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THE IDEAL STRANGER LIFE



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SETTING OUT TO SEA?!

The Twin Kingdoms's unusually welcoming behavior towards **Freya** makes **Aura** suspicious, so she asks **Zenjirou** to visit the Uppasala to gain a deeper insight into the Northern Continent.

Freya becoming his concubine is ultimately just a verbal promise the princess made in Capua, so Aura is set to benefit greatly from their trip. She trusts Zenjirou more than anyone, so he can both carry out the negotiations and investigate the Northerners.

However, while the danger posed to the **Glasir's Leaf** is significantly curtailed by a magic tool for **water purification** in addition to the **Lulled Sea**, Zenjirou is not entirely happy about spending a hundred or so days at sea on a wooden ship.

Aura suggests a magic tool that uses their lineal magic—**teleportation**. With their first successful batch of **marbles**, she commissions **Francesco** to create it in secret, but...

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

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INTRODUCTION



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Prologue — Prime Minister, Marshal, and Duke

According to the calendar, it had been around twenty days since the region had entered the active season.

The sun on the Southern Continent was harsh enough that, subjectively, the difference was not immediately palpable, but after twenty days, things had cooled enough to be noticeable. If the thermometer Zenjirou had brought was correct, the temperature had stayed lower than body temperature even at noon of late.

It was on an afternoon like that—too harsh to be called pleasant, but at least bearable—that an important ceremony was taking place in the Capuan royal palace. As evidence, the audience room was filled with as many nobles as could fit into the room. It felt almost as if every single noble within the capital was now present there. Of course, the majority of those nobles were there solely out of curiosity and to spectate, not as part of the ceremony itself.

There were three main people involved in the event. The first was a slight man of middling age. Zenjirou estimated that he was around 160 cm or so. He had wide, dark eyes and jet-black hair cropped relatively short. His skin was likewise darkened significantly and close to black.

Most Capuans fell between Southeast Asian and Latino in terms of complexion to Zenjirou, but this man was even darker skinned. His fairly slight build was still lean, though, and he gave off a vibe that it would be unwise to cross him.

This was Fidel Regalado. The man's bearing meant that even with his smaller stature, he didn't fade into the background. If anything, he was one who drew attention, such was the intimidating air he gave off.

Even he, though, was almost completely invisible thanks to the man next to him. This man had a massive, two-meter frame that was incredibly well trained and tempered. He was clad in a military dress uniform and had a heroic bearing. That was more than enough to narrow down who this was.

This was General Pujol Guillén, a hero of Capua.

The man had an air of pressure around him on a daily basis, but the gleam in his eyes and grin on his face inspired an intimidating sense of awe. His glee was inevitable; his long-desired goal was finally within his grasp.

It sounded charming when put like that, but the kindest thing that could be said about his smile was that it was like standing in front of a salivating drake, starving and with its mouth open.

Unfortunately, the third participant in the ceremony at the general's side was Zenjirou himself. The clothes he was wearing were those of royalty, so his finery was several levels higher than either the viscount or general, but he was still the least noticeable among the three. Frankly speaking, he just wasn't as intense.

That went without saying when it came to the general, but even the viscount seemed stronger and prouder than Zenjirou, who was well aware of the fact without anyone saying anything, so he was doing his best to have some form of commanding presence. Whatever the circumstances of his birth and upbringing, Zenjirou was royalty now. Proud and superior behavior was not a right but a duty. Zenjirou had the fable of the frog and the ox in his mind as he stood straight and puffed his chest out. His back was starting to ache and twinge due to the unusual tenseness.

An official on the dais struck a gong, signaling the start of the event.

"The inauguration will now begin. Make your way to the throne when you are called. Lord Fidel, Viscount of Regalado, come forth."

The viscount was the first to be called. He stepped up onto the raised area with an easy gait, kneeling before Aura where she was seated.

The queen looked down at the man from her throne before standing. She then kept her eyes on him but held her hand out to the side in a silent demand. That was more than enough for the official at her side. He immediately placed some drake parchment into her hand.

It wasn't particularly large, but the gold embroidery on it was visible even from a distance, showing just how grand it was.

The queen unfurled the sheet in front of her and sonorously read its contents.

“Fidel, Viscount of Regalado. By my name as Queen Aura I, I appoint you my prime minister. May you prove equal to your role.”

She offered the letter of appointment to the man—Viscount Regalado—kneeling before her.

“I humbly accept, Your Majesty,” he replied, his voice unable to hide his emotions as he took the document by raising both hands above his head.

Aura then took a shining golden mass and a sparkling silver container from another official before handing it to the viscount. The golden object was the prime minister’s seal, and the silver container was an inkwell. The ink inside it was of a vermillion shade created by following a specific recipe. The prime minister could use both objects together to create official documents in his role.

The prime minister had wide-ranging, powerful authority. He could not enact or repeal laws but could authorize almost anything within the scope of already existing laws. Taken to the extreme, it was a position that could run the country as it had been until now without actually consulting the monarch.

“Lord Pujol, Marquis of Guillén, step forward,” the same official said loudly once the viscount had returned to his position.

The man’s gait was deceptively light considering his immense frame as he walked up to the throne. Things proceeded in much the same way they had for the smaller man.

Aura had reseated herself and awaited his arrival. Zenjirou was of the opinion that it was pointless since she would be standing again in the course of the ceremony, but it was likely also tradition.

“Pujol, Marquis of Guillén. By my name as Queen Aura I, I appoint you my marshal. May you prove equal to your role.”

“I humbly accept, Your Majesty.”

Where things differed in this instance was in the object handed to him. While the prime minister had been handed a seal and inkwell, the marshal was handed a short cane. It was about the length of an adult’s upper arm. However, it was constructed of gleaming gold, set with a mother-of-pearl inlay, and tipped with a ruby approximately the size of a clenched fist.

This was the object of the marshal's office, the marshal's baton. The marshal had full command of all military matters. Essentially, he was the prime minister, but for the military.

Having appointed both a prime minister and marshal, Aura could technically shut herself away in the inner palace and do nothing while the country carried on functioning both politically and militarily. To put it another way, she had previously treated the running of the country like driving a manual car. But the car now had full autopilot in the form of these two men and could progress autonomously.

The general case of the monarch's word being law was unchanged, so Aura could still activate the metaphorical brakes if needed to halt that autonomous advance, as well as accelerate or steer it to change course.

However, if she fell asleep at the wheel, the country would keep on going. Decreasing her responsibilities was—in one way—exactly what she was aiming for. If she let her guard down, though, there was a greater risk of the country going in a direction contrary to her wishes.

She's got it tough, Zenjirou thought to himself. I wish I could help at least a bit.

It was then his turn.

“Sir Zenjirou, come forward, if you would.”

Given his position as royalty, the official was rather more polite as he called Zenjirou forth. He advanced silently. His position meant walking a fine line. Capua was patriarchal to the degree that even marrying a matriarch would make you the family's head, which meant that he was the spouse of the most influential person in the country.

It would be odd for him to hold himself as highly as Aura, but it was equally odd for him to defer too much to his wife. Therefore, he had to strike the fine balance between using as respectful a tone as he could and holding a fundamentally equal position. Today, he didn't hesitate to kneel in front of the throne.

He kept his gaze on the red carpet as he heard Aura speak from her now-

standing position.

“Zenjirou Capua. By my name as Queen Aura I, I appoint you Duke Bilbo. I also grant you second place in the line of succession. I look forward to your actions as a member of the royal family in the years to come.”

“Prince Consort Zenjirou” was married to Aura and so should avoid being too deferent to her. However, “Duke Bilbo” was nothing more than the head of a branch family, even if he was indeed royalty. Woman or not, there was no issue with him deferring to the head of the main family.

“I will do my utmost to live up to your expectations, Your Majesty,” he answered, taking the copy of the register accorded to him as Duke Bilbo and the gold, pin-like affair that signified his position.

Its official use would be to hold a turban in place. The native clothing of the country had turbans and used pins to hold them in place, acting as a somewhat simplified crown. However, the fashions from the Northern Continent meant that outside of intensely formal affairs, he could wear the more Western style of clothing even for official functions. On those occasions, it was to be used to hold a cloak in place or else as a pin on the chest.

With both objects in hand, Zenjirou made sure he did nothing that would contravene the etiquette of the event as he returned to his position. And thus, the formal inauguration of the prime minister, the marshal, and Duke Bilbo was over.

Regalado, Pujol, and Zenjirou. Each of them had attained new positions and had been central to the country even before that. The new titles gave two of them even greater influence. The political landscape of the country had just undergone a massive shift.

Each of the nobles present began planning how best to steer the newly decided future of the country in a way beneficial to them.

Chapter 1 — Ambition, Trade, and Safety

Several days had passed since the induction of the prime minister, marshal, and new duke. Aura was currently receiving a checkup from both Doctor Michel and Princess Isabella. Her second pregnancy was currently progressing well. The doctor's estimations placed her delivery date in approximately another two months.

Of course, with her pregnancy, her stomach was now visibly swollen. It was her second pregnancy, but the situation was not one that she could get used to. She was less wholly seated on the sofa than she usually would be to avoid even the slightest risk of harming the child growing inside her, with the aging doctor on one side and the middle-aged princess on the other.

“If I may take your hand, Your Majesty?” Michel said, doing so and then pausing in his speech. “That will do. Your pulse is normal and both you and your child seem to be in good health. What say you, Princess Isabella?”

The princess had a friendly smile on her face as she nodded in agreement.

“I feel the same way. You should both be fine even without any intervention. However, I shall cast a mental rejuvenation spell just in case.”

“Please do.” Aura nodded from her seated position.

Her pregnancy was, as both medical professionals had said, going almost anticlimactically well. She had barely had any morning sickness—quite unlike her first pregnancy—and while her stomach had swelled, it was not to the extent of the first time.

She had been concerned there was some problem with the child, but if the medical advice was to be believed, nothing was out of the ordinary. According to the doctor, such docile children were relatively common during pregnancies. It was slightly odd to assign a child a personality while they were still in the womb, though.

Regardless, the combination of this much easier second pregnancy with the

first-class medical care from Isabella meant that outside of some difficulty moving, the queen was completely healthy. If anything, the daily worries from running the country were being eased by the spells Isabella was casting, so she was almost better than she'd ever been.

She adjusted herself on the sofa slightly and rolled her neck several times—almost as if she was making sure the position she was in was right.

"Thank you, Princess Isabella," she said. "Your treatment is as superlative as ever."

"It is an honor to hear, Your Majesty. I shall take my leave, but if there are any changes in your condition, please summon me without delay."

"I will. My thanks again."

"Of course. Excuse me." The princess offered a bow before leaving.

Once she had departed, Aura stretched in her seated position and let out a grunt.

"The Gilbelles' healing magic truly is something. Perhaps I need not have appointed the prime minister and marshal," she mused.

"Your Majesty," Michel said sharply at her slip.

The queen shrugged slightly with a rueful grin. "It was a joke, Doctor; you need not look so fearsome."

"Please don't say that I look fearsome. I will make no political statements, but in regard to the child currently growing within you, I am reluctant to endorse even your current level of work."

With her medical practitioner not budging even when speaking to the queen, she raised her hands in surrender.

"I know, I know. I shall not push myself. I am well aware that my health is important."

She was an accomplished stateswoman, but that wasn't the same as being utterly irreplaceable in the field. On the other hand, there was no woman in Capua who could replace her when it came to passing on the country's lineal magic to the next generation. If asked whether she was more important as the

queen or as a woman, the answer would have to be the latter. Of course, that was taking things to an extreme, and her position as queen was still exceedingly important.

Besides, she had already appointed both a prime minister and marshal. She could not now take that back, so deciding how things would work in the future would be more constructive.

“I would hear how our new prime minister has been faring. Fabio?”

The secretary took a step forward at that, breaking his silence. “Of course. First, in regard to the man himself: the viscount has made no great strides as of yet. He is gathering court officials to be his aides in ensuring the country’s politics continue well, but that is best described as a legitimate right of the prime minister and so is allowable.”

“Indeed,” the queen agreed with the slender-faced man’s comment.

For better or worse, the nobility were a faction-based group. The faction leader might have gotten his hands on the juicy position of the prime minister, but the leftovers needed to be spread between the underlings or he risked worsening morale.

Of course, anyone installed to such positions would need to have at least a bare minimum level of skill and professional ethics. However, if a prime minister could not appoint those he wished within those constraints, there would be no point.

While Capua’s royal family was an oddly strong example of one, the fact remained that the country was feudalistic in nature. Trying to crack down on each and every usage of such a position to benefit its holder—and their faction—would be a Sisyphean endeavor. For a feudal country in its infancy, it was even considered a necessary evil.

“Then we shall simply observe the minister’s actions for a while. The viscount’s ambitions are relatively benign for his level of ability. He may very well be satisfied if his position is rewarded appropriately. Of course, negligence can be fatal, so we must maintain that observation.”

With that, the queen shelved matters concerning the prime minister. Then,

she took a breath and questioned the other appointment, the one far more likely to cause issues.

“The problem will be the new marshal.”

The new marshal, Pujol Guillén was infinitely ambitious and made no secret of it. The man was an amalgamation of fierce spirit and a desire to rise in the world. In terms of position, achievements, and standing, there was no better choice for the position. Still, Aura had fought shy of truly appointing him.

“How has Marshal Pujol spent his time?” she asked once she was ready to hear the answer.

The secretary’s face remained unreadable as he spoke plainly. “The marshal’s first act was to step up the recruitment of soldiers.”

There was a long pause. “Summon him,” Aura said eventually.

“The arrangements have already been made,” Fabio said. Her confidant’s tone was almost horribly level as he assured the queen that the preparations had been made in advance.

The marshal’s first action had been an increase in recruitment to the army. If one was to ask what was bad about that, they would find that there was in fact nothing wrong with it. If the recruitment was for knights, then it would impinge on noble society, and so the marshal should at least notify the queen—although legally, even that would be acceptable—but increasing their armed forces by recruiting commoners was completely permissible.

As a matter of fact, the country’s army was not big enough. It obviously wasn’t as big as it had been during the war—when they had the most active troops—but even compared to the period of peace preceding it, the army was twenty percent smaller.

As the person standing at the army’s head, it was completely natural for him to want to make up that deficit. Indeed, there was even scope in the budget to do so. Even if that full twenty percent difference was impossible, there was more than enough leeway to make up half the difference without going into the red.

That slack in the budget was from multiple sources: the recouped taxes

Zenjirou's spreadsheet had brought to light, the sturdier water wheels he had suggested along with the contract with the guild to create them, the sales of the new spirits he had spurred on, and so on. However, only Fabio and Aura should currently be aware of that.

Therefore, while thinking just in terms of the military, Pujol's actions were completely natural. However, Aura had to see things from the perspective of the country as a whole, and increasing recruitment was not necessarily for the best, to say nothing of the fact that using that budgetary slack for the army was even worse.

After all, the military was not the only entity to still bear wounds from the war. A considerable number of Capua's young men had faded into the fog of war. Working men were currently a valuable commodity for not only the army, but also farming villages and even urban areas.

The worst off were the relatively smaller and medium-sized regions. Since they were living hand-to-mouth on occasion, the recruitment would resonate strongly with them.

Additionally, the army currently had a relatively generous budget for its size. The extra wages for the new soldiers would not unduly strain it. Of course, the training would be tough and physical, but farming without machinery was similarly difficult for a soldier's training.

Furthermore, there were no signs currently pointing to war being on the horizon. Therefore, even joining the army was unlikely to send you into actual combat. With all those benefits in view, it was plain to see what would happen.

Taking the foundation of those villages that were barely subsisting into the army would be a nightmare when one considered the drop in the country's strength that the loss of those villages would cause. It was a problem that Aura could not overlook in her position as queen.

The young men having their chance for wealth crushed as they were sent back to their poor villages was a huge inconvenience for them. However, Aura was not *so* skilled in politics that she could maintain the country without someone drawing the short straw. With that said, overturning the marshal's very first decree would lead to the army being less stably managed in the

future.

Either the circumstances or the man himself needed to be curtailed.

While Aura was racking her brains for a solution, the notification of the marshal's arrival came to the room.

"Show him through," she replied.

"Very well."

A few moments later, the door thudded open and a man appeared in its frame.

While his uniform's finery had increased with his progression to marshal from general, the figure was almost tiresomely familiar.

"Thank you for coming. I know the sudden summons will have been an inconvenience. Sit, to begin with," she greeted the man. Her voice was plainly displeased as she remained sitting on the sofa.

"Of course. Excuse me." For his part, the marshal paid her displeasure no mind and kept his face calm as he seated his heavy frame on the sofa opposite her.

Aura and Pujol alike were not ones to beat around the bush. Additionally, the summons that had brought him there was technically unplanned and urgent. As a sign of her desire to waste as little time as possible, the queen placed the order in question on the table between them, almost tossing it into place, before speaking.

"This document has reached my desk. It is indeed by your hand, is it not?"

The marshal met her glare from his own seated position, letting the queen's presence—which would cow most people—flow past him as he offered a nod.

"Indeed. This is the written order containing my first command as marshal. However, I may have been too hasty in my elation and not properly worded it. This is the document containing the order which will be made public."

As he spoke, he drew a sheet of drake parchment from his pocket. It was clearly not an official order yet, with multiple corrections and crossed out words on the sheet.

“Ah...I see.”

So that was how he was playing it. Even as she surveyed the document and appreciated the quick remediation, she scowled internally. The new offering was much the same in its general structure. However, it had additional information included in it. More specifically, a quota on how many people would be recruited and a deadline for said recruitment.

Both were conservative numbers. With such numbers, the area of influence would be limited to the capital and surrounding region. By the time rumors reached the borderlands, the quota would be filled and the time limit would be up. Aura’s concerns about its influence on the agricultural villages had been wiped away in one fell swoop.

“I intend for this order to make it clear to one and all—both domestic and foreign—that our power and will are alive and well on my appointment as marshal and that *in due course* we will regain our old strength.”

There was a question in the marshal’s comment, and it was a logical one. Essentially, the main aim of the order was not to build the army’s strength, but to show his intentions upon his appointment. That was why its influence had been curtailed significantly and kept to a minimum number of people.

Aura purposefully wiped all traces of expression from her face as she tapped the table with her index finger. “I understand what you wish to say. You could consider this increase in our forces something of a welcoming gift for your appointment, though how very like the nobility it is to give *themselves* a gift.”

She shrugged slightly. Seeming to intuit that she had understood his intentions, the hulking marshal gave a wide, almost animalistic grin as he nodded.

“You have my thanks. However, I do hope to see some practical results. With Viscount Regalado becoming prime minister, we should expect the capital’s security to grow somewhat lax, temporarily. Therefore, it is my humble opinion that the free-floating youths of the capital can be put to work to maintain that security.”

“I certainly see your logic,” she replied. She could say little else in that regard. The war had decreased their manpower on the whole, so larger cities—

including the capital—had become a gathering ground for the bereaved.

If men in their prime died at war, the inevitable result was a profusion of widows and orphans. Orphans unable to live on their own would be almost magnetically drawn to larger towns and cities like the capital.

Those orphans were a problem, but an even bigger problem was those who managed to survive their childhood years. It was an unfortunate truth, but orphans who had lost their parents and then banded together for survival rarely became contributing members of society.

In many cases, they grew into organized criminals, which caused headaches for the guard by disturbing the peace. Several years had passed since the end of the war, so the orphans from it were likely to be making that transition soon. If they could instead bring them into the army, it would be quite the success in defense of the capital.

“The viscount’s eldest will be one to watch, but he lacks experience. He will need to be aided by those around him for a few years,” Aura mused, mostly to herself.

The capital guards who maintained public order in the city were traditionally commanded by the Regalado family, but the viscount could not continue in that position after becoming the prime minister. Therefore, the man’s eldest son had—as custom dictated—become the next to hold the position. However, he was still in his early twenties.

He had more than enough motivation and potential but was certainly not yet on the level of his father and had a damning lack of experience. With that in mind, the conditions would be perfect for the would-be gangsters trying to disturb the peace in the capital, so tempting them into the army was exceptionally to the point.

It was budgetarily acceptable as well, and the limits on recruitment amount and period defending against an influence on the country as a whole took any reason she had to object.

“Very well, this *is* your first order, after all. I shall say no more about it; you may do as you wish.”

Aura's face took on a slightly meaningful smile.

"Thank you," he said, straightening, showing no sign of noticing her expression before bowing his head, the wide grin still on his lips.

Just as Regalado had become prime minister and Pujol had become the marshal, Zenjirou was now Duke Bilbo.

However, there were distinct differences between Zenjirou's new dukedom and the other two positions. The first was that it was not a position of duty, but rather of nobility.

The prime minister was the person in charge of general governance, and the marshal was in charge of military affairs. Naturally, both were afforded significant authority and a commensurate workload.

Zenjirou's position as Duke Bilbo, on the other hand, was almost an honorary title. While greater status also conferred greater authority, there were very few obligations that went along with it.

In other words, this was something he should celebrate. He was a highly ranked, mostly unfettered man.

The hawk-eyed nobility would never let such a delectable opportunity pass. Therefore, Zenjirou had been pulled out to various social gatherings over the past several days.

"Truly, Sir Zenjirou, I offer you my congratulations. Ah, perhaps you would rather I address you as Duke Bilbo now?"

Zenjirou kept a polite smile fixed on his face as he replied to the fawning middle-aged baron who was hosting the event.

"Thank you, Baron Pantoja. I was invited here today as Duke Bilbo, so I do not mind you addressing me as such. You may feel free to call me by name, though. Her Majesty may have bestowed this title on me, but I am her husband before I am Duke Bilbo."

Only a few days had passed since he had taken up the mantle, but Zenjirou had already lost count of the number of times he had needed to repeat that explanation. Apparently the Capuan nobility saw his new rank as more

noteworthy than his position as the queen's husband.

He could somewhat understand their perspective, but "his" rank had been gifted to him by his wife, and he felt that the title he could more proudly call himself was her husband. Still, he was well aware of the difference between his opinion and that of the country at large, which was why he was publicly announcing his view this way.

"I understand. At least here, I shall address you as Duke Bilbo, then. I believe there will be a place prepared for that rank, but I assume you'll need people to run it?" the baron asked with a covetous glint in his eyes. This was another question Zenjirou had heard over and over for the last few days.

Of course, he already had an answer prepared, so he simply repeated it again. "Indeed. Her Majesty is making arrangements for the maids and administrators required. The knights are outside of my expertise, so I will be assigning their running to someone I can trust."

His position was only meant to reduce the curtailment of Aura's influence that the appointment of a prime minister and marshal represented. Taking things to an extreme, Zenjirou saw his duty as the duke to simply agree with Aura at the meetings he attended.

Therefore, the estate and knights that would protect both him and his position were merely putting on a show and could be kept to a minimal level.

Up until now, he had been strictly "the queen's husband" and "a male royal," and had made a point of presenting himself as a figurehead. That had worked well at first, but when Aura had fallen pregnant with their first child—Prince Carlos Zenkichi—his status had been brought into question. Zenjirou could no longer feign being a mere figurehead.

He had acted as the queen's representative during her pregnancy during many events, comporting himself well on each occasion. He had also carried out the negotiations with Princess Freya from the Kingdom of Uppasala while in Valentia and even headed the force dealing with the swarm raptors. He had brought the dispute with Nabara in the Gaziell march to a completely beneficial conclusion, learned teleportation, and finally negotiated for—and received—access to a healer from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.

Describing him as “incompetent” or “a figurehead” after all of that was impossible. He clearly had the ability to serve as a member of the Capuan royal family without any issues.

The public’s estimation of him changed from person to person, but that fundamentally summarized the situation, which meant that he had to put even more thought and care into his words and actions than ever before.

Prince Consort Zenjirou had the minimum abilities needed to act as royalty. With that thought in mind, it was hardly a surprise that some of the nobles wanted to see the sovereignty of the nation transferred to him—a much more pliable individual—than Aura—who was a force to be reckoned with despite her gender. And there was no guarantee that sympathizers of that line of thought weren’t present today.

Zenjirou kept his smile on his lips as he warily scanned his surroundings. As he did, his gaze came to rest on a crowd. The largest crowd, of course, was centered around him. But the crowd his eyes had fallen on was still a rather significant size.

Seeing the blonde beauty at its center, he also found a perfect excuse to get out of his current conversation.

“I have yet to greet our guest from the Twin Kingdoms. I shall have to excuse myself.”

His apology given, Zenjirou moved away and towards the woman at a slightly brisk gait. He followed what etiquette required, purposely placing himself in her eyeline and making a somewhat roundabout approach so as to avoid being threatening before raising a hand in greeting.

“Talajeh, it has been a while. Though perhaps not *that* long.”

The consort’s—now duke’s—approach prompted the crowd to part around the blonde woman. No longer obscured by the wall of people was a striking beauty, with golden hair that fell in waves around her shoulders and soft, amber eyes set against lightly tanned skin. Her heritage as a mix of the Northern Continent’s refugees and the desert tribes set her apart among both groups, yet strangely also offered a sense of familiarity and even more charm.

She wore a yellow dress with an open chest that almost made it seem rude *not* to look, and Zenjirou's greeting prompted both a friendly smile and a slight curtsy.

"Your Majesty. Ah, Duke Bilbo would be more appropriate here, perhaps. Your assistance has borne much fruit."



The openly stated thanks caused the nobles gathered around her to focus more on their conversation. While there were naturally many men who had been lured in by her sex appeal, there were also a surprising number of young women around her.

The reason for that was the selection of accessories she was wearing. She had rings, bangles, earrings, necklaces, hairpieces and brooches—all formed from solid gold. The daily rotation of jewelry she wore made their quality all the more apparent the longer you looked if you had even the most basic amount of knowledge.

Talajeh had thrown herself headlong into the Capuan social life since her arrival, but the rumors went that no person had seen her wear the same accessories twice.

“I see. I am glad to hear it. Her Majesty and I have regretfully been unable to make much time for you, but that certainly lightens my heart,” he replied with a slight smile.

Talajeh had spent a significant sum to have him teleport her to Capua in hopes of acquiring a magic tool to create a space isolation barrier. The spell required for that barrier fell under the Capuan royal family’s lineal gift of space-time magic. The only two who could use it were Aura and Zenjirou.

Talajeh had therefore sought to negotiate directly with Aura, but the other woman’s pregnancy and preparations for the installment of the prime minister, marshal, and duke had led to a complete lack of negotiations.

