

**HOW
A
REALIST
HERO**

REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki





✠
Maria Euphoria
✠

"NOT 'ONE WHO DEFEATS THE DEMON LORD' OR 'ONE WHO CONQUERS THE WORLD,' BUT 'ONE WHO LEADS THE CHANGE OF AN ERA.'"

✠
Jeanne Euphoria
✠

**HOW A REALIST HERO
REBUILT THE KINGDOM**

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

“You mean when she cut her hair?” I asked.

“I saw her determination and resolve in that act,” he said. “As a person, as a woman, the princess has grown into an individual who can stand on her own two feet. I don’t want her to dull that resolve by clinging to a dying man.”

He’s rejecting Liscia for her own sake, huh, I thought. Honestly... What a stubborn old man.

“I, too, have something to ask,” Georg said.

“What?”

“What has become of the soldiers in the Army and Air Force who rebelled against you alongside us?” he asked. “And what of the nobles who engaged in corruption and then rebelled?”

“In recognition of their valor in the Amidonian war, I have pardoned the soldiers of the Army and Air Force for their crimes,” I said. “The House of Vargas rebelled against me, but I must consider their accomplishments up until the time of the former king. I have decided that only Castor and Carla will be judged for their crimes. I abolished the Duchy of Vargas, but I allowed the disowned eldest son to inherit the family name, and granted him just Red Dragon City as his fief. Though, that child still being young, his mother Accela and their steward Tolman will assist him in his duties. As for Castor and Carla themselves, to repay Excel’s accomplishments in the war effort, I have heard her plea and, at a later date, I will judge the two of them personally.”

Georg closed his eyes and remained silent. How must he have felt listening to me?

“Now, as for the corrupt nobles... I abolished their houses, confiscated their domains and assets... and had them executed,” I said. “For those who acted directly, I did so publicly. For those who were merely implicated, I did so privately.”

Under current law, treason was a crime that carried a death sentence for relatives of up to three degrees of consanguinity. If, like Georg, they had cut ties with their families properly, their uninvolved relatives wouldn’t have had to get involved, but the vast majority of the corrupt nobles had neglected to do that.

They must have thought they couldn't lose.

Worse yet, in addition to treason, they bore charges of corruption, bribery, collaborating with Amidonia, misdeeds within their own fiefs (under the protection of their own status, they'd engaged in murder, rape, theft, etc.), and so on. Anyway, they had broken the laws like crazy.

For those whose only crime was treason, like Georg and Castor, I still received petitions to spare their lives, but for these people, I actually received petitions calling for me to murder them more brutally than I did.

"The system of collective responsibility is supposed to hold their families responsible for not stopping them, right? Isn't three degrees of consanguinity a little much?" I asked.

"There is nothing else to be done for it," said Georg. "If humans or beastmen live to see their great-grandchildren, they've lived a very long life, but there are races that live to see their great-great-grandchildren and greater's faces while still being active. Because of that, the punishment had to reach farther."

"Still, too many innocent people died!" I cried. "Hakuya and I worked like madmen, and we were just barely able to reform the law to only cover two degrees of consanguinity in time. We also stayed the execution of everyone under the age of thirteen, and had them placed in the care of orphanages or the church, but that was the best we could do..."

Those under ten had been placed in an orphanage run by the state, while those who were between the ages of eleven and thirteen had been left with the church.

The difference between the two was whether they would be able to marry and have families of their own in the future. For those in the orphanage, it was possible, but those given to the church would be cut off from secular life and be unable to marry. Furthermore, among the people implicated by association, there had been a woman who had given birth less than a month ago, so she had also been left with the church along with someone to watch her. If she tried plotting anything untoward in future, she would be dealt with then. That was about all I could do right now.

"I'm... opposed to the system of collective responsibility," I said. "The only

ones who should be judged for a crime are those who commit it. Even if they are related, it's wrong to execute an innocent person. And publicly, at that. In order to judge heinous crimes, and as a deterrent against them, I can't let go of the death penalty. That's why I don't want that penalty to be a public spectacle, and I want to reform the minds of people who see it as one."

"The country is already yours," said Georg. "I believe you should do as you see fit."

"...I will," I said.

"Sire, is it hard on you, taking the lives of others?" asked Georg.

I must have looked pretty anguished, because Georg said that as if trying to comfort me.

"How could it not be?!" I burst out. "On my orders, countless lives vanish. The weight of that responsibility feels like it's going to crush me. Up until half a year ago, I was just an ordinary guy, damn it!"

"I've read about it in the princess's letters," said Georg. "She praised you as a king among kings. She wants to support you, with all her body and soul."

"Liscia is... doing a good job of supporting me," I said. "But I have to make a decision that will sadden her. I... have to kill you." I placed my hand on my forehead, speaking in a low groan. "Your plan was brilliant. Hal's old man... Glaive told us everything. By gathering all the corrupt nobles in one place, we were able to round up all of them and their assets in one fell swoop. It was a splendid plan that filled in a number of gaps Hakuya and I had overlooked. But... because it can't be made public, I have to treat you the same as I did the corrupt nobles."

There were two reasons it couldn't be made public.

The first was that there had been death caused by the fighting between the Forbidden Army and the Army. Unlike the Forbidden Army's losses in the battle at Red Dragon City, which were limited to one warship, the battle outside Randel had seen losses on both sides. If we publicized Georg's true intent, the bereaved wouldn't accept it.

The second was that relations with Zem, who had been forced to pay a

ransom for their mercenaries, would worsen even further. The way things stood now, Zem were regretting that they had sent mercenaries to the losing side in order to take revenge for my canceling of our contract.

If they learned that Georg and I had been secretly working together, Zem would think the kingdom had set them up. It was actually Georg who had done that on his own, but I could hardly blame them for feeling that way. Their feelings towards us were bad enough as it was. They didn't need to be made any worse. That was to be avoided.

That was why, as things stood now, Georg's plan could not be made public.

All of that said, Georg himself must have been aware of that fact. He had been fully aware of it, and was literally trying to take the secret to his grave. How stubborn. He really was... an idiot.

"Hey, was this really the only way? This was what you wanted? To sully your own name, and commit a double suicide with the corrupt nobles, are you satisfied with that?" I rose from my chair, slamming my fist into the iron bars. "Where was the hurry? We could have taken our time to purge the corrupt nobles! The same goes with Castor! He believed that you had some idea, followed you to the end out of friendship and became a traitor for it! I had jobs I wanted you to handle after the war, and now my plans are all thrown off! Sure, handling it all in one go was a big deal, I'll give you that. The country's been cleaned up a good deal, and Hakuya's and my stock has risen, making it easier to implement my policies. But, still, it's meaningless if you lose you for it! Do you have any idea how much it hurts a state to lose talented people?! It sure as hell isn't equal in value to getting rid of some corrupt nobles!"

"..." Georg's eyes remained closed as he listened to me in silence.

I pounded on the iron bars once more. "Answer me, Georg! Are you really satisfied with this?!"

"That goes without saying," Georg calmly replied. "From the roots of a great tree that I thought, like my own body, would only wither away and die, I now see new growth sprouting. All I can do is pray for it to grow up well."

"Even if it knocks down that great tree as it does?!" I yelled.

“That is the joy of seeing the next generation grow up strong,” said Georg. “In time, you will come to understand it, too, sire.”

“...Will I really?” I asked.

“When a child is born to you and the princess, I guarantee it.”

I slumped back heavily onto my chair. Feeling strangely enervated, I asked him the last thing that had bothered me. “Please, tell me this... Is this something you came up with *entirely on your own*?”

“What do you mean by that?” Georg opened his eyes and asked.

Don't play dumb with me!

“This is the first time we've met,” I said. “Yet you have a strangely high opinion of me. You're trying to leave this plan in my hands, as well as Liscia, who you love like a daughter, in my hands, and the future of this country in my hands, too. It's just wrong, no matter how I think about it. Where did that loyalty come from?”

“Is learning of your unusual talents from the princess's letters insufficient as an explanation?” Georg asked.

“Yeah, it's insufficient,” I said. “I can't see you embracing this loyalty to a bunch of words on paper. If you were going to martyr yourself for something, it could only be for the *House of Elfrieden*.”

Now that I thought of it, something had been off *from the very beginning*.

From the moment I'd taken the throne, the path I had needed to travel down had seemed to have been prepared for me strangely well.

I was suddenly given the throne, I was entrusted with all of the power to control national policy, even given an engagement to Liscia to bolster my legitimacy, and then at some point, the corrupt nobles had been smoked out for me. When I looked back, I could see everything had been moving to make things easier for me. If that was the will of someone... there was only one person who could have done it.

“Was this plan done on that person's orders?” I asked.

“...I will remain silent.”

“Answer me,” I ordered. “What does that person know, and what do you know?”

I waited for Georg to speak, but he had nothing to say to me. It was so silent in the dungeon that I could hear the ringing in my ears. I realized I could wait forever, and it wouldn't do me any good.

“Why won't you answer me?” I demanded.

“When the proper time comes, I am sure that person will tell you themselves,” said Georg.

I rose to my feet, pulling a small bottle from my pocket and placing in front of Georg. “Poisoned wine. While I may not appreciate the form it took, I can't publicly execute a man who tried to martyr himself for his country. Also... I'll be offering the same to those who want to martyr themselves for you.”

It must have been the work of Georg's strong personality, but there were more than a few soldiers and officers in the Army who'd said they would do just that. His former second-in-command, Beowulf, as well as a number of high-ranking officers, had demanded they receive the same punishment as Georg. Furthermore, even among the soldiers of the Army and Air Force who had had their crimes forgiven for their distinguished service in the war against Amidonia, there were those who'd had to be restrained after they attempted to commit suicide in front of the castle after demanding their commander's life be spared. Honestly... I was sick of all these people wanting to die.

Georg took the bottle and said, “Thank you,” his cheeks loosening slightly. That menacing lion face of his now looked like that of a happy old man. Georg opened the bottle, holding it up in my direction. “Sire. I ask that you take care of the princess for me.”

“I can promise you that,” I said. “Liscia is already an irreplaceable member of my family. ‘Protect your family, come what may’... No matter what happens in the future, that is one belief I will never change.”

I knew the pain of loneliness, and I would protect my family, no matter what might come.

No matter how inefficient that might be.

Perhaps sensing my resolve, Georg nodded with satisfaction. “It relieves me to hear that. I will always be there, praying for the Elfrieden Kingdom’s glory and for Your Majesty’s happiness and good fortune, from the shadows beneath this nation’s grass and leaves. Now... I am sorry.” With those words, Georg downed the contents of the bottle in a single gulp.

With time his body began to tilt to one side, then the bottle fell from his hand to shatter on the ground.

With the thud that followed, the dungeon was silent once more. Having fallen over to the side... Georg’s face seemed to be smiling in satisfaction.

I stood, turning my back to Georg’s cell, and walked away.

Step, step, step, step. A few echoing steps later, I turned back just once. “...Don’t make me carry all of this burden.”

I faced forward and began to walk once more. I didn’t turn back again.

The next day, Chris Tachyon’s new program ran a story with the title “Former General of the Army Georg Carmine Takes His Own Life in Prison.”

Chapter 7: Promise

Morning, one week (eight days) after we returned to Parnam.

In the castle's governmental affairs office, all that could be heard was the scratching of my pen and the shuffling of paper as Liscia passed documents to me. I had been getting work done while in Van, but not only had the workload not decreased after returning to Parnam, if anything it had grown.

Now that the system of three dukes had collapsed, I needed to reorganize the army post-haste.

In order to build a relationship of equals with the Empire, I needed to increase military expenditures to counter the threat of the Demon Lord's Domain. In other words, to strengthen the military. That plan for strengthening the military was the one I had spoken of during the ultimatum to the three dukes, the unification of the armed forces.

When I looked at the history of the other world, an army's strength or weakness depended heavily on its mobility. In other words, how fast it could get where it needed to go, and whether it could deploy the needed firepower.

The reason we'd won a crushing victory over the Amidonian forces recently had been that we'd been able to reach the battlefield before our opponents. Because we had arrived a day ahead of the enemy, we had been able to fight the exhausted forces of the principality with a well-rested Royal Army. Had we arrived simultaneously, our exhaustion would have been roughly the same, and while the forces of the principality would still have been outnumbered, they would have dug in and fought harder. If that had happened, the fight would have been much more difficult for us.

In order to achieve that mobility we needed, it would be necessary to roll out a transportation network, and, at the same time, eliminate the divisions between our Army, Navy, and Air Force, to create a system that worked under a single command structure to immediately move all of our forces. That system

would be a unified armed forces.

The Forbidden Army, Army, Navy, Air Force, and, lastly, the troops that were nominally part of the Forbidden Army, but were the personal troops of the nobility, would all be dismantled and reorganized as one force to be called the Elfrieden Defense Force (EDF).

In organizing that EDF, I had to be cautious of resistance from each branch of the military, but with the recent uprising, the Army and Air Force had lost their influence. The temporary heads of each force, Glaive and Tolman, were both cooperative, so they would pose no problem.

Furthermore, the Navy had sided with us and therefore had not lost their influence, so by appointing their Admiral, Excel, as Supreme Commander of the EDF, we could expect very little resistance. Excel wasn't keen on being enshrined as the Supreme Commander, but I had made her accept the position under the condition that it was just until Ludwin gained enough experience to handle the role.

That was enough for the Army, Navy, and Air Force, but the real headache was going to be the nobles' forces.

They were part of the Forbidden Army, but the fact that command over them lay with the various nobles made them hard to deal with.

In this world with wild beasts and monsters (though, before the appearance of the Demon Lord's Domain, these had only existed in dungeons), thieves, pirates and bandits, there needed to be a certain amount of policing power in every area.

That was why the landed nobility trained personal troops, which they were obligated to use to maintain stability inside their fiefs.

However, in this country, the numbers they had were excessive. It was the effect of the king-before-last's expansionist policies.

At that time, battlefield achievements had been the shortest route to glory and advancement, so the nobility used to levy commoners from their fiefs to bolster the ranks of their personal forces. Despite the fact that, while conscripting amateurs might raise their manpower, if it led to a fall in

productivity, it was pointless. Eventually, when the former king, King Albert, hanged tack from his predecessor's expansionist policies, the nobility still maintained their enlarged forces.

That was why, now, I was stuck with the task of dismantling their forces down to the bare minimum required for policing. Those who had a primary trade outside of soldiering would be given severance pay and released from service, while those who sought to join the EDF would be able to undergo testing to enlist.

While the organization would be decided on by Excel, Glaive, Ludwin, and the other military officials, they had looked over my proposal and found they had no choice but to give it their stamp of approval.

While we worked, Liscia and I were silent. There was an awkwardness between us.

...No, I was likely the only one feeling awkward. Liscia was acting the same as always.

That day, even as I'd told her that Georg Carmine had committed suicide in his cell, Liscia's expression hadn't changed in the least. Her face had been emotionless, and my report had only elicited a quiet "I see..."

It wasn't that I thought she would lose her composure. It wasn't as if I thought she would blame me for it. Liscia wasn't that kind of girl, and I was well aware of it.

But I hardly expected her to be able to go about her daily routine this way, like everything was normal. I thought she would look at least a little distraught. There was no way this wasn't painful for her, no way it wasn't heart-wrenching, but when I saw Liscia acting like nothing had changed, I couldn't find the words to say to her.

It would have been easier if she'd lashed out at me a little...

"Why didn't you spare Duke Carmine?!"

...Yeah. No, that wouldn't have been any better.

Just imagining Liscia insulting and demeaning me was enough to depress me.

If she would just punch, and we could forget it all after that... But, no, the only one that would make feel better was me. Honestly, what was I thinking? After running my mouth like that to Georg, could I not even protect the heart of the girl closest to me?

“Souma,” she said.

“Huh? What?” I raised my head, and saw Liscia looking at me with her head inclined to the side questioningly.

“Your pen’s stopped, you know?” she asked.

“...Oh, sorry.”

That’s no good, I thought. I have to keep it together.

I went back to work. *Right now, I have to focus on taking care of all the little tasks in front of me.*

While I worked with that thought in mind, there was a knock at the door. “Come in,” I said, and the head maid Serina entered.

“Pardon me,” she said. “The preparations are complete, and your presence is requested.”

“Right.”

We stopped working, and I donned my royal cape and headed towards the audience chamber. Today was a day for rewarding those who had distinguished themselves in the war with Amidonia.



“Glaive Magna,” I said. “Your loyalty was truly remarkable. In recognition of that loyalty, I grant you Randel and its surrounding region to rule.”

“Yes, sir,” Glaive said. “It will be my pleasure.”

“Very good. In addition, while this is only provisional, I also grant you some of the powers Georg held as General of the Army. Until they are folded into the EDF, keep them in good order.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “I swear I will do my utmost to meet Your Majesty’s expectations.”

In front of me as I rose from the throne, giving commendations in a grandiose tone, Hal's old man, Glaive Magna, bowed deeply. We weren't broadcasting this, so I wasn't keeping up with stiff formality, but there was a secretary in the corner dutifully recording my every word, so I had to act kingly. That was to ensure that future generations who read the records didn't look down on me, or so my chamberlain Marx had sourly told me, but... honestly, I didn't really care what people would think of me after I died.

In the war with the Principality of Amidonia, the Elfrieden Kingdom might not have gained any territory, but we had secured hefty war reparations. Furthermore, we had been able to collect ransoms from Zem for the return of their mercenaries, and I'd been able to confiscate the corrupt nobles' land and assets. The dismantlement of the Carmine and Vargas duchies had been decided on, too.

