

HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki



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REBUILT THE KINGDOM





"NOW,
I WILL
BEGIN."

Trill Euphoria



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WORLD MAP
HOW A REALIST HERO
REBUILT THE KINGDOM

GRAN CHAOS EMPIRE
(White Line Includes Vassal States)

DEMON LORD'S DOMAIN

KINGDOM OF LASTANIA

NOTHUNG DRAGON
KNIGHT KINGDOM

UNION OF
EASTERN NATIONS

STAR DRAGON
MOUNTAIN RANGE

MERCENARY
STATE ZEM

KINGDOM OF
FRIEDONIA

NINE HEADED DRAGON
ARCHIPELAGO UNION



UNION OF
EASTERN NATIONS

STAR DRAGON
MOUNTAIN RANGE

Red Dragon City

Lagoon City

AMIDONIA
REGION

MERCENARY
STATE ZEM

REPUBLIC OF TURGIS

**ELFRIEDEN
REGION**



Nelva

Randel

Parnam

Bridge of the
Carrier Hiryuu



Venetinova

NINE HEADED DRAGON
ARCHIPELAGO UNION



Aisha Udgard

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



Juna Doma

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



Roroa Amidonia

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



Naden Delal

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

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.



Poncho Ishizuka Panacotta

The Kingdom of Friedonia's Minister of Agriculture and Forestry. This "God of Food" saved the people with knowledge he gained traveling around the world to eat.



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.



Komain

A girl from the group of refugees driven out by the expansion of the Demon Lord's Domain. Serves Poncho after naturalizing as a citizen of the Kingdom of Friedonia.



Serina

Head maid of Parnam Castle and Liscia's personal attendant. Can't resist the B-grade gourmet dishes that Poncho makes.



Kaede Foxia

A mage attached to the Kingdom of Friedonia's National Defense Force and Ludwin's second-in-command. Is engaged to Hal.



Halbert Magna

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



Kuu Taisei

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



Ruby

Red dragon girl from the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Formed a dragon knight contract with Hal, becoming his second fiancée.



Taru Ozumi

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



Leporina

Kuu's servant and bodyguard. Having followed Kuu from a young age, she is now staying in the Kingdom of Friedonia.



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Prologue: The Countdown to Marriage

— Afternoon on the 2nd day, 2nd month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar
— Parnam Castle —

“Heh heh heh! At last, it is complete.”

It was a clear day, and fairly warm for the winter season. In a curtained, somewhat dim room, I couldn’t help but smile as I looked at a certain work of mine. That was because the thing I’d found time in my busy schedule to slowly work on was finally finished.

Fwahaha! It would be no exaggeration to call this the ultimate weapon.

I’d never lose again.

That was how excited I was about this.

“What’re you grinning about?” Liscia, who was sitting on the bed, said in exasperation.

This was Liscia’s room. Though the layout of the furniture hadn’t changed since the last time I was here, we had recently installed a crib for our children, Cian and Kazuha. It had only been a month since they were born, so the children lived next to Liscia.

I lay down my completed work and turned to sit backwards in my chair, resting my elbows and chin on the backrest as I watched Liscia and the children. It was currently time for breastfeeding.

Liscia’s hair had grown out to the same style as when we’d first met. With her hair tied back at the nape of her neck, Liscia lowered her clothes off one shoulder, and gave milk to our child with a gentle expression on her face. Her beauty was so divine as to make me think she’d been cut from a portrait of the holy mother.

Cian finished, and now it was Kazuha’s turn. The now-full Cian was lying in the crib with his eyes closed.

“Oh, come on, I finally finished them, you know?” I picked up the thing lying at my side and showed it to Liscia. It was two sets of baby clothes. “Well? Don’t you think they came out cute?”

The little hooded outfits were hand-sewn by me.

Upon hearing we were having twins, I’d started coming up with ideas, then taken measurements after they were born to begin work. I was confident with the results.

Incidentally, I’d apparently been grinning the whole time I was working on them, and my other fiancées had found it super off-putting.

When Liscia saw the unusual design of the outfits, she sighed. “Yes, they’re cute, but those are practically costumes. What creatures are they modeled on?”

“Machapin and Zukke.”

“I’ve never heard of them?”

“Well, yeah, they’re fictional creatures from my world.”

Machapin and Zukke were the main characters of a children’s show I’d watched a long time ago.

They were blue and brown with relaxed faces, and when you looked closely, you started to doubt whether or not they were really cute, but they had a strange charm, and many products were released of them.

Setting out to make baby clothes for the twins, the first thing that had come to mind was that full-body costumes based on Machapin and Zukke would be adorable.

“They were modeled on Nessie and a yeti, I think?” I added.

“I get that I don’t get what you’re talking about... You seem to have put a lot of effort in, but they’re babies, they’ll make a mess of them in no time, you know?”

“Well, I did make two more sets, so they’d have a change of clothes.”

“Focus that passion on your administrative duties. You’ll make Hakuya cry, you know?”

“But I refuse.”

“Honestly... Oh.” Feeding must have ended, because Liscia pulled Kazuha away from her and patted her on the back to burp her. Then, carrying Kazuha over to the crib, Liscia laid her down next to Cian. Kazuha soon closed her eyes, mumbling as she went to sleep.

Kazuha tended to get cranky when she was alone, but if Cian was there, she went to sleep easily. Since they were twins, was it reassuring to have her other half next to her?

Liscia and I stood side-by-side looking down at the children, who were sleeping with full bellies and peaceful expressions.

Just looking at them made me feel happy, too. I hoped they’d drink lots of milk, sleep well, and grow up healthy.

Liscia laughed wryly. “You’re grinning again, Souma.”

I must have had quite the smile on my face, but could you blame me? I mean, Liscia’s expression wasn’t that different.

“Oh, come on, aren’t our kids super adorable?” I said.

“A doting parent already? ...Well, I feel the same way, though.”

“I mean, seriously, I’m just so happy.”

“When you say it so directly... that’s kind of embarrassing.” Liscia let out an embarrassed laugh.

Oh, I loved her so much.

“I’m happy, being surrounded with family like this.”

“Hee hee! We’re not married yet, though.”

“Ah! Speaking of marriage... we’ve finally set a day for the ceremony,” I said.

Our wedding ceremony, which had been pushed back repeatedly by Liscia’s pregnancy and the campaign in the Union of Eastern Nations, finally had a date: the first day of the fourth month of the 1,548th year (this year) of the Continental Calendar. That would be the day of my coronation and marriage to Liscia and the others.

When I told her that, Liscia let out a deep, emotional sigh. “In two months, you finally will be the real king, not just the provisional one.”

“Yeah. And you’ll all stop being queen candidates and become queens.”

“It’s been about two years since you came to this world, I suppose. But with all that’s happened in that time, it’s hard to believe it’s only been two years.”

“Yeah... I’m sure the me of back when I was first summoned could never have imagined the situation he’d be in now.”

I had five fiancées, and children already born to one of them. It felt like I’d come to a very far away place.

Liscia giggled. “Hee hee! Come to think of it, Souma, when we first met, you said, ‘I’ll probably quit this whole king gig in a few years, anyway. We can tear up the engagement then,’ or something like that, didn’t you?”

Yeah... I did say that, huh? It felt so long ago now.

“Don’t bring it back up too seriously,” I said. “It’d be a problem if you wanted to call things off at this point.”

“Obviously. But, back then, I thought, ‘If I become his family, could I tie Souma down in this country, I wonder? If I can make the marriage a fait accompli...’”

“Huh, you were thinking things like that?”

She’d been ready to marry me from that early on?

Liscia smiled proudly. “I did, in fact, manage to become your family and make the marriage a fait accompli, so isn’t that impressive?”

“...Yeah, I’m no match for you.” I gave Liscia a light kiss.

It had been embarrassing before, but we could kiss more naturally nowadays. Liscia didn’t look like she minded it, either.

After the kiss, I awkwardly scratched my cheek. “Ahaha... But there’s a problem that’s come up regarding the marriage.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“With my coronation, the marriage with all of you, and the first public appearance of the children happening together, Roroa and her people are

getting worked up."

They apparently wanted to mobilize the entire capital in a massive celebration. It was the sort of idea you'd expect from a girl who loved festivals so much.

Liscia smiled wryly. "That's so like Roroa, but... it sounds like a lot of trouble. What's involved, exactly?"

"The initial plan included holding wedding ceremonies for any of my subordinates who wanted them, too. The House of Arcs and House of Magna were just happening to have weddings planned for around the same time, after all."

The Captain of the Royal Guard, Ludwin, would be marrying Genia the Overscientist, while Hal was planning to marry both Kaede and Ruby. By having the castle run those ceremonies, the hope was to have wedding ceremonies all around the capital for the event.

"We found other subordinates who wanted to take this chance to get married, but... because the event got too large, we don't have enough couples to marry during it. If possible, having marriage ceremonies for those who serve me directly would be convenient, I'm told."

"But marriage isn't that simple, right?" Liscia said, chiding me, and I could only nod.

"Well, yeah. But we have a number of couples who feel like they should be coming together, but aren't, so I think it's up to them to act."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Poncho for one, Ginger for another."

"Ohh..." Liscia nodded, seeming to get what I meant.

Those guys were in a situation where it wouldn't be strange for them to get married at any moment, but they themselves were so awkward that there was no noticeable progress whatsoever.

I want Poncho, in particular, to settle down soon...

The number of marriage meeting requests coming into the castle was starting

to have an adverse effect on the bureaucracy. I understood Poncho's opinion on the matter was important, but still.

Was there really nothing that could be done...?

Chapter 1: The Red Oni is Blue

— In the middle of the 1st month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar —
Magna Domain, Randel —

The city of Randel in the west of the kingdom had been the central city of former General of the Army Georg Carmine's duchy, and it was now the property of Hal's father, Glaive Magna.

It was also the place where the Forbidden Army and the Army had clashed during the previous war.

Granted, the only real battle had been fought at a fortress built nearby, the walls being only lightly bombarded, so the city itself had taken no damage. Now that a year had passed, it had returned to its previous calm.

The House of Magna's mansion was in the castle town at Randel.

This city was ruled by Glaive, so normally he would have been able to live in Georg's former abode, Randel Castle. However, knowing Georg's true intent in what he'd done, Glaive could not bear to reside in the man's castle, instead living in his mansion in town and going to the castle only for work.

This was the mansion that, today, Halbert had brought Kaede and Ruby back to.

In order to reward the soldiers who'd participated in the expedition to the Union of Eastern States, they were taking turns being given long-term leave. Halbert and his partners' return was making use of that leave.

Glaive welcomed the three with open arms. "Ohh, I'm glad to see you home safe. Little Kaede, and Madam Ruby, too."

The "little" for Kaede and the "madam" for Ruby was an indication of how long he had known each of them. While he had known Halbert's childhood friend Kaede since she was a little girl, he was hesitant to be too familiar with the newcomer Ruby.

The two of them gave Glaive a light hug with somewhat awkward smiles.

“We’re back, Sir Glaive,” said Kaede.

“We have returned, Father,” said Ruby. “You needn’t address me so formally, though.”

“Oh, I see. Let me just call you Ruby, then.”

Glaive was usually stern-faced, but now he was all smiles.

“No matter how many accomplishments my son makes on the battlefield, they can’t equal the feat of bringing two wise and beautiful ladies into our house. He’s always been a handful, but I must praise him for taking you two as his wives.”

Kaede giggled. “You’re exaggerating, you know, sir.”

“You’re embarrassing me,” Ruby added.

Seeing his father dote on his future daughters-in-law, Halbert sighed. “I’m back, too, you know?”

“Hm? Oh, Hal. I hear you distinguished yourself in the Union of Eastern Nations, too. You do me proud as a father, but don’t let it go to your head and do anything to put my daughters here in danger.”

“Yeah, I know,” Halbert responded meekly to the lecture.

Glaive found that attitude suspicious coming from Halbert. It felt like he was much less easily fired up than usual. In any other circumstance, he’d have said something like, “Don’t treat me like a kid forever!” and pushed back, but today he was acting awfully willing to listen.

“Did something happen?” Glaive asked.

“...Nothing really. Sorry, I’m tired, so let me go rest in my room.”

With that said, Halbert hoisted his luggage, and walked off towards his room.

When Glaive noticed Kaede and Ruby watching him go with concern, he cleared his throat to try and change the mood.

“Now then, both of you, come along now. My wife is eagerly waiting to discuss your bridal outfits.”

"We understand," said Kaede. "Come on, let's go, Ruby."

"Okay."

Glaive led the two of them to the dressing room where his wife was waiting.

However, when the two passed through the door and he closed it, he glanced in the direction of Halbert's room.



Meanwhile...

Halbert was not resting in his room at all. He had in fact snuck out through the window, taking his two favorite spears to a copse in the mansion's courtyard.

Halbert exhaled deeply in the cold winter air, then began to swing his spears. The sound of their blades cutting the wind, and the clatter of the thin chain that bound them together, echoed through the trees.

Block, thrust, slash... He moved as though he were fighting some unseen foe.

Most likely, he had a specific someone in mind.

However, the way he looked, swinging madly, only made it look like he was trying to cast off some indecision.

There was just one thought in Halbert's heart as he swung.

Is it okay... for me to be doing this?

That was the one thing he considered.

Being given leave, coming home to his family with his fiancées, preparing for the wedding that was soon to come... that whole life separated from fighting put Halbert on edge.

Is it okay for me to be doing this...? Can I beat that guy this way?

His swings became more and more sloppy.

Because he was swinging wildly with more power than he could control, his pivot leg was unstable, and he shook left and right. He was gradually getting winded, too.

His inability to move the way he wanted fed further frustration, and Halbert

stabbed his spears into the ground.

“Hahh... Hahh...” Halbert’s shoulders heaved with each breath.

A shadow approached him. “...Honestly. You’re a sore sight.”

“Huh?!” When Halbert turned to look, Glaive was watching from the shadow of a nearby tree. “Oh, it’s just you, old man...”

“Those ridiculous patterns won’t do you any good as practice. You’re just blowing off steam.”

“Guh...”

Perhaps he had some self-awareness, because Halbert didn’t argue back.

With a single sigh at his son, Glaive approached and clapped a hand on Halbert’s shoulder. “Did you lose to someone in the Union of Eastern Nations?”

“Wha?! I haven’t lost yet! I haven’t lost... but... I met a guy I’m not sure I can beat.” Halbert reflexively argued back hard, but his words gradually weakened and in the end he sat down limply.

Glaive furrowed his brow. “There’s someone out there who could do this to you, the boy who was always so needlessly full of confidence?”

“...Fuuga Haan,” said Halbert. “His strength is on another level, and he’s got overwhelming charisma, too. When I saw what he’d accomplished, I felt myself being drawn in despite myself.”

What was stuck in Halbert’s mind was the lingering illusion of the Fuuga Haan he had seen that day.

“I admired the way he lived as if he was burning, and for a brief moment, I wasn’t even scared of dying. The fact that I’d thought that way made me many times more scared when I thought about it later. Still... at the time, I thought I wanted to use up my life as a warrior. Completely forgetting Kaede and Ruby.”

His father was silent.

Hal pictured the heroic image of Fuuga racing back and forth across the battlefield, leading the temsbock cavalry, who would fearlessly give their lives for him, having no regrets if they died along the way. He had been entranced by

that sight, and though he'd managed to stop, he'd felt himself being pulled in.

"I was never so conceited as to think that there was no one out there stronger than me," Halbert said. "That dark elf by Souma's side—even with me, Kaede, and Young Miss Carla all teaming up on her, she still overwhelmed us. There's always someone better out there."

"Call her Madam Aisha, would you?" Glaive asked. "That's the second primary queen you're talking about."

"That Aisha... Madam Aisha's never going to betray Souma. So, as long as I'm loyal to this country, I'll never see her blade turned on us. But... Fuuga's from another country. He wants to make his name heard across the continent, too. For as long as he holds on to that ambition, eventually he and Souma... he and this country are going to clash."

And he figured when that time came, the ones facing Fuuga would be him and Ruby. Because Fuuga flew around on his flying tiger Durga, Aisha, who didn't have a flying mount, was at a disadvantage.

Durga was so powerful that any attempt to face him with a wyvern would stand no chance.

In the end, only Halbert and Ruby the red dragon were going to be a proper match for him.

"I need to get to a point where I can win against him," Halbert said. "If I don't, I can't protect the country, or Kaede and Ruby. When I think about that... I can't help but rush. I start thinking, 'Is it okay for me to be doing this? If I don't get stronger, I'll never be able to beat him.'"

Getting married and gaining a partner meant having that much more to protect.

In Halbert's case, he'd be gaining two at once, so the responsibility was doubled.

Honestly, I'm amazed that Souma can take this pressure. I'm sincerely impressed.

He was the king, and he would be gaining five at once, after all.

On top of that, he and Liscia now had two children at the same time. In terms of the number of things they had to protect, Halbert had nothing on Souma.

In terms of brawn, the difference between Halbert and Souma was like that of a grown man and a baby, but in terms of mental fortitude, the opposite was true.

“When I think I’ll be marrying Kaede and Ruby soon... I worry more and more about whether I’m all right like this. It’s like... will I be able to protect my wives?”

“...I see.” Glaive, who had crossed his arms, listening in silence, surprisingly grinned. “You were just a whelp before, but now it seems even you’ve finally started to develop some awareness of your responsibility as the family heir.”

“Don’t tease me. I’m trying to have a serious conversation here, okay?”

Halbert glared at him, but Glaive shook his head quietly.

“I’m not teasing you. First of all, what you’re feeling is something everyone feels before getting married. I don’t think the fears you harbor have all that much to do with Fuuga at all, you know?”

“Huh? Fuuga... has nothing to do with it?”

“He may be a contributing factor,” said Glaive. “However, your fundamental concern is whether, once you marry those two, you can defend this family as the head of the household. That’s a worry even an ordinary husband who doesn’t face powerful enemies on the battlefield has to contend with. There’s nothing special about it at all.”

When Glaive laughed it off like that, Halbert felt as if the scales had fallen from his eyes.

Halbert had thought he was afraid of Fuuga, but Glaive was saying a large part of what he feared was uncertainty about having a family. If that was true, it meant that uncertainty had taken the form of the phantom of Fuuga.

“Are you speaking from experience here?” Halbert asked.

“Well... yes, I suppose I am.”

Seeing Glaive turn aside awkwardly, Halbert was dumbfounded. Even stern-

faced Glaive had panicked like him before getting married.

Glaive cleared his throat and told his son, “Ahem... Still, even if it’s not the root of your worries, you truly view this Fuuga fellow as a threat, correct? If you’re so uncertain, rather than do training that will not benefit you here, why not go somewhere you can concentrate and train seriously?”

“Train seriously?”

“Before you take those two as your life partners, it might do you well to spend some time alone in self-contemplation. Fortunately, with the rollout of His Majesty’s transportation network, getting around the country has become much easier. I’ll put the two of them up in the house here, so use your leave to go where you want, get in touch with a variety of people, and train to your heart’s content.”

Training alone. It was an appealing proposal for Halbert. He certainly wasn’t going to be able to focus here. In that case, this would be a good chance to take a fresh look at himself.

“But is that all right?” he worried. “Won’t Kaede and Ruby get mad?”

“Even if they do, you need to tell them yourself. Oh, I’m sure they won’t be happy about it, but they’ll believe in you and send you on your way.”

“Yeah...”

“But be sure you don’t do anything that would sadden those two girls. If you go traipsing through the flower quarters just because it’s the last time you’ll be single, you’ll be eating my and your mother’s iron fists of retribution.”

Glaive sounded desperate somehow as he made that last threat.

“I had no intention of doing anything like that...” Hal said. He paused. “Don’t tell me you did?”

Glaive broke into a cold sweat as he placed a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Remember that some things will not be forgiven as youthful indiscretion. If you anger the ones who are going to be your life partners, expect them to take a complete grip over your married life going forward.”

Hal was silent.

Was this the reason that, despite his mother's gentle demeanor, the House of Magna was under her dominion?

Getting the feeling he'd glimpsed some of the circumstances of his own family, Halbert resolved to be careful himself.

When he returned to the house, Halbert did as Glaive had said, and revealed to Kaede and Ruby that he wanted to leave on a journey of self-improvement. When he did, their response was...

"Well, if that's what you want, Hal, that's how it has to be, you know."

"When you're satisfied, hurry back."

...to accept it with wry smiles.

It seemed they had both been worried about Halbert not acting like himself recently. Halbert was very grateful for their kindness.

And so, borrowing a war horse from Glaive, Halbert set out on a journey alone.

He traveled two days south from Randel on horseback.

Eventually, a deep forest came into sight. It was the self-ruled domain of the dark elves, the God-Protected Forest.

This was Halbert's third time coming to the forest. The first time had been to provide aid during a disaster, and the second to be an escort for Souma when coming to pay his respects to Aisha's father before marrying her.

When Halbert told the dark elf warriors standing guard outside the forest that he wanted to go to the village, he was quickly allowed through because he was a familiar face.

They said they would send out a messenger kui to inform the chief he was coming, so Halbert thanked the guards and proceeded into the forest on horseback.

During the bumpy horse ride, Halbert thought about things.

It sure was bad back then. Like something out of hell...

He felt as though the feeling he'd gotten watching Fuuga was akin to a natural disaster. As if something beyond human knowledge was wielding an incredible power, and he was but a fly before its might.

This forest was the place where Halbert was first made to keenly feel his own powerlessness.

That was exactly why he'd chosen it as the first place to go when taking a fresh look at himself.

Have I changed since then? I'm commanding the Dratroopers under Kaede now, yes. And I've gained a reliable partner and mount in Ruby. I also received an incredible weapon from the Turgish craftswoman Taru. But as for me, myself...

While he was thinking these things, he suddenly came out into an open area.

In the God-Protected Forest, which with its many trees was gloomy even in the middle of the day, this was the one place without any tall trees, the open sky spreading out above him.

It was where the landslide had happened. Because the landslide had mowed down all the tall trees, this was the only open place.

Halbert dismounted to look at that scene.

Back then, the dirt covering the ground had been a dark brown, but now it was blanketed with green, and there were young trees as tall as Halbert.

Sensing someone behind him, Halbert turned around to find a smiling dark elf warrior.

“Why, Sir Halbert, I haven’t seen you since Sir Souma came to visit.”

The young man was Aisha’s father and the chief of the God-Protected Forest, Wodan Udgard.

“It’s been too long, Sir Wodan,” said Halbert. “I’m sorry for coming on such short notice.”

Halbert was sorry to impose, but Wodan spread his arms wide to welcome him.

"Think nothing of it. You've done much for us, so you are always welcome. I'm sure Sur and Velza would have been happy to see you if they were here."

"Are they away now?" Halbert asked.

"Yes. It seems they left the forest on some urgent business a few days ago."

"I see... I'm a little disappointed to hear that."

The twelve-year-old dark elf girl, Velza, had become attached to him after he'd saved her during the disaster. Since he was at the God-Protected Forest anyway, it would have been nice to see her, but if she wasn't here, that was that.

Wodan asked, "So, what is it that brings you to the God-Protected Forest?"

"...I'm in training now. To reevaluate and improve myself."

"Training... is it? I believe I recall hearing you would be wed soon, am I correct, Sir Halbert? At the same time as my daughter is to marry His Majesty."

"Well... yes, but..."

"Hm, it seems you have your reasons. Would you mind telling me them?"

When Wodan asked that with sincerity, Halbert related the sequence of events that put him on this journey. When he spoke about Fuuga, Wodan groaned with a difficult look on his face.

"There is a warrior out there who can even make my Aisha acknowledge his superiority? Honestly... It's a wide world out there, isn't it?"

For Wodan, who knew Aisha's strength better than anyone, it was hard to believe there was a being out there that even she feared. However, when Halbert's tortured expression told him it was the truth, he shuddered.

Halbert sighed and said, "I'm... afraid of that man. If he becomes an enemy someday, will I be able to win against him? Will I be able to protect Kaede and Ruby, my wives-to-be? I overthink that, and it even makes me start to doubt whether I should be marrying them at all."

"Hmm..." Wodan seemed to think about what he'd been told for a little while. The silence was awkward, and while Halbert was waiting for him to please say

something, Wodan suddenly came out with, "That's weakness."

"Huh?!" When directly confronted with his weakness, Halbert gulped.

Seeing the reaction, Wodan realized his poor choice of words and corrected himself. "Ahh, I'm not saying this as a criticism of you. We all carry weakness in us to one degree or another. What is important is whether or not we can face it."

"Face our weakness, you mean?" Halbert asked.

"Yes. You're doing that. Now it's just a matter of whether you can look at the true nature of that weakness. 'Weakness is never just weakness.' These words have been handed down among the warriors of the God-Protected Forest."

Wodan crouched down, running his hand along the moss on the ground.

"In that disaster, the grass and trees were mowed down by dirt and mud. We can say that they were weak when compared to the land. Our power, too, was small and insignificant."

Halbert was silent.

"Yet, look. Now grass covers that same dirt. Grass is knocked over easily, but it has a strength that more than compensates for that. It sprouted just a few days after the disaster, and in mere months, the area was covered in green. Now that about a year has passed, new trees have begun to grow, too. There is a strength in those we think to be weak. The same is true of people."

When Wodan stood up, he turned to face Halbert.

"The heart that knows fear is cautious and averse to recklessness. The heart that wishes to run away is thorough when it comes to securing its own safety. That is why we say in the God-Protected Forest that you should not reject your fear."

"Don't reject fear..."

Was it important to fear Fuuga?

It certainly may be true that caution is important. However, that said, when I stand in front of Fuuga, will I be able to fight? When I fight Fuuga, who I fear, will I be able to defend this country, defend my family?

As Halbert thought it over, Wodan chuckled.

“If you wish to know more of the heart that knows fear, is there not someone close to you who would be well-suited to teach you? Why not try asking them?”

“Huh? Who are you talking about?”

“There is, isn’t there? The one who bears the greatest fear in this country, and the one who must also act the most cowardly. In the capital of Parnam.”

When he said that, it hit Halbert.

It was true, that guy was in a position where he always had to be afraid of something. To fear, to prepare, and despite his weakness, to somehow overcome his terror.

They were supposed to be friends, so it might not be bad to go and talk.

While Halbert was thinking that, Wodan for some reason drew and readied his bow.

“Sir Wodan?” Halbert asked.

“Heh heh! Well, that aside, you came to this forest to train, did you not? How about it? Will you train with the father of the girl they say is the strongest in this country?”

When he put it that way, a warrior like Halbert couldn’t pass it up.

Halbert readied his two favorite spears, grinning. “Sounds good to me. Compared to using my head, this is way more my style.”

“You mustn’t abandon using your head. Even during this battle, keep thinking at all times.”

“Yes, sir!”

While they shared an exchange like instructor and pupil, the two started to fight.

Finally, having carried out combat training with Wodan, Halbert left the God-Protected Forest behind, turning his horse north-northeast.

The next place Halbert arrived was the familiar capital city of Parnam.

When Halbert reached the capital, he immediately headed for the castle.

The guards knew who he was, and he already had clearance from Souma, so despite the suddenness of his visit, he was led to the king's governmental affairs office with only a simple check first.

When Halbert knocked, a listless voice came from the other side. "Come in..."

When he entered the room, the provisional king, Souma, was there on the other side of a mountain of paperwork.

Next to him were a number of bureaucrats and the Black-robed Prime Minister, Hakuya.

When he noticed it was Halbert, Souma, who looked a little exhausted from all his paperwork, cocked his head to the side.

"Hal? That's unusual. You came all this way just to see me?"

"Well, I just wanted to talk with you for a bit... I can come back later if this is a bad time."

He obviously couldn't get in the way of Souma's duties.

Souma let out a big yawn. "Hmm, I was just thinking I needed a break, so sure. Hakuya and everyone else, let's take a short breather."

"Very well." Hakuya bowed and then left the office. The bureaucrats departed, too, leaving only Souma and Halbert in the room together.

"So? You came here because you had something to talk about, right?" Souma said, indicating that he should speak.

Halbert resigned himself and said, "Fuuga's been on my mind ever since we came back from the Union of Eastern Nations."

"Oh, yeah? Have you awakened to the way of the warrior now?"

"Don't be silly... I'm trying to talk seriously here," Halbert said resentfully.

Souma shrugged his shoulders. "It was a joke. He's been on my mind, too. He comes after my newborn children, Liscia and the others, and this mountain of work, though."

"He's pretty far down on the pile."

“What is it about Fuuga?”

Halbert suppressed his desire to keep up appearances, and decided to be forthright. “If we end up fighting Fuuga at some point down the line, I’m the one who’s going to be facing him, right?”

“...You would be, yeah. I think that, probably, the only ones who could put up a proper fight against Fuuga and Durga would be you and Ruby. If Aisha was the one who’d made a contract with Naden, I could have relied on them, but I’m not going to cut it myself. I don’t see the other wyvern cavalry being able to stall him, either.”

Souma crossed his arms and rested them on the back of his chair as he spoke.

“Honestly, I’m worried the soldiers will flee just because Fuuga and Durga charge them. It’d be bad if they ended up doing the, ‘I-It’s Lu Bu!’ thing.”

“Lu Bu? What’s that?”

“...No, never mind. Anyway, in order to prevent that sort of situation, we need a great man of our own who’s just as majestic as Fuuga. Like, ‘If Wei has Zhang Liao, Wu has Gan Ning.’”

“Zhang Liao? Gan Ning?”

“It’s a shame that no one gets my *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* references,” Souma said with a straight face after spouting a bunch of nonsense no one else understood. “For my part, I have high hopes for Hal the Red Oni. I need you to become someone the people will think of when they’re afraid of Fuuga, saying, ‘Well, we have Hal the Red Oni.’ I’m never going to have that sort of flowery presence on the battlefield.”

“Flowery presence? You mean, like, charisma?”

“Yeah. If you and the other vassals could make up for what Fuuga has but I don’t, that would be a huge help. To keep the people from being dragged in by the atmosphere around Fuuga.”

“...” Halbert pursed his lips.

Those expectations would weigh heavily on him. Just when he was thinking he needed to do something about himself, he was having to shoulder the people’s

expectations, too. He would be expected to win against an opponent he didn't know for certain he could best. By all of the people, too. That was an incredible burden.

Please... Don't make me carry that...

Then, Souma stood up and clapped Halbert on the shoulder.

"So, Halbert, I'm counting on you." With no way to know what Halbert was feeling, Souma said, "If Fuuga charges us, hold him off for a minute at least, would you?"

"...Huh?" Halbert blinked. "Is just a minute okay?"

"Hey, if you can last five, ten minutes, or even longer, hell, even win, that'd be a great help, but I can't expect too much, can I? Battles can be decided by the luck of the moment. Nothing is absolute."

"Well... Yeah, I guess." Now Halbert felt confused.

Souma scratched his head. "Even Fuuga and Durga can't possibly take on the whole of the National Air Defense Force. Even if no one can take him on one-on-one, if we surround him and keep beating on him, he should concede."

"Surround him and beat on him... Huh? Is it okay to do that?"

"He's not a guy we can be picky about how we beat. The issue is if we can set it up or not. In the previous war, we had a situation where we couldn't stop Gaius's charge and things got dicey, after all. Wyvern cavalry using our treasure, the Little Susumu Mark V Light" (a lightweight Maxwell-type propulsion device) "are good at hit-and-run attacks, but they aren't suited to pinning an enemy down. That's why, in order to encircle Fuuga, I want you and Ruby to do your best holding him in place."

Halbert was dumbfounded.

Souma had felt just as threatened by Fuuga, but he'd been thinking about it in an entirely different way.

Halbert had thought they needed a single person who could defeat the man, but Souma had been thinking of a way to win using a large group that included Halbert.

Because of Souma's weakness, he wasn't picky about the methods he chose to survive.

Halbert felt the scales falling from his eyes.

"I don't necessarily need to beat Fuuga?"

"I told you, didn't I? If you can, nothing would be better. But don't push yourself too hard. In order to convince the people you're a great man who's Fuuga's equal, the first priority is for you to survive. That sort of heroic figure will provide emotional support to the people. That's why, no matter how dirty it is, you and Ruby have to survive together."

"You make it sound so simple," Halbert said slowly.

Standing in front of Fuuga and surviving wasn't going to be easy.

However, it would be a lot easier than being expected to beat him. Just for that... he felt it was worth having come here today.

Halbert smiled a little and waved his hand. "Thanks for hearing me out. Well, I'm gonna head off now."

"Hmm, you're done already? Wait, your wedding's close, too, isn't it? Should you really be hanging around here?"

Halbert laughed. "I'm on the last training retreat I'll get to take as a single man. I've got to become strong enough to fight equally with Fuuga thanks to a certain king, after all."

He said that a little spitefully.



It happened while Halbert was on a journey to train and reevaluate himself.

Kaede and Ruby, having seen him off on his journey, were staying at the House of Magna's mansion in Randel. Because the extended leave they'd been granted was about a month long, they had been using it to relax and wash off the grime of the campaign trail.

And today, in the House of Magna's dressing room, Ruby was trying on the wedding dress she would wear at the ceremony.

"W-Well, what do you think?" Ruby asked, looking down at her pure white dress. It was a simple, clean color, and the contrast with Ruby's blazing red hair made her look very pretty.

When a dragon transformed into human form, their clothing was made of their transformed scales, and it wasn't possible to change them to differ from their body color. So, red for Ruby, and black for Naden.

That meant that to put on the pure white dress she was wearing now, Ruby had temporarily made her scale clothing disappear and become naked before putting on the prepared dress.

Using this method, the dragon race could partake in fashion. But, unlike the outfits made of their own scales that transformed with their bodies, ordinary clothing would be torn to shreds when they transformed into dragon form. So if they wanted to transform, it would require getting naked.

Ruby spun around in front of the mirror, letting out a sigh of delight. "What a lovely dress..."

"Hee hee, it really looks good on you," Halbert's mother Elba said, pressing a hand to her cheek as she looked at Ruby's dress.

Kaede stood at her side, smiling. "It really does suit you, you know, Ruby."

Ruby smiled bashfully. "Thanks, Kaede."

Elba nodded in satisfaction. "Because our hair colors are so close, it feels like you're my real daughter, seeing you like this. I was grateful just to have Kaede, who I've known since she was young, come marry into our family, but to have you, too, Ruby... My boy is so blessed."

"N-No, that's not true," Ruby said quickly.

"Yes, it is. Honestly... How could that boy leave his adorable brides to go off traveling by himself? Glaive's just as bad, too, getting him fired up to do it. When he gets back, make sure Halbert does plenty of what the two of you want from him. You have my permission."

"Ahaha... We'll do just that, you know," Kaede replied with wry smile.

Incidentally, Glaive had gotten an earful from Elba when she'd learned the

reason Halbert had left on his journey.

"It was fine to hear him out, but sending him on a journey was going too far. Think of those two poor girls who were left behind! You need to understand women's feelings more!" And so on, and so on.

Kaede and Ruby had interceded saying, "He did it with our permission," mollifying Elba, but Glaive had been forbidden contact with his two daughters-in-law-to-be for a while as punishment.

The punishment was quite a shock to him, apparently, so Glaive was staying shut up in his room and sulking.

Kaede smiled wryly, remembering that fact.

As Elba pinched the sleeve of the wedding dress Ruby was wearing, she narrowed her eyes. "Let me tell you about this dress. It's the one I wore when I came to marry into the House of Magna, you know."

"Huh?! It is?!"

Elba giggled. "Yes. I've never had a daughter, so I was wondering when it would ever see the light of day again. I'm sure the dress is happy to have you wear it."

"I-Is it okay to let me wear something so important?! R-Rather than me, shouldn't the head wife, Kaede, be the one to wear it?!"

Kaede smiled wryly. "In the House of Foxia, we have our own garments for these sorts of wedding ceremonies, you know. My elder brother has already inherited the house, but there is a traditional outfit our women are supposed to wear. We're a family that originally drifted here from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, you see."

The wedding outfit used by the House of Foxia was a pure white shiromuku, a colorful iro-uchikake, and a long-sleeved hikifurisode, closely resembling the Japanese style wedding dresses of Souma's world. The House of Foxia wanted Kaede to wear that traditional dress, so she wouldn't be able to wear Elba's dress.

"That's why I'm leaving the dress to you, Ruby," Kaede said.

"I see... But it sounds like your kimono will be lovely, too." Ruby was delighted by the description of it.

"Hee hee, it's going to be pretty," Kaede giggled. "But Aunt Elba's dress is lovely, too. I'd have liked to wear it."

"Oh, then why don't you wear both?" Elba clapped her hands as if she'd come up with a brilliant idea. "You're both about the same height, so why not trade outfits halfway through the banquet? I'll get permission from the House of Foxia."

"I think that would be lovely, but... recently, I feel like Ruby's chest has been getting larger," Kaede sighed, glancing at it.

"D-Don't look at me like that!" Ruby hurriedly brought her arms up to cover it.

A dragon's human form started out androgynous, but then changed to the sex which matched that of their partner. Ruby's body was becoming more and more feminine, and Pai, whose knight had been a woman, was becoming a man.

That said, Naden, who had contracted with Souma, was as puny as ever, so there was individual variation in how those changes manifested.

As Kaede eyed Ruby's chest with jealousy, Elba smiled wryly. "Well, you'll just have to do what you can with padding there."

"The world is unfair, you know," Kaede complained.

"If Naden heard you complaining with your breast size, I think she'd snap..." Ruby commented.

While the three of them were chatting, one of the servants entered the room with a knock.

"My lady, there is a person who says they wish to meet with the three of you," he told them.

It turned out the person in question wanted to see Kaede and Ruby as well, so Elba had that person seen through to this room. It turned out to be a young man, accompanied by a dark elf girl of about twelve.

"Oh?" Ruby said. "If I recall, you two were..."

The dark elf girl bowed her head. “It’s been too long, Lady Ruby. And it’s a pleasure to meet you, madam. I am Velza, daughter of Sur, of the God-Protected Forest.”

“Ahh, so you’re Velza!” Elba said. “I’ve heard about you from Hal. If I recall, you were the girl Hal saved during that disaster.”

Velza gave an energetic response. “Yes! I truly must thank you for what he did.”

“Hee hee, what an energetic and adorable girl you are,” Elba said fondly.

“So, what have you come for today?” Ruby asked. “What is your business here, Sir Sur?”

Sur smiled wryly and shook his head. “Oh, no, I’m just here accompanying my daughter...”

Velza stared hard at Kaede. “Fox ears... Would you happen to be the one who will become Lord Hal’s head wife, Lady Kaede?”

“Huh? Uh... yes, I am. Why do you know my name?”

“I heard about you before when Lord Hal and Lady Ruby came to visit the God-Protected Forest. I see... So you’re Lady Kaede.”

Velza suddenly dropped to one knee, lowering her head.

“I have come today with a request!”

“A... a request?!” Kaede yelped. “Of m-me?!”

“Yes! I... I want...” Velza raised her face, full of determination, looked straight at Kaede, and said, “I want to serve Lord Hal! Please, make me a retainer of the House of Magna!”

It was decided they should talk this over calmly. After Ruby got changed, they moved to the reception room and listened to Velza speak.

Velza brought a hand to her chest and explained her reasoning. “Lord Hal saved my life. I wish to repay that debt, and to swear loyalty to Lord Hal. We dark elves pride ourselves on remaining by the side of those we swear our loyalty to and defending them until the day we die. So, please, place me at your

side."

"Now that you mention it... Madam Aisha did say something like that," Kaede said, recalling Souma's second primary queen to be.

If she remembered correctly, the reason Aisha had become Souma's self-imposed bodyguard was because she'd sworn loyalty to him.

Seeing the seriousness in Velza's eyes, Kaede and Ruby were taken aback, and Elba smiled, saying things like, "Oh my, oh my," and, "Ah, to be so young again."

Kaede broke into a cold sweat as she asked, "But, in that case, shouldn't you be asking Hal directly?"

"When he came to the God-Protected Forest before, I did tell him subtly. However, Lord Hal thought it was a childish joke, and he wouldn't take me seriously. He would only say, 'When you get bigger.'"

That dense oaf! Kaede and Ruby thought simultaneously.

There was a faint romantic yearning visible through Velza's words. Their fiancé's complete inability to understand how serious the girl was gave both of them headaches.

Velza kept on going. "You will be marrying Lord Hal soon, correct? That being the case, I wanted you, who will be his wives, to know my intention in advance. And I want your permission. When I am bigger, please, allow me to be at Lord Hal's side."

Velza stared straight into Kaede's eyes. Her seriousness was apparent.

Ruby looked at Elba, but this time she only smiled, saying nothing. It seemed she intended to leave this to Kaede and Ruby.

Meanwhile, Kaede stared probingly at Velza. There was a brief silence, and Ruby, who could no longer handle the stress in the air, cried out and clutched her head.

"Augh! What is with this atmosphere? ...What do you think, Kaede?"

Kaede was silent.

She looked into Velza's eyes and gently spoke. "You said you wish to serve Hal

as a retainer of House Magna, but will you really be satisfied with just that?"

"That's..." Velza was suddenly at a loss for words.

Kaede didn't take her eyes off her.

Velza, realizing she couldn't hide the rest, honestly confessed her own feelings. "...No. That is the bare minimum, the least of my wishes I want granted. If Lord Hal has no intention of going further, I want to stay at his side as a retainer. However... in truth... if at all possible..."

Velza worked up the courage to continue.

"If at all possible, I would like to be Lord Hal's wife. I wish to be at his side as his wife."

"I thought as much. That's what it comes down to, then." Kaede sighed. From what she'd heard so far, she'd anticipated this.

For this girl, Halbert, who had rescued her from the sand and dirt, was a kind of prince on a white horse. In her mind, he probably looked three times cooler than he usually did.

If I were in her position, I think I'd have fallen for him, too, Kaede thought. Honestly, you know. That Hal. When he's cool once in a while, he really gets a girl going.

While complaining in her head about her absent fiancé, Kaede thought hard.

She'd learned through Aisha that if a dark elf swore her loyalty to someone, they would serve them until death did they part. If she rejected Velza here, that might only inflame her passion further.

In addition, having a tie to the dark elves, who because of their previous insular tendencies had had few exchanges with the outside world, would not be a bad thing for the House of Magna.

It was a hard offer for Kaede, who was marrying into the House of Magna as the head wife, to refuse.

Hal has to be the one to make the final decision, but I'll have to be prepared to accept her if it comes to that, Kaede decided. It's a complicated feeling, but... I'll need her to become someone deserving of my acceptance.

Kaede resolved herself and then spoke. "Velza."

"Y-Yes?!"

"How old are you now?"

"Twelve."

"I see... In that case, I would like to impose one condition."

"...What might that be?" Velza asked hesitantly.

"That you attend school in the capital Parnam beginning this spring, and you must successfully graduate."

"Sch-School?"

While Velza was blinking, Kaede had taken on an extremely serious expression.