From what Zenjirou had heard within the inner palace, it seemed Aura would be willing to accept depending on the price. However, he couldn’t let that out here. Instead, he searched around for another topic. As he did, Talajeh’s already soft eyes softened even further in a smile.

“You need not let it concern you. After all, Capua reigns supreme over the west. There is more than enough business to find, so I have not had the time to feel bored.”

Despite it not being entirely appropriate for a noblewoman to say that, she did so clearly and without hesitation. Talajeh’s family—the Elementaccato

duchy—had veins of gold within their lands that were very productive. Her massive jewelry collection and the fact that she wore it to her social engagements were likely both part of her marketing.

His understanding that her goal was—for better or worse—purely trade-oriented made her a fairly easy person for him to speak with this way. If he thought of her sex appeal and almost *too* friendly smile as her tools of the trade, he could even almost feel a sense of kinship with her.

“My, that certainly is something to hear from someone of your stature in the Twin Kingdoms. It is decidedly pleasant to hear as a citizen of Capua as well. Would you be willing to tell me what in particular has caught your interest?”

The blonde’s smile deepened even further at his question.

“But of course. Our lands are separated enough that there are many things we have wildly differing views on. Carpentry would perhaps be a perfect example. The Twin Kingdoms is far behind in that respect.”

“I see. It does sound rather obvious now that you mention it.”

Zenjirou couldn’t help being impressed by her mentioning something he’d never thought of. It was, with some thought, completely obvious, though. The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle was a large country, but over eighty percent of it was covered in desert. The widespread utility of magic tools meant that ordinarily barren land could support them, but they would not permit the land to be developed in the same way as Capua’s rain forests.

Wood was therefore a scarce resource in the Twin Kingdoms and both the number and skill of carpenters were far lesser than Capua could boast. The decoratively carved wooden stools and tables local craftsmen sold to Capuan nobility would easily go for ten times the price in the Twin Kingdoms. Even combs carved from fragrant woods would fetch a good sum.

“So, taking an excess supply somewhere that lacks the same...” Zenjirou mused.

“Such is the fundamental thrust of business,” she replied with a broad grin.

The Twin Kingdoms had a lack of wood. That thought prompted Zenjirou to consider another use of the resource.

"If wood is so valuable, what do the Twin Kingdoms use for fuel? Magic tools, perhaps?"

The country was mostly desert. However warm the days were, nights were cold and even cooking required fire. The smithing industry would require vast amounts of fuel as well.

Talajeh gave a somewhat ambiguous smile. "Indeed. The palace and noble estates—along with blacksmiths—usually use fire magic tools. But even simple magic tools are valuable, so the masses use techniques passed down from the desert dwellers that preceded us."

The "passed down techniques" here referred to burning dried feces and unusable offal from the rearing of livestock. Large beasts like dash drakes and pompo drakes produced vast quantities of feces. Their primarily plant-based diet meant that if it was dried and burnt, it didn't smell particularly bad, so it was fairly effective if considered objectively. However, they were at the palace for a social event, so it was not the most suitable topic for conversation—thus her vague reply.

Realizing that, Zenjirou hurriedly steered the conversation back on track. "I see. It is similar to how agriculture here treats plants that grow fast yet have no use as pests, even calling them 'the green invaders.'"

In fact, such plants could be considered the biggest enemy to farming within the country, as they could easily overrun a field if you weren't paying attention. The only ways to deal with them were man—or tamed drake—power, which meant that poorer villages lacking both of those things could be pushed out by the encroaching vegetation and inevitably have their arable land curtailed.

"Since there is no use for the plants, they are simply gathered and burned," he continued.

Talajeh let out a deep sigh that made her generous chest sway. "We could only dream of such luxury," she said emotionally.

The earlier comments about taking a surplus towards a dearth made Zenjirou consider having those useless plants exported to use as fuel. However, he soon realized it wouldn't work.

He had found himself thinking based on the standards of a modern world, but the cheap transport of commodities between distant countries was only possible with a modern, efficient transportation network.

Zenjirou held the trump card of teleportation, so he had managed to forget that movement within this world was fundamentally limited to foot or carriage. While the drakes were far more suited for transporting goods than Earth horses, they would never measure up to trains, trucks, and especially ocean freighters.

Heavy and bulky goods like burnable wood—which additionally would need to be transported in huge quantities and couldn’t be too expensive—would see the shipper in the red within a month. Zenjirou wasn’t well versed in distribution, but even he knew that.

“Considering the distance, I assume you are after small luxuries. Accessories and indulgences, perhaps. The wood itself aside, charcoal would be a product the second it was completed.”

Talajeh’s amber eyes shone at Zenjirou’s murmurings. “That is certainly intriguing. If Capuan charcoal was cheaper than importing wood from our neighboring countries, it could become a significant source of trade.”

“Ah, true.”

Even as he agreed, he blushed internally at her pointing something out he hadn’t considered. His blunder could also be put down to the influence of teleportation. Zenjirou had traveled between the two countries using it, so it made the distance between them feel much shorter than it actually was.

While the majority of their lands were indeed desert, the Twin Kingdoms didn’t have to go out of its way to trade with Capua rather than closer countries with different climates.

As common as wood was in Capua, the transportation charges meant that they probably couldn’t compete with their neighbors.

“Distance is a hard hill to climb,” he commented with a resigned sigh.

Still, Talajeh’s eagerness showed no sign of abating. “Then perhaps you would be willing to part with some seeds of the plants that grow particularly quickly? If

we could have them take root, it would be a blessing beyond words.”

Zenjirou allowed a rueful smile onto his face as she pressed him. “That would not work. While they may grow abnormally quickly, that is only the case in Capua. With the Twin Kingdoms being completely different from the climate to the soil, I can only see it being fruitless.”

Capua was blessed with plentiful water and arable land. Plants that thrived in this environment would be unlikely to take root in the dry sandy ground of the Twin Kingdoms. If he could be *sure* they would not, he would have been more than happy to allow it. The problem was that if, by some quirk of fate, things went according to Talajeh’s hopes and they proliferated quickly even in the Twin Kingdoms. Talajeh had only just commented about the price of importing wood from their neighbors. In other words, they were not self-sufficient on that front. So if Capua were to allow them to become more so—even if only in terms of burnable fuel—then the country would be strengthened.

“I simply wish to make the attempt. Please, Duke Bilbo?”

“Even so. Introducing prolific, neophytic species into an environment can easily destroy the existing ecosystem. Besides, such an agreement is beyond my abilities to allow.”

“Nee-oh-fi-tic? Ee-co-sis-tem?”

The soul of language hadn’t worked, which meant that they were concepts that did not yet exist on the Southern Continent. While Talajeh looked confused by the terms, she at least understood his refusal.

Incidentally, the region her family ruled didn’t have living things big enough to be seen by the naked eye; it was a true desert in every sense, so such plants wouldn’t have much of an impact regardless. The fact that any kind of capital could be established on such land was proof positive of the vast strength of magic tools.

Either way, Zenjirou could not spend his entire evening on this conversation.

“I shall take my leave, then. Do enjoy yourself, Talajeh.”

“Of course, Duke Bilbo. Thank you once again.”

The two parted with smiles and the waiting nobles descended upon both of them immediately.



It went without saying for the queen, but even Zenjirou—now both prince consort and duke—was very busy within the palace. The time the couple spent together each night was a valuable period of relaxation for both husband and wife.

However, the fell influence of their work was not completely shut out of even the inner palace. They had just taken their usual bath and changed into loungewear and were now sitting on opposite sofas to talk.

Being on opposite sofas meant that it was a serious discussion. Zenjirou was the first to speak.

“You look fine, but I want to check just in case. Are you doing okay?” he asked, leaning forward to take in his wife while wearing his blue-striped pajamas from Japan.

Aura was clad in a thin nightdress. Her stomach was visibly bulging but she looked the same as ever outside of that. Her reply only served to affirm his hopes.

“Indeed, thanks to you. Princess Isabella’s healing is superb. In fact, I almost feel *too* well and fear I might forget my pregnancy.”

The answer prompted all the tension to drain from his shoulders. He asked the question almost every night, but he couldn’t help his worrywart ways.

“Right. That’s great. I suppose having both Doctor Michel and Isabella makes it almost certain.”

“As I said earlier, I feel much the same as before I fell pregnant. I have therefore been able to get a significant amount of work done. Although with that play from Pujol, I can hardly call it smooth.”

Aura’s nose flared as she scowled and Zenjirou offered a weak smile back.

“Well, he’s always the same. Things are going about as we expected for me. I think I’ve managed to deal pretty well with the nobles trying to get in with

‘Duke Bilbo.’ Lady Talajeh is the problem. She practically breathes business.”

Aura let out a hum. “I would like to hear about that in more detail.”

Thus, husband and wife went through their usual nightly ritual of sharing the information they had gathered throughout the day.

Once they’d spent all the time they needed to ensure they were on the same page, Zenjirou let out a long sigh.

“The only thing I can really say is that the general hasn’t changed since becoming a marshal.”

“He has not, but his environment has changed significantly. The position of marshal is one such thing, but his marriage is also a large part of it.”

“Right...Lucinda. She seemed pretty reserved and intelligent,” Zenjirou commented as he thought back on the woman he had met in the Gaziel march.

She wasn’t ugly by any means, but she seemed rather plain. However, her actions during the face-off between general Pujol and his Nabaran counterpart—coupled with how she had dealt with Pujol trying to take the knight commander hostage—changed things for the better and truly demonstrated her intelligence.

“Indeed. My concern is not just her intelligence and insight. This impression is only based on an external view, but she seems to be directing him.”

There was a bitter scowl on her lips at that. While Pujol had thus far been ambitious, he had a clumsiness to him, only seeming to know how to pursue his goals with everything he had.

It was almost charming, like someone accelerating into a curve and bashing into the wall to turn, but losing time instead. Lucinda’s intelligence could add a brake to that and let him coast along the curve and lose as little time as possible. It wasn’t something the queen was particularly happy about.

“Hmm, it might be a bit optimistic of me, but is it really that bad? Someone managing to control the general...oops, marshal, I mean, can’t only be a bad thing.”

While understanding his—as he had said—optimistic view, Aura shook her

head. "You are partially correct. As a matter of fact, the number of times I have had to rebuke him has noticeably dropped since his marriage. His current behavior would normally be welcome, but that is only the case if his position as marshal has satisfied his ambition. If he aims for even more power over the army and Lucinda supports him, 'troublesome' would not even begin to cover it."

"That's a good point..." Zenjirou admitted.

Pujol's current position was definitely a grand accomplishment for him, but that wasn't necessarily his ultimate goal. Anyone who was even passingly familiar with the man would question whether he would ever *have* a final goal. He seemed to always be aiming higher, with bottomless determination.

"Do you think he might move towards eventually attempting to usurp the throne?" Zenjirou asked hesitantly.

Aura didn't seem to know what to say to that and pondered the question with a blank expression for a while. It took a good half-minute or so, a rather long time for how insightful she usually was, but eventually, she understood what he was getting at and shook her head as a reluctantly amused smile forced its way onto her lips.

"Ah. You are not from this world. I suppose this is one way our views differ. To sum things up, that is impossible. At least on the Southern Continent, one without lineal magic will never be accepted as king. In a certain way, you could consider it the equalizer for royalty. Somewhat, at least."

As she spoke, her smile did indeed take on a cynical edge. What she was saying was entirely true, though. Not even the war had seen such an example. The various countries' royals had sometimes utterly wiped each other out through their differences, but the general view that lineal magic was a requirement for being royalty remained common between them.

Therefore, on the Southern Continent, a person could become influential within the country but would be unable to represent that country unless they also had lineal magic.

"Pujol understands that. The absolute worst case would be puppeteering the royal family while he holds the real power. Even then, though, he would be

unable to supplant us.”

“I see.”

Zenjirou could only nod with a slightly awed feeling at how a world with magic worked. They then pivoted to discussing the blonde he had met earlier.

“That reminds me, the ducal families like Talajeh’s have existed longer than the country itself. The four tribes—now four duchies—had followed the culture and traditions of the Southern Continent but never managed to gain recognition as royalty. Then along came the Sharou and Gilbelle families, and they *did*, despite looking and acting as differently as they did. Guess that shows just how big magic is.”

“Well, that is true. Speaking of Lady Talajeh, she has been rather active.”

Zenjirou smiled as he nodded in agreement. “Yeah. It’s sorta like she’s a merchant through and through, despite her looks. The moment she opens her mouth, it’s likely to be business talk.”

“The rumors I have heard say much the same. Despite that, the nobility seem rather well-disposed to her. With her figure and dress sense, you could easily see her garnering favor from the men while simultaneously earning resentment from the women. However, she is almost shockingly well-liked by the women as well.”

Aura’s busy schedule and pregnancy meant that she hadn’t recently been involved in any of those social events, but the rumors she’d gathered claimed that Talajeh had managed to become even more popular with the women.

Zenjirou agreed. “Yeah, that’s what makes her such a saleswoman. She’s very careful not to alienate people while currying favor. I’m sure the clothes she wears are the source of her popularity with the men, but it looks like how she treats herself as a living mannequin makes the women struggle to resent her. Also, all that jewelry—the gold—is a big part of it, I’d say. It’s really popular with the noblewomen, and they sell like hotcakes despite how much she charges.”

“The first thing that comes to mind with regard to her family would be their gold. They used to solely be a conduit to the metal but have built up their craft over the years and now deal in goldcraft and coin alike. The assistance of magic

is there, so they cannot measure up to the Sharou family craftsmen, but they are at the peak outside of that. I may find myself having to purchase something if it were recommended.”

She rolled her neck in exasperation. Of course, Talajeh had offered the queen a suitably lavish example, but with the products being so popular within the palace, even Aura might have found the need to loosen her purse strings to buy one.

It was less a hobby and more an instance of diplomacy. While Aura was as fond of pretty ornamentation as any woman, buying such items was more trouble than enjoyable.

Zenjirou had a sudden realization at that and spoke up. “Oh? Then maybe I should buy one? You know, as a present for you.”

Until very recently, he had been a royal with no money of his own. Such thoughts would therefore have been pointless. Now, though, he had money as “Duke Bilbo,” albeit a small amount, relatively speaking. Would it not, therefore, be socially risky to *not* buy his wife a gift?

The queen considered his words for a moment before agreeing. “Indeed. It sits poorly with me to outright say so myself, but you are correct. For royalty, the couple simply knowing their relationship is good is not enough. It is safer to continually demonstrate to the public that that is true. However, in this case, you would buy two, not one.”

A brief moment of thought on Zenjirou’s part helped him arrive at the answer. “Ah, Princess Freya.”

“Correct. Her Highness is already practically a concubine. Gifting something to me and *only* me will lead to rumors of your discontent with Princess Freya. However, there needs to be a distinct difference in the gifts, as is appropriate for giving gifts to both a queen such as myself and a concubine-to-be such as Princess Freya. That said, she *is* a princess. Too clear a distinction would also be rude.”

“Blehhh... Such a pain.” He couldn’t help but whine, looking up at the ceiling. Still, he managed to rally and sit back up before questioning his wife further. “Okay, got it. Would having Talajeh deal with the fine details be an issue?”

"That should be acceptable. In fact, if she is of the caliber you have intimated, I believe she will be able to prepare things perfectly suited for both Princess Freya and myself."

"Yeah, that seems likely." He couldn't help but let his lips quirk into a grin as he imagined Talajeh smiling and saying, "Thank you for your patronage" as she swiftly handed over two specially ordered sets of jewelry.

"That will lead to a lot of money flowing from our coffers to the Twin Kingdoms. It irks me to go with their suggestion, but accepting her commission would offset that," Aura added.

"Right. That *is* her main goal here."

Talajeh's family had gold mines that supported their lands. However, they were in soft, sandy soil. That meant that even with wind and earth magic tools, they lost multiple people to cave-ins every year.

The wages carried a commensurate addition in light of that danger, so the job was fairly attractive and they could make up for the yearly loss of labor. Still, decreasing the number of casualties would be better.

"So we'll be making the isolation barrier. Who takes the lead on that? Me? Or you?"

It was the first spell he had learned. Zenjirou could currently use three spells: the barrier, a retrieval spell, and teleportation. Therefore, making a magic tool could—for those three spells, at least—be done with his cooperation rather than Aura's.

She considered his question at length, looking up at the ceiling in thought.

"That will be my role. The actual enchanting will be done by either Prince Francesco or Princess Bona. We do not know which, but either will carry it out in the palace proper. Therefore, it would be easier for me to do as I am constantly there."

The job being Aura's responsibility due to her always being in the palace could apply in the reverse as well: Zenjirou was not necessarily in the palace, so it was not his job.

The unspoken implication made him remember their earlier plans, and his face twisted into an uncharacteristic scowl.

"So I can pretty much take it that I'm heading to the Northern Continent?"

The queen straightened slightly at that, a serious expression on her face. "You can. Truthfully, it is the best path I can see, all things considered. My only regret is the burden it will place on you."

Freya and her retinue would be departing for Uppasala on the *Glasir's Leaf* come the new year. Aura's suggestion was that Zenjirou accompany them.

There were significant benefits to his doing so. The first was to ensure that the process of Freya becoming his concubine went smoothly. While Capua and Freya herself were already treating it as a done deal, it would be shocking news for the Uppasalans.

On top of that, Zenjirou was not the king. No, he was the prince consort—nothing but the queen's spouse. There was unlikely to be a single royal who wouldn't object to the first princess of their nation becoming the concubine of a mere consort. To have it easily accepted would give the impression of Uppasala being a vassal state of Capua.

However, if Zenjirou—the man who wanted her—was to spend nearly a hundred days crossing the sea all the way to the Northern Continent to ask for her hand, they would be much more amenable to the idea.

Secondly, it was an opportunity for Aura to directly get eyes on the Northern Continent from someone she could trust without question. This was half intuition, but their interactions with the Twin Kingdoms had raised her suspicions. Why had the Sharou family conceded so easily to their demands without even pretending to negotiate?

Equally odd to her was their wholehearted welcome of—and concern for—Freya. It would help to see whether the Twin Kingdoms considered the Northern Continent's trends a threat.

After all, Zenjirou had a camera, a phone, and a dictaphone, all allowing him to record video, images, and sound. The ability to personally witness a person and their speech rather than hearing an observer's impression would vastly

increase the amount of information she could obtain.

Lastly—and this was the clincher—Zenjirou could use teleportation. It would naturally require Uppasala's permission, but if they could get something akin to an embassy established within the Northern palace or capital, it would allow at least limited instantaneous movement between the two countries, which meant that even if Freya emigrated to Capua, she could easily visit her home.

Despite the preliminary nature of such matters, having someone who could cast the spell making that initial visit meant that a representative could be brought *back* with him. Freya's father would be rather difficult to invite, what with him currently reigning, but other royals visiting Capua would enable Aura to negotiate directly with them.

In every respect, the only conclusion she could draw as queen was that having Zenjirou aboard the *Glasir's Leaf* was the best possible move. Zenjirou could understand the logic to it, but unlike his trips to Valentia, the Gaziel march, and the Twin Kingdoms, it was not such a simple decision.

"Hrmm. I get what you want to say. Really, I do. Honestly, I'm scared, though."

That was his completely truthful opinion. It was perhaps slightly embarrassing to fear what his concubine-to-be was doing, but that was the truth.

"Spending around a hundred days on a wooden ship making an international crossing honestly seems insane to me. It's something even normal merchants don't do, let alone normal people. It's a gamble that adventurers and daring merchants make, risking their lives."

"Is that so?" Aura asked, struggling to understand his feelings. She was far better versed in the general norms of this world than Zenjirou, but sailing was something she was less familiar with.

This was due to the general apathy on the Southern Continent towards the idea of crossing the ocean, so it was not her fault. Because of that, though, she could not truly understand the dangers lurking on such long sea voyages.

"Yeah. It's a literally life-risking act...to say nothing of how Princess Freya came from the very far north of the Northern Continent to the middle of the

Southern Continent. She might not make her way into textbooks in my world, but she'd definitely be in somewhat specialized history books."

"I see." Aura nodded as Zenjirou earnestly praised his concubine-to-be.

It certainly held up to scrutiny. Now that she considered it, Zenjirou had respected the woman right from the start. In fact, it might have been that respect rather than any feelings of attraction that had allowed her assault to work.

Zenjirou crossed his arms in thought. "Still, I know you're right when you think about the country as a whole. I should accept it as much as possible, but however much of a disgrace of a royal it makes me, I don't have the guts to put my life on the line like that even for my country."

The queen smiled at the blunt statement from her husband. "That is nothing to be ashamed of, though I will admit that those royals who are willing to put their lives on the line are well regarded. However, it is a matter of degree. Being ashamed of such hesitation dulls one to the risks to their life. In the extreme, it can also lead to something irrevocable..."

Zenjirou was briefly lost for words as she seemed to stare off into the distance. The royal family had been wiped out during the war, leaving only Aura behind. One of those people must have been similar to what she was describing now.

The couple were family, but whomever person she was remembering might as well have been a stranger to him despite being a beloved family member to her. Any words of sympathy or consolation from him felt like they'd be superficial at best, so none left his lips.

While he remained silent, not knowing how to react, Aura shook off her memories and continued as if nothing had happened. "Regardless, there is nothing wrong with your reaction. Still, I *do* want to send you to the Northern Continent for the nation's benefit. Therefore, I want to do all I can so that you are willing to accept it. First is the provision of magic tools, including those for water purification and the Lulled Sea, the latter of which is practically a national treasure. Of course, it is traveling by land, so it will arrive later. According to Her Highness, however, it makes the intercontinental trip immeasurably safer. What

are your thoughts?"

Zenjirou's face matched her own serious look as he considered it deeply. "Right. Well, not having to worry about water while at sea is a big thing. Apparently, the princess herself can cast the spell version, so they can carry less water and therefore more food. That makes it safer as well. If the Lulled Sea works as well as they've said, it *will* lower the possibility of any accidents," he agreed.

However, the seas in this world were home to aquatic drakes. When you found out some were bigger than blue whales on Earth, and vastly more aggressive, you could hardly call the trip safe, even if the actual sailing portion was tractable.

"Then what of having Prince Francesco create a teleportation magic tool? While you can cast the spell yourself, that would hardly be the case in an emergency. So the tool would be simple—you could hold it and speak a word in the magic language to be transported to a set location, regardless of your own visualization. That would make it possible for you to escape if the situation called for it."

That would be tantamount to abandoning his shipmates, including Freya and his knights, but even Zenjirou didn't feel the need to pursue that line of thought. In an emergency, he was the only one Capua absolutely wanted to return.

There was a long pause before he spoke, confirming things just in case. "I remember the royal family saw teleportation as a treasure to such an extent that it would not permit a magic tool of *any* kind to be made for it. Do you think this is beneficial enough to ignore that choice?"

"This" of course referred to Zenjirou going to the Northern Continent. His objection to the trip was that he couldn't be sure of his safety. Making a teleportation tool would ensure his well-being. The value of him taking this trip was highlighted simply by Aura's willingness to commit what had previously been considered a taboo.

Indeed, the queen nodded. "I do. My opinion as your wife need not even be said, but you are irreplaceable to me even as the queen. Additionally, your

presence on the Northern Continent will be of such benefit that I wish to do all I can to make it a reality. I must ensure your safety even as I send you into danger. Even commissioning a magic tool for teleportation is but a small concern to accomplish those contradictory goals.”

Zenjirou hummed in consideration, slightly dissatisfied with the main thrust being her views as the queen. Still, her statement about her thoughts as his wife had his lips quirking up.

A magic tool that could be used in an emergency to teleport him out regardless of the mental state he was in would certainly cause the risk to him to plummet. As far as he was concerned, with that in place, the risk to him felt even lower than boarding a plane.

Then, the queen seemed to have another idea. “Oh, I know. Another form of protection could be a tool akin to the barrier that Lady Talajeh desires. While not to the same degree as teleportation, it would be somewhat helpful in protecting you.”

Zenjirou couldn’t hide his shock at that. “What? You mean being able to deploy the isolation barrier on the ship?” In a certain way, that would be even more powerful than the Lulled Sea.

The queen smiled as he jolted forward in excitement. “No, it would be for after you arrive. If something happens then, you could temporarily ‘turtle’ with it and recover your faculties.”

“I see...” He nodded in understanding but was imagining a completely different way of using it.

“Zenjirou?” Aura asked quizzically.

After a brief period of further thought, Zenjirou articulated his idea. “Say, Aura? I can use the spell as well, so I know it doesn’t have the widest area of effect, right? Maybe half the living room at most. Is it possible to make it bigger, though? More specifically, big enough for the *Glasir’s Leaf* to fit in?”

That was enough to make her understand what he was getting at. The queen laughed slightly at that.

“That would make a tool for it work much the same as the Lulled Sea. ‘It is

theoretically possible but not practical' would be my answer. Improving magic is an awfully troublesome endeavor. With elemental magic, it could be possible with Espiridion and Pasquala aiding us. However, the barrier is space-time magic. You and I are the only ones capable of using it."

She shrugged as she finished. Zenjirou sighed.

"Yeah, so that's not happening."

It went without saying that he wasn't particularly skilled with magic, but neither was Aura. Of course, unlike him, she could cast the hereditary magic passed down to the royal family, but that was merely by memorizing the incantations as a whole, not *understanding* it. There were royals who had been dedicated to research before the war, but neither Zenjirou nor Aura had their capability.

"Okay, then. It's not a high priority for me, but I'll take it if we can get it done. The barrier tool too."

She understood the implication of that, and her eyes widened before a smile blossomed on her face. "You will go?"

If he'd "take it," that meant he was working under the assumption he would be going. He met her gaze head-on and nodded.

"Yeah. With that many precautions, the risk to my life is as low as possible. With all that, I would have been willing to go anyway."

Of course, more selfishly, he wouldn't want to go even if it was safe. He was a normal man at heart, and he was essentially going up to a king and asking for his daughter's hand in marriage—while in fact *already* being married. He'd like nothing more than to run from that.

Still, however things had happened, *he* was the one who had accepted the arrangement, so he felt it was his duty to personally ask for her father's permission.

"Thank you, Zenjirou. I truly do not know how to repay your devotion." She smiled.

He shifted awkwardly before answering. "Well, yeah. As long as things in the

inner palace stay as they are, I'd take that as plenty of payment."

"I will remember that," she replied gravely, taking his embarrassed statement on board.