For all of those gains, there was little need to reward the troops. Most of the troops mobilized had belonged to the Army and Air Force. They were under suspicion of treason, and this had been a battle to clear them of that suspicion, so no rewards needed to be paid.

Additionally, for those who had taken a wait-and-see approach to the conflict, the nobles whose forces were part of the Forbidden Army, I didn't need to pay for any rewards to them, as they hadn't participated. It meant they had missed out on a good opportunity, but that was their problem, not mine.

The only ones who need to be rewarded were the Navy and my directly-controlled forces in the Forbidden Army. Those of the nobility or knightly class in either force would be given land, but that would come from the former fiefs of the corrupt nobles and the dismantled Carmine and Vargas duchies. Those who were of lower status would be given a cash bonus.

And so, today, I was to give personal rewards to those who had contributed the most. It was standard to give titles in the peerage and land, but if they wanted something else, they were welcome to negotiate for it. If it was within my power as king, and a suitable reward for their efforts, it would be granted. If they wanted cash or rare items in the possession of the royal family, that was fine.

Long ago, there had been a knight who'd used this system to request the right to marry a princess he was in love with. There'd also been one who'd used it to request a corrupt noble be brought to justice. This was a situation where you never knew what crazy requests might come flying, so I opted not to air it over the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

This time, the people to be rewarded were as follows:

The turncoat from the Army who had led them in the battle with Amidonia, Glaive Magna.

The Lord of Altomura who had stalled for time and delayed the Amidonian forces, Weist Garreau.

The commander of the marines who had, likewise, delayed the Amidonian forces at the Valley of Goldoa, Juna Doma.

As well as the one who sent reinforcements during the battle outside Randel, the chief of the dark elves who lived in the God-Protected Forest, Wodan Udgard. Sir Wodan was Aisha's father.

Normally, the Admiral of the Navy, Excel Walter, would have been first in both rank and in terms of her contributions. However, she was foregoing any recognition of her achievements for herself in order to seek clemency for the two Varguses, so she wouldn't be receiving a reward.

Also, before giving the aforementioned five their rewards, I formally gave Aisha, who had been defending me as my self-declared bodyguard, the newly created post of *kochiji*.

If I were to explain what that changed, it was that before she had been like a mercenary I was paying out of my own pocket money, but now she was a proper knight with a salary.

Incidentally, her title, *kochiji*, came from the a bit of wordplay on the nickname of Cao Cao's bodyguard Xu Chu, read *Kochi* in Japanese. The original's name was written "Tiger Fool" and meant "a fool who is strong like a tiger," so I chose to write hers with the character for "Eastern Wind" instead.

...Not that there was much point in me obsessing over how it'd be written with kanji in this world.

In addition to that appointment, I gave Aisha a gauntlet from the treasury in the castle that was enchanted with a spell that reduced physical and magical damage (it was called the Iron Wall Gauntlet, apparently). To be honest, I had wanted to give her a shield, as it suited the image of her position better, but Aisha used a two-handed greatsword, so I'd opted for this instead.

Aisha held the gauntlet tight to her breast, stuttering and slurring her words through her tears. "Ohh... Your Majesty... Th-Thank you sho much!"

...I'm glad to see she's happy and all, but isn't that a bit of an overreaction?

Everyone watched her with wry smiles.

"Weist," I said. "You served me well in distracting the Amidonians. Please, continue to maintain stability in your lands as Lord of Altomura. Furthermore, when the city of Venetinoa is complete, I am sure I will place you in charge of managing her."

"Yes, sir," he said. "Inadequate as I may be, I will serve you to my utmost."

After Glaive, I finished presenting Weist with his reward. It was decided that Weist would take on the additional post of Lord of Venetinoa, the coastal city that was currently under construction. While his original fief had been in the countryside, because it was in a crop-growing region with fertile land, he had quickly gained influence. In the recent operation, he had played the important role of portraying himself as a coward in front of Gaius and Julius. This was his reward.

Now, it was time to reward Wodan Udgard, Aisha's father who had sent reinforcements to aid us in the battle outside Randel.

These were reinforcements neither Hakuya or I had anticipated. We had known how powerful the dark elves were, but we'd assumed they were busy with reconstruction after the landslide, and they weren't interested in affairs outside their forest to begin with, so we had thought it would be pointless to send a request. However, contrary to our expectations, Wodan and his people had dispatched troops to aid us.

Apparently, when Aisha had been staying in the God-Protected Forest, she

had independently made the request on my behalf. From what Hal had told me of the battle outside Randel, the corrupt nobles had brought out cannons and launched a reckless attack. Without those reinforcements, our losses would have been much greater. It was truly a happy miscalculation.

I walked over to Wodan, taking his hand as I thanked him. “You have my gratitude. I thank you for sending reinforcement when you yourselves face such difficult times.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Wodan. “We have only repaid our debt of gratitude. When the disaster struck, the relief force that Your Majesty led reminded us that we have ties to the outside world.”

“I am glad to hear it,” I said. “It shows me anew that this country was built with many different races coming together. If you have a wish, you need only name it.”

Wodan shook his head. “We already owe you more than we can ever repay. With the steady supply of relief supplies you send, our warriors have already been amply rewarded. I seek nothing further from you.”

“Please, don’t be so modest,” I said. “Those reinforcements wouldn’t have come without you making the decision. If you’d like, we can plant trees around the God-Protected Forest to expand your territory.”

“I am grateful for the offer, but the forest is fine as it is,” he said.

Hmm... That leaves me in a conundrum, I thought. I wanted to show my gratitude to Wodan somehow. However, no matter what I offered as a reward, Wodan stubbornly refused to accept it.

“You truly have nothing you want?” I questioned.

When I asked him that, Wodan took on a pensive look. “...In that case, I have one request for you, sire.”

“Name it. If it is within my power, it will be yours.”

“Then... would you take my daughter?”

“Father?!” Aisha yelped. She had been standing behind the throne, and she sounded surprised.

His daughter... He means Aisha, right?

Wodan continued, smiling, “I see my little girl who never used to show an interest in anything but fighting and food has grown into a fine woman. That change came from her feelings for you, sire. Could I ask you to take her as your wife?”

“Sir Wodan is called Chief in the village in the God-Protected Forest, but he is actually nobility with the God-Protected Forest as his domain,” my chamberlain, Marx, hastened to add. “You would be able to take his daughter Aisha as your second primary queen.”

Marx was handling things here today on behalf of Prime Minister Hakuya, who was indisposed.

I have mentioned this in past, but in this kingdom queens were broadly categorized into primaries and secondaries, and it was possible to have multiple of each.

Originally, there had only been one primary queen and the rest had been either secondary queens or concubines (mistresses) with no power, but one king a number of generations ago had said, “I don’t want to call these women I love concubines.”

...He must have been a passionate man.

As a result, all of his secondary queens had been made primary queens. (The original primary queen had been made First Queen, with the others called Second Primary, Third Primary, and so on, to distinguish them.) And his concubines had been promoted to secondary queens, a convention that continued to this day.

While I’m at it, let me explain the difference between a primary and secondary queen.

To become a primary queen, the lady in question had to be of the knightly class, the nobility, or higher. To make a woman of lower status a primary queen, she would first have to be adopted into such a family. That process wasn’t necessary for a secondary queen.

The children born to a primary queen had the right of succession. The line of

succession was determined not by order of birth, but the children born to the First Queen, the Second, and so on. In cases where there was a large gap in age, the numbering of queens could be changed.

Conversely, while a woman of any class (even a slave or a prostitute) could become a secondary queen, their children had no right of succession. However, they were still royalty, and noble and knightly houses that wanted to form a blood connection with the crown would try to marry their sons and daughters off to the king's children from those queens. It was definitely one way of marrying into money.

While the position didn't come with any power, it also took less responsibility than being a primary queen, and they were allowed to act freely, within limits. For women of common birth who had no interest in power, this was often the position they dreamed of.

But... making Aisha my second primary wife...

"Would you consider that a reward?" I asked.

"As a father, my feelings are complicated... but she seems to be hoping for it, and a father always wants to grant his little girl's wishes," said Wodan. "Besides which, with the people of the God-Protected Forest beginning to look to the outside world, I think it would be valuable for them to see their chief's daughter marry into the royal house. It wouldn't just create a bond between the royal house and the God-Protected Forest, it would become symbolic of the bond between humans and dark elves, as well."

Then it wasn't just for his daughter's sake. There were political considerations, too.

Looking at it from my position, if I strengthened my ties with the God-Protected Forest, I would probably have the elite archers who showed their might in the battle outside Randel at my disposal.

No, even if I set that sort of pragmatic gain aside... Aisha was cute. If I had to ask myself whether I'd want her as a wife or not... I did.

She might be a little too loyal to me, but it let her affection for me come across all the more directly. Though it did feel a bit like I'd tamed her with food.

I couldn't expect much from her as a political operator, but Aisha had more than sufficient martial prowess to compensate for that. She was the sort of woman who would be reassuring to have at my side.

...But, is that really okay? I returned to the throne, looking at Liscia beside me.

I had told Liscia we were only temporarily engaged so that I could potentially get out of it. But, now that the war with Amidonia was behind us, my thinking on the matter had changed.

People had died because of my orders. I carried a weight of karma far too great to ever return to ordinary life. I could no longer stop being king, or abandon this country.

I felt the same about my relationship with Liscia. Since the day we'd first met, we had overcome so much pain and hardship together. I couldn't break off our betrothal, and I had no desire to. If Liscia would be my queen, I could accept being king.

...But, that's a different issue entirely.

While I had resolved myself to be king, I still had reservations about taking more than one queen. Liscia, Marx, and even Juna had repeatedly told me it was normal, but as someone dragging along the moral views of modern Japan, I was hesitant.

...Yeah, it wasn't that I thought it was insincere to love more than one woman. I wasn't that full of myself. But I thought giving an immediate answer here and now wouldn't be fair to Liscia.

I'd feel like I was cheating on her...

While I was thinking that, Liscia looked at me. Seeing that I was at a loss for words, Liscia said exasperatedly, "Souma, marry Aisha like you ought to."

"Like I *ought* to...? You're fine with that, Liscia?"

"I don't have the right to refuse, but Aisha and her father have already told you it's fine, haven't they?" she said. "Actually, if you don't take her, that's probably going to be the bigger headache."

"How so?" I asked.

Liscia stressed the practical aspects. “You’re a king, Souma. There may be situations where you’re forced to marry the daughters of major nobles or princesses from other countries as part of your internal or external diplomacy. In preparation for that, I want the higher-ranked queens to be filled out with people I can trust.”

“No... But... I mean...”

Seeing me still hesitating, Liscia sighed. “Souma, you’re able to make decisions when the country hangs in the balance, but when it comes to the women in your life, you’re so indecisive.”

“Urkh...”

“Honestly... Aisha!” Liscia called.

“Y-Yes!” The dark elf jumped in surprise. Aisha had been standing in her bodyguard position waiting anxiously as she watched things unfold.

Liscia leveled a finger at her. “I’m not giving up the position of First Queen, you hear me? You’re Second Queen, got it? If that’s all right with you, it’s all right with me. In fact, I welcome it.”

“Y-Yes! If it lets me be by His Majesty’s side!” Aisha cried.

Liscia nodded and looked me straight in the eye as she said, “I’ve set everything in place for you. Now... treat her right.”

“...Right,” I said slowly.

I dunno. I felt like I had been the future balance of power between the two of us get decided right there.

Liscia had shown so much spirit. I couldn’t keep pathetically waffling any longer.

I walked over to Aisha. Aisha, the fearless warrior of the battlefield, had eyes that were trembling with uncertainty.

Oh, geez, don’t look at me like that, I silently pleaded.

“Aisha,” I said.

“Y-Yes!”

“So... will you marry me?”

She inhaled sharply. “Yes! It would be my pleasure!”

I refrained from any quips about how her response made her sound like a server responding to orders at a Japanese-style pub. My face was burning with embarrassment.

In among all the smiles, I could see Sir Wodan’s face dripping with all the complicated feelings of being a father.

I said to him, using not the tone I would usually use as king, but a tone used towards those above you, “...This is how it turned out. I’ll come to formally give you my regards at a later date, Father.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “I will be waiting. Son.”

Thus, Aisha became my second fiancée.

With a second primary queen chosen...

“Finally, that’s one less burden on my mind,” Marx said with an expression of relief. Marx had felt a sense of crisis about the shortage of royals brought on by the succession crisis after the reign of the king before the last one. That was why, with my formal marriage to Liscia not having taken place yet, he was constantly badgering me, “Get more wives, make more babies.” He didn’t even seem to care if they were conceived out of wedlock.

That aside... what was I going to do with the *kochiji* title I’d come up with now? I couldn’t very well make one of my queens act like a personal bodyguard.

When I said that to Aisha, though...

“Leave it to me! Even if I become your wife, I will always protect you, sire!” Aisha declared with a broad smile, so I ended up letting her keep it.

For me, I knew Aisha was tough, so I figured it was all good, but the previously-elated Marx was immediately holding his head in his hands. I wanted to put the Second Primary Queen he had finally managed to get into a position that was synonymous with danger. I had to feel bad for the guy, only having new things to worry about.

Juna watched all of this with a slightly lonely smile on her face, but none of us realized it at the time.

...Juna. You...

With the exception of Excel.

With the very eventful reward for Wodan out of the way, it was finally Juna's turn.

I offered her some words of commendation, then asked, "Is there anything you want of me?"

Of course, I knew what Juna's response would be. She would likely ask that all of her achievements be counted as her grandmother, Excel's. If Excel wanted to save Castor and Carla, she needed to have as much merit to her name as possible. This was the gentle Juna. I was sure she'd do it out of consideration for Excel.

Juna looked me straight in the eye and opened her mouth, "Your Majesty, I ask that all of my..."

"May I have a word," Excel cut her off before she could finish speaking. "Forgive my sudden interruption. I would like permission to speak."

"Hm? ...Granted," I said.

"Thank you." Excel bowed and began to speak slowly. "As you are aware, Your Highness, Juna Doma is my granddaughter. However, Juna's father, my son, has been married into the Doma family of merchants in Lagoon City. In other words, Juna is a commoner."

I had heard that when Juna had disclosed her ties to Excel to me. However, why was she bringing up Juna's low status now?

Excel continued. "I gave her a rank in the military because she is my granddaughter, but that doesn't change the fact that Juna is the child of a common family. She has no connection to the doings of any noble house."

"...What are you getting at, Duchess?" I asked.

Excel turned not to me, but to Juna. "I am sure you mean to use your

achievements for my benefit, but that will not be necessary.”

“But, Grandmother...”

Excel silently shook her head. “It’s fine. You have nothing to do with the House of Vargas. You mustn’t use your achievements for people you’ve never met. Use them for your own sake.”

“Grandmother...”

“I can’t sacrifice my granddaughter’s happiness for the sake of my son-in-law and my other granddaughter,” said Excel. “You don’t have to worry about us. You should have your own wish granted.”

As Excel turned her gentle gaze on her, Juna lowered her eyes and seemed to struggle internally for a moment. When she finally raised her eyes, she stepped forward and kneeled.

“Your Majesty. I have a request.”

“...What might that be?” I asked.

“If it is at all possible, then like Aisha... I wish to continue singing at your side.”

Could she mean... No, there was no doubt about it, Juna meant for me to take her as my bride, too.

“Sire,” Marx said gleefully, “if you take Juna Doma, it will be as a secondary queen. If you wish to take her as a primary queen, you will need to have her adopted into a noble or knightly family first.”

He must have been more than happy to have another candidate for the position of queen appear. When I looked to Liscia, she nodded, accepting it.

But...

“I’m sorry, that’s not possible.” I gave a clear refusal.

Liscia’s eyes went wide, while Excel asked “Why...?” looking at me pleadingly. Juna continued to look down at the floor, so I couldn’t see her face.

The air in the room grew heavy, but... I hoped they’d wait to hear everything I had to say.

“I can’t do that now,” I said. “You’re the central pillar of Project Lorelei, the

project to create a music program using the Jewel Voice Broadcast. You are the Prima Lorelei. You're popular with the people, too. What do you think would happen if I announced you and I were getting engaged? There'd be riots."

When I said it that way, everyone seemed satisfied with that explanation. It was fresh in their memories that the Congress of the People had sent petitions saying, "Show more of Juna on the Jewel Voice Broadcast."

It was common for flame wars to break out on an idol's blog if she was discovered to have a lover in my old world, but in the current situation, I worried Parnam itself might get torched. The Kingdom would be burning with jealousy... Yeah, not a funny joke.

That was why I said, "Could you wait, just for a little while?"

Juna gasped.

When Juna raised her face, I thought, *Well, this is awkward*, as I told her, "I need your strength as the Prima Lorelei for producing our broadcast programs. That's why, for now, I'm asking you to stay the people's songstress. When more songstresses have gathered, and we have trained enough people that can keep the program on course, I swear, I will take you then."

When I said that, Juna rubbed the tears from her eyes. "I'll wait longingly for that day, sire."

When she spoke those words, she wore the smile of a pure, innocent young girl.





Intermission 2: What the Black-Robed Prime Minister was Doing Then

That day, when Souma the provisional King of Elfrieden welcomed new candidates to be his queen, there were two people in other places holding talks over the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

Elfrieden's Prime Minister Hakuya Kwonmin was speaking to the image of the younger sister of Empress Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire, Jeanne Euphoria, projected by the simple receiver on a desk.

