessed with now too." Genia removed her hand from Trill's shoulder and looked up at Mechadra. "We've done our best. Now we just have to believe in the people...the soldiers who'll be using it. If they have honest hearts, the technology will definitely respond to that."

"Hee hee, you're right."

"Yeah...I think so too."

"Indeed!"

Merula, Taru, and Trill nodded in agreement.

"But I'll miss having Mechadra's heroic form towering over us," Trill said. "Maybe I should sneak aboard a warship; smuggle myself inside the luggage..."

"Enough! No stowing away!" Merula scolded her and Trill hurriedly shook her head.

“I-It was only a joke! I’m Empress Maria’s younger sister! If I did that, it would cause her no end of trouble!”

“Oh, right...Trill’s a princess.” Taru said, clapping her hands as if she’d just remembered.

“A princess, smuggling herself? You can’t pull that kind of mischievous prank.”

At that time, someone far away may or may not have sneezed. No one can say for certain.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 15 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom: Volume 14

by Dojyomaru

Translated by Sean McCann

Edited by Meiru

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 Dojyomaru

Illustrations by Fuyuyuki

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc.,
Tokyo

English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: October 2021

*Download all your fav Light
Novels at*

Just Light Novels