He felt slightly taken aback at the unexpected way she had reacted but decided to ask another question that the conversation prompted.

"I just remembered. What about our other guest? Fiqriya from the Animeum family? She came here to discuss magic with Espiridion, but that hasn't happened yet, right?"

"Unlike Lady Talajeh, Lady Fiqriya has participated in only the bare minimum of social engagements. It seems her sole purpose is indeed to deepen her knowledge of magic." Her lips quirked in amusement at something.

"So she hasn't spoken with him yet?"

"No. He is servicing the roads, so he has traveled via my teleportation magic but will be returning via carriage. He will need to rest for a while as well, considering his age."

There was a sour look on her face at that. The rainy season damaging the roads was practically a yearly affair in Capua at this point, but with the additional issue that Nilda Gaziel had exposed with the nobles' register, things were much more urgent than usual.

Those with vast mana reserves were usually poor at fine control, but the head court mage was an exception to that. He had an amount of mana on par with royalty but excelled at precise spells. His abilities and knowledge were both superlative, so he had learned spells across all four of the elements. That made him perfect for the role of maintaining the roads.

"We handed over the documents she brought before he left. Has he managed to read them yet?" Zenjirou asked, thinking back to them.

The bundle was of a considerable size, he seemed to remember. While each sheet of drake parchment was far thicker than a sheet of copy paper like those he'd brought from home—so it was hard to compare them directly—it probably wasn't something one could go through with any great speed.

The queen quelled his concerns, though. “He did so before leaving, yes. He said it was crude and incomplete thinking but had several novel developments. He was rather excited as well.”

“So does it look promising?” Zenjirou had only been hired to cast the teleportation spell, so any meeting between Lady Fiqriya and Espiridion had no real bearing on him, but he would still rather see her achieve what she had set out to do.

“It does. I imagine he will send her an invitation before long. Can I bother you to also be present for their first meeting to verify what happens?”

He nodded cheerily in answer.

“Got it. It’d definitely be best to see how that goes. Espiridion would probably be fine, though. Lady Fiqriya seems like a rather rational person.”

“Of course; it is just to be certain.”

At that point, the tension between the two seemed to snap.

“So, that’s it for the annoying stuff?” Zenjirou asked.

“That should do for today, yes.”

He stood up and moved over to the other sofa to sit next to his wife. They pressed into each other.

“Do you mind?” he asked, lifting his hand.

“No,” she replied, prompting him to softly put it on her swollen stomach.

“This one is really quiet. Oh, did it just move?”

“It did. Both Doctor Michel and Princess Isabella say things are going well, though. The doctor said this is down to individual differences between pregnancies.”

The conversation between the two of them was calm as they showed their affection.

“It’s a bit trite, but maybe it’s a girl? Are we naming this one the same way, one name each?”

“We should, yes. I have already decided on both possibilities.”

“Man, you beat me to it. What should I do? I’d like to use one of the characters from my name like we did for Zenkichi, but I can’t think of another name with the same reading. The language here is phonetic, so a single character having multiple ways it can be pronounced won’t make sense to most people.”

“In that case, you should teach them your language once they have learned the local one. A certain degree of familiarity will serve them well with manipulating the tools you brought with you, so it would not be a waste.”

“That might be a good idea, yeah.”

The two of them spoke of the child to come, and the future in general—a future they would make bright.

Chapter 2 — The Old Sage, the Magic Researcher, and the Watcher

Ten days had passed and a grand procession of guests had arrived at the capital.

This was the relief force from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. The relatively high number of carriages compared to the people was due to the relatively high proportion of women unused to traveling.

The person in charge of the expedition was a woman, Lucretia Broglie from the marquis family of the same name. Her maid was naturally present, but Talajeh's and Fiqriya's were also with them—their charges having been sent earlier via teleportation. There were also maids to replace the roughly half of Princess Bona's maids who had been brought back home before.

Their presence had been reported via dwarf wyvern when they'd reached Fort Montjuïc on the eastern border, so their reception at the capital went relatively smoothly.

As far as the general protection of the city went, the guard made some fumbles. However, when you considered it was Viscount Regalado's son's first major operation after his father had passed the baton on to him, keeping things to that level was more or less acceptable.

It was perhaps fortunate that Marshal Pujol had been watching—having assumed that such things would happen—and immediately moved to assist with any real issues, so the only harm was to the new commander's pride.

The day of arrival was for administrative formalities, while the actual welcome was planned for two days thence. While the Twin Kingdoms' magic tools made the journey as easy as possible, a whole month of travel still wore heavily on the body.

The day of arrival—and the day after, unsurprisingly—were spent resting in their rooms in the palace before their invitation to a welcome banquet two days

later.

“It is an honor to meet you, Queen Aura, and also to see you again, Your Majesty,” Lucretia offered in greeting as she knelt before the throne, turning to look at Zenjirou for the latter part of her sentence. “I am a noble of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, Lucretia Broglie, of the family of the same name. I am indebted to you for the lavish spread you have prepared for our greeting.”

She gave a deep bow of her head as she finished. Whether due to the magic tools the country commanded or her own youth, she showed no sign of visible fatigue from the monthlong journey.

The seated queen’s lips rose in a slight smile as she spoke. “A most courteous greeting. In the name of Capua, I, Queen Aura I, bid you welcome to our country. Be at ease, Lucretia.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” the younger girl replied, bowing once more, which sent her hair bouncing.

Aura’s gaze slipped from the blonde to the woman with short silver hair off to the side. “We should finish the arrangements while we are here. Princess Freya, come forward.”

“Of course.”

The princess stepped proudly forward, red dress there for all to see.

Lucretia of the Twin Kingdoms and Princess Freya of Uppasala stood before each other to carry out the final formalities of their arrangement. Lucretia was the first to speak.

“Princess Freya, on behalf of Marquis Broglie of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, I have come to deliver the Lulled Sea to you.”

“I confirm my receipt of it and offer my deepest thanks to Marquis Broglie,” Freya replied.

In truth, charge of the item had been passed to her yesterday. The conversation here was merely a matter of formality.

With the exchange completed, the queen spoke in a carrying voice from her throne. “It would appear things have been completed without incident. I hope

you can partake of our meager offerings for your welcome tonight, Lady Lucretia. While I would not ask you to unduly stress yourself, I would like to see you present for as much of it as you can manage."

Of course, without any clear physical ailment, a direct request to attend from the queen was close to a command.

"It would be my pleasure," Lucretia replied, looking every inch the noble she was as she slightly lifted her dress in a curtsy.

While the banquet was being held in honor of Lucretia, she was—as sad as it was to say—not a particularly important guest as far as both Zenjirou and Aura were concerned. The Lulled Sea she had brought with her was much more important.

As proof of that, the short time between the official ceremony and the banquet that night was spent talking with Freya instead.

"My apologies for summoning you while you are busy making your preparations for tonight, Princess Freya. Take a seat," Aura said.

"Not at all. I wanted to talk with you as well," Freya answered before accepting the queen's offer with a "Pardon me." She had a neutral expression on her face as she seated herself opposite the queen and prince consort. Her guard, Skaji, stood behind her as ever.

While there was still plenty of time left until the banquet, it took quite a while for women to get ready. Aura's comment on how busy the princess must have been was nothing but the truth.

"In the interest of saving time, let us move right to business. First, as an apology for taking up this time, I yield the floor to you."

The short-haired princess nodded at the queen's blunt words.

"I shall accept that offer. I wish to head to Valentia. Would it be possible to acquire your permission to do so?"

Aura and Zenjirou exchanged glances at that and nodded. It was just as they had expected and was, in fact, exactly why they had summoned her so quickly. The silver-haired woman looked askance at their reaction, but Aura gave a quick

response.

"I would not be opposed, but when exactly would you be departing, Princess?"

"If I had permission, as soon as tomorrow, even," she replied instantly.

"I see. I assume that is due to the Lulled Sea?"

"You are quite correct," she replied with a slight nod.

Things were going much as the couple expected. It was an easily predicted action for anyone who had some understanding of Freya's personality and thought patterns.

The Lulled Sea was a magic tool that could minimize the movements of water and air alike across a significant area. It was practically a guardian deity for a sailor. However, without knowing its exact capabilities, it would be impossible to put it into use in the most effective way. Since this world lacked a formal time-telling system, without the division of twenty-four hours into minutes and seconds like on Earth, the sailors would have to test how long the tool could be used for themselves. They needed to know how long it would remain in effect and what the cooldown time was before it would work again.

The sailors needed to gain an intuitive grasp of that. There was also the problem of where on the *Glasir's Leaf* to place it. The tool had the form of a massive globe. Even the snow-white sphere itself was easily two meters in diameter. Its age meant that its exact composition was a mystery, but it was even heavier than it looked.

While the *Glasir's Leaf* was a massive ship made to withstand the rigors of long voyages, something the size and weight of the Lulled Sea would still be a burden. They needed to plan where to put it and potentially add reinforcements. Otherwise, it was all too possible that they could damage the deck.

Additionally, the ship would be out on the open sea for long voyages, so it would naturally pitch and roll. It could even list almost to the point of capsizing. Something of the Lulled Sea's size and weight could easily injure or even kill a sailor if it came loose and fell into the sea itself.

The tool, therefore, needed to be made fast to the ship, but that couldn't be done just anywhere. Even veteran sailors could easily be taken by storms and gales, which was where the Lulled Sea came into its own. However, if it was not placed somewhere with immediate access, it would become nothing more than a decoration, while putting it somewhere with free access to all the sailors—many of whom were fairly rough men—was also risky.

Freya wanted to get the item to Valentia as quickly as possible so that she could determine the best place to put it while also verifying its functionality.

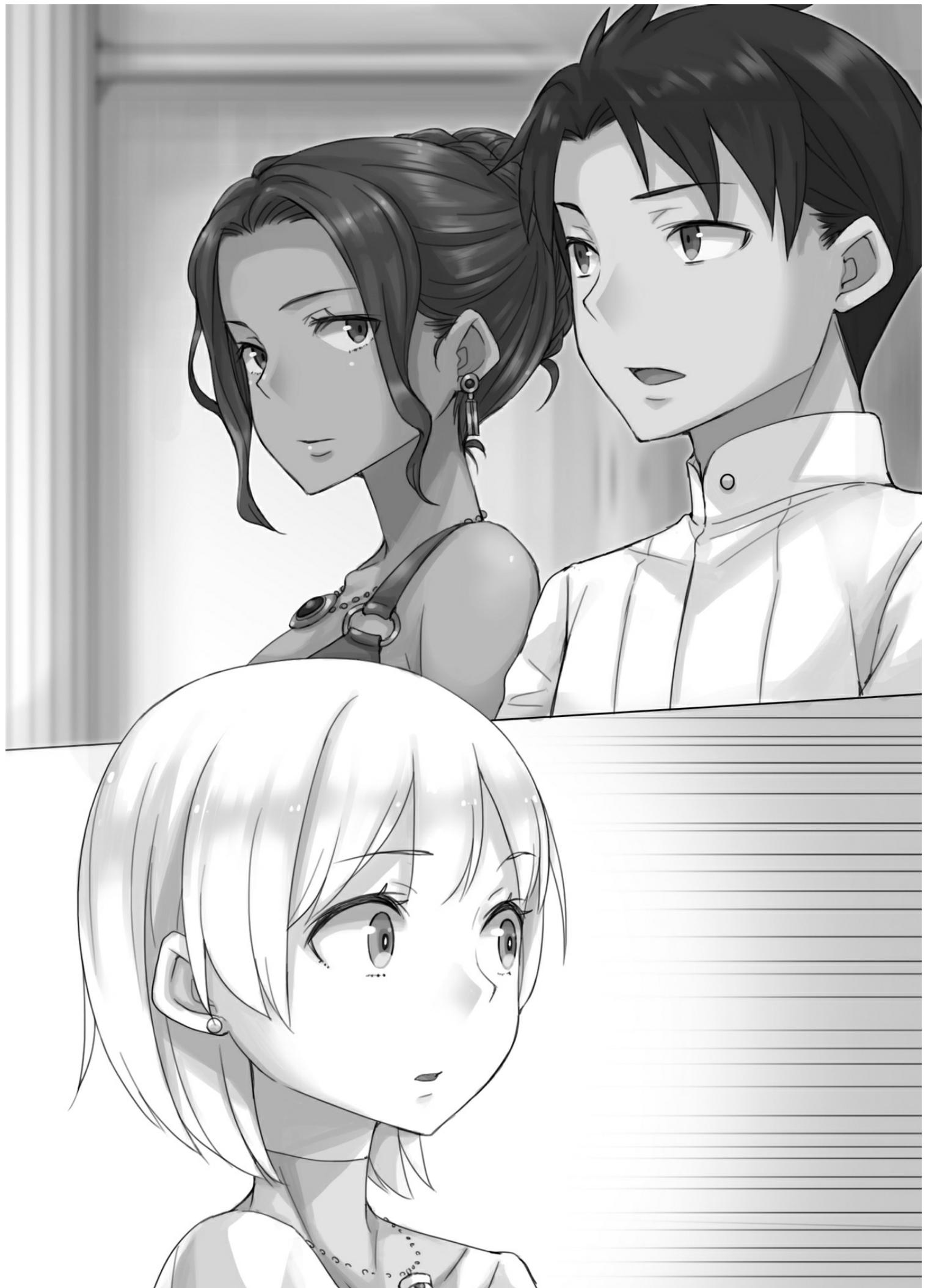
There were only two months until their planned departure for the Northern Kingdom. Her wish to get the tool to Valentia as quickly as possible was easily understandable. That was precisely why Aura and Zenjirou had picked this point to summon her.

"Hm. I can understand your desire to head for Valentia. You want as much time as possible to get your crew acquainted with the Lulled Sea, no? I may be unfamiliar with ship travel, but I am well aware that familiarity with one's tools can easily be the difference between life and death. I would therefore like to grant your request to go as soon as tomorrow."

"Thank you," Freya answered before waiting to hear what the queen would say next. Aura's tone had made it clear that this wasn't the end of the conversation.

Just as she had thought, the queen continued after a moment.

"That is precisely why I summoned you here so urgently. There are already only two months until the *Glasir's Leaf* departs. It seems unfortunately possible that you may not return to the capital before you leave, so this was my only opportunity. I shall therefore quarry right to the heart of the matter. Princess Freya, when you and your ship leave, would it be possible to add several passengers from our country?"



Freya looked shocked for a moment, but the request was fairly natural. For her, the biggest problem was gaining permission to marry into Capua from her homeland. However, from Aura's position, the arrangement was nothing more than a means to an end. The real goal was to—by the formation of that marriage—form a bond between the two nations and establish an international trade deal. While it fell in line with Freya's own goals, it was easily possible that Uppasala wouldn't be entirely happy about letting their first princess marry a foreign prince consort, even if it was of her own accord.

It was therefore entirely understandable that Capua would also want someone to negotiate on their behalf. Immediately understanding that, Freya instantly drew up estimates in her head of the ship's capacity, their crew number, how long the journey would take, and so on to determine how much leeway they had.

"Well, until I speak to my vice-captain in Valentia, I cannot say for sure, but I estimate we could accommodate around ten people. Naturally, there will be no special treatment in terms of food and water rations."

Not wanting to give them too much hope, Freya offered a rather moderate number. If these passengers were brought along as "trade," they could have packed ten times that aboard. However, Aura was personally approaching to request their passage, so the delegation must have consisted of ambassadors with permission to act in her stead, in which case, she couldn't treat them nearly as roughly.

Still, the voyage would be a tough one, so her final comment about water and food was nothing but the cold hard truth. Then again, as far as water went, they would be in much better shape than they had been on the trip to Capua—assuming the magic tool for purification worked as they hoped.

While Freya was considering all that, she was surprised to see Aura turn to look at Zenjirou, who nodded once.

Puzzlement, realization, and finally shock flitted through her mind. The mere possibility she had just considered was so shocking she could not hide it from her face. Zenjirou's next words to her showed that this "possibility" was, in truth, fact.

"Thank you for that permission, Your Highness. The would-be passenger is me, Zenjirou Capua. Naturally, I would not be alone, but the specifics can be confirmed once the precise number of potential passengers is calculated."

As he spoke, he forced a smile onto his face. While he may have resolved himself to doing so, spending a hundred days at sea on a wooden ship was scary for a person from modern Earth. But now that he had spoken the request before Freya, there was no taking it back.

Still unable to hide her shock but understanding his seriousness, Freya pressed him. "Are you certain? I know this may be rude to say, but perhaps the two of you are looking too lightly on this voyage?"

Zenjirou kept the false smile on his face as he met her ice-blue eyes and conceded the point. "It is hard to truly refute that. Indeed, I know little more of sea travel than you have told me."

Aura offered a shrug and her own reply. "Yes, that is likely somewhat true. Even so, I believe this is the best decision. I hardly think I need to speak of the benefits to you."

"You are correct. Truly, I have no reason to object. I simply wish to know if you are both certain."

Morbid though it was, sharing the ship with her meant Zenjirou would literally be in the same boat as her crew if there was an issue. From her perspective, if he were to sink beneath the waves, there was a high probability that she would be sharing his fate. Therefore, she focused on the benefits of making it to Uppasala, which was a much more welcome outcome for her.

However, as someone more familiar with the open ocean, she could not let someone viewing it lightly pass without comment. It was honest, good advice.

The queen nodded with a serious look. "You stated that the Lulled Sea and water purification magic tools would greatly increase the safety of the crossing. Also, while I will refrain from sharing specifics, there will be multiple other safeguards in place to protect Zenjirou."

Freya noticed the prince consort's expression falter for a moment as Aura made her statement. Unless she was mistaken, he looked guilty. The

combination of his reaction and Aura's words actually put Freya at ease, if anything.

I see; the safeguards she mentioned are to protect only him.

Capua's lineal magic was space-time magic. She had personally experienced what was perhaps their trump card—the teleportation spell—on several occasions now. The queen's ambiguous wording and Zenjirou's guilty face let her easily guess that he'd have a way to activate the spell for himself.

With that understood, things were much more easily done. Freya even felt more lighthearted about it.

"I understand. In that case, I would be willing to welcome you aboard. However, I must reiterate the risks of a long sea journey in addition to the various inconveniences inherent to such a voyage. Please bear these warnings well in mind."

Her icy-blue eyes zeroed in on Zenjirou's own dark eyes as she spoke. Her statement made him feel like he'd really stepped off the precipice now, and he gulped before replying.

"Very well. I suppose it will be a long journey, but I shall leave it in your hands, Princess Freya—no, Captain Freya," he said, a smile on his face, even if it was only a bluff.



The next day, Freya left with both the Lulled Sea and her retinue, as promised, for Valentia. Considering she had attended the party the night before as well, it was a fair burden on her.

Zenjirou could have teleported Freya and Skaji if it was just them going—and he had indeed made the offer—but Freya had refused decisively.

That was to be expected, really. The Lulled Sea could change the fate of the *Glasir's Leaf*, and conveying such precious cargo personally was a natural stance to take.

The unexpected thing was that Lucretia had asked to accompany them. According to her, since the Broglie family had been its custodians, she could be

of use in instructing them on its operation.

It was a logical argument, and beneficial to Freya, so the princess had no choice but to accept. Lucretia purposely moving away from her target (Zenjirou) in the capital was merely following Freya's advice: if she wanted to marry Zenjirou, it was important that she win the favor of Aura, his legitimate wife. Additionally, if the marriage was to the benefit of Capua—country and family alike—Aura would accept it. Demonstrating her own value in this way was, in a certain respect, a rather admirable act.

Whatever the case, Lucretia was departing with Freya. Zenjirou, on the other hand, was still busy within the capital.

Today, he would be sitting in on a meeting between one of the guests from the Twin Kingdoms—Fiqriya of the Animeeum family—and the leading Capuan mage, head mage of the court, Espiridion.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," the former greeted the latter. "I am Fiqriya, carrier of the name of Animeeum from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. I could ask for no greater honor than to meet you, Sir Espiridion. You are famed across the continent for your skill in magic."

As she spoke, Fiqriya bowed her head, letting her relatively short hair fall forward slightly. Her dark eyes were sparkling, and there was unquestionable energy to her tone.

Zenjirou was only an acquaintance at best, but his opinion of her was that of a cool and collected intellectual, so it was rather surprising to see her this way. The beautiful woman's cheeks were flushed slightly as she smiled. If she had been opposite a man around her own age, it might have led to their imagination getting away from them, but fortunately, the man across from her was an elderly sage.

"I am likewise honored to hear that, Lady Fiqriya. I am Espiridion, the leader of Capua's court mages."

With his conversation partner being a high noble from another country, Espiridion's reply was polite. Fiqriya seemed slightly ill-at-ease with his behavior and frowned.

"Please, you need not speak so formally with me. I am here as a researcher who has reached an impasse. I would have your candid and honest opinions," she said with an intent look.

Espiridion weathered her gaze, stroking his beard once before laughing heartily. "You need not worry there. I am not proud of it, but this old man has yet to let a word go unsaid in a magic discussion, whomever I am speaking with."

The dark-haired girl's smile widened. "I am glad to hear it."

"Of course, an overly formal way of speaking will certainly interfere in a proper debate. If you are willing, I can speak in the same way I usually would."

"I would like nothing more." She nodded with a grin.

"Very well. Then let us speak not of status, but unreservedly, as two people unraveling the mysteries of magic." As he spoke, he gave an even more unreserved smile.

It seemed like the two of them had fairly positive impressions of each other from the introductions. Relieved, Zenjirou cleared his throat to draw their attention and spoke.

"You seem to be done with your greetings. I am simply providing the space to meet. I do not have the knowledge to follow high-level magic discussions, so pay me no further mind and continue as you both wish."

"Very well, Sir Zenjirou."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The mage and researcher bowed in unison. Still, despite telling them to pay him no mind, it was hard to forget when there was someone of a much higher station so nearby. At first, Fiqriya's gaze was constantly flicking to where Zenjirou was seated. However, once she received Espiridion's corrections on her documents, she completely forgot the younger of the two men.

"I should return this first. I did not have much time, so I have only looked it over once."

Fiqriya gulped upon receiving her work back. "Could I ask for your opinion?"

she asked after a pause.

The mage shrugged slightly as she chewed her lip nervously. “‘Naive’ would be how I summed it up. There were at least three mistakes in the rules of the language, and likely two more, with another possible one. If I were taking you on as an apprentice, I would have you review your fundamentals in that respect first.”

“I see...” She was clearly somewhat discouraged by his harsher-than-expected summation.

“However, there was mention of a new rule that I was unaware of. Rather impressive. The lack of time meant that I could only verify it in simple cases, but I believe it to be correct. I am deeply intrigued by how you arrived at that conclusion. Would you be willing to explain while you correct the mistakes?”

“Of course. Please wait a moment.”

That exchange reenergized her, and she immediately turned her gaze to the document. The periodic circlings, double lines, and additional notes were probably the older man’s comments. While having her opus so heavily marked up was probably disheartening, her curiosity seemed to overwhelm her when taking into account the mage’s renown.

“This part... Oh, I see. Indeed, you are quite right. These three locations are my mistakes—no, my lack of knowledge. It does not make a perfect rule. As for the point you praised...that was the rule regarding water magic. My family is a leading figure in water magic, so I have a firm foundation there.”

She almost seemed to be denying it was her own ability, simply shaking her head with a chagrined look. Espiridion raised a single white eyebrow as he listened.

“Hm? I *did* think that there was a relatively large amount of material on water magic. I believe it was followed by earth, then around the same levels of wind and fire.”

“Indeed. That is the rough breakdown of my leanings, so my knowledge of the language is along similar lines.”

By that point, the two of them had completely forgotten about Zenjirou’s

presence and began speaking in earnest. The main conversation was Fiqriya asking a question and Espiridion answering it, but their roles reversed on several occasions when they discussed water magic.

They seemed to have reached a stopping point when Espiridion took a sip of the now lukewarm tea and let out a satisfied sigh.

“It has been a while since I have had such a stimulating discussion. Youth today are focused solely on learning spells, with far too few interested in the language itself. I see you are far more promising in that respect.”

Fiqriya chuckled. “Thank you. Learning magic, becoming proficient in magic, or developing new magic are all activities that expand individual or collective abilities, so it is hardly a surprise that many are drawn in that direction. However, the language forms the foundation of all of that, and deepening one’s understanding of it can pave the way for further magic, so I believe we should place more importance on it,” she agreed.

Espiridion’s complaints and Fiqriya’s rueful agreement made Zenjirou think back to his lessons with Octavia. The requirements for a successful spell were the correct pronunciation, the correct amount of mana, and the correct visualization. Conversely, one could say that if you knew the correct pronunciation, mana amount, and visualization, the spirits would do anything.

The bottleneck there, though, was the research into the language that the two had been lamenting. The magic language was difficult. A short sound contained many meanings, and a simple difference could change the meaning utterly.

Additionally, the language commonly had completely different pronunciations for words when they were in the present tense, present continuous tense, past progressive tense, and future progressive tense. Depressingly, the same held true for numbers.

All of this was Zenjirou’s subjective feeling, but he’d say that it would be ten times harder to learn the language of magic’s numbers than someone learning Japanese as a second language would find it.

In Japanese, if you took the numbers one to ten, the first three were simple. They were usually just read as *ichi*, *ni*, and *san*. After that, though, four was

commonly read as either *yon* or *shi*. Five and six were simply *go* and *roku*, but seven could be either *nana* or *shichi*.

Additionally, the same number was used in different ways depending on what you were counting.

Pigs were counted with *hiki* after the main number, cows with *tou*, and birds with *wa*. Rabbits used the same as birds, but pens used *hon*, books used *satsu*, and paper used *mai*.

With *hiki*, one through three became *ippiki*, *nihiki*, and *sanbiki*. The pronunciation morphed depending on the number.

If the way the sounds morphed was consistent, it would have been one thing, but *tou* was *ittou*, *nitou*, and *santou*—not *sandou*. With *wa*, it was *ichiwa*, and *niwa*, the *wa* pronunciation didn't change even for "one." The issue, though, was that while *sanwa* was fine, *sanba* wasn't wrong either.

He found it rather understandable that learning how to *properly* count in Japanese on one's own rather than learning from someone who already knew it was seen as horribly difficult. The changes that numbers underwent in the language of magic, however, were easily ten times that of Japanese. It almost let him imagine how difficult fumbling out a new spell could be.

While the soul of language meant you heard "eleven offerings of mana," there were nearly a hundred different ways that even the word "eleven" could be said. Deciphering the language was akin to drawing up a distribution map for every living thing in the sea.

