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Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

XVII



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Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

VII



Mio Carmine



I
GREW UP
WATCHING.
THAT
LARGE
BACK OF
HIS.



Georg Carmine



**HOW A REALIST HERO
REBUILT THE KINGDOM**

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki





"YOU,
TOO,
MADAM
MIO."

"YOU'RE
PRETTY...
GOOD!"

SPARKS FLEW
AS AISHA'S
GREATSWORD
AND MIO'S TWO
LONGSWORDS
COLLIDED.

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.



Gatsby Colbert

Formerly the Minister of Finance in the Principality of Amidonia. Now acts as a reliable Minister of Finance for the Kingdom of Friedonia.



Georg Carmine

Former General of the Army in the Elfrieden Kingdom. Rebelled against Souma, and destroyed the corrupt members of the nobility.



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.



Castor

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



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.



Genia M. Arcs

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



Ichihha Chima

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



Taru Ozumi

Blacksmith from the Republic of Turgis, and Kuu and Leporina's childhood friend. Currently teaches smithing in Friedonia.



Trill Euphoria

Third daughter of the Gran Chaos Empire's royal family. Emissary of the Empire in Friedonia, and developer of the drill.





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Chapter 1

Uninvited Guests

Chapter 1: The Lion's Daughter

I grew up watching that large back of his...

My father was a big man, but the size of the things he carried on his shoulders made him appear even greater than he actually was. He shouldered the country and the people who lived there as he faced our enemies, served the royal family on a level above himself and his own.

Father believed that they would protect the nation, and protecting the nation would in turn protect his own family. He was awkward and didn't spend much time at home, but as his daughter, I was still proud of him all the same. Proud of that large back of his—the back of a man who everyone relied on and respected.

When he fought to defend something, his martial prowess would overwhelm any foe. I admired and aspired to be like that myself. It was this desire to be like him one day which led me to live the path of a warrior. At first, Father did not approve of a woman like me seeking strength, but when I asked him to teach me, he responded with sincerity. He trained me, and allowed me to watch as he led his troops.

He was never one for words, but I feel like he told me a lot of stories during our sparring sessions. He pulled his punches against me at first, but each time he held back a little less, I felt as though he was praising me, saying, "You've gotten stronger." But, well, he never actually said it out loud...

Ultimately, I didn't manage to beat him even once; still, though, I think I ended up strong in my own right. But now... The father who taught me to live as a warrior is no more.

He was captured as a traitor, and died in prison. Father raised a rebellion against the royal family that he had so loved and

respected—that he has put his life on the line to serve—and he was captured in the ensuing war. In the end, he took his own life. The fame he had built up was lost, and all that remained was the infamy of that treasonous act.

I was in a foreign land when I learned of my father's fate. You see, prior to raising his rebellion, he disowned us—his family—and sent us out of the country. It was probably so that if the rebellion failed... No, because he *knew* the rebellion would fail, and he didn't want us to be held accountable for his actions. Perhaps Mother could sense his grim determination, because she obeyed him without letting him see her cry. I was ready to stop my father, even if it meant having to fight him, but I was rendered unconscious with a surprise attack. When I came to, I was already outside the country, and unable to return.

When I received word of my father's passing, I cried. Enough for my mother's share, too, when she admirably did not. Then, after crying my heart out, I stood up. I wanted to learn what it was my father truly meant to do. Even though the way the throne had changed hands had been awfully sudden, I couldn't imagine that my father, so full of loyalty to the royal family, would have started a rebellion.

I didn't know what the new king—I believe his name was Souma—was like, but Princess Liscia, who my father had cared for just as much as he cared for me, was with him. The princess supported King Souma, and had sent a number of letters to Father requesting that he talk things over with him directly. Yet Father never responded. Then he started the rebellion, and even went so far as to make an enemy of the princess.

No one who knew my father could ever have imagined him doing it. He would never have placed the princess in danger. That was why I knew there had to be some secret motive behind my father's

rebellion. I wanted to know what it was. As his daughter... The daughter of Georg Carmine.

◇ ◇ ◇

Father's name echoed throughout the land as a warrior of superior talent. The Carmine Duchy was largely made up of land won from the Kingdom of Amidonia in the time when Queen Elisha's father, the king two reigns before King Souma, was in power. This seized land, still inhabited by its former citizens, could not possibly have been ruled by a halfhearted individual. It goes without saying that my father, the head of the House of Carmine and chosen ruler of the Duchy, was no ordinary man.

Eventually, with the passing of the king, a succession crisis broke out, ending with Lady Elisha as the royal family's sole survivor. It was then that her husband King Albert took the throne. Father had been friends with King Albert for a long time, and he had great trust for him.

Respected by the people, and feared by the Amidonians. That was my father, Georg Carmine.

— The 6th month, 1545th year, Continental Calendar —

This happened about a year before King Souma was summoned.

When your domain borders a hostile state, you never know when you might be caught in the fires of war. In fact, Randel, the central city of the Carmine Duchy, was so close to Van, the capital of the Principality of Amidonia, that it was fair to say they were right in front of each other's noses. Because of that, there were troops stationed on the border at all times, and they closely monitored any moves the other side made. Though that may have helped to

prevent any major conflicts, skirmishes on the border were still a frequent occurrence.

During the reign of King Albert, it seems they insulted our country as being “peace-addled,” but that could not have been further from the truth. On that day, there were reports of small-scale clashes near a bridge crossing close to the border. Father took his second-in-command, Sir Beowulf, and rushed to the scene on horseback. Because I pushed for it, I was allowed to accompany them, too.

“Though there were no fatalities according to the report, magic was used, and there have been casualties. Currently, forces from both sides are staring each other down from opposite ends of the bridge.” Beowulf reported on the situation as we rode towards the site.

“Was it both sides that used magic?” Father asked.

“Yes, sir.” Beowulf nodded. “That seems to be the case.”

“...That is fine, then,” my father sighed. “If our forces attack them too hard, we could end up giving the Principality excuses that we don’t have to.”

Personally, I was not satisfied with that answer.

“Father, why must we show such consideration to the Principality? Doesn’t their country only have half the power and troops that ours does?” I asserted.

“Lady Mio, that’s...!” Beowulf tried to say something, but Father held up his hand to silence him.

“Mio, you just spoke of power and troop totals, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think this kingdom can afford to fight the Principality now?” he asked, eyeing me for my response.

“Are you referring to the food crisis? I do believe our opponents are equally affected by that.”

“There is more to it than just food,” he rebutted. “The wounds left by the succession crisis have still yet to heal. Seeds of discontent have taken root throughout the members of noble and knightly classes.”

“Do you mean some would betray us to join the Principality?”

That was absurd. The principality must have been hit even harder by the food shortages—they barely had any fertile land. Surely no one would defect to a country like that.

That was what I thought as I looked at my father, but he just sighed again. “No, they may not openly betray us. However, it is entirely possible that they might be hesitant to cooperate, leak information to the enemy, fail to send needed aid to our allies, or deliberately delay their response to orders.”

“They’d engage in those sorts of... childish pranks?” I chided.

“Individually, those small betrayals may not be serious. But when many of them overlap, they shake the framework of our country. Albert... His Majesty is working desperately to keep them in check right now.”

“...You’re saying the Kingdom can’t present a unified front against the Principality right now?”

Father nodded and asserted, “Because His Majesty married into the royal family, tamping down that discontent is the best he can do. If we are to make this country truly one again, we will have to count on the next generation to do it.”

“The next generation... You mean Princess Liscia? I’ve heard that she’s quite wise.”

“She can be inflexible and a little too active at times, though,” Father said, a wry smile on his face.

Despite her upbringing, Princess Liscia had graduated from the officers' academy, and was now learning from my father as she served. Because of how Father viewed the royal family, I felt like his attitude towards her was more fatherly than anything he ever showed me, his real daughter. A long time ago, I was upset over this and raised the issue with my mother. She got a good laugh out of it.

"It's easier to be open with your feelings and fawn on the daughter of another family. There's no responsibility to be a parent there. You'll understand when you grow up," was what she told me. I couldn't understand it at the time, but from the next day onward, the time Father would spend training me grew a little longer. Mother must have told him how I felt. He never said anything about it, but he must have decided that extended training would be his response. That was when I realized my father was an awkward person.

But Princess Liscia, huh? Though we were both learning from my father, because of my position as the heir to House Carmine, he didn't want me to get too involved with the military, so I had little contact with her. I was incredibly jealous that she got to work alongside him.

"It's coming into view now," Beowulf called out to us. His words brought me back to my senses.

Off in the distance, there were guards planted on both sides of the bridge, staring each other down. The mood was so tense that if any soldier were to draw their sword, or even throw a rock, it could spark another clash.

"Ohh, Duke Carmine."

Noticing my father's arrival, the soldiers of the Kingdom parted to open a path for him. It looked like a representative for the Principality had just arrived, too. When we touched ground at the

bridge, a handsome young man with cold eyes appeared from the Principality end. He approached our side, flanked by burly warriors.

"You must be Sir Georg Carmine," the young man said as he looked up at my father. "I am Julius, crown prince of Amidonia. In my father's name, I have come to quell this disturbance."

If he was the crown prince, did that make him the son of Gaius VIII, the current sovereign prince of Amidonia? It seemed that because the capital was so close to here, a member of the princely family had come to handle the situation personally.

"Indeed, I am Georg Carmine," my father responded. There was a solemn dignity to his voice, but Julius showed no reaction to it.

"This is a waste of time, so I'd like to cut to the chase," Julius spoke in a dispassionate and bureaucratic manner. "Our country has no intention of attacking yours at the moment. We see this clash as the result of the soldiers getting out of control. How about you?"

Even though soldiers were injured on both sides, his words were as cold as his eyes. Still, it did not take my father long to reply.

"...We are of the same opinion."

"Then could I ask that both sides withdraw their troops?"

"Very well."

"Father!" I exclaimed. "Are you really all right with this? There are people injured. If we don't make it clear who's to blame, then..."

"Stand down, Mio." Father gave me a piercing look. I gulped and swallowed the rest of my words.

"Hmph," Julius snorted. "If we were to try to attribute blame, the argument would go on forever. It's a waste of time. The sparks of discontent are always smoldering within us, after all."

There was a visible hostility in Julius's eyes. Father stepped forward quickly and said, "That's true. I doubt either of us desires an all-out war."

".....!" His tone hadn't been threatening. In fact, he had kept his voice quiet. And yet, I could tell that the weight of Father's dignified presence had made Julius gulp. "Understood... We'll be careful not to cause one."

"Yes. Both of us should be."

Father and Julius stared one another down, then each turned his back on the other, as if to say the discussion was at an end. We had avoided an all-out war for now, so the wounded on both sides were carried away for treatment.

Suddenly, a lone young man raced out from the Principality's side.

"Please, wait!" he cried out.

The man, who wore no armor or uniform, was tall and lanky, and gave me the impression he was a bureaucrat of some sort.

"Colbert." Julius's brow furrowed as he looked at him. His face seemed to say, "Why are you here?"

The man called Colbert rushed over to Father and put his hands together in front of him. "I am Gatsby Colbert, an official in charge of the finances of the Principality of Amidonia."

"...Hmm." Father turned and looked down at Colbert. "I am Georg Carmine. Did you have some business with me?"

"Ah...!"

For a moment, Colbert seemed cowed by the atmosphere that a warrior like my father gave off, but he mustered his courage, and looked into my father's lion eyes.

"Your soldier's attack has destroyed a boathouse used by the people of our domain! Our fishermen rely on it for their livelihood, and we demand compensation!"

"...On what basis do you claim this was done by us?" Father asked.

Colbert produced a piece of paper from his pocket. "We have confirmed that there are lacerations caused by wind magic at the site. Our border guards may include individuals who use fire or earth magic, but we have no wind magic users. Furthermore, our soldiers have attested that people on your side used wind magic."

Father quietly looked through the materials presented, then snorted, "...Very well. We will pay to repair the boathouse."

"Thank you. Do you mind if we make an estimate of the cost?"



“I will trust your judgment.”

“Understood.”

After exchanging those few words, my father returned, and I asked him, “Was that all right? Admitting fault so easily?”

“There was no hostility towards the Kingdom in that young man’s eyes,” Father said, letting out a little laugh. “He was simply thinking of those who had been hurt. Even under my gaze, his eyes remained unswerving. He had the will to look me in the eye. That is proof he had nothing to hide.”

Father crossed his arms and watched as Julius and Colbert walked away side-by-side.

“The crown prince is a calculating ruler, able to handle things with pragmatism, while the bureaucrat is unafraid to make his opinion known, even to military men. Amidonia has produced some promising youths, too. It seems... we can’t afford to let our guards down.”

It was then that I burned the image of those men who my father had viewed with deference into my eyes.

“Mio, I hear you’ve had trouble concentrating on your lessons on how to manage a domain.” On the way back, Father called out to me.

“Urkh... I’ll admit, it’s not my best subject...”

“Sigh... You’re not a bad warrior, though.”

Though I was pleased he recognized me as a warrior, that sigh made me feel like I was being called out for my shortcomings—it was awfully conflicting.

“It’s difficult to be the lord of a large domain when all your skills are of the martial variety. My own father was always telling me that.”

“Grandfather said that to you?”

“Yes. There was a time when my skills were purely martial, too. I leaned on my wife for support, and over a long period of time I got used to it, but... it seems my blood runs thick in your veins.”

“...I’m sorry.”

Mother was a woman of great wisdom, and because Father was away from home so often as part of his duties, she was effectively the one who handled the administrative side of things. I was often told I looked like my mother when she was young, but I apparently inherited none of her inclination toward domestic affairs.

“I-If we have to, let’s bring in a husband who is good at handling internal administration!” I said.

“...Yes, I suspect that’s how it’s going to go.” Father gazed up to the sky. “I pray it will be a bureaucrat with spine, like that young man.”

Hearing the tone of resignation in my father’s voice, I couldn’t say anything. And, as Sir Beowulf listened to our exchange, a smile broke out on his face as he suppressed a laugh.

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However, the day when I would inherit the Carmine Duchy never came. Three years had passed since then.

“I’m going now, Mother,” I said, with two longswords strapped to my back and a full-face helmet held under my arm.

Mother gave me a slightly troubled look. Putting one hand on her cheek, she sighed, “Mio... There’s no need for you to endanger yourself over him, you know? I’m sure he wouldn’t want you to, either.”

“...Maybe not. But I don’t want to leave it like this.” I put a hand on my mother’s shoulder as her lion tail drooped. “No matter how things ended up, I believe that Father fought with determination. That’s why I want to know the truth. If I find out that he truly wanted to defeat the current king, then...”

“Mio, your father didn’t want us getting caught up in it...”

“I know that. But I’ve already made up my mind,” I replied to her, as I looked into her eyes.

With another sigh, she said, “Once you set your mind on something, you won’t bend. That stubbornness must have come from your father.”

“Of course. I am his daughter, after all.”

“I see...” Mother lowered her head. “...In that case, do what you want.”

She looked at me again, now with a gleaming strength in her eyes.

“I’ll accept whatever result that determination of yours brings. If you say that willfulness is because of his blood, then that is my own determination. As his wife, and as your mother.”

“Mother...”

I felt something hot rising in my chest, and the tears nearly began to flow. I put on my helmet to shield my face before turning my back towards her.

“I swear I will emerge victorious. Then I will have my wish granted.”

“...Please, just don’t take on more than you can handle, Mio.”

With those words from my mother, I left the house.

Chapter 2: Invitation

— Late in the 8th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar -
Parnam Castle —

“Okay, Kazuha. Say ahhh.” I brought the little spoon to her mouth.
Munch.

It was the night of one of an ongoing series of hot days. Liscia and I were in her room, feeding the twins. Kazuha’s toys were covered in drool, and she would chew on just about anything, but when it came to baby food, she wouldn’t eat unless I put it in her mouth. Even so, once it was in there, she smiled and ate it, even as she made a big mess of it. Maybe she just enjoyed being fed. *I never know what babies are thinking... They’re cute, though.*

Now that we were feeding them more baby food, I could even help feed the twins. Though, according to Doctor Hilde, it was best to give them breast milk after they ate their baby food as a nutritional supplement, which was why, next to me, Liscia was breastfeeding Cian.

It had been about eight months since the twins were born, and they both had full heads of hair that was a similar color to Liscia’s. They could crawl now, and Kazuha in particular was always going somewhere, making Liscia and Carla worry to no end.

Cian, meanwhile, despite having learned to crawl, was generally more relaxed, playing with stuffed animals and wooden blocks. (I was worried he might swallow those, so I prepared an extra large set.) He would sit there, flipping them over, looking at them, whacking them, licking the rounded corners of the blocks, and lightly chewing on the ears of his stuffed animals. Cian didn’t seem like an energetic baby, but Kazuha was the complete opposite. She would charge in and flip him over, or ride on top of him like a baby turtle on

the parent turtle's back. When night came, they would both sleep soundly.

As I finished feeding Kazuha, I asked Liscia, "She's done eating. Are you good to go?"

"Yeah. I think Cian's had his fill. Let's trade."

"Righty-o."

I took Cian from Liscia, then deposited Kazuha in her arms in return. Kazuha started suckling Liscia's breast immediately, as if she had a separate stomach for milk. Meanwhile, Cian, who was now full, was starting to doze off.

"...Eat well, sleep well, and grow up healthy."

"Hee hee, you sound like a real father," Liscia giggled.

"Well, yeah, I am these kids' real father, after all." Though we were sharing a peaceful moment, I let out a sigh. "But I'm not going to be able to see them for a while after this, huh?"

"...You're going to *that* country, aren't you?"

I nodded and said, "I received the invitation before the wedding. I could have refused, but... I'm scared to leave the issue unaddressed. I have other reasons to go, too, so in the end..."

"I'd like to go with you, but I can't, right?"

"...Yeah. When I consider what could happen in the worst case..."

"I understand, but... it sure is frustrating." Liscia said, lowering her head. "To be honest, this is an issue I should be settling. As someone who learned under him."

Putting my arm around her, I whispered, "I can't take you with me because of the children. We'll be taking every precaution, of course, but it's a foreign country, we can't be certain that nothing will go wrong."

“Right...”

“Well, I expect it should be a week at most this time. I’ll do what I can about the matter that’s concerning you, too.”

“...Don’t be reckless. You need to come back safe for the children’s sake, too.”

“I know.”

We nestled close to one another for a little while after that.

◇ ◇ ◇

The next day at the governmental affairs office in Parnam Castle.

“The ‘Great Martial Arts Tournament’ in Zem?” Aisha asked, as if acting as the representative of everyone gathered there. There were seven people in the room including me; three of my queens, Aisha, Roroa, and Naden; Prime Minister Hakuya; my personal trainer and sounding board, Owen; and Hal’s father Glaive Magna.

Setting aside Liscia, who I had told about this yesterday, the reason Juna was not here was because I had sent her to Lagoon City. The maritime state to our east, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, had become more active lately, and Excel was gathering information on why.

I wish I could focus on the east, but now the west, too... While I was thinking that, Roroa crossed her arms and said, “I’ve heard of this before. The whole country gets involved in puttin’ on the tournament.”

The Mercenary State Zem was founded and led by the mercenary commander, likewise named, Zem. It was a robust country. Their geography was even more mountainous than the Amidonia Region’s, and they had mercenary forces (which was just a name for their national army) that would fend off any foreign attack. They proclaimed eternal neutrality, while at the same time earning foreign

currency by forming contracts with other states to dispatch mercenaries. In some ways, you might have been fair to call them a military state.

It was still fresh in my memory that, during the rebellion Georg Carmine had staged, the corrupt nobles had hired Zemish mercenaries. Though, cornered as they were, the best they could have hired were third-rate mercs who were worth very little when ransomed back. Hakuya later told me, *“If it were Zem’s elite forces that had come, this wouldn’t have ended with such a small offensive.”*

“Zem ain’t the type to go holdin’ festivals year in and year out like we do, so they’ve gotta put a whole lotta passion into this tournament,” Roroa continued. “The merchants’ll be there, and money’ll be changin’ hands, too.”

“You probably shouldn’t use us as a baseline for comparison, though.”

Ever since we had adopted all the religions inside the kingdom as national religions, and we made their festivals, like the Spring Announcement Festival, into major events, we had been celebrating a lot more. There was always something going on month by month.

Aisha cocked her head to the side and asked, “Um... Does that mean we’re entering someone in that tournament?”

“Ahh, no, no. The current Mercenary King, Gimbal de Zem, sent an invitation to come watch the finals. Though, that invitation arrived before the wedding.” I put the letter I had received down in front of everyone. “This was delivered to Owen and Herman who were watching the western border while we were away in the Union of Eastern Nations. Right, Owen?”

“Yes, sir.” Owen gave me a solemn nod. The old man was normally energetic to the point it was annoying, but today he spoke little, and

his pallor seemed to be not so good. I knew why, so I decided to press on without touching on the matter.

“Hakuya, what do you think King Zem is looking to do here?”

“He wants to restart diplomatic relations with our country after we terminated their mercenary contract with us. To accomplish that, he wants to show off how powerful his mercenaries are.”

“It’s a show of force, then?”

“Yes. The best result for him would be forcing us into another contract, but, failing that, he wants to demonstrate his country’s strength, and show us how terrifying an enemy they could be.”

“Darlin’s goin’ to a country we don’t even have diplomatic relations with just for that?” Roroa chimed in, sounding unamused. “Can’t ya just ignore him?”

“Well, ignoring him outright would be a problem, but I was planning to politely decline. It’s just... some circumstances have cropped up that made it so that’s no longer an option,” I said, slumping my shoulders. “First of all, the person who delivered the invitation is a problem.”

“The person? Who?”

“Mio Carmine. She’s the daughter of the former General of the Army, Georg Carmine.”

“Wha?! Lady Mio, you say?!?” Glaive exclaimed.

During the rebellion, Glaive, who had stood alongside Beowulf as Georg’s right and left hands, had been sent to help take care of things when it was over. I had entrusted him Georg’s old castle at Randel, as well as a portion of his former domain. However, even after he was given Randel Castle, Glaive did not choose to live there, instead ruling from a mansion in the castle town. I took this as proof that his respect for his former commander had not waned.

When the name of Georg's only daughter came up, Glaive seemed to lose his composure. He rounded on Owen, who had been the one to accept the letter. "Sir Owen. You're certain that the messenger was Lady Mio?!"

"...Almost certain. The messenger was a knight who had the tail that marked her as a lion beastman, and she carried two longswords on her back. I recognized the way she acted, too."

"How could this happen...?" Glaive pressed one hand to his forehead.

Georg had severed ties with his wife and daughter to avoid them being held responsible for his rebellion, and made them leave the country. In order to honor his wishes, I never searched for the two of them. If their locations were discovered, there would be those who wanted to dispose of them before others tried to use them for their own gain.

But now that his daughter was supposedly out in Zem, I wondered what had led her there, of all places. Glaive couldn't help but be concerned for her. And, unfortunately for him, there was more information of concern.

"About Mio, she's apparently won her way into the finals of the Great Martial Arts Tournament."

"She what?!"

"That's impressive, but... what's the problem?" Naden cocked her head to the side. "If she were hiding out in the country with a grudge against you... I'd understand you viewing that as a threat, but her participating in a martial arts tournament in another country shouldn't even be an issue, should it?"

Naden's question was to be expected. But things were not that simple.

“It has to do with the special situation inside Zem,” I said. “Hakuya, explain please.”

“By your will.” Hakuya stood in front of the map on the wall, and pointed to Zem. “I believe you are all aware their country was founded by Zem, who was called the Mercenary King. During a time of chaos on the continent, as Emperor Manas rose in the Gran Chaos Empire, the rulers of many cities were vying for hegemony in that land.”

“So, like the Union of Eastern Nations now?”

“Similar to that, yes. It was a land prone to conflict, so those who found themselves unable to find work or who lost their homes to the fires of war survived by working as mercenaries. When the various lords began to gather up these sellswords to fight in their wars, that laid the foundation for the mercenary industry.”

I was impressed by Hakuya’s explanation. So that was the history behind all of this, huh?

“But...” Hakuya continued. “The mercenaries of the time were something like battle slaves, to be thrown away at a whim. The people groaned under the strain of war, and the mercenaries were discontent with the way they were treated as expendable. In the middle of all that, Zem appeared with a rare aptitude for commanding people, and martial skills of his own to be proud of. He led the oppressed mercenaries in a rebellion, taking cities one after another, and built an independent state for them all.”

It was a spectacular series of events that sounded like the plot of a movie. In fact, there was a dramatization called the *Chronicles of Zem*, and it was apparently quite popular. When I heard this story, what came to mind for me was the way men followed Fuuga. Zem must have been a great man of a similar caliber.

Hakuya continued explaining, “Because of how the country was founded, they value ‘being strong’ over anything else.”

“Oh, hey, that’s not so different from the national values in Amidonia, huh?” Roroa said.

“Yes.” Hakuya nodded. “But I would add that while Amidonia thought, ‘We must be stronger than those who have wronged us, so that we can take revenge,’ what Zem believes is more like, ‘If you’re strong, your every wish will be granted.’”

“If you are strong your every wish will be granted? Is that not a little too simplistic...?” Aisha cocked her head to the side at the idea, but Hakuya simply shrugged and moved on.

“They believe Zem built the country on strength, and that was how he became king. What they ought to focus on is the charisma that let him unite an unruly band of mercenaries, but... well, I suppose there’s nothing to be done about it.”

“It’s a matter of how the people themselves see things, after all,” I added in.

Aisha seemed to understand, and she nodded. “I-I see...”

“That idea is demonstrated most simply in the prize for winning the Great Martial Arts Tournament,” Hakuya said. “The prize is ‘the right to have your wish granted.’”

When they heard the prize was the right to a wish, everyone just sort of stared vacantly at him. When I heard it the first time myself, I was taken aback, thinking it was an awfully vague prize. But, when I heard the details, I was shocked by how ridiculous that country was.

“Obviously, it must be a wish that can be granted. They cannot grant impossible wishes like bringing the dead back to life. However, if it is a wish that can be granted by people, they can grant it. If you wish for ‘money,’ for instance, they will pay the winner up to a preset

limit. If you wish for ‘women,’ you can literally take any woman you want as your wife.”

““No way!””

The girls looked angry. They must have felt bad for the women forced to marry a man they didn’t love. *But the reverse is also possible, huh?* If a woman won, a man might be forced to marry her. When I looked at powerful women like my own wives, I had to wonder if there were a lot of past examples of that. Not wanting to stir up the hornet’s nest, though, I didn’t bring it up.

“One of the possible wishes is also ‘to become king.’”

“What, they can be king, too?!” Aisha asked.

“Yes. Like I just said, the country values strength. The people want the King of Zem to be the mightiest of all warriors. To that end, anyone who wants to become king can receive the right to challenge the current king as their prize. If they are able to defeat them, the challenger ascends the throne as the new king, and inherits the family name Zem.”

“Incredible...”

They really were a country that recognized brute force as a way of changing political regimes. I had heard that their current king, Gimbal de Zem, had ascended the throne that way. Though he carried on the Zem name, he had no blood relation to the original Mercenary King.

“It’s a wonder that they can run a nation that way.” Glaive crossed his arms and groaned.

“It seems the king only controls the military and external affairs, while internal affairs are managed by the bureaucracy,” Hakuya replied. “Even if there was a change of kings, the bureaucrats don’t, so they are able to keep things running smoothly.”

“But if that’s the case, wouldn’t the bureaucracy become too powerful?”

“Because strength is so highly valued, bureaucrats like myself would be the lowest of the low, and they work them like slaves. I have heard stories where a bureaucrat was engaged in corruption, and the Mercenary King went to their house personally and killed them along with all their subordinates.”

What the heck? That’s like something out of The Unfettered gun. Nah, I guess he’d be The Unfettered Mercenary King, huh?

“But what if a bad guy wins? Is it okay to let someone like that be king?” Naden asked.

Hakuya nodded. “Yes. If they can just win, any person can become king. However, if they are too evil, they will undo themselves in no time.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Because it is a country of mercenaries, people have a strong sense of independence, and rebellions come easily. If the king is excessively tyrannical, he will be unseated in short order. Even if they are the strongest warrior, they can’t deal with repeated uprisings all by themselves.”

“Well, if they win, they can have their wish granted, within limits, so no one is going to want to have all the limitations that come with being king,” I commented. “They’d be bringing a lot of trouble onto themselves.”

“Hmm, it’s a pretty good system, huh?” Naden replied, sounding impressed.

But was it really? I felt like it was a country that existed on top of a delicate balance. With some impetus, it could all fall to pieces. But even without any, the changing times might eventually destroy that

balance too. That's how it felt to me. Their country would surely be left behind by the flow of the ages.

As I stood up, everyone turned to face me.

"So, now that you've all heard, you can see why we can't just ignore it as a simple tournament. On top of that, they say Georg's daughter Mio is still in the running."

Everyone gulped in unison. The possibility of Georg's daughter having a grudge against the Kingdom, and potentially having a wish granted, was a real threat.

"Depending on what she wished for if she won, it could affect this country. If she were to become king while still harboring resentment against the Kingdom..."

"You'd be lookin' at another enemy state. Like we used to be," Roroa said with a sigh. I nodded to her.

"Anyway, we don't know what Mio's thinking, and that worries me. I need to go to Zem to find out what her intentions are, too." Then, looking around to my comrades, I said, "Now, as for who will accompany me, I want to limit numbers as much as possible in the interest of safety and mobility. First of all, I want to ask Aisha and Naden to come. I'll likely be counting on them to guard me."

"Okay. I understand."

"Roger that."

The two of them nodded. Next I looked towards Glaive and Owen.

"I wanted to bring Glaive to probe Mio's intentions, since he's an old acquaintance of hers. But we can't have the man managing the National Land Defense Force leave when I'll be out of the country. In his place, I'd like Owen, who also knows her, to come along."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

“...I suppose this is how it has to be. Won’t you take my son or Ruby?” Glaive asked, and I shook my head.

“If I were to bring two dragons with me, they would likely not take kindly to it. I am leaving Ruby so I can take Naden. If it’s just Hal on his own, I don’t see a point in forcing him to come along. His first wife, Kaede, is pregnant as well, so I think I’ll do without him this time.”

“I see... Sire, please take care of Lady Mio...”

I could see the strain on his face. He seemed awfully concerned for Mio.

“I will do my best to consider it.”

“...Please, do.” Glaive backed down.

“Ah!” Roroa spoke up. “Why not try bringin’ Mr. Colbert with ya, then?”

“Colbert?”

“Well, y’know how the Principality of Amidonia and the Carmine Duchy were neighbors, right? With all the clashes along the border, my brother and Mr. Colbert must’ve met the Carmines a few times to settle things.”

“Oh, yeah...?”