"Your signal is clear," said Hakuya. "It looks like the simple receiver you sent us is in good working order. Thank you very much, Madam Jeanne, for going out of your way to have it delivered by griffon."

"My sister understood how important the hotline Sir Souma was talking about establishing will be," Jeanne said. "With this, the Kingdom and Empire can coordinate as need be. It's only natural we would hurry to get things in place."

The Jeanne on the screen smiled broadly.

After the conference with Amidonia, Jeanne had reported back to her sister, Empress Maria, about Souma's proposals: A secret alliance with the Elfrieden Kingdom, establishing a hotline between the two countries, and the exchange of plenipotentiary ambassadors from each country, as well as the establishment of embassies for them to be stationed at.

Hakuya had assumed that Maria wouldn't refuse these ideas, and, as he'd expected, Maria had gladly approved all of them. In fact, she had even rolled around in bed laughing as she did.

"I've never seen my sister like that," Jeanne said. "She must have been very pleased."

"Pleased...?" Hakuya asked.

“To find someone who shares her values... a person who understands her, if you will,” said Jeanne. “There aren’t many of them inside the Empire. People who are able to understand my sister, that is.”

“I see.”

Geographically they were west and east, ideologically they were an idealist and a realist, and yet Maria and Souma, who appeared to be polar opposites, understood one another.

That might be interesting, thought Hakuya.

“With a response like that, I want to arrange for my sister and Sir Souma to be able to talk over the broadcast as soon as possible,” said Jeanne.

“They’re both very busy people at the moment, and it’s hard to make their schedules agree,” Hakuya said. “When things eventually settle down, let’s arrange a time for them to talk.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

After that, they made small talk (Including venting their frustrations about their respective leaders) for a little while, then Jeanne said, “By the way, there’s been something bothering me for a while now. I see many books behind you there, Sir Hakuya. Where are you now?”

“...Oh, these are books we have on loan from Amidonia as collateral against the war reparations,” he replied. “There are a good number of them that I want to have copies made of before they have to be returned. I was working on categorizing them until just a little while ago.”

“The Prime Minister himself is sorting them?” Jeanne asked in surprise.

“Of course, I have people to help, but it’s something of a hobby of mine,” said Hakuya. “I actually like to sort books. I divide them into categories, line them up in order, sometimes flipping through one that catches my attention, then derive pleasure from looking at the well-ordered bookshelf when my work is complete. Books are human wisdom. The progress of a country. When I think of them arranged before me on a shelf, available for me to read whenever I please...”

When she saw Hakuya wax eloquent about books, Jeanne's eyes opened wide.

If you mentioned the name Hakuya, the pride of the kingdom, the Black-robed Prime Minister, he was famous as one of the geniuses discovered by Souma, the man who had used his trickery to make sport of Gaius VIII of the Principality of Amidonia.

Having met him herself, Jeanne had had an impression of him as a clever individual. However, when Hakuya spoke about books, his eyes were those of a young boy. That gap made Jeanne's heart skip a beat.

"...I take it you like books?" Jeanne asked.

Hakuya came back to his senses. He quickly regained his usual clever expression, but the tips of his ears were a little red. "...Pardon me. I can get carried away when it comes to books, you see..."

"Hee hee. I feel like I've seen an unexpected side of you..."

"Is it that unexpected?" Hakuya asked. "I think I would make a better librarian than a Prime Minister, personally."

The reason Hakuya had received an audience with Souma to begin with was that his uncle had said, "At your age, you need to stop sitting around doing nothing but read books. Go do something useful to society!" and entered him into the If You Have a Gift event's Gift of Wisdom section without asking for permission.

He had won that competition, and when he'd had his audience with Souma, he had been charmed by the young king. Thinking that, just maybe, Souma could get this country that was on the verge of failing back on its feet, Hakuya had given up being a bookworm and volunteered his services, only to find that at some point he had become the Prime Minister.

The truth of the matter was, while Hakuya did want to support Souma's reign, he had meant to do it as an advisor to Souma and the then-Prime Minister Marx. However, that Marx had gone and recommended him as a better Prime Minister than himself. Thanks to that, Hakuya couldn't read the books he wanted to, and his days had become very busy.

“Hmm... Then if we were to arrange a post for you as Chief Librarian of the Imperial Archives, would you come to our country?” Jeanne asked. “I imagine our archives have a more extensive collection of books than the kingdom’s.”

“Ahh. That is an alluring proposal, yes.”

“But you can’t do it?” Jeanne asked.

“Had you asked me before I volunteered my services, I’m sure I would have jumped at the offer without a moment’s hesitation,” he said.

Nowadays, Hakuya thought these busy days weren’t so bad. There had been a time when, for Hakuya, history was a thing to be found in books. However, now he felt it was a thing that they themselves would make. When he was serving under Souma, the one trying to push this country forward, he felt like he himself was one of the characters in history. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

“But now, I wish to move forward into a new era alongside His Majesty and the others,” he continued. “Then, once I raise my successor, I hope to become a historian and record what happened in these times.”

“A comfortable retirement, huh...” Jeanne said. “That may be a luxury in the times we live in.”

She was most likely right. The times were too hard to allow for an easy retirement.

The threat of the Demon Lord’s Domain was slowly encroaching from the north, and various countries were forging alliances to advance their own goals, or opposing one another. For Hakuya to have his quiet retirement, all of that would have to be resolved. As for whether that was possible, even with all of Hakuya’s wisdom, he couldn’t see the answer to that.

“Well then, I will be looking forward to our next talk, Sir Hakuya,” she said.

“Yes. Let’s speak again sometime, Madam Jeanne.”

The transmission cut out on Jeanne’s side.

Whew... Hakuya exhaled, then rose to his feet. He reached out to the pile of Amidonian books.

These precious books had been paid no attention while they were in

Amidonia, and were now sorely in need of repair. If Hakuya hadn't taken custody of them, some of these books might have been lost forever.

With a sigh, Hakuya reached out and picked up one book. As soon as he did...

"Prime Minister."

There was a man in black clothes kneeling in one corner of the room. There was a black cloth wrapped around his face as well, and he looked like he was melting into the darkness of the closed off, dimly lit room.

Hakuya asked the man, "How are the preparations?"

"They proceed apace. However..." The man seemed to hesitate.

Hakuya furrowed his brow. "Did something happen?"

"The thing is... I feel as though things are going entirely too well," said the man. "Almost as if there was the will of another actor in play here..."

"I see..."

Hakuya dismissed the man, then flipped through the book he had picked up.

When he had taken the books in Amidonia's archives as collateral against the war reparations, Hakuya had had a certain expectation. He had expected there would be family registers and materials regarding rights and ownership. Those sorts of writings tended to be in the archives in a nation's capital, after all. To have those books in hand was to grasp the heart of the nation itself.

When he'd advised Souma to take the books as collateral, it had been because the Amidonian royal family was more inclined towards military matters, and he'd hoped they wouldn't realize the importance of them. However, contrary to Hakuya's expectations, there was only one book of that variety in the collection he'd seized.

That book, the one Hakuya held now, was on the recent genealogy of the royal family of Amidonia. When he flipped through it, there was a folded piece of paper stuck between the last page and the cover.

When Hakuya unfolded the piece of paper, he saw there was a drawing of a small animal with black circles around its eyes holding down one of its eyelids as it stuck its tongue out at him.

When he saw that, Hakuya blinked a few times, then chuckled to himself. “I see. There would have to be someone like this in Amidonia, yes.”

“What is it, teacher?” a sudden voice asked.

Hakuya turned and saw Tomoe there, looking at him blankly. He was embarrassed to have been caught with his guard down, and he cleared his throat loudly to mask it.

“Why, little sister, I’m sorry I didn’t notice you there.”

“No, I just got here,” Tomoe said. “I came in because it seemed like you were done talking. You looked like you were having fun, right? What were you looking at?”

“Oh, this?” Hakuya showed Tomoe a picture with a little animal drawn on it.

Tomoe held the piece of paper up to her face, then held it at a distance, then held it up to the ceiling to look at it, before finally tilting her head to the side.

“Was this animal what you found so funny? I’ll admit it’s cute.”

“It’s a drawing of an animal called a bronze raccoon.” Taking the piece of paper back, Hakuya patted Tomoe on the head and said, “They are commonly said to play tricks on people.”



Chapter 8: Crime and Punishment

Early in the 11th month, 1546th year, Continental Calendar - Midnight

It happened in the domain of a certain noble within the Elfrieden Kingdom.

In the manor of the important noble who was lord of that domain, twelve shadowy figures were holding a secret meeting in the darkness.

“What do the rest of you make of this summons?” one of them asked.

“Of all the nobles in the land, our fourteen families have been summoned. Most likely... the kingdom has caught on to us.”

“There have been reports of the black-robed one’s dogs sniffing around us, as well.”

“Then, the intent of this summons is...”

“...to make an example of the others, no doubt.”

“To make an example? It isn’t a trap?” one suggested in a hysterical voice.

Another laughed dryly. “Heh heh heh. Unlike the nobles who have engaged in corruption, we haven’t been caught doing anything. With no crime to condemn us for, that king and the black-robed one cannot bring us to justice.”

“I see... That is why he is making an example of the others.”

“Indeed,” one of them agreed. “To keep us in line by making us think, ‘Tomorrow, that could be me.’”

“Two of the three dukes have fallen, and those nobles who didn’t participate in the recent war have lost their influence. If he can just keep us quiet, there will be nothing left to stop that king.”

“Hmph... All as the king planned,” one of them said. “Or was it the black-robed one?”

“It doesn’t matter which of them it was. But, if we look at it from another

perspective, we can say that this was the best the king could do against us.”

“Heh heh heh, you are quite right,” another chuckled. He added, with a sneer, “That is why, for now, we must lay low. We must act in a way that will not anger that king, that will not give him reason to punish us. No, if anything, we must cooperate with what the king does.”

“It galls me to do it,” another one said irately.

“It’s no matter... I doubt it will take long,” the sneerer replied. “Once all obstacles have been removed, I am sure that king will rush forward with revolutionary policies at an even faster rate than he has been. Reform taken too quickly will breed resistance. We need only support those people from the shadows. The more of them he executes, the more that king will be seen as a tyrant, and that will only breed more resistance.”

The other men nodded, impressed by the man’s words.

“I see. He cannot keep at it for long, then.”

“Indeed. When the time comes, we will push the king from power and place someone more malleable on the throne.”

“When that is accomplished, we can take things back to how they were under King Albert’s reign.”

“The momentum is with that king for now. We mustn’t be caught in it. In order to wait it out, we must do as the king demands for now. But, in due time...”

The men laughed darkly.

Then one of the men raised a question. “What do we do about the houses of Jabana and Saracen? Haven’t the heads changed?”

“Leave them be. If they displease the king and can no longer maintain their houses, that is their concern, not something for us to get involved in.”

“Of course. Now, gentlemen, I ask you to all follow the plan we just agreed on.”

“Yes. To take back our era.”

“““To take back our era.”””

However, they had not realized that there was a watcher in the darkness.



It was a sunny afternoon. I was helping Souma with his administrative work again today.

“Okay, Liscia,” Souma said. “Hand these papers to Hakuya for me.”

“Got it.”

Taking the papers from Souma, I went to leave the office, when...

“Liscia!” Souma called out to me.

Wondering what it could be, I turned around. Souma seemed to be trying to say something, but it wasn’t coming out. He either was trying to tell me something and couldn’t find the words, or kept opening his mouth to say something and then hesitating.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Ah...! No, um... it’s nothing.”

“Okay... Well, I’ll get going then.”

I left Souma and headed out from the governmental affairs office. When I closed the door, I sighed despite myself.

Souma probably felt obliged to say something to me because of what happened with Duke Carmine.

Geez... It’s not something Souma should feel responsible for...

Even when I’d been told Duke Carmine had committed suicide in the dungeon, I hadn’t lost my composure. That man I had respected like a father and a teacher was dead, yet I felt strangely calm. That surprised me.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t sad. Actually, I felt like my heart had been torn apart. But, still, I was able to act like my usual self. That was surely... because I’d had something like a premonition that it would turn out like this. That the Duke Carmine I knew would chose the path of ruin, taking all of the darkness that has

infested this country with him. And that Souma would accept his determination to do so.

Georg Carmine and Souma Kazuya.

Georg Carmine was a great man who I held in high esteem. He was strong and noble, a warrior who epitomized everything I should aspire to be. I respected him, and I thought I wanted to be like him.

And, as for Souma... he was the man I had decided, of my own will, to support.

I had lived a life largely detached from love and romance, so I wasn't sure what it was that I was feeling for Souma. Being a member of the royal house, I'd never held any great hopes for what my marriage would be like.

But when I'd seen Aisha's beaming smile when she became his second fiancée, or Juna's smile when he told her, "I swear, I will take you (as my wife)," I had felt just a little pain in my chest.

...I knew now. This was probably that sort of feeling. I felt strongly enough about Souma to be having those sorts of emotions.

This was something that two men who were important to me had decided on. Even if it was sad, if it was painful, I had to accept it or I would be making a mockery of their resolve. I chose to believe in their decision.

That was why, when I heard about Duke Carmine's death, I didn't take out my frustrations on Souma.

Duke Carmine wouldn't have wanted to hurt our relationship. That was why, if I stayed right there at Souma's side, like normal, that would be paying my respects to Duke Carmine. That was how I felt.

I would continue to believe in Souma. No matter what decision he made, I would accept it and stand by him.

Today was the day of judgment for Duke Vargas and Carla. As her friend, my desire to spare Carla remained unchanged, but no matter what decision Souma came to, I was prepared to accept it. No matter what tragic conclusion it might lead to.

And yet...

Hey, Souma, I thought. Why do you have such a pained look on your face?

A strange atmosphere had fallen over the great hall in Parnam Castle.

This was the place where Castor and Carla's sentence was about to be handed down.

In response to the pleas of Duchess Walter, who had contributed greatly to the recent war effort, Souma had taken the right to judge them from the courts, and would be doing so personally. It was no praiseworthy act for a king to insert himself in the affairs of the courts, but Duchess Walter had gone so far as to return all other rewards for her service in order to make the request, so he had been able to force it through.

Now, Souma could judge the two of them personally.

People were positioned more or less where they would be in the audience hall.

Souma was seated higher than the rest, using a chair that, while not the throne, was still fairly impressive, with Aisha and me flanking him on either side. Aisha's position as bodyguard was no longer diagonally behind him, but directly beside him, a change made to reflect her new status as a candidate to become a queen. That inevitably meant that she was in the center of everyone's attention, so Aisha seemed tense.

Looking down at the floor there was the former General of the Air Force, Castor Vargas, and his daughter, Carla, both kneeling with their hands bound behind their backs. They both, perhaps because they had resolved themselves to accept their fate at this point, were sitting up straight.

Between them stood Prime Minister Hakuya and Duchess Walter, facing one another. Hakuya's role was to call for them to be prosecuted for their crimes, while Duchess Walter was to defend Castor and Carla. In a normal trial, the prosecutor and the defense argue over whether a crime has been committed, but on this occasion the two's crimes were already known.

Because of that, Hakuya's job was to seek punishment for their crimes, while

Excel's job was to defend their actions and seek a more lenient punishment. If her defense was successful, their punishment would be lightened, and if she failed, they would face the punishment Hakuya was seeking. Therefore, there could be no finding of innocence.

Also, to observe this trial, there was a long table facing sideways with fourteen nobles seated in a single row. Souma had told me he would seek their opinions during the trial.

I had been told their selection was random, but... was it really? The nobles seemed to be whispering to one another.

No matter what's in store, I won't be surprised, I thought. This is a trial that was thought up by Souma, after all.

While there hadn't been many cases of the king taking the right to judge from the courts, it had happened before on occasion. However, in those cases, normally the king gave a verdict which could not be contested. This format, where the king held a trial where he would be the judge, was unheard of. It was a form of trial with no precedent. I couldn't predict anything that might happen.



“Now then, let us carry out the trial of Castor and Carla,” Souma declared in a quiet voice.

Hakuya read out the crimes of which they were accused. “Former General of the Air Force Castor Vargas and his daughter, despite the lawful transfer of the throne to His Majesty, resisted his authority and even rejected his ultimatum, turning their swords against the Forbidden Army. The crime of treason applies in this case. Therefore, I believe it is appropriate that their land and assets be seized and they be subject to the death penalty.”

I had expected this. Hakuya was pushing for the death penalty for both of them.

...Of course he was. Treason was a serious enough crime that it carried a death penalty for all relatives of up to three degrees of consanguinity.

The number of people affected was being kept to an absolute minimum because Duke Vargas had heeded Duchess Walter’s advice and formally cut ties with his family. Furthermore, in recognition of Duchess Walter’s distinguished service in the war, it had been decided that Carla’s young brother Carl, who had been disowned and left in the care of the House of Walter, would inherit the House of Vargas with just Red Dragon City and the area around it as his fief. Excel’s daughter, who was also Carla and Carl’s mother, would serve as his advisor.

When Hakuya finished presenting the punishment he sought, it was Excel’s turn to defend the two and request a lesser punishment.

In prior deliberations, Duchess Walter’s offer to “offer my head in exchange for their two lives, or turn over all of the Walter Duchy with the exception of Lagoon City” had already been rejected. Taking her head was out of the question, and if he destroyed all three duchies, it would put the rest of the nobles on guard against Souma.

“It was foolish for Castor and Carla to rebel against Your Majesty,” said Excel. “However, they most certainly did not do it in an attempt to usurp your position. It was their loyalty to the former king, Sir Albert, and friendship with the General of the Army, Georg Carmine, that led them astray. Of course, the throne had been formally ceded to you by Sir Albert, and it is unthinkable that

any of your vassals should have doubts about that.