"You wish to be of help to Hal, yes? I am aware that members of the dark elf race are excellent warriors. I think you have high potential as a martial artist. However, I am sure Hal will be flying to the front lines on Ruby's back. This is not a place someone can accompany him half-heartedly, and I can imagine many scenarios where fighting alongside him would instead be a hindrance."

Velza was silent.

"Thus, it will be important for you to provide support from the rear. If you are to be his partner, I want for you to master academics, and to be someone who can support Hal from off of the battlefield."

"To support Hal... That's what going to school is for?" Velza asked.

Kaede nodded. "I will leave the ultimate decision to Hal, but if you can graduate from either the Royal Academy or the Officers' Academy, I will respect your intentions."

Elba had been watching in silence, but now she spoke. "Kaede, are you all right with that?"

"There's no helping it." Kaede shrugged. "There is currently high demand for talented people in the kingdom. It will take at least four years to graduate from either school. If she learns academics, and still feels the same way four years

from now, I have no reason not to welcome her.”

“Honestly... you’re too good for Hal, you know that, Kaede?” Elba said, smiling.

Kaede gave her an uncomfortable smile in return.

Velza, who had taken on a thoughtful look after hearing the condition, nodded firmly. “Very well. I wish to learn in the capital, and four years hence, I will appear before Lord Hal as a lady befitting of the House of Magna. When that time comes, I will be in your care.”

Velza bowed deeply to Kaede, Elba, and Ruby. Then, in a hurry to enroll, she dragged Sur off and they left.

After seeing them off, Ruby asked Kaede, “Are you thinking, with four years, she’s bound to change her mind?”

“From what I’ve seen of Aisha... I don’t think that’s going to happen. When the time comes, let’s resolve ourselves to welcome her warmly.”

“Okay,” Ruby said slowly. “But was it really all right for us to discuss this without Hal?”

“This is his own fault for being so damn cool. But... if I think about it, that girl wanted to become his subordinate. That means he’ll have a wife among his superiors, his coworkers” (his mount) “and his subordinates.”

“That sounds... difficult. I feel a little sorry for him.”

Kaede laughed happily. “He’ll have to suck it up. We’re going to work together from above him, beside him, and below him to see to it that, no matter how high he rises, no more girls fall for Hal.”

“Count me in on that.”

The first and second wife exchanged a firm handshake.

“That boy’s such a troublemaker,” Elba said, still smiling.



Around the same time...

“Achoo!” Halbert sneezed.

Having met Souma in Parnam, Halbert was heading further east. Conveniently, there had been a unit heading to the island where the island carrier *Hiryuu* was stopped, so he had left his horse at the castle and taken a ride with them.

Speaking to Souma had done a lot to lessen his fear of Fuuga.

But that doesn't mean I can be incautious. I have to protect Kaede and Ruby, after all.

Pondering that, Halbert had decided to continue his voyage to reevaluate himself.

And thinking about where best to train, he'd figured it had to be the *Hiryuu*, the home base of the Dratroopers he was the commander of.

Upon reaching the *Hiryuu*, he immediately headed to where the members of the Dratroopers were training.

"Hm? Commander?" one of them asked.

"Weren't you on leave with Young Miss Kaede?"

"Didn't you say you had a wedding to prepare for?"

Halbert was supposed to be on leave at home with his fiancées, so the unit members looked at him like they'd seen a ghost.

With a wry smile at their befuddled looks, Halbert shouldered his spears and casually said, "Well, you know, the home life was a little boring, so I came in to get a little exercise."

"To get some exercise? Randel's on the west side of the kingdom, isn't it? This island's in the far east, you know? Just how far did you come just to get some exercise?"

Halbert's strained excuse had obviously not worked.

One of the men even said, "Oho! I see! Commander, you got scared, didn't you? I understand the feeling, but that's not gonna fly, sir. If you start mistreating your wives now, they're going to hold that over your head for life, you know?" The stubble-faced middle-aged soldier nodded sagely.

He might have been speaking from experience, but he was a little off the mark.

Halbert smiled wryly, poking the soldier lightly in the chest with the head of his sheathed spear.

“I have permission, don’t you worry. Now then, you lot, I hope you haven’t been slacking off while Kaede and I are away, right? Just because we’ve been set free from the battles in the Union of Eastern Nations doesn’t mean I’m going to let you relax forever.”

“Don’t underestimate us, sir,” one of the soldiers who was younger than Halbert said with a serious look on his face. He was the newest member of the Dratroopers, being only eighteen, and the mission to reinforce the Union of Eastern Nations had been his first campaign. “In the battle at Lasta, we were forced to reevaluate our understanding of what sort of situations our unit will be deployed into. We descended from far above to allies who were fighting at a disadvantage, then fought hard to open a way through the middle of the enemy. No one would slack off in their training after going through a battle like that one.”

“...You have a point.”

That was just how close the Battle of Lasta had been.

There had been few allies against the enemy’s overwhelming numbers. And though the elite Dratroopers had been sent ahead, they’d been forced to fight at a disadvantage. If the wyvern cavalry hadn’t brought gunpowder casks for aerial bombardment, Halbert shuddered to think what might have happened.

He faced his unit and sincerely lowered his head. “Sorry. Forget what I just said.”

“Oh, no! I’m the one who was being presumptuous!” the young Dratrooper protested.

“Ha ha ha! You can really hold your own now, kid,” another one laughed. “Did that first night” (it was a night battle) “make a man of ya?”

“Whoa, don’t say that so vulgarly!”

The middle-aged soldier put an arm around the younger one's shoulders, and the other unit members were laughing, too. The harmonious scene made Halbert smile.

Souma had said Halbert didn't necessarily have to beat Fuuga. That meant not relying on his own personal martial prowess, but to surpass Fuuga as a unit, an army, or a country.

Halbert had such reliable comrades. He wouldn't be fighting alone.

Halbert felt his hesitation clearing up.

Crossing his two spears, he slid them along each other to make noise as he turned to his unit to say, "Okay, I came all this way. That's enough idle banter. It's time to train!"

""""Yes, sir!"""

And so, Halbert sweated alongside the members of the Dratroopers.

About two hours later, Halbert, having finished his training, stood in front of a hand-pump well (though, this being a carrier, it was attached to a water tank), naked from the waist up, pouring water over his head.

When he was washing the sweat of training from that manly body and catching his breath, someone who was passing by called out to him.

"You! Are you Commander Halbert of the Dratroopers?"

"Huh?"

When Halbert turned in response to the sudden question, the person standing there was Castor, the captain of this island carrier, the *Hiryuu*.

The Dratroopers were a land combat force, so, strictly speaking, he belonged to a different organization than Castor, but as long as he was aboard the *Hiryuu*, Captain Castor was effectively the highest in rank.

Halbert hurried to salute. "Ah! Captain, pardon me!"

"No need to be so stiff," Castor said. "I heard you were on leave, though?"

"Y-Yes. I am, but, um... stuff happened..."

Everyone kept pointing out that same thing, and Halbert was getting tired of explaining, so he tried to laugh it off.

Castor, sensing he didn't want to talk about it, simply said, "Hmm..." with a gesture as though he were thinking. "So, you're free now, then?"

"Huh? Err, well, yeah."

Castor grinned. "Then will you join me after this?"

Castor brought Halbert to his private room, which was separate from the captain's room, and had him sit on the sofa. Meanwhile, he took a bottle of wine from the shelf, a glass, as well as crackers and nuts as a snack.

"My second-in-command is on leave, too, you see," Castor explained. "I've been bored."

It seemed that Halbert was being asked to join him in drinking.

Castor sat down on the opposite sofa and asked, "Commander Halbert... Ah, can I just call you Halbert? How are you with alcohol, Halbert? Strong, or weak?"

"Huh? Uh, normal, I guess."

Castor gave a satisfied nod. "I see. Well, normal is best. My mother-in-law is such a heavy drinker, the mornings after I'm forced to join her are rough."

"O-Oh... Is that right?"

Halbert blinked as Castor poured wine into the glass.

Why was he here drinking with one of the former three dukes, and the current captain of the *Hiryuu*?

If you consider our positions... Wait, if I'm going to say that, the way I treat Souma like a buddy is even more of a problem.

The House of Magna was by no means a small house, but even considering that, Halbert seemed fated to be tied to the important figures of this country. That was no doubt a headache for Kaede.

If he thought back, the time Souma and the others had overheard him and

Kaede arguing in the singing cafe Lorelei may have been when his luck had run out (?).

Castor tilted back his glass and said, “I envy those who can go home at times like this. I know it’s my just desserts, but... I’m not able to return to my home in Red Dragon City. It would cause problems for Accela and Carl.”

Even though he’d had a good reason, Castor had rebelled against Souma, and for that, his family name had been taken from him, and he was now in Excel’s custody. He had been forbidden from meeting his young son who was allowed to inherit the family name in Red Dragon City, as well as his wife, Accela, who was effectively the one managing things.

Castor agreed that the punishment was only natural, but being unable to see his wife and child still made him feel lonely.

Seeing Castor’s pain, Halbert, who had once thought about siding with the former General of the Army, Georg Carmine, in an attempt to make a name for himself, couldn’t help but sympathize.

He had a question he wanted to ask Castor, who was forced to live away from his family.

“Captain... how did you feel when you got married? When you took on a new family?”

“Hm? What’s this about, so suddenly?”

“Well, I’m getting married soon myself, you see.”

“Ohh, now that you mention it, you are. To the fox-eared girl and the red dragon girl, right?” Castor smirked. “Oho! If you’re here, then does that mean you got scared of getting married?”

Halbert only smiled wryly, neither confirming nor denying, because he was partially correct.

Castor cackled. “Oh, I envy your youth. I felt much the same when I married Accela.”

“Huh? You, too, captain?”

“Did you think I wasn’t thinking anything at all?” Castor said teasingly, then

tilted back his drink. “Well, I’m not much of a thinker or a worrier, but... that time, I stupidly started thinking about all sorts of things. Like whether I could protect Accela or the children who would be born to us.”

Halbert was silent.

He was surprised that Castor had thought the same sorts of things he was. Maybe, no matter the time or place, the things men thought about before marriage were the same.

“So, once you were married, what then?” Halbert asked.

Castor downed the rest of his drink and laughed awkwardly. “Having gone into marriage with all that ardor... Well, I soon saw that I’d been misunderstanding the situation.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“The woman I was wanting to defend was more flexible and resilient than I’d given her credit for. Even more than I was, maybe. There were plenty of times I thought I was protecting her when the opposite was true.”

Castor poured himself another glass.

“Think about it. Even if I did it to stay true to my convictions, I broke the House of Vargas apart. But when I sent Accela to be with Duchess Excel, she told me, ‘Please, do what you want,’ and supported me. Then, after the war, she protected the House of Vargas. Furthermore, even though I cut my ties, she still behaves as my wife, sending letters telling me about everything that’s happened recently. Honestly... she’s so strong.”

Halbert was silent.

“How about you, Halbert?” Castor asked. “Are the people that you want to protect so weak that you need to worry about protecting them?”

Halbert closed his eyes and considered his fiancées.

Kaede was his childhood friend. She’d been timid long ago, always quick to hide in Halbert’s shadow. He’d thought he needed to protect her.

But at some point, their positions had changed. She was now his superior, and he fought under her command.

She had a strong core that allowed her to tell him off and make him stop when he tried to go the wrong way, too.

There were still situations where Halbert would need to protect her, but she wasn't a little girl who needed protecting all the time.

Ruby, meanwhile, was both an adorable girl and a powerful red dragon.

If Ruby got into a fight in dragon form, she could burn her enemies to a crisp from far away with a fire attack. She was a strong girl, no objections there. However, he knew she could be emotionally vulnerable. He hadn't forgotten her wounded eyes from when they first met.

Kaede was a girl who wasn't just weak; she had strengths, too. And Ruby was a girl who wasn't just strong; she had weaknesses, too.

When he thought of the two of them, Halbert realized something.

Huh? Neither of them are girls that need constant defending?

Thinking back on it, neither was so weak that he needed to worry about whether he could protect them or not.

In fact, because he was agonizing over it like this, despite how busy they were before the wedding, they'd sent him off out of necessity.

If anything, Halbert was the one being protected here.

Misunderstanding things... He's right.

With this, Halbert felt like all his worries had fallen away.

His unease about Fuuga had been assuaged by talking to Souma, and Castor had helped him realize that his concern over if he could protect the others was a misunderstanding of the situation.

It seemed he hadn't needed to worry about any of the things he'd been agonizing over.

Halbert smiled wryly. "...Captain?"

"What is it?"

"Is marriage... Is having a wife a good thing?"

Castor bashfully laughed. “Well, of course it’s good. She can be a bit of a nag at times, though. I was just telling you about Accela, but in her letters, she’s always writing, ‘You aren’t drinking too much, are you?’ and ‘Are you taking care of your appearance?’ It makes me want to say, ‘Who are you, my mom?’”

“Isn’t that nice, though?” Halbert asked. “It means she loves you, right?”

“I get that, but it’s exhausting to be asked over and over. Well, not having to hear her nagging may be one benefit of not being able to go back home.”

Just as Castor said that... it happened.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Hm? I wasn’t expecting anyone today.” Castor inclined his head towards the door. “Come in!”

The door was silent, and no one showed any sign of entering.

Castor stood up, suspicious, and went to open the door...

“Ah?!” he cried.

He shut that door so fast there was a loud, echoing bang. Whatever he had seen on the other side, Castor was sweating buckets.

“Um, was it not a guest?” Halbert asked, dubious about what was happening, but Castor didn’t answer.

While Halbert was wondering what was up, this time, the door opened on its own.

“Geez,” a woman said indignantly. “Closing the door on me so suddenly? Isn’t that awful of you?”

The person saying that was a lone woman.

She was a blue-haired beauty with horns and a tail. Halbert thought it was Duchess Walter for a moment, but on closer examination, there were some details that were off.

First of all, Duchess Walter’s horns were small antlers, while this woman’s were singular horns. On top of that, she had a pair of dragon wings on her back that Duchess Walter didn’t.

Looking at her, Castor finally managed to force himself to respond. “A-Accela?! Why are you here?!”

The blue-haired beauty was Excel’s daughter and Castor’s wife, Accela.

She was a daughter born to Excel and her second husband, who had also been a dragonewt (but he’d fallen sick and died at an age that was young for a dragonewt).

Because of that, despite her looks being similar to Excel’s, she had the features of a dragonewt.

Accela turned what looked like a plastered-on smile towards Castor. “Oh, my? Is it strange for a wife to come visit her husband?”

“Ah! No, we cut ties to avoid you being responsible by association, so you’re not my wife anymore, are you?”

“You were judged, weren’t you? So where’s the harm in us restoring our ties?”

“That’s not the issue... I mean, I’m forbidden from coming into contact with you or Carl, you know?!”

Accela giggled. “Yes, you can’t make contact from your end. However, there’s no issue with me coming to visit you.”

“Huh?! Is that how it works?!”

“Remember, you did a brilliant job capturing a ship from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, didn’t you? His Majesty was quite pleased to be able to find out what’s happening in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, and in recognition of your meritorious deed, he gave permission for me to come visit you.”

“H-He did...? I’m glad to see you, Accela.”

Castor tried to keep up appearances by saying that, but Accela immediately noticed the half-drunk bottle of wine lying out on the table.

Her eyes narrowed, and she stared at Castor’s face up close. “Drinking while the sun’s still high, are we? Did I not tell you, repeatedly, in my letters to practice moderation and take care of your health?”

"Th-That's... I was doing it to deepen bonds with my subordinate here."

"Deepening your bonds with your men," Accela said sardonically. "Yes, there was something about that in Mother's letters. You and your men have been frequenting an establishment where you can drink with women, she said. What exactly is that about, may I ask?"

"That's also... um... I couldn't refuse." Unable to bear Accela's gaze, Castor tried to avert his eyes, but Accela caught his face with her hands and snapped it back to facing her.

"Look me in the eye and answer me. You haven't done anything you'd have to feel guilty about, have you?"

"No, no! ...I may have looked a little, but I haven't done a thing I'd have to feel bad about you finding out about!"

"You don't seem to be lying." Accela, seemingly satisfied with that answer, released Castor... only to then pull him in hard for a kiss.

Castor was shocked at first, but then eventually wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close to him.

They shared a kiss so passionate that Halbert, who was forced to watch, turned a bright shade of red.

When Accela eventually moved her face away, there was a soft smile on her lips. "I'm glad to see you again, Castor."

"...Me, too, Accela."

Castor had a natural smile on now. There was a warm atmosphere around them.

Halbert, who had been watching them with a dumbfounded look on his face, came back to his senses, and realized he was getting in the way. He crept along the wall to the door, closing it behind them as he left so as not to disturb them.

"Now, since I've come all this way, shall I clean your room for you?" Accela asked. "You don't have laundry piling up, do you? Your subordinates won't like you if your quarters are gross, you know?"

"H-Hey. Don't mess with my desk too much! I'll bring out the laundry myself,

okay?"

He could hear that sort of husband and wife conversation from the other side of the door. It was clear he should give them some alone time.

Halbert moved away from the door, walking off down the corridor.

Watching the two of them, it kind of makes me want to go see Kaede and Ruby.

Walking faster and faster, he eventually broke into a run.

Halbert wasn't confused anymore.

I'm going back! To those two!

Halbert's journey ended, and he returned to Randel, where the people he loved were waiting.

Chapter 2: Ginger Wipes It All Away

— 3rd day, 2nd month, 1548th year, Continental Calendar — Parnam Castle

On this cold day, Ginger Camus, the principal of Ginger's Vocational School, where various fields were studied academically in the castle town, was having a meeting with Souma.

This was to report on a certain study from the music department which had opened just the other day.

In the governmental affairs office, Ginger sat on the sofa, anxiously waiting for Souma to finish looking through the materials he had submitted.

The only sound in the room they were alone in was the flipping of pages.

Eventually Souma, who had been intently reading the research documents, asked Ginger a number of questions. Ginger answered them.

"Hmm," Souma groaned. "I see. That's fascinating. It's an interesting thing you've focused on, but... I can't say whether it's of any practical use to me or not. I'll want to get opinions from a singer like Juna and a specialist on magic."

"Why, yes," said Ginger. "I think that would be for the best."

"So, in the near future, could I ask you come back with the president of this 'Society for the Study of Work Songs'? I'll bring together some people who can make a decision, too."

"Understood." Ginger rose and bowed his head.

He hadn't been able to get an instant answer, but this was a step forward. He'd be able to bring back good news to the researchers of the school.

While Ginger was feeling relieved, Souma lay the papers down beside him and said, "By the way, on a different topic... Ginger."

"Y-Yes. What is it?"

“Don’t you have any plans to marry Sandria?”

For a moment, Ginger stared blankly back, unable to process what he’d heard. Then, as he gradually understood Souma’s words, the blood rose to his head, and he quickly turned red.

“Whuh?! What’s this, out of nowhere?!”

“Oh, well, you know how I’m holding my wedding together with the coronation in April?” asked Souma. “We’re planning to hold weddings around the capital for any of my retainers who want to participate. I’m looking for retainers who are interested, you see.”

“Y-Yes... I’ve heard.”

“When I first met you two, she was saying, ‘I don’t want to let you go,’ and ‘Please, keep me at your side,’ so I thought you’d be talking marriage in no time, but... I haven’t heard of any progress since,” Souma said with a doubtful look on his face. “I wanted to ask if you intended to get married or not.”

Ginger struggled to find the words to respond.

Honestly, Ginger wanted to marry Sandria, too.

They had overcome their positions as slave and master from his slave trader days, and worked together to find buyers for the slaves who would treat them well.

Then, even after Sandria was set free from slavery and Ginger was appointed to be the head of the training facility which came before the vocational school, Sandria had continued to support him.

He felt their bond was deepening. Ginger could feel that Sandria cared as much for him as he did for her, and that wasn’t just his ego speaking.

“The truth is... I’ve told her I’d like her to marry me before,” Ginger admitted.

Souma’s eyes widened. “What, so you’ve proposed already? What was her response?”

“I will have to decline for now’... she said.”

“Huh? She refused?! Oh, but with a ‘for now,’ huh... ‘For now’?”

Ginger nodded. If she was saying “for now,” then that meant she wasn’t entirely unwilling to consider it. That was a way of saying it might be possible she would accept later.

While Souma cocked his head to the side, unable to figure out Sandria’s true intentions, Ginger smiled wryly and explained, “San says she can’t be my first wife.”

Specifically, Sandria had told him this, with a slightly troubled look: *“I am very happy to hear that. I love you, too, Lord Ginger. However, I am a former slave, and have no ties to my family. If I think of the House of Camus, which will continue to rise under King Souma, you should take the daughter of an influential family to be your wife. If you just keep me by your side as a mistress after that, I would not mind.”*

It seemed she was declining solely in the interest of the House of Camus.

Because she cared for Ginger, she didn’t want to become a fitter to him.

It was a feeling that came from her all-too-pure affection for him, so it was hard to reject it. The fact that she wanted him to keep her by his side, even as a mistress, meant that, in her own way, she was accepting his proposal.

Ginger clutched his head. “Honestly, I don’t know what to do. She accepted my feelings, but not in the way I would have wanted. I think she would accept marrying me if she was the second wife, but it would be rude to both San and the other person if I arranged another political marriage just so she would marry me.”

“Well, it seems like a common concern in noble society,” Souma said. “I can’t say her thinking is out of line with the times we’re living in, but... it must be a complicated feeling for you.”

Souma brought a hand to his chin, a pensive look on his face.

Souma had only experienced an unorthodox romance in which he deepened his bond with Liscia and the others after already getting engaged to them, but it wasn’t wrong to get married because of mutual affection.

When he saw Ginger and Sandria who loved each other, but were at cross purposes, Souma couldn’t just leave them be.

"If status is the concern, why don't I have some house adopt Sandria first? I'm sure there are many houses that would want ties to the House of Camus, and with a word from the royal house, things would move quickly."

"...No, I don't think that's the issue." Ginger silently shook his head. "I think, probably, San has a complex about having been a slave who was sold by her family. She looks down on herself, thinking she's not good enough for me."

"That makes sense, yeah... So, until that complex is resolved, she can't take a step forward?"

If so, it was a hard problem to solve. That sort of complex was a personal issue, and no matter how much others tried to help, only the person themselves could resolve it.

In the end, Sandria would have to come to terms with herself.

Souma crossed his hands behind his head, groaning as he leaned back in his chair, thinking. He then asked Ginger, "That part about being sold by her family, did you ask about that specifically?"

"Yes. I'm told she was the daughter of a merchant family, but after her father was tricked into shouldering a debt for a bad person, he sold her to a slave trader to protect his family and business. From the way San tells it, it was a hard decision, and I've never heard her say a word of complaint against her father."

"That's terrible. That happened in this country? I want to see that villain prosecuted."

"No, it seems San was sold here from another country." Ginger sighed powerlessly. "It seems the villain was connected to powerful people in that country, and he had no choice but to take it lying down. If it had happened in this country, I'd have you prosecute that miscreant, so as to restore San's honor, but there's not much we can do if it happened in a foreign land, is there?"

"Yeah... It would be difficult if we're not on friendly terms with them," Souma said. "If they're tied to influential people, we'd probably be accused of interfering in internal affairs, too. What country was it, by the way?"

"The Gran Chaos Empire. There's clearly nothing that can be done there,

right?"

Souma went silent.

He was thinking, ...Huh? Maybe this'll be easier to solve than I thought!

If he explained the situation to Maria or Jeanne, and had the villain and their powerful backers indicted together, he felt like it would fix everything.

If those two knew that their people were being made to suffer without their knowledge, they were sure to bring down the hammer of justice on the villains.

He'd thought it would be difficult, so he was almost disappointed how simple this was going to be.

However, Ginger still look depressed.

Oh, right. Ginger doesn't know we're on good terms with the Empire.

Because the secret alliance with the Empire was a secret, the number of the people inside the country who knew was limited.

For Ginger, who wasn't informed, he couldn't have imagined the channels that existed between the two countries, even though Souma and Maria could hold secret meetings whenever they pleased.

Souma was about to tell Ginger, seeing the gloomy look on his face, then... stopped.

Sure, if I make the request of Maria, she'll take care of it. But is that good enough? Rather than me taking front stage, shouldn't it be Ginger, who cares the most for Sandria, who takes an active role? Especially if we expect things to go well.

Souma put his mind to work for the two of them. When he thought about his relationship with Ginger, and the line he had to the Empire, he got an idea.

"Hey, Ginger."

"Oh, yes? What is it?"

"Don't you have connections in the Empire?"

Ginger shook his head vigorously. "N-Not at all! I've never even been out of the kingdom, you know?!"

"You may not have. But there's someone in the Empire you know."

"Someone I know? Who are you talking about?"

"Piltory Saracen. Remember him?"

"Sir Piltory... Ahh. The nobleman who took Anzu and Shiho to be his wives? Wait, you're telling me Sir Piltory is in the Empire?!"

Piltory Saracen was the hot-blooded young man who was head of the House of Saracen, and when Ginger was a slave trader, he'd set the beautiful twins Anzu and Shiho free to become his wives. He'd been the prince in their Cinderella story, so Ginger remembered him.

Now that he mentions it, Sir Piltory said he'd be going to the Empire, Ginger realized, his mouth dropping open. I'd completely forgotten.

Souma laughed and told him, "Piltory is currently residing in the Empire as our chief negotiator there. He may have influence with the higher-ups in the Empire, so why not ask him? If it's a favor from the man who set him up with his two wives, a man that hot-blooded isn't going to refuse."

"Y-You're right! I'd love to ask him! May I head to the Empire?"

"No, if you just need to contact him, it can be done from the castle," Souma said. "I'll arrange things for noon tomorrow, so could you come to the castle again?"

"Of course! Please do!" Ginger bowed deeply.

Then he left, returning home with a look of unrestrained excitement on his face.

Watching him go with a wry smile, Souma stood up and stretched.

"Now then, I guess I'll make the preparations for their wedding."

He wouldn't take front stage, but he'd set everything up for them.

While thinking about that, Souma headed for the Jewel Voice Room.

The next day...

"Oh, my. If that's what you need, please, allow me to be of assistance," Piltory

said from the other side of the simple receiver, thumping his chest.

This was the Jewel Voice Room in Parnam Castle, where the jewel for the Jewel Voice Broadcast was kept, and Ginger was using it to speak to Piltory in the Empire.

Beside them, Souma and Aisha were watching. By having Souma sit in on them, they could avoid criticism that he was using a national treasure for personal reasons.

When Ginger asked for help with Sandria, Piltory accepted immediately and enthusiastically.

“You brought me and my wives, Anzu and Shiho, together, Sir Ginger. In a way, you were our Cupid. How could I do anything less than help you?”

“Your Cupid...? I was just a slave trader...”

“That’s just how grateful we are. They’ve both given birth now, and the House of Saracen is secure. I hear that Madam Sandria did a lot to take care of my wives, too. In order to repay the favor, I swear I will put a word in with the higher-ups in the Empire regarding the matter of Madam Sandria’s family and ask them to take care of it.”

After agreeing to take on the task with a commitment that suited such a hot-blooded man, Piltory bowed his head.

“Thank you!” Ginger was smiling.

It wasn’t a given that everything would work out just yet, but there was some hope of a resolution now. And this was all thanks to the connections Ginger had built going back to when he was a slave trader. He’d never liked the job, but now he was glad he hadn’t run away from it.

“It sounds like you’ve worked things out.” Souma, who had remained silent up until this point, walked up to the jewel. “Piltory. I’m asking you as well. Please, help Ginger out.”

“Yes, sir. It will be done, Your Majesty,” Piltory replied with a salute.

Souma nodded, putting a hand on Ginger’s shoulder. “I’m sure Piltory will handle the rest. I’ll contact you if there’s any progress, so come to the castle

with Sandria when the time comes.”

“Yes! Thank you so much for everything!”

“Removing his subordinate’s worries is part of a superior’s job,” Souma said. “Now, I’ll handle the rest, so you can head on home.”

Ginger repeatedly thanked him, bowing his head over and over as he left the room.

Once Aisha confirmed Ginger’s presence had retreated, Souma spoke to the Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel.

“...You heard how it is. Can I ask you to handle it?”

“But of course.”

The response was a woman’s voice.

When Piltory stepped aside, the Empress of the Gran Chaos Empire, Maria Euphoria, appeared. She had been listening to the earlier Jewel Voice Broadcast from off screen.

Maria put a hand to her cheek with a troubled look. “To think I’d learn something like that was happening in my country because people from another country told me... That’s embarrassing, as the person responsible for this country.”

Her tone was apologetic.

Souma silently shook his head. “No ruler can see into every nook and cranny of their country. I’m sure things like this happen in my country, too. I just don’t realize it.”

“...That’s true,” Maria admitted. “Everyone, no matter who, has their good sides and bad sides. Some people are bound to do evil deeds. Even with the power of an empress or king, it would be difficult to stop them before they can act.”

“If you wanted to stop them in advance, you would need to institute an absolute surveillance state,” Souma said. “But if you clamp down too hard, that will spread more discontent and distrust in the country. At present... the only thing we can do is deal harshly with these things when they come to light.”

"Yes. So leave this matter to me."

"If you're agreeing to handle it, that's reassuring," Souma said. "I'll be counting on you."

With that, Souma and Maria nodded firmly to one another.

About one week later...

Ginger and Sandria received a summons to appear at the castle together.

Normally, when there was business at the castle, Ginger would go while Sandria stayed at home, but today the summons called for Sandria, as well.

Sandria tried to refuse, saying it wasn't a place a former slave like her belonged.

But Ginger assured her, "It's okay. I'll be with you, so let's go together."

That, and the fact that it was a message from the castle, made her reluctantly agree to go.

When she passed through the main gate guarded by the palace guards and saw the impressive castle rising up before her, Sandria felt awkwardly out of place, and grabbed Ginger's sleeve as he was walking beside her.

Seeing Sandria like that, Ginger chuckled. "You're not acting like yourself, San. Normally, you're bold no matter who you're dealing with."

"You're more of a bully than I thought, Lord Ginger," Sandria said, pouting like a child. "I feel so out of place here, it's intimidating."

"I think you're cute when you're acting tim—Ouch!"

"You really are a bully." With a look of displeasure, Sandria pinched Ginger's arm. She may have been embarrassed, because her face was red.

I think that's cute, though, Ginger thought, looking sideways at her.

When the two of them entered the castle, a dragonewt maid appeared to lead them where they were going and began walking ahead of them.

As they walked down the hall and rode the weighted elevator, Sandria asked, "Um, Lord Ginger? I was told to accompany you today, but are you aware of the

reason you've been called?"

"Yes, well... It's probably because things are ready."

"Ready...?"

Ginger nodded, then looked up. "I've done what I can. The rest is up to you, I'd say."

Sandria cocked her head to the side, a question mark floating over her head.

Then the elevator stopped, and the three got off into the hall.

Eventually they arrived in front of the Jewel Voice Room.

"Please, go in. Everyone is waiting," the dragonewt maid said, then turned and left.

When they entered the room as instructed, they were greeted by a massive Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel.

"It's big..." Sandria said in awe. "Is that the jewel for the Jewel Voice Broadcast?"

While Sandria was distracted by the massive floating jewel in the middle of the room, someone in the room called out to them, "You're here!"

There stood a tall man dressed all in black.

It was this country's Prime Minister, Hakuya Kwonmin.

Hakuya bowed to the two of them. "His Majesty is indisposed with preparations for the coronation and weddings, so I will be watching over you in his place this time."

Watching over us? Do what? Sandria wondered.

Then what looked like a full-body mirror beside the jewel lit up, and the form of a person was projected on it.

It was a beautiful girl who, in her white armor, embodied the idea of a princess general. Surprised by the girl's sudden appearance, Sandria tugged on Ginger's sleeve.

This was a simple receiver for the Jewel Voice Broadcast, but even if the

common people knew they existed, hardly any of them had actually seen one. It was hard to blame Sandria for being surprised.

The girl greeted the three of them. "Hello, Sir Hakuya. And Sir Ginger and Madam Sandria, was it? It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am the younger sister of Empress Maria Euphoria of the Gran Chaos Empire, Jeanne Euphoria."

The sudden appearance of the younger sister of the empress of the great nation in the west left Sandria briefly unable to understand what was happening.

Lady Jeanne... Ahh, it really is Lady Jeanne! Sandria was familiar with that beautiful face.

Sandria had been born in the Gran Chaos Empire, and she had seen that face before, just once.

While she was young, and the previous emperor was still alive, she had been in a crowd with her family, watching a Jewel Voice Broadcast where His Imperial Majesty and the imperial family appeared.

Sandria had thought Jeanne was a pretty girl even back then, but she was shocked to see she'd grown to be so beautiful and dignified.

Jeanne looked at Sandria as she said, "In place of my busy sister, I will be the one handling things on our side this time. Now then, Madam Sandria..."

"Ye... Yes." Sandria was awestruck at having been addressed by name. "What is it?"

Jeanne bowed her head deeply. "In place of my sister who could not be here, I wish to apologize to you."

"Huh...?"

"I have heard the story of your fall into slavery. I am told your father was deceived, forced to shoulder a debt, and sold you to defend his family and business."

Jeanne was speaking about her circumstances. Why did Jeanne, the younger sister of the empress, know anything about her?

Then, with a flash of realization, she looked at Ginger, who nodded seriously.

Jeanne bowed her head again. "I am told that the con man was connected to influential nobles in the region, and his victims were forced to simply accept their losses. In having allowed this oppression to occur, we have failed as those responsible for this empire. The fact that our mismanagement caused trouble for you and others pains my sister. We are truly sorry."

"N-No... There's no need for you or Lady Maria to apologize..." It confused Sandria that Jeanne was bowing her head to her.

She wanted someone to explain what exactly was going on here. She'd already accepted her situation, but now she was getting an apology. From the younger sister of the empress, someone far above her station, too.

Jeanne told the confused Sandria, "I know this is late in coming, but we have taken the con man and the nobles he was attached to into custody and are investigating their other crimes. These villains will be dealt with harshly under our laws."

"R-Right..."

"The nobles will have their family names terminated and their assets seized. These seized assets will be used to compensate the victims, at least in part."

Those who had caused her to be sold as a slave were being brought to justice. It felt like something happening in some far-off world to Sandria.

She resented those who'd done this to her. She was sad her family had sold her into slavery. However, she hadn't thought about that for a long time now. Because...

While Sandria was looking at the screen, Ginger's passionate eyes were on her.

Because I met Lord Ginger...

Having been sold off into the kingdom, she had been taken in by Ginger's grandfather, who'd sympathized with her plight and taken good care of her.

Then, after his death, Sandria had been able to meet Ginger.

From there, it had been a quick succession of wonderful events.

Ginger was a kind man, and he took good care of everyone.

Ginger was now the head of the newly established Ginger's Training Facility by King Souma. And he had set Sandria free, saying he wanted to be with her forever. Because of that, they'd remained close, and they continued to run the training facility together to this day.

It might have been bad luck that she'd fallen into slavery. But Sandria felt more than fortunate enough now. Her heart was full and satisfied with her feelings for Ginger.

Having received the apology from Jeanne, Sandria ran through all that in her mind, and confirmed it all for herself again.

"Also... there's someone who wants to see you." Jeanne invited someone in.

It was a middle-aged beastman with the same raccoon ears and tail as Sandria.

Looking at the man who stood on screen with a pained look on his face, Sandria's eyes went wide as she whispered, "Dad..."

"Sandria..."

They both fell silent for a while.

The father was subdued into silence by his guilt over selling his daughter into slavery, and the daughter was unsure what to say to her father.

The two just stood there, staring at one another without words.

As if forcing the frozen time to move, Ginger put a hand on Sandria's lower back and gave her a push.

"Lord Ginger?"

"You should just tell him exactly what you feel," Ginger said. "That's what we arranged this time for."

She was silent for a moment. Then, with Ginger's urging, Sandria made up her mind and stepped forward.

"Um... Is everyone else doing well? Mom and my brothers and sisters?"

"Ah! Y-Yes, they're doing well. The business, too. Thanks to you, we held on

by the skin of our teeth. Because of that, I'm sure you went through a lot of trouble... I'm sorry..."

Her father didn't bow his head as he apologized, but looked straight up. That was because if he looked down, the tears were bound to fall. He felt that, after what he put his daughter through, crying and begging for forgiveness would be unfair.

Sandria understood that, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I'm so... sorry..." her father burst out.

"...I know. It wasn't just our family you had to protect; you had your employees and their families to think about, too. If you hadn't sold me, I'm sure someone else would have been sold instead."

Then Sandria smiled though her tears.

"I'm happy to have come to this country and met Lord Ginger. I think I'll only get happier from here on. So don't blame yourself anymore."

She *was* happy. Whether she had been a slave or not didn't matter. Here and now, being able to be at Ginger's side was happiness. She wanted her father, so far away, to see that.

"Sandria..." her father whispered.

He turned away, rubbing his eyes, then bowed his head deeply to Ginger.

"Sir Ginger, after having sacrificed my own daughter, I am well aware that I have no right to speak. However, let me endure the shame as I say this: Please... make my daughter happy."

"...Yes. Of course I will, Father."

Ginger gave him a firm nod. Then bringing one hand to Sandria's cheek, he used his other to wipe away her tears.

"San, I told you we'd get even happier, didn't I?"

"...Yes," she whispered.

"I'm more than happy enough. If I were to get any happier, it would have to be by marrying you, having children, and building a family. How about it?"

Sandria giggled nervously. "...Well, I think if that happened, I'd be much happier."

"Will you accept my proposal?" Ginger asked.

Sandria's heart was full of love for the man who had used his connections to do all this for her. Ginger hadn't only wiped away her tears, he'd wiped away all her sadness.

Sandria was no longer chained down by the feelings of inferiority caused by having been a slave.

She practically leaped into the air as she hugged Ginger. "Yes, darling! Please make me even happier!"

Those words expressed her feelings more honestly than anything.

Chapter 3: Falling

“Wh-What is this?” I exclaimed.

My name was Naden Delal. I was a ryuu from the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and the candidate to be Souma’s second secondary queen.

That said, I was probably more famous as the weather girl who told the people of the kingdom the weather forecast.

Today, I was gathered in a room in the castle with the other fiancées: Liscia, Aisha, Juna, and Roroa. There was a raised platform and a podium in the center of the room, and five desks placed facing it.

On the black board behind the podium, these words were written in blocky letters.

“Second Lecture — Bridal Training Course.”

...What? What was a bridal training course supposed to be?

Since all the fiancées were gathered here, it was presumably a lecture we were all about to take, but what exactly were they going to make us do?

Not to mention...

Second lecture?! Did they have a first without me noticing?!

Since when had these lectures started? Maybe it had been before I came to this country?

While I was standing there befuddled, someone put their hand down on my shoulder.

“Whoa...! Wait, Roroa?”

When I turned back, Roroa, who looked the closest to me age-wise, was standing there with a blank look on her face.

“What’re ya doin’, Nadie?” she asked. “Just standin’ here like this?”

“No, I just couldn’t figure out what’s going on here...”

“What’s goin’ on...? Ohh, that’s right, this’s your first time, isn’t it, Nadie?”

Roroa nodded to herself knowingly.

From what I’d heard, Roroa had joined after the other three fiancées, but from the way she spoke, had she been there for the first lecture?

Roroa put on a mischievous smile. “Mweheheh, be ready. This lecture can be pretty shocking.”

“Sh-Shocking?”

“You’ll be learnin’ a lot. Like all sorts of things about Darlin’.”

“About Souma?”

What exactly was I going to find out about Souma in this course?

From the naughty look on Roroa’s face, I felt like the “material” was going to be pretty risque.

I... I was kind of interested... and I was about to ask Roroa for more details, a silly grin on my face, when...

“Nyahaha...” (Bop!) Roroa took a sudden karate chop to the head. “Ouch!”

Behind Roroa stood Liscia with a look of exasperation on her face.

It hadn’t sounded painful, but as Roroa clutched her head and overreacted for comedic effect, Liscia sighed and said, “What nonsense are you putting into Naden’s head when it’s her first time?”

“No, no, Big Sis Cia,” Roroa protested. “Where’s the lie in what I said?”

“It’s not what you said, it’s the tone. What’re you making it sound sleazy for?”

“She’s right, you know, Roroa,” Juna said with a wry smile. She was already seated, “I can understand why you’d want to put it that way, though.”

Even when she wore a wry smile, she was beautiful. It just wasn’t fair. Juna was mature, her gestures were so very feminine, and she was busty. In my human form, I was the exact opposite. Fourteen, unpolished, and with no curves to speak of. It was giving me a bit of a complex.

Lately, I’d been feeling a gap opening between me and Ruby in terms of our figures, too.

Oh, God. Why were there such gaps between those who are blessed with great abundance (particularly in the chest area) and those without...?

Wait, in my case, “God” would be Lady Tiamat. To our holy “mother,” differences in figure might have meant little.

“Ah! It seems she has arrived,” said the other busty one... erm, I meant Aisha.

Liscia and Roroa had sat down already, so I took the empty seat on the far left.

The door opened, and a blue-haired beauty with a tail like mine entered.

That beauty, who was for some reason wearing a professor’s hat today, was Excel Walter, the commander-in-chief of the National Defense Force, who had also fought alongside us in the Kingdom of Lastania.

This woman had a beautiful face that looked to be in her mid-twenties despite having been alive for over five hundred years, and she was busty, too.

Honestly, I couldn’t stand her.

I remembered her flirting with Souma on my back (even if she’d just been teasing him), so I did not have a good impression of her. Knowing she was involved, my guard naturally went up.

Excel stood on the teacher’s platform, placing her things on the podium before looking around to each of us.

“I see everyone’s here. Now, let’s start the second lecture of our Bridal Training Course.”

Excel glanced over at me with a grin.

“To start us off, as this is Naden’s first time, I’d like to review the general outline of this course. This course exists to teach all of you, who will be marrying the present king of this county, His Majesty King Souma, the secrets to marital and familial happiness. You will learn everything from the spiritual aspects of what it means to be a wife, male psychology, and how to make your husband look good, to how to perform your ‘duties’ at night in a way which will keep your marriage happy.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is... Wait, our ‘duties’ at night?!” I exclaimed.

Does she mean...? I-I guess she does.

Dragons formed contracts with knights to produce and provide for their offspring. So as a result, I did have a certain amount of knowledge in that field, but... we were going to learn about that here, all together?! What to do when we “did it” with Souma?!

“Huh? We’re really doing this?” I cried.

I thought she might be pulling my leg, so I looked around to the others, but Liscia and the rest were looking downwards, awkward smiles on their faces...

Apparently we really were going to be studying that stuff.

With a serious expression, Excel told me, “The creation of heirs is a matter of great importance to the nation. If there were some misstep, and it led a gap to form between husband and wife, there might be those who sought to take advantage of that. That’s why, embarrassing as it may be, you must take this course.”

“Urk... Okay...”

Her logical argument left no room for rebuttal. I was going to marry a king, so I had to be prepared to do this much, at least.