Hostile relations can make unexpected connections, huh? If all I had was people like Owen, who were close to the Carmines, they might be looking at her through rose-tinted glasses. If I really wanted to know what Mio was thinking, it was best to look at the information from many different angles.

“I get it. I’ll bring Colbert, too.”

“Nyahaha, I’ll run the finance department while Mr. Colbert’s away.” Roroa wore a happy smile. Her financial sense was a cut above the

rest, but she was prone to making high-risk, high-return decisions. I felt like she was a good balance with Colbert, who kept a tighter hold on the purse strings, but... was this going to be okay?

"Don't do anything too crazy, all right?" I said to her. "Don't make Colbert cry when he comes back home."

"It's only a week, right? It'll be fine."

Was it okay to trust that innocent smile? Regardless, the members of my entourage had been chosen now, so...

"And... Hakuya," I addressed him.

"Yes, sir."

"I'd like you to make preparations for *the other reason* we're going to Zem."

"Yes, sir. I understand." Hakuya gave me a deep bow.

All of the orders were given. Now it was just a matter of seeing what Zem would throw at us... *Hopefully, this can all be settled peaceably, somehow.* I could only pray that it would be.

Chapter 3: Mercenary State Zem

— One day in the 9th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar —

“Sigh... It sure is nothing but mountains, huh?” I said as I looked at the scenery while riding on Naden’s back.

We were in the skies over Mercenary State Zem, heading to watch the finals of the Great Martial Arts Tournament. There was a wyvern flying alongside us, carrying a gondola which held Aisha and the other members of our entourage. Naden and I had been riding in the gondola at first, but the scenery outside was so beautiful that Naden said she wanted to go for a swim through the sky. I ended up tagging along for her little midair stroll.

Our view was truly breathtaking. The Amidonia Region had been pretty mountainous itself, but the mountains of Zem were big, tall, and they shone blue when viewed at a distance. There were settlements dotted around at clearings in the mountains, and I could see the people were raising some white woolly animals that looked like sheep or llamas. *You know, I wouldn’t be surprised to see a certain “Girl of the Alps” out here.*

I petted Naden’s back as I asked, “What do you think, Naden? Does this sort of mountainous scenery put you more at ease?”

“Because the Star Dragon Mountain Range is all mountains?”

“Yeah. The only ones near Parnam are medium-sized, and are the source of our water.”

“I never thought about it, you know... Dracul itself is flat, and I only really went into the mountains to hunt, after all.”

“Oh, yeah,” I recalled. “The deer meat I had in your cave was delicious.”

It didn't taste too gamey, and the meat was soft. I'd enjoy eating it again.

"Heheh, would you like me to hunt for you again sometime?"

"That'd be nice. I'd like to eat it again, using soy sauce and ginger to completely get rid of that gameiness. Oh! But don't come back covered in blood, okay? If you cause an uproar in the castle, I'll be in for a long lecture from Liscia."

"Roger that... I know it all too well."

While we were chatting idly, our destination came into sight in the distance. There was an aged castle rising up in the mountains, that was Blanc Zem Castle. Incidentally, the place the castle looked over was also called Zem City. The Colosseum where the finals would take place was located here, as well.

Being their country's greatest hero, the name Zem was used on everything, from the city itself to the dishes cooked there. Looking at it from the perspective of a foreigner, it felt excessive, but it just showed how great the people of this country thought the first Mercenary King Zem was.

"Can I assume that castle's where we're going?" Naden asked.

"The Zemish side said to land right in the courtyard."

"We're not going to suddenly get attacked, are we?"

"They probably wouldn't do anything that stupid, but... if it happens, let's fly away," I assured her.

A single wyvern rider flew towards us from the direction of the castle. They came up alongside Naden, then put his hand forward to salute me.

"I assume you must be King Souma of Friedonia and his entourage!" the rider said. "I have come at the orders of the King of Zem to welcome you! I will guide you in, so please follow me!"

“Gotcha. Lead the way.”

We followed the wyvern rider and flew over the walls of the castle to land in the courtyard. Naturally, the anti-air repeating bolt throwers did not take aim at us. There were no flowers in the courtyard, just plaster figures of macho men, and columns of soldiers who were masses of muscle, trying to look no less tough.

I jumped down as Naden turned back into her human form, and Aisha came out of the wyvern gondola that had landed with us and rushed over to me. “Your Majesty, take every care not to be separated from Madam Naden and me.”

“I know... I’m counting on you to protect me, Aisha, Naden.”

“Roger that.”

We had fought against Zemish mercenaries during the battle against the corrupt nobles. There was no guarantee that none of the soldiers lined up here had been among those who had been forced to pay ransom money for their release. Also, I had entrusted old man Owen with the task of guarding Colbert. We had brought other guards as well, and snuck in a number of members of the Black Cats, too.

“Make way!” a voice rang out.

The line of soldiers in the hall split in two. Once they had, a single man walked through the middle of the crowd. He was a large, muscular fellow with an eyepatch over one eye. His physique was quite similar to Owen’s.

The man stood in front of me, and spread his big arms wide. “It is good of you to come to Zem, Sir Souma, King of Friedonia.”

“You are... Sir Gimbal?”

“Indeed. I am Gimbal Zem.”

“Thank you for the invitation, Sir Gimbal, King of Zem.”

I shook his hand as the representative of the group. If Gimbal felt like it, he could easily have crushed mine, but he held back and left it at a somewhat firm handshake.

I introduced Aisha and Naden to Gimbal, “Sir Gimbal, these are my wives, Aisha and Naden.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Sir Gimbal.” Aisha put her hand to her chest and bowed.

Naden did the same. “I-It’s an honor to meet you.”

Gimbal seemed impressed with the two of them, stroking his short goatee. “It seems your wives are strong and beautiful warriors. Especially Madam Aisha. If you were to participate in the martial arts tournament, you might have some chance of winning. If you could win and they defeat me, you could even become the king of this country.”

He must have found the aura Aisha gave off as a warrior quite stimulating, because there was a somewhat defiant look in Gimbal’s eyes. Aisha looked straight back at him, accepting it.

“It is an honor to meet you, but I am happiest in the Kingdom... at His Majesty’s side,” she replied. “I have no wish I would want granted in Zem.”

The way Aisha could say that so boldly was really inspiring. Aisha could be a bit of a disappointment once food got involved, but as a warrior, she was always so gallant and beautiful I couldn’t help but fall head over heels for her.

Hearing her response, Gimbal laughed heartily. “Is that a fact? Well, well, I can see she loves you dearly.”

“She’s too good for me.”

“Now then, you must be tired from coming here. Please, rest in your room first.”

“Thank you.”

Gimbal clapped his hands twice. When he did, a person clad in armor walked over from among the soldiers and dropped to one knee before us. I couldn’t see her face, but the shape of the armor indicated it was a woman. She took off her helmet, and held it under her arm. She was a little older than me, with well-balanced features, and cat ears perched on top of her dirty blonde hair.

“Ah! I knew it...!” Owen, who was a little ways back from the rest of us, exclaimed.

Then is this cat-type beastman Mio? Was she Georg’s daughter, Mio Carmine? Sexual dimorphism was a trait of many of the beastmen races, but this woman was far prettier than anything I would have imagined from the stern lion face her father had.

Gimbal put a hand on her shoulder and said, “You can spend your time as you like until the finals tomorrow. If you wish to look around the castle town, she will be your guide, so please ask. She is a participant in the tournament, but I hear she is from the Kingdom, so I asked her to help out.”

Yes, she certainly is from the Kingdom...

“It is an honor to meet you. I am Mio.”

The girl raised her head and stared straight into my eyes.



"There's no doubt about it. That was Duke Carmine's daughter, Madam Mio," Owen said with a pained look.

After we had each been shown to our rooms, I had gathered my key companions in the room allotted to me and my queens.

"Yes, it most definitely was Sir Carmine's daughter. I have met her on multiple occasions," Colbert agreed, so that more or less confirmed it.

Mio, the daughter of Georg the traitor. If he assigned her to be our guide, it was a near certainty that Gimbal knew who she was. It was clear Mio was plotting something by taking part in this tournament. But what was Gimbal's angle, putting us in contact with her like this? Were their plans the same?

"What do you think? Colbert?" I asked Colbert, the intellectual of the group.

Colbert brought a finger to his mouth as he pondered. "Though I've met her in the past, we weren't friends, so I couldn't tell you what Madam Mio is thinking. But... if Sir Gimbal were plotting something, you would have expected him to show some reaction when you and Madam Mio met."

"Reaction? Like a scheming look, or something?"

"Or a forced smile, maybe. But I didn't see either. It's entirely possible that Madam Mio's intentions are just as inscrutable to Sir Gimbal." Colbert crossed his arms and groaned. "Even if she is the daughter of Duke Carmine, Madam Mio is still originally from the Kingdom. To Sir Gimbal's eyes, she must appear as a suspicious individual who still has ties to us. It seems Madam Mio has been winning her way through the tournament, so perhaps he arranged for the two of you to meet so that he could gauge your reaction?"

"He was checking if we're secretly connected to Mio?" I said with a sigh. "If that's what it was... his fears are unfounded."

Had he been scrutinizing our motives, the same way we were scrutinizing his?

"Yes, completely." Colbert nodded. "But it does prove that Sir Gimbal doesn't have a full grasp of what Mio's intentions are, either."

"...So it all comes down to what Mio's thinking, huh?"

If she won the tournament, she would be granted a wish. But what was she participating for? What exactly was the wish she'd want granted?

"Hrm... If she's got a grudge against Souma, maybe she wants 'Souma's head'?" Naden said that so casually that I felt a chill on my neck.

"I-Is that a wish Zem can grant?"

"I doubt she could ask for it directly. However, if she asked for 'the throne of Zem,' and defeated Sir Gimbal to become the Queen of Zem, she could start a war with us any time she wanted to. Naturally, based on the relative size of Zem, they would have a hard time winning a war against us alone." That was Colbert's sober analysis.

Well, our country was coordinating with the Empire and the Republic, so even if she roped the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State into attacking us with her, we could still beat them back. But if she didn't attack directly, and instead fomented unrest inside the country, lending mercenaries to the dissidents and encouraging terrorist attacks, that would be a pain.

"So if someone with a grudge against the Kingdom got a hold of the Zemish throne, they'd have all sorts of ways to harass us, huh?" I thought aloud.

“Does Madam Mio even resent you to begin with, sire?” Aisha asked. “She had a bit of determination in her eyes when she looked at you earlier, but nothing like the dark emotions you would expect from someone looking at her father’s killer.”

“Now that you mention it... you’ve got a point.”

If there was any hostility or murderous intent, a warrior like Aisha wouldn’t have missed it. Mio’s expression then—her eyes, specifically—were full of resolve. I felt no anger or hatred. When I met Julius in Van after the war with the Principality of Amidonia, his disgust for me was palpable. Even if he kept a level head, those sorts of emotions weren’t something you could fully suppress.

“That makes it even harder to figure out, then. What exactly does Mio want?”

“Madam Mio, like Duke Carmine, has a one-track mind...” Owen said with a pained expression. “You could take that to mean she’s stubborn and obstinate like him. Once she sets her mind on something, she will do whatever it takes to stay the course. Even if it’s a path of carnage, and she may fall along the way...”

“...This father and daughter are a couple of pains in the neck,” I said, scratching the back of my head and trying to find some resolve. “I guess all that’s left is to talk to her directly, huh? She’s our guide, after all.”

“You’re going to have her join us,” Naden asked, and I nodded.

The “one-track mind” that Owen mentioned and the lack of “dark emotions” that Aisha detected led me to believe that she wasn’t going to kill me the moment she saw an opening.

“Whatever Mio’s wish is, she’ll win the tournament first, and then openly try to have it granted. That’s why I want to try to talk with her as much as I can before then.”

“Is that not... dangerous?”

“Don’t worry, Aisha. I’ll keep you and Naden with me at all times as a means of protection and escape, of course. If Mio tries to harm me, will you stop her for me?”

“Leave it to me.” Aisha thumped her chest with one hand. “I can see that Madam Mio is quite a capable warrior, but I won a tournament of my own back in the Kingdom. I won’t let her lay a finger on you!”

“Well, if it gets dicey, I’ll grab you in my mouth and run away into the sky.” Naden put her hands on her hips and puffed up her chest. My wives were so reliable.

Colbert opened his mouth, a pensive look on his face. “Should I... look into it a little?”

“You, Colbert?”

“Because I’m from the former Principality of Amidonia, she may be less wary of me than she would someone from the Kingdom. It would be easier for her to air her complaints to someone who was also part of a hostile faction.”

I saw what he was saying. Maybe she would let a complaint slip.

“I’m grateful, but don’t push yourself too hard,” I said. “If anything were to happen to you, there’d be no one left to keep Roroa under control, you know?”

“...I could say the same thing to you, sire.”

Seeing the wry smile on Colbert’s face, everyone nodded in agreement. *Huh? Is that how they all see me?* It felt kind of awkward, so I cleared my throat loudly and moved along.

“Anyway, don’t any of you get careless.”

“““Yes, sir!“““

Chapter 4: Mio

“Zem City developed around the Colosseum in the city’s center,” Mio explained, pointing towards the towering Colosseum as she led the way.

It was a massive, austere structure reminiscent of the Roman Colosseum—probably larger than Zem Castle itself. The stone carvings on the walls were a sight to behold, too. The fact that the vast majority were of men carrying swords was indicative of this country’s belief in the supremacy of brawn over all else.

Aisha, Naden, Owen, Mio, and I had all come down to the castle town. Everyone but me was dressed as normal, but I would stand out if I wore my military uniform like I had when meeting Sir Gimbal, so I changed into something lighter—like what an adventurer might wear.

Mio continued her explanation as we stared at the majestic Colosseum in awe. “This structure predates the rise of the first Mercenary King Zem, dating back to the country that existed before Zem’s founding. The mercenaries who lived in that country were low in status. They were treated like war slaves, and would throw their lives away for anything if you had the money. Some mercenaries who were in trouble financially were forced to put their lives on the line as gladiators in this very Colosseum.”

“They made a spectacle of it?” I said. “I see... Zem brought all their grievances together and rose up, huh? Do they still put on those sorts of massacres there?”

“No. There are shows where people fight the wild animals and dungeon monsters that others caught to prove their strength, but there are no battles to the death between people anymore,” Mio responded. “The worst that happens is someone gets carried away and kills their opponent during the Great Martial Arts Tournament.”

She was answering questions when asked, like she was supposed to. I couldn't sense any hostility in her words or attitude.

"The battles between people and animals are popular, and spectators come from across the continent to see them. The most popular is the battle between the mercenaries and the dragon that walks on land."

"The dragon that walks on land?"

"It's a type of wyvern that gave up the skies to run around the mountains. They call them 'earth dragons,' or 'wingless ones.' They're fierce creatures that use their devolved wings for balance as they run around on two legs. ...You can see one right over there."

I looked in the direction Mio indicated, and there was a rhinosaurus pulling a freight car. The majority of the freight car was taken up by a cage, and there was a massive animal inside it.

"That's an earth dragon...?"

Based on Mio's description, I had been imagining something like a carnivorous dinosaur, but it was a bit closer to a wyvern than that. It had horns, and was spiky all over, giving off the impression of a ferocious beast. On top of that, it was large enough to compete with Ruby and the other members of the dragon race, in terms of size.

"Hmph, it only looks tough. That thing's no match for me," Naden said dismissively.

Wait, wait, why was she feeling so competitive?

"Do they tame creatures like that in Zem?"

"No, earth dragons are ferocious, so they don't get attached to humans. They just catch them to fight in the Colosseum. They're still wild animals."

"...Isn't that dangerous?"

"I've heard that there have been many cases of them escaping and running wild," Mio said dispassionately.

Wait, they escape?!

I worried if that was all right, but Mio shrugged. "It's fine. The people in this country are ridiculously good at fighting against animals."

"Oh, I see. You're talking about Zem's riding-beast hunters." Owen nodded, seemingly satisfied with Mio's explanation.

"Riding-beast hunters?"

"Sire, do you notice anything when you look at the people walking on the street?" Owen asked, leading me to look about our surroundings.

I had been noticing earlier that many of them wore breastplates, gauntlets, and other such pieces of light armor over top of their clothes. They looked indistinguishable from adventurers at a glance, but were all of them actually Zemish mercenaries?

"There's a lot of people dressed like adventurers in light armor?" I said.

"That's also true, but it's something else. Please, pay attention to their weapons."

"...Oh!"

There was something that definitively set them apart from a typical adventurer. They all used weapons like spears, axes, and halberds. *Ah, because of how often they are in tight places, adventurers prefer not to use weapons with a long reach,* I thought, recalling my own escapades as Little Musashibo.

"The mercenaries here are all using long-handled weapons," I commented.

Owen gave me a satisfied nod and said, "In the Army, we have a saying. 'If you're facing a Zemish mercenary, get off your horse.' The

Zemish mercenaries use long-handled pole weapons, and they're famous for being especially effective against cavalry."

"Ahh, and that's why they're called riding-beast hunters?"

"Yes." Mio nodded. "Zem is not a fertile country, so they can't afford to raise a large number of horses, wyverns, or other riding beasts. Because of that, historically they assumed only the other side would have mounts, and created and developed tactics that allowed even a foot soldier to fight against mounted warriors."

"On top of that, if a mercenary can take a high-status person like a knight prisoner, they can receive a ransom for them. That's why Zemish mercenaries are super strong when they're facing cavalry. Many of them use long-handled weapons so they can surround the knights and pull them down," Owen added. So there was a proper reason for it, huh?

"So, why do you tell people to 'get off your horse'?"

"Because it's hard to make tight turns on horseback, it's actually harder to fight a line of soldiers in close combat from up there. If everyone is on the ground, it's harder to tell who's higher in status, too."

"Ah, I get it."

It seemed like mercenaries had extreme strengths and weaknesses. I hadn't planned it this way, but how we holed up in the fort outside Randel and struck them as they came in must have been one of the more difficult situations for them to handle.

"You were saying they couldn't raise a lot of wyverns, right? Do they not have much in the way of wyvern cavalry, then? They guided us in when we landed at Blanc Zem Castle, though."

"The wyvern cavalry report directly to the King of Zem," Owen said. "The king's direct forces are this country's elite warriors, and

standing army. They aren't loaned out to anyone. Because raising wyverns is expensive, there's a natural limit on the number of them they can keep. It would be a lot of trouble if they loaned them out to another country and lost them as a result."

"I see..."

They must have been keeping the strongest soldiers in reserve. In which case, though Zem's mercenary companies were renowned for their strength, the ones being loaned out were actually the weakest. This country wasn't to be taken lightly.

I looked up at the Colosseum again. "So this is where they hold the Great Martial Arts Tournament."

"That's right." Mio nodded in confirmation, a pensive look on her face. "The Great Martial Arts Tournament is a major event that the whole country works together for. The warriors fight in an elimination format for the right to have a wish granted. The battles continue until one of the opponents yields, or is rendered unable to continue fighting. That can include death."

"So they literally put everything on the line, huh? ...And you're participating in the Great Martial Arts Tournament, too."

"Yes."

Hrm... I figured I shouldn't make her feel cornered if I didn't have to, so I'd avoided touching on the core of the matter before now, but maybe it was time to ask a direct question.

"If you're fighting in the tournament, you must have a wish you want granted, too, right?" I asked. "What is it you want so bad that you're willing to risk your life to get it?"

"That, I cannot say." Mio looked straight at me. "I will grant my wish with my own strength. In order to see it through, I cannot tell you it

here. I intend to win this tournament, so I'm sure you'll find out then."

Well, of course she wouldn't spill the beans so easily. Mio seemed strong-willed like Georg, so we wouldn't find out anything until she won it all. While I was thinking about it, Aisha stepped forward, quickly inserting herself between Mio and me.

"Madam Mio. I couldn't detect any dark emotions in what you've said."

As Aisha stared straight at her, Mio's eyes stared back at her, unswerving. Aisha knocked on the hilt of her greatsword with the back of her right hand. Because we were on a busy street, she was trying to intimidate her without actually putting her hand on it.

"However, if you intend to harm His Majesty to avenge Duke Georg, I will cut you down," Aisha declared.

"Liscia asked us to do it. I won't hold back on you, either," Naden added with her arms crossed. Her black hair spread out and sparked a little.

Even in the face of their threats, Mio showed no sign of being intimidated. "I can see you two really do love King Souma."

"It's obvious that a wife should be concerned for her husband's well-being."

Naden followed up with, "Normally, it's the other way around, though. Oh, well. 'The right person for the right role' is practically a family motto for us, anyway."

"The wife protects the husband?" After listening to the two of them, Mio closed her eyes quietly. "...Come to think of it, Lady Liscia is a wife now, too. I wonder how she feels."

"Madam Mio?"

“It’s nothing. More importantly, there’s somewhere I’d like all of you... especially Madam Aisha, to come with me.”

“Especially Aisha?”

When I asked her that, Mio nodded. Taking one of the sheathed longswords off her back, she pointed it towards the door to the Colosseum and said, “I’d like to have a match with Aisha in the sparring arena of the Colosseum.”

“A match? Why?”

“My father always believed, ‘We say more through combat than through words.’” Mio held up the scabbard for us to see. “If you wish to know me, Madam Aisha, we should cross swords in a sparring match. I can tell you have considerable prowess as a warrior. For my part, I think that it will make good practice for the finals tomorrow.”

“No, but...” I stammered.

Before I could say any more, Aisha responded, “Let’s have it out, then.”

“Aisha!”

“Let me do it, sire. I want to judge her with my own eyes.” Aisha looked straight at me. It looked like we had a strong-willed one on our side, too... It didn’t matter what I said, now. She wasn’t going to listen.

“Fine... But be careful you don’t get hurt.”

“Understood!”

That was how we ended up with an impromptu mock battle between Aisha and Mio.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

We were in a practice arena surrounded by stone walls, with nothing else but a sand floor. The sounds of sword colliding with sword echoed through the air as Aisha and Mio traded blow after blow.

“Hahhhhhh!”

“Yahhhhhh!”

Sparks flew as Aisha’s greatsword and Mio’s two longswords collided. They were both using blunted training weapons, but if they made contact at that speed, the one who got hit wasn’t going to get off with just minor wounds. I had seen Aisha and Liscia spar before, but this was nothing like that.

At the time, Liscia had been using technique to dodge, parry, and neutralize the attacks that Aisha threw at her with dumb brute strength. That one was what you might call a battle of hard versus soft. However, Mio, like Aisha, was also all about hard.

That made this a battle of hard versus hard. Mio’s martial arts were impressive to behold, and though she was facing Aisha in a straight-up test of brute strength, she wasn’t being pushed back.

“Urgh! Can I not push through?!”

“Compared to my father’s heavy sword, this is nothing!”

When Aisha took a big swing with her greatsword, Mio crossed her longswords to catch it and then knock it back. Then she took two swings with her longswords, with a time delay in between them. Aisha blocked both with her greatsword.

“You’re pretty... good!”

“You, too, Madam Mio.”

The two exchanged words while jostling with the hilts of their weapons locked. Perhaps deciding that the greatsword was too hard to use when her opponent was so close, Aisha held her sword in her

right hand while performing a backfist strike with her left. Mio blocked it with her elbow.

Next, Mio launched a low kick, but Aisha raised one leg to protect her defenseless thigh. They continued trading roles as attacker and defender like that for a while. Naden, Owen, and I, who were watching the fight from a safe distance were in total awe.

“Wow. They’re fighting with fists in between their swords.”

“I’ve never fought with a sword, and even I can tell how abnormal their strength is...” Even Naden, who didn’t specialize in fighting in her human form, was entranced with the way they fought.

“It’s like a collision of souls. Both of them are fine warriors,” Owen spoke up. The old general, who was the same hard type of warrior as the two of them, got emotional at the sight of their battle. “I wish you could fight at even one-tenth of that level, sire.”

“No way, that’s absolutely impossible! Even if there were a hundred of me, I couldn’t fight like that!”

“You mustn’t be so dispirited. You have an heir now. Let’s add more to your training menu.”

Urgh... That stirred up a hornet’s nest. But, well, the reason the onlookers could talk about it so lightly was that the two combatants looked like they were having a riot.

“How about this?!”

“Not yet!”

As they competed with strength and in technique, things got more and more heated. They fought with swords, punches, and kicks, never pausing for a breath, to keep their opponent from having an opening to use magic.

“.....?!”

Mio's sword knocked Aisha's greatsword upward. But that was a ruse.

"There!"

In the instant it was exposed, Aisha pounded her fist into Mio's belly. Mio was sent flying backwards, but she corrected her stance in midair and landed on her feet.

"Guh...!"

However, the damage must have gone through, because she held the spot where she was hit and grimaced. Aisha, meanwhile, stood there, not going in for a follow-up.

As I was wondering why, *snap*, the string holding Aisha's hair in a ponytail burst. Her silver hair fell down.

"...It looks like you only missed me by a hair." Aisha said.

Mio shook her head as she continued grasping her belly. "You landed such a clean hit on me that I have no choice but to admit defeat."

"Think nothing of it. It was pretty dangerous for me, too. You're plenty strong, Madam Mio."

"...It's a good thing you weren't participating in Zem's tournament." Mio said with a wry smile.

"With the skill you have, I'm sure you'll achieve good results in the tournament." Aisha furrowed her brow. "But... Madam Mio, what is it you want to wish for if you win?"

Refusing to say anything, Mio looked away.

"Your father said, 'We say more through combat than through words,' right? There was no indecision in your technique, I felt something like a strong conviction there. Something not held captive by grudges and hatred." Aisha laid down her training sword and approached Mio. "If you have a grudge against the country and His

Majesty, you can't have a very positive view of me. I am his wife, and will protect him no matter what. Yet, I feel nothing like that from you. During our match, you were almost like a child, enjoying the chance to test your strength. What exactly is it that you..."

"...That, I cannot say." Mio stretched and turned towards us. "My wish is something I must grant for myself. If I don't, I cannot face my father in the afterlife. I'm sure it will all become clear when I win the tournament."

She looked at me with unswerving eyes—they were filled with determination. The way she wouldn't budge once she made up her mind was just like Liscia. Was that because they had trained under the same man? If so, there was probably no way to get an answer out of her.

Ultimately, we ended up going back to Zem Castle without having been able to suss anything out.

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That night...

Naden rolled over onto her side in the big bed, then let out a sigh.
"...We couldn't figure anything out, huh?"

"Yeah. She didn't seem to be harboring any negative emotions, though."

Having returned to Blanc Zem Castle, we went back to our room. Aisha, Naden, and I were talking about what had happened today there.

"For now, at least, her requesting my head as her prize... seems unlikely, I think. She has the same sort of single-minded personality as Liscia, so I'm having a hard time imagining that she's been deliberately hiding her negative emotions from us."

“Yes. In fact, she seemed ill-suited to that sort of performance.” Aisha, who was sitting in a chair, her arms crossed, agreed with me. “In that case... is her wish to ‘Restore the House of Carmine,’ or something along those lines, perhaps?”

“If that’s all, I feel like I could probably grant that.”

I obviously couldn’t return all of their lands to her, and there would have to be conditions, but restoring her house wasn’t out of the question. Georg had done everything properly in regards to severing ties with his family, so Mio and her mother weren’t guilty of any crime. She’d likely have the support of Glaive, Owen, and others from the Army too, so it wouldn’t even be that difficult.

“But if that was her wish, Mio wouldn’t need to participate in the tournament. She must have involved another country because it’s something that couldn’t be granted in the Kingdom.”

So it’s something we can’t do anything about, or perhaps something Mio doesn’t think we can do anything about...? What exactly is she thinking? While I was pondering that...

“Darling... Could it be that you feel guilty towards Madam Mio?” Aisha came right out and asked me, and I couldn’t argue back when it came up so suddenly.

“Well, yeah... The issue of Georg is a problem I’ve left untouched ever since I first took the crown. When I think of my responsibility to the victims... It’s complicated.”

The reason the Kingdom was stable now was because of Georg’s contributions. I had never forgotten that, but thinking I should give it some time, I ended up putting off dealing with the problem. The fact that I was now at the whims of a single woman was the cost of my indolence.

Aisha gave me a stern look. “Darling. Even if Madam Mio’s wish ends up being something you think you could grant, please think long and hard about the result of doing so before you make a decision.”

“...You do realize I’m trying to be careful of that, right?”

With a wry smile, Naden added, “But you’re not always logical about things, are you? Especially when it involves family.”

“Well, yeah... There are some things I can’t compromise on.” I looked away.

Naden let out a sigh. “Liscia studied under Mio’s dad, and she respected him, right? ‘Because they both learned under Georg, I want to do something for his daughter...’ Is what you’re thinking, isn’t it, Souma?”

“...You understand me well.”

“You’re easy to figure out,” Naden said with a smile. Aisha was nodding, too.

“If she knew that she was a ball and chain around your ankle, making her husband make bad decisions, Liscia would be sad, right? We’ll shoulder your guilt with you. So, please, make the right decision.”

“Got it.” I gave a meek nod.

They were both right. If I let my emotions put the people I wanted to protect in danger, that would defeat the purpose. I had... to see this through. If she wanted the restoration of her house, fine. If not, the only other thing I could think of was... *That could be pretty difficult.*

I let out a little sigh at the premonition I got.

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Around the same time, Colbert was going to another room, alone.

It was the room given to Mio in Blanc Zem Castle when she was assigned to be Souma’s guide. Mio was chosen because she said she

was from the Kingdom. But the room was only temporary, as she didn't serve Gimbal personally.

"Excuse me. Is Madam Mio here?" Colbert knocked and called out. The door immediately opened.

"...How may I help you?"

"Ah!"



When he saw the state Mio was in, Colbert's face froze. Since she was in her room, Mio had taken off her armor, and was wearing a thin tank top. The thin fabric couldn't hide her figure the way her armor could, and her breasts were asserting themselves.

While averting his eyes from her appearance, Colbert said, "I-I'm sorry to bother you when you were relaxing. I am the Kingdom's Minister of Finance, Colbert. I came hoping we could talk a little."

"By all means." With that, Mio invited Colbert into her room, seemingly unconcerned.

"Huh? It's all right?"

"You came to talk, didn't you?"

"Ah, right... Pardon me."

Even as he felt a little flustered, Colbert went into Mio's room. Being temporary quarters, the room was simple, with a bed and not much more. There were no real furnishings, just a mannequin that Mio could put her armor on, and her two swords leaned up against the wall.

Mio offered Colbert a chair, and sat down on the bed facing him.

"Did Sir Souma ask you to look into me?"

"Ah! Yes. There is that, but..." Unable to look Mio in the eye, Colbert's gaze wandered as he spoke. "I wanted to relive some old memories, so I'd like to talk, even if it's just a short while."

"Old memories? ...Come to think of it, you do look familiar." Mio stared hard at Colbert's face. "You're not from the Army, right? You look more like a bureaucrat."