While it should, in theory, be finite, human intellect would probably never see its end, even after generations.

"This word, *saltwater*, is rather intriguing," Espiridion said. "Its restrictions mean it is of little practical utility, but it seems like it would be a drop-in replacement for most water spells. I gave your saltwater manipulation spell a trial and it certainly functioned."

"Indeed. While water creation was, naturally, incompatible, with water manipulation, simply replacing the word 'water' with 'saltwater' and adjusting the costs accordingly made the spell function as expected."

“Quite. While the water manipulation spell itself can also function on saltwater, the specialized spell uses *far* less mana. It seems safe to say that the more limited the compatible targets of a spell are, the less mana it uses.”

“I believe so, yes.”

The elderly sage and potential sage’s cheery conversation was unsurprisingly mostly outside of Zenjirou’s ability to understand. However, the small parts he *did* understand seemed to be contradictory to him.

His doubts must have shown on his face, because as the conversation ebbed, Espiridion seemed to suddenly notice his presence and turn the conversation to him.

“Oh, Sir Zenjirou. Is something on your mind? I will happily answer if I am able.”

Fiqriya’s gaze turned to evaluate him at the same time. He felt it would be ruder not to say anything at this point, so he simply spoke his mind. “There is. It is nothing major, but I had a thought. If I understood you correctly, then Fiqriya’s research is incorrect in several places, no? Yet spells using those hypotheses work correctly?” Zenjirou felt it was similar to someone learning the wrong formula for a problem and yet somehow getting the correct answer.

The older man smiled happily at his question. “Ah, that is one of the trickier parts of the language. While from a broader perspective, Fiqriya’s hypotheses break down, they are valid in some ways. Applying specialized hypotheses to everything is the wrong way to research the language, but it *is* an effective tool for finding new spells.”

“I see,” Zenjirou said, doing his best to follow the sage’s explanation.

It actually seemed somewhat similar to the relationship between Newtonian mechanics, the theory of relativity, and quantum mechanics. According to Newtonian mechanics, if you applied a constant acceleration to something, it would eventually exceed the speed of light. In reality, though, it never could.

In other words, you could say that the explanation was wrong, but outside of particle accelerators, everything on Earth could be predicted through it. That was why it was still used despite people knowing that it was “wrong.”

Zenjirou could see how a similar thought process could mean that Fiqriya's hypotheses were wrong and yet would allow him to use a new spell. "I see. Then—and this is just a proposal—but why should those specialized examples not be announced as-is? With a disclaimer that they are, in fact, limited, that is."

The other two gave rather reluctant reactions.

"I would not refuse were you to order it, but I would be against it. Simple spell developers would use it to form all kinds of spells that fell within it. It is hardly pleasant to think about them using the hard-earned—and fundamentally flawed—results of Fiqriya's research to simply create new spells."

The woman in question was rather taken aback by someone addressing their own royalty so reluctantly, but she soon rallied and gave a more restrained response.

"I think Sir Espiridion is correct, Your Majesty. Would you be willing to explain the reasoning behind your suggestion?"

Zenjirou was somewhat lost at their reaction but explained his thoughts.

"I am an amateur and so may be somewhat wrong, but I would have thought that would facilitate the development of the language you were aiming for. Most of the people involved with magic are interested in making new spells, right? So new rules—even if they were not entirely valid—could be used to do exactly that. I would believe that you could see much quicker progress than the two of you—however skilled you are—working relatively alone. I thought that if you used those newly developed spells for further research, it would help your research."

Taking a basic hypothesis and putting it into practice and then letting that practical use feed back into further research was, from Zenjirou's perspective, a normal thing to do, suggested with no real thought.

However, magic research was a solitary endeavor in this world—or perhaps occasionally shared with a few apprentices at most—so it was rather strange to them. That was likely a side effect of seeing the way to keep research's value being to keep it secret, and not just for lineal magic.

Abnormal though the idea was, Espiridion was not called a sage for nothing and could see its benefits. The man rested a hand on his chin to consider it. “I see. A multitude of magic to use for further research is indeed a benefit. The tendency towards keeping our results close to the chest is nothing more than a side effect of how we carry it out to begin with. I can understand your point. However, knowledge is power and money alike, so I cannot call the tendency outright *wrong*. I propose we leave the final decision in this matter to Fiqriya. What do you think?”

The woman put her own hand to her chin to think about it as well. Eventually, she seemed to come to a decision and looked up before speaking carefully.

“In that case, anything but the last hypothesis—the one you praised, Sir Espiridion—would be things I would not mind being made public.”

“Hmm. So you’d rather not publish the complete project, then,” the older man said teasingly.

However, Fiqriya shook her head, albeit with a conflicted smile. “No. While I cannot say I do not feel that way on at least some level, the more fundamental problem is that the spell that forms its foundation is a secret magic of the Animeeum family.”

Both Espiridion and Zenjirou exchanged looks at her easy claim of why it couldn’t be published.

“In which case, surely you should not have even shown it to us, let alone considered publishing it?”

While Zenjirou’s concern was expected, the woman replied with a somewhat chagrined smile. “Truthfully, it is secret in name only. The tradition was lost so it became a non-viable spell. Of course, I did get permission from my father, Duke Animeeum, before sharing this with you both.”

Zenjirou had the briefest confusion about how such a thing could be *lost*, but then remembered that the family was originally a nomadic tribe. Missing the chance to pass knowledge down would be fairly simple in such a harsh lifestyle.

“Very well, then. I suppose I may have asked you some rather difficult questions,” Zenjirou said.

They likely didn't want to admit they'd *lost* their secret magic.

"Not at all. If anything, I would love to talk about it. I want as many perspectives and opinions as possible to develop my research, but it is seen as taboo within my family, so very few will even listen."

Zenjirou would have loved to have said he wouldn't either, but simply deferring to that kind of thing was a poor position to take for royalty. He turned a questioning look to the foremost expert in the country, prompting the man to ponder things before offering a slight nod. When he turned back to Fiqriya, Espiridion continued as if nothing had happened.

"That is quite intriguing. If you can, I would like to hear more about it."

The "if you can" was a subtle statement that if there were any diplomatic incidents that arose from this, they would be entirely on Fiqriya's head, but the woman's smile didn't falter as she began to speak.

"Thank you both. Your Majesty, Sir Espiridion, have you heard of the traditions of the four ducal families? Actually, in this case, it would be more accurate to say the four tribes."

Zenjirou immediately shook his head, followed shortly after by Espiridion, who had needed to think about it.

"Unfortunately not," Zenjirou replied.

"Hmm...from before the country's founding? That far back, no, I have not." Her smile deepened. "I suppose that is only to be expected. Before the country was founded, our tribes were nomadic. We had no writings to pass down and relied solely on the shaky foundations of oral tradition. According to those traditions, each of our tribe leaders had their own jinnia."

"Jinnia?" Zenjirou asked.

Espiridion seemed to know of this, though, and interjected with an explanation. "It was a legend passed down by the desert tribes of spirits that had even greater power than usual, and even physical forms. Frankly, I see it as nothing more than a tall tale, but did they exist after all?"

Espiridion leaned forward eagerly, but the younger researcher simply

shrugged and shook her head.

“No. As you surmised, it was nothing more than a tall tale.”

“Alas.”

Fiqriya chuckled at his reaction before continuing. “The legends and conclusions I drew from the spell are all I have to go on, but I believe it to be something the tribes used to strengthen their influence. To say we were the offspring of those great jinnia and the four heroes... It was likely an attempt to claim some sort of lineal magic and be recognized by our neighboring countries as royalty. As you can see from our history, though, it was in vain. However, our ancestors were persistent and continued their fruitless efforts to create that now-lost spell. They called it jinnia summoning.”

Fiqriya was rather cheerily going through her ancestors’ somewhat embarrassing history. Her enjoyment of it made Zenjirou think she might have had some biases against her family, but she didn’t seem to be taking *malicious* joy in the tale, at least.

While he couldn’t say for sure, he decided it was probably joy at unearthing previously hidden history. While Zenjirou was considering that, Espiridion had started questioning the spell with interest.

“Hmm, so presumably that spell was never functional?”

Fiqriya shook her head. “While I cannot say for sure, as far as I have been able to determine, it was.”

Now it was Zenjirou’s turn to voice his doubts. “That seems rather odd. While it may now be lost, if the spell was in use in the past, then surely it is proof that the spell’s target—these jinnia—existed in the past.”

After all, she had just now discounted their existence. That seemed to be exactly what she was waiting for. Her smile broadened as she continued her explanation.

“Indeed. To be more precise, a spell called jinnia summoning existed, but it did not in fact summon jinnia. First, the ceremony used for the spell was several mages working in concert. The leader had to be a direct descendant of those jinnia, and could even carry out the ceremony in our normal language—not the

language of magic.”

“A likely story,” the old mage snorted.

He was quite correct. There were no examples of several people pooling their strength to cast a single spell. Casting a spell without the language of magic was nothing but fantasy either.

“The summoning spell was actually a complex interweaving of creation, manipulation, and animation spells. The evidence for that is that there were many instances of a person with large amounts of mana and proficiency in magic participating in a support role, despite being ostensibly better suited than a person from the chief’s family who cast in our normal tongue.”

“Ah, so that’s how they did it.”

Her explanation was enough that Zenjirou could see how the “summoning” actually worked. It was essentially a magic version of the helping hands skit.

The leader of the ceremony would be at the front, saying something grand in their usual language like, “Oh great jinnia of our ancestors’ ancestors. Heed the call of our blood and answer my summons,” which would draw all the attention to them.

While the focus was on them, the real mage would use the language of magic to cast the real spell. The reasoning was simple. This world had an extremely convenient automatic translation effect called the soul of language. Due to that, a third party would be able to tell in an instant that the “jinnia summoning” was in fact no such thing. After all, translated incantations were brutally to the point.

Since Fiqriya had called it a combination of creation, manipulation, and animation spells, it was likely something along the lines of *“Water in the air, gather here, take the form of a maiden and then move according to my will.”* There was no room for misinterpretation there.

It was somewhat rude, but it made him smile a little, imagining their ancestors doing that while looking deadly serious. He pushed down the urge to laugh as he continued.

“So you mean to say that the real spell used behind the scenes was lost?”

Perhaps along with the public-facing ‘spell’ and group ceremony?”

Assuming it was still around, it would be an important piece of the tribes’ history regardless. Fiqriya gave a conflicted look before capitulating.

“Well...unfortunately, much of the public ritual made its way down. The Elehalieucco tribe’s in particular seems to have made its way down the generations mostly untouched. Shuura is in the midst of poi— Putting her efforts into resurrecting the tradition.”

Zenjirou’s ears pricked, certain she had been about to say “pointless effort” but he wasn’t so crass as to point that out here.

“I see. That is a shame. I seem to remember Lady Shuura from that family has a fair amount of mana as well,” Zenjirou said, thinking back to when he’d met the four beauties.

In terms of mana alone, Shuura was easily the most gifted. Conversely, Fiqriya here had the least by far.

Shuura was the eldest daughter of the main family. Fiqriya, though, was from a branch family and had earned her way to adoption by the main branch through her knowledge of magic. There was naturally a difference there.

“Due to how things happened, many of the people in the families—particularly the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families—truly believe in the ceremony. Shuura is putting in the most effort to its recreation, but that is the case for both of the families I have mentioned, along with the Elementaccato and even my own families,” she said with a quirk to her lips.

“I see, so that is the state of things,” Zenjirou nodded understandingly.

If there were a large number of people who believed in the ceremony and were truly trying to recreate it, he could understand why Fiqriya’s research was not ideal for publishing.

It would mean that there were in fact no jinnia, and the spell was actually just gathering whichever of the elements and making them behave in that way. However much proof she brought to bear, it would never be accepted. The very fact that her research had “hit a dead end” was in regard to the replication of the spell. Researching while keeping it secret would be inefficient. Still, it was

incredible she had the results she did.

“So, if you are *certain* that the spell was originally a hoax, have you succeeded in replicating it?” Zenjirou asked, the only one of the three who hadn’t read the research in question.

Fiqriya nodded confidently. “As you have discerned, I have. It is significantly minimized and simplified, but I succeeded in casting the spell.”

“Espiridion?” Zenjirou asked, looking for confirmation from the man. The mage shrugged and shook his head.

“I can only say it as likely. The incantation should indeed give such an effect, but I have yet to succeed in casting it. Well, the two other spells were successes, but that one eludes me yet.”

The failure probably pained his pride, so he’d felt the need to add that extraneous information. The language in the west of the Southern Continent, the language of the center, and even the languages of the Northern Continents all lacked characters to precisely record the pronunciation of the language of magic. It was like showing the difference between an English “R” and “L” using hiragana. There was a slight difference in pronunciation, but the same character had to be used for both. But this was on a much larger scale.

A mage of Espiridion’s caliber could—for simple spells—look at the recorded pronunciation and use his own knowledge to determine a likely pronunciation, but the simplified jinnia summoning was apparently impossible for even him to replicate in that way.

“If you would like, I can cast it here,” Fiqriya offered.

Struck with curiosity, Zenjirou turned to Espiridion to ask for permission, only prompting him with his name. The man considered it for a while. “It should be fine. I am sure it is not dangerous.”

The spell that was to be cast was not dangerous to begin with, and if Fiqriya was plotting something unsavory, he should be more than enough to defend Zenjirou. With that permission, Zenjirou moved to indulge his curiosity.

“If you would, then, Fiqriya.”

“Of course. Could I ask for some aid with my preparations? I need two bowls of about this size,” she said, gesturing. “One should be filled with water and the other empty. Could I also borrow a cup around this size?” She had started off with a smile but shifted to a more embarrassed tone as she asked.

“Ah, the incantation you prepared did not contain anything for creation. So that was what you meant by ‘simplified.’”

“Indeed.”

Zenjirou didn’t entirely follow, but Espiridion seemed to, so it must have been the case.

“Very well; it will be done,” Zenjirou said before turning to call to the maids and soldiers behind the door.

Some time later, the table they were seated around was home to a silver bowl of water, an empty bowl of the same size, and a silver cup.

“This should work. Pardon me,” Fiqriya said, excusing herself from her seat and picking up the cup to dip in the water.

“That...is a little too much...” she said, scooping up some water from the bowl before returning some of it, carefully measuring the amount. “This should work,” she said eventually.

She then placed the half-full cup on the table. Then, she stood in front of the table and placed her right index finger into the water, just up to the first joint.

“Water in this container, follow my commands and take the form of a person. As compensation, I present two hundred and three offerings of mana to the spirits of water.”

The effect was immediate. The water stood within the cup. Perhaps the best way to put it was that it was deformed as much as it could be while still being recognizably humanoid. It had visible limbs, a torso, and a head, but no digits, and its head was smooth with no semblance of hair. Its head made up roughly a third of its height.

It had been made from just a cup of water, so it was roughly big enough to place on someone’s palm. Still, it was immensely impactful to see.

“Oh!” Zenjirou marveled, leaning forward unconsciously.

Figriya seemed pleased with his reaction, her face breaking into a smile as she lifted the cup. As its proportions might suggest, the figure didn’t have much in the way of a sense of balance, so it rolled around in the cup.

It made Zenjirou feel kind of bad even as he found it cute, but the caster herself seemed to feel nothing, simply tipping it out into the empty bowl. The figure floundered for a while but eventually managed to stand in the middle of the bowl. Standing must have been its default state.

As the two men looked on with interest, Figriya gave a small command. “*Advance.*”

The little figure started walking across the bottom of the bowl. Of course, even for a small doll made of water, the bowl was small, so it soon reached the edge and slipped over. However, it floundered its way back to its feet and simply went right back to it, walking over and falling again.

It probably hadn’t been doing so for even a minute. The effect had then run its course and it lost its shape, splashing into a cup’s-worth of water in the bottom of the bowl.

“That is as far as I have gotten. It seems to require specific commands in the language of magic, and I have only managed to implement *advance*,” she said regretfully.

Espiridion’s interest seemed to have been entirely piqued, though, and he made his way over to Figriya with a swiftness belying his age.

“Interesting. Very interesting. The initial careful measurement was to eliminate the part of the spell that adjusts the amount automatically to reduce the mana expenditure, no? The phrasing of ‘*follow my commands*’ suggests there should be a great deal of freedom in its actions with the right additional phrasing. I shall be borrowing this a moment.”

As he spoke, Espiridion practically pushed her away from the bowl to stand there himself. He put his wrinkled index finger into the water that had been a humanoid until a moment ago and spoke an incantation.

“Water in this container, gather at my finger and briefly take the form I desire.

As compensation, I present one hundred and fifty-six offerings of mana to the spirits of water."

"Impressive, Sir Espiridion."

He had fluently chanted the water manipulation spell, which had impressed Fiqriya in some way. It was beyond Zenjirou, but apparently, it was possible to tell someone's proficiency in magic by listening to their pronunciation.

The enchanted water gathered at his finger before the blob morphed into a humanoid figure.

"Hm."

Then, with a mental command from the man, it began to steadily walk across the bowl. At a glance, it seemed to be a perfect recreation of Fiqriya's spell. However, it was different on closer inspection. Fiqriya's simplified summoning had been entirely independent, but Espiridion's manipulation magic had the figure's head connected to his finger by a fine strand of water.

"That should be sufficient for the image," he said, almost mumbling to himself as he ordered it to move into the cup.

It lost its shape and poured like some viscous fluid, quickly moving into the cup from the bowl. Once it was done, he cut the spell and removed his finger from the cup.

"I shall test it out. Fiqriya?"

"Yes?" she replied, straightening at the sudden address.

"I wish to try several things with the spell you demonstrated. If you notice anything, then inform me of it, would you?"

"Of course, Sir Espiridion."

The two of them had completely taken on a student and teacher vibe astonishingly quickly.

"Then here I go. I shall adjust the construction first..."

He put his finger back into the cup of water and cast the spell.

"Water in this container, follow my will and take the form of a person. As

compensation, I present two hundred and three offerings of mana to the spirits of water... Hmm, that would have been too convenient.”

The spell had not worked, but Espiridion did not seem unduly bothered, just shrugging.

“You changed *commands* to *will*. That would certainly be a dramatic improvement if it worked. I suppose even slightly changing the construction also changes the amount of mana required?” Fiqriya suggested, her eyes sparkling.

Espiridion continued looking at the cup, though. “That is eminently possible. However, the language is immensely delicate and complex. Replacing *commands* with *will* may well have caused some contradictory effect in the rest of the spell. It is worth considering, but I will return to the basics for now. *Water in this container, follow my commands and take the form of a person. As compensation, I present two hundred and three offerings of mana to the spirits of water.*”

This time, the spell was just as Fiqriya had originally cast it. As perhaps should have been expected, it functioned perfectly. The water in the cup once again took a small humanoid form.

“Sir Zenjirou, this will wet the table.”

Zenjirou nodded back at his warning. “I do not mind. Do as you will,” he answered, curious about the magic experimentation himself.

“Very well.” Espiridion then tipped the cup over—not into the bowl, but onto the table. Once the figure had found its feet on the flat surface, he gave a clear order. “*Advance.*”

The order was the same as earlier but now in a different place. Instead of being in a constrictive bowl, the figure began to walk, now with no impediments to its progress. As it continued steadily on with its somewhat comical gait, the old man gave another order.

“*Halt.*”

“Oh?!” Fiqriya exclaimed as it stopped on the spot.

Espiridion somewhat proudly stroked his beard at her impressed look and gave another order.

“*Turn around.* Hmm, I suppose not.”

He had been attempting to get it to pull an about-face, but it simply turned its head back to “face” Espiridion with its smooth features.

“How to change its direction?” he pondered, falling silent for a while.

“Perhaps this? *Return.*” The figure simply shuddered, but did nothing else.

“Hmm...what caused that?”

“Perhaps it cannot understand, Sir Espiridion?”

“I see. I suppose it cannot remember where it needs to ‘return’ to. What to do, then...”

“So these are the limits of my simplified version?”

“It is too soon to say, Fiqriya. Taking its abilities into account is the correct approach, but you must not lose sight of optimizing the commands either. In fact, you could say that is even *more* important in terms of researching the language of magic.”

“It is as you say.”

While the new student and teacher were talking, the spell reached its time limit and fell apart on the table with a splash.

“Oh, already? This is hardly enough time to test,” he said, white eyebrows drawing together in a frown.

A short period of effect was one of the shortcomings of this world’s magic. Even Zenjirou knew this; it was the most basic of basics, after all. But then he came up with an idea.

“Fiqriya, did the four tribes get the Sharou family to make the spell into a magic tool after the country was founded?”

The easiest way to solve the shortcoming of the time limit was via the Sharou family’s lineal magic. The static flames used as both heating and lighting in the palace would hardly be enough to even slightly warm water if it had to be used as a spell. While the normal jinnia summoning was only a parlor trick, making it

into a magic tool would improve its utility by leaps and bounds. It would effectively be one of the mainstays of fantasy fiction: a golem.

Fiqriya shook her head with a rueful smile as she answered Zenjirou's question—and hidden concern. "Unfortunately, there is no such thing. The four tribes kept the spell a secret from the Sharou family even after the country's founding, so there would be no way for it to be made."

Creating a magic tool from a spell required casting it several times in front of the enchanter. Claiming you could cast the spell because you were descended from the jinnia while the spell had phrases like "take human form" or "follow my commands" would completely expose it.

"Besides, there would be no use for it. Even my simplified version uses significant mana; I dread to think how much more a complete version would use. I estimate it would take at least ten years to complete. Additionally, as you just saw, the 'jinnia' cannot follow complex commands, so there is no point either."

"I see. I suppose so," he agreed, albeit with a cold sweat running down his back.

The time it would take to make, along with the lack of following complex commands, meant there was no reason to pursue making a magic tool. In other words, if that time could be shortened or the commands made more complex, it would be a completely different story.

The manufacturing time would be solved by the currently in-development marbles, while the complex commands seemed like there might be some breakthrough if the pair kept researching as they were...in which case, there could very well be a magic tool for jinnia summoning—or making golems of the four elements.

Even if they were limited in abilities, if they were cheap and plentiful, they could well be worth it. Fiqriya's current research was based on her specialty of water magic, but there had apparently been jinnia for fire, wind, and earth as well.

An earth jinnia could work in the mine that was worrying Talajeh without an issue. If it worked efficiently, it could even be used in place of dash drakes to

cross areas with no feeding or watering grounds.

A fire jinnia would be invaluable on the battlefield. Using them for the front line would both lower the number of wounded on their side and increase the same for the enemy. A wind jinnia could be used to counter the large flying drakes plaguing people on longer journeys.

Even a little thought let him think of several valid use cases. The marbles were only known to the Capua and Sharou families, so Fiqriya was unconcerned with it since she knew nothing of them, but if she eventually managed to reproduce the spell in full, the Sharou family would hear of it. With how much King Bruno and Crown Prince Josep wanted to strengthen their country, there was no way they would fail to think of what Zenjirou had.

Maybe we should put a stop to it now, he thought, keeping a smile on his face as he watched the other two interact.

“This was a rather productive meeting. You have my thanks, Fiqriya.”

“Likewise. It was an honor to receive your instruction. It feels like I have accomplished as much today as in the past three years on my own. Thank you very much.”

The old sage and younger researcher exchanged bright smiles.

That night, word reached Zenjirou that marbles suitable for magic tools were at last feasible to produce en masse.

Chapter 3 — The Isolation Barrier and Static Flame

Several days later, the bigwigs from both Capua and the Twin Kingdoms had managed to match their schedules to meet in the royal palace.

Queen Aura and Prince Consort Zenjirou were in attendance from Capua. From the Twin Kingdoms were Prince Francesco of the Sharou family and Princess Bona of the same. Also present was Talajeh from the Elementaccato family.

All five of them had rather busy schedules that needed much massaging to meet, so they had relatively little time. Fortunately, they had all been informed of the matters they would be discussing ahead of time, so they moved right into the main business with very little fanfare—only cursory greetings.

“So, the request is from Lady Talajeh here, or perhaps the Elementaccato family as a whole? It is for a magic tool for an isolation barrier,” Prince Francesco said. His tone was as far from tense as could be. He showed nothing but relaxation as he spoke.

At that, the commissioner—Talajeh in this case—nodded slightly. “Indeed. I have already obtained permission from Her Majesty.”

“The precise details are yet to be determined. If those conditions cannot be made to work, there is still the potential for this to come to nothing,” Aura warned with a slight smile on her lips. She wasn’t going to allow Talajeh to push things on as if everything was certain.

Zenjirou had been right. The blonde woman was every inch the merchant, and not one to let your guard down around.

Bona picked up the conversation there, a serious tone to her own voice. “The spell itself falls under Capua’s lineal magic, so it will of course require both families in cooperation to complete. Who from the Capua family will be participating?”

Her chestnut eyes rested equally on Zenjirou and Aura with an

inextinguishable light of curiosity. The commission was for a magic tool that used Capua's lineal magic, while the commissioner was the family holding sway over vast gold mines. They would be able to use very pure gold for its construction.

Despite the serious expression on her face, Zenjirou couldn't help but find the way that Bona was shifting excitedly in her seat amusing. She made him think of a dog who had been told "Wait" in front of its favorite treat.

"Zenjirou is often absent from the royal palace, so if the request is accepted, I shall be seeing it through," Aura answered. "While creating the tool may take a great deal of time, the continuous length of time I will be required is much lower. A rough estimate is fine, but approximately how long would its construction take?"

The queen's simultaneous answer and question prompted the two foreign royals to exchange glances.

"Well, the spell itself does not require particularly large amounts of mana, but the other requirements are harsh. It will need to automatically charge with enough mana to preserve the life of a miner and needs to be easily usable by even an amateur... I believe you'd be looking at around two years, give or take."

Slightly after Francesco finished, Bona came to about the same conclusion and agreed.

"That would be my rough estimate as well."

Naturally, that schedule was not taking into account the marbles up anyone's sleeves. Francesco's behavior sometimes made it hard to remember how secret it was, but the Sharou family could drastically reduce both the time and effort of enchantment with a transparent sphere.

It was a tightly guarded secret outside of the two royal families of the Twin Kingdoms. Therefore, things would be decided based on a normal schedule.

"In which case, the problems likely lie more with your side than our own. Which of you two will actually carry out the enchantment? As I will be providing the spell, it must be done within the palace. Inevitably, therefore, whichever of you is required will need to remain here for another two years."