Excel giggled. “Hee hee! Well, you don’t have to worry too much. You can think of it as studying ways to deepen your love with His Majesty. Right, Princess Liscia?”

“Huh?! Me?!” Liscia cried out in surprise when the conversation suddenly turned to her.

“Princess Liscia has become one with His Majesty before the rest of you, and given birth to little Cian and Kazuha. That’s done something to help with this country’s shortage of royals. Okay, everyone, give Liscia a big round of applause.”

Clap, clap, clap, clap... The applause was full of jubilation and envy.

Liscia turned a bright shade of red. “Hold on! That’s embarrassing! Stop it!” She must have felt like she was being put on display.

By the way, as for Cian and Kazuha, whom Excel had just brought up, Souma and Carla were looking after them today.

Excel turned to Liscia, who was covering her face, and said, "Now then, Princess Liscia? When you engaged in intercourse with His Majesty, did the things you learned in the course help?"

"I think... they did. A lot."

So Liscia acknowledged the efficacy of the lessons. Th-They were useful, huh?

I wondered how they'd been useful, but I doubted she was going to be giving us those details, even if all the other four fiancées piled on and started asking.

With a satisfied smile, Excel clapped her hands. "I think you can see the utility of this lesson now, then. Please study hard, and put what you learn into practice. Okay, now before we begin the lesson... Naden."

"Y-Yes?" I yelped.

Excel pulled a white notebook from out of her belongings and handed it to me. The cover suspiciously had words like, "Top Secret" and "Not to be Taken Outside."

While I looked dubiously at it, Excel smiled and said, "This notebook contains His Majesty's true opinions about all of you, which I extracted from him after getting him drunk. That includes you, too, of course, Naden."

"Wha?!" I stared hard at the note.

This thing had how Souma felt about me written in it?!

And hold on, she'd said it like it was nothing, but getting him drunk and then questioning him was pretty scummy, wasn't it?

When I looked around, everyone nodded knowingly.

"W-Well, this is for Souma and the country," Liscia seemed to be saying.

"If not for resorting to this, we never would have heard His Majesty's true feelings," Aisha's eyes suggested.

"We do know this is improper, but..." said Juna's resigned look.

"Well, what's done is done, they say," Roroa's shrug implied.

...What was this? I felt like I could hear the voices (excuses) in all of their heads.

“Oh, my, you don’t want the notebook, Naden?” Excel asked archly.

“...I do.”

If she asked whether I wanted it or not... I did, of course. I was concerned by what Souma thought of me, too, after all.

So... *Sorry, Souma.*

Once I took the white notebook Excel had prepared for me, she continued.

“The evaluations written in here are unchanged from last time, but I’ve newly added his opinion of Naden. It’s very important to know what your partner thinks of you in a married relationship, after all. Now, let me announce His Majesty’s opinion of Naden.”

“Whah?! You’re reading it out here?”

“Everyone else has already gone through this. You can read his opinions of Liscia and the others later.”

“...F-Fine.”

If everyone else had already had theirs read out, I’d have to put up with it. It was embarrassing to have mine made public, but I was interested in what Souma had to say about the others.

Excel began reading what was in the notebook.

“Now, on to Naden’s evaluation. According to His Majesty, ‘Naden looks small, but she’s a girl who really has it together. I mean, she was there to scold me when I was freaking out over Liscia giving birth. I find I’m relying on her as a partner not just in battle, but in our personal lives, too. Naden’s a ryuu, so I know she could live on her own if she wanted, and go wherever she wants. That freedom and independence reminds me of the women in my old world. It’s a nostalgic feeling.’”

“Ohhhhh...” I murmured.

This... this was embarrassing, yeah. Hearing Souma’s praise for me in front of

everyone else, I was happy, but I thought my face was going to burst into flames.

Liscia and Juna smiled, while Aisha and Roroa looked at me with a bit of envy.

Excel continued. "Now, when I asked him if there was anything that he had on his mind about Naden, this is how he answered. 'I wish she'd stop jumping on me in the morning to wake me up. It's cute, but it makes me want to pull her under the covers and go back to sleep while cuddling her.'"

"It's his fault for not just getting up!" I exclaimed. "...And if he wants to pull me under the covers, I don't really *mumble mumble*."

I nearly said something embarrassing, but ended up trailing off.

Seeing my response, Roroa said, "That's good," leaning back in her chair. "I wanna try gettin' on top of him to wake him up, too. I figure it oughta be fine for someone lightweight, right?"

"W-Would you happen to be implying the rest of us are h-heavy?" Aisha said, sounding panicked.

Well, looking at her, since Aisha was tall, had a good amount of muscle on her, and had an impressive figure that she kept hidden... she must have been the heaviest here. But it wasn't that she was in any way fat.

Roroa stuck her tongue out. "For the first time, I think we've got an advantage on our bustier competition. Right, Nadie?"

"...I can't deny it."

There were things we could do because we were small. There were things we wouldn't be able to do unless we were bigger, too, of course, but there was no helping that.

Seeing Liscia, Aisha, and Juna looking at us jealously, I felt a little more confident in myself for the first time.

Then Excel clapped her hands. "Okay, that's enough. We're in class now, you know."

"~~~~~"Yes, ma'am."~~~~~"

“No need to get jealous. His Majesty sees all of you for your own merits. I want you to keep that firmly in mind. Now that we’ve finished announcing Naden’s evaluation, I’d like to begin a lecture on the things a husband and wife can get up to.”

From there, Excel’s Bridal Training Course began.

The content was... often risqué enough I’d be hesitant to talk about it, but, well... it was highly educational, I think.

When I heard about the black notebook, which contained all of the [censored] things Souma wanted to do with us, and which we would be given afterwards, my interest in the lecture grew.

...There was just one thing that bothered me. This part of Excel’s lecture.

“For a husband and wife, kisses are an important way of checking the bond between them. They feel less special if you kiss all the time, but be sure to kiss when it really counts. Learn how to encourage him to do it.”

My innocent heart was racing as I listened, but the others...

“Ever since the children were born, it’s come naturally to us,” Liscia put in.

“If I act like I want to, he’ll do it,” said Aisha.

“With me... he can’t do it without the help of alcohol,” Juna sighed.

“I end up kissin’ him myself,” Roroa grinned.

They were accepting what she’d said with surprising ease.

Hang on! Just a minute! I was shocked. No way?! Am I the only one who hasn’t kissed Souma yet?!

With Excel’s class over, and having received the aforementioned black notebook, I decided to ask the other fiancées for details.

When, as a part of that, I told them I still hadn’t kissed Souma, they were all visibly surprised.

“Whaa?! Ya haven’t kissed him yet, Nadie?!” Roroa’s eyes went wide.

I was the one who really felt this was unbelievable. “For me, it’s weirder that you’re all acting so normal about it. I know Liscia’s already had his children, but

when did the rest of you kiss him?"

"For me, it was in the town near the border with the Star Dragon Mountain Range where we met up with you," Aisha said. "With Lady Liscia's consideration, I was allowed to sleep by his side for one night... Hee hee." Perhaps remembering what had happened then, Aisha's face broke into a silly grin.

Ohh... That time...

It was after Lady Tiamat had torn them apart, when Liscia had arranged for the exhausted Aisha to be with Souma.

I had been told they hadn't done anything, out of consideration for Liscia, but it seemed they'd sneakily been having a little fun, after all. I'd underestimated her.

"For me... it was in the Republic of Turgis," said Juna. "When I was caring for His Majesty, after he passed out at a hot springs inn in Noblebeppu... um... he was so vulnerable, I couldn't help myself..."

Juna squirmed bashfully as she spoke.

I had a racial weakness to the cold, so I hadn't been able to join them on the trip to the Republic of Turgis. To think an event like that happened there, in secret... It was a bit frustrating.

Maybe I should have bundled up and gone with them.

"It was the Memorial Festival in Van for me," Roroa grinned. "When he said, 'I will protect Princess Roroa for the rest of my life' during his speech, I got so emotional, I ended up kissin' him hard."

She puffed her chest up with pride as she said that.

...Hard?

"Isn't that a weird way to say it? Isn't a kiss soft?" I asked.

"Nah, I got so carried away, I ended up smashin' teeth with him." Roroa was laughing about it.

Even that memory of failure was already, at worst, a bittersweet memory for

Roroa. I was super jealous.

Then Liscia gave me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry, Naden. I never realized. Normally, as the first primary queen, it would be my job to manage things and make sure that none of us was being treated unfairly.”

“It’s not your fault, Liscia...” I said uncomfortably. “It’s just that Souma hasn’t kissed me even once.”

“I think the fact you’ve never done it before is the cause of that,” Juna said with a pensive look.

What did she mean?

“For a woman, her first kiss is something that stays with her. His Majesty knows that, so he’s being careful,” she explained.

“Ohh!” Aisha broke in. “Yeah, once we’d done it once, he was a lot less hesitant. Though he doesn’t ignore the people around us, doing it anywhere and everywhere.”

So, Souma was trying to be considerate, by assuming my first kiss was important to me, and while looking for a good time to do it, he’d kept missing chances? Hmm... I was happy he cared, but that was kind of vexing.

Roroa and Liscia were nodding, too.

“Darlin’ can be pretty shy,” Roroa added.

“He can. Even after we had been engaged for a while, he didn’t try to lay a hand on me,” Liscia agreed. “If the saint from the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State hadn’t shaken him up, he might not have done anything until we were married. The children might not have come until later.”

“Oh, ya think? Well, praise be to the saint, then!” Roroa said jokingly, and everyone smiled wryly.

If the Orthodox Papal State’s sending a saint to the kingdom to try and put themselves in a more advantageous position had made Souma and Liscia cross the line, and thus indirectly helped produce an heir, that was ironic...

Wait, that wasn’t important right now.

“Ohh... What can I do?” I moaned.

“This may not be the best way to say it, but you’re his means of transportation, aren’t you?” Aisha asked. “Don’t you have a lot of time alone, like when you’re predicting the weather?”

I could only shake my head. “During those times, I have Souma on my back and I’m in ryuu form, you know? If I were to try to turn my head around and kiss him, there’s too much of a size difference, so we could only touch noses at best.”

“I... guess so.”

“W-Well, I think the next time you’re alone together, you should try doing it at your own pace, Naden,” Liscia said. “I highly doubt Souma would refuse you.”

Trying to be supportive, Liscia was giving her permission.

...Okay. If Souma wasn’t willing to do it because he was being considerate, I’d have to do it myself! My prey wouldn’t come to me on its own. I’d have to hunt.

“I’ll give it my best!” I declared.

While I stood there feeling like I had back when I was hunting in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, everyone looked a little taken aback.

I apparently had the eyes of a large, carnivorous beast.

I didn’t want to weird Souma out, so I’d have to hold back a little.

Some days later, my chance finally came.

Today I was going to be flying around with Souma to see what the weather would be like for the week.

“Okay, let’s go, Naden,” he told me.

“Roger that!”

Having changed into my ryuu form, I had Souma get on my back, and I swam up into the sky.

Then, hanging in the sky in predetermined places, I predicted the weather using my ryuu whiskers, and Souma wrote the results down on paper.

During that routine work, I kept thinking furiously about where I would try to kiss Souma.

Should we stand on top of a mountain? Or beside a pretty lake? Or maybe set down on a little island...?

While watching the terrain flow by beneath me, I agonized over what to do.

I must have been pretty out of it, because Souma got suspicious. "What's wrong? Your head's in the clouds today."

"...We are in the sky, after all."

"Oh! Hey, that was clever." Souma let out an impressed laugh.

It looked like I'd dodged the issue.

I refocused, got back to work, and we were at the final stop.

"It's going to be clear six days from now, and seven days from now, too," I said.

"Okay, and done. That's everything, huh...? Whew!"

Having finished taking down everything I told him about next week's weather, Souma let out a tired yawn, and held his forehead, probably because of his tired eyes.

"You okay? You look even more tired than usual."

"Yeah... Cian goes to sleep easily, but Kazuha's always crying at night. I've been taking turns checking on them with Liscia and Carla, so I'm a bit short on sleep."

"You're the king. Couldn't you leave this to the maids? If you collapse, the country's going to be in serious trouble, you know."

"I know, but... Liscia wants to watch after them herself, without leaving it to a wet nurse. I can't make her go through all the trouble alone, and, as a father, I want to take part in raising my own children. It's tiring, but... Well, I'm just happy to be able to see the children's faces."

Seeing Souma smile like that, I felt a frustration building up deep inside my chest, and it was hard to be there.

Happy just to see the children's faces... I think that was the right way for a parent to feel. But, just as Souma was Cian and Kazuha's father, he was my knight, my king, and my life partner. I didn't want him to be satisfied with just the happiness he got from Liscia and their family.

...I know. I was being jealous.

I wanted him not to just look at Cian and Kazuha, but at me, too. Normally, it might be a virtue to keep that feeling bottled up inside my chest and never speak about it. But even if that was a virtue... I felt like I just couldn't do that.

If I did, it would have bad consequences.

I didn't want to think badly of Liscia and her children.

I didn't want to start acting unlike myself, losing the me that Souma loved.

That was why I needed Souma to face my feelings head on.

"I know Cian and Kazuha are cute, but it feels lonely when all you look at is the children," I burst out.

"Huh?" Souma got a blank look on his face, and I brought my face around close to his.

"Look at me, too, okay?"

"Oh...! Sorry. I didn't mean not to..." Souma seemed to recognize my jealousy and apologized. He stroked my snout. "You're right. I feel like the children are more important than my own life, but that doesn't mean I can neglect my time with you. No, not just you, Naden. Liscia, Aisha, Juna, and Roroa, too."

"That's right. It's your responsibility to make every member of the family happy. If you make anyone cry..."

"If I do, then what?"

"Hee hee, this."

I changed into human form. Even though we were still high in the sky. Seeing me rapidly shrink, Souma cried out in surprise.

"Whoa, hold on, Naden?! If you transform here...!"

"It's dangerous, so don't let go, Souma."

I held Souma's hand tight with my now-human hands.

Now that I was fully human, we were being pulled downward by gravity. Souma's back was toward the ground, and I was falling with him, his right hand held in mine. We were gradually accelerating, and I could feel the air rushing by us.

This height and speed was nothing to me, but it looked like it was an incredible experience for Souma.

"%\$&@#!" Souma shouted incoherently, slapping my hand with the hand I wasn't holding. That was probably his way of saying, "I give, I give!"

I took his hand in mine, brought my face close, and shouted loud enough he could hear me over the wind. "It's okay! I'm with you!"

"There's nothing okay about suddenly making me go skydiving!"

"You make Halbert and his people do it all the time!"

"Sorry, Hal! I swear, I'll tell them to raise the Dratroopers' pay!"

It seemed Souma had managed to adapt to the situation. No, maybe I should say he'd stopped caring.

It seemed, holding hands with mine so that our arms formed a ring, he'd developed the composure to be able to look at the ground.

"It's scary what you can get used to," he said. "I'm starting to have fun now."

"Well, you're always flying through the sky on my back, after all."

"Just please, turn back before we hit the ground."

"Got it. But, now, let's do something we can only do in human form."

When I pulled Souma in close, our bodies turned so the scenery was upside down.

We accelerated, pitching headlong towards the ground.

And then...



I brought myself close to Souma's flustered face, and locked lips with him.

We couldn't stay close for long with our bodies like this, of course, so it was only a light kiss, but Souma turned bright red and his eyes went wide.

"I-Is now the time?!"

"Well, I heard I was the only one you hadn't done it with yet."

"But still... Mmph!"

I pulled him in and kissed him again. While repeating that process, the ground got close, so I turned into my ryuu form and got Souma on my back.

Finally released from free fall, and with an exhausted look on his face, I stifled a laugh as I asked Souma, "Well, how was it? Your first kiss with me."

"...I'd rather have my feet firmly on the ground when I kiss someone," Souma joked with a serious look on his face. "In more ways than one."

"Ahahaha!" I burst out laughing. "Hee hee! If you don't want another kiss in the air, make sure you kiss me regularly from now on, okay?"

"...I'll remember that."

With this, I was sure we'd made a memory we'd never forget.

Hee hee! I wonder what kind of face Liscia and the others would make if I told them about it!

I hummed to myself in ryuu form as I danced up into the sky.

Chapter 4: Heart Piercing

— 15th day, 2nd month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar — Genia's Dungeon Laboratory — On this day, I visited Genia's dungeon laboratory near the capital with Aisha.

I was there to see the current progress on the joint project between the Kingdom of Friedonia, the Gran Chaos Empire, and the Republic of Turgis: the drill.

Today they were going to actually spin the drill and test it.

This drill was the work of the kingdom's overscientist Genia, the high elf Merula, Trill Euphoria, who was the younger sister of both Empress Maria and Little Sister General Jeanne of the Empire, and Taru, the blacksmith from the republic.

In addition to these four, Genia's fiancé and keeper Ludwin was present, as well as Taru's comrades, Kuu and Leporina.

Incidentally, the leader of this drill project was Trill.

Trill had been the first to start on development of the drill, and she'd had experience as a researcher in the Empire, so this time, Genia and the others were serving as her assistants.

I went over to talk to her. "Now, then... Madam Trill—"

"Just Trill is fine. I may be a princess of the Empire, but they sent me here to be rid of me."

"Okay. Trill, then. Please start the test and explanation."

"I'll do just that. It may be dangerous, so don't stand in front of or behind the experimental drill, the 'Little Piercer Mark XII.'"

"There are all sorts of problems with that name..."

Like how lazy it was, or how I was now wondering what had happened to Mark I through XI...

The test drilling machine that Trill pointed to was not in the conical shape everyone might imagine, but instead a stamp-type drill like those used in shield tunneling machines for digging subway tunnels. The conical type had a certain allure to it, but this was probably more practical.

When I asked, it turned out Taru had proposed this shape.

“With a conical shape, the tip is fragile and breaks while you’re digging. If that break makes the tip flat, its penetrative power drops, so we made it flat-faced to begin with and used multiple blades for the digging.”

“Ookyakya!” Kuu laughed. “I thought it looked unusual, but there’s a proper reason for it!”

Hearing Taru’s explanation, Kuu looked impressed.

“Oh, hey,” he added. “Do you think you could make a smaller version to put on the end of my cudgel?”

“If I was going to do that, a sharp spearhead would be faster,” Trill retorted. “For a weapon, you want the power to pierce through in an instant. The drill on the other hand, will be continuously carving away at a hard object, so its form has to prioritize sustainability. It’s not suited to being used as a weapon.”

“Hmm... It looks cylindrical, so I thought if I hid one in the tip, I might be able to catch anyone who thought I was using a normal cudgel by surprise. Ookeekee, that’s too bad.” Kuu shrugged, but he didn’t look all that disappointed. He tended to live in the moment, so he may just have been saying whatever came to mind at the time.

We moved from beside the experimental drill to a place a little further away. They said Trill had broken all sorts of stuff while she was in the Empire, so I was a little worried to be so close, even at this distance.

Apparently Aisha had the same concern.

“Sire, please, stand behind me.” She put her hand on the hilt of her greatsword as she positioned herself between the drill and me. If it broke and sent shards flying this way, she probably meant to cut them down.

Genia and Trill both had past offenses on their records, so I took Aisha up on

her kind offer and hid behind her.

“Now, I will begin,” Trill said, raising her hand.

One researcher in a white coat pressed a switch of some sort.

Bwun, een, eeeen, eeeeeeeeen, eeeeeeeeeeeeen...!

The front part of the drill began to spin while making strange noises.

It was slow at first, but the speed gradually picked up, and in no time, the countless blades embedded in the front of the drill were revolving too fast for the eye to see.

“...It looks stable,” I said after maybe a minute.

Trill thrust out her chest, which, relative to her height, was quite sizable, with pride.

“Yes. This is all thanks to Big Sister Genia.”

Then she hugged Genia’s left arm.

Though she was younger, Trill was the more well-endowed of the two, so Genia’s arm was buried in her soft flesh.



“The biggest task was supplying the stored magical power to the apparatus in a stable manner, but the magical power storage system Big Sister Genia provided sorted everything out nicely. Ohh, how wonderful the technology of the House of Maxwell is!” Trill rhapsodized. “Viva Maxwell!”

“You’re too into this,” Genia told her. “Also, your drill hair is sitting on my head.”

Not only was Trill rubbing her cheek against Genia’s, her hair, which was tied in a distinctive drill-like sidetail, was resting on top of Genia’s head, so Genia was a little unamused.

However, Trill didn’t let go. “Ohh, if I were a man, I swear I would take Big Sister Genia as my bride...”

And she was saying some pretty incredible things, too.

I knew she was a big fan of the kingdom’s overscientists, the House of Maxwell, but this was already to feel less like she was a fan and more like she was a worshiper.

It seemed not even Ludwin could let that line go unchallenged. He took Genia by the arm and pulled the two of them apart.

“Please, stop, Madam Trill. Genia is my fiancée.”

Genia, with a look that showed she felt she had finally been liberated, hid behind Ludwin’s back.

Trill looked at Ludwin and puffed up her cheeks. “They tell me you’re Big Sister Genia’s childhood friend, but I see you have no appreciation for the things she develops. I, however, can properly understand the way she thinks!”

“True, Genia’s greatness is difficult for me to comprehend.” Ludwin, who was by nature a serious man, countered Trill’s argument directly. “But I’ve been with Genia for a long time. If you claim to understand Genia’s greatness, I understand everything that’s wrong with her. She’s a shut-in, unconcerned with anything outside her research, lacking in common sense, and unconcerned about how she looks to others. Even though she’s a girl, she doesn’t take care of her appearance, she lets the laundry pile up, and if you leave her alone, she’ll

even collapse because she forgets to eat. I can't say I don't have my reservations about our married life."

"Big Brother Luu, if you take it that far, even my feelings are going to get hurt, you know?" Genia pursed her lips in displeasure, but...

Wow, Ludwin sure has been through a lot, huh?

It seemed even Trill was put off by how bad it was. "E-Even so, the greatness of her technology wins out!"

"Because you comprehend its greatness," said Ludwin. "I can only vaguely understand it. However, despite that, even as I'm confronted with Genia's bad points and can't understand her good ones, I still want her to be with me. I still want her as my wife."

"Big Brother Luu..."

As Genia clutched at Ludwin's cape, her cheeks reddened and her face melted into a big silly grin. It was an uncommon expression for one who was usually so aloof.

I guess if he was going to talk so seriously about how much he loved her, that would be enough to make anyone smile.

It seemed Trill was not amused, because sparks flew where her eyes met with Ludwin's.

...Hold on, why was this turning into a love triangle? It was an unusual one, too, where even though there were two women and one man involved, Genia was the one at the center of it.

Well, in the interest of friendly relations with the Empire, I couldn't have the commander of our National Defense Force and the Imperial ambassador's relationship go sour, so I'd have to put my foot down.

I slipped into my king mode just a bit, and spoke to Trill in a frightening tone.

"Madam Trill. If you mean to take issue with the engagement of one my vassals..."

"Wh-What are you going to do about it?" she shot back defensively.

"I will report your words and actions just now, not a single detail omitted, to Madam Maria and Madam Jeanne. Madam Jeanne told me, 'Please, tell me if she does anything to embarrass the Empire. I will bring her back, even if I have to tie a rope around her neck to do so.'"

This time, it was Trill who hid behind Ludwin's large body. "Th-That's the one thing I don't want!"

Her distance from Genia, who had already been hiding there, dropped, and Genia looked bothered by that.

"I'm finally in a position to learn from Big Sister Genia!" Trill wailed. "I don't want anyone taking me back to the Empire! Please, spare me that, at least!"

"Then please refrain from making waves about any of my vassals' marriages, would you?" I glared at her a little.

Trill quickly saluted. "Understood, sir!"

Good grief.

Watching that exchange between us, Kuu smirked.

"...What?" I asked.

"No, I was just thinking you can sure talk the talk when you need to, Bro."

"The castle is in a frenzy preparing for my coronation and wedding right now," I said tiredly. "More than that, we have a plan to hold weddings for a number of my vassals at sites around the capital at the same time. I'm short on couples to marry as it is. If someone tries to get in the way of Ludwin and Genia's engagement, that's a problem for me. I don't need more work."

"Isn't that a pretty personal grudge to be acting on?" Kuu questioned.

"I won't deny it."

I was already busy, so I didn't have time for this. If I was being honest, I wanted to spend more time raising Cian and Kazuha. Ohh, how I wanted paternity leave!

While I was thinking about that, Kuu got a pensive look on his face. "Weddings, huh..."

It looked like he was plotting something, but, well, I could probably leave him be for now.

For now, I had to focus on what was in front of me: the drill, “Little Piercer.”

While we’d been bantering like idiots, it had kept on spinning.

One of the earth mages who was standing nearby carried the Little Piercer in front of a massive rock wall that had been prepared, and then moved the drill forward.

We were moving the Little Piercer with an earth mage’s gravity manipulation magic for now, but in actual practice, it would be pushed from behind by a large animal like a rhinosaurus.

As the front end of the Little Piercer made contact with the rock, it kept spinning and chipped away at it.

The power to keep spinning when it hit a rock wall was incredible. However, the speed with which it was carving away at the rock felt rather slow. Though it was making steady progress, it went as slow as the walking speed of a giant tortoise.

“Well... it’s a start, I guess?” I said. “Can’t you have it dig any faster?”

“That’s what we’ll have to solve going forward,” said Merula, who despite being part of the research team seemed to have been left on the sidelines a bit. “Currently, this is the fastest it can dig. If we increase the speed it moves without increasing the speed at which it can dig, it will break the machine. That’s why I suspect we will need to improve the spell so that the central axis can spin faster.”

“You think that’s possible?” I asked.

“I think it will take time. But we’ll do it.”

If Merula, an expert on magic spells, was on the job, I could safely leave it to her.

Fortunately, it seemed to be spinning nice and stably.

“The rotator itself is stable, right?” I asked. “I’d like to think of other uses for it, too.”

“Ookya!” Kuu exclaimed. “In that case, Bro, I’m interested in that ‘leisure skiing’ you were talking about before. If we have a rotational mechanism, we can make what you were calling a lift, and that’s what you said would make this ‘leisure skiing’ stuff possible, right?”

Kuu’s eyes were sparkling. Now that he mentioned it, we had discussed that.

True, if it had leisure skiing, the republic, with its snow and hot springs, could likely bring in tourists from the kingdom and Empire to gain foreign currency.

I mean, I’d want to go skiing with my family, too... but still.

“I’d have to turn this machine over to Turgis for that, you know...” I began.

“What are you saying, Bro?! This is a joint development project between our three countries. No one’s going to let the kingdom monopolize it!”

Kuu sounded offended, but I tried to mollify him as I explained.

“No, I know that, of course. But some of the materials used in this machine are sensitive. If I’m not careful, it could cause a conflict over them. With the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State in particular.”

The material in question was, of course, the central element of the magic storage system, curse ore.

Curse ore, which had the property of nullifying (actually absorbing) nearby magic, was hated in this world where magic tended to be seen as the work of spirits or the gods. That trend was especially prevalent in countries like the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State and the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, so if they found out we were using curse ore, it was bound to cause some serious headaches.

It seemed it was commonly dug up in the southeast of this continent, and our country had abundant reserves. They could probably mine it in the east of the republic, too. I could keep it under wraps if we were only using it in our country, but if we shared the information with other countries, too, there was the risk that it would eventually leak to third parties.

When that happened, how many of the countries of mankind were willing to support its use would determine how things developed after that.

In light of resistance from people connected to the Orthodox Papal State and Spirit Kingdom, would the Empire and republic really be able to continue cooperating with us?

I would need to sound them out on that as I negotiated.

That's why I told Kuu, "It's certainly true that this machine will have a major positive effect on the Republic of Turgis. If the country profits, it'll be easier to shut up those who support the policy of northward expansion, so I'd very much like to see you introduce the technology."

"Bro..."

"It's just that we need to talk more about how the materials used in it are to be handled first. So, Kuu, I want to arrange for talks between the kingdom, Empire, and republic. Would it be okay to have you as representative of the republic there?"

Kuu thumped his chest. "Yeah! My old man left me in charge of any negotiations involving this drill. I'm not that smart, but I can tell this machine's going to open a way to the republic's future. So, if it gets this thing into the republic, I'll do whatever it takes to help!"

Kuu's eyes were earnest.

He'd been a bit of a goofball when we first met him, but at some point, he'd become so reliable. There was a saying about how fast boys grow up. I'd felt this with Julius, too. It seemed as long as people stay alive, they keep growing.

I had to keep doing my best, too... or so I was thinking, but...

"Ookyakya! I can't help but wonder what this 'leisure skiing' stuff is. The name's got a nice ring to it," Kuu added with a devilish look on his face.

It seemed his growth was a bit uneven.

Half out of exasperation, I shook hands with him.

I didn't even notice the serious eyes Taru and Leporina had fixed on Kuu.

Some days later, it was busy in Taru's workshop in the Parnam craftsmen's town.

“Hey, Taru,” Kuu said. “We’re done filing the anvil. Where do you want it?”

“Ohhh, it’s pretty heavy,” Leporina groaned.

Kuu and Leporina were carrying in a heavy-looking anvil. They had been doing maintenance on it outside the workshop until just now.

Hearing their voices, Taru, who had been cleaning the ash out of the furnace, stopped and wiped the mixture of soot and sweat from her brow. She pointed to a spot near her.

“Close to the furnace here.”

“Gotcha,” said Kuu.

Kuu and Leporina laid the anvil down where they were asked to.

The three of them were currently doing a major cleanup of Taru’s workshop.

The workshop had been left vacant recently because of her work on the drill development project, so Taru was using her day off today to clean the place up and do maintenance on her tools there.

Kuu had volunteered to help, and then dragged Leporina along, too.

Ever since they were in the republic, Kuu had wanted to show Taru his good side, so he often helped with cleaning the workshop, and was used to doing maintenance on her tools.

Leporina, who was often dragged along into helping, was the same.

Taru had anticipated the work would take all day, but with the extra help, they were finished before the sun went down.

As thanks for the assistance, Taru served the two of them black tea that she had allowed to chill after making it. It was still before spring, and cold, but the three of them were sweaty from their work, so the cold tea tasted especially good.

“Thanks for today,” Taru said bashfully, hiding her mouth with her cup.

“Master Kuu, Leporina.”

“Ookyakya! It was nothing,” Kuu said energetically. “Right, Leporina?”

“Yes.” She seemed a little exhausted, her bunny ears drooping. “I’ve long

since gotten used to being run ragged by Master Kuu.”

Taru watched those two contrasting individuals for a moment.

“So, Master Kuu, I still haven’t heard what you were here about,” she said at last. “Why did you come to see me today? You didn’t come just to help clean up the workshop, I assume?”

“Ookya? Oh! Right, right!” Kuu slapped his knee as if he’d just remembered.

Oh! He actually came on business... Taru’s eyes widened a bit in surprise.

In Kuu’s case, it was more than possible that he’d just dropped by on a whim. Or rather, before this, that would definitely have been what Kuu was doing. However, today Kuu spoke to Taru with a serious look on his face.

“I wanted to hear about that drill in detail. How about it? How’s development?”

“Going smoothly,” Taru said. “Even when there’s an issue, if Madam Genia and Madam Trill argue over it for a while, they have a new breakthrough in no time. Those two are smart. From there, it’s simply a matter of me making parts of the quality they demand, and Merula providing the spells.”

“Simply...? I’m sure it’s not as easy as you’re making it sound, though.” Kuu let out a sigh.

There was no doubt Genia and Trill were geniuses, but for Taru to be able to respond to those geniuses’ demands surely meant she was a first-rate craftsperson.

Kuu smiled in satisfaction. “Ookyakya, it’s all thanks to you. If you hadn’t been around, our country couldn’t have gotten in on the drill development project. I’m really glad you came to the kingdom with me.”

“...Sure.”

Taru’s response was curt, but her cheeks reddened a little. She probably didn’t mind the compliment.

Leporina was watching Taru with a peaceful look on her face.

Putting a hand on his knee, Kuu stood up and picked up the hand-operated

drill for use on wood. While spinning it, Kuu let out a little sigh.

“The problem now is, will our country be able to put the drill that’s developed into use? The question of whether we have people who can or not... will have an effect on its future.”

““Master Kuu?””

Kuu wasn’t acting like his normal self, so Taru and Leporina got worried. The usually easygoing goofball was acting like another person entirely.

When Kuu unfurled a map of the continent in front of the two of them, he smirked like a beast that had its eye on some prey.

“I’ve been thinking about what’s to come ever since I met Fuuga in the north. The future of the Republic of Turgis.”

“The future of the republic...” Taru whispered.

Leporina was silent.

Taru was surprised by the unexpected seriousness of the discussion, but Leporina had seen Fuuga in the Union of Eastern Nations with Kuu, and she’d already been told all this.

“In future, Fuuga’s Malmkhitan is going to rise in the north,” Kuu said. “He has the ambition, as well as the ability, to make it happen. Bro’s Kingdom of Friedonia is in the east, and Empress Maria’s Gran Chaos Empire is in the west. It’s likely that future events on the continent will revolve around these three countries.”

Kuu pointed to the map as he said that, then he pointed to the Republic of Turgis.

“In the middle of all that, what will our country do? We’re involved in the medical alliance and joint drill development project, so we have friendly relations with the kingdom and Empire. But that’s not enough for us to relax. If Fuuga’s Malmkhitan swallows up the Union of Eastern Nations, and then either allies with or invades and destroys the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State and the Mercenary State Zem, his fangs might reach all the way to the republic. It can’t even be assured that the kingdom and Empire will be safe forever.”

Kuu sat down in his seat, putting his elbows down on his crossed legs as he groaned.

"If that happens, can our country get through it? The land is locked in ice and snow during the winter, making it hard for enemies to approach, but that doesn't give us much hope for victory. The snow and ice lower our productivity, too, making it hard to develop our country. That said, it's not realistic to think we could expand northward and claim some land that doesn't freeze. We don't have an air force because of the bitter cold and violent air currents, so we'd struggle to hold any land we could take."

The republic was so cold that wyverns and dragons hated it, the violent air currents kept air forces away, and in winter the roads were closed by snow, making it hard for foreign enemies to enter.

However, turning that all around, it also meant that they couldn't build their own air force, and in winter the supply lines to their homeland were cut off, so it was hard to invade other countries, too.

Many in the older generation in the republic still believed in the policy of northward expansion, but Kuu thought they needed to hurry and wake up from that pipe dream.

"In considering the future of the republic, we need a new path to replace the policy of northward expansion," Kuu said. "I'm thinking this drill development project could be the breakthrough we need."

"A new path, you say?" Leporina asked.

Kuu nodded firmly.

"Our people are skilled with their hands. The accessories they create while cooped up in their houses for the winter are detailed, and I think it's fair to say we're the best on the continent when it comes to making things like that. I want to build on that even more. I want to make the republic indispensable to the kingdom and Empire, just like your skill as a craftsperson is absolutely vital for the drill."

Basically, what Kuu was thinking of was technological nationalism.

The ability to make complicated parts could, at times, be the most powerful

diplomatic card to hold.

If he could make it so the parts built in the republic were indispensable to the kingdom and Empire, he could expect the other two countries to do many things in return to benefit his country.

Furthermore, if the drill was developed and opened the roads in winter, that would mean they could import large amounts of food. It would help to raise the funds for that, too.

“The improvement of our technology will ultimately make the republic wealthy,” Kuu said. “In order to accomplish that, it’s important for the country to support craftspeople like you, Taru, who will create that technology. For that, I need to change minds in the republic.”

The people of the republic were residents of a country with advanced technology, but they only thought of the accessories they made as a way to pass the time during the winter. Until that thinking changed, he couldn’t expect further technological advancement.

“I plan to talk to my father about this, too, but we should praise craftspeople who make something amazing, and clamp down on those that churn out large amounts of shoddy garbage,” Kuu said. “That will create a desire to create something better in the country, and we’ll grow. That’s the path the republic should take.”

Taru nodded at Kuu, who gripped his hands into fists as he spoke. “I think it’s a good idea. Our techniques are a treasure.”

“Master Kuu, you can say impressive things, after all!” Leporina was even tearing up.

Kuu laughed bashfully. “I didn’t come to the kingdom just to play around, you know? I’ve been watching Bro’s policies, and absorbing what I think I should of them. That’s why I know what needs to be done.”

Then Kuu scratched the back of his head, as if troubled.

“The ability to create superior technologies requires adaptability. That’s something we lack.”

“Huh? Adaptability?” Leporina asked.

“Yeah. Like how Bro used the jewels from the Jewel Voice Broadcast to create broadcast programs. He used something that had only been used for speeches before to provide entertainment for his country’s people. No one in this world ever thought of that, right? The ability to adapt and apply existing technologies is guaranteed to be important going forward. Like the rotational mechanism in the drill. I’m sure Bro’s thinking of all sorts of uses for it.”

“You may be right.” Taru nodded with a pensive look on her face. “I’m sure Madam Genia and Madam Trill will come up with all sorts of uses for it. But I can’t think up ideas like that.”

“Yeah, and neither can I. That’s why, while they may not be up to Bro’s level, we need to find people of our own who can think of these things. Lots of them, too.”

“If we’re going to find these people, do you have any idea where to look?” Leporina asked.

Kuu smirked. “Not now, no. But with some time, we can make them.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“We round up some of the clever folks from our nation, young and full of motivation, and we send them to the kingdom and Empire to learn. Just like I’m learning from Bro. Then, if they come back home to teach, it should increase the number of people who are able to think with adaptability in the republic.”

Kuu’s idea was to gather students to study abroad in the kingdom and Empire. Of course, he would need to get permission from Gouran Taisei later, the man who was his father and the head of the republic, but Kuu planned to convince him, no matter what.

Leporina was impressed. “Wow. That’s amazing, Master Kuu. I never knew you were thinking about all this.”

“Yeah, well, you’re welcome to keep the compliments coming, you know?” Kuu said laughing bashfully. “Well, I am our future head of state. I’d be in a sore spot if everyone was useless when I take over. I’ve got to hire anyone useful I can, regardless of race or age.”

“I think that’s wonderful.” Taru seemed genuinely impressed, which only made Kuu happier.

“Ookyakya! You falling in love with me all over again?”

“You get carried away so quickly,” she sighed. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

“Well, because I want you to be the wife of the future head of state.”

At hearing him express his affection for her directly like that, Taru had no words.

The way he said it was as casual as ever, but his eyes were serious and focused directly on her.

“I’m always serious, you know?” Kuu said. “I know we can’t do it right now, but I have every intention of making you my wife when we go back to the republic. I want you to act as a representative for the republic’s craftspeople, after all. I want you to walk with me.”

She was silent.

“Well, there’s no rush to answer,” Kuu said. “Think on it.”

With that, he stood up with an, “Ups-a-daisy,” and left the workshop.

Left behind, Taru and Leporina stared vacantly at the door through which he had left.

At last, coming to her senses first, Leporina asked Taru, “The young master seemed serious. What will you do?”

Having come to her senses, too, Taru answered her question with another. “Huh?! What will I do...? Are you okay with this, Leporina? You love Master Kuu, too, don’t you?”

After she asked that, trying to read Leporina’s expression as she did, Leporina nodded.

“It’s certainly true that I have feelings for Master Kuu. However, Master Kuu will one day be head of the republic. If he were to ask for my hand on his own, that would be one thing, but I cannot ask him to take me as his wife myself.

That's why, honestly, I'm jealous of you."

"Leporina..."

Seeing the worried look on Taru's face, Leporina giggled.

"Until you make your feelings clear, out of loyalty to you, Master Kuu isn't going to look at another woman. Whether you choose to accept or reject his proposal, I think now he'll finally be able to look at me, too. I won't ask that he marry me, but I can appeal to him so he wants to make me his bride on his own. I just want to be by Master Kuu's side, whatever form that takes."

Taru was speechless.

Leporina stood up and put her hand on the door. "Now, it's just a matter of what you want. I don't mind being second, so I'll be rooting for the two of you. That said, if you reject his proposal, I'll work to soothe Master Kuu's wounded heart, and make sure he takes me as his first."

"You're able to come out and talk about your feelings honestly, I see," Taru said quietly.

"Because I want to be with Master Kuu, from the bottom of my heart."

When Leporina said that, as if putting her words into practice, she followed Kuu out the door. Left behind, Taru asked herself a question.

What do I want...?



It was a winter day when I was still ten.

I hated the winter when I was little. The Republic of Turgis was shut down by snow and ice in winter, and whenever I opened the door, the snow was piled up to chest-level for me, so it prevented me going outside.

During this season, the adults stayed near the fire, their heads down, working on crafts as a side job.

That was because it wasn't possible to work the fields or take the boats out fishing in the winter, so they had nothing else to do. They seemed so gloomy, it was mind numbing.

I would just stare vacantly as my grandfather the blacksmith struck the iron.

In this season, blacksmiths were busy mending all the tools that the farmers gave them to repair. The orders came in during fall, and they had to be repaired during the off-season so they were ready to be returned in the spring.

That was why, even though it was winter, my grandfather was currently standing in front of a blazing furnace, wearing thin clothes.

Clang, clang, clang...

I listened to the banging of the hammer and stared into the dancing flames. I thought my grandfather was cool when he was beating iron.

But when I had to see this same scene day after day, it inevitably got boring.

I'm bored...

While thinking that, I let out the latest of who knows how many sighs that winter.

Bwoon! My thoughts were interrupted by the trumpeting of some large beast outside.

Was it a numoth?

Numoths were large, woolly creatures, and they would trudge, undeterred, through the thick snow, so they were primarily raised as large mounts for the military.

When I rushed to the door, the numoth's feet were right before my eyes. It was so big, I had to look up to see it, so my jaw dropped in surprise.

“Ookyakya!” laughed an energetic young voice from above. “Would I be right in guessing this is the Ozumi Workshop?”

For a moment, I thought the numoth in front of me had spoken, but I soon noticed a young boy of the snow monkey race who was about my age was peeking over the side of the numoth.

“I want you to repair my old man’s sword, since I broke it swinging it around.”

It seemed the voice belonged to the boy.

“It... It is...” I managed to say.

A girl of the white rabbit race who looked a little older than me peeked out after the boy.

“Hey, Young Master,” she said. “We scared the poor girl by suddenly riding up on a numoth. Also, this numoth’s a military one that your father is raising, and we borrowed it without permission, too, so he’s going to get mad again, you know?”

“Ookyakya! Where’s the harm? It’d be grueling to walk through this snow.”

The snow monkey boy didn’t seem concerned in the slightest at the white rabbit girl’s chastening. There was probably a difference in status between them. The boy was acting like he was more important than she was.

Then the boy nimbly jumped down from the numoth.

“Ookya?!”

He was not any taller than I was, so he sank into the snow up to his chest.

Perhaps feeling stubborn, the boy shouted, “Fungh!” and trudged through the snow towards me.

When he got in front of me, the boy finally grinned and said, “I’m Kuu. And that’s Leporina up there. You?”