“However, the sudden change of rulers threw not only Castor but many other people into confusion. Carla only followed Castor as his daughter. Neither of the pair had any ambitions of their own. Fortunately, there were no casualties among their subjects or the Forbidden Army during the battle at Red Dragon City. Can you not spare them their lives, if nothing else?”

Bowing, Duchess Walter sought to reduce the severity of their crimes.

Souma just sat there listening to her speak.

He was so expressionless that it was impossible to read from his face what he might be thinking. I think, probably, he was suppressing his emotions so they wouldn't show.

Having heard the arguments of both the prosecution and the defense, Souma opened his mouth. “Castor. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“No,” Duke Vargas said firmly. “There is no need for a defeated commander to speak. Please, part this head from my shoulders.”

“...I see.”

“There's just one thing,” said Duke Vargas. “I'm the one who started the war. Carla only followed orders. I'll take her punishment, as well. I don't care if you torture me, or humiliate me in public. But, please, can't you spare Carla's life?”

While still bound, Duke Vargas bowed so that his head nearly touched the ground.

Seeing her prideful father do that, Carla's eyes opened wide in surprise. “Father!”

However, Souma let out a sigh, his expression remaining impassive. “I've heard that the one leading the Air Force in that battle was Carla. I can't let that crime go unpunished, can I? You must have known this might happen when you raised the flag of rebellion.”

“Urgh...” Duke Vargas bit his lip. However, he said no more.

This time, Souma looked at Carla. “Carla. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“...I do not.” Carla shook her head weakly.

“Is that all? You have nothing else to say?”

“In that case, there is one thing. I apologize for my lack of wisdom. Lic... The princess tried to mediate between us, but we still stubbornly refused to listen.” With those words, Carla hung her head.

While Carla had been in prison, she’d said she didn’t want to become a burden by having us intercede on her behalf. She probably felt the same way now.

“You won’t beg for forgiveness?” Souma asked.

“I will not. Judge me as you see fit.”

“...I see.”

Souma looked away from the two of them, then said to the nobles seated in the rear, “Now, I would like to hear from those of you gathered here. These people have, in their thoughtlessness, raised the flag of rebellion against me, the current king. What do you think is the appropriate judgment for these fools? I would very much like to hear your unreserved opinions.”

Souma said that with a look that, even to my eyes, seemed a little frightening. For a moment, something seemed off to me. The way he said it, it was as if he had already made up his mind. Though he said he wanted to hear their opinions, it was as if he was saying, *“I can’t imagine any of you would dare object to executing these traitors, would you?”* in order to intimidate them. It was as if he was acting to constrain the nobles watching the trial...

Normally, Souma would listen to any opinion, implementing it if he felt it was right, but what he was doing now was the exact opposite of that.

When I considered that and looked at the nobles, they were all from houses with dark rumors swirling around them or houses that had repeatedly declined to get involved when there was a crisis. Could it be that Souma meant to use Carla and her father to make an example and force these people to swear loyalty to him?

He was showing off his power and saying, *“If you don’t want this to happen to*

you, then obey me.” That was the impression I got.

Then, one of the nobles stood and raised his voice. “Your Majesty! When you say it like that, you make it seem as if their crime is already decided!”

The speaker was a young man with a masculine face. He was maybe around the same age as Halbert. But he didn’t have the same roughness as Halbert. He seemed to be a serious, good-natured young man.

“Who is that person?” Souma asked.

“That is the head of the House of Saracen, Piltory Saracen,” Hakuya said.

Piltory said, “I understand this to be a place to determine the weight of their crime. If you do this, forcing your will on the rest of us, then this trial has no purpose!”

“Ga ha ha! Well said, young Saracen!” another of the nobles said, rising to his feet. With his ash gray hair combed back, and a thick beard the same color as his hair, he was a big, muscular man just starting to show the signs of old age.

Hakuya narrowed his eyes, calling out that person’s name. “The head of the House of Jabana, Sir Owen Jabana.”

“O Black-robed Prime Minister,” the man responded. “Duke Vargas over there has defended this country for over a hundred years, which is longer than I’ve been alive. He may lack maturity, but I doubt his feelings towards this country have changed. He rose against His Majesty not out of personal greed, but because he was prepared to die for his friendship with Georg Carmine.”

“You suggest his treason couldn’t be helped because it was done in the name of friendship?” Hakuya glared at him.

“No, no,” Owen said, shaking his head. “That’s not what I’m saying. The throne had formally been passed to His Majesty King Souma, so I can only say that Duke Vargas acted rashly. It’s not a crime that can be pardoned. However, Duke Vargas has already been stripped of his position, his fame, his lands, and his assets. Is it not, perhaps, a little much to now take both his and his daughter’s lives on top of all that?”

“‘Forgive the traitor’ —is that what you are saying?”

“Old as I am, I think it would be regrettable not to,” Owen said. “Duke Vargas is a person who could command troops for another two, three hundred years. Is there anyone in this country who could lead the Air Force as well as he?”

Perhaps emboldened by Owen’s words, Piltory began to argue forcefully once more. “Sire! You yourself said, ‘If you have a gift, I will put it to use,’ didn’t you?! Are you going to lose a rare gift like his?! I cannot believe that Duke Vargas, a man who bared his fangs against you because he trusted in his friend, is somehow inferior to us nobles who opportunistically refused to take a side! I beseech you, do as Duchess Walter has said and lighten his sentence!”

Having listened to their words, Souma closed his eyes for a moment, and then... gave the order.

“...Take them away.”

In an instant, soldiers surrounded the two and removed them from the hall. Owen quietly obeyed the soldiers with a disappointed expression, while in contrast, Piltory continued to cry, “Sire! Please, reconsider!” even as he was being escorted out.

Once they were taken away, an unpleasant silence fell over the hall. Everyone held their breath, unable to say anything until Souma broke the silence.

“Are there any other opinions?”

The other nobles’ opinions were all some variant of “Sentence both of them to death.”

“The law is the law.”

“If you let this pass, it sets a poor example to your other vassals.”

“Any fool who would oppose Your Majesty can be of no use.”

...And it went on like that. While what they were saying sounded reasonable, it was clear they were thinking, “We don’t want to displease the king like those two.”

...

I... was having a hard time understanding it. True, the nobles who had remained feared Souma, and they would have a hard time plotting against him.

However, when I compared the two who'd been expelled with the twelve who remained, I had to question which group would really of more benefit to Souma and to the country.

...No. Don't doubt him. I decided to believe in Souma, didn't I?

I pinched my thighs. As I desperately tried to suppress my internal conflict, I heard Souma whisper, "This is something... that has to be done."

Souma?

"I understand your positions." Souma stood and raised his right hand up high.

When they saw that gesture, Duchess Walter's eyes went wide, the nobles held their breath, and Castor and Carla lowered their heads in resignation.

Souma swung his hand down as he gave a short order. "Do it."

In the next instant, there was the sound of a blade slicing through the air and a splash of blood. And then...

...twelve heads fell to the ground.



The book I referred back to when deciding how I should act as king was *The Prince*.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* was called "the devil's book," and for hundreds of years after it was released, it was attacked by the Christian church. The parts most often singled out were, "Chapter VIII - Concerning Those Who Have Obtained a Principality by Wickedness" and "Chapter XVII - Concerning Cruelty and Clemency, and Whether it is Better to be Loved Than Feared."

Chapter VIII had as its theme "even though a good, upstanding ruler can lose his country, one who seized his state through vile and treacherous means may, thereafter, live out the rest of his life in peace, without facing rebellion from his people." In it, Machiavelli said, "I believe that this follows from cruelties being badly or properly used."

Also, in Chapter XVII, he reasoned that men are self-serving creatures, and if asked to harm one of two people, they would chose to harm a person they love

over a person they fear. This meant “it is much safer to be feared than to be loved.”

He also said, “When a prince is with his army, it is quite necessary for him to disregard the reputation of cruelty,” noting, “Hannibal of Carthage faced no dissension among his troops or against himself, whether in victory or in defeat. This arose from nothing else than his inhuman cruelty.”

The Christian church, which preached love, attacked these portions, saying, “What is the meaning of this? Recommending that princes, who should rule through virtue, engage in acts of cruelty!” It angered them, and *The Prince* was banned.

Then, partially because of its established reputation as the devil’s book, its content wasn’t closely considered, with extreme statements being given the most focus. It got to the point where misreadings like, “*The Prince* approves of the use of cruelty,” or, “*The Prince* says to massacre all who oppose you,” went unchallenged. It also saw occasional calls to reevaluate this tendency.

However, what I want to say firmly is: *Machiavelli did not go into extensive detail about cruelties.*

In Chapter VIII, he did say, “An usurper ought to examine closely into all those cruelties which it is necessary for him to inflict, and to do them all at one stroke so as not to have to repeat them.” But when it comes to the content, he only listed historical examples, and at no point did Machiavelli himself say, “Do it like this!”

It was the same in Chapter XVII. He credited Hannibal’s wonderful deeds to his inhuman cruelty, but he didn’t elaborate on what cruelty was. Now, what were these cruelties that Machiavelli said were to be done all at once, or the cruelty that was the burden a prince must bear?

First, Machiavelli said in Chapter XVII that, “A prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that he avoids hatred,” and noted that, to avoid being hated, “He must abstain from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women.” Then, in the same section, he said, “When it is necessary to proceed against the life of someone, he must do it on proper justification and for manifest cause.”

This could be reworded, “Even if a prince has just cause, he shouldn’t lay a hand on his subject’s land, assets, or women, and killing is only permissible with proper cause. (Which is to say, killing without a proper cause is not permissible.)”

In other words, when Machiavelli spoke of “the use of cruelties,” he limited it to “the killing of those for whom you have just cause.” Therefore, how far can those justifiable killings be permitted? Was he saying, as the church condemned him for, that you should “kill all of your enemies”?

I am well aware that opinions are divided on that point, but I believe the answer is “No.”

That is because, in Chapter XX of *The Prince*, Machiavelli himself said this:

“Princes, especially new ones, have found more fidelity and assistance in those men who in the beginning of their rule were distrusted than among those who in the beginning were trusted.”

With those who may have been hostile at first, if they came to need assistance to support themselves, they could be won over with ease. Once they had been won over, they would work desperately to dispel the bad impression they had left, and so they were much more useful than those who, having not opposed the new prince at first, lived in security.

For an example in Japanese history, the fierce general who had served under Nobunaga Oda, Katsuie Shibata, should serve as an easy-to-understand example.

When Nobunaga’s younger brother rebelled against him, Katsuie sided with the younger brother at first, but later surrendered and became his vassal. From there, Katsuie rendered distinguished service under Nobunaga and became his chief retainer. However, if his efforts had been deemed insufficient, he might have been banished like Hidesada Hayashi, who had surrendered with him. That must have been part of the reason Katsuie worked with such desperation.

Now, getting back on topic, what Machiavelli meant when he spoke of “cruelty” wasn’t “Make sure you kill all who oppose you,” or anything like that.

Therefore, what exactly did he mean?

To answer that, we must look to the historical examples Machiavelli used of “cruelties being used well.”

When Syracuse was attacked by the Carthaginians, Agathocles deceived and killed the senators and people of influence, and then, once he had solidified his own power, he fended off the Carthaginian attack.

In order to seize the rule of his hometown of Fermo, Oliverotto deceived and killed his uncle who was his patron along with the citizens of influence, then held Fermo for a mere one year.

As for the man Machiavelli held up as his ideal prince, Cesare Borgia, he murdered those he had reconciled with and solidified his power. Among those he killed was the aforementioned Oliverotto.

Machiavelli approved of these actions. And what we can see from these examples is that *the target of cruelties was allies within your own camp*.

The senators, who might have been allies as members of the same camp, but would have got in the way of one’s policies.

The father who stood in the way of one becoming a prince.

And finally, the ones who had reconciled and become one’s allies, but who could not be trusted not to turn on one again.

Those sorts of troublesome allies, or to put it more strongly, *potential enemies within one’s own camp*, were the target of Machiavelli’s cruelties.

The same can be said of the “cruelty” in Chapter XVII.

Hannibal was said to be feared by his men due to his inhuman cruelty, but if we are to judge the quality of that “cruelty,” by looking at the contrasting example he gives of Scipio, what he means begins to come into view. Scipio was a great general, but his men betrayed him, and the people under his rule rebelled against him. The reason was that his too-great forbearance kept him from punishing his followers when they engaged in abuses.

In short, Machiavelli was saying that Hannibal, who was Scipio’s opposite, was able to properly condemn his allies, which made him feared by those who

served under him, and regardless of whether he won or lost, they never betrayed him.

If we think of the target for Machiavelli's "proper use of cruelties" as being allies who might in future become enemies, along with his other assertion in *The Prince* that when neighboring states are at war, you should clearly state which side you are on, because if you attempt to remain neutral, you will generally fail, we can begin to see what Machiavelli's underlying thoughts were.

Basically...

"Don't trust opportunists who join whichever side is winning at the moment."

...That's about it.

Machiavelli had served as a diplomat in a time when Italy was rife with scheming and treachery.

He must have seen countless cases where things were brushed under the rug because someone didn't want to make a big deal of them, only to see the ones whose transgressions had been overlooked become a major source of trouble later. That was why he said that, even if it was deemed "cruel," the source of the illness needed to be cut out at its root.

That was why I had the twelve nobles decapitated.

More than ten men clad all in black stood behind the twelve beheaded nobles. Their faces were covered in black cloth, and they wore black clothing that resembled ninja outfits. In their hands they held bloody swords, making it plain to see that they were the ones who had decapitated the nobles.

The sudden intrusion and murder made everyone present gulp. My expression remained unchanged. Hakuya's did not change, either. We were the only ones.

"Huh?! Souma!" Liscia exclaimed.

"Sire! You knaves, who are you?!" Aisha cried.

Liscia and Aisha both drew their blades and stepped forth to protect me, but I just put a hand down on each of their shoulders.

“It’s okay. These are my *subordinates*.”

Liscia stumbled, “Your subordinates... Huh...?”

While Liscia was still looking bewildered, one of the men in black approached. While the other men all wore nondescript black clothing, this one alone wore black lacquered armor. He stood nearly two meters tall, with a muscular build that was apparent even through his armor. From his neck down, he looked like some sort of dark knight, but his face was covered with a black tiger mask. The man in the black tiger mask knelt before me, bowing his head. “Master. The mission is complete.”

The man in the black tiger mask had a low voice that suited his appearance.

Liscia inhaled in surprise. “That voi... Ow!”

Liscia started to say something, but I gripped her shoulder tighter. Liscia looked at me with surprise, but when I shook my head... it seemed she figured out what was going on. She quietly sheathed her sword.

When I looked over to Excel, she seemed to have grasped the general situation, too. There was a slight anger not quite hidden in her smile.

“*I am going to insist... on a proper explanation for all this later,*” she seemed to be silently saying. When a beauty like her got angry, it was an incredible sight to behold.

I felt a chill run down my spine as I tapped Aisha, who still hadn’t relaxed her guard, on the shoulder. “Aisha, you put your sword away, too.”

“B-But...”

“His name is Kagetora—‘shadow tiger.’ He is the leader of the intelligence agency, the Black Cats, who report directly to me.”

When I said that, the agents of the Black Cats held up their swords in front of themselves in unison.

I had been caught out by the Empire’s secret service in Van, the capital of Amidonia, so I had recently organized this unit under my direct command to focus on intelligence operations.

To be more precise, I had greatly increased the number of agents Hakuya

already had, refined their skills, brought on Kagetora with his superb abilities as a commander to lead them, and then reorganized them into a unit under my direct command.



They were a unit with many mysteries. The identities of the members were unknown. It was also unclear why, though the unit had only formally been organized the other day, they could act in such unison.

The greatest mystery was Kagetora's identity. The way he commanded his unit as if they were his own arms and legs... it was almost like he were a veteran general of some sort, but was there anyone like that in this country?

Just who could he possibly be? No one knew his true identity.

"...Hey, Souma," Liscia said slowly. "Is Kagetora..."

"No one knows his true identity. Got it?"

"Ah, right..."

Liscia looked like she didn't know what to say, but she nodded. I immediately gave an order to Kagetora and the Black Cats.

"Once the nobles' bodies have been disposed of, contact the units from the Forbidden Army lying in wait around their mansions. They are to charge in and secure evidence. If there is any resistance, suppress it."

"By your will," said Kagetora.

The Black Cats began to clean up the bodies, immediately departing.

Kagetora looked to Liscia one last time, then left the great hall. Once they had left, Liscia gave me a slightly harsh look.

"...You're going to explain all this for me, right?" she demanded.

"I know," I said. "But I'm not sure where to begin..."

"Maybe you want to start with why you killed the nobles."

"Well, yeah, that would be your first question..." I said.

I began to slowly explain my reasons for this murder.

"Now, as for the reason those twelve had to die, they were also connected to Amidonia," I said. "That's something that both Hakuya and Georg had confirmed through their independent investigations."

“They were spies for Amidonia, you mean?” Liscia asked.

I shook my head. “That’s not quite accurate. I said ‘also,’ didn’t I? They were connected to Amidonia, to the corrupted nobles, and also to our side.”

“Huh? What do you mean by...”

“They were opportunists,” I said. “They side with whoever’s winning.”

Those nobles had always cooperated with whoever was on the winning side, in order to avoid trouble themselves.

