



**THE WORLD'S LEAST
INTERESTING MASTER
SWORDSMAN**

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Chapter 1: Organizer's Worries

Part 1 — Nostalgia

In the capital of the Domino Republic, two of the Eight Sacred Treasures—Danua, the Bountiful Silo of Compassion, and Elixir, the Sacred Chalice of Will—were talking before their departure to the Arcana Kingdom.

“Oh lawd...” Danua grumbled to herself, looking displeased. Although she had the appearance of a young woman, something about her suggested she was in fact a lot older than that grumpy face of hers might otherwise indicate.

“Ha ha ha! Cheer up already! You have to demonstrate your abilities at the ceremony!” Elixir said, trying to lift her companion’s spirits. If Danua really had been against it, she would have made her opinion known much more loudly by now. However, as she was with Elixir, Danua was holding back with just how upset she really was.

“I ain’t too happy about feedin’ folks who don’t really need it...”

The task wasn’t about stomachs that needed to be filled, nor were there people who wanted to eat her delicious food. Danua was unable to hide her dissatisfaction about feeding a group of people who didn’t really require her ability.

“There’s a lotta people waitin’ on me and my services. Even knowing that, why do I gotta...?”

“Ha ha ha! You already know why. If this ceremony goes well, we’ll secure this country’s peace! This is our chance to help Master!”

“Yeah, I get that, but y’know...”

The Eight Sacred Treasures were going to be the main event of the ceremony. They had been gathered as a symbol of the good relations between the Domino Republic and the Arcana Kingdom, as well as a display of the Republic’s national might. That was the reason Danua was unhappy; they weren’t being used for

their original purposes.

“I understand how you feel, Danua. Everyone remembers how it was back when we were needed by people, and we all miss it. Well, maybe not Noah...”

The majority of the Sacred Treasures loathed being used as tools or as symbols simply to boast about.

Even so, Elixir reproached her friend, who was longing for a time long past. “The world and times have changed; that’s not necessarily a bad thing. I mean, it’s probably a good thing that we’re not needed.”

“I know...”

The Eight Sacred Treasures were needed most during the times when humanity was in peril. To yearn for a period like that again was simply preposterous, and to yearn for better days at the cost of humanity was certainly putting the cart before the horse.

“If the day we were needed were to come...even if *they* were to catch up to us, maybe the humans would unexpectedly be able to do something about it. I mean, after all, this world and generation have Suiboku after all.”

“That Suiboku is especially worrisome. You should know that.”

“Exactly! Ha ha ha ha!”

Danua didn’t join Elixir in her laughter. This planet’s strongest living being had completed his training, and now he was even more of a threat. Having reached the limit of his abilities, he was still just as dangerous. If he were to go on a rampage again, there would be no telling what kind of havoc he could wreak.

“Oh lawd...” Danua mumbled to herself.

Part 2 — Pursuit

Although the Arcana Kingdom had been around for a very long time, there were still corners of the kingdom that hadn't yet been discovered by its inhabitants. That was the case for Tempera Village, and the same was true for the forest in which Sansui and Suiboku lived; although both places were technically the Arcana Kingdom, no Arcanian had been aware that either of them existed. That's why the kingdom hadn't ever come across Sansui or Suiboku. Whether that was a good or bad thing, one couldn't say, but that was how it had been until now. That was because the kingdom had believed that they had no reason to meaningfully interact with the hidden parts of the kingdom, nor to exploit them. Now, of course, the Arcana Kingdom was unable to exploit those areas, for a completely different reason: a decision made by the kingdom itself. However, that was not the case for other countries.

Agents sent by neighboring countries were all gathered in the forest.

"They were here. There are some faint tracks."

"I see. Then we're going in the right direction."

One of the agents scrambled up various tall trees, inspecting the thin branches. Suiboku was also moving throughout the forest, but without using Flash Step. Instead, he used Feather Step to leap lightly between the trees, leaving traces of his passage on branches that would probably break if a normal human were to step on them, and thus successfully not leaving any tracks on the ground. Normally, that method of movement would be difficult to follow. However, if you were already aware of how he moved, tracking him became quite simple. The traces left on a small branch stayed behind, after all.

Although climbing up and down the trees was a lot of work, there was a real chance that, by doing so, they could find a trail. Suiboku would have taken a straight route throughout the forest, narrowing down the amount of trees they had to inspect. The group—composed of twenty young men—was searching for Suiboku's residence. As a group of covert agents, they would normally be concerned that being in a big group like this one would make them stand out; however, in such a dense forest, there was no one else around to think anything

of it.

“Should we continue the pursuit? We’re really deep in the forest now; we could stay here and wait.”

“It would be reckless to allow ourselves to be ambushed by someone who is able to nimbly navigate the forest. It’s best that we locate his residence and then attack while he’s sleeping.”

Their goal was to take Suiboku captive. It sounded outrageous, but it wasn’t just their goal; it was also the goal of the agents sent from other countries.

“I think you all already understand this, but...our jobs are on the line during this mission. We simply can’t fail.”

They weren’t a group of twenty just because they didn’t have to worry about appearing suspicious in the forest. The fact of the matter was that this was an important job and their higher-ups had recognized that it required twenty men to even have a chance at being successful.

“Once again, I’ll confirm our mission. We are to capture the man known as Suiboku, a Rare Arts user.”

A group from the Arcana Kingdom had stopped in multiple countries on their way to the Magyan Kingdom. Mostly, they had been there to stock up on food and get some rest; while there, they paid a substantial sum in compensation to the countries that they were in. Naturally, they had handed over a lot of money, but that wasn’t all. They also handed over small amounts of Coiled Peach and Divine Ginseng as part of their payment.

These weren’t simply gifts for letting them pass through, but were more of a way of saying, “We can freely hand over these kinds of wonderful treasures.” This was of course a type of custom, and other countries’ delegations did the same kind of thing when traveling through foreign lands, though rarely to this extent. With just a small amount of Coiled Peach, a king’s wife and mother would find that their skin gradually became supple and clear. With just a small amount of Divine Ginseng, you could even regain a lost body part.

For the Arcana Kingdom, which had gifted these items, they appeared to be quite complex to make. Regardless, it was only to be expected that the people

in every country would want them. The Rare Arts user who was able to create these items was known to be the exclusive property of the Arcana Kingdom. The kings of the neighboring countries searched for that very Rare Arts user in a frenzy...only for them to find him fairly easily. That Rare Arts user was Suiboku.

It seemed that he had an apprentice, but it was said that the apprentice was unable to make Coiled Peaches. If the other kingdoms were able to take Suiboku captive, they would be able to monopolize the Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng, as well as the ability to make noble treasures. There was a lot of competition, but it was worth doing. If it went well, the winning country would be able to amass a substantial group of mages, just like House Caputo of the Arcana Kingdom. The agents, knowing the significance of that, were naturally nervous. Something didn't feel quite right.

"Come to think of it, we haven't run into people from any other countries yet."

"They may be tracking him differently than we are. Our method is sound, but it does mean we have a higher chance of running into other agents... Moreover, it's a lot of time and work," another agent responded.

However, even they themselves weren't entirely confident in that logic.

He's right; things have been a little strange from the start. The Arcana Kingdom was quick to show off how useful the ability was, but then they more or less abandoned the user altogether.

If another country found a Rare Arts user with that kind of ability, they would first be confined against their will, stealing any sliver of freedom from them. The user would then be made to cultivate Coiled Peaches and forced to mentor apprentices. Then, the country in question would designate the finished items as national secrets and kill anyone who tried to find those secrets out. At least, that was what his country planned to do with these resources. They wouldn't dream of making their capacity so obvious. They planned to conceal that capability and never mention the fact that they had a user with that ability.

It wasn't like the Arcana Kingdom tried to be secretive about it either. The queen ate the Coiled Peach, and it had an effect. Showing off an item that has an effect like that...then purposely not hiding its creator... There's got to be

some limit to that kind of recklessness.

Part of being an agent was being able to think for yourself. In actuality, the person who raised the question, the person who answered it, and even those who were just listening, all had the same thoughts as him. The fact that the Arcanians had left Suiboku in this forest was actually really strange. If the Arcana Kingdom had Suiboku well protected and secured, it wouldn't be so surprising that they had been so public about what he could do. However, he couldn't think of a single logical reason as to why they would boast about him and then leave him unattended.

Is the one in this forest even the real deal?

Maybe the mage who could make Coiled Peaches was somewhere else, and the man called Suiboku was simply a decoy. This could very well be in a trap. It was a very plausible situation, and one that they had assumed could be the case from the beginning. It wasn't that they had just realized that now, but rather that it was becoming more of an actual possibility. Even so, they couldn't back out. Even if there was a trap waiting for them, it was their job as agents to discover that trap. Before searching other areas, they had to make sure he wasn't in this area first. In a forest this big, they had to make sure there was absolutely nobody else here.

That's why there were twenty of them. They needed a lot of people so they could swiftly respond to any situation that might arise.

The higher-ups did their best to properly prepare us for this mission. That's why we're not allowed to fail... Even if another country managed to abduct him, we would have to continue our pursuit and take him for ourselves.

No matter the objective, the reason that most jobs ended in failure was generally due to not enough preparation or a lack of personnel. If you had everything arranged beforehand, most jobs could be over quite quickly. But if you had all that and it still didn't go well, then that was due to the people chosen for the job lacking the required skills for it. The higher-ups would no doubt put any success or failure down to that and then praise or blame the people who had been chosen for the job.

This is exactly what we want! Win and come out on top against the Arcana

Kingdom and the other countries and show them our ability.

The agents were very confident in their skills, and they were using the pressure from the higher-ups as a positive force. Their positions depended on this job, especially since an assignment like this coming around was rare indeed. This spurred them on to continue through the forest with zero hesitation. However, what awaited them wasn't a decoy laid as a trap by the Arcana Kingdom, nor did they run into another country's spies. In fact, it was none other than the very person they sought.

"I find it quite noble and capable of you all that you followed me this far. I would like to give you praise for that, but in all honesty, it's really just annoying," someone said to the agents as they advanced through the forest. Upon hearing the slightly dissatisfied tone in the voice's words, the agents dispersed in an instant, hiding behind the trees.

We made ourselves way too obvious...! We paid zero attention!

I didn't even sense him... No, that's just an excuse!

The panicked agents looked for the source of the voice. There must have been someone waiting for them in that general direction.

"I've always made it a point to have very little interaction with the outside world, but seeing how such a large group has managed to find me, I guess I was too careless."

They couldn't work out where the voice was coming from. The agents, still hiding behind the trees, frantically searched the forest for the source. Even though they were all experienced and skilled, they were unable to determine the location of the person who continued to speak.

"I've already captured one hundred of you, all of whom were also seeking the Coiled Peaches and the Divine Ginseng. Humans have coveted those items for decades, but to seek me especially... It would have been much better to seek Danua and her master for that purpose."

The words were clear, so the person was obviously nearby—it felt like the voice was being directly projected into their ears. But that surely couldn't be the case.

Are they using a Rare Art?

Their location had been discovered, but they themselves did not know the whereabouts of their enemy. The situation was very much less than ideal. Even so, they were unable to turn back.

Being intercepted by the target like this isn't good, but it's a whole lot better than him getting away and into the Arcana Kingdom's protection... We have to capture him, no matter what!

One of the agents tried improvising.

“Where are you hiding? Show yourself!”

That was not something an agent should have said. Everyone knew, including himself, that it was akin to a declaration of defeat. However, though the tactic was shameful, it didn't come from a place of desperation.

Even though he's caught us, he made his presence known by talking. I guess this shows he's got a lot of confidence. We could use that pride of his to our advantage and get him to show himself.

Whether they fought him or captured him, they had to get him to show himself. The agent had only planned to goad their target a little; even so, he continued, and none of the others attempted to stop him.

“Do you really plan to stay hidden and talk us into leaving?” said one of the agents.

Provoke him, and strike when he appears. The rest were all waiting for that opening too. The agent readied his hidden weapon, prepared to attack at any time.

“Oh, that's what the others said too,” the voice responded.

They believed they had succeeded in provoking him upon hearing his response.

“You all want Coiled Peaches, Divine Ginseng, and the person who can make it. So in other words...you don't need your lives.”

Suiboku appeared without any indication of wanting to make a preemptive strike. His entrance was clearly visible, as the Rare Arts user floated down from

the top of the trees.

Now!

The secret agents had zero intention of showing themselves. Instead, they fired off pre-prepared numbing blow darts, aiming to hit him before his feet reached the ground.

“Hm.”

Suiboku unsheathed his wooden sword and swung it as he slowly descended down from the tree. In one swift motion, he deflected all of the numbing blow darts.

“Hm, I see you are all quite skilled.”

Although they knew that he was here, they’d had no idea where he would appear. Nevertheless, they had all managed to aim their darts at Suiboku. If he hadn’t swung his wooden sword, all twenty shots would have hit their marks. Even if the darts had hit him, though, numbing poison made by an ordinary person wouldn’t have an effect on an Immortal like Suiboku.

“Hm.”

Suiboku had complimented them, but none of the agents were particularly thrilled with that. They were all shocked that he had managed to stop all of the darts; in actuality, though, such a feat was to be expected. Suiboku was still there, despite his deflection, so the agents swiftly began their pursuit. They were going to capture Suiboku using a bola: two rocks tied together with a length of rope.

“You all could probably make it as actual hunters, since you all seem to have the arm for it,” Suiboku remarked as he swung his wooden sword again.

Before, there had only been the sound of the sword cutting through the air. However, this time, there was a dull clunking sound. All twenty agents suddenly felt a rush of pain to their faces. The agents looked around to see what had just hit them, not knowing what had happened. They were all dumbfounded when they saw that they had been hit by the bolas they had just thrown at Suiboku. They had been thrown right back at them, in what was nothing short of a miracle.

Realizing this, one of the agents had another epiphany.

I see now! He's not trying to seek protection from Arcana at all. He's confident in his own ability! Even if they offered him protection, he probably refused it!

The agents had been both right and wrong... Well, in fact, they had actually been entirely wrong.

“Next?”

This time, Suiboku challenged them directly, just as expected from someone who possessed such ability. He was arrogant, the kind of fool who would always respond to a threat.

It's not over yet!

The agents threw out their smoke bombs. They weren't just bombs that let out smoke—they were also packed with a powdered substance with an effect like tear gas, and were made so that they would explode upon impact. If Suiboku deflected the bombs with his wooden sword like he did earlier, that would cause it to explode. Even the strongest person couldn't defeat their own physiological responses. Once they had overwhelmed his senses, they would be able to try to catch him again.

“Hm. I guess you really are trying everything,” Suiboku said. As he spoke, he hit the smoke bomb that was flying towards him with his wooden sword, and...it didn't break. It didn't hit its target, nor did it explode when it hit the ground near him. It had remained perfectly intact.

What the hell! I saw him swing his wooden sword but...it's as if he didn't swing it at all!

This time, the agents really had no idea what had just happened. Even if Suiboku had used a Rare Art, they were still unable to discern how things had unfolded in that exact manner. As the agents carefully examined the area around Suiboku in an attempt to figure things out, they noticed that the smoke bomb lay nearby, completely intact. Suiboku had swung his sword and deflected the smoke bomb entirely, and he had done it so lightly that the smoke bomb hadn't exploded on impact. While they didn't understand that at all, it wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility that he had deflected *one* bomb.

However, it hadn't just been the one agent; they had *all* thrown bombs, twenty of them, all together. For him to have deflected all of them safely without knowing that they were smoke bombs was, again, nothing short of a miracle.

"Next?" Suiboku asked again. Such a demeanor was only to be expected of a person who possessed such ability.

"Ahhh!"

"Haaaah!"

Two of the twenty agents let out a yell and ran directly towards Suiboku. Upon seeing that, the remaining eighteen agents all dispersed and ran off in every direction.

"Hm."

It was, by all appearances, a very obvious retreat. The two heading towards Suiboku had no intention of capturing him, but rather intended to slow him down as a last resort. The other eighteen also had no intention of going after Suiboku again; their plan was to return and report that their opponent was simply too strong.

There's nothing we can do!

The agents had all decided that it was impossible to capture him. Suiboku had managed to sense and locate all of them within this deep forest, and he was skilled enough to completely shrug off their attacks. Even with twenty people fighting just one man, it would have been unthinkable. They didn't know if someone else would be able to do it, but they *definitely* knew that they themselves were unable, and that they needed to report back accordingly to the higher-ups.

Even if we were able to capture him, we would need several people who are talented at combat! We're only agents; there's no way we can face an opponent like this!

Feeling the pain of their prior naivete, they chose to retreat with the understanding that even just running away would be difficult. Apart from the two who chose to act as shields, the agents were also unsure if they could possibly make it out alive. The most important thing for all of them, collectively,

was that at least one of them made it back to report what had happened.

However, it seemed that they had even underestimated their opponent yet again. It wouldn't be difficult; it would be *impossible*.

"Flash Step Art: Cowherd."

The two who had run towards him as sacrifices were—as irony would have it—the only two who realized what he had done. As they were running towards Suiboku, they saw the other eighteen who had run away suddenly appear next to their target. He had used a Flash Step Art, Cowherd, which brought his target right to him. As he did that, all the smoke bombs that had been lying on the ground nearby suddenly exploded.

"Ki Wave: Raiden." One of the people who had been brought towards Suiboku was struck by a ki wave. It then spread to the others close by, resulting in a powerful force striking each one in turn. All eighteen of them had been hit and then swept off their feet by an unseen power. They all fell to the floor with no idea of what had just happened to them.

"Huh?"

This time, they really were expressing shock. The two agents who had charged towards Suiboku also stood stock-still, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

"Ah, mortals... It's all the same." Suiboku let out a sigh at their stupidity. "Surely you should have realized that you all are unable to do anything to me by now."

Suiboku had experienced similar situations many times in his long life. Those thinking they were a cut above the rest tried to capture him, only to then realize that they really weren't, after all. It always ended up with mortals standing around, dumbfounded.

"Well, I guess I should hand you over to Sansui's employers."

That finally reminded them of a questionable rumor that had been circulating—Suiboku had a pupil who was said to be impossibly strong. That turned out to not be exaggerated, just not quite accurate enough.

No matter how many people there are, no one can win against this kind of power!

All they could do was resign themselves to their fates. The two agents who were still on their feet, finally realizing that there was nothing they could do, dropped their weapons and stood very, very still.

Suiboku was visiting the Sepaeda mansion in the Arcana Kingdom capital. He hadn't come empty-handed; instead, he had brought along a gift from his forest—the intruders. They had been bound tightly and gagged, mostly so they couldn't attempt to take their own lives. The intruders had been so cooperative that Suiboku hadn't really needed to go that far in restraining them. They probably would have stayed resigned to their fate even if they hadn't been tied up.

Lord Sepaeda looked at the intruders.

Those too, huh...?

They were, without a doubt, enemies of the Arcana Kingdom—dishonorable thieves who had resorted to sneaking in and taking what they wanted, rather than challenging the Arcanians head-on. Even so, having seen the ignorant intruders who had now fully realized the weight of the situation, Lord Sepaeda couldn't help but feel a little pity for them. They had no doubt thought that they'd taken a routine job, aiming to capture a Rare Artist, when in reality they had met one of the strongest creatures in the whole world.

"They underestimated me. I apologize for bringing them here when you have just returned from a great battle. I was not aware."

"I guess they assumed you couldn't be as strong as you are."

Lord Sepaeda had no problem blaming their ignorance. Sansui used to bring up Suiboku at any opportunity, but no one could have guessed then that he was that strong. It wouldn't be too unusual to assume that their master had never met Sansui or Suiboku and thought that they could simply kidnap the master. While such an expectation was not unusual, it had also undeniably led to this humorous result.

“I guess all I can do is systematically eradicate every country that sends assassins after me,” Suiboku said angrily. He wasn’t the kind of man to act purely on the basis of his own desires, but he also couldn’t stand being underestimated. If the neighboring countries all thought that Suiboku was just a mere swordsman, it would be better to let them keep thinking that. Of course, in order to show how strong he was, he intended to lay waste to the whole of the land.

“Please don’t.”

Lord Sepaeda—who was by any measure not the most humanitarian person—put a stop to it.

“It won’t have any effect on this country,” argued Suiboku. What he meant by that was that the Arcana Kingdom wouldn’t sustain any damage in the process. If it went wrong, however, it could *also* mean that he would submerge the rest of the entire continent in the sea, leaving only the Arcana Kingdom standing.

He does have a previous record...

While a late realization, he now fully understood why the Sacred Treasures feared Suiboku, and why Fukei was trying to kill him. It was normal to be scared of a man who was not only insanely strong but also had the self-confidence to match it. Not to mention, it didn’t take much to trigger him into causing mass destruction.



Thinking of how this monster had lived here long before the Arcana Kingdom even existed, it truly was a miracle that Arcana had ever formed in the first place.

It's a good thing this country wasn't destroyed. Wait, Sansui has been with Suiboku for around five hundred years...

Even then, this was a diplomatic nightmare that would shave years off anyone's life. If they failed, it would lead to other countries being destroyed right alongside the enemy country that sent secret agents into the Arcana Kingdom. Lord Sepaeda was struggling with the idea that he had to suffer mentally in order to protect an enemy nation.

But Suiboku wasn't angry without good reason. It was only natural that he would be upset that so many agents had been sent to capture him. It made sense that he was so irritated. Even though the damage his retribution would generate would be on an unimaginable scale, he still couldn't blame him for being mad.

"To put it bluntly, this was due to our mismanagement. We will be sure that the country that sent the assassins will receive their due punishment. Not only that, but it is important that we make it so that no other agents can infiltrate our borders. I know it is a bit late, but His Majesty does have plans to increase the defenses in your forest..." Those really were long overdue by this point. Honestly, it was strange that the forest had been left unprotected in the first place. Not only would it have protected Suiboku from intruders, but it also would have meant that there would be nothing to anger Suiboku in the first place.

"We will not go as far as to build walls, but we will deploy some soldiers to specific parts of the forest and they will stand guard."

"Hm... You don't have to do all that," Suiboku replied.

The Arcana Kingdom was mostly just improvising with these defensive measures. However, when thinking about the potential consequences of other countries trying to abduct Suiboku, as well as the destruction he would wreak if something were to happen, it was the least they could do.

Even so, Suiboku regretfully declined. If Suiboku had looked deeply offended by the suggestion, Lord Sepaeda would have rushed to withdraw it. However, he looked regretful, which prompted Lord Sepaeda to inquire, “May I ask why?”

“I plan to leave here once Sansui returns.”

Lord Sepaeda was honestly quite relieved to know that the god of destruction himself had plans to leave. However, it also seemed that Suiboku was hinting at his own death. The Immortal who had lived for the better part of an eternity was planning to leave this world.

“I’ll take Sansui back to our home, where he will receive guidance. To be honest, there are still a lot of things for Sansui to learn here, but if I wait any longer, it’ll just begin to cause issues.”

Due to his grudge against Suiboku, Fukei had brought trouble to the Arcana Kingdom just the other day. Suiboku had killed Fukei, even though Fukei was one of the oldest Immortals in their village. It was hard to imagine that another Immortal would take his place now that he had been killed. That said, it didn’t even have to be another Immortal; it wouldn’t be that strange if someone else entirely appeared, hoping to avenge Fukei.

“At any rate, it’s the end of the road for me,” Suiboku remarked. Without taking Suiboku’s will into account, it could be said that he was quite correct. It meant that the relationship between Suiboku and Sansui, which had seemed eternal and unchanging, would be upended in an instant.

Sansui would leave Sepaeda, head to where Suiboku had previously lived, and once again immerse himself in training. A future that once seemed a lifetime away had actually been right around the corner the whole time. Lord Sepaeda couldn’t help but feel a little sad realizing that, even for Immortals, a lot could change very quickly.

“In that case, I guess it’s best that I...”

“Please don’t.”

That sadness soon disappeared. A god of destruction had clearly different views than a mere mortal did.

Amongst all the chaos, the group that had left for Magyan had returned. While they should have been happy that the marriage had been approved and they had managed to return safely, it seemed the side that should be welcoming them home had a mountain of problems of their own.

“Right now, in order to solve these problems, we are working with His Highness,” Lord Sepaeda said to his father and his younger sister, wearing a complicated expression on his face. His sister and father wore the same expression.

“I see. That is a problem.”

“Hm...we have to do something.”

There was a possibility that Suiboku would end up destroying every country besides the Arcana Kingdom before he took his leave. While the Sepaeda family did enjoy being the center of attention, they did not want to be the harbingers of this world’s doom.

“If the other nations apologized, all would be fine, but a surprising amount of nations have been chasing after him, sometimes making multiple attempts.”

The other nations had no idea of the danger they were in, but even for those who were aware of some danger, they couldn’t begin to imagine the sheer magnitude. Although it sounded strange, Lord Sepaeda was doing everything in his power to protect the other nations.

“If we told people from other nations just how powerful Suiboku was, they might realize... I have to imagine their agents don’t know that much about him.”

“Not only is he unimaginably strong, but I don’t think anyone would quite believe us,” Douve said, giving her father an understanding look. Suiboku had the kind of power that you had to see to believe.

“The same applies to Shun Ukiyo, Sansui, Shouzo, and even Saiga. They all possess power that’s hard to really understand.”

Shun Ukiyo was Disaea’s ace. He was the first person in ten thousand years who was able to wield Pandora, and he could do so without thinking. It was said that he was peerless in duels. However, to Suiboku and Fukei, he would be

nothing. Either one of them would be able to dispose of him. The Arcana Kingdom's ace, Fuushi Ukyou, was in possession of five Sacred Treasures himself. Although a recent addition to the roster of aces, he had chosen the path of reconciliation. He owned Vajra, who could control the weather; Elixir, who could make her owner unkillable; Dainsleif, who could eliminate bloodlines; Ungaikyo, who could make duplicate items; and lastly Danua, who could create food. What Ukyou lacked in battle prowess, he made up for with his Sacred Treasures.

The other nations were very aware of Shun and Ukyou's abilities, since the eight Sacred Treasures had always existed in this world. However, no one would believe that Sansui was five hundred years old, that Saiga could learn every Rare Art, or that Shouzo had ten thousand times more mana than any other mage, even if they heard it from a trusted source. So they would absolutely never believe that Suiboku had lived for four thousand years, was friends with God, had destroyed countless nations, had killed thousands of people, and even now would have no problem doing it again. Or rather, if someone were to hear about any of those things, they would probably hope it simply wasn't true.

"So, Brother, I assume that you already have a plan ready?"

"I do have one ready, actually. I will use your upcoming wedding ceremony to alert the other nations."

Part 3 — Reward

Sansui and his wife, Blois, were at the Wynne family residence, where they were receiving numerous guests. These guests were all people who had developed deep bonds with the Wynne family, beginning with Blois's older sister marrying into another noble family. Everyone was wearing their best clothes and a full smile. Although it was a sophisticated gathering, one could also say that it was akin to a celebration. Admittedly, this was a celebration wherein only those in the upper echelons of this territory were allowed to partake, and with quite an entry fee.

Among the attendees, the main attraction was not Blois's father, the acting lord, Senve Wynne. It also wasn't Hetter, the heir, nor was it Lyra, who was known for being a fixer. In fact, none of the members of the Wynne family were at the center of events. Instead, all eyes were on one of the four great aces of the Arcana Kingdom, Sepaeda's Grand Instructor of Warfare, Sansui Shirokuro.

"He's still as young as ever..."

"Suiboku hadn't changed a bit either, probably because he's an Immortal, so I wonder if that Golden Balm medicine would have any effect."

"Is it a medicine that kills Immortals if they drink it...?"

Suiboku had visited this place many times while Sansui was off on his trip to Magyan, and as a result it seemed that they were more accustomed to his master than before. Suiboku, unlike Sansui, had good command of a variety of skills and was very well versed in all of the Immortal Arts. Suiboku wasn't the kind of person to hide that fact, either, so it seemed the guests were also becoming more aware of the Immortal Arts. They also knew that Sansui had been alive for five hundred years, that he didn't age, and that he could appear to grow older when using medicine. The guests that Sansui had met before when he came to announce his wedding to Blois were now staring at him quite intently with this new information.

I don't want to be here... Sansui thought to himself, ashamed. He didn't like being the center of attention in the first place, and he especially didn't like

being gawked at like a rare animal. However, mixed among those stares were several gazes that felt less like curiosity and more like savage carnivores focusing on their prey.

“Suiboku’s apprentice... Suiboku is the one who can make that anti-aging miracle drug, the Coiled Peach...”

“I heard that Sansui hasn’t yet learned how to make Coiled Peaches, but even so, he’s still someone close to Suiboku.”

“Suiboku has many other skills that can help with aging... It’s probably best to get to know Sansui, just so we can get closer to Suiboku.”

These were all gossipy women who, like Chette, were obsessed with their beauty. Although they were all getting fired up at the notion, there were other guests nearby who were trying to keep them in check.

“You understand though, right? At the very least, they’d knock you out and drag you back home.”

“He’s a swordsman working for Lord Sepaeda. If you do something, don’t be too shocked by the consequences.”

“Look at the people around you. If you attacked him, you’d end up being a laughingstock no matter how good-looking you ended up. ‘You acted like a beggar to get that handsome,’ they would say.” The men were calm, even though they also wanted the nourishing tonic known as the Coiled Peach. However, it seemed they didn’t want it badly enough to engage in risky behavior, and chose not to act on their desires by starting a fight with Sansui.

“Chette, have a look at the ladies over there.”

“I used to be like them, right? It’s like looking into a mirror.”

“No, you were even worse. A whole lot worse. Honestly, it was *so bad*. Try not to forget that.”

Lyra was with Chette, giving her a stern talking to. Of course, nobody tried to stop her either.

“Hey, Papa, how come you’re still a kid?”

“You’re right. I probably should have worn some formal clothing, too.”

On the other hand, Lain and Blois, who were here with Sansui, were glaring at him for a whole different reason. He had the build of a child and was dressed casually. He hadn't taken any of the Golden Balm and wasn't wearing the nice clothes he had received. They seemed a little disappointed in him. Since it was a celebration, they wanted him to show off a bit more.

"However, I learned an important lesson when I came back here previously. No one will recognize me if I don't look like this."

Sansui knew that the two of them would have something to say about his appearance, but since it was an event where he was the main attraction, he had come dressed as he always did. That said, he didn't look too happy about it. He may have stood out because he was dressed so differently, but it also could have been because he was floating too.

"I think you're very right in thinking that, Master Sansui. There's nothing wrong with that appearance; however, it might be best to dress like that once they're a little more used to you."

"You can't give Lain and Blois so much trouble, you know? Since you are the main attraction, you have to act as such."

Blois's father Senve and her mother Kette were the ones admonishing Sansui. They seemed quite serious, seeing as they were the hosts of the celebration. Although they were often quite a mediocre couple, apparently these situations were the sort of thing that they put a little extra care into.

"Your attention, please!" A loud voice echoed from outside the Wynne house gates at that exact moment. "I am an envoy sent here by Lord Sepaeda! I have a reward for the Grand Instructor of Warfare, Sansui Shirokuro!"

Everyone had gathered in the garden wearing a tense expression. This was the beginning of the actual formal event.

"You have done well to come all this way, messenger. I am Sansui Shirokuro, Grand Instructor of Warfare."

"I am the head of this house, Senve Wynne. Thank you for coming such a long way."

The gates opened, allowing the envoy to enter as Sansui and Senve welcomed him. Of course, the members of the Wynne household stayed respectful and kept silent, with the other attendees following suit. Although it was a small-scale event, it was still an award for distinguished achievement, so there were to be no interruptions.

“Sansui Shirokuro. Lord Sepaeda has bestowed upon you a gift for your hard work. Please, take a look.”

Sansui had acted as an advisor to Douve, and he had gone in that capacity to the Magyan Kingdom as Sepaeda’s ace. While there, he had acted as a team leader for the royal exhibition match held by Heki Magyan and had secured a wondrous victory in the process. Then, while in Batterabbe territory, he had a duel with the heir to the house, Saiga, that surpassed all human understanding. Both of his performances had been honorable fights and would greatly bolster Sepaeda’s military fame—the reward for which had been formally delivered to him. The reward must have been of great value, since this was a very formal way of delivering it. The whole situation was a little too formal and stiff, but that was often how these official procedures went.

“For Lord Sepaeda to dispatch such an official messenger... I guess that’s expected for a knight who works directly under him.”

“He doesn’t have any special skills like Master Suiboku, but it seems he is recognized for his strength...”

“I wonder what kind of treasure he will be awarded...”

The guests who had gathered technically had nothing to do with the reward. However, they were also vassals of House Sepaeda; it wasn’t like they were completely uninvolved. It was Sepaeda’s way of showing that those who contributed would be generously rewarded. That was why Lord Sepaeda had decided to reward Sansui in a public place where he would have an audience.

“Here are the contents. Please look carefully,” instructed the messenger.

“Understood,” Sansui replied.

The messenger was not alone, and in fact had ten other men in tow. Four men formed a group and began bringing out large boxes, one after the other, to

a chorus of gasps from the audience. Carved into the boxes was Sepaeda's family crest. As such, the boxes were themselves of such high value to the point that one box alone would be treated like an heirloom. It wasn't every day that you got to see so many of them at once.

Yeah, that's right... I guess that's a normal response...

The guests had gathered here today to see Sansui receive his reward, and it wasn't even that they weren't expecting there to be so many rewards. Even if they were expecting that, it was still an incredible spectacle. Sansui felt a little guilty seeing how shocked they were. He no doubt would have been a lot happier about this before he became an Immortal. He had been generously rewarded by a nobleman for his work as a warrior with quite a few treasures. Receiving them in public was a way to garner respect from others by showing what rewards valor received. It was something that Sansui had always yearned for; however, even he couldn't be as overjoyed as the people around him. Blois and Lain were the same.

I wonder if the princess is okay... thought Lain, who, until she had come of age, had been raised as a member of House Sepaeda.

It's been a while since I last saw the Sepaeda family crest, thought Blois, who had served as a bodyguard for Sepaeda's princess.

To them, the people who had gifted these items were more than just noblemen; they were people who they knew very well. They had known both the good and bad sides of House Sepaeda, so Blois and Lain felt more nostalgic than grateful. The surrounding guests and family members of House Wynne were all shocked at the amount of treasure. However, Sansui and his family weren't as pleased as the rest.

It seems Blois and Lain were expecting this. Even so, that doesn't mean that they had correctly anticipated everything. Sansui, on the other hand, had.

"That's it for the rewards from Sepaeda. Now, let me present..." the messenger said, as if it had been long awaited. With a slightly pompous movement, the messenger from Sepaeda gave a signal. The group of men brought out even more boxes, ones that were completely different from the boxes with the Sepaeda family crest. They came from a certain culture, one that

neither Blois nor Lain had seen before. Sansui was the only one who recognized the style.

“Here is the reward for the imperial match from the king of Magyan, His Majesty, Magyan Khan.” It was a reward from Sunae and Tahlán’s father. Blois and Lain quickly became excited at the appearance of these mysterious boxes.

“Three gold-embroidered rugs, three rolls of thin silk fabric, three floor cushions, five pieces of jewelry...” It was the first time the Sepaeda messenger had seen such sentimental gifts from a foreign nation. They were unknown treasures, made in a distant land, brought into daylight by being gifted to a swordsman. The attendees all remained silent as Sansui decided to do something a little mean.

“May I touch the items?”

“Of course, by all means.”

Sansui’s request was the epitome of rudeness. However, since he was confirming the receipt of the items, it wasn’t all that strange. After all, the receiver of the items could do whatever he liked with his own gifts, even if he was being a little hasty about it. After the envoy had concluded that there was no real reason to be upset, he gave Sansui his permission.

“Hm,” Sansui mused to himself, having spread out the silk cloth to look at the design. The silk, woven by a craftsman, seemed as if it would rip with the slightest amount of force. Holding the silk, Sansui decided to show off his more playful side. Drinking a little of the Coiled Peach mixture, Sansui’s stature grew in front of everyone. Sansui—who was now bigger than Blois—spread out the silk even farther and draped it around his wife.

“H-Hey!”

“It suits you, Blois.”

This is out of character for me, thought Sansui. It would probably make the other attendees jealous. However, if he let himself be afraid of the others’ reactions, he wouldn’t be able to show his love towards Blois. Sansui, who had draped the embarrassed Blois in the gift he had received, tried to laugh like Tahlán.

“When I was in Magyan, I saw a lot of beautiful women in similar outfits. I always thought you would... Actually, I’ve always imagined you wearing similar outfits.”

“H-Hey...” Blois, who had taken the surprise attack from Sansui on the chin, didn’t seem that mad. She wasn’t even opposed. She just seemed confused.

“Let’s use this gift to make you some clothes. I think you’ll look great in them.”

“Oh, okay, sure!”

Sansui looked at Lain. He was trying his best to appear manly in front of her, but he wondered what she thought.

“Papa...good work! Incredible work!”

“Oh, okay.” The image of her ideal father was sparkling within her eyes.

“It’s like it’s not even you, Papa!”

“Um, well, okay...” Sansui was aware that he was acting out of character, but he couldn’t help but accept the fact that, according to his daughter, he was at his best when he didn’t act like his usual self. He did so, even though it felt like he was denying his true self, because he had been reminded of the importance of expressing his feelings.

As such, Sansui had put on a little act. It wasn’t the best thing to do, being so lovey-dovey at a formal event. The envoy coughed to clear his throat; meanwhile, the onlookers had probably become jealous seeing such a scene. Sansui had been away from his wife for longer than a year on official business, and in his mind, it wasn’t a bad thing to show his affection to his wife, whom he hadn’t seen in a long while. More importantly, there wasn’t anyone who would or could complain to Sansui. Apart from a few Sepaeda leaders, most wouldn’t find it rude of Sansui to drape his wife in his hard-earned battle rewards. They’d probably compliment him for doing it in the first place.

“Sansui! If you’re going to do something like that, let me know in advance next time!” Blois, his wife, finally complained.

Once the envoys and the guests had all gone home, it was just the members of House Wynne left. The Sansui family were in their allotted room, where Blois was playfully hitting Sansui, her face bright red.

“I was so embarrassed!”

She wasn't *really* mad, but that didn't mean she wasn't annoyed. She had leaped towards Sansui—who was still in his adult form—and was hitting him on his chest with both hands.

“Do that kinda stuff when we're alone!”

“Yes, okay.”

Sansui was trying to imitate Tahlan, but Blois was unable to imitate Douve. Sansui had known all along that he would receive treasure from the Magyan Kingdom, so he had planned to make a show of it. Blois, who had been unable to prepare for the occasion, seemed to take it as nothing other than a surprise attack.

“I...I was so embarrassed... How am I even gonna look at people tomorrow?”

“Miss Blois, you don't have to worry about it that much,” Lain retorted. She seemed more upset than Blois. “He didn't really do anything *that* strange. He just thought you'd suit the treasure he received.”

“I mean, yeah...but—! He did it in front of everyone! That's what embarrassed me!”

Sansui really hadn't done anything too bad; if anything, Blois was making a mountain out of a molehill. She knew that herself, but it was still embarrassing for her.

“S-Sansui, you did good! You acted well! You draped the fabric on me in an appropriate way!” She mostly felt ashamed by how cowardly she was. “But, as for me? I was useless! If you had let me know in advance, I could have responded better!”

Sansui had gone out of his way to show his affection for her. He showed that he could do such stylish things even when surrounded by noblemen. However, Blois had been too rigid and couldn't do anything to respond properly. She kept

replaying it over and over in her head, feeling full of shame. If only she could have acted more appropriately, it would have made for a wonderful scene.

“I wanted to act more mature in front of everyone just like you...!”

“I’m sorry.”

“I think Papa messed up there, for sure.” Lain didn’t seem that sad even though her parents were arguing. Blois was shocked. “If you keep reacting like this whenever Papa tries to do something lovey-dovey, he’ll end up not wanting to do it again, you know?”

“Uh...” Blois stuttered as she responded to Lain, who was very maturely explaining the situation. It was evident that Sansui had hurt Blois’s feelings, which he hadn’t meant to do, but it also kind of ended up being a success. Now, Blois could say, in a cute tone of voice, that she didn’t enjoy being surprised like that, and ask that Sansui let her know in advance in the future. Then, Sansui could make sure that next time it’d go more smoothly.

“Gah, Miss Blois, I swear...”

“L-Lyra put you up to this! This is her work!”

Blois had completely calmed down upon this revelation. She hadn’t considered previously that Lain would pull out her “optimal solution.” There was no doubt in her mind that Lain had confided in Lyra—the most resourceful of the four siblings.

“Yep. Lyra said to me that Blois would no doubt get angry later, and then when she calmed down and regretted it, I should talk to her about it.”

Those were really clear instructions.

Sansui and Blois couldn’t hide how much Lyra’s ability to plan so far ahead chilled them to the bone.



It showed that she had given it some thought; rather than consulting Sansui and Blois, she had talked to Lain, who was just one step away from them. She even accounted for them realizing that it was her work. Meanwhile, it was obvious that Lyra wanted to show off that she could give appropriate orders and that she was smart. It was more scary than cute.

“Strange. Lyra and I have been apart from one another for a long time, and have rarely spent any time together.”

Blois was working as a bodyguard for Douve around when Lyra had come of age. The only time Lyra had met Blois was when Sansui and Blois went to formally announce their wedding to the Wynne family. They had become friendly since Blois had started living in the family home, but it had only been around one year. It seemed Lyra understood Blois more than Sansui, even though she had spent less time with her. If she had been able to work out this much, one would begin to suspect she was telepathic or had premonitions.

“She might be even more stubborn than the princess,” Sansui said. Blois nodded in agreement. Although late to realize it, Sansui finally understood how Hetter and Blois felt towards Lyra.

“Let’s move on. Blois, I apologize. Next time I’ll talk to you first before going ahead with something.”

“Yeah, I’d appreciate that. I’m sorry for ranting earlier.”

“Good!” Lain appeared very satisfied seeing her parents make up. It seemed that Lyra’s instructions were meant to ensure that they made up in the end. She really was terrifying.

“So, moving on...I received a decree from His Lordship earlier. There’ll be a wedding soon, so he’s asked that I go to the capital alone.”