“...Taru.”

“You’re called Taru, huh? Nice to meet you, Taru.”

When he said that, the boy who had introduced himself as Kuu took my hand and shook it vigorously.

The boy had cut through the snow that kept me from going outside as if it didn’t matter it was there.

That was my first meeting with Master Kuu.

“It’s morning...” I murmured.

I had the day off, but out of ingrained habit, I had woken up before dawn. As per usual, it was still dark out.

As I got out of bed, I remembered the dream I just had. It was a dream of

when I was little, the first time I'd met Master Kuu and Leporina.

After that day, Master Kuu and Leporina had repeatedly come over to my house to play.

There were limits to the fun we could have indoors, though, so Master Kuu had always been quick to take me outdoors. We'd ridden on the numoth and gone all sorts of places.

Because Master Kuu was reckless by nature, he'd taken Leporina and me to dangerous places where we were caught in avalanches, chased by wild creatures, yelled at by adults who found out, and put through all sorts of other rather unfair situations.

Fond memories.

I tried comparing the Master Kuu of then to the Master Kuu of now.

I think... Master Kuu really has changed.

I felt like coming to this country — coming into contact with a number of worlds — had helped to broaden his horizons.

He'd tagged along to the Union of Eastern Nations, so he was as reckless as ever, but through it all, he had an awareness that he was the son of the head of our republic, and he was seeing what was good for our country, and what was out there that threatened us.

I think he has grown.

But some things never change.

Master Kuu was always trying to break down walls that stood in our way.

Like how he had broken through the snow to come to me in our youth, now he was trying to use the drill to open a hole and bring fresh air into the republic, which seemed locked in snow and ice.

It was because Master Kuu was the way he was that, even after all the hell he put her through, Leporina loved and adored him, and would follow him anywhere.

I... wanted to help Master Kuu, too.

I couldn't fight, so I couldn't follow him to the battlefield like Leporina, but I could at least watch Master Kuu press forward from behind.

Just as Master Kuu had broken through the snow to take me outside, if there was a wall that stands in Master Kuu's way, this time, I wanted to be the one to tear it down.

Since I didn't have battlefield strength, I'd do it using all the technology at my disposal.

“...Okay.”

Having found my resolve, I ate breakfast and left the workshop.



Ten days later...

“Heyyyy, Taruuuu, I’m heeeere!” Kuu called.

“Taaaaruuuu?” Leporina called.

Taru had just called Kuu out with a letter saying she had something important to discuss, so he was here at her workshop with Leporina.

The furnace wasn't lit today, and it was high noon, so without light shining inside the building, it was gloomy.

The two entered the workshop and looked around.

“Honestly, that Taru,” Kuu said. “What's she doing so sneakily?”

Leporina was silent.

Taru had been acting strange lately.

It seemed she was always busy, so it was common for her to be out when Kuu came to visit her workshop.

She seemed to be up to something, but when Kuu had asked, all she would say was, “It's still a secret.”

The “still” in that sentence suggested she meant to tell him eventually, so he'd left it alone, but it bothered him.

There was one other thing that was odd, too.

About a week ago, Taru had come to borrow the cudgel that was his favorite weapon. She was the one who'd made it in the first place, and she'd said she wanted to do maintenance on it, but he didn't have it back yet. Had she called him here to return it today?

While Kuu was thinking about that, Taru came out from inside the workshop.

In her hands, she held an object that was very long and wrapped in cloth.

“Master Kuu, Leporina. Welcome.”

“Hey, Taru,” Kuu said casually. “Is that my cudgel you were working on?”

Taru shook her head a little apologetically. “I’m sorry, Master Kuu. The maintenance was a lie.”

“Ookya? You didn’t work on it? Why?”

“What I did wasn’t maintenance, it was an upgrade.”

When she said that, she pulled the cloth off the long object.

Inside was Kuu’s cudgel, which had changed.

The central part which had the golden centipede design wasn’t noticeably different. However, both ends had two channels carved into them, with bits of bare metal sticking out.

If Souma could have seen it, he might have thought it looked like the Wolf’s Tooth Cudgel or Langyabang that showed up in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*-inspired action games.

“Wh-What is this?!” Kuu cried out in surprise.

Taru pointed to the centipede’s head section.

“Press the button there.”

“Huh? This?”

When Kuu pressed the button like he was told to, the metal bits on each end of the cudgel went, *Gween!* and started revolving rapidly.

As Kuu and Leporina stared on, dumbfounded by what they were seeing, Taru explained, sounding somewhat proud: “I added the drill function you said you

wanted, Master Kuu.”

“No... No, no, no, no, no, no!” Kuu pressed the button once more to stop the spinning, and then turned on Taru. “No, didn’t you say it wasn’t possible when we talked about it before?”

“It was pretty hard. If you’re going to swing it around as a cudgel, a cylindrical shape is better than a conical one, so I consulted with Madam Genia and Madam Trill, and this is what we came up with. Scattering countless blades across the end of it was inefficient, so we used two grooves, similar to a hand drill for punching holes in wood, to make a shape that would dig through things. The drill section was reinforced with Merula’s magic, so it’s pretty strong.”

Putting her hands on her hips, Taru thrust her chest out with pride.

“If I were to name it, it would be... the Drill Cudgel.”

As Taru went on plainly explaining the change to the weapon, Kuu clutched his temples.

“No, it’s more than I expected, and I’m glad you made it for me. I never expected you’d make what I wanted a reality. You’re pretty stubborn, right, Taru? I was expecting you’d blow off a silly request like this.”

“This is... a show of my resolve.” Taru touched the Drill Cudgel softly and spoke in a serious tone. “The things you want to do, the wishes you want granted, the things you want to accomplish... I want to support you in all of them. Even if people say it’s reckless or crazy, I won’t reject it. I’ll do everything I can with my skills, and I’ll make it happen for sure.”

“Taru... You...”

Kuu reached out to her. When he did, Taru took his hand and pressed it to her own chest.

“For as long as you keep facing forward, driving toward your dreams, I will be right behind you supporting you. Because in my heart, I want to break through with you.”

“Does that mean... you’ll accept the engagement?”

Taru nodded slightly.

Kuu was so full of emotion he tried to hug her, but just as he was about she said, "Wait," and held up a hand to stop him.

Kuu screeched to a sudden halt.

Taru asked, "Can I put one condition on it?"

"S-Sure! If it's something I can do, then anything!"

"Well, then..." Taru walked over to Leporina, taking her hand.

"Huh? Taru?" Leporina asked.

"Come with me," she said.

Then, hand in hand with Leporina, the two stood in front of Kuu, and Taru said, "If we're getting married, I want it to be with Leporina, too."

"Huh...? Whaaaaa?!"

This made both Kuu and Leporina's eyes go wide with surprise.

"U-Um, Taru? Why would you suddenly...?" Leporina began.

"I can support Kuu on the technological front, but I have a lot of weaknesses elsewhere. I can make weapons, but I can't fight alongside him, and I'm too shy to be much use in social situations, either. You can help Kuu at times like that, right, Leporina?"

While Leporina stared at her in confusion, Taru snorted.

"There may be a time when I'll need to accept him taking a wife who can do the things that I can't. If so, I want it to be you."

"Taru..." Leporina said, moved.

"H-Hey! Don't just decide this on your own... Taru's the one I..."

Kuu tried to interrupt, but Taru jabbed a finger in front of his nose.

"You're always being so reckless. I hear you were being reckless in the Union of Eastern Nations, too."

"W-Well, yes, but..."

"No matter how much I worry, I can't help you on the battlefield. But Leporina can defend you, and fight alongside you. If Leporina is with you, I can

feel a little more at ease waiting. I will support you at home, and Leporina will support you outside. You don't hate Leporina, do you?"

"Well, no, I don't hate her... but that doesn't mean..."

As Kuu stammered, Taru kept pressing him.

"Before, you were saying, 'Will you be my wife?' to King Souma's little sister."

"I was just trying to get your attention!" he yelled.

"I know. You were always flirting with girls, then glancing in my direction. I kind of knew you wanted me to get jealous."

She was right. When she said all these things that saw right through his vanity, Kuu wanted to find a hole and hide in it.

As he was feeling that way, Taru faced him straight on and said, "But you never tried to hit on Leporina. Even though she's a cute girl, and you've known her even longer than you've known me. That's because you knew how Leporina feels, right? If you hit on her when you had no plans to follow through, you'd end up hurting her. That's why you never did."

Kuu was silent.

"M-Master Kuu...?" Leporina asked hesitantly.

She'd hit the nail on the head again. She completely saw through Kuu. That was probably because, though she treated him brusquely, Taru had been watching Kuu all of this time.

"Leporina's always been thinking of you," Taru said. "And you don't hate her. I like Leporina, too. So... I don't want her left out."

"Oh, fine, I get it! I give, I give!" Kuu raised his hands in surrender. Then, awkwardly, he looked to Leporina. "Erm... there you have it. Will you be my wife, too?"

Leporina must have been overcome by emotion. She was smiling as big tears streamed down her face. "Master Kuu... Yes! I know I have many shortcomings, but please take good care of meeee!"

Taru rubbed Leporina's back. Leporina who had been so happy about their

engagement, and Taru who was so eager to protect him that she welcomed Leporina.

With those two wonderful girls in front of him, Kuu seemed to have made up his mind. “Ookyaaa! If that’s how it is, I’m going to be a man and look after both of you!”

“That’s wrong,” said Taru. “We’re the ones who’ll be looking after you.”

“Taru’s right,” Leporina agreed after sniffling.

With the two poking fun at him to the very end, Kuu wasn’t able to act cool.

Chapter 5: The Black Tiger's Delivery

— Night of the 1st day, 3rd month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar —
Parnam Castle — The leader of the Black Cats, the intelligence and covert operations unit that reported directly to the crown, was summoned by Souma to the governmental affairs office in Parnam Castle.

When Kagetora entered in his usual imposing black tiger mask and black armor, not through the office door, but the glass door leading onto the terrace, Souma pressed a hand to his forehead and sighed.

“I have come at your behest,” Kagetora announced.

“...Can’t you use the normal entrance?”

“People are suspicious of me in this outfit. It wouldn’t do to have one of the maids fainting again.”

“It’s a bit late to say this, but that outfit’s not very sneaky at all, is it?”

It might melt into the darkness, but Kagetora looked intensely out of place anywhere there was light. However, Kagetora shook his head.

“If need be, the attention of others can be diverted using enchantments. More importantly, what is it you have called me here for today? I am led to believe you have some important task for me.”

“Yeah. This is a task I can only entrust to you.” Souma’s face grew serious, and he drew a rectangular object from the drawer of his office desk.

It was a metal case.

It was a rectangular prism, 15 centimeters x 20 centimeters x 40 centimeters, with no ornamentation on its surface, but there was a big lock on the top side, which was where the lid was.

Looking at the simplicity of the design and the attention paid to defending it, you could infer how important the contents must be.

Souma passed that metal box to Kagetora.

"I want you to deliver this to my father-in-law in the House of Elfrieden. I'm asking you like this because I mean for you to deliver the item personally. It must remain sealed until it's in Father's hands."

"You mean the former king, Sir Albert?" Kagetora stared at the metal box.

It was a tightly sealed box.

The sender was the current (provisional) king of the country.

The recipient was the former king.

And then there was the care taken in sending it with the leader of the Black Cats.

It was almost as if some dangerous object that might shake the country was inside.

What in the world could possibly be in the box?

"May I inquire as to the contents?" Kagetora asked.

"You may not. I cannot tell you."

Having said that, Souma now passed a letter with a wax seal to him.

"I would like you to give this letter to Father along with the box. It contains the key to this box. Have Father read the letter in your presence, and when he has finished, you are to carry out the orders within."

"...Understood."

Kagetora bowed his head and accepted the box and letter.

Though the delivery was nothing if not mysterious, he knew the young king. There had to be some deep thought at work here, so Kagetora would ask no more. Now all that remained was to carry out the task with which he had been entrusted with precision.

Kagetora was about to leave from the terrace in the same way he had arrived... and then it happened.

There was a knock at the office door.

Kagetora tried to hide himself, but Souma said, "Wait," and stopped him.

“It’s me. May I come in?” It was a woman’s voice. That voice belonged to Liscia.

Souma said, “Go ahead.”

The door opened, and Liscia and...

“My lady?!” Kagetora exclaimed.

...of all people, the former queen, Elisha, entered with her.

“It’s been too long,” Elisha said formally. “Sir Car... I mean, Sir Kagetora.”

She was as graceful as ever, and despite now being a grandmother, she was still a beautiful lady.

It turned out that, having heard from Souma how difficult raising twins as their first children was, she had rushed to their side to support them.

Liscia and Elisha each held one of the children, Kazuha and Cian. Liscia glanced to Kagetora, who was standing stunned in one corner of the room, nodding to him with a soft smile.

Seeing her, something hot welled up in Kagetora’s eyes, deep within the mask.

That tomboyish princess... she’s a mother now...

This room now held three generations of royal princesses. The scene made Kagetora want to pinch the bridge of his nose, but he desperately hid his emotions, not wanting to let them be discovered.

While Kagetora struggled, unbeknownst to anyone, Souma asked Liscia, “Did you already finish giving milk to Cian and Kazuha?”

“Yes. They both drank a lot today, and now they’re sound asleep. Cian fell asleep at my bosom, but Kazuha was excited for some reason, and she just wouldn’t go to sleep.”

“Hee hee, Kazuha is just like you were when you were little,” Elisha giggled. “You were a rambunctious little thing, you know? Always quick to try and sneak out of bed.”

“M-Mother. It’s embarrassing when you bring up things I can’t even

remember..."

Elisha's talk about old memories was turning Liscia's cheeks red.

With a wry smile at their conversation, Souma took a peek at the twins' faces. Kazuha was asleep in Liscia's arms, Cian in Elisha's.

"Oh, honestly," Souma sighed. "If it weren't for my duties, they're so cute that I could stare at them all day."

"Oh, geez, don't be silly," Liscia said. "You're the king, Souma, so keep yourself together."

"Hee hee hee! Liscia, you sound just like I used to."

Liscia's chastising Souma for acting like a silly parent seemed to amuse Elisha.

While Kagetora stood there, feeling out of place in this homey environment, Liscia peeked in his direction.

Then she walked over. "Um... Sir Kagetora?"

"...What is it?"

"Could you hold her for me?"

With that said, she handed Kazuha to Kagetora.

It seemed Kagetora was uncharacteristically dismayed by the proposal. "No, I... I would scare the child were I to hold her..."

"It's all right." Liscia looked at Kagetora with complete sincerity. "You closely resemble a man I loved and respected. I've heard from mother. That person once held me when I was Kazuha's size. And he adored me like I was his own daughter. So... there is no chance that this girl, my daughter, would dislike you."

"Princess..."

Kagetora took off his gauntlets, and hesitantly accepted Kazuha.

He had thick, burly arms, but because Kagetora was a feline beastman, his arms were covered in fur.

Though the fur tickled Kazuha for a moment when he took her, she soon began breathing softly with a look of total calm on her sleeping face.

Children are always sensitive, because there's still so much they don't know about the world. That sensitivity must have let her pick up on the fact that these arms belonged to one who would protect her unconditionally.

A minute later, Kagetora returned Kazuha to Liscia.

"I am grateful that you offered me this valuable experience."

"Hee hee. Souma may continue to cause a lot of trouble for you in future, but please don't push yourself too hard, and take care."

Seeing Liscia's concern for Kagetora, Souma was just a bit upset. "Trouble? Now that's just not fair."

"Oh, my! Jealous of Sir Kagetora, are we, son-in-law?" Elisha teased.

Souma shrugged in resignation. "I won't deny it, Mother."

Even as Liscia said, "Yeesh," she was smiling.

Feeling his lips turn upward beneath the mask thanks to the warmth around him, Kagetora said, "Pardon me," and then vanished into the darkness of night from the terrace.

— In the evening of the next day —

Kagetora was now in the previous king Albert's former domain, secreted away in the mountains.

He arrived at Albert's mansion and was led by a maid, who looked somewhat intimidated by his appearance, to the living room.

Though it was now the third month of the year, it was still cold in the mountains, and a fire burned in the large hearth. Albert was already in the living room, and he greeted Kagetora with a smile.

"Ohh, Sir Car... Sir Kagetora. Good of you to come."

"Yes, sir." Kagetora saluted. "I am pleased to see you seem in good health."

Albert slapped him on the shoulder. "None of that, none of that! I'm retired now. Let us cast aside the restrictions of liege and vassal, and treat one another, instead, as old friends."

"No... If you'll forgive my rudeness, I do not believe we were that well acquainted."

"...You never change. That personality of yours is as troublesome as ever."

With a sigh at Kagetora's stubbornness, Albert extended his right hand.

"Then let us become friends now. If you would treat me *as if you were an acquaintance I've known for a long time now*, I would be pleased."

"...Yes, sir. If that is what you wish, I will do so gladly."

Kagetora took Albert's hand, and they exchanged a firm handshake.

Albert had Kagetora sit on a sofa near the fireplace, and he himself sat at a spot across a small table from him.

Then, folding his hands together above his knee, Albert asked, "So, what business have you come on today?"

"Sir, I have come bearing a delivery for you from my master, His Majesty, King Souma."

Kagetora passed over the metal box he had received. Then, from his pocket, he produced the letter which was the other thing Souma had entrusted him with, and gave it to Albert.

The former king looked at the metal box, and said, "Oh, my, what could it be?"

"I also received this letter from my master. He says you are to read it in my presence. The key to this box should be enclosed with it."

"Hmm. Understood."

Albert accepted the envelope. Breaking the wax seal and pulling out the letter inside, he began reading it. He occasionally would go, "Mm-hm, mm-hm," or, "I see..." as he read, and when he finished, he folded up the letter.

He took the key to the metal box from inside the envelope. Holding it in two fingers, he looked to Kagetora.

"The letter, it said you are to follow my orders while you are here, you know?"

“Yes, sir. I have been ordered to do so by my master.”

“Hm... Be sure you remember those words.”

With that, Albert put the key into the lock holding the box shut. There was a clink as he turned it, and the lid slowly opened.

Kagetora was watching in anticipation, waiting to see what important item might be inside, but...

“Hm?”

Inside was a single bottle of wine.

What... exactly is this supposed to be? Kagetora’s eyes went wide.

He’d been made to carry what seemed like an important box, but in truth, he had only been bringing a bottle of wine to Sir Albert.

Kagetora began to think his master might be having a laugh at his expense, but then...

“Hm?! That wine?!” Seeing the brand of wine, Kagetora’s eyes bulged beneath his mask.

Seeing Albert’s reaction, Albert smirked. “Oh, my, how strange. You shouldn’t know anything about this wine.”

“No... It’s nothing. It was just my imagination.”

“This wine, you see? When my daughter Liscia was born, I sent it to an old friend. A wine made in the year of her birth, in the hope that he would always protect her. My friend often said, ‘I intend to drink this wine on the day the princess is married.’ That friend is no longer with us now, but...”

As Albert spoke, he gestured for one of the maids to come closer, then ordered her to bring two glasses and something for dinner.

After that, Albert leaned back in the sofa, looking down at the letter once more.

“It seems my friend entrusted this wine to my son-in-law. However, my son-in-law says he has no taste for wine and it would be wasted on him, so he would like for me to drink it. It would be a problem if I were falling down drunk

on their wedding day, so I am to drink it as a pre-celebration. ‘It would be awkward to drink it alone, so have *the one I sent to bring it to you* join you’... is what it says. Will you join me, Sir Kagetora?”

“No, I could never drink such a thing...” Kagetora faltered.

“You are under orders to do as I command, yes?”

“Guh...”

Kagetora tried to excuse himself, but he couldn’t in face of an order from his master.

While he was grinding his teeth, the maid brought in a small feast and set it on the table.

Then, as if to strike the final blow, Albert raised a glass to Kagetora.

“I was just thinking I had too much time on my hands with Elisha away. What do you say? Would you join me for a drink, in remembrance of my late old friend, and celebration of *our* daughter’s marriage?”

“...Yes, sir.” Finally giving in, Kagetora accepted the glass. “Understood. But there is no way you could get drunk on so little alcohol.”

“Ho, ho, ho, rest assured. Our wine cellar has plenty more of this vintage. I bought it in bulk because I was so overjoyed by Liscia’s birth, you see.”

It seemed the bottle Albert had sent to his friend was just one of many.

“Such wasteful spending...” Kagetora sighed. “Wouldn’t the madam be furious if she heard of it?”

“She was, indeed, quite cross with me. She wouldn’t let me hold Liscia again for a while.”

“Heh heh heh! That’s so like you... Gyah ha ha!” Kagetora laughed louder than you would usually expect from him.

Albert joined in, and the mansion was filled with the echoing laughter of men.

That night, there was drinking and merry-making, but in the morning, only Albert remained in the living room, his guest long since having vanished.

He had likely already set out for another mission.

Like a shadow, Kagetora was a man of many mysteries.



Chapter 6: A Wedding Present That Was Worth a Fortune

— 3rd day, 3rd month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar —

Ding dong! Ding dong!

There was a joyous pealing of bells.

“Congratulations!”

“May the Mother Dragon watch over you!”

The masses clapped and applauded unceasingly.

On this day, two couples were joined in matrimony...

However, it was not in the Kingdom of Friedonia, but in the Kingdom of Lastania inside the Union of Eastern Nations.

“Princess Tia! Congratulations!”

“Lord Julius! Please, take care of the princess and make her happy!”

“You’re beautiful, Captain Lauren!”

“Congratulations, Jirukoma!”

On a warm day where you could feel the coming of spring, the Kingdom of Lastania witnessed the weddings of Julius to Princess Tia, and Jirukoma to Captain Lauren.

It being the wedding of the country’s sole princess, the central city of Lasta was so bustling that you might think the entirety of the not-exactly-large population of this small country was clustered there.

Because Lauren was popular among the soldiers of the Kingdom of Lastania, there was some jeering from guys who were jealous of Jirukoma mixed in with all the applause.

“Captain Lauren’s finally become another man’s property...”

“Damn you, Jirukoma! Stealing Captain Lauren from us! If you ever make her cry, you’ll pay for it!”

But there was only a very small number of them.

The vast majority showered them with blessings, and the two newlywed couples waved to the crowd.

On the high platform behind them, Princess Tia’s parents, the current king and queen of the Kingdom of Lastania, watched with satisfied smiles.

Eventually, the new brides and grooms began walking down a road packed with crowds on both sides.

They made a full circuit of the city, showing themselves off to those who had kindly come to see their wedding.

As they did, one of the guests of honor, Lauren, perhaps unused to wearing a dress, tripped and nearly fell over.

Jirukoma reached out and caught her.

“S-Sorry! Sir Jirukoma!” Lauren’s face turned bright red as she jumped away from him. Then, with silk-gloved hands, she covered her cheeks. “Urgh... How embarrassing. Unused to this sort of frilly outfit, I’ve made a fool of myself. I’m now finally able to become your wife, and yet I hate myself for not being able to act as feminine as the princess.”

Seeing her so bashful, Jirukoma thought it was cute. Unable to suppress his rising emotions, he swept her up in his arms.

Suddenly finding herself in a princess carry, Lauren blinked repeatedly.

“Uwah?! Sir Jirukoma?!”

“I loved you for your usual, gallant self,” Jirukoma declared. “Yet seeing you so gorgeous today, I’ve fallen in love all over. I am the happiest man on the continent, Madam Lauren.”

“Sir Jirukoma... yes. Oh, but, please, stop with this ‘madam’ business. It makes us sound like strangers. I’m your wife now.”

“I understand... Lauren. Then don’t call me ‘sir,’ either.”

"Yes, dear!" Lauren replied in Jirukoma's arms, a broad smile on her face.

Seeing the happiness of Lauren's face, Tia smiled at Julius, too. "Captain Lauren looks so happy, doesn't she?"

"Yes... I'm sure Jirukoma feels the same," Julius said with his usual cool expression. "I'd say he's not normally the type who would sweep a woman up in his arms in front of others like that, but he was pushed into it because he didn't want to see a sad look on Madam Lauren's face."

Tia peeked at his face. "But... I'm really jealous of her."

Seeing the thinly veiled hope in Tia's face, Julius let out a resigned sigh. "...Shall we, then?"

He lifted Tia up like Jirukoma was doing for Lauren. But, of course, his embarrassment was winning out.

Julius wore his usual stony expression. Tia wrapped her supple arm around his neck, and drew her face in so close he could feel her breath.

"I love that about you, Lord Julius."

"What about me?" he asked.

"The way you're kind, but awkward and unable to show it."

"You... don't mince words."

Julius gave Tia a light headbutt. It didn't hurt at all, but Tia held the spot where he'd hit her with both hands, and she puffed up her cheeks.

"I think you'd be so wonderful if you could just be honest with your feelings, Lord Julius," she said wistfully.

"This personality suits me. In my work, it's easier to be just a little respected, and just a little feared."

"Murrgh, but then no one will know how wonderful you are."

"You understand me, Tia." He smiled slightly. "That's all I need."

Tia's heart skipped a beat. "The way you're always making my heart race like that... it isn't fair."

“I could say the same of you.”

“I make your heart race, too?”

“Yeah. If I take my eyes off you, I never know where you might wander off to.”

“Murrgh.” Princess Tia groaned in dissatisfaction.

Julius smiled slightly again.



Some days later, in the governmental affairs office of the royal mansion in Lasta, Julius was creating some documents that were needed for government purposes.

Normally, this would be something for the King of Lasta to do, but Julius could do it both faster and better. At some point, Julius had begun doing the work in his place, and the king would merely press his stamp on it after looking it over.

Due to their accomplishments in surviving the prior demon wave, during the conferral of honors within the Union of Eastern Nations, the amount of territory held by Lastania had been nearly doubled.

That said, because their country was so small to begin with, the increase in their power as a nation was negligible. Yet with more territory came more people, and consequently the number of matters that needed to be attended to rose, meaning the volume of work was on the rise.

With the current volume, no one but Julius could handle it, and it had been decided, due to his marriage to Princess Tia, that he would be the next king, so the work could be entrusted to him without fear of usurpation.

Basically, Julius now found himself in a situation much like Souma had when he was first summoned to this world.

For one as neurotic as Julius, it bothered him to have work piled up so haphazardly, so he actively took on work he didn’t want and did it all in silence.

Knock, knock, knock.

Then there was a knock at the office door, and he heard the voice of a lovely

young girl.

“Lord Julius, it’s Tia!”

“Come in!” he called back.

The door opened, and Tia, who had become his wife just the other day, came in. In her hands, she carried a tray with tea.

“You’ve been working hard. Why not take a short break?”

“...Yeah. I think I will rest a bit.”

Julius laid down his feather pen, moving over to sit at the tea table with her.

While pouring his tea, she apologetically said, “I’m sorry, Lord Julius. This is supposed to be my father’s work...”

“Don’t worry about it. I was simply better suited to doing paperwork than your father,” Julius said nonchalantly, sniffing the aroma of the tea she had made for him.

“Still, we’re... um... newlyweds, but you’re already back to work.”

“It couldn’t be avoided. If the royal family is lax, the country will stagnate.”

“Well, yes, but... I hear things are much *sweeter* over at Captain Lauren’s place, you know? They, um, you know... every night, and she’s not been getting a lot of sleep.”

“...Well, they did say they were going to have three children.”

It seemed Jirukoma and Lauren were getting along nicely. The two had some time off, so they must have been making the most of their time as newlyweds.

Maybe because she was jealous of them, Tia pursed her lips. “I’m old enough to have children, too, you know?”

“I told you to wait a little longer, didn’t I?” Julius sighed.

Even though they were married, Julius had yet to lay a hand on Tia. The fact that Tia was still only sixteen (turning seventeen this year) played at least some part in that.

That was considered marriageable age in this world, but she was younger

than his little sister Roroa, and some of her gestures still seemed childish, so Julius was in no hurry to do anything with her. He wanted to continue their relationship as it was for at least another year.

Julius reached out, gently stroking Tia's cheek.

"There's no need to rush into things. We'll be together forever. If, in all the time we have together, you can bear my children, that would make me happy."

"Lord Julius..."

They stared into each other's eyes. The mood had started to get vaguely sweet... and then it happened.

Thud! Thud! There was a violent pounding on the door.

Julius ordered, "Enter," and a young soldier rushed in without pausing for pleasantries.

"W-We have trouble, Lord Julius!"

"You're awfully noisy. What exactly is it?"

The soldier raised his voice.

"A... a wedding gift has arrived from Lady Roroa of the Kingdom of Friedonia!"

"“Wha?!”” Julius and Tia gulped in unison at what they were seeing.

They were led not to the entrance of the castle, but to the south gate of the walls of Lasta.

When they passed through to the other side, there was a long luggage train that continued up into the hills. There were a variety of carts in the luggage train, some drawn by horses, others by large mounts like rhinosaurs.

There were many adventurers guarding it, too, making it more like a merchant caravan or fleet.

As Julius stared at it in dumb disbelief, the thin, gray-haired gentleman who had been riding in the lead carriage walked over.

"I presume you must be Lord Julius Lastania and his wife, Tia." The man stood in front of her, offering a reverent bow.

"Yes, but... hm?" Julius said. "I've seen you somewhere before."

"Yes. My name is Sebastian Silverdeer. Previously, I managed an apparel store in the princely capital of Van known as The Silver Deer. I have maintained close ties with Princess Roroa since those days."

Julius was puzzled. "An apparel store? I've never been to such a place..."

If he was an acquaintance of Roroa's, had they passed by one another in the castle, perhaps?

Julius stared hard at Sebastian's face. The man seemed like he was mild-mannered, but not one to be underestimated. Julius had a feeling he'd met him somewhere before, a long time ago.

Not at an apparel store, but somewhere more savage...

"The Silver Deer... wait, Silverdeer?! No, you couldn't be *the* Silver Deer, could you?!"

"Hmm, there's a name that takes me back." Sebastian had a peaceful look on his face as he basked in the nostalgia. "They used to call me that."

The Silver Deer had been the epithet of the right-hand man of General Herman, Julius and Roroa's grandfather.

A renowned scout, he had been nicknamed that because of his silver hair and the ease with which he hopped around the Principality of Amidonia's treacherous mountain roads.

In his youth, Julius had seen the man come as an assistant to Herman when he came to visit the castle.

However, the Silver Deer was supposed to have retired around a decade ago.

The man had said he ran an apparel store in the capital, and was close to Roroa. Suddenly, it made a lot of sense.

"Grandfather Herman must have really adored Roroa," Julius commented.

"My, whatever could you mean?"

Julius sighed at Sebastian's attempt to play dumb.

Ever since the death of Herman's daughter, Julius and Roroa's mother, Gaius

had thrown himself into revenge against the kingdom.

Because Julius was a warrior, his father had never pushed him away, but because of Roroa's more bureaucratic leanings, she had been isolated in the family.

Honestly, both Julius and Gaius had ignored her counsel, so Roroa had gotten closer to the bureaucrat Colbert than to them.

Grandfather Herman must have been worried about her, and sent his right-hand man to watch over his granddaughter, in case anything should happen.

It seemed the perpetually stony-faced general was soft on his granddaughter.

"Does Roroa know?" Julius asked.

"Why, even I don't know what you might be alluding to."

"You're a shrewd one, I'll give you that." Julius smiled wryly. "Well? What is the wagon train about? I was told it's our wedding present."

"Yes. Everything here is Lady Roroa's wedding present to the two of you. If I were to simply describe the cargo, it is wood, stone, and iron."

"Huh? Wood, stone, and iron?"

As a wedding present? What in the world was Roroa up to?

Julius was suspicious, but then Sebastian produced a sheet of paper from his pocket. "I have been entrusted with a letter which I am to read aloud in your presence."

Sebastian then began reading.

"Congratulations to my big brother and adorable big sister. You two flirtin' with each other? Brother, Big Sis is a little on the small side, so don't go forcin' her into anythin' too weird in bed."

"That Roroa... We're only at the introduction, and it's already this bad," Julius groaned. His head was starting to hurt at the sudden assault.

Tia turned bright red at the "in bed" part and looked down at the ground.

Julius was going to have to smack his sister upside the head the next time they met. She'd be queen by then, but if he got King Souma's permission first, it

wouldn't turn into a diplomatic incident.

Sebastian cleared his throat, then continued reading.

“Now then, as for your wedding gift, I was talkin’ with Darlin’ about what’d be appropriate, and... we were thinkin’ what you’re really gonna be needin’ for your newlywed life is a house. That’s why we’re sendin’ ya a mountainload of timber, stone, and iron. Ya can put what we sent you together and make a nice house for yourselves, right? Bye bye. From Roroa.”

Tia looked dazedly at the luggage train that continued into the mountains. “Materials for a house? But there’s enough here to build a castle.”

Julius smiled wryly at her literal interpretation. “Tia, we’re royalty. As royalty, wouldn’t our ‘house’ be the ‘country’?”

“Oh, I see! Then Lady Roroa sent this for the country?” Tia asked.

“That must be it. They’re all things this country lacks now.”

The Kingdom of Lastania was recovering from the damage they’d suffered during the demon wave.

In addition to the territory they had held before now, they also needed to rebuild the new territories they had been awarded. There was sympathy money flowing in from the rest of the Union of Eastern Nations, but the materials for reconstruction that the money was supposed to buy were in short supply to begin with. Even with doubling their size, it didn’t change that they were a small nation, and merchants would go to places that could pay more.

Supply and demand. The price of supplies rose the more they were in short supply.

In the end, they had been unable to obtain sufficient supplies at the market, and were being forced to focus on repairing the walls, medical facilities, and other high priority institutions.

That must have been why Roroa had sent goods, not money. It seemed likely the other nations would raise an objection if it came in the form of material aid, but this was just a wedding gift for her brother. It wasn’t going to resuscitate the whole country all of a sudden, but it would make the process a lot easier.

Julius conveyed his thanks to Sebastian. “It must have been hard, bringing all of these supplies all this way.”

“Why, yes. Gathering the supplies was hard enough, and the arrangements to bring them through the other countries of the Union of Eastern Nations was far more troublesome. I’m told His Majesty went to a great deal of effort.”

“He’s put us even further in his debt, huh...”

“Debt...! That’s right, what are we going to do?!” Tia exclaimed, clapping her hands against her cheeks.

“What is it?” Julius asked. “Suddenly raising your voice like that...”

“Lord Julius, this is a wedding gift to us, right? And Lady Roroa will be getting married to Sir Souma soon, too, I’ve heard. I think we need to send them something, too, but is there anything in this country that could match up to this wonderful gift?!”

It seemed Tia was concerned about the return gift. It was true, there was likely little this small, recovering country could send to the Kingdom of Friedonia.

Julius gently stroked her cheek as she quivered with worry. “It’s okay, Tia. If it’s a wedding gift for those two, I can prepare one.”

“Y-You can?! But is there anything like that in this country?” Tia stood there with question marks over her head.

Julius gave her a smile. “There is something we can give. It’s something this country is well-positioned to offer. Sebastian.”

“Yes. What is it?”

“When the supplies are unloaded, you’re returning to the kingdom, right? I’ll go get it now, so could you deliver my wedding present to Roroa and Souma?”

“As you wish, sir.” Sebastian bowed reverently again.

Julius went back to the castle temporarily, withdrawing the item he was after from his desk, and then returned to the gate where Sebastian was waiting. Then, when he turned over what he had brought to Sebastian, he asked to have it be delivered to Souma.

When she saw what Julius had given him, Tia cocked her head to the side. “Is that item equal to their gift?”

“Yes. This will do.” Stroking his dumbfounded wife’s hair, Julius insisted, “I’m sure Souma must want this more than anything.”





Another two weeks later, in the governmental affairs office in Parnam Castle, as Roroa and Sebastian watched, Souma went through the wedding present Julius had sent.

The reason he was looking through it was because what Julius had sent was a sheaf of papers.

When he finished reading, Souma let out a sigh, and laid the papers down on top of his desk.

“I have to hand it to Julius. Not only did he know what I want, he had this prepared in advance, too. He’s frighteningly perceptive.”

“Darlin’. What was my brother’s weddin’ gift?” Roroa asked.

Souma crossed his arms. “This is a report on the situation in Malmkhitan compiled by people working under Julius.”

“That’s the place where that Fuuga fella you’re so worried about’s from, yeah?”

Souma nodded, stood up, and walked over to the map of the continent hanging on the wall. Then he looked at Malmkhitan in the Union of Eastern Nations.

“It seems that Fuuga and Madam Mutsumi’s wedding was just held in Malmkhitan. Simultaneously, they succeeded in eliminating the remaining anti-Fuuga elements within Malmkhitan. In short, Fuuga has shored up the home front inside Malmkhitan.”

Souma put his hand on top of Malmkhitan on the map. The territory was still small enough that his hand spilled out of it, but just like his fingers were now spilling out, so too would Fuuga’s ambition spill out from inside the country.

“Now his eyes will turn to the *outside* in earnest,” Souma said.

Fuuga had talked about this. First he would secure the country, then once that was finished, he would request aid from other countries in the Union of Eastern Nations to invade the Demon Lord’s Domain.

That plan was finally going to be put into motion.

Going forward, Souma was going to be less and less able to ignore Fuuga's actions.

He returned to the desk and put a hand down on the papers. "This is an independent report based on Julius's independent investigation into Malmkhitan. I've sent the Black Cats to engage in intelligence operations of our own, but because the Union of Eastern Nations is a group of countries, making contact is difficult, putting some heavy limits on their activities. However, because Lastania belongs to the Union of Eastern Nations, it seems a fair bit of information is making its way to Julius."

"So, my brother was tellin' ya about that?" Roroa asked.

"Yeah. For instance, it's hard for the Black Cats to investigate what negotiations Fuuga might make with other states inside the Union of Eastern Nations. Julius says this isn't a one-off thing; he'll be sending regular updates. As our wedding gift."

Souma wanted information on Fuuga, no matter what. Even if it had cost him more than the goods he had asked Roroa to send.

That he'd understood that, and sent this back as a wedding present, showed that Julius was not a man to be underestimated.

"This wedding present is worth a fortune," Souma said.

Chapter 7: Time to Face One Another

— Around the end of the 1st month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar —

It was around the time when the reinforcements sent to the Union of Eastern Nations were returning, and all of the cleanup was over. It was an evening so chilly that snow was falling in the royal capital.

Komain had come to Serina's room in Parnam Castle, and was sitting across a table from the owner of the room. While there was tea laid out on the table, there was a bizarre atmosphere in the air that left her unable to relax and drink it.

In that tense situation, Komain asked, "Do you mind, Serina? I'm going to ask one more time."

In response to Komain's serious expression, Serina was her usual cool self.

Komain found her resolve and opened her mouth. "There's not much time left, so no beating around the bush. How do you feel about Poncho?"

Komain sure cut straight to the chase.

Serina cocked her head to the side. "I don't know what to tell you. I think Sir Poncho is Sir Poncho?"

"That's not what I mean. I'm asking whether you like him or not."

"Whether I... like him?" Serina groaned. She was a beauty, so there was a certain flourish to the way she looked when deep in thought. "I find him... likable, you know? He may be weak-willed and indecisive, and I would be grateful as his aide if he were to have a little more self confidence, but he has good character. I would say, without a doubt, he's a likable person."

"I agree, but... that's not what I was asking." Komain clutched her head, wondering how it had come to this.

Souma had asked her to subtly help Serina realize her romantic feelings, but an unaware Serina made for quite the tough adversary.

From Komain's perspective, Serina and Poncho seemed compatible.

Serina was highly capable and filled in for Poncho's shortcomings as a minister, while Poncho had used his cooking to seize firm control of Serina's stomach.

Komain's relationship with Poncho was similar, but she felt like Serina and Poncho's ties were even deeper.

They needed each other.

That irked and frustrated Komain, who was pining for Poncho herself.

"You love Poncho's cooking, don't you, Serina?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"How do you feel about Poncho, who makes that food? As a man."

"I respect him. I think having encountered that sort of food is the greatest happiness in all my life. That's why I'm grateful to Poncho for creating all those dishes."

Serina looked enraptured. Komain thought there really was something there.

"And that respect and gratitude hasn't transformed into romantic feelings at some point?" Komain asked.

"Romantic feelings... is it?" Serina looked up slightly in response to that.

That change made Komain think, "Oh?"

This was Serina, always cool and composed, her expression never changing, and yet now she looked just the slightest bit melancholy.

While Komain waited, wondering what it could be...

"Um... I don't really understand what 'romantic feelings' are," Serina confessed, as if searching for the words to express herself.

"...Come again?"

"My family has served the royal house for generations. I was educated from a young age to become a servant befitting the royal family. I was taught that loyalty and sincerity are meant to be reserved for those in the royal family. As a

result, I've never thought about anyone outside the royal family."

Komain was speechless. It seemed Serina's cluelessness about love came from her devotion to her family's duty, and the thorough education that had molded her into a maid.

No, no matter how proud a family was to work in service of the royal family, they wouldn't suppress all their personal feelings except loyalty to the crown. If they forbade romantic feelings, then Serina herself would never have been born.

However, Serina, ever loyal to her duty, must have taken their teachings at face value.

Thinking of the royal family first, she had cast off any special feelings for any of the other people outside it as unnecessary. Serina could skillfully handle any job you set her to, but she was so awkward when it came to herself.

Komain slumped her shoulders, because of course this was going to be hard, but at the same time she thought, *But even though she's like this, Serina has a strong interest in Poncho's food. Her usual iron mask has a way of falling apart when she's eating, too, so with one more push, maybe she'll realize her own feelings?*

If that came to pass, what was needed next was Komain's own resolve. In order to open a heart that was locked up so tight, somewhat forceful methods might be needed.

"Very well," Komain said. "I will find my resolve, then."

"Hm? I'm not entirely certain what you might mean?" Serina cocked her head to the side.

Komain stood up and looked down at her. "If that's how it's going to be, I'll go all out! In order to reach the place I want to be, I don't have the luxury of being picky with my choices."

As Komain found her determination and left the room, Serina looked on dumbfounded.



It was a few days later.

Poncho was in a room in a certain mansion in the capital with a tense look on his face.

Just the other day, talk of an arranged marriage meeting had arrived, and he was about to meet the lady in question today.

Though the numbers had declined from their peak, Poncho was still a well-off bachelor, so these offers kept coming in.

Normally Serina and Komain stood behind him, keeping a keen eye out for ulterior motives, but today Komain was away on business. Because of that, the only one behind Poncho today was Serina.

When it was almost time for the meeting, and Poncho was losing his composure, he tried striking up a conversation with Serina behind him to distract himself from his nerves.

“I wonder who exactly it is I’m meeting today, yes.”

“Hm? You haven’t heard?” Serina asked.

“I haven’t, no. It was suddenly brought to the castle, so the information on my partner hasn’t had time to reach me. The castle says they want me to at least try meeting her.”

“That is... odd.”