"Yes. I was originally involved with the finances in the Principality of Amidonia. When Duke Carmine was still alive, I met you along with

Julius sometimes when we were mediating, after clashes. Though I don't think we ever spoke more than a few words to each other."

"Oh! From back then?!" Mio clapped her hands.

"You remember?"

"Yes. Father always praised you two. He said, 'There are some good youths in Amidonia, too.' Oh, yeah... There's no difference between Elfrieden and Amidonia now, huh?"

Maybe because she'd learned he was an acquaintance, Mio was acting a lot more casual now.

Colbert nodded. "It's technically a united kingdom, but yes, we've become a single country."

"So that's why you're serving King Souma, huh? What about Sir Julius?"

"A lot happened, but he's in the north now, and doing quite well. He married the princess of a kingdom he was staying with, and is working hard on behalf of his family."

"Sir Julius is? The guy that had such cold eyes? I can't even imagine."

The conversation popped like they were a couple of old friends. Colbert knew that even if he tried to dig into matters, Mio wouldn't tell him her intentions, so he worked to understand what she was like while making idle banter.

When he spoke to her like this, he could only see her as a normal girl. Her expression changed at the smallest of things, and she would chuckle when he told a funny story. He felt no hostility, no wariness, and she didn't seem worried about anything.

In fact, she was so natural, she didn't seem bothered by how provocative the outfit she was wearing right now was, and her chest swayed every time she reacted to something. There were many times Colbert looked away in embarrassment.

“You keep looking away? Why is that?”

After a while of prodding, she got suspicious, so Colbert gave up and told her, “Could you, um... put something over yourself?”

“Hm? I don’t need to. It’s not like I’m naked.” Mio gave him a blank look. Because she had spent so much time in the Army training with burly men, she didn’t have much in the way of feminine shyness, apparently. “I’m proud that I don’t have a lot of excess meat on me, too.”

“Well, yes... You don’t, but...”

“This is the body my Mother and Father gave me. What do I have to be ashamed of?”

Mio was so bold, Colbert started to feel effeminate for having let it bother him. He did his best to carry on without staring at her chest.

“Speaking of your father, you don’t look much like him, huh? Duke Carmine was terrifying to stand in front of, but you’re... um... beautiful.”

“Ahaha, thanks. They always tell me I get my looks from Mother. With the complaint, ‘If you would have taken after her internally too, you’d have grown to be a proper lady.’”

“That’s not true...”

“I can recognize it myself. I got my stubbornness from my father.” Mio let out a self-effacing laugh. “But even though you said he was terrifying, you didn’t hesitate to tell my father your opinion, did you? I was impressed.”

“Well... Duke Carmine didn’t kick people for voicing their opinion.”

“Huh? Did someone kick you?”

“Well, yes. Lord Gaius, and quite frequently...”

When he was working in the Principality of Amidonia, any time he tried to admonish Gaius VIII, the man had gotten angry and kicked him. If he'd been able to write him off as someone who didn't listen, like Roroa had, he would have been fine. But, because he was unfortunate to have a serious personality, he clashed with all of the military officers but Julius.

"The militarists hated me because I spoke too much for such a weakling."

"Hee hee, look's like you've got a difficult personality, too." Mio gave a small smile, but eventually put on a serious expression. "Hey, Sir Colbert."

"Yes?"

"Do you know anything about the series of events that led my father to raise a rebellion?"

"I—" Colbert couldn't come up with an immediate answer when faced with that serious look of hers. He wasn't sure how to respond, but her sincerity made him think he needed to give her a response nonetheless. "...I only started serving the Kingdom after they annexed Amidonia, so I haven't been told anything about Duke Carmine's rebellion, since it happened before then."

The fact was, Colbert didn't have any information on the rebellion that wasn't public knowledge. The people who did know the situation were tight-lipped. It was likely only Souma and his wives, and a very small number of their closest retainers who knew.

"...Oh, yeah?" Mio's shoulder slumped in disappointment, having sensed no lie in his words.

As he looked at her, Colbert spoke up, "Madam Mio, you..."

"Please, don't ask, Sir Colbert." But Mio gently rebuffed him. "I'm sure nobody wants what I'm wishing for. Deep down, Mother

probably wanted to stop me, and Father... if he were here, he'd get angry, and tell me to mind my own business."

Mio looked at the longswords leaning against the wall.

"But this is still the only path I can take."

"Madam Mio..."

Sensing her determination, Colbert could say no more.

Chapter 5: The Great Martial Arts Tournament

It was a clear autumn day, and the Zemish Great Martial Arts Tournament was about to begin. The Colosseum was bustling with excitement. It was a massive structure, larger than the domed stadiums in the world I came from. In the center was a square arena, fifty meters on each side, waiting for fights to take place on top of it. (In a certain famous Budokai of the Tenkaichi variety, this arena was called the Bubudai, but I wonder if it had an official name here?)

Up in the stands, King Gimbal of Zem stood up.

“My people, gathered here!”

Gimbal called out to the crowd using a Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel in place of a megaphone.

“You will see! The well-trained bodies of these brave warriors, and their polished technique, as they fight with well-used weapons, and rise to the highest summit! The one and only victor will have their wish granted, so long as it is possible! And, should they desire, they may even sit in the special seat, reserved for the king alone—which is behind me now! I won’t let them have it for free, of course! If it comes to that, they will have to defeat me, and take my royal title along with it!”

Gimbal raised his thick arms around as he spoke.

“This country has been protected and cultivated by the strong! Ever since I first took the throne, I have waited for the day when one stronger than I would defeat me! If you wish it, fight through this battle, and face me! In my name! Gimbal, King of Zem!”

Then he thrust his raised arms towards the ring in the center.

“I declare the finals of the Zemish Great Martial Arts Tournament have now begun!”

“Woooooo!”

The crowd packed into the Colosseum’s stands rose as one, and clapped in praise of Gimbal. This passion wasn’t just because they were excited for the tournament. Because this country treated the tournament winner like a hero, being a former winner himself, Gimbal received the fervent support of the people.

“...They’re pretty fired up, huh?” Naden, who was wearing a black dress, said, sounding a little weirded out by it.

We were watching the Colosseum from the stands along with the King of Zem. There were two opulent chairs in the middle of the stands, where the king and I sat side by side while there was another seat to the side of me occupied by Naden. There were actually two seats prepared for my queens, but Aisha firmly refused, wanting to focus on her role as my bodyguard, so Naden was sitting with us as the representative of all my queens. Both Aisha and Owen stood guard behind us, keeping a watchful eye on the area.

“Th-This is kind of tense. I don’t get looked at as your queen like this that often,” Naden said in a small voice as she froze stiff.

Now that she mentioned it, as a secondary queen, she wasn’t in a position that garnered much attention at ceremonies, huh? That had suited her just fine, though, because she wasn’t good at acting dignified, or formal.

“It’s just hitting me now that I’m the wife of a king.”

“Just now?”

“Hmph. It’s your fault for not being regal.” Naden looked away peevishly.

The gesture didn't have even a hint of queenliness, but I appreciated how much of a normal girl Naden was. As her hand laid on the armrest, I put mine on top of hers. She glanced at me, seeming not at all unhappy about the situation.

Then the crowd began to rustle. I looked at the stage, wondering what it could be, and a massive cage was being carried in. Inside the cage was the earth dragon we had seen in town yesterday.

"What's that for?" I muttered.

"It's a sideshow before the final tournament. In order to demonstrate the martial prowess of my country's mercenaries, six chosen warriors will fight it," Gimbal explained, because we were clearly dumbfounded.

Come to think of it, when she was explaining the Colosseum, Mio had said, "*The battles between people and animals are popular, and spectators come from across the continent to see them. The most popular is the battle between the mercenaries and the dragon that walks on land.*" Was that what we were going to see now?

"Sir Souma, have you heard of Zem's 'riding-beast hunters'?"

Since Gimbal was asking me, I nodded. "Yes. I've heard Zem's mercenaries are unrivaled at fighting cavalry."

"Even if you were being charitable, you couldn't say my country is prosperous. We don't have the resources to raise and support a large number of horses or wyverns, so we trained assuming that other countries would deploy far more cavalry than we could. That meant training foot soldiers to defeat cavalry. So..." Gimbal pointed at the earth dragon. "...The cavalry they need to defeat includes wyvern cavalry."

"I see..."

Wyvern cavalry? They intended to face the air force with foot soldiers, too?

“They can do that?”

“Naturally, there’s nothing they can do against a flying opponent. However, if they can bring them down to earth, there are things that can be done. We gathered people who can use long-range magic, or draw powerful bows, and loaded the anti-air repeating bolt throwers onto war carts, focusing on knocking the wyvern cavalry out of the sky. Even if they survive the fall, they’ll quickly find themselves surrounded by infantry.”

“Make the air force fight on land... is that it?”

“Yes. That earth dragon is a stand-in for a fallen wyvern.”

From what I could tell, the earth dragon was smaller than a red dragon like Ruby, but still much larger than a wyvern. It was vicious, too. If they could beat that thing, that meant they could win against a grounded wyvern and its rider, too, huh?

“Though, earth dragons don’t spit fire. If they could, the audience would be in danger. But the trade-off is that they’re stronger and more agile than a wyvern on land, so it works as practice.”

“Right...”

They opened the cage, letting the earth dragon loose. At the same time, six mercenaries came and surrounded it. They were all carrying pole arms. Then...

Gyaohhhahhhh! The earth dragon let out an ear-splitting roar, and attacked the mercenaries.

The first to be targeted raised a shield, and dodged at the last minute to avoid the attack. The remaining mercenaries used that opening to strike from outside where the earth dragon was, focusing with spears and the like, dealing cutting blows to its body. Because it was so massive, the amount of damage a single blow could do was only slight.

When it turned its anger towards another mercenary, that merc took over as the decoy, and the others looked for openings to attack. Even if they were minor wounds, the more of them there were, the more blood it lost. By repeating that process, they made the earth dragon bleed out, sapping it of its stamina. I thought it was a bit like a bullfight, but it looked like something out of that famous game about hunting monsters. I mean, they were taking on a powerful earth dragon with a group of companions, after all. Though it wasn't completely one-sided.

“Gwah!” Snap!

One mercenary was sent flying with a powerful tail slap and slammed into the wall beneath the stands. He slumped to the ground and stopped moving... Was he okay? Even that scene made the crowd go wild.

“...This is in poor taste,” Naden whispered to me. I liked how Naden didn’t go along with those around her, and could keep her normal sensibilities.

“Yeah... But it’s necessary for this country,” I responded quietly. “It’s to impress on the mercenaries and the people the fact that wyverns can be beaten. If they do that, they won’t be so intimidated when they see them on the battlefield.”

“Is that how it works?”

“That’s got to be it.”

There was more than one set of values in the world. When we think about the customs of a country, we have to look at them from a multifaceted perspective, considering their history, culture, situation, and environment before making any judgment.

“But I agree with you, it’s in poor taste. I wouldn’t want to do it in our country.”

"You've got that right. I'm so glad we didn't bring Tomoe."

Ahh, yeah, she has a point there. If you know how the earth dragon feels, this is probably pretty depressing. While we were talking about that, one of the mercenaries took advantage of an opening when the earth dragon fell over to climb up on top of it. He stood on the dragon's shoulders and slammed his spear into its spine.

Gyaohhhhahhhh! The earth dragon let out one last dying cry, then fell to the earth with a great thud. It thrashed for a while after that, but with another thrust of the spear, it stopped moving entirely.

Quest clear... I guess. The mercenary who struck the final blow received a standing ovation.

When Gimbal finished clapping, he looked at me. "What do you think? Of our mercenaries."

"...They're strong."

Even as I felt there was something irreconcilable between us, I decided to leave it at that.

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Once the arena was put back in order, it was finally time for the final tournament to begin. The rough-and-tumble mercenaries competed using their combat abilities. This was an elimination tournament, and each match was decided quickly. Mio was fighting now.

"Hahhh!" Swinging her two longswords down with a battle cry, she sent a burly mercenary flying.

It was the semifinals in no time. This came as no surprise, given she had been able to put up a serious fight against Aisha, but Mio had overwhelmed all her opponents up until now without ever seeming threatened.

From beside me, Gimbal spoke, "How do you feel, Sir Souma? Of my country's warriors."

"They all seem very strong. I can see why Zem's mercenaries are renowned for their power."

It was true that those who remained in the tournament all had incredible martial ability. The place was littered with guys who could take on Kuu or Halbert—assuming he wasn't riding Ruby. Owen had said that Zem's mercenaries were strong against cavalry but weak against infantry, but they were just bad at fighting as a group. One on one, they were in no way inferior.

Gimbal gave a satisfied nod. "I'm sure you can. How about it? Would you be willing to enter a mercenary contract with us again?"

"It would be reassuring to have you as allies, but our country is in the process of strengthening our own military. If I were to hire them, it would dampen the spirits of all my subordinates who are trying to get stronger. I'm afraid to say I can't form a contract."

"That is truly unfortunate." Gimbal suddenly had a serious look on his face. "You seem to hate mercenaries, Sir Souma."

"...Not true."

"I can read between the lines. You've made a firm decision not to use mercenaries."

Clever man. I guess I can't dodge the issue, huh?

"It's not so much me, but my teacher, who didn't trust mercenaries."

The man I regarded as my teacher, Machiavelli, the author of *The Prince*, felt this way. He'd had a difficult experience with them. When Pisa broke away from the Florentine Republic, which Machiavelli served, he raised an army to restore Florentine control over the city. But, because he put a mercenary commander in charge of his troops, they retreated without taking Pisa, despite having broken the walls of the city.

In *The Art of War*, Machiavelli said (though I'm paraphrasing here), "For as long as those who make war their business try to profit from their talents, they cannot be benevolent actors. That is because, in order to feed themselves in peacetime, they will attempt to make a considerable profit during a war, and they hope that it will not end."

These "people who make war their business" are mercenaries. Unlike soldiers, who are attached to a state and want to defend their country and family, the people he refers to will serve any faction if the compensation is right. That is why Machiavelli argued for a militia, instead of relying on mercenaries. The reason mercenaries were so willing to engage in heinous acts of plunder was that they needed to support themselves in peacetime, and their uncertainty about their own prospects if peace came led them to wish for the war to go on. All of these factors led Machiavelli to opposing mercenaries.

"When he was discussing those who make their living off of war, my teacher used the saying, 'War makes thieves and peace hangs them,'" I said. "Because they can only live in times of war, they try to make a profit by outrageous acts in wartime, and try to keep the conflict from ending."

Gimbal remained pensive.

"I think of countries as if they were big people. Mercenary State Zem is one big mercenary. What do you say about that mercenary? Can she live in a less chaotic time?"

I looked Gimbal straight in the eye as I asked that. He stared right back at me, then eventually shrugged.

"...Ha ha ha, it looks like we can't come to an understanding." Gimbal laughed, but his eyes weren't laughing. "If you won't form a contract, I hope you'll at least maintain cordial relations, so we can avoid our

countries coming into conflict. I pray my elite warriors will not have cause to turn their arms on the Kingdom of Friedonia.”

“I do agree with that. If you can maintain *true* permanent neutrality, our nation has no intent on fighting with Zem.”

Though we both kept a calm tone, you could sum up what we said as: “Mess with my country, and you’ll pay.” and “If you start it by giving mercenaries to other countries, you’ll be the one to pay.”

Aisha, Naden, Owen, and the Zemish bodyguards were all looking pretty tense as our conversation transpired.

“In this country, strength is everything,” Gimbal said, crossing his thick arms. “Without strength, you can’t protect your people and country. With strength, you can. Because of my martial prowess, the country recognizes me as king. What do you think, my lady?” Gimbal looked at Naden.

“...Me?”

“I’ve heard the dragons of the Star Dragon Mountain Range prefer strong knights.”

It was likely out of spite asking why a dragon, who was supposed to prefer a strong partner, formed a contract with a powerless person like me, but... maybe he was just curious. Whichever the case, I was not happy about it.

Naden thought for a moment, then shook her head. “That single standard of judging a person only by their sheer power is a lot like the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and I don’t like it.”

“Oh... You have an unusual set of values for a dragon.”

“I’m not a dragon, I’m a ryuu, after all. Souma liked what made me unique.” Naden looked straight into Gimbal’s eyes as she spoke.

“That’s why I wanted to be with him. The only ones who can decide my worth are me, and the people who I love.”

“Oh...” Gimbal smiled. “I can see she loves you dearly.”

“She’s too good for me,” I responded, looking at Gimbal. He was a mountain of muscle, but looking more closely at him, I could see thin scars all over his body. They reminded me of the late Georg Carmine. It was the body of a man who had fought for many long years.

“...Sir Gimbal.”

“What is it?”

“Is it really... because of your strength that the people support you?”

Gimbal furrowed his brow. If he took that as an insult, he’d misunderstood me.

“It’s true that you can’t defend them without strength. As the man carrying the country, it’s absolutely necessary. However, there are times you can’t defend with strength alone. No, there have been times I couldn’t.”

I had encountered a number of situations like that in my time as king. The food crisis, the economic downturn, the natural disaster, and diplomatic issues... There were many times that just gathering strong retainers wouldn’t have gotten me through. If I had been missing any one of the family I had around me now, or the companions and retainers I trusted, I would not be in a better world as a result. Wasn’t it the same here in Mercenary State Zem?

“That thunderous applause after your opening remarks today. I can’t imagine it was only for your strength.”

“.....”

“Assuming the winner today wants the throne, and they defeat you to become the new king, would that same passion be directed at the new king right away? Would they be happy that someone stronger appeared and ended your reign? I think... More than just your

strength, the people of this country look at the burdens you've shouldered along the way with them."

"If that's the case, it would be contrary to the structure of Zem as a country..." Gimbal said that with a strained smile, then sank deep into his chair. "To be defeated by someone stronger and more reliable than me, and to entrust my burden to them—that is a time-honored tradition I've inherited from the past kings of Zem. If what you say is true, then my desire to live as a warrior is out of step with the wishes of the people."

"Sir Gimbal..."

"But I'm surprisingly fond of the way this country is."

"...I see."

I didn't agree, but I couldn't bring myself to reject the view, because he'd made his peace with it.

While we were talking, the semi-finals had ended. It looked like Mio had moved on to the next round. I was focused on talking to Gimbal, and I'd barely been watching the fight, so I asked Aisha about it, "How is Mio? Can she win?"

"She's strong. I get the impression she is especially well-suited to fighting one on one. Though she relies on strength over finesse, there is no waste in the way she moves. She must have been receiving daily instruction from a truly impressive warrior."

"Well, her father and teacher was *him*, after all..."

"She's the sort of opponent who Zemish mercenaries have trouble with, so she may be able to take the victory."

There was a short break, and then the final match began.

"Hahhhh!"

Her two longswords captured her opponent's halberd. When one sword cut the head off of it, the other was thrust at her opponent's throat. With nothing but a pole left for a weapon, her opponent surrendered. Mio had won, just as Aisha anticipated. Her opponent hung their head and departed the arena, leaving only Mio on the stage.

"A remarkable victory!" Gimbal spoke from the stands. Mio laid down her sword, and knelt. Gimbal asked her the question. "The wishes of the strong are to be granted! Tell us what it is you desire!"

...It's finally happening, huh? I braced myself.

Mio stood up, pausing for a breath before she spoke her wish.

"I want the truth! Why did my father raise his sword against the royal family? As his daughter, I want to know! In order to find out, I want the King of Zem to request the Kingdom of Friedonia reinvestigate the matter!"

Chapter 6: Crossing Swords

“I just knew she’d ask for that...” I pressed my hand to my forehead. I’d talked to Aisha and the others about it last night. There was a chance that Mio’s wish was probably going to be the restoration of the House of Carmine. And if it wasn’t that... I had an inkling it would be the restoration of Georg’s honor. He bore the disgrace of becoming a traitor, and sacrificed himself to root out the villains who had infested the Kingdom. Things went as he planned, and now that the problems inside the Kingdom were nearly all fixed, all that remained was to restore his honor.

Naturally, I wanted to make the truth known, and rehabilitate Georg’s reputation. Liscia loved and respected him, and I didn’t want to leave the man who had risked his life for the country as a villain. However, because it was before I formally took the throne, I had put off restoring his reputation in order to avoid confusion. When I considered that it might still cause chaos, even now that I had been coronated, I was hesitant to get started—especially when I considered the children who had just been born.

But, at the same time, it was also a problem I didn’t want to hand down to their generation. *No... but Mio isn’t demanding a release of the results from the new investigation. All she requested was that we “reinvestigate” and “to know the truth.”* She might have had some vague awareness that there was a reason why Georg needed to keep everything a secret when he died. That was why she wanted the truth just for herself.

“Don’t let your emotions lead you to make a decision lightly.” Aisha’s words from yesterday came back to me. It was true that I was feeling a little sympathetic towards Mio right now. That was no good. I needed to be aware of the risks of granting her wish.

"Influencing other nations is beyond the realm of what this country can do. If you insist on it, you will need to defeat me, become queen, and negotiate with other countries in your role as sovereign," Gimbal declared to Mio. "However, King Souma just so happens to be here in the audience."

Gimbal looked at me.

"You should ask him directly whether your wish can be granted or not. I, Gimbal, will observe the result as Zem's king."

He was taking a dignified tone, but I felt like he was saying, "Would the Kingdom please solve their own problems?" Well, that was fair. I stood up and stepped forward. When I did, all the eyes in the crowd were suddenly on me. They all must have been interested to see how I'd answer.

It was generally accepted in this country that the winner of the tournament's wish ought to be granted, so if I refused I was going to get booed. Well... I'd have to be ready for it.

"First, Mio. Your victory in the Great Martial Arts Tournament was incredible."

"Thank you."

"And... I understand your wish."

"Sire!" Aisha exclaimed from behind me.

Naden followed up with, "Souma, is it okay for you to say that?"

They sounded worried, but I put my hand up and signaled for them to stop. I deliberately made the announcement to Mio in a regal manner.

"You were willing to go as far as winning this tournament for your wish. You must be quite determined. In which case... In the process of granting your wish, I would like you to show me your determination once more."

Those words made Mio furrow her brow. “...What do you mean by that?”

“This is a martial arts tournament. Clearly, your determination should be shown through battle.” I extended my hand towards Mio. “If you can defeat the warrior from my country who I will send against you, I will reinvestigate the truth of Georg Carmine, as you wish, and tell it to you.”

At my declaration, the whole Colosseum shook with applause. The site was filled with people who had come just to enjoy watching a good fight. What I was proposing was basically an exhibition match. They must have been genuinely pleased to be able to see another fight.

I turned back to a dumbfounded Gimbal and asked, “That’s how it turned out. Is it okay?”

“Hmm. If the parties concerned accept it, I suppose it’s fine. Though, with the crowd so worked up, I couldn’t very well refuse it now.”

“You have my gratitude.”

Once the crowd settled down, I asked Mio, “Do you accept my terms, Madam Mio?”

“I accept your proposal. Right now, even if Madam Aisha were my opponent, I would make you grant my wish.” Mio put her hands together in front of her and bowed to me.

Aisha put a hand on the hilt of her greatsword and stood to my side. “*Sire, send me,*” is what her eyes pleaded, but I poked her in the ribs instead.

“Ahwhuh?!”

Aisha let out a strange cry, and fell to the ground. Paying no more attention to Aisha as she glared at me, tears in her eyes, I looked

down at Mio and said, “Don’t misunderstand. Your opponent is not Aisha.”

“Then who would you have me fight?”

“You’ll see soon enough... That’s how this thing is going!”

I raised my voice as I looked around the stands.

“You saw how things went! So...” Spreading my arms wide, I bellowed, “Come forth, Kagetora!”

As my shout reverberated through the Colosseum, a black shadow descended from the stands to the arena where Mio was standing. A sudden interloper—his strange and majestic appearance made the audience gulp.

His massive form clad in black armor, wrapped in a cape of the darkest black, he carried an odachi, a large, single-edged sword similar to a Nine-Headed Dragon Katana, at his waist. But more mysterious than anything else was the black sword tiger mask that he wore.

“The black tiger of Parnam...” Gimbal whispered beside me. “It is said that any spy who meets him never comes back.”

They were apparently terrified of him.

“Don’t tell me you brought him here.”

“I did. As my bodyguard.”

After responding to Gimbal, I gave Kagetora his orders, “Kagetora. Fight with Mio, and test her determination.”

“...By your will.” Kagetora drew his odachi from its scabbard, then cast it outside the arena.

Kojirou, you are defeated... Yeah, no. Historical reference aside, it was probably because the scabbard didn’t work well with his cape. Mio drew her two longswords and took up a fighting stance, too.

“I know not who you are, but I can see you are a good warrior. Now, let us do battle.”

“...Have at you.”

Then the two ran forward, and their blades collided.

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He's strong, she thought. The man was dressed all in black, with a black sword, and a tiger mask over his head. She could only assume he was outfitted this way to be purposely strange, but the air around him was that of a battle-hardened warrior. She could feel it when their swords collided, too.

As she swung with her longswords, Kagetora would knock away each blow with his odachi. His guard was so solid that Mio felt like she was beating her swords against a rock. *He's blocking all my attacks...* This was different from the kind of strength that Aisha had.

In addition to the techniques that must have been cultivated through many long years on the field of battle, this person could see through all of her attacks. *I've never faced anyone like this before...* she thought. But, as they traded blows, she felt something familiar. *It's like... when Father was training me.*

Making a large leap backwards to put some distance between them, she spread her two longswords wide like a pair of wings, then rapidly closed the gap. She tried to cleave through her opponent's torso before he could swing down his odachi.

“You let off too much.”

“Guh!”

Kagetora let loose with a tackle instead of swinging his odachi, and sent Mio flying. She felt like she'd been hit by a charging bull as she soared through the air.



When she landed and tried to recover, Kagetora came after her with a followup attack. As Mio blocked the downward swing of his odachi with her two longswords, Kagetora told her, “You depend too much on your inborn strength. Because of your excessive confidence, you’re too soft when it comes to judging your effective distance. You need to let the tension out of your shoulders more, and focus on eliminating unnecessary movements.”

“Y-Yes, sir! ...Huh?”

Mio put distance between herself and Kagetora, as if she’d been launched away from him. In an attempt to hide her confusion and surprise, she used the back of her hand to wipe the sweat that dripped from her chin. *Yes, sir...? What was I thinking just now?* She couldn’t believe herself, meekly accepting Kagetora’s advice in the middle of a battle. Mio was shaken up, but Kagetora simply held his odachi in a fighting stance, unmoving. He was just staring...
Watching...

Wha?! No way... As she peered into the eyes beneath his mask, Mio felt something like a premonition. His stature, his presence, the way he carried himself, and the techniques he unleashed... She remembered all of them. The premonition confused Mio horribly, and she couldn’t even take up a proper stance with her longswords.

“What’s wrong? Are you finished already?” Kagetora quietly said.
“You’re going to let it end? Was this all that your technique, your resolve, could manage?”

“.....!”

His words snapped Mio back to reality. She kicked off the ground and quickly closed the gap between her and Kagetora. He tried to swing his odachi down at Mio who charged in... but he stopped halfway. Mio had made no effort to defend her exposed head.

Thump! In the next instant, Mio socked Kagetora in the face. The impact made him back away this time. With her face downturned, and her arm still outstretched, Mio told the stumbling Kagetora, “Don’t just say whatever you want...”

As she raised her face, there was a burning *anger* in her eyes.

“As if I’d let it end with just this. I’m sure Mother accepted it, but I haven’t. This anger, this sadness, this indignation... I’ll make you take all of it. *You* and no other!”

“...Very well.”

That punch must have cut the inside of his mouth. Kagetora spat the blood out, and then readied his odachi once more.

“A dialogue between warriors needs no words. Show me the extent of your resolve.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The battle between Mio and Kagetora raged on.

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From the stands, we were watching their battle. At some point in the middle, there was an obvious change in the way the two of them fought. In the beginning, they gave measured blows, trying to see how their opponent reacted. But now each fought as if they wished and gave it their all.

Mio, in particular, seemed to have let her emotions explode. She went at him hard, relying on brute force, and Kagetora accepted every one of her strikes. It probably... meant exactly what I assumed it did.

“Sire... Was this really all right?” Aisha asked in a whisper. “I think it’s a gamble whether or not Madam Mio will be satisfied with this...”

"Well, yeah," I whispered in response. "I bet Hakuya will have a few choice words for me later, but... I don't think it's a bad bet. Didn't you say it yourself, Aisha? 'More is said through combat,' right?"

"Yes... I did say that." Aisha thumped one hand on her chest, a look of concern still showing on her face.

"Because this involves another country, it may seem like a big deal. But if we can just satisfy Mio, we can handle the rest however we please. In order to make her accept the result, we don't need any little tricks. Perhaps because they learned under the same teacher, she and Liscia both have very straightforward personalities."

I watched Mio fight. She seemed angry, but I could see another emotion there, too.

"If we go at her with sincerity, she should accept it."

"...I see." Aisha nodded as she watched the two of them fighting down below. "They both certainly seem to be enjoying themselves."

"If I'm being honest, when they talk with their swords like this, I can't follow what they're saying, though..."

"Would you like to talk with me through combat, sire?"

"If I got injured, it would impact my duties, so please, no... Oh!"

It had been awhile now since they started fighting. If they played around any longer, people would start to find it suspicious.

I gave Kagetora the sign. He silently glanced towards me and nodded.

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Shing! Clang! One of Mio's longswords swung up, knocking Kagetora's odachi from his hands and sending it clattering to the ground. Without delay, the other was at Kagetora's throat.

"...I yield."

Kagetora slowly spread his arms. The match was decided, and the Colosseum was rocked with applause. Mio was the victor, yet she seemed more surprised than anyone.

“Why did you let me win?”

“...The master’s orders.” Kagetora quickly answered, having decided that there was no lying his way out of it. Souma had demanded he “look for an opportunity to lose.”

Mio looked up at Souma in the stands, and whispered, “King Souma had no intention of preventing my wish?”

“...There will be a new investigation into the true intentions of your father, Georg Carmine, I’m sure. The results of which will no doubt reach you.”

“Huh?! But I already...”

“Even so. Now that it’s come to this, my master must make sure everything ends properly. You had best prepare yourself. From here on... I am sure you will be expected to do a suitable amount of work.” With that, Kagetora picked up his odachi and turned his back on Mio as he said, “It must be difficult for you, having had such a stubborn and foolish father. I suspect the late Georg feels sorry for what he did to you and your mother.”

“Wha—?! Even so—” Mio shouted after Kagetora as he departed.

“Even so, he is my pride! No matter what path he chose to walk!”

“.....”

“Will we meet again... Sir Kagetora?”

Remaining unturned, he replied, “...If there comes a day when the two of you return to the Kingdom, I am sure we will meet somewhere.”