This wedding wasn’t going to be the usual sort of thing. It was a joint wedding between Setenve Arcana and Fuushi Ukyou, Tahlan Magyan and Douve Sepaeda, and Happine Batterabbe and Saiga Mizu. It was to be a grand national event; Blois and Lain had been giggling while imagining how luxurious the ceremony would be.

“Princess Douve is gonna wear a bridal dress from Magyan, right?”

“I think she plans to change her outfit a lot, so she’ll probably only wear it once...”

“How nice... I wanna see what it looks like...”

“Fanne is still too young to travel, and I want to be near her. So it’s best if you stay here, Lain... Though, to be honest, I want to go too.”

“Let’s ask Mr. Suiboku! He’ll be able to do something!”

“If we leave it to him, he might just end up bringing the capital to us...”

“Yeah, let’s not do that then.”

Both Lain and Blois wanted to attend the ceremony, but with Fanne still being so small, it was a difficult prospect. They could have always asked Sansui’s master, but if they were to do that, they knew all too well the lengths to which Suiboku would go, so that seemed to stop them in their tracks.

“Wait, wait! Papa! You got to see the princess’s bridal dress, right? I bet it was so pretty!”

“Yeah, it really was. She looked so beautiful, His Fathership almost shed a tear,” Sansui responded. He felt a little down, even though he was the one who had brought up the topic of the wedding ceremony in the first place. But, remembering the scene from the other day, he nodded in response to Lain’s question. The good-looking couple all dressed up, the extravagant venue, all of the noblemen and women wishing them well, everyone laughing happily... The image was immaculately beautiful.

“Seeing her alongside Lord Tahlan was honestly picturesque. Plus...they both looked very happy.” Sansui let out a sigh while recalling it. It really had been a great ceremony, and one that went without a hitch after they had solved all of the issues in the Magyan territory. “However...that might not be the case for this ceremony.”

The letter Sansui had received also mentioned “other nations interfering with Suiboku” and “holding a demonstration at the wedding ceremony in order to stop it.” In other words, they were worried that there was going to be a lot of trouble at the wedding ceremony, caused by the nation’s most prestigious person following House Sepaeda’s orders, Sansui.

“Huh, are you going to chop off people’s heads and put them on display again?” Lain asked her father, who seemed quite down about the ceremony. It was not an improper guess to make, since he had done something similar in the past.

That was back during the peace talks...

There had been a veritable storm of blood during the peace talks, and then again during the wedding. One could almost say that whenever there was an attempt to hold a peaceful event in this world, there was almost always bloodshed. Actually, no. The real problem was that there were always people who used peaceful events as opportunities to bring about calamity. In this case, that’s what Sansui’s employer was doing.

“I can’t say I definitely won’t.”

“What...even though we haven’t had to talk about you gibbeting people in so long...?” Sansui had left the Magyan Kingdom on good terms. However, upon hearing his daughter’s concern, he was reminded of his reputation he had carved out in blood in his own country. Sansui was saddened that it hadn’t just been propaganda spread around by a political enemy, but was instead a true story that his own employer had used and spread as a heroic tale.

Sansui went to bid farewell to Blois’s parents before he left for the capital. He had been staying with them for around a month, and they would be taking care of Lain while he was gone. It was basic good manners to bid them farewell before leaving.

“Thank you for everything. I’ll be leaving for the capital today to attend a wedding ceremony. Please continue to look after Blois and Lain in my absence.”

“Ha ha ha! No need to be so formal! Blois is my daughter and Lain is my granddaughter. It’s only natural that I’ll look after them both!”

“Yes, there is no need to be so formal when saying goodbye. In fact, you could have just said, ‘I’m off!’”

Blois’s parents laughed cheerfully. Thinking about it, they had the right of it—it wasn’t like Sansui was going that far, nor was he going off to war. He was only

attending a wedding, albeit a very large one. It wasn't really a situation where you had to be nervous. As such, it was normal for Blois's parents to see him off with a smile. However, that wasn't the case.

"I should tell you both," Sansui said, having decided to inform them of the reality of what might happen, "the decree I received also mentioned that there will be a demonstration at the wedding."

"A demonstration? Surely a wedding of that scale is already a demonstration of the nation's prosperity...or is that not what you mean?"

"The gifts you received from the Magyan Kingdom were extravagant. I guess you also don't mean that you're showing their gifts, as a display of not only the strength of the Magyan Kingdom, but also the strength of our country's relationship with them?" Blois's extremely mediocre noble parents could only think of normal "wedding demonstrations." Those in themselves were all valid displays of power; however, Sansui had something a lot more severe in mind.

"I have often ended up having to use my sword in demonstrations for Sepaeda. There have been times when it was needed and times where I was simply following orders, and that was the outcome. As you both already know, there have been many incidents where I have had to spill blood..."

The "gibbeting" that Lain often brought up referred to when Sansui followed Douve's orders and decapitated a full group of assassins. He had been directly ordered to let their heads roll, so he had done exactly as he was asked. They were assassins, after all, and really couldn't complain if they were the ones who got killed instead of their targets. Sepaeda had then lined up and displayed the severed heads, which was also somewhat understandable. Gibbeting itself was a part of Japanese culture, so he couldn't say it was strange that the people of this country had done it as well.

Sansui killing the assassins was Sepaeda's way of sending a message, and there was nothing strange about that. The fact that the story of the gibbeting was still circulating was good evidence that it had been successful. However, it wasn't fun being at the center of the rumors, and it especially hurt when his daughter brought it up.

"My job includes a lot of terrible things at times... I may bring trouble to Lain

and Blois, as well as to this family.” It was to be expected when you made your living being a swordsman. Even though you knew it was needed, it was always upsetting seeing how it affected those around you.

“Master Sansui, you don’t need to be ashamed about that. You also don’t need to apologize to us,” said Blois’s father, Senve, looking confidently at Sansui. Senve spoke with real conviction, although he then looked apologetic, as if trying to hide the fact that he felt he was at fault. “You’re doing all you can to support your wife and child, after all. No matter what anyone says about it, that’s got nothing to do with you.”

Sansui felt relieved. Blois’s mother, Kette, stood beside Senve, looking quite down. Sansui had meant to be self-deprecating, but it seemed it was tormenting the two of them.

“Back when I inherited this land from its owner, everyone was saying that I had sold my own daughter in order to buy this land. In fact, that was exactly the case. It’s not that I had done something and gotten promoted for it; instead, I had simply responded to a request from my predecessor. I wish I could say it was due to my daughter’s dedication, but in fact, it was because I had sold her. I was unable to argue otherwise.” Senve looked like he was about to break down into tears, and Kette looked like she had just finished crying.

“I’ll tell you again. We will protect Blois and Lain when you’re not here. We will protect them from others... It’s only natural.”

“Up until now, we’ve always been supported by Blois, and we’ve been unable to help her. You were always supporting her in our stead. Now, it’s our turn to protect our family.”

Sansui felt ashamed again. These two were definitely mediocre nobles, but that wasn’t to say that they had been living in peaceful ignorance. This couple knew what despair tasted like, and were fully fledged adults as a result. They had experienced what Sansui was worried about and were able to imagine how he felt. It was as if they were saying, “Don’t worry about it. Leave it to us.” Or, since they were family, they were asking him to rely on them.

“Understood. I’ll head off to the royal capital now.”

It would have been harder on them if he hadn’t let them step up like that,

because then they would feel as though they couldn't do anything. Sansui, knowing this, prayed that he wouldn't cause them any trouble.

"I...believe in them."

Sansui was able to head to the capital with no worries or fears. Even if it ended with a mountain of bodies, he had vowed that it was a part of his job to demonstrate on House Sepaeda's behalf.

Part 4 — Greetings

The royal capital feels like it's covered in dark clouds, or like a forest is blocking out the sun, like it's an area full of problems. But that had all occurred more than a year ago, and now the city is gearing up for a wedding ceremony. It's an auspicious event, with nothing else present to suggest otherwise, so it's normal to be excited for it.

However, I'm thinking about the catastrophic, planet-annihilating amount of damage Suiboku can bring down if he gets mad enough. That possibility has arisen due to other countries interfering with him and, Suiboku's ire aside, is something that needs to be dealt with. Bloodshed is probably the only solution.

I arrive at the Sepaeda mansion in the royal capital and greet His Lordship with a stern expression.

"Your weapons instructor, Sansui Shirokuro, has arrived. I am ready to follow your every order as the sword of Sepaeda and cut down as many people as you require."

This is my work, and I have to do it. I'll gibbet one hundred people if they ask. After talking to Blois's parents, I know what I have to do.

Lord Sepaeda seems surprised. "I have nothing to ask of you. Well, at least not at the moment," His Lordship responds.

"What?" I ask, after a moment's hesitation.

"I certainly did write in the decree that there would be a demonstration, and I still plan to do that. However, we all think that it should be without bloodshed."

When he says "all," he means the king and the leaders of the Four Great Houses. The people who are at the helm of the kingdom are all in agreement.

"The last time there were peace talks, the exiled nobles and sore losers of Domino were all put to the sword. We acted violently, and that in turn triggered even more violence. However, this time, a lot of countries are present with us today. If we are to do anything bloody, it could lead to a multitude of problems thereafter." Last time, their opponents were actively being cut down, so they

could act decisively against them. However, the other neighboring countries are going to be working with them for the foreseeable future. Thus, Arcana is unable to do anything extreme.

“The most important goal is to protect the neighboring countries from your master. Who knows what it would be like if we were to add that to the current situation?”

His Lordship looks exhausted from the tension of the situation. Trying to appease a disgruntled Suiboku is a task in itself, and no doubt one that is chipping away at his sanity.

“I am sorry,” I say, on behalf of my master.

“This is a result of our carelessness. Neither you nor your master Suiboku are in the wrong. Although, if you allow me to give one excuse...it would be that Master Suiboku is too strong, and I never once thought there would be fools who would target him.”

His Lordship apologizes in turn, blaming himself. He feels ashamed, having presumed too much, and having lost his sense of objectivity in the process. “Well anyway...we will have guests visiting from the Magyan Kingdom. It would be inexcusable to spill blood in front of guests who have come such a long way.” His Lordship hadn’t been able to attend his younger sister’s wedding ceremony in Magyan. Even so, he had heard from his younger sister and father that it had been a good ceremony. Knowing that, there is simply no way that they can have blood spilled at the ceremony here in Arcana.

“Tahlan and Sunae will be joining my family. We must be successful today in order to ensure the safety of their homelands.” While he can’t hide how tired he is, His Lordship still wears an earnest expression. I can feel how much he wants this ceremony to be successful.

His Lordship pauses briefly. I’m surprised by his serious expression.

“What’s with that face? Are you thinking that I’m saddened by Tahlan and my younger sister’s ceremony?”

“To be honest, yes.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m happy about it. However, Tahlan has been so sincere

with us. I am not so evil that I would go and betray that.” The current acting lord seems bitter at first. However, he had tested my resolve, and realizing that I had passed, he had admitted his feelings. After all, I’ve continued to bring results, and during that time, I have also become proud of my role as Sepaeda’s strongest swordsman. His Lordship and His Fathership are difficult at times, but they learn from their mistakes.

“This wedding ceremony will also be us welcoming Tahlan. Hence why we have chosen to make our demonstration very ‘wedding-like.’”

In other words, I’m someone who is unable to hold a “wedding-like” demonstration. I’m a little hurt. Whenever I hold a demonstration, it’s always accompanied by bloodshed, so it feels a little sad knowing that others have realized that too. To be honest, I hadn’t even considered that it would be a “wedding-like” demonstration.

“We have decided on this so that the wedding ceremony can remain a place of celebration and so that people will not fear us. You won’t have to do anything, so relax.”

“Thank you.” There are no plans to fight. That’s fine. It’s a lot better than being told, “No matter what, you have to fight.”

“You will be treated as one of the many senior vassals. Enjoy yourself and celebrate your pupils’ wedding.”

Although it sounded stupid to Sansui, as this was a wedding ceremony, it was customary to greet the spouses-to-be. It was especially important in this case, given that one of them was a member of the royal family. Sansui, feeling ashamed that he had jumped the gun a little, changed into formal clothes and headed out. However, as this wedding was being held for three couples, he had to think about who to greet first. He first thought of going straight to his mistress, Douve, but instead decided to pay his respects to Setenve and Ukyou. He was somewhat close with the other two couples, but not this one.

As such, he decided to get the process of seeing them out of the way instead of putting it off so he could be in good spirits when he went to visit the others. All he had to do was greet them and say congratulations. It was a superficial meeting, after all.

I doubt they want to talk to me for long anyway.

As Sansui thought of what to say to the couple, he could only come up with stock phrases. He didn't know either of them well, and they seemed to dislike him for some reason. It probably was best to keep it completely surface-level with them and not overstay his welcome.

"Master Sansui, please come on in."

Or so he had thought, anyway. Instead, the situation had taken an unexpected turn. As he entered the castle and prepared to state why he was there, he was swiftly ushered in.

Huh? Why are they just letting me in?

He figured it wasn't too strange, though; maybe the couple had nothing else to do? However, they were talking with two other people when he arrived. As such, Sansui thought that he would be made to wait. *There goes my plan.*

He wondered what they intended to say to him; while thinking about it was giving him a bad feeling, it would be impolite to just suddenly leave after having been let into the castle. Therefore, Sansui prepared himself and headed into the room.

"Mr. President, Your Highness. Pardon me," Sansui said, greeting them as he entered the room. However, the response came neither from the princess nor from Ukyou.

"Ah, Sansui! Long time no see!"

"I heard of your heroic exploits in Magyan. Splendid work."

Caputo's Shouzo Kyoube and the current heir to Caputo, Paulette Caputo, were standing in the room. Domino's ruler, Ukyou, along with his bride-to-be, Setenve Arcana, also greeted Sansui, somewhat belatedly.

"I apologize for gathering you all here. But Setenve thought it would be awkward if it were just us three. Paulette and Shouzo were both fine with it, so they came along too," Ukyou explained. "Take a seat." Ukyou was speaking bluntly, but it seemed Setenve was grateful for that, urging Ukyou to carry on talking.

“Huh...” Humans were often quite confusing. Sansui had only planned to greet them and leave; instead, it now seemed it was turning into a full-fledged meeting.

This is awkward.

It was to be expected, in a way. Sansui didn't have many connections outside of House Sepaeda and House Batterabbe. Even though Setenve and Ukyou were acquaintances, the idea of sitting down with them and talking for a long time made him nervous.

“First of all...I apologize for causing so much trouble for your master. I thought I was showcasing Danua, who can make immense quantities of goods, but instead it seems it was your master, who can cultivate anything, who was targeted instead.”

Ukyou, either aware of the tension or not, brought up a topic to discuss. He had decided to apologize, even though he hadn't personally caused any problems for Sansui, but rather for someone close to him. He was taking responsibility by making sure to cover all his bases.

“I ask that you excuse me. I have a good reason for so recklessly giving out Coiled Peaches.”

They had not just spread the panacea to every disease around just to boast about having it, naturally, which made him curious as to what the real reason was. It wasn't Ukyou who began to explain, but Setenve.

“One reason is that we want to show the strength of our nation. As you are already aware, the Arcana Kingdom has formed a substantial alliance with the Domino Republic. As a result of years of tyranny and internal fighting, the Domino Republic has been incredibly impoverished, and so Arcana has been carrying the financial burden for their rebuilding effort. It wouldn't be strange for people to think that our nations are going to collapse together.”

Thinking about it, mutual collapse seemed almost certain. However, Arcana had people with substantial military prowess. If anyone were to attack, they would be swiftly repulsed; however, there would still be damage incurred in that scenario. In order to avoid that, the Arcana Kingdom had to display their power, showing that it would be better to remain jealous than to be despised.

“By obtaining superior healing methods, we would be able to prepare against epidemic diseases, and in emergencies we could reduce the wear and tear on our troops. If we had just distributed the magical fruit, it would have been difficult to properly maneuver the other countries. I know it’s a bit late to claim it was Danua after everything, but we didn’t think it would be such a huge deal...”

“And this was the result. It’s not the best look.”

The political aspects of it aside, the results of their actions were very clear. The prospective bride and groom were regretting rousing the danger of the god of destruction.

“Lamenting the situation will solve nothing. Why don’t the both of you work on solving the problem instead?” Paulette inquired, interrupting in order to cheer the couple up.

“That’s right! I can help with this! Leave it to me!” Shouzo responded to Paulette, patting himself on the chest.

There was no one in the Arcana Kingdom who could even hold a candle to Shouzo’s raw power. If you saw the extent of what he could do, you’d know immediately not to invade a country containing such a person.

“I’ll do my best! I’ll show everyone my shocking magic power! Of course, I’ll also make sure that I don’t cause *too* much damage.” He made sure to add extra emphasis on that last part. It was proof that he didn’t fully believe in his ability to do so, but even so, it was good that he was trying to be careful. It would have been much more worrying if he wasn’t.

When I first met Saiga and the others, they were a lot worse. At least Shouzo isn’t too bad.

Sansui was putting how he used to be before he became an Immortal to one side while praising Shouzo and putting down Saiga. However, that was because he wasn’t aware of how he actually was. No doubt Shouzo would surprise him as he got to know him better.

“I don’t think threatening the wedding guests will achieve anything, so I’ll do my best to avoid starting a war. I will really try my best!” Shouzo was acting just

like Saiga right now. Paulette smiled despite herself.

“All right, we’ll leave it to you, Shouzo.”

“Apologies for forcing this onto you, but give it your all.” Ukyou and Setenve thus both surrendered the fate of their nations to him. Though, at this point, it wasn’t just the fate of their own nations, but of other nations too.

“All right, enough of the formal talk.” Shouzo had decided to suddenly change the topic.

“What...?” Paulette tried to ask Shouzo what he meant by that, but was interrupted as he turned to Ukyou and Setenve to ask a disrespectful question.

“So you two are getting married, huh? How do you feel about that?”

Of course, everyone was curious about that, but it wasn’t the kind of question you were supposed to ask people who were your superiors. Sansui wanted to point that out to him, but Shouzo’s eyes were sparkling. He simply had to hear how they were feeling about it. Sansui couldn’t bring himself to say something rude to him about it. In fact, if Sansui were to say, ‘Don’t say such rude things,’ that would in turn end up being rude. The couple was due to get married, and from looking at them sitting side by side, they seemed quite satisfied.

“Y-You can’t just suddenly ask things like that!” Paulette shouted, trying to warn him, using an opportune lull in conversation to mention it. That said, that in itself was problematic. It shouldn’t be that strange to ask your superiors how they were feeling about their upcoming marriage.

I’m the same, but if you think too deeply about it, you forget how it looks on the outside.

Sansui, who had calmed down earlier, realized that Shouzo was more than likely just thinking about the wedding rather than anything else.

“Lady Paulette, it’s all right. It’s understandable that someone would want to ask how the princess of their nation felt about getting married,” Ukyou responded, returning to his senses—or, rather, untensing his shoulders. One could say it was his way of going from official to unofficial. “If you ask Setenve anything, you won’t get much out of her, so just ask me instead.”

“You can’t just...!”

“If I say something strange, you’re very welcome to call me out for it. I don’t plan to complain about you, so you don’t have to get mad or anything,” Ukyou stated casually, calming Setenve down. She looked like she had more to say, but she managed to hold back. It didn’t seem like he was going to say anything inappropriate, and if he did, she could scold him then and there.

“Shouzo, you were probably expecting us to gush about our love life, but unfortunately, I don’t have much to say in that regard. Setenve and I are both focused on our work, and when we do talk, it usually concerns internal or external political affairs... It’s embarrassing to admit, but we only really discuss how we plan to keep other nations in check. As for wedding plans, we’ve left that up to a specialist.”

“Wow... I guess the higher-ups like you guys have a lot to think about...”

Shouzo was very naive, so he neither despised nor pitied them. That was just his nature. There were things that he—a mere magic user—didn’t understand. However, Paulette and Sansui still felt on edge and were unable to calm down.

“But that doesn’t mean I dislike Setenve or anything, nor does Setenve dislike the fact that she’s marrying me,” Ukyou explained.

“Ah, that’s right! I mean, once you become a married couple, that’s just the kind of stuff you have to do.” Shouzo had managed to expertly talk around Ukyou’s frank yet vulgar statements. He was able to observe the lowest level of courtesy.

“We are always working, but that means we’re also always together. Setenve is someone who prioritizes work over romance, and while some people may think that’s kind of bland, I’m more or less the same as her. I guess you could say our values are aligned.”

Ukyou thus explained why they had no reason to gush over their love life. He wasn’t expounding on her charming feminine traits but was instead sincerely explaining the parts of her that he liked. What he was saying wasn’t necessarily embarrassing, but Setenve’s face was gradually turning red anyway.

“We both know that we won’t betray one another. That’s why we have no

worries regarding getting married, and it's also probably why we spend more time worrying about other things."

"Wow...it's almost like you've been married for years already!"

"Hey, that's not something you should say to newlyweds," Ukyou replied, calmly stopping Shouzo in his tracks. Setenve was quite obviously embarrassed. However, she didn't seem mad, nor did she try to deny being flustered.

I'm glad you have such a good bond, Lady Setenve.

Paulette was smiling at Setenve. She knew that whatever she could say here would further humiliate her.

Paulette...don't laugh at her.

Setenve was oblivious to Paulette's smile. She knew that if she were to say what she wanted to say, she would end up self-destructing with rage, so she chose to stay silent.

"If you wanna hear gushy love stories, why don't you ask the Immortal who recently had a daughter?"

"Huh?"

Ukyou had pointed the crosshair at Sansui. It seemed he wanted to continue discussing personal matters.

"Ah! That reminds me; you recently had a child! Congratulations!" Shouzo said to Sansui.

"Ah, correct, yes. We gave birth to a healthy little girl..." Sansui responded.

Ukyou had seemingly done this on purpose, given his mischievous laugh, while Setenve kept glancing over at Sansui's troubled face with a poised expression. Shouzo was genuinely congratulating his fellow ace from the bottom of his heart, while Paulette was laughing just like she had with Setenve before. Although Shouzo was sincerely offering his well-wishes to Sansui, the situation remained awkward. Setenve had felt the same before; however, she'd had Ukyou to save her from the situation. Meanwhile, Sansui had no one to save him. Even if Blois had been here, she wouldn't have been much help, and would no doubt have frozen up just like Sansui.

“It’s embarrassing to say, but we have yet to be married...”

“Well, you were in Magyan for around a year, so that much can’t be helped! I haven’t really spoken with Blois a lot, but she’s that mage who dresses like a guy, right? Were you guys already an item when I met her back then?”

It’s like he’s working with Lain...

Shouzo and Lain were complete opposites, but the way they naively asked questions was quite similar. Although Sansui had talked about this plenty of times before, he still struggled with what to say. It was a weakness he had yet to improve on.

“That’s right, yes. She made me aware of her feelings not long before that.”

Sansui decided to just go ahead and tell them the juicy details. They were certainly embarrassing, which they could probably tell just from his expression and tone of voice. For her part, Setenve was laughing at Sansui with a mischievous look in her eye. Sansui felt that it wasn’t very classy of her to find so much joy in other people’s suffering.

“Wow! Blois confessed to you? I would have never guessed!” Shouzo replied, shocked.

“Y-Yeah... I was also caught off guard...”

He had in fact been very surprised by it at the time. Putting that thought aside, he began to talk about the beginnings of their love.

I hope Blois doesn’t get mad at me for this...

He had just made the neighboring countries’ leaders and her own country’s princess aware that she was the one who had confessed to Sansui. It wasn’t so scandalous that Setenve and Ukyou could go around broadcasting the news, or even use it for blackmail, but it could have an effect on Blois’s dignity. After all, surely the evil witch Douve would be the first to know.

“I had seen her mature over the years, but I never really saw her in that way...”

“Yeah, I can imagine that. It would be a little weird, a five-hundred-year-old guy having the hots for a twenty-year-old girl.”

“Uh...yeah...” Sansui said, flinching a little at Shouzo’s direct but calm observation. He wasn’t necessarily wrong; instead, Sansui was in the wrong for having brought such personal matters to light. “Though, to be honest, I sort of lost all interest in that stuff while undergoing training...”

“Ah, that’s right. You never really had those kinds of thoughts to begin with.”

Sansui definitely knew that to be true. Around the time Blois had confessed to him, he really hadn’t been capable of having those feelings. He had simply been unable to look at her in a lustful way. That he had transcended sexual desire was, as usual, a source of great relief.

“So it makes sense that it was Blois who confessed, since you had zero interest in women back then.”

“Quite right. I was of two minds when Blois confessed to me...” Shouzo was actually quite the conversationalist. Sansui was surprised at how much he was sharing. “I always thought of her as a younger sister, but she changed me for the better. I would like to make her happy, as part of my duty in being a man.”

“Oh...how wonderful!” Shouzo responded. Sansui kept talking, guided by Shouzo. It helped that Ukyou, Setenve, and Paulette were all listening along to Sansui’s tale of love without any rude remarks.

“So, do you have any cute stories to tell us?” Shouzo asked.

“Unfortunately not...” It wasn’t that he didn’t have anything to say, of course. He decided to continue. “You could say that we are similar to Ukyou and Setenve—though that may come across as rude—in that Blois and I also share the same values. Our personalities are similar too. We both have led lives so focused on combat that neither of us really knows how to spend time with one another...”

Sansui couldn’t even flirt, let alone talk about flirting. He was still very new to it all. When he admitted that, the atmosphere became a little more relaxed, to the point that it wouldn’t have been strange for someone to laugh about it.

“I guess when it comes to that, I should probably ask the princ—I mean, Lady Douve and Lord Tahlan,” Sansui suggested.

“Ahh...” Shouzo responded, understanding what Sansui meant. The other

three also knew what he meant without having to ask. “Those two really are amazing, huh?”

“They are amazing. Especially Lord Tahlan. He is very much in love.” Sansui nodded. Even during the turmoil in the Magyan Kingdom, Lord Tahlan had remained a stand-up guy.

“Is it true that a bunch of women who wanted to be Lord Tahlan’s wife were working to overthrow the country?”

“That’s true, yes. They all worked together, along with his mother, to put Lord Tahlan on the throne. We were able to see that it ended peacefully, but they were on the verge of a civil war before that.”

“I wonder why they wanted to make the person they liked king...”

“I wonder that too.”

Sansui thought about going into all the ins and outs of the situation in regards to why they would want to make Tahlan king. However, thinking about it normally, Shouzo was right. Tahlan himself was against it, and there was absolutely nothing moral about it.

“Hey, Setenve, why don’t you invite Tahlan to come see Arcana’s throne?” Ukyou asked his fiancée.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Setenve retorted. There were some jokes in this world that you just shouldn’t make. A groom suggesting that his wife cheat on him ahead of the wedding was probably a prime example of that. “I don’t even really like Lord Tahlan. Even if he can’t become king, he should still do his utmost for his kingdom. He’s probably never even felt the need to give in to the temptation of the throne.”

Tahlan was charming, but that didn’t mean every woman would fall for him. It wasn’t that those women had bad taste; instead, it was more that they had a clear idea of what they looked for in a man.

“Yeah...I’ve never really looked at him like that either. He definitely is charming, but I can’t see him as anything else...”

“Wow... Ah!”

As Paulette began to talk about her taste in guys, Shouzo froze after being deep in thought for a while. After all, he was the one who had destroyed her marriage proposal.

“S-Sorry, Lady Paulette...would you possibly have preferred to marry him?”

“What? Ah, ah! No, no, not at all! I still have a desire to get married. However, that doesn’t mean I think badly of you—quite the opposite, in fact...!”

The naive youngster and the modest young lady continued to talk past one another for quite a while.

I guess this is what you would call a lovers’ quarrel...

Sansui was able to sense what was going on between them.

“Hey, hey, hey, let’s leave Paulette’s marriage proposal for another day. We have stuff that we can only really do today with everyone gathered here, right?” Ukyou interrupted. Although the situation was interesting, Sansui felt bad for those two being put to one side. “I wonder how Saiga and his harem are doing. He always seems to be taking on tons of responsibility...”

“Yes, it’s exactly as you say. I felt Lord Saiga was carrying a lot of burdens when he returned to Batterabbe. Regarding those three, though...”

There were a lot of heavy topics to discuss, even though it was just before a wedding celebration. However, a lot of that heaviness came as part of the job. You could even say that all the members of these different factions being able to talk and laugh like this was a sign of things going well in this country.

Part 5 — First Steps

Sansui had finished talking with Ukyou and Setenve. Now that he was done with them, he would be meeting with people he knew well, so he felt a lot more relaxed. It might not have been the best idea to leave Sepaeda until last, but that conversation might end up going on for a while, so he decided to pay the Batterabbe couple, Saiga Mizu and Happine Batterabbe, a visit first. Compared to the other couples, they were quite young.

“Sansui...long time, no see,” Saiga greeted Sansui.

“It hasn’t been that long,” Happine retorted.

“I wonder... It feels like I haven’t seen him in years...”

“You’re exaggerating, Saiga.” For his part, Saiga looked exhausted. Happine didn’t look quite as tired, but that was no doubt down to Saiga not being so used to these kinds of things.

“I’ve...been meeting with so many people today. I don’t know who is who...”

Are you really fit to be a politician?

He’d had to take in a continuous amount of information with no chance to digest any of it and had gotten confused. It was the job of a head of house to meet with a lot of people and listen to what they had to say, yet he wasn’t managing at all. This was his trial by fire.

He should have at least undertaken some appropriate studies...

Sansui was also someone who was only skilled at fighting, so he understood what Saiga was going through. Since he understood it too well, he figured it would be best if Saiga received instruction from someone else other than himself.

“Saiga puts too much pressure on himself. They’re only greetings.”

Happine was cold in response. As the heir of the house was marrying, it was normal that he would have to meet with a lot of people, starting with the nobles serving under his house. Sansui knew he was one of many people taking

up Saiga's time. Most of the visitors had only come because it would have been bad manners not to do so, so they weren't that serious about the whole affair. They planned to greet the newlyweds, offer some tepid compliments, give their thanks, then leave. Doing that with several people was no doubt difficult; however, the people coming to give their greetings knew that their group was one of many.

"We'll be sure to sit down and do all of those political and economic talks you imagine eventually. So, for now, just be calm. Or I won't wait for you."

"But I mean...my visitors might dislike me if I'm not prepared..."

"That's why I told you to just say noncommittal things."

"But if it's all noncommittal...that might hurt my visitors' feelings..."

"It's the visitors' fault if they get upset!"

She's strong...

Saiga had mostly been meeting with people from within Arcana. All of them were of a lesser rank than Saiga, who was due to become heir. Even if he did say something that they didn't like, the person would have to suck it up and leave it at that.

"It's good that you're serious about it, though. If the heir who joined the family via marriage began looking down on people and getting greedy, people would probably abandon you."

"Th-Then..."

"I'm saying there's a limit to it! You've still got a lot of people to meet with today and you're already exhausted! Think of your health!" Happine scolded him.

There was no hint of disappointment or resentment in her words. He was successfully avoiding what he considered his biggest failure. However, he had focused so much on not making that mistake that he had tired himself out.

"That reminds me. I heard there were some guests here from the Magyan Kingdom. Have you two met with them yet?"

Surprisingly, greeting the Batterabbe couple was turning out to be more tiring

than meeting with the royal pair. The two of them were busy and didn't really have time for a friendly chat. Therefore, Sansui decided to change the topic.

"Yeah, we already spoke with them. They seem to be with Lord Tahlan at the moment."

"It seems they'll be getting shown around the palace ahead of the wedding ceremony."

It would make sense that the visitors from the Magyan Kingdom would head to see Tahlan, especially since he had been living in the royal capital for a while, so he would be able to show them around.

Now that I think about it, Magyan is quite far from Arcana, and it'll probably be a little weird for them being here. They probably want to see a lot.

Since it was a totally foreign culture to them, it might take them a while to be shown around. In that case, they might still be touring the palace when Sansui went to greet Lady Douve and Lord Tahlan, meaning that Sansui might end up meeting the guests as well. He wasn't really feeling up to that, but it would be more rude if he went out of his way to avoid them.

"Ah, that reminds me. The envoys from Magyan told me that they were secretly watching our duel," Saiga mentioned.

"*That* duel?"

"Yep! The one where Saiga tied with you!" Saiga had tried to downplay it somewhat, but Happine was full of pride. It seemed like she had also wished for revenge for the three defeats Saiga had endured and was quite pleased that the last duel came to a draw. While it was less than ideal that she was gloating about it to Sansui, who had after all been Saiga's opponent in the duel, it would have been even worse for him to take offense.

"Ha ha ha..."

"That's right, your fiancé has gotten a lot stronger."

"Right!"

Sansui wasn't going to say that Happine hadn't actually done anything. The reason Saiga had become so strong was due to Happine always being by his

side, shouldering part of the burden of his suffering. She did have some right to be so smug.

“Happine...stop, you’re gonna make me blush.”

“But you’re happy, right?”

“I guess.”

That was exactly it. The reason Saiga had tried so hard was because she wanted him to become a man she could brag about.

After leaving the Batterabbe couple, Sansui followed the trail left by Lord Tahlan and Lady Douve as he walked through the palace. It wasn’t rude or anything, and the two of them hadn’t stopped at any one place.

They really are in love.

Moving through where they had traveled through the palace, Sansui had actually arrived somewhere before them.

“Arcana’s castle is quite small compared to the one in our home city. I guess it’s because this country doesn’t have Spirit Summoning, so I suppose it’s not a bad thing.”

“Oh my. While it *is* small, one could take that as a bad thing. You’re marrying into this family, so shouldn’t you be a bit more careful with your words?”

“Ha ha ha! You’re right. That’s why I really don’t think it’s a bad thing. But please understand that I don’t wish to put down my own home city in front of my father’s vassals.”

“Ah, what a dilemma.”

Just from hearing their voices, you would assume the noble bride-to-be was tormenting her groom. However, from looking at their faces, that was obviously not the case at all. Douve was laughing and Tahlan was wearing a bright smile. Neither of them was laughing just to make the other feel better; they were genuinely elated as they spoke.

“His Highness Tahlan likes his women like that, I see. The young women who didn’t realize that are no doubt full of regret, wishing that they had treated him

so,” said the guest from the Magyan Kingdom who was walking behind the couple. He himself was a high-ranking figure, just like how the Arcana Kingdom had sent a former family head. He was around the age of retirement; even so, he still had a strong gait.

“Ah, when Tahlan and I are together, we end up showing off how close we are as a couple more than we do the palace. Should I take my leave?” Douve asked.

“What are you saying? There is nothing I want more than to see you two getting along together.”

“I understand that but... Oh?” The three of them finally noticed Sansui.

“Long time no see, Mistress, Master. I have been given the honor of attending your wedding ceremony,” Sansui greeted them.

“Oh... That’s no good. I thought you would be spending time with your wife and daughters...”

“No, I have already taken a long break.”

“You haven’t been able to see them for a long time, though. Not since you got sent to Magyan, right? I figured you wouldn’t want to be away from there any longer as a father and a husband. We should have at least held the ceremony in Sepaeda...” Douve and Tahlan seemed sincerely apologetic. They knew that Fanne had been born when Sansui was in Magyan, and they felt bad about taking him away.

“No, no. This is important to the nation. I am honored to be here today.”

The two of them did seem to feel really bad about it, but they also both knew they lacked the power to change the plans for the ceremony. All they could do was apologize. Sansui was satisfied with that.

“Well, well, Sansui. I haven’t seen you since Magyan.”

“Yes... I apologize for interrupting your time together.”

“Not at all... In fact, the two of them are already very passionate ahead of their wedding ceremony. If it’s all right with you, Sansui, shall we take a walk together?”

It seemed the guest who was with the newlyweds wished to speak with

Sansui. He was hoping to finish greeting Douve and Tahlan, but he wasn't so busy that he could decline the guest's offer.

"Mistress, Master...would that be okay?" Sansui asked the newlyweds.

"Yes... I would have liked to talk with Lain, Blois, and Fanne...but for today, just a greeting from you will suffice," Douve responded.

"Master Sansui, I would ask that you accompany him, as he is from my home country," Tahlan said, giving his approval. The two of them clearly had no issues with his departure.

With that settled, Sansui took his leave and went to walk with the Magyan representative. The original aim was to show him around the castle; however, Sansui understood that was merely a pretext.

"With all due respect, I didn't believe the report that Prince Tahlan had returned to Magyan from the Arcana Kingdom until I met with him directly."

"It was unavoidable. It was around the time when there were dire rumors circulating about His Majesty Magyan Khan, which was really quite unfortunate."

The representative's words no doubt showed his true feelings. It was a far too common scam—someone saying that they had come from a country so far away that no one had heard of it. The fact that he had believed Lord Tahlan upon meeting him was not only a testament to how much he trusted him, but also due to a full-fledged delegation having come along with him. If he believed him upon seeing that, it was neither rude nor too late.

"I am ashamed of my ignorance, not knowing that a country like this existed so far away."

"Please don't feel ashamed. All of us in Arcana wouldn't have known about your country if it weren't for Sunae. We should also feel ashamed."

"Her Highness Sunae..."

The guest let out a sigh. Not only was she Tahlan's sister, she was also the only person left with the right to succeed the throne. It seemed he was remembering her display of royal magnificence back in Magyan.

“Lord Tahlan left the country with His Majesty’s permission. However, Her Highness Sunae left without a word. We thought that she had left to follow Tahlan...but we never expected that she would return with those vassals in tow...”

She had seemingly followed Tahlan and then returned with him. Nobody had believed that would happen, not even him. However, thanks to the royal exhibition match, as well as the secret rematch, her reputation had increased significantly. Even her subordinates had become popular without her having to do anything, no doubt down to her royal influence.

“Yes, Lady Sunae’s accomplishments are not inferior to Lord Tahlan’s,” Sansui said, despite worrying that he was puffing her up too much. However, it seemed the Magyan representative didn’t think so.

“Exactly. The citizens of our nation, as well as the royal families of neighboring territories, can’t help but admire her feats.”

“Is Arcana any different to how you imagined it to be?”

The warriors who had participated in the royal exhibition match had mostly been people from Tempera, as well as two Japanese people. Those seven people had left an impression on the people of Magyan, and Douve and the former head of House Sepaeda not participating should have diluted their impression of people from Arcana.

“The five people from Tempera are without a doubt followers of Lady Sunae. However, I can’t say that Arcana and Tempera have an active relationship...”

“Ha ha ha! I had heard already. After all... No, that’s quite tactless of me.”

He seemed to know a lot about the secret rematch. The four martial artists, aside from Ran, were just wannabes. If you were going to put someone before the king, you should pick someone suitable to represent your homeland. The fact that they couldn’t do that... It was enough to work out the relationship between Arcana and Tempera from that alone.

“Everyone in Magyan probably thinks of Arcana as a place where various abilities are in widespread use or as a country that is completely shrouded in mystery. Except the only powers that are in widespread use here are magic and

the Mystic Arts, as well as the Hex Arts, which are mostly used in trials. As for the Immortal Arts and Tempera's martial arts...outside of the people in the royal tournament, there is no one in Arcana who uses those."

Sansui laid out the bare reality. He wanted the visitor to be aware of the difference between the image Magyan had and the actual reality of it all.

"Yes, that is the case now. However...it isn't too far-fetched to think that the mistaken impression will soon be reality."

There had been movements within Arcana to allow the spread of new Rare Arts. Among those Arts were Four Vessels Style, Bursting Venom Style, Drunken Fist Style, Mist Shadow Style, and Silver Demon Style. It was known that you needed to be from a certain bloodline in order to use those five abilities. The people had accepted that, and there was a good chance that they would eventually become widespread within Arcana. However, at that current point in time, there was zero chance of any of them spreading to Magyan or its surrounding areas.

"If I were to return here ten years from now, this country might just be as my people imagine. Magyan can't lose..."

Arcana was quite a big country, and they were able to change when they wanted to. If Arcana could do it, there was nothing saying Magyan wouldn't be able to do it either. Actually, that had to be the case, or otherwise the Magyan Kingdom would be accused of incompetence.

"Although...first of all, I would like to celebrate His Highness Tahlan's wedding. I must be sure to enjoy it as much as I can in place of His Majesty."

Sansui sensed a change in his mood. His tone had become more serious, though that wasn't to say that he had been joking around previously.

"In all honesty, I was worried that His Highness Tahlan and Her Highness Sunae were feeling ashamed of themselves in a distant country somewhere."

Tahlan and Sunae had both set out on their own solo journeys. The fact that both of them were able to marry in a different country showed that they had overcome most obstacles with their own abilities. Magyan had recognized that, but it was normal to have a certain wariness about the wedding. After all, going

as far to worry about them was what a family member would do.

“However, it seemed my fears were utterly groundless. The Arcana Kingdom welcomed two members of a royal family they had never heard about.”

“As you already know, Lord Tahlan is a sincere and brave man. Lady Sunae is also a standout figure, representative of her kingdom’s dignity. It’s not that we’re special; it’s that they’re both highly skilled people,” Sansui confidently stated, laying out the reasons why Arcana had taken them both in. “No matter how big Arcana is, if there is something not worth accepting, Arcana will act accordingly. The fact that we accepted them is a testament to their skill.”

“Ah. You’re right.”

There would always be people who were jealous of skilled people and would treat them coldly or persecute them. The more skilled you were, the more people would resent you. They would take pleasure in looking down on you. Those kinds of people were no doubt in every country, even in Arcana and Magyan.

“I have been granted an audience with Arcana’s king and with the leaders of the four great noble houses. The leaders of this country warmly accept others and their differences. There may be those who say heartless things, but as long as I have such strong examples, I have no need to worry,” the visitor said as he looked at Sansui. “That includes you. Arcana’s strongest swordsman, Sepaeda’s ace, the Sword Apostle, the Young Blademaster...Master Sansui Shirokuro.”

Sansui was Tahlan’s sword tutor and an Immortal, born neither in Magyan nor in Arcana. Although a stranger, he had received the utmost hospitality and was acknowledged as an unparalleled swordsman.

“I saw the duel between you and Her Highness Sunae’s fiancé. You won with ease at the royal tournament, even though I realized that you weren’t showing your true potential.”

“I apologize for holding back in a duel in such an honorable place.”

“What are you saying?! After such a fight, it was impossible to not be pleased with such a performance, regardless of how His Majesty felt. If anything, you both fought to match your opponent...” The envoy was exuding fear. He had

prided himself on being an adept swordsman, a cut above the rest; however, he had since discovered the existence of someone greater. That was what he feared.