Does anyone go into an interview about a potential arranged marriage with no knowledge of their partner? Serina wondered. If they hope to form relations with Poncho, they would have had to lay the groundwork for it first. Wouldn’t they normally give the lady’s name and advertise her lineage, appearance, and talents, so as to inspire as positive an impression as possible of her in Poncho?

While Serina was thinking that, Poncho bowed his head apologetically.

“I’m sorry to always trouble you like this, Madam Serina. Accompanying me to these marriage interviews.”

“No, this is a duty I undertake on His Majesty’s orders.”

“I’m still grateful for it, yes. I’d like to tie the knot already. I feel bad for you

and Madam Komain, helping me with all this.”

“Yes, I... suppose.”

Seeing Poncho clench his fists with enthusiasm, Serina felt just a little irritated. However, she did not know what at.

Poncho had said nothing particularly strange. Yet still... for some reason, there was a rustling in her chest.

As Serina clutched at her chest, there was a knock at the door.

“C-Come in, yes,” Poncho called.

“Pardon me,” came the response as the door opened, and in came a woman in fine clothes. This woman was presumably his partner for the day.

When they saw her face, not just Poncho’s but Serina’s eyes bugged out, too.

“M-Madam Komain?! Didn’t you say you had business today?!” Poncho cried out.

“Yes,” Komain replied with a smile.

Today, she was more dressed up than usual. She wore a vibrant shawl over her usual Native American-ish outfit, and on her head she wore a hairpiece made of jade. This was likely her tribe’s finery. She was wearing make-up, too, thin though it was.

Seeing Komain all dolled up like this, it finally dawned on Poncho.

“C-Could it be that you’re my partner for today?”

“Yes,” said Komain. “I asked His Majesty Souma to arrange this for me. Please, take good care of me today!”

An instant later, an intense wave of pressure flew her way. From behind Poncho, Serina had turned those eyes that had repelled many conniving potential marriage partners on Komain.

Struck by this cold gaze, like that of a wild wolf, an ordinary woman would have broken. However, Komain had already experienced it once, and she knew it was coming, so she was prepared.

I won’t lose, Madam Serina. Komain sat straight up, looking right back into

those eyes. Not returning the pressure, simply staring at Serina.

Responding, *I have nothing to feel guilty about, and I'm not afraid of your intimidation.*

As she kept staring back, Serina dropped the pressure in no time.

Perhaps Komain will be all right? she relented. She knew the woman was not approaching Poncho with ulterior motives. *I know Komain's personality well. She is without artifice, cheerful, and has a pure respect for Sir Poncho. In her case, even if they were to wed, I see no misfortune befalling Sir Poncho as a result... or at least I shouldn't...*

She had acknowledged Komain as a valid partner, but Serina's chest was filled with an eddy of conflicted feelings.

As Serina tilted her head, unable to identify why, Komain seated herself across from Poncho.

"Um... if you're here as a potential marriage partner, that means, you, um... would be willing to marry me, yes?" Poncho asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Komain replied crisply. "I have great respect for you, Poncho... Lord Poncho. There's my gratitude for what you did for the refugees in our time of need, but I also am enamored with your gentle personality. Of course, I also love the many dishes you make."

This straight expression of affection made Poncho blush.

He had been laughed at for his appearance before, but Poncho was unused to this sort of pure affection being directed towards him, so he was flustered.

"U-Um... I'm not much when it comes to looks or personality, but you still wish to be with me, yes? Oh, no, I don't mean to suggest I would be dissatisfied with you in any way, Madam Komain. But still, your elder brother, Jirukoma, is a manly warrior, nothing like me, right? For someone as lovely as you, Madam Komain, I would think you could find a more talented and attractive man, one who has performed great acts of valor, yes."

"I suppose I could. Long ago, I wanted to marry a strong, cool guy, like my brother." Komain chuckled. "But the one I fell for was you, Lord Poncho. The

heart never acts quite as we expect it will, does it? I mean, I fell in love with you, even though you're the opposite of my type."

"Madam Komain... thank you, yes." Poncho answered Komain's shy smile in his own shy way.

He met Komain while distributing food aid to the refugee camp, and she had helped him with the former refugees after he'd become the magistrate of Venetinova.

Then Komain had ended up serving under Poncho, supporting him both openly and secretly.

That was why Poncho knew how good-natured Komain was. He thought she was too good for him, but if she was willing to marry him, he couldn't have asked for a happier outcome.

Poncho turned around and asked his assistant, who was standing behind him, "What do you think, Madam Serina?"

"...Let me see." Appearing to think for a moment, Serina looked at Komain and said, "Madam Komain can be expected to support you without ulterior motives. However, you are a minister in this country, and, though you are an up and coming one, you are nobility. Without influential backers, I think Madam Komain merits some concern in that regard, wouldn't you say?"

What Serina was saying was right.

The people they had chased off so far had come from lineages of knights, nobles, and influential merchants. If Komain, who had no backers, became his wife now, she couldn't be expected to fend off the jabs of women of such parentage.

However, Komain looked straight back at Serina and replied, "If I am to become Lord Poncho's head wife, then I am told His Majesty Souma will arrange for my adoption into a suitable family. He seems to feel it's a threat to the country that a good vassal like Sir Poncho should remain single for so long."

"H-How embarrassing... Yes..." Poncho bowed his head apologetically, but the reason he hadn't tied the knot yet wasn't his fault. It was because Serina and Komain were intimidating the candidates.

Serina looked probingly at Komain and asked, “True. In that case, your lineage should be no problem. However, in that case, the responsibilities of the first wife of a noble will land squarely on your shoulders. Can you bear that?”

“Let’s see. What I really want is for Sir Poncho to take *someone reliable* as his first wife, and then to keep me at his side as his second.”

“...Is that a fact?”

“Yes. However, that person just won’t appear,” Komain said. “If I just keep waiting like this, I never know when my turn might come. That being the case, I think I will do my best to be able to handle it myself.”

Komain words were earnest, determined, and there was nothing Serina could say in response.

The path she would walk was sure to be fraught with difficulties. Even knowing that, Komain had decided to walk down it. With her and Poncho supporting one another.

To make light of that determination... was something Serina could not do.

Serina closed her eyes and took a step backwards.

That was proof of her recognizing Komain as suitable for Poncho.

Poncho avoided giving Komain an immediate answer, due to the nature of these sorts of meetings, but he promised to provide a favorable response. They would likely be engaged to marry in short order.

“This is awkward to say, but this is a load off my shoulders, yes,” Poncho added.

“Hee hee,” Komain giggled. “You went through a lot of these marriage meetings, after all. You’ve lost weight, haven’t you?”

“Have I? I don’t think my waistline has changed much.”

“You wouldn’t be Poncho if you weren’t paunchy, after all.”

Watching the two of them talk, smiling, from up close, Serina felt like she had been left all alone by the flow of time.



“Whew...”

Some days had passed since then. In a room in Parnam Castle, Serina let out her umpteenth sigh of the day.

Carla could simply watch no longer, and hesitantly spoke to her.

“...Um, Head Maid? Did something happen? It seems to me that you’ve been sighing a lot today.”

“Pardon me. I was a little lost in thought.” Following her meek apology, Serina resumed cleaning the room as a maid, but her expression remained as sullen as before.

Honestly... what is it...? Serina wondered.

Ever since she’d heard Komain’s confession, there was a maelstrom of conflicted feelings whirling inside her chest.

Poncho was a good colleague of hers, and Komain was a pleasant girl. She ought to have been happy they’d gotten engaged, so why couldn’t she bring herself to bless the two of them?

Do I think I’ll feel lonely once they’re married...? That’s absurd. I’m no child. I shouldn’t feel left out. So why...?

Though Serina’s hands hadn’t stopped working, her thoughts were looping, and they eventually poured out in another sigh.

Normally, Serina’s default persona was the cool and serious type whose emotions were hard to read, which made Carla all the more alarmed to see her look so gloomy.

“Um, could it be you’re feeling unwell somewhere? If you’re under the weather, maybe you should leave this to me, and take the rest of the day off?”

“That’s not it, really... Was my work sloppy in some way?”

“No, you were doing well,” Carla said hastily. “In fact, the way you looked so sad but your hands were still moving properly made it more creepy... Whoa, excuse me!”

Realizing her slip of the tongue, Carla hurriedly saluted and apologized.

Seeing Carla so flustered, Serina let out a sigh of exasperation. “There are times when I’m not at my best, too.”

“Um... are you really sure you won’t consider resting?” Carla suggested.

Serina shook her head. “It would be nice if I could, but... in this case, it wouldn’t let my mind rest.”

“Your mind? It’s not your body?”

“Yes. How should I put this...? I don’t like leaving things I could be doing to other people. It’s the job of a maid to look after others, so it feels to me like having others look after me is contrary to my role.”

“I see...” Carla said. “Well, I have to say, you aren’t the head maid for nothing. You’re like the ideal maid.”

The ideal maid. That was what Carla called her, but Serina cocked her head to the side and wondered if she truly was.

She felt like the desire not to have others worry about her came not from her thoughts as a maid, but her thoughts as an individual. Serina hated having to rely on others. She desired not to have others look down on her just because they had lent her their strength.

In the end... I suppose I’m clumsy.

If she could be honest with herself and accept help from other people, life would be much easier.

In fact, the king of this country, Souma, always honestly recognized when he could not do something himself, hired someone he could delegate the task to, and kept the country running smoothly by trusting them.

However, because Serina had the misfortune of being talented enough to do anything, she had come all this way not relying on others. She couldn’t just change the way she had lived after so long.

If my personality let me rely on others better... I’m sure I could have asked someone about these conflicted feelings... Serina reflected.

“Oh! But Head Maid, you’ve let Sir Poncho cook for you before, right? I hear he’s done it for you a number of times as thanks for being his assistant.” Carla

suddenly brought that up.

"Yes," Serina said. "What about it?"

"No, um, if you hate letting other people do things for you, maybe you actually dislike it when Sir Poncho cooks for you... is what I was thinking."

The words Carla spoke off-handedly set off a rustling in Serina's chest.

"That's not true," Serina said. "Sir Poncho's dishes are all unique, nothing I could come up with. That's not something I could do myself, you see?"

"Oh, no, maybe that was true the first time, but you're a better cook than most, right? The dishes that Sir Poncho and the master make use a lot of unusual ingredients, but making the dishes themselves is incredibly simple. If you'd asked him to write down the recipe, there would be no need to trouble Sir Poncho. You could make the dishes yourself, couldn't you?"

"Huh?!" When Carla pointed that out, Serina's eyes went wide.

Now that she mentions it, that's true.

Poncho's dishes were novel, but all of them were made with affordable ingredients, and if he had just told her the recipe, of course, Serina could make them, too.

Despite that, Serina had never tried to make them herself. She would just smack her lips and eat what Poncho made for her with an enraptured look on her face.

Though she claimed that she hated letting others do for her what she could do for herself, Serina had been letting Poncho cook for her.

Serina was certainly looking after Poncho, but Poncho had been looking after her, too.

And *not once* had that felt unpleasant to her.

Now that she had been made to realize that, Serina stood there with a rare look of amazement on her face.

I... was relying on Sir Poncho, wasn't I? And the reason I didn't notice, was that it came so naturally...

This was the first time she realized how special Poncho was.

"The weather's just awful, isn't it?" Serina griped.

It was that afternoon. The sky was heavy with clouds.

According to *Naden's Weekly Weather Forecast*, which she, as the head maid, dutifully checked every week, sleet was expected today, turning into snow at night.

Under a sky that weighed her down just looking at it, Serina left through the gates of Parnam Castle and headed out to town.

She had work as Poncho's aide today, so she was on her way to his residence.

Being an aide to Poncho was a respectable job, so normally she was able to receive permission to take a carriage... but today she was in a walking kind of mood.

She walked through the chilly streets wearing a coat over her classical maid uniform.

When a beauty like Serina walked through the city, she naturally drew the eyes of men passing by. If those men had women accompanying them, the jealous women would sometimes pull their ears or slap them for it.

From a man's perspective, she was quite the sinful woman.

While looking at the scenery of the town, Serina let out a sigh. Normally, she wouldn't think anything of this scenery, but today it felt awfully lonely to her.

I'm sure Sir Poncho will be replying to Komain soon. Those two will be engaged, then eventually become husband and wife. There's no place for me there...

Serina remembered something that Ginger's secretary and maid, Sandria, had said. *"Then, how would you feel if Lord Ginger were a woman? If it were a woman that Lord Poncho was having such a good time talking to right now, would you still not feel the least bit anxious about it?"*

What did I respond back then...?

If she recalled, it was something about how, if Poncho only made food for that woman, and she couldn't eat with him anymore, she wouldn't like it... or something like that.

If things continued as they were, the one eating with Poncho would be Komain.

Was it all right for her to hate that?

Did Serina have the right to?

It's like a scene I'm looking at through glass...

Staring at the glass window of a carriage that had just stopped in front of her, that was what Serina thought.

She could see the people within clearly, but they were in a separate space, and as envious as she might be of what she saw, she could never have it for herself.

Looking at her face reflected in the window, Serina looked like a child about to burst into tears.

Sleet began to fall from the sky.

"It's started coming down, huh?" Serina murmured.

It was soggy snow that turned to water the second it touched her skin or clothes.

Serina had been staring vacantly up into the sky for a while, but at this rate, she was going to catch a cold.

She had meant to arrive at Poncho's mansion before it started coming down in earnest, so she had made no preparations for rain at all. Fortunately, it wasn't far.

Serina walked quickly through the sleet until she arrived at Poncho's mansion.

When she knocked to inform them of her arrival, Komain came to answer the door and her eyes widened.

"Whoa! What happened, Serina?! You're soaked!"

"I got caught out in the sleet for a little while."

"This took more than a *little* while... Why didn't you come by carriage?"

As Komain fussed over and welcomed the soaking wet Serina, heavy footsteps sounded from deep inside the mansion.

Of course, it was the master of the house, Poncho. He had a large bath towel in his hands.

As he rushed to Serina's side, he threw the towel over her head quickly. "I... I heard Madam Komain's voice, so I brought a towel. If you don't wipe yourself quickly, you'll catch a cold! Madam Komain, please boil some water and bring it here, yes."

"U-Understood!"

Watching Komain hurry off, Poncho started wiping Serina's hair with the towel. His hands weren't gentle at all, and Serina was at his mercy. Hanging her head, her eyes closed, Serina was thinking.

No... I really don't dislike this at all...

Her wet hair was being touched and scrubbed. She was letting someone else take care of her. Despite that, she didn't feel any displeasure from it at all.

No... I can't hide it anymore. This person is special to me.

Serina finally acknowledged her own love.

She placed her right hand on top of Poncho's left hand, which was on the other side of the towel, and brought it down to rest on her cheek. His big hand was warm and reassuring.



“M-Madam Serina?! Wh-What is it, yes?!”

Serina’s sudden action made Poncho’s usually narrow eyes go wide.

“Nothing really... Only what I want to do.” When she looked up, Serina wore her usual dauntless and serious face. However, the corners of her lips were turned up just a little. “Sir Poncho, your right hand is slacking. You were going to wipe my hair for me, weren’t you?”

“Y-Yes... Um, but, it’s difficult to do with only my right hand...”

“Bear with that much, at least. Because you are a special person who is allowed to take care of me.”

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about. Wait, Madam Serina, why are you touching my cheek now?!”

This time Serina’s left hand was on Poncho’s cheek. That ultimately put them in a position where they were holding one another’s cheeks.

Poncho’s eyes darted around as he tried to process the situation. “Wh-What is this?! Is this a joke?! Are you teasing me, yes?!”

“Yes. I am teasing you. But this is no joke. In my own way, I’m showing my love for you here.”

“Y-Your I-love...?! Wait, whaaa?!”

Serina took one step back from the surprised Poncho, then lifted up the hem of her long skirt and bowed her head, like she was asking him if they might share the next dance at a social event.

“Sir Poncho. You are special to me. That is why I cannot abide you pushing me aside to share your table with someone else. Even if that is a family member. If you say you can only let family sit at your table, then let me be a part of that family.”

“Huh...? What do you mean by...”

“It’s simple. If you are to take Komain as your wife, please take me, too.”

Poncho was left speechless, his mouth just opening and closing silently like he was a goldfish.

When a beauty like Serina, whom he had assumed was far out of his reach, suddenly confessed her love to him, even if she did it in a weird and roundabout way, his mind went blank.

That was just when Komain came back with a basin of hot water. “Um... Did something happen while I was bringing the water to a boil?”

“I was just expressing my desire for Sir Poncho to make me his wife.” Serina said nonchalantly.

Komain’s eyes went wide. “Well, then! You’ve realized your own feelings, Madam Serina?”

“Yes. It did take some time to look at them, however.”

“Ahaha... Too long,” Komain said, laying the basin down with a laugh. “But I’m glad. If you’ll be coming, I don’t need to be adopted into a noble family. I’m fine with being the second wife.”

“Komain... are you sure about that?”

“I said I would do my best if the need arose, but I think it really would be hard for me to act like a nobleman’s wife, after all. If you’ll take care of things outside the home as the first wife, I’ll focus on inside the house.”

Seeing the peaceful smile on Komain’s face as she said that, Serina smiled a little, too.

She was sure she could get along fine with her.

“Wait, Poncho?!” Serina shouted. “Your eyes have rolled into the back of your head! Are you okay?!”

Komain shook Poncho and tried to call him back to reality.

As she watched her, Serina suddenly remembered something Komain had said before. “By the way, what was the ‘place you want to be’ that you were talking about that time?”

On the day that she had most likely resolved herself to have the marriage meeting with Poncho, Komain had said it was to reach the place she wanted to be.

Komain responded, "That's obvious," and grinned. "The table that Poncho, you, and I can sit around as a family."



Later, Poncho's engagement to Serina and Komain would be widely publicized, and the gold digger women would be greatly disappointed.

Conversely, Souma and the other elites of the kingdom who had been worried about Poncho were relieved.

"It feels like everything worked out the way it should in the end," Souma said with satisfaction.

"Yes," Hakuya agreed. "If Madam Serina and Madam Komain are with him, we can be sure they will protect the gentle but timid Sir Poncho from those who might try to take advantage of him."

Souma gave a big nod in agreement. "He's someone we need to continue doing good work for us in the future. For the development of the kingdom, and for my own personal reasons, I want to see Poncho build a happy, stable family."

May the three of them be happy together, Souma wished silently.

Chapter 8: Before the Ceremony

“Dawoo.”

“Aayee.”

Cute voices from tiny little mouths.

“Ohh... They’re so cuuuute!” I exclaimed.

“They certainly are,” agreed Carla.

We smiled as we watched the babies moving around in their crib.

Cian and Kazuha were both about four months old, with their necks firmly set in place, and they could play while on their tummies now, too.

Maybe because they were twins, it was hard to tell their faces apart, but in terms of personality, they were becoming quite different people.

Cian tended to stare off into space and didn’t cry often.

He was a quiet boy who didn’t cause trouble, but he froze up a lot when introduced to a new situation. That was apparently a sign of shyness, and when an unfamiliar face came near him, his face would stiffen and he would look away. Even if they tried to circle around in front of him, he would turn his head and avert his gaze again.

When his eyes had first opened, he’d refused to look at either Aisha or me for a while.

That wasn’t the case anymore, but the only ones he’d smiled for from the beginning were Liscia, Lady Elisha, and maybe Carla. It made me feel a little lonely, as a parent.

Meanwhile, Kazuha was a bundle of energy, always smiling, and always crying.

She didn’t object when someone held her, and she would keep on crying regardless of who sang her a lullaby. From the moment she was laid down, she

would swing her arms and legs energetically. She never calmed down.

Because she moved so much, she would accidentally slap Cian, who was beside her, so we'd considered separating the two a little so he could get some rest, but when we'd tried to move her to another bed, she had thrown a fit.

Maybe because they were twins, Kazuha felt most at ease when her other half, Cian, was close by.

Even though she still slapped Cian from time to time.

Hang in there, Big Brother.

While looking at those adorable twins, I whispered, "Honestly... Why are my children so cute?"

"Master, you're too much of a doting father. You're repeating yourself." Carla sounded exasperated, but cute was cute, so what could I do?

Oh! Kazuha was clapping her little hands and smiling again.

Cian was looking at Kazuha, and maybe he lost his balance, because he fell over.

Oh, geez! How cute *were* they?

I could watch this forever.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're so happy, master, but do you have time to be wasting here?" Carla asked. "This is an important day for you, is it not?"

That pulled me back to reality, and I let out a sigh.

"...Well, yeah. The girls take longer to prepare, of course, so they're already getting ready. I'll have to go pick them up soon."

No sooner had I said that than there was a knock at the door.

With a simple greeting, Prime Minister Hakuya came in. "Your Majesty. It's about time for you to begin preparing."

"I know." I shrugged in exasperation, then clapped a hand on Carla's shoulder. "Okay, Carla. I'm counting on you to look after Cian and Kazuha for a while."

“Yes, sir.” Carla saluted. “Leave it to me.”

“Ayee!” Kazuha imitated her by raising both hands above her head in the banzai position.

Was that a cheeky response?

Meanwhile, Cian looked at me blankly, like he was saying, “Are you going away somewhere?”

If he could be so easygoing on a big day like this, he was going to be big when he grew up...

Wait, I can’t go on acting like a doting parent forever.

I hit myself in the head to get into a new frame of mind, and then followed Hakuya out of the room, leaving the children behind.



— 1st day, 4th month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar —

Today, beneath clear blue skies, we would be holding my coronation as the King of Friedonia, as well as my wedding to Liscia and the others.

I, who had kept calling myself the acting king and the provisional king, would formally ascend to the throne as king, and I would also become the husband of Liscia and the others.

They would, from today forward, not be my fiancées, but my primary and secondary queens.

We were already a family, though, so it felt a little late for all this.

For us, our big day would become a festival the likes of which the people of this country might only see once in their lives.

There was an unprecedented number of people gathered here in Parnam today to see the coronation and wedding.

When people gathered, that invigorated the merchants, and there were stalls and street performers livening up the city.

Dece the warrior and his party were there in that festive city, too.

"Whew, things have gotten so exciting, there's no comparison with any ordinary festival," he commented to his party members.

"Well, that's to be expected," Febral the priest answered. "If the new king is formally ascending the throne and getting married, that's something the whole country has to come together to celebrate. For a celebration in the capital, this isn't overblown."

Augus the brawler took a swig from the bottle of wine he had bought at a nearby stall and laughed boisterously. "Let's not sweat the details. We're adventurers, traveling from country to country. It doesn't matter what the country's celebrating so long as there's good food, and good drink, am I right?"

"This country certainly does have good food," said Julia the quiet beauty. "Public order is good, too, so we've really settled in."

Febral shrugged in response.

Augus called out to Juno the thief, who was walking ahead of the group, a skewer of meat in one hand. "Hey, Juno! You agree, right?"

"Hm? Me?" Juno put a hand on her hip and thrust out her meager chest. "I'm celebrating the king's coronation and wedding, like I should."

"Huh? Why?" Augus asked.

"What do you mean, 'why'...? What's it to you? I can celebrate for whoever I want."

Juno looked away peevishly.

Her comrades didn't know that the one controlling Mr. Musashibo was the king of this country. They didn't know Juno had been meeting with that king and his queens for secret late night tea parties, either.

He's just finished putting down monsters up north, and as soon as he comes back he has a coronation ceremony? He must be busy. Ignoring her bewildered comrades, Juno lifted her skewer up toward the blue sky. Congratulations, sir... no, Your Majesty! I'll come play again sometime soon, so don't go treating me badly just because you're married now!

While she was thinking that, a salute of cannons was fired, and the birds took

off.



"It looks like things have really livened up," I commented.

Looking down on the castle town from a certain room in Parnam Castle, it was possible to tell the city was packed from even this far away.

No, but seriously, the last few days leading up to this were super busy.

The arrangements for setting up the site and placing personnel had been a lot of trouble.

That was because, thanks to Roroa's plan to have weddings all across the city, the key retainers we could normally have used were indisposed because they were preparing their own weddings.

The key members who would be getting married the same day as us were Ludwin, the commander of the Royal Guard, to Genia the overscientist; Halbert, the commander of the Dratroopers, to Staff Officer Kaede and Ruby the red dragon; Ginger, the principal of Ginger's Vocational School, to his maid-secretary Sandria; and Poncho, the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, to Head Maid Serina and Komain, the former second-in-command of the refugee group. All of them were faces that represented this country.

In particular, the inability to use Ludwin, who had been tasked with the security of the capital as the commander of the Forbidden Army, and Serina, who was in charge of managing the castle's maids, left a big hole.

It had taken a lot of effort just to establish a chain of command for the day of the event.

We had managed to get several veteran members to send skilled personnel to assist: Excel, the commander-in-chief of the National Defense Force; Owen, the retired general; and Herman.

Prime Minister Hakuya, who was popular with the ladies but remained single, would direct them on the day of the event, but everything would be helter-skelter until then.

I had naïvely thought holding the two events simultaneously would cut down

on costs, but I would have to think things through a little more cautiously in future.

“Now, then...”

Having finished changing with the help of the maids, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror.

“Hahaha... Looking pretty white today, huh,” I said without meaning to as I looked in the mirror.

The design of the outfit itself was extravagant, making use of gold-thread embroidery. Aside from the tailcoat, it wasn’t that different from my usual black military uniform, but on the whole, it was very white.

During the ceremony, I was going to wear a cape, like the former king Sir Albert had, on top of this.

When I saw how regal I looked, it made my cheeks twitch just a little.

“Ha ha ha... If I wear this much white, it hides my black heart,” I muttered.

“Now, that’s not true!” Tomoe objected. “You look really cool, Big Brother.”

“Really? I think the outfit overpowers him, you know?” Yuriga shot back.

...I’d received two comments that were polar opposites.

“It feels too much like he’s being forced to wear it,” Yuriga went on. “He doesn’t live up to it.”

“Murgh, that’s not true! Big Brother looks great in these clothes.”

“My brother Fuuga would look more dashing.”

Ichihia was also in the room, trying to get them to settle down and stop arguing.

“Now, now, you shouldn’t fight on a happy day like today.”

““Hmph!”” Tomoe and Yuriga both looked away peevishly.

Good grief. The three kids were up to their usual antics today, too, huh.

All three were dressed to the nines today, though.

That was because Tomoe would be attending the ceremony as my little sister,

while Yuriga and Ichiha would be there as guests from Malmkhitan and the Duchy of Chima, respectively.

In the case of Yuriga and Ichiha in particular, they were acting as envoys for Fuuga and Duke Chima, respectively, and would say a few words of congratulations each during the coronation ceremony.

“Urgh... I have to speak in front of a large number of people, don’t I?” the youngest of the three, Ichiha, said nervously. “I’m getting all tense.”

He shuddered at the thought.

Tomoe took Ichiha’s hand, and wrote the kanji for “human” on his palm.

“Listen, Ichiha, Big Brother told me before that, at times like this, you write the character for ‘human’ on your palm like this, and then pretend to eat it, okay?”

“‘Human’? That’s how you read this?”

“It’s read that way in Big Brother’s world.”

Yuriga, who was beside her listening, furrowed her brow.

“Do you mean a human in the sense of mankind? Or in the sense of the human race? Would celestials like me be included in the ‘humans’ you’re writing and eating?”

She was really focusing on the details there. It was just a little charm to calm you down, so I didn’t think there was any need to think so deeply about it.

With a grin, Tomoe said, “Oh? Could it be you’re getting tense, Yuriga?”

“Nwah?!” Yuriga’s face turned red, and she pinched Tomoe’s cheeks. “Why are you such a cheeky little kid?!”

“If you’re mad, dosh that mean I’m right?”

“Shut up, shut up!”

“Shtop, your shtretching them.”

“Um, Yuriga, isn’t it about time you let go?” Ichiha asked nervously. “Tomoe, you too. Don’t tease Yuriga so much.”

Those three kids sure made a racket. They really were lively.

Hold on, Yuriga's people were called celestials? I felt like I'd missed that up until now, so it surprised me.

Then there was a knock at the door, and a maid came in and bowed. "Your Majesty, the princess and the others are prepared, so please come."

It was time already, huh?

I told the three kids, "Well then, you three, I'll be counting on you at the ceremony."

"Yes, Big Brother!"

"Count on me. I've got this."

"I-I'll do my best."

Having heard their three responses, I went to go see Liscia and the others.

Liscia and the others were being dressed in the castle's great hall in an area divided by screens.

Because this had become a major event, we were perpetually shorthanded, and this allowed the maids and the makeup and dressing staff go back and forth from one to another.

When I took a peek inside, it was so full of stuff that it reminded me of being behind the scenes at a drama club event, but if they were done preparing, the room had likely been cleaned up a little.

Before heading to the great hall where Liscia and the others would be waiting, I headed to another room nearby.

I knocked and then entered. In that room were several people sitting around a long table chatting: Liscia's parents, the former king Sir Albert and former queen Lady Elisha; Aisha's father, Sir Wodan; Roroa's grandfather, the old general Herman; and finally Juna's grandmother, Excel.

Basically, this was where the families of the brides were gathered.

At one end of the table, next to Excel, a blue-haired man and woman were

sitting there looking very small.

These were Juna's parents. From what I had heard, they were merchants who operated the main Lorelei singing cafe back in Lagoon City. I was going to be marrying their daughter Juna, so they had needed to be invited as a matter of course, but even if they were related to Excel, being in a room with the former royal couple, generals, and nobles had to be difficult for them.

I might need to show some more consideration here.

While I was thinking that...

Sir Albert noticed me. He stood up and spread his arms, then patted his upper biceps lightly. "Ohh, son-in-law! You look so manly, I scarcely recognized you."

The others stood up, too, looking at me with peaceful faces.

I bowed my head deeply to them. "Fathers, mothers, and family. Thank you for coming today."

"No, no." Wodan shook his head. "I am very happy to have lived to see this wonderful day. When I saw Aisha in her dress earlier, she reminded me of her late mother. The reason that crude glutton became so beautiful must be that her meeting with you made her want to be more feminine. I wish my wife could have seen," he finished sadly.

It seemed Aisha's mother had died of a pandemic when Aisha was still little. Even the long-lived races could get into accidents, and die of serious illness. If they were incautious, it was entirely possible they would live shorter lives than humans did.

Taking care to remember that, I thought about the people I hadn't been able to invite here.

"Yeah... I wish Grandpa and Grandma could've seen, too," I said. "I would've liked them to see the way I've 'made a family,' like Grandpa told me to that day."

"Hee hee," Excel giggled with a relaxed expression. "I'm sure they're watching over you together. The dead live on in the memories of the living, after all. You can easily imagine those precious people in your memories watching over you,

right?"

Those words must have come from her having lived five hundred years, experiencing many meetings and partings.

It was true, if I imagined what Grandpa would think if he could see me now... I could see him smiling.

Sir Wodan wore the same sort of smile. "Yes. I think my wife is happy."

"I wonder what faces my family would make," Herman mumbled, his arms crossed.

If it was Roroa's family, that meant Julius... and Gaius VIII.

Julius was one thing; we had fought together in the Kingdom of Lastania. But remembering the devilish look on Gaius's face, I shuddered. We'd fought to the death in a war, so he must have hated me.

I broke into a cold sweat. "I'll bet he's glaring at me from the hereafter."

Herman let out a little laugh. "Heh, well, you'll be fine. As long as my little girl is with him on the other side, that is."

"Your little girl... Do you mean Roroa's mother?" I asked.

Roroa's mother had passed away while she was still young.

"Her mother was much like her: bright, cheerful, and spirited. If Sir Gaius had kept up that sour face during his own daughter's wedding day, she'd have slapped him upside the head. You're the one who saved Sir Julius from his crisis, too, after all."

I tried to picture the scene of a mother who looked like Roroa slapping Gaius upside the head.

"The idea that Gaius was whipped like that... I can't see it," I admitted.

"I can only say this now, and you may not believe it, but Sir Gaius wasn't always so stubborn." Herman narrowed his eyes, as if thinking of fond memories. "He inherited a grudge against the kingdom, but when my daughter was there, that was never all there was to him. My daughter's personality brightened the castle, and supported Sir Gaius. But when she passed away, Sir

Gaius only had revenge left. If I look back on it now, it just shows how important she was to him.”

I was silent.

He'd lost the woman he loved, and had only revenge remaining... huh. Hearing that really changed my impression of Gaius.

“The reason that he got along so poorly with Roroa was because he couldn't bear to see her becoming more like her mother with every day. That's what I think, nowadays.” Herman laughed in a self-effacing manner. “Ha ha... but forgive me, I shouldn't be saying this in front of people from the kingdom.”

“No... Thank you for telling me.” I shook my head.

Unlike the boisterous Owen, Herman was always so quiet. If he was speaking so passionately about this, there had to be something in it he felt he needed to convey to me.

“Roroa would never talk about this sort of thing,” I went on.

“She gets that from her mother,” Herman told me. “You would think she'd be good at letting people indulge her, but the truth is, she's stubborn and unwilling to show weakness.”

“You're right...”

“I am letting you, the man taking her as your wife, know about Sir Gaius, because I hope you will learn a lesson from him.” Herman looked me straight in the eye. “When you marry my granddaughter, you will also be becoming king. As king, I am sure you will put the country first. Because you believe that will protect your wives, and the children they will give birth to. Because you value 'family,' you will put that family second or third, for their own benefit.”

I had no words. That was exactly the kind of problem I might fall into.

“When that happens, I want you to remember Sir Gaius,” Herman said. “While you put them second and third, before you realize it, that family may be gone. All that will be left is a country without those important to you. Could you remain a good king like that?”

“...I'm not confident I could.”

If I was being honest, I didn't think it was possible. But in my position, I couldn't come out and say that. If a king showed weakness, the people would be uneasy, and would cease to follow him.

Herman nodded. "I cannot fault you for that. So I want you to look at your family as you look at your kingdom, and protect them the same as you would it. If the king builds a peaceful family, that is for the good of this nation, too."

"Yes. Thank you for the lesson."

Building a peaceful family is for the good of the nation. Let me carve that sentiment into my heart.

I bowed my head to Herman, communicating my regards for the former princely couple of Amidonia.

Then Herman bowed his head to me. "I've spoken too long, but in the end, there is really just one thing I wanted to say. Please, make my granddaughter happy. That is all. So that, even when I'm gone... that girl can always stay as bright and cheerful as she is now."

"Yes, I'll see to it, grandfather."

The other parents watched this exchange between Herman and me with gentle eyes.

Except for two pairs of eyes, which looked to have frozen up with tension. It went without saying that those belonged to Juna's parents.

I walked over and bowed my head to them with a wry smile. "I'm sorry. I've put you in an awkward situation."

"Oh! No... We're well aware how out of place we are here," Juna's father said hastily, glancing around the room.

It must have been hard to relax with important figures from around the kingdom, including the former royal couple, here.

This man was Excel's son, a handsome middle-aged fellow with blue hair.

He was human by race, so he looked older than Excel, but he must have been quite the looker in his youth. Next to him, Juna's mother was every bit as beautiful as you would expect a descendant of loreleis to be.

Still, these two looked relatively plain compared to their current company.

“Because I wanted to marry the primary and secondary queens at the same time, I’ve put you two through a lot of trouble,” I said.

“Oh, no, Juna seems happy, and that’s good enough for us,” her father said quickly.

“That’s right,” her mother agreed. “Please take care of her, until death do you part.”

These were common blessings from common people. They made me more happy than anything.

Juna’s folks were wonderful people. Though Juna resembled Excel, her good nature and kindness must have been their influence.

Her father, in particular, was such a fine man, I couldn’t believe he was Excel’s son.

“...You’re thinking something rude, aren’t you?” Excel demanded suspiciously.

“No, not at all...”

Excel narrowed her eyes at me, and I looked away.

Of course, a veteran like Excel was going to be sharp.

Then Lady Elisha, who had been watching our exchange, burst into giggles.

“Hee hee hee! Now, now, son-in-law. Don’t spend all your time with us; go and be with Liscia and the others. I’m sure they’re waiting with bated breath.”

Ah! That was right.

“Yes, Mother. Now then, everyone, I will see you later.”

I bowed to the parents and family one last time, and then left the room.

The grand hall where Liscia and the rest were waiting was right next to the waiting room where their families were.

There were guards standing on either side of the large doors, and they saluted me as I approached.

I stood in front of those doors, reached for the handle... then froze up.

On the other side of the door were Liscia and the others in their bridal clothing. The moment I thought that, my body refused to move. If I opened this door, our relationship would change. From engaged to married, from regent to king, from candidate to queen.

The fact was, I felt like Liscia, who had become a mother, had already changed. Having gained Cian and Kazuha, who were more important than her own life, she was even more stable than before, and would not be shaken easily.

What about me, though? Cian and Kazuha were more important than my life, too. But if you asked whether I had changed, I wasn't so sure.

In my old world, I had heard talk that women's values changed when they gave birth, but men never stopped being children.

Was it possible for me to grow in a way that was equal to the way Liscia and the others no doubt would?

When I thought that, I hesitated to open the door.

Looking at me as I stood motionless, as if time had stopped, the younger guard worriedly spoke to me.

"Um, Your Majesty? Is something the—"

"Shh. Get a clue." The middle-aged guard standing across from him brought a finger to his lips and silenced the young one.

Then, with a sage look, the middle-aged guard nodded at me.

Because, in the chaotic period after I first assumed the throne, I had spoken to everyone in the castle to use them as much as I could, and I had been eating with the guards and maids in the cafeteria, some of them would readily strike up a conversation with me. That trend was especially strong with the middle-aged guards and the granny-type maids.

They were polite, of course, and they wouldn't do it when anyone who liked to go on about the dignity of my position was around. But this man was one of those middle-aged guards.

"You must be feeling uneasy, am I right?" the middle-aged guard asked. "I can understand. This is a path any man who decides to have a family goes down, after all."

"Is that how it works?" I asked.

"Yes. I went through it when I married my wife. Though, that said, you've already long since prepared for this, right, sire? The only thing stopping you now is sentimentality."

"Sentimentality...?"

Sentimentality. Being sentimental. He had a point.

It went without saying that my relationship with Liscia and each of the others would change over time. There was nothing I could do about that, and I had long since accepted it.

I could only say that the reason I was still hesitating to go forward was that I was basking in sentimentality. It was a waste of time to think about it, you could say.

With a wry smile, I put my hand down on the middle-aged guard's shoulder. "You've got a way with words. It's not like being indecisive now is going to change anything."

"Yes. Besides, if you dawdle too long, your pretty wives are going to get mad, you know?" He smirked.

Just as he said that, there was a shout from behind the door.

"Souma! You're there, aren't you?! Get on with it, make up your mind, and get in here!"

"Y-Yes!"

I stood up ramrod straight at the sound of Liscia's voice, then hurriedly opened the door and rushed in. The guards immediately closed the doors behind me.

The glimpse of the middle-aged guard I got just before the doors fully shut, with a look on his face like, *They'll have him whipped in no time*, irritated me.

But when I turned around...



The sight of Liscia, Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Naden, all in wedding dresses, hit me with a shock so hard that it rattled my brain.

First, there was Liscia. She had her hair down today. She wore a pure and cute long dress with white as the main color, but a pink lining that peeked out from the hem. The sash around her waist was the same color as her military uniform, giving her a dignified beauty that was both gorgeous and very true to who she was as a person. She looked fit to represent all of the queens.

Aisha's pure white dress was a stunning contrast with her brown skin. The ribbons on her head were also white, and it reflected her innocence. I had a strong impression of Aisha as a warrior, but she had a good figure, and was very attractive to me as a woman today.

On top of her white dress, Juna wore a blue corsage and sash that matched the color of her beautiful hair. The dress had a light blue tinge to it, too, reflecting her nobility, which was like the moon reflected in the water, and her enveloping kindness.

Roroa's dress had a white base color, too, but the hem and sash shone with a light lemon yellow to match her cheer and youth. The dress gave off the same charm and cheer that she herself did, and even though it had a long skirt, she looked like she might start running around in it at any moment.

Naden's dress was a little shorter compared to the others. She was the only one with a tail, so that had likely been a decision to keep her from looking weird. The front was knee-length, but I thought that was a lovely representation of her flexibility and free spirit.

Five different women, five different dresses. All of them beautiful, all of them suited to the person wearing them.

They looked so brilliant in their wedding garb, I just stared at them, entranced, for a while.

As I stood there speechless, Liscia shyly asked, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"R-Right... You're pretty. All of you. You left me without words."

I was stammering for some reason, but everyone grinned.

“M-Me, too?” Aisha asked. “I’m taller than all the others, but is that still okay?”

“Hee hee hee, oh, Aisha,” Juna giggled. “You’re slender, but shapely. I think you’re very pretty.”

“Shapely... I’m not sure how I feel about Big Sis talkin’ about that,” Roroa griped. “How about you, Nadie?”

“I wish I had cleavage. Pretty desperately.”

“Don’t pout on such a happy day,” Liscia tried to mollify them. “Besides, I think you two look lovely and wonderful in your dresses.” I fully agreed with her.

Roroa and Naden were even more gorgeous than usual today, but in a pure way, feeling like true princesses.

Of course, Aisha and Juna, with their feminine sexiness were wonderful, too, and Liscia, who had the best parts of both camps, was marvelous in her grace.

“Hahh...” Looking at those five lovely ladies, I let out a sigh.

“What’s wrong, Your Majesty? Have we done something to offend?” Juna asked with concern.

“Could you not sigh in front of us?” Naden snapped in a prickly tone.

I hurriedly shook my head. Obviously there was nothing wrong with them, and I couldn’t possibly be dissatisfied.

“It’s just... I have such lovely brides, so when I think we can’t just have a normal wedding... Well, I’m pretty disappointed.”

“Ahh, I went and planned this whole thing, and even I’m thinkin’ that a bit,” Roroa agreed with me.

The weddings in this world weren’t significantly different from Western-style weddings on Earth.

In a church, the bride and groom pledged their love before a priest or pastor. That was the sort of ceremony Ludwin and Hal were likely having.

The sort of wedding where, though the ceremony also held the meaning of tying two houses together, it was a syrupy sweet time where the brides and grooms only had eyes for each other.

But our marriage ceremony was different.

It would be broadly classified as a wedding, but as the wedding of a king, it could not be devoted solely to the brides and groom. The main goal was to introduce the queens to the people, and make clear the ranking between them.

The coronation and wedding would, of course, be broadcast over the Jewel Voice Broadcast, and every person in the country would be able to see it.

Our people wouldn't be the only ones watching the ceremony, either.

It was going to be broadcast over the jewels we used for broadcast conferences with the Gran Chaos Empire and Republic of Turgis, so Empress Maria and Sir Gouran, the head of the republic, would be watching, too.

In a marriage ceremony watched over by so many people inside and outside the country, we would have to keep alert constantly, and there would no room for the brides and groom to enjoy some sweet time to themselves.

"It may be disappointing, indeed." Aisha crossed her arms and looked gallant, despite being in a wedding dress.