When the kingdom had been in decline, they’d had underground connections to the Principality of Amidonia. When the civil war had broken out, they’d supported the corrupt nobles from the shadows, while remaining uninvolved themselves. They had always fomented discontent while securing their own safety like that. Only thinking of their own profit and self-preservation.

“They profited by providing supplies and personnel with resistance groups, and if the winning side shifted, they’d crush their current allies to win acclaim for themselves,” I said. “If suspicion turned on them, they would foment rebellion elsewhere, so as to keep the investigation from catching up with them. It seems they did it again and again under your father’s reign.”

Having learned what was going on behind the scenes during her father’s reign, Liscia was at a loss for words. “No...”

“Now, what made them dangerous was that they never directly rebelled themselves,” I said. “When the advantage was on our side, they acted almost like loyal vassals, so it was hard to bring them to justice. That’s because when things were going our way, they actually did their jobs.

“The more confident a ruler is in his ability to maintain power, the more forbearance he has, the more he wants to trust his vassals, the more he will fall into a trap like that. ‘If I can build a stable administration, it should be fine. There’s no need to reduce the number of allies I have,’ he’d think.”

“But... you had them killed, right?” Liscia asked.

“That’s because I don’t see my rule ever being stable,” I said. “In fact, I think someday I may be forced to stand at the crossroads of fate. When that time

comes, I guarantee you that those opportunists would have hurt me. I don't want you, or Aisha, or Juna, or any of the people I care about to get hurt, and then think, 'If only I had disposed of them back then.' If that ever happened, I'd probably go crazy. That's why, here and now, I decided to nip it in the bud."

In Machiavelli's *The Prince*, he said this: "I hold it to be true that Fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less."

In this world, a person's rise or fall will be decided by whether their actions are suited to the era in which they live. However, that can only be judged by those who come later. Nobunaga Oda, Napoleon... Even if they are geniuses in their time, once the times no longer suit them, they will be destroyed.

Machiavelli had likened fortune to a raging river.

He said that, though the sudden change of fortune cannot be stopped, if one prepares for that change in advance, its flow can be made less unrestrained and dangerous.

The important thing was to not be optimistic about one's situation, but to be resolute and do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

In regards to this, Machiavelli said, "Fortune is a woman, and if you wish to keep her under it is necessary to beat and ill-use her," a way of putting it that would upset any feminist who heard it. Setting aside his choice of words, in order to ensure that the roots of calamity didn't remain, I had given the order to strike down twelve nobles here.

When she heard my explanation, Liscia slowly nodded. "I understand your reasoning, Souma. What will you do with the Houses of Saracen and Jabana, the ones you had leave?"

"Allow me to explain that," Hakuya said, stepping forward. "The Houses of Saracen and Jabana had worked alongside the other twelve under their former heads, but that connection between them was broken with their deaths. The present head of the House of Saracen, Sir Piltory, is a fine young man who excels with both the pen and sword, while the head of House Jabana, Sir Owen, is a sober and honest hotblooded man. They can be counted on to serve His Majesty without duplicity. I believe you could see that from the way they acted

while being led out of the great hall.”

“...So you showed some discretion about who was to be executed, then,” Liscia said.

“That is correct.” Hakuya nodded. “The ones executed were all up to something-or-another. Now we are investigating their mansions in the capital, collecting evidence of what that was for each of them. The punishment for the crime and the finding of evidence are in the wrong order, which is hardly praiseworthy, but I ask you to understand.”

With that said, Hakuya bowed his head.

He was probably trying to back me up. By telling her I hadn’t murdered twelve people on my suspicion alone, he was trying to keep it from doing anything strange to my relationship with Liscia.

Liscia seemed to understand that, too, so she didn’t press the issue any further. “Okay, I understand the twelve, but what if the other two had agreed with you, Souma? Would you have killed them, too?”

Hakuya shook his head. “In that event, the plan was for me to provoke them. Though, if they had attempted to curry favor with His Majesty like the other twelve houses, we would have had little use for them after this.”

“You’d thought it through that far...” Liscia looked at me, scandalized.

No, this sort of plan that involved reading the vagaries of people’s hearts is Hakuya’s department, I thought. I don’t have that nasty a personality... I think.

Seeing me avert my eyes, Liscia let out a sigh of resignation. “So, what happens to Carla and her father now?”

“...I’m getting to that.” I walked over to stand in front of the bound Castor. Having seen everything that had just unfolded, he looked dumbfounded. The blade he’d expected to fall on his own neck had fallen on another’s. It was little wonder he was so bewildered.

“Castor Vargas,” I said. “Because you refused to heed my ultimatum, you are guilty of treason.”

Castor bowed his head. “...I understand.”

Then he bowed his head even lower than before, grinding his forehead against the floor this time. “That’s why, I beg you. The crime is mine alone. So, please, spare just Carla.”

“You are not the one who decides that,” I said coldly. “This is your judgment. Your crime of treason is plain to see. ...However, as both Piltory and Owen said earlier, I will recognize your contribution to this country in the more than one hundred years you have protected it. I have already taken your post, your lands, your assets, and even your family name from you. Therefore, I will spare you your life, and that alone.”

I turned to Excel, who was silently watching to see how things developed.

“Castor will be left in your custody. However, he is forbidden from entering the former Duchy of Vargas, and also forbidden from contacting his son Carl, or the boy’s mother, Accela. Excel, your son-in-law is the one who did all this, so you must keep a proper watch on him.”

“Ah! ...Yes. It will be as you command.” There were tears forming in Excel’s eyes as she gave me a proper bow.

When she raised her face, I saw her mouth the words “Thank you,” to me. I showed no reaction, moving on to Carla.

Even though her father had been spared, Carla still wore a quiet expression.

“Carla,” I said, “you are guilty of the same crime. What’s more, you don’t have Castor’s distinguished record of having protected the country for one hundred years. I’m sad to say it, but I don’t see any way I could lessen your punishment.”

“...I understand,” she said quietly.

“W-Wait! Then kill me!” Castor exclaimed, grinding his face against the floor in desperation. “Carla turned her blade on you at my orders! So let my record be used for Carla...”

“Take him away.”

My attendants dragged him from the room. He kept screaming “I’ll take her place!” until he was out of the room, but I was under no obligation to listen to him.

Once things had quieted down, I continued. “You have clearly committed the crime of treason. However, if I let the mastermind, Castor, live, it would reflect poorly on me to kill his daughter. Therefore, I will spare your life, but you will live as a slave. Your owners will be the royal family—that is to say, Liscia and myself.”

The second most heavy punishment in this world was forced labor as a convict slave. There was no such thing as life imprisonment. Those who became convict slaves, unless they were granted an amnesty, would be forced to do endless hard labor in the coal mines. Though, in Carla’s case, because I had chosen to give ownership of her to the royal family, she would be spared the coal mines and kept in the royal house as a servant who had to be absolutely submissive.

“...Okay.” Carla accepted my order, nodding weakly.

Excel was about to say something, but she held it in. She must have decided it was better than her being killed, at least. Hakuya closed his eyes in silence, while Aisha was flustered by the atmosphere in the room. And finally, Liscia watched what I would do in silence, her expression unchanging.

“I will give you further directions later, but, for now, I have an order to give you,” I said.

“...As you wish.”

I walked over to Carla, who was hanging her head, crouched down and whispered *a certain order*, quietly, so that only she could hear. Carla’s eyes went wide.



When Souma quietly whispered the order, I doubted my own ears.

“If it comes to it, kill me.”

When he saw my eyes widen in surprise, Souma looked at me with a serious look on his face. “Not now, of course. If I become a tyrant, I want you to be the one to stop me. With your martial ability, you could kill me easily, right?”

Kill him if he becomes a tyrant...?! Why would he suddenly say that to me?!

I kept my voice low, asking him, “Why would you say that? And why to me, of all people?!”

“Because Liscia and the others might not be able to,” Souma whispered, a troubled smile on his face. “At some point, I found myself surrounded by many people I care about. Just recently, I got engaged to another person on top of Liscia. It’s Aisha, over there.”

He got engaged to that dark elf without me hearing about it? I thought, stunned. Has Liscia accepted it? Well, knowing her personality, she’s probably being pragmatic about it...

“Well... Congratulations?” I whispered.

“Thanks,” he whispered back. “So you see, I have more and more people I care about. In itself, that’s a good thing, but when I think of what would happen if, someday, I grew drunk on power and become a tyrant... it starts to scare me. If that came to pass, I worry whether Liscia and the others could stop me like they should, you know?”

“Liscia would stop you,” I whispered. “You know her straight-laced personality.”

“Would she?” he retorted, still whispering. “Sure, if I started indulging in too much debauchery, or started massacring the townspeople, she’d admonish me for it, but what about if I had a good justification, like I did this time? Individual purges aren’t that much of a problem on their own. But when they happen repeatedly, eventually you reach a point of no return. When it comes to that, will Liscia and the others be able to abandon me?”

That’s... No, probably not, I realized.

“It’s not my place to say it, but... Liscia is head over heels in love with you,” I whispered. “If you fall into hell, I’m sure she’ll be right there beside you.”

Liscia was too serious and too devoted a girl. Probably, no matter what happened, she would follow Souma loyally to the bitter end.

Souma nodded. “I know, right? Aisha’s sort of the same way. Do you think Juna would do it, maybe? Anyway, there are a lot of people who would try to suffer alongside me. I don’t want that. If there were a revolution in response to

my tyrannical rule, it wouldn't just be me who got executed, it would be Liscia and the rest, too. I don't want Liscia and the others to turn out like Marie Antoinette."

Marie... who?

While I still had a question mark hovering over my head, Souma whispered with a serious look, "That's why, Carla, before those I care about can suffer with me, I want you to take on the role of putting an end to me."

"...I'm a slave now," I whispered. "If I kill my master, the collar will kill me, you know?"

"Yeah," he whispered back. "So, please, only do it if you're prepared to die, too. And, if I manage to hand the crown on to the next generation, I will set you free."

This man... he says the most incredible things as if they were nothing. I was stunned.

Souma had told me, if he became a tyrant, to become the blade that struck him down. Then, having killed him, to die myself. By keeping me at his side as his slave, he was hoping to use me as a personal deterrent against his becoming a tyrant.

"You really... don't show any mercy," I whispered.

"I only hold back for those I care about," he whispered back.

"I meant towards yourself," I whispered. "Though I suppose the meaning still got through."

I had thought the same thing in the battle with Amidonia, but this man treated himself far too poorly. If he didn't take better care of himself, he was going to cause no end of worry for those around him.

Liscia, you've fallen for a real troublesome guy... I thought to myself.

That was right. In order to keep my best friend's love life from a sad future, I decided to act as his deterrent.

Sitting up straight, I bowed deeply. "I have received your order. Until the day comes that I must act on it, I will work my hardest for you, praying that that day

never comes.”

Souma nodded in satisfaction at my response. “At this moment, we have no work meant exclusively for a slave. For now, you will join the maid force... But... Well... Uh, get the details from the head maid yourself.”

When he gave me that order, he sounded a bit hesitant towards the end. I wondered what was up, so I followed Souma’s gaze to see a beautiful maid who seemed to be around twenty years old smiling happily.

When I wondered what it was about her, I realized Liscia was looking in my direction, an expression of utter pity on her face.

...Huh?



With the trial of Castor and my friend Carla over, Souma, Aisha, and I were returning to the governmental affairs office when suddenly, Souma stumbled in front of us.

“Souma!” I cried.

“Sire!” Aisha shouted.

When Aisha and I tried to support him, Souma put a hand on the wall. “I’m fine. Just stumbled a bit,” he said, motioning for us to stop with his free hand.

“But...” I said.

“It’s all right,” he said. “...I’d like to be alone for just a little while,”

Then he went into the governmental affairs office by himself.

From the glimpse I got of his face in profile, he looked pale and unwell. Left on our own out in the hallway, I struck up a conversation with Aisha, who had likewise been left behind and was standing there in a daze.

“He was his usual self just a moment ago,” I said. “What do you think happened to him all of a sudden?”

“I am not entirely sure myself,” said Aisha. “However...”

“However?”

“He looked like a soldier returning from his first battle,” she said, looking troubled. “Like one... who had just killed for the first time.”

“You mean he’s feeling bad over how he killed the twelve nobles?” I asked.

But Souma had done that because he’d believed it to be necessary, hadn’t he? If so, he had nothing to regret. Besides, Souma had experienced his first battle in the war with the Principality of Amidonia. He’d struck down Prince Gaius VIII of Amidonia, and he’d had the corrupt nobles executed after that. This wasn’t a first for him.

When I pointed that out, Aisha shook her head. “This is mere speculation on my part, but the time with Gaius was a case of ‘kill or be killed.’ The corrupt nobles had clearly manifested their intention to rebel against him. However, in the case of those twelve nobles, they were not immediately attempting to harm His Majesty. Even if he knows it would be harmful to leave them alive, he questions whether or not it was the right decision to kill them. In his heart, perhaps he can’t quite come to terms with it.”

Aisha looked worriedly at the door to the governmental affairs office.

He can’t come to terms with it... huh.

...Yeah. I thought Aisha’s interpretation of it was correct. I’d heard Souma had come from a peaceful world. There hadn’t been a war there in some time.

Because he had come from a world like that, Souma absolutely hated to have people die. But he wasn’t so unduly optimistic that he thought everything could be taken care of without sacrifices. That was why the policies Souma took were always focused around minimizing the sacrifice while maximizing the reward.

It was a natural frame of mind for the ruler of a nation. However, in Souma’s own heart, he wasn’t so insensitive that he could accept even those minimized sacrifices.

“Hey, Aisha,” I said. “What do you do to support a soldier like that?”

“Well... I have never been a part of the military, so I am no expert on these things... but I often hear it is best to *make them forget about it.*”

“Make them forget about it?” I repeated.

“I hear that their superior officers and the older soldiers will invite them out for wine and women to help them vent,” Aisha said. “It is the sort of thing that only time can heal, so they keep them from thinking about it too deeply and breaking down.”

Wine, or the other thing... huh, I thought to myself. In that case...



The trial had begun at noon. Now it was most definitely night time.

I lay alone in my bed, the governmental affairs office completely dark with all of the lights turned off.

There was a lot of work for me to do. But, just for today, I had asked Hakuya to let me shirk my duties. I just didn't have the will to do anything. Hakuya understood that. I wished I could just go to sleep. But, contrary to that hope, I was wide awake.

If I used my head just a little, that might help, so I decided to think through whether the execution was justified or not.

I thought that executing the twelve nobles had been correct, examining it in the long term. If I'd left them alive, and if anyone had been hurt by the seed of calamity they would sow, I was sure I would have regretted that. But, well, now I was desperately holding my chest, trying not to regret that I had killed them.

“All cruelties should be carried out in one stroke.”

“A prince need not concern himself over a reputation of cruelty.”

“In order to avoid destruction, it is better to choose to fight.”

“When the time of your demise comes, it is too late for regrets.”

I went over Machiavelli's ideas over and over again in my head. But all I was doing was looking for an excuse.

If I was going to regret something, I preferred to it be that I had chosen a path that didn't hurt those I cared most for. I thought I had convinced myself of that before making the decision, and I resented my own heart for still wavering

despite that.

While I was pondering, the door suddenly opened. I moved just my head to check, and Liscia and Aisha were standing there.

In rather provocative attire.

“Huh?!” I reacted in shock.

They were both wearing what looked like thin bathrobes that only went down to a little above the knee.

Maybe they weren't wearing anything underneath the robes, because the cleavage that poked out from where the collar met, as well as the bare thighs that stuck out from beneath, were captivating. In the light that came in from the hallway beyond the open door, their silhouettes were accentuated in a provocative way. It made Aisha's height and her shapely figure stand out all the more, while Liscia's well-balanced body was beautiful, too.

It was a little too much for me to take in all at once, and I stared for a while, entranced.

...Honestly, if I hadn't been feeling so down at the time, all reason would have likely gone out the window in an instant. However, in my current state of mind, it all seemed more like a bad joke.

“...What do you think you're doing?” I demanded.

My tone was so scary that I startled myself. No, that wasn't what I ought to have been saying, and I knew it. It was like I was taking my frustration out on them.

I kept my tone as calm as I could manage and corrected myself. “I believe I asked you two to give me some time to myself.”

“We can't leave you alone when you're like that, now can we?” Liscia paid my objections no heed as she came over and sat down on the edge of the bed where I was lying down.

Aisha also said “P-Pardon my intrusion,” and came around to the opposite side from Liscia before politely taking a seat.

Whether I turned my head left or right, there was a beautiful girl's bottom. I

could only cover my eyes with one arm, looking straight up. “What is this...? What do you two want...?”

“That’s, well... we want to help you forget, you could say...” Liscia said.

“Come again?” I asked incredulously.

“Anyway! You can do whatever you like with us!” Liscia burst out.

“I-It is my first time doing such a thing, so I am counting on you, Your Highness!” Aisha cried.

“You can do what you like with us”... “I am counting on you”... what are these two saying?!

“Listen... I’m not in the mood right now,” I said.

“Ohh, if only we’d had Madam Juna here with us,” Aisha said sounding disappointed.