Both of them had already been in Capua for over a year. Accepting the order would mean that their stay would be lengthened by another two. Of course, Capua had someone they could send instantly to and from the Twin Kingdoms —Zenjirou. Therefore, at least a few days could be spent back in their homeland, so it was not too grave a situation.

Still, that would be a *temporary* return. It changed nothing about the fact that the majority of their time would be spent abroad.

Both Francesco and Bona were both unwed despite being the right age for it. While there was a secret contract fundamentally forbidding Francesco from marriage, spending a whole two years here could have a significant impact on Bona's life.

Despite that, she spoke. “I-If it is acceptable to you, I would happily do so. The item will certainly be worthy of your name!”

Her eyes were sparkling and she was on the verge of standing from her seat, given how far forward she was leaning. The potential impact such a stay would have on her future seemed to have no bearing on her.

“Prince Francesco?” Aura asked. “Your opinion?”

The prince gave his usual affable smile as he agreed. “That’s fine. If Bona is eager to do it, then I’m glad to let her. There are plenty of other things I want to do.”

The comment brought Bona back from her own rampaging desires to remember her role.

“Prince Francesco. Please do not overly burden Their Majesties.”

Her homeland had appointed her to watch over him. However, if she were to turn her hand to the task of enchanting, it would take much of her time. There would be at least several days where she would be shut away in her workshop forming raw materials into the vessel for the enchantment. The fact that she still didn’t change her mind and say she would simply observe was proof of the passion of her engineering soul.

Regardless, the general agreement for the tool’s construction was now in place. Talajeh’s smile was twice as bright now that she had a path to buying her

objective.

“Queen Aura, Princess Bona, I look forward to your work, and I thank you in advance for your efforts.”

“I will simply be spending a few moments casting magic each day, so it is no major burden,” Aura said.

“Leave it to me, Talajeh. I will make sure it is to your satisfaction.”

Aura was fairly easy in her response, while Bona was almost excessively eager. Despite the difference in their levels of motivation, the result would certainly be something to look forward to.

“That makes me think,” Aura noted. “As was said, this will require around two years, no? Princess Bona will primarily be remaining within the country until it is complete. What of you, Talajeh?”

The blonde merchant thought briefly before offering a suggestion with a flattering smile. “That would be a somewhat poor use of time. I would like to make use of one of Your Majesties’ abilities to return to the Twin Kingdoms at some point. However, I would also like to keep abreast of the progress, so aid with returning would also be appreciated.” Talajeh’s eyes took on a searching look as she peered up through her eyelashes at the two local royals while waiting for a response.

The queen’s reply was quick and succinct. “Your return to the Twin Kingdoms is one thing, but coming back to Capua once more will be expensive.”

Sending someone home to the Twin Kingdoms would require a single usage of teleportation on either Zenjirou’s or Aura’s part. However, bringing someone from the Twin Kingdoms to Capua would need the caster to *also* be sent. Then there would be a second casting of the spell for the traveler, and then a third for the caster to return afterwards.

The bare minimum would be three casts of the teleportation spell. The caster would also need to spend a night in the country, which would cost at least five times as much.

The explanation sent the blonde’s mental abacus whirling back and forth. “Allow me to confirm: would I be permitted to bring as much with me on future

occasions as I have this time?”

“I would not object.”

Talajeh’s amber eyes softened further as she smiled. “Then there should be no issue. I will be able to pay the cost and even remain in the black.”

The queen couldn’t hide a reluctant smile at the merchant’s boast of being able to pay for several teleportations with what she could personally carry.

“Do try to not take excessive amounts of our currency. Intermediary amounts aside, ensure the final movements are in goods in both directions.”

Capua was a grand country with many rich nobles and merchants. However, there was a limit to the hard currency circulating within the country. Excessive amounts of it leaving to foreign lands would slow their economy.

“Understood.”

Once that was arranged, Francesco spoke up. “Perhaps we can allow Talajeh and Bona to retire to discuss things in more depth. After all, until the tool’s form is finalized, you will not be needed, Your Majesty.”

“You are correct, but what of you, Prince Francesco?” Bona asked, giving him a clearly questioning look at the suggestion. It was a logical idea but still sounded like he was using that logic as a pretense to get away from her watchful eyes.

The prince just offered an utterly open smile to the girl. “I have other matters to discuss with Their Majesties. I believe I will remain here for a while.” As he spoke, Francesco lifted a hand to feign brushing his hair from his ear. As he did, he put his index finger and thumb together in a ring for her to see.

The ring implied spheres, so Francesco wanted to talk to Aura and Zenjirou about the marbles. Bona had no choice but to withdraw, in that case. The marbles—transparent spheres—were deeply entwined with secrets of the Sharou family. While Talajeh was still here, it could not be discussed. Therefore, Bona’s role was to get her away from the discussion in as natural a fashion as possible.

While still somewhat uneasy, she could accede to that and so faced the

woman in question. “Very well. As you have heard, I will be leading the magic tool’s construction. I would like to discuss the particulars of its basic functions, its materials, its size, and so on. Would you be free after this, Talajeh?”

“I would. Thank you, Your Highness.” Then, the very embodiment of the phrase “time is money,” she stood.

A little time passed in silence after Bona and Talajeh had left the room. Once the two of them were definitely out of earshot, Aura spoke.

“So, as we planned, the public role now rests with Princess Bona. We can get to the real request. First, what we have. Now.”

The last word was directed to the narrow-faced secretary standing behind her. The man immediately put her order into action.

“Pardon me, Your Highness,” he said, placing a flat wooden box in front of the prince. He then lifted the lid to reveal a space divided into twelve: three compartments across vertically and four horizontally. Within those compartments were a total of ten marbles.

The box was lined with soft cloth to protect the marbles from accidents.

“My...” Francesco marveled.

“As you see, this is the second batch of jewels we have produced for the creation of magic tools. I would hear your unvarnished opinion,” Aura said. She straightened as she spoke, her full chest just as visible as her pregnant stomach. The prince didn’t spare her a glance, immediately taking the marbles out and carefully evaluating them one by one.

Silence reigned as his usually languid smile fell from his face to be replaced with an intense look as he inspected each of them. Both Aura and Zenjirou waited with bated breath. From a distance, the second batch looked much the same as the first. The coloring was still a slightly darker green than a ramune bottle, and there were visible bubbles in them. They also looked like proper spheres from where they sat, but so had the first batch.

After a long period of inspecting each one fully in turn, the Sharou prince offered his conclusions. “These four are not good enough. There are imperfections to too great an extent. The remaining six are passable. The color

is still somewhat dark, so they will be inferior to His Majesty's jewels, but they will still be a great aid as an enchanting medium."

Six out of ten was good enough. Next to Aura's almost menacing smile—as befitted her position as queen—Zenjirou's was a jumble of happiness and unease. They had, albeit somewhat imperfectly, succeeded in producing marbles now. It was like taking that first step over the peak of a hill. Once that step was taken, there was no stopping the trip down. It was impossible.

Would they be able to do anything? Would they manage to run the slope without falling? Or even nudge their course slightly? Whatever the case, they would not be going back up that hill.

His mind made up, Zenjirou spoke. "Would you note down what it was about each of the four that made them unsuitable?"

Simply turning them away without detailed reasons would only lower morale. However, if the issues were explained, it could be used as feedback to improve future examples.

Zenjirou then turned to his wife at his side. "Your Majesty. I would also like to return at least one—preferably three—of the passable versions as examples."

However precise the explanation, trying to make acceptable products with only the unacceptable versions to draw from was difficult. Having both good and bad examples *and* a detailed explanation for why the latter were lacking would allow for much more efficient improvement. His explanation of that had been considerably persuasive.

"Very well. Three will be returned to the craftsmen to learn from."

"Ah, Your Majesties? If I am *documenting* the inadequacies of these, then I would like to be paid for my consultation. I doubt you will be stopping with this second batch, correct?"

The prince didn't hide his dissatisfaction at the couple taking his conclusions and running with them without consulting him. While his evaluation didn't require much effort, he wasn't willing to work for free. His protests were hardly a surprise, especially with what he wanted being right in front of him. His desirous gaze was on full display, fixed on the acceptable marbles, prompting a

grin from Aura.

“Then we can present the three that are not being returned to the craftsmen to you.”

He jolted. “Really?”

Given how advantageous the offer was, the prince broke decorum and half-rose, hands on the table in front of him. The queen then placed her palm towards him as if to rein in his excitement.

“However, it goes without saying that I cannot offer *three* of these jewels to you for your evaluation. There is something else I wish to ask of you. A secret magic tool, to be precise.”

“Oh?”

He fell back into his seat, green eyes shining expectantly at his new client. The queen gave a half smile at the prince reacting as they’d assumed. She pulled another two marbles from her pocket and placed them on the table.

“These are to be the medium you use. I wish for magic tools for both teleportation and an isolation barrier. They need to be completed by the end of the year—so within two months. If doing both is impossible, you are to prioritize the latter. However, it needs to be able to be used immediately and must be single-use.”

The marbles she had presented were two that Zenjirou had given her, brought from Japan. They were to be his lifelines on his intercontinental voyage. This was not the time for scrimping.

The blonde prince took them and looked at both with interest, rolling them over his palm. Eventually, he looked back at the couple.

“These will make that relatively simple. The single-use teleportation should be doable within the day. The barrier should take five at most. Of course, I will need cooperation from one of you, though.”

Making a magic tool required both the enchanter and someone who could cast the spell that was to be imbued. Francesco could make magic tools using the basic elements alone, but both of the required spells fell under space-time

magic. Only someone from the Capuan royal family could use them. In other words, Aura or Zenjirou.

While there were technically two choices, there was only one choice for Aura. "I will assist with both," she said.

"Are you sure?" Francesco asked.

Zenjirou smiled ruefully as he agreed. "The possibility is much greater that I would cause you to waste your mana," he said.

Creating a magic tool consisted of enchanting the medium first and then casting the spell into it. The issue was that the time span for that second spell to be cast was far from generous. If Francesco gave the signal and Zenjirou fumbled the spell, there would be essentially no time for him to attempt to recast it.

Failing at the spell didn't use up mana, so Zenjirou could retry it repeatedly, but Francesco's spell would have already been successful, so the mana invested in it would have been wasted.

While Francesco had at least double the mana of Zenjirou, it was still limited, and enchanting took considerable mana. Repeated failures would not only inconvenience Francesco, they would also delay the tool's completion.

With Aura, though, it was practically a non-concern. If both of the tools could be completed far in advance of Zenjirou's planned departure, they could ask for more.

Zenjirou asked for and received Aura's permission with a look and put his hand into his pocket. He retrieved another marble.

"This is my request, Prince Francesco. You can leave it for last, but I would like you to enchant this as a static flame. Of course, if you are short on time, I will withdraw the request."

"A static flame? With that jewel, it can quite literally be done in moments," Francesco said with an askance look.

Zenjirou shook his head and pulled out a sheet of drake parchment. "The physical structure of it is the more complex part here. If you do not have the

time, then we can ask our own craftsmen to deal with everything other than the magic tool itself.”

As he spoke, he spread the parchment out to reveal a plan he had put great pain into drawing. He was not particularly artistically inclined, so it had taken a significant amount of effort to make something a third party could understand. But the blueprint seemed to be mostly understandable for the prince.

“This is rather interesting. The bottom part acts like a vise? Ah, to fix it to a table or the like. Then the static flame itself... Ah, it’s fixed inside this dark sphere with all the holes. The sphere is metal, I assume? You also drew a lidded cup? That is rather strange as well. The base is rounded and these protrusions look almost like claws.”

Zenjirou started to explain everything as best he could as the prince looked curiously at the blueprint. “I want to be able to attach that cup to the sphere with the flame inside. The claws should go into the holes on the sphere and make it hard to separate.”

The requested tool was, simply put, for a safe way to use fire on the ship. As far as he had found, fire was treated much the same way on ships here as it was during the age of sailing on Earth. The galleys had stoves, but they were only ever lit when the seas and skies were exceptionally calm. Most sailing was without any form of fire.

In other words, the majority of food would be dried meats and beans, pickled vegetables, and hard bread, all of them long-lasting. He didn’t feel confident he could withstand that, so he’d prepared a way to safely use fire at sea.

A static flame was as the name implied—a flame that did not deviate from a contained sphere. You could entirely surround it in either a metal net or some form of holed metal plate to almost completely negate the possibility of it spreading, even if the ship rolled completely.

Additionally, clamping it to a fixed structure like a desk would make the magic tool even less likely to move. Putting the metal cup atop it would allow for boiling a cup of water. He could then drink hot tea or make simple soups using the dried meat and beans even while they sailed.

The journey would be difficult at best, so he couldn’t underestimate any

lightening of the load through food and such. He also vaguely remembered reading somewhere that tea had a lot of vitamin C. Scurvy—caused by a deficiency of the vitamin—was inevitably linked to long sea voyages. The fact that none of the sailors had symptoms of it even after over a hundred days at sea meant that it might be a needless concern, but it still bothered him.

“If constructing the appliance will take too much time, I am more than happy for just the flame itself to come from you.”

That was something only an enchanter could create, but the rest of it could be delegated to the craftsmen. It would still be worth taking even if it wasn’t completed in time. If the trip went according to schedule, the *Glasir’s Leaf* would be arriving in Uppasala as the rainy season began in Capua. On Earth’s calendar, April. Zenjirou had a vague approximation of the climate there being akin to Northern Europe on Earth, and he couldn’t imagine them not needing some form of heating at that time of year.

Francesco spent a while inspecting the blueprints Zenjirou had drawn up before finally lifting his gaze from them. There was a confident, motivated smile on his face. “I understand the gist. I will attempt all three. The teleportation, the barrier, and the static flame.”

“Thank you,” Zenjirou replied, the tension leaving his shoulders.



That night, once they had eaten and bathed, Aura and Zenjirou discussed the events of the day as they always did. With his upcoming trip to the Northern Continent, they had commissioned the magic tools from Francesco in order to lower the risk to him to as close to zero as possible. Simultaneously, they had managed to successfully produce six marbles suitable for enchantment out of a set of ten. There was obviously a lot of room for improvement in terms of their transparency compared to the ones he had brought from Japan, though.

“We shall have to give the glass workers a reward. Extra pay is a given, but they are also close to burning through another furnace, so perhaps a longer break,” Aura mused contentedly.

Zenjirou then voiced a concern. “The money aside, are you sure about the break? In terms of the secret and their safety, I mean.”

The glassworkers were monumentally important now that they had succeeded. If the Twin Kingdoms could tempt—or take—one of them, it would have a massive impact on Capua. Zenjirou's concerns were entirely expected.

Aura had far more of a sense of things on that front, though, and felt that the risks and rewards balanced well enough to allow them the extra freedom. "I understand your perspective. However, shutting people away and making them work will not lead to results. Particularly for skilled jobs. The guards are watching every exit and entrance to the city and the business quarter is also under surveillance. The craftsmen will at least be ordered to keep their silence as well."

The phrasing of her final statement and the way she said it certainly left some doubts. After all, the craftsmen were not particularly well-drilled; they were normal people. Now that they'd completed a grand undertaking they'd surely drink to celebrate. Then some woman at the bar could ask what they'd been doing, and in all likelihood, the reply would be something like "This is just between us, but..."

It was practically inevitable. It would vary from person to person, but it was fairly long odds that only one of them would slip.

"And you're okay with that?"

Aura gave an unfriendly smile at his worrying. "Rather than being 'okay' or not, it is more of a matter of *when* it will happen. I hope that the specific method can remain hidden for our and Carlos's generations but there will be no hiding our success."

Even if they only traded with the Sharou family and drew up a contract between their two nations, sooner or later, that contract would be contravened. After all, the Sharou family's purchases would allow for an increase in production speed the likes of which had never been known. Hiding it would be impossible. In fact, some sharp-eyed nobles from each country might have already noticed the change despite most of the marbles being supplied by Zenjirou and used by Francesco.

"I want to maintain secrecy, but I also want to maintain our personnel. Shutting the glassworkers away and denying their freedom will make it an

unattractive craft, so maintaining our workforce in the future will be more difficult.” Her shoulders—slightly bared by her nightwear—lifted in a shrug as she spoke.

Crafting was greatly affected by the crafter’s motivation. Simply producing something that already existed was one thing, but creating a whole new industry was quite another. Without that motivation, it would be all but impossible.

She was aware that using the sovereign’s rights to gather and conscript the people would not have the effect she wanted, in which case, all she could do was allow the earning potential of this new profession to spread among the crafters and draw interested parties that way.

“At any rate, it is a matter for the future,” she summarized.

“I see.”

While he understood the surface level of what she was saying, he couldn’t fathom the specific way one would need to go about it. He’d just have to leave it to her.

“All right, then. I probably can’t help with that. On another note, you’ve ended up responsible for all the casting for the magic tools. Is that going to be okay?”

The negotiations had left Aura assisting with at least three magic tools—a barrier to sell to Talajeh, a tool for Zenjirou, and a teleportation aid for him as well.

Aura merely shook her head in response. “In both terms of the burden on my body and time, there should be no issue. I will simply visit Princess Bona or Prince Francesco when necessary and use the spell several times. Although the barrier aside, teleportation requires a significant amount of mana, so I will need to be wary on that front.”

A day spent making the teleportation tool would mean using the same amount of mana as casting the spell once. While she had far more mana than Zenjirou, she could still only use the spell three times a day. Any usage needed to be planned.

"Hmm, got it. If the schedule doesn't work out, then let me know. It might be a bit inconvenient for him, but I'm not incapable of doing it. Worst case, he said the teleportation tool will be done within a single cast, so I can do that. On that front, though, how much should I come clean to Princess Freya?"

The magic tools they'd just commissioned were things Zenjirou would be taking with him on the intercontinental trip. Freya was the captain of the ship he'd be traveling on, so they needed to decide how much to show of both the tools and their effects.

Aura's answer was immediate. "For the time being, keep the teleportation tool's existence a secret. It is too dangerous to reveal it, and there is no point regardless."

"Well, that's true."

He could only agree there. It was a trump card, a last resort, something he could use while abandoning everything else. It couldn't be allowed to fall into someone else's hands and there was no benefit to anyone else knowing about it. Aura's opinion on its secrecy there was practically inevitable.

"Conversely, you should most definitely show and explain the static flame tool to her. In fact, it may be best to have her use it for a while and give her permission to do so."

"Yeah, it does need that much caretaking."

He didn't have any objections to that either. It was a source of fire he'd be bringing and using aboard while at sea. Even assuming Francesco completed it exactly to his specifications, Zenjirou was completely unfamiliar with sailing, so it would be dangerous for him to assume it was safe. If he was wrong, it could set the ship ablaze. He'd need to explain and demonstrate it to the ship's owner and have her be familiar and happy with its use before he brought it on board.

If Freya or her vice-captain said it was not acceptable, he might even have to give up on it. Fortunately, it was not *necessary* for his survival.

Keep the teleportation secret, but tell her about the flame. Their opinions were as one up until that point. The issue was with the last item.

"There is no need to tell her about the barrier either. It is to protect you while

ashore. Additionally, keeping its existence hidden makes it more valuable for protection should the need arise.”

While she phrased it somewhat ambiguously, Aura was concerned that some of Freya’s subordinates might have loyalties to king and country more than to Freya herself. It was a remote possibility, but if the negotiations failed, things could devolve to force. In that case, the Northerners’ knowledge—or lack thereof—of the barrier would change things significantly.

While Zenjirou understood that, he could see another use for it. “Hmm, I’d rather tell her. I think that at the same time as the spell cuts off the interior from the exterior, it also fixes that interior in three dimensional space. If it *does*, then it could serve as an ultra strong anchor if things came to it.”

“The barrier serving as an anchor? What do you mean?” she asked, pressing for an explanation to supplement her lacking knowledge.

“Uh, well the spell cuts off a space and stops outside interference, right? So the cut off space is probably fixed in place as well. If not, you could dig under it and make it move.”

“I understand your point, now,” she said. Despite that, there was an issue. If his hypothesis was correct, then would it not be left behind in the planet’s orbit and rotation?

Despite that thought, he decided not to consider it for now. If that was the case then trying to use teleportation at different times of year could put you at a different point in the planet’s orbit. The convenience and absurdity of magic was beyond his ability to understand in full.

“So I thought that using it aboard the ship might fix the ship as a whole in space.”

“I see. Which would make it an anchor,” she said, clapping in full understanding of his point.

If *part* of the ship was fixed in space, that would inevitably mean the rest of it was also fixed. It was certainly worthy of the moniker of “anchor.”

“What would the point be, though? Would it be better than a normal anchor?”

Zenjirou scratched at his head with a concerned expression. “It probably wouldn’t be much different when you’d normally use an anchor. It wouldn’t work in most cases, but if the *Glasir’s Leaf* were strong enough, it’d be a light in the darkness for the sailors, especially those who got seasick.”

A normal anchor kept a ship in position, but it did not stop its rocking completely. Additionally, in deep enough seas, it was completely ineffective.

This would be different, though. It fixed space itself in place, so it would be effective anywhere, and the ship would be just as stable as if it were on land. It would be a blessing beyond compare to those who got seasick and even veteran sailors would benefit from the ship being completely still when they had to perform any number of risky, complex jobs. In that respect, it could be said to be even better than the Lulled Sea.

“Hm. But you think that it would not work in most instances?” she asked, looking at him with interest.

Zenjirou nodded. “Yeah. It’s kinda hard to explain, so I’ll use an example.”

He rose from the sofa and fetched a sheet of paper. He then placed the fresh sheet of paper down on the table.

“Pretend this sheet of paper is the boat. Normally, the waves and current make it move like this,” he said, putting a hand on each end of the paper and sliding it up and down the table. “If you cast the spell, then it forces a part of it to remain stationary. Press down on it in the middle with your finger?”

“What? Oh, I see.”

Aura understood what he was trying to explain but still followed his request. She stood up and pressed down on almost the very center of the sheet with her finger. Zenjirou didn’t stop his sliding motion. The paper started to warp and crease.

“Right. This is what happens when you use the spell on a single part of the ship. The whole ship is subject to the waves, but only part of it is held still, so the whole thing starts getting damaged immediately. If it was in the middle of a rough storm, then...”

He then made bigger, faster movements than he had been. Before long, there

was a quiet tearing noise from under Aura's finger as it broke.

"It'll probably break like this."

"So surely it is unusable?" Aura asked, an unhappy look on her face.

However helpful the sailors would find it, damaging the ship made it completely unusable. However, Zenjirou shook his head seriously.

"No, there is a use for it. It'd be best if it's never needed, but it would come into its own if the *Glasir's Leaf* was about to sink."

If the ship was going to sink regardless, it didn't matter if using the tool would damage the ship as a whole. Then, if Zenjirou's assumptions about its capabilities were correct, the tool would hold back its sinking temporarily. It wouldn't matter if there was a massive hole in the side of the ship and it was taking on water. It would be like an invisible crane was holding the vessel up from a single point.

"I don't know the full details, so I'm not sure, but usually there's very little time to evacuate the ship before it sinks. Plus the swaying and panicking make it harder. So even if it wouldn't *stop* the ship from sinking, it could give a temporary reprieve and hold the ship still until it was evacuated. I think it would be really valuable."

Aura seemed overwhelmed by his explanation and was lost for words. She believed she understood and her decision was made with the balance of both her feelings as his wife and what benefit it would be to the country. She didn't think that decision was wrong, but she was now painfully aware that she had been far more optimistic than her husband—the man it would affect.

He had accepted the journey with thoughts of the ship sinking or going off course. With that understanding, the queen felt a simultaneous heat and pain in her chest. She hadn't realized that her hand had come up to rest on her chest until she made a decision.

"Very well. I leave the matter to you. If you believe it would be better to inform Princess Freya, then do so."

"Mm, got it."

Despite the matter of the tools he was taking being finished, the conversation about the preparations themselves was not.

“Speaking of, she should be in Valentia by now, right? Have we heard anything?”

“We have.” Aura nodded. “There was a dwarf wyvern from the governor yesterday evening. The princess’s party—including Lucretia—along with the Lulled Sea arrived safely in Valentia last night.”

“Right. I didn’t think there’d be any issues since it’s in the same country, but it’s still good to hear,” he said with a relieved look.

Aura added some more information. “The princess also spoke to her vice-captain and included some information. It seems we can send around ten people. They have provided two rooms for us to use. There is another free room near the bottom of the ship, but apparently, it is not a room suitable for a person to stay in. It can be used to take what we wish to Uppasala.”

“Ten people and two rooms,” Zenjirou mused looking up at the ceiling.

That meant that not even he would be getting a room to himself. The maids attending to him would be women, while the soldiers and knights for his protection would be men. The two rooms would probably end up inevitably being split by that method. With how poorly he dealt with not having private space and communal living in general, it would be a somewhat stressful journey for him.

“So, how are we picking who’s going? I guess the first two are me and Natalio?”

“Yes, along with Ines and—though she is usually my maid—Margarette. Having someone who can blend in will make things easier while you are there.”

Margarette was blonde, green-eyed, and pale-skinned. It was an exceedingly rare set of features on the Southern Continent, but that was quite the opposite on the Northern Continent. She would blend in better than the darker-skinned native Capuans.

“Got it. So that’s four of us decided, six left. What’s the minimum number of maids and guards, then?”

Aura put her hand on her chin and thought. “With the length of the journey, they will need some form of shift system. For the guards, four—including Natalio. As for the maids, including Ines and Margarete, at least three. In that case, we need to appoint someone to lead while Natalio is resting. In other words, a knight rather than a soldier.”

“I’ll leave picking the guards to Natalio like always. I need at least one more maid, then. Who’s best?”

“I believe you would be best served by leaving that to Ines.” People knew their jobs, so getting the specialists to pick would be best.

“So that’s me, four guards, and three maids. That’s eight of us in total. Should we take anyone else?” he asked.

Aura folded her arms. “A skilled diplomat would be my first thought. Naturally, you would be the official envoy while they would be your deputy to ensure the smaller matters go smoothly.”

“So a specialist in diplomacy. Like Rafaello Márquez perhaps?”

She nodded. “He would be perfect in terms of his abilities. There are two problems that would still remain with taking a diplomat,” she replied with a frown.

“Problems?”

“Indeed. The first would be them taking you lightly—or more bluntly, as a figurehead. However skilled your deputy is, an official envoy like you has authority far outstripping them, particularly in this instance where you are asking for Princess Freya’s hand. A subordinate who was your superior in ability could complicate matters.”