“If I were ever up against you, I would preserve the dignity of my soldiers... I am deeply relieved that things were solved without it leading to a battle.”

“Yes, I am also very much pleased it ended without a fight.”

“Her Highness Sunae is to marry a wonderfully strong warrior. His Highness Tahlan is the pupil of a wonderfully strong swordsman... That is definitely reassuring.” The delegation’s chief representative would soon return back to his homeland, and he seemed very relieved that he could state honestly that the two of them had strong companions.

“Please continue to guide His Highness Tahlan...”

“Yes, leave it to me. I am Sepaeda’s combat instructor, after all!”

Chapter 2 — Ambiguous Words

Part 6 — Discomfort

In the medium-sized Oseo Kingdom, located south of the Arcana Kingdom, a secret meeting was held. Oseo was a mountainous country, with a sizable castle located at the foot of a large mountain. The castle had a large room especially for meetings; however, due to this not being an official meeting, it was instead being held in a storage room...not exactly suitable for a king.

The attendees of the meeting were all dressed in clothing that made it difficult to discern their ranks and statuses. That wasn't to say they were just wearing civilian outfits; they were in clothes that were as far away from their professions as possible. They also weren't secret agents infiltrating the castle; this was a normal proceeding. Whenever the king ordered espionage work, they would gather like this to report the results of their tasks. This way, it kept the king's hands clean of his vassals' dirty work. There was another benefit to this kind of meeting: as there were no records being kept, they were able to honestly report any failures.

"Your Majesty. The group of agents sent into the Arcana Kingdom have all been captured. Arcana has sent us an informal statement. Communications have ceased," the chief of the secret agents said, giving a painfully miserable report. In public, he had different duties, and his chubby appearance did not seem like the one of a spymaster, which was why he was a perfect fit for the role. That said, the report he had to give today was undeniably awful. "Even though you gave us an ample budget, as well as allowing us to focus mainly on this task, we gave it our all, only for things to end like this... I sincerely apologize for our lack of ability. We await your orders."

His graceful transparency was commendable. Since all of the secret agents who had been sent to infiltrate Arcana were in captivity, it could be that he genuinely couldn't think of an excuse. It wasn't only the king listening to his report, after all; there were a lot of senior vassals present too, all with agonized

expressions on their faces. They had understood that there was a chance of this plan failing, but none of them had anticipated the plan *completely* falling apart.

“Understood... As for orders, I’ve been considering various things...” It was a good thing this result wasn’t being recorded officially. The king, relieved by that, made a very important decision. “It stops here. We will completely give up on trying to obtain the Rare Art known as the Immortal Arts.”

Making decisions was a part of his job as king; however, declaring something ‘impossible’ wasn’t ideal as far as appearances went. Even so, all the present senior vassals nodded in response to the decision.

“Father! How cowardly of you!” The one person who spoke up wasn’t a senior vassal. It was the king’s heir, the crown prince, Black Oseo. “If you surrender now, that means we’ll have to accept the Arcana Kingdom’s rise to power. We should put together a plan to seize their power with all of our kingdom’s might!”

The prince was correct. It was too soon, just giving up at the first obstacle, and even if the same thing was to happen again, there were countries out there that would keep trying. That was why no one had any complaints about his statements. Even so, no one made a move to agree.

The king sighed, which prompted his son to continue, “First order of business should be punishing their incompetence!” The prince was referring to the chief of the secret agents. The spymaster was aware of his own incompetence, and therefore he didn’t attempt to argue against punishment. If this order were to go through, he would lose his position and his property. He might even be executed, although it didn’t seem he was particularly worried about that outcome. “And the agents who have been captured will be punished too! We’ll get a new chief, put together a new squad, and send them back in!”

These were all just suggestions. Rather than simply going along with random shouting about what should be done, it would first be discussed. The prince had missed something, though.

“Black. Your plan leaves something out,” the king said mildly.

“Missing something? Like what?”

“We don’t have a candidate to be our next chief.” The prince had called for the country to use all its might, but it already had, and it had failed. That was why the king had asked for them to give up. “You’re asking for someone better than our current chief. Who can we hire to do that?”

“Um, well...”

“The spymaster *does* have potential successors among his subordinates, but there are none on the same level as him. The same goes for the captured agents too.”

The prince wasn’t wrong; if the current people doing the job were incompetent, it should be left to someone else. That said, there was no point if there was no one else good enough to replace them.

“We also can’t train them. It would take years.”

Prince Black remained silent; he understood his father’s words, though he still didn’t know what to do.

“I’ll say it one more time. We are giving up because it is impossible. If the people we have for the job now are not enough, then our *country* is not enough.”

The Arcana Kingdom had five aces that they could place all their trust in. Although what they could do differed from ace to ace, they all performed exceptionally well in their fields of expertise. Other countries lacked that kind of confidence. They didn’t have people who had received abilities from God, nor did they have people like Ran, who was possessed by a demon, and they didn’t have bloodlines that allowed people to use Rare Arts, like House Caputo and the Saive family.

Their operatives mostly had average abilities. While they did have people who were trained and exceptionally skilled like Blois, there were only around ten of them. Those ten people had been assigned specific jobs, but they would be unable to perform properly as spies.

“If it’s impossible, there is nothing else but for us to give up.”

Prince Black let out a wordless exclamation of dissent.

It was true that they could still give up later, even if they tried over and over again. However, they had exhausted their trained personnel after only one attempt. The king was able to recognize the truth of the situation. Even though the prince was grown, he was still young, and he was struggling with accepting that difficult truth. He couldn't logically deny his father's words. If the prince had pupils he had trained personally, the situation would be different, but he didn't.

Regardless of that fact, the prince still couldn't give up. "If that's the case, let's cooperate with other countries! If we bring countries with a lot of Rare Art users onboard, we can have them train pupils in those Arts!" As ideas went, that one might work. Other countries had also sent their agents out to their neighbors in order to abduct their Rare Artists, so they could work together with them rather than all competing for it.

"Okay, do you have the diplomatic resources to make that happen?" the king asked the prince.

The prince had no response.

In order for that idea to work, they needed to have strong connections to the other countries. It wasn't impossible for them to begin working on that, but who knew how long that would take? The king understood the prince's feelings of inadequacy and his jealous feelings towards the other strong nations. But he also knew there was nothing that could be done about the situation. Unlike the prince, who thought that a king had absolute power, he knew the limits of his own nation and how inferior they were to other countries. He didn't only know that in his head, but also deeply within his heart. It wasn't a nice thing to realize.

"Those great countries are just going to keep getting bigger!" the prince exclaimed, repeating what everyone already knew. Everyone agreed with him, after all. They all wanted to steal the Rare Arts and, if possible, monopolize them entirely. Everyone wanted that, but...they all knew it was impossible and that they should give up. Even Prince Black, who kept whining about it, should have known to give up.

"I understand what you are saying. However, while we have no concrete

ideas, complaining about it so loudly is only adding insult to injury,” the king said quietly.

Black’s face went bright red and he couldn’t speak. It looked like he wanted to continue complaining, but instead he held back and took another look around the room. It was filled with senior vassals who seemed worried about the king’s heir.

“I apologize,” the prince said, holding back his true feelings. He hadn’t lost his passion, but he had at least stopped his ranting, realizing he was acting out of turn. The senior vassals were all relieved; it seemed that he did have all the appropriate qualities to be heir to the throne.

“Black. I don’t wish to overlook the Arcana Kingdom’s steady rise to power.” Rather than dwell on the situation, he began to introduce his own idea. “However, it will be difficult to handle by ourselves. We need to cooperate with other nations. Even though we don’t have the strongest diplomatic relationships currently, that is not to say that we can’t build any. That is a job for you, as my heir.”

“I see. You have an idea,” the prince remarked after a moment’s contemplation.

“As you are well aware, the Arcana Kingdom plans to hold a joint wedding ceremony. A lot of kingdoms who are opposed to Arcana will be gathering there.” Weddings were a means of conducting diplomacy for all countries. Moreover, they weren’t just an opportunity to network for the host of the wedding; they were also an opportunity for the guests to network amongst each other.

“In other words... You wish for me to hold a meeting there to bring about Arcana’s collapse?” the prince asked.

“That depends on your skill as a diplomat,” the king responded. The stronger a light shone, the darker the shadow. While the Arcana Kingdom held a grandiose marriage ceremony, the opposing kingdoms would be able to scheme towards their downfall in the shadows. The king, the prince, and the senior vassals all let out evil laughs.

“We won’t see the results immediately, but we can prepare. It’s good for you

to learn how to set the stage without causing too much of a commotion,” the king concluded.

Part 7 — Diplomacy

Prince Black entered Arcana in accordance with his wedding invitation. That invitation hadn't been faked; he had received it in an official capacity from Arcana itself, so he was able to enter the country normally. However, the wedding itself would take place within the capital; since he had entered from the south, he had to travel through the Batterabbe region. Prince Black had brought along an entire retinue of maids and knights, so he didn't feel that uneasy, and was able to take in the scenery accompanied by the slight shaking of the horse-drawn carriage.

He felt disgusted. He didn't feel insulted because he'd had rocks and mud balls thrown at him; this was simple jealousy. *Seeing how much land they have, it reminds me how small my country is...!*

The Arcana Kingdom had always been relatively large, whereas Oseo was medium-sized at best. In fact, Arcana was almost two times as large as Oseo. Moreover, Oseo had very little land they could actually cultivate due to all the mountains in their home region. Their size wasn't necessarily a bad thing, though. He didn't dislike his home country or its size. It was just hard not to notice the difference in their regions when entering a large country. He felt like even if Oseo were to invade, the Arcana Kingdom wouldn't think much of it, nor would it be that much of a threat.

It's annoying how we wouldn't be able to do anything with our numbers.

While emotionally he was on the verge of going for it, he knew gazing upon the tranquil countryside landscape that it wouldn't be possible. Looking at the situation objectively, he was traveling with around one hundred escorts; if you included the servants, who were just there to do odd jobs and were unable to fight, that number roughly doubled. Even though he had tried to gather strong people, he could only manage around one hundred of them.

That's right, this is the country...

There had been a number of rumors circulating about Arcana. Rumors about the Sword Apostle, who was over a hundred years old... About the owner of the

legendary sword, who could use any ability... About the mage with five hundred times more mana than an ordinary mage, who was capable of taking out an army... About the person who was completely compatible with the armor of entropy and disaster that had reappeared for the first time in a thousand years... About the dictator who had five Sacred Treasures in his possession...

I doubt these are groundless rumors... I can't imagine they would spread such ridiculous fairy tales. They're probably the result of that selfish princess running her mouth...

Normally, these kinds of rumors wouldn't have reached the rulers of other countries. The fact that they had was proof of Arcana going out of its way to confirm them. He didn't understand what they had planned to do, but the king and the leaders of the four great noble houses all guaranteed the existence of the five aces. Even then, Black didn't believe that was something to worry about. He was probably the only one who felt that way, but then again he was also one whose perceptions routinely deviated from the reality of the world.

I can at least believe that there is someone who is compatible with the Armor of Entropy and Disaster, and that there is someone in possession of five Sacred Treasures... Those things are easy to accept.

The existence of the Eight Sacred Treasures was known even in far-off Magyan. They were treasures created by God and given to mankind. Information regarding their functions and adaptability continued to be passed down through generations, not that people would necessarily take those stories seriously. Or at least, Black mostly didn't believe in the legendary Eight Sacred Treasures. You'd have to be insane to believe in something you hadn't seen with your own eyes.

But the annoying thing is, even without the Treasures, Arcana is still a huge threat!

Even if it was all a lie, there was still a substantial gulf in power between Black's kingdom and Arcana. There was still a real possibility that Oseo could acquire the Immortal Arts and that they could form an alliance with the Domino Republic, which was of equal size to Arcana.

With those two things, I could pave the path for a new superstate!

An unrealistic potential future appeared before him. However, it seemed that the neighboring countries also had their apprehensions regarding Arcana.

My father said it wouldn't be easy to form alliances with neighboring countries. It is hard to be optimistic but...it's a reality within our grasp.

A lot of “guests” from other countries were similarly concerned about Arcana’s development. As such, the foundation for building friendly relations had already been laid down. Their interests were the same, and they shared the same enemy.

I can't rush this. First I'll make plans to meet with them again, making a few friends along the way. If I suddenly bring up forming an alliance, it might invite suspicions. However...

Logistically, everything was coming together, and so it was easy to get carried away.

“I wonder...will I be able to put an alliance together immediately?” He knew himself that he was being idealistic. However, he was still young and naive. *If I made my first order as king an attack on this country...I would go down in history. Not only Oseo's history, but the world's history.* Somewhere deep down, he knew the idea was idiotic.

Hm, I wonder if Arcana has even noticed...that all the countries who oppose them are using this wedding ceremony as an opportunity to form an alliance against them. He was possibly thinking of the current situation in such a way to make it somewhat bearable.

A wedding ceremony. It's annoying...really annoying...but I came here as a representative of my nation. I need to think of a few congratulatory lines. Since he was at a wedding ceremony, he still had to go along with things, although his heart wasn't in it, and even though he planned to unleash his jealousy and hate as he wished for their destruction.

As if I have to wish for Arcana to prosper! What insincere words. Even though it annoyed him to no end, he was still serious about his task. A real politician was able to lie easily, no matter how much it pained them to do so. In that case, he might still seem sincere.

A few days passed in the horse-drawn carriage, and Black finally arrived at the kingdom's royal capital. As the princess was due to be married in a joint wedding, the capital was understandably busy. Nobles from throughout the country competed with one another to put on a grand show.

Prince Black wasn't annoyed by this fact. Under normal circumstances, he might have been bothered by the commotion, but since it was such a grand event, it was to be expected. He also thought that it was normal for the center of a nation to flourish like this, and it was impossible to measure a nation's capabilities with that alone.

"Well."

He had been placed in a lavish inn within the royal capital. Of course, Arcana was covering the costs. Just like Magyan, Arcana also had rooms within the castle reserved for guests. However, this time, their countries weren't on the best terms, so they had made sure to place him in such a way that he wouldn't have much chance to cross paths with them. If he had asked to be placed in the palace, they would have allowed it, but most envoys had chosen to stay in an inn, including Prince Black.

He scrutinized the list of attendees he had been given by the Arcana Kingdom. When inviting other countries to a wedding ceremony, it was customary to address the invitation to that nation as a whole. It was never clearly stated that they expected a nation to send anyone, allowing the receiver to choose if they would dispatch a delegate or not. Moreover, if a smaller nation were to request a larger country's presence rather than simply giving them the opportunity to be there, that could prove offensive. That said, it would also be rude to not send an invitation in the first place, but that didn't mean that smaller nations weren't aware of what caliber of nation they could safely request attendance from for their events.

In the same vein, if a larger nation were to request the presence of a smaller nation, it would be thought of as them exercising their authority. It wasn't rude, but neither was it regarded as classy. That was why, when nations sent wedding invitations, it was left up to the recipients to decide if they would attend or not. However, that also meant that the host couldn't anticipate which nations would attend, and therefore could not know in advance the caliber of the attendees.

Since Prince Black was next in line for the throne, he received the same treatment as a king. The Oseo Kingdom recognized the Arcana Kingdom as an important diplomatic destination.

There are countries on the same rank as mine, as well as countries above us, and people who are on the same level as the king here in attendance. You wouldn't know which countries had decided to attend until you were at the wedding site, though they would send a list of attendees ahead of the ceremony, allowing you to prepare ahead of time...to an extent.

Prince Black felt somewhat depressed upon seeing the guest list. "If my country were to hold a ceremony like this, I wonder if this many people would even attend." It was an empty worry. If Prince Black was to invite countries that Oseo was on good terms with, other crown princes or people of similar status would attend. In the case of the Arcana wedding, high-status people from other countries that weren't even on good terms with them were in attendance. That was the same for other countries who were regarded as large... In other words, it was very plain to see how much respect they had for Arcana.

It bothered him, but he could look at it positively. "I get to talk to all these people... This is actually ideal." Although the other countries held Arcana in high regard, that didn't mean that all of them were on good terms with the object of their esteem. In fact, most of them had their eyes on Arcana. "Did they not expect this? Even if so, I guess it's difficult being such a large country."

Black planned to take full advantage of this turn of events, but one could also say it was already an ideal situation. It hadn't come about naturally; instead, Arcana had created it. As a great power putting on a display of their prestige, the powerful Arcana had no choice but to invite several countries.

"If that is the case... Heh heh heh, maybe they'll come here too," the prince mused to himself, laughing genuinely for the first time since coming to Arcana. His laugh was short-lived, though, as a knock was heard against the door. One of his chamberlains entered the room.

"Your Highness, a guest from the Arcana Kingdom has arrived. Shall I let them through?"

"Yeah, let them in." It had turned out exactly as he had imagined; he could no

longer restrain how happy he was.

The chamberlain nodded to him and briefly left. When he returned, he had brought a young man with him.

“Your Highness, Prince Black Oseo, it is an honor to meet with you. I thank you for accepting our invitation. Welcome to the Arcana Kingdom.” One of the three grooms, Fuushi Ukyou, had entered the room. He was First Princess Setenve Arcana’s fiancé and ruler of the Domino Republic. “I never expected that a noble such as a crown prince would attend the wedding of a stranger with unknown origins such as myself.”

Seeing him grin, Black let out a scornful smile in return. “What do you mean? It’s a ceremony for the joining of the Arcana Kingdom and the Domino Empi— Ah, I mean, the Domino Republic. It wouldn’t be strange if my father attended, surely.” It was very easy for Black to offer these simple pleasantries, given how he felt a sense of superiority looking at Ukyou with his statesman smile.

In terms of destruction, Domino... Regardless of how ruined it is, and regardless of him being a foreigner, Ukyou holds a lot of authority. And for him to go out of his way to greet me...! One of the most influential people here had taken the initiative to come and visit *him*. He wasn’t here to offer his thanks for attending the wedding; he had come here to stop Black.

“I am glad I was able to meet with you, even though I didn’t send word in advance. The ceremony will begin soon, and I won’t have much time to speak with everyone...”

“I guess that can’t be helped. You are the groom, after all...” He was desperate to make friends, so he had paid Black a visit. One more friend meant one less enemy. Black took that as proof that both Arcana and Domino feared the surrounding nations. “You must be really busy right before the wedding, so I’m quite surprised that you came to visit me. There is no need to personally give greetings to just my country, after all.”

“Ha ha ha! Yes, you’re right. While it is embarrassing to admit, my bride Setenve and I are so busy that we’re dividing up the workload. We really should have come to visit you together.”

Black’s smile deepened as Ukyou gave his weak response. *You don’t even*

have the time to visit the envoys from the large nations! You understand the danger of my country! But that just means it's getting to the point where you can't do anything about it! Black got riled up just from thinking about that. He shamelessly reveled in the fact that he would soon bring them down.

“As you know, the Domino Republic is still in its infancy. And, as you can see, I'm also still very young for a leader. We are receiving aid from Arcana, and our financial situation isn't doing too well. We have no means of conducting independent diplomacy, and all we can do is accept Arcana's support...” Ukyou let out an exaggerated sigh as he laid out the reality of the situation. It felt a little performative, but Black was pleased that he felt the need to put on such a performance.

“What do you mean? I have seen the list of attendees, and there are plenty of noble houses from great nations who will not cause any trouble. Like my nation, for instance.”

“I am grateful for that. Since they are all here to attend my wedding ceremony, I should be playing the role of the joyful groom. However, I can't help but feel uneasy, wondering how many of the guests are sincerely wishing us well,” Ukyou stated honestly. He looked away from Black, wearing a troubled expression. “It seems a lot of assassins have been sent here to Arcana. I am the groom, after all, so I'm not privy to the details but...I heard that even some of the nations here today had sent their own killers.”

Black flinched momentarily. As Ukyou was looking away, he didn't catch the prince's expression. *Damn it...he's caught me off guard!* Realizing that he had made a mistake, he hurriedly tried to brush it off. He had no choice but to keep moving through it. *How annoying...he's made fools out of our agents!* Once again realizing that Arcana was untouchable, he felt a flush of shame, but he was unable to let Ukyou see that. Doing so would be political suicide. He regained his self-control and fixed his expression.

“I can imagine that's something large countries often have to worry about. There seem to be a lot of places that are jealous of those nations on the rise.”

“It's quite sad. I wonder if it stems from a mutual misunderstanding,” Ukyou said, fixing Black with a piercing look. It felt almost like it was on purpose. “You

surely don't plan on returning home once the ceremony is over, right? If it's all right with you, after the ceremony everyone will be gathering together in order to deepen their friendships..." Behind the scenes, they were on opposite sides; however, their motivations were one and the same: using this wedding as a means of networking.

"That sounds wonderful. I would love to join," Black responded, playing along. *No one's going to come to your little gathering. Better yet, no one really wants to be friends with you!* The prince laughed and smiled. "That said, I am the crown prince. If there is urgent news from my country, it may be that I have to return suddenly..."

"Of course. That's to be expected when you have your own country."

Black had given a suitable excuse, implying that he would have to decline, and Ukyou had accepted it as something to be expected, not seeming the least bit let down by it. This annoyed Black somewhat, even though it was reasonable that he responded the way he did. *Do you think of Oseo as a small, insignificant speck of dust? Or is it that I'm the only one who agreed to receive you? Is Setenve really out talking with other envoys?* He wanted Ukyou to show at least a little bit of disappointment at him having effectively said no. Even though he wanted to bask in his triumph, the President of Domino didn't seem to be even a little dejected.

Black, thinking that Ukyou must have just been pretending to be strong, was suddenly inspired. "It must be quite difficult finding somewhere to hold a meeting for so many people." If he had reached out to many people and only one had responded, then it wouldn't have been an issue. He wondered how terrible Ukyou would feel if the President had reached out to several of them and they all had said no. If he peeled that composed expression from Ukyou's face, what kind of emotions would he see underneath? While thinking of that, Black let out a genuine, natural laugh.

Ukyou and Setenve had decided to split up and make the rounds separately. As Black had expected, most countries had given an ambiguous answer, saying they would go to the meeting if they could. Regardless of that, the two of them weren't particularly put off.

“Well, this much was to be expected.” Ukyou smiled, happy that it had gone exactly as he had thought.

“You’re laughing? What’s so funny?” On the other hand, Setenve didn’t seem so pleased. She was, in fact, pretty tired from having made her way around the inn.

“I imagined what they would look like if I peeled their composed expressions from their faces after seeing Shouzo’s ‘demonstration.’ Thinking of that made me laugh.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” Setenve asked.

“You could say that...”

As the two of them headed back towards the castle, they seemed more like an old married couple rather than newlyweds. Or, rather, they seemed like two con artists coming up with a new scheme.

“Well...it is what it is. We’ll have to do more rounds, so don’t look so tired already.”

What they were doing could almost be considered secret meetings, but they were all diplomatic, not truly covert. They were doing so in an attempt to build stronger bonds and it was quite the task. They couldn’t really leave it to Saiga or Happine. It was something that they would eventually have to learn how to do, but for now it was too early. Tahlan and Douve would probably be able to do a good job, though...

“That said, there was something weird about him.”

“Even though you referred to him as a speck of dust, he’s still hanging on?” Ukyou and Setenve had actually split up into two, despite Black’s suspicions to the contrary. They had decided that they would divide up the guests by gender. Ukyou went to visit male guests like Black, whereas Setenve went to visit the female guests. It would have been a little difficult for Ukyou to go visit the female guests by himself.

“They all complained about Tahlan,” Setenve mentioned. But it wasn’t that kind of issue.

“That handsome man, was he flirting with women while on the road?” Ukyou asked.

“No, he wasn’t unfaithful... It’s just the women ended up falling for him.”

“That’s because he was flirting!”

Part 8 — Pupil

The royal family, House Batterabbe, and House Sepaeda were all powerful families, each with the authority and military strength of a medium-sized nation. Since there was a joint ceremony being held by all of them, the remaining two houses, Caputo and Disaea, had also contributed. Even Domino, which was still rebuilding, helped out with some of the expenses. As a result, the whole of the royal capital became a place of celebration, almost resembling a vast wedding hall.

The ceremony itself, however, was to be held within the castle. They had made sure to use every large hall within the royal residence and were serving the numerous guests exquisite dishes and alcohol. The food provided was not only Arcana's highest-quality cuisine, but also a wide array of Japanese dishes provided by Danua.

However, no one was particularly focused on the food. After all, it was to be expected that the food and alcohol provided were of the highest quality. Everyone had discerning palates so they didn't think too much of it.

There's a lot of food I've never seen before... Even so, the alcohol is the same as always. Not that it matters anyway... Oseo's representative, Black, was of the same opinion. He didn't seem to think much of the Japanese food Danua had brought out. He was still new to it all, but he was also a politician. Even if new food was served, there was no way that he would be particularly impressed by it.

That's the prince of the Wink Kingdom. That house symbol...was that the Poker Kingdom...? As I thought, there are a lot of other countries in the same league as Oseo here. They had opened up the halls, and it seemed they'd had an issue over how to split up which countries and into what halls. It was a little tacky, but it seemed that they had settled on the idea of doing it based on countries' standings; as such, large nations, medium nations, and small nations had all been separated into different halls. There were other deciding factors, but for the most part it was based on size.

They did say that once we had been shown to our respective halls, we were

free to move around to the others, but...not sure how I feel about that. It was a standing buffet without any assigned seats, so if a guest wanted to go to another hall and meet with other envoys, then they would have to do so of their own accord.

I should probably go and meet the envoys from the larger countries if I want to achieve my goal... Black thought about it a little. He had no plans to gauge the others' feelings, but he still looked around the room at everyone else anyway. Everyone was engaged in conversation, making no attempt to leave. *I should probably stay here.* He had no emotional reason for doing so. He just felt it would be a little strange if he were the only one to leave; other envoys no doubt shared his same goal, yet they hadn't left themselves.

He also felt a little apprehensive about going to the hall with all the envoys from the larger nations all by himself. An outside observer might call that cowardly, but at least he was honest with himself. Not to mention, he also had a perfectly logical reason for staying here. *It's not out of the realm of possibility that they've purposely kept the smaller nations from interfering with the larger nations rubbing shoulders together. Or, maybe that's not the case at all.* If all the large nations were to join together, they could easily destroy Arcana. But if they did so, there would be peace, with no further need for military forces.

That was a ridiculous, idealistic thought. Larger nations were incapable of joining forces. On the surface, they might act as partners, but underneath it all, each partner would actively work towards the other's destruction. Only if the situation were dire enough would that not be the case. However, from their point of view, Arcana and Domino banding together wasn't so urgent an issue that they had to act immediately. Thus, all of the large nations were looking for partners, a union of nations they could use as a banner to bring everyone together. If the middle nations wanted to participate, that was their decision.

All the other envoys here are aiming for the same thing... Black would remain here and try talking with the others. It was embarrassing, but it was something he had to do, so he sucked it up. *This is to bring down Arcana...and to lead the way for a new superstate.* He decided to take his first step. Once he had taken that first step, all he had to do was keep going. As he thought that, he overheard a conversation.

“Gosh, they’ve gathered so many nobles here. I would have preferred for them to have us all in one room... It seems like they’ve organized us based on our standings. Don’t you think that’s in bad taste?” Everyone gathered in this room was from a medium-sized nation. Judging from everyone’s murmurings, someone important had entered the room. *It’s the Jigsaw Kingdom’s very own king...!* The Jigsaw Kingdom was situated south of Arcana, close to Oseo, with Jigsaw and Oseo being on neither good nor bad terms.

Black knew that Jigsaw would be attending the wedding ceremony; however, he hadn’t expected the king to appear in the hall he was in. He struggled to hide his surprise. *For a king to come here and greet us... It’s just as I thought!* A king from a large nation had appeared in a gathering of medium-sized nations. On the surface, he seemed relaxed, but beneath, he was no doubt desperate.

“Well, well, Your Majesty! What a surprise seeing you here...!” Black said as he rushed over to greet him. The king of Jigsaw was younger than Black’s father, having just taken the throne. However, he was roughly ten years older than Black, so Black naturally acted respectful when talking with him. In truth, that respect was actually fear. Speaking with the leader of a country that was so close to your own was a different kind of scary. However, that fear had come in handy this time.

“Oh, Prince Black, you’re here. I had thought that you would come to the ceremony, but you hadn’t come to greet me yet, so I came looking for you.”

“I-I apologize. I thought I ought not to interrupt the larger nations...”

“You needn’t worry about that. You’re from a neighboring nation, so I wouldn’t have minded.” The king of Jigsaw was, naturally, alluding to how Oseo wasn’t a large nation; however, there was nothing Black could do to argue that point, as the person in question was the king of a nation close to Oseo. The Jigsaw Kingdom had annihilated then merged with the neighboring Peace Empire just a few years before. They were still in the process of subjugating their conquest, but even so, their lust for territory was frightening.

“Never mind that... Being in touch with a new culture makes you realize how small you actually are and how vast the world is. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, I completely agree,” Black replied after a short pause. Each hall,

including the one they were in, was adorned with carpets that resembled paintings. It seemed that the tapestries were gifts brought from the distant Magyan Kingdom. They weren't gifts with monetary value, but rather ornaments for admiration. The Arcanian paintings they were lined up against were of equal quality, albeit of a different kind. The carpet itself was also like a painting, depicting ferocious lions and tigers...the work of a craftsman from a distant country.

"I'm jealous. I'd never be able to get something like that, no matter how hard I tried." Black looked at the king, who seemed consumed with envy. "While we were busy dealing with trifling matters amongst the neighboring kingdoms, Arcana was forging bonds with distant nations. At this rate, we're just gonna get left behind, aren't we?"

"Yes, you are right," Black responded. The look on his face wasn't jealousy; it was hate. A country that he had thought was in the same league as his own nation was actually one, almost two steps ahead. They had increased their territory, obtained a new Rare Art, and brought back new culture with them. It was borderline intolerable. "If we were to form an alliance, we could develop to a level where we wouldn't lose against Arcana." By "wouldn't lose," Black didn't mean a battle of honor—he meant they'd win a full-scale war. They wouldn't start a war right away, of course. Now was the time for preparations.

"Yeah, you're right. There's no way we're going to be left behind," the king replied after a moment's pause. Black had sensed that the Jigsaw king was cut from the same cloth as himself. He would have to be the one to offer an equal alliance with a kingdom of a lower rank. He had the arrogant patience you'd expect from a politician.

He's terrifying...but reliable. He had an ally who hated their mutual enemy more than him and who wasn't willing to compromise. *If I form an alliance with him...we will definitely destroy Arcana! We can take control of everything!* Black had been moved by the hate of the large nations; however, he was glad that he was not the target of that hate.

"President Ukyou came to visit me. It seems he visited you too, right?" the king asked Black.

“Yes, he did.”

“I want to interrupt his plans. I have a lot to tell you. Would you meet with me before you leave this country?” He seemed to be asking casually, but Black really had no choice when it came to a decision between Arcana and Jigsaw. If he answered too vaguely, the king might divert his hate towards Oseo.

“Of course, Your Majesty. And if you were to ask Lord Ukyou something, I am sure he would respond right away.”

“I’m glad,” the king responded. He was being nice, when in reality his answer was more akin to something like, “Of course you will.” If Black hadn’t first said “Of course,” even if he had chosen Jigsaw in the end, he might have upset the king. They would have said he wasn’t a good fit, and they could have possibly retaliated later. Black had used his good sense to narrowly avoid such an outcome.

“I would love for the others to attend. They don’t have to go out of their way, though.” Everyone’s glance turned towards the king of Jigsaw. He wasn’t forcing them to join in an alliance. However, not attending would be taken as them acting against that alliance. As such, the countries located near the Jigsaw Kingdom didn’t plan to oppose them. That wasn’t the case for countries that were under the protection of other large nations, of course. However, as for countries that weren’t, they rushed to declare that they would be attending the meeting.

This gathering of people... It’s proof the Jigsaw Kingdom is a large nation. I wanted my nation to be at the center of it all...

Up until now, Arcana had been making enemies of the surrounding countries, which had resulted in different countries sending their assassins. Now, a large country was putting itself at the head of an alliance. There was probably also another large country working behind the scenes, as well. *As I expected...this is just one of those inevitabilities of history!* This wedding ceremony was to be Arcana’s last hurrah. After this, the kingdom would be slowly dismantled and ultimately destroyed. A mischievous smile grew on Black’s face as he thought about the course of events to follow.

“Excuse me, everyone.” The right person had just appeared in the hall, which

was drowning in a bloodthirsty atmosphere. Although it was a standing buffet, it was still a wedding ceremony, which meant it was customary for the hosts of the wedding to come greet their guests. “I sincerely thank you all for attending my wedding today. I apologize if I have caused any upset by having you all separated into different halls. That was a result of my own clumsiness.”

Although it was quite an insincere greeting, the men present seemed indifferent to that insincerity. However, men weren’t the only ones present; there was also roughly the same amount of women in attendance, representing their various countries. They were women from all countries, of all ages and marital status. Since it was a wedding ceremony, everyone was dressed up; however, there were a few guests who had gone above and beyond. It was rude for a guest to dress up in such a way that brought attention to them and detracted from the bride and groom. In some places, it could be seen as disgraceful. Regardless of that, numerous attendees were dressed up because they had someone they wanted to impress, or because they wanted to bag a partner at the ceremony. The person that most of those individuals wanted to impress had just entered the room, causing all of the women to panic.

“Lord Tahlan! Ahh, Lord Tahlan!”

“Such a manly figure... His outfit is wonderful too!”

“Please come over here!”

One of the grooms, Tahlan of the Magyan Kingdom, had arrived in the hall. All of the women in attendance had immediately and completely forgotten all sense of etiquette and thrown themselves at him. Every woman, no matter her age or standing, uniformly wore the expression of a young maiden in love. Tahlan, who was at the center of all their admiration, greeted them with a smile.

“I’m glad to see you are all enjoying the ceremony. Could you all possibly tell me your favorite drinks? I would like to make sure I can prepare enough in case we run out, and to make sure you have some for you all to take back home with you.”

Upon hearing him speak, all the women suddenly remembered where they were, regaining their manners after that abominable display. Although it was a

little late, it was admirable that the women had eventually realized and put a stop to it.

“A-Ahem... M-My apologies. It seems the alcohol has gotten to my head a little.”

“I apologize. Usually I am able to handle myself better.”

“Please forgive me, Lord Tahlan. Please don’t think of me as some disgraceful woman...”

The women hadn’t drunk a drop of alcohol, but they were using the excuse that they had overindulged anyway. They had been able to pull it off, as there was a scent of alcohol in the air and their faces were awfully red. Even so, they weren’t fooling anyone, though everyone pretended that they had.

“No, it’s my fault for providing such strong alcohol, considering the circumstances. The alcohol from my nation goes down a little too easily.” Tahlan knew that the women hadn’t drunk a single drop of alcohol. However, he still blamed himself.

He’s the prince from that foreign country! Black felt awestruck seeing him. As for Tahlan, his composed face showed no ill will as he looked at the women.



Tahlan hadn't lost any respect nor good faith towards the women who had acted so uncouthly. Instead, he had treated them all the same, regardless of their ages. Anyone, including Black, could have acted that way just for show. Anyone with the right upbringing and knowledge could have come out with a smooth line, just as Tahlan had earlier.

However, the one issue was the expression someone else would have had while saying it—they wouldn't have been able to hide their true feelings. Moreover, if the person you were talking to happened to be a woman who was in love with you, she would have been able to detect those true feelings just by looking at your face. Tahlan, however, had perfected his expression. It wasn't that he was a master actor; instead, it was his genuine appearance that was perfect. He wasn't trying to hide his true feelings; he sincerely held no ill will towards them.

I see now. That's why women are so obsessed with him. Black couldn't help but feel inferior. Everyone was acting perfectly in line with their position, but that's all they were doing: acting. None of them could have even begun to imitate Tahlan's demeanor. The Magyan prince was exactly what all men aimed to be and what all women wanted their men to be like. That was who Tahlan Magyan was.

Black wasn't jealous that Tahlan was popular with women. Actually, no, he was jealous. It was just that, if he acknowledged that fact, he would then think of himself as inferior. He was tormented by those feelings of inferiority whenever he looked at exemplary men or "princes" other than himself. He often told himself that was the only reason for it.

"I must take my leave, as I have many guests that I have yet to greet. Please excuse me," Tahlan said to the giggling girls, then walked over to Black with a sense of purpose. As he approached, his perfectly handsome face and tall, chiseled body came fully into Black's view. The prince of Oseo couldn't help but feel even more jealous seeing Tahlan's good looks.

"Your Majesty, welcome," Tahlan said to the king of Jigsaw, who was standing beside Black; for his part, Black was standing stock-still. "I had never thought that there were any distant countries other than Magyan. It has been a pleasure

to be able to learn about them today.”

“Hmph... I guess it is a good opportunity to learn about them.” The king didn’t seem too interested in what Tahlan had to say. Black was unable to read the real meaning behind the king’s response. It could be that he was simply just responding with a stock phrase and didn’t have a real ulterior motive. “There is nothing to learn from just being content enjoying the local sights. It would be shameful for a king of any country to allow himself to remain ignorant. I’m unable to stay here for too long, as I’m only here to offer my well-wishes. However, if I ever visit on different business, I would love to learn about your country’s culture.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll be sure to visit the royal capital and tell you all about it personally.” It was a harmless conversation between two royals.

“However...not only did you disregard the behavior of those women, but you’ve also come here without your fiancée. I assume there is something you wish to discuss with me?”

“Yes, I do. There’s going to be a show outside. If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, you should see it...” Aha, this would be a show that wasn’t a part of the main wedding event. None of the guests had known about that until moments before.

Black let out a light chuckle, realizing the implications. *This country is desperate*. Even at an extravagant wedding ceremony such as this, they were still trying to win their guests over. It seemed the Arcana Kingdom wasn’t satisfied with having them attend, passing along a few souvenirs, and calling it a day.

“How about it, Your Majesty?” Tahlan asked the king of Jigsaw. “It’s a display that you’ll rarely have a chance to see in a different country...”

“Hmm...” If anyone else other than Tahlan had said that, it would have been taken as rude. That it wasn’t considered such wasn’t because of how Tahlan was as a person, but because he was from a faraway country. If Black, for example, someone from a neighboring country, were to make a comment like, “This isn’t something you can see in *your* country,” then that would definitely be a cause for upset.

However, the Magyan Kingdom wasn't even aware of the Jigsaw Kingdom's existence, so it wasn't that strange for Tahlan to make a comment about something not existing in Jigsaw. Of course, what he was talking about might not have originated in the Magyan Kingdom, but it would be boorish to ask about that. Tahlan had come here to make them believe that this "display" had come from Magyan.

This guy's not stupid.

The Jigsaw Kingdom had no intention of falling into Arcana's trap. No matter how you looked at it or what was said, all of it was part of Arcana's plan. Even so, their opponents weren't idiots and were eager to play along.

"You seem to have a lot of confidence in your display's novelty. Are you sure about that? I mean, it might be something we have in my country."

"Oh, you are absolutely correct. I said something quite thoughtless."

"But...even so, I have to say, you have gotten me intrigued." His opponent, the king, seemed to want him to come along no matter what.

Tahlan cheerfully responded, "If you are at least somewhat interested, I implore you to come along and see the demonstration. There will be a lot of people watching, and I'd like it if you'd confirm if it's something you have back in your country or not."

"Hm, very well. It would be foolish to dwell on this too long at a ceremony, so go on, show me the way there. By the way..." The king of Jigsaw laughed mischievously as he glanced at Black. "What will you do? Don't you want to come have a good laugh too?"

Black paused for a moment. He didn't share the same sense of curiosity and wasn't that interested in the performance. He felt like he might act out of character if he saw a major nation put on such a show.

"Oh, it's the prince of Oseo, Black. I do apologize for my rudeness. I would also like to invite you to come and see the demonstration."

Black was irritated that it had taken Tahlan this long to extend an invitation. However, compared to the king of Jigsaw, Black was a minor figure, so if Tahlan had invited them both along at the same time, it would have been an insult to

the king. Black could imagine the king being annoyed at being grouped with someone from such a small, insignificant country. All of Tahlan's consideration was quite obviously aimed at the king, not Black.

"The reason it's taking him so long is that he's trying to come up with a way to say no," the king chortled. Surprisingly, he was the one who turned down the invitation with a confident expression. "He has a lot of people he wants to meet at such a big event like this. He may also have plans later."

"Yes, you are quite right. I apologize for not asking if he had time first."

The conversation continued without any input from Black. Deciding not to be discouraged by it, he instead joined in. "Um... Actually, I believe I will use this opportunity to deepen my connections with the other dignitaries."

"Of course. Another time, then," Tahlan responded as he retreated without so much a hint of disappointment or restraint.

Black felt humiliated upon realizing that he wasn't Tahlan's main target, but he wasn't about to expose his secrets. *It's obviously a ploy to win people over... There's no real need for me to go.* Withholding his complaints, Black bowed towards the king. "Your Majesty, I will..."

"Hmph, you should go talk with other people." The king departed in the same direction as Tahlan, letting out a big laugh—big like the size of his country. "Well, be seeing you." The king had practically given Black an order. If Black didn't understand that, he would be cut off.

Invite a variety of people and get them to open up... Is that what you're asking me to do?! They would expect him to be successful at doing so. If not, he would once again be cut off. *It's fine; this is perfectly suitable work for a prince!* Black got excited at the thought. If he was successful in this role, he could end up being one of the key figures in forming the alliance against Arcana.

International diplomacy was basically conducted under a point-deduction format. When dealing with a person of a similar rank, as well as someone of the same rank, it was expected that the diplomat was to treat them with courtesy. If they did anything wrong, they lost points. There was no such thing as gaining points by being good at diplomacy. That was the case for diplomats and foreign

ministers, no matter how hard they worked. Although unfortunate, that state of affairs made sense for the host country. Things like how good the host was at greeting other dignitaries, or how delicious the food they served to guests was, were all a part of diplomacy. Relations between two countries, at the very least, were all about exercising moderation while doing your best for your own country.