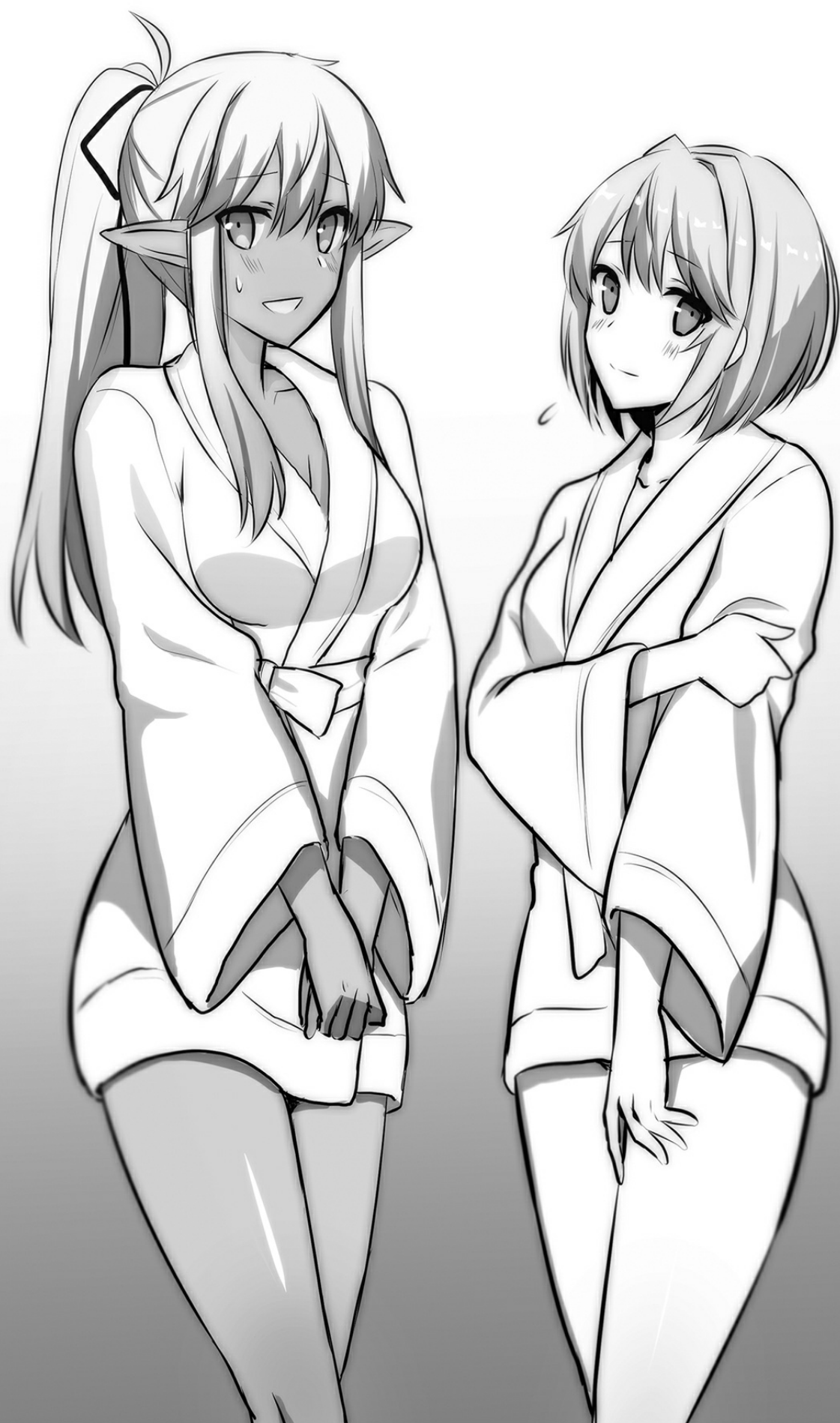
No, Juna’s busy going through the procedure to transfer here from the Navy right now, okay? I sighed... Oh, whatever. I’m sure they’re doing it because they’re concerned.

While I was thinking that, Liscia started fidgeting. “Um, Souma...”

“What?” I asked.

“It’s a bit chilly, so can we join you under the covers for now?”

She was shivering, huh... Well, it is almost winter, after all. They must be cold in those outfits.



Before I could say *It wouldn't be a problem if you had dressed properly to begin with*, the two hurried under the covers. It was a single bed, making it was a tight fit for three people. Inevitably, the two of them ended up pressed up against me. Close enough I could feel their hearts beating.

"Whew," Liscia said. "This is nice and warm, huh."

"Indeed," Aisha said. "I could fall asleep just like this."

"This is my room and office, though, you know..." I could only put on a wry smile in response to their comments. But, well... it really was warm.

My worries from before seemed to be melting away. That was how great the warmth of others was. Just by having someone there next to me, my heart felt lighter.

I could remind myself that I was protecting them. That I wanted to protect them.

"You two," I said.

"Hm?" Liscia said.

"What is it?" Aisha asked.

"Thanks."

When I said that, the two of them smiled, one on each side of me.

Then, perhaps because we were tired, the three of us soon drifted off to sleep.



Epilogue: Peace is Yet Distant

This place was the child care center that had been in the castle for a long time now. It was mostly a place where people who worked in the castle, such as the maids, left their children.

“King, play with uuuus!” one child yelled.

“King, let us ride on your shouldeeeers!”

I said nothing.

Sitting on the carpet, an adorable little wolf-eared boy of around three was playing with a human girl. Meanwhile, a cat-eared girl who was around the same age had occupied my lap and was rolling around on it. The cat tail that grew out of her rear end was swishing back and forth.

“Hmm, I can’t get up now, so just climb up on your own,” I said.

““Aye!”” the kids cried.

The two who had been fooling around together started climbing up my back. Yeah, they were pretty darn adorable. I had gotten used to them hanging over my shoulders and touching my face all over now.

“Hee hee. You really are popular with the children, Your Majesty.” The birth mother of my beloved little sister Tomoe, Tomoko, watched us with a smile as she folded the children’s laundry.

When we’d practically forced Tomoe to become my adopted little sister-in-law, we had also had Tomoko take up residence here to work at the nursery school. By the way, the little boy who was using his slobber-covered hand to touch my face right now was her eldest son (Tomoe’s real little brother), Rou.

“Big brother,” Tomoe said, “I’m happy that you’re playing with Rou and his friends, but are you sure its okay? Won’t Big Sister get mad at you again...?”

Tomoe, who stayed here to help her mother when she didn’t have to do work

negotiating with rhinosaurs, was busy soothing a baby. When I thought about it, Tomoe was still only ten years old. What a good, reliable kid she was.

"It's fine," I said. "I don't have a massive backlog of work to get through anymore. Besides, I've left my Living Poltergeists in the governmental affairs office to keep up with the work."

"Oh, I see," said Tomoe. "You can play the day away, then. Isn't that nice, Rou?"

"Aye!" Rou raised his hand up straight.

He's so cuuute.

I really liked kids. I could watch them toddling along with their little steps all day. It stimulated a protective urge inside me. When my grandma and grandpa had been alive, I'd helped out with book readings at the local preschool, after all.

After I had played with the children for some time...

"That's an incredible look for you, Master."

When I turned to see who had called out to me, Carla was standing there. In a maid outfit.

"No, I don't want to hear that from you, Carla," I said.

"...I suppose that's fair." Carla said, slumping her shoulders. Really, when I looked at her...

"It's terrifying how badly that maid uniform suits you."

"Please, don't tell me... I feel the same way."

Carla was a dragonewt to begin with, so she already came with more accessories than your average person. She had a tail, dragon wings, and little horns. If you made her wear a maid uniform on top of that, it was too many character traits piled onto one person, and she beamed with too much personality.

"To top it off, isn't the skirt on that maid outfit awfully short?" I asked.

"D-Don't look," Carla said, holding down the front of her skirt.

The maids in the castle wore classical maid outfits with long skirts, but with the one Carla was wearing right now, it looked more fit for working the floor of a maid cafe. The skirt only went down to just above her knees, and it was an airy dress type maid outfit. It made her figure stand out all the more.

“Urgh... the head maid... said to wear this one...” Carla muttered, flustered.

“Ahh. I thought it might be Serina’s handiwork.”

The head maid, Serina, was a talented maid, but she did have a sadistic side reserved for cute girls like this. Apparently she enjoyed making them wear embarrassing outfits, then watching the girls go through the shame and agony of it.

What was more, the stronger-willed a girl was, the more she enjoyed “buwwying” them, which meant Liscia and Carla were right in the middle of her strike zone. Liscia had told me stories with a distant look in her eyes.

Buddha save both of them.

“But, still... Has it been a week since then?” I asked. “Is your training period as a maid done now?”

“T-Training... Urkh... Ah...” Carla clutched her head.

No, seriously, what happened to you? I wondered. *Weren’t you just trained in the basic skills you’ll need as part of the maid force?*

“The... The whip...”

“Whip?!”

“She used the whip... to hit me...”

“It was that hard?!”

“What’s more, it was a special one, with a magic spell on it,” said Carla. “It wouldn’t leave a mark where she hit me... But. It struck half with pain and half with pleasure.”

What’s with that whip?! That’s not for disciplining, it’s for breaking them in, isn’t it?

“According to the head maid, ‘The pain keeps you from giving in to the

pleasure, while the pleasure keeps you from bearing the pain by tickling your ribs.' While I may have fallen to become a slave and a maid, I won't let myself be reduced to being useless, so I was determined to learn my job properly, but... that whip scares me. Maybe it would be easier if I could have given into the pleasure..."

"That is because the maid force are the master's dogs," a voice said pleasantly. "We have no use for a perverted sow."



“Eek?!” Carla shrieked.

When she turned around, Serina was standing there with a glossy smile. Given that she’d just made Carla, who had fearlessly plunged into the battlefield, shriek like that... just how scary was she?

“Is something the matter, sire?” Serina asked.

“...No, it’s nothing.”

Sorry, but as long as she doesn’t have her sights on me, I’m going to play ignorant, I thought. It’ll be fine, Carla. I’m sure you won’t die. ...Physically, at least. Emotionally, I’m not so sure.

“Now then, Carla,” Serina beamed. “I believe I asked you to make His Majesty’s bed in the governmental affairs office, did I not?”

“No, um... Collecting the sheets of a man I’m closely acquainted with was embarrassing, so I...”

“What are you talking about?” Serina demanded. “If you call yourself a maid, eventually His Majesty and the princess will [censored], and you have to make the bed where they [censored] and [censored] while it’s all [censored], while keeping a straight face.”

“I-I really hope you’ll spare me from that, at least?!” Carla said with her face turning a bright shade of red...

Wait, huh? Aren’t Liscia and I being indirectly embarrassed here, too? I was feeling really awkward right now.

On top of that, Tomoe asked her mother, “What is [censored]?” and left her struggling to answer.

Don’t say things in front of a child that are going to affect their emotional development...

As I was thinking that, Serina tilted her head to the side questioningly. “Incidentally, sire. Are you going to be okay, sire?”

“Huh?”

“No, it’s just that I see someone running this way from behind you, sire.”

Serina smiled.

When Serina said that with a smile, I turned around to see...

“Oh, crap!”

I got Rou down off of my back, then hurriedly tried to run away, but... I was grabbed firmly by the collar.

“Gwah!” I yelped.

“Gahaha! I’ve been looking for you, Your Majestyyyy!”

When I turned around, a muscular man who was just starting to show the signs of old age, with his gray hair combed back and a beard in the same color, was standing there with an overbearing smile.

When I had judged Castor and Carla, he was one of the two who had not been intimidated by me and continued to defend them. It was the head of the House of Jabana, Owen Jabana.

After the trial, I had hired him on as my personal educator and advisor (and martial arts trainer). I’ll talk more about that one in a parenthetical later.

Oh, by the way, as for the other person who had defended the two of them, Piltory Saracen of the House of Saracen, when I’d explained the evil deeds of the former head of the house (his father), he had said, “My word... I can’t believe that my father did such things. I can offer you no proper apology. Knowing what I do now, I am prepared to serve you to the bitter end, sire. I will go through any peril for you.”

He seemed to be thinking in the way you might expect from a serious young man of the nobility, so I gave him the very dangerous mission he was looking for. The mission of “Special Ambassador in the Elfrieden Kingdom Embassy to be established in the Gran Chaos Empire.” We were in an experimental phase still, so there was no telling how far extraterritoriality would protect him.

Now, back to Owen.

Owen was the type who could vociferously speak the truth to those above him.

By his own account, “These old bones have nothing to lose. I’m going to live

out what little is left of my life being true to myself!”

He said he didn’t have much time left, but it felt like even if I killed him, he’d still come back somehow...

If I kept someone like this, who could tell his ruler the honest truth, at my side, it would reduce the chance of me straying from the right path. While I might have ordered Carla to die to stop me if it came to it, I would prefer to make it to retirement without getting killed.

So, after a bit of this and that, I brought Owen on to help educate me, but...

“Gahaha, sire! If you were free from administrative work, you should have told me! Come on, come on, let’s start our training for the day!”

I was silent.

It seemed that, in Owen’s mind, education included physical education, and any time I was free from my administrative tasks, he would try to train me. If he caught me, it meant running, practice swings, mock battles, everything on the training menu for a newly-recruited soldier.

“No, I have Aisha training me already, so...” I said.

“What are you saying? The princess of the God-Protected Forest, Madam Aisha, is much too easy on you, sire! She only makes you train with your puppets!”

“You’re too loud,” I said. “But, if I use my puppets, at least I can put up a fight.”

“And what will you do when you find yourself in a situation where you can’t use them?” Owen demanded. “Your life is the life of this country itself. If an assassin attacks, if you can fend off the enemy’s attacks for a few exchanges, or even just one exchange, your bodyguards will be able to get to you in time. That one exchange will decide the life or death of our country. That one exchange will bring our country glory.”

Urgh... Because he was right, there was nothing I could say. As I slumped my shoulders, Carla, who Serina had also grabbed by the collar, looked at me with just a little sympathy.

“I see you have it hard, too, Master...”

“You too,” I said with no emotion.

“Come, come, sire! To the training grounds!” Owen declared.

“You, too, Carla,” Serina scolded. “You need to hurry and learn how to make a bed.”

And so, the two of us were dragged off in different directions.

Some days later, we received a report that a rebellion had broken out in Amidonia.



“It’s lookin’ like my brother couldn’t win, after all,” Roroa said.

In a room at an inn in a town near Van, the first princess of Amidonia looked at the two people with her. One of them, the former Minister of Finance, Colbert, shook his head.

“This country has already been defeated. The negotiations were only to limit the damage. I think it’s too harsh to blame Lord Julius.”

Julius gave off a cold impression, but he rated Colbert’s skill at finance highly and, partially because of their close age, the two had formed a friendship. Colbert couldn’t bring himself to criticize his employer and friend.

Roroa smiled wryly at Colbert, seeing him like that. “Maybe not, but if there’re war reparations to be paid, the ones sufferin’ will be the folks in town. We call it the capital, but it’s just one city. The area around it’s not all that productive. Shouldn’t he have let the kingdom keep it for a while and avoided takin’ responsibility for the war? We’re not totally beat yet, and if we left the territory as-is, the Empire and Kingdom couldn’t say anythin’ more. If that got us past the current crisis, there were any number of moves left he could’ve played.”

Roroa said all that like it was no big deal.

Sebastian, the other person who was here with her, shrugged. “Not everyone could accept that so easily. People don’t act solely on the arithmetic of profit

and loss. We all have things we're emotionally attached to, you see. Lord Julius has them, you have them... and I am sure the young King of Elfrieden has them, too."

"Me and Souma, too?" Roroa asked.

"Yes," said Sebastian. "In the same way that the spirit of Amidonia was precious to Lord Gaius and Lord Julius, the smiles of the men and women who live in the principality are precious to you, right? Would you be able to cast them aside because your arithmetic said to?"

"...I see," Roroa said.

True, that's somethin' I want to protect, profit or loss aside, Roroa thought. Does that Souma have somethin' he's attached to, profitable or not, too?

"You met Souma, didn't ya, Sebastian?" she asked. "Watchin' the broadcasts, he seemed like a clever, funny guy. What'd you think, meetin' him in person?"

"Well, let me think... He looked like an ordinary young man, able to listen to the opinions of others and, more than anything else, he felt like someone who valued the people close to him."

"The complete opposite of my old man, huh," Roroa nodded. "But, in that case, there's still a chance."

Roroa shook her closed right fist in circles. It was the gesture she made before throwing dice when gambling or playing a board game.

"Will it work out in my favor or not? I was thinkin' my odds were fifty-fifty, but maybe it's not so bad a bet, after all. He'll make a fine opponent for the biggest gamble of this gal's life."

"Princess... Are you absolutely certain about this?"

Colbert wore a look of concern, but Roroa said with a serious look, "We've gotta do it. Uncle Herman'll keep things under control down south... but somethin' smells fishy up north. We've got information sayin' the forces of the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria have come up near the border."

On this continent, there were two major faiths, Mother Dragon Worship and Lunarian Orthodoxy. The center of the latter faith, the Orthodox Papal State of

Lunaria, was a dangerous theocracy with a unique system of values. With this country looking like it was on the verge of death, they might try something.

Roroo rose to her feet, turning to the other two and clapping her hands. “Now, here’s where we’ll turn it all around. From here on out, we won’t be lettin’ my brother, the Papal State, or Souma go doin’ whatever they please. We’ll be the ones to get the last laugh!”

Roroo spoke proudly, puffing up her meager chest.

Then, mentally, she added, *And, Souma, you’re gonna be laughin’ with us. Though, unlike ours, yours is probably gonna be a strained smile!*

Roroo smiled like a mischievous child who had just thought up a new trick.

Afterword

Thank you for buying *How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom* III. This is Dojyomaru. I have one page for the afterword this time. Now then, what should I use it for?