While it was somewhat brazen, if the two of them were to join hands and declare they were getting married, it would—to a certain extent—make their relationship the main focus. If they brought a skilled diplomat and said that person would determine the details, it would strengthen the political overtones.

While Princess Freya was an important political tool, she was also the king’s lovely daughter. Until they met, it would be impossible to see whether the cold-

blooded calculation of a ruler or a father's love for his daughter would take priority. However much the marriage would benefit both countries, if half of that marriage didn't even come to the negotiating table while asking for her hand—instead leaving it to someone else to make the agreement—there was a strong possibility the man could simply refuse to allow it.

"In that case, I can see that it might be better if I'm the only one negotiating. You said there were two problems, though. What's the second?"

The journey would be tough, but the negotiations once they arrived could be even tougher. With that now weighing heavily on his mind, he'd had to ask the question.

"The other problem is simple. There will only be two rooms, no? Unfortunately, all of our skilled diplomats are men."

The realization struck him as soon as she finished speaking.

"Ah, the balance!"

With two rooms and ten people, the rooms would need to be split into men and women. However, there were already five men when Zenjirou and his four guards were counted. If they only had men who could serve as diplomats, that would add another. A man of high enough caliber to do so would also have his own guards. Those people were usually the same gender as their lord or lady. Which meant that would be yet another man. In total, three women and seven men.

He'd much rather not spend nearly a hundred days crammed into a room with six other men. Honestly, even four others were pushing it.

"So we'd be better off having the last two be women? Who do we have who would be useful?"

Aura offered a slight shrug.

"Well, we need not necessarily fill all ten spaces. If you insist, perhaps another two maids? After all, they are grouped by threes outside of the head maids."

The maids they had already decided on were Ines—who was in charge of the cleaning of the inner palace—and Margurette—who was usually Aura's

personal maid. Aura's advice was that he should take one more in terms of the amount of work, but taking three would cause no problems.

"That could work. Well, we've still got some time, so let's put those last two slots on hold. If we don't think of anything, we can fill them with the maids."

"That works to a degree, but you should decide at least a month before you leave. The people you choose will need to make preparations, but so will those who remain behind."

"Ah, right."

With that, they could draw a line under the intercontinental trip for the time being. Zenjirou came back to the first problem.

"The marbles are finally complete."

"Thanks to you. Each round burns the furnace out and our success rate is around six in a hundred, but the fact remains that we *have* succeeded. That is significant in and of itself."

There were two batches that Francesco had been shown. The first consisted of four and the second of ten. However, there were a large number of marbles that were visibly failures even without his judgment. With those taken into account, Aura's statement was more or less correct.

That said, the scary thing was that their value for enchanting should still put them well within the black, even if the success rate remained the same.

"There's no stopping it now, is there?"

"No. There is not," Aura agreed.

Mass production of the transparent spheres could shorten what would ordinarily take years to a matter of days. With the enchanters themselves—the Sharou family—already being aware of their success, there was no stopping it. There would be a magic-industrial revolution on the Southern Continent.

It would not be caused solely by the mass production of marbles, though.

"Knowing the prince, he will certainly be using one of those three marbles to make his enchanting magic tool."

A magic tool that could create other magic tools. While Francesco's idea was somewhat tepid, it was very much a spark that would ignite an inferno from Zenjirou's perspective.

Even worse—or perhaps better, depending on your view—was the combination of the mass production of marbles and a tool that created more tools. It was a powerful synergy.

The marbles alone would do nothing to solve the limited number of Sharou family members who could create new magic tools. The tool to create magic tools alone would do nothing for the years that each tool would take to create. However, the combination of the two meant fewer limits in parallelization and far shorter time periods to finish each one.

The queen offered a daring smile as he shuddered. "He just might, yes. He may even use up all three for his own curiosity."

This time, the marbles were very specifically given to *Francesco* as thanks for creating the space-time magic tools. Given how strongly the teleportation tool had been avoided until this point, they had sworn the prince to secrecy.

Frankly, the queen had originally had little confidence that he would keep that secrecy, but by a quirk of fate, it seemed like he may well do so. After all, the creation of the tool was a secret. The prince could—assuming he did not report it—slip the payment into his pocket without his father and grandfather finding out. With Francesco's defiant nature, there was a strong possibility he would act as an accomplice without them saying anything.

"Yeah, that definitely seems likely. Man, this is going to be crazy," Zenjirou said before suddenly remembering something. "Right, speaking of crazy. Have you seen Espiridion since that last meeting?"

She looked taken aback for a second but then nodded. "Oh, the other matter you brought up. Fiqriya of the Animeeum family wants to become his apprentice and rediscover the traditional magics of the four dukes."

She would technically not be an official apprentice, just temporarily acting as one. Still, that was mostly correct.

"Yeah, summoning jinnia. It's a pretty crazy spell as well, I think. It doesn't

stay active long enough to be anything more than a trick or surprise, but making it into a magic tool and letting it persist for longer would make an incredible spell.” His wariness was completely clear as he offered that warning.

However, the queen—despite appreciating that concern—dismissed his worries. “It would certainly be a significant threat were they to do so. It would even be worth it to consider canceling the marbles. However, it is unlikely that such fears will be realized—at least at present, and as long as we live, I would say. In fact, we should perhaps be more concerned that it could even cause a civil war within the Twin Kingdoms if it were to come to fruition.”

“What do you mean?” Zenjirou managed after a moment. He’d been completely thrown for a loop by the conversation taking the turn it had.

The queen’s expression grew slightly more serious as she explained. “It is simple. As far as I have heard, Lady Fiqriya is considered something of a heretic within the four families. The majority of them also believe that the jinnia both existed and are their forebears, no?”

Jinnia were spirits with both free will and a physical body. It was a legend only heard within the very center of the Southern Continent, in the desert regions.

“Something like that. The four tribes that existed before the ducal houses each made a contract with jinnia of the four elements, and their descendants are the four families today. That’s what most of them believe, at least.”

Fiqriya, having figured out that it was all just the families talking themselves up along with a sham spell to give themselves more credibility—the spell actually being a combination of creation, manipulation, and animation—was an exception among exceptions. Once Zenjirou had explained all of that, Aura gave a satisfied nod.

“That is how things are. Even should Lady Fiqriya succeed with a magnificent reproduction of the jinnia summoning, it will have no more use than a parlor trick. If she were able to bring it to the Sharou family and create a magic tool of the spell, then it would indeed be a show of awe-inspiring power when coupled with the marbles to mass-produce the tool. However, think it through more logically. The spell is jinnia summoning, and the other people of the four families truly believe in the legend of the jinnia. How would such a tool appear

to them?"

"Huh? Oh! If you assume the jinnia exist, it'd be like sealing them inside the magic tool and forcing them to obey you," he said, understanding what had gone unsaid.

It was an inevitable conclusion, frankly. The four families saw the jinnia as their ancestors—holy, inviolable existences. If they were sealed into magic tools and put to work, then Aura was right; it could easily cause a civil war.

"From what you and Espiridion have said, Lady Fiqriya is an intelligent individual, is she not? She must understand as much. In fact, it is *because* she understands how heretical such research would be that she sought assistance all the way in Capua rather than in her homeland."

"Hmm? Are you sure?"

His impression was more that she prioritized her research of the language. He would, of course, agree that she seemed intelligent and unlikely to do anything foolish. Still, he felt the main reason she had come all this way was that Espiridion was simply that much more knowledgeable about the language of magic and she wanted his assistance.

"Still, I get what you mean. As long as she's not an idiot, she wouldn't ask for a magic tool for it. Even if she did, it would probably cause a civil war and just lower their country's strength."

"So you understand. Lady Fiqriya and the Twin Kingdoms will not be a problem. If anything, the problem will be old Espiridion. He was able to use her simplified jinnia summoning instantly, was he not? It would not surprise me in the least if he were to develop and present it before she did."

This time, it was Zenjirou's turn to give an askance look at his partner's concerns. "That shouldn't be too much of a problem, should it? Even if he can use the spell, he can't create a magic tool from it."

He couldn't even consider the man requesting such a thing from Francesco or Bona. Aura, however, gave a shake of her head with a vexed look on her face.

"The problems start before that. While Lady Fiqriya was adopted into the Animuum family, she was—by birth—a member of a branch family. Combined

with the public legend, there would be no contradiction with her succeeding in the spell. *He*, however, is a Capuan through and through.”

“Ah, right. If the legend were true, Espiridion wouldn’t be able to use it in the first place.”

While he wasn’t sure how firm the belief was, the four families referred to themselves as being descended from the jinnia and claimed the lost jinnia summoning spell as their lineal magic. If Espiridion—with no links to any of the families at all—succeeded, then “problem” would be the kindest way of describing it.

“We should probably give him a warning, right?”

“Well, I find it unlikely he would make such a mistake. However, I find it equally unlikely that he would stop his research despite being aware of the danger. The more he researches, the greater the chance someone will see it.”

Espiridion was an extremely gifted mage and a calm, rational person besides. But age had not dulled his curiosity in the slightest, and he researched magic with a fervor. With unknown magic dangling before him, there would be no reigning in his curiosity.

“I shall tell him that even once he has finished his research, he is not to cast the spell before others. That should be enough to ensure there are no issues.”

Head Mage Espiridion was, in her estimation, someone she could put the utmost trust in, both in terms of personality and skill. Repeatedly stressing the same things to him was not how their relationship worked.

With the topic finished, silence fell for a while in the living room. Usually, when serious matters were finished, they would change their seating arrangement and have a more relaxed discussion. Today, however, neither moved from their seat as the silence dragged on. Both of them had the sense that the serious discussions were not yet over.

After a while, Zenjirou broke the silence. “Say, Aura?”

“Hm? What is it?”

He took a deep breath and hesitated for a moment. However well the

pregnancy was going, was what he was about to bring up truly something he should ask his pregnant wife?

She sensed his hesitation and nodded with a dignified smile. “Go ahead.”

He cleared his throat and, once he was ready, spoke. “You’re allowing the marbles to carry on. Plus you’ve given Prince Francesco tacit approval for his own magic tool. Is that because you’re concerned about the suspicions you mentioned a while ago?”

As far as questions went, it was entirely rhetorical. She—as he had expected—nodded in assent.

“It is. The way the Twin Kingdoms behaved was clearly unnatural. They simply accepted all of our demands without even a perfunctory attempt at negotiation. They were also abnormally welcoming of Princess Freya and, from what I heard after the fact, highly focused on any information on the Northern Continent. Whatever the truth of the matter, the Twin Kingdoms—or at the very least King Bruno and Crown Prince Josep—are expecting and preparing for great strife. When you also take into account their attempt to maintain good ties with us, one could assume that they expect it to be beyond even their means to deal with. Something that involves the whole of the Southern Continent, perhaps.”

Thus her decision as queen was to send even the prince consort on a perilous voyage to the Northern Continent to get information as quickly as possible.

Zenjirou nodded in understanding. “Yeah, I think that’s fine. Honestly, I’m not as politically savvy as you, so I can’t quite see *why* you’re so wary, but I can understand how you’re responding to it. There’s a strong possibility that whatever’s coming will mean that all of the countries on the Southern Continent will have to let bygones be bygones and cooperate. I can understand why we’re accommodating the Twin Kingdoms because of that, but I doubt that’s where your thoughts end, right?”

There was an oddly suspicious look in his eyes, a real rarity for him, especially towards his wife and queen. Aura’s own response to that was equally as unusual. She looked away from him for the briefest of moments.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

"We're making marbles and selling them to the Twin Kingdoms. We're aiding Prince Francesco with making a magic tool to produce magic tools. That will be good for the continent as a whole, yes. Selling those marbles, though, seems to benefit Capua as a single country even more. That's not quite right, though, is it? On its own, all that would do is make the Twin Kingdoms stronger. It is worth more in their hands as enchanting materials than as simply an object of value in ours. It will put them in a stronger position, widening any gap between us. You, in your position as the queen, won't have overlooked that, and I doubt you'd just sit and watch the situation unfold, would you?"

She remained silent for a few moments at his questioning. Eventually, she let out a sigh of defeat and capitulated with an almost relieved expression. "You are quite right. If the combination of our production of marbles and Prince Francesco's new magic tool continues on its current trajectory, the Twin Kingdoms will become much stronger, though the other members of the Sharou family seem to see such a tool as a threat to their income. I do not know whether it will be implemented, but even the acceleration from the marbles will turn the Twin Kingdoms into a pillar of the continent."

"Yeah, I think so too. Obviously, providing the marbles would make us into a supplementary pillar, but I can't see you aiming for that. Unfortunately, the only way I can see out of this is both really simple...and something I'd rather not do."

There was a slight bite to his words, and Aura nodded with a firm expression.

"Indeed. The method you have thought of and the method I am likely to implement are most probably one and the same. It will depend on the conditions, but I believe we would be best served by your second concubine being from the Twin Kingdoms."

He couldn't hold back the crease on his brow at that. He understood it as a royal decree, but hearing it from his wife a little less than two months before she gave birth hurt quite a bit.

"Who, specifically?"

"Either Princess Bona or Lucretia."

Zenjirou looked up at the ceiling upon hearing the names he expected. "Yeah, figures," he said, letting out a long sigh.

They could not send someone too close to the main royal family as his second concubine. In that respect, either Bona—who had been born as a lower noble but awoken to enchanting—or Lucretia—who was the second prince’s daughter but could not use enchantment magic—was perfect.

“Princess Bona would be best, but they will likely want to use Lucretia. That will be the biggest impediment in negotiations.”

For Capua, an enchanter in her own right would be preferable. However, the Twin Kingdoms would want to use Lucretia, who had relatively little value to them. Zenjirou was still lost for words as the queen carried on her explanation.

“Of course, we need as much information as possible before negotiating. The marbles aside, this is all predicated on the necessity of the marbles and the suspicion I have. The combination of the Sharou family’s statements, your statements when you return, and how true my suspicions turn out to be all need to paint such a picture that our countries *must* align to deal with the issues.” She paused briefly before giving a final command. “At that point, Zenjirou, you will wed one member of the Sharou family as a sign of our alliance.”

This was not a request from his wife, but a decree from the queen. He had no right to refuse.

“Understood,” he said heavily.

Chapter 4 — The Second Birth, the Three Promises, and the Four Magic Tools

Roughly a month had passed, and having received a dwarf wyvern from Valentia, Zenjirou finally found himself once more teleporting to the port town.

He was wearing the now completely familiar third uniform of Capuan royalty. The only difference from the norm was the small bag on his shoulder. It was a rarity, considering any such things would usually be carried by his subordinates.

Incidentally, the people accompanying him today were Ines—whom he had sent the day before—and several of the soldiers attached to the governor's position. He would normally also have Natalio with him, but the man was currently busy and was not present. He had already chosen the three who would be on the *Glasir's Leaf* but still needed to finish picking people for the knights of Duke Bilbo.

Now that he thought about it, Zenjirou realized he had delegated almost everything to do with his personal protection to Natalio. Regretting that, he had said that the knight could abstain from the trip to the Northern Continent if he wished. However, Natalio had given a *strong* shake of his head and said, “I am hesitant to travel by sea, but it will be far more relaxing than remaining in the capital.”

Zenjirou didn't quite see how it worked, but apparently, being taken on by Duke Bilbo was quite the prospect for any knight currently without a position. Therefore, Natalio's house—the Maldonado family—had been inundated by knights and their relatives day and night. Among them were senior knights who had assisted him when he was younger, sons of his father's friends, or even younger siblings of commanders in the great war.

In a feudal society like Capua's, such connections were often taken into consideration when selecting personnel. If those people had a certain level of competence, it was no particular problem. The issue was that there would be an extremely small number of people chosen from that group. Even if Natalio

narrowed it down to those he couldn't afford to lose, it would still be too many. Considering the order's future, he also needed competent comrades rather than just those with sufficient connections.

There was no end to the worries of the newly elevated commander. Regardless, that was why it was only Zenjirou and Ines currently in Valentia. The two of them, accompanied by the borrowed men, headed towards the port.

The sky and sea alike were blue as the sun shone down. As it was right in the middle of the active season, the sunlight was mild and the sea breeze was pleasantly cooling.

Eventually, they came to the jetty that the *Glasir's Leaf* was anchored to. Zenjirou's arrival had been prearranged, so the main crew was there on standby.

Freya—in her captain's garb—stood at the front, flanked by Skaji, her vice-captain, the navigator, first officer, and so on, ending with Lucretia. Zenjirou knew she had come to Valentia to instruct them on the use of the Lulled Sea and water purification tools, but he hadn't thought that she would be *on* the ship directly doing so.

He raised a hand easily and spoke. "The official greetings are unnecessary. At ease."

"Of course, Your Majesty. On behalf of the *Glasir's Leaf* and her crew as their captain, I offer you welcome," Freya said, standing straighter.

"Thank you, Captain Freya. Pardon the suddenness, but I would like to personally check on your progress. May I have permission to come aboard?"

"Of course, Your Majesty."

Zenjirou climbed up to the ship, led by a smiling Freya.



The gangway was a set of wooden stairs, so even Zenjirou or Lucretia—one unfamiliar with ships and the other wearing a skirt—could easily get aboard. Still, even docked, there was no avoiding the shifting deck.

Zenjirou stumbled with a slight grunt as he took his first step, but it wasn't enough that it would knock him over as long as he was ready for it. While his first few steps were slightly unsteady, he soon got used to the movement and his gait firmed up.

Freya watched it happen as she guided him. "Your Majesty, this is the first thing I wish to show you."

She had led him to practically the center of the ship, just in front of the main mast. There was a huge wooden box there that was clearly out of place.

On closer inspection, it was not a box at all. Wood had simply been nailed to the deck to fix whatever was inside it in place. Because of how firmly it had been constructed, the structure had appeared to be a box at first glance, but looking at it from close up showed several gaps big enough to put a hand through in each of the sides.

There was a sphere of pure white, approximately two meters in diameter, within. A magic tool.

"This is the Lulled Sea?" Zenjirou asked.

The number of planks around it made it hard to see inside, but Zenjirou's sensitivity to mana meant that he could see it blazing with light even so.

Freya nodded proudly as she came to stand at his side. "It is. Our experimentation led to it being installed here. It would have been better farther down in the ship in terms of stability, but that would make it impossible to immediately put it into action if needed. Therefore, we decided on this location for ease of use. We could not directly nail down the magic tool itself, so the base was covered in boards, which were then nailed down instead. Then, as you can see, we surrounded it with a wooden cage to make certain that it would not move."

It had probably taken roughly a month of trial and error before they had settled on this method. As she explained everything, Zenjirou heard the

characteristic pride of someone who had worked hard.

“When it needs to be used, you put your hand through one of these spaces and touch the tool anywhere while saying the activation phrase in the language of magic.”

“May I touch it?” Zenjirou asked, his curiosity getting away from him.

“Of course,” she replied with a smile. “However, the ship is moving, so take care not to catch your arm on the cage.”

Listening to her, he carefully reached out his hand. The white sphere was slightly cold to the touch, just like it appeared. Since it was constantly—albeit slowly—rotating—he could feel it gently slipping past his fingers.

It was cold, but solid and firm to the touch. It looked and felt like white marble, but he didn’t know what it was actually made of. Regardless, the fact that it was sturdy was welcome.

“Thank you,” he said as he withdrew his hand.

There was a lilt of excitement in Freya’s voice as she offered a suggestion. “Would you like to see it in action?”

Zenjirou couldn’t help but smile at her acting like a child who was eager to show off a new toy.

“Please,” he said. As he did, he looked as surreptitiously as he could at the watch on his left wrist. He thought it could be useful to get an idea of exactly how long the Lulled Sea remained in effect, at least in terms of minutes.

Seemingly not noticing his action, Freya happily approached the tool and, with casual ease borne of familiarity, put her hand on it.

“Very well then. *Lull*.”

Immediately, it took effect. The first noticeable change was the wind stopping. It had been comfortably caressing his cheeks but had abruptly died down.

A much more natural feeling in comparison, the deck’s slight nonstop shifting under his feet suddenly stopped as well.

The Lulled Sea minimized all movement of air and water within a certain radius. Standing on an unshifting ship with no wind felt rather strange.

“Incredible. It makes things feel like it’s just a really precise 3D image.”

“What? Three-dee image?”

“Never mind. I was talking to myself. This is incredible, though. While ships and the sea are far from my knowledge base, I can still understand how much of a boon these conditions are while on a voyage.”

“Indeed. With the Lulled Sea aboard, our *Glasir’s Leaf* has conquered the seas,” she said, so happily that a giggle wouldn’t have been out of place. Then, after a pause, she continued, “Or so my vice-captain said. I’ve seldom seen him so excited.”

She stuck her tongue out slightly. That prompted another smile from Zenjirou.

“Your vice-captain is practic—ah, pardon, *is* a skilled sailor, I seem to remember you saying,” Zenjirou said, correcting himself from saying that he was ‘practically the captain’ slightly too late. While she had originally been the one to say so, explicitly repeating it in front of Freya, when she held the title of captain, was still wrong.

Her smile took a wry tinge at his circumspect wording. “Indeed, he is practically the captain. I am more of a figurehead, so I can only direct the ship when he gives permission in calm seas. He once said that he’d rather take his chances in a dinghy over the ship with me at the helm in a storm. I think *that* was going a touch too far,” she said somewhat angrily.

“Well, he sounds like he’s got a sharp tongue. I should be ready for it as well.”

Since he was going to be spending around a hundred days on the same ship as the man who was the captain in all but name, he should be ready for a scolding from him as well.

It was mostly an idle remark from him, but Freya took it more seriously than he expected. “Well, I will stress that he isn’t to speak rudely to you.”

Zenjirou was shocked at that. “You need not bother. In fact, I would rather you did not. I’d prefer both him and the rest of the crew to know that they

should not feel the need to moderate their language and behavior while we are at sea."

There were many things more important than manners while at sea. Survival, for example. He'd much rather they yelled, "Get the fuck out of the way!" than politely come up to him and say, "Excuse me, Your Majesty. I beg your pardon but it appears there are rough seas incoming. Could I trouble you to remain in your cabin for a while?" The latter would likely see him swept away by a wave before the sailor had finished speaking. He would very much prefer surviving with a little rudeness over that.

The princess had spent long periods of time at sea, so she could rather easily understand his thinking.

"Very well. I shall do so."

"I appreciate it, Princess Freya. Incidentally, I recall you had another magic tool...for water purification? How is that serving you?"

While it was a much less dramatic effect than the Lulled Sea, it would be just as helpful. With a magic tool that converted seawater into potable water, the greatest shortage on a long trip was solved.

Her face was a picture of joy at his question. "It is perfect as well. With the magic tool, we should be able to guarantee drinking water for everyone even without my casting the spell version. While we are here, I would like to demonstrate it."

She almost trotted back to her cabin and returned with two blue-tinged stones, one larger than the other. They were cuboids with blunted corners. The bigger was long enough that it poked out from either side of Freya's hand where she was holding it.

While they were different in color, they were almost identical in shape to the healing stone Francesco had once shown him. The differences were that there were two of them, they were different sizes, and they were connected by a silver chain, which was over two meters in length.

"Here you go, cap'n!"

While she had been fetching them, a brawny sailor had brought over a huge

cask of seawater and placed it on the desk.

“Good work.”

It had been rather roughly placed, but when Zenjirou looked inside, the water was completely flat, almost like the surface of a mirror. The deck was still under the influence of the Lulled Sea.

“The water truly is not moving. Would you mind me disturbing it?” he asked.

“Feel free,” she replied.

With her permission, he forcefully smacked his palm into the water’s surface.

There was a loud clap, and a ripple spread from the place he had connected with. It died down unnaturally quickly, though.

“That’s very interesting. Does the minimization of water and air movement not impede the water purification, though?”

Freya answered immediately. “It does not. From what Lady Lucretia explained, it only limits manipulation of the water and air. We have had no issues with the purification tool so far.”

Lucretia’s name coming up made Zenjirou turn reflexively to the side-tailed girl in question.

“Is that so?” he asked her.

With the conversation having turned to her, Lucretia’s big eyes were wide as she answered firmly, “It is, Your Majesty. The Lulled Sea does not prevent water purification or creation spells. Those it interferes with are manipulation, either in full or in part, such as the waterball spell.”

The lack of hesitance in her answer made it seem like her knowledge hadn’t simply been crammed at the last moment.

“I see. You are rather knowledgeable about both magic and magic tools,” Zenjirou said. He had been looking at her solely as someone who was betting everything on marriage, but he *did* remember that she had assisted him with no issues when he was in the Twin Kingdoms. She might have been surprisingly competent, in fact. Still, that didn’t alter the fact that she was hunting him.

“Your praise honors me, Your Majesty. While I am still young and inexperienced, I believe I have learned enough that I will not bring shame on the Twin Kingdoms,” she said with sparkling eyes. The gleam within them looked almost hungry.

Nobility in the Twin Kingdoms, particularly those close to the Sharou family, learned many spells that would be convenient when made into magic tools. Of course, the Sharou family itself also learned those spells, but it was more efficient to have another cast the spell rather than the enchanter cast both components.

This was even more true when one took into account Lucretia’s goal to marry into the Capuan family and become royalty once again. Putting effort into her studies of magic was hardly shocking. Still, most of her efforts were directed at the man she wanted to marry.

“I see. How diligent,” he summed things up before Freya came back into the conversation.

“Lady Lucretia had much to say about the water purification tool as well, such as the optimum amount of water for a single usage.”

That prompted him to look. Indeed, the cask was only two-thirds full. That was likely the best amount, then.

“Hm? I believe I heard that you are also capable of casting the spell. Would you not already know the optimum amount?”

Lucretia rather proudly answered his question.

“When the Sharou family creates a magic tool, it can increase the capabilities of the spell somewhat. Water purification and creation are two areas that their focus and research have been on, so they are twice as effective compared to the normal spell.”

Zenjirou let out an impressed hum at that.

“Allow me to demonstrate, Your Majesty. Please, sample the water in the barrel first.”

One of the sailors to the side used a wooden tankard to scoop out some of

the water. Zenjirou took it and carefully tilted it so that it barely touched his lips.

“Salty. It certainly is seawater.”

Freya got the magic tool ready. The bigger of the two stones sank to the bottom of the cask. She then put the smaller of the two into a large leather sack and tightly tied the neck shut around the chain between them.

“The Lulled Sea is currently active, so this is unnecessary, but this is to avoid the salt spilling while at sea. Now, *separate*.”