Kagetora jumped into the stands and disappeared into the crowd.

“Mph... Mph...”

Mio was left alone in the arena, hanging her head as she cried. The people watching apparently thought they were tears of joy, but those in the front row said they were like the tears of a lost child when reunited with her parents.

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Meanwhile, having vanished into the crowd, Kagetora was meeting with a woman in a mostly-deserted hallway. The woman in question had a feline tail, and though her age showed a little, her profile, and her eyes closely resembled Mio's.

Kagetora stopped right beside her, and faced forward. “...You came?”

“I wanted to see my daughter’s efforts through to the end,” the cat-eared woman said without turning.

Kagetora took a deep breath. “Couldn’t you have... stopped her?”

“Never. My husband was a man of conviction. If his daughter was going to act on her convictions, I would not stop her. Because that is my conviction.”

“...I see.” Kagetora smiled a little beneath the stern face of his mask.
“Living in a family like that must be quite difficult for you.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. But we’re family. I may have given up, but I still love them.”

“...You’ve been an incredible mother, and an impeccable wife to a couple of unsophisticated fools.” With that, Kagetora placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Now then, *my lady*, please, take care of yourself.”

“Yes. I know you’re a *complete and total stranger*, but nonetheless, please take care of yourself, too. I’ll be looking forward to the day when we *coincidentally* meet again.”

Without turning back, the two walked off in opposite directions.

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“Mio, that was splendid,” I called out to her as the massive crowd in the Colosseum looked on. She was in the arena, taking a knee, and bowing her head. “Raise your head. You are the victor.”

“...Y-Yes, sir.” She raised her face, but, as might have been expected, she seemed really intimidated. Her face was a mix of awkwardness and confusion.

The audience were so excited they didn’t seem to notice it, but that clearly was not the face of the victor. *Well, I’m sure she has a lot on her mind about this.* I decided not to worry about her as I carried on talking.

“As promised, when I return to my country, I will carry out a new investigation into the motivations of Georg Carmine. To that end, I would like to invite you to come, as well. Would that be acceptable?”

“Y-Yes, sir! I don’t mind!” Mio immediately accepted. That was settled then.

Next... I guess I needed to do something to appeal to the people of Zem, too.

“Obviously, you have already cut all familial ties with Georg, so no matter what the result of the investigation, I guarantee you here and now that I will not seek your life, or to harm you in any other way! Let every person here be my witness!”

The Colosseum roared with applause. All spoils go to the victor. It’s only natural they be praised. If I were to do something to harm the victor, the people of this country would not be happy about it. I made clear that wouldn’t happen, while also making it a fait accompli that we would be taking Mio home with us.

As the winner of the Great Martial Arts Tournament, Mio was a card that Zem wouldn't want to let go of. However, in the face of this impassioned crowd, Gimbal would probably not be able to get in the way of her returning home.

I returned to my seat and looked at Gimbal. "You heard how things turned out. Is there any issue with me taking the winner of the tournament home with me?"

"...The people seem satisfied with that, so I have no objection." Gimbal shrugged with a wry smile. "There is no cup or throne associated with this tournament. In a way, you could say that the throne I am sitting on might be, but I haven't faced a challenger in many years now."

Gimbal rubbed the armrests of his throne.

"What needs to be prioritized, over anything else, is the national belief that, 'Those who are strong will have their wish granted.' That's why, no matter what, I want to make Mio's wish come true now."

"Leave that to me. I won't mistreat her."

"That should be fine, then. Well, if someone from your country were to win, and then continue to stay in the country, it might lead to undue speculation down the line. If you want to collect her, that's convenient for me... or so I'll choose to tell myself."

"Thank you, Sir Gimbal."

It looked like Gimbal hadn't had any clue what Mio was up to, either. Judging by her words and actions, she didn't harbor a grudge against the Kingdom, so if he kept someone like her close at hand, he would always have to be wary she might be a spy. If you thought about the trouble that involved, he might have been relieved to have a nuisance taken off his hands.

"The House of Carmine is taken care of now, right?" Naden asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah. The House of Carmine is."

Having been able to handle the Mio situation first, I slapped my cheeks in order to refocus myself. *Now... tomorrow's going to be where things get serious.* There was one other reason I had accepted Gimbal's invitation.

Though I had been unsure if it was okay to leave Mio alone, the matter that was coming up tomorrow was an issue that directly impacted the future of our country. *I'm sure that she'll be coming soon enough, so I need to keep on top of my game,* I thought as the crowd's cheers continued.

Chapter 7: First Meeting

That night, there was a feast held in the great hall of Blanc Zem Castle in honor of the victor.

If you hear the words “feast” and “castle” in the same sentence, you might imagine something more gaudy, but Zem was not known to stand on ceremony. When it came time to honor the winner of their national tournament, it turned into a raucous celebration with drinking and singing.

Souma, his wives, and Gimbal each gave an address at the beginning of the event, and then quickly retired. This was at the urging of Gimbal, because if the drunken mercenaries were rude to Souma and the other foreign guests of honor, it could cause a diplomatic incident. He was probably telling them, “I can’t handle you guys, so just do whatever you want on your own.”

“Ungh... Hic.” In the middle of that raucous celebration, Mio was red-faced and vomiting.

As the center of attention at tonight’s function, the guests came to hear a word from Mio, and, at the same time, pour her a new glass of alcohol to have a toast. Mio knew she had a high tolerance for alcohol, but after this many drinks, even she was a little unsteady on her feet.

“Whoa, there.” As she stumbled, someone got under her to hold her up. “Are you all right, Madam Mio?”

“Sir... Colbert?” she mumbled.

“Your face is bright red. Are you sure you haven’t had too much to drink?”

"Ungh... It's 'cause everyone makes me drink a toast with them..." As she spoke, Mio felt something welling up inside her chest. "Urgh... Blech!"

"Whoa! Madam Mio, hold yourself together!" Lending Mio a shoulder, Colbert took her out onto the terrace to get some fresh air. He gently stroked her back as she held onto the railing and puked over the edge.

"I'm sorry... for letting you see me like—urgh!"

"You don't have to force yourself to speak, okay?"

After a little while like that, Mio calmed down.

"I really am sorry. I've caused some trouble for you."

"No... Ah! I know this comes a bit late, but congratulations on your victory."

Mio gave him an embarrassed laugh. "Ahaha... Thanks."

"After what His Majesty said, I'm sure you'll get the new investigation into Duke Carmine that you were hoping for. He won't treat the House of Carmine badly, either."

Seeing the genuine smile on Colbert's face, Mio gave him a troubled smile of her own. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Huh? Aren't you happy?"

"Ah... Um... I'm happy, yes, but... I kind of figured some things out, and I'm feeling better after letting out all that pent up frustration..."

"Eh?"

"No, I'm just talking to myself," Mio explained to him with a wry smile on her face. "But, more importantly, Sir Colbert, will you be going back to the Kingdom right away? I'm sure I'll be joining you, but I need to bring my mother, too, so I need to prepare."

“Oh, no, I’m sure I’ll be going home as soon as tomorrow, but His Majesty and the others intend to stay in Zem a while longer.”

“Huh? They do?”

“Yes, well... They have other business to attend to...”

Colbert was being evasive about something. Mio cocked her head to the side. “Something other than the Great Martial Arts Tournament? What could that be...?”

“If you’re curious, will you join us?” The two turned towards the sudden voice that came from beside them. There stood a tall, smart-looking man dressed all in black.

“Sir Hakuya. You’d arrived?” Colbert was taken aback by his sudden appearance.

“Yes, just now. I’ve already reported to His Majesty.”

“Hakuya... The Kingdom of Friedonia’s ‘Black-robed Prime Minister,’ huh?”

Hakuya nodded and bowed his head slightly to Mio. “I appear to have been eavesdropping. I’m sorry. I came to speak to Sir Colbert, and happened to hear the two of you talking. It is an honor to meet you, Madam Mio. I am Hakuya Kwonmin, and I serve His Majesty in my capacity as Prime Minister.”

“Oh! Nice to meet you. I-I am Mio Carmine,” she stammered.

Hakuya gave her a weak smile. “I have been hearing about you. Congratulations on your victory.”

“Th-Thank you.”

“In regards to the House of Carmine, once we return to the Kingdom, I will perform a sincere reevaluation of the situation. ...If it were possible, I would however have liked to consult with His Majesty in advance of any decision on the matter.”

Hakuya let out an exhausted sigh.

Mio asked him, “Um, when you asked if I would join you, what did you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I was asking if you would join us in our other business, Madam Mio. I heard from His Majesty that you hold no hostility towards His Majesty or the Kingdom, correct?”

“Oh, yeah. I have no real axe to grind.”

“Then there’s no issue.” Hakuya nodded. “I want to bring a small but elite set of guards tomorrow. If you have the martial prowess to win a tournament, I think you should be more than up to the task. Besides, if anything should happen to His Majesty and the others, I won’t be able to carry out the new investigation into Sir Georg, so I expect you will do a good job of defending them.”

“R-Right...”

“You can leave your mother to Sir Colbert, I’m sure. How about we have her return to the Kingdom in advance, while you stay with us?”

“O-Okay. I have no problem with that...” Mio blinked, unable to grasp the situation. “Um, so what exactly is this business?”

“A meeting with... a very important person,” he said, his expression very serious. “Tomorrow, here in Zem, there will be a meeting that decides the future of the country. That is why not just His Majesty, but I too, am here.”

“I see...”

Just what had she gotten herself into? Mio’s head was a confused mess.

◇ ◇ ◇

The following day, we left Zem City and flew through the air.

"You could have ridden on my back." Naden telepathically griped at me.

Because there were things we needed to talk about, I didn't ride on Naden's back this time, instead joining everyone in the gondola that she was carrying in her ryuu form. Naden had given me an unhappy look about it, but this time I didn't really have much choice.

Inside the gondola were me, Aisha, Owen, and Hakuya who had joined us in place of Colbert. Colbert took the wyvern gondola we had used on the way here back with Mio's mother—which was to say Georg's wife—and they headed back to the Kingdom before the rest of us.

The remaining guards were with us as well, but Mio seemed a little out of place among them. She had apparently joined us at Hakuya's request. I knew what her intentions were, and I had no reason to view her as a threat now that we had promised a new investigation into Georg, but it was still a bold move, bringing her like this.

By the way, on the matter of that new investigation, Hakuya had thoroughly chewed me out last night for making that decision.

"Honestly... That may have been the right choice this time, but a single misstep and it could have harmed national interest. I do wish you would consult me in advance. Now listen, sire, you really do need to..."

It was lecture time with Hakuya for a little while after that. Once I had heard everything he had to say, I told him, "I do think this stuff through."

I had learned from Liscia's sermons that when someone is on your case, it's more effective to wait until they're done before you explain yourself.

“Georg was especially respected by people in the military. Even now that he’s a traitor, there are probably people looking around, suspecting he might have had some reason, right?”

“Well... yes.”

“I thought it was a good opportunity to extinguish that discord within the country. If Mio will just cooperate, we can give them a beautified version of the story that is incredibly close to the truth.”

There were two points that were preventing us from making Georg’s plan public.

Firstly, Georg had sent Glaive to inform me about the plan in advance. Because people died as a result of the plan, I would end up agitating their bereaved relatives. There were people like Carla’s family who joined the rebellion and martyred themselves for their friendship with Georg, too, after all.

Secondly, we took the mercenaries hired by the corrupt nobles captive, and used them to collect the nobles’ secret wealth in the form of ransom money. If Zem found out about that, it would cause a lot of trouble. Because, from their perspective, they would have been deceived by Georg and me. It could well turn into a diplomatic incident. Conversely, if we could just keep those two points under wraps, we could do as we liked about the rest.

When I explained that, Hakuya sighed, “It could lower the people’s opinion of you, because you let a good vassal die.”

“That will pass. Georg deceived everyone, and, because of my youth and inexperience, he was able to make me dance on his strings. If Mio will say the right things to back up the story, we can make the public view it that way. From there, if we just pump up Georg’s reputation, the things we make public won’t hurt me that much.”

“I see... It’s not that you were blind, but that Duke Carmine was simply too good for you? ...You’re quite the schemer, huh?” Hakuya

let out a sigh filled with a little admiration and a whole lot of exasperation. “If Duke Carmine were listening, I’m sure he’d want to disagree.”

“Well, you know, dead men tell no tales.”

“It’s all in how you say a thing...”

After that exchange, I was able to force Hakuya to accept it. Though we’d only move on it once we were back in the Kingdom. Until then, we had to focus on what lay ahead of us.

“Um, where is this gondola going? We seem to be heading in the opposite direction of the Kingdom of Friedonia...” Mio asked, unable to bear being in the dark about the current situation any longer.

It was true we were heading west, not east towards the Kingdom.

“Because of the other reason we came to Zem.”

“...I hear you’re meeting someone important.”

“That’s right. This is a very important negotiation that will affect how we act going forward. That’s why, well, I’ll have to ask you to forgive me for not heading straight home. I promise we’ll launch the new investigation into your father as soon as we’re back.”

“Th-That’s not a problem, but... um, is it okay for me to come to such an important place?”

I smiled wryly as Mio seemed to break out in a cold sweat. She had looked so strong and brave fighting Kagetora, but she was as timid as timid could be when you took her out of her element and brought her to a place for negotiating like this. She was so cool you might fall in love with her when she was doing what she specialized in, but kind of a disappointment when it came to anything else.

“Reminds me of a certain someone...” I muttered.

“...Um, sire? Why do you look at me when you say that?” Aisha gave me an accusatory glance, and I looked away to try and hide what I’d been thinking.

“W-Well, it’s an important negotiation, but that’s a job for me and Hakuya to handle. Nothing bad will happen to you for joining us, so relax.”

“On the other hand, in your case, sire, failure can not be tolerated,” Hakuya told me that with a dispassionate look on his face.

“I know... We don’t have much time left, after all.”

As the air in the gondola grew heavier, Mio looked around restlessly, not sure what she should do. As they were talking...

“Souma, we’re here. It’s that place that looks like a house, right?”

...Naden’s voice echoed inside my head.

I looked down from the gondola’s windows, and there was a mansion on top of one of Zem’s mountains. It looked like a Canadian log house, made using lots of logs. That was apparently the King of Zem’s mountain villa for getting away from the summer heat.

As I looked down at the villa, I spotted a luxurious gondola meant to be carried by a wyvern parked nearby. “...They’re already here, huh?”

“Sire, we must hurry, too.”

“I know. Naden, set us down next to that gondola.”

“Roger that.”

Naden made a smooth descent and landed next to the luxurious gondola. When Naden took on her human form and we got out of the gondola, a number of people immediately came out from the villa.

“Hee hee.”

The person at the head of the group stood in front of us, then chuckled. Like always... especially now that I was meeting her in the flesh, I was overwhelmed by her beauty. I thought I was used to seeing it, too... Of course, if it was just about simple beauty, my own wives were no less beautiful than she was. Liscia, Aisha, and Juna were all beauties, and Roroa and Naden were cute.

However, in her case, the air around her was different. She had natural charisma. The charm that always drew people to her. Fuuga had something like it, too, but in his case, it mostly arose from his ridiculous martial abilities. Her presence exuded purely from her human charm.

She extended her right hand to me. I took her hand, placing my left hand on top of it, and she reached out and placed her left hand on top of mine. We exchanged a firm, two-handed handshake.

With a smile, she said, "I'm finally able to meet you, Sir Souma."

"Yes. I'm happy to be able to talk with you in person, Madam Maria."

Though, strangely enough, it didn't feel that way, this was my first meeting (not counting the Jewel Voice Broadcast) with Empress Maria Euphoria of the Gran Chaos Empire.





Another reason I'd accepted Gimbal's invitation was that he proposed a meeting between myself and Empress Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire from within Zem's borders. His goal in inviting me to the Great Martial Arts Tournament was likely to show off the strength of his mercenaries, and either convince us to reenter the mercenary contract with them, or, failing that, to secure a treaty of mutual non-aggression. Between encountering Mio personally and this chance to meet the Empress, Gimbal drove a hard bargain.

That said, we had amicable relations with the Empire, but our alliance was fundamentally a secret one. The trade brought about by the medical pact between the Kingdom, the Empire, and the Republic of Turgis must have been visible even to those outside the three countries. Only members of the highest echelons of our two nations knew that we were in constant communication using the Jewel Voice Broadcast, though. If information leaked and third parties discovered we had such a close relationship with either the Empire or the Republic, there was the risk they would become wary of us. For example, if Fuuga learned about it, that would cause quite a stir.

Upon hearing the news of an apparent joint relationship between the Empire and our kingdom, he may be desperate enough to build a power base that outstripped our own; enriching his country's resources, and strengthening their military were also not outside the realm of possibility. He would likely pursue his ambitions with greater intensity, and even less heed for the consequences of his actions.

Because we had kept things secret to prevent that, neither of us had been able to head to the other person's country for talks. However, since this was proposed by a third-party, we were keen to take

advantage of the opportunity. Because Zem was sandwiched between our two countries, it was probable that they made the offer in order to gauge the risk of being caught in a conflict between us. They likely wanted to bring Maria and me together so that they could use the atmosphere of the meeting as an indicator of whether our countries were on amicable terms or not.

I was willingly going along with this narrative, however. With everything in mind, by agreeing to come to Zem, I would knock down three birds with one stone. And, as for Gimbal, my assurance that we won't be hostile towards them—assuming they are truly neutral—probably has satisfied his end goal, for the most part. He truly was more than just a capable warrior, but also a crafty king.

I found a familiar face in the group of people behind Maria who had come out to greet us. I extended my hand to her next. "It's been too long, Madam Jeanne."

"It has. You seem well, King Souma."

This was Maria's little sister and general, Jeanne.

Jeanne shook my hand, then turned to Hakuya. "It's been a long time since I've seen you, too, Sir Hakuya. It's a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine. I am glad to see that you seem well, Madam Jeanne."

"We see each other's faces during our regular scheduled talks, but this feels kind of strange."

"Heh, it does, doesn't it?"

Jeanne was grinning broadly, and even Hakuya's stony face had a hint of a smile on it.

Those two were getting along as well as ever. I'd heard that, as they were both run ragged at the whims of their respective rulers, they

had formed something they called the “Association of the Victims of Slothful Masters.” Their membership, by the way, may have expanded now to include Colbert, who was run ragged by Roroa, and Leporina, who had the same experience with Kuu.

Maria clapped her hands. “Oh, right, Sir Souma. In addition to Jeanne, I’ve brought some capable commanders from our country to provide security at this conference. Let me introduce them to you. Gunther, Krahe. Please, come this way.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Two men in impressive suits of armor stepped forward. The one in yellow armor was your stereotypical macho man. His stern face was built similarly to Owen or Herman, and had a crew cut and a goatee. He looked to be in his thirties or forties, but was definitely the type who appeared older than their actual age.

He pursed his lips, crossing his arms behind his back like a military man would, tilting his head so that his goatee stuck out, and making no attempt to make eye contact.

The other man wore blue armor, and gave off the opposite impression. He was a slim but strong man, like Julius. This guy was around thirty, maybe. He had long hair, and was wearing a little makeup, so he had a face reminiscent of a member in a visual-kei rock band.

The long-haired man looked at me with a broad grin. It wasn’t unpleasant, but I’d never felt someone’s eyes cling to me quite like this, and it made me shiver a bit.

Indicating to each of them with the palms of her hands, Maria continued, “Let me introduce them. The big one is Gunther Lyle, and the slim one is Krahe Laval. These two, as well as Jeanne, have managed the Empire’s military for me, since that’s not something I’m not good at.”

“...I’m Gunther,” the big man said suddenly. He felt a little intimidating, but I didn’t detect any hostility there. He was likely quiet by nature. Looking at the way Maria’s expression hadn’t changed a bit, this was apparently just how he always was. Krahe, on the other hand...

“Well, well, it is an honor to meet you, King Souma. My name is Krahe Laval. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I don’t mind if you want to call me ‘Lavie.’ Oh, you won’t? How rude of me to suggest it. But I truly am pleased to make your acquaintance. Yes. I never lie.”

Even if he was using up Gunther’s share of talking time, too, the man was too garrulous. He approached with a friendly smile, grasped my hand with both of his own, and shook it vigorously.

Shocked by his forwardness, I looked to Maria and the others, struggling to figure out how I should respond. Maria gave me a slightly troubled smile while Jeanne pressed her palm against her forehead.

“Not again...” she mumbled.

This was apparently business as usual here, too.

“Erm... You have some unique personnel in the Empire too, I see,” I said, giving a strained smile.

Maria responded with a business smile of her own. “They are both loyal and reliable commanders.”

That probably meant they were capable, so their personality was second priority. Our country had some of those, too. (Like the super sadistic head maid Serina, or Genia the Overscientist.)

Krahe went on babbling, “Still, to think I would be present when the Saint of the East and the Hero of the West meet. I am beyond delighted. This will be another page in the book of legends. Once the

two of you crush the Demon Lord's Domain, hand in hand, this day will be spoken of forever. Ohh, you're marvelous, Your Imperial Majesty. Truly, you are a saint."

The look of ecstasy on Krahe's face made it seem like he might burst into poetry or song. He came off as a bit of a freak which began to weird me out.

"Lady Maria, you are a heavenly vision of beauty descended to—Ow!"

"You talk too much, fool!" Jeanne dropped a fist on top of his head to shut him up.

Grabbing his head, she forced him to bow. "Ow! Madam Jeanne, that hurts! I said that hurts...!"

"I'm sorry, please ignore Sir Krahe. He's a highly impressionable individual, and with the way he worships my sister as a saint, he's like a young maiden with her head full of dreams."

"...The Empire has some *really* interesting people," I joked.

"It's a big country, after all." Maria chuckled. "Of course there are all kinds. The Kingdom is the same way, right?"

She was looking at my queens and retainers behind me. *Yeah... She has a point.*

"Ahh, let me introduce them, Madam Maria," I said, walking over to them. "These are my wives, Aisha and Naden."

"Nice to meet you. I am Aisha Udgard Elfrieden."

"Naden Delal Souma."

These two hadn't sat in on our Jewel Voice Broadcast conferences, so this was Maria's first time meeting them. Because the broadcasts were held in secret, aside from the rare exception of people like Ginger and Sandria, there were few people who she had met.

"I've heard of the two of you from Souma. You're both adorable."

Maria smiled at both of them.

"This is that singing, dancing empress... She's pretty normal, huh?" Naden said quietly to herself as she looked at Maria.

Come to think of it, Naden had been watching broadcast programs from the Empire while she was in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Incidentally, the simple receiver she had been using was in the castle now.

I didn't want to be thought of as engaging in spying, thus leaving a bad impression, so I'd told Maria we had a receiver that could view the Empire's broadcasts. Since they used separate jewels for public broadcasts and important communications like us, she said it wasn't an issue. In fact, she wanted a receiver that could view broadcasts from the Kingdom in return, so we sent her one.

When Juna saw Maria singing and dancing, she'd said, "What natural charisma... It's frightening how gifted she is," which got her competitive spirit all fired up. I felt lucky to have caught a glimpse of her determination to always win.

"You're amazing. I think this is the first time I've seen a woman who's stronger than Jeanne." Maria poked around Aisha's physique as she stood rigid and upright.

"Y-You flatter me."

Maria had a gentle demeanor, and could interact with anyone quite naturally. She was good at closing the distance between her and other people, so I could see why the people of the Empire loved her. If this came to her naturally, she was a born enchantress. It wasn't just Krahe; she could probably make any man dance around in the palm of her hand.

"Th-The Empress? Seriously?" Hearing a strange tone of voice, and I turned around to see Mio was frozen stiff, her eyes blinking rapidly.

She'd just come along as told, and now the head of the superpower to the west was standing in front of her. No doubt her mind was still trying to process all of what was going on.

Owen gave Mio a slap on the back. "Ah! Sir Owen?"

"I know how you feel, but relax. When you live in the Kingdom, these sorts of ridiculous things happen all the time. It'll be easier on you if you get used to it early."

"...What happened to the Kingdom after I left?"

Ouch, that hurt. Nothing bad happened to it. Probably.

"Sister, it's about time," Jeanne urged.

"Hee hee, yes, it is." Maria looked at me. "It won't do for us to stand here, talking all day. Let's go inside. I've heard in advance that you have something of great importance to discuss, after all."

"Yes. As such, I would like to limit the number of people who attend the talks. Will that be acceptable? We'll each have one assistant inside the room, and one guard outside."

"I understand. I'd like Jeanne to join me. Gunther will stand guard."

"Then Hakuya will join me, and Aisha will be the other guard."

We ordered the others to watch the surrounding area.

Lavie... Er, no, Krahe, who was left out, said, "Why must I be left out of this historic conference? I'm very sad. I mean, silly Gunther is just a taciturn ox of a man, isn't he? I'm begging you, let me be by your side, too. Please, please, please, please."

He cried and begged desperately, but Maria and Jeanne both just waved it off.

Following that, Maria pointed at Naden. "I've heard the raven-haired Madam Naden is a dragon from the Star Dragon Mountain Range."

“Huh? Why are we talking about me now?!” Naden’s eyes widened at the sudden change in topic to her.

I thought I noticed a flash in Krahe’s eye then. Maria continued, “I’ve heard she’s a particularly unique type of dragon called a ‘ryuu,’ too. Aren’t you curious how Naden met Souma, who is not one of the dragon knights of Nothung, and built a bond strong enough it led them to form a contract?”

“...Certainly!”

Whoa... In order to distract Krahe from the conference, she’d brought up Naden’s heritage, and was trying to shove him off onto her. That was an empress for you. What a harsh move.

“Why don’t you ask her about it while we’re having the conference?”

“Ohhh, I most definitely will!” Krahe rushed over to Naden, put his hands together in front of him, and bowed his head. “Please, please, tell me about it!”

“Whoa, you’re too close! Souma, can I shock this guy?!”

“Uh, no, he’s kind of a foreign general...”

“We don’t mind. If he gets too rude, please, punish him,” Jeanne said with a smile.

“I can?!”

She gave permission awfully easily. Is this really all right? Naden sent sparks flying through her black hair to intimidate him, but it seemed Krahe didn’t mind at all, as he kept getting closer.

“Ohh, the hero’s dragon partner wreaths herself in lightning? How mystical and divine! Ahh, I’m fascinated to learn how you and Souma met. What was the story? Please, tell me! Now, now, now!”

“Gyah! Stay! Away! From! Meeee!”

I dunno. If he was able to go this far without batting an eye, I almost had to be impressed. *Ah! I might just have the word to describe Krahe...* He was a romanticist—to an unhealthy degree—that was what Krahe was.

“Sorry, Naden. It’d be a pain if he interrupted the conference, so can you keep him occupied for us?”

“Wait! Why me?!”

“Please. I promise I’ll make it up to you later.” I put my hands together, as if in prayer, as I asked her.

“Murgh...” Naden groaned. “...I’m going to make sure you make it up to me.”

“Yeah, I swear I will.”

“Okay, I get it. I’ll chat with him, but just for a little while.”

It looked like I’d talked her into it. Naden would handle Krahe, so we decided to quickly go inside the villa and get the conference going.

Chapter 8: Direct Conference

The site of our conference was the living room of the villa. There were two couches, and Maria and I sat across from one another in them with our respective assistants sitting next to us. Near the door was Gunther, and by the window on the opposite side of the room stood Aisha, guarding the room, and making sure there were no eavesdroppers. It felt like too much security for a conference between two friendly nations, but because we were in the territory of a third country, it was inevitable.

“This is a valuable opportunity to meet in person. There is something I would like to take this chance to discuss with your country,” I said, cutting right to the point.

“Something you want to discuss... You say?” Maria’s brow furrowed and she cocked her head to the side. “Is it something you couldn’t have said over the broadcast?”

“It’s not that I couldn’t have, but there are emotions, the feeling of the room—factors that can’t be transmitted over the air. In order to accurately convey those things, I felt it really was best that we meet in person. If I poorly communicate what I want to talk about here, I believe it could form a crack between our two nations.”

“...Let’s hear it,” Maria said, looking at me with probing eyes.

I took that to mean she wanted to hear what I had to say, first. I looked into her eyes, and gave it to her straight, “In the near future, I expect that my country will be sending a fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union.”

Maria quietly closed her eyes, while Jeanne cried out in surprise, “Wha?!”

The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union was a group of states in the sea east of the Kingdom. Though they had a shared leader, each

island had a strong sense of independence, and their own political systems, so they weren't unified.

Jeanne slammed her hands down on the table and glared at me. "Do you mean to fight another war among humans, at this late date?! You experienced the demon wave for yourself! In these times, when mankind doesn't unite as one—"

"Jeanne," Maria called out to her, and Jeanne fell silent.

Maria's expression had not changed, and she hadn't spoken especially loudly, but behind her single word, I felt the weight of a person who carried a great nation on her shoulders. It made me sit up straight and pay attention, too.

"For now, let's hear all of what Sir Souma has to say."

"...Thank you. Hakuya, the map."

"Yes, sir."

I pointed at the map Hakuya spread out and explained, "Our nation shares a sea border with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, and the relationship between us is currently strained by issues surrounding the fishing industry. Ships from their region are coming in large numbers to fish in the waters near us, and they regularly cause trouble with our fishermen."

Maria nodded. "I've heard the situation. But is there no way you can clamp down on it peacefully?"

"It's impossible. There are armed ships in their fishing fleets, and they interfere when we try to stop them. They seem to be skilled, so they're likely part of the Archipelago Union's regular forces. In other words..."

"...The state is behind the illegal fishing?"

I nodded in response. "If we don't strike at the root of the problem, all we're doing is playing whack-a-mole. That is why we will send a

fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, deal with the matter, and secure the safety of our fishermen.”

“A fleet... Do you mean to open hostilities at sea?”

“The Archipelago Union is not a signatory to the Mankind Declaration, the same as us. I do not believe the Empire needs to protect them.”

“I see...” Maria stared at me. There was no anger, sadness, suspicion, or anything like that. It was like she was staring into the core of my being. *That stare is hard to deal with...* Though I tried to pretend I was perfectly fine, there was a sweat beading up in my hands.

“...Do you have any questions?”

Maria remained silent, as if she were thinking about something. I had expected to be criticized, or at least questioned when I told her we were sending a fleet to the Archipelago Union, so this silence was unexpectedly awkward. I felt even more like I was sleeping on a bed of needles than I might have if she’d called me out for it.

It seemed the silence was just as unbearable for Jeanne, and she spoke up. “Sir Hakuya! Was this your plan?!”

“...It did not originate with me, but I have considered it in depth with His Majesty.”

“You’re in agreement with it, then. Why...?”

“Jeanne...” Maria cut her off again. “After negotiating with Sir Hakuya over the Jewel Voice Broadcast, you must know what kind of person he is, right?”