Well, I suppose I'll touch on the content of this volume just a little. Oh, this is going to involve spoilers, so if you're reading the afterword first, please come back when you finish the main story.

Now then, this volume includes about one-third of what was labeled as the Post-War Arc in the web version. It's the section that addresses what Souma will do with the capital of the Principality of Amidonia, which he occupied in the previous volume, as well as what he will do with those who rebelled against him. I believe both the good and bad points of this story come out especially strongly in this volume, and I am thinking with some trepidation about how it will be received by readers as I write this afterword. That miniature pseudo-thesis that received mixed reviews has all been included here, after all.

Now then, that girl who might best be called a "seriousness breaker" will start to really get involved in the story next volume. What's more, what's more, I'm planning to fix the pits that were written out of sequence in the web serialization into a proper chronological order, so I hope you'll join me again next time.

Finally, I give Fuyuyuki, who has once again drawn lovely pictures for us, my editor, the copywriter, and all of you, the readers out there who support me, my greatest thanks.

This has been Dojyomaru.

Bonus Short Stories

Aisha and Juna's Secret Pact

—The end of the 10th month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar — Parnam Castle

“Aisha, could I get you to put that dresser over here, please?” Juna called.

“Understood.”

Aisha tenderly placed the chest of drawers that was *taller than she was* down in the corner of the room. Even after single-handedly carrying a dresser that was heavy enough to make the room shake when she put it down, Aisha wasn't even slightly winded.

Juna gave Aisha an apologetic smile. “Thank you. Also... I'm sorry. I shouldn't be making you, who will be His Majesty's second primary queen, help me with my move...”

Aisha laughed. “Ahaha, this isn't enough luggage to present me any real trouble. Besides, Madam Juna, you will be His Majesty's wife too one day, so our positions are equal.”

It had happened a few days ago. The two of them had become betrothed to King Souma Kazuya of Elfrieden. Currently, only his betrothal to Aisha had been made public, but it had been decided that his betrothal to Juna would be announced when her work as an idol was at a good stopping point.

However, announced or not, it was a fact that they were betrothed, and so a room had been made at Parnam Castle for Juna. Still, if he had taken on extra attendants to help, there would have been risk of the details of their engagement leaking to the public, so Aisha was using her strength to help with the move.

“That's everything, I think. Let's take a break,” suggested Juna.

“Okay,” said Aisha.

The two sat at the table and asked one of the servants waiting out in the hall to go fetch some boiling water. Juna transferred the water the servant brought into a glass pot with tea leaves in it, then waited a little while before pouring two cups of tea.

“I received some herbal tea at Lorelei, the singing cafe where I was lodging before, as a parting gift,” she said. “Though it’s not like I’m going to be leaving Parnam.”

“Will you be living at the castle from now on, Madam Juna?” Aisha asked.

“Yes.” Juna nodded. “It’s close to the Jewel Voice Broadcast studio, and besides that... if I am going to act as a go-between for His Majesty and Grandmother, it would seem to me best were I at His Majesty’s side as often as possible.”

“Hmm... Is that really all there is to it?” Aisha asked with a meaningful smile as she sipped her tea.

Juna gave up and confessed with a wry laugh, “Of course, even if I didn’t have that reason, I would want to be at His Majesty’s side.”

“Hear, hear!” Aisha grinned, having heard exactly what she wanted to hear.

Juna laid down her teacup, resting her elbows on the table as she looked at Aisha. “You really do love His Majesty, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Aisha said. “On the day we first met, I swore my body and soul to His Majesty.”

“But that was an oath of loyalty as a dark elf warrior, wasn’t it? When did you first start to think of him as a man?”

“That would have to be... when the disaster struck the God-Protected Forest,” Aisha answered with a look of fond recollection. “I am quite confident in my own strength. I wouldn’t lose out to just any man.”

“Yes. I’m well aware,” Juna nodded. It would have been fair to call Aisha the strongest in the kingdom. It wasn’t just that she wouldn’t lose in a contest of strength to just any man; in single combat, Aisha could overwhelm even battle-

hardened veterans.

Aisha shook her head silently. “Yet, there, my strength meant almost nothing. While my martial abilities would let me cut my way through any bloodbath, I was powerless before the might of nature. When word came from the village, I stood there not knowing what to do. That was when His Majesty said ‘Leave this to me,’” Aisha said with a broad smile. “He said ‘I have no power, but I’m in a position to make many people move,’ and ‘If there are lives that can be saved, I’ll save as many as I can.’ The man I thought was weaker than me, who needed my protection, instead was the one who protected me. He made me so happy, and he was so reliable... I just clung to His Majesty’s chest and cried.”

“Yes... I can see why you would have fallen for him.” Juna was satisfied. Someone’d she thought was weaker than her had shown that he was strong in another way, and had been able to protect her. That was what had won Aisha over.

“If anything, I want to ask you the same question, Madam Juna,” Aisha said. “You were sent by Duchess Walter as a liaison, right? You were interacting with His Majesty as part of your mission, so when was it that you came to long for him?”

“That’s a fair question,” Juna said. “I think in my case, I was drawn to His Majesty’s weakness.”

“His... ‘weakness’?”

“Yes. Just before issuing the ultimatum, His Majesty was straining himself pretty hard,” Juna said.

Aisha had been staying in the God-Protected Forest during that time, so she had only heard about it from the others, but she knew that Souma had been feeling worn down by the coming conflict with the three dukes and the Principality of Amidonia.

“Despite that, he was putting up a strong front for Princess Liscia’s benefit,” Juna continued. “He must not have wanted to show her his weakness. Watching His Majesty work to carry the heavy burden of ruling the country, even with that frailty... I came to think, whether or not it was as a liaison, I wanted to be there to support him.”

“I see... That is very like you, Madam Juna.” Aisha gave a satisfied nod and popped a tea biscuit into her mouth. “Mmf, when I find out it’s a fat way...”

“I can’t understand a thing you’re trying to say, so please continue when your mouth is empty.”

“...Excuse me,” Aisha said. “But, when I think about it that way, it is quite mysterious. We both love the same man, and yet I fell in love with him for his strength, while you fell in love with him for his weakness.”

“That’s only natural,” Juna said. “People have as many faces as the moon in the night sky. A strong face, a weak face, a gentle face, a cruel face... I’m sure if we were to ask Liscia, there’s a good chance she fell in love with yet another face of his.”

“Hee hee. I am sure you are right,” Aisha said with a smile. However, then she suddenly took on a serious expression, leaning in close and whispering to Juna, “By the way, since we are already alone together, I would like to talk about that matter.”

“‘That matter’? What do you mean?” Juna asked. Nothing came to her mind, but she responded in a whisper, caught up in the conspiratorial atmosphere.

Aisha’s eyes opened wide, as if to say *“Have you forgotten?!”*

“It was when I went into Parnam with His Majesty!” she said. “That time, when we went to Lorelei, you said it to me, remember? When I asked, ‘If there were eight of us, do you think we could only have His Majesty to ourselves one day a week?’ you said, ‘If we invite each other on our days, we can both have more time with him.’”

“Ah...”

Now that you mention it, I did say that, didn’t I, Juna recalled. That was something she had said for Souma to hear, a little joke to make his heart race, but apparently Aisha had been taking the proposition seriously.

“But, even including me, he only has three fiancées, you know?” Juna said. “You’ll have more than one day a week...”

“No. His Majesty is the king, so I am sure he will end up taking other wives for

political reasons,” Aisha said. “It hurts neither of us to start thinking about it now.”

“...I suppose you’re right,” Juna said.

Juna agreed that the more days she could spend with Souma the better. Rather than be optimistic about the future, she would be best advised to always be looking for cards she could play. That was something she had learned from the man who would be her husband.

“But you’ll want days where you can have him to yourself, won’t you, Madam Juna?” Aisha asked.

“Yes. Well then, how about we take our own physical condition into consideration and plan out a schedule together...”

These secret talks continued late into the night.

Liscia’s Happy Family Get-Together

—Late in the 10th month, 1,546th year, Continental Calendar — Parnam Castle.

On this day, having won the war against Amidonia and made it safely through the post-war negotiations, the Elfrieden Royal Army led by the provisional king Souma made their triumphant return to the royal capital, Parnam. Liscia was now visiting her father, the former king Albert, and her mother, Elisha, in their room.

“Father, Mother. I have returned,” she said, giving a formal military salute and reporting in.

The couple who were sitting on the terrace welcomed their daughter with a smile.

“Ohh, it is good to see you home and safe,” Albert said.

“Welcome home, Liscia,” Elisha added.

Liscia felt relieved by their smiles at first, but then she noticed her little sister Tomoe was sitting on her mother's lap, a troubled look on her face.

"Not again..." Liscia sighed. "Father, Mother... are you bothering Tomoe again?"

Ever since they had adopted Tomoe, the two of them had been adoring and doting on her like a pet cat. (Though, given that she was a mystic wolf, maybe it was more precise to say like a pet wolf?) Liscia figured that because she herself had already been a tomboy by that age, and hadn't been a cutesy girly girl, they were happy to have a little girl who acted like one.

"Tomoe just got back today, too, you know? Show some restraint," Liscia complained.

"But it's been so long since we were last able to see her," Elisha said while patting Tomoe's head.

Albert nodded, too. "We were most lonesome with both of our beloved daughters off in Amidonia. Is it not natural that we would want to spend some quality time with our girls when they get back?"

"Still... can't you see the troubled look on Tomoe's face?" Liscia asked.

"B-Big Sister, I'm okay, really. This is a bit too much of an honor, though..." Tomoe said timidly, trying to mediate. She probably didn't want others fighting over her.

Liscia pinched her temples, shaking her head in dismay. "Tomoe, you can't spoil them like that."

"Is that not something you should be telling us instead?" Albert questioned.

"Who do you think you're kidding? You two are the ones being spoiled here," Liscia shot back.

"Now, now, Liscia, come and sit with us." Elisha let Tomoe down off her lap and beckoned for Liscia to come over.

Liscia reluctantly sat down at the table with them. Tomoe moved to sit in the seat next to Albert, so the whole family was now seated at the same table. Then Elisha stood up and walked around behind Liscia.

“Mother?” Liscia asked.

“Oh, Liscia, you really did go and cut your hair,” Elisha said, running her fingers through Liscia’s now short hair. “A girl’s hair is her life, you know. How could you suddenly cut it off like that?”

“I-I wanted to show my resolve at that moment...” Liscia said, pouting. If she faltered a bit in her defense of it, that was because she herself understood that, even if it had been meant to show Duke Carmine her resolve, cutting her hair on that occasion had been a hasty decision. While it was nice that Souma had said, “The short hair looks good on you, too,” if he had said, “I liked it better before,” that would have been too sad.

Elisha chuckled to herself, knowing how her daughter felt. “But, well, you did wear your hair like that a long time ago.”

“She did?” Tomoe asked, to which Elisha nodded.

“Yes. This girl was such a tomboy, she didn’t act at all like a little girl.”

“M-Mother! Stop it! Not in front of Tomoe.” Liscia said hurriedly, but Elisha put a hand on her cheek and let out a little sigh.

“When Liscia was your age, she was already joining the castle guards for morning practice. I wanted her to grow her hair out so that I could tie it up cutely, but she said, ‘Long hair would get in the way of my training,’ and wouldn’t let it grow.”

While Tomoe was listening with admiration, Albert whispered in her ear, “The tomboyishness comes from Elisha’s side. I have no knack for the martial arts, as you can well see. I hear, in her younger days, Elisha was quite...”

“Darling? Were you saying something?” Elisha asked with a broad smile.

Albert sat up ramrod straight. “N-Not a word!”

While Tomoe was smiling wryly at her adoptive father’s antics, Elisha continued. “Was it when you were around fourteen? You suddenly started growing it out then, right? Did someone say something to you about it at the academy?”

“Urkh...” Liscia mumbled. Perhaps Elisha had hit the nail on the head. “Um...

One of my female friends in my class said, 'Liscia, you're cool, but you're not much of a girl, are you?' I got argumentative and told her, 'If I grew out my hair, I'd look like a girl, too!'... and I've just sort of been letting it grow longer since. That's why I wasn't that attached to keeping it that length, though..."

"But you were so dashing and lovely with your long hair, big sister!" Tomoe cried.

"Ahaha, thanks." Liscia gave an embarrassed laugh.

Elisha smiled. "Do you think you'll grow it out again now?"

"I'm still thinking about that. I mean, he told me I look good both ways," said Liscia.

"Our son-in-law-to-be did, you mean," said Albert. "I am most relieved to see you two are so close."

Liscia realized she had said too much and blushed.

Albert let out a jolly laugh. "So young and innocent. And only half a year ago, you were angry with us about it, saying, 'How could you decide my engagement without even consulting me?'"

"I'm not unhappy about the engagement, but I'll have you know that I'm still not over the fact you decided on it without ever consulting me!" Liscia snapped. "Thanks to you, we've gone through so much over the last half year."

"But you were able to overcome it all together, were you not?" Albert said, looking at Liscia with a gentle expression on his face. "In the past half year, this country has quietly, but meaningfully, begun to change. However, none of it could have happened with you alone, Liscia. I am sure our son-in-law could not have done it alone, either. With him clearing the road, and you supporting him along it, I believe you have been able to move this country forward greatly."

"Have we really?" Liscia looked doubtful that that was the relationship she and Souma had. Ever since Souma had the throne thrust on him, she had done her best to support him, but she wasn't sure how much she had been able to. It wasn't something she could know for herself.

Elisha gave her a gentle smile. "You're doing fine, Liscia."

“Mother?” Liscia asked.

“You’re doing more than enough to support your groom to be,” her mother said. “I sat on the throne for a time, so I can tell you, with great power comes great responsibility. It grinds down the soul of the one who holds it. Naturally, they lose the ability to worry about others, and eventually they lose sight of themselves, too. That hasn’t happened to him. Even after running around to rebuild this country, then experiencing both a civil and foreign war, he hasn’t forgotten to care for you. That choker was a present from him, wasn’t it?”

Liscia touched the choker around her neck.

“His soul is still healthy,” her mother said. “I can’t say whether he is aware of it or not, but it must be your presence that’s supported him and kept it that way.”

“My presence is supporting Souma...”

I hope so, thought Liscia.

“Thank you, Father, Mother.”

Liscia wore a gentle smile much like Elisha’s.

Jeanne and Hakuya’s Joint Complaining Session

Based on an idea by the provisional king Souma, a hotline had been installed between the Elfrieden Kingdom and the Gran Chaos Empire using Jewel Voice Broadcast jewels.

This hotline was for the bureaucrats of both countries to keep in regular contact so that meetings could be arranged between Souma and Empress Maria. However, because they were both very busy people, and there was also a time zone difference, it hadn’t been easy to arrange for them to meet.

As a result, when there were things that exceeded the bureaucrats’ authority to discuss, but were not important enough for Souma and Maria to hold talks, the Prime Minister of the Kingdom, Hakuya, and the younger sister of the empress and general of the Empire’s armed forces, Jeanne, would talk in their place, then submit a report. Hakuya and Jeanne spoke over the broadcast at an

average of once every five days to trade information.

First they would discuss highly important matters that would require a report to Souma and Maria, then they exchanged opinions on matters of policy in both nations, and with what time they had left over, they would engage in small talk about recent events. Although that small talk was nearly always complaints about their respective masters...

Today was no different, and when their meeting was finished, the two had a lively discussion about everything wrong with the masters they served.

“Sigh... Why must my sister be so slovenly?” Jeanne complained.

“What happened?” Hakuya asked.

Jeanne looked exhausted on the other side of the simple transceiver, wearing a wry smile that seemed to say, *What can you really do but laugh?*

“Before, I told you how my sister had brought a bed into the governmental affairs office like Sir Souma, right? Well, this happened the other day. As per usual... and it’s a problem that I have to say this is per usual... when she woke up, my sister went straight to work in the office, but, would you believe it? She was still wearing her pajamas. This is a room that male bureaucrats come in and out of, you know?”

“That’s...” Hakuya couldn’t quite find the words for it.

The rumors said that the Saint of the Empire, Empress Maria, was a woman of great beauty. From what he had seen of her younger sister’s beautiful countenance, those rumors were likely true. It wouldn’t be good for the male bureaucrats to see such a beautiful woman working in her nightclothes.

Jeanne sighed loudly once more. “Fortunately, my sister doesn’t sleep in a camisole, or anything that would make her figure apparent, it’s a more bulky type of thing, but when I saw her working while wearing a nightcap instead of the crown... This time, I couldn’t stop myself from shouting at her. ‘You’re the empress! Please, pay a little more thought to how people see you!’ I said.”

“...I feel your pain.”

“I know the burden my sister bears, so I don’t want to hound her to act like an

empress too much... but this time, it was just too much..." Jeanne moaned.

"I don't think there was anything else you could have done," said Hakuya. "I am sure, were I in your position, I would have scolded her, too."

Jeanne likely felt guilty that, even though she knew her sister's heavy burden, she still had to scold her. It was her position. Hakuya tried to assuage those concerns.

"Even if we were to be unduly generous and condone the pajamas, the nightcap is simply one step too far," he assured her.

"Huh?! *That's* the problem?!" Jeanne exclaimed.

"The ruler's head is where the crown rests," Hakuya said very seriously. "A ruler must never stand before their vassals with something so casual there in its place. Were I to see that, I might resign on the spot."

It was strange reasoning, that he could accept the pajamas, but not the nightcap. Jeanne was befuddled for a moment, but soon burst out laughing.

"Bwahah... Y-You're right, we definitely can't let the nightcap go..."