That doesn't mean that diplomatic relationships are meaningless. If you can do the bare minimum, that can also be used as a deciding factor. Large nations were the ones who decided whom to work with. The king of Jigsaw had decided Prince Black was capable enough to make that decision on his behalf. *I'm probably the right age for it. I should aim for people who are easy to recruit, rather than those with a stronger disposition.*

If Black was successful in gathering people, he would be complimented, and that would be that. If it didn't go well, all he had to do was put in a little more time and effort. *It's no big deal trying to recruit members for an alliance. The problem is what comes after: destroying Arcana and making deals with other large nations.* He therefore believed that he would be successful at bringing about Arcana's demise.

However, that was not to say that it would be easy. At that moment in time, if they were to go to war with a large nation such as Arcana, it would also mean they would be in competition with the other large nations who had their eyes on Arcana's fortune. Even if their alliance were to win, there was no saying how much damage they would incur or what rewards they would receive. If they took a lot of damage and another country started to get ideas, that would be the same as losing.

Now, as for the main competitor...

The king of Jigsaw looked around the garden he'd been led to. There were numerous envoys from the large nations gathered in the garden. Since they were attending a ceremony by the Arcana Kingdom, there were naturally many kings and people of similar stature present. There were also kings of medium-sized nations there, sheltering under the umbrella of the larger nations. That group was particularly loud, so the king had kept his distance. That group, in turn, kept their distance from him.

Everyone had forgotten about the wedding, the demonstration, and the Arcana Kingdom. They were here, not to see the demonstration, but instead to focus on the gathering of the large nations within the garden.

“Everyone, thank you for being here today!” The owner of the voice was Domino’s supreme leader, Ukyou. He had been going around greeting all the guests, so everyone was aware of who he was. He was the foreign dictator who had taken over the ruined nation of Domino, which had previously been highly ranked. He was also a skilled revolutionary—in other words, quite dangerous.

Even now he persists with that brazen attitude of his. I can at least admire his courage. He was treated as an upstart, not as a man who deserved respect. Everyone was ostensibly laughing along with him; however, deep down, they were laughing *at* him.

“The preparations are finally done, so we will proceed with the demonstration!” Ukyou announced.

“I appreciate that we don’t have to wait, but what have you been up to all this time?” the king asked. Everything was apparently ready, but there was nothing set up where all the envoys stood. There were tables with food and alcohol around, but outside of that, there was nothing to suggest that a demonstration was about to begin.

“Ha ha ha! I ask that you look above!” Ukyou raised his hands towards the sky as if he were a circus performer. All of the envoys were taken in by his showmanship and looked up to the sky. In the midday, slightly cloudy sky there was...a flying boat. It was just passing through the dim rays of sunlight. It looked small, as it was so far away, but it was easy to tell that, in reality, it was actually quite large.

“One of the Eight Sacred Treasures, the flying ship of one of Arcana’s four great noble houses, Caputo—Noah, the Ark of Survival!”

Flying magic already existed in the Arcana Kingdom, but there was nothing that could make it so that a giant ship could fly.

It really is flying... It’s also really strange.

If this was a demonstration, surely they would want us to board it.

Wait, is it gonna come down here?

Nobody had any complaints upon seeing the legendary Noah. On the contrary, they were all coming up with their own ideas.

If my country could obtain that...it would help us massively on the military front, as well as give us a huge boost in national prestige.

As a last effort, they're presenting us with this as a means of peace... It must feel fantastic to look down upon your country from that ship.

I thought Danua and Vajra were good, but imagine getting this...

They were all counting their chickens before they had hatched, all imagining what they could do if they had Noah in their possession and letting out light chuckles. All of them were staring at the Ark of Survival, so none of them saw Ukyou's face, which was painted with a look of scorn.

"Now, everyone! It's time for the main event!" Ukyou laughed brazenly as he signaled to a soldier standing nearby him. The soldier lit a fire, which in turn gave off smoke as it lifted off and headed towards the sky. They all wondered what the signal was for—it seemed to be heading towards Noah. Those who realized where it was headed all focused on Noah, eyes wide open.

"Huh?" they all said at once.

Suddenly, a gigantic fireball appeared just above Noah.

Using Vajra, the sky had purposely been made cloudy. Noah was floating above in the slightly overcast sky, and Paulette Caputo and Shouzo Kyoube were on board.

"There's the signal fire... It's time."

"All right," Shouzo said, expression troubled as he realized what he was about to do. He wasn't about to wreak destruction or cause mass murder, but even then, he was against it from an ethical standpoint.

"Shouzo..." Paulette was the one who had given the order, but even she wasn't feeling too great about it.



Although it was supposed to be a demonstration, in reality, it was a threat designed to intimidate the attendees with a show of strength. Shouzo couldn't help but think about the guests who had attended just to celebrate the marriage of the three couples, without an ulterior motive. He tried to shake off the thought.

"It's all right! I'll do my best!" Shouzo had decided to follow Caputo's orders blindly without giving them any thought. Even having made that choice, he was still against the orders given to him by the people who were making the difficult decisions, believing them to be unethical.

"I...believe in them!" Shouzo turned his back to Paulette and raised his hands towards the sky. Magic that was much, *much* stronger than even the most talented mage could manage poured from Shouzo. He was the ace that among the other extraordinary aces held the most raw magical power—the Scarred Fool, the Cursed Farmer, the strongest magic user. If you combined the magic ability of the other aces together, they still would not have the same amount of power as Shouzo. It could crush any large nation's most talented people like ants.

There are some things that you need to be up close to see, and there are some things that you need to be far away to see. As for those who stood in the royal castle's garden that day, they had a very good view of what was happening. A large hole had opened up in the clouds; the hole hadn't been created by wind or anything like it, but instead by the explosion of a giant red-hot ball of fire. The rest of the clouds remained together without scattering; the opening was more of a focused aperture above all the onlookers. They all stood staring at it, mouths agape. As representatives of their countries, as well as adults, it wasn't the most flattering expression to adopt.

Before they could realize that they were all standing there with mouths wide open, a second fireball followed. A huge blast parted the clouds, apparently coming from Noah—who shouldn't have any means of using magic.

"Ahh, ahh..." Everyone fell back onto their behind, dirtying their exquisite clothes. The important leaders, each from a large nation, had gotten mud on

themselves, but nobody paid any attention to that. From far above them came a great wave of heat, followed by a massive boom. These sensations instilled a deep fear in the onlookers, far more so than the tip of a sword being pressed against their neck.

“Everyone, I thank you for being a witness to our magic! Thank you for your admiration! However, this seems to have been slightly over the top for a demonstration. We have sullied your clothes, and your colleagues will no doubt be wondering what has happened to you.” As Ukyou took on the role of explaining, everyone remembered that this was supposed to be a demonstration, making their blood run cold at the thought. Everyone also remembered the “rumor” that Caputo had an ace who could wipe out an entire nation. Before, everyone had simply been shocked. Now, they were frozen by fear.

Th-They weren't kidding! Were we about to make enemies with the nation that had this up its sleeve?! The agents that had infiltrated the country had all been returned. The countries who had sent them, not giving up, had intended to follow up by using force. Their schemes had been set to begin unfolding at this wedding ceremony.

I-It's impossible! There's no way we can win against a country like this! Even if we worked together with all of our neighboring countries, we would just get blown to pieces! If you launched yourself towards the clouds, the clouds would scatter into parts. Similarly, if you launched yourself towards the earth, the earth would scatter into parts. Soldiers, civilians, nobles, royals, castle walls, fields, and roads... All of them would be blown to smithereens.

What the hell...? Arcana isn't trying to become a super nation at all; they already are one! They've already harnessed the ability to stop anyone that comes their way! The national representatives, realizing the reality of the situation, all went sickly pale. Every representative, whether from a large nation or a medium-sized nation, had realized who exactly they were trying to pick a fight with. The politicians, with their thick, brave masks, felt absolutely helpless.

Ukyou didn't take any joy in looking around at the attendees. *I've...also seen this before.* He had seen a sight like this back when his army had been blown away by the very same magic. Ukyou, who had become head of a large nation,

had possessed a similar pride as the rest of the attendees...and his soldiers were the ones who were made to pay for it. Dwelling on that fact did nothing. Regardless of what had happened to the dead soldiers, he had to do everything in his power for the civilians who were still alive.

“How was it, everyone? A sky covered in darkness has cleared up! This is what my country dreams of for the future!” In order to dispel the dark clouds that loomed over the future, they first had to prove how they planned to dispel those dark clouds. While they could have just done this in private, doing this in front of the kings and leaders of the other nations was nothing less than a threat—*if you wish to go to war with us, we will blow all of you to pieces*. This was an uncouth display of arrogance, or just plain rudeness, as far as diplomacy was concerned. It was an unexpected threat, throwing all pretense out the window.

“I would love for everyone to pray that our bright future, like this bright sky, will continue after this wedding!” It had been an overtly excessive demonstration, not something that should be done for guests who had been invited personally to a wedding. If they were to complain, there was probably nothing Arcana could respond with.

“Ha, ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! Lord Ukyou, you sure are malicious!” was the response of many politicians in the crowd. Everyone started laughing—an insincere expression of mirth.

“Yeah! Showing off that much power...anyone would be absolutely petrified with terror!”

“Even though I’m wearing my best clothes, they got ruined! This hasn’t happened since I was a child!”

“If you were going to reveal the truth behind that rumored magical power, you should have mentioned what you were doing in advance!”

Everyone was laughing as they spoke, playing down Arcana’s faux pas. There was no way that this could be officially recognized as a demonstration. If it was, Arcana would then have to explain why they wanted to demonstrate that particular capability. If that was to happen, they wouldn’t be able to say it was a demonstration, nor even a threat: it would be a formal declaration of war.

“If there were some blankets laid on the ground, we wouldn’t have gotten so dirty... I guess you didn’t have much time to prepare beforehand?” The large nation representatives continued to pander to the super nation, and Ukyou couldn’t help but let out a scornful laugh as he watched it all unfold.

“Yes, that is quite right. Please forgive us for embarrassing you all,” Ukyou, realizing it had been a genuine diplomatic faux pas, apologized. Nobody would be losing any points. When the person you are facing is leagues above you, all you can do is give them points.

The large and lively group of people within the palace didn’t notice the large gust of wind outside, as all of them were too focused on the people in front of them.

“Ah, I see, you wish to attend a meeting with the Domino Republic’s Lord Ukyou,” Black said.

“I wish to hear his epic tales about taking the Empire down. Laugh all you like, but boys can’t help but be drawn to heroes.”

I never even once thought of calling the man who took down an already failing kingdom and then yielded to Arcana a “hero”! Black was currently in the hall reserved for smaller nations, trying to warn small countries that had been close to Arcana, as well as other small nations who were angling to get close.

“I get that. I guess you don’t hear something like that every day. As for the king of Jigsaw’s invitation, I will have to let him know that you declined...”

“N-No! Please don’t!” Ah, that was truly the sorrow of a small nation. Black was speaking with the king of one of those small nations, who wished to meet with Ukyou, but was also unable to brush off an invitation from the king of Jigsaw. *Thinking about it from a national interest point of view, it’s not Arcana they need to be worried about; it’s Jigsaw. In fact, it’s not just Jigsaw; they should be worried about other large nations. I can see why you wouldn’t choose that!* The king and Black were quite serious, and hadn’t been blinded by Ukyou’s bribes.

The king of the small nation whom Black was talking to had his eyes fixed on Ukyou’s bribe and was almost deciding to go against his nation’s best interests

because of it. *Ack... I'd also like a piece of Coiled Peach or Divine Ginseng, but I can't give in...*

Your relatives and the other people close to you may want Coiled Peaches or Divine Ginseng, and even though it'll do nothing to benefit your country, you probably want it for yourself... How foolish! Even if small nations were to take Jigsaw's side, they probably wouldn't pass around the Coiled Peach. If there ever was a day where they did, that would be several years down the road.

As a result, small countries wanted to stick with Arcana where they would have a good chance of receiving the Coiled Peach... Well, that was the small nation king's logic, anyway. *If my country takes Arcana's side, I can't expect any protection from Jigsaw... What should I do?!*

However, quite naturally, being Jigsaw's target wasn't considered a safe choice. It was one thing to make a decision that went against the interests of the nation, but it wasn't the best idea to make a decision that would ultimately lead to that nation's demise. The king of the small nation who was trying to conduct diplomacy based on his own personal feelings was losing ground to Black's brave determination. Or rather, it wasn't his determination, exactly. It was more that a small nation couldn't go against a medium nation that was being backed by a large nation.

There's no point worrying about it! Hurry up and decide! I'm pressed for time! Prince Black didn't particularly want to destroy an inconsequential, small nation, but if he couldn't succeed in bringing them into the fold, he would be cast away from Jigsaw and it would be the end for him. *I have to make sure I get as many nations as I can to join the alliance so that we can be Arcana's downfall... Just say you'll go along with Jigsaw!*

Ah, that was the sorrow of a medium-sized nation. Even though they had a real need for the small nation before their eyes, they were in fact being used by a larger nation already. The two attendees, despite being present at a joyous occasion like a wedding, didn't seem happy at all. This state of affairs had been obvious since the start, and this kind of development should have been expected. Unfortunately, politics was rarely a happy thing.

"There is no need to rush. You are right in that chances to speak with the hero

who took down a huge empire are far and few between. You are close with the king of Jigsaw, so I am sure you will be able to meet with him any time,” Black said, indirectly laying down his threat. If the small nation king were to accept Ukyou’s summons, he would be called to speak with the king of Jigsaw, but not for anything he’d like. Formal and oppressive demands would be sent to his country.

This isn’t good! But...! No matter how indirect he tried to make it sound, he was still being forceful. No matter how hard the leader of the small nation tried, there was no way he could get out of this situation. He needed something else to try and help him escape.

“What a wonderful demonstration, Your Excellency!”

“Showing off such magical prowess like that, then introducing us to him after... Arcana sure has a lot up their sleeve!”

“You don’t think they were trying to persuade us, do you? Anyone would want someone like that in their ranks!”

A group of people seemingly speaking in intentionally loud voices had entered the hall that Black was in. There were about ten of them, and everyone shuddered when they saw their faces.

What...?! Why are so many important people from large nations gathered around Ukyou?! Black was also surprised, as were many others. Looking at the situation as it stood, the large nations feared the rise of Arcana. Everyone believed that, irrespective of their differences, they would be able to use all their might against Arcana. The people who had just entered also had the same intention, which was why they had gone to see the demonstration.

“I had always planned to introduce him to everyone. It would be a waste hiding a mage with that much power. He is a loyal retainer of House Caputo and won’t half-heartedly agree to anything.”

“What...? Then I have to show him that I’m serious!”

“Anyone can solicit anyone else, and there’s no reason he wouldn’t join you.”

“Our country will make sure not to fall behind!”

The leaders of the large nations were being even more overbearing than him and taking the initiative to cozy up to Ukyou. They were trying to get on the president of Domino's good side, even though he himself had failed against Arcana.

"Y-Your Majesty! Why, it seems like there was a splendid demonstration! I would love to hear why everyone is in such fantastic spirits!" Black put the king of the small nation to one side as he headed to speak with the king of Jigsaw, who was beside Ukyou. Unable to hide his feelings, he displayed quite a lot of panic.

"Hm? Well, hm...they showed us a demonstration of magic cast by Caputo's most powerful mage."

And?! You're not even gonna give me the slightest hint of what happened there?! There was no way everyone had suddenly changed sides just because they saw a demonstration. Something else must have happened there. Was it Saive's magic? There's no way that could have gotten everyone to pledge themselves...! Black, the ever-serious politician, couldn't find the right answer.

However, the king of Jigsaw understood very well what had happened. As a result, he jumped right ahead to the conclusion.

"By the way, Prince Black. I promised that I would have a chat with you, didn't I?"

"Y-Yes! I'm still trying to get people..."

"I was looking for an appropriate place to talk with you; however, I couldn't find one. I hate to admit it, but His Excellency recommended a good place, so we'll be going there."

"What?" Black was briefly stunned. Ukyou, who existed under the Arcana Kingdom's patronage, had chosen the meeting place? This was proof that the king of Jigsaw had more or less given up on the plan to overthrow Arcana before they could even really talk about it.

"I-I..."

"Is there something wrong?"

“N-No... There’s nothing wrong with Ukyou suggesting a place to meet,” Black said; after all, he could do nothing but agree. Conversations between politicians were often vague. In public situations, they said certain things with the intention of changing what was said later. Given that, the king was acting correctly.

However, to Black, it felt like he had completely embarrassed himself. He had taken a leaf out of the king of Jigsaw’s book and acted all high and mighty, but now he felt like everyone was staring at him with contempt. Black himself couldn’t bear his own ridiculousness. *What is even going on?!* The world of diplomacy was simply all power dynamics, but Black couldn’t accept the reality of the situation.

Part 9 — Liquid Capacity

As it was a wedding ceremony, there was plenty of high-quality alcohol available. However, it was considered uncouth to overindulge. It was a waste, considering a lot of it was of such a high caliber. But, if you drank too much, you would lose all sense of reason.

“Gah...!” However, most people had done just that and thus were gulping down a lot of alcohol. In Black’s case, he wasn’t drinking the alcohol just because it was delicious. He had lost his senses completely and wanted to lose even more, so he had escaped to the bottom of a bottle.

“Why...why?!” Black was no longer acting as a prince should at a gathering of people from all across the region. It wasn’t that he had unmasked his bad side or anything; he usually knew how to act appropriately. However, the reason he was unable to do so now was that he had reached his absolute limit.

“Why has every country given up...?” This wedding ceremony was supposed to be Arcana’s high point, after which it would then go downhill. The representatives from the large nations would band together to attack Arcana; Black had been part of that side, so he had expected to end up looking down upon Arcana. He had believed that so completely that he had been able to pretend that he was here to celebrate the Arcana Kingdom’s good fortune. He had been able to withstand the pressure because he thought it would all lead to a great result. However, that hope had disappeared. It was over before it had even begun.

It wasn’t just the king of Jigsaw—who had, after all, invited Black to join his alliance in the first place—but the other leaders of large nations were also all treating him the same. Even if he tried to talk to them, they would scoff in his face and reject his request. If all the large kingdoms, who were of an equal rank to Arcana, had all given up, then the reality of the situation was that they would not be able to bring down Arcana. Arcana would in turn be able to rebuild Domino, harness their power, and finish becoming a superstate. All Black could do was stand there and look on in envy. Every single large nation had given up.

“Why...why only Arcana?!” Black, who was finding solace in alcohol, was

blaming everyone but himself. The neighboring countries were unable to stop what was happening. If Black were to talk to them thoughtlessly, it would only result in doing more damage. With no one to stop him, he continued to drink more and more. “I withstood humiliation only to get nothing... This country will continue to be flattered and indulged and thus make another leap forward.”

Prince Black had been heir to the throne since the day of his birth. As a result, he had been constantly praised by those around him and came to believe that he was the absolute best in all the world. Of course, that impression had been quickly corrected during his upbringing. If he were to become king, he wouldn't be able to run the nation all on his own, after all, and his country was just one of many other medium-sized countries. There were limits to their finances, personnel, and land. As such, he was well aware of what they were capable of. They were forced to flatter large nations, be constantly cautious of countries of the same rank, and to act brazenly only with smaller nations. However, if you were able to accept that, then you could handle how the world worked.

History told a tale of a world full of impermanence. Even large nations could be corrupted by politics, could fall apart due to fights over succession, could decay due to invasions from different peoples, and could fall due to attacks from neighboring countries. Even at the height of their prosperity, even if they were lording their power over other nations, if they were unable to withstand events, they would also perish.

For every strong nation, there was a multitude of nations with the same amount of power. If you tried to get one step ahead of them, the surrounding countries would beat you back. That's how it was supposed to be.

“That's...what I wanted...!” Black was young and had a vision of a perfect future. He would have talented people, would be able to destroy neighboring countries at a whim, would have all the Sacred Treasures, and his country would develop and prosper. Under his leadership, his country's influence would become stronger, and all of the people of his nation would thank him.

He knew that was a laughable, idealistic dream. However, it was almost driving him mad from jealousy seeing another country achieve exactly that. The most absurd thing was that nothing was going to plan for him, yet it was going perfectly for them. The fortune he had wanted so intensely was now in the

grasp of someone else.

“Hee hee hee...” He could no longer withstand it. Anyone else would have been as upset as him and thus find solace in the bottle. However, this wasn’t the place to do it. If he really was unable to handle his drink, he should have picked a more appropriate location to indulge.

“Prince Black, is something the matter?” Someone had appeared to admonish him for his behavior. It was none other than the world’s most handsome and most beloved man. He had come from a faraway country and had managed to marry into a great Arcanian family. He was living the life of the main character in a story. “It seems that I supplied a bad batch of alcohol. Shall we get you to your room so you may recover?” The groom showed sympathy to the man he knew was actually drunk. He was too perfect...

“Don’t touch me, foreigner!” Black said, uttering something that he really shouldn’t have.

Part 10 — Foolish Questions

Sansui and the lord of House Sepaeda walked through the castle where the wedding ceremonies had already begun. The demonstration had been a success, so the two were in good spirits.

“How vexing... It’s my younger sister’s wedding, yet we have to focus all our attention on the demonstration. I don’t even get to see her all dressed up as a bride,” said Lord Sepaeda.

“I feel the same,” Sansui responded. He empathized with his lord. There wasn’t anything that could be done about it, as they were the hosts, and while he didn’t have to go around and greet every guest, he did have to make sure that the day went ahead without a hitch.

“It’s times like these I curse the position I was born into. I just wish I could enjoy the ceremony as a commoner.”

“Commoner ceremonies aren’t much different, though. You would still have to greet all the guests.”

“That’s true... If the common people heard that complaint, they’d be upset. Let’s just pretend I never said that.” Lord Sepaeda looked over at Sansui as he bantered with him. Sansui had the body of an adult, but his clothes were different from what he usually wore. He was dressed in formal attire, not his usual kimono.

“That doesn’t suit you. It’s weird seeing you so tall.”

“Yes, I agree.”

Sansui, up until now, had always worn Japanese-style clothing—a simple kimono. It had been that way ever since he had left the forest. While there were times when he regretted he hadn’t ever worn anything else, now that he was wearing formal clothes, he discovered that they were hard to move in and he simply couldn’t get accustomed to them. It was hard to get comfortable.

“Though that might not be the case once people get used to seeing it...”

“That’s true. I’m also just not used to seeing it...”

As Sansui was wearing clothing appropriate for his position, when most people saw him, he would simply blend into his surroundings. However, for those who were close to him, it was weird seeing him look so different from how he usually did. Of course, if he didn't ever dress like this, they wouldn't end up getting used to it.

"You should have worn clothes like that from the beginning. I know you've only just recently changed your body, so nothing could be done about that..."

"Yes... It got to the point that even my wife's family didn't recognize it was me..." Sansui wasn't very gifted with conversation, but when telling the embarrassing story from the other day, he seemed to be able to make it interesting. Not that it was fun for the person the story was about. "I wanted to show Blois and Lain how I looked, so I applied some Golden Balm, put on my formal clothing, and went to Blois's family home, but...the guards on the gate thought I was an intruder and sent me away."

"They take their job seriously, huh...?" Lord Sepaeda mused, laughing involuntarily as he praised the guards. "It goes without saying, but you messed up there. Even if they were being rude to you, you should have laughed it off and carried on through."

"They weren't rude to me. They did threaten me, though. They said that the family was related to the world's best swordsman, and that if I tried anything, he would send me flying..."

Lord Sepaeda erupted into laughter again. Eventually, he calmed himself down and continued talking in good spirits. "So, those guards barely got away with their lives, then. That is your line of work, after all." The guards had simply mistaken him for a stranger, and it wasn't like they had knowingly threatened his dignity. Moreover, they also hadn't put on airs carelessly or surrendered any of their dignity.

"Although, that said, I think I terrified them."

"Don't worry about it; it's good for them. You should be relieved that they took their jobs seriously and didn't say anything out of line."

I shouldn't say anything about Chette, then...

The story about the gate guards could be told to the current lord of House Sepaeda just as it was. There were some stories that would be outrageous if told exactly as they were, so it was important to determine the right time to do so.

“When you’re working, you never know who could be watching, so they should be vigilant at all times.”

That’s rich coming from him...

He was often brazen, even when talking to kings, and had tried to injure princes from different countries. Coming from anyone else, it might have been quite a significant line.

“Don’t give me that look that says you’d rather hear that from anyone but me.”

“My apologies.”

Lord Sepaeda wasn’t an Immortal, so he couldn’t read people’s auras. However, he was able to tell quite easily what Sansui was thinking just from looking at his face. It could have been the result of them knowing each other for a long time, but it could have also been that Sansui’s expressions were easy to read.

“My father and I are both very sensible people. We have to be, seeing as Douve can be very impudent.”

He’s aware of how rude she is...

“Speaking of unruly people...”

Right then came the voice of someone who had quite clearly crossed the line and lost all reason.

“Don’t touch me, foreigner!”

“I swear... Honestly, why do I, of all people, have to attend the ceremony of a foreigner groom!” the voice continued.

“Prince Black, I understand that you are unsatisfied. However, this is not the best place to behave like this. We should move to a quieter room.”

“Shut up! While you might be able to fool the ladies, you won’t fool me!”

Tahlan was trying to restrain a young prince; however, that prince was lashing out regardless.

“You think you can fool everyone with that face of yours! But do you really think I’m going to trust or welcome a prince from a country I’ve never even heard of? You’ve got another thing coming if so!”

“Those words not only hurt me, but they could hurt those two over there. Please be mindful of what you are saying.”

“Mindful of what I’m saying? What am I even doing wrong?!”

The prince was holding nothing back and entirely disregarding his surroundings. Although this was a place where politicians often hid their true intentions, he was speaking with such force it was clear his words were coming from the heart.

“I doubt your country even exists! I bet you’re not even a prince!”

“You are simply just not aware of my homeland...”

“And! Not to mention...!” Was there any need to continue to say things just to hurt people? Was it better than lying about how you felt? Although maybe there was a reason why people chose to lie—especially if all they had to say otherwise was absolutely venomous. Spurred on by the alcohol, the man had not just taken off but hurled away his mask, and was allowing his true feelings to pour out. “If the Magyan Kingdom *really* exists, and you *really* are a prince...you should be back in your country, doing your absolute best for them! Not here, in a faraway land!”

Tahlan was shocked into silence by this criticism.

“Even if you are to wed, it should be with someone from a neighboring country! Even though you’re a prince, you’re going against the interests of your nation just by being here! You aren’t a prince! You’re nothing!”

Tahlan did not reply.

“There’s no future for Arcana, who willingly allowed you into their kingdom! Just how long do you think your prosperity will last? It makes sense that other

countries are turning a blind eye to it, knowing that if they just leave the Arcanians alone, they'll eventually bring about their own demise...!"

Tahlan was an honorable man, yet he was not without sin. He had nothing he could safely say to the drunken man.

"Are you quite finished?"

"Huh?"

However, that only described Tahlan. Lord Sepaeda, having listened to Prince Black's entire tirade, stepped in to confirm if he was finished.

"What?"

"Okay, it seems like you've nothing left to say. I'm sorry, Tahlan, for letting this boy bark on and on like that. I thought I would let him finish." Lord Sepaeda, who was standing behind Black, removed his gloves, passing them to Sansui, who had also been holding himself back. The swordsman, sensing what his master was about to do, respectfully accepted his master's gloves.

"Hey... Lord Sepaeda! I see, you're coming to protect the groom? There's no use; no matter how you dress it up, everyone knows that he's not really a prince! He's just fooling the ladies with that face of his, whereas the men are all laughing at him on the inside!"

"Oh, so you had more to say."

"Huh?"

"Now, are you finished? Any last words?"

Lord Sepaeda clenched a fist, then punched Prince Black.

"Gah...!"

Sepaeda was a family known for its military prowess, so naturally, the current acting head of the house could throw a punch. It was an unfair blow from Lord Sepaeda, who was more muscular and bigger in stature than Black. The prince had been hit directly in the face.

"Ack...!" The prince groaned in pain. He stumbled a bit, as he had been drinking, but he remained standing. His mouth was bleeding, so he pressed

down on it; however, that didn't stop the flow. It continued to pour down onto his high-quality formal clothing.

"Ugh..." All the visitors from the other countries present in the hall were all fixated on the scene. However, no one attempted to help Black. Even though he had been unfairly assaulted, there was no one to lend him a hand.

"Your Lordship...no, Brother! Don't you think this is a bit much...?" Tahlan inquired, finally speaking up.

"Tahlan, I understand what you're thinking. However, that's not the problem." Lord Sepaeda pushed Black, who was still stumbling, and still recovering from both the alcohol and the hit to the head. The prince collapsed to the floor with little more than a nudge, while his blood dripped out onto the lavish carpet. "Tahlan, if my sister was from Magyan and someone said the same thing to her, would you just remain silent?"

Tahlan's shocked expression told the whole story.

"Would you just stay silent as they said she should have married a man from a neighboring country, and if she doesn't do that, she's a failure as a noble daughter?"

"Of course not. Although I abandoned my royal duty, I would still act as a man," Tahlan responded after a brief pause.

"Exactly. Now watch." Lord Sepaeda sat on top of the fallen prince. He held one hand up in the air as he used his other hand to pin Black down.

"Ah, ah..."

The lord's actions had gone far beyond conducting a simple argument or lashing out in anger. He wasn't laying into his opponent while the other man had no idea of what was going on. He attacked him in a way that allowed Black to get a bearing on his surroundings and the situation.

"If my sister was treated this way in Magyan, even if you hadn't done anything, I would kill you and destroy all of Magyan. So, out of respect for Magyan, I am simply responding in a similar manner."

Every time Lord Sepaeda landed a punch, a bone broke. The bones in his fist

broke, and the bones in Black's face broke.

"Tahlan, I may be acting barbaric. I probably shouldn't have descended to his level and made a disgrace of myself." He raised his injured fist again, but there wasn't even a hint of pain in his expression. "But, honestly, I don't really care. I'm not interested in acting civil right now, even if they may think of me as a disgrace or a barbarian," Lord Sepaeda said as he threw another punch. Prince Black's face, which was already a mess, became even more bloody and broken. "There's no way I'm gonna get in a carriage, with all those treasures...then say, 'I'll take Tahlan in as a family member, but I had no intention of being his ally.'"

Black let out another groan, tears rolling down his cheeks as he flailed about. It was a weak attempt at resisting. It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that he was being terrorized.

"This is how we protect our allies in Sepaeda. I bet you didn't think we could be this uncivilized, right? Are you gonna run back home now? Are you thinking that you can't join a family like this?" The reason for the current acting head of the family's violent act became apparent. The hall went back to being deadly silent, with only Prince Black's groans echoing in the room.

"No, Brother. Sometimes even a man has to act like a savage at times."

"I'm glad you said that. If this scared you, I wouldn't have been able to trust you with my sister." Lord Sepaeda swung his fist down in response to Tahlan's confirmation. His hand was now completely mangled, his fingers bent in such a way he could no longer open his fist. It was nothing less than the result of a barbaric act.

"You said you were the heir to the Oseo Kingdom, right, Prince Black? I'll take your words from earlier seriously, then." Holding his broken hand in his other, uninjured hand, Lord Sepaeda stood up. "I have no other option than to take it as a declaration of war. If that's not the case, then say so." Lord Sepaeda's fist was covered in blood, both his and his target's.

"Hm. He hasn't denied it." Lord Sepaeda had given Black, who could no longer speak, a few seconds to respond. He then turned to Sansui, who was still holding his gloves, and gave him an order. "Sansui, go and throw those gloves right into the king of Oseo's face."

Disregarding the specific cultural significance of throwing a pair of gloves at someone, anyone could understand the gravity of a situation where those gloves were thrown at a king of a country.

“When asked why you are entering their country, just be honest. If they challenge you, or if they don’t take you seriously and try to stop you, cut every one of them down.”

He had more or less ordered Sansui to commit suicide. Even though he was an envoy from a large nation, if he tried to force his way through, they would absolutely take him out. At least, that’s what the representatives of the neighboring countries probably thought when they heard the order.

“Are you unhappy with this order? Do you think I don’t need to go that far?” From a common-sense point of view, the lord’s order was actually a roundabout way of saying something else. If Sansui were to have an issue with it, that would be him saying that it was too difficult, too dangerous, or simply impossible. “But, Sansui, would you be able to say that in front of the king of Magyan? After acting as a team leader at the royal exhibition match, showcasing your military prowess, to a king who thought ‘I have nothing to worry about if I have such a powerful swordsman as an ally’—would you be able to say that wasn’t the case?” However, Lord Sepaeda, Sansui, and even Tahlan weren’t worried that Sansui could lose.

“Your Brotherhood, I have something I would like to ask,” Sansui put in.

“What is it?”

“When would you like me to return?”

The representatives from other countries were shocked. Even if Sansui was successful, he would no doubt end up getting caught by Oseo’s soldiers. Though Sansui was a swordsman Sepaeda had faith in, no matter how strong he was, there was no guarantee that he would be able to return when he chose to.

“Two days after the actual ceremony. I have no plans to change the arrangements just for you, so be back then.”

“Understood.”

That was nothing less than a lack of imagination. He despised the fact that the

words “no matter how strong” had even crossed his mind.

“I, Sepaeda’s Grand Instructor of Warfare, Sansui Shirokuro, will now go and answer their declaration of war.” An ace was someone you could send somewhere and be certain of their victory. The Arcana Kingdom’s foremost ace had been sent to the Oseo Kingdom, signaling its complete destruction.

Chapter 3 — The Well-Dressed God of Death

Part 11 — Resolve

Saiga Mizu and Happine Batterabbe were one of the couples to be wed; however, they rarely did anything by themselves. They were with two of Saiga's other wives, Magyan Sunae and Zuger Saive, and were greeting the guests together. Zuger was a Hex Artist and often didn't want to be out in public. However, this time she had no choice but to join the "full lineup."

Hey, Happine...doesn't the atmosphere feel a little off?

You're right. Maybe it's because Shouzo's demonstration happened. I feel like I heard a loud noise just before.

Saiga was the heir of House Batterabbe, so greeting guests was a part of his job. As he was also one of the grooms, he was doubly tasked with welcoming everyone. The guests from other countries weren't idiots, so they were making sure to properly return the formalities. Those returned well-wishes were far from sincere. Just like Prince Black, the important people from the neighboring countries also believed that there was no future for Arcana.

However, after a certain point, the expressions of the guests they were greeting had changed. They had gone from the fake kind of laughter that politicians were good at to a forced, stiff sort of laugh. Not only that, but once they had greeted the guests, those guests seemed in a rush to come back through for a second try.

Shouzo's magic is almost as strong as Master Suiboku's Immortal Arts... After seeing that, it would astonish even the most wicked people.

But...that makes it even scarier...

Up until just before, the atmosphere was more akin to "Just greet them and be done with it." However, now it felt like "I don't want to make an enemy out of them," or "If I upset them, they'll destroy me." It felt like there was a sense

of “It’s troublesome to get closer to any other country,” like it was almost dangerous to do so.

That’s why they were approaching Saiga, keeping each other in check while teetering on the edge of what was diplomatically appropriate. The situation had improved, at least when compared to moments before when they were being half-ignored. However, there was also much more pressure. It was quite difficult for Saiga, who was still very new to being a politician.

You get it, right? Now’s the time to stand firm! If we give them an opportunity to take advantage of our weakness, that’ll end up hurting the house of Batterabbe!

I get it! I won’t make any careless promises, and I won’t hold back! I’ll be sure to be ambiguous!

Saiga had been repeating those insincere mantras to himself in order to act like the politician of a large nation. However, those were a lot better than inappropriate or disadvantageous mantras. Saiga was still a beginner at diplomacy, and as such he was keeping to simple greetings.

Um, Lord Saiga! You remember what His Excellency Ukyou said, right? Don’t attack anyone and don’t break anything. If you can do that, then you can come back from anything...

Zuger, that’s the very least I can do. Even if I can come back from it, that means I’ll have to go back on what I said, causing people to lose faith in me. So it’s better if I’m just ambiguous.

As the four reminded themselves of what they needed to focus on, they greeted the flood of politicians with strained smiles. Everything was just a matter of getting used to it. If he didn’t endure these hardships multiple times, he would never grow. If anything, since he could negotiate as an overwhelmingly strong individual, that made the difficulty level easier.

“Hm?”

There were still envoys from various countries around them; however, they had all looked away from Saiga. For his part, he couldn’t see what they were looking at. They hadn’t only diverted their gaze from the Batterabbe heir;

rather, everyone was looking in the same direction. There was a bit of a commotion, even though nobody had screamed or anything like that. It was quite obvious that something had happened, yet there were no signs of people converging together.

“Excuse me.”

The four of them made brief excuses to the envoys around them and hurriedly headed towards where everyone was looking. It wasn't proper of them to leave without the permission of the guests, but there was also nothing that those guests could do to stop it. If there was something happening, it was up to Saiga and his wives to do something about it. It would be rude for the guests to stop them from doing so, if they even could stop them. The group of four had barely given them an opportunity to do so.

“What's wrong?” Saiga asked. He and his wives, upon entering one of the halls, felt the uneasy atmosphere. Envoys from various countries were all crowded together, focusing on a single part of the hall. Lord Sepaeda was sitting in a chair at the center of the area they were all looking at. It was a standing buffet, so there were no other chairs; even so, he had sat down and was surrounded by a crowd of people.

That wasn't the only strange thing. He was also being treated for an injury. It wasn't something as simple as just bleeding, but something far more serious.

“You really went too far... The bones in your hand are quite delicate, so that's how it ended up like this...”

“You shouldn't use a word like ‘delicate’ with a warrior. There are some people who might take it the wrong way.”

The bones in Lord Sepaeda's hand were broken; splinters were protruding out of his flesh. An ordinary person would probably be crying in pain, but the lord seemed quite calm as he received treatment.

Next to him, a guest lay on the floor. He was fully unconscious and his face had been completely smashed in. Even though the guest lying on the floor was in much worse condition, no one made any attempt to help him. It was easy to tell that Lord Sepaeda had been violent towards the guest and in turn had injured himself.

“L-Lord Sepaeda...what happened?” Saiga asked shakily. Lord Sepaeda could be severe at times, but not to the point he would entirely disregard his surroundings like this. At least during this wedding, he had been one of the people keeping things civil. That the very same Lord Sepaeda who had been keeping the peace had chosen to be violent in this hall filled the envoys from other countries with unease. Saiga tried to imagine what had led to Lord Sepaeda going this far as he examined the victim’s face.

“Brother, I have brought you a guest from the Magyan Kingdom.”

“Brother, your hand...”

“L-Lord Sepaeda? What on earth...?”

Before Lord Sepaeda could respond to Saiga, someone else had appeared. A guest from the Magyan Kingdom, who had previously been shown around by Tahlan and Douve, had now arrived at a scene of violence, which was not very fitting for what was meant to be a peaceful wedding ceremony. The guest no doubt thought he had been invited to a strange event held by this unknown foreign country.

“First, I would like to apologize,” Lord Sepaeda replied, speaking first to the guest, not to Saiga. He didn’t entirely ignore Saiga and his wives, though, and looked towards them as he showed them his hand. “A member from a neighboring royal family, whom we had formally invited to the ceremony, was insulting Tahlan.” The guest from Magyan, as well as Sunae, who was with Saiga, both stiffened. What they had feared most had happened. “Disregarding his own ignorance, he was saying that he had never even heard of the Magyan Kingdom and that he wouldn’t recognize a prince who didn’t give his all to his own country.”

Tahlan, who had brought along the delegation, no doubt had told them what the prince had said earlier. He had a dark look on his handsome face. It proved that what Lord Sepaeda was saying was correct.

“I sincerely apologize. I just invited everyone and anyone without any regard for who they were,” Lord Sepaeda said to the Magyan delegation as he looked around the room. Members of the royal families from various neighboring countries were still in the room, and quite a few of them were people who had

sent secret agents after Suiboku. They had only looked away because they felt guilty. “It is quite obvious that I mishandled this by resorting to my hands. Although we are now reconciled...we are clearly at fault. I would like to tell this to the king of his homeland directly,” Lord Sepaeda said as he motioned to the unconscious man.

You can't really justify that.

Sunae, the guest, Happine, and even Zuger couldn't feel sorry for him. What would cause someone to beat someone else to this extent? He had insulted the groom at his own wedding. It was only natural he received a beating.

“Of course, I will be sure to inform him,” the visitor from Magyan responded respectfully. It was an unfortunate situation, but a good way to confirm who their allies were.

“The fact that he received punishment from you directly... Such a rude person is undeserving of such an honor. Sansui should have been right next to you. Couldn't you have just left it to him?” Douve asked her brother, who had protected her groom after all, while rubbing his injured hand.

“That's true; it was probably a wasted opportunity. However, I've tasked Sansui with another job, so it's probably good that I did this.”

“Oh my, during my wedding ceremony? Brother, are you sure you got the timing right?”

“Don't worry, he'll be back before the main event. It's an easy job for him, after all.”

An “easy job” for Sansui. The group of envoys, Saiga, and Saiga's wives' faces all went rigid hearing that. None of them needed to ask where he was going and what he was going to do. That much was obvious.

How strong do you have to be to call yourself the strongest? If you were the strongest in a nation, you could probably call yourself the strongest. You could also probably declare yourself the strongest if you won in a large tournament, or if you participated in a war. In other words, if you were strong enough to do all of the above, you were probably reasonably strong.

However, that was how mortals determined things. Suiboku, who had destroyed his own homeland, was searching for the strength to be able to wipe out an entire nation on his own. The person who had that strength, Sansui, had left the forest several years before. However, he had never made an enemy of a nation before and thus hadn't been acknowledged by House Sepaeda as being able to do so. Regardless of that, he had now been ordered to do just that. One could imagine how he felt about it.

"I'm going to have to kill a lot of people."

From a logical point of view, one would expect a man who was going to cause that much havoc to say something like that. However, Sansui couldn't reconcile himself with the fact that people were going to get involved and be killed as a result. People with no involvement whatsoever would die. It was ridiculous. That was the nation's problem, however; it wasn't an issue for those with diplomatic authority.

I have to do it. Up until now, I've always acted as the world's strongest swordsman, so now it's time to really act as such. That was the reason why Lord Sepaeda was able to so easily call for war: he had the world's strongest swordsman at his disposal. If he didn't have Sansui, he probably wouldn't have been able to get away with inflicting such grievous insults on the Oseo Kingdom.