“Yes... But, right now, I can’t figure out what he’s thinking.”

“At times like that, you look at the other person’s face.”

Their face? I touched my own. Was it that strange?

When she saw my reaction, Maria chuckled. “If they have something to hide, it will show on their face—whether they’re trying to act agreeable so as not to offend us, trying to deceive us, or getting tense as they think their plot will be discovered... Right? In your eyes, does Sir Hakuya’s face look any different from how it usually does when the two of you are negotiating?”

“...No. I think it was the same.”

“Sir Souma’s face felt the same way to me.” Maria looked straight at my face. “To make it simple, you’ve got some reason you’re doing this, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Can you tell me what that is here?”

“I cannot.” I looked straight back into Maria’s eyes as I spoke. “It’s not that I don’t trust the two of you, but if the information leaks, everything I have done to prepare will go to waste. I absolutely must avoid that.”

If she could tell when people had something they were hiding through their eyes, I wanted her to see through me.

“I swear it is nothing that will disappoint our sworn friends,” I assured her.

“Then let me trust the word of my sworn friend.”

Maria’s response came more easily than I expected.

“Sister...”

“However, do not forget that if you do anything to betray that trust, I will be forced to rescind our secret alliance, the medical pact, the research agreement, and our cooperative stance towards you to a blank slate.”

Though she was bold enough to trust us, she didn't forget to make her stance clear. She truly was a woman who was carrying a great nation. I had nowhere near her capacity.

"I will take that to heart," I said. "Because I do not want to fight you."

"I feel the same. So... If you went out of your way to tell us something that you knew might upset us, you must have some reason, right?"

Detecting the certainty in Maria's words, I gave up and nodded. "Yes. There is something I want the Empire to help us with."

"If you want to attack the Archipelago Union with a pincer attack from the east and west, I can't do that, you know?"

"I wouldn't ask for any such thing. I'd like the Empire to act as a mediator of peace."

"Peace...?" Maria had a difficult look on her face again. I had already told her I was sending a fleet, but now I was asking for her to mediate peace, the exact opposite course of action, so I couldn't blame her for being suspicious. "Is it safe to assume you mean with the Nine-Headed Dragon King?"

"No. It seems the Nine-Headed Dragon King is already gathering a fleet of his own. I don't think we can negotiate with him. Therefore, though this will be a lot of work, I'd like the Empire to persuade the rulers of each island of the risks of fighting us. I want you to tell them, 'If the Kingdom decides to fight, they will likely bring all of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago under their dominion. That's why you should avoid conflict,' and stir up their sense of danger."

"Ah! ...That's not likely to avert conflict." The look in Maria's eyes became sharper. "Historically, that country was founded by those who came together after being chased off the continent for some reason. The rebellious spirit is deeply rooted in the people, and they

epitomize the saying, ‘If you would be made the butt-end of a spear, become the cutting edge of a dagger instead.’”

That was a saying from this world. In my old world, we would have said, “Choose to be the mouth of a chicken, rather than become the tail of an ox.” It means it’s better to be at the head of a smaller group, rather than a follower of a large one.

Maria continued, “When we called on them to join the Mankind Declaration, not a single island responded. If I tell them, ‘Your enemies are strong, so avoid fighting,’ in this case, it would actually rile them up more. If that happens... Ah?!”

Maria’s eyes went wide.

“No, don’t tell me that’s what you’re aiming for?!”

It seemed Maria had an accurate grasp of my intentions. *Is she gonna get mad?* I thought, but instead she thought about it even more. That was unexpected, and I looked to Hakuya. He seemed bewildered, too. Jeanne, meanwhile, was looking back and forth, from Maria to the two of us.

I waited quietly for Maria to speak, and eventually she slowly opened her mouth. “...It’s vague, but I believe I’m beginning to see what it is that you’re trying to do.”

“Huh?”

This time, it was my turn to be surprised. *No way... That was all it took for her to figure out our plan?*

“We’re always gathering information on other nations, too.” As I remained speechless, Maria smiled at me. “We have some amount of information on the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, and I could detect no lie in anything you’ve said. If I compare what we know about that country with what you’ve said, Sir Souma, I am able to get a vague idea of what you want to do.”

“I see...”

What an incredible person. It seemed like she’d more or less figured out our goal, even if not perfectly. I don’t know how many times I’d thought this now, but she was just too amazing. Not only did she have natural charisma, she was incredibly wise, too.

Maria clapped her hands. “I understand. The Empire will offer the Kingdom our full cooperation on this matter.”

“S-Sister?! Is it all right to decide on the spot like that?!” Jeanne protested, but Maria seemed unconcerned.

“If my prediction is right, it’s something that will be meaningful for the Empire, as well. But I think we’ll have to agree that you owe us one, right?” she said, smiling playfully.

I slumped my shoulders, all malice sucked out of me. “...Consider us in your debt. I’ll find some occasion to repay the favor.”

“Hee hee, don’t forget you said that.”

With that, things were sorted out with the Empire. Ultimately, Maria showed us she was on a much higher level than we were, but there was no denying we’d managed to secure the Empire’s cooperation. That made this whole trip worthwhile.

Now we can send a fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union without reservation. I was still surprised by Maria’s sagacity, but it still felt like a load off my shoulders.

With the most important discussion out of the way, we moved our negotiations to a number of other topics. This was an extension of the things we usually discussed over the broadcast, so it ended without issue, and so did my first direct meeting with Maria.

Afterward, we were to have a friendly get-together using this villa. If we were to leave and try to return to our own countries now, it would mean traveling by night, so the plan was that we would stay

here overnight, and then head home in the morning. The food for the get-together was made by chefs from both the Kingdom and the Empire, using ingredients provided by this country. Each side tested it for poison, too.

If anything were to happen to Maria or me, that would elevate the risk of Zem being attacked from both sides, so I didn't expect them to pull something, but we still took safety precautions just in case. It made me painfully aware of how difficult it was for the heads of two nations to meet.

Also, in regards to who the chefs from the Kingdom were, we weren't going to be able to properly protect any more VIPs than we already were, which meant that Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Poncho, and his pregnant wives Serina and Komain, couldn't be here. In their place, we brought the staff who worked at the Ishizuka restaurant.

“““W-We will serve you with wholehearted devotion!”””

When tasked with making food that the Empress of the great land to the west would eat, they were petrified, but... it looked like they would still give it their all.

“Oh, gosh. The outside is crispy, but the inside is juicy.” I could tell by looking at the beaming smile on Maria's face as she stuffed her cheeks with tatsuta chicken that she was enjoying it.

Because we had limited space this time, we had gone with a buffet format where people would stand and eat. People from both countries were talking to each other about whatever they liked.

“*Munch, munch.* Was the Kingdom's food always this good?”

“We do have a bunch of picky gourmets in our house, after all.”

Mio and Naden were chatting. *Naden, aren't you forgetting yourself there?*

“Sir Gunther! I daresay, those are some fine muscles you have there!”

“...You, too, Sir Owen.”

“Ohohoho, Sir Gunther, you’re acting uncharacteristically shy.”

The commanders, Owen, Gunther, and Krahe, seemed to be getting on well, too, and the get-together continued with that relaxed atmosphere. Compared to the times when I was invited to late-night parties by the nobles, the lack of anyone coming up to me, rubbing their hands together with a fake smile plastered on their face, was a huge relief.

When Maria and I were talking, even our subordinates would hesitate to approach. Perhaps because of that, Maria was able to savor her meal to the fullest.

“You’ve taught us the recipes, but authentic cuisine really is different. Even the scent of the soy sauce you use is better than our country’s.”

“Well, that must be the fruit of the mystic wolf race’s daily struggle to improve their methods.”

“It’s so delicious my fork won’t stop.” Maria grinned as she scarfed down the food.

Somehow, I suddenly felt a sense of kinship with her. *Jeanne said she was a bit of a disappointment in her private life, but to think she was this kind of easygoing woman...* While I was thinking that, Aisha came along and offered Maria a dish.

“Madam Maria, this stew is delicious, too.”

“Oh, my, Madam Aisha, is that true? I’ll have to try it.”

For some reason, she was hitting it off with our dark elf glutton just as well.

“Um, Madam Maria? If you go too crazy, won’t Madam Jeanne get mad at you again?” I asked out of concern, but Maria just chuckled in amusement.

“It’s fine. Jeanne is in another room sulking right now.”

“Ahh... Is that so?”

Hakuya and I hadn’t talked much about our intentions with sending a fleet out towards the archipelago, and though Maria seemed to have it figured out, she didn’t talk about it. In fact, she probably kept quiet to help preserve secrecy around the matter. Seemingly out of the loop on this, Jeanne became very sulky. Obviously, she wasn’t going to openly sulk during a friendly get-together with another nation.

“I’m sorry. I’m feeling a little under the weather, so I’ll have to ask you to let me excuse myself.” She had made that excuse, then withdrawn to another room. But, in her sister Maria’s eyes, it was clear that she was feeling down because she had been left out.

Maria bowed her head. “I’m sorry—for leaving Hakuya to take care of Jeanne.”

“Don’t worry about it. Hakuya’s not good with these sorts of lively events to begin with, so he may have just been looking for an excuse to escape.”

“Do you think so?” Maria cocked her head to the side inquisitively.

“Yeah. And besides...” I trailed off, before telling her my jerkish opinion on the matter. “I think that smugly unmarried guy could stand to be swung around at a woman’s whim every once in a while.”

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“...Hmph.” In another room, Jeanne turned her head to the side peevishly.

Hakuya was standing nearby with a slightly troubled look on his face. Despite having a brilliant mind for politics and strategy, he was still a single man who had spent his entire life as a bookworm before coming to serve at the castle. There weren't many chances to interact with women, so naturally he had little clue how to mollify one when they were in a sour mood.

If this was going to come up, I should have paid more attention to how His Majesty interacts with his queens... Souma and his queens got along well, but they got into little spats all the time. Liscia might get mad at him for his indelicacy some times, while Souma might sulk about his wives banding together and disregarding his opinion other times.

To give an example, they had just recently had an argument over the future direction of Cian and Kazuha's education. Though, everyone who overheard them just got exasperated, because it was way too early to be talking about it, anyway. However, those arguments were just a little friendly tussling between husband and wives, and if they left each other alone, they were ready to make up in no time. In Souma's native world, it was apparently said that, "Even a dog would turn up his nose at a fight between a husband and wife."

Hakuya had no desire to get involved in another family's marital disputes, so he did his best to stay out of it. Now, he was seriously regretting not having paid attention to how Souma calmed his wives down when they got mad at him.

"Um... Madam Jeanne?"

"...What is it, Sir Hakuya?"

It looked like she was at least willing to respond.

"Um... Are you mad?"

"I'm not mad... I'm indignant."

“I do apologize. But we can’t speak when we don’t know who might be listening. We had no intention of leaving you out of the—”

“That’s not it.” Jeanne cut off Hakuya’s explanation and turned to face him. “The one I’m indignant at is myself, for being so useless.”

Jeanne crossed her arms over her chest, and cast her eyes downward, looking sad.

“For as long as my sister upholds her ideals, the Kingdom will walk alongside the Empire... It was King Souma who said that, and now he’s talking about invading the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. That on its own should have been enough to make her furrow her brow, yet, for some reason, my sister accepted his request.”

“That’s because... No...” Hakuya was about to say something, but stopped himself.

“It appeared as if you and King Souma had become totally different people, and my sister had cast aside her ideals... I have no idea what all of you were thinking.”

Jeanne shook her head.

“But what I do understand is that all of you have something that you’re thinking about. It’s just a matter of me not knowing the situation. That’s... intensely frustrating. Especially when my sister was able to correctly discern your intentions from only a few small hints.”

Hakuya let out a small sigh. “Madam Maria is a smart woman. We hadn’t anticipated her seeing through us like that, either. Even if it made relations tense for a while, so long as Maria continued to act like her usual self, that would have been fine. But, having more or less figured out what we were up to, Maria promised to cooperate. It’s terrifying just how perceptive she is.”

"My sister is too easygoing in her personal life, but she's a very smart person." Jeanne smiled weakly. "That's why we rely on her. Too much. When I see Sister constantly shouldering the burden of being empress, I want to be there to help her, but... if only I had more strength."

Unable to find the words to say, Hakuya gave her an empathetic look.

"I'm sorry. For whining to you like this."

"No, I understand."

They were both in the position of having to support the leader of their nation. Souma was exceptionally good at delegating tasks to those who had the capability to do them. He had gathered so many people they called him a personnel maniac, and that meant they were able to pursue policies in a variety of different directions. The downside was that it was harder for him to do his work as king outside, and he looked rather plain to the people, but if the state was well-run, the people weren't going to complain about that.

But... What if?

What if Souma had possessed Maria's ability and charisma? If he could do everything on his own, wouldn't he have done so, and pushed forward on his policies instead of recruiting personnel? Because it was faster that way? Solving issues all on his own would have earned him more popularity, and led to greater expectations for him. The more he lived up to people's hopes, the greater those hopes would become...

I see... Madam Jeanne is... It must have felt irritating, watching a sister like that. Maria was such a genius that Jeanne couldn't even say, "I wish you would rely on me more."

"Watching my sister perform as a lorelei in addition to her political duties, it made me think. Isn't this closer to what my sister really

wants to do?" There was a pain in Jeanne's voice. "The failure of the combined offensive of the forces of mankind led by the Empire, and the death of the last emperor... Sister ascended the throne in a time when the people were gloomy and dejected. She told me, 'I want to make the people smile.' That was what motivated her to bring the Empire together once more, and give them the hope that was the Mankind Declaration."

"...I think that's incredible."

"Sister only wanted everyone to smile! Perhaps... Perhaps she didn't even want to be empress. She seems so full of life when she's singing and dancing, and the people love to see it. Honestly, I wish I could let her do nothing but that, but... it's not an option."

There was nothing Hakuya could say in response to the sadness in Jeanne's voice. As a foreign national, he had little flexibility, and as a high ranking member of the Kingdom, he couldn't speak carelessly. If there was one thing he could do, it was quietly listen as Jeanne vented.

Suddenly, Jeanne slapped her own cheeks.

"Madam Jeanne?!"

"I can't keep acting gloomy like this." Then, she gave the surprised Hakuya a smile. "Not when I've been blessed with an opportunity to talk to you, Sir Hakuya. I'm wasting time."

"...I don't mind."

"Well, I do! Let's drink the night away!"

"Ah! I don't hold my drinks that well..."

"Ohh, that's right, huh?" Jeanne grinned. "It's okay. If you get wasted, I'll tend to you."

"I can't let a VIP from another country see me in that sort of wretched state..."

“Oh, what’s the harm? Let loose every once in a while.”

“No, what I’m saying is...”

“Come on, now that that’s decided, let’s go get some food and drinks from the party.”

Jeanne took Hakuya’s hand and started to walk off with firm steps, dragging him along. Hakuya had an uncharacteristically bewildered look on his face. *Well... this is better than her looking depressed like before.*

Seeing the happy look on Jeanne’s face, he prepared himself to keep her company the whole night through.



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Not long after that, a bewildered Hakuya and happy Jeanne came into the room. Jeanne was pulling Hakuya along by the sleeve. It looked like she was feeling better now.

“It seems like your sister’s in a better mood.”

Maria had also noticed them, and was smiling softly. “Speaking of little sisters, is Trill doing well?”

“Yeah. A little too well. She’s hard at work on developing the drill with Genia. I actually wanted to bring her along, but she firmly refused...”

I thought it would be a good chance for the three sisters to get together, but...

“Not a chance! If I were to meet my sisters now, I’d surely receive an extended lecture about not interfering with Big Sister Genia’s married life! Big Sister Jeanne is so strict, I might even be taken back to the Empire! I absolutely refuse to accompany you!”

...Trill wasn’t having it.

Granted, I couldn’t be too firm with her given her own status. I had Jeanne’s permission to be strict with Trill, but I wouldn’t have wanted to upset her and delay the drill development project as a result. That was why I was letting her do as she pleased, within reason. If things got out of hand, I’d have her sisters scold her, though.

Maria chuckled. “That’s so like her. Always free-spirited. I envy her a little.”

“Speaking of free spirits... Everyone here is acting pretty free-spirited, huh?”

I looked around, and people from the Kingdom and Empire were mingling in quite a chaotic scene. Naden was passionately regaling Krahe with the story of how the two of us met. Her face was a little red, and her eyes were unfocused. She looked tipsy.

“So, like I was saying, Souma, he told me I had individuality. It... made me really happy.”

“Oho, I see, I see. That is a wonderful way to have met. Here, have another drink.”

“...*Hic*.”

It looked like Krahe had wheedled her into telling him everything. Well, him knowing how the two of us met wasn’t going to cause any problems. There were guards nearby, so if it sounded like she might divulge anything that ought to be kept secret, they’d probably stop her. But Naden... if she still remembered this when she sobered up, she was going to be writhing in shame, wasn’t she?

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the room, Mio was knocking back a stiff drink.

“Urgh... What am I even doing here...?”

“M-Madam Mio? Aren’t you drinking a little too much?” Owen commented, attempting to stop her.

Mio shouted, “You think I could get through this without drinking?!” and helped herself to another. “I was surprised enough that the Elfrieden Kingdom and the Principality of Amidonia had been unified, but we’re on friendly terms with the Empire now, too...? What happened to the Kingdom while I was away? I feel like a traveler coming back home after a decade, and shocked by how everything’s changed... *Hic*.”

"A lot happened. Oh, geez, you're drinking too much. If you're hungover, the gondola ride is just going to be that much harder on you, you know?"

Though Owen was trying to calm her down, she wasn't listening to him.

Hrm... If it was going to be like this, maybe I should have brought Colbert and her mother, too... Mio's mother didn't seem like the type to be intimidated by this type of thing. Before parting ways with Colbert, I'd had the opportunity to speak with her briefly.

When I asked her what she thought about Georg, she'd said, "*This is the path that tactless man chose. No matter what others think of him for it, I'm sure it was the best choice he could have made. As his wife, I can only believe in him, and accept it.*" What a strong woman. I doubt the sight of her daughter drowning her confusion with alcohol would have fazed her.

Looking around closer, I found our bodyguards Aisha and Gunther glaring at one another.

"....."

"....." (*Munch, munch.*)

Gunther stared Aisha down, standing upright and unmoving, while Aisha was returning the stare, but held a plate with a variety of dishes on it, and munched on them as she glared back at Gunther. Seriously, what was I looking at here?

"Um... Why is Gunther glaring at Aisha?" I asked Maria.

"Oh, I'm sorry. That stern look on Gunther's face is normal for him. He likely wanted to speak to his fellow bodyguard, but couldn't find the words, and their eyes happened to meet, so he couldn't look away... I suppose?"

"He's shy, even though he looks like that?!"

When we first met, I thought he must not have a good impression of me, but was he actually just feeling tense? When I thought of it that way, the rough old man started to look kind of cute.

Maria chuckled. “Everyone looks like they’re having fun.”

“...Yeah, they do.”

“By the way, Sir Souma? I’d like to talk alone for a little while,” she said in a mischievous tone.

Taken aback by her sudden invitation, I panicked a little. “Alone...? That’s not good. We’re both leaders, you know?”

“Madam Aisha and Gunther should still be able to see us on the balcony over there, so I don’t think it should be a problem?”

“That’s... fine, then.”

We told Aisha and Gunther we wanted to talk alone, so we’d like them to guard us from a distance, and then headed out to the balcony. I was afraid of getting sniped out here, but there were members of the Black Cats positioned around the villa, so it was probably fine.

Maria’s shoulders trembled a little. “It’s a little chilly outside, huh?”

“Well, it is autumn, and we are in the mountains, after all.”

She was right about it being chilly, but I couldn’t even tell how many layers that dress she was wearing had, and I was dressed pretty heavily myself, so it was tolerable. Decidedly, we stayed out on the balcony.

Maria was the first to open her mouth, “Now, in regard to the dispatch of a fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union...”

“...I can’t reveal any more to you at the moment, you know?”

“I won’t be asking. What I’m about to say is in regards to the favor we’re owed. You did say you would pay us back someday, didn’t you?” she said, a mischievous smile on her face.

“Wait a sec. Um... If you ask for anything too unreasonable, it’s going to be a problem.”

“Hee hee, the agreement we made was a verbal one, not committed to paper. It only counted as a favor to you because you believe that we’ll follow through on it. So, I’d like you to make me a verbal promise, too.”

“Return the favor with a promise?”

“Yes. If, at some point in the future...”

What Maria said to me after that, despite the calmness in her voice when she said it, made me doubt my own ears.

“Huh?!” I looked at her, eyes wide.

Maria just... smiled.

These must have been Maria’s true feelings, which even Jeanne didn’t know. Even after I listened to everything she said, I couldn’t say anything for a while.

After a silence that felt especially long, I finally managed to reply, “Don’t say anything so ominous...”

Maria chuckled. “It’s important to be prepared. So, how about it? This is a verbal agreement, not committed to paper, but can I ask you to do it?”

“I...”

This... wasn’t something I could just nod and agree to so easily. If what Maria had just spoken about came to pass, I would have to gather Hakuya and my closest retainers and debate the matter for days. But only if it truly happened. For now, it was only one future

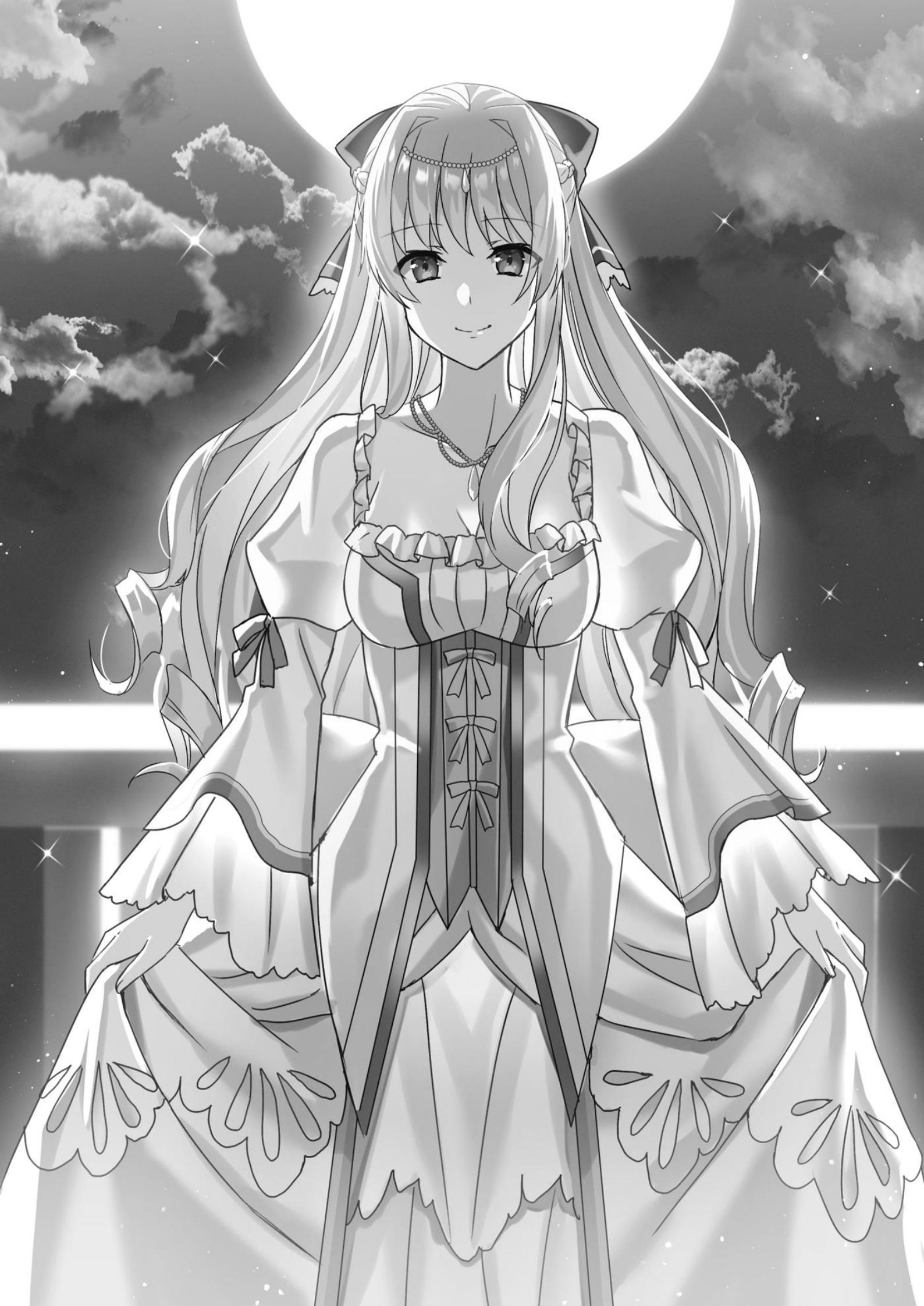
possibility. If I told them I wanted to debate the matter now, they would tell me I was worrying too much.

I, myself, couldn't believe it was going to happen, after all. *Oh...* *That's why it's a verbal agreement.* This way, she'd be happy if I did as I promised, but I couldn't be faulted for not doing it. It was the same as when I asked her for a favor. Still, Maria and I both believed that if the other promised something, they would follow through. She must have spoken about it because she trusted me. In case the time should ever come.

"...I understand." I looked Maria in the eye and nodded. "If that sort of situation arises, the Kingdom will act as you wish."

Maria gave me the biggest smile she had yet today in response. The way she looked as she gently lifted the hem of her skirt in the moonlight was entrancingly beautiful.

Then, in a gentle voice, she said, "I believe you, Sir Souma."



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The next day, we each returned to our own countries. Gimbal, King of Zem, came to visit in the morning, so he, Maria, and I were bidding one another farewell.

“Sir Gimbal. I thank you, in my capacity as empress, for providing us a place to talk like this.”

“I thank you on behalf of the Kingdom, too. We were able to have a fruitful meeting as a result.”

As Maria and I both thanked him, Gimbal shook his head. “If the Kingdom and Empire are on good terms, we won’t be caught in the middle of your wars. Well, assuming you two don’t happily invade us together, that is.”

He’d said that jokingly, but a lot of truth is said in jest. Gimbal wanted to avoid us being so hostile to one another that his country became the battlefield for our wars, but he didn’t want us to be so close that we decided to invade him together either. That’s why he provided a place for us to meet, doing both of us a favor, while letting him probe what our relationship was like. He was a seriously tricky one to deal with.

Maria and I both replied with plastered-on smiles.

“Like I said before, if you remain genuinely neutral, the Kingdom will not start any trouble with you.”

“Hee hee, the Empire won’t be breaking the Mankind Declaration when we were the ones who issued it to begin with.”

Gimbal replied with an equally fake smile. “Ha ha ha, that’s reassuring to hear. If you wish to use this place for conferences in the future, just say the word, and I’ll lend it to you anytime.”

“Thank you for that.”

“We’re grateful for it, Sir Gimbal.”

We all shook hands as our retainers looked on. It was a theatrical way of showing we had a relationship of trust, but that sort of display was important, too.

And so, we each returned to our own countries.

Chapter 9: Before a Loyal Retainer's Grave

On the way home from Zem, I rode on Naden's back at some points, and also joined people in the gondola to chat. This was just a quick foreign excursion, so it had only been about a week since we left the Kingdom.

I had Naden fly to the castle and set the gondola down in the courtyard, as per usual. As the guards saluted our arrival, and everyone stretched the travel stiffness off, Liscia and Juna came out of the castle carrying Cian and Kazuha. Roroa was behind them, too.

Liscia gave Kazuha (I couldn't see her face from this distance, so I figured it out from her Machapin baby outfit) to Roroa, and rushed over to my side. *Oh... Having a wife to welcome me home is nice...* As I held out my arms, ready to catch Liscia in them, she ran straight past me and hugged Mio.

"P-Princess... Is that you?"

"...I'm a queen now, though," Liscia gently told Mio, who was staring at her in astonishment. "Oh, and I'm sorry. We made your family go through so much trouble for us."

"No... Just hearing those words makes it all feel like it was worth it, somehow." Mio returned Liscia's hug.

The two former students of Georg finally met, and their eyes were wet with tears as they hugged. I liked how Liscia could be so considerate of people, and it was a moving scene, but I felt a little sad that she had prioritized Mio over me. *I'm so petty, and I hate myself for it...*

"What're you lookin' so sad for, huh? We're right here, too, ain't we?"

“Look, Cian, Kazuha, it’s Dad.”

Roroa and Juna took Cian and Kazuha’s tiny little hands and pressed them to my face. The kids cooed, as if trying to console me. *Y-You guys...*

“I’m home, everyone!” I was so moved, I hugged the four of them tight.

“You’re really makin’ a big deal of it when you were only gone for a week, Darlin’.”

“Hee hee, welcome home, Darling.”

Roroa and Juna smiled at my overreaction.

As I was enjoying the first time I was able to spend with family in a week, Hakuya, who had walked up behind me at some point, loudly cleared his throat. “Sire, I’m sorry to interrupt the happy family moment, but let us address the matter of Madam Mio immediately. If we spend too much time on it, it risks impacting our later plans.”

“...Okay.”

I had promised, so I was ready to get right to work on restoring Georg’s honor. I wouldn’t go back on my word when I had said something publicly. Georg’s honor would definitely be restored. But... *Whether that’s something Georg himself wanted is another matter.*

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One autumn night a month later... An announcement from the castle came through on Chris Tachyon’s news program.

“We will now make an announcement regarding the new investigation into the insurrection led by former General of the Army Georg Carmine.”

According to the news, the reason for reinvestigating the issue was that Georg's daughter Mio had won the martial arts tournament in Zem, and gained the opportunity to speak directly with King Souma, who was in attendance. She had emotionally requested that King Souma open a new investigation into Georg's rebellion. To make a direct appeal to the king like that could easily have been seen as an affront, but King Souma saw how Mio had been willing to cut her way through Zem's powerful warriors to have him hear her wish, and decided to launch the investigation when she provided new evidence in the form of a journal Georg had kept during the rebellion. It seemed there had been an actual investigation performed during this past month.

The people of Friedonia (especially those in the Elfrieden Kingdom) were not sure what to make of Georg Carmine's rebellion. Because the man himself had committed suicide in prison without ever saying a word, and his closest associates chose to follow him into death, there was no one left who could speak to how things had turned out the way they did. The castle's announcement at the time that "Georg started an insurrection, so we put it down" had been very plain. That's why the people of the Kingdom's opinions on the matter were largely based on speculation.

If we were to summarize how they saw things having happened, it looked like this:

Georg was suspicious of the sudden transfer of power from the former king, King Albert, to King Souma. Due to that distrust, he closed himself off inside his domain, and ignored Liscia when she tried to persuade him to speak with King Souma. On top of that, he sheltered nobles who King Souma had accused of corruption inside his domain. It wasn't clear if those nobles put him up to it, or if he was using them instead, but he led the Army in a revolt. It was possible that, in his old age, he had grown ambitious, and wanted to

become king himself.