Her hand was still on the chain as she spoke the single word in the language of magic, activating the magic tool. It was not as dramatic and instantly visible as with the Lulled Sea, but if he strained his ears, he could hear something akin to pouring sand from the sack with the smaller stone in.

The noise did not continue for very long. Once it had stopped, plus a little longer to be certain, Freya carefully loosened the sack. Once she had confirmed that there was salt in the bag and that it had stopped pouring from the stone, she looked up from the half-kneeling position she’d taken while using the tool.

“That is complete. Would you sample the water once more?”

“Very well,” he answered, having no reason to refuse. He took the tankard again and did the same as before, barely wetting his lips, then took a larger sip, then a normal pull from it. Once he’d swallowed, he gave his honest impressions.

“It is normal water. I cannot see any problem with using this for drinking.” It was almost *too* normal. While it was bland, as Zenjirou had said, it would certainly quench someone’s thirst. “So, is that the salt?” He indicated the bag she was still holding to prevent spillage.

“It is. Would you like to sample that as well?”

“Very well,” he said, bringing his hand up as she lifted it and taking a minuscule pinch of the white powder to place on his tongue.

“It certainly is salt,” he said after a moment. “It is slightly more bitter and complex, though.”

Unlike the salt Zenjirou had on his table back on Earth, this was slightly more distinct. Well, it would have all the other impurities present in seawater, so it was not entirely surprising that it was not pure sodium chloride. It might even be that this was the norm in Capua, but unfortunately, while he had eaten finished meals, he had not put the salt directly on his tongue before. Whatever the case, the initial combination of water and salt had been separated into its constituents in moments.

“This is truly incredible. I cannot even begin to guess just how valuable it is on a long journey. Even outside of the tools, I assume it is more efficient than making salt from seawater as you normally would?”

Freya nodded in response to his marveling. “It is. If we use it the most number of times we can, it can guarantee enough water to slake the thirst of every sailor on the ship.”

It was an incredible boon for long sea voyages. It would be no exaggeration to say that drinking water was a sailor’s biggest concern on a long journey. While it was indispensable for human life, it was also heavy and took up space, in addition to being hard to store due to its liquid state.

Being able to solve that problem with nothing more than a magic tool and an empty barrel would at least cut the issues of long journeys in half. The space not taken up by water could be used for extra food, vastly increasing the distance that could be traveled without resupplying.

The Lulled Sea made it possible to weather storms, and the water purifier made water shortages a thing of the past. While there was still the fundamental concern about traveling in a vessel made of wood, much of Zenjirou’s fears had been alleviated.

“Wonderful. This is truly groundbreaking progress.”

“It is!” Freya said with a confident smile.

The Lulled Sea was *still* in effect. Zenjirou casually checked his watch and saw that it had already been more than thirty minutes. It was a heartening result for him. Still, he had other things to do besides kill time here.

“Princess Freya. I actually have magic tools of my own that I would like to

bring when we depart for the Northern Continent. I believe they will both be of assistance during the crossing, but I am very ignorant when it comes to the sea and ships. I cannot, therefore, risk exposing the ship to danger and would like your opinion as well. Would that be acceptable?"

He lifted the bag that had been on his shoulder until that point. Lucretia had the most dramatic reaction to his words.

Her side tail flicked like a galloping horse's tail as her blue eyes went wide.

"You are going to the Northern Continent, Your Majesty?"

Apparently, she had been completely unaware of that right up until now. She was clearly considering something, but Zenjirou focused his gaze on Freya instead, holding the bag out to her.

Freya looked at the bag for a few moments before coming to a decision and nodding. "Very well, Your Majesty. I can certainly offer my opinion, but the final decision on whether you may use them aboard will rest with the vice-captain. Is that acceptable?"

It seemed her claims of figurehead status were more apt than he had thought.

"Very well, if you would," he said, having no other way to answer.

A static magic tool like the Lulled Sea was one thing, but there was no need to explain and demonstrate these out on the deck. Once he had been led to the biggest room on the ship—Freya's quarters—he took out the barrier and static flame magic tools and explained their function.

While they were in her quarters, it was still a cabin on a ship, so the space was small. Other than the two royals, only Skaji and Ines were present.

There was only a single chair, so Zenjirou and Ines were seated on two beds. Once he had explained how the tools would work and how he saw them being used, the princess had an awfully conflicted look on her face. The strongest component of that expression was surprise. There was a roughly equal mixture of admiration and wariness, and the slightest hints of happiness. It seemed the tools he had brought had been fairly impactful.

Once she had her emotions in order, Freya thoughtfully began to speak. “First, the static flame. I believe it is a highly effective tool. However, I cannot definitively say that it is safe, so I believe that the vice-captain should inspect and make a final decision.”

The tool was exactly as he had requested. It attached to a surface such as a desk with its base and would remain in place. It was currently fixed to a table in the room and would not separate even if there was a strong wave. The one disadvantage was that the force it attached with would inevitably leave marks on whatever it was attached to.

As the name implied, the flame defied nature to remain unmoving. It was surrounded by a large metal sphere, so it would not leave the confines of the tool, making it safe to use the flame even aboard a rocking ship. However, the metal around the flame had several small holes, so a long and thin piece of flammable material—a strand of straw, for example—could potentially get inside, which meant the possibility of the flame spreading was not zero.

“The vice-captain will make the final decision, so this is only my personal assumption, but I believe it should be acceptable to use it even when the waves are high. Naturally, there will be conditions, though.”

“Such as what, specifically?”

Freya’s ice-blue eyes made their way to the ceiling as she considered it for a while. “Well...that it not be left unsupervised while lit, that there be preparations in place to extinguish a fire should the need arise, and that if there were a fire of any size, the tool would be in our custody until the end of the trip.”

They were all sensible, easy-to-understand conditions. Zenjirou had no qualms about accepting them on the spot.

“Understood. I have no problem with any of that. What of the other tool?”

He had thought that one would be much easier to accept than the static flame, so his voice was light as he spoke. However, Freya’s expression was far harsher than he’d expected. Her icy-blue eyes narrowed further as she gave her decision in a single breath.

"I apologize, but the barrier magic tool will need to be in our custody, to be returned when you disembark. Should it be lost at sea, we would be unable to provide a replacement but would pay a suitable fee. However, I ask that you not bring such a tool aboard our ship." Still seated, she gave a deep bow.

"Would you share your reasoning?" he asked.

It was an obvious question. He would much prefer that the tool never see any use but believed it would earn its keep in a situation where the ship would inevitably sink. In terms of danger, he had assumed that the static flame—since it involved fire, the biggest enemy of ships—would be far worse.

His doubts faded away upon hearing her explanation.

"I am aware that you have no such intention, but I cannot allow a tool that could cause the ship to simply halt to be in someone else's possession."

"Ah..."

It was, now that she had pointed it out, obvious. While Zenjirou had said he would only use it in the final hour, that would still be from *his* perspective. Freya had no firm guarantee that he would only use it when there was no other choice. What would happen if Zenjirou used it while the voyage was fully underway? It went without saying that the damage would be extreme. Anyone working on the decks or masts would likely be thrown into the sea.

Freya was not optimistic enough that she could leave such a dangerous thing in a passenger's hands. Likewise, Zenjirou was not so selfish as to insist otherwise when he understood the situation as he did.

"Very well," he replied with a small smile. "Then I ask that you take care of it while we are at sea."

With the topic mostly finished, the conversation turned to idle chatter.

"Oh?"

"We've started to move again," Freya commented.

The ship had begun to sway once more. The Lulled Sea had reached the end of its effective period. Fortunately, everyone in the room was seated, so no one was hurt even upon the sudden change in the ship's movements.

“Is it always around this amount of time?” Zenjirou asked as he nonchalantly checked his watch again.

“I believe so, yes.”

Having checked the time, he repeated it firmly in his head to memorize it. Fifty-two minutes. That was how long the tool had remained in action.

Of course, he was only checking his watch, and there was no guarantee that the length of effect was correct to the second—or even minute—every time the tool was used. Still, it was a useful approximation.

That was everything he had come there to check. “I should be going, then,” he said, standing.

Skaji promptly opened the door for him. “Of course.”

“My thanks.”

The four of them left the room and were greeted by those who had not entered: the guards and Lucretia.

“Good work,” he praised the guards. “We will be leaving now.” He stepped out onto the deck and the group headed directly for the gangplank.

“Allow me to walk you to shore,” Freya said.

“I would be glad of that,” he replied.

The two of them exchanged some small talk with smiles as they moved through the ship. The gangplank was steeper than when they had embarked thanks to the ship being slightly higher relative to the jetty now. Fortunately, it was well-built and had a handrail, so it was not particularly difficult to use, but it would be somewhat scary to run across in a hurry. Still, he wouldn’t fall if he paid attention.

Once he was safely back on dry land, Zenjirou turned to exchange farewells with Freya.

“Excuse me, Your Highness. I have a request,” came a shaking voice before he could. It was Lucretia. Though her voice was shaking, her expression was serious.

“Does it need to be now?” Freya asked after a pause with a purposeful look at Zenjirou.

Lucretia took a deep breath, her nerves evident, but she still nodded firmly. “It does. I cannot waste time, so I would like to make the request now,” she said before practically diving into a deep bow and sending her hair bouncing. You could never call her actions the refined manners expected of nobility, but it showed how desperate she was.

“Your Majesty?” Freya asked shortly.

Zenjirou gave a brief nod of acknowledgment. “I do not mind.”

He couldn’t honestly say that he was feeling particularly positive about this, but it was hard to decline. His gaze moved to Lucretia and, inevitably, so did everyone else’s.

Whether it was due to the attention on her or what she was about to say, Lucretia was visibly shaking. Still, she spoke clearly. “Princess Freya. Please allow me to accompany you on the *Glasir’s Leaf!*”



The worst option Zenjirou had imagined was right on the money, and he couldn't spare the mental capacity to pay anyone else there any mind. He just looked up at the sky and sighed.



Several days later, Zenjirou had mostly put the matter of Lucretia Broglie's vexing request from his mind and was slumped opposite his wife in the living room. He let out a long sigh.

"I've sent her back to the Twin Kingdoms for now, so we just need to wait for the reply."

"Well done, Zenjirou. Now the final two people are decided. After all, a daughter of the Broglie family could hardly travel alone."

Seeing a glimmer of hope, Zenjirou asked a question. "Uh, Aura? She made the request on her own and she's back in the Twin Kingdoms asking for permission to actually go through with it. Why are we just assuming that it's a done deal?"

His wife turned a pitying gaze on him, but her words were calm. "Because the Twin Kingdoms have no reason to refuse her request. She is not so valuable a piece that they cannot afford to lose her, and thanks to your set of magic tools, such a loss is unlikely in the first place. With their desire for more information on the Northern Continent, her request is perfect."

"Yeah...that figures," he replied, slumping even further back into the sofa. He'd had some idea of that. Naturally, it assumed that Aura's estimation of their desire for such information was accurate. If it was, though, sending someone in was practically a requirement. "But why didn't they make the request themselves?" Zenjirou asked in sudden realization.

They could have requested that Freya take an ambassador as part of the payment for the magic tools she had been given. She would have been unlikely to refuse them.

The queen's expression sharpened slightly before she gave a cautious answer. "There are several possibilities, but I believe they see the Northern Continent's influence as a threat. Therefore, while they want information, they likely do not

want to do something so overt as sending an official ambassador.”

Lucretia’s request was a personal one. It let the Twin Kingdoms minimize their involvement. Above all else, she was going with Zenjirou, the prince consort of Capua. If her technical heritage wasn’t spread and she kept up her pretense of being a Broglie by blood, she could quite easily hide in his shadow.

“If only we had some way of turning her down...” Zenjirou complained, looking up at the ceiling.

“Unfortunately, she is here as a guest. If the princess grants her permission, we are in no position to gainsay her,” Aura said regretfully.

While her surprise at the request was plain to see, it was of benefit to her as well. They had learned much about both the Lulled Sea and the water purification tool, but Lucretia still knew more. Having someone familiar with magic tools on the ship’s maiden voyage with such things aboard was a big deal.

She also probably harbored some hopes of securing a trade deal with the Twin Kingdoms for the potential of more, in which case, directly taking someone to forge friendly ties with her father and brother would be perfect.

“So I should probably assume she’ll be on board. She’s going to try and start things, isn’t she?”

The “start” Zenjirou was referring to was in the sense of a man and woman. They would be on a trip that was nearly one hundred days in length one way. Being on the same ship, there was every possibility that Lucretia would work towards her aim of securing him.

“I would not be so sure. She is dedicated to her goal in her entirety. She may realize that it would be possible to earn your ire in such close proximity and therefore lose everything.”

“That’d mean she hasn’t given up on me at all. Considering *my* main goal, I’d rather she just stayed as out of the way as much as possible.”

Zenjirou’s primary goal on this trip to Uppasala was to convince Freya’s father—the king of the country—to allow him to marry the princess. It went without saying that asking for the hand of the country’s first princess while being nothing but a prince consort was a rather difficult prospect. Bringing someone

else from another country who *also* wanted to be his concubine would almost certainly make things even more difficult.

"Still, I *did* promise," he mused, bringing his right hand up to his face.

Around his wrist was a plain metal bangle. The Windhammer, a strong magic tool given to him by Princess Margarita of the Twin Kingdoms. It resulted in a momentary powerful tempest. It was strong enough that it could even push back a knight mounted on a dash drake.

He had tried it once in the inner palace's gardens, but it had caused so much damage that he had wanted to apologize to the maids.

It wasn't unlimited, of course, but it could be used in quick succession and was perhaps the best kind of magic tool for a rank amateur in physical combat like him.

"Princess Margarita. She is Lucretia's older sister if I remember correctly," Aura commented.

"Yeah."

Margarita was considered to be on the same level as Francesco, and she had made a single request in exchange for giving him the Windhammer: to "be there" for her sister. Or to be more specific, to accept her invitations three times.

Of course, those invitations did not need to be deep things, just simple requests to spend time together and such. With that in mind, he could not bluntly turn Lucretia away.

He sighed. "Well, technically, it was a request to Princess Freya, but I'm counting that as the first invitation," he complained.

Aura had started with a rueful smile, but her expression morphed into a serious one as she listened to him complain. "Zenjirou, are you so against Lucretia as a concubine?"

"What? I mean, I'm against having a concubine in general, not just Lucretia."

The response was so fast that it was practically delivered instinctually. Aura's face reverted to a half smile.

“I understand that. I still hope you will listen to my wishes for the country, though. You accepted Princess Freya, did you not? You even agreed to the dangerous trip between our continents for it. It is rather unfair for me to ask this of you, but are you fond of her?”

It was a horribly difficult question to answer, but she was asking it as the queen of the country, so he could not stay silent.

“Well, I guess so. She’s cute and not a bad person. She’s assertive but doesn’t try and get in too close. She’s also someone I can respect.”

From what he had heard, the Northern Continent was roughly as patriarchal as the Southern Continent. Freya had risen in that society to the position of a captain while still in her teens—even if it technically was a figurehead position—and even succeeded in an intercontinental crossing. That took willpower and courage, and it was a great achievement. That was more than enough for him to respect her.

Aura nodded in satisfaction. “In comparison, the more fundamental problem with Lucretia is that you hold no affection for her. Or so it seems. What of Princess Bona?”

At this point, it was nothing more than a possibility, but it was entirely feasible that he would need to take someone from the Twin Kingdoms as a matter of state. If Lucretia was just too incompatible with him, it would only serve to harm the country. While political marriages were a literal marriage of the politics between two countries, it was still a marriage involving a man and woman. Being such a marriage, if there were irreconcilable differences, it could fall apart.

If the man was willing to just keep his wife shut away within the inner palace until she died, then it wouldn’t cause any political harm. But Zenjirou was far from that type of man. Therefore, as the country’s queen, Aura needed to know his feelings. She needed to keep the possibility of the potentially necessary political marriage breaking down as low as possible.

Zenjirou took her question as seriously as it was asked, looking inside himself and considering everything with his eyes closed. “No. It’s relative, but I would say that Lucretia would be better.”

It was an unexpected response, and one of Aura's eyebrows rose. "Really? It seemed to me that Princess Bona left a better impression on you."

"Well, that's true," he admitted with a shrug. "I just don't think she'd accept a political marriage to me, though. In comparison, affection aside, Lucretia's as eager for it as can be. If I *had* to choose one of them, at least Lucretia is willing and we could find some common ground."

There was a long pause. "I see," Aura replied eventually, accepting what he had said.

However, she was internally nowhere near as calm. Her palms were clammy and her heart was beating much faster than normal. She remembered hearing a similar answer and thought process before.

It wouldn't do any good to invite his displeasure by outright saying it, so she didn't, but he sounded just like a girl of a royal or noble family with *expectations* from her family. In truth, he was picking the least harmful of the options given, without actually taking his own feelings into account. Choosing based on the prospect's feelings towards him rather than vice versa. After all, that was safer.

It was how people who knew that they wouldn't get the best result thought. Aura repeatedly clenched and unclenched her hands under the table, getting the blood flowing back to her fingers. Judging from the plain, self-deprecating smile on his face, Zenjirou likely hadn't realized this. He had given up on his wife and superior actually giving him what he wanted.

Thinking back on things, when their opinions had clashed, it had almost always ended up with the shield of it being "for the country's benefit" and Zenjirou capitulating.

"When I have given birth, I will start acting in earnest. The succession in the Twin Kingdoms will likely be over by next year, so I can negotiate in person with King Bruno once he has hung up his crown. I can feel out their intentions and what they want from an alliance, in treaties and in trade, before coming to a decision."

"Don't push yourself too hard. Whatever Princess Isabella says, childbirth is still a matter of life and death," he warned her.

"I know. Thank you," she replied as she met his look of earnest love, unable to shake the imagined future of that look changing someday.

Chapter 5 — Birth, Trip, and Departure

Time passed, and the year changed. The festival to ring in the new year was an important event for the entire country of Capua.

This was Zenjirou's third time experiencing the festival, but there was a big difference from the previous two occasions: his wife was not with him.

The last two years, he had been at her side more as a piece of furniture than an active participant. That was not the case this time, though. The queen was resting in the inner palace. According to Doctor Michel and Princess Isabella, she could go into labor at any moment.

Fortunately, she was stable, and with both doctor and healer at her side, everything should be fine. However, with contractions ready to start at any moment, she could hardly take the leading role in the new year festival. Therefore, he had the heavy responsibility of carrying it out in her place.

Leading role or not, though, the things required of him were hardly that taxing.

He simply had to sit in the middle of a prearranged ceremony, recite some preset phrases, and make some predetermined gestures. That was all.

The problem was that the nobles looking up at him from under the dais were looking at him more intensely than ever. It was not the first time he had carried out such a ceremony in Aura's place, but the importance of the new year festival was particularly high.

Another part of it was that the one portion of the nobility that was constantly fearmongering over the queen being unable to fulfill her role on an important occasion had been vindicated. He had also heard the appellation of "majesty" from local nobles more times than he could count on his hands today. Ordinarily, it was a real rarity.

Regardless, the third day of the festivities was also the last, and it had ended without incident. The citizens were allowed into the royal palace's courtyard, all

carrying lit candles. Zenjirou was sitting on a balcony visible from the courtyard, waving to the citizens.

The points of light spreading out across the ground like the starry sky above were as beautiful as ever, but he didn't have the wherewithal to enjoy the sight just then. Before the ceremony had begun, a messenger had informed him that Aura's contractions had started.

The thought of his wife being in the middle of childbirth, even as he remained seated and waved, made him want to leap from his chair and run to the inner palace. He could not, though. Even if he did, there would be nothing he could offer in the inner palace. In fact, only here could he take Aura's place to finish up the festivities. For her, he would do what he could where he was.

He repeated that to himself over and over, keeping a smile on his face even as the hand still in his lap was white-knuckled, tightly clenched.

The seconds dragged on, each feeling like an hour, but then the event was finally over and Zenjirou was sprinting through the corridors of the inner palace without the slightest hint of shame.

"Please wait, Sir Zenjirou," Louisa attempted to calmly advise him. She had an LED lamp in one hand while her other held the hem of her skirt so that she could keep pace with him. "Running along the dark corridors is dangerous."

Zenjirou was in a dead sprint, though, and couldn't muster a response. The maid gave up at that point.

"I will go ahead," she said, overtaking him and spinning to start running backwards, using the lamp to shine a light where he was stepping.



Finally reaching the living room, Louisa figuratively slammed on the brakes and opened the door. Bright white light spilled from the doorway out into the corridor, overwhelming even the lamp in the maid's hand.

All of the floor lamps in the living room were lit. Zenjirou rushed inside like a moth drawn to flame. The force he entered the room with made it seem like a commentator should be declaring a touchdown as he grabbed the maid in the room and questioned her.

“Where’s Aura?!”

That took the last of his energy because he soon found himself doubled over, hands on his knees as he heaved for breath.

The maids acted as one. The first of them rubbed his back while another went to fetch a cup of cold water. The third waited until he could hear her over his gasping and reported to him with a smile.

“Her Majesty has safely given birth. There are no issues with either mother or child.”

Before he could even feel happiness and relief, he was overwhelmed by surprise and confusion.

“What? Already?” he asked blankly.

The second maid held out the water to him.

“Oh, thanks.”

While he drained the cup and a maid briskly wiped the sweat from his brow, the other continued speaking.

“Yes. Doctor Michel and Princess Isabella said the delivery was extremely quick and uncomplicated. They gave permission to allow you through when you returned. Would you like to go in?”

There was only one answer he would give to that. “Yes.”

“Very well. The child is sleeping, so please remain quiet.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

The maids watched as he went over to the bedroom door and slowly passed

through.

“Ah, Zenjirou. It looks like the festivities were completed without issue, then. Good work,” his beloved wife greeted him as he quietly entered the room.

“Aura? You’re already feeling okay?” he asked, moving to her side with quick steps.

She was half-upright on the bed with a lively smile on her face as she waved at him.

“I am. There were no issues. The birth itself did not even take half the time of the last, and Princess Isabella’s magic was just as helpful.”

He listened and then looked at the refined, middle-aged woman standing at the side of the bed.

“Princess Isabella, you have my deepest thanks for your aid,” he said, offering her an unreserved bow.

She offered him a soft look. “I did very little. Her Majesty completed the birth under her own power.”

When healers were present at births, one of the most common forms of assistance they provided were spells to bolster both mental and physical stamina. Neither had been necessary this time, though. Both had been used after the birth, but Isabella was not wrong to say she had not been needed for the act itself. Then again, if she had not been present and provided the healing, Aura likely wouldn’t have been in quite such high spirits.

“Truly, I feel well enough that just lying here is most annoying,” Aura said.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“No, Your Majesty.”

The doctor and healer alike cut her off before she could ask to get up.

“I know. I was simply remarking,” she said, raising her hands in surrender.

The last few months had brought the doctor and healer very much in sync. Now that he knew his wife was safe, Zenjirou’s gaze finally drifted towards their second child.

Amanda was holding the baby in her arms, and the bundle seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Wary of waking it up, he kept his distance and spoke quietly to the head maid.

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A girl, Sir Zenjirou,” she replied briefly, keeping the infant in her arms, rocking softly back and forth.

“Right, a girl...”

“She has just dropped off, so please refrain for a while,” Amanda chided him as he reached out to touch the baby’s red cheek.

“Oops, sorry,” he replied, drawing his hand back and satisfying himself with looking at her face.

“A girl...”

Despite his intense stare, there was no way he could tell the baby’s sex from watching her sleep. Seeing her so closely, he felt the urge to reach out and wake her up, but he forced himself to step away from the head maid and his daughter, instead moving back to his wife on the bed.

“You’d picked out a name, right?” he asked her.

“I have. I had chosen Juan for a boy, and Juana for a girl. She is a girl, so Juana will be her name.”

“Juana,” he repeated, rolling the name over in his mouth and repeating it several more times to get used to it.

“Have you decided?” she asked.

He looked away somewhat guiltily. “Not yet.”

On the Southern Continent, when parents came from different cultures, children were often given a name from each, like Carlos and Zenkichi. He had been trying to think of a Japanese name but had yet to settle on one. It couldn’t be delayed for long, so he would have to come up with something before he left for the Northern Continent.

Isabella’s expression hadn’t faltered as she watched them talk, and when the

conversation came to a lull, she spoke up. “It seems there are no issues with your health, Your Majesty. I will keep you under observation for the next three days to be certain, but if there are no problems, I will likely take my leave.”

Zenjirou let out a brief noise of surprise, but it was hardly something that should have shocked him once he considered it. The contract stipulated her presence until the day of delivery. If anything, the extra three days of observation were somewhat of a freebie.

Despite that, he decided to question her regardless. “Princess Isabella, is the child—Juana—also well?”

He could tell that there were no major issues from how peacefully she was sleeping, but asking would do no harm.

“There do not seem to be any issues currently,” the princess replied. “However, anything more specific is outside of my remit and not something I should interfere with regardless.” Her friendly look darkened at that. The contract with her was to maintain the *queen’s* health until she gave birth. The child was not part of it.

Additionally, a newborn should not generally be treated with healing magic. Such children were often weakened and did not survive for very long. Of course, they could simply have been that weak to begin with if they needed healing so soon after their birth. There was no need to look into it now, though.

“I see. Very well. Thank you for your assistance so far, Princess Isabella,” Zenjirou said with a polite bow of his head.

Aura took up the flow of the conversation from her reclined position on the bed. “Allow me to offer my own thanks. Your presence has ensured that this birth went without incident.”

“It is an honor to hear it,” the princess replied calmly.

Her occupation as a healer meant that she was in all likelihood quite used to such conversations.



Four days later, Zenjirou was in the Purple Egg Palace of the Twin Kingdoms of

Sharou-Gilbelle. He was using the same annex as the last time—it was currently serving the role of an embassy from Capua to the Twin Kingdoms.

It went without saying that he had used teleportation to arrive.

“Welcome, Sir Zenjirou.”

“Ah, Lucretia. It will only be for a short time, but I shall once again be in your care,” he said, lifting his hand to greet the blonde.

Isabella had already been sent back by Aura after checking that there were no major issues with either the queen or the new princess. They had used the opportunity to have her inform the Twin Kingdoms that Zenjirou would be following the day after. Preparations had therefore already been made for his arrival.