Their prince brought about that problem, however. Neither I, nor His Brotherhood, nor Tahlan had done anything wrong.

The representatives from the large nations saw Shouzo's magic and had suddenly changed sides, acting as if they hadn't been scheming the whole time. Believing they could win, they had attempted to make an enemy of Arcana, only to turn their tails and abandon it once realizing it was impossible. It was laughable. However, you could say that they had made the right decision. It was certainly a better one than the one the prince had made by choosing to give into his anger and starting an argument.

The kings of large nations were protecting their countries. That prince was unable to protect his own. Thus, I see no reason why I should protect Oseo. If Sansui put his mind to it, he could probably arrive in Oseo using Flash Step by the next morning. As Sansui was an Immortal, he was able to act without

needing to sleep. He would go to the enemy country without rest or sleep, return their declaration of war, and then return to Arcana. He wouldn't try to sneak around; he would simply walk right on in. It would be impossible for an ordinary person, but it was relatively simple for Sansui.

Master, please forgive me. However, this is also a condition of serving in the mortal world.

It wasn't that he was acting without guilt. Suiboku had told Sansui to not end up like him, and yet Sansui was now acting exactly like his mentor.

Sansui had been running all night, traversing through the royal territories and the Batterabbe territories, eventually leaving the Arcana Kingdom entirely. After having traveled through a few other countries, he had arrived at the border of the kingdom of Oseo by early morning. He had planned to just go straight into the territory, despite not having a formal invitation, any intent to hide his weapons, or plans to just enter quietly. He planned to break through directly, just as he was ordered. He had the face of a foreigner and was still dressed in formal clothes, looking like he had just come from a high-class occasion. Moreover, he also had a ceremonial sword with him.

The ordinary commoners waiting to enter were all staring at Sansui, who was standing out like a sore thumb. Sensing that he was dangerous, they had all slowly moved away from him, causing the swordsman to stand out even more, which in turn naturally caught the attention of the soldiers at the border checkpoint.

"Hey, you over there!"

Sansui was currently Sepaeda's Grand Instructor of Warfare and dressed accordingly. It was plain to see that his outfit was of high quality. The guards were immediately suspicious and surrounded him with weapons.

"Who are you?! We haven't received any word of a noble coming to visit!" He could have been an urgent messenger for all they knew, so they had yet to attack him, although they were positioned in a way that they could do so at any time.

Sansui went on to identify himself to them. "I am Sansui Shirokuro! I am the

Grand Instructor of Warfare for House Sepaeda of the Arcana Kingdom!” He spoke confidently and proudly. “I am here on orders from the lord of House Sepaeda to speak with the king of Oseo!” All of the people who were waiting to enter Oseo scattered in all different directions after hearing Sansui’s declaration. More guards had begun to gather at the checkpoint.

“Yesterday night, we received a declaration of war from the heir of the Oseo Kingdom, Prince Black! I am here to request an audience in order to respond to that declaration!”

“Wha—?!” The soldiers were shocked. Arcana was a large nation and well-known in the surrounding areas. The border soldiers hadn’t heard anything about their kingdom declaring war on them.

Nonsense... Our country actively declared war on a large nation like Arcana?! No matter the country, there should have been at least some advance notice!

The soldiers, understanding the gravity of Sansui’s words, gradually got more confused. If he was telling the truth, then their country was going to be in severe trouble. Of course, regardless of that long-term situation, if the individual in front of them was to attempt to force his way into their country, they would have to respond. The soldiers wondered if it would be okay for them to take a messenger from a large nation into custody. If Sansui tried to push his way through, it might leave an opening for the others.

“These are the orders from my master! I am to arrive in this country with no advance notification or permission! If you block my way, in the name of the head of Arcana’s Great House Sepaeda, I am to cut everyone down, leaving no man remaining!”

This was Sansui’s declaration of war. The statement, or threat, was delivered plainly. The border soldiers realized that they would be unable to defuse the situation easily. Their actions could cause even more trouble for their nation; even so, it was plain to see their opponent planned to fight, so all they could do was return the favor.

“It’s an enemy attack! Capture him!”

The soldiers finally attempted to go after Sansui. As they had greater numbers, all they had to do was a very basic maneuver—blocking the enemy in

with their spears. Even if they had planned to stab him, it wouldn't require much collaboration or advanced training to do so. Their enemy was alone, so boxing him in would suffice. However, that was a tactic better used on an enemy with limited mobility.

“Feather Step.”

Sansui moved across the ground with Feather Step as he unsheathed his ceremonial sword. He ran straight towards the soldiers who had blocked him in with their spears.

“Ki Blade.”

The ceremonial sword he was using wasn't fit for battle. It wasn't as strong as a normal blade and it wouldn't be able to do much against armor. However, that wasn't a problem for Sansui. It was simple enough for him to pierce through a weak point in their protection.

This sword isn't that thick or very heavy, but the metal is reasonably strong. Moreover, it is perfectly sharp. They did a fantastic job honing the edge. I ought to thank them when I next meet them.

Sansui cut through a soldier's neck with the ceremonial sword. The sword was imbued with ki, allowing it to cut cleanly through. Depending on how you removed the blade, it could then lead to heavy bleeding, and so Sansui struck the soldier and extracted the blade in such a way that it caused blood to splash over the soldiers standing next to them.

“Ah! Ahhhhh!” the blood-soaked soldiers screamed. They had all lost sight of Sansui, but now turned to look at him. Sansui slowly began to walk; his movements were graceful and elegant, not a stride expected of someone engaging in battle. However, that began to draw even more attention towards him. They could see soldiers screaming while covered in blood and a man leisurely walking. It was no surprise he had caught everyone's eye.

“Ki Blade.” Sansui swung his sword in an elegant arc and cut down a second soldier.

“Oh...”

Another fell.

“You said you’d capture me, right? Time to start actually trying!” As Sansui had declared himself an envoy from a larger country, it made more sense for them to try to capture him rather than kill him. Sansui disagreed with that decision.

“Kill him!” the leading soldier yelled. He was annoyed that two of his soldiers had fallen, that Sansui was using Rare Arts, and that he had challenged them so easily.

The other soldiers joined in the shouting. “Yeahhhhh!”

“Yes, that’s it.”

The remaining civilians all scattered away in response. However, Sansui, the target of their anger, remained standing with his sword readied.

This guy can teleport in an instant! We should create some distance and aim for him after he teleports! The leading soldier unsheathed his sword with one hand, throwing the spear in his other hand at Sansui. If the envoy jumped out of the way of the spear, he would be met with the sword. Even if he was able to avoid the spear, he wouldn’t be able to avoid the sword.

“Too slow.” If he were any other regular Rare Arts user, that maneuver might have worked. Unfortunately, they were up against Sansui, Suiboku’s only pupil. Dodging the tip of the thrown spear, Sansui grabbed the haft as it passed by him.

What! I know I only threw it with one hand and didn’t put much power into it but...he caught it at this distance?! The leading soldier was shocked by Sansui’s display of ability.

“Even though you plan to take me captive, I can’t help but feel you’re going easy on me. I find that awfully rude.” He was Arcana’s strongest swordsman and House Sepaeda’s Grand Instructor of Warfare. Even so, these men were still taking him lightly. It was the same as not listening to someone when they spoke.

“Ki Blade, Cross Touch.” In contrast to the soldier who had unsheathed his sword and lost his spear, Sansui sheathed his ceremonial sword and readied the spear. Using the Cross Touch ability, the ordinary spear became a jumonji yari, a

type of spear with a T-shaped blade.

The leading soldier froze still when he saw what Sansui had done. He was at a disadvantage using a sword against a spear. *Should I borrow a spear from one of the others? Should I block with my sword? Or should I just retreat...? Ack, there's no way I can fight him on my own...* He tried to come up with an exit from this situation.

"Too slow." However, even that was a fatal move.

The soldier cried out wordlessly as he was struck.

What...? I couldn't even respond in time to the spear?! The lead soldier was shocked as the life drained from him. Even though his opponent was stronger, even though he had a better weapon, there was no way he should have been able to respond to so many attacks. They had simply lost. He had incorrectly judged just how much stronger his opponent was. Even if he had been able to judge the gulf between them correctly, it meant nothing now.

"Too slow, too slow, too slow!" The other soldiers stood in shock seeing their captain cut down so easily. Sansui swung his spear, felling the remaining soldiers while they were frozen in place without even giving them a chance to respond. "I'm House Sepaeda's most renowned warrior! How dare you look down on me!" He held onto the ceremonial sword and the spear he stole at the same time as he stared the rest of his enemies down. It would be suicide for any of them to try to face off against Sansui. A well-trained swordsman could easily take out five ordinary soldiers.

This has gotta be a joke... We're all in full armor, and he's only wearing formal clothing... Unbelievable. There was no way they should have been outdone by an opponent with hardly any means of defense or ease of movement. That was especially the case where ordinary martial arts were concerned.

"Wh-What...? That noble...he's fighting them all dressed like that."

"A warrior from Arcana... He can even use a spear."

"Hey, hey, you gotta be joking... I thought he had backup on the way, but he's just fighting them all on his own?!" The civilians watching from a distance were all in shock after seeing Sansui defeat the border guards all by himself. They

were all aware of the capabilities of the residents of this world, and it should have been impossible for one person to defeat so many trained soldiers that easily. Sensing what Sansui wanted to do, they didn't deem it a success on his part. That went for the border guards too.

"Hey, archer! What are you doing! Kill him already!"

"I'm trying! Stay away from him!"

As they were border guards, naturally they had archers set up around the perimeter. They would be able to shoot their arrows from a distant, high-up position. It was a simple but effective tactic.

"Everyone...fire!"

The archers, as well as the soldiers, weren't necessarily skilled. However, in the case of twenty archers firing at the same target, at least five should have hit. He was wearing formal clothing, so it should have been easy. No matter how great he was, he wouldn't go unscathed after being hit with an arrow. It might not have killed him, but it should have greatly weakened him.

"Hm."

If he were an ordinary person, all he would have been able to do to protect himself from the rain of arrows would be to curl up into a ball. A more experienced soldier might have tried to use magic to shoot them down. However, Sansui had observed all twenty arrows while in flight. He had taken note of each arrow and from which direction they had come, allowing him to work out their trajectory. He didn't have to make any exaggerated movements and was able to easily dodge the arrows with one single step. Fifteen of the arrows wouldn't have hit him anyway; however, the remaining five were right on target. But, since Sansui had moved out of the way, none of them hit anything at all.

The archers paused briefly in shock before resuming their volley. "One more time, fire!"

Twenty arrows had been launched, yet none of them hit their target. That was surprising, but it was also something that might have been achieved with luck. None of the arrows had hit their mark, but he also didn't fire back at them,

so their leader ordered them to fire again.

He just got lucky! Even if we were to give up now...there's no way he can dodge them every time! As much as it pained them to admit it, even if what had happened was based on skill and not luck, there was no way he could successfully dodge an entire volley multiple times unless the wind sent them astray. Humans weren't perfect, after all.

"Fire, fire, fire!"

That should have been the case, except their opponent was an Immortal. Not a single hit had ever landed on Sansui. After training for five hundred years, he left no room for chance or miracles. He had moved the least amount possible and had purposely chosen which arrows to knock out of the air. For those watching Sansui, it all looked incredibly boring. He had taken a step, almost half a step, and had used his spear to knock one or two arrows out of the air. The archers were filled with fear as the arrows continued to land on the ground, missing their target entirely.

"D-Don't fall back! Don't fall back!" The leader of the archers seemed close to tears as he shouted the order. The soldiers with the spears stood with their weapons ready, but their hands were shaking. The archers' hands were shaking so much that they were unable to redraw their bows. They all knew that it wasn't them who had made a mistake. All twenty had aimed for their target, and they all knew that none of them had purposely tried to miss their shot. Even so, the target seemed uninterested. Sansui had managed to successfully avoid them, but he acted as if he hadn't done anything.

"Oh, us too!"

"Y-Yeah!" The soldiers with the spears, who were on the same ground as Sansui, joined in the attack. They couldn't all strike at once, but they could throw all of their spears, thus making it difficult for Sansui to dodge.

"Too slow." They had thrown roughly five spears, and Sansui had avoided them easily. "I said, too slow!" In response, he began his counterattack. With the stolen spear still in his hand, he closed in on the spearmen. They tried to strike back, but they were all cut down without hesitation. The soldiers who had thrown their spears tried to turn to flee but were all slain just the same.

“Attack! It doesn’t matter if you hit our own, just attack!” the leader of the archers bellowed as he watched the bloodshed.

“What?”

“Everyone’s gonna get killed at this rate!” The lead archer had come to a frightening conclusion. Their opponent was no ordinary person. However, it wasn’t a painful decision, simply fear regarding the strength of their opponent. His subordinates knew that fear all too well, whether it was the fear that they would be court-martialed, or that they would otherwise be resented by the wounded soldiers and their families.

“Ahhhh!” The guilt of shooting an ally to death... In order to get through that, all the archers had bellowed. As they yelled, they attempted to kill Sansui.

“Feather Step.” Although he was overwhelming them, he was in close combat, with arrows coming in from above. In response, Sansui made himself lighter and jumped aside, escaping.

“H-He flew?!”

“Calm down, cal—”

Sansui floated in front of the archers, startling them. Although they should have been looking down on him, he was now eye level with them.

“Flash Step.” Suddenly, he disappeared from their view. He hadn’t escaped or moved far away; instead, he appeared right next to the archers. Sansui, who had previously been floating, was now standing right there.

“Ah.” The archers were frozen with fear. “Ah...”

Sansui was ready to kill. The archers remained standing still, like frogs that had been caught by a snake. The swordsman then swiftly brought them to their ends.

“Ah, ahhh!” The soldiers were no different than the civilians. They could have tried to escape, but they were all paralyzed with fear, unable to move. Sansui ignored the civilians and instead continued cutting down the armed soldiers.

The civilians couldn’t take their eyes off the scene before them. They both felt like they couldn’t look away, and that if they did look away, they too would be

cut down. As they watched, they realized something was strange. There was something unnatural about the murderer putting on this bloody show. However, they couldn't figure out what it was.

As they stood puzzled, Sansui looked up towards the morning sky. "Well." There was a cloud of white smoke rising. It wasn't from a fire; it was a signal flare to warn others that they were in danger. The people manning the checkpoint had seen what Sansui was doing and had made the decision to raise the alarm. It was a simple request for help.

"This won't be a problem," Sansui remarked. This was the Oseo Kingdom checkpoint. As it was a place where people from outside the country could attack directly, it made sense that they would have a way to report an emergency. A group of soldiers, quite obviously larger than the soldiers who had been stationed at the checkpoint, were headed towards him. No one used to thinking about things normally would believe that there was any way one person could beat a unit of soldiers. However, for those who had just witnessed what happened before them, they didn't believe that at all.

"This country...is doomed." They understood the need to call for backup after seeing how many soldiers had been defeated. They had been directly attacked, so they had to raise the alarm as a part of their duties. However, that would only lead to more sacrifices.

A signal had been fired off from the checkpoint on the border, indicating there was an emergency and that the nation was in danger. Soldiers departed in droves from nearby towns. An attack from an enemy country would be devastating, but even just an attack by bandits at the checkpoint would do some serious damage. The fact that there was a force present that could breach the border checkpoint was also a threat, and if there was no response to that threat, then the nation's safety would be compromised. They had to engage the enemy and quickly restore the border checkpoint's integrity.

They understood the urgency; everyone from the knights down through the infantry and all the other soldiers were all bursting with morale. Even though they were dealing with a brand new phenomenon, they all managed to form up. There was a strong sense of solidarity, which motivated them even further.

They hurried on towards the origin of the signal: the border checkpoint. Everyone ran fervently up the steep hill, which was located within a mountainous region enshrouded in a rich forest.

“Hm... Stop!” a knight at the front bellowed back to the others. The hot-blooded soldiers all followed the order and stood still. No one tried to push ahead and instead tried to catch their breath. The ruins of a large building had fallen and lay in front of the knight leading the group. Those at the front were quick to notice that it used to be the border checkpoint building. The rest of the soldiers just thought a large object had fallen.

“Wh-What?! Did they move a whole boulder?!” one of the soldiers exclaimed.

“Calm down, it’s just a roadblock!” The soldiers were shaken but not confused. They had run here knowing that there was an enemy, so it wasn’t a surprise for them to see something like this.

“Listen.” There was a person standing on top of the rubble. He was dressed in formal clothing and was a warrior of a different nationality. He pulled two swords from the multitude of blades that had been stabbed into the mountain.

“My name is Sansui Shirokuro. I am the Grand Instructor of Warfare of the great noble House Sepaeda, from the kingdom of Arcana. On orders from Lord Sepaeda, I have come to the Oseo Kingdom.” He was not dressed in clothes appropriate for battle, though he seemed willing to fight. The soldiers wanted to say, “Stop kidding around; stop bluffing.” However, the person standing on top of the rubble had a commanding, persuasive presence. “I will now begin moving towards your king. If you try to stop me, you will be met with my sword.” The bold figure had a sense of dignity, and because of that, the soldiers took him seriously.

Someone then gave the order. “Kill this man!” Knowing that the opponent before them was strong, the front-most soldiers led the attack.

“World Manipulation, Mountain Throwing.” Sansui threw his unsheathed sword at the approaching soldiers. Naturally, it wasn’t a weapon made to be thrown, but if it hit its target, it could be fatal. However, that normally wouldn’t work against armored opponents. As such, they had readied their shields preparing to block the attack. The sword Sansui had thrown, however, hit a

target and was able to pierce the soldier's shield, the arm that was holding the shield, and their armor.

"W-Wah..."

It hit like a battering ram. The thrown sword had an unnatural weight to it, a weight that no human would be able to stop.

"Ki Blade. Feather Step." Sansui took another two swords out of the rubble, this time dual-wielding them. Sansui floated upward like a feather on a breeze before throwing himself at the line of soldiers.

"G-Gah...!"

It was difficult to respond to a sudden attack from above. However, the soldiers were used to the mountainous terrain of the Oseo Kingdom and did their best to respond to the attack.

"Useless." Sansui nimbly cut them down with the two swords, all while avoiding their counterattacks. His control was impressive. In an instant, he had managed to find an opening and attacked the enemies without hesitating. The fully armored soldiers all fell over like they were dolls being knocked over by the wind. Once Sansui had made his way through them, none were left standing.

"H-Hey...!"

Their confidence and sense of solidarity meant nothing. As their companions continued to push forward, they continued to get cut down by the formally dressed warrior. The soldiers thought that to themselves as they swung their swords, unable to do anything about the constant rain of attacks.

We're all wearing helmets. How does he have that much strength while dual-wielding...?

"Leaden Step."

They should have feared Sansui's abilities. Lightening his body with Feather Step, in the split second he attacked his opponent, he put more weight into the sword. If the sword remained light as a balloon, it would have hit lightly; however, if the sword became heavier, it would hit heavily. The ability to switch

the weight between light and heavy allowed for speed and power to work together. He had never once failed at deploying this technique. If he hadn't been able to control it, the weight of the sword would have been like the weight of his body, meaning he wouldn't be able to use his enemy as a stepping stone and would instead fall over. That never happened to Sansui. He had mastered the skill.

"Th-They...they were just there!" The last remaining soldier, who had just watched all of his companions collapse, had lost his courage. He probably felt confident and proud when he had his companions around him, but now that they were all gone, he was scared and meek. Coming towards him was a god of war with the strength of a thousand men. He could have tried to run, but there was nothing the soldier could do otherwise.

"No!" he called out.

"Mountain Throwing." Sansui threw his sword in the direction of the soldier as he tried to run. It pierced his target in his lower abdomen, adding his body to the rest.

"Gah..."

Staring in the opposite direction of where they had marched from, the last soldier looked over at Sansui's back in desperation. The monster they had just faced was about to bump into the rest of the unit, obliterate them, and keep on going.

You've gotta be kidding me. The soldier would die soon, having been pierced through his lower abdomen. In his last few moments, he watched Sansui.

"All right." Sansui checked his body after having torn through the battlefield. The last remaining soldier wasn't able to work out what he was checking for.

I don't get it...

What time he had left was consumed by his confusion and bewilderment about the otherworldly Sansui before him.

Part 12 — Honesty

In the Oseo Kingdom's official meeting room, the king and several other officials were holding a meeting regarding the training of Mystic Arts users.

"We don't have enough doctors, nor Mystic Arts users. Many territories are without doctors, meaning those with doctors have a bigger burden to carry," one of the attendees remarked.

"There have been people asking that we seek aid from the Arcana Kingdom... Caputo, to be precise. And, actually, they're no longer asking; rather, they're demanding."

"If we do ask for aid, we can hope for a lot of improvements being made. There is nothing else we can do, and those who are working in healthcare will no doubt be angry if we don't do it."

"I can understand why it'd be the right thing to do coming from a healthcare point of view... However, it doesn't bode well for the future." The Arcana Kingdom had a family that specialized in the Mystic Arts, so they always had Mystics at the ready. However, that wasn't the case for other countries. It was difficult to even find someone who could use the Mystic Arts, and there weren't very many of those people who could teach it. The Oseo Kingdom could always send one of their own to Caputo to receive training; unfortunately, as they planned to go to war with Arcana in a few years, that was no longer possible. They didn't want to think about what would happen to the exchange student if they were to end up mixed up in the war. They wouldn't be so quick to kill someone who was able to use a Rare Art.

"It continues to irk me that we were unable to get our hands on the Immortal Arts..."

"We would have been able to make better use of the people being left to rot and could have taken over Caputo's position."

"We're done, so let's end it here."

The grass was always greener on the other side. Although it might appear greener, that wasn't to say the future would be brighter as a result.

I wonder how it really is... Even if we were able to monopolize the Immortal Arts, the information would get out from somewhere, and we'd be threatened by the large nations into giving it up...and there's no way we'd be able to replace Caputo. Even so, the king was calm. He was often pessimistic, but this time the negative outcome was quite believable. If they had been successful, then it wouldn't have been wrong to send in so many agents.

However, they lacked the blind faith to believe they would be able to protect their massive profits. Although they had failed to secure the Immortal Arts, it would have taken a miracle for them to bring them back to their own country without anyone noticing. Arcana having a monopoly over the Immortal Arts, as well as having a noble family that specialized in the Mystic Arts, just seemed *appropriate*. That was just a large nation having power suitable for its size and strength. If a medium-sized nation attempted to do the same, it would be said that it was too much for them to take.

However, their annexation of Domino went too far. It may be a vassal state on paper, but marrying their princess to the president of Domino was basically the same thing as conquering them...

Arcana becoming a superstate wasn't ideal. *Anyone can fantasize all they like, but there comes a time when you have to compromise with reality. If they can't do that, then they will rot just like the Domino Empire did. That's just the reality of it.* In this world, there were no real winners, after all. No matter how impressive or strong you were, one misstep could spell the end of it all.

The Arcana Kingdom will fall together with Domino. That's just the reality of it. The king laughed a crooked laugh. The target of his envy was going to collapse in no time at all. He laughed because he couldn't stop imagining it. The king tried to warn himself that he was too quick to do so, but he was unable to contain his excitement. *Black will probably find some time to celebrate the wedding. He will be able to learn a lot more than he would by being here.* The king wasn't wrong. If he was wrong about something, it was about the kingdom of Arcana being a superstate...

"Your Majesty, I have an urgent report! A man who has named himself an envoy from Arcana has entered the country!" A high-ranking knight gave the report without any regard to royal etiquette, having simply barged into the

meeting room. However, upon hearing the contents of the report, everyone understood why. It was a report that the king needed to hear immediately.

“What...? Then we must discuss how to seize him...” Clearly, the knights didn’t know how to deal with a foreign invader, so they came to ask the king. All of the other officials were in agreement with their ruler.

“We can’t!” the knight responded. “That envoy was able to take out an entire unit of soldiers, and he’s already broken into the castle!” The knight hadn’t come to ask what to do, but to warn them of what had happened so that they could escape. “We don’t have long until he wipes out the castle guards! You have to leave now!”

Sansui Shirokuro cut down everyone who stood against him on his way to the royal capital. He pushed ahead, all to fulfill the order of his master. Although Oseo was a medium-sized nation, it still had castle walls and a castle gate. Unfortunately, that only worsened the situation. Sansui stated who he was and what his objective was to the people at the castle gate, then proceeded to cut them down when they tried to stop him. Since the castle gate had been broken through, that provoked the garrison to gather. It was only one intruder, so it should have been easy to intercept him—however, that was not actually the case. They were unable to injure him or even put a mark on his formal clothing.

One playwright had witnessed the tragedy and would go on to tell a lot of people what he witnessed that day. He became a playwright because he enjoyed interesting plays. He would often think of an interesting idea, then want to make it become a reality. That’s why, when he witnessed a massacre, it was both a blessing and a curse. He still remembered how he felt when he saw the respectful, high-level noble commit mass murder.

However...he felt lucky to have witnessed it. It made him realize just how stagnant their imagination had become. He had never been particularly affluent, but because there was hardly anyone in the countryside who wanted to watch plays, he had come to the royal capital. This led to many sleepless nights...as a result of what he had witnessed. *I was slow to run away, which in turn ended up being a blessing, as I was able to witness the massacre.* Those who had stood in front of the intruder no longer had a future ahead of them,

and those he had passed no longer had any life to live. The knights who had been sent to protect the royal capital had rushed to stop him from getting any farther, but had all been turned into corpses with the stroke of a sword.

The Young Blademaster from Arcana had cut through everyone, regardless of whether they were a knight or a soldier. He was like a hero from a fairy tale, a hero who could take down thousands of men. The only difference was that he wasn't wielding a sword of legend; instead, he was using swords he had stolen from the Oseo soldiers he had fought. This wasn't a play, so his sword broke when he kept cutting people down. The reason he was able to keep cutting through soldiers was that he continuously kept stealing the swords of those he killed. What was really graceful about it, though, was that it was like looking at a script's choreography. He hadn't taken them by force, he hadn't stripped them off any corpses, and he hadn't scrambled around on the ground to try to pick up the weapons. He would sometimes use a broken sword to end a soldier's life, then take a new sword from their weak hands. Sometimes, he would grab the end of a soldier's spear and take it from them.

The playwright of course knew about fight scenes. He also knew how difficult they were. He could see how desperate the Oseo soldiers were to kill the intruder. However, the intruder was so skilled that it almost seemed like they were attacking him just to be killed, and were falling to the ground like it was all a part of the plan. A battle scene was like a promise. You had the person who would be cut down and the person who would be doing the cutting down. The playwright knew how difficult that was, and that was why witnessing someone pull it off in a real-life fight, and being able to do so against a troop of soldiers trying to kill him, was borderline godlike. The playwright watched it all proceed. Fully clad soldiers were slain by one single swordsman—it was a legend that seemed completely detached from reality.

But, could they call it a noble killing? He was mesmerized by the swordsman's abilities. The nobleman hadn't used any extravagant attacks or magic. He had watched him slay multiple people with only one sword.

He had, however, noticed something—not as a spectator, but as someone who wrote plays. In a play, an actor had to wear clothes that suited their role. If they were playing the role of a commoner, they would be dressed appropriately

in their own clothes. However, if they were playing the role of a noble, they would have to prepare clothes that resembled what a noble would wear. Depending on the production, sometimes they would have to borrow costumes instead of wearing their own clothing. However, borrowed clothes *were* borrowed clothes. If they got dirty or damaged, then they would have to pay a fee. They were all used to making sure to keep the clothes clean and moving in a way that would ensure that the clothes didn't get damaged.

That's why he had noticed something—that the Young Blademaster had taken great care of himself as he single-handedly attacked the capital of a nation. He made sure that he didn't get any blood on his clothes or any dirt on his shoes. Once one person had realized that; everyone else was filled with wonder. It was difficult to understand.

The playwright and the others didn't really understand it either. He had killed countless soldiers, even though there were archers all stationed high up on roofs, and although he was in a country where he wasn't getting any support, he was mostly worried about not dirtying the shoes he was wearing. He made sure to carefully step over the bodies so no blood got on his shoes, using his tiptoes to ensure he didn't damage them in the process.

That's when the playwright understood that he lacked imagination and insight. "Madmen" were often categorized as people that did things differently from ordinary people. However, that wasn't the case at all. He was heroic enough to kill an army of thousands, but he was also similar enough to other poor people that he didn't want to get his uniform dirty. If he were captured, he would be tortured for the rest of his life. If not, he'd end up living his whole life facing huge armies.

The playwright wished he could be so nonchalant and more concerned with keeping his uniform clean. If one couldn't call the murderer a madman, what could one call them? The fact that he had single-handedly tried to invade an enemy country on his own was already a heroic tale in itself. Tales of his military fame would echo throughout the world. However, although he was in the middle of this epic fight, he was more concerned about the state of his uniform and shoes. The playwright often had the madman play the role of the antagonist or act like a clown—scenarios where they couldn't understand what

was being said to them, they couldn't handle their alcohol, or they had become insensible due to medicine. In any case, the playwright depicted madmen as somewhat reasonable. However, seeing the noble murderer changed their line of thinking.

That was a madman who was achieving things that some people could only dream of and had absolutely no regard for his own life. However...everyone knew that he hadn't infiltrated Oseo. He had gone through and overcome every obstacle on his way from the border to the royal capital. He hadn't just been mindful of not getting his uniform or his shoes dirty starting when he arrived in the royal capital, but had been doing so the entire time...

What was even more surprising was his reason for invading Oseo. At the time, when everyone was in awe of him, they didn't know the real reason, but when they found out the truth...no one really understood. Prince Black had been rude at the royal wedding, and it seemed he had come to complain to the king. Apparently his masters in House Sepaeda were acting bizarrely by ordering him to do so in the first place, but the man himself was even more bizarre for just accepting the order and going straight to another country in his formal clothing.

The playwright thought a character of his would have had a more heroic reason for being there, like rescuing a maiden who was abducted, getting revenge, confessing to a long-forgotten crime, fighting on behalf of oppressed people, or some actual reason like that. This was where the playwright had to admit defeat and admit that facts were sometimes stranger than fiction. At any rate, the playwright had no confidence in their ability to write a play about what they witnessed that day.

Oseo Kingdom, the royal palace.

The castle, a nation's symbol of authority, was currently in danger of being conquered by a lone intruder. Or, rather, it was already being conquered. The king, who was holed up in an audience chamber under the protection of one lone guard, stared at the door. He could no longer hear any commotion from outside. The other soldiers had all been defeated, and the noncombatant members of the staff were all frozen with fear.

“He’s coming...”

The last remaining soldier was the commanding officer of the imperial guards. He unsheathed his sword with a mixture of resignation and resolve. Suddenly, the doors to the audience chamber broke open, making no sound whatsoever as they did. The furniture that had been stacked up against the door flew through the air, having been rendered absolutely useless.

“M-Monster,” the king spat out at the man who was waiting on the other side of the destroyed doors. In a certain sense, he was dressed appropriately to meet with a king; however, he had gone about it the completely wrong way. Although he had fought a few guards on his way, his uniform showed no evidence of a struggle, nor did the assassin show any signs of exhaustion as he calmly strolled into the audience chamber.

“Your Majesty... I will protect you until the very end!” The commanding officer of the imperial guards raised his sword above his head and charged at the intruder with no regard for his life. He planned to take the intruder with him, and so he put his all into his swing. In response to the attack from the guard, the intruder didn’t use any Immortal Arts. He simply lifted his sword.

“Impressive.”

Time felt as if it had come to a stop, as the commanding officer witnessed the truth of who he was dealing with—a perfectly calm and composed swordsman. The guardsman felt impressed as he was cut to pieces, but he also regretted being unable to protect his king. They had both swung as they passed each other; however, it was the officer whose life was ended.

“Tell me your name,” the king said to the intruder after a long pause. He was unable to protect himself, let alone his kingdom. All that was left was to protect his pride.

“I serve one of Arcana’s four great noble houses, House Sepaeda, as its Grand Instructor of Warfare, as well as its foremost swordsman. I am Sansui Shirokuro.”

He bowed while introducing himself, having addressed the king from a place of absolute unassailability.

“Sansui...Shirokuro...the Young Blademaster, Arcana’s strongest warrior...”

“I am honored that the king of another country knows of me.”

It almost sounded like a joke. This was the work of someone who far exceeded just being a strong swordsman. “Strongest” would imply that he was the strongest out of all the soldiers in his country. That would mean that, if there were a second and third strongest, they could join forces and be undefeatable. As in, they would be able to take on over one hundred soldiers with ease. However, the man who stood before the king had surpassed that. If the king understood the situation properly, Sansui had single-handedly destroyed an entire nation. *That’s* what being the strongest was. Who else could have done something like this?

“The man known as the Lightning Slasher after he took out a squad of Arcana’s knights by himself, who then went on to decapitate more than one hundred soldiers, then displayed their heads for all to see...” The king raised his eyebrows as he spoke of Sansui’s exploits, what he had assumed were exaggerated rumors that had strayed far from the truth.

“Correct.”

In actuality, they were far removed from the truth. This monster didn’t just have the strength to subdue a whole unit of soldiers on his own, nor to behead a group of mercenaries on his own. He had the strength to do even more than that. After all, Oseo had fallen before him. He had been able to attack them head-on, and he had won.

“What are you after? My head?” the king asked.

“No, I’m here to give you our response.”

If Sansui had planned to kill the king, he would have already chopped his head off. Instead, standing in front of the defenseless ruler of Oseo, Sansui pulled out a bag he had hanging from his waist.

“House Sepaeda will accept your declaration of war. Let us do battle in order to uphold our honor and dignity.” After completing the task his master had set, he then threw the bag at the king’s face.

There was a pause before the king could reply. “Huh?” He was confused.

Having a bag thrown at his face was so rude that he simply couldn't comprehend what had just happened. "A response to *our* declaration of war? Not a declaration of war from Arcana?"

"Correct."

"What are you talking about?!" The king didn't understand what Sansui was saying. "My son, Prince Black, went to Arcana as a representative for Oseo. However, he was attending as a royal wedding guest! He wasn't sent to pass on a declaration of war!" The Oseo Kingdom did have plans to go to war with Arcana, but that would be in a few years' time, once they had formed an alliance with a large nation. There was no way Oseo could take on Arcana all by itself. "This has to be a mistake!"

"Please, do tell me if there was a mistake." Sansui then began to tell the king what had happened at the royal wedding ceremony. "Your nation's representative, Prince Black, publicly insulted the groom, Magyan Tahlan. He used incredibly impolite language in front of guests from other nations."

"What...?"

The king wasn't able to deny the accusation, nor could he deny that Prince Black harbored a lot of hate for the Arcana Kingdom.

"The prince, having been invited to a wedding ceremony, proceeded to insult the groom. Was there any intention behind that other than a declaration of war?"

"W-Well..." The king, being the leader of a medium-sized nation, knew all too well that he was unable to give a vague answer in response to such a straightforward question. "First, I would like to apologize for my son's rudeness. I must assume that your claim that he was throwing insults at the groom is indeed true."

"So you admit it," Sansui replied.

"A lot of guests were present, right? If that was a lie, it would soon be found out." As it was a royal wedding ceremony, alcohol was no doubt present. It wouldn't be too strange to assume that was the cause behind his son's rudeness. "He harbors a lot of jealousy towards the great nation of Arcana,

which resulted in his insults... I ask that you forgive him.”

“Are you saying that his outburst was a result of his personal feelings and not a declaration of war?”

“Yes...we do not wish for war,” the king responded. Though he denied the accusation, his eyes were trembling with rage. “Even though we were in the wrong...Arcana also didn’t take the time to confirm the situation.”

“Are you saying that we should have first confirmed with you before deciding it was a declaration of war?”

“Yes. If Arcana had done that, we could have avoided what transpired here today.” The king was still unaware of the situation regarding the border and the border checkpoint; even so, he knew that many of his men had sacrificed themselves for him in droves. That in itself was a huge blow.

“Why did you resort immediately to using force rather than confirming it with us...? It reeks of ambition for my country!” Not only did they have their eyes on the Oseo lands, it felt like they were actively searching for a pretext for war, acting carelessly while using Black’s slip of the tongue as an excuse. That was the correct political guess to make. “Thus, Arcana jumped right on it, making an enemy out of everyone! Will the far and distant kingdom of Magyan come to help? They can’t do anything; no one can help!”

Even if a family was insulted, it was expected that they would just endure the slander. That was the mature thing to do. “It’s too late! I’m going to ally with the great nations and prepare for war! And when that happens, it won’t matter how strong Arcana is or how strong you are! You won’t be able to protect your country!” the king shouted, protesting their childish barbaric actions. Arcana was unable to withstand something it should have just brushed under the rug.

Sansui, who now stood before the king, was unable to deny anything. Arcana’s actions had indeed been careless.

However, as Sansui had done something similar to what his master had done, he decided to say something similar to what his master had once said. “I am Sepaeda’s foremost swordsman, as well as their Grand Instructor of Warfare. In order to protect House Sepaeda’s honor, I fought. I have nothing to be ashamed of,” Sansui proudly declared. It was a far cry from the ambiguous statements

politicians would make, instead serving as a very clear and direct answer. “I was there when your son verbally abused Prince Tahlan. It pains me to think of how the prince must have felt at that moment.” Sansui and Lord Sepaeda thought similarly; in truth, there was simply no way someone wouldn’t be furious at having that happen to them.

For what reason was Sansui strong? For what reason was he a warrior? And finally, for what reason was he the strongest? “I exist as the strongest swordsman so that people do not have to restrain themselves. If Sepaeda wishes for retaliation, then I shall see that it is done.” Sansui had become House Sepaeda’s sword for that reason. “We have no plans to rely on Magyan. We will simply use all of House Sepaeda’s power.” Sansui was quick to the point; indeed, it was admirable how direct he could be. “If I am not strong enough for that...then I will aim to be stronger.” The man who had just laid low a whole nation on his own was equally direct about his own ability. If he, one person, did his best, he could protect a nation. The king couldn’t help but feel jealous, not of Arcana, but of the man who was the embodiment of that ideal who stood before him.

“Hey, hey, Sansui. Don’t be such a buzzkill.”

A man entered through the gap in the wall, where the entrance to the audience chamber previously stood. He was the same ethnicity as Sansui and was also wearing formal clothing. Judging from the quality of his clothes, he was of an even higher rank than Sansui.

“I’m also an ace, after all. You can at least rely on me.”

“Lord Ukyou...”

Ukyou?! The dictator from another realm, the one that took over Domino...why is he here?!

The president of the Domino Republic, Fuushi Ukyou... He was one of the grooms, as well as a leader of one of Arcana’s vassal states. He laughed as he approached Sansui. “We can’t start the ceremony without you. I came here on Noah, and Shouzo gave us a bit of a boost with his magic.”

“I am quite sorry...”

“You’d probably be able to make it in time anyway. We’ll just have to hurry back and do the ceremony as is. It is your pupils’ wedding, after all, so let’s head on back.” Ukyou lightly tapped Sansui, the man who had taken down an entire nation, on the chest.

The king was frozen with fear as he watched him do it. *He really is the Young Blademaster... Does that mean the other three aces will come too?! One was enough, but there were five of them in total. The king couldn’t stop himself from shaking when he thought of that fact.*

“There are a lot of people who want to see you there. Also, you’re too quick! We didn’t make it in time.” However, the king was about to lose all hope, as ten men filed into the room after Ukyou.

“Ha, ha ha ha! What skill! On the way here, we had a look at the roads you took, and well...I was speechless!”

“I can see why you’re the pride of Sepaeda! When they said you could take out a whole army, this was what they meant!”

“If Sepaeda is in possession of a swordsman like yourself, the future is bright for Arcana!”

It was a sight that made the king doubt his own eyes. The kings of all the neighboring great nations had gathered in Oseo’s audience chamber. They all praised Sansui, and while they were all boasting about his exploits, they also had expressions of fear and respect on their faces.

“I apologize you had to see me act in such an embarrassing manner,” Sansui apologized.

“No, no, there’s no need to be embarrassed for accomplishing your master’s orders! I want my subordinates to take note!”

“Such a humble yet strong figure! I would love for you to come to my country and teach martial arts!”

The king of Oseo understood what those other rulers were doing. They had just witnessed what would happen when Arcana was provoked, and they were buttering their representatives up, knowing that they wouldn’t be able to handle the same thing happening to them. Ultimately, it was the right decision

to make, but it also meant the door had just closed on Oseo's future forever. The kings of the great nations all turned to the king of Oseo as if they had just remembered he was there.

"I do not mean to be rude, but I heard your conversation earlier..."

The king of Oseo, startled, came to attention as he was addressed.

"What were you planning on our behalf?" The question was full of loathing.

"W-Well..." The king hesitated.

"Of course, you are free to imagine what you like, and even to do what you like. However, if that daydream were to become a reality, I ask that you don't curse our names when you do it." Although ambiguous, it was a clear rejection. It was only natural for a medium-sized country to want to align with a large nation. However, a large nation would find it impudent for a smaller country to try to make use of its power.

"It's over..." The king had realized the severity of the situation. There were no large nations willing to oppose the Arcana Kingdom and no one he could call for help. That meant that other medium-sized and smaller nations would no doubt also abandon the Oseo Kingdom. Oseo was entirely alone.

Part 13 — Reflection

As Noah was meant to be a boat for evacuations, she couldn't move very fast. However, Shouzo was also on board, and he used his magic to strengthen the winds, allowing Noah to move faster than usual. Noah, originally built to withstand the winds, was now being pushed and made to move even faster by the wind. The leaders of the large nations were also on board and were currently showcasing their wits as they complimented Shouzo and Noah.

"It's not every day you get to see scenery like this! As expected of Caputo's ace!"

"I'm thankful to Lord Ukyou! Next time, I want a ride over my own country!"

"Lord Sansui is wonderfully strong! He's like the hero out of a story, managing to defeat an entire nation on his own!"

As the leaders all hurried to compliment them, the three receiving the compliments had conflicting expressions. Neither Sansui, Shouzo, nor Ukyou had plans to make fools of them. If anything, it was better than Black or King Oseo.

"Sansui, Shouzo...I'm sorry," Ukyou apologized to the two of them as he distanced himself away from the group of kings. "Even though Shouzo had worked so hard to set up the demonstration, I couldn't stop that prince from causing a scene. If I knew this would happen, I probably would have wanted to do the demonstration in front of everyone."