That was the people's script for the rebellion; which was why the current appraisal of him was that of a once-loyal warrior who had grown arrogant and rebelled in his old age. However, that was when Mio appeared with Georg's journal.

"This is something that must be kept secret, but I take up my pen now because I want you, my family, to know the truth."

The diary that began with this passage depicted a Georg who was completely different from the one people had spoken of up until this point.

If we were to summarize the depiction of Georg in the diary she had, it was as follows:

Georg was always loyal to the royal family of Elfrieden. He viewed Princess Liscia not only as the daughter of his liege, but as if she were his own daughter, too. He also understood that the young man King Albert had chosen to marry Princess Liscia was fit to be a king. However, there were those among the Kingdom's nobility who fattened themselves through corruption, and even those who collaborated with the Principality of Amidonia, and they could not accept the way that Souma pursued them for their corruption, and tried to improve the country.

Georg sensed an impending rebellion by these nobles, and an invasion by the Principality of Amidonia, so he brought the corrupt nobles together, and led the rebellion himself, so that he could root out the corrupt nobles by losing to Souma. At the same time, Georg shut off the corrupt nobles's collaboration with Amidonia. If, during that war, the Amidonians had invaded through the Carmine Duchy instead, and worked together with the corrupt nobles, the war might

have dragged on for a long time. Because he was cautious of that, Georg worked to keep them from collaborating with the Principality of Amidonia.

As a result, the Principality of Amidonia instead hoped that King Souma and the nobles would knock each other out, and invaded through the south because they couldn't coordinate things with the forces of the corrupt nobles. Then, when the Anti-Air Repeating Bolt Throwers on the walls of the castle in Randel fell, Georg surrendered, and was successfully taken captive along with the corrupt nobles. He was satisfied with the result, but there was just one thing wrong. He felt guilty for the people of the House of Vargas, who had joined the insurrection out of loyalty to their friendship with him.

The journal ended on the day Georg surrendered and was captured.

At the end of the journal, it said, "In order to keep Liscia from being sad, this must be kept secret. When you finish reading this, please, burn it." However, when Mio learned of her father's tragic resolve, she could not bring herself to do so. Though it was against Georg's last will, she had won the martial arts tournament in Zem to redeem her father's honor.

Souma read that diary, and immediately ordered a new investigation into Georg. When he did, it became clear that accounts from those who fought in the Army as part of the rebellion, and those who fought against them in the Forbidden Army, were consistent with the contents of the diary.

The soldiers who fought in the Army back then reflected on their experiences.

"Despite having a force that was larger than the Forbidden Army, Duke Carmine only surrounded the fortress where they were holed up, and didn't actively try to attack them. Because Duke Carmine,

who was known for his intense attacks, was acting so passive, the soldiers couldn't muster the will to fight."

"The only ones who were motivated were the forces led by the corrupt nobles."

Meanwhile, the soldiers on the side of the forbidden army said...

"It was only the corrupt nobles' forces that actively tried to attack us during that siege battle."

"They were the ones who brought out the cannon to attack us, while the Army's units only attacked from a distance. I remember feeling let down when Georg surrendered the moment His Majesty arrived with the Air Force."

The Forbidden Army and Army were fighting each other as enemies, but both sides had this understanding of events. And this was recorded in the diary.

"When His Majesty (Souma) comes with the Air Force, I will immediately surrender, and, to aid in having the corrupt nobles captured with me, I'd like to wear down their forces first. In order to limit the casualties among the soldiers I have dragged into this rebellion with me, I will remain passive, only launching enough sporadic attacks to satisfy the corrupt nobles."

...This was consistent with that understanding, too.

By comparing this diary with the accounts of those who actually experienced the war, it became clear that its contents were highly believable. There were those who suspected it was a fabrication, made by Mio to rebuild the House of Carmine. An appraiser compared the writing to letters from Georg that were stored in the castle, and came to the conclusion that it was unmistakably written in Georg's hand.

Later, historians viewed the timing of the diary's appearance as "too convenient," and suspected it might actually be a forgery, but a new analysis of the writing came back showing it was a match for Georg's. Because of this, it was concluded that this was unmistakably Georg's own handwritten diary. It came to be called *The Loyal Retainer's Diary*, and was kept in the museum in Parnam.

With the veracity of the diary believed to be high, through its publication, Georg's reputation changed greatly from an "arrogant traitor" to a "patriotic warrior who deceived both his enemies and his allies." However, it was still a fact that he had started a rebellion, and there were still living relatives of those who had died in the Army and Forbidden Army as a result of it, so it would take some time for Georg's reputation to recover completely.

◇ ◇ ◇

One day, when the Kingdom was abuzz with the results of the new investigation into Georg, Souma and Liscia appeared to the people in a broadcast, holding Cian and Kazuha as they stood before Georg's grave. The location was a hill overlooking the Carmine Duchy.

The broadcast explained that the new ruler of Randel, Glaive Magna, had said, "I know he committed treason, but it wouldn't sit right to throw my former master's body away," and received Souma's permission to bury his body here. Their key subordinates were lined up behind Souma and Liscia, and among them was Mio Carmine. There was a large man in black armor next to Mio who drew attention, but perhaps the location of the broadcast jewel had been chosen poorly, because his face was out of frame.

Queen Liscia handed her child to the dragonewt maid who was nearby, and in return took a bouquet of flowers which she placed on Georg's headstone. Then, once Liscia returned, it was King Souma's

turn to hand the child he was holding to her, and to walk in front of the grave.

"Can you see our children, Duke Carmine?" Souma knelt there, and placed his hands on the headstone as he bowed his head. "They are the 'future' that you risked your life to defend. I know I was too immature to see through to your true intentions, but please—keep watching over the kingdom you loved from the afterlife."

As he said that, King Souma lowered his head, and his shoulders quivered. His face was out of view, but was he crying, perhaps?

One person watching said, "It's like he's trying desperately not to laugh."

If so, it must have been a laugh of self-derision. Perhaps he wanted to laugh at his own ineptness for not being able to discern his retainer's true intention. However, the people did not blame King Souma for failing to understand Georg. It was soon after he had been given the throne, and he was still young, not even twenty at the time.

The older, more experienced Georg was to be praised for pulling off the deception, but no one moved to condemn Souma's failure to catch it. That was visible in the expression on Mio's face as she watched King Souma from behind, too. Was she humbled to have the king show her father such respect? There was an incredibly awkward look on her face, as if she were sleeping on a bed of needles, throughout the whole broadcast. The large man in black armor beside her was clutching his cape. He looked as if he was trembling, too, but maybe this was just people's imagination.

Souma rose, then stood in front of Mio. "Here, Georg Carmine's honor has been restored. You, his daughter, are to inherit the House of Carmine, and rebuild it."

"Y-Yes, sir!" Mio knelt, and put her hands together.

King Souma nodded. “However, though he had his reasons, it does not change the fact that he committed treason. Therefore, while I cannot return all of your former lands, I will give you your old home, Randel, and the lands surrounding it as your domain. The present owner, Glaive Magna, was happy to accept this.”

“I-I’m grateful, yes!”

As Mio bowed her head once more, King Souma placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Mio Carmine. I want you to show the same loyalty to this country that your father once did.”

“By your will!”

The House of Carmine was restored. That news excited the whole kingdom.

◇ ◇ ◇

Once I had made sure we were no longer broadcasting, I dropped the pensive look and relaxed.

“I’d say that’s everything settled.”

“Good work, Souma. I think that was pretty believable,” Liscia congratulated me on a job well done.

“Um, I’m sorry to make you do all this for me!” Mio bowed even deeper than before, so low it looked like her forehead might touch the ground. I slapped her on the shoulder.

“I’d been meaning to restore Georg’s honor at some point anyway, so don’t sweat it. Besides, you helped me dress up the facts in a pretty convenient way.”

We kept the fact that Georg had sent Glaive to notify us in advance, and that he had used the Zemish mercenaries to make the corrupt nobles spend the money they had squirreled away, only to get it

back, a secret. If those things got out, it would hurt the country. Obviously, I'd told Mio what had really happened to that staged revolution, but she wouldn't go public with it. For that reason, if I could just get her to accept the outcome of the new investigation, I could handle anything else.

"Sire. Take the princess."

"Ah, thank you." I took Kazuha from Carla. "Oh, right. Now that Georg's honor has been restored, there are more people who look at the House of Vargas in a more sympathetic light. Considering the extenuating circumstances, I could release you from slavery now, you know?"

Hearing this, Carla shook her head with a wry smile and said, "Not yet. I have a role in making sure you don't go off the rails, and I've gotten used to being a maid lately. I worry about Prince Cian and Princess Kazuha, too. I don't mind if you wait until Prince Cian takes the throne to release me."

She laughed after she said that. *Well... if she's fine with it, I guess it's okay.*

I looked at Kagetora, who was standing next to Mio. "What do you think? Would the late Duke Carmine have been satisfied with this result?"

Kagetora just stared vacantly into the sky, giving no answer.

👑End of Chapter Story: The Quiet Island, and the Tranquil Kingdom

— One night in the 12th month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar

—

Bonk!

“Ow...! What?”

I had been asleep until mere moments ago, when something bonked me on the head and forcefully stirred me from my slumber. Though the sky I could see out the window was beginning to brighten, it was still dark. *It's probably around five in the morning...* I thought; then I noticed my body felt heavy for some reason. I was being held down so hard I couldn't roll over.

Moving just my head, I looked down toward my chest, and the reason why was immediately apparent.

“...Wait, again...?”

“Zzz...”

Naden was sleeping on top of me, completely naked. I wasn't wearing any clothes, either. Last night had been Naden's turn, so we'd both fallen asleep in this state after, um... a whole lot of passionate lovemaking.

I put my hand on Naden's back as she lay between me and the blankets, breathing softly. Her smooth skin was a little cool to the touch. I don't know if it was because she was a ryuu, but Naden's temperature was generally on the low side. It wasn't to the same degree as a cold-blooded animal, but if I hugged her while I was sleeping in the summertime, she was comfortably cool. By that same token, when I did that, my own body heat felt sweltering to her, and she complained if I hugged her too long.

In winter, on the other hand, Naden would snuggle up to me. Because she had a low body temperature, when she was alone, it took quite a while for her blankets to warm up. Normally, she handled that using the heater I had made for her, but when we slept together, she'd press her skin right up against mine.

When she pressed up to me, sometimes, like right now, she would end up climbing on top of me. Due to her petiteness, she easily fit right on top of me. I was actually a little cold now, but if we fooled around a bit, the blankets would warm up, and it wasn't an issue. If I could say there was one problem, it was that when we were like this, with Naden nuzzling her cheek against my chest, her horns hit my face sometimes. She was at least wearing the horn covers (like mittens for her horns) I had sewn for her, but it still was a bit of a shock whenever she hit me with them.

"Nngh..." Naden raised her head, and rubbed her eyes. When our eyes eventually met, she cocked her head to the side. "Souma? You're awake? Is it morning already?"



“It’s still before dawn.”

“Oh, yeah...? Well, I’m going back to sleep, then. Haah...”

“I’m all for that, but can you get off me first?”

“No way.”

Shot down instantly. Oh, well.

I went back to sleep once more with Naden staying where she was. When we first started sleeping like this, I had dreams where I was being crushed flat by a rhinosaurus, but now... I was already pretty crushed. *I hope... these peaceful days... can last fore... ver... Zzz...*

◇ ◇ ◇

One day, about a month after Georg Carmine’s reputation was restored...

I was in the governmental affairs office receiving a report from Hakuya about the effects of it. “The new information of Duke Carmine was a little confusing to the people, but no one is making any noise about it anymore. The almost excessive glorification of him, and the fact that Madam Mio made a new pledge of loyalty to you, has led the majority to believe this is what he would have wanted.”

“Well, it would be weird for outsiders to hold it against me when his own daughter doesn’t.”

Even if some other nation tried to set her against me and sow discord, Mio herself had no intention of doing anything, so it wouldn’t even create a spark.

Hakuya continued, “The honor of men in the Army like Sir Beowulf, who joined Duke Carmine’s farce of a rebellion, and died along with him, has been restored as well. Though, as part of the rebellion,

those who had families, like Sir Glaive, left the Army of their own volition—or were forced to—so hardly any of those who died had kin left behind.”

“It means he took those steps in advance. Well, even if their houses aren’t restored, as long as their honor is, they would probably be satisfied with that.”

“Yes. I’m sure Inuga—Ah, pardon me. I nearly started talking about someone who definitely has nothing to do with the subject we’re discussing.” Hakuya cleared his throat in a deliberate manner.

I smiled wryly and said, “That’s true. You really shouldn’t bring up people who have absolutely no connection to what we’re talking about.”

“I’ll be more careful in the future. Oh! Speaking of Madam Mio, there is just one issue.”

“With Mio? What?”

“It seems she’s having trouble managing her domain.”

“Ahh...”

With the restoration of Georg’s honor, Mio had been reinstated as a middle-ranked knight and given Randel and the surrounding area as her domain. Because all knights belong to the National Defense Force, Mio would be working in them, and would entrust management of her domain to a magistrate during that time. However, because the Kingdom was always short on capable hands, it wasn’t easy to come by a talented magistrate.

Fortunately, the National Land Defense Force’s base was near Randel, so Mio didn’t have to travel far. It seemed she had been managing things there herself for some time, but Mio was a warrior to her core, and suddenly being tasked with political duties had proved too much for her. It wasn’t long before her brain overheated.

Those who had once managed the House of Carmine had returned to her side, and Glaive of the House of Magna was watching over her as a neighbor, but that didn't solve the fundamental problem.

Hakuya shrugged. "Madam Mio has sent us a letter requesting we introduce her to someone who is good at administrative tasks, and has a head for numbers. 'If possible, I would like to marry someone who can do mathematics, and have him manage the House of Carmine,' she says."

"In a way, you have to respect that."

"The calculations must have been really hard for her."

"But a husband, huh..." I rested my head on the palm of my hand. "I'm sure there are a lot of knights and nobles who would want to form marital ties with the reborn House of Carmine. If she puts out a call, I have no doubt she'll find any number of candidates to be her husband. But, given the importance of her house, I wouldn't want her getting engaged to anyone strange. In some ways, it's even more important than with Poncho."

"Should we have Madam Serina scrutinize the candidates again?"

"In this case, Serina's the same gender as Mio, and she's already Poncho's wife, so she wouldn't obstruct the process, but... that's not a fundamental solution to the problem. The core issue is a shortage of talented people."

Someone who was single, gifted at administrative tasks, strong at math, and who I could accept marrying into the House of Carmine... Hakuya said he had no intention of marrying just yet, and there just weren't that many other... *Hold on a second.*

"Isn't there someone who comes to mind?"

"...There is. We have just the person for it." Hakuya seemed to have come up with the same idea as me, and he nodded. "If you read the

criteria in this letter closely, it seems like she's requesting a specific person, too."

"Yeah, it does. The castle isn't a marriage consultancy service, though..." That said, we still called in the person in question.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door, and a young man with short hair walked in. "Your Majesty, did you require something of me?"

"Hey, thanks for all your hard work, Colbert."

The young man who entered the room was our Minister of Finance, Gatsby Colbert.

"I'll cut straight to the chase, Colbert. Would you help the House of Carmine with their administrative tasks for a while? It would mean commuting between the capital and Randel, though."

"By the House of Carmine, you mean... Madam Mio's house, right? The one that was just reestablished."

"Yes. Mio is more of a warrior, and I hear she's been struggling with the finances. You're an old acquaintance of hers, so why don't you go help her out for a while?"

"Yes, sire! If that is your command, I will obey." Colbert put his hands together in front of him and bowed his head. "But while I'm away, please take care of Lady Roroa..."

"I know. I'll keep a close eye on her."

The man was a model Minister of Finance who never forgot to impress the importance of these on me.

Once he had bowed and left, Hakuya asked me, "Was it all right not to tell him she was looking for a husband?"

“I can’t be sure how serious Mio is about that just from reading a letter. It could be her griping about having to deal with the numbers, and bringing it up would just make Colbert unduly cautious.”

“You have a point there.”

“I know, right? You know how it goes, eh?” I said with a suggestive smile. “Let’s let the young couple work it out between themselves.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, around that same time... To the east of the Kingdom of Friedonia, in the United Kingdom of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago (called the Archipelago Union for short), in a port town that belonged to the Archipelago Union, a young man had a frown on his face.

The tall and lanky man, whose hair was tied in a ponytail, had white fox ears on his head, making it clear that he was a member of the mystic fox race like Kaede. From the Nine-Headed Dragon katana he wore at his hip, you could also tell he was a “mononofu,” a job roughly equivalent to that of a knight in the Kingdom of Friedonia.

The mononofu with white fox ears looked at the town and sighed. *It seems the situation is serious...*

This island, like the other islands of the Archipelago Union, had a prosperous fishing industry, and the ports were always bustling. The islanders lived, and died, by the sea. It bore them a great bounty, but when the waters were rough, it would take their lives without mercy. Because they were in constant danger, they lived every day to the fullest.

That was why, at this time of day, the fishermen who had come back from their early morning fishing were in the pubs, singing sea shanties... Or they would have been, but...

Now there were few people in the port town, and it was silent, without a sea shanty to be heard.

Many of the shops on what should have been a busy shopping street were shuttered, and there were few products on display at the ones that were open. There was a man on the side of the road who had drunk himself into a stupor, lying down with no vitality in his face.

The mononofu with white fox ears peered into an open fishmonger's business.

"Hello there, Chief. What can I help you with?" A beastman fishmonger who had the face of a tanuki called out to him while rubbing his hands together.

He called the man chief because he was the island chief, a position held by one person on each island of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. By the same token, they called the chief of the largest island the Nine-Headed Dragon King.

The mononofu with white fox ears was the island chief of a small island.

He saw that despite the small number of fish on display, they were all awfully expensive. Fish that would have been sold in bulk before were being sold individually and at close to double the price.

"That's expensive..." he muttered.

The tanuki-faced fishmonger crossed his arms in indignation. "Well, what else would you have me do? The fishermen traveled a long way, close to the continent in the west, and risked their lives for these fish, you know? The cost of stocking them has gone up, so if I don't sell them for this much, I won't be able to make a living."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean it that way," he said, bowing his head. "We mononofu defend the people. I felt like I was being forced to see

how my own powerlessness has made them suffer... If I offended you, I apologize."

"Oh, no. Please, raise your head. It's not your fault, Chief," the fishmonger said, slightly panicked.

The mononofu with white fox ears purchased a number of fish and had the owner wrap them.

"What's going to happen to this country...?" The tanuki-faced beastman suddenly mumbled. "The taxes keep going up, even though we can't catch fish, and I hear we're about to get into a fight with the Kingdom of Friedonia to the west. The Empire in the east has been telling the chiefs of all the islands that, 'The Kingdom will be coming to invade soon,' haven't they?"

"Yeah..."

It was true that envoys from the Gran Chaos Empire had been visiting the chiefs of each island recently. It seemed every island had seen them at least once, and even the chief of a small island like this one had received a visit.

The fishmonger got a far-off look in his eyes as he spoke, "It sounds like the Nine-Headed Dragon King is scrapping for a fight, too. What are we supposed to do if there's a war when we're in this state...?"

The mononofu with white fox ears had no answer, so he simply bowed, and then left the store.

His home was situated on the island's high ground. Though it was called a house, because of the history of conflict between the islands, each island chief's residence was like a fortress. They were built on top of stone fortifications and surrounded by white-painted walls. There was a building on the low ground, and another on the high ground. The island chief generally lived in the "second house," on the high ground, but carried out his political duties in the "first

house” on the low ground. This was all built on the highest point on the island, so the gate of the second house had a view of the bustling port, and the blue sea beyond it.

As he returned from the fishmonger, he noticed someone was waiting for him by the gate.

“Lady Shabon...”



The person was a young girl wearing the outfit of a court lady with its frilly sleeves and hem. She was maybe eighteen years old.

The girl had airy, emerald-green hair, but what was truly distinctive about her was the fish-like fins that she had where a human would have had ears. Her slim arms also had translucent fin-like growths attached to them like sleeves. Her kind were known as mermaids, and they were especially common in the Archipelago Union.

“I have returned, Lady Shabon.” The mononofu with white fox ears called out to the mermaid girl, and stood next to her.

The girl he called Shabon turned her somewhat sleepy-looking eyes towards him. “Welcome home, Kishun. How were things in port?”

“...Unfortunately, they have only worsened.” Kishun showed Shabon the fish he had purchased. “Even fish like these are now traded at five times their former price. The situation is serious. This country has problems already, but the taxes still rise, and war looms with the Kingdom of Friedonia to the west. The people cannot have even a shred of hope.”

“When you cannot have hope... cannot imagine a bright future... that is the hardest.” Shabon gazed down on the port town below with a tragic look on her face. “It’s like this everywhere in this country. It is like the will to live has been stolen from the people along with their fish. We live with the sea, are raised by the sea, and die with the sea. That has been the pride of our people, and it makes this situation all the more intolerable.”

“Lady Shabon...”

“And... The situation continues to worsen.” The sadness in her voice was palpable.

Kishun struggled to respond. “The... The fishmonger asked me if war with the Kingdom of Friedonia would really come.”

“It seems there are envoys from the Gran Chaos Empire visiting every island as we speak...” Shabon trailed off. “They say things like ‘The Kingdom is preparing their forces to bring the whole of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago under their control.’ and ‘That’s why you should join the Mankind Declaration, and come under the Empire’s protection.’”

Unable to find the words to say, Kishun remained silent.

Looking down, she continued, “Because the chiefs are fiercely independent, they would rather go to war with the Kingdom than accept the Empire’s protection. And Father, the king of our islands... intends to do just that.”

“To do that at a time like this... The island chiefs and King Souma are both terrible.” Kishun clutched his fists in frustration as he spoke. “I had heard he was a wise king. A hero summoned from another world who had saved the Union of Eastern Nations from the demon wave, but...”

But Shabon silently shook her head. “I am sure the Kingdom has its own justifications. Because our fishermen have been fishing near the Kingdom, there have been conflicts with their fishermen, and Father has been having the military intervene in those clashes. He must have thought war was the only way to resolve it now.”

“But if they would just consider our situation...”

“That is supposed to be Father’s job. It’s too much to ask that they consider our situation when we’ve done nothing to communicate it to them, wouldn’t you say?”

“Still! The way things are going...”

“...Yes, at this rate, it will go quite badly.”

Shabon began to sing in a clear voice.

When the great darkness appears, the sea beasts will vanish.

As the great fish disappear, few fish will remain.

When the sea falls silent.

With man and beast gone, none will tell the tale again.

It was a song handed down since ancient times in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. A majority thought it to be no more than a scary story just a few years ago, but now most of the people believed it to be the truth.

Shabon had a tragic look on her face. “We can say that we have entered the ‘silent seas’ phase now. If we consider what comes next... there is no time for delay.”

“Lady Shabon...”

“Kishun, I have come to a decision. I will go to the Kingdom of Friedonia.” Shabon looked towards the sea, determination showing on her face. “If I can save the people of this country, I don’t care what happens to me...”

Midword

Thank you for reading volume 12 of Realist Hero. This is Dojyomaru, who came down with the flu early this year, and then was hospitalized a week later due to an intestinal obstruction caused by gastroenteritis. It was a painful lesson on the importance of health.

This volume is the Mercenary State Zem arc, but the story centers around the issues surrounding the House of Carmine which had been left untouched, as well as foreign relations. Continuing from the last volume, which focused on internal affairs, it concludes the story of the 1548th Year, Continental Calendar.

I really struggled with the page structure for these two volumes.

In the web version, the previous volume and this one's Zem arc formed a single volume, but there was too much text to be contained in one release, but not enough material in the Zem arc to fill a volume on its own.

In the past, I've written that one of the strengths of web novels is that you don't have to worry about the page count, and you can write as much as you want. I got a lot of feedback on that, but with freedom comes responsibility. You're guaranteed to pay a price for doing things however you please later. Be careful.

Because of that, after this midword there are some interludes set after Souma and the others return to the Kingdom, and the prologue to next volume's Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago arc. It was a little too long to fit into the next volume, so in a way, things worked out just right.

I hope you will stick with me to the end.

Oh, and, and...

I believe this has already been advertised online, as well as on the band wrapped around the cover in the original physical publishing, so you should already know, but Realist Hero is getting an anime.

Yes. Seriously.

This is thanks to all of you who've supported the series.

I'm truly grateful.

There is an anime coming... is the only information I'm allowed to reveal so far. I can't talk about it myself, but I'm sure Overlap will continue releasing information as things move along. Please, wait for it.

Now then, I give my thanks to the artist Fuyuyuki; to Mr. Satoshi Ueda of the manga adaptation, which I am enjoying reading as it comes out; to my editor; to the designers; to the proofreaders; and to all of you reading this now.

This has been Dojyomaru.

Intermission 1: The Lioness Seeks Her Prey

— 1st month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar — Randel, Carmine Domain —

“Hey, Sir Bee,” Mio called out.

In the governmental affairs office in Randel, Mio and the Kingdom of Friedonia’s Minister of Finance, Colbert, were staring down piles of paperwork. Though he was called Colbert by Souma and Roroa, who found his surname easier to say, his given name was actually Gatsby, and Bee was a nickname Mio had come up based on that.

“...What is it, Madam Mio?” Colbert replied with a small sigh.

Mio clapped her hands together in front of her face. “Please. Marry me!”

“I don’t want to.”

“An instant reply?! You couldn’t pretend to think about it a little longer?!”

“If you keep asking repeatedly, I’m going to get fed up with it.”

If it came purely from affection, Colbert wouldn’t have dismissed it so callously. She was doing it in large part to escape from the work laid out in front of them, though, so it was hard to blame him for not being more delicate about it.

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It all started back when Souma returned from Mercenary State Zem. He ordered a new investigation into Georg Carmine, who was seen as a traitor. The result of the investigation was that there emerged a possibility that Georg’s revolt had been a scheme to have the corrupt

nobles swept away along with him, and it was highly likely that was what happened.

No matter what his reasons, the fact of his betrayal remained, and he couldn't be declared not guilty. But, if his actions emerged from a pure sense of self-sacrificing loyalty, there was some room for leniency. Georg's honor was restored, and his family, who he had cut ties with to protect them from joint responsibility, were allowed to return to the country. And so, though she couldn't be given all of the former Carmine lands, the site of his former castle Randel and the lands surrounding it were passed to Georg's daughter, Mio.

However, now that Mio had inherited the House of Carmine, she immediately got tripped up by something.

"I can't manage a domain!"

As she sat sprawled across her desk in the governmental affairs office, the new lady was clutching her head. This was typical of those who were more martially inclined. Mio was a muscle head, and when she was pressed on not having learned the skills to manage Georg's domain...

"I-I'll take a husband who's gifted in administrative tasks if I have to!"

She tried to dodge the issue.

Mio was a fairly capable warrior, but she had no skill whatsoever as an administrator, so even Georg had silently accepted the inevitability of it. But now, she was paying the price for neglecting her studies. When she first returned to Randel, Georg's former subordinate Glaive Magna, along with others from the House of Magna, had helped her carry out her administrative tasks. However, the House of Magna had their own domain, too, and couldn't keep helping Mio forever, so once the work that had piled up was sorted, they pulled out.

Also, though many members of the knightly class tasked managing their domain to a magistrate, because Souma had added the management of their lands to the criteria considered in promotions and demotions, the knights had begun competing over administrators, leading to a lack of talented ones available. Feeling pressured by the situation, Mio had gone running to the castle for help.

“We’re short of hands, and there’s no one to hire!” Mio asked with such urgency it seemed like she might get down on her knees and perform a kowtow. *“Can’t you send someone?!”*

She would welcome a husband who was a good administrator—to stay true to what she had told her father that day. Once it came to that, there was a face that flitted through Mio’s mind.

It belonged to Minister of Finance Colbert, whom she had met one day on a bridge on the border with the Principality of Amidonia, and then again in Zem. The Minister of Finance’s administrative prowess was impressive, and, despite being a bureaucrat, he’d had the guts to speak his mind to people like her father Georg and Prince Gaius who even the warriors feared. Her father had even said he was a promising young man.

From what she’d heard, Colbert was still single, too.

When she spoke to him in Zem, she had learned more about his mild disposition, and his sincerity, too. If someone like him would be willing to come marry her, Mio would be happy about it, and the House of Carmine would be secure, too. That’s why, when she made her request to the king, she had inserted a little of her own selfish desires, too.

“If possible, I would like to marry someone who can do mathematics, and have him manage the House of Carmine!”

Souma knew that she and Colbert were old acquaintances, so she figured he would probably know who she meant. And he did. Souma and his people didn't want the House of Carmine, which they had gone to such trouble to reestablish, to immediately collapse. He and Hakuya talked it over and decided to send Colbert to assist her.

And so, Colbert came to Mio in Randel.

"It's been a long time, Madam Mio. Since Zem, right?"

"Urgh... Sir Colbert, I'm glad you came." There were tears in her eyes as she took his hand. Her incredible emotion was a little off-putting for Colbert.

"My... The pile of work never gets any smaller..."

"I-I get that. Let's start on it immediately."

This was how Colbert, in addition to his role as Minister of Finance (which basically entailed keeping an eye on Roroa's financial policies) and as a manager of sorts for the loreleis, ended up as an assistant to Mio, traveling back and forth between the capital and Randel. Because he had the misfortune of being a man who took all his work seriously, another job had fallen into his lap.

Though, looking at Souma, who did the work of several people by manipulating multiple consciousnesses; Hakuya, who assisted Souma, and also negotiated with the Empire; and Poncho, who was, for a time, both the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry and the magistrate of Venetinova, everyone else in the Kingdom's upper echelons of power had it more or less the same, so it was hard for him to complain.

Regardless, Colbert was helping Mio with her duties, but... One day, while they were working, Colbert carelessly mentioned he was single. Mio already knew this, of course, but now he'd given her cause to talk about it.

In that moment, the lioness's eyes shone.

"Hey, Sir Colbert."

"...What is it?" Colbert responded without looking away from the paperwork.

"I want you to marry me."

"...Okay?"

As Colbert looked up, doubting his own ears, there was a look of glee on her face. "Oh! You're accepting?!"

"No... No, no, no! That was not an 'affirmative' okay, it was an, 'I don't understand what you just said,' okay!"

"You don't? I just proposed to you, right?"

"No, that's not the issue! How can you ask me that so lightly?!"

Mio cocked her head to the side and looked at him, perplexed. "Did you want it to sound more weighty? Like, marry me, or I'm going to die?"