Juna put a finger to her lips and went, "Hmm?" questioningly. "But it's every girl's dream to have a big, gaudy wedding at a place like the castle, isn't it? We're the ones to be envied here, surely."

"Ahaha! That kind of jealousy is pretty common, right?" Naden smiled with nostalgia.

She must have been remembering her time in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Naden had harbored a complex about Ruby, who was a normal dragon, while Ruby had felt jealous towards Naden, who was an unusual ryuu.

The grass is always greener, they say.

Roroa smirked. "Hmm. So, what you're sayin' is, if we sell wedding packages at the castle, we'll turn a profit. Even if it's out of reach of the common people, the nobles'd pay a pretty penny to—Ow!"

When Liscia retorted with a light chop to her head. “Roroa, don’t tie everything back to making money.”

Roroa laughed. “Nyahah!”

“Honestly,” Liscia said, putting her hands on her hips, but she seemed more gentle than exasperated. “No matter what shape it takes, as long as we’re happy with it, isn’t that good enough?”

We all nodded in agreement.

“Yeah. Right now, I’m happy,” I said.

“Hee hee, then let’s hear a word from you, as the head of the household,” Liscia said teasingly.

I scratched my cheek. “Head of the household...? What house is this, anyway?”

The fact was, even if we got married, we weren’t going to have a single last name.

That was because the mother’s family name changed based on the position her children would be in.

I was inheriting the names of both the House of Elfrieden and the House of Amidonia, so I would become “Souma A. Elfrieden.”

Liscia and Roroa would pass their names to their children, so they would remain “Liscia Elfrieden” and “Roroa Amidonia.”

Because she was becoming a primary queen with right of succession, it might have been best for Roroa to take the name Elfrieden, but we were maintaining a clear separation to agitate the people of both countries as little as possible.

Liscia’s children, Cian and Kazuha, carried the name Elfrieden.

If the two countries continued to stay reconciled, it might be possible in the future to establish a House of Friedonia, but that would be up to how things went from here.

The second primary queen, Aisha, would become, “Aisha U. (Udgard) Elfrieden.”

The Udgard name was being kept to promote harmony with the dark elves, who had only just begun to make contact with the outside world.

As for Juna and Naden, whose children would have no right of succession, after talking it over, we'd decided they would take the family name "Souma," and become "Juna Souma" and "Naden Delal Souma."

Naden had no family name.

Delal was a part of her name, as was the case with her friend, Pai Long. Because of that, she needed a new family name, so I'd decided to have her use my family name, Souma.

It had become my given name now, but Souma had originally been my family name.

After that, Juna had asked to use the Souma name, too.

Because the children of secondary queens often inherited their mother's family, many of them kept their original family names, but Juna's father, that man who seemed too kind to be Excel's son, had told me, "I do not want to claim excessive ties to the royal family!" and "My mother's name already makes me stand out badly enough. Just the thought of any more makes my stomach hurt!"

In the end, Juna was taking the newly established Souma family name, and if they wanted the children to inherit the House of Doma, they could be adopted into it later.

Given all that, our names were all different, so what was it that we should call our house when we were all together?

While I was thinking about it, Liscia shrugged. "It's a name we're using among ourselves, why not just be the Souma family? It's our husband's family name, after all."

Liscia said that with a smile, and no one objected, so it was decided.

Now then, moving on...

"Erm... I was asked to say something, but I don't know what to say, so suddenly..." I began.

“What don’t ya just try sayin’ whatever popped into your head, darlin’?”

“...Okay. Well then... Today, on this day, we will become a family. I hope that we will continue to support one another, as we have before, even more in the future. Let’s laugh, cry, and sometimes fight, as we spend time together.”

I hugged Aisha and Naden first.

“Aisha. I’ll live as long as I can, so I want you to live with me.”

“Yes.” Aisha nodded firmly. “Let’s live together as long as we can.”

“Naden, you, too. It may only be for a short time in your long life, but give me your time.”

“Hmph,” she snorted. “It’s a bit soon to be making this a memory. This is where we *start* making memories, not where we look back on them.”

I let the two of them go, then hugged Roroa and Juna next.

“Let’s build a home where the smiles never stop, Roroa.”

“Even when we cry, I’ll be smilin’!”

“No matter what kind of bashing I receive from the people for it... Juna, I’m making you mine.”

“Yes, forever,” she smiled.

Then, finally, I hugged Liscia.

“Just two years ago, I was saying I’d throw away the crown, and tear up our engagement, too.”

“Two years ago, I stormed into my father’s room, mad he’d gotten me betrothed without my input.”

“I’m not letting go anymore,” I told her. “Not of you, and not of this kingdom where Cian and Kazuha live.”

“I won’t let you go, either. Not away from this world, and not away from me.”

While we were feeling one another’s warmth like that, there was a knock at the door.

It seemed like the time had come.

I let go of Liscia. Then, looking at each of them, I said, "All right... Let's go, everyone."

"~~~~~Okay!"~~~~~

We were going to become the king and queens of this country.

Final Chapter: The Wedding Ceremony

"His Majesty Souma Amidonia Elfrieden, King of the United Kingdom of Elfrieden and Amidonia, will now appear," Hakuya declared loudly.

I stepped out alone onto the red carpet.

This was the audience hall, the place where I had originally been summoned, and where I had also first met Aisha, Juna, Hakuya, Tomoe, and Poncho.

This place was pretty familiar to me, but today it was decked out in gaudy decorations.

On either side of the red carpet running through the audience hall knelt generals and bureaucrats, including Prime Minister Hakuya, Chamberlain Marx, Commander-in-Chief of the National Defense Force Excel, Black Cats Commander Kagetora, and Hiryyu Captain Castor.

In front of the throne at the end of that carpet were the former king, Sir Albert, and the former queen, Lady Elisha.

This scene was being broadcast nationwide using the Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel. (It was positioned so that Kagetora was off screen, though, of course.)

I absolutely could not be allowed to make a fool of myself. I walked slowly towards the two of them, as if savoring each step. Then, kneeling when I reached them, I lowered my head.

Sir Albert took the crown lying beside him, and stood before me.

"I, the 13th king, Albert Elfrieden, will hereby carry out the coronation of the 14th king, Souma A. Elfrieden! You will henceforth be king, comforting the people within, repelling the enemy without, and making the country prosper!"

"Yes, sir."

Hearing my response, Sir Albert nodded and placed the crown on my head.

"Finally, I was able to hand you the crown," Sir Albert said in a whisper so quiet only I could hear.

With my head lowered, and a wry smile on my face, I responded, “You’ve been holding onto it for me all this time. I’m sorry.”

“I should hope so. I was able to give you the throne, but it was annoying that I couldn’t give you the crown until your coronation. The position of king can be so restricting. The coronation kept getting delayed, too. Having to hold onto the crown all that time gave me the chills.”

“Between Liscia’s pregnancy, and the expedition to the Union of Eastern Nations, a lot has happened.”

“But that ends today. I’m counting on you to take care of Liscia and the kingdom, son-in-law.”

“Yes, Father.”

When Sir Albert moved away from me, Lady Elisha approached to drape an exquisite velvet cape over my shoulders.

In my ear, she whispered, “I will be wishing for your happiness, and the happiness of Liscia, your other queens, Cian, Kazuha, and any other children yet to be born. May you remain in good health forever after.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Hee hee,” she chuckled. “Do come and visit us in Albert’s domain. Though, instead of being called Grandma, I think I’d prefer to be called Grandmother, like Excel.”

When Lady Elisha said that, I couldn’t help but smile a little.

“Okay. That’s what I’ll teach them to do.”

When Lady Elisha moved away, I stood up.

Then another voice called out to me. “Your Majesty.”

The one who walked out from the line of retainers was Roroa’s grandfather, Herman. He saluted me, walked to my side, and knelt.

The bureaucrats running the ceremony brought a sword in a sheathe with sparkling detail work to him, and Herman offered it to me.

“This is the treasured sword handed down by generations of Amidonia’s

sovereign princes. We ask that Your Majesty please protect the people of both Elfrieden and Amidonia, without discrimination."

"...Got it." I accepted the sword and held it aloft. "I will endeavor to be a king supported by both peoples."

It was important for me to inherit not just the Elfrieden name, but the Amidonia name, too. That was why I had to be recognized as rightful successor not just on the Elfriedenian side, but on the Amidonian side, too. Herman was handing me this treasured sword as a way of showing that.

Herman stood down, and then I turned to my retainers, who stood up.

"Pledge your unswerving loyalty to the new king, His Royal Majesty Souma," Hakuya intoned, and they all bowed to me in unison.

The rustling of clothes echoed through the room. It was amazing to behold.

This concluded the coronation ceremony.

I was now, both in name and in fact, the king of this country. Not provisional, or temporary.

I was now King Souma A. Elfrieden.

This was the moment of its happening.

The pipe organ began playing. Then the doors to the audience chamber opened wide, and five beautiful brides appeared.

Liscia, Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Naden.

They parted with their families at the door, and the five in wedding dresses walked forward with children who were all dressed up helping them.

Liscia's helper was Tomoe. The other four were assisted by children from the castle nursery.

When the five of them got closer, they stopped in front of me, got down on both knees, and bowed their heads.

Tomoe bowed once before joining the line of retainers, while the other children scampered off.

The wedding ceremony would now begin.

The priests of Mother Dragon came forward, presenting five tiaras and five golden rings.

I took one of those tiaras, stood before Liscia, and placed it on her head. "I hereby make you my first primary queen. Let us develop this country together."

"Yes. I will be with you forever."

When Liscia stood up, she looked me straight in the eye and extended her left hand. Then she added, "And, of course, Cian and Kazuha will, too," in a voice only I could hear.

I put a ring on her finger, and then we shared a light kiss.

Seeing the little tears forming in the corner of Liscia's eyes, I wanted to ignore the procedure and hug her, but I managed to restrain myself in the eye of the public.

Doing the same for Aisha, Roroa, Juna, and Naden in turn, I took off whatever headpieces they had been wearing and replaced them with tiaras, put rings on their fingers, and then kissed them.

"I hereby make you my second primary queen. Let us protect this country together."

"Yes!" Aisha declared. In a whisper, she added, "(Of course, I will continue to protect you, too!)"

"I hereby make you my third primary queen," I told Roroa. "Let us make this country prosper together."

"Yes! (Just you leave it to me, darlin'!)"

"I hereby make you my first secondary queen," I told Juna. "Let us make this country's culture flourish together."

"Yes. (Hee hee, yes. Let's make a bright country, full of songs.)"

"I hereby make you my second secondary queen," I said to Naden. "Let us open a future for this country together."

"Yes. (Roger that. I'll take you anywhere, Souma.)"

When we kissed, they each gave me something like a declaration of their

resolve.

They hadn't said anything during the dress rehearsal for the ceremony, so they must all have thought about it during the lead up.

Had Liscia taken the lead on that? The ceremony was highly formal, so I was very happy to be able to tell how each of them felt through it. I don't know how many times I had thought this before, but they were all so wonderful that they seemed wasted on me.

Now we were husband and wives, a family.

The priests departed, and Liscia and I headed towards the thrones.

There was a seat for the king, and a seat beside for a queen. Liscia and I sat, and the other four stood beside us.

Once everyone was in their positions, Hakuya resumed his job as presenter.

"On the occasion of His Majesty Souma's coronation and wedding, messengers have come from every country to offer their congratulations. First, the younger sister of Empress Maria Euphoria of the Gran Chaos Empire, Madam Trill Euphoria."

"Yes, that's me!" Appearing from the entrance, her drill hair swaying, it was Trill, original promoter of drill development.

This time, as the resident ambassador in Friedonia, she was here to offer congratulations on behalf of Maria.

Kuu was acting in the same capacity for Sir Gouran of the Republic of Turgis, Ichihia for Duke Chima of the Duchy of Chima, and Yuriga on behalf of King Fuuga Haan of the steppe state of Malmkhitan.

Trill and Kuu were one thing, but Ichihia and Yuriga seemed to be tense about their role here.

But, you know, though Yuriga was supposed to be Fuuga's representative, he probably wasn't interested in the fact I'd become king, or that I'd gotten married.

He was probably charging headlong towards his ambitions even now.



Meanwhile, in the north of Malmkhitan, Fuuga stood on the banks of the Dabicon River, which flowed from far to the west. The land beyond this river was called the Demon Lord's Domain.

Stroking his trusty comrade, the flying tiger Durga, he pointed his rock-crushing blade, Zanganto, at the opposite shore.

"Listen up! Once we cross this river, we'll be in the Demon Lord's Domain! That is the land the monsters chased us from, and the land mankind must reclaim!"

He turned back to face the 20,000 soldiers behind him.

5,000 were the pride of Malmkhitan, the leaping cavalry, riding temsbocks.

5,000 were heavy cavalry, riding larger, stronger war horses than were usual.

The remaining 10,000 were foot soldiers, a group composed of refugees who had been driven from their homelands by the expansion of the Demon Lord's Domain.

Upon hearing that Fuuga was going to push into the Demon Lord's Domain, refugee soldiers from across the Union of Eastern Nations had gathered under him.

Fuuga spoke to all of them.

"These numbers here are no more than dust compared to the expeditionary force once led by the Empire. There may be some who think it foolish to venture into the Demon Lord's Domain where the expeditionary force was wiped out by demons with these numbers. However, I have seen it for myself. The demons, said to have wiped out the expedition, did not show themselves, even when I went quite deep into the Demon Lord's Domain. In short, the demons live only in the deepest parts of the Demon Lord's Domain! Everything else is simply a lawless zone, where monsters run rampant!"

Fuuga turned the hand with which he had been petting Durga towards everyone else. He tightened it into a fist, then pulled it towards himself.

"That is why we can take it back! If only in part, to begin. This time, we will

reclaim the abandoned city to the north, and the smaller cities around it, and begin to restore them. We will be the first on the side of mankind to successfully take back land from the Demon Lord's Domain!"

The passion in Fuuga's words excited the assembled troops.

"If we can accomplish this, we will astound the nations of this continent, bring in more support, and that will allow us to take back even more new land! We will be daybreak's bell, ringing out the end of a stagnant era!"

"""Yeahhhh!"" the soldiers roared in response to Fuuga's speech.

The spark of his passion set the whole army ablaze in an instant.

Fuuga leapt on Durga's back, then pointed Zanganto toward the northern sky and shouted, "Now onward, you brave warriors who have assembled here! We will make our names echo across the whole of this continent!"

"""Wowwwww!"""

Incited by Fuuga's fiery speech, the men charged headlong into the river.

As Fuuga stared at them, a single warhorse came over to Fuuga's side. It carried Fuuga's wife, Mutsumi Chima.

She looked beautiful with her long, black hair streaming behind her, her body clad in light armor, as she rode the horse with a longsword slung over her back.

"A brilliant speech, Lord Fuuga," she said.

"I've told you, just Fuuga is fine. You're my wife."

However, Mutsumi shook her head with a wry smile. "I couldn't address the commander of this force without the proper respect. It would be intolerable if I were to do something that lowered the morale you worked so hard to raise."

"You're as conscientious as ever... but, well, sorry. We just got married, and I'm starting a campaign. I received a letter from Yuriga, and apparently Souma's officially becoming king down south in Friedonia. When I heard that, I couldn't sit still."

Yes, Souma felt a sense of urgency about dealing with Fuuga's existence, but Fuuga was conscious of Souma, too.

Because each was conscious of the other, there was a mutual understanding, paired with a fundamental disconnect, and they were both preparing for the clash that might come sometime in the future.

Fuuga's existence made Souma stronger, and Souma's existence made Fuuga stronger. To call them rivals might have sounded nice, but when you considered the future to come, it was a complicated relationship, and not one to be welcomed.

Mutsumi chuckled. "Don't mind me. No matter where you go, Lord Fuuga, I will be at your side. So, please, follow the path you believe in. Whether it leads to glory or hell, I will stay with you all the way."

Mutsumi brought a hand to her chest and smiled.

"And, please, show me the world that only you can create."

"...Yeah! You'll have a front row seat! I love you, Mutsumi!" Fuuga leaned in and planted a kiss on his wife, then had Durga race off.

Behind him, Mutsumi and the soldiers followed.

And so, Fuuga's military force stepped into the Demon Lord's Domain.



"Ah!" I exclaimed. I had suddenly felt a shudder run down my spine. I didn't know what it was.

Trill's congratulatory remarks had ended, and we were in the middle of Kuu's very serious remarks.

"...was the result of the cooperation between our three countries. My father Gouran hopes that cordial relations between the kingdom, the Empire, and the republic will continue to..."

As I twisted my head to look around, Kuu continued.

"That being the case, in the hopes of lasting friendship between the republic, the kingdom, and the Empire, we would like to congratulate Sir Souma on his coronation and wedding. Please, continue to show us your favor."

With his address finished, Kuu mouthed the words, "Thanks, Bro," and winked

at all of us. Throwing in that bit of mischievous charm at the end was so like Kuu.

I gave Kuu my thanks, and then Kuu bowed and left the audience hall.

I remembered that Yuriga, as representative of Malmkhitan, was next according to the program.

This wedding was a ceremony, so while it had a certain flair to it, it couldn't avoid feeling somewhat stiff. It was at times like this that I felt envious of my subordinates holding their weddings down in the castle town.

I wonder what Hal and the rest are up to now...

While I was thinking that, Yuriga entered the room, so I returned my focus to the matter at hand.



At the same time, Halbert was trying to catch his breath.

“Oh... I’m getting tense,” he muttered.

His military uniform was Halbert’s default outfit, but now he was wearing a tuxedo instead. His messy hair was also neatly set today, and that made him kind of uneasy.

He was the groom in the ceremony about to take place, so he understood that was to be expected, but he didn’t feel like himself, and it made him nervous.

“You need to suck it up already, you know, Hal,” Kaede told him.

“If you can’t be bold and confident, it makes us look bad,” Ruby agreed.

Beside him were Kaede in a shiromuku and Ruby in a wedding dress, both of them wearing wry smiles. Their yellow and scarlet hair stood out against the pure white outfits.

These two were all dressed up as brides today, so they were even more beautiful than usual.

In fact, falling in love all over again looking at them, Hal had been unable to resist going for a hug, only to have them get upset that it would mess with their

outfits.

However, their beauty was also an element that felt like it was pushing Halbert into a corner.

"If they could see these two now, they'd be jealous, I'm sure of it..." Hal murmured.

There were quite a few people in attendance for their wedding.

Because it was happening at the same time as Souma's coronation and wedding, all of the major figures in the country, excluding family of the bride or groom, had gone to the castle instead. In their place, many of his subordinates in the Dratroopers and colleagues from his time in the Forbidden Army had rushed to attend Halbert's wedding.

For Halbert, they were comrades and good friends.

However, in the military, where the gender ratio was highly biased toward the male side, the adorable Miss Kaede, a staff officer, had been something of an idol.

Because of that, Halbert's old war buddies felt an incredible jealousy for the man who was her childhood friend, and who had now snatched her away from them. Basically...

"How dare you be the only one who gets a cute wife, you bastard!" they were shouting in their hearts.

That was about how it was.

Adding insult to injury, his other wife, Ruby, was beautiful, too.

That fact only poured more fuel on the fires of jealousy.

If any of those men saw the women in these beautiful wedding outfits, their jealousy would only flare up harder.

"Congratulations on your marriage. Now let me sock you one!"

That had to be how they felt.

Halbert's shoulders slumped in exhaustion.

"The guys were going on about how, when it came time for throwing wheat,

they were going to hit me with it as hard as they could. There were even a few of them double-checking their throwing forms.”

The practice of throwing wheat was equivalent to the practice of throwing rice in weddings on Earth.

When the brides and groom came out, the attendees would throw wheat, a symbol of fecundity (because a single grain could produce many more) at them.

Normally, this was done like the throwing of salt during sumo, throwing it upwards gently so that it scattered, and not overhand like a baseball.

“They started muttering, ‘Maybe we’ll mix in some gravel...’, too,” he complained. “Although they stopped because it’d be dangerous if it hit anyone else.”

““Ahaha...”” his wives-to-be laughed.

The men were jealous of Halbert, but they didn’t want to cause trouble for Kaede and Ruby.

Even if their husband was going to be Halbert, the men wanted them to be happy.

So, because of their complicated male feelings, they had settled on throwing the wheat as hard as they could.

Kaede gently placed her hand over Halbert’s right breast with a wry smile.

“They’re letting you off with just throwing wheat at you as hard as they can, so I think they’re good friends, you know. It means you’re so fortunate that everyone is jealous.”

“That’s right,” Ruby added, placing her hand over his left breast. “If you’re a man, accept a little jealousy as the price you pay for taking two wives as pretty as we are.”

With the two of them blasting him like that, Halbert laughed wryly and said, “You’re merciless. But you have a point. If that’s how they feel, I’m gonna show off how happy I am, and make them good and jealous.”

“Hee hee! That’s the spirit, Hal!”

“Make sure you escort us well, darling.”

Kaede and Ruby kissed Halbert on the cheek from both sides.



“H-Hey...” Hal objected.

“Hee hee! Your face is bright red, Hal.”

“We’ll save the kiss on the lips for the main event.”

Halbert’s face felt like it was going to melt, so he shook his head.

Kaede chuckled as she watched him, but then something seemed to occur to her. “Come to think of it, Hal, there was a message from His Majesty Souma to everyone getting married this time.”

“From Souma?” Halbert cocked his head to the side.

Given that they were ruler and servant, it was normal for messages to come, but he didn’t understand why it would be restricted to those getting married.

Smirking, Kaede added, “Apparently, ‘Depending on the political situation in the north, the country may become quite busy going forward. Therefore, during this period of comparative calm, make sure you get on with the baby-making’... That’s what it said.”

“Nuhuh?!”

Hearing the words “get on with the baby-making” from Kaede’s mouth, Halbert was so surprised that he took a step backwards despite himself.

Ruby may have been embarrassed, too, because her cheeks reddened.

While smiling wryly at their reaction, Kaede explained Souma’s intentions. “Those of us getting married today are the retainers His Majesty especially relies on. He’d like to avoid pregnancy or childbirth overlapping with any event that leaves him shorthanded.”

“R-Right...” Halbert said, his voice cracking slightly.

For a man who had been in the military, Halbert was awfully innocent about these sorts of things.

That was because, though it was normal for the seniors at the officers’ academy to take the younger men out to places where they could fool around with girls to blow off steam, Halbert had been with Kaede even back then, so, out of concern for how she would see him, he hadn’t experienced any of that.

Even when they were split up, with Halbert joining the Army and Kaede joining the Forbidden Army, his colleagues had known he had a cute childhood friend, so if he'd ever so much as looked lustfully at a woman, they would have reported him to her.

Naturally, his colleagues weren't acting out of genuine affection for Kaede, but jealousy towards Halbert for having a cute childhood friend.

As a result, though, Hal had no experience playing around with women.

After Hal's transfer to the Forbidden Army, they'd been together with Kaede again, so the situation stayed the same as back at the academy.

This was the reason that, for all his crudeness, Halbert was rather innocent.

Kaede approached Halbert, and said with upturned eyes, "I'll do my best to fulfill my duties as wife. So, please, Hal."

"M-Me, too... Okay?" Ruby hesitantly tugged on Halbert's sleeve.

These two were so cute, they made him feel grateful, embarrassed, and... happy.

Halbert, with his face bright red, slapped his cheeks to reinvigorate himself.

Then, taking both of their hands, he walked towards the door.

"Oh, whatever! Wheat, gravel, bring it on! Hell, come with spears and arrows, too! If you think you can get in the way of my happiness now, just try it!"

Filled with emotion, Halbert couldn't help but shout that.



At the same time, in a different church in the capital, the former slave trader Ginger Camus and his former slave Sandria were having their wedding.

"Now, you shall swear your oath, in the name of Mother Dragon," a priest intoned.

Under the watch of the teacher's and research staff of Ginger's Vocational School, where Ginger was the principal, and under the watch of Sandria's family, who had been invited from the Empire, the two were about to say their vows.

“O Ginger,” said the priest. “Do you take Sandria to be your wife, and swear to share your whole lives, in times both good and bad?”

“I do.” Ginger gave a firm response to the priest’s question.

There was no sign of the usual, slightly weak-willed Ginger here now.

This was the result of his deciding: *I need to be a man for today, at least. If I’m not, I’ll make Sandria uneasy.*

The priest nodded, then turned to Sandria.

“O Sandria. Do you take Ginger to be your husband, and swear to share your whole lives, in times both good and bad?”

“...I do,” Sandria responded, tripping over her words a little bit.

The reason it had taken a moment for the words to come out was not because she was feeling tense, but because she was verklempt. That was because, upon hearing the part about their whole lives, everything that had happened so far was racing through her mind.

Her father being deceived and saddled with a debt. Her being sold off to this country as a slave to pay it. Meeting Ginger after she had given up on everything.

From there, things had gotten better and better, like when the rain suddenly lets up.

Being freed from slavery. Making it to this fine day where she was now Ginger’s wife.

“Now, seal your promise with a kiss,” the priest said.

The two turned to face each other.

“Lord Ginger... I’m so happy,” Sandria said, beaming.

Ginger said with a wry smile, “I’m your husband now. I think you can drop the Lord business, you know?”

“But... Ginger... no, that won’t do. It only feels right with the title.”

“Well, if that’s what you want to call me, so be it.”

"Would you prefer if I went all the way, and called you Master?" she asked.
"You'll be master of the house, so it doesn't seem too out of place, right?"

"That makes it sound like I'm forcing you into some sort of roleplay, so stop it!"

Sandria chuckled at how earnestly Ginger was begging her.

In response, Ginger gave her a shy smile.

The former slaver and slave.

Ginger had always been in the higher position, but he had also always been the one being swung around. That relationship wasn't likely to change going forward.

Ginger lifted the veil hanging over Sandria's face. They stared into one another's eyes up close.

Ginger spoke. "Even now, I remember your eyes from the time back when I was still a slave trader."

"My... eyes?" Sandria stared blankly at him.

"Back then, you had this 'It's because I'm a slave' look in your eyes, as if you had given up on the future entirely. I wanted to give you hope."

"Hope... for the future, you mean?" Sandria asked.

"Yes," Ginger said. "How am I doing? Can you imagine a bright future now?"

Sandria closed her eyes and meditated for a bit. Opening her eyes, she smiled and said, "There's a big house with a big yard. You and I are living there. We have two children, a boy and a girl. Maybe we're raising a large pet, too. That might be nice. I hear that raising animals is good for the children's education, too. In that house, I wake up early to prepare breakfast, have the children wake you up when you sleep in, and then after all of us eat the meal I've made, our family holds hands and goes to school together. That's what I imagined."

Sandria's story was eloquent. Ginger was taken aback by the amount of detail.

"I-Isn't that a bit specific?"

"For me, it's the happiest future imaginable."

Standing on her tiptoes, Sandria planted a kiss on Ginger's lips.

She was already able to imagine a bright future.

Ginger happily accepted her feelings.



At the same time, in yet another church, Ludwin and Genia were in the middle of exchanging the kiss that sealed their vows in front of the priest.

Because of the height difference between the tall Ludwin and petite Genia, Genia stood all the way on the tips of her toes, and Ludwin leaned forward as far as he could for the kiss.

There were shrill cries from the ladies in the audience.

In among them were their fellow researchers, Merula the high elf, and Taru the engineer from the Republic of Turgis.

"Congratulations, Genia, Sir Ludwin!" Merula called.

"Congrats!" Taru added.

They congratulated the couple with raucous applause.

Incidentally, Merula's keeper, the bishop Souji, was carrying out the wedding in the castle as a representative of Lunarian Orthodoxy. Because Merula was a wanted woman, having been declared a witch by the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, and she couldn't be allowed to appear on the broadcast, she couldn't accompany him.

Well, even if she had been able to go, she probably would still have put her fellow researcher Genia's wedding first.

Even Trill, who was attending the wedding in the castle as representative of the Gran Chaos Empire, had said she would be coming as soon as her responsibilities as ambassador were complete.

Because of the connections between all the houses involved in this multiple simultaneous wedding event, many families had to run back and forth from one ceremony to another. Though it was causing some confusion, the festive mood throughout the capital was turning even that chaos into a good time.

In the middle of that celebratory atmosphere, Genia pulled her face away from Ludwin's and giggled.

"I knew it! You sure are big, Big Brother Luu. It makes kissing hard."

"I'm on the tall side, sure. But I think how small you are has something to do with it, too, you know?"

"Hm... It seems I could do with some additions to my body to be a fitting wife for you. In terms of height, and... if at all possible, chest." Genia laughed wryly at her disappointing physique.

Ludwin gently scooped Genia up in his arms. Genia cried out in surprise at suddenly being put in a princess carry.

"Uwah?! Big Brother Luu?! What's this, all of a sudden?!"

"Well, I was just thinking the height difference makes it easier to do things like this."

Having said that, Ludwin winked at the dumbfounded priest.

The priest snapped back to his senses, and turned to the attendees to say, "Here, a new husband and wife are born. I would ask all in attendance to go out in front of the church, and celebrate with them as they first go out the door."

It seemed Ludwin wanted to leave the church with Genia in his arms.

The priest, picking up on that, was having the attendees leave the building, even though it was not the standard procedure. He would wait to greet them outside. He was quite the flexible priest.

Once the attendees filed out and only the three of them remained in the church, Genia looked to Ludwin with eyes that were, naturally, as a result of her position in his arms, upturned, and asked, "You're sure you want to disregard protocol like that?"

"You're the one always breaking established patterns, right, Genia? I just want to show everyone how cute my wife is. Let me let loose once in a while, too."

Genia's face turned beet red. "Big Brother Luu, you can be a bit mischievous at times, you know that?"

"You're the one who incited me. By the way, am I still getting called Big Brother now that we're married?"

"You'll always be Big Brother Luu to me. I can't change the way I call you now."

"Well, fair enough. Okay... let's go, Genia."

Ludwin started to walk with Genia in his arms, and they passed through the church door together.

Once they were outside, the attendees stood on either side of the carpet, throwing wheat.

When Ludwin finished walking down the middle of the attendees, Genia threw the bouquet she was holding backwards behind her.

In this world, too, there was the superstition that the person who caught the bouquet would be the next bride. The bouquet sailed in a high arc, towards the women hoping to catch it.

Before it could touch down, one girl made a big jump to catch it.



“Sorry!” she called.

The bouquet was still about ten meters from the ground when it was snatched.

In the middle of the bewildered crowd, the girl who had caught the bouquet landed and bowed apologetically to everyone around her. Each time she bowed, her *bunny ears* shook.

“Sorry, sorry! The young master ordered me to catch it!”

“...What are you doing, Leporina?” Taru sounded exasperated.

It was Leporina who had caught the bouquet.

Leporina was supposed to have gone to the castle with Kuu, but it seemed he’d ordered her to come all this way just to do this.

With a troubled look on her face, Leporina handed the bouquet to Taru. “Urgh... The young master said, ‘It’ll be our turn next anyway, so let’s take it for ourselves.’ Oh! The young master will be coming here later, too.”

It seemed that Kuu couldn’t fully slip out of a ceremony where he was one of the guests of honor, either.

That must have been why he’d dispatched Leporina to catch the bouquet. And he apparently intended to slip away as soon as the royal ceremony was over.

“Master Kuu, honestly...” Taru accepted the bouquet, albeit with a wry smile.

Though she complained, she was using the bouquet to hide her mouth, which looked ready to burst into a grin, so she wasn’t entirely displeased.

Leporina was smiling, too.

Seeing that exchange between the next to be wedded...

“Is this what they call ‘sharing the happiness’?” Ludwin asked.

Genia grinned. “I’m not really sure if we’re the ones who shared with them, or they’re the ones who shared with us, though.”

Ludwin and Genia both laughed happily.



“O-Okay, everyone, let’s toast! Yes.”

Meanwhile, around that same time, in the garden of the Poncho Ishizuka Panacotta mansion in the capital, Poncho was wearing a white tailcoat as he proposed a toast.

Poncho was dressed in his best clothes, but because of his rotund belly, his shirt looked even more stretched than usual.

Next to Poncho were a cool-faced Serina and a happily smiling Komain, both in dresses.

They had held their wedding ceremony in the morning, so Serina and Komain were already Poncho’s first and second wives.

“““Cheers! Ohhhhhh!””” At Poncho’s urging, the attendees raised their glasses.

Then, in the next second, they all fell over one another in the rush to the tables covered with many large platters of food.

Because this was a party held by Poncho, widely revered as Lord Ishizuka the God of Food, all of the dishes were popular items from the Ishizuka’s Place cafeteria, and they looked delicious.

These Ishizuka dishes that normally only the night staff at the castle could eat were being presented in a buffet format. There was no way people wouldn’t crowd around.

More than that, though, Poncho was a rising noble, and many of the merchants he bought ingredients from wholesale, people from the marketplace, and members of the general public had been invited, too, so many were not concerned about appearances when racing for the food.

Even the knights and nobles, desperate not to have all the food snatched away, abandoned their shame to engage in pillaging the dishes, so of course it was going to be a riot.

As this war over the food unfolded, the brides and groom were left standing on the sidelines.

Despite all the noise, mysteriously the party wasn't totally ruined.

On closer inspection, there were individuals smartly moving in among gluttonous guests.

"Roast beef is two slices per person," a servant said. "If you want seconds, please return to the end of the line."

"Madam, would you like something to drink?"

"The line for tatsuta chicken ends here."

"There should be no fighting on this blessed day. Guests who cannot respect this will be asked to leave."

They were all wearing butler or classical maid uniforms.

They deftly divvied out the food, served drinks, organized lines, and mediated when fights seemed likely to break out, all in an effort to minimize the chaos.

Their movements were truly professional. This was only to be expected. That was because they were a family that had produced many butlers and maids who served people of high status in the castle.

As he watched them at work, Poncho wiped away his cold sweat with a handkerchief. "Th-This has gotten incredibly boisterous, yes. If Serina's family weren't handling things, this would have been a disaster."

The butlers and maids going around the event site were all members of Serina's family.

They should normally have been here as guests, but they'd said that, by their nature, their house was better-suited to wait on guests than be waited on as guests, so they'd asked to be in charge of service at the party.

"I feel bad making Madam Serina's family help out, too, yes," Poncho admitted.

"Have no worries," Serina said. "We take pride in our work as servants."

Serina was as expressionless as ever, but there was a certain pride in the way she spoke.

"Even if we hadn't asked, Father and Mother would have carried out the role

of servants. They're happily running around to all of the tables now."

On the other end of Serina's gaze was a gentleman in a butler's uniform, carrying a tray with many glasses of wine on it with one hand.

It was Serina's father. He would normally have been expected to sit quietly with the other relatives as the father of one of the brides, but he was moving around like a fish in water, carrying out the duties of a servant.

Watching Serina's father, Komain smiled wryly. "My parents are gone now, but I've always assumed a father would weep for joy on their daughter's big day."

"Our work is our life in my family," Serina said. "Because we've been educated for generations to put loyalty to our employer's house first, we tend to put our own feelings second, or third, as we work. I've even been told I'm the most expressive member of the family."

When Serina said with a straight face that she was the most emotionally expressive person in her whole family, Komain couldn't tell if that was supposed to be a joke or not, so she froze up.

Poncho, who was listening, too, let out a troubled laugh and wiped his cold sweat away again. "When I went to pay my respects to her father before the wedding, it ended in very few words, yes."

Poncho was talking about the time he'd brought Serina to her family's home to meet her parents before the wedding.

Though he was sweating profusely...

"P-Please, give your daughter to me, yes."

...he had managed to come out and say that properly.

Serina's father had just listened silently.

And as for Serina's own conversation with him...

"Father. I will be marrying this man."

"Understood."

It had been over with those two lines.

Finally, Serina's father had turned to Poncho, and said, "My daughter has her shortcomings, but I hope you will take care of her," and bowed his head.

If you included the time Poncho had spent on introducing himself, it was over in a little over five seconds.

That might have been fine, since it meant things were sorted out, but it felt like it had ended too easily after all Poncho's stressing over it.

Poncho related the story to Komain, and she was taken aback. "W-Wasn't that a bit too easy?"

"That is just how much he trusts Madam Serina, yes," Poncho said. "He must have been able to answer instantly because he knew Madam Serina wouldn't fall for any strange man."

"It's because Father knows I never yield once I've set my mind on something," Serina said nonchalantly, and Poncho and Komain looked to one another with wry smiles.

It was hard to tell because of her paucity of facial expression, but the two of them had been with her long enough to know she was feeling shy.

Seeing their reaction, Serina turned her head away peevishly. "It's not as though Father simply trusted my eye for men. I've sent the recipes for junk food you've taught me back to the family home, and though it may not show on their faces, they were moved by how wonderful those dishes were."

"Ohh. Then Poncho had them by the stomach before he even went to pay his respects, huh?" Komain clapped her hand, as if it all suddenly made sense.

It seemed that Serina and her father shared not just a common temperament, but a common taste for food, too.

Serina quietly offered Poncho a tray with a number of dishes on it. "Come now. If we leave them alone, all the food will be eaten by the guests. I've secured a number of dishes for us, too, so let's eat them together."

"Wh-When did you do that?! We've been talking this whole time, yes!"

"No, I slipped over when I saw an opening earlier. I've brought enough for Madam Komain, too."

With that said, Serina laid out a tray of colorful food in front of Komain's seat, too.

She had gone when she'd seen an opening... according to her, but to move through that massive crowd, secure food, and even arrange it in a manner pleasing to the eye, it was a technique that would put even ninjas to shame.

Komain looked at the food in front of her and sighed. "Serina, you may be one of the most capable people in the kingdom..."

"I just move efficiently," Serina said. "Please, look at these delicate arms. I've never dragged anything more heavy than Carla."

"Dragged?! Not carried?! And wait, you're treating Carla like an object?!"

"Pardon me. Carla is a fine to—colleague."

"Did you just start to say 'toy'?!"

"U-Um... Madam Serina?" Poncho asked hesitantly.

Serina cocked her head to the side. "Is something the matter?"

"Um... About the dishes on the plate in front of me..."

Komain looked at what was on Poncho's plate.

Komain and Serina's plates had roast beef and napolitan, complemented by mashed potatoes, salad, and fruits.

In contrast, Poncho's plate was packed with liver pate, a fried dish made with pumpkin and nuts, and eel omelette, a dish from Souma's world.

"Poncho, is there something wrong with the food?" Komain asked.

It was strange that his food was different from theirs, but a big eater like Poncho should have been able to eat this much. Komain didn't understand why Poncho was so perplexed.

However, Poncho's face turned bright red and he looked at Serina. "Madam Serina... are you doing this deliberately?"

"Of course," Serina said nonchalantly.

There seemed to be some mutual understanding between them, so Komain

puffed up her cheeks, upset at being out of the loop. “Don’t leave me out. What is it about these dishes?”

“Oh, um, Madam Komain...” Poncho said hesitantly. “The ingredients used in them, they... uh...”

In contrast to Poncho, who seemed to have trouble saying it, Serina came right out and told her. “They are said to increase sexual potency.”

Increasing sexual potency. As the meaning of those words hit her, Komain turned red so fast you could hear a little *poof!* sound effect.

“Um... Liver, pumpkin, nuts, and eel are all said to be effective at recovering your stamina, yes. So they’re believed to increase sexual stamina, too...” Poncho explained despite his embarrassment.

It seemed Komain hadn’t noticed, but there was no way Poncho, the God of Food, would not.

Seeing Poncho and Komain looking down, their faces turning a bashful red, Serina said, “We’re husband and wives now, you know,” in an exasperated tone. “Now that we are married, it’s only natural to think about an heir.”

“Well... Yes, you’re right... Yes.”

“His Majesty told us to take this chance to make babies, and he says many of our colleagues will be incited by this event to marry by the end of the year,” Serina went on. “I would expect that, around this time next year, the upper echelons of the kingdom will be experiencing a baby boom. If possible, I would like to have mine before the midwives are too busy. I’ll need you to work hard to make that happen, darling.”

“D-Darling?!”

Hearing Serina suddenly address him that way, and telling him to work hard on making a baby, Poncho’s eyes went wide.

With eyes that seemed unable to believe she still had to say this, Serina looked at Poncho and said, “You are my husband now, and that is what I will call you. More importantly, how long are you going to go on addressing your wife as ‘Madam Serina’?”

Poncho panicked a bit when she drew attention to it, but eventually he found his resolve and said, “M-Ms. Serina... Ms. Komain...”

“...I suppose that will have to do as a compromise,” Serina said.

Komain giggled. “In that case, I’d like to call you ‘dear.’ It makes me feel like a newlywed. Now then, dear, I’ll have one of those.” Having said that, Komain took a piece of liver pate from Poncho’s plate. “I think... I will be needing stamina, too, after all.”

“M-Ms. Komain?!” he yelped.

“Hm... should I eat some as well, perhaps?”

“N-Not you, too, Ms. Serina...”

Serina took an eel omelette. The two of them looked at the intimidated Poncho with wry smiles, then planted kisses on both his cheeks.

““Stay strong, darling/dear.””

The sweet sound of those words was dizzying, and Poncho nearly fell on his back.



Like that, Souma’s followers were each enjoying their wedding day.

In the capital’s fountain plaza, many citizens were watching the coronation and wedding ceremony over the Jewel Voice Broadcast. It was now reaching its final stages.

The only thing remaining now was Souma’s coronation speech after being formally crowned king.

Souma rose from the throne and walked forward. First Primary Queen Liscia stood beside him, Aisha stood behind, and Roroa, Juna, and Naden waited in the back.

Souma turned to face the Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel that had been moved onto the red carpet. In other words, he turned to face the people watching this coronation and marriage ceremony.

“Around two years have passed since my arrival in this country.” Souma spoke

in a quiet, but firm tone. “In these two years, many things have happened, both internally and externally. In an age of blindingly fast changes, this country, too, has been changing. To the point that even the official name of the country has changed, becoming the ‘United Kingdom of Elfrieden and Amidonia,’ also known as the ‘Kingdom of Friedonia.’ In the midst of all that, I am glad to have been able to welcome this day.”

He paused.

“From this day forward, I will formally be the king of the Kingdom of Friedonia.”

He went on:

“In addition, now that I have married both Liscia, the daughter of Albert Elfrieden, former king of the Kingdom of Elfrieden, and Roroa, the daughter of Gaius Amidonia, the former sovereign prince of the Principality of Amidonia, I will be ruling over both nations as Souma Amidonia Elfrieden. I intend to do my utmost to be recognized as a worthy king by the people of both the Elfrieden Region and the Amidonia Region. However, no matter how firm my resolve, and no matter how hard I try, there are limits to what one man can accomplish alone. That limit is not particularly high, either.”

He paused, and went on.

“We did not overcome the many events of the last two years by relying on my strength alone. It was the result of the queens who were at my side supporting me, the retainers you see lined up here, and many others who could not be here in attendance today, as well as you, the people, all working for this country. I hear that a program called *Nameless Heroes* has been popular with the public, and if you watch it, you’ll see what I mean. The world isn’t made solely of those who do the big showy jobs. We know there are nameless heroes working in the shadows. The reason that, here, now, I was able to reach this bright day, is thanks to all those unnamed heroes. Those nameless heroes... they are you, each and every citizen of this country!”