This was surely Hakuya's attempt at a joke. To try to cheer Jeanne up, he had told a ridiculous joke with completely deadpan delivery. Jeanne chuckled.

"Well, does Sir Souma ever do anything like that?" Jeanne asked.

"His Majesty is no slob," Hakuya said. "If anything, he's fastidious and reasonable. You could say he's a proponent of efficiency, I suppose. His sleeping in the governmental affairs office arose from his thinking that it would be more efficient. That's all the worse in some ways; it makes it hard to criticize him for it."

This time, it was Hakuya's turn to wear a sour face.

"But, efficient or not, he doesn't work in his pajamas, does he?" Jeanne asked.

"His fiancée, Princess Liscia, keeps a tight leash on him when it comes to such things," said Hakuya. "Working in his pajamas... would be worse than this, yes, but Liscia once found him sleeping in his clothes so that he could go straight to work when he woke. She made him sit on the floor so she could lecture him

about it at length.”

Ever since, Souma had made sure to change into his nightclothes before going to sleep. Even the provisional king who would ignore unnecessary traditions couldn't stand up to a lecture from Princess Liscia.

“Hee hee hee! They make a good couple,” Jeanne said.

“Yes. I happen to think so, too, but...” Hakuya was sounding like he was avoiding saying something.

Jeanne inclined her head to the side questioningly. “Is there some problem?”

“No... It's just that, recently, Princess Liscia seems to be being influenced by His Majesty.” Hakuya was thinking of Souma and the others' recent eating habits. “The truth is, recently, His Majesty has been making his own meals, you see. Ever since he acquired this grain called ‘rice’ from the mystic wolves, he's been preparing fried eggs and miso soup to go with it. The sort of meal he can eat with two bowls and a single plate.”

“That's... awfully simple, yes,” Jeanne said.

It was normal for a royal meal to be a little more extravagant. It was partly to show the authority of one who stands above others, and partly because if a royal ate anything too strange, their vassals would look down on them for it.

“Didn't Liscia get angry at him?” Jeanne asked.

Hakuya sighed. “You see, Princess Liscia is very fond of these meals.”

“Why?!”

“Princess Liscia has experience attending a military academy, so she is used to simple meals,” Hakuya explained. “In fact, it seems she would be more upset to have a formal style of eating forced on her. Now, as for the new queen candidates, Madam Aisha and Madam Juna, Madam Aisha lived in the God-Protected Forest, and will eat anything that is edible, while Madam Juna is of common birth, and so she has no resistance to eating these sorts of meals. Earlier, I saw the four of them eating this menu with great gusto.”

Hakuya slumped his shoulders in dismay.

Jeanne could only smile wryly. “I think it's good that they get along so well,

but that is a problem, isn't it? As the king of a nation, Sir Souma will no doubt need to take wives other than those three. When that time comes, he'll have trouble if they aren't the sort who would accept a meal like that."

"Precisely," said Hakuya. "I doubt the daughter of another royal or noble family would. In fact, if the number of people able to enjoy these sorts of meals with gusto increases, that would be a problem, too."

"My sister would join in with glee, I'm sure." Jeanne imagined her sister at the same table as Souma, cheerfully eating a simple meal. ...Yes, somehow, it suited her sister to a T.

"By the way, are those meals good, by any chance?" Jeanne asked.

"Yes. Earlier, I happened to join them, and they were quite good," said Hakuya. "The fried egg flavored with soup stock was quite the delicacy. It had a simple, yet profound, flavor."

"It sounds delicious just hearing you describe it," said Jeanne. "I wish I could have tried it the last time I visited. ...Ahem. In that case, might it not be fastest to use that delicious food to win over any new queens who come in?"

"I suppose I should consider that angle..." Hakuya murmured.

And, as they were talking about that, the time for their talk came to an end.

"Well, Madam Jeanne, I think we should call it a day."

"Yes. I'll be looking forward to our next chance to talk, Sir Hakuya."

"As will I." He paused. "I do hope we won't have any new material to complain about when that time comes."

"I couldn't agree more."

The two both wore wry smiles as they closed out the communication.

In the Refugee Camp

Outside the castle walls that surrounded Parnam, the capital of the Elfrieden Kingdom, there was a place where many hovels had been built. This shanty town was where the refugees who'd been displaced by the expansion of the

Demon Lord's Domain lived. These refugees, who had drifted here during the reign of the former king, Albert, lived by helping and supporting one another. The issue of refugees who had escaped from the Demon Lord's Domain had been a source of trouble for all of the nations affected. It had been dealt with in various ways, from conscripting them into the armies and positioning them on the front lines, to working them to the bone as a cheap source of labor.

In that situation, the mediocre but gentle-natured Albert had silently tolerated the existence of this refugee camp. While his successor, King Souma, was unable to actively help them integrate, he had ordered his Minister for the Food Crisis, Poncho, to provide food support.

While Poncho had been in the Principality of Amidonia, he'd provided emergency food aid to the residents of Van, and here in the Elfrieden Kingdom, he did the same.

And so, Poncho was wearing a bandanna and a gown-like apron called a *kappogi* (Souma's idea), like some old cafeteria lady, and was taking the lead in serving meals to the refugees.

"We are serving food here, yes," Poncho called out, standing in front of a cylindrical pot, ladle in hand. "This time we have the mystic wolves' miso soup and a pork soup made with lily root dumplings from the Principality of Amidonia. Everyone, please line up, and don't push and shove, yes."

"The end of the line is here," Tomoe added. "There's plenty to go around, so there's no need to hurry."

Helping Poncho was Tomoe, who despite being a refugee herself was now King Souma's adopted little sister. In addition to Tomoe, there were many other mystic wolves helping to serve food. While they had gained the right to live in the capital in exchange for their skill in making soy sauce and miso, the mystic wolves had once lived in the refugee camp. Because of that, they had a sense of camaraderie with their fellow refugees and the money they made from producing Kikkoro brand miso and soy sauce went to support them.

At this point, a young girl came up to Poncho and Tomoe as they were serving food. "Thank you for your hard work, Poncho, Tomoe."

The girl was around seventeen and wore clothing in earthen colors that was

reminiscent of a Native American attire. As if to represent her exuberance, she was a beautiful, healthy, athletic girl with tanned skin and muscular arms and legs. When they noticed the girl, Poncho and Tomoe both smiled.

“Wh-Why, Madam Komain. It’s been a while, yes.”

“Hello, Komain,” Tomoe said.

Her name was Komain. She was the younger sister of the leader who kept everyone in this refugee camp together. When Poncho took off his bandanna and started bowing repeatedly to her, Komain panicked.

“P-Poncho, don’t bow your head to someone like me. You’re the one supporting us. It hurts my heart to see you do that.”

“Ah!... I-I’m sorry, yes.” Even as he said that, Poncho continued to bow his head to her. This was the product of his own timid personality, so even if she pointed it out to him, it probably wasn’t something he could fix. Komain understood that, so all she could do was smile wryly.

“I think you could afford to act a little more self-important, you know?” Komain asked.

“Urkh. I-I suppose you’re right. If Madam Serina were here, she’d say, ‘As one who stands above others, please, be more proud of yourself,’ and get upset with me. Ahaha...”

Poncho wore a troubled smile. Ever since she had been charmed by the food he made, the head maid, Serina, had constantly gotten herself involved in Poncho’s business. Souma had noticed, and was formally ordering her to assist him more and more often. However, today she’d had some other work to do at the castle, so Serina was not present.

“Serina? Is that your wife?” Komain, who was not acquainted with Serina, tilted her head to the side and asked.

Poncho hurriedly shook his head. “N-No, she’s not my wife! While I do rely on her, she’s like a coworker. Because of the way I look, I’m still single, yes.”

Poncho responded humbly, but Tomoe tilted her head to the side in confusion. Was Poncho and Serina’s relationship really just that of coworkers?

Even to the eyes of ten-year-old Tomoe, the two of them seemed very close.

Komain also reacted with surprise. “Is that right? Well, you’re a hit with the women of the refugee camp, you know?”

“P-Please, don’t tease me with jokes like that, yes.”

Poncho seemed to think she was joking, but Komain spoke the truth. The fastest way to a person’s heart is through their stomach. There were many women in the kingdom, the principality, and even here in the refugee camp who loved Poncho for the delicious dishes he made. However, due to his lack of self-confidence, Poncho didn’t realize it at all. He was dense, but Komain found his humbleness and lack of arrogance likable.

“We’re all grateful to you and King Souma, you know?” Komain said. “You support us when we have nowhere to go, and no home to return to, and for that we truly thank you.”

“Ah! You’re welcome, yes.” Poncho laughed shyly in response to the girl’s heartfelt words of thanks.

Komain smiled. “Well, I’ll go around and let everyone know you’re handing out food!”

Then, with that said, she rushed off with a sense of urgency. The way that, before she was out of sight, she turned back once and waved to Tomoe and Poncho was memorable.

Poncho had seen her off with a smile, but the smile now vanished, replaced with a pensive look. When Tomoe noticed, she asked him, “What’s wrong, Poncho? You look depressed.”

Poncho snapped back to his senses. “Ah! No... I was thinking about what would happen to Komain and the others from here on.”

“From here on...?” Tomoe asked.

Poncho nodded with a solemn look on his face. “Right now, we’re offering them support, but we can’t leave the refugees like this forever. Kindness alone is not enough to rule a country. Eventually, His Majesty, the Prime Minister, or someone else will attempt to solve the underlying problem. Komain and the

others may be forced to make a hard decision. When that time comes, I worry it will darken her smile, yes.”

Kindness alone is not enough to rule a country.

Those words of Poncho’s echoed heavily in Tomoe’s young heart. But...

“It’s going to be okay,” Tomoe said, smiling to Poncho.

“Madam Tomoe?” he asked.

“Big Brother Souma is really kind,” she said confidently. “He’s not full of himself, even though he’s a king, and he’s always looking out for me, a former refugee. My teacher... Hakuya is a very warm person, too, even though he doesn’t look like it, you know? I’m his number one student, and I say so, so I must be right.” Tomoe clasped her hands together behind her back and looked towards the castle. “If those two have something planned, it definitely won’t be all harsh. I’m sure they’ll figure something out.”

It was a baseless confidence, but Tomoe didn’t doubt it in the slightest. The people she loved would never leave people in sadness, she believed.

Poncho said, “I-I’m sure you’re right,” and nodded. “I’d like to trust in His Majesty and everyone else, too, yes.”

“Okay!” Tomoe cried.

“Now, let’s work hard on handing out food, yes!” Poncho agreed.

When he said that, Poncho rolled up his sleeves and held his ladle up high.

Maid Training

One fine afternoon early in fall.

“Now, do it the way I told you,” Serina ordered.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Carla replied.

The head maid, Serina, and Carla, who had been assigned to the Maid Corps just the other day, were together in Parnam Castle’s dance studio. While they stood in front of a large mirror on the wall, Serina was beating all of the know-how she would need as a maid into Carla’s head.

However, while Serina wore a maid uniform with the classical long skirt, Carla wore one with a flared skirt that only went down to above her knee and which accentuated her chest, the sort of maid outfit that wouldn't have looked out of place in a modern Japanese maid cafe. It went without saying that this was the sadistic head maid's proud handiwork. Carla, who was being forced to wear it for the first time, was bright red with embarrassment.

Right now, she was practicing walking gracefully with five thin books on top of her head. Carla managed to walk along at a brisk pace without the five books randomly stacked on her head moving even a little.

"Hmm... As expected, those with training in the martial arts are on a different level," Serina said, sounding impressed as she stood there holding a short whip. "It must be because you have a solid core. This is something most people struggle with at first."

"Heh heh, for a warrior, being able to move your body is the most basic of basic," Carla said, puffing out her chest with pride, as if to say, *How do you like that?*

"Don't get full of yourself." Serina cracked the whip at Carla's rump, causing her to jump a little.

"Yowch?!"

The whip Serina used had been specially enchanted. It would leave no mark where it struck, but it would attack the place it hit with a half-and-half mix of pleasure and pain. Apparently, it was a training item that used pleasure to stop the victim from trying to brace themselves against the pain, while the pain stopped them from trying to indulge in the pleasure.

Carla protested with tears in her eyes, "Wh-What was that for, Head Maid?!"

"I believe I've taught you this," Serina said sternly. "What do you say when praised?"

"Ah...! 'You are too kind.'" Carla hurriedly clasped her hands in front of her and gave a slight bow.

Serina nodded. "Yes. At all times, a maid must remain humble."

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

“At this rate, it might be best to have you learn the rest on the job,” Serina said. “Now, shall I show you how to make the beds? Let’s move to another place.”

“Yes, ma’am! Roger that, Head Maid.” Carla said with a salute, earning herself another whack in the butt with Serina’s whip.

“Ow?!”

“Don’t salute. We may swear loyalty to the royal house, but this is not the military.”

“I-I understand,” Carla said with teary eyes, rubbing her sore bottom which kept getting hit.

The two left the dance studio and were walking down the corridor towards a room with a bed.

“Still, it’s a little unexpected.” Serina said all of a sudden.

Carla tilted her head to the side. She had been walking behind her.

“Unexpected? What is?”

“When His Majesty ordered me to train you as a maid, I thought you would resist more,” Serina said. “At times, a lady who was formerly of the nobility has been forced to become a maid. In many cases, her pride gets in the way, and she feels a resistance to performing her tasks. While you may have been reduced to a slave, you were once the daughter of one of the three dukes, were you not?”

“...I was.”

“I had thought I would have to first begin by crushing that haughty attitude of yours utterly. But, sadly... I mean, fortunately... I didn’t have to do that.”

She definitely started out saying “sadly” there, didn’t she?! Carla thought.

Carla felt a shiver run down her spine. Haughty girls would be the ideal prey for this total sadist of a head maid. She would break their pride and retrain them as dogs, fit to serve their master anywhere. Carla was deeply relieved that

she didn't fit that profile.

"It seems to me that you've accepted your position as a maid, haven't you?" Serina turned back with just her neck and asked Carla. "You were a noblewoman and a soldier. What do you think of your current situation?"

"It's not like it hasn't left me a little out of sorts," Carla admitted. "There's a lot of work I'm just not used to being involved in that's required of a maid, and because I was always out seeking glory on the battlefield, I've never really acted like a girl."

Having decided that she couldn't keep anything hidden from this head maid, Carla revealed her true feelings.

Serina's gaze grew harsh. "Then... you are dissatisfied with your situation?"

"No! Not at all!" Carla hurriedly denied it, then laughed wryly and scratched at her cheek. "I'm a little bewildered, but I'm not dissatisfied in the least. If anything, I'm grateful."

"Grateful... you say?" Serina asked.

"Yes. After I committed a crime out of my own bullheadedness, my best friend and the one she cares for saved me. I'm sure... I must have caused a lot of trouble for them."

While there had been the intentions of many different people in play, and it was a situation with no simple explanation, the result was still that Carla had participated in a rebellion against King Souma. The ones who had saved Carla were her best friend, Liscia, and the man Liscia loved, King Souma. It had been a given that she would be executed for her crime, but they had instead made her a slave (and, on top of that, treated her as a maid, under the justification that there was no work for slaves in the castle), which must have involved a lot of trouble on their part.

"I may no longer be in the military, but I want to serve those two in whatever capacity I can," Carla said. "That's why I want to learn my job as a maid quickly."

"...A fine aspiration." Serina's dangerous tone vanished. She had likely been testing Carla's determination as a maid. It seemed she was satisfied with the answers she had received.

“Oh, but... Is there anything we can do about this maid dress?” Carla asked, fidgeting in embarrassment. “My thighs feel awfully exposed, and it worries me...”

“Why is that?” Serina demanded. “I think it looks very cute on you.”

“But, when I crouch down, well... I worry people might see...”

“Carla...” Serina said with a dismayed sigh. “You became a maid after becoming a slave. If I were to treat you the same as the other maids, it would set a poor example. In fact, how do you think your coworkers feel, seeing you work in that outfit?”

“I think they pity me,” Carla said.

Whenever they saw her being toyed with... erm, instructed by... Serina, the other maids treated her far more warmly than anyone would have expected to treat a slave. That was because with Carla there, Serina’s sadism wasn’t being directed towards them (or at least her focus was more spread out).

“That means the clothes you wear have a proper meaning behind them,” Serina said.

“Head Maid...” Carla stared into Serina’s eyes. “...No, I’m pretty sure this is just what you’re into, right?”

“Of course,” Serina responded nonchalantly. “I simply can’t get enough of seeing you writhe in humiliation.”

“Don’t you feel even slightly guilty?!”

“Come now, let’s be on our way. I still have many, many tasks for you to learn.”

“Urkh...” Carla mumbled. “Understood...”

Carla’s days of suffering had only just begun.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue: On a Moonlit Terrace](#)

[Chapter 1: Project Lorelei](#)

[Intermission 1: Lord Ishizuka](#)

[Chapter 2: Meeting on a Street Corner in Van](#)

[Chapter 3: Negotiations](#)

[Chapter 4: Pact](#)

[Chapter 5: Withdrawal](#)

[Extra Story: The Story of a Certain Group of Adventurers 3](#)

[Chapter 6: Standing in Front of the Lion's Cage](#)

[Chapter 7: Promise](#)

[Chapter 8: Crime and Punishment](#)

[Epilogue: Peace is Yet Distant](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 4 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom: Volume 3

by Dojyomaru

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Emily Sorensen This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2017 Dojyomaru Illustrations by Fuyuyuki All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2017 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: August 2017

Premium Ebook