"Yeah, about that...why did you only want the kings of the large nations to see it?" Shouzo asked innocently. As Ukyou himself just said, if they had done the demonstration in front of everyone, including Prince Black, this massacre probably wouldn't have happened.

"If we had been unlucky, the medium-sized countries and the smaller countries would have just tried to join forces with us. If they become our allies, then we'd have even more to look after. Right now, Arcana is already busy with Domino... That said, it probably wasn't the best idea to provoke kingdoms we can't really keep an eye on."

This was also something that they hadn't planned on. For larger nations, the demonstration gave off the message, "If you attack us, we'll destroy you," whereas for middle-sized nations, the message was "If you don't join us, we'll kill you." At least, there would have been a lot of countries who would have interpreted it that way. They would have disregarded every other country and run straight to Arcana. Unfortunately, Arcana didn't have the time or resources for them.

"I see..." Shouzo responded. In terms of mightiness, Arcana could make an enemy of everyone around them and win. However, that wasn't to say that they could rule the world, given the level their political and diplomatic structures were at. Everyone hated that they had to bother with managing outside affairs. This might be a strange way of putting it, given how Arcana was developing, but they had no interest in expanding further than what they were already committed to.

"Well...as a result of that, Tahlan had to experience something not so pleasant. As well as you, Shouzo..." Shouzo, who was generally kind to people, had been forced to do the demonstration. Then, since Tahlan had to undergo that treatment, Sansui was made to use force and do what he did. "I'm really sorry, Sansui." Ukyou had therefore realized his blunder.

"But what happened with Black was more like an accident. Even if he was at the demonstration, he might still have gotten drunk and lost his temper," Sansui commented, attempting to point out that the fault didn't lie with Ukyou. There were people who thought that being honest with your feelings was a virtue. There were also people who thought that withholding your true feelings from the person you were speaking with was disgraceful. Black was one of those people. To be honest, he wasn't fit to be a politician.

"Yeah, but...if I had worked to the best of my ability, maybe that wouldn't have happened." A middling power had become angry after having been snubbed by the larger nations; anyone would have been able to predict that. Then, their anger had been directed towards one of the grooms. "We made you go and do exactly what your master talked about. For that, I am truly sorry."

"Yeah." Sansui looked down as they passed one of the villages he had destroyed. Black was at fault, but the people who had been living in that village

weren't. Sansui wasn't in the wrong, either, but it was the young Suiboku who had realized what would happen if he followed the same path. "However...I do not regret it. It's not the reason why I became so strong, but...if I compromise or give in, then me becoming stronger means nothing."

"That's true..." Shouzo nodded. The most feared of the aces, who was currently producing wind with his magic, looked down at his hands. "I...wanted people to be thankful, and I wanted a lot of magic, but...this happened. That led to people being afraid of me like this. Even so...it's fine. I'm doing something for the people who care about me. I think that's the most important part."

While not a good outcome, it was better than not being able to do anything. Shouzo and Sansui, while both reflecting on what they had done, had also confirmed that they were able to protect what mattered to them as a result.

"Um, should we stop? I mean...the wedding ceremony will be starting soon." They had entered the Arcana Kingdom's territory, and had to cheer up sometime before they reached the royal capital. Ukyou was one of the three grooms getting married, after all.

"Yeah, Setenve will give me an earful if she seems like this," said Ukyou.

"I'll also get scolded by Lady...ah, your bride." The three aces thus returned to the Arcana Kingdom, which they had to protect with all their strength. The wedding ceremony was finally going to take place.

The wedding ceremony.

Like the ceremony in Magyan, there was a strictly formal atmosphere. The three couples had vowed to love one another for eternity in the presence of the king. All of the kings and nobles from various countries watched on with serious expressions as the brides and grooms took their vows. Or, rather, they were standing guard. The display of martial arts in the Magyan Kingdom had just been a simple exhibition match. However, this time, it had been completely different; it had been an *actual* display of martial arts. If any outsider upset anyone from Arcana, their country would be invaded.

Understanding this, all the nobles from the different countries were paying extra careful attention. They had heard what had happened to Oseo from the

king of a great nation. Medium-sized countries and small countries were all therefore acting carefully to protect themselves and their people. The formal atmosphere was thus to be expected from a superstate.

Amongst this, bonds of love and friendship were being formed.

“Ambassador, what do you think of this Arcanian-style wedding ceremony?”

“I do not think Magyan culture is inferior, but...this is a nice ceremony.”

A representative from the Magyan Kingdom, attending as a member of that kingdom’s delegation, was seated next to Lord Sepaeda. While the other countries’ kings were all holding their breath, he was whispering to Lord Sepaeda, “Lord Sepaeda, how is your hand?”

“No need to worry. It’s nothing,” Lord Sepaeda responded. It was natural that the Magyan representative was concerned for his hand, as the Sepaeda noble had broken multiple bones, and some of those breaks had even pierced the skin. However, this wasn’t the time to exchange simple pleasantries.

“Healing with the Mystic Arts is amazing. If I were to damage my hand that badly in my country, I wouldn’t be able to use it again. However...you have Divine Ginseng and so forth, right? Wouldn’t it have been better to use that?” the representative from Magyan asked.

“There’s no need to make such a big deal out of what I did to that guy. If I turned being stung by a mosquito into a whole production, I wouldn’t be able to stand as lord of House Sepaeda, which is known for its fighting skills,” Lord Sepaeda replied. From the standpoint of the Magyan Kingdom, Arcana was far more advanced in its medicine. Even then, the lord of House Sepaeda was refusing to use that advanced medicine. His rough-around-the-edges warrior spirit was coming through clearly.

“I see...” The Magyan representative held great respect for him, so much so that he dared not praise him. It could be taken as rude to state something so obvious to someone. “However...holding a ceremony like this is proof that it is a fantastic match. I believe this will lead to a bountiful future for both of our countries.” The representative ended up offering his compliments in a more roundabout way. He was being purposely ambiguous, but he didn’t have any ulterior motive.

“Of course it will. But I must say, it is rather shameful for us to be holding a ceremony for three couples,” Lord Sepaeda responded in a straightforward manner, although he was also being sincere. He was able to be so direct because he had acted so directly before, allowing him to clearly state the truth hidden behind the ambiguity. “I have heard from my father that the king of your country is a strong, sturdy, and wise man. We also have love that we are not able to show our children. Our country is not so dense that we don’t understand that.”

“It really is a fantastic match...” What happened was not necessarily a good thing. No matter how much people expected it, a lot of blood had been spilled over a wedding that should have been completely without conflict. However, that had allowed the representative from Magyan to confirm something—they wouldn’t hesitate to get their hands dirty if it came to the Magyan prince who would be joining their family. The representative would be able to report this back to the king, along with an actual example. “By the way...this is probably something I shouldn’t say to you, but Lady Sunae has also married a good person.”

“Of course.” The lord of Sepaeda was unable to hide his envy in response to the representative’s words. “If someone had said the same thing to Princess Sunae, he probably would have destroyed them himself.” The two of them looked over at one of the grooms, Saiga, as he gave his vows in front of the king.

A big difference between this ceremony and the ceremony in Magyan was that the person who stood before Saiga was Happine, not Sunae. Regardless, Saiga’s face was frozen with resolve. That wasn’t a consequence of how serious the ceremony was, but more of what had happened during the ceremony.

“Happine,” Saiga said to his bride standing next to him, trying not to interrupt the ceremony. “I heard what Sansui did in Oseo.”

“Yeah,” Happine responded. A lot of people often said that the aces had all destroyed nations, but up until that point, the only person who had actually done so was Ukyou. Now, this time, it had been Sansui. Next time, it could very well be Saiga.

“It’s not as if I want to, but...” He had the power to destroy a nation, so he had readied himself for doing so, if the time were ever to come. “If that ever happened to Sunae...I would do the same thing.” He didn’t feel a sense of duty; rather, he had decided he would simply do it. If he didn’t, it would negate everything he had done when he was in the Magyan Kingdom. However, it could also cause issues for the Batterabbe family. “If it comes to that...”

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Even if it were to cause issues, he would still use force. Happine’s response, therefore, was also full of resolve. “Batterabbe is a famous warrior family. If someone were to be insulted publicly, you would *have* to do the same thing,” she reassured him. “You would do the same if it were me...or Zuger, right?”

“Of course I would.” They were talking amongst themselves, but that also counted as a vow between them.

Another couple were also exchanging vows. “What he said really struck a chord with me.” One of the other grooms, Tahlan, was explaining to his wife. “All of them were correct. There was nothing I could say in return.” Prince Black had been completely drunk, but he had managed to hit Tahlan’s weak spots.

“Well, I guess so,” his wife, Douve, agreed. “He had no right to say any of that, but at the same time, you didn’t have to stoop to his level and respond.” His weakness had been exposed at this ceremony; even so, she didn’t mind. In fact, she loved that about him. “Plus, my brother and Sansui were incredibly mad. That’s what family is for, right?”

“I am so lucky.” Tahlan was an amazing man that everyone admired, but only Douve could get him to react as such.

“You’re both so lovey-dovey. Your father is over here trying not to listen.”

“Then how about you shut up?”

Meanwhile, Ukyou and Setenve were sandwiched between the two couples. Even though it was difficult to hear what they were talking about, it was clear they were communicating their feelings to one another.

“Yeah...I just keep racking up these mistakes,” Ukyou said, sighing.

“You’re not at fault. If it had gone any further, we would have put a stop to

it,” Setenve responded. The two of them considered their work part and parcel of their private lives. Although the conversation appeared impersonal, they were truly communicating their feelings to one another.

“Youngsters, the future of our kingdom,” the king addressed the three couples. He had been pretending to not overhear their conversations—he wasn’t annoyed by them, either, just relieved that the ceremony would be able to go on without a hitch. The royal families of the four great noble houses had put a lot of work into this joint ceremony. Even then, something untoward had happened. Fortunately, they had dealt with it together.

This wedding ceremony would set forth the heirs of Arcana. Although they usually snarled at one another, when it came to emergencies, they all worked together for the future of the kingdom. All the pleasantries and fixed phrases would come after what they needed to do. It was a blessing for one’s country and a great demonstration to others.

Yes, this is what I need to protect.

One of the wedding ceremony attendees was Sansui Shirokuro. Although he could feel the other nobles’ fearful looks, he still stood straight. The people he had hurt and killed had done nothing wrong, but if their deaths were necessary to protect what was laid out before him, then it had to be done. He felt different from Suiboku in that he felt pride, not shame, as he looked over those he had protected.

Chapter 4 — The Temptation of Isolation

Part 14 — Deception

After the pre-celebration and the actual ceremony had finished, only the representatives from various countries remained. To say if this was the norm depended on the situation; however, in this case, as Setenve and Ukyou had invited them in advance, they were expected to remain. They all behaved differently from when they were first invited, but Ukyou and Setenve did not take a high-handed attitude with them. They just laughed as they tried to build new relationships. The representatives couldn't help but feel nervous towards the couple's friendly behavior. They had seen what happened to the country that overstepped at the ceremony.

That, of course, referred to Prince Black, who had done just exactly that. His face had been destroyed as a result of the heavy discipline handed out by the lord of Sepaeda. They had tended to him somewhat, but they had not used any Mystic Arts, nor any Coiled Peach or Divine Ginseng. They had done just enough to ensure that he didn't die. That had been Arcana's attempt at mercy—although it was a very weak attempt. But, if they had not shown that mercy, he might have ended up dying. The guards and servants that had accompanied him to Arcana from his home country knew that all too well and did not dare to complain.

"What a shame..." they all murmured to themselves. His guards and servants were not aware that negotiations had failed between him and the representatives of the other countries. They also did not know that Oseo had failed to secure the Immortal Arts. And, naturally, they also didn't know that Arcana had become a superstate. So, as a result, they had no idea what was going on. They weren't present to help and thus they had no idea of the situation. They didn't know that their own prince had insulted someone at the wedding ceremony, had thereby angered Arcana, and had been severely punished as a result. All they did know was that their master had been

assaulted. The reality of the situation was so horrific that everyone tried to just ignore it. They cared for the prince at the assigned accommodation, waiting for him to be conscious again. They knew that when he woke up, the situation wouldn't be any better, but they had no other choice.

“Uff...uff uff ugh!” The prince finally woke up a few days after the ceremony. What waited for him when he woke up was incredible pain in his face and an intense headache. He had passed out, as well as had his face beaten in, so he was unable to see or hear clearly, and his nose was blocked. “Gah! Guaaahhh!” He was unable to take in his surroundings, and all he could feel was intense discomfort. He let out a bloodcurdling scream. Even though he had drunk a lot of alcohol and had lost consciousness, he could clearly remember what he had done and what had happened to him. He had hoped it was just a dream, but the pain in his face was a cruel reminder that it wasn't. He screamed out again, unable to withstand the sensation.

“Your Highness! Please relax!”

“You'll hurt yourself! Please, just try to relax!”

His guards and servants pleaded for him to cease. They were unable to wipe away his shame or heal his wounds. All they could do was ask that he stay quiet.

“I'm going back to Oseo,” the prince declared after a prolonged bout of screaming. He had finally calmed down, and he had decided that he wanted to go home.

“It's probably best if you stay lying down...”

“Shut up... I won't heal as long as I'm here in Arcana!” the prince spat out. To Black, Arcana was enemy territory, and there was no way he could receive treatment in enemy territory. It was better for him to go back to Oseo. “What good is it doing me to remain here?!” he howled out in pain. Eventually, they responded to his wishes, and it was decided that he would be taken back to Oseo.

On the way back, the prince was filled with rage, while the others were filled with sadness. The prince's own actions notwithstanding, the people who were supposed to protect him had failed to do so, and they feared for their futures.

They would of course lose their positions, and his servants and guards would be executed. The others would no doubt be punished in another way.

A few of them had thought about running away, stealing the jewels and the clothes the prince had brought with him, and completely disappearing. However, if they were to do that, then their families would be the ones punished instead. Thinking of that, none of them were able to run away, and they instead hung their heads low as they returned to Oseo. They thought that it couldn't get any worse than that. However, none of them had expected that their country had been completely destroyed.

"Th-This can't be..." Everyone looked on at the destroyed border checkpoint. It had been completely destroyed and now lay in ruins. They all would have preferred to have been met with an angry unit of guards instead of this. The gate into the country had been annihilated, and no one had attempted to repair it. That meant that it wasn't only the checkpoint that had been laid to waste, and that there had been more damage within the country, meaning that they'd had no time to repair the gate.

"Heh heh heh...how is it? They're probably all overjoyed to see me return. Or rather, they'll all be enraged when they see my injuries." It had been a few days since they had left Arcana, but the prince's injuries were still severe. Although he was fully conscious, he wasn't aware of his surroundings. While that wasn't great overall, it was no doubt the best for his mental state.

"Yes, Your Highness. The guards at the border passed on their best wishes."

"Everyone is grieving what happened to you."

They weren't about to tell him the truth, so his guards and servants therefore all reluctantly lied to him. This wasn't a case of them being ambiguous; it was more coming up with a lie you would tell to a child.

"Right...the rage of the people of Oseo can't be matched." Prince Black was able to cover his eyes from a reality that he wouldn't wish to see. For everyone else, it was like they were walking the path to hell. Corpses that had begun to rot were scattered about. The guards at the checkpoint had attempted to fight the intruders and in turn had all been wiped out.

While it was plain to see for the guards, the servants were also able to work

out what had happened. None of them felt the need to investigate further—the corpses of dead soldiers remained, but there were no enemy corpses. They carried on while carefully working their way around the corpses. It was a horrific path to be on. For better or for worse, Black's nose still wasn't working properly, so he was unable to notice anything strange. However, for the guards, it was their worst nightmare. The country's border had been broken open, and the guards had been completely wiped out along with it. Since the group was following in their footsteps, they could be moving directly towards the enemy.

Realizing they had no other path to take, they headed for a nearby town. They arrived around dusk, only to discover that the next settlement had also been damaged. Luckily, the town hadn't been occupied by the enemy nor entirely destroyed, and people had begun working to rebuild it. They had been traveling for a long time and were finally able to rest. However, that wasn't necessarily ideal. Once they arrived, they were able to learn the truth of the situation.

“A swordsman from Arcana named Sansui Shirokuro came here to respond to a declaration of war?”

“Around ten days ago... That was just a day after His Highness was assaulted!”

“And...he already returned to Arcana?!” They thought this had been caused by the prince throwing insults. He had angered Arcana, who then responded with an army. However, none of them ever could have thought it was the work of a lone man in just a few days.

The residents of the city felt the same. Even though they had experienced it, the event was something they would have never imagined. A lone man had been able to take down guards stationed at the checkpoint in less than a day and had then managed to carry on into the country. The fallout, at least, was an objective reality they couldn't disbelieve.

“I feel bad making His Highness stay in this town...”

“Me too. Can we not make haste to the next town?” However, unfortunately, they couldn't grant their request. According to a soldier, every town from the one they were in up until the royal capital had been completely destroyed, and there were mountains of corpses from dead soldiers even within the royal capital. In other words, they still had a long way to go before they could return

home.

“Your Highness, please rest here for now.”

“Ah, are we at an inn in Oseo?”

“Yes, this is a top quality bed.” Of course, there was no way they could tell him the reality. While the servants mourned for their futures, they continued to devotedly support their prince. All that remained after that was more grief and sorrow. They had come to terms with their despair and accepted the situation before them.

One saving grace was that Black Oseo was on the mend. He was recovering at a rapid rate, seemingly energized by his anger, and able to stand up independently around the time they arrived at the royal capital. He still wasn't able to see very well, but he was able to walk with the help of a guide.

“Your Highness, we have arrived at the royal castle... It seems His Majesty will be coming to meet you,” one of his servants said.

“Of course...I'll have to show him how I look...” Black responded.

Black was unaware of the current situation, as his assistants had been deceiving him as to the actual reality as if he were a child, so the prince was still out for blood. *Once I tell my father about what happened, he'll be furious with Arcana. We should launch a full-scale attack in response.* Black, still in his imaginary bubble, headed into the audience chamber.

“Welcome back, son,” the king greeted him after a moment's pause.

“Thank you, Father.”

“I have heard what happened from the Arcanians. However, I also wish to hear it directly from you.”

“From Arcana...? I am not sure what you heard, but everything I am about to tell you is the truth.”

The prince believed that his father would listen to his lamentations, but the prince's assistants were speechless when they saw the king's face. The king seemed displeased in the extreme as he spoke with his son, even though he had

been beaten to a pulp. It was plain to see that his ire was directed towards Prince Black.

“I went to Arcana as a representative of this country; however, as you can see I was subject to barbaric brutality!”

The knights who had been urgently summoned to the castle were present, and they were all irate. However, they were not angry that the prince had been subjected to violence; they were angry that the prince had acted in such a way that he was assaulted as a result.

“The charade they put on was unbearable to watch. They think they own the world, so they crudely showed their treasures off in a shameless and ostentatious display.”

The king, hearing the prince’s rage-filled words, began to tremble with anger himself. Even though their country had been driven into a corner, the prince still occupied himself by lamenting about his own misfortunes.

“However, the other larger nations, who should have been admonishing them for such uncouth actions, instead chose to praise them. It was as if they all turned a blind eye to Arcana’s tyranny and pledged obedience to them!”

That information sounded questionable, but nobody present in the castle doubted it. The king, for his part, had seen how other nations’ kings tried to curry favor with one another.

“I was unable to withstand it any longer, so I gave them a taste of the Oseon spirit. That then resulted in the Arcanian barbarians acting like savages.”

“I see,” the king responded.

“Your Majesty, I have not yet given up. Although I was a victim of their barbaric acts, my spirit is still strong, and my blood still boils,” the prince continued.

“I see.”

“Your Majesty, a lot of nations know about the barbaric acts I was subjected to! I implore you to prepare a proclamation! We shall gather the other nations and deliver the final blow to Arcana!”

The king, White Oseo, listened attentively until the end, before he finally hit the prince with objectively reality.

“We struck a deal with Arcana. Get out of here.”

Black was dumbstruck for a moment before he could respond. “What?”

“I don’t want to see your face. Get out already.”

“Y-Your Majesty?!”

“Do you not understand?!” the king shouted at the prince, his face and voice filled with rage. “You were sent to a wedding ceremony as a representative of the nation, where you then proceeded to make aggressive statements! It’s no wonder they took that as a declaration of war! No one would believe that wasn’t the case!”

“W-Well...”

“Who told you to do that?!”

“B-But...! But, are you going to let them get away with doing this to me? I’m the prince!”

“Are you even *aware* of what has been done to this country? Did you even realize that, while you were feeling sorry for yourself, Arcana *attacked* us?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve had enough! Someone throw this fool out!”

Making him take responsibility for what had happened, the king stripped Black Oseo of his princely rights and placed him in confinement. He also lost his right to succession, so he would be spending the rest of his days in despair. However...was there any worth left in being the heir to the Oseo Kingdom? They hadn’t lost him. They had lost the nation.

That was usually how these things worked out.

Part 15 — Temptation

The king of Oseo was gulping down alcohol in his private quarters, feeling like a failure. He had made a mistake by sending Prince Black into such a precarious situation. If the king had gone in his place, then they could have avoided this tragic result. He couldn't help but feel regretful. But the more he regretted what had happened, the more he felt the jealousy rise up within him. He could control his sorrow, but he couldn't control his envy. Ironically, that's exactly how his son felt.

"Why...why does Arcana have everything...?!" He harbored deep resentment towards the nation that had complete control of what everyone wanted. "The Eight Sacred Treasures, the strongest swordsman, huge expanses of land...support from those around them!" Arcana had gotten to the point where they could get away with anything, where no one would betray them. Instead, everyone was trying to butter them up. They controlled five aces, one of whom could wipe out an entire nation on his own. If they wanted, they could deploy the power of an entire army just because someone had upset them. They didn't even have to worry about their finances.

"Shit!" It was only natural that even the large nations had given up, because Arcana was no longer playing by the rules. A country like that shouldn't be able to exist. *I wish it'd be destroyed*, the king thought to himself. His son had agreed with him, but due to his actions, the only country that had gotten destroyed was Oseo. "If only I had more strength..." If only someone would come their way that was strong, had the same goals, and would work with them without expecting compensation. Realistically, the king couldn't expect such a selfish wish to come true, and he would be wrong to pin his hopes on it. However, that was not to say that such a turn of events wasn't possible. After all, Arcana had all of that happen to them.

"If it is strength you require, I can help."

"Wh-Who's there?! Not another Arcanian?!" The king was currently in his private quarters within the castle. It was not the sort of location where anyone could just walk in. Given that, the source of the voice must have infiltrated his

way into the room by using extraordinary means.

“No, I am not from Arcana. I am quite the opposite... I am an enemy of those in possession of the Eight Sacred Treasures.” Although he had rudely barged his way in, he spoke in a friendly manner. He was around the same size as a human, though his skin was covered in scales. Moreover, he wasn’t alone. He was surrounded by other creatures of all different races, who seemed to be accompanying him as bodyguards. Though they were creatures with nonhuman characteristics, they seemed intelligent. It was the king’s first time meeting one in person, but he knew exactly what they were.

“I-It can’t be... Ancients from the old world!”

The legends spoke of a human race that had lived in a different world than their current one. In that world, intelligent creatures existed, and humans at that time didn’t dominate the world as they do now. Those sapient beings—dragons—ruled the world. In order to allow humans to fight them off, God had bestowed the Eight Sacred Treasures upon them.

“Although you are human, you act in opposition with those who own the Eight Sacred Treasures... Moreover, you are set against your neighboring nations. In other words...”

“Even though you’re Ancients, you’ll help me...?” The legend continued to tell that, even though humans owned the Eight Sacred Treasures, they were unable to triumph over the dragons. They were chased into a corner and pushed out of the old world.

“Do you accept, King of Oseo? Or will you refuse for the sake of humanity? Or...?”

“Of course I accept!” the king blurted out after a brief hesitation.

What had appeared before the king was a strong contender with the same goals as him. It seemed fate hadn’t yet given up on his country.



It had roughly been half a month since Sansui Shirokuro invaded the Oseo Kingdom. The source of all the commotion, Prince Black, had been put in confinement, and Oseo remained in a state of chaos. The realm had been heavily damaged and hadn't received any aid from surrounding nations. That meant they were unable to rebuild, maintain public order, or gather information. It was clear to see how far the enemy had gotten just from looking at the destruction.

The key people in charge of leading the Oseo Kingdom were dumbfounded at the downfall of the kingdom. Up until about half a month ago, they had just been an ordinary medium-sized nation. While they had their fair share of problems, those that they had were no different from any other country's. However, as a result of just one diplomatic problem, they had come close to being destroyed. To make matters worse, all of the neighboring large nations had ignored them. No one had come to help them. It was more likely that they would invade instead.

Although they were aware of all that, the key people of Oseo remained. The wealthy had already fled, but even if the key leaders of Oseo were to flee, they had nowhere they wanted to go. They weren't staying in Oseo because they wanted to stay. They had remained out of pure force of habit.

The king had summoned them to an audience. They were well aware of the current situation, so they were all depressed, had given up, and were just going with the flow. As they had been officially invited, they all gathered in the official audience chamber. They had all obeyed and gone, not because they were hopeful, but because they had nothing else to do. Everyone was dressed in formal clothing, but those clothes had been handled roughly, as if the person who had originally worn them had been cut all over. The clothing was all worn out, like it was mimicking its wearer.

The audience chamber room, a symbol of national pride, was designed to be impressive. However, at the time of their meeting, as a result of there not being enough people to help, a strong stench of blood lingered there. This was a castle that had been witness to the loss of life, and this room was a symbol of that. Despite that, the king was almost glowing as he stood before everyone.

“Everyone...I would first like to apologize,” the king said to the chief vassals, who were all seated with lifeless expressions. The king’s son was the main cause of everything that had happened, so it was only natural for the king to take the blame. However, the king had a look of invigoration, despite the circumstances. For their part, they had never seen him this energized before. He laughed everything off—a laugh only someone in power could get away with. “I sent my inexperienced son to Arcana. As the Arcana Kingdom has reported, Prince Black acted rudely, taking advantage of his position. My son’s wrongdoing is my mistake.”

Black had been sent to a large nation, not to mention to a place where a lot of other large nations would be gathering. The king had sent his undiplomatic son, despite being well aware of the precarity of the situation. “However! There was no reason for them to go *this* far! I would have accepted them beating my son within an inch of death, as well as one of them throwing a glove in my face! However! They went further still!” He had made peace with their wanting retaliation. However, he couldn’t accept that they felt the need to go so far with that retaliation.

“I’ll say it again! There is no reason for them to go so far!” It was only logical, so logical no one could argue it. “I wouldn’t have complained even if they had killed my son! However, they took the lives of soldiers trying to protect their country and destroyed the property of my civilians! That I will not forgive! We will get our revenge, and we will teach them a lesson!” It was unjustifiable self-defense, as well as unjustifiable revenge. The Arcana Kingdom, Sepaeda, and Sansui had all gone too far.

“We will march on Arcana! We’ll teach them a thing or two! We’ll do more damage to them than they did to us!”

That was one month ago.

Prince Black had a dream where he became king and gave the order to destroy Arcana. That, however, was simply a dream. He hadn’t been able to do so, and there was no way his father—the current king—would know about it. However, his father was currently doing exactly what he had wished for.

“This...isn’t out of desperation! We have a chance at success!” the king

proclaimed as he gestured to the door, and several figures not quite human entered. Anyone with an education would be able to recognize them—they were Ancients from the old world, members of a race that once fought humans a long time ago and now only existed in children’s books. They were now standing before the chief vassals, and those vassals couldn’t believe their eyes. However, once they realized that they were looking at the real thing, they became excited.

“If they have both the world’s strongest swordsman as well as the Eight Sacred Treasures, then we will ally with the Ancients!”

Although he was the king, if he began talking nonsense, those around him would move to stop him. If they couldn’t, they would ignore him and flee. However, that was not the case for this kingdom. Everyone was angry, so they wanted to fight.

“We have betrayed humanity...but other countries betrayed us! This will be a rightful battle for revenge!” The chief vassals didn’t applaud the king’s speech. Instead, they all roared with anger. Seeing their wild enthusiasm, the creatures laughed. They were pleased to have gained a human ally that wouldn’t betray them. This was the birth of a powerful enemy alliance that the Arcana Kingdom could have never even imagined.

Side Story Compilation I — Four and Three

Aid

A royal exhibition match was held to wish for Magyan Khan's good health, with seven fighters on each side. The results saw Arcana walking away with seven wins—quite an appalling performance for the Magyan Kingdom. The contents of the match were completely one-sided, with the other side being beaten to a pulp. Of course, there were some rules in place that worked in Arcana's favor, such as it being forbidden to inquire about Arcana's fighters before the match and Royal Presence users being forbidden from wielding weapons, even though those without were permitted to do so. Those rules had been crudely written but strictly enforced. Thus, due to those two conditions, Arcana had secured their victories. Although both sides had agreed to the terms, it was in no way a fair fight.

However, Magyan Sukreen had then received aid from the Shrine Maidens. That was a violation of the rules, even though no one was in a position to complain about the regulations. The royal families representing the other nations had lost all of their matches at the royal exhibition match, and the futures of those women were as good as finished. But even so, some felt pity for them. This is a story about how they regained their honor.

Deyiaoe Utto, Magyan Toris, and Baigao Shiyoki were each royals who had lost in the battle the previous day, and they had all been summoned to the royal palace in Magyan by Magyan Heki. Heki was Magyan Khan's heir, next in line to the throne. The three that had been summoned were fully prepared for death. After all, they had deceived Tahlán and plotted a rebellion. Although they had never actually acted on their plan, as they were found out too quickly, they couldn't complain if they were put to death. If not death, then they could expect exile or imprisonment.

However, Heki, who had summoned the three women, didn't have that on his mind at all. "I will start by saying that...I have no intention to punish you," he

said. “Putting aside the fact that I’ve fought you all and won...it would be strange if I were the one to punish you after you lost to Sunae’s subordinates and her husband.” If the women had actively rebelled, then they would have been put to death without any questions. However, since they had been unable to act on their desires, it wasn’t a problem leaving it unaddressed. Moreover, it would be difficult to make it public that the queen consort had led the rebellion, as it would have a negative effect on the honor of her children, Tahlan and Sunae. And as Heki said, it was Sunae who had defeated them. Since she and the others weren’t looking to punish them either, it would make no sense if Heki were to do it himself.

“The reason I called you all here...is because I want to give you all a job to do. I’ll say it once again; this isn’t a punishment. Think of it as a way to get your honor back.” The three women, upon hearing that, doubted what had been said. They were grateful for being given the opportunity to restore their honor, but they never expected that it would be the heir to Magyan who gave the opportunity, nor this soon.

“You probably are all thinking it sounds too good to be true, right? Keep this between us, but...I, as well as the kings of other countries, don’t think badly of you three.” Since they had been offered a chance to restore their honor, that probably also meant that they would be given grueling work. However, they had expected as much. What they hadn’t expected was even receiving the opportunity.

“Your targets were those three. The Marked...I mean, the Silver Demon Style user Ran, Saiga Mizu, and Sansui Shirokuro. They’re all strong opponents that not even my father or I could beat. However, you stood your ground against them. My father said the same thing, right?”

Since they had lost seven consecutive fights, Spirit Summoning had surrendered some of its authority. However, at the very least, they had been able to protect their pride. If the three women had run, the people of the nation would have been disappointed.

“While we can’t just act like that overwhelming defeat never happened, it’s a good chance for you to regain your honor. We’ve already given the same opportunity to the warriors who fought in the first four matches.”

“Thank you,” said Magyan Toris in response to Heki’s kindness. She had to make sure that he wasn’t lying. “However...regarding Lady Sukreen...” Magyan Sukreen had been the mastermind behind the plot. She was a relative of Toris, and it was through that connection that Sukreen had reached out to Toris. What Heki wanted to say was that while they had been forgiven for betraying the country, Sukreen would not be receiving that same mercy. Even so, Toris had a shred of hope for her.

“That one’s no good,” Heki declared, clear and professional. “I won’t be allowing her to restore her honor. She’ll have to carry on as she is.” He had outright rejected it without even suggesting that he’d consider it depending on their performance. “That one’s no longer a royal.” He was being extremely impolite towards the queen consort by referring to her as “that one.” No one would correct him on it, though.

“Sukreen threw away the dignity of the nation in front of everyone...!”

No matter what you thought, there were some words you should never say.

“If a foreign country far away was to be attacked, would this country and the surrounding countries invade?!”

“How many years will that be? Ten years after? One hundred years after?”

“Why do we have to worry about such things?!”

The three of them had all heard Sukreen’s improper remarks—or, rather, her abusive words.

“A royal family who doesn’t worry about what things will be like one hundred years after the fact doesn’t deserve to live...!”

It was often said that the royal families planned a hundred years ahead, signifying how important it was that they always plan while keeping the bigger picture in mind. That didn’t mean it was all right to ignore more imminent problems. Even so, at that time, Sukreen wasn’t thinking about anyone but herself. Rather, it had been that way with her from the beginning.

“Besides, there’s nothing we can do if we’re told an unknown force will attack us next year.” Heki himself didn’t believe that Sunae’s warning would actually come to pass. It could still be ten years yet, like Sukreen had said. However, if

they didn't have that much time, they wouldn't be able to reform the army. Forcing improvements in just a few years could cause the situation to get worse. The situation would take decades to improve, taking trial and error into account. If so, that would mean that Sunae wasn't too hasty in raising the alarm.

"So...that is what I want to ask you three to do." Since they would have several decades to do it, there were plenty of ways to approach the problem. Heki had asked the women to find a way.

"Sunae already mentioned it, and it was proven at the secret rematch, but...just changing how you fight can open up more opportunities to react. So it's probably best to have more new abilities or bloodlines that use different abilities."

The Rare Art of Spirit Summoning was by no means weak. If anything, it was one of the strongest. The reason the four people before them had lost was due to them lacking information and having weak tactics. If they had been able to gather information and change how they fought, then they may have been able to win easily, like in the secret rematch. They should even be able to handle a skilled Rare Arts user. There were rumors that there were numerous martial arts practiced in Tempera Village. It wasn't reasonable to assume that was enough. More information and preparation were needed.

"I guess the Shrine Maidens have already left, right? They weren't treated well from the start, which is regrettable. Next time, we can't make any mistakes." The three of them had managed to work out what kind of job they would be doing.

"So, you want us three to go to Tempera Village and lay the groundwork for diplomatic relations, right?" Toris asked.

"Yeah, exactly that," Heki replied. Tempera Village descended from a group of mercenaries that the Arcana Kingdom had kept secret. It was also home to an astonishing ten Rare Art bloodlines, a literal powerhouse of a village. "To be honest, I want all ten bloodlines. However, I realize it would be more or less impossible to do so right now. It wouldn't go well at all." Sukreen had failed in that regard. Although it was wrong of her to hide it and use it maliciously, the

Art of the Shrine Maiden was a useful Rare Art. She should have been kinder to the girls from that bloodline, and she also should have built good relations with the village they were from.

“If possible, I would like you to acquire one of their experts to work as a teacher, like my older brother did. Then, if we’re unable to acquire the bloodline, we can at least secure the technique...” By older brother, Heki meant Tahlan. The three of them were a little shook up just from hearing his name. Even though he had been indirectly praised, they all were happy about it.

“Well, anyway, like Toris said, first try to build up a foundation after you’ve made your greetings. If we take it slow and steady, it increases the likelihood of things going well.” He hadn’t told them to do absolutely everything they could to bring back the bloodline. Instead, he had told them to take something with them and get to know the people there. It was a reasonable job and only suitable for those who could be responsible. Not to mention, going back and forth would take a lot of time. This might as well be a kind of punishment for the three young women.

“Ran of the Silver Demon is detested by the people of her hometown and is unable to return. However, she often returns to the village to train the other four. I want you three to tag along. I have already spoken about this with Arcana, so if you won’t go, someone will go in your place.” Similar to how Sansui and the others had all left their towns for a year and a half, the young women would be spending a year and a half of their youth on this task. Although, being able to restore their honor in such a short time made it all worthwhile.

“Understood, Your Highness Heki.”

“I will do my best to protect the kingdom.”

“I am incredibly grateful for your consideration.”

They had no reason to decline.

Thus, the trio of Deyiaoe Utto, Magyan Toris, and Baigao Shiyoki had become envoys for the Magyan Kingdom. Traveling alongside Four Vessels Yabia, Bursting Venom Suji, Drunken Fist Kazuno, and Mist Shadow Konoko, they headed towards Tempera Village. On the road, they had real reason to be glad

that they were with a delegation from Arcana, as the three women from Magyan had no attendants with them. None of them had anticipated it being this long of a journey, so the trio was struggling. It wasn't an issue of stamina; they were having trouble keeping up with the Temperans' pace.

Despite that, they carried on with their journey until they were a day's walk from Tempera Village. The seven of them huddled around a campfire, feeling relieved that tomorrow would be their last day on the road. Everyone was feeling relaxed, so Yabia decided to address the trio. "Um, so, I've got something I'd like to ask you..." If she were to say something careless, she could cause problems for Ran and Sunae. Regardless, she went ahead and asked, completely letting her curiosity get the best of her. "Oh, if you don't want to say, that's totally fine, okay? It's nothing big or anything... If it's inappropriate, I'll shut up..." Yabia said, rambling on a bit.

Utto, Toris, and Shiyoki all glanced at one another, noticing her awkward way of speaking. "You don't need to worry about us being royals. We plotted a revolt, after all, and we lost at the royal exhibition match. You can address us more casually," Utto responded. The three of them had come this far without even a single attendant, so their position was plainly obvious. They were prisoners without chains.

"That's what I don't get." Suji, Kazuno, and Konoko all nodded along as Yabia said what they were all thinking. "I get that Prince Tahlan is popular. Even by our standards, he's a great guy, he's popular in the Arcana Kingdom, and he usually attracts every lady's eye whenever he's traveling somewhere." Tahlan was a hit with the ladies and everyone knew that. He was the prince of a great nation, he was attractive, he had a good personality, and he was both strong and smart. Every woman who knew him liked him. However, Yabia had no idea how someone could be so in love with a man that they would plan a revolt on his behalf. "That said, there's never been anyone else who's even come close to committing a crime. You all went as far as plotting treason for him. I don't understand why."

They understood the queen's feelings and why she had wanted him to be king. They could also understand the pain and regret he must have felt if he had been unable to take the crown due to problems with his talents. However, they

couldn't understand why these three in particular had joined in as fighters. They had been blessed with the Royal Presence, born into one royal family or another, then trained as skilled warriors. Even if Tahlan couldn't become king, he would still certainly have lived a joyous and fulfilling life. Was it worth throwing all of their gifts away for one man? The four of them, who had left their village seeking opportunity, struggled to understand.

"Well...um..."

"Even though we weren't in any sort of relationship with Prince Tahlan, and Prince Tahlan had no desire for it, we went ahead and did it anyway... That's what you're asking about, right?" Magyan Toris said, filling in for Yabia's awkward silence.

"Yes..."

If Prince Tahlan had been having relations with all seven of the princesses and he wanted to use them in order to become king, they could have understood that. However, the seven princesses, who had no relationship with Prince Tahlan whatsoever, had selfishly barged in and tried to make him king.

"As you can tell by my name, I am a Magyan, so my situation was different from the other six. I'll explain my side." As it hadn't evolved into a full-blown revolt and had instead been hushed up, usually talking about the reason behind the events wouldn't be allowed. However, they were far from Magyan with no one around. Moreover, they were speaking with martial artists who had asked, yet who were uninvolved in their local politics. "To put it bluntly, I can't say I didn't think I would get something out of it..."

"By getting something out of it, does she mean...?"

"I think so, based on context... She's very open about it."

Two of the Temperan women thus whispered amongst themselves.

"Besides that, I felt that Prince Tahlan had the right to be king." Toris continued to speak, ignoring the secret conversation between the martial artists. "As you all know, Prince Tahlan is a wonderful person. We thought it wasn't a good enough reason to deny him the throne just because he didn't have the Royal Presence." Disregarding what she had said first, Toris's words

made sense. “Though it is the custom and has over time become law, I thought it would be beneficial for the country if that were to change.”

The reason Sunae was next in line instead of Tahlan was, to put it crudely, simply tradition. Surrounding nations followed the same custom, so it’s not like Magyan was the odd one out; however, if Magyan were to adopt a new method, such a change would have been accepted. If anything, it would have made more sense logically. “However...looking at it now, going as far as to plan a revolt was...a result of us not seeing the bigger picture.” Tahlan and the others had said the same thing—there wasn’t actually an issue with Heki and the other eligible heirs.

So what was the reason for them revolting and trying to make Prince Tahlan king? “We thought we had to do everything we could to make him king, even if he didn’t want it himself.” Magyan Toris had acknowledged her own recklessness, even though anyone could be susceptible to that sort of heedless idealism. The martial artists knew of that all too well and could all sympathize. “At least, that was my reasoning... I don’t know about the others.” Within the Magyan Kingdom, there was the idea that Tahlan should become king. Although the other kingdoms understood that, what would they think about it?

Baigao Shiyoki then said, “I think you were wrong from the beginning. We’re royals from a nearby country, so for us it wasn’t a revolt at all... It was a regime change. Although it was wrong for us to do it on a personal level, we would have been doing Magyan a favor as a matter of policy.” Princesses from neighboring countries had formed a conspiracy and tried to make Tahlan, who lacked the Royal Presence, king. It sounded like a moving tale, at least depending on how it was told; however, for other countries, it just made the Magyan gambit more appealing. If they succeeded, it would all be fine, and if they failed, the nations could deny everything and the princesses who were complicit would be removed from their positions. That was the dark side possessed by many countries.

“Well...I didn’t expect it to go to plan,” she said, speaking bluntly, “because although we idolized Tahlan and tried our best, I never once thought we would be able to win out over Prince Heki, the leading candidate for heir to the throne. I wasn’t aware that having help from the Shrine Maidens was a cheat,

but honestly, even if we hadn't been caught cheating like that, we had no chance of winning. Having the Royal Presence but being unable to use Spirit Summoning meant that he wouldn't earn the right to be the heir."