"That's too heavy! And no, that's not what I meant!"

"Are you the eldest son, by the way?"

"Huh? No, I'm the third son..."

"Good! Then it shouldn't be a problem for you to take my family name!"

"It's a big problem!" Colbert pressed his hand against his forehead. "For starters, we've only met a few times when I was in Amidonia, and then again while we were in Zem. I can count the number of times we've met on my fingers. Why would that suddenly lead to us getting married...?"

"In noble and knightly houses, it's not that uncommon for the bride and groom not to meet until the day they get married, is it?"

“That’s when the families have already sorted things out!”

“You say that, but I can’t stand that sort of roundabout method. Besides, when you have your prey in your sights, you want to take them down then and there, right? You can think about whether to boil or bake them once you’ve already caught them.”

“What an aggressive way of thinking! It’s a weird analogy, too!”

Realizing she was not the kind of woman who could be persuaded with reason, Colbert’s head started to hurt. He sensed that, like Roroa, once Mio had made up her mind, she would go through with things no matter how she was rebuked. If he got involved with a woman like this, she’d run him ragged for the rest of his life. *How did it turn out like this?!*

And so the difficulties (?) of Colbert began.

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Time passed, and we return to the story after Mio’s umpteenth proposal had just been shot down by Colbert. The callous dismissal made her purse her lips.

“What’s wrong with me? I’m a devoted woman, you know? ...I’ll do everything other than administrative work.”

“Please, don’t remove the one thing I want you to work at from the list.” Colbert continued looking at the documents without further reply, causing Mio to puff up her cheeks.

Here she was, confessing her feelings, and this guy didn’t feel a thing. This was an affront to her as a woman. Mio put her hand to her face and struck a model-like pose that came off as awkward, probably due to its unfamiliarity to her. “T-They say I’m a beauty, like my mother, and I think I’ve got a pretty good figure. I stick out in all the right places, you know? My three sizes are...”

“You don’t have to say! ...Hahh,” Colbert sighed and began rubbing his own shoulders. “I am aware that you’re beautiful. If you would become a lorelei, I think you’d be an immediate sensation.”

“Oh, I’m a terrible singer. My voice is loud, but I can’t carry a tune. I was the rare exception that those rule-obsessed totalitarians at the officers’ school allowed to lip-sync when we were singing the school song.”

“...You’d be popular if you’d just keep your mouth shut.”

“That correction just makes me sad. But you’re complimenting my looks, right? I don’t come from a bad lineage either, so why won’t you accept my proposal?”

“Because. We. Are. Still. Working!” Colbert emphasized every word of that.

Mio gave him a blank look. “You’re going to accept my proposal when the work is done?”

“No... Once the work is done, you won’t need me anymore, right?”

“As if. Even once this work is done, more work will come in. I’m back in the army, but I haven’t even shown my face at the training grounds in some time.” Mio let out a deep sigh, resting her head on her palm, and her elbow on the desk. “I’m losing my edge... I really do need a reliable husband—someone I can leave the domain to entirely.”

“Once this backlog is cleared, someone other than me should be able to manage it.”

“You’re the one for me, Sir Bee!” Mio opined, standing up with vigor. Colbert jumped a little, intimidated by her passion. She continued, “I can tell you’re a talented bureaucrat, too, Sir Bee. But if you ask me how talented, I couldn’t say. It’s frustrating, but in my current state, I have no aptitude for bureaucratic work, and I lack the frame of

reference to judge it. But, as a warrior, I can sense that you've got guts in a way that the other bureaucrats don't."

"Guts... you say?" he asked.

"Yeah." Mio nodded. "If you think something is wrong, even if the person you're dealing with is overwhelmingly stronger than you, you have the courage to speak up. You've got spine. Even though you don't look all that strong. Though, I can feel that from His Majesty, and the Prime Minister, too. Granted, your personality is likely to put you at loggerheads with stubborn militarists."

Mio's words reminded Colbert of his experience of trying to warn Gaius off of invading the Kingdom without considering the needs of his people, and being kicked for his efforts, so he couldn't say anything in response.

Mio exhaled as she sat back down. "Now that Mother is gone, too, I want someone reliable, like you, Sir Bee, to stay with me. That's my honest wish."

"Your Mother? ...Huh? I heard that Sir Georg's wife returned to the Kingdom along with you, but... come to think of it, I haven't met her yet, have I?"

In the time since he had come to Randel, Colbert hadn't seen the late Georg's wife once. Normally, she should have been the first person he greeted. Because he'd instantly been brought in to help with the mountain of paperwork, it had slipped his mind.

"Where is she now?"

"Hm? Parnam Castle, why?"

"Huh? The castle? Does that mean..."

She's a hostage, thought Colbert. Though Georg's honor had been restored, the Carmine domain had been considerably reduced in size. He thought perhaps Souma was keeping Mio's mother hostage

so that she couldn't oppose him if she resented him for that. That might have been the right decision for a ruler to make. However, when he saw Mio's unguarded personality, he couldn't help but feel like that was overthinking things.

"...You're misunderstanding, aren't you?" Having picked up on it from the look in his eyes, Mio said, "It's nothing like what you're thinking. Actually, Mother was the one who asked to go to the castle. His Majesty only granted Mother's wish."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, if I remember, she's looking after the children of the castle's workers at something she called 'daycare' now. She said in her letters that it's a lot of fun."

"Well, that's good... But why?"

"Probably because it's *easier to meet* at the castle..." Mio said awkwardly.

Colbert cock his head to the side. "Easier to meet? With who?"

"Oh, forget that. I'm just talking to myself." Mio shook her head, then let out a sigh. "Obviously, I asked Mother to help with the bureaucratic work, but, you know..."

She sighed again as she thought back to it. When she asked, her mother had said... *"This is your time now, do something about it on your own. The domain is smaller and easier to manage now, so handle it however you like. Struggle, fail, and each time you do, grow as a person, and as a ruler."*

"...It's a mother's job to be both cruel and kind, huh?"

Mio smiled wryly. "It really is. I never realized it when Father was around, but Mother was no less stubborn than he was."

"They were a couple that resembled each other? Since you've inherited their blood, I think you must have an aptitude for being a lady, too, Madam Mio," he said, encouraging her.

Mio leaned in. "Are you ready to marry into my family now?!"

"We're back to that?!"

Mio grinned as she watched Colbert panic. "I'd recommend it. If you treat me right, you can have as many concubines as you like, and I won't get upset."

"I don't need that... Looking at Sir Poncho, it seems like a lot of trouble."

That was what Colbert sincerely thought after he saw how much weight Poncho lost for a while after marrying his two beautiful wives. Poncho's weight was on the rebound now that the two of them were pregnant, but that was an even greater demonstration of why he'd ended up so thin to begin with.

Mio cocked her head to the side and gave him a blank look. "You look after the loreleis, too, right? Aren't you close with any of them?"

"No way would I lay a hand on any of the loreleis. I don't want to make enemies of the whole country."

"...I wonder if His Majesty sneezed just now."

"Ohh, no. Obviously, I'm not criticizing His Majesty! Madam Juna was with him since before the concept of what a lorelei is even took form."

"Ah ha ha, I know that." Mio laughed at him, as Colbert turned red with embarrassment.

He's fun to tease, thought Mio.

“But maybe one of those loreleis is genuinely head over heels for you, Sir Bee? You’re a kind, older man, and reliable, too. They aren’t used to having men around, so I’d expect you to catch their attention, you know?”

“Th-That can’t be right... I-I mean, these are loreleis, you know?”

“You could take one of them after they retire, couldn’t you?”

“I can’t imagine anyone would want that...”

“I don’t mind. So just relax, and marry into my family.”

“Augh! Enough of this! Please, do your work!” Colbert cried out in embarrassment.

It seemed their lively times working together would continue for a while.

Intermission 2: Research Girls's Party (The Plan to Improve Mechadra)

It happened while Souma and the others were in Mercenary State Zem.

Genia the Overscientist, Merula the high elf, Taru the Turgish blacksmith, and Trill the Empire's Drill Princess were having tea at the log house inside Genia's dungeon laboratory. These were the four key figures of the Drill Research Project, which was a joint enterprise between the Kingdom, Empire, and Republic, but they were on break now.

Suddenly, Trill spoke. "Big Sister Genia, let's put a drill on Mechadra!"

"...What's this, all of a sudden?" Genia looked at her dubiously.

Trill pointed out the window to where Mechadra towered over them. "We have such a splendid mechanical dragon, but its only means of attack is to throw itself at the enemy! How dull! We should give it weapons! And a drill!"

"I get where you're coming from." Genia set her teacup down on its saucer. "I built it to research the construction of a living creature's body, so though it's fully mobile, I didn't build it to be moved. But when I learned about the king's power to move things, I thought I could make it stronger, and cooler."

"That's a surprise. With you, I would have expected the moment that thought occurred to you, you would already be attaching armaments to it," said Merula, the one who had been dealing with her the longest.

It was true, normally Genia would have. Forcing her husband, Ludwin, to cover the necessary costs.

Genia smiled wryly. “You’re not wrong, but you see, Mechadra has a lot of restrictions... This is a good opportunity, so I guess I’ll walk you through them.”

Genia stood in front of a movable blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk, then began writing out the restrictions on Mechadra. The other three watched the scene unfold. These four were engineers, researchers, and craftspeople—they were highly curious, in other words. They used stories about research to spice up their tea parties rather than stories about love.

Genia pointed to one of the items she had begun to write down. “First, we have to consider the Star Dragon Mountain Range. The king tells me we’ve been told to do what we like with the bones, but there’s limits to that. To make this quick, we can’t do anything that would offend them. Like, no using it in wars against other people.”

“I wasn’t really suggesting we arm it to so it could be used as a weapon!” Trill asserted.

Taru, who had been listening quietly, cocked her head to the side. “Then why add weapons?”

“Because they make it cooler!”

“...You sound like Master Kuu,” Taru muttered in exasperation. Taru had, despite doubting the practicality of it, added a small drill to Kuu’s cudgel.

“I don’t really get it either,” Merula mumbled.

“You don’t? I understand how Young Miss Trill feels, though.”

Merula and Genia had a difference of opinion. Even among the research girls, there was a split between the romanticists (Genia & Trill) and the pragmatists (Merula & Taru).

Genia continued, “Out of consideration for the Star Dragon Mountain Range, in addition to limiting how we use it, we should

probably not alter the original form. Adding wheels to the hands and feet, or swapping around parts to make it more humanoid, and so on.”

“I think all of that sounds cool. Can we not do it?” Trill asked with a blank look on her face.

“Try putting yourself in their position.” Genia shrugged. “How would you feel if we were to swap your hands and feet for wheels, or tear your body apart to make it more like another creature?”

“...That makes for quite a bizarre image, doesn’t it?”

“It does indeed. That’s why we shouldn’t change its shape to be too different from a dragon’s.”

Now that everyone had accepted that, Genia moved on, “Now, the biggest issue is with Mechadra’s structure. I already mentioned this, but Mechadra wasn’t built to be controlled. People can’t ride it like a battleship, and even if they could, they couldn’t do anything with it.”

Genia put a blueprint of Mechadra up on the backboard. Looking at it, the basic frame was made with dragon bones, but the muscles were made using metal and monster parts.

“This really isn’t a setup you can just move around, huh?” Taru said quietly.

“Yeah. The only thing that can do that is the king’s ability, Living Poltergeists.”

Genia wrote “Living Poltergeists” on the blackboard.

“Let’s review what we know about the king’s ability. It’s able to move things about at will. But all it can do is move them, nothing more complicated than that. For example, he could make this chalk write on the board, but...” Genia snapped the long piece of chalk in half. “He can’t break the chalk he’s manipulating in half like this.

Fundamentally, all it does is move objects. However, there is one thing that lets him ignore that restriction somewhat.”

Genia touched the blueprint of Mechadra.

“That’s the fact that Mechadra is modeled on a living creature. This applies to the king’s roly-poly mannequins, and the Factory Arm, too. If they’re modeled on living beings, he can control them in complex ways, almost as if they were alive.”

“He can only move inanimate material, but if that material is in a form that resembles a living being, he can control it like it was alive... Is that correct?” Trill asked.

Genia nodded in response. “That’s right. But even in that case, he can’t snap them in half like this chalk, or cause them to break.”

“Where does that difference come from?”

“His mental image... perhaps?” Merula was the one to answer Trill’s question. “When we demonstrated the connection between work songs and the power of magic, we talked about how a mental image could change the power of magic, so maybe that’s involved in the case of Living Poltergeists, too. If he’s able to control things that are modeled on living creatures as if they were alive, maybe it’s a matter of whether or not Sir Souma can imagine the way they would move?”

“I see. That hypothesis sounds like it could be right.” Genia crossed her arms and groaned as she thought. “I’d like to investigate that theory at some point in future, but the issue right now is that, even with the king’s ability, he can’t make it move in any greater way than a dragon itself could.”

“Hm? Whatever do you mean by that?”

“Even if we were to attach a drill like you wanted to, Trill, the king’s ability wouldn’t be able to make it spin.”

“No way!”

Genia confronted a shocked Trill with the cruel truth. “Because, though the drill is a physical object, the way it moves isn’t organic.”

However, Trill was not so quick to give up. “I know! We can handle just the spinning mechanically. If we install the equipment to spin it like a normal drill, it doesn’t matter if King Souma’s ability can spin it or not.”

“In that case, the issue would be switching it on and off. He can’t push an on/off switch with Living Poltergeists, and we can’t put a crew aboard to push the button.”

“Urgh... No...” Trill’s shoulders slumped.

Genia crossed her arms and sighed, “It’s not just drills—firearms like cannons are no good, either. If it were a battleship, we could have a crew load the shells, but Mechadra wasn’t built to carry a crew and let them do things. An anti-air repeating bolt thrower would be plagued by the switch issue, too.”

“Wouldn’t putting blades on the arms work?” Merula raised her hand to suggest.

“Yeah, that would be manageable.” Genia nodded. “If they’re weapons that Mechadra could use itself, it could probably use them, too. Though, I feel like there’s not much difference between slashing with its claws and slashing with a sword.”

“...The important thing is if Mechadra itself would be able to use it,” Taru mumbled with a pensive look on her face. “In that case, if we made it so that Mechadra could press the switch, wouldn’t it be possible? Instead of building it into Mechadra, make something like an external suit of armor.”

“Ohh, that might actually work.”

Genia pondered Taru’s proposal.

“Anything like a cannon that requires loading wouldn’t work. Even if we pre-loaded it, if it was only good for one shot, it would be a lot of effort for next to nothing. Well, if we were going to make it so Mechadra could operate it itself, it would have to be able to do it with those big hands. They’re not going to be able to handle delicate work. If we could clear that prerequisite, though, it’s possible.”

“In that case, I’ve thought of a number of ideas for equipment—” Taru started, only to be cut off by Trill.

“First, the drill! Taru, do you think we can load it with one?”

“...It would depend on where. If it’s going to control it with that massive body, it would probably have to be big.”

“That raises the issue of weight, too,” Genia added. “In the case of a drill, we need to load the revolving apparatus, and the equipment that stores the energy for spinning it, too. The larger the blade, the heavier it gets.”

“If it gets too big, it will be hard to walk around with, too.”

“Urgh...!” Trill grumbled, disheartened by the logistics. “I-If it can’t carry it, then what about... a tail, maybe? Or we could attach it to the stomach?”

“...I think either of those would end up in the way.”

“There’s no space inside the stomach for it, so it would have to be sticking out constantly.”

“Nooo...” Trill slumped to the ground. “I want to see Mechadra use a giant drill. With that huge body, it would smash opponents with a strike that can pulverize mountains in a single blow. Wouldn’t that be a great big dream?”

“Well, I can kind of understand the feeling.” Genia awkwardly scratched her cheek. “But we’re engineers. Not dreamers. We need

to make what we realistically can with what we currently have available to us.”

“Big Sister Genia...”

“Now, let’s start thinking about equipment it would be possible for us to create.”

“...Okay.”

From there, the conversation’s focus shifted to Taru and her ideas for equipment. A number of things were proposed, and, just as they were coming up with something they could do...

“Hey, I had an idea,” Merula said.

“What is it, Merumeru?”

“Don’t call me Merumeru... King Souma’s ability makes it move like the creature, not exactly the same as the creature would, right? I mean, he’s able to move puppets and mannequins, which I’m not sure we can really count as people.”

“...I seem to recall that’s right.” Genia stroked her chin.

Merula continued, “In that case, he’d move Mechadra like a dragon, but not exactly the same as a dragon would, right? It has wings, but can’t fly, for one thing, so maybe it moves less like a dragon, and more like a person in a kigurumi suit?”

“Hm... And?”

Merula puffed her chest up with pride. “We’ve been thinking of Mechadra as half-dragon, half-machine. That’s why we thought of weapons as extra equipment, but if it moves like a person, we have more freedom. Our ideas so far were like putting a suit of armor on someone. But people can hold weapons in their hands, too.”

“I see. We were too fixated on the idea of dragons and machines, huh?”

If instead of installing equipment on the body it could be held in the hands; that provided room for more different types of armaments.

Trill's eyes sparkled. "Th-Then we could give it a drill, too?!"

"Yes, it might be possible if it was a weapon it held with both hands," Genia agreed.

"Huzzah!"

"But." Genia pointed a finger at the elated Trill. "Now the issue is how it will carry it. If it's holding it all the time, it'll get in the way. With both hands occupied, it won't be able to fight hand-to-hand."

"Urgh!"

"Ideally, we'd want a system that could deliver it to Mechadra." Genia crossed her arms and groaned.

Trill, Merula, and Taru all thought about it. They all racked their brains, but no one could come up with a good idea. While they were...

"Hey, Taru. You here?"

"Master Kuu? And Leporina?"

"Hello, Taru."

Kuu and Leporina from the Republic came to visit Genia's log house.

"What's up?" Taru asked.

"Ookyakya. I thought I'd call on you and we could head back home together. With Bro off in Zem now, I've got free time. Why don't the three of us eat together tonight?"

"...But I'm still working." Though she said that, Taru didn't look at all unhappy about this development. Seeing the look on Taru's face, Kuu grinned.

"We'll wait for you to finish. What are you up to now?" Kuu looked at the blueprint of Mechadra posted on the blackboard. "That huge machine dragon, huh?"

"We were thinking about adding armor to it."

"Heh, well, isn't that interesting." Kuu looked at it, nodding thoughtfully, but soon let out a sigh. "But, you know, for me, rather than Mechadra, I'd like you to make that ship that breaks ice as it goes that Souma was talking about."

"The icebreaker... right? The ship with a drill on it."

"Yeah. With our frozen seas, the Republic definitely needs them."

"It's okay. Sir Souma already put in a request for us to develop that."

While the Republic team was talking about that...

Genia, who had been listening to them, got a thoughtful look on her face. "A ship with a drill on it, huh?"

"Big Sister Genia?"

"It doesn't have to be a ship, but it might be worthwhile to develop a way for the drill to move around on its own. If it could get to Mechadra on its own, and then Mechadra could use it..."

"Oh! That could work, Big Sister!"

With what sounded like an actionable plan emerging, Trill's eyes sparkled.

With a wry smile, Genia said, "The added armor that Taru proposed, and a self-propelling drill. Let's put together a plan to improve Mechadra with a focus on those two elements."

"Okay!"

And so, Mechadra began to undergo improvements at the hands of its enthusiastic engineering team. It would still be a little while before Souma and the others found out about it.

Prologue to the Next Chapter: Law of the Sea

On a small island in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, there was a portly beastman named Zudai standing near the bay. He, like so many of the other islanders, made his living as a fisherman. Zudai's family had always fished, and despite his lack of learning, he could throw a net further than just about anyone on the island. However, he hadn't been out to fish in some time—there was nothing of real value to catch.

It had gotten so bad that if you caught a small fish, you were doing well. But now that it was *highly dangerous to go out to sea*, there was no hope of getting results that merited taking the risk. Because of that, the fishermen spent their days at home with dead eyes full of depression. Zudai was the same. He couldn't take the boat out, so he'd cast a net near the rocks close to his home, hoping for some small fish at least. And every morning, when he went to check his nets, his shoulders slumped with disappointment.

On this day, too, he had walked over to the rocks where he had cast his net, scratching his belly as he went. Zudai pulled in the net, rubbing his eyes as he did. All he had caught were small fish the size of a finger, and small crabs. *Another day of no fish worth mentioning...* As he sighed in disappointment, a thought occurred to him, *What? It's awfully dark today...* His house stood with the sea to its east, and normally when he came to the beach at this time of day, the morning sun made it blindingly bright. Looking up to see the clear blue sky, only to realize there was no sun in sight.

Mmm... Hm? Nnnngh?! As Zudai's mind woke from its still half-drowsy state, he was able to register how abnormal the situation around him was. It was bizarrely dark. There was no way this place should be so dark at this time of day. Realizing that, he looked to

where the sun ought to be rising... *Wha?!* There was something huge in the sea where there should have been nothing.

Because the sun was behind it, the backlighting made the object look black, but it seemed to be a massive island. Zudai couldn't believe his eyes. There was no way that a place that had been empty sea yesterday could have spontaneously produced an island overnight. *That's no island. But what is it, then...?! I-It can't be...!* The conclusion Zudai came to terrified him. He got goosebumps, and broke into a cold sweat. His mind had only frozen up for a few seconds, but to him, it felt like hours.

"Ah!" Suddenly he snapped back to his senses, and shot towards his home like a bullet. *G-Gotta run away! Gotta run away!*

But... it was too late; there was nowhere to run to.

The island-like object let out an ear-piercing explosion, likely waking up everyone on the island. The sound of the thing that would take all their lives—the sound that started a tragedy.

On this day, one of the islands in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago became a desert isle.

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— In the beginning of the 1st month, 1549th year, Continental Calendar — the sea near Lagoon City —

It was a time when the celebratory atmosphere of the new year hadn't quite ended yet. There was a vessel patrolling the waters near Lagoon City—a domain overseen by now Commander-in-Chief Excel Walter. It was an orthodox cruiser by the standard of the Kingdom's National Naval Defense Force, pulled by a single sea dragon. And on its deck was Castor, Captain of the island carrier Hirayuu, and Tolman, the General of the National Air Defense Force.

As rumors spread that war would soon begin with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union over the fishing industry, Tolman had come to discuss the composition of the wyvern knights aboard the Hiryuu, as well as to visit Castor, who was his former master. Souma intended to deploy the Hiryuu, which was still his secret weapon, in the battle against the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. That on its own showed how serious Souma viewed the coming encounter.

Once their meeting was over, Castor borrowed a cruiser and took Tolman on a ride around the waters near Lagoon City, under the pretext of patrolling. As he leaned against the railing, Castor asked, “How about it, Tolman? Cutting through the wind on a ship is nice, too, huh?”

“Ha ha ha, it is, yes. It’s refreshing in a different way than riding on a wyvern,” Tolman said with a laugh as he was buffeted by the sea breeze. “I see the ship can go quite fast, too. There’s the sound of the waves, and the smell of the sea... We don’t have any of that in the sky.”

“Once you get used to it, it’s hard to get away. Life on land feels like it’s missing something.”

“You’re a real man of the sea now, aren’t you? Are you aboard the Hiryuu all the time lately?”

“No, lately I’ve been clamping down on illegal vessels with this cruiser.” Castor touched the brim of his captain’s hat as he looked out at the sea spray. “Our liege’s plan didn’t just come out of nowhere. We’ve just been waiting to put it into motion, and keeping a keen eye on things to stop it from escalating to armed confrontation before then.”

Tolman looked to the east, stroked his goatee and asked, “Have the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago’s fishing vessels been very active?”

"Yeah. They come in groups to fish near our country. They drive off any of our ships that approach them, too."

In this world, there were no international maritime borders, like "200 nautical miles from the coast." However, by tradition, the seas near a country were believed to belong to them, and if ships from another state wandered in, they couldn't complain if their vessels were seized, or sunk without question. Ships from the Archipelago were deliberately flouting this tradition.

"When we receive word from our fishermen, we send out a warship, but if we try to catch the fishing stragglers, there are armed ships that get in the way. Then, once the fishing ships have fled, the armed ones pull out, too."

"...Is there fighting?" Tolman asked.

"No, the armed vessels are primarily just there to keep us in check." Castor shrugged. "Their ships are light, made of wood and reinforced with metal. They're pulled by horned doldons (dolphin or whale-like creatures with a single horn), which move fast, even if they don't have the power of a sea dragon. Anyway, the point is that their ships are fast. If they focus on running away, it's hard to land an attack on them."

"I suppose that's to be expected from the ships of a maritime state..." Tolman groaned.

"If it did come to a fight, they'd hit us with pirate-like tactics. They'd come in fast and hurl explosives, or perform a boarding action. With our old fleet, even if we had the numbers, it would have been a tough fight," Castor said, as a grin appeared on his face.

"But now we have the Hiryuu, huh?"

"Yeah, that's right. It's not like they couldn't counter it by loading anti-air repeating bolt throwers on their ships, but there's no way they can beat it upon their first encounter. Though even after that,

we're refining our methods day and night. We've got plans for dealing with whatever countermeasures the other side comes up with."

"The idea of a carrier is amazing, isn't it?"

"It's a terrifying weapon that will upend all our thinking about how naval battles are fought." Castor gave a small smile, masking the pride he felt within. He was the captain of that carrier. It felt like his own child was being complimented whenever someone understood its magnitude.

Tolman smiled wryly at the way his former master was acting. "I can see that His Majesty was working on something incredible... Hm?"

Suddenly, Tolman noticed something in the corner of his eye. He had been looking at the horizon for a while now, but an object had just appeared on it.

As Tolman suddenly shaded his eyes with one hand and looked off into the distance, Castor cocked his head to the side. "What's up, Tolman?"

"...I see a ship."

"A ship?"

Castor took a look for himself using the binoculars hanging from his neck. When he did, he could see a ship heading towards them from the east. He couldn't see it clearly yet, but it seemed larger than a fishing vessel. Once it got even closer, he was able to tell that it was probably a warship. There weren't supposed to be any other ships of the National Naval Defense Force in these waters today. The other sailors must have noticed it too, because there was suddenly a lot of noise on deck.

"That's not one of ours! It looks like a Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago ship!" the sailor up in the crow's nest shouted.

On closer inspection, Castor could see it was built of wood with metal plates bolted on to raise its defense. *But why just one ship? This has never happened before*, he thought as he returned to the bridge and gave orders to the sailors. There were no fishing ships around for it to be defending, and it wasn't one of the usual armed ones, either. So why was it coming at them alone? What were they planning to do, coming so close to the Kingdom?

If they tried to launch a raid on the Kingdom with just one vessel, they would be found by a patrol ship, like they just had been. Castor had already relayed information about them back to Lagoon City by messenger kui. Reinforcement would be coming in no time. *Are they really planning to pick a fight with the Kingdom's fleet using a single ship?*

“Just in case, be ready to open fire immediately!”

Castor’s second-in-command shouted the order into the speaking tube, “Yes, sir! All hands, prepare to fire the cannons!”



Because they didn't know what the other ship was up to, Castor changed course, placing his ship at a diagonal to the other ship's heading, and prepared to open fire. They were getting closer and closer. Soon they would be in firing range. *Is there no avoiding a battle now?*

"Ready..." Castor began.

Just as he was about to give the order to fire in order to preempt the other ship, the sailor up in the crow's nest voice came in through the speaking tube, "The enemy ship has cut loose the creature that was pulling them!"

"Huh?!" Castor cried out in surprise.

Cutting free the creature that was pulling your ship meant losing all propulsion. That meant they could no longer come towards them, or run away. *Why would they do something so foolhardy now?*

As Castor remained dumbfounded, the lookout continued, "The enemy ship has raised a distress flag!"

"Now it's a distress flag?" Castor scratched his head. "They do it now...? Augh, damn it!"

Tolman, who was unable to grasp the situation, simply looked at Castor with a dazed expression.

After some time, Castor made up his mind and spoke, "...We have no choice. All hands, we're going to rescue that ship."

"Huh? You're helping them?" Tolman asked, and Castor scratched his head.

"They've raised a distress flag. We have to help them."

"Isn't it blatantly suspicious? Couldn't it be a trap?"

"Tolman... there's this thing called the Law of the Sea that all sailors have to obey," Castor said, sounding unamused. "Flags, smoke signals, special cannonballs... There are a number of ways to signal that your ship is in distress. But any ship that sees a distress signal is obligated to provide help, no matter what country the other is from, and no matter what kind of position they themselves are in... Even if their countries are at war."

Anyone who falls into the sea has their life at risk. It was a place where, when the unexpected occurred, everyone came to help each other. Guaranteeing to aid others in times of crisis also guaranteed that they would help you in an emergency, too. This was the creed of the sea.

"Was there an international treaty like that?"

"No, it's not something countries decided—it's a custom that sailors came up with themselves. But if people find out we ignored it, we'll receive pushback from sailors from every country. That includes our own, too. If they all strike, the flow of goods will be disrupted, and we won't be able to get fish anymore."

"I see... But aren't there people who would abuse distress signals—such as a pirate ship looking to ambush another?"

Castor shook his head. "They'd be turned away from ports in every country if they did that. It's only acceptable to ignore a distress signal from a ship you've already entered hostilities with. There's a moral code we have to follow out here at sea. If you can't do the bare minimum of respecting a distress signal, whether you're a fishing ship, a warship, or a pirate ship, you're not going to be able to continue operating out here."

"I see... so that's how it works," Tolman said, acting convinced.

Castor's ship approached the distressed one and pulled up alongside her. They laid ladders between the two vessels, and the Kingdom's sailors boarded the other.

They were greeted by a young man and woman. One was a beautiful mermaid girl; the other was a young beastman man with white fox ears who carried a Nine-Headed Dragon katana at his waist.

"We will not resist. Please, lower your weapons."

When the marines surrounded them, the young man laid his sword down on the deck, and raised his hands in surrender. The mermaid girl did the same. They were transferred to Castor's ship without incident, and the Kingdom's sailors began searching for other potential passengers.

Tolman asked, "Who do you suppose these people are?"

"Like I'd know. We'll have to ask them." Castor spat out in response.

As he looked at their two new passengers from where he stood on the bridge, he noticed the quality of the clothes they wore, and got a look on his face like he'd bitten into something unpleasant. These were clearly people of some significant status. *Uninvited guests at a time like this... What kind of trouble have we come across here?* Castor let out a little sigh as he anticipated the headache to come.

Chapter 1: Uninvited Guests

The calendar year had changed to 1549, and I welcomed the new year as the official king of the country. Today, Liscia's room was filled with energetic voices again.

"Hey, Cian, Kazuha, come here," I called to Cian and Kazuha from outside their wooden playpen.

"Squeee! Daada, daada!"

"...Daa."