The words *yuusha* and *eiyuu* both translate to “hero” in English.

Souma had been summoned here as a *yuusha*, but he was referring to his people as *na mo naki eiyuu*, heroes without names.

He might not have been able to hear it in the castle, but in the fountain plaza, where people were watching the broadcast, there was loud cheering.

Souma allowed himself a pause, then continued once more.

"I was told my coronation speech should be about what I want to do with this country as a king. However, my feelings are unchanged from when I made my New Year's address. That is, I want to make a 'good country.'"

He smiled.

"You might think this is a rather plain goal. My fellow summoned hero, the father of the nation, the First Hero King, likely had a much grander vision than mine. However, I think that strong beliefs are often left behind by the times. For instance, if I embraced the dream of 'uniting the continent,' I might well gain the support of those who shared that dream. In this chaotic world, there is fertile ground for that sort of grand dream. In this situation, which we all find constricting, we hope for a way to break out. But what of the next generation? Is it not possible that grand dream would become a shackle on them?"

He paused.

"The king before the last one took a policy of expansionism, trying to build a country that could equal the Gran Chaos Empire. It's true, our territory expanded. However, if you look at the result, it ended in a civil war between the royals after his death, and invited intervention from the foreign countries he had angered. If your dreams are riding the current of the times, then at the end of that era, it is the way of the world that they will be abandoned. So, how are we to go about creating a country when thrown about by the currents of the era?! Well, we must look at reality, change gradually with the times, and adapt."

He paused.

"It doesn't require us to think hard about it. If you can feel that today is better than yesterday, and tomorrow will be better than today, that is enough. That is something this country has already put into practice."

Then Souma spread his arms wide.

"Look at this Jewel Voice Broadcast. This Jewel Voice Broadcast, which can be

watched as video in the large cities and heard as audio even in small ones, has been used for many things since I first took the throne. If you feel it has grown easier to live today over yesterday, and tomorrow over today, that means you don't want to go back to how things were before. I ask you! Could you return to a life without the songs of the loreleis?!"

"No!" Souma couldn't hear it, but that was the answer the people shouted.

"Could the housewives of this country dry their laundry without Naden's weather forecast?! Could the fishermen take their ships out to sea?! Could the farmers choose when to harvest their crops?!"

"No!"

"Without the transport network we laid, could the traveling merchants carry their goods?! Would the store owners be able to stock their shelves?!"

"No!!"

"In the larger cities, we have installed sewer systems, and improved public health! Could you keep living there, if the air and water went back to how they were before?! We've increased the number of doctors! Could you feel safe living without the number of hospitals we have now?! Could you feel safe giving birth?! We've created new culinary customs, eating things we hadn't before! Would you be all right with the variety of dishes on your table decreasing?! The metal-poor Elfrieden Region has received a steady supply of metals from the Amidonia Region, and the food-poor Amidonia Region has received a stable supply of food from the Elfrieden Region! Could you afford to lose that relationship now?!"

"Absolutely not!!"

It was true, the people had no desire to return to yesterday.

Even if the day-to-day changes were small, they would eventually realize the many great changes that had occurred, and it would change their understanding of things.

Souma lowered his hand and spoke to the excited people.

"Like this, as the days pile up, through gradual change, I will build a good

country. Together with my queens and retainers. That is how I am as a king. That is how this country is. Now, I implore all of you, lend this country your strength. So that, little by little, we can steadily work towards our magnificent future!"

Saying that, Souma raised a fist.

At the same time, Liscia, Aisha, Juna, Roroa, Naden, and the line of retainers bowed their heads.

In that moment, a cheer rose up from the people watching.

If you listened closely, you could have heard it over the broadcast, too.

The voices from the fountain plaza had certainly reached the castle.

And so, Souma and the others slowly walked to the exit.



Liscia and I led the way, and we went to the terrace overlooking the castle courtyard with the other queens.

Looking down into the courtyard from there, it was packed with people, people, and more people.

If I were the villain of a certain famous anime movie, this was a scene that might have made me say, "The people are like garbage," but in my current position, I couldn't use that line, even as a joke.

When we stood by the railing and waved to the masses below, there was a roaring applause that seemed to shake the whole castle.

This was something similar to the practice of Ippan Sanga in Japan, where the Imperial Family would appear to the general public from the balcony of the palace at the beginning of each year.

In order to catch a glimpse of me and my queens on our big day, many citizens, regardless of their status, had gathered in the courtyard. That was as far in as they would be allowed to come, of course, and there was heavy security in place.

Though they could see us in the flesh, I was sure we had to look pretty small,

so I was glad so many people had turned up despite that.

“Your Majesty, I have brought Prince Cian and Princess Kazuha.”

I turned toward Carla’s voice, and she was standing there with the former royal couple. Carla and Lady Elisha were each holding a baby.

Judging by the color of their baby clothes, Carla was holding Cian (blue), while Lady Elisha was holding Kazuha (pink).

I chuckled and said to their mother, “Liscia, you take Kazuha.”

“Okay.”

Liscia took Kazuha from Lady Elisha, and I took Cian from Carla.

Then we approached the railing again. Taking every care that they wouldn’t fall, we held them so that the people could see.



There was a roar of applause.

“Wahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“Fwah...! #\$/@aah!”

Surprised by the crowd, Kazuha tried to bury her face in Liscia’s chest and started crying.

Liscia said, “There, there,” rocking her back and forth to calm her. Kazuha went on sobbing a little, but she didn’t raise her voice.

Still, seeing the way she wasn’t raising her face from Liscia’s chest, the large crowd must have scared her.

Meanwhile, as for Cian... his face was frozen solid.

It was like he’d been hit by petrification magic, his expression didn’t change as he looked at the crowd.

Cian was shy, and his face often froze like this when he met a new person.

So, in a way, this was business as usual.

I tried poking his pudgy little cheeks to try and get them to loosen up, but his face stayed the same, like he was engaged in some kind of staring contest.

Stubborn...

“It’s amazing,” Naden whispered, waving her hands. “Everyone is blessing these children.”

Aisha and Juna smiled softly, too.

“They’re the prince and princess, after all,” Aisha said. “When the royal family has a bright future, that’s something for the people to be happy about, too.”

“Hee hee, those two are probably even more popular with the people than the loreleis right now,” Juna added.

“Well! When all’s said and done, the people love us,” Roroa said with a cheerful smile. “Big Sister Cia’s popular with folks in the Elfrieden Region, and I’m a hit with people in the Amidonia Region. Juna’s famous as the Prima Lorelei, and Big Sister Ai and Nadie are well liked ’cause of all the exposure

they've gotten on the Jewel Voice Broadcast. I'm sure there's some jealousy towards Darlin' now he's gone and snatched us all up for himself."

Then Roroa winked.

She was probably right. I was surrounded by all these marvelous wives. I'd have to willingly accept a little envy.

But... we were loved by the people, huh?

"That scares me, just a little," I whispered.

"Souma?" Liscia cocked her head to the side.

I smiled wryly and adjusted the way I held Cian.

"It means that the people here, celebrating with us, they're just that willing to express their emotions. You could say they easily go with the flow."

I focused my eyes on the crowd as I spoke in an undertone.

"If I rule poorly, and betray their expectations, their blessing will turn to resentment, and their applause to ridicule. I was thinking they might condemn our family with the same fervor that they celebrated my coronation, our marriage, and Cian and Kazuha's birth."

When I said that, the others got pensive looks on their faces.

Just as I had taken on the heavy burden of ruling this country, they had taken the burden of being its queens, so they surely had their own thoughts on the issue.

But...

"Relax," Carla murmured in my ear.

At some point, she had moved to stand right behind me.

"If you go down the wrong road, Master, I've been contracted to risk my life to stop you. If it comes to it, I will stop you before the resentment can turn on your family, too."

Carla was whispering that so only I could hear. It made me laugh despite myself.

"Ahaha... So you'll kill me if I go astray? Is that anything to be saying on such a fine day?"

Carla responded with exasperation. "It's your own fault for being so pessimistic on this fine day."

"...You've got a point there."

"Yes. So, please, be a good king, so that day never has to come."

With that said, Carla smoothly moved away.

Serina was always messing around with her, but Carla was a sword hanging above my head. She was an ever-present danger, a deterring sword that forced self-reflection. If a time ever came when I went astray, that sword would fall.

Conversely, she was also a guarantee that something would stop me if I went too far.

In my position as king, that deterrent and guarantee were reassuring.

"It's going to be okay, Souma." Liscia approached me with a soft smile.

Seeing that, the people cheered.

"We've managed to overcome everything so far. From here on, no matter what happens, with this family, we can overcome anything."

Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Naden nodded in agreement.

I felt like they were giving me courage, and I said, "Thank you," then turned back to the people and once more I resumed waving.

"But I think we could do with more family." Still facing the people, Liscia continued to talk. "That's why, from today on, you'll be sleeping in our rooms."

"Um... Liscia, that's..." I began.

Did she mean... what I thought she did?

That I wouldn't be able to sleep in my own bed, or the bed in the governmental affairs office for awhile...?

Still smiling, Liscia declared, "This is already decided. You'll be in Aisha's room tonight, by the way."

“I... I know I have my shortcomings, but please take good care of me,” Aisha said bashfully while still waving to the people.

It seemed they had each reported on their plans and current physical condition to one of the court ladies at the beginning of the week, and using that information, they had put together a schedule of who would sleep with me when.

Tomorrow was Juna, then Roroa, Naden, Liscia... and so on.

Incidentally, no one had asked *me* what *my* plans were.

“Stay strong, Souma,” Liscia said teasingly.

“...Right,” I said nervously.

I'll work hard. And I mean that in many ways.

That was when the crowd let out another loud round of applause.

Huh? Why cheer now? I was thinking, and then...

“Souma, look at that!” Naden pointed straight up and shouted.

I looked up to the sky...

“Wha?!”

High in the sky above, I saw a large white shadow flying between the clouds.

That fur which shone in the daylight, and those great wings that seemed to rend the sky... There was no mistaking her.

“Lady Tiamat?!” Naden cried, because that form was unmistakably that of Mother Dragon.

Madam Tiamat would, on rare occasions, take a sightseeing flight around the continent, and Mother Dragon worshipers believed catching sight of her was a good omen.

Liscia and I had seen her before, too.

“Souma, we did send Madam Tiamat a wedding invitation, right?” Liscia asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. Through Princess Sill of the Nothung Dragon Knight

Kingdom. But, because Madam Tiamat doesn't interfere in the world below, I didn't expect she could come."

Since I was marrying Naden, it would have pained me not to invite Madam Tiamat, the mother of all dragons, so I'd sent an invitation just in case. But, as expected, there had been no response.

I put a hand on Naden's shoulder as she stared, dazed, into the sky.

"No way... It's Lady Tiamat... Why...?" she whispered.

"She can't intervene in matters on the land," I said. "But I'll bet she was worried about you and Ruby, since you're marrying into a country other than the Dragon Knight Kingdom. That's why she did it like this. She went on a sightseeing flight, and 'just happened to pass by her two daughters on their big day.'"

"Souma..." As tears pooled in Naden's eyes, I clapped her on the shoulder.

"Come on, why don't you give your overprotective adoptive mother a response?"

With a sob, Naden said, "Okay!"

Naden waved up toward the sky, emitting the roar of a ryuu while still in human form.

There was a similar roar from the castle town at the same time, so Ruby must have noticed, too.

Then, as if she'd heard their energetic voices, Madam Tiamat let out her own cry, like that of a whale. It would no doubt remain in the record that her cry was like a blessing on the entire country.

"It was a good wedding," Liscia said.

I agreed with her from the bottom of my heart.

Midword

Thank you very much for purchasing volume 10 of *Realist Hero*. This is Dojyomaru, who bought himself a road bike, and who has been physically unable to drive less than 40 kilometers on any day with clear skies since.

Road bikes: They're the vehicles of the devil. I chose a bike because of cost efficiency, but I never thought I'd get this hooked...

That aside, let's talk about the main story. In this volume, Souma finally officially ascends the throne as king, and marries Liscia and the other girls. I suppose you could call this the end of the second part.

Oh! But the story goes on, so please stay with me.

To tell you the truth about the romantic parts with the side characters in this volume, I hadn't originally planned to go into them so heavily.

I thought it would be fine to do the coronation and wedding ceremony, and just present the information that those characters were now married, too.

However, from readers following the story in real time, I heard they wanted me to conclude all of the other romances properly, so the wedding ceremony became its own independent chapter. It's an unusually in-depth romance plot for this story.

Well, that's fine occasionally, right? This is the tenth volume milestone, so please overlook it if I let loose a little too much.

Though, from here on, we won't be able to dawdle.

With the appearance of Fuuga, the movement of the world is accelerating.

Souma has to prepare for the moving times, and if he does something to prepare, I'm sure that will agitate Fuuga, and push him to act even faster.

The way they influence one another will make the era move forward at an accelerating rate.

Although the next volume is of the internal politics kind. This is preparation,

too.

Now then, after this midword, we have an extra story.

There were about fifty pages left to spare, so I went into detail depicting something that I hadn't yet, but wanted to eventually.

In terms of the timeline, it's a little before the coronation. I considered placing it between the fourth and fifth chapters of this volume, but while this one is also a love story, it has a different atmosphere to it, so I separated it from the main story...

When I write these sorts of new stories, instead of a plot, I create a list of scenes I want to depict, and then as I depict them, they have a way of turning out feeling somewhat different from how I imagined. It's mysterious.

Now I give my thanks to the artist Fuyuyuki, who is the illustrator, to Mr. Satoshi Ueda of the manga adaptation, to my editor, to the designers, to the proofreaders, and to all of you now holding this book.

This has been Dojyomaru.

Now, please stay with me through the extra story.

Bonus Story: The Happiest Queen of All

It happened on a day when Sir Souma's coronation and wedding to Liscia and the others was closing in.

"Cian, Kazuha. Grandmother is heeeere," I said, peeking into their crib.

"Dawoo?" asked Cian.

"Ayee!" squealed Kazuha.

As our eyes met, Cian's face froze with his fingers still in his mouth, while Kazuha moved her arms and legs around excitedly.

They were different reactions, but both very babyish, and so cute. I brought my hand to my cheek and stared at them, charmed.

"Oh, goodness me, your children are cute," I cooed to my daughter.

"Mother..." Liscia, who was beside me folding baby clothes, said with a somewhat wry smile. "It's true these two are cute, but what's with this 'Grandmother' business? You're not Excel, you know?"

"Oh, what's the harm? Being called Granny makes me feel old."

Liscia had given birth to Cian and Kazuha before turning twenty, and I had given birth to Liscia in my teenage years, too. That was why I was still just shy of forty.

(Author's note: The year is slightly longer in this world, so by Earth reckoning, she would be slightly over.) I giggled at the look of exasperation on Liscia's face and told her, "In another twenty years, you'll know how I feel, you know?"

"I'd... really rather not think about that." With a sour look on her face, Liscia put the folded clothes into the dresser.

There was a knock on the door, and when Liscia answered it, one of the maids, Carla, came in.

"Liscia. The master wishes to speak to you regarding your dress for the

ceremony.”

“Souma does? Okay.” Liscia looked over at me. “Sorry, Mother, could you look after the children for a while?”

“Certainly,” I smiled. “I wouldn’t want you to keep our son-in-law waiting. Take care.”

Liscia smiled back and left the room.

Carla, who had taken her place as a result, saluted and said, “Give me any command.”

I answered her with a smile, then returned to peering at the babies in their crib.

“It’s... like a dream,” I whispered to myself so quietly that Carla couldn’t hear.



I was twelve when I first gained a proper understanding of my magic.

I, who was born to the King of Elfrieden and his third primary queen, lost my mother at a young age. I was raised by my adoring father, and became quite the little tomboy as a result.

I was unfortunately gifted with a talent for martial arts and horse riding, so I joined the castle guards on rides, and spent my youth covered in constant scrapes and bruises.

One day, I had heard there was a wild horse in the stables that wasn’t used to people, and convinced myself, “I will break it in!”

Ignoring the attempts of my maids to stop me, I tried to ride the horse.

“...!!”

That was when it happened.

Suddenly, “memories” that were much too vivid flowed into my head.

Of me, recklessly mounting the wild horse.

Of me, calming it, despite some resistance.

Then of the horse, going wild the moment I got full of myself and let my guard

down.

Of me, thrown from the horse, falling head-first to the ground.

Intense pain, the ground appearing much too close, and a spreading pool of my own blood.

That vision spread inside my head, and I had a realization.

These were *my* memories. The memories of a future “me” who had gotten on that horse.

“...Let’s not do that, after all,” I whispered.

I decided against riding the wild horse, returned to my room to the relief of my maids, and lay face down on my soft bed.

Up until then, I hadn’t known what my magic was.

This was common for those with dark magic, which was any magic that wasn’t healing light magic, and that didn’t belong to the four elements: fire, water, earth, and wind.

Because dark magic as a category was special, and often included magics that could only be used by one individual, it wasn’t uncommon for that person not to understand it all that well.

However, after my experience that day, I understood mine clearly.

“The power to send memories back to my past self when in mortal danger.”

That was my personal magic.

It was an ability that, when faced with a threat to my life, allowed me to send regrets such as, *I should have done this back then or I never should have done that* to myself as I stood at the branching point that led to that future.

My impression, having received the memories of that future “me,” was that it was like I, myself had made that decision, and time had rolled back from that future to the time I was in now.

However, I also had the sense that it wasn’t my own future.

I had not, after all, made that decision yet. It was like being shown the result of an entity that was identical to myself making the decision I was about to

make.

In addition, because of the requirement that I had to be facing a threat to my life, it was also an ability I could only use once in my life. Because the odds were high that death would await me not long after I sent the memories.

It felt like a divine revelation or a sixth sense when I was on the receiving end, but when I was the sender, it would be like leaving a will to my past self.

When I realized that, it made me shudder.

It was fine to be the receiver. But when I thought of being the sender, I felt nothing but fear.

It was also difficult to explain this power to others, and if I was not careful, they might think I had gone crazy.

I wanted to know if I could send memories to people other than myself, but this was a magic that came with risk to my life, so I couldn't test it.

Unable to talk with anyone about this magic, I got depressed.

Whenever I thought about receiving more memories of my life being in peril, I couldn't be as rash and reckless as I had been before.

When those around me saw how ladylike I had become, they welcomed it, saying, "I know she is only the daughter of the third primary queen, but maybe she's begun to recognize her role as royalty."

All I could think in response was, *You people have no idea what I'm going through.*

"Sigh..."

When things got like this, I couldn't muster the will to do much of anything, and I spent a lot of time staring off into space.

I spent my days gazing out the window, looking at the flowers in the garden, and so on.

Then, one day, it happened.

I was wandering through the garden in a daze, and I heard a voice.

"Hmm, I see, I see."

I poked my head out from behind a hedge, and there was the old gardener and a young noble enthusiastically talking about something.

“That is why you need to prune the flowers during this season,” the gardener was saying.

“I see,” said the noble. “You’re teaching me a lot here.”

It seemed that the old man with the pruning shears was teaching the young man, who seemed to be a noble, about gardening as he worked. The young man was better dressed, and likely of a higher status than the old man, but he was enthusiastically taking instructions from the old man.

I snuck closer to the two of them, and observed that man.

He was likely somewhere between eighteen and twenty years old, and had a somewhat exhausted look about him, making him seem older than his years. His face was average and lacked impact, and though he seemed kind, he didn’t look like he would be able to move up in the world in future.

Patting his own lower back, the old man said to the young man, “Is that all you wanted me to teach you? Was it any help?”

“Yes! Thank you for your tutelage,” the young man said happily.

It looked like they had finished their conversation.

The old man left to move on to his next task, and the remaining man sat down. Producing some paper and a portable pen with its own ink bag, he began to write something down.

I approached the man and asked him, “What are you doing?”

“Just a moment,” he said, writing without looking up to see who was addressing him. “I’m taking a summary of what I heard just... Huh?!”

As it suddenly hit him that someone was talking to him, he jumped a little. He looked kind of silly like that.

“I’m sorry to call out to you so suddenly,” I said.

“Oh, no, it’s fine... Wait, Princess Elisha?!” The man quickly got to his feet, and bowed to me as hard as he could. “That was incredibly rude of me, not realizing

I was speaking to a princess!"

"It's fine," I said. "I'm the one who crept up on you, after all. But, setting that aside, what is it you're doing here?"

The man put a hand on his head as he looked up. "Well, the truth is, gardening is a hobby of mine. When I saw this beautiful garden, I wanted to hear what the person maintaining it would have to say, and I had him teach me some things."

"Gardening... is it? Even though you're a man?"

"Oh, you see, my domain is out in the mountains, in the middle of nowhere, but we have a lot of land and a large yard, so I took up gardening. It seems I'm a little clumsy, and I come up short in both martial and political pursuits, but, let me tell you, when it comes to gardening, I have some confidence... Just kidding."

With that, the man let out a weak laugh.

He felt so unreliable.

It seemed my first impression, that he wouldn't be going far in life, wasn't wrong.

"Ahaha... I'm weird, aren't I? I know that." He may have sensed what I was thinking, because the man said that with a wry smile.

Seeing the dejection on his face, I kind of felt bad about it. Maybe it was because I'd seen all the people in the castle with glaring ambitions. I'd gotten into the habit of appraising everyone I met.

"But you're fine that way, aren't you?" I said without intending to. "There are plenty of knights and nobles who pride themselves on their martial ability, or their cleverness. Having one laid-back noble like you around isn't going to make the country any better or worse."

"Princess..." The man's eyes widened.

I smiled at him. "I think you should just be yourself. With all the schemers in this world, I find it comforting to know there are people out there like you, too."

“You are... too kind.” The man placed his hand over his chest and bowed his head.

Three years passed, and I turned fifteen.

My father, the King of Elfrieden, passed away.

In order to build a nation that could oppose the massive Gran Chaos Empire on the western side of the continent, my father had fought wars to expand the country’s territory. He had annexed a number of small and medium-sized nations to the north, carved a large swathe out of the Principality of Amidonia’s territory to the west, and held repeated clashes with the Republic of Turgis in the south and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago in the eastern sea.

This rapid expansion bred friction, and our country came to contain the conquerors and the conquered, the plunderers and the plundered, the killers and the killed, all at the same time. Those seeds of unrest rapidly grew when my father died without designating an heir.

Who would become the next king and inherit the country?

Because the country had grown so large, there were many who raised their hands.

Internal struggles inside the royal house intertwined with the intrigues of the knights and nobles, and the sparks grew larger.

Then the seeds of unrest germinated.

“If that house is siding with them, our house will join their opposition.”

“We can never forgive that person, so we won’t join the faction they support.”

Like that, the upper echelons of society divided into camps, and those camps came to oppose one another.

These sparks very quickly fell my way, too.

“Choose a fiancé, they say...”

I looked at the portraits of suitors piled up on my desk and let out a sigh.

I was the daughter of the third primary queen, and had more than a handful of half-siblings who were above me. I was around tenth in the line to the throne, and with my mother already deceased, and without the backing of any families, I should never have been involved in the succession crisis.

That was why, initially, I had been left sitting on the sidelines.

However, as the conflict had intensified, a number of successors had died under suspicious circumstances (most likely assassinated by rival claimants). Now I could no longer remain uninvolved.

I was an insignificant girl with no backers, but I still bore the blood of my father, so there were those around me who were starting to think they should bring me into their camp for whatever little benefit that would bring. Or maybe thinking that... in order to keep me from being taken by another camp, it would be better if they just did away with me.

It was around this time that my magic started to activate often.

I would be about to drink tea, and see an image of myself suffering for it.

I would be walking on a balcony, and see an image of a chandelier falling.

I would be traveling in a carriage, and see an image of myself surrounded by armed men.

Those were surely warnings from a future “me.”

In order to keep those futures from becoming my reality, I wouldn’t drink the tea, or I’d take a different route, and I’d managed to avoid that future somehow.

But there were limits to how long that would be enough. In the eyes of those who were watching me dodge crisis after crisis, I must have appeared a rather bizarre person indeed. I would have to gain backers of my own, and quickly.

That was when talk of an arranged marriage was brought to me.

In making a choice, it would decide my faction and backers. Being a member of the royal family, I had long since resigned myself to not seeking to marry for love. In my current situation, I knew I had to find a partner who could overcome the succession crisis and survive with me.

Thinking that, I picked up one of the portraits, and then...

“Eeeeek!”

I was hit by an intense image of death.

Not just one, either: countless visions of my fated death raced around inside my head.

It overpowered me, and I blacked out.

When I awoke, I was in bed.

It seemed one of my maids had heard my scream, rushed to my aid, and cared for me.

I told the maid by my side, “Thank you, I’ll be fine now,” then left my room, thinking about the visions with my still-muddled head.

They had come from many futures in which “I” had made the wrong choice.

One “me” had gotten engaged to a man from an accomplished military family.

He was an impressive warrior himself, and his followers were strong. I had hoped that a man like that would be able to protect me.

However, he’d taken advantage of his military prowess, acting in a prideful way that stood out and made more enemies. In the castle, full of both allies and enemies, those actions had cost him his life. In the end, he’d been deceived with surprising ease, and killed before “we” could even be married. The memory ended with “me” and his servants at enemy swordpoint.

One “me” had gotten engaged to a man who was an excellent schemer.

He’d hatched plots to eliminate members of opposing factions. However, he’d earned the resentment of many, lost their trust, and eventually suffered betrayal, falling at the hands of his own companions.

That memory ended with “me” getting caught up in the same incident.

One “me” had gotten engaged to a man who was in the largest faction at the time.

That faction currently had many members and was overwhelming the

opposition, but when all the other factions were gone, it would fracture due to an internal power struggle, and that would turn into an endless quagmire.

This might have been the future where the most blood was shed.

That memory ended the same as the others.

One “me” had tried to flee the conflict.

If the outcome would be the same no matter who I married, I’d decided I would choose to marry no one and go into hiding. However, for someone like me without the backing of a family, hiding in town had been the only option.

In an environment without the security of the castle, I had been quickly discovered, and because of the atmosphere of suspicion, I’d been assumed to be plotting something and viewed as a threat.

That memory ended as I was about to be disposed of for being a troublemaker.

The choices of all the other “me”s didn’t lead to bright futures, either.

Even in the futures where I would narrowly survive the succession crisis, after all the blood that was shed, the Kingdom of Elfrieden would not be able to unite as one. The invasions that followed, the attacks by monsters, the scheming of nobles, and the uprisings by the people would all work to weaken the kingdom.

Ultimately, the memories of every “me” seemed to end with the castle burning.

Ten or so of those sorts of visions raced through my head.

It was like time had been wound back over and over, but I could still tell that the memories were not my own.

I was forced to witness the outcomes of the choices that those “me”s who were not me made.

As I remembered those scenes, I rushed into the washroom and threw up.

When my stomach was empty, I collapsed powerlessly on the spot, leaning against the wall for support.

“I... can’t do this anymore.”

Those were the words that slipped from my mouth.

Ten times I had failed.

There might be some disagreement on whether that number was a lot or a little, but it was more than I could bear.

Even if I received the memories, I was still only myself.

Even if I made a decision, failed, and passed on my experience to the next “me,” that didn’t mean I could return to the past. It would be the end for the me who had failed.

The next “me,” or the “me” after the next “me,” might reach a happy future.

But she wasn’t me.

I could only become happy here, in this world where *I* was. If I failed, death awaited, like it had for all of the “me”s so far.

When I thought of it that way, I was terrified to even choose.

It was frightening that the memories I’d received all cut out right before death. I was sent to the brink of death again and again, without knowing what death was like.

To make an analogy, it was like there was an infinite number of ropes hanging in front of my eyes, one of them tied to a sword hanging above my head, and I was watching the ropes be cut one by one. I lived in fear of the sword that would eventually fall and take my life. Even if it didn’t fall this time, I could never relax.

I felt cornered, and hugged my knees.

No! I don’t want to make any more choices!

If nothing I did would work, I would do nothing.

My heart was completely broken.

From then on, I spent even more of my time staring off into space.

I was wandering a maze in which I could see no exit, and I had reached a dead end. I lacked the will to resist fate, and I was simply waiting for the inevitable

end to come.

Thinking and fretting over it only made it more painful, so I did everything I could not to think about it, and would spend my time lying out in the sun.

I think, by this point, my thought process was already that of an old woman.

Then, one day, when I chose the garden for my dazed wandering...

“Please! I’m begging you!” a man’s voice cried.

“I hear you, but I can’t...”

Two men were talking.

I poked my head out from behind the hedge, wondering what it could be about, and saw a man in his early twenties bowing his head to a still-young (his mane was short, so he looked young) lion beastman.

The beastman man sounded troubled. “Raise your head, Albert. There are things I can’t do, even for you.”

“Please, do something, Georg!”

Georg... Oh! I remembered.

That lion beastman was Georg Carmine, the eldest son of the House of Carmine, one of the three ducal families which controlled this country’s Army, Navy, and Air Force. I remembered him having come to the castle with his father, the current head of the house, back when my own father was still alive and well.

The other man, Albert, on the other hand... Who was he? I knew him from somewhere, but I couldn’t remember where.

He was still young, but his exhausted face and beard made him look older than his years.

“Please, Georg! Let me meet with your father, at least!” Albert begged.

“I’m telling you, I can’t.”

They were arguing over something, but their informal tone implied a friendship that had lasted many years.

Albert had a more bureaucratic look to him, so it was surprising to see him on good terms with someone from the House of Carmine, who were the representatives of the military officers.

Georg started pulling at his mane. “I owe you, and I do want to be of help. But the Duke of Carmine is my father now. My father and his men are following Duchess Walter’s direction to not get involved in the succession crisis. If the three branches of the military get involved, the crisis will spread throughout the entire country. They’re each clamping down on their own subordinates to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

It seemed Albert’s request had something to do with the current crisis, and, though it pained him to do it, Georg was refusing whatever-it-was.

It was true that if the three forces got involved in this conflict, it would only invite more chaos.

I felt it was a given that Duchess Excel Walter, who had supported this country for many long years, would take steps to keep them under control. And if Duchess Walter strongly opposed getting involved, her son-in-law, Duke Vargas, would obey her. Meanwhile, if the two other houses were opposed, Duke Carmine would have to be, too.

I felt like reason was on Georg’s side.

However, Albert was not ready to back down.

“This isn’t a request for him to support anyone! I just want him to provide protection to keep somebody from being harmed!”

“And I’m telling you that doing so could be interpreted as intervening!”

Georg pressed Albert’s shoulder. That was all it took to unbalance him, and the man took a few steps backward before falling to his knees.

Seeing that, Georg pityingly said, “If anything, I’d like to ask you not to involve yourself in the conflict any further. You’re a good guy. As your friend, I know that.”

“Georg...”

“But you’re weak. So weak that you stumbled when I shoved you just a little.

You lack the power to overcome this crisis, and you're too softhearted to bring others down. That's why I'm telling you, if you shut yourself up in that mountain domain of yours, you can stay out of this."

Albert hung his head in silence.

Georg placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "So back off, Albert."

"Georg... I still..." Albert grabbed the arm of the hand Georg had placed on his shoulder. "I still want to save her! I want to save Lady Elisha!"

Me?! Why?!

For a moment, I didn't understand what he'd said. He wanted to save me? I didn't know who he was, so why was he so desperate?

Thankfully, Georg asked exactly the same thing I wanted to know. "Why go so far for Lady Elisha?"

"Because she told me, 'You're fine that way,'" Albert said in a tortured voice. "I'm a mediocre man, with less power, wisdom, wealth, or influence than anyone. I'm so boring that, if asked if I have one thing I can be proud of, it's my skill at gardening. But she told me, 'You're fine that way.' She also said, 'I think you should just be yourself,' and 'With all the schemers in this world, I find it comforting to know there are people out there like you, too.' I felt like those words saved me!"

It's him...

I finally remembered that day. That man.

The one I had met in this garden and spoken to a few years ago was Albert. And all because of that short conversation, he was desperate to help me.

Upon learning that, it hit me hard. I had forgotten that we'd even talked, yet this person had remembered an off-hand comment I'd made, and was trying to save me.

Looking back, I realized this man had been in the memories I'd received from the other "me"s, too. No matter what position "I" was in, no matter who "I" had gotten engaged to...

"Now is not the time for infighting!"

“Can’t you put your weapons down and talk this over?!”

“The royal house will be destroyed at this rate! Please, reconsider!”

I’d witnessed him visiting many factions, trying to make such appeals to them.

Of course no one would listen to a man with no power, yet he had been left alone because there was no way he could become a threat. Even “I” had taken no notice of him.

But he had done it all to protect me.

How foolishly, meaninglessly, and ridiculously honest he must have been.

Before I knew it, tears were streaming down my cheeks.

It felt as though my heart, frozen by the memories I’d witnessed, was beginning to thaw.

When I was wiping away my tears with my sleeve, Georg told Albert with a pained look, “I really can’t help you in my current position.”

“I see.” Albert slumped his shoulders. “That’s that, then.”

Georg helped him up to his feet. “I want you to remember this. I pledge to do my utmost to help you when I inherit the House of Carmine. Even at the cost of my life.”

“Georg...”

“So don’t be reckless. Don’t make an ingrate of me.”

Once he said that, Georg clapped Albert on the shoulder and then left.

Albert, who was left behind, stood there in silence, watching him until he was gone.

I waited until I was sure my own tears had dried, then came out from behind the hedge and walked over to Albert.

“Sir Albert.”

“Huh?! Princess?! How long have you been there?!”

“Quite some time.” I smiled at the surprised man. “Um... thank you for doing this for me.”

"N-No! I've been of no help... In the end, I couldn't even get my friend Georg to aid me."

"There was nothing you could have done," I told him. "But setting that aside, I was surprised to see you speaking with Sir Georg of the House of Carmine in such a friendly manner. You're not very similar people."

Albert put his hand behind his head and laughed. "We got to know each other through our parents, and we've been together since we were children."

"I'm sort of interested," I said. "Ah! Should we sit down somewhere?"

It seemed odd to just stand around talking, so we sat down on one of the benches in the garden.

"Come to think of it, Sir Georg mentioned he owed you for something," I went on. "What was that about?"

"Oh... Georg has settled down these days, but he used to be a rambunctious little brat. He broke his father's precious vase, he cut up an impressive tree in the garden while swinging around a sword, and, although this one wasn't entirely his fault, he beat up a nobleman's son who was causing trouble in town."

It seemed Sir Georg had been your typical tough kid in his younger years.

"He was always being punished by his father for it, so Georg often fled to our house. I wasn't as active as Georg, but I lacked the guts to get up to any real mischief, and I was a quiet boy, so I was well-liked by adults. I smoothed things over between Georg and his father a number of times. He wasn't always entirely in the wrong, after all."

"I see..." I murmured. "That's why he 'owes' you, is it?"

"Yes. Oh, because Georg is clumsy with words, there was also the time I acted as a go-between between him and his fiancée. He never flinches in the face of an enemy, but you can see the fear on his face when he doesn't know how to handle a woman. I helped make sure he wasn't misunderstood because of that."

"O-Oh...?" I was dumbfounded by this unexpected side of Georg.

This was... maybe it wasn't my place to say this, since I'd asked the question, and Georg might have preferred I didn't know. Still... I'd learned something from asking.

This man before me didn't have a public face and a private face; he was exactly what he looked like. I had witnessed so much hatred and ugliness through the other "me"s that this felt like a kind of salvation to me.

Surely, this man wouldn't try to eliminate anyone.

Even if someone was harmful to him, and eliminating them would be to his benefit, he wouldn't be able to bring himself to do it. That was his weakness, and his kindness. It was disqualifying as the ruler of a country, and a comfort to me right now.

This man surely would not be able to overcome the current crisis.

However, if it was a fate I couldn't transcend anyway, it might not be bad to spend my final days relaxing by his side.

I would surely see less dirtiness than the "me"s up until now had. Because this man couldn't possibly do anything dirty.

But... in order to do that, there was something I had to tell him.

If he was with me, he would be caught in the unrest, and might lose his life.

It would be dishonest to cling to him without telling him that much.

If, even after being told, he would still take my hand... I...

"...Sir Albert," I said slowly. "There is a garden at your family home, isn't there?"

"Oh. Yes. It's much smaller than the gardens at the castle, though," Albert said, staring blankly at me.

I looked Albert straight in the eye and asked, "Would you take me to see those gardens?"

Albert's eyes went wide. "That's...! No, I would love nothing more than to show them to you, but my domain and mansion aren't fit to invite a member of the royal house to..."

"I know that. I wouldn't be going as a princess of the royal house." Albert didn't seem to get where I was going with this, so I told him clearly. "I wish to cast aside my family name, and marry down into yours."

"M-Marry down?! You want to come and marry me?!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Do you already have a wife, perhaps, Sir Albert?"

"Oh, no, I'm still single..."

"That's perfect, then."

"Wait, that's not what I wanted to say! Why is this coming up so suddenly?!"

With a self-effacing smile, I told the confused man, "I'm currently being pressured to choose a fiancé. However, no matter who I marry, as long as I am in the castle, I will be caught up in the conflict. That's just how valuable royal blood is. Using people, and being used... I've had too much of it. I want to spend my days relaxing with someone like you, and to do so as long as I can!"

Then I extended a hand to Albert.

"This is my selfishness. From where you stand, I am a troublesome woman who might drag you into the conflict just by being at your side. Even so, if you will allow it... I want... for you to take this hand. I'd like to spend time resting my heart with you, for as long as possible."

My words made Albert gulp.

I knew I wasn't being fair. I realized I was taking advantage of his kindness.

Still, if I couldn't change the fate that would ruin me, I at least wanted someone like Albert with me at the end.

Now that I had given up on resisting, like the other "me"s had, this was my sole wish.

There was a short silence, and then Albert slowly opened his mouth.

"I've always... wanted to protect you. Yet I lack the wits to do it, and I could be of no help. That... frustrates me."

I was silent.

"That's who I am, but if all you want is for me to be with you, I can do that

much.”

Then Albert took the hand I’d offered him.

“I can in no way promise you’ll be safe if you come to my domain. I doubt you’ll be able to live in the same splendor as at the castle, either. Despite that, I will work to allow you to spend your days in peace and quiet. If you are willing to have me, then please.”

“Thank you... Albert,” I said.

This was how I chose my fiancé.

“It sure is tranquil out here, isn’t it?”

I was staring out the window at the scenery during a rocky carriage trip.

Albert’s domain was in the countryside, centered around a farming and dairy village in the mountains. While the carriage bounced along the country road, we passed ox-drawn carts.

There was a pastoral scene, unlike anything in the castle, spread out before me.

“I’m getting a little excited,” I said with palpable anticipation.

Albert smiled wryly. “I can see that. Though I am not sure we have anything that will entertain you, princess.”

“Albert!” I grabbed him by the beard and pulled out a few hairs.

“Yes...? Ouch!”

“You’re going to be my husband, so drop the formal language, and don’t call me ‘princess.’”

“O-Okay. Elisha.”

Albert begrudgingly nodded as he rubbed his chin. The fact that he couldn’t take a firm stance against me, even though he was about five years older than me, spoke to an inborn timidity. That said, I was gradually beginning to see that as part of what made him cute.

“Oh! What a pretty river,” I said, enchanted. “Do you think there are fish in

it?"

"Yes. When fall comes around, they'll be quite plump indeed. Georg and I often went fishing there when we were children. Georg was always quick to get bored and resort to catching them by hand, though."

"Fishing! That sounds nice. I've never done that before, so, please, take me."

"Of course I will."

While looking at the country scenery, which seemed unaffected by the murderous atmosphere in the capital, I chatted with Albert about nothing in particular, saying things like, "*What's this?*" "*What's that?*"

It was a lot of fun to simply do that, and I felt my original, more active personality coming back to me.

That kept up for a while. Finally, before I knew it, we had arrived at Albert's mansion.

It was small for a noble's manor, but in this land, with its lack of other buildings nearby, it still had a certain presence.

When we passed through the little gate in a wall that wasn't going to provide a defense against much more than wild animals, the well-kept gardens were right before our eyes. They weren't the size of the royal gardens, to be sure, but they were a good match for the compact space, and they came off as being in good taste.

"The gardens are wonderful..." I sighed in contentment. "Did you do all this, Albert?"

"Yes. I made these gardens as a hobby."

"They're incredible. Well done."

"It's embarrassing when you praise me so freely."

Albert laughed bashfully, but I really did think his gardens were wonderful.

We sat down in a roofed terrace between the gardens and the mansion. Staring into the sunlit gardens from the shade there, the contrast of light and shadow felt very tasteful.

“This is the perfect place to relax,” I told him.

“We can relax all you want. Now seems like a good time, so would you like tea?”

I nodded, so Albert had one of the servants prepare it.

When we were drinking tea here in the seats of this terrace, time seemed to flow at a more relaxed pace.

“Whew... I’m starting to get sleepy.” I yawned.

“It’s a warm, sunny day, after all. You must be tired from traveling, too. It’s the perfect situation for dozing off. It’s all right if you go to sleep. I’ll wake you when the sun starts to go down.”

“Hee hee, it’s a luxury to be able to use our time like this.”

I took him up on his kind offer and did just that.

The pretty garden, the warm atmosphere, and Albert’s gentle smile made my heart and body feel like they might just melt away.

How long had it been since I’d felt so at ease?

If I could have a wish, it would be for these good days to last as long as possible... I thought as I drifted off to sleep.

I’m sure, somewhere, I must have thought it was an impossible wish. However, contrary to my expectations, those dream-like days continued.

It seemed that the bloody struggle continued unabated in the capital, but it never extended to this domain.

I learned this later, but apparently my marriage to Albert worked in my favor.

Albert was known for being mediocre and without ambition.

When the factions saw me throw away my family name to marry a man like Albert, they must have seen me as lacking ambition, too. They might have thought, *“If she has such a poor eye for men, that little girl is not worth worrying about.”*

There was also Albert’s well known friendship with Georg. If they carelessly acted against someone with connections to the House of Carmine, they would

be in trouble if Duke Carmine intervened.

It was possible Georg made sure talk of their friendship spread far and wide. That would have been the most he could do to help his friend Albert.

Perhaps those were the reasons why I, who had demonstrated that I was of little threat by marrying a mediocre man, and who was also difficult to act against, was being left alone for the time being.

Thanks to that, I was able to spend my days relaxing here in this land.

In fall, we went out to fish.

“There... Got it! I caught one, Albert!” I grinned.

“You’re good at everything you do, Elisha. I can’t catch a thing.”

I usually helped Albert with his work, but on days off we would go fishing together like this, or enjoy a picnic in the hills.

“What shall we do on our next day off?” I asked him.

“It should be just about time of year when we can pick mushrooms in the back hills. Do you want to go?”