However, there were people who did have the right to become heirs everywhere within the kingdom, and only the strongest could become king. That was the case for Sunae too; however, the seven people who had participated in the fight the other day were all just weaklings with privilege. None of them had any hope of becoming king from the outset. "The right to be king...that's just how it is." There was a hint of pain in Shiyoki's words. Even though she was born a royal with the Royal Presence, she was still compared to her siblings. If you were lacking in any way, you couldn't even dream of becoming king. Even if a prospective heir wasn't just some nobody, they wouldn't ever be able to keep up with the high-level competition if they were only average in talent.

"So, I wanted to dream that I would be the woman to make Tahlan king, the woman that Tahlan needed... I wanted to live that dream for a while." He was more gifted and had been born at a higher level than Yabia and the others, but he never treated them coldly. However, those four lacked the ability to dream. It wasn't a case of not putting in enough effort—they simply lacked the talent. Wanting to dream was enough of an incentive.

"You may not have noticed but...Tahlan is so much more special than us. He is like sunlight," Deyiaoe Utto said, continuing the final part of the conversation as she began to explain why they admired Tahlan so much. "As we were all born with the Royal Presence, we were always fussed over, but since we weren't considered candidates for the throne, we were treated badly. That made us feel discouraged, and we began to look down on others as a way to preserve our pride." Rather than looking up at what they couldn't be, they chose to look down on others for a sense of superiority. Even these women, who were supposed to be close to the top, weren't able to escape such vileness. One wondered how much Tahlan, who was leagues below them, struggled.

"That's why, at the beginning, we looked down on Tahlan too. No matter how good-looking he was, and no matter how much he trained, he was still regarded as someone who could only use Shadow Summoning. He seemed like someone

we could easily beat if we felt like it..." Their superiority complex was strengthened by the perceptions of others about the reality of the situation, and it was comfortable. Looking down on Tahlan had also become comfortable. "Even in front of Tahlan, we did nothing to hide our glares, full of contempt... We were awful women." It was something that happened a lot, but even then, it was despicable of them. It pained them to admit that they were just as bad as other people. The fact that they were able to admit to that, however, was a sign of their growth.

"Then...when we saw Prince Tahlan actually fight...we were amazed." Shadow Summoning users couldn't hold a candle to Spirit Summoning users. They were the only two Rare Arts in the Magyan Kingdom, so both were still respected by the general public. As they were able to make duplicates of themselves to deceive or fight, they had a lot of opportunities to show off their abilities. Naturally, there were also exhibition matches where nations would compete against one another. "Half of his siblings were Spirit Summoning users. They would constantly train, continuing to win glory after glory. They were brilliant."

No matter how blessed with aptitude someone was, it would always be a struggle to become the nation's strongest swordsman. Tahlan had fought against other Shadow Summoning users, achieving the title of the strongest. After that, he fought warriors from other countries, demonstrating his prowess. The seven female warriors knew all too well the difficulties he had gone through to become rightfully acknowledged as strong, and to be rightfully acknowledged as the greatest. The women, unable to do that, admired Tahlan for that reason.

"We just brazenly changed our attitude once he produced results. And he...laughed at us, without any malice." The person they once used to ridicule had achieved something, causing them to change their attitude entirely, such that they began to admire him. While that was a good thing, it couldn't have felt good for the person who had been ridiculed in the first place. They would be resentful, questioning the sudden change of heart. Or they could get arrogant, saying their former detractors could no longer make a fool out of them.

However, Tahlan had gracefully accepted their recognition, such that

everyone had been mesmerized by his pure heart. “When he accepted our recognition...that was when I really fell for him. I felt ashamed that I had been so vile as I watched Tahlan improve himself without a trace of malice.” They loved and respected him, so they wanted to be loved and respected by him. He had then traveled to a faraway country and made another woman his wife, choosing her home as the place where he would put down his roots. That was a good enough reason to cause havoc. “However, his heart was meant for someone else...” Utto began crying as she recalled her lost love. She had realized her feelings for him once again and was unable to deal with the magnitude of her loss. “Why did Lord Tahlan...go for her?!”

Toris and Shiyoki joined Utto in crying in despair.

“That bitch, Douve Sepaeda! What kind of underhanded tricks did she use to win his heart?!”

“What was His Majesty even thinking? Why did he allow the wedding to go ahead?!”

“I can accept that being weak is a part of her country’s culture but...couldn’t he have picked a better woman...?!” The three women were overflowing with jealousy and unable to come to terms with the fact that he had chosen Douve despite everything. It would have been a better match if he had met a noble and intelligent woman. Instead, he was with a woman whose only positives were her social standing and her good looks. She was a venomous she-devil armed with a sharp tongue who looked down on others. It would be one thing if they had just misunderstood her character, but she actually was like that, and she had even acted like that in front of Tahlan.

“I think it’s wonderful that Tahlan can love a woman like that! But it shouldn’t have to be that way!”

“True...” The four women from Tempera all felt the same about Douve’s personality. None of them had gotten deeply involved with her, nor were there any deep connections between them. However, even though they only knew her on a surface level, they understood her personality all too well.

“I feel like we don’t really understand her...” The atmosphere had changed, so one of the four martial artists spoke up to change the topic, hopefully breaking

the tension and returning to a more relaxed conversation. “She has a five-hundred-year-old Immortal working for her, and she managed to get a guy like Tahlan... Despite all that, it doesn’t feel like she went around looking for them, though.”

“It’s not like she’s especially strong or anything, nor does she have a good personality. She does seem to have an idea of what she can’t do, however. Even so, that much is natural.”

“We’re the ones who weren’t able to do that, though... Anyway, it seems like she’s just lucky when it comes to finding people.”

“So not only was she born with a high social rank, good looks, and a good body, but she’s also lucky? Well, that makes sense, I guess.” The four Temperans were fully aware of the reality of the situation. The only possible conclusion was that Douve was just incredibly lucky. Both Sansui and Tahlan had no real connection to Arcana and thus hadn’t had any real reason for appearing there. Regardless of how she managed to get them, she was extremely lucky just to have encountered them.

“I guess it is just luck...” The seven of them cursed the heavens. In the end, humans always ended up cursing not their own ability, but their luck.

“At the match the other day, those two really showed what they’re made of.” Shiyoki tensed up as Toris began to talk about something it seemed she had recalled. Those two had gone up against none other than Saiga and Sansui. The Spirit Summoners had ended up losing, even though the Arcanians hadn’t even put their all into it. No one else there could imagine how daunted the two of them were. The two of them hadn’t fought a duel to the death, but more of a casual sparring match. Even so, the opponents of the two Arcanians were nothing but afraid.

“Having such a strong swordsman work for her... I find it hard to believe it’s just luck.” Batterabbe having Saiga in the position of “head of house” wasn’t too far removed from Magyan and the surrounding country’s values. It was common for a family or country to welcome a strong male into the family in order to raise their social standing. However, having such a strong man just working for you was very far removed from those values. They simply didn’t

understand why Sansui was following her orders to begin with. He was no doubt being treated well, but they couldn't understand why he was content with being in a relatively low position like that. Sansui being Sansui, his values were probably different from those of a normal person, but even considering that, it wasn't every day you met someone who just happened to be *that* convenient in their outlook.

"She just continues to be lucky. Soon that woman will have nothing to fear," Shiyoki lamented. Douve had the best man as a husband, the strongest swordsman working beneath her, and a brother who held the utmost authority. Nothing could possibly trouble her.

"Well, that isn't right," Konoko said, turning pale as she disagreed with Shiyoki. The other three women all nodded with frozen expressions. "There is something she should fear. Or rather...there is something that nearly everyone from the Arcana Kingdom fears."

"Arcana, which has all of the Eight Sacred Treasures, plus Lord Sansui, Lord Saiga, Lady Ran...as well as three other talented people...has something to be afraid of?" Utto asked. What would Arcana, who had collected the strongest people in the world, be afraid of? It must have been something completely unknown to her.

"Sansui Shirokuro's master, the world's strongest man, Suiboku." Sansui's master was a full-fledged Immortal, known in Magyan and surrounding areas as a human who could bring about natural disasters—a being akin to a god. While Sansui had been tied down by the Arcana Kingdom, Suiboku was a monster whom Arcana couldn't control.

"Our village was destroyed by that very person a long time ago... He sounds extraordinarily strong."

"Is he that powerful?"

"Ran, Saiga, Tahlan, and Sansui could all go up against him and they wouldn't even be able to leave a mark." Ran and Saiga were both physically powerful. However, Sansui and Tahlan simply were not. As such, the four of them wouldn't be able to do any damage to Suiboku. The three women shivered as they imagined Suiboku's ungodly strength.

“I know there’ll always be people who are better, but...he is the greatest warrior in this world and the true source of Arcana’s power. It makes you wonder if this world is small, or actually really big...” The four women from Tempera were each descendants of special bloodlines, and each made use of their abilities by learning the martial arts, but their many-talented home was treated as a small village of no importance. Utto and the others, who were each stronger than any of those four, were no match for Heki and the other kings who all shared the same Royal Presence. Those other kings were in turn no match for Ran, Saiga, or Sansui. Even then, those three would be brushed aside by Suiboku. No matter how hard one tried, for someone like them, beating him was an unreachable goal. There were too many obstacles in the way. It almost seemed stupid to even try.

“Are you women able to do your best despite that?” Shiyoki asked, posing a brutal question. From the outside looking in, the difference seemed minuscule, but to the people themselves, it was in fact enormous, a gulf that could continue to build and act as an obstacle. The women all knew that very well. In other words, did they have any reason to do their best if they knew that they wouldn’t be rewarded?

“I heard that you were all outcasts from your village. Even if your reasons are justified, just why do you put yourself through all this suffering?”

“Because that is what can make us stronger,” Kazuno declared proudly. “At the very least, we need to become full-fledged martial artists. In order to do that, we need to train in that village. We need to be trained by martial artists and become competent wielders of our Arts.” Becoming a full-fledged martial artist... They didn’t aim to be one of the best, nor village chief, but rather just martial artists. From an onlooker’s perspective, she may have seemed to lack the necessary will. For the women, however, it was a goal they could achieve if they aimed for it.

“Just like when you all saw Tahlan and thought you could no longer be vile...we saw Ran doing her best and decided we wanted to do our best for Ran!” It was a meaningful decision on their part. If it was a goal that they could achieve just by going on as they had without pushing themselves, even if they were to fulfill it, they wouldn’t be able to boast about the victory. As such, they

wanted to become respectable warriors. In response, three princesses felt shame as they realized the magnitude of the determination the other four women had.

“W-Well...we also have proof that if you become full-fledged, you can work for Arcana, so...”

“That’s true! Although we’re being persecuted by the village, it’s just an old form of training; it’s not like they’re going to kill us or anything.”

“I mean, we did win our matches at the royal exhibition and they complimented us... That really motivated me...”

“We’ve only been away from the village for two years... It’s really not *that* bad...”

They were all trying to play it too cool. The four Temperans felt embarrassed as they tried to downplay their situation. However, the respect that the other three had for them did not falter.

“We should...have done the same thing,” Utto said regretfully. She had finally worked out how she should have acted with Tahlan when she last saw him. She shouldn’t have dangled the crown in front of him, using that as bait to conspire for his love.

“We all were able to do our best because we were so moved when we saw Prince Tahlan fight. If we had said that to him...surely he wouldn’t have laughed.” The three of them were despicable. Realizing that now drove the point home. They should have just told him straight away that they loved him. They should have just been honest with their feelings rather than saying that they could make him king. However, the women hadn’t had the courage to do so. Although they said that their feelings wouldn’t get across to him, they feared being hurt. In the end, Tahlan was the one who had ended up suffering, and they couldn’t save him from it.

“We caused Tahlan so much trouble...all due to our naivete. I feel so bad.” They talked about what they had done wrong and what they should have done better. That was something Sukreen was unable to do, but the three women were proof it could be done.

Tempera was nearby. The night began to take its leave as the morning arrived. The women who had come all the way from Magyan had learned a lot about themselves already. They would probably learn a lot more on the journey to come.

Powerhouse

Hidden in a hollow surrounded by steep slopes lay Tempera Village. The Temperans, after having been brought close to extinction by Suiboku over two thousand years ago, now lived modest lives. In the past, when the four women and Ran had returned to the village, nobody made any effort to greet them—only the head of the Testudo Style had interacted with them. However, this time was different. A number of people had come out and greeted the women at the entrance to the village.

“Ah...!”

“Yabia, Suji, Konoko, Kazuno...you’ve all been gone from the village for a while. Even though you were sent out on an errand...you begged me for training and then left me waiting here... Who do you think you all are?” The four of them, realizing who was greeting them, all froze with fear. Yabia threw herself to the ground to grovel. There were a number of men waiting nearby who were wearing the same martial arts clothing as Yabia, so it wasn’t surprising to see her reaction. They appeared to specialize in the Four Vessels Style and were no doubt the best at that particular style.

So strong!

Utto, Toris, and Shiyoki all trembled as they looked at the men. It wasn’t too hard to see what they were all thinking. All of them were incredibly toned as well as blessed with perfect bodies. They had been born with outstanding qualities, then trained in the Art passed down from their ancestors. They were truly *elite* warriors. Not only did they use rare skills, but they also knew what they were capable of, making them mighty indeed. It was easy to tell how strong they were from their muscular appearances.

“L-Long time no see...Master! I did not think you would greet us...”

“The master of the Testudo Style told me to bring him the guests...except it’s only you, so I guess I can just turn you away.” Yabia, Suji, Konoko, and Kazuno all lowered their heads. The man who was speaking had an incredibly powerful-looking body—he was no doubt fantastically strong—but he also had a terrifying face. It wasn’t just him either. All of the men looked like him. It was normal to be afraid.

“Are you the master of the Four Vessels Style? I am an envoy from the Magyan Kingdom, Magyan Toris. I would like to extend my thanks for you being able to welcome us on such short notice...”

“Magyan? Are you a relative of Sunae, the one that beat Ran?” The Four Vessels Style men all looked at Toris. It wasn’t an exaggeration to call them elite. One could tell that they were actual warriors from just looking at them and that Yabia and the rest stood no chance. That was also obvious from looking at the women.

“Yes...I apologize. I also apologize for bringing shame upon your people.” The three strong women all bowed. The master of the Four Vessels Style, who was by no means a vulgar man, raised his hands to his waist and bent his elbows as he greeted the women. The other men around him followed his lead and did the same.

“Let’s discuss details once you’re in the village. Is that all right?”

“Yes, of course.”

Strong people knew how difficult it was to have a strong body, one good enough to fight. One only had to look at someone’s body to learn how hard they had studied.

Tempera Village was home to ten different fighting styles, which were known as Rare Arts in Arcana. It was a hidden village, far smaller than any city-state, which worked to preserve its unique culture. It was also home to the Testudo Style manor, which played an important role in village life. The seven women the Four Vessels Style master was leading were all amazed at the people who had gathered to meet them.

“There is a lot I wish to say, but I believe the master of the Four Vessels Style has already covered most of it. However, I would like to hear the apologies from

your own mouths.” They were in the main hall of the Testudo Style manor, where all of the masters of the various styles, as well as various other influential people, were gathered in a wood-paneled room strongly reminiscent of a dojo. As the Four Vessels Style master joined them, all of the important village figures had thus gathered together.

This is quite a group of people. They’re all on the same level as Lord Heki and his father...

I heard that Yabia and the others were dropouts, but now I see what they mean by that...

They would fit right in with our regular army back home... So this is the power of a small village hidden away...

Each of the influential people had an overbearing presence about them. Though the inside of the hall was simple and had a rustic feel to it, due to the collection of powerful people gathered there, it felt more like the war council of a large nation. Naturally, for the three princesses, it was the sort of atmosphere they were used to. The current feeling of pressure wasn’t directed towards them, so they had no reason to feel nervous—so much so that they were able to feel compassion, as well as respect, for the four martial artists who were the actual targets.

“First of all...our report regarding the Berserker God, the most urgent matter,” Yabia said nervously; she and the others had fallen to their knees, bowing before the masters. “As the Testudo Style master feared, the Berserker God was in Arcana, and he apparently was headed towards Tempera Village.” The Testudo Style master and his attendants all froze, even though the other nine masters didn’t seem that tense. “The Berserker God accepted our refusal when we informed him of it, and...” Yabia took off the large wicker basket she had been carrying and brought it forward. “He gave me this, saying it was his apology to our village.” Yabia opened up the basket, allowing a sweet fragrance to escape and fill the room. “It is a fruit with healing abilities. If you eat too much, it can kill you; however, it is still effective in small amounts, and it is an incredibly powerful medicine.”

The princesses all stared in astonishment at the amount Yabia had. The

Magyan Kingdom had some Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng, but Yabia had heaps upon heaps of both in her wicker basket. Magyan and Arcana both bordered countries that housed nobles who would do absolutely anything to get their hands on these fruits, and this small hidden village was now in possession of a large number of said fruits. Suiboku had made them as an apology for his mistake. However, for the three princesses, it was an astonishing hoard of treasure. If either Magyan or Arcana were to auction the fruits off, some countries would offer their whole treasuries in order to have just one.

“I-I see... I will be sure to pass this around to the people who were defeated by Ran.” Not being aware of the material value of the fruits, the masters began to relax due to the inviting scent. Yabia closed the lid of the wicker basket as the conversation progressed. “And? Surely there’s no way it took you two years to just bring this back.”

“Well...in fact, seeing as Ran was just mentioned...” *Ran*. The moment her name was mentioned, the calm atmosphere soon became tense again. The atmosphere dripped with fear and anger as a result.

“The people of Arcana decided that Ran would be taken to Magyan, the home of her new master, Princess Sunae. We were able to accompany her, and as a result, we were late returning to the village.” This time Suji presented a large box she had been carrying on her back. “Along with their welcome, they held a royal exhibition. Although they were aware of our position, they addressed all of us individually by our names, and we participated in the matches...” Suji opened up the lid of the box, revealing a number of gold and silver treasures that had been sent by the Arcana Kingdom. “We took advantage of the fact they were unfamiliar with our Arts and we secured a victory. As a reward, Arcana gave us these treasures.” As the treasures were revealed, a clattering noise came from outside of the room. Someone was probably peeking in. Pretending not to notice, they carried on with the conversation.

“It was not only the Arcana Kingdom. His Majesty the King of Magyan, who was impressed with the strength of our martial arts, also gave us similar treasures.” This time, Konoko opened a box she had been carrying. It was a box with a completely different design to the Arcanian box, and filled to the brim

with a number of treasures from the Magyan Kingdom. This also caused a commotion outside of the room, though the atmosphere in the room remained tense.

“So what is the reason for you giving that to us?” the Testudo Style master asked with a stern expression, after a moment’s pause. Regarding the goods from Suiboku, that was his way of apologizing to the entirety of Tempera, and as such it was expected that he would give them to the village’s representatives. However, regarding the treasures from Arcana and Magyan, they should have been accepted by the four women for themselves. It made no sense that they were now presenting them to the village elders. “It seems you were all doing quite well in those far and distant countries. It would have been better for you to stay. Why did you decide to come back instead?” The Testudo Style master’s words clearly indicated his refusal of their gifts.

“We learned, once again, how powerless we are.” The four women, who were still at the feet of the masters, were painfully honest with their words. “We each fought a rematch with an opponent we had previously won against at the royal exhibition. Each of us lost shamefully, unable to use their unfamiliarity as an advantage, and unable to even land a hit.”

“We were able to keep our dignity in such a public place, but doing so pushed us to our limits.”

“We had no right to leave the village and no right to speak of our families. Realizing that, we...wish to ask...for more...training.”

“These treasures are too much for us. We will donate them to the village, so please accept them.” They had all spoken the truth. While they had managed to keep up appearances, in the end, it hadn’t helped.

“Of course!” The Drunken Fist Style master roared with anger. “Kazuno! What the hell were you trying to do? You can’t even tie your own belt!”

“It’s a good thing you won! What would have happened if you had lost?”

“Punks who aren’t even fully mature have no right to be saying their family names!”

His attendants followed his lead and scolded Kazuno. It was to be expected.

The masters of the Four Vessels Style, the Bursting Venom Style, and the Mist Shadow Style all wore the same expression.

“Even though you’ve been ostracized by the village, you show off your abilities in distant countries? You’ve got it the wrong way around!”

“Did being with them make you feel generous? Asking us for more training with that pained expression! Give me a break!”

The women withstood the verbal criticism.

They’re so strong...

The three princesses were deeply impressed with the Temperan girls’ gracefulness. The three of them had each sympathized with the martial artists after the rematches, comforting them by telling them that their opponents were simply too strong. However, in reality, this is what should have happened. They themselves all knew that they carried royal names, so they should also have been criticized when they lost. The feelings of shame and guilt were so painful, they felt their chests tighten.

“Well, we can deal with that later. We have guests, so let’s see what they have to say.” The Bursting Venom Style master turned his stern gaze towards the three princesses. “So, what brings you here?” The head of the secret village might have been speaking to the royalty of a nation, but he didn’t act like it. The women briefly thought about the breach of protocol, although it was really just a meaningless custom. If the four martial artists were a disgrace to their village, then the three royals were a disgrace to their home countries.

“I am Magyan Toris. I am a relative of Magyan Sunae, who visited here a few days ago. I was one of the opponents of these four women in the royal exhibition,” Toris spoke as their representative. “As you are already aware, they secured a wonderful victory, leaving a long-lasting impression of how incredible Tempera is among the citizens of my country. Although they had already done enough, we four then proceeded to ask for a rematch. They thus allowed us to save face.” They knew that they would be thrashed, yet still allowed a rematch. Various kings had been thankful for that, as were the three princesses.

“As a show of gratitude, Magyan, as well as other countries, gifted these treasures.” The four women then proceeded to present the boxes they were

also carrying on their backs. The gifts were a symbol of gratitude for the rematch and were more numerous than the rewards from the royal exhibition.

“I see... Suji, it seems you’ve learned to show some consideration for your opponents.” If it was a fight you needed to win, you had to win by any means possible. After that, you could then face your opponent with courtesy. Someone without sympathy for their opponent wouldn’t be able to do such a thing.

“So, you only came to offer us these treasures?”

“No... With all due respect, I would like to be able to witness the thing known as ‘true martial arts.’” The atmosphere changed as the words “true martial arts” rang out. The envoys were aware that the martial arts displayed in Magyan at the time didn’t measure up. In all honesty, that wasn’t a bad thing.

“They lost honorably, but...their defeat piqued our curiosity. Just how powerful is a real martial artist?”

“I see. That’s something you wouldn’t have been able to witness except by coming all the way to Tempera Village.” They had just barely managed with Yabia and the others, which had led them to wonder just how powerful an elite martial artist was. It was entirely natural that they were curious.

“I assume you have certain things you wish to keep secret from outsiders. However, I would like to see your technique, as long as you do not mind that.”

“Well, it is true that I find it vexing that some people think of Suji as a representation of the Bursting Venom Style, as well as thinking of it as an uncommon martial art...” the Bursting Venom Style master said, feigning reluctance as he rubbed his chin.

“We are aware of your wishes. If you would allow us some time, we will now discuss what to do,” the Testudo Style master responded, stopping the Bursting Venom Style master from continuing the conversation.

It’s vital to get a good starting point when negotiating. If we can rope the Bursting Venom Style master into this, then maybe we can also befriend the other families, Toris thought to herself, before allowing herself a silent self-directed laugh, mocking herself internally.

“Of course. Would it be best for us to leave the village momentarily?”

“No, no...we have a place that those four were using. I'll guide you there.”
They could take advantage of the situation, isolate the Bursting Venom Style warriors, and just focus on them.

That would be adding insult to injury...hee hee hee.

As Heki had said, this wasn't a job that could be completed in just a year. Even if they were only able to become acquainted with one house, they shouldn't aim for that from the beginning. What was important was to be exceedingly polite. If they were to state what they wanted from the get-go, it wouldn't lead to the optimal outcome.

Sukreen deceived the Art of the Shrine Maiden users and had tried to exploit them. There's no way I'll repeat the same mistake as her...

The other two princesses remained silent; although they hadn't touched on the subject, they all thought the same as Toris.

Acting out of turn will always catch up to you. I think it's a good decision.

It's better to be modest and pay respect to your opponents... If we don't, we'll have to stop.

As the three princesses had chosen to take their leave, the four martial artists also did the same. The seven women all temporarily left the itami room.

“Marionette Style, have they left?” the Testudo Style master asked the head of another house.

“Yes, they all left together.” Marionette Style used a similar power to that of the Shrine Maidens, and its users had been keeping a close eye on the women from the beginning. Although it probably wasn't going to happen, they had been ready to deal with a hostile situation, should such a thing arise. The Marionette Style users would be able to deal with it, as they were terrifying assassins whom not even Suiboku could deal with when he first came across them.

“Well, what do you think?”

“I did not sense any hostility from them and their words were truthful. However...they are hiding their true intentions.”

“I see... I think I can guess what they are.”

While they might have an ulterior motive, as long as they didn't intend to cause any harm, it wouldn't be an issue. They had previously formulated a clear idea of what their intentions were, seeing how the four women had returned. It seemed they had been right after all.

“Ahh.” The Testudo Style master had a glimpse of the future, which led him to sigh dejectedly. He was able to picture how it would turn out, having seen everything play out in his mind, hence why he was so dejected. Nobody thought anything about his behavior. Even though they were unable to see the future, they were able to work out why he was so down.

“Ah...yes, please inspect the contents of the boxes.” Once the Testudo Master had given his permission, a group of women entered the itami room. There were three sliding doors placed around the room, and all of them opened as the women poured in. Everyone was excited as they checked the contents of the treasures.

“Wow, is this a rug? This is a rug, right? Is it one you can use on the floor? It's not a quilt, right?”

“Whoa...what beautiful, thin materials... I wonder how they made these...”

“Hey, let me see that ring! Ah, and that hairpin... It is a hairpin, right? That too!”

“This mirror...it's so pretty...”

There were a lot of gifts, not only from Arcana, but also from Magyan and various other kingdoms too. A large group of women surrounded the tightly packaged treasures, even as the ten masters felt relieved that the princesses who had been present earlier didn't have to witness such a sight.

“Well, well...”

Those who were in receipt of gifts had to act a certain way. However, that varied hugely between country and culture, so there was no definitive answer

on how someone should act. The giver would no doubt be delighted to see the recipient so happy with their gift. After all, they gave the gift to make them happy, and it was much better than having them being displeased with it. In other words, it wasn't a bad thing that the women were so happy.

"We can't let them see them like this..." It was understandable they didn't want them to witness this kind of situation, however.

"Are you finished checking the items? Now we can decide who gets what," the Mist Shadow Style master said quietly. His voice could barely be heard over the excited voices of the women, but even so, the women went silent. Even though they had received a lot of treasure, it would be difficult to pass all of it around the village. "While not the best solution, I believe that as these were items Konoko won, we Mist Shadow Style users should receive a portion." Upon hearing that, four other martial artists, as well as the Mist Shadow Style users, all laughed. The six remaining martial artists, however, all had sour looks.

"The remaining portions will then spread out as such—the Four Vessels Style will receive a portion from Yabia's gifts, the Bursting Venom Style from Suji's, and the Drunken Fist Style from Kazuno's." That was the fairest way of doing it. Although no one had actually permitted it, the four women had participated in fights as representatives of their martial arts. As such, the houses should receive the rewards.

However, it was uncertain if the other six houses would agree, as they likely weren't open to not receiving anything. It didn't make a lot of sense for the men, who had no real interest in the treasures, to receive everything.

"But, her portion is in there too. So..." There were probably treasures in there that were awarded for Ran's work. If there were, it was uncertain who would be the one to receive them. "How about we give it to the Testudo Style? They often carry the burden." Once again, that was a fair opinion to have. When Ran had returned to the village a few days prior, the Testudo master was the only one who had dealt with her. Everyone had pressured him into it, true, but it was also true that none of them had shown their faces at the time.

"The Testudo Style also gave out their book of secrets. Thinking of that, we should at least give them some treasure," the Mist Style Shadow master said,

showing off his political acumen. With this, it would mean that five houses would receive something, whereas the other five wouldn't. It would make the numbers equal, plus the lack of feeling indebted would work in the Mist Shadow Style's favor.

"Aren't you being a bit hasty?" Surprisingly, it was the Testudo Style master who spoke up. The other uses of the Testudo Style all wore expressions that seemed to say "don't do anything hasty." If they continued with this idea, rather than handing it out evenly, they would receive a lot more. In other words, the number of people they had to share it with would double. The treasure was definitely going to be shared primarily with the main family, but the rest of it could be effectively passed around the branch families. As a result, the weak houses were reluctant to distribute it to everyone, which could lead to friction. There was no way to only focus on the opinions of the branch families. "We should first hand it out to those who were hurt by her, with the remainder being kept by the village as a whole." It was less than ideal having everything jumbled together, so the Testudo Style master suggested that the healing fruits be distributed amongst Ran's victims. Naturally, no one had any complaints regarding that. Or rather, each family had victims, so there was no compromise needed.

"As for the remaining treasures...it will be as Mist Shadow Style said. It would be strange to focus on other houses after we received the book of secrets." The Testudo Style master had a wife and children. He didn't want the treasures that much himself; however, if he were to simply give them up, it might have roused suspicion. If they were to split the village into two, it would cause long-term problems. It would no doubt cause a huge argument later—that was obvious even without being able to see the future.

"But those four who went along with her, can we even say they're a credit to our people?" The practitioners of the Mist Shadow Style, Bursting Venom Style, Four Vessels Style, and Drunken Fist Style all flinched. The remaining five houses all let out a laugh, as if they had struck gold.

"Oh! As expected of the Mist Shadow Style, you've got a good eye!" *Slap, slap, slap!* The Delusion Style master slapped his knee. "We Delusion Style users make sure everyone is taught proper discipline! As a result, none of our lot

followed her! If you praise those four, you'll upset the youngsters in the village!" Although he was blunt, those close to him agreed as they laughed along with him. One could say that wasn't the best example of proper manners, but no one objected. "So, Testudo Style master! Do you happen to have an ingenious plan that everyone can agree on?"

"While I don't think they'll agree...I do think it will avoid petty squabbles," the Testudo Style master responded, with a tone that said "Don't provoke me too much." "I'll get straight to the point... The remaining treasure will be shared equally among the ten houses, being entrusted to the main families." Those in the branch families were displeased upon hearing his conclusion. They couldn't face the fact that they wouldn't get any of the treasures. The Testudo Style master spoke with brutal realism, even as he withstood the painful glares.

"Can the branch families even organize that? Rather than saying it will turn into a fight over the treasure, it already is a fight over it."

It would be a lot of work to have the main families organize all of it, but it would also be impossible to spread the treasure out among the branch families. Thieves would run rampant, while there would be others who would use their martial arts for awful things.

"Not to mention, there are a lot of things that can only be used for ceremonial purposes, so there's no use having items like those kept by the individual branch families. The main houses will have to not be stingy and hand them out at weddings." This was a pragmatic solution that nevertheless disappointed the branch families. Although they wanted to take the treasures with them and make them their own, they didn't have the confidence to just grab them.

"Having the various main houses organize the distribution of the treasures is fine. But do you think that is going to convince us?" the master of the Four Vessels Style objected with a stern look. "Half the families haven't even done anything, right?"

"Okay. In that case...five families—Testudo, Four Vessels, Bursting Venom, Drunken Fist, and Mist Shadow—will decide first which treasures they will receive. Then, the remaining five..." He looked at the families who had not

given Saiga their book of secrets, and whose abilities were not yet known to the world. These were Marionette Style, Delusion Style, Shark Tooth Style, Stormy Winds Style, and Revolving Circle Style.

“How about taking the role of entertaining the envoys?” Looking after the envoys wasn’t that much of an undertaking. As there were only three of them, it meant they wouldn’t have to be distributed among the five houses. Which meant...

“Do we have to entertain them?” the Revolving Circle Style master asked to confirm.

“Unless you’re a proud martial artist who doesn’t want to do anything to earn their treasure.”

“All right...” the master of the Revolving Circle Style said, chuckling, but with a troubled expression. Entertaining guests from a faraway country was one thing, but he wasn’t a fan of having to reveal his abilities to them. It wasn’t that he had an ability that was best when unknown, but keeping it secret was always a reliable advantage. He would have to throw away that advantage, which was painful.

“Do any of the other houses oppose this? If not, we will go ahead as agreed, and the houses whose secrets are out in the world may decide which treasures they wish to take.” Once the Testudo Style master had given the word, the women began squabbling over treasure again. Half of them stood back and watched dejectedly, but all of the others were scrambling over the rest. Even so, the only ones who were serious about it were the main houses, while the branch families remained indifferent.

“How nice for them...right?” the master of the Stormy Winds Style complained as he watched the women. The users of the Stormy Winds Style had the most impressive builds, sporting huge muscles. They narrowed their eyes as they spoke.

“Those nobodies get to receive treasure? If it had been us who had left the village, who knows just how much treasure we would have brought back? In fact...treasure is nothing. What I want to say is...” The martial arts passed down to Tempera Village were all authentic. While it was a reality that they were all

frogs in a well, if they were to attempt to traverse the ocean, they would not sink. It was also a reality that they longed for the world outside of the well they were in. “Just how much were they praised...?” The villagers of Tempera were unable to even imagine just how big Magyan, Arcana, and the other nations were. However, they did understand that there were a lot of people in those countries, and those people had commended the four martial artists from their village. In front of large groups of people, they had displayed their abilities, taken down powerful enemies, been commended for doing so, and then received treasures. In other words, those who hadn’t were jealous.

“Can we not just go to Arcana?” None of the other leaders moved to object to what the Stormy Winds Style master said. Arcana was probably actively looking for people, and if all else failed, they could always try Magyan.

“We’re strong... That’ll translate to the outside world...right?” There were a lot of reasons why they had yet to leave the village. However, the main reason was that they all doubted their own strength. What would they do if the abilities they had received from their fathers and grandfathers, and their forefathers before them, weren’t any good? They were of two minds over it. There had never been any reason for them to leave the village before, and that was fine up until now. However, now that they knew their abilities could be used in the outside world, and people were seeking them...

“I understand how you feel.” The Testudo Style master, who could see the past and future, had also given in to temptation. What would happen if it didn’t apply to the outside world, and just how far could they go with it? If it was possible, they would receive glory. That is what they strongly wished for, as they had trained so hard for it.

“But...we’ll be compared to her...I mean, Ran.” The atmosphere immediately got heavier. The wild child born in Tempera, Ran, had shaken their confidence. They all thought it wasn’t a big deal, but they had been proven wrong. Even though they had trained so hard while following their teachings, they had all been beaten by a little girl. Ran was now considered one of the most powerful people in the outside world. Regardless of how it actually was in Tempera, from the outside world’s point of view, Ran was their representative, and she was the strongest martial artist in Tempera.

“It sucks...” The Stormy Winds Style master didn’t like it. No matter if they were in Arcana or Magyan, as soon as they announced themselves as someone from Tempera, they would be compared to Ran. If anything, they’d be treated as Ran’s henchmen. For people who disliked Ran, this was unbearable.

“So, I guess we won’t leave...” They were outstanding martial artists, but they were also humans with hearts. They wanted to be rewarded for working hard, but they didn’t want to be compared to someone they disliked. They were just normal humans, with weak hearts.

The seven women arrived at the detached building away from the Testudo mansion and sat down for the first time in a while. As the four martial artists were returning to their lives here, they also began to unpack their belongings.

“Well, they actually listened to us,” Toris said as she settled in. “We’ll just go along with what they decide. Of course, if they ask to leave, we’ll do so immediately.”

“Just as Prince Heki asked of us.”

There were no objections from Shiyoki or Utto. They knew they were just pieces on a chessboard and had no place aiming to be the main character. They were to do as they were told for their nation’s sake and for their own atonement.

“I feel like they’ll laugh at us saying we just did as we were told. It’ll seem like we wasted a year when we go back,” Yabia noted, poking a little fun at the situation. Fortunately, the women had matured enough that they were able to laugh it off. After a short while, enough hot water for the seven of them arrived, followed by some cakes to eat with tea, allowing them to take a break.

They probably didn’t want to serve us, but we’re with guests, so...

As it was the first time they had been welcomed to the village, the four martial artists could only smile bitterly. However, they still hoped that their travel companions—the three princesses—would be able to achieve what they came here to do. The four of them, however, were all hated, so they were unable to act as intermediaries for the princesses. The most they could do was remain silent and not do anything; if they were to try and help them, they would likely end up inconveniencing them instead. If they thought that the

three princesses were friendly with the four of them, then they might end up being hated too.

“Could I have a moment of your time?” While they were lost in thought, a group approached the detached building, consisting of the attendants of the Four Vessels Style master who had welcomed the group when they arrived in Tempera. “We have a message from our master...”

“Of course. What is it?”

“I accept the message.”

The Magyan group of three and the Temperan group of four split paths here. The Magyans were unable to refuse. Instead, they were only able to obey orders. Regardless of if they were guests or of a lower class, they all shared one trait in common: selflessness. When the three Magyans left the building, the Four Vessels Style master and his other attendants were waiting outside. People from the other houses were also glaring at them from afar. Although the master of the Four Vessels Style was the one who had summoned them, it seemed that the people from the other houses had also asked for their presence.

“First, we will tell you of the village’s collective wish. We are to host you all here as guests in the village. It won’t be forever... It will be roughly the same amount of time that Yabia and the others stayed in Magyan.”

“That’s plenty, thank you.”

“In that time, the Marionette Style, Delusion Style, Shark Tooth Style, Stormy Winds Style, and Revolving Circle Style houses will show you around and provide hospitality.” The aforementioned houses weren’t the ones to which Yabia and the others belonged. It had been decided that the three princesses would be under the care of martial artists they had never heard of for around half a year, which was more or less exactly what Heki had wanted. As such, this was the best possible outcome. Of course, until they had completed their mission, they couldn’t really call it an “outcome” yet, but the three of them were grateful nonetheless.

“As such, there is no place for the Four Vessels Style... However...” It didn’t seem like they were finished passing on the village’s decision. The members of

the Four Vessels Style were brimming with fighting spirit. “It is incredibly displeasing that you think Yabia and the others are representative of the strength of the Four Vessels Style.” They were not out for blood; instead, their fighting spirit was an indication that they wanted to show just how strong they were to the visitors from another land. They practically exuded their straightforward desire.

“I’m probably asking for a lot... We let you fight them once. But to be honest, we would like you to fight those responsible for the Four Vessels Style.” The three of them had no reason to decline. The only issue was—who would fight? The three princesses exchanged glances. They all felt the same, however. There was only one of them who could fight. Not wanting to keep them waiting for long, they made up their minds moments later.

“Then I...Deyiaoe Utto...shall fight.” All of the Four Vessel Style users were willing to fight the women who stood before them. However, only one of them stated their name.

“I’m Uzame of the Four Vessels Style.” He was a man in his thirties, wearing similar clothing to that of Yabia. The muscular man had walked forward, leaving the others behind. “If Tempera Village had sent someone to partake in the royal exhibition...I would have been one of the candidates. I take pride in that fact.” He was the perfect representative; he didn’t claim to be the best, nor did he pretend to be merely qualified. He instead established himself as an elite.

I’m done for...

Utto readied her fists as she looked over at the prideful Uzame. Spirit Summoning was more effective as a grappling technique, but her opponent was an elite Four Vessels Style user. Grappling with an opponent who could cause major damage with their arms and legs would be suicide. As such, she prepared to strike with her fists.

“Hm?” Uzame sensed something was off as he saw her ready herself. The other Four Vessels Style users, as well as the other martial artists, were equally concerned. Anyone who was familiar with the Four Vessels Style knew that fighting with your fists was the way to go. However, Utto’s stance was a little off.

Does her art center around grappling? Actually, even then...it feels like her stance has been changed from a grappling stance to a fist stance. Uzame was trying to read where Utto's strength lay, but all he could tell was that her stance was closer to that of a beginner. He couldn't help but feel uneasy.

"Well, here we go."

"All right."

Regardless of all that, it was still a match. Uzame didn't know how Utto would handle herself, but Utto also didn't know anything of the true Four Vessels Style. The only way to confirm would be to fight.

"Four Vessels Style of the Orb Blood, Stance of the Facing Blades." Uzame, deciding he would get a read on the situation, spread both of his arms and then covered his face. It was one of the Four Vessels Style basics: a defensive stance. Yabia could also fight with a similar stance; however, an elite warrior was on a completely different level than a half-baked beginner.

"Ancestral spirits, lend me your strength...!" In response, Yabia invoked her Spirit Summoning. Rather than transforming into an enormous beast, she had instead grown dramatically in size. Everyone started chattering when they saw her transformation. No one with abilities like that resided in the village.

"Is that a form of Mist Shadow Style?"

"No, it's different... Her flesh, bones, and skin grew with her... She's like a beast." The onlookers asked a user of the Marionette Style to confirm what they were seeing, at which point he confirmed that it was not a form of Mist Shadow Style.

Did she transform into a beast? Is it a martial art that allows the user to become stronger like Ran or the Stormy Winds Style? Although Uzame was surprised, he carefully considered the potential abilities of Spirit Summoning, making sure to keep his guard up...

Smack!

A light noise sounded as a fist covered in long hair hit Uzame on the chest.

She's fast!

While Uzame was taking in the situation, she went for a direct attack. Even though she hit what she was aiming for, it didn't hurt him. There wasn't much weight behind the attack—almost like a testing hit.

“Guh!”

However, as there wasn't much power behind it, the hit came in fast. She had managed to avoid Uzame's hands and feet as he stood in a defensive stance, and had hit him directly in the chest.

*I can see why he was the only one recommended by the village chief now...
He's on a different level than Yabia.*

Although Utto was on the offensive, she didn't think any less of him. Instead, she thought back to Yabia's rematch with Siyanchi Envee. Yabia had lost almost immediately due to her subpar martial arts ability. Uzame, on the other hand, was able to predict Utto's attacks. Although he was unable to avoid everything she threw at him, he had been able to successfully read about half of her blows, and had managed to keep his arms in place after Utto's initial hit. She knew from Envee's first match what would happen if she were to attack his arms. It would be like attacking a sharp blade with only her bare fists. That was why she had stopped just before he could block and withdrew her fist. It was surprisingly difficult, being unable to unleash a flurry of blows and only being allowed to strike once.