The two of them came up to the fence and used it to pull themselves to their feet. The boisterous voice belonged to Kazuha, and the relaxed one to Cian.

Kazuha immediately let go and toddled for a few steps before falling over. It was an impressive fall, but I was making her wear a backpack with a cushion (made by yours truly) that made sure she wouldn't strike her head when she fell. She laid there, flailing her arms and legs like a turtle flipped on its back.

Cian, meanwhile, tried to let go of the fence like Kazuha had, but kept getting scared and immediately grabbed it again. Once he finally managed to take a step, he instantly had his hands on the ground. Then he crawled over to Kazuha and put his hands on her body to help him stand up.

He's using his sister as a stepping stone? (He was not actually stepping on her.)

Once he got up, Cian turned to me, and spread his arms as if he was saying, "Hug!" but one of Kazuha's boisterous legs knocked him off his feet, and sent him tumbling onto his back like her. Cian was wearing the same backpack as Kazuha, of course. Now there were two babies on their backs, flailing around excitedly.

“““Th-They’re so cuuuute!”””

Aisha, Roroa, and Naden squealed together.

The trio was so charmed by the baby duo that I could practically see the heart marks in their eyes.

“Sheesh... What are they saying such an obvious thing for?” I commented.

“How can *you* say that with a straight face, Souma?” Liscia gave me an exasperated look with her hands on her hips. Next to her, Juna had a small smile on her face.

“I mean, come on, it’s a fact that the kids are cute!” I tried to make my case.

“I know how you feel, but... aren’t you being too much of a doting parent?”

“Now, now, Lady Liscia. It’s a fact that they’re cute.” Juna took the children by their little hands and helped them up.

The way they sat there like little teddy bears was just so cute... I hated that there was no such thing as photography in this world. It was beyond cruel that I couldn’t leave a record of these adorable children’s growth.

“The children are getting bigger and bigger,” Aisha said happily.

The other day, Cian and Kazuha both turned one year old without ever getting seriously sick. They were both still small, but compared to when they were first born, they had certainly gotten bigger. Now that I was a parent, I had learned what a joy it was to see your children reach a birthday. It felt so many times more emotional than my own birthdays ever had.

“Maa! Maa!”

“Maa...”

Cian and Kazuha raised their hands, as if begging us for hugs.

“Oh, ya want a hug, huh? C’mere, Kazuha.”

“Okay, I’ll hug Cian, then.”

Roroa and Naden picked up and hugged Kazuha and Cian.

By the way, though they couldn’t speak actual words yet, they had started using their voices to express their intentions. When they called me, they said, “Daa,” and when they were calling Liscia, they said, “Maa.” I thought “Maa” was probably supposed to be “mama,” but it seemed to mean women in general for them.

Maybe that was because the other four got carried away with saying things like, “Mama’s here,” when they were playing with the children. Liscia’s response to that was, *“But I’m the one who gives them milk...”* and she’d puff her cheeks up. I think Aisha and the others apologized afterwards. Now that I thought about it, there was one other person who the children treated differently.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Come in,” Liscia said.

“Pardon me.” Carla entered wearing her maid dress and bowed her head.

When the children saw her...

“Cawla!”

“Cawla...”

...the children said happily.

Though it was a bit slurred, you could tell they were saying Carla. In fact, the first name our children learned wasn’t mine or Liscia, but hers. It seemed the two of them loved Carla. She had been with them constantly, even when they were still in the womb. And she’d also been at Liscia’s side since they were born, caring for them, and

this was the result. Well, it was to be expected, but still... I was jealous.

"To think they'd learn your name before the person who gives them milk..." Liscia's cheeks puffed up again.

With all our jealous eyes focused on her, Carla coughed to try and hide how awkward it felt, then said, "Master... I have a message from the Prime Minister asking that you come to the governmental affairs office."

"...Oh, it's that time already, huh? I wanted to play with them a little longer, too..."

"Just do your job, *Your Majesty*," Liscia said sharply as I was looking at the children, still loath to leave.

Urgh... I guess I have no choice. I had to do my job for the children's sake, too. Cian, Kazuha, Dad's gonna work hard.

"Hurry up and go."

"Yes, ma'am..."

Liscia practically ran me out of the room.

I closed the door behind me, then slapped my cheeks to get myself in the right mindset. *Okay, King Mode activated. Time to switch gears.*

◇ ◇ ◇

When I reached the office Hakuya, Tomoe, and Ichiha were already there waiting. If the two of them were here, that meant that the thing I had asked for was ready.

When I sat down in my chair, Ichiha somewhat timidly approached and presented me with a bundle of papers. "Y-Your Majesty, I brought what you asked for."

"Thanks, kid." When I took it, Ichiha got a troubled look on his face.

"Hm? Is something wrong?"

“Umm, I’m one of your retainers, so could you not call me ‘kid’?” he said hesitantly.

Huh? ...Oh! Right, right! I clapped my hands, as if I had just remembered. Tomoe smiled wryly, and Hakuya pressed a hand to his forehead and shook his head.

“Sorry, Ichihा.”

Though we were treating Ichihा as an exchange student from the Duchy of Chima, he had recently accepted an offer to become my retainer.

The method of identifying monsters by their parts which he was studying would also be useful in studying demons when we inevitably met them. That’s why I wanted to combine his abilities with Tomoe’s, since she could talk to demons. But it was still a top-level secret that Tomoe had talked to a demon before. If this information leaked to another country, we’d be looking at instant instability. In order to prevent that, only I, my family, and a select few among the upper echelons were informed of it. Naturally, a foreign exchange student like Ichihा couldn’t be told.

I needed Tomoe and Ichihा to work in lockstep to study the demons. In order to be able to reveal Tomoe’s ability, Ichihা needed to be my retainer, not just a foreign exchange student, and to be prepared to live in this country for life. When Hakuya, Tomoe, and I tried inviting him to serve this country after graduating from the Royal Academy, Ichihা was quick to agree.

“I wouldn’t mind that. With my sister no longer there, I have no lingering affection for the Duchy of Chima. I want to live here, in this country where people have accepted me for who I am,” Ichihা had said with a smile.

With that agreement firmly in place, Ichiha was told Tomoe's secret. I had made her tell him about it herself. Tomoe seemed unsure what he was going to think, and Ichiha was tense because I had told him we were going to reveal classified information that he absolutely must not divulge.

"N-Nice weather today..."

"Y-Yeah, it is, huh?"

They had a rather awkward, but comical, exchange. I felt like we were at an arranged marriage meeting.

Anyway, I addressed Ichiha, who was now my retainer, "Ahem... Now, Ichiha. Let's see what you have for me."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

I looked through the bundle of papers Ichiha had given me. I had asked him to produce a document regarding something specific.

"...I see, this is well-done. Every page is full of information. This should prove to be very useful," I said with a nod.

"Tomoe and the Monster Research Society people helped, too."

"Hakuya, have this copied and distributed to the relevant people immediately."

"Understood."

"Well done, Ichiha and Tomoe. You may leave now," I said to Tomoe and Ichiha after handing Hakuya the bundle of paper.

"Yes, sir."

"We'll be going now then, Big Brother."

Once I saw that they had left the room, I turned to Hakuya. “It looks like preparations to send the fleet to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago are moving forward smoothly.”

“Yes. Because we’ve prepared for a long time, with careful planning.” Hakuya replied with a cool expression.

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair. “Careful planning... huh?”

“Hm? Is there something that bothers you?”

“When you plan things out in advance, something unexpected always happens, right? During the war with Amidonia, I made Castor mistrust me and he rebelled. Then, when it was over, Roroa came along and upended everything. All these things happened that we never saw coming.”

“...That’s true.”

I rested my head on the palm of my hand and looked out the window. I had bitter memories of the unexpected events that happened in the war with Amidonia.

“Here’s hoping something unexpected doesn’t happen again.”

“...Don’t say something so ominous.” Hakuya let out an exasperated sigh.

And so—though I’m not sure if this conversation tripped some flag and led to it—a few days later, Castor sent two “unexpected people” to us from Lagoon City.

◇ ◇ ◇

The two people that Castor had taken into custody had asked for an audience with me, the king, so he sent them here by wyvern gondola. When I received the report, I hurried to the audience chamber with Hakuya and Aisha. It would have been better if we’d been told in advance, but all of the messenger kuis were being

pushed to their limit in preparing the fleet, and this was deemed urgent, so he only sent a wyvern knight ahead to notify us. Because of that, there wasn't much time between being informed and their arrival. This was like finding out you had won an award when it already arrived in the mail.

"Hakuya, about the report Castor sent us... Do you think it's true?" I asked as we hurried to the audience chamber, having already changed into my formal uniform.

Hakuya, who was also walking quickly, nodded. "Yes. They also provided something to prove their identity. I don't think there's any doubt."

"I see. Damn! Why now, of all times...?"

"Tell me about it." Hakuya had a gloomy look on his face.

We had been working steadily towards a plan that we had refined and refined. Now, just when the fleet was almost ready to leave port, this sort of irregular event came our way, so I couldn't blame him for looking that way. If these people were who the report stated, one mistake in how we handled them could make all that preparation meaningless. No matter what, that had to be avoided.

"Nothing could be more trouble than this. Do you think the Nine-Headed Dragon King has a hand in it?"

"I wouldn't know, sire. You'll have to ask them yourself."

"Geez... Aisha."

"Yes."

"I don't know what's going to happen. Be careful."

"Yes, sir! Leave your defense to me." Aisha thumped her chest with one hand, the other firmly gripping the hilt of the sword at her hip (which was not her greatsword, because it was too unwieldy to use indoors).

I caught my breath in the next room, and then the two of us entered the audience chamber. I looked at the bottom of the steps as I walked to the throne, and the two individuals mentioned in the report were kneeling there, heads bowed.

Once I had sat down, I spoke to them, “It’s got to be hard talking in that position. I’d like you both to raise your heads.”

“...Understood.”

“Yes, sir.”

The two of them stood up and raised their heads. One was wearing a frilly outfit that was reminiscent of an ancient Chinese court lady. She was a charming young girl with distinctive wavy emerald green hair. There was something like a fish’s fin on her ear, so it was clear at a glance that she wasn’t a human. Looking closer, what seemed like a dangling sleeve at her elbow was actually a thin, transparent fin, too. According to the report, she was a mermaid, and they were common in the Archipelago. Though her lower half wasn’t that of a fish, I understood why she was called that based on her appearance.

The other one was a tall, thin beastman with white fox ears. He wore hakama pants, and though he had been disarmed for this audience, with a Nine-Headed Dragon katana at his side, he would have looked just like a samurai. His face had the same intelligent pretty-boy look as Hakuya and Julius, so if I made him dress up as an onmyouji exorcist like Abe no Seimei instead, he’d look the part. If someone told me he was an emissary of Inari the fox god of the harvest, I’d believe them.

What caught my attention as I looked at the two of them was their expressions.

The young man was doing everything he could to keep a serious look on his face that betrayed no emotion. This was the most common expression during an audience with the king. Even if he bore me ill

will, showing it here would only hurt him, after all. As for the other one, the mermaid girl... I should just come right out and say it.

Her eyes were dead. No, I'm not making a joke about her having dead fish eyes because she's a mermaid, or anything like that. There was no life in her eyes, and though I'm sure she was pale to begin with, her pallor wasn't good, either. If she was trying to hide her emotions with a serious face like the young man was, her feelings were dripping out.

Tragic resignation—she felt so cornered that she was trying to give up on everything.

If I met someone with this expression on the way to the forest around Mt. Fuji, or perhaps a tall cliff, I'd feel the need to stop them and say, "Don't do anything hasty." But here she was, standing before me. Even as she felt that way, there was a reason this was occurring.

"Sir Souma A. Elfrieden, king of Elfrieden and Amidonia." The mermaid girl put her hands together in front of her and bowed her head. "First, it is an honor to meet you. I am Shabon, daughter of Nine-Headed Dragon King, Shana, who rules the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union. The man with me is an island lord of the Archipelago Union, Sir Kishun, who has accompanied me as my guard."

"It is an honor to meet you. I am Kishun." Having been introduced, the young man with white fox ears bowed his head.

The United Kingdom of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago—a union state situated in the sea east of us. The name came from a legend that a Nine-Headed Dragon had once gone on a rampage there. The interesting thing about that was that my weird translation ability was rendering the "dragon" in that name with the same kanji

as an eastern dragon—a ryuu, not a western one. I guess it was something like Yamato no Orochi, not King Gidora, that went wild there, huh?

Was that just a legend? Or was it a monster? Or perhaps one of the Old Ones that the Mother Dragon, Madam Tiamat, had mentioned? It wasn't clear.

Though it was similar to the Union of Eastern Nations in that it was an amalgamation of island states, this place had a much longer history. Remnants of royal families who had been run off the continent; oppressed minority races; people driven out after losing in political struggles; and criminals—this country was founded by people left with no place to go on the mainland. Maybe because of that, there weren't as many members of the major races, like humans, there.

The sea serpent race that Excel belonged to had once owned an island in the archipelago, but lost it due to war, political strife, or calamity, and came back to the continent where they settled in Lagoon City. There were apparently a lot of unusual races like that in the islands. They had a history of races with nowhere to go but their one island fighting over territory at sea, and constantly warring to preserve their islands' independence.

I don't know if it was because their country formed that way, but they were violent by nature, and every island was fiercely independent. *I guess you could say they were rebellious spirits?*

Now, the head of the largest island, Nine-Headed Dragon Island, was accepted as the overall chief of the Archipelago Union, but the chiefs of each of the other islands governed individually. If their king was a shogun, the island chiefs would have been his daimyos. If the Nine-Headed Dragon King tried to step in and dictate how an island should be ruled, the islanders would resist it.

You may wonder why the Nine-Headed Dragon King was considered to be the chief of the Archipelago Union, but it was in order to oppose foreign forces. Back in the time when the Gran Chaos Empire had more steam behind it, there was a sense that they might manage to unify the continent. If the Empire were to invade the Archipelago, no individual island could take them on. Because of that, the King of Nine-Headed Dragon Island, which had the largest population, brought the islands together to form the Archipelago Union, and created a system that would let them overcome the divisions between the islands to fight as one.

The formation of this union was an exception for the fiercely independent people of this country. Conversely, if not for the threat of foreign invasion, the islands would never have fought together.

In the time since the Union was formed, the islands had mostly stopped fighting each other, and a prosperous system of trade developed, but they were still strongly rooted in their customs (which I think it's fair to say were bad customs).

Let's take this story back to the present now.

The daughter of this Nine-Headed Dragon King was Shabon, who now stood before me, and her bodyguard was Kishun. In their country, it was customary to address people by full name, as if the two names were one. Also, like in Japan and China, the family name came before the given name. So, in this example, Shabon's name was actually Sha Bon.

These two had shown up with no forewarning. I had nothing but a bad feeling about this.

"I am indeed King Souma A. Elfrieden of Friedonia. Let us get right to the point, Madam Shabon. Why is it that you have come to my country without any advance notice? You were taken into custody by

one of our patrol ships, too. This could easily spark a diplomatic incident.”

Shabon deeply bowed her head. “I apologize for our many transgressions. Please, forgive us. I simply had to meet with you, Sir Souma. I would very much like for you to listen to what I have to say to you.”

“Listen... you say?” *What could she have to say to me now, at a time like this?* “You are, of course, aware of the tensions that exist between my country and yours, correct?”

“Of course.” Shabon raised her head and nodded.

“Is King Shana involved in this?”

“...No. Father has nothing to do with it. I am here of my own volition.”

“So you’re acting on your own, then...?”

Ahh, damn it. That confirmed this was trouble. Even as I clicked my tongue internally, I looked at Hakuya who was standing beside me, and he had a look of exasperation on his face, too. Aisha, meanwhile, was staring Kishun down with a look that said, “If you intend to harm His Majesty, you’ll not get off unscathed,” and she was totally ignoring the conversation.

I asked Shabon a question, “Do you understand the current situation, Madam Shabon?”

“Yes. And that war approaches,” Shabon answered with lifeless eyes. “Our country’s ships have been fishing illegally in your waters, threatening the livelihood of your own fishermen. And those illegal fishing ships are officially guarded by Father’s... the Nine-Headed Dragon King’s fleet. Even though you have repeatedly sent letters protesting it.”

She paused. But before I could respond, she continued.

“And in order to break out of this deadlock, you have decided to make war on our country, right? There are emissaries from the Empire urging all of our island chiefs to join the Mankind Declaration, but the fiercely independent chiefs won’t choose to do that. In fact, if a foreign threat is coming, they will work with the Nine-Headed Dragon King to meet it. In the near future... there will be a great war at sea to decide which of our countries is greater, I’m sure.”

Well, that was more or less the answer I expected.

“If you know all that, then why are you here?” I said with a sigh.

Shabon looked straight at me, eyes still lifeless, and said, “Please, use me as your ‘tool.’”

Bonus Short Stories

Souma and Maria Watch

We were having a relaxed get-together after the first conference where Maria and I met face-to-face.

“It looks like everyone’s having a good time.”

“Yes. Everyone does seem to be enjoying themselves.”

As the two of us talked, I was watching my companions. They had each found someone they could get along with and were engaged in pleasant conversation.

Maria chuckled. “I had expected talks with another nation to be more tense. During this sort of get-together, you would expect us all to be trying to get a feel for the other side’s intentions, you know? But everyone’s acting as they normally would.”

“Well, our countries have amicable relations, so it would be weird for our subordinates to be fighting when we’re not... It looks like our second-in-commands are getting along, too.”

I smiled wryly as I caught a glimpse of Hakuya and Jeanne out of the corner of my eye. Jeanne seemed to be enjoying herself, and Hakuya gave off a much softer impression than he usually did, too. Maria must have noticed it as well, because she was smiling softly.

“I guess I should have expected your subordinates would be like this. You approach everyone without prejudice. They must have learned from watching you, Sir Souma. That’s how they can be so open with everyone.”

It was a little embarrassing being given such a direct complement.

“I could say the same of the Empire. Because their leader is so soft and fuzzy, her subordinates are kind, too.”

“Oh, my? Me? Soft and fuzzy?”

Maria made a show of puffing up her cheeks in mock anger. Even though I knew she was a year older than Juna, it still made her look like a cute little girl.

I shrugged. “Having met and talked with you, I can say you’re pretty soft and fuzzy.”

“That’s quite a thing to say. *I am* an empress you know.”

“My apologies, Your Imperial Majesty,” I said jokingly.

“Yes. Very good,” she said in a self-important tone. I knew she hated to wield her power in this way, so she was just messing around, too.

Then both of us broke out laughing.

“Ha ha ha, I don’t know what it is, but even though I know you’re supposed to be important, I can’t help but laugh when you act like that.”

“Hee hee! It’s because I’m not good at being important. When I do it in front of you, it’s just an act.”

“Like you’re playing empress?”

“Yes, that’s a good way of putting it.”

After we’d had a good laugh, Maria smiled. “It’s so peaceful here.”

“Hm? What’s this about, all of a sudden?”

“If we could laugh like this with people we had just met, we wouldn’t need a framework like the Mankind Declaration...”

She said that like we’d be better off without it. That was probably how she really felt, too. Maria’s Mankind Declaration existed to force the signing nations to band together in the face of the Demon Lord’s Domain. She had taken the heavy burden of leading them upon herself. But if there was a way for countries to work together

without compulsion, nothing could be better than that. After all, it would relieve the huge weight on her shoulders.

“...Our country may not be a signatory state, but we do support your ideals,” I said.

“Sir Souma...”

“When Kuu inherits the Republic, they’ll be reliable allies, too. In a few more years... just a few more years, you won’t need to shoulder everything by yourself.”

If Maria threw in the towel now, I’d be in trouble. The role she played in maintaining the balance between the countries on this continent could not be overstated. If she said she was retracting the Mankind Declaration tomorrow, the world would be thrown into disarray. That sort of chaos could lead to the rise of ambitious people like Fuuga.

But... I couldn’t rely on Maria forever.

There was no way it was healthy to put this much stress on one woman. Someday, we all had to move on from the Mankind Declaration and set her free.

“Just wait a little longer, Madam Maria. Soon enough, my country will be capable of shouldering the burden alongside yours. I’m sure Hakuya would agree. Together with my companions, we’ll change the situation that’s put this heavy burden all on you.”

“...Will you?” Maria smiled slightly. “I suppose I’ll have to keep working just a little longer, until that day arrives, then.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I chose this path for myself. But...” Maria looked at me.
“Do hurry.”

“I will.”

With that, we two sworn friends nodded to one another.

Aisha and Gunther Face One Another

““.....””

During the get-together, Aisha stood facing one of the Empire's commanders, Gunther. In her hands, she held plates stacked with food which she was greedily gobbling up. *This man. He seems to have considerable skill. What is he thinking...?* Unlike Krahe, because Gunther was a man of few words, Aisha was on her guard around him. Even now, as everyone around them was having a good time, he was alone in his silence, not eating or drinking, just glaring at her with a frown on his face.

“Are you not going to talk to anyone?” she said.

“...There is no need.”

“Then why not eat something? It's all delicious, you know?”

“...There is no need for that, either”

“Murgh.”

He was completely unapproachable—not that she wanted to be friends with him. It just made her uneasy to encounter a warrior with unquestionable skill, who was so unreadable. Protecting Souma was of utmost importance, so she kept an eye on him. And because the food looked good, she ate as she watched.

But because just eating and watching him was awkward, she tried striking up a conversation, too.

“Everyone looks like they're having fun. Why don't you loosen up yourself?”

“...No. That is not my role as a warrior.”

I really can't figure out what he's thinking... Aisha sighed. She came from a martial background. Being strong, but not all that smart, she knew she wasn't perceptive enough to discern what someone was thinking based on words and gestures. She was better at understanding a person when they crossed swords and traded blows. That was just how warriors communicated. *Still, I can't challenge him to a battle here.*

If she were to challenge him to a duel at a party like this, they would doubt her reasoning. It would cause problems for Souma as well. Aisha didn't want that, so she continued the conversation, even though it wasn't her strong suit.

"Then what do you think a warrior's role is?"

"To serve those he has sworn himself to. To risk his life to protect them."

"Hmm." Aisha could relate to that answer. "I agree. Because I've sworn myself to His Majesty, too."

"...But I had heard you were King Souma's wife?"

"When we first met, I was his bodyguard. But though we are now married, my wish to protect him, even at the cost of my own life, remains unchanged."

"...Is that right?"

Oh? It felt like Gunther had softened a little. Was that because her sympathy for his position had changed the way she viewed him? As Aisha watched him closely, she saw that though Gunther still remained standing still, his eyes were moving. Following his gaze, she found Souma and Maria talking, and then Hakuya and Jeanne. His eyes bounced between both pairs.

"Sir Gunther, is Madam Maria the one you've sworn yourself to, or is it Madam Jeanne?"

“...I have sworn myself to both daughters of the Imperial House of Euphoria,” Gunther said in resignation. “Despite their youth and beauty, they carry the weight of an empire on their shoulders. I respect that, and believe they must be protected. I can only serve them as a warrior, but I will do my all to make sure they can feel at ease.”

“You stay on your guard so that they can relax theirs... Is that it?”

Aisha felt like she understood. Maria and Jeanne looked relaxed as they chatted with Souma and Hakuya. Quietly watching over them was a way of showing his loyalty.

“Heheh! It seems you’re a fine warrior!”

“...You’re too kind.”

“Ah! But what about the third daughter of the Imperial Family, Madam Trill? Do you swear loyalty to her?”

Gunther’s frown deepened in response.

Seeing that, Aisha couldn’t help but burst out laughing. “Pfft... Ahahahaha!”

So he can make a face like that, too. He might be an interesting individual.

Aisha wanted to tell this story to Souma.

Naden and Krahe Talk

During the get-together, Souma’s second secondary queen, Naden, was talking with Krahe, a commander from the Empire.

“So then me and Souma took care of the storm that attacked the Star Dragon Mountain Range.”

“I see, I see. That’s just lovely.”

No, it was more like Naden was telling the story of how she met Souma, and Krahe was enthusiastically nodding along and prodding her to keep going.

“Was it a natural storm?” he asked.

“No way. There was this weird thing inside the clouds that was causing it.”

“The Lurker in the Clouds... I like it! It sounds exciting! So, what happened? Did the lurker have a terrifying and dignified form, like some sort of demon lord?”

“Oh... It was a cube. Like a metallic one.”

“A metallic cube... huh?” Krahe looked blatantly disappointed. “The Cube in the Tempest... It’s strange, I’ll give it that, but it lacks impact. Now, if there was a massive, bat-winged devil, or a three-headed dragon, then we’d have something to be excited about.”

What’s the Thousand Year Dragon King got to do with this? was the joke Souma would have made if he were listening.

Naden sighed in exasperation. “I can’t change what we saw, so you’ll have to live with it. But it did make an impact if you were actually there to see it, you know? There were these patterns carved into the thing, glowing faintly, but more than anything, it was just huge.”

“Hmm... When you say it like that, maybe it does work.”

“...Is the way it looks that important?”

“Of course!” Krahe got up close to Naden, a serious look on his face. “Stories of heroes and saints need a terrifying and dignified enemy! No matter how strong the hero, and no matter how revered the saint, their story cannot function with them alone! The people respect Lady Maria as a saint, and King Souma was summoned to be a hero. The story of our times will be sung for ages to come. We’re just waiting for the enemy they’ll stand against to appear.”

Krahe spoke as if enraptured, not even pausing for a breath. It made Naden think of how he'd been described as being a romanticist, and to an unhealthy degree.

"Wouldn't it be better if there was no enemy? Nothing beats peace."

"What are you saying? The story needs a powerful enemy for them to strike down! Our lives are short, but if people tell stories of us, they'll last for a hundred generations. If I could leave but one page in Madam Maria's story, I would know no greater bliss."

"That's..."

Wrong somehow, thought Naden. When she was in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, Souma told her that though a tree that remained beautiful forever was wonderful, the flowers that bloomed for a short time before falling were beautiful, too. It felt like, in trying to leave behind his name in a story, Krahe was grasping for eternity.

I don't think Souma would say something like that. He wouldn't be interested in leaving his name in history. What instead came to her mind was Cian and Kazuha's young, innocent faces. *Even if his name doesn't remain, preserving his children's lives and wishes into the future is enough... That's what he'd think. I feel like I can understand that, too, now.* Naden chuckled.

She adored Cian and Kazuha. But wouldn't her own child be even more dear to her? Then again, some people said it was easier to dote on kids that weren't yours, since you had no responsibility for them. *But I still want Souma's child. For the future.*

Naden squirmed as she covered her flushing cheeks with her hands.

Krahe cocked his head to the side at the way she was acting. "Hm? Is something the matter?"

She cleared her throat to hide her embarrassment. "...No, it's nothing."

Even if she told the man in front of her what she was feeling, he probably wouldn't be able to understand. We all have our own set of values. That's something she'd learned since coming to the Kingdom. *But a story requires a strong villain... huh?* Naden looked at Krahe and felt a little uneasy.

He was pure, in a way. True to his dreams and desires. On its own that might have been a virtue. But wasn't it dangerous to seek an enemy for the sake of that dream?

Maybe I should report this to Souma later... Naden thought as she looked at Krahe's friendly smile.

Mio and Owen Get Better Acquainted

"Madam Mio, are you all right? You're not looking so good."

During the get-together, Owen, who was both Souma's personal trainer and sounding board, approached Georg Carmine's daughter with concern. Owen was a former commander in the Army, and greatly respected him, so he always wanted to look out for her.

Mio gave Owen a weak smile. "I-I'm fine. It's just because the amount of information I have to take in is dizzying."

She was constantly wondering, *What am I doing here?* Here Mio was, in the same place as the empress and her entourage. She couldn't believe it. The relationship between the Kingdom and the Empire had changed completely in the time she was away. During King Albert's reign, they hadn't known what the Empire's intentions were, and had just been jerked around by everything that the Empire did. Now they were building an amicable relationship as partners in an alliance.

"There was a time not so long ago when all of this would have seemed impossible."

"Well, our country has gone through a lot," Owen said, crossing his arms with a smile. "His Majesty and Lady Liscia have both tried their hardest."

"I can see that."

"You'll be even more surprised when we return to the Kingdom. His Majesty will keep his word and launch a new investigation into your father's actions. Depending on the result, the House of Carmine could even be restored."

"...Ah ha ha, I guess so."

Mio's laugh sounded a little troubled. *I don't really care about that, though...* She was no longer fixated on Souma and her father at this point.

"So the House of Carmine will be restored... huh?"

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

"Oh, no... It's just that I'd be the head of the household, wouldn't I?"

"You would indeed."

Mio scratched her cheek awkwardly as Owen looked at her as if she'd just said the most obvious thing in the world.

"Um... I'm a capable warrior, but governing is not my strong suit. My father had more or less given up on me there..."

"Ahh..." Without a word more, Owen looked at her with a small wry smile.

Realizing the situation, Mio continued, "As you've likely figured out... I'm not the smartest person around..."

"Mmm... W-Well, I've heard that when Duke Carmine was young, he was entirely focused on his skills as a warrior, and was scolded by his father for it, too. You've still got room to grow, Madam Mio."

“Oh? Is that right?”

Mio had the impression that her father was skilled with both the pen and the sword, but apparently that wasn’t true in his youth.

Owen nodded. “I hear that he devoted himself to his administrative duties around the time he brought a wife into the household. Ga ha ha! He must have wanted to show her his good side. Or maybe he didn’t want her to see his weaknesses. That’s how men are, after all.”

“...I’m surprised.”

Even living with my father, I never knew that aspect of him.

Owen clapped a hand on Mio’s shoulder. “Well, when the house is restored, I expect you’ll bring in a husband. You can choose someone who’s skilled at administrative work.”

“Ahh, Father said that, too... Ah!”

“Is something the matter?”

“You know, I just remembered that there was a bureaucrat who earned my father’s rare praise... Right. I believe, Sir Colbert was his name”

“Colbert? The Minister of Finance?”

“Yes. Though he still served the Principality of Amidonia at the time.”

Father praised him, and if he’s the Minister of Finance now, he can handle administrative work, I don’t think I could ask for better than that, Mio thought to herself.

“Um, Sir Owen, may I ask a question?”

“What is it?”

“Would you say I’m pretty?”

“...Huh?” Owen stood there gaping, not sure what he’d been asked for a moment. “Oh, um, I think you’re more than pretty enough, Madam Mio... Why ask that so suddenly?”

“Oh, I thought I might be able to use my womanly weapons to ensnare a gentleman,” Mio said in a flirtatious tone, a serious look on her face. “I think I’ve inherited Mother’s good looks. I learned from Father that in war, you must use every means and weapon at your disposal. They say that love is war, so I thought I might face my target with all the weapons I can muster.”

Owen was taken aback to hear Mio talk like this so seriously.



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by Dojyomaru

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