“Mushroom hunting! If we manage to pick a lot, let’s share with everyone.”

“Hmm. I do need to give Johan the hunter something in return for the venison.”

Our relationship with our subjects was good. It was a small domain, so we had to interact with the people without regard to status. When we went out like this, people wouldn’t hesitate to call out to us.

“While we’re at it, why don’t we roast them in the garden?” I suggested.

“Ha ha ha, there’s an idea,” he laughed. “I’ll call all the townsfolk.”

And so, as we spent our days in peace, at some point, I stopped thinking about my life being targeted. I was able to believe that tomorrow would be another day just like today.

After surviving a harsh winter, animals would go looking for mates in the spring. In the same sort of way, my relationship with Albert deepened, too.

It had been a lifestyle of resignation, where I thought that if I couldn't change my fate, I at least wanted to spend time at his side, but at some point, I began to feel I was happier than the other "me"s who hadn't chosen him.

"Albert," I said, "I'm glad I came here."

Albert gently hugged me around the shoulders.

About a year had passed since I'd moved to this land.

Rumors on the wind told us that bloody incidents were unfolding in the capital frequently.

When I say "rumors on the wind," I allude to the fact it took considerable time for news to reach such a remote location, and when it did, it came by word of mouth.

By this point, I didn't care what happened in the capital anymore.

I had no desire to return, and... I had no need to, either.

On a clear spring day, in a small chapel in our domain, Albert and I were married and became husband and wife.

Afterwards, our people, Georg, and a small collection of friends called out their best wishes.

"Congratulations, my lord!"

"Lady Elisha, you look so pretty!"

"May you both be happy! The blessings of Mother Dragon be upon you!"

It was a chapel like you'd find anywhere, the dress was a hand-me-down from Albert's mother, and the guests came wearing whatever they happened to be wearing. It was no different from a wedding between the common people.

So why was it that it made my heart flutter so?

I had memories of more glamorous wedding ceremonies, but I could say that the me I was right now was the happiest "me" I'd ever experienced.

I said to my new husband, who was smiling bashfully, "Albert."

“Yes, Elisha?”

“The me who can be here, loving you like this, is happier than any other ‘me.’”

Albert stared at me blankly.

It may have been a weird way of saying it. However, those were my honest feelings, without an ounce of untruth.

Albert turned his head to me, laughed, and said, “That should be my line. I had such an adorable, wonderful princess come to marry a man with no future prospects like me. No matter who you ask here, they’ll say I’m the happiest of all.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” I teased. “I’m far happier.”

“No, no, I’m happier.”

We argued like that, then both burst out laughing in unison.

“We’re both so happy, darling,” I said with a smile.

“Yes. We are indeed, my beloved wife.”

We looked at one another and smiled together.

After that, a little more time passed.

Gradually, news of incidents in the capital stopped filtering in. Had the succession crisis finally settled down? ...Not that it mattered much to me. No matter who took the throne, no matter what faction won, it had nothing to do with us.

Besides... I had something more important going on than that nonsense.

As I was relaxing in the living room with Albert, I mustered up the will to tell him. “Darling.”

“What is it, Elisha?”

“It looks like we made a baby.”

“...Huh?” The book he was reading fell from Albert’s hands. His mouth hung open, an amusing look on his face.

While I was chuckling, Albert came back to his senses.

“A baby... Our baby?!”

“Oh, my. Do you doubt my fidelity, darling?”

“Not at all! I see... I see!”

Albert stood up vigorously and hugged me, then, as if that weren’t enough, he lifted me in the air and spun around. Honestly, he was too excited.

“Thank you! Thank you, Elisha!”

“Hee hee, you’re getting a bit ahead of yourself,” I chuckled. “Don’t thank me until it’s born safely.”

As soon as Albert settled down, we sat on the sofa.

“If it’s a boy, I hope he’ll be energetic and brave, like his mother,” he said.

“Hee hee. If it’s a girl, I hope she’ll be gentle and quiet, like my husband.”

We talked about the future of our as yet-unborn child.

I think that was the peak of our happiness.

Then it happened.

One of the three dukes, Duchess Excel, came to visit.

“Lady Elisha, I have come to ask you to inherit the throne of the Elfrieden Kingdom,” the beautiful, blue-haired beauty of the sea serpent race said, and then knelt before me.

For an instant, my mind was so blank that I couldn’t tell what she had said.

While Albert looked on with concern, I barely managed to speak.

“The throne... you say?”

Why now, after all this time...? Why was that word coming up?

“A-Anyway, please, come in.” Acting on my dazed behalf, Albert invited Excel to come in to the living room.

We sat down on the sofa, and when all three of us (mainly me) had calmed down, Excel explained the events that led to this point, and the current state of the country.

From what she told us, the succession conflict had ended in the elimination of almost the entire royal family. Though the chaos had been limited to the capital, maneuvering to recruit members into factions and pulling them from others, betrayals, scheming, and deceit had run rampant, and much blood had been spilled.

That had bred further resentment, resulting in interminable tit-for-tat violence. The contenders all became suspicious, and in many cases, both sides killed each other, or even members of their own side.

It may have been inevitable that this would lead to the near-elimination of the royal line.

The reason it was only a “near” elimination was because I had survived.

That was the reason Excel was here.

“But I’ve already married out of the family, and cast away the Elfrieden name,” I tried to protest.

Excel silently shook her head. “The only one remaining in the direct royal line is you, Lady Elisha. If someone outside the House of Elfrieden were to name themselves king, the chaos would spread further. Neighboring countries like Amidonia and Turgis are already making unsettling moves. In order to quell the chaos, I need you to ascend the throne.”

“But... I...”

I was at a loss for words, and Albert put his arm around my shoulder.

“From what Georg told me, the three dukes won’t be getting involved in the issue of who succeeds the throne, right?” Albert asked.

“...Yes. That was the case, at least. It was because we were doing all we could to keep our own forces in line, so as not to expand the chaos. However, at this point, Lady Elisha is the only royal left. There can be no division now, so the three dukes and our forces will put our lives on the line to protect and serve

Lady Elisha."

When she said that, Excel knelt on the ground and pressed her head to the floor.

"I am aware that you two have avoided the conflict, and were living in happiness here. I also know our request will destroy that. However, if the country falls into chaos, it won't be long before the fires spread to this land."

I could understand what Excel was saying. I understood it, but...

"If I return to the castle, what will happen to Albert and *this child*?" I brought my hand to my not-yet-apparent belly.

Excel's eyes went wide. It seemed she hadn't known.

She bowed her head deeply once more.

"I beg your apologies for troubling you at such an important time! Of course, the child and its father will both move to the castle, too. I swear we will protect all of you. In particular, Georg, who assumed the mantle of the Duke of Carmine the other day, is prepared to throw his own life away for you."

"Georg took over as head of the house, did he...?" Albert whispered to himself.

I closed my eyes in meditation for some time.

...No memories are coming, huh?

I had thought a future "me" might send back the result of a decision I'd made here, but there was no sign of that happening. Did that mean this decision would not be fatal, or had no other "me" managed to reach this point yet...? I couldn't be certain. What I did know was that I had to make a choice.

The choice I should make is...

I thought, and thought... then looked at Albert.

"Darling. Will you stay with me, no matter which choice I make?"

Albert gave me a big nod. "Of course! We are husband and wife, after all."

Hearing his response, I made up my mind.

The choice I made, after having seen what became of all the other “me”s up until this point, was...

“Very well. Let’s return to the castle.”

“Ohh...!” Excel cried in relief. “You have my gratitude, Your Majesty.”

“However...” I held up a hand to stop her before she could bow again. “Once I have ascended the throne, I will entrust all of my rights as king to my husband, Albert.”

“Wha?! That means...”

“Yes. With my assent, Albert will rule the country as king.”

“M-Me, rule the country?! That’s impossible!” His eyes wide with shock, Albert vigorously shook his head.

...Sorry to get you involved, Albert. But this is an absolute necessity.

“With all due respect, I have to agree that is not possible,” Excel said. “For one thing, if he is not of the Elfrieden royal line, I doubt the people will accept him.”

However, my resolve did not falter.

“I have inherited the blood of the royal house, as will *this child*. Albert, who is my husband and the father of this child, should be able to serve as a temporary king until the next generation.”

“No, but... again, with all due respect, I cannot imagine Albert has the qualities required to be king...”

Excel seemed pained to tell me this, but I shook my head silently.

“Duchess Walter, the Royal House of Elfrieden has shed too much blood. That is the result of ugly internecine violence. That is known by our retainers, and even by the people. The Royal House of Elfrieden has lost their faith. Am I wrong?”

“I... believe it is as you say.” Showing some hesitation, Excel finally acknowledged what I was saying and nodded.

“Even if I were to take the throne now, I couldn’t bring the country together,”

I told her. "More than anything else, that is because of the royal blood which is my claim to the throne. Even if I took the throne, the people would feel uneasy, and it would gall those who backed other candidates in the succession crisis. I couldn't unite the country in times of crisis. Because the royal house has lost its power, if there were further division among our retainers, the country would truly be finished."

Excel listened to me silently.

I probably was convincing. That was because I had seen it through the eyes of a future "me."

Even if one faction survived the conflict, the resentment it gave birth to would have lasting repercussions. Unable to unite in the face of crises like natural disasters, monster attacks, and foreign invasions, the castle would burn.

That would be the same, even with me as the queen.

"I understand what you are saying, but... why would you make Sir Albert king?" Excel asked.

I gave a direct reply to her obvious doubts. "Because Albert will be a king no one hates."

"A king no one hates?" she repeated.

"Yes. If he were a wise king, that would please our loyal vassals, but the corrupt ones would find it restricting, and eventually bring him down. If he were a powerful king, he could eliminate those corrupt vassals, but I suspect the royal house currently lacks the power. If we act carelessly, it will lead to resistance and civil war. In the opposite case, if he were a king who pleased the corrupt vassals and pushed away the loyal ones, the country would go to ruin."

She was silent.

"What this country needs right now is a king who will not be hated by loyal vassals or corrupt ones. Only a ruler the loyal retainers will want to help, but the corrupt vassals will see as easy to manipulate, can keep the country alive."

"...And you're saying that's Sir Albert?" she said slowly.

"Yes. The reason I wasn't caught up in the conflict must have to do with his

personality. He is incompetent and harmless. That is why no one has paid attention to us.”

Excel sighed and said, “What you describe is practically a puppet, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “In the current situation, I don’t believe the country can be maintained by anyone other than a puppet king. That is just how deep our country’s wounds run. We need time for them to heal.”

I looked straight into Excel’s eyes.

“Even if we cannot eliminate the corrupt vassals, if we rule by listening to the loyal ones, the situation shouldn’t degenerate too easily. We will have the loyal support of the three dukes, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then, as I’ve said, Albert is the most suitable king for this country right now. Let us maintain the status quo, buy time for our wounds to heal, and leave improving the situation to *the next generation*.”

I brought my hand to my belly.

Excel slumped her shoulders in resignation. “Put off seriously rebuilding the country until the next generation?”

I chuckled a bit. “For a member of a long-lived race like you, it’s not that long, is it?”

“I understand,” she said regretfully. “Very well. We three dukes will support Lady Elisha and Sir Albert. I would have preferred to leave the throne to you, who can think this far ahead, though.”

“There is no future where that happens,” I told Excel firmly, and then turned to face Albert. “Darling, I’m sorry to cause all this trouble for you, but, please, for our child’s sake, could I ask you to become the king of this country?”

Albert seemed to have gone into a daze at some point in the conversation, but when I took his hand and made him touch the belly our child was in, he came to his senses.

“H-Hmm... I think the burden is too far beyond me, but if it is for you and our child, I will have to do it. I can already feel the pain in my stomach, though.”

Albert's tone made him sound less than reliable, but he nodded.

The way he couldn't say no when others relied on him was a weakness, but it was also a strength that kept people from being cruel to him.

Thus, we returned to the castle, and Albert became king with my assent.

Though there was some resistance to the idea, the three dukes who were in charge of the three forces gave us their full support, and because Albert wasn't self-righteous and would listen to anyone's opinions, there were no major sparks over it.

Time went by, and the country did not get better, but it did not get much worse, either. You could say Albert was doing a solid job of maintaining the status quo.

As for me, I gave birth to a girl not long after returning to the capital. Albert gave this girl, who cried with great energy, the name Liscia, taking the overall sound of her name from my own.

Liscia grew up smoothly, without any major illness, and before I knew it, she had become the same sort of tomboyish princess I once was.

"If it's a girl, I hope she'll be gentle and quiet, like my husband."

It seemed my wish from that day had not come true.

She grew attached to Georg, who came to visit from time to time, and took an interest in the sword.

When she went out to play, she received an endless number of cuts and bruises, making me worry for her as her mother, but, well, if she would just grow up healthy, that was good enough for me.

However, as we spent our peaceful days, unexpected events like the appearance of the Demon Lord's Domain, the invasion of massive numbers of monsters, and the flow of refugees from the ruined countries of the north caused the slow decline of the country.

Until the day when *he* was summoned.

In the middle of the burning castle, I remembered all this.

Had the threat to my life brought back the memories?

The hero summoned from another world, Sir Souma Kazuya... Albert had mishandled his treatment of him.

He'd made him the prime minister so that his revolutionary policies could get the country back on its feet, but he'd been unable to protect him against resistance from the nobles, and been forced to relieve him from his post and drive him away.

The result was that our loyal vassal who supported him, Georg Carmine, had died in the burning of Randel, along with Sir Souma and our daughter, Liscia.

Now we, too, faced our ends at the hand of a noble insurrection.

The nobles had hated Sir Souma, but the people had supported him, and driving him out had pushed the people away from us, leaving us isolated without support.

If we had trusted him more, and given him more authority, things might have gone differently.

However, thinking about that now wasn't going to help.

I decided that the least I could do was confess to Albert about my magic, and send our memories back to "us," around the time we first met Souma. So that the past "us" wouldn't have to arrive at this future.

It was my first time sending another person's memories (it was my first time sending my own memories, too), but I feel like it worked. I could be confident the "me" who received them would reach a different future. Perhaps even a world in which Liscia, Sir Souma, and the others wouldn't have to die.

When I thought about that, it lightened my heart a little.

"I'm sorry, Elisha," Albert apologized. "This is all because of my folly."

I shook my head. "No. I've had more than enough happiness. Meeting you, giving birth to Liscia. More than any past 'me,' I can say with pride that I was happy."

The fact that I was facing a crisis to my life, and had just sent my memories to the past, was proof that I was the first to have reached this point.

That meant I was the first to have chosen Albert as my partner.

I was the first to have loved him, and the first to be loved by him.

I was also the first to give birth to Liscia, and the first to know the happiness of family life.

Even if the “me” that I sent my memories to would have a more wonderful future than my own, none of that would change. My life was fully satisfying.

“I’m glad I met you that day,” I told him.

“Elisha...”

In the middle of the flames, we embraced one another.



“Lady... Lady Elisha!”

“Huh?!”

Hearing a voice, I came to my senses, and found Carla looking at me blankly.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “You seemed out of it.”

“No, I was just thinking about a different ‘now.’”

Looking at Cian and Kazuha’s faces, I remembered the memories I’d received that day.

Based on our memories from that day, Albert had been able to give our son-in-law the throne without making the wrong decision. The country had been rebuilt after the transfer of power, to the point where it was actually greater than before, and we could now look upon our grandchildren’s faces.

If I thought of it that way, I had to thank the “me” who had sent these memories.

I must be the happiest of all the “me”s so far.

“Come to think of it, when I said I would be going ahead to help out and see these children first, he pouted a little,” I chuckled. “He said I wasn’t being fair.”

“Of course he would. Sir Albert’s been left all alone in his domain.”

“Hee hee, what a troublesome grandfather you have, Cian, Kazuha.”

As I spoke the children’s names, they both turned and stared blankly at me.

“Oh, gosh, you’re both so cute. I wish I could just drag you back to the mansion like this.”

“If the heir to the throne suddenly vanishes, there will be a huge uproar, so please don’t,” Carla said.

“I suppose I’ll just have to visit regularly, then. About twice a week.”

“If you leave the house that often, won’t Lord Albert end up sulking again?”

“He can come with me,” I said. “Staying the night would be nice, too.”

“If you come and spend the night twice a week, you’ll be at the castle more than half the week, won’t you? I thought you two had left the castle to prevent sowing the seeds of strife?!”

It was cute the way Carla felt the obligation to respond to everything, so I giggled.

Ohh... I really am happy...



In the middle of the flames, as we prepared for the end, I heard two voices echo.

“Father! Mother!”

“Are you both okay?!”

When I looked up, there was a young man and woman rushing to our side.

Why? How am I able to see these two? I thought in my dazed mind. They were supposed to be dead.

Were we seeing phantoms? Or, with our deaths approaching, had they come to take us to the other side?

“Liscia! And Sir Souma!” Albert had a shocked look on his face, and called them by name.

When I heard those words, it woke me up. It wasn't just me; Albert could see them, too.

That meant what I was seeing before my eyes was the undeniable reality.

Liscia rushed over to my confused side. "Thank goodness. You're both all right."

"Liscia, you're alive?!" I exclaimed. "I was sure you'd died..."

"Duke Carmine got us out," Liscia said painfully, grasping at my sleeve.

It turned out that while Randel was burning, Georg had bought time for the two of them to escape.

"I want you to remember this," he had once said. "I pledge to do my utmost to help you when I inherit the House of Carmine. Even at the cost of my life."

Sir Georg, you kept the promise you made that day, I thought gratefully. You risked your life for Sir Albert, and you saved Liscia and Sir Souma's lives.

I closed my eyes in thought for a moment, and then asked something that had been bothering me. "But how did you two get here? The castle is surrounded, and on fire."

"Ahh... That would take some explaining, so let's save it for later," Sir Souma told me. "First, we'd better get out of here."

I heard the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching.

A cute, petite girl with long, black hair, antlers that were larger than Excel's, and a black lizard tail growing out of her bottom rushed into the room.

"This is bad, Souma! The fire's spreading fast. We've gotta get out of here, quick!"

"Got it, Naden," Sir Souma said. "Okay, you two, come this way."

Sir Souma led us out onto the balcony. We were able to get some fresh air there, but the rising smoke made it hard to see the situation around us. This place was high up in the castle, too, so even if we got outside, there was no escape from here.

However, Sir Souma said, "It's okay," with a laugh. "All right, we're counting

on you, Naden.”

“Roger that... I’d rather not let anyone but my partner ride me, though.”

Once she had said that, the girl called Naden jumped over the edge of the balcony.

That’s dangerous! I thought, and tried to run over, but Liscia caught me by the wrist and stopped me.

“To sum things up quickly,” she said, “when we escaped Randel, we disguised ourselves as adventurers and headed for the Empire. Souma figured if we went to the Empire, which wanted the summoned hero, they would protect us, given the right conditions.”

“Then, on the way there, we met a messenger from the Star Dragon Mountain Range.”

The Star Dragon Mountain Range? I thought, befuddled. *The independent domain of the dragons, ruled by Mother Dragon?*

“The messenger told me that the Mother Dragon, Madam Tiamat, wanted to meet me. Then we were invited to the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and we met her there.”

As I watched, Naden grew, becoming a massive, long, black creature. Her face resembled a dragon’s, but I had no idea what manner of being she was.

Touching the creature’s body, Liscia added, “She’s Naden Delal. The dragon Souma formed a contract with.”

“Well, there’s still some time before the Contract Ceremony, so it’s just a provisional contract for now, though,” Sir Souma added, scratching his cheek.

A dragon...? Really?

“Geez! You can talk about all that later, can’t you?!” I heard Naden’s voice echo inside my head.

This creature... the black dragon... was talking, so did that mean this dragon really was Naden?

“It looks like the sight of me has the soldiers down below making a fuss,” she

added.

“We’d better hurry then, huh?” Sir Souma said. “Okay, everyone, get on Naden’s back! There’s nothing to tie us down, so everyone will have to hold on tight to each other, and not let go!”

Following Sir Souma’s directions, we got on Naden’s back. Liscia held on to Sir Souma, Albert held on to Liscia, and I clung to Albert.

“Okay, go for it, Naden!” Sir Souma ordered.

“Roger that!”

Then, in the next moment, Naden rose into the sky.

The burning castle shrank away beneath us. The capital was going off into the distance.

“Sir Souma, where do you plan to go now?” Albert asked.

“We’ll head for Lagoon City, and join up with Duchess Walter,” Sir Souma answered. “We’ll have Duchess Walter announce Liscia’s survival, and reassemble the currently scattered Army. Those officers deeply respected the late Duke Carmine, and they hold Liscia, whom he loved like a daughter, in high regard. That’s why they broke when they heard the two of them had perished, but when they learn Liscia is still alive, I believe they will gather once again. Duchess Walter and Duke Vargas support the royal family, so the three forces will come together.”

“It’s not just me,” Liscia added. “Those corrupt nobles hated you, Souma, but you had the support of the people. If they know you’re alive, it will embolden the people.”

The two of them hadn’t given up. I felt something rising in my chest.

The passion of these two youths, whom I had thought were still just children, brought tears to my eyes.

I could believe the future would go on.

I tightened my arms around Albert’s waist.

Hey, “me” who I sent my memories to.

It looks like, even after sending my memories, life goes on.

Like I thought, I really am the happiest.

Bonus Short Stories

Visiting the Doma Family

It was early spring, with my coronation and marriage to Liscia and the others gradually approaching, and I was now visiting a port town near Lagoon City with Juna.

“It’s been a while since I’ve ridden in a traditional carriage. It’s a bit hard on the backside, huh?” I commented, pressing a hand to my lower back.

Juna giggled. “The carriages in the capital and the rhinosaurus trains have been designed to reduce the shaking, after all.”

We had flown out of the capital with Naden, but I figured it would cause an uproar if a ryuu landed in a little town like this, so we’d asked her to set down in Lagoon City, and we were taking a merchant’s carriage from there.

Our business being what it was, Naden was waiting back at Lagoon City.

“Mmm... This sure is exactly what you’d expect a port town to feel like.” I yawned, taking a big, deep breath of the sea breeze.

“It’s a town like any other you’d find on the coast,” Juna said. “If there’s one thing we can pride ourselves on, it’s that you can always eat fresh fish.”

“I love towns like this.”

“Hee hee, thank you. Welcome to the town where I was born.” Juna extended her hand to me.

I took her hand in mine and started walking with her. In a romantic way, of course.

As we were walking, several people called out to Juna.

“Oh, Juna, you’re back?” one lady asked.

“It’s been too long, ma’am,” Juna said. “I’m here to visit my family for a bit.”

“From the way you two are holding hands, could that man be your...”

"Hee hee, it's a secret."

It seemed, as you might expect from her hometown, a lot of people knew her here.

Well, even if some people seemed to have cottoned on to who I was, no one was prying too deeply. That probably showed just how much everyone in this town loved Juna.

We kept walking until we stood in front of a house. It had a cute red roof that made me think of a doll house. As someone used to the dense neighborhoods of the country I'd come from, it seemed reasonably large, but by the standards of this world, it was a normal size.

"Your father manages the Lorelei singing cafe, which has a large number of branches, doesn't he?" I asked. "This place is... Well, it's comforting to a former peasant like me."

"Hee hee, it's tiny, isn't it?" Juna giggled. "The main branch is in Lagoon City, and this house is just for our family to live in, so it's big enough."

"I guess you're right. Having a house that's too big can be inconvenient."

The castle was so huge, it was a lot of trouble getting from one side of it to the other. Well, it was generally just my own room and the governmental affairs office I was going in between, and when I got busy, I slept in the office, so it felt less like I lived in a luxurious mansion and more like I was a live-in worker at a company, or something like that. But still.

"I'd love to live in a little town by the sea like this," I told her.

"Would you? Once Prince Cian is all grown up and you can abdicate the throne to him, why don't we live here?"

"Ha ha ha, that could be a good idea."

If Liscia could have heard us, she would have angrily told me I was getting ahead of myself.

We reached the entrance.

"Now then, sire, please, come inside," Juna told me.

As I was shown into the house, Juna's family was already waiting in the living room. They greeted us warmly, though they seemed a little tense.

"Wh-Why, Your Majesty! How could of you to come to our humble home," her father said nervously.

"Oh, no, I should have come to pay my respects as soon as possible." I shook hands with Juna's father as I apologized. "I'm sorry that I used my busyness as an excuse not to come sooner."

I greeted Juna's mother and sat down on the sofa at her father's invitation. Once I was seated, I bowed my head deeply one more time.

"I'm truly sorry. I'm taking Juna... your daughter... as my bride, but it took me far too long to come pay my respects."

In the time since I had gotten engaged to Juna, I had been busy with government work, diplomatic visits, and dispatching reinforcements, so I just hadn't managed to find time to come meet her folks. I was in frequent contact with Juna's guardian, Excel, at least, and I had stayed in contact with her parents by exchanging letters, but I had long wanted to come pay my respects in person, like any man ought to.

Her father hurriedly shook his head. "No, no! The engagement was something Juna wanted for herself."

"But... you're not worried about your daughter becoming a secondary queen?" I asked.

"I am, but Juna has never been one to back down on something once she's made up her mind, so I always knew she'd choose her partner for herself. It seems Excel's blood runs thicker in her veins than in mine. I don't know whether to call her devoted, or stubborn..."

"D-Dad!" Juna sounded unusually flustered. Like with a parent-teacher meeting, having a relative tell someone about you had to be embarrassing.

Still, though her father was as beautiful as I would expect from someone of Excel's lineage, he seemed surprisingly *normal*.

"It happened when Juna was maybe ten years old," the man reminisced. "She

said she was going to join the Navy with my mother. And then, while she was being trained by my mother, who was amused by the idea, she became more and more like her..." He trailed off and paused. "Um, are you sure you're okay? She won't run you ragged like my mother does, will she?"

"I would never!" Juna's face was red with embarrassment. "...Please, you're embarrassing me."

I wanted to see more of these rare expressions from Juna, so I said to her father, "No, do tell more. We have lots of time, so tell me all your old stories about Juna."

"Not you, too, sire!" Juna elbowed me a bit, but I really did want to hear.

After that, Juna's parents and I talked at length about her. By the way, we kept talking even after Juna left the room in utter humiliation, and I had to go to a lot of trouble to get her back into a good mood later.

Ruby Roars

"Congratulations!"

"You make such beautiful brides!"

"I wish both the brides happiness!"

Under clear skies, the wedding guests were scattering wheat to celebrate the new brides and groom who had just said their wedding vows in front of a priest at the church. This was supposed to be a ritual where the brides and groom were showered with wheat as a wish for fertility. However...

"Out with the oni!"

"Out with the oni!"

"Ow, ow, ow! You idiots, hold back a little!"

Some tough male guests were throwing the wheat *overhand*, directly at the groom. This was Halbert, Kaede, and Ruby's wedding ceremony, and the ones throwing wheat at Halbert were his fellow Dratroopers. In order to give their blessings to Halbert, and to take out their jealousy over him being the only one

to score two cute brides, they were throwing the wheat with all their might.

“Out with the oni!”

“What is that strange shout for?” Halbert shouted.

“It’s apparently an incantation from His Majesty’s world, used when driving oni out of your house, you know,” Kaede, in her white shiromuku outfit, said with a peaceful look on her face.

The men were, of course, being careful not to hit Kaede or Ruby. That meant Halbert was facing the relentless assault of wheat grapeshot on his own. The wheat attack finally let up by the time it was time to throw the bouquet.

“...Yeesh. That was hell,” Halbert muttered.

“You held up well, you know, Hal,” Kaede smiled.

“Come on, the ceremony isn’t over, so keep yourself together!” Ruby grinned.

With Kaede comforting him, and Ruby, wearing a wedding dress borrowed from his mother, rousing him to action, Halbert smiled wryly and fixed his collar.

“Whew... That’s the ceremony finished, at least. Now it’s just the reception.”

Kaede giggled. “Come to think of it, Sir Glaive was crying manly tears at the ceremony. I always thought it was the bride’s father who was supposed to cry at times like this.”

During the ceremony, Halbert’s father had been crying as if he was overcome with emotion. However, remembering the scene, Halbert could only shrug and smile wryly. “Nah, I’m sure he felt emotional seeing the two of you in your wedding dresses. He’s known you since you were little, Kaede, and because Ruby’s hair is red, he’s been treating her like his own daughter. I’m sure he didn’t see me as anything more than a bonus that came with the two of you.”

“He *has* been treating me as well as a daughter,” Ruby agreed. Even before officially becoming Glaive’s daughters-in-law, they had already been his daughters, as far as he was concerned.

“Still, I’m not sure he should have cried even more than your old man, Kaede,” Halbert added.

“Ahaha...” Kaede laughed wryly.

“Why not? I’m envious of you for having a family like that,” Ruby said. As a dragon, she had no family, just like Naden. Ruby had no blood relatives who could come attend a ceremony like this.

Halbert and Kaede seemed at a loss for what to say.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that.” Ruby shook her head. “I have family, too, now. The two of you and all of the Magna and Foxia families are my family now, and that’s enough for me.”

“Ruby...” Halbert said slowly.

There was a sudden murmuring from the crowd.

“What’s that?!”

“It’s huge! Could that be?!”

Wondering what it was, the three of them looked up to the sky, and...

“““Huh?!”””

Though it must have been flying at a great height, they could clearly make out the figure of a white dragon.

“Is that Lady Tiamat?!” Ruby gasped.

“Mother Dragon’s observational flight... You almost never see her out in broad daylight like this...” Kaede murmured.

Normally, Mother Dragon made her observational flights at night. If she was appearing in broad daylight like this, and over the capital where both Naden and Ruby were having their weddings, that showed clear intent on her part.

Halbert hugged Ruby close and said, “See, Ruby? You had a mother who would come to your wedding, after all.”

“Yes!”

Then they heard a roar from the direction of the castle. It must have been Naden. Not wanting to be outdone, while still in human form, Ruby unleashed a dragon’s roar towards her “mother” in the sky. Had her two daughters’ voices reached her? Madam Tiamat’s voice echoed back like the song of a whale.

The Secret XXXXX Fortitude Enhancement Plan

“Hm... We’ll need this... and a little more of this,” Serina murmured.

It was a day with Souma’s coronation and wedding fast approaching. In the study at Poncho’s mansion, the castle’s head maid, Serina, seemed to be looking over some documents. As she did, Komain, who was passing by with some laundry, cocked her head to the side.

“Serina? What are you doing?”

“Oh, I was making sure we’ll have enough of the ingredients we’ll be using for the dishes we serve at our reception,” Serina said nonchalantly.

The fact that Souma’s coronation and wedding were close also meant that Poncho, Serina, and Komain’s wedding and reception, which would be held at the same time, were close, too.

Komain laid the dried laundry on the sofa and took a peek at the documents Serina was looking at. “It’s almost time for the wedding, yeah. Are we short on anything?”

“No, I was simply checking to be certain. We do expect a good number of people to be in attendance, after all. As the House of Ishizuka Panacotta, it would be a disaster if we were to be short of food during our reception.”

“Ohh... You have a point there.” Komain winced a little as she agreed.

This was Poncho, who had first acted as the Minister for the Food Crisis, resolving the food crisis which tormented people both in the kingdom and the principality. He now acted as Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, working to spread knowledge of delicious ingredients and how to cook them. He was even worshiped by some as the God of Food, Lord Ishizuka, by some of the people.

There were high expectations for the food at his wedding, and the guests would no doubt be arriving hungry. Poncho was also an emergent noble, and members of the knights and nobility would be in attendance. Not only that, he had invited his wholesalers and suppliers as well, so they expected that many people who were more concerned with their appetites than their appearances would be coming.

"If your family hadn't stepped in to help, I'm sure it would have been chaos," Komain put in.

The servants for the event would be Serina's family. Having been able to secure a large group of specialists in the service industry had really saved the three of them.

Serina smiled slightly. "If they've been of service, nothing would make me happier."

"Hee hee, are you feeling a little embarrassed, Serina?"

"Not in the least." Serina turned away peevishly, making Komain chuckle.

This was the same Serina who loved to toy with Liscia and Carla, but she wasn't used to being teased herself. Serina cleared her throat a little, then showed Komain one page from the document.

"I do not think there will be any shortages, but we should acquire large quantities of the ingredients used in any dishes we expect to be popular. I suspect many people will eat Napolitan spaghetti as a main course, not a side, so it might be best if we were to buy more pasta."

"You have a point... Oh?"

Komain was looking through the papers when she stopped on an item at the bottom of the list of ingredients to add. There were a small number of items there that seemed unlikely to be needed for cooking.

"Mead...?" she read slowly and looked up.

Serina quickly looked away. From that reaction, it seemed these were items Serina had ordered personally, with her own intentions.

"You like mead, Serina?" Komain asked.

"No... I don't mind it, but I'm not especially fond of it, either."

"Huh? Then why are you ordering it?"

"That's... for Sir Poncho to drink..."

Serina was being evasive, so Komain looked at her dubiously.

"Does Poncho like mead?"

“...I couldn’t say. I am not aware whether he does or not.”

“Huh? You’re ordering it even though you don’t know if he likes it or not?”

“Well, I intend to force him to drink it, either way.”

“Huh?” Komain had no idea what Serina was up to. “Um... What exactly are you doing...?”

“This isn’t solely for my sake. I am doing it for yours, as well.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing. Now, let us get back to work.” Serina clapped her hands.

Komain wasn’t satisfied with her answers, but she remembered she had left the laundry out, so, even as she cocked her head to the side in confusion, she gathered up the laundry and left the room.

Left alone in the room, Serina looked down at the list Komain had left. Thinking of the purpose of the mead...

“You will be taking both of us as wives. You’ll need it, won’t you, dear?” Serina covered her mouth with the list to cover her girlish smile.

Incidentally, though Serina did not know this, the word “honeymoon” in Souma’s original world came from a tradition where the groom would drink mead for the first month after marriage, in order to increase his sexual fortitude, while the newlywed couple stayed cooped up in the home and worked hard at procreating. It seemed this family’s honeymoon would be an intense one.

The Drill Princess Wants Out

While Souma’s marriage was in progress, the third princess of the Gran Chaos Empire, Trill, stood in front of Souma and the others, her hands together on her chest and her head lowered.

“To King Souma, and all his queens, congratulations. In place of my elder sister, Empress Maria, I pray for your great happiness and the continued

friendship and development of our two nations.”

This was a day of celebration, so she wasn’t in her usual outfit for working on machinery but instead a dress befitting a princess of the Empire. Because of that, her impressive portions, which contrasted with her short stature and were normally covered up by a blacksmith’s apron, stood out all the more. Basically, she stuck out in all the right places. Like they say, clothes make the man. Or the woman, in this case. Dressed like this, she looked the part of a princess for sure.

When Trill’s remarks were finished, Souma stood up.

“Thank you, Madam Trill. We, too, would like to continue our friendship with the Empire. Please, communicate that to Madam Maria.”

“I most assuredly will.”

With her respects paid, Trill retreated to the seats for foreign guests. She sat and maintained her composed expression, but internally she was impatient.

Urgh, I want to get out of here, fast!

Trill had been thinking that the entire ceremony. It wasn’t that she didn’t respect Souma and his queens, and it wasn’t that she didn’t care about relations between the kingdom and the Empire either. It was because the kingdom and the Empire were engaged in a joint research project together that Trill had been able to come to this country where the people who were the object of her admiration, the House of Maxwell, were. She was grateful to Souma for proposing the idea, and that was why she was attending this ceremony.

However, while this ceremony was happening, the sole heir of the House of Maxwell, Genia, was getting married to Ludwin. Trill called Genia her “big sister” out of respect, and she wanted more than anything to be at her wedding.

I have complicated feelings about it being a wedding to Lord Arcs, who wants to monopolize Big Sister, but Merula and Taru will both be attending, and I’d hate to be the only one left out. Maybe I should just slip out...? But if I did that, who knows what Big Sister Jeanne would say later...

Jeanne, who was Maria’s younger sister and Trill’s elder sister, had acridly told

her not to let loose once she went to the kingdom. Because of the joint development project for the drill, there was probably no chance she would be suddenly hauled back to the Empire, but if she went too far, she would likely be forbidden further contact with Genia. The reasoning being that, as long as she was in the kingdom, she could give orders to others for the joint development project.

I would hate that! Not being able to meet with Big Sister Genia!

While she was looking around furtively, wondering what was happening with Genia, Trill noticed something. She saw Kuu, who was sitting next to her, give Leporina, who was sitting across from him, an order. Leporina made an unpleasant face, but got up and left the room immediately.

“Umm... Sir Kuu?” Trill whispered. “Where did Leporina go?”

Kuu smirked. “Ookyakya! Oh, she’s making a little trip to Genia and Lord Arcs’s wedding. I ordered her to go snatch the bouquet when the bride throws it.”

“Big Sister Genia’s bouquet?!” Trill’s eyes went wide. “That’s not fair! I want it, too!”

“Ookya? No, no, you’re not going to be getting married anytime soon, right? Me, Taru, and Leporina will probably be next, so it’s a perfect fit.”

“That’s not—! ...the issue here.” Her voice rose for an instant, but Trill returned to a whisper and continued. “Then give me the bouquet after she’s caught it. You only need to be the ones who caught the bouquet. After that, you should be done with it.”

“That’s, well... I guess you’re right.” What Kuu wanted was the superstition, not the flowers themselves.

“Right?” Trill pursued. “If the bouquet is just going to wither, I’ll make it into dried or pressed flowers and keep it as a family treasure.”

“A family treasure...?” Kuu repeated. Could the wedding bouquet of the kingdom’s foremost researcher really become a family treasure for the imperial royal family? He looked a bit exasperated. “You’re, uh... not much better than me, huh.”

Trill had managed to make Kuu, who was always recklessly causing trouble for Taru and Leporina, this exasperated. In a way, she might be someone really special.

“Well, when the wedding ceremony’s over, I’m planning to slip out, though,” Kuu added.

“Huh?! No fair! I want out, too!”

“Hm? You want me to carry you on my back? It’s fast if we cut across the rooftops.”

“...No, I think I’ll call a carriage.”

This was a conversation that took place in one corner of Souma’s wedding ceremony.

Kuu Joins In

“And I’m here.”

Having slipped out once the coronation and wedding at the castle were over and all that remained was the party, Kuu was now landing at the site of Ludwin and Genia’s wedding.

He was “landing” because he had taken a shortcut across the rooftops between the castle and here. In the same formal attire he’d worn for the coronation, at that.

“Ah! It’s Master Kuu!” Leporina cried.

Noticing Kuu’s arrival, Leporina and Taru rushed over.

“Hey, Leporina,” Kuu said. “Did you catch the bouquet like I told you to?”

“I did, but... it was pretty embarrassing. The other women glared at me.”

“You’re making her act recklessly, like always,” Taru complained with exasperation, holding the bouquet Leporina had caught.

However, Kuu laughed it off without seeming to care. “Hey, where’s the harm? I’m sure that bouquet wanted to go to the next bride, too.”

“Then Leporina should hold it, too.” Taru offered her the bouquet, but Leporina hurriedly shook her head.

“No, no, you should hold on to it, as the first wife.”

“We’ll be getting married at the same time, so that doesn’t make a difference.”

Seeing Taru and Leporina trying to push the bouquet off on one another, Kuu sighed. “Then how about you split it?”

““That feels kind of bad.””

“O-Okay...” Kuu faltered. Thinking about it, it seemed a little ominous to split up the symbol of two loving people’s happiness, so they were right to firmly object.

Leporina came back to her senses and said, “Wait, Master Kuu, shouldn’t you go pay your respects to the bride and groom first?”

“Huh?! Whoops! You’ve got a point there.”

Kuu quickly brought Taru and Leporina with him and headed over to where Ludwin and Genia were. It seemed they were speaking to Genia’s fellow researcher, Merula.

“Lord Arcs—no, I guess from today on, it’s Lord Maxwell-Arcs, huh?—and Genia, congratulations.”

Ludwin wore a soft smile. “Why, Sir Kuu. How good of you to come. A visit from the son of the head of the republic is too great an honor for a single humble servant of His Majesty, like myself.”

“Ookyakya! No need to be so stiff. Genia’s been taking good care of our Taru, so you’re like family, even if we are from different countries.”

“Hee hee! You have a point. Taru’s always good to me, too,” Genia giggled. “People like us always put logic and reason first, but Tarie always delivers parts that meet our demands. Nothing could make us more grateful.”

“No... Master Kuu tells me the development of the drill will benefit the republic, so I’m happy to be a part of that,” Taru said with a little smile.

Ludwin, who was watching the two of them warmly, asked Kuu, “You were at the castle, right? How did His Majesty and the others look?”

“Oh, it was real austere and impressive,” Kuu said. “Bro did great during the coronation, and his brides looked pretty in their wedding dresses.”

“I’m glad.” Ludwin smiled. “I see. It was unfortunate, as the former Captain of the Royal Guard, that I couldn’t be there to help.”

“Hey, don’t sweat it. It was Young Miss Roroa... or is it Queen Roroa now? Anyway, it was Queen Roroa’s idea to have weddings all around the city. Having a wedding with your cute wife here is helping support Bro. Think of it as a perk of the job.”

“...Yes. I do think I’m fortunate.”

“Ookyakya! You’re not afraid to say it, huh?” Kuu laid a hand down on Ludwin’s shoulder. “Well, anyway, congrats. When we get married, we’ll send an invite to the House of Maxwell-Arcs, so be sure you come, okay?”

“Sir Kuu, your marriage will be in the republic, right? I am a vassal of another country, you realize?”

“Like I care. I’m inviting Bro, too, so come with him as a bodyguard.”

“...Very well. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

The women beside them were talking, too.

“I’d like to raise the revolving speed of the drill, Merula,” said Genia.

“Even if we increase the efficiency of the enchantment, there are currently limits on how much stress we can put on the revolving parts.”

“It’s not just power; it needs to release heat, too.”

They had started discussing the drill at some point. If Trill had been here, instead of still in the castle as the imperial ambassador, the discussion would have been even more lively. Unable to join in the conversation, Leporina, who was a girl, but not a researcher girl, was left standing on the sidelines.

“Research girls from three countries, all standing together. This is a happy sight in its own right, I’d say,” Ludwin put in.

"If only they'd chosen a sexier topic than a drill, sure." Kuu shrugged.

"Hee hee! Well, that's fine, isn't it?" Leporina said, hugging Kuu from behind.

"Hey, what are you hugging me for?" he objected.

"I have nowhere else to be, so give me some attention. I have Taru's permission."

It seemed Leporina had gotten more forward in her approach to Kuu after receiving the okay from Taru. Kuu acted unhappy, but scratched his cheek like he wasn't entirely unwelcoming of this turn of events.

"Stop hugging me from behind," he said.

"Hm? Why?" she asked.

"You're taller than me, so it makes me look pathetic."

"Pfft! Ahaha!" Leporina burst out laughing.

It seemed this was to be a wedding of many smiles.

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How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom: Volume 10

by Dojyomaru

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