She's learned about the Four Vessels Style through Yabia...however!

Utto had managed to cleanly hit Uzame without making contact with his arms and then stopped the attack halfway through. As a result, it didn't hurt much at all. If Uzame had then counterattacked, Utto wouldn't have been able to stop her own momentum. Still holding his Facing Blades stance, Uzame took a big step forward.

I knew he would move now!

However, Utto had expected it. She moved to the right to match him and swung around to his left side instead.

“Take this!”

Utto threw a punch, aiming for his left flank; as she swung her arm, she kept

her elbow tightly in position. It was an effective attack, and by stepping into the blow she had put some power behind it. If it landed, it could break a rib.

“Hmph!”

“Wha—?!”

However, Uzame used his arm to protect his torso. Utto was unable to stop her fist—she had put all her strength into her strike, and had stiffened her arm up as well.

“Four Vessels Style... Pole Strike!” Uzame didn’t miss the opportunity. He put his left index finger, middle finger, and ring finger together, striking at Utto.

“Gah!”

One might think he was just going to stab her with his fingers, but Utto knew that it would be the equivalent of the tip of a spear. In fact, it was even more dangerous than that. She had no chance to catch her balance as she jumped back, collapsing to the ground.

“Haa...haa...” Utto readied herself as she stood back up again. As expected, he was skilled. Not only was he able to predict her movements, but he was also able to react quickly and counterattack despite his opponent attacking him.

I just narrowly escaped death...

The Four Vessels Style was comparable to wielding a fine sword. Yabia also wielded that sword; however, she was a third-rate swordsman. Uzame, on the other hand, was an elite swordsman holding a celebrated blade. Although the sharpness of his limbs didn’t differ from Yabia’s, the threat they posed was on a whole different level.

“Heh heh...that’s the face of someone who just narrowly avoided death.” Even though she had become more beast-like, Utto was nervous. As such, Uzame laughed loudly seeing her face.

“I see now...your fighting style is similar to *hers*... You’re unable to heal your wounds, aren’t you? This is hilarious!” laughed Uzame.

“Correct. The Royal Presence that resides in our bodies allows us to change into beasts... It’s different from the Marked...as well as her...and we are unable

to heal ourselves.” Spirit Summoning made one’s body more robust; however, if subjected to something more powerful, the user would still be wounded. They also didn’t have the ability to heal those wounds. That was the biggest difference between Spirit Summoning and those who were Marked with Tainted Blood. “As a result, when fighting with a Four Vessels Style user or a Bursting Venom Style user, I have to pay extra attention to their hands and feet...”

“I see... All right, I get it.” Uzame was relieved. “The Four Vessels Style is a threat to you...!” The other onlookers all smiled with relief. “Ah, I apologize. I don’t mean to ridicule your martial art... I just don’t know if it’s a fighting style I’m not used to, or if it’s a direct answer to the Four Vessels Style. You have nothing to be ashamed about.” That came from a place of trauma regarding Ran. She was a monster with no regard for his hard-earned abilities.

“She...was the worst. She just kept throwing punches and kicks, to the point that her bones and fists would break into pieces... I couldn’t do anything about it.” His own family’s skills had been brute-forced by pure physical strength and the ability to heal. He had been surpassed by talent alone. It made sense that he would harbor ill will towards such an opponent. “Compared to that, you’re...you’re actually taking my skill into account, you’re being properly vigilant, and you’re actively trying to counteract me. It’s proof that you do fear the Four Vessels Style. I’m glad.”

I guess that’s one way of viewing it...when it was that we just felt more annoyed than anything...

Some might not like the fact that one side had taken specific measures. Utto, who was afraid of this, felt relieved that she hadn’t upset Uzame.

Though we’re in no place to say such a thing after refusing a rematch with Ran.

Although a small matter, there was no reason to laugh. It was a normal feeling for someone who had trained hard all their life.

“However...one can’t win by just coming up with a strategy.”

“I know...! I just don’t want to be compared to Yabia...!” Fighting without touching his arms or legs was harder than Utto thought. Her opponent was an

elite martial artist, not to mention someone who had mastered using all four limbs in combat. Aware of the complex battle before her, Utto re-readied herself.

I've had training...but not nearly as much as him, Utto thought, ready for what was to come next.

“Four Vessels Style, Cat Claw!”

Thwip! Uzame's hand remained open as it warped like a whip, and he lashed out with a backhanded blow. As Uzame had taken the initiative to attack, Utto was able to calmly step back. She had readied herself to attack, but this time, she hadn't put any weight into it, so she was able to easily move away from her opponent.

This is...something only learned in form training...

It was a light attack, as if he were aiming to gently stroke her with his fingers. Even so, Utto made a concerted effort to avoid it. After all, her opponent was a Four Vessels Style user, and each of their fingers was like a weapon. Even just being slightly grazed was enough to leave a mark.

A skill reserved for different schools of martial arts...something he wouldn't be able to use with fellow Four Vessels Style users.

Four Vessels Style users' limbs were invincible, but that wasn't the case when up against other users of the same style. Thus, when facing other Four Vessels Style users, they would use tactics fit for fighting one another. They also practiced abilities to use against non-Four Vessel Style users, and one of those was Cat Claw. If he had been using it against another Four Vessels Style user, his fingers would have already been sheared off. For those who weren't users of that style, however, it was incredibly dangerous.

I see... This is good to know...

It wasn't like his physical ability had improved, so the attack wasn't that fast, allowing Utto to swiftly dodge even as she admired his ability. She lowered her stance as she jumped forward, closing the distance between them.

“My claws are nothing like a mere cat's!” Utto's nails were also dangerous to her opponent, who wasn't wearing any armor. Even the lightest scratch would

leave a grievous mark, no doubt carving a path towards victory.

“Hmph!”

Uzame raised his leg, covering his torso. For a normal person, it wouldn't provide much protection, leading to them being hit and falling over. However, for Uzame, whose limbs were like swords, there was no way he would be knocked down.

“Too bad...!” Utto had expected he would try to defend himself like that, to the point she was actually grateful he had done exactly that.

I'll aim for...his back!

She leaped forward, passing his flank. As was the case for any martial artist, a Four Vessels Style user's back was vulnerable. If she was able to tear into his back, it'd be her victory.

“Too bad!” As she tried to spin around, Uzame landed a forceful kick.

“Guh...!” She should have been able to reach behind him. He shouldn't have been able to hit. Unsure what was going on, she jumped out of the way and looked at Uzame. He was still standing on one foot, with one leg outstretched behind him. He didn't seem to be very balanced, especially not balanced enough to be able to produce a kick with that much force.

“I haven't cut...only lightly kicked...even then...this power.” He wouldn't have lost his balance from just extending his leg. If he had cut her, it would have nothing to do with his footing, but she had certainly been hit.

“It's not an issue of having good balance or a strong body...”

“In martial arts, the important part is not the foot you kick with, but the position of your foot. Shouldn't you also be looking at that?” Uzame placed his foot back on the ground, regaining his balance.

“Did you stiffen your body by burying your other foot in the ground?”

“Precisely... Four Vessels Style, Standing Post!” Uzame's foot had sharpened as he thrust it into the ground, hardening and securing itself within the earth. The logic behind it was simple, but the control and the mastery of the martial art were impressive.

“I know it’s a simple trick, but don’t make fun of it, all right? There are a variety of other more practical and useful abilities.”

“All right...as you say.” It was a simple trick. It was also a kind of surprise attack, one that couldn’t be used more than once. However, it was still somewhat troublesome. She was no longer able to aim for his back and take the victory.

“In that case...” Utto went back to basics. She began moving her body in small, swift increments. “I’ll stop the cheap tricks.” Spirit Summoning users came out on top as far as reflexes and movement speed went. No matter how sharp her opponent’s hands and feet were, no matter how powerful they were, they couldn’t match up to her agility. As such, she had no reason to hesitate. She could be cut to pieces, but if she was afraid of that, then she would bring disgrace to her country.

As Utto prepared herself, Uzame readied himself as well.

“Four Vessels Style, Arrowhead Stance.” Rather than continue the Facing Swords Stance, he clenched his fists and pushed his chest forward. This wasn’t a stance meant only for defense, as it focused more on balancing both offense and defense.

“Hyah!”

They both moved at the same time, as if they had planned for it. Uzame threw a punch as Utto readied another, while Utto moved in time with Uzame.

If I move first, I’ll have the upper hand. He’ll try to use it to his advantage and catch me off guard. If he goes first, I won’t be able to respond to any of his sly tricks. So, I’ll move at the same time as him, making use of my speed in order to land the first hit!

That was a technique Utto could pull off with her outstanding reflexes and her strengthened body, especially since she had been successful with her improvised techniques for fighting another martial arts style. Utto landed a hit on Uzame’s face, sending his fist into the sky.

“Ha ha ha...that worked,” Uzame said, even as blood poured out of his nose. Even so, he was laughing. He wasn’t laughing to appear strong, but because he

had secured victory. “I’m sorry, though. You see, I can handle a punch like that.” If Utto had been fully transformed, she probably would have broken his neck with one hit. Unfortunately, she was only half-transformed, so she wasn’t even able to knock him out.

“Huh...” Utto wasn’t surprised by that. She was more surprised by Uzame’s fist, which had missed but was now clinging to her body.

“The Four Vessels Style does use one’s four limbs as weapons. However, they’re not just sharp or blunt weapons. They can also become coarse files.” By “files,” he was referring to a piece of equipment that was used to shave the surface of wood or metal. His hand didn’t have the same effect as adhesive glue, but Utto wondered what would happen if it were to attach itself to cloth or fur. Actually, it would almost certainly get tangled among all the fibers.

“This is usually reserved for those wearing clothes, but your hair is quite thick...!”

Uzame’s arm, which had become a file, had gotten tangled in Utto’s thick body hair.

“If I pull it away, your fur and skin will tear clean off. And...” Uzame then moved his other arm towards Utto’s stomach. “If I thrust this in, it’ll pierce your body.”

Utto paused for a moment before replying, “I admit defeat.” It had come to this. There was no other way she could win. Utto surrendered and Uzame accepted.

“Ha ha ha, good work, Uzame! Your opponent...Lady Utto? She did well too!” Both parties retreated as the Four Vessels Style master rejoiced. All the other Four Vessels Style users were shouting loudly, with onlookers of other martial art styles praising their efforts.

“Thank you for fighting with me. I was able to see the essence...no, a glimpse of the Four Vessels Style.”

“What? Thank *you* for fighting with *me*. I got to have a satisfying victory,” said Uzame, wiping the blood from his nose, seeming to be in good spirits. He went on to tell Utto what he had felt during their bout together. “While I don’t know

the specifics, I can tell that you are not that well versed in hand-to-hand combat. Here in Tempera Village, you can learn many different and interesting styles of martial arts.”

“Yeah, I hope I can learn a lot.”

“If you do, next time you might be able to get one up on me! Ha ha ha!” It wasn’t impossible for someone who was weak to suddenly get stronger, but if someone who already was strong were to learn a new way of fighting, it would take a while for them to get used to it. Since Spirit Summoning was so powerful, she hadn’t had any reason to think of other special abilities.

“I’ll have to come up with some more dangerous abilities,” Uzame continued.

“That terrifies me.”

“Oh yeah. Be terrified.” Even if she got used to this way of fighting just a little, she wouldn’t be able to surpass those who were better. She wouldn’t be able to take down Uzame even if she improved in a small amount of time. Utto had fought earnestly, but the fight had still been a piece of cake for Uzame. The difference between their abilities wasn’t all that much, but it was a disparity that was hard to overcome. However, since Utto had fought, the Magyans had been accepted into the village. She felt a sense of victory from that. She couldn’t be *too* happy, though.

No matter how hard I try, how serious I am, there is still someone to whom I can’t hold a candle...which is most displeasing. I wonder if Lord Tahlan feels the same...

She began to drown in the feelings she’d experienced during the battle.

I thought that if I did my best like Lord Tahlan, I would be able to see results. But now I wonder if it was this hard for Lord Tahlan too...

All she could do in times like this was to try her best, complete her objective, and receive praise from those around her. Not to say that it wouldn’t be difficult, of course.

That poisonous woman somehow took Lord Tahlan away from his hometown. I wonder if he was at his limit, having been surrounded by those who could use Spirit Summoning...

His smile, as well as how he always tried his best, was wonderful. However, Utto never once thought that behind that smile, he was struggling. She had finally realized the truth.

I didn't even try to understand... She had never even tried to touch on it. No matter how hard it was, she pushed him to be strong. She knew her shame, even if she never showed it. As such, other martial artists just saw her resolution.

The five families that had taken the three princesses into their care noticed it the most. "Uzame mentioned it, but that's not her real ability, is it? I feel like that's something she quickly scraped together to prepare for a fight against a Four Vessels Style user," the Marionette Style master said, pointing out how unnatural she had appeared. "She comes off as experienced, yet her technique is unpolished. Even then, I don't feel like she's skilled with grappling or weapons... I wonder how she usually fights."

The Marionette Style master continued to ponder over it as the Delusion Style master interrupted. "Wait a minute! There's no way the master of the Marionette Style can't figure this one out! Isn't this what you guys are good at?" The others thought the same thing of the Marionette users, who were usually skilled at analysis. Everyone roared with laughter in response.

"I guess we all have to fight just like before. Whatever moves you're good at, they ain't gonna work!"

Nobody understood their fighting style. As a result, their curiosity was piqued.

"I wonder what would happen if they were to fight with us Delusion Style users..."

"They probably wouldn't want to fight against you guys in the first place," the Stormy Winds master said, nonchalantly poking some fun at the Delusion Style users. "You're powerful, but those who rely on face-to-face combat dislike your style... Of course, if it were us, the Stormy Wind users, we could probably put up a good fight."

The tall man, who towered over the others, began to tremble with excitement. "You're right about that. I don't mean to speak ill of the contest just now, but it'd probably be a much flashier fight." He had an air of confidence

regarding head-to-head combat, though he could also sense that the other houses didn't want that to come to pass.

"I swear, you talk a big game, don't you? Did you forget that when we weren't able to handle *her*, you said to leave it to you, then probably got beat without being able to do anything?" The Revolving Circle Style master had had enough. It seemed he had hit a sore spot, as the master of the Stormy Winds Style suddenly looked withdrawn. "We've yet to grasp the intricacies of the Spirit Summoning Art... However, from what I have heard, it's enough to rival *her*. She is able to win against someone that all of us combined were unable to defeat. It's embarrassing to have her practice with people beneath her."

He gave a slight warning to the youngsters who were celebrating. If they were careless, she could achieve a crushing victory against another martial art style. "If you are going to carry the pride of your school, I feel you should take it a little more seriously."

He felt a strong sense of rivalry as he spoke. After all, the Four Vessels Style user had the upper hand and had only won by a small margin. Since they had fought in front of everyone, a standard had now been set. The Revolving Circle Style master would not look so kindly on a sloppy and careless defeat.

"That's true...however! We will be first up!" The Shark Tooth Style users were the last to speak, but they were the first to suggest that they would welcome the guests. The other four houses were surprised, but they had also not been able to say that they would do it.

"They could work their way through the houses, learn their skills, and win in any battle. That is how martial arts works but...it's not good form!"

They could explore their partner's fighting style and construct the perfect tactics before fighting them. There was nothing wrong with doing so—in fact, it was exactly what Utto and the others were doing. However, avoiding defeat and forcing it onto others was just a little tacky.

"These women came here ready for defeat! Thus, we should prepare to be humiliated and welcome them in! Right, you guys?" The Shark Tooth Style users all laughed in response. It seemed this was a celebration of sorts, and it would be embarrassing for them if they were to appear frightened. "All right...tonight,

we'll take them in!"

The Testudo master looked over at the Shark Tooth Style users celebrating. *Thankfully the situation calmed down but...I wonder what will happen in the future.* They had once said to Saiga, who had visited the village, that they wanted nothing to do with the outside world. That wasn't untrue, exactly, but more a product of their rational way of thinking. However, that wasn't the only reason.

We're still reclaiming our confidence. As a result, we long for the unknown world, seeking recognition from many people...knowing that it could lead to our downfall.

Their confidence, which had been destroyed by Ran, was beginning to recover after having received treasures from Arcana and Magyan. If Yabia and the others were able to achieve such great things, then the rest of the villagers should be able to as well. Such wishful thinking could lead to reckless behavior.

Soon, the dragons will come...and at that time, we will know powerlessness, even more so than we did with Ran.

Fearing losing their regained confidence, they put on a brave face and hid behind their fortitude. They kept telling themselves that they were strong as they threw themselves into unwinnable fights. As long as they did so, that sort of pointless conclusion could be waiting for them.

However, looking at those women who hold us in such high regard...makes me want to dream a little.

Thus, Utto, Toris, and Shiyoki were welcomed into the martial art families. Would they remain seasoned Spirit Summoning fighters, would they contribute to forming strong bonds with the village, or would they help improve the village itself? That was yet to be known...however, what they did know was that it was going to be difficult.

Calculation

The four women were still in the other building. They could hear welcoming voices from where they were, and naturally, it was quite disheartening. They

couldn't see outside, so they weren't aware of how the fight had gone, but it wasn't hard to believe that it was an even match that had gone well. The four of them were jealous. They themselves were unable to fight head-on.

"Well, all we did was guide them here..."

"If we have time to envy other people, we should use that time to train..."

"That's right. We should start immediately."

"Practice starts tomorrow, but we can just start working amongst ourselves."

No matter how much they complained, nothing would change. If they didn't practice, they wouldn't achieve anything. Just as they were about to head out to lift their spirits...

"Wait a moment."

They had been caught by the women of the Four Vessels Style.

"Ah, hello..." It was a gathering of important women, with the eldest daughter of the main Four Vessels Style house leading them. They were all much stronger than Yabia and the others, which caused the four runaways to freeze. The village women would no doubt nag them, so they prepared themselves.

"Long time no see..."

"I don't need you to greet me! More importantly..." The eldest daughter of the head house thrust her finger into Yabia's chest. She wasn't going to attack, but it was still hard to remain calm with the tip of that woman's finger on her chest.

"The last time you returned from Arcana, you were empty-handed...but this time you brought a lot of grandiose things with you."

"Aha, aha ha ha... It doesn't suit them."

"Right? There's no way nobodies like you should be able to bring back that much treasure. You did something sneaky to get it, didn't you?"

"Yes, you are correct..." The men were jealous they had received so much praise, whereas the women were jealous they had gone not just to a large city, but to a faraway land like Arcana. While they couldn't imagine what it was like,

there was no doubt in their minds that it had been a beautiful place and a wonderful experience.

“Since you returned with princesses, did you get to stay in a wonderful castle, with fancy rooms?”

“Uh, yes...”

“People like you...!”

“No, I mean...it was thanks to Ran and Sunae...”

“I don’t care who Sunae is, and don’t you dare speak *her* name!”

“Sorry!”

Ran was hated, completely despised. As the runaways had each been born at the bottom of a branch family, the four of them had no honor to hold on to and were only known for accompanying Ran. They were scoundrels who had latched on to Ran, taking advantage of her power and reaping all the benefits. They didn’t want to swap places, but they were still jealous. The village women wanted to experience something splendid like that.

“Then, where is it?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t play dumb with me.” The women didn’t come just to berate them. Although that’s what they had ended up doing first, they also had another reason to be there.

“It’s here, right? Some sort of trick or cheat you got outside of the village that allowed you to win in the fights!”

The four women all looked at each other. “We did receive some treasures from the Berserker God...”

“As I thought!” The eldest daughter of the main house seemed pleased. “While it would have been the first time they had seen your abilities, that wouldn’t be enough to help nobodies like you!” She wasn’t far off the mark. If they hadn’t had the treasures—or tricks—they wouldn’t have been able to win the matches.

“Hand all of it over!”

“H-Huh? Wait...what?”

“Hurry up!”

The eldest daughter started to close in. Yabia was absolutely bewildered.

“We did receive a lot of luxurious treasures, but we don’t have enough! They’ve been shared with all ten houses, with ours being the last in line!” The Four Vessels Style house was the first to participate ahead of the other houses. Naturally, the other houses didn’t like it, but even then, the Four Style Vessels Style master didn’t give in, even going as far to say that they would be last to pick the treasure they wanted. As a result, the more interesting treasures were snatched up by other houses. Uzame and the others got to fight, but that wasn’t the case for the women. Or rather, the women got the short end of the stick, so the men could get what they wanted.

“You low-lives probably have something left!”

“N-No, we don’t...”

“We were watching! You didn’t hand anything over to the youngest daughter of the Drunken Fist Style!”

Yabia had brought back the fruits from Suiboku. Suji had brought treasures from Arcana, whereas Konoko had brought them from Magyan. Utto, Toris and Sukiyo had brought gifts from neighboring countries near Magyan. Kazuno was the only one who hadn’t brought anything back.

“We’ll be taking those...noble treasures!” They leapt towards the box that Kazuno had carried on her back, which now stood in the center of the room. “Any treasures that made you able to accomplish something must be amazing...” Other women from the Four Vessels Style barged past the four, surrounding the box.

“Huh?” After looking inside the chest, they let out a lifeless reaction.

“Um, I’m sorry, everyone. Those are just our belongings.” Around seven people’s possessions had all been stored in Kazuno’s box. That’s all that was in there, so there were no treasures. In fact, it was all dirty clothing.

“Wh-Where are you hiding them?!”

It was said that the items Suiboku made could often be mistaken for normal everyday items. So, if you wanted to hide them, you could do so in plain sight. However, the four women weren't hiding anything.

“The noble treasures, such as the Coiled Peach and Divine Ginseng, were all stored in the same box and have already been handed over.” They had forgotten to mention that they had already been taken.

“Why?!”

“There's nothing we could do with them, even if we had them.” They had returned home hoping to learn how to win without simple tricks. They had matured, and had no problems handing over the noble treasures.

“N-Nooooooooo!” However, the eldest daughter couldn't comprehend it and let out a shrill scream.

“Um...sorry,” Yabia apologized. She was unsure on how to react.

Side Story Compilation II — Disaea's Arms

House Disaea also attended the joint wedding. The old head of house had brought along Shun Ukiyo and Kakejiku Byoubu as he walked around greeting other guests. Although it was an auspicious event, Shun didn't seem very happy.

"What's wrong, Shun? Even though we have Japanese food, you don't seem too happy about it."

"I feel like I'm a bad omen, sitting here at such a happy event. By the way, Byoubu, aren't you meant to be on guard? Aren't you eating too much?" Shun was proud of his job as an assassin for House Disaea. However, he felt like he didn't really fit in and had at first declined to attend the joint wedding. He only ended up going because the head of the house ordered him to.

"Well...I guess I shouldn't be eating while working...but this sushi, it's so good..." she admitted, self-conscious about what she was doing. As it was a ceremony, it would be impolite for her not to eat, but since she was working, it was actually impolite for her specifically to be eating now.

"Ho ho ho. My cute Shun, don't bully Byoubu like that. It makes me happy to see her enjoy herself," the head of House Disaea said, sticking up for Byoubu and her rudeness, even though she was meant to be working as a guard. Due to his old age, he probably lacked a healthy appetite, but he seemed to take pleasure in watching youngsters enjoy their food.

"You're too easy on Byoubu."

"Ah, but I've also left you to your own devices too, you know? You don't always have to stick by me."

"Hey, hey, you *say* that now..." Shun said as he looked around the room, feeling fed up. There were a lot of Japanese dishes lined up around the hall, which was filled with envoys from a variety of countries. The envoys were all too occupied by political discussions, and the food had mostly gone untouched.

Shun thought it was a waste of delicious food, but he could also understand that the politicians were working hard. The fact that one of the guards was enjoying the food was only Shun and his master's problem, after all.

"You're the one enjoying it the most."

"Huh, really?"

"Good, good! You might as well eat it or it'll just go to waste!" Byoubu was really savoring the food, based on her expression. She usually took her job seriously, but she had let her guard down in order to enjoy the taste of home.

"You can ask Danua for more if you want, you know?"

"Huh, can I?"

"You're gonna eat more...?"

"Don't say it like I'm some glutton, Shun. I haven't even eaten that much!"

Danua was able to recreate any dish she had eaten. Byoubu, after giving it some thought, had decided on a dish she wanted to request from Danua. "I'd like some curry. I'd especially like some curry from that small soba restaurant inside the train station."

"What, now...?"

"When you can't get something, it makes you want it more... How about you, Shun?"

"After work."

Since Byoubu was talking about what she wanted to eat, that made Shun want to eat something too. He hadn't really missed any particular kind of food, but now he suddenly had an appetite for it.

The head of House Disaea laughed. "We'll leave that for later... Why don't we go see Pandora? I think she's currently lined up with the other Sacred Treasures." The highlight of today's wedding was the Eight Sacred Treasures, which had all been gathered together by Arcana. There had never been a country before that had collected all eight of the legendary Sacred Treasures, and having done so was a huge point of pride for Arcana.

“That reminds me. Apart from Pandora, I’ve never seen any of the other Sacred Treasures.”

“Same goes for me. We don’t really come to the royal capital a lot like the other houses.”

The group headed towards the exhibition hall, which was located quite a distance away from the main hall. The Treasures were all lined up on display within the national treasury of Arcana and were currently being heavily guarded. There were also other items, like gifts from Magyan, as well as some other high-value items on display, with Magyan soldiers guarding the area. The merchant house of Disaea had many treasures of its own, but even they didn’t have a showcase of this caliber.

One part of the display especially stood out—the display of the Eight Sacred Treasures in the center of the room. However, as Noah and Danua were unable to fit into the room in treasure form, only six were on display. One of those Sacred Treasures was Pandora, which was owned by Disaea. They had bought the legendary item a long time ago, and it had been locked away until the most compatible user, Shun, appeared. Pandora, a large suit of armor, was now on display, seated in a chair similar to when she had been locked away. She was a terrifying size and was really a spectacular sight.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen her seated in a chair. It’s so picturesque.” The three people from Disaea approached the display, being careful not to disturb the other guests. They were about to be stopped and warned by the guards, but as the head of one of the four great houses was present, they let them pass. More to the point, they were also currently lending Pandora to the royal family.

“...!”

The sentient armor, Pandora, responded to Shun and the others’ sudden appearance. In order to preserve her dignity, she was unable to move, but she began to complain about how bored she was and how much she disliked being with the other Sacred Treasures.

“Shut up, you.”

“If you stayed quiet, you’d be such a cool piece of armor...”

She had ruined the ominous aura around her as she grumbled out complaints. Shun was worried that it could lead to her losing her dignity.

“Well, we can always talk with Pandora. Why not have a chat with the other Sacred Treasures?” Without Noah and Danua, Pandora was the biggest item on display. Although one’s eyes would be drawn to her first, that wasn’t to say the other five weren’t equally majestic.

One of them, Vajra, began to complain. “I hate this display! I hardly stand out!” Vajra protested, producing a small amount of wind and electricity. She was currently leaning against a wooden stand. “Put that ridiculously large Pandora in a corner or something! That would help a lot!”

“Ahh, all you do is complain. You really are an intolerant tool,” Ungaikyo said, scoffing at Vajra. She was currently on top of a stand covered with a cloth. They were bickering among themselves when they noticed the three people...mostly Shun.

“So, are you Pandora’s perfect candidate? It’s been almost 10,000 years since I last saw one. Has it really been that long already?” It seemed Pandora’s perfect candidate was a little unusual to the Sacred Treasures, who had been around longer than even a certain Immortal.

The mirror was reflecting the light, and it seemed to be inspecting Shun quite intensely. He was being treated as a strange item by a strange item on display. Shun looked a little perplexed by this interesting turn of events.

“So...I heard you met Suiboku and just ignored him?”

“Y-Yes...well, it’s not that I ignored him. I just had no reason to really fight him.” Ukiyo Shun had previously been ordered to attack Fukei when the Immortal had gone on a violent rampage through Domino. As Shun was heading there, Suiboku appeared before him and asked that he not raise his hands against Fukei. Shun allowed it, which led to Suiboku fighting his old rival. If Shun had been bothered by the request, he could have killed Suiboku there and then.

“Next time, please kill him. He’s not a nice guy.”

“You have no right to ask that of me,” Shun retorted, annoyed.

“So, Suiboku really is hated by the Sacred Treasures.”

“Well, I can kind of see where they’re coming from.” The head of the house nodded along as he agreed with Byoubu, who had confirmed that the rumors about Suiboku were true. Even to a great power like Arcana, Suiboku was someone to fear. They had taken a lot of precautions to ensure that Suiboku wouldn’t go on a rampage at the wedding.

“Hm...I won’t let you kill Suiboku! You have no idea how much he has struggled, nor what he’s gone through!” It was Eckesachs, naturally, who protested. She was also currently propped up next to a wooden stand like Vajra. It seemed she still yearned for Suiboku, who was once her wielder. She was the most powerful sword, so it made sense that she appreciated the world’s most powerful man.

“Ha ha ha ha! We’ll probably shock those around us by arguing like this! Then we’ll make our masters cry, so we should probably shut up!” said Elixir, who was seated on top of a stand covered in cloth alongside Ungai-kyo. Just as she had pointed out, the guests were currently fixated on the Treasures. Eckesachs and Vajra, once they noticed, had shut up immediately. They were quite concerned with their dignity.

“However, is this Shun?! He looks nothing like the one before! Even though he’s also a perfect candidate, I’m shocked by how different his hair is!” The perfect candidate before Shun had also been Pandora’s first user. Elixir, who had seemingly known the previous user, started to offer up her honest opinion about the current one. “He was so serious about his isolation and freedom. He was always wandering about.”

“You’re right, he is completely different. Shun isn’t that nice or good-looking of a person.”

“Are you saying that I’m some kind of weird, lame child?”

“Oh, did you finally realize?” Shun was annoyed, but he wasn’t entirely distracted by that feeling. Instead, he noticed that the situation had become quite dangerous. The Sacred Treasures had stopped arguing, but now people from House Disaea were arguing instead.

The rising tension in the exhibition hall was broken by a message from outside the hall.

“Lord Disaea, if I could have a moment...”

“Oh...”

The flustered soldier spoke directly into the lord’s ear. That action alone was a form of foreshadowing about what had happened, and after a short pause, the other guests quickly grasped the situation.

“Hm...you two, listen up. It seems that a fool has appeared in one of the halls and insulted Lord Tahlan. The current lord of Sepaeda happened to be there too and has given him a beating...” The old head of the house laughed as he passed on the information, saying it loud enough that the Sacred Treasures could hear. “Plus, Lord Sansui has been ordered to go say a thing or two to the man responsible for the idiot.”

Shun and Byoubu had serious expressions as they looked at one another.

“It’ll be a fight for honor, and probably a major one. The person responsible for the fool won’t be able to resolve it on his own.”

“You’re right. I feel sorry for those caught up in it.”

Neither of them considered it their problem. Although they were aware that the situation would probably lead to a large loss of life, neither of them tried to stop it.

Dainsleif, another of the sacred treasures, was more concerned. “Isn’t that a bit much as retaliation for some simple defamation?” The Demon Blade of Vengeance had been placed on top of a wooden stand and was glowing strangely, while her voice seemed downcast about the situation. “So, Sansui is really Suiboku’s pupil. They wreak havoc because they think it’s right, and they have no limits when it comes to revenge.”

“While I don’t know a lot about Suiboku, there’s not much else that can be done in this situation.” For his own part, the head of Disaea agreed with the vicious act that was about to take place. As he looked over the value of the gifts from Magyan, he thought that he should be sure to secure some stronger foreign trade routes. “However, the reason Sepaeda has been able to act alone like this is because they have Lord Sansui. How about you two? Would you do the same for me?”

When the older man asked Shun and Byoubu if they would act in the same way as the country's strongest swordsman, the two of them grinned.

"I would deal with imprudent people. If it came to destroying a country, Byoubu is probably better suited for that."

"Don't make me do something you don't wanna do." Byoubu, despite brushing Shun's suggestion off, didn't say she couldn't do it. "I guess I'd have to, thanks to Shun's recommendation. If it comes to that, leave it to me."

Kakejiku Byoubu was another ace, equal to Shun Ukiyo. That woman, who was yet unknown outside of Disaea, was capable of doing the same things as Sansui.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing *The World's Least Interesting Master Swordsman: Volume 9*. I am slowly approaching hitting double-digit volume numbers as a serialized author. In all honesty, I am constantly surprised that it has gone this well. I've heard that 880,000 units have been sold, and I would like to thank every single reader for that. I keep telling myself that this industry isn't easy, but even so, I'm plenty pleased with the success of this series.

I say this every time, but I heavily rewrote this volume. Although I have rewritten all of the main prose, the story itself remains the same. I've included the perspectives of individuals from other countries, as well as the thoughts of those in Arcana and the main characters, while also writing how they would see the situation once they knew the reality of it. I also introduced a new chapter where I could write about the princesses from the Magyan Kingdom and neighboring countries. After receiving the wonderful illustrations from Shiso, I had the idea to bring more life to the girls. The story hereafter may also contain those three princesses, as well as Ran's friends, the four Temperans.

Now, about me personally. When the pandemic was starting to calm down, I headed home to my mother's home in Miyakojima. I hadn't been back in around two years, but even so, my grandmother and grandfather were both fiercely healthy and they warmly welcomed me back. My grandfather took me to a variety of places, and I got to experience picking lemons. Perhaps someone who bought the lemons I picked could be reading this very book... I like to imagine that. I stayed for one night and two days, but it was a lovely and fulfilling time.

Now, last but not least...to Shiso and my editor-in-charge, Kurota. Thank you so much for your diligent efforts. I look forward to working with you both on future volumes.

- Rokuro Akashi

Bonus Short Story

Assignment

This takes place after Saiga and Sansui's fourth duel.

Magyan Sunae, Saiga's wife, remained in the empty arena, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

"Saiga has gotten stronger..."

She was a young woman born to a king and his first wife, and nobody expected much of her. She herself even admitted as much. Instead, she did her best as a wife to support her husband. She could say with confidence that, if she hadn't been there for Saiga, he wouldn't have become as strong as he did.

"I'm really proud of him."

However, if that were the only reason, then she wouldn't have been able to get as involved as she had. On a recent visit to her home country, she was able to give Saiga a wake-up call regarding the limitations of Spirit Summoning. Being able to do so was the result of having good friends as well as good subordinates. Sunae's birthright wasn't any sort of personal accomplishment. Instead, she could take pride in having gained a good husband and friends.

When she had decided to leave Magyan without any advance notice, she never imagined that she would end up feeling so accomplished. She was sincerely relieved that she had chosen to seek adventure.

However, someone had come to rain on her parade. It was none other than Ran of the Silver Demon Style.

"Sunae, can we have a quick word?"

"What is it, Ran? You seem pretty tense. Did you get all worked up watching the match before?"

Most people were amazed after watching the duel between Sansui and Saiga.

However, unlike them, Ran could have gotten involved herself. It wouldn't be a surprise if she wanted to have a rematch with Sansui.

"Me, tense? Don't be stupid. I'm not tense at all. You're just losing your marbles," Ran said, laughing at Sunae's words. "I can understand if you're feeling exhausted, but isn't it a bit early to be satisfied, or to think that's enough?"

"What?"

"Haven't you started thinking about your next goal?" Ran let out a loud and provocative guffaw, even though she meant no harm. If anything, she was being friendly, with absolutely no hint of scorn in her manner.

"You're really intense, Ran. I get what you're saying, but I just want to enjoy this moment a little longer." Saiga's development as next in line for the throne, as well as her reporting to her home country just how big the world was, were both out of her hands now, and properly under the control of more suitable individuals. Since Sunae had nothing to do, she probably should have started working towards her next goal. However, she felt it was a little too soon for that.

"That's true. I guess you can at least take the day for that. Or...maybe a week."

"So what's the rush?"

"I don't like seeing you like this." Contrary to her provocative words, once again, she meant no ill will. If anything, she seemed a little concerned, but nothing more than that. "During the Royal Exhibition, I acted as your subordinate and made you look good. Probably due to the fact you've fought me and won..."

Ran had lost against Sunae in the past. She knew it was a result of a difference in affinity and breadth of knowledge, resulting in a surefire way to win on Sunae's part. It seemed Ran had also realized that it had been due to her inexperience.

"I like your fighting spirit. I don't like seeing you look so satisfied when you're finished fighting, though," Ran said, laughing as she readied her fists. While she

wasn't out for blood, it was plainly obvious she was in the mood for a fight.

"Well, well..." Sunae didn't know what Ran was getting at. The Temperan girl wasn't channeling her Tainted Blood and instead had taken the stance of an ordinary person. Sunae wasn't so tactless that she intended to stop her by force. Instead, she opted to join her and took on a similar stance.

"Go easy on me. I'm not that good at fighting like this."

"Relax. Of course I'll go easy." That was just a playful bit of banter between two friends. For those two, it was better to show their intentions through their actions rather than their words. They were both very aware that, in cases like these, actions spoke loudest of all.

"All right...!" Ran jumped into action. Due to her harboring a vast quantity of Tainted Blood, she was able to read, as well as mimic, her opponent's movements. Even though she hadn't strengthened her body, she was still capable of pulling off skilled maneuvers. Ran's light, precise hits closed in on Sunae's face.

Sunae let out a wordless cry; she could sense that Ran didn't plan to land any of the hits. However, due to the onslaught coming her way, her body tensed up. Ran stopped her fists right at the last minute—something that she wouldn't have ever done before. If she had gone ahead with the strike, she would have been able to knock Sunae out. It was a confident power move.

"Hyaah!" Ran had stopped herself from connecting, but she didn't stop her attacks. She grabbed Sunae's arm, throwing her over her shoulder.

The site where Sansui and Saiga had fought was made from stone and was partially broken. One would probably die if they were violently thrown against it. As such, Sunae tensed her body even more.

"Did I scare ya?"

"You're mean."

However, Ran didn't throw her to the ground. Instead, she stopped halfway, slowing her movements and laying Sunae gently on the ground.

"If this were a real match, this would've been a win," Ran said.

“You’re right,” Sunae responded. Since it was an obvious outcome, Ran made no attempt to make a show of it. On the other hand, Sunae, who understood that she would have lost, became a little more grumpy.

“So, spit it out already.”

“I’m just getting started.” Ran moved from an attack into a throw. It wasn’t anything an ordinary person couldn’t pull off—in fact, it was an entirely ordinary move, but incredibly refined.

“As you already know, I’m a genius. However...as a result, I’ve never felt the need to guide those without talent.” Ran housed an enormous amount of Tainted Blood, with which she was able to strengthen herself, as well as instantly recover from grievous wounds. Those with only a little amount of Tainted Blood and no talent wouldn’t be able to do what Ran could.

Ran, who had won against Sunae, had her eyes clearly on the prize. She was thinking back to the four Temperan women. “Those four don’t have an ounce of talent. They were only able to fight with the abilities passed down from their ancestors. That was true even on that night, when they realized what they were capable of.” Even if someone wasn’t talented, they could learn to fight if they practiced enough. Ran, a genius herself, had begun to realize that that in itself was a martial art. “I can strengthen myself in an instant, as well as regenerate rapidly and repeatedly. However, those who don’t share the same talent as me are unable to do the same. I tried thinking about how I could make those people strong...and then this happened.”

“I see. You want them to start mimicking your movements.” Even though copying someone’s actions was done in an instant, there was some purpose in practicing them over and over. What would usually take someone more than ten years to learn could be reproduced in just a few years.

“In Tempera Village, there are some martial arts that, even though they lack a certain ‘blood,’ are still able to use other techniques. I plan to combine those together and incorporate them into the Silver Demon Style.” A martial art that focused on acquiring several difficult techniques from an array of arts would, if possible, allow even the weakest person to become strong. However, it would take a lot of work for that to become a reality.

“Saying I’ll do it is one thing, but if I don’t work on making it effective, it’ll just become a less effective version of the existing martial arts. This will probably end up being my life’s work...or, better yet, I’ll end up entrusting it to my successor,” Ran said, clearly laying out her mission as she looked at Sunae. “So, how about you? Do you plan to carry on living a life of pleasure after the issue you raised with your siblings back home?” Sunae had pointed out a problem with her society, and she was pleased with having done so. However, she hadn’t intended to go any further and look for a new way to fight using Spirit Summoning.

“There’s...no reason for me to try,” Sunae timidly responded. Even if she were to learn a new fighting style in Arcana, it would be difficult for her to introduce it back home.

The only Spirit Summoning users in Arcana were her and Saiga. As a result, no matter how hard she tried, there wasn’t really any reason for it. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration for her to say she was at her limit.

“Then, what are ya gonna do? Are you just gonna spend the rest of your life looking after him, spanking his ass? You might be happy taking on that role, but...is that the sort of life the woman named Magyan Sunae should be leading?”

Sunae ruminated over Ran’s words as the other woman painted a picture of how her life would look as Saiga’s wife.

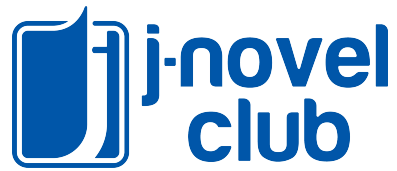
“I want to live my life as Saiga’s wife. I don’t see anything wrong with it, and I’ll probably be quite busy.” She believed that her intended future would be sufficiently fulfilling, especially since a life with Saiga as next in line for the throne probably wouldn’t be an easy one, and supporting him wouldn’t be an easy job. “I mean...Blois chose a similar path. She seems happy.” Blois Wynne, a talented swordsman who rivaled Talan himself, had given up both the sword and her magic to be a wife and a mother. Sunae wasn’t about to criticize her for that choice. “But...I guess it’s as you say. That’s not like me.” Blois and Sunae were very different people, after all, and Blois’s choice wasn’t for the woman named Magyan Sunae.

“You, as well as the other four, are disciplined. It’s pretty shameful for you to

say that since I no longer need you, there's no need to keep improving yourselves," Ran responded. Indeed, making oneself stronger in order to keep up with a friend was a meaningful endeavor. "Anyway, that's the face I wanted to see."

"Yeah, you've made me realize the truth." Sunae laughed as she gave Ran a light punch. "But I still wanna just enjoy the moment for a little longer."

"Ha ha ha, it's no fair if it's only you enjoying the moment," Ran said, laughing.



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The World's Least Interesting Master Swordsman: Volume 9

by Rokurou Akashi

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