“As the letter I sent with Princess Isabella mentioned, I have little time on this occasion, so I would prefer to offer my greetings in writing to Pope Benedict and King Bruno. I also offer my apologies that the latter is addressed to King Bruno rather than King Josep. Naturally, I do not mind which of them it is delivered to.”

Zenjirou pulled two letters from his pocket as he spoke and passed them across to Lucretia via the maid at his side.

He had only found out upon his arrival that the throne had passed from father to son as the year passed from prior to the next. It had not even been half a month since the new year, so things for both the former and current king would be busy during the transition, and neither of them would have time to hold an audience with him.

That duty would inevitably fall to the pope.

“Very well,” she said after checking the seals on the letters. Zenjirou then moved directly to the main topic.

“The reason I am in the Twin Kingdoms is to offer you transport. To be certain, you have acquired permission from the Twin Kingdoms, have you not?” he asked, holding back the hopes that she hadn’t.

She nodded with a wide grin.

"I have. King Bruno gave me official permission to visit the Northern Continent."

"Hm? I see. Very well."

Even as he replied, he considered the nuance of what she'd said. Lucretia was officially being allowed to go to the Northern Continent. She was not officially being *sent* to the continent by the top brass of the Twin Kingdoms.

She had also specified that the permission came from the former king. She had returned to the country last year, so it *was* while Bruno was still on the throne, albeit barely.

However, the actual event was happening this year, so it would ordinarily have been allowed in King Josep's name. Leaving it in the former king's name left an escape route if the worst should happen.

The caution seemed almost lacking in nerve. It seemed like Aura's estimation was correct. He left a note in the back of his mind to report that to his wife later as he continued.

"As I have said, I have little time. The weather may change things, but the *Glasir's Leaf* is planning to leave in ten days. I want to be in Valentia five days before that. Naturally, you will have to go before then."

Zenjirou was the only one there who could cast teleportation, so if she was to use the spell to get to Valentia, she would have to be sent before him. There was a strong light of conviction in her big blue eyes. She was well aware of this fact.

"That is acceptable. From tomorrow onwards, there will be no issues."

"You have been allocated two spaces on the *Glasir's Leaf*. Just to confirm, but I assume that the two I will be sending are you and your maid?"

"Indeed. Flora and I would be my request."

Flora was the maid assigned to Lucretia by the Broglie family. She was a close, close confidant to Lucretia and was currently waiting in Valentia while her mistress was temporarily in her homeland.

The urgent teleportation home had not stretched that far, after all.

“Very well. Then I shall send you tomorrow at noon. Will sending you directly to Valentia be acceptable?”

Zenjirou himself would be returning to the capital to say his farewells to his wife, son, and daughter. He would then head to Valentia as well. Sending Lucretia to the capital, and then to Valentia would increase the cost. However, Lucretia seemed to have some slack in her budget, since her response was to the contrary.

“I would also like to travel via the capital. I have several things to take care of there. If possible, I would also like an audience with Her Majesty.”

Zenjirou thought her suggestion over before nodding. “Very well. Her Majesty is a busy person, so the possibility is rather remote, but I shall convey that. Is that still acceptable?”

Ordinarily, such a sudden meeting would be impossible, but Aura currently had some leeway.

She was recovering after childbirth, so much of the governing was being carried out by Prime Minister Fidel and Marshal Pujol. However, she had recovered faster than expected, so there was some space in her schedule. A short meeting would be feasible.

With that said, if it turned out to not be possible, the rather significant cost of an extra teleportation would go to waste.

Lucretia nodded firmly in response to the warning. “That is fine. Thank you for your concern.”

“Very well; that is how we will proceed, then.”

The conversation simply halting once their business was concluded demonstrated that the relationship between the two was not particularly strong. After a long pause, Lucretia hurriedly tried to break the silence at the same time that he addressed her.

“Ah... Ah—”

“Incidentally, Lucretia—”

“Ah, yes? What is it, Your Majesty?”

“You are welcome to go first,” Zenjirou decided.

“I could not possibly. It is nothing so urgent.”

“Nor is what I had to say.”

“Please, I could not delay you further.”

Whatever it was, he was clearly about to ask her for something, and she would not let the opportunity pass.

Zenjirou let out a sigh quiet enough that she wouldn’t hear before continuing. “Very well. I wanted to ask why you requested passage on the *Glasir’s Leaf*. While you may be unaware of the exact dangers of an intercontinental voyage, you must be aware of the risk to your life over the next hundred or so days. I would like to hear why you are willing to face that risk,” he said. Then, as an afterthought, “Of course, you do not *need* to answer.”

She seemed to lose her earlier energy at that, her eyes filling with a strong sense of indecision. Then, she rallied and looked meaningfully at his right wrist.

“Well. I presume you have heard a little about me from Princess Margarita?”

Zenjirou traced the Windhammer with his other hand as he nodded. “I know your general circumstances, yes.”

Princess Margarita—one of the most skilled among the younger generation of the Sharou family’s enchanters—was Lucretia’s older sister by blood. He had been given the Windhammer by Margarita in exchange for “being there for my sister.” More precisely, for not turning her down on three occasions.

With her having made such a request, it was unlikely the two were on bad terms. At the very least, Margarita saw Lucretia as family.

Lucretia’s expression was affectedly blank as she continued. “The circumstances around my birth were never secret to begin with, let alone being an open secret. However, it is not the kind of thing one talks about, so most outside of the country are likely unaware of it.”

The utter lack of emotion in her voice as she derided her circumstances was somehow even harder to hear than it otherwise would have been.

“I was born to Prince Philbert and his legitimate wife, Lady Yolanda, but lost

that right due to my lack of ability in their lineal magic. I was therefore raised as part of the Broglie family for as long as I can remember. The silver lining is that both my blood and adoptive families are kindhearted people. However, the cloud is that they are all almost clumsily earnest. So much so that they will not treat a child as a child.”

As she spoke, her expressionless face morphed into a bitter smile. Zenjirou didn’t miss the tears welling in her eyes, though. While her voice remained even, he could hear the sadness in it.

“So I was brought up without any deceit. Without hearing a single falsehood. While the Broglie family treated me as one of their own, they also never forgot the respect of my lineage. Conversely, while Prince Philbert and Lady Yolanda treated me as nothing more than a member of a vassal family in public, they showered me with the love and affection of a family in private.”

“That...” Zenjirou began, his face twisting like he’d swallowed something sour as he understood the situation she’d been put in.

The slightest imagining made it obvious what a strained environment it would have been. Neither the Broglie family nor Prince Philbert’s family were wrong in showing her honest affection. However, giving her the full knowledge of her situation at the same time made things hopelessly tense.

The Broglie family was effectively bringing her up with love and affection while simultaneously reminding her she was not *really* part of their family. At the same time, Philbert’s portion of the Sharou family was keeping up the pretense in public while also loving her as a part of their family. It was obvious that in such an environment, she would end up with a deep-rooted desire to return to the royal family.

With both families treating her with love and affection as they brought her up while *both* stressing that she actually belonged to the latter family, a child that loved their family would inevitably try to live up to those “expectations” and correct the issue. The desire to correct the situation was the predominant challenge and reason Lucretia lived.

Despite her youthful looks, she was an adult. Correcting that perspective would be nigh on impossible.

I get the reasoning, and I can sympathize, but why do I have to get dragged into it? Zenjirou sighed mentally at the information, which was more bothersome than he'd expected.

Either deciding to go on the offensive or simply change the way she was doing things, the young woman's smile turned to one of childish innocence. "That is why I want to return to the Sharou family. I need achievements and to fulfill conditions to do so. Going to the Northern Continent is a foothold to attain those things. Does that answer your question?" she asked firmly.

"It does. You have my thanks for your honesty," he replied evenly, keeping his conflicted feelings from his voice.

In the Twin Kingdoms, someone in Lucretia's position would only be allowed to return to her own family by marrying royalty. That would also apply to her becoming Zenjirou's concubine.

She had taken advice from Freya. To do so, she needed to show what benefit it would have to Capua. Thus she had made her request in order to raise her value. She was willing to marry a man she had no fondness for to achieve her goal. Staking her life on a sea voyage was much the same.

It was somewhat refreshing for her values to be so straightforward. If he had been completely uninvolved, he might have even been tempted to support her. However, being her target made the idea a far less tempting proposition. Still, considering it a marriage of convenience rather than one of any emotion might make it easier.

"I shall send you to the capital tomorrow, then. Would three days there, heading to Valentia on the fourth work for you?"

She nodded. "It would, thank you."

Zenjirou remembered something else. "Incidentally, Lucretia, while I am an amateur myself and cannot precisely speak from a point of knowledge, I know that a ship is a lethally dangerous place during an intercontinental crossing. In short, I would like to recommend that you wear something easier to move around in while on board."

"Right," she replied quietly, her voice embarrassed. She had purposefully

worn a larger dress than usual, and even now her hands were hidden in its sleeves.



The next night, Zenjirou was back in the inner palace of Capua. While the majority of the continent's denizens would find an overnight trip between the far west and the center of the continent to be absurd, teleportation made it easy. He could use the spell twice a day, so he had sent Lucretia first and then followed himself.

He had only ever been and gone to the Twin Kingdoms using the spell, so the magnitude of the journey wasn't really apparent to him. Lucretia, however, had spent the month taking the land route, so she was almost angry at the ease of the journey.

Regardless, he was now in the living room speaking with his wife. Originally, it had only been a place for the queen to exchange information with her husband. Now that he had the position of Duke Bilbo, though, it was something like an informal supreme council.

"Good work, Zenjirou. I will send Lucretia to Valentia three days hence. Once you are ready, head there under your own power whenever it is convenient."

"Well, it's just coming and going with teleportation, so it doesn't really count as 'work.' Fortunately, they've got their hands full with the succession, so I didn't have to bother with all the greetings."

Aura looked marginally conflicted at that. "So the Sharou family headship and throne has passed from King Bruno to Prince Josep. I knew it would be soon, but this is sooner than I expected. Almost shockingly so."

While the speed was beyond her estimation, the actual succession was much as she had predicted. The surprise was that it had taken place while Prince Francesco was not in the country.

With both the former and current kings being part of the Total Unity Faction, they would want to install Francesco as the next crown prince due to him embodying their ideals. Holding the abdication and coronation while he was not present was proof positive of a large paradigm shift.

While the next crown prince could be selected later, the son being completely absent from his father's enthronement would completely remove him from the running as far as most nobility was concerned. There was no chance that either of the men involved had failed to realize that.

It therefore meant that they had either given up on putting him on the throne or prioritized the transfer of power despite it lowering the possibility of the other.

"Hmm, well, Prince Francesco renounced his right to the throne as far as the public's concerned, so putting him in that position would definitely cause some chaos. They might not think they can afford it for a while."

Zenjirou saw both men as logical statesmen. If Aura's estimation of their panic was correct, he could see them surrendering their own goals to deal with it.

Aura nodded in agreement. "That is eminently possible. It makes me want to know all the more urgently what has them so spooked."

"Yeah. If you're right and they're wary of the Northern Continent, we should probably be careful too."

"Please do so."

With their course set for dealing with the two Sharous, the couple moved on to the next topic.

"Nine days until I go, then. It almost feels like time's been going quicker lately. Maybe it's my age."

That earned a slightly concerning glare from his wife. She was older than him.

Sensing he might have stirred up a hornet's nest, he hurriedly continued. "Right, so, about the trip. The people and things are all in Valentia now? Other than Lucretia and me."

It was a painfully blatant attempt at glossing over the issue, but she wasn't really angry, so she just smirked and let it pass.

"Indeed. The dwarf wyvern has arrived saying that everything has been loaded onto the *Glasir's Leaf*. As for the passengers, Natalio and his men arrived some time ago, and I have sent the three maids."

There were two cabins assigned to them. One for the men and one for the women. They had also been allocated some space in the ship's hold. Turning up empty-handed to ask for another country's princess was unthinkable, practically the stuff of a heroic epic.

Therefore, that space had been taken up by riches bearing the country's dignity. They had also taken Freya's advice and included drake skin and bone along with logs sliced into thin discs. The last items may have been the most valuable gifts. With their source of lumber drying up, Uppasala would see it as a sales pitch for the sheer amount of such trees they could grow.

There was no diplomat accompanying them, so Zenjirou would need to carry out the initial negotiations.

"Princess Freya's marriage aside, I just need to lay the groundwork for the trade deal and ask for a real diplomat to deal with the rest, right?" he asked nervously.

Fortunately, she agreed. "Indeed. You need only attain permission for such negotiations. In fact, forgive my bluntness, but if they bring up specifics, do not get involved."

Aura loved him and trusted him beyond most others. However, that trust did not extend to his abilities. If she was unable to make those harsh judgments, she would have been unfit to be queen.

"I know. I'll just feign ignorance for the lot on that front," he answered ruefully—but without taking offense—all too aware of his shortcomings.

"Please do."

"Anyway, I need to get permission to use teleportation, and I'll need a room to use for a base."

The only reason they could so casually discuss sending more people somewhere over a hundred days away was because after Zenjirou had been there once, he could send one or two people easily via teleportation.

"Yes. You need not worry too much, though. If you accomplish your goal, it should practically be an inevitable allowance."

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“There is no one who would allow you and Princess Freya to marry but not allow you to use teleportation. Either as a father or as a king,” she explained frankly.

“Ah, right.”

That made sense now that she explained it. If it was allowed, then Freya would inevitably move to Capua on the Southern Continent and trade would flow between the two countries. A father allowing his daughter to marry and move a hundred days away by ship would not object to her being theoretically able to visit every day. Meanwhile, a king would have the foresight to know that a direct line to his trade partner would be vastly beneficial.

“So I don’t need to prepare much in the way of arguments for that either.”

“Indeed. You need only put your efforts into marrying Princess Freya.”

“That just makes me wish we could have found some reason to turn Lucretia down...” he complained in disappointment.

It was completely understandable. Visiting a foreign country to take its princess as a concubine *while being accompanied by another concubine candidate* would inevitably be a detriment.

“I apologize for the hardship,” she said guiltily. “She wants an audience with me before you leave. I shall stress things to her there. Until Princess Freya becoming your first concubine is a settled matter, there will be no progress on a second, so she is not to make it public that she is aiming for that.”

“I appreciate it, but that phrasing definitely feels like the second will be on its way once the first is sorted.”

Aura made no response.

“Say something, wife of mine.”

“I will look comprehensively at the situation and try to meet your requests as best as possible.”

“How transparent, Your Majesty.”

Still, he understood that her position didn't allow her to prioritize her husband's selfishness over the good of the country, and he left things at that for his own mental health as well.

The serious matters were done with now, and Zenjirou looked at the clock. "Whoops, it's already that late? I'll go check on Zenkichi and Yoshino while I can."

His joy was clear in his expression as he stood up. "Yoshino" was the name he had given to his second child, the result of several days of thought.

"Indeed. There is a good chance both Carlos and Juana will be up at this time. We may even be able to hold them."

Capua's first prince, Carlos Zenkichi Capua, and first princess, Juana Yoshino Capua. They would one day carry the weight of the country on their shoulders.

For their parents, though, they were simply their adorable children. And Zenjirou would not be able to see them for months on end, so he could not miss his opportunity over the next few days.

"Let's go. I'm gonna hug 'em, hold 'em, and even carry 'em."

"Please refrain from holding them for so long that they start to cry again. I do not want to face Cassandra's or Esmerelda's anger," Aura said with an exaggerated shudder at the two wet nurses' names.



The next day, Aura used some of her free time to summon Lucretia to the palace.

"It is the first time we have met in an unofficial situation," the queen said. "It is rather belated, but I should introduce myself. I am Queen Aura I of the Kingdom of Capua."

"I am Lucretia Broglie of the nobility of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. I am honored that you are willing to hear my request today."

While the younger woman kept the polite noble's smile that was expected of her, it was possible to see she was somewhat overwhelmed by the queen's overbearing presence. There was a distinct difference between a queen who

had managed to win out through a great war and a barely-grown young woman.

Aura reclined on the sofa, crossing one leg over the other as she continued forcefully. “I have little time. Let us dispense with the formalities. What is it you want, Lucretia?”

The younger woman visibly gulped at the intense look from the queen but managed to gather herself and speak. “Of course! I shall get straight to the point. Please tell me what needs to happen so that I can marry His Majesty.”

The queen murmured slightly, somewhat amused by just *how* to the point her question was. The girl was quivering like some small animal, but managing to so plainly show her desires despite that was demonstrative of fairly impressive courage.

So Aura told her, “Everything.”

“Ever...ything?”

“Indeed,” Aura replied, offering some extra explanation. “The country must benefit. The people—or at least the upper echelons—must accept it. I must benefit. Finally, my husband should be emotionally fulfilled.”

It was harsh counsel, but Freya actually fulfilled all of those conditions. International trade benefited the country as a whole. She had persuaded Zenjirou—who until that point had stubbornly refused all such offers—and gained understanding and acceptance from the nobility. The trade was with the royal family rather than the country as a whole, so it benefited Aura. Finally, as Freya had been rather proactive, she had managed to get close to Zenjirou and earn his favor.

Asking the same thing of Lucretia could certainly be called cruel, but since Zenjirou didn’t *really* want to accept even Freya, it was certainly the bare minimum.

“The country’s benefit can be left to the Twin Kingdoms. Unlike Princess Freya, your country will take the lead in any negotiations rather than you doing so personally. Any benefit to me personally will also come from that. However, the understanding from my country’s nobility along with my husband’s favor

are things you will have to earn personally.”

“Of course!” Lucretia nodded happily.



At this point, she was completely taken in by Aura. Stating that the benefit to the country and its queen was the responsibility of the Twin Kingdoms could conversely be taken that if talks between the nations fell through, Lucretia would never become his concubine.

Assuming the political landscape allowed it, Aura would prefer to follow Zenjirou's hopes and avoid taking a concubine from the Twin Kingdoms. Thus the trap in her words. However, her keen intuition from the war told her there was a strong chance that trap could go to waste.

Either way, the blonde in front of her seemed to have completely missed the implication and was instead burning with motivation.

"Very well. So I need to gain the acceptance of the Capuan nobility as well as His Majesty's favor, correct?"

The younger woman's tiny clenched fists and expression made Aura think of a dash drake running headlong into a mud pit, so she gave her a warning to avoid hurting her husband emotionally at the very least.

"A word of advice. Focus less on 'scoring points' and more on not losing them. As people who may share their lives, that would be for the better. Carelessly chasing what seem like good opportunities could have the opposite effect, and undoing that is by no means easy."

Zenjirou would vastly prefer to spend time with someone who had relatively few things he liked about them but nothing he *disliked* over someone with many things he liked, but also many things he disliked.

Of course, Aura was not Zenjirou, so this was only her personal estimation, but she was fairly confident in it. It was certainly what she had perceived from him.

"Thank you for your valuable advice," Lucretia said with a serious look, bowing deeply.



Eight days later, Zenjirou was in Valentia. His boarding of the ship was something of a ceremony, so he was wearing his third uniform. It was slightly

difficult to move in.

The majority of his luggage had been sent ahead and already stowed in his room or the hold, so he was currently empty-handed. Well, there was a newly completed compass in his pocket, but he didn't intend to show that to Freya yet. It was simply metal magnetized by an electromagnet. It was relatively weak, and most didn't last long. Zenjirou was no professional either, so it wasn't exactly what he had been aiming for.

He had brought five of them to make up for the quality with quantity. However, they would have far less credibility than the sailor's current techniques of navigating by the sun and stars. This trip would let him see how precise they were and enable him to actually promote them to Freya.

He climbed the stairs up to the ship and stepped onto the deck. There was a group waiting there for him. His knight Natalio was standing at the head, with another knight he had picked and two soldiers.

Ines had already become a fixture of this kind of trip, but this time, Aura's maid Margarette was also there, along with one of the younger maids.

There were four men and three women. Adding Zenjirou brought the total to eight people, the entirety of the Capuans boarding the *Glasir's Leaf*.

Lucretia—having been sent to Valentia earlier—and her maid, Flora, were also there to greet him. These ten were the guests, while everyone else was part of the ship's crew.

Leading the veterans through the storm to the Southern Continent was a silver-haired woman wearing men's clothes. Zenjirou spoke respectfully to her as she stood flanked by the brawny sailors.

"I, Zenjirou Bilbo Capua, as both husband to Queen Aura I of Capua and as Duke Bilbo, request permission to travel on the *Glasir's Leaf*."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I, Freya Uppasala, as captain of this ship welcome you to travel, and to the ship as a whole." She raised her right arm smoothly as she spoke.

There was a roar on the deck a moment later. The men behind her had all yelled in unison. If you listened carefully, you could tell it was a "welcome."

However, the sheer volume and the nature of the men it was coming from made it practically a weapon of sound, even a threat.

Although Zenjirou was rather timid by nature, he managed to avoid backing away. The fear probably showed on his face, but he'd take that. The stifled smile on Freya's lips meant that she, at least, had noticed his nerves.

Once the voices died out, Zenjirou raised his own hand. "Thank you for your welcome. I am a complete amateur when it comes to ships and will be nothing more than a hindrance at sea," he said.

In fact, that was pretty much the case whether at sea or on land when things got heated, but there was no need for him to say that. Knowing that they were all listening to him with interest, he spoke in a carrying voice.

"From what I hear, seconds can mean life or death at sea. Therefore, though you may have already heard this from Captain Freya, I will repeat it myself. From this point until we leave the ship, I have no issue with you treating me as a normal person. After all, a hesitation over formalities could mean life or death. Natalio, you and my escorts should especially be aware of this. The best way to protect me aboard is to allow the experts to carry out their roles as best as they can."

Natalio and the other guards saluted at that.

"Understood, sir!" Natalio said.

Zenjirou nodded back and then returned his gaze to Freya and the sailors behind her. He had been understood.

"May I, Captain?" the most important-looking of the men behind her asked, stepping forward.

"By all means, Vice," Freya replied.

The man was not particularly big for a sailor, but he was certainly muscular enough to be intimidating to Zenjirou. The dark red beard and confident expression on his face made him look even bigger.

"I am Vice-Captain Magnus of the *Glasir's Leaf*. We shall take you at your word and treat you without reserve on the sea, Your Majesty."

“I have no intention of rescinding my words. I am in your care until we reach the Northern Continent, Vice-Captain Magnus,” Zenjirou replied, shaking the man’s offered hand.

“Vice is fine. There are other Magnuses aboard. Short address is best at sea. We shall refer to you as Majesty.”

“Very well, Vice.”

“Good, Majesty.”

With the greetings dealt with, it was finally time. The *Glasir’s Leaf* was shoving off.

“The waves are slight and the wind is good today. You’re fine to stay on deck for a while, but make sure you hold on,” the vice-captain said.

Zenjirou nodded, standing on the deck as the other man indicated. “I will take you up on that.”

He, the three maids, Lucretia, and her maid were all holding on to the railing around the deck of the ship. Due to their role as Zenjirou’s guards, Natalio and the others were not.

Freya checked that her guests were holding on and then gave the command. “*Glasir’s Leaf*, to seal!”

The sailors all began moving as one. The gangway was removed, the anchor pulled in, and the main sail unfurled. The white cloth filled with the wind and the ship began to move away from the jetty out to sea.

It was par for Zenjirou’s personality that he was looking behind them rather than ahead. “It’s getting farther and farther away,” he mused quietly, looking at his departing home rather than the oncoming sea.

“Rest assured, Your Majesty, we shall protect you,” Natalio told him.

Zenjirou was just about to reply when a call rang out.

“Eyes sharp! We’re leaving the harbor!”

Indeed, the ship was just passing the three breakwaters and heading out into the open sea. The waves inevitably grew stronger, and the ship swayed more.

“Oh?”

Those holding on, and the sailors—who had trained until the point of literally throwing up—had no problem, but amateurs who lacked a grip certainly did. Natalio and his compatriot both fell with yells as the ship rolled beneath them.

Zenjirou’s statement of relying on them just sounded harsh to him now. He looked awkwardly away as the two soldiers offered their superiors a hand up.

“Are you okay, Sir Natalio?”

“Sir Robert, please grab hold.”

“S-Sorry.”

“Thanks.”

Zenjirou felt obligated to offer a warning to the knights once their subordinates had helped them up. “Perhaps you should hold the railings until you are used to the movement of the ship?”

“Of course; my apologies.”

“We shall take you up on that.”

They probably understood there would be no standing guard in that way. Natalio and the other knight made no pretenses and grabbed the railing.

“That was an unseemly display,” Natalio said. “Since my arrival, I have been out with fishermen training to stand at sea, but it was not enough.”

The other knight nodded emphatically in agreement. “You can say that again.”

Seeing them not lose too much heart, Zenjirou replied rather cheerfully, “Good work regardless. Anyway, there are at least another hundred days of this. Get used to it during the trip.”

Natalio chuckled. “How depressing.”

“Well, we will have to get used to it whether we want to or not. We won’t be able to do anything if we don’t,” the other knight added.

Natalio was used to Zenjirou’s disposition due to the amount of time he had spent as his guard, but the other knight also joined in. They would all be sharing a room for the trip. If they didn’t get friendly with each other relatively quickly,

the journey would be more difficult.

“I have to say that the two soldiers are handling themselves well,” Zenjirou observed.

“Right. They’re from Valentia. They might be soldiers now, but they were fishermen originally, so they know how to handle themselves on a ship.”

“They will be far more reliable than us at sea. If the need arises, you should rely on them first.”

“Got it. Your time will come when we make landfall.”

“Even should it take our lives,” Natalio vowed.

“Though we are staking our lives now and it could well come to nothing, pathetically enough.”

The topic was relatively grave, but the three of them comfortably chatted as the ship progressed. The port soon vanished, and the lighthouse passed beyond the horizon.

“Can’t see it now...” Zenjirou commented. Putting it into words made it feel all the more real. He looked out at the featureless sea for a while, but it was unsurprisingly not enough to hold his attention forever.

Instead, he turned to the blonde also holding the railing. “Lucretia, I imagine you already know, but we have only been assigned two cabins. You will therefore need to room with my maids. Will that be an issue?”

She looked surprised for a second, apparently not having expected him to speak to her, but she soon smiled back at him.

“Thank you for your consideration. I can honestly say that I have never done the like of it before, but I will do my best,” she answered, thumping a hand to her chest as if proud of her small stature.

“If you cannot get used to it, you are welcome in my cabin as well, Lady Lucretia,” Freya said, walking over after having left the rest to the vice-captain.

Calm waves and wind aside, Zenjirou could not let go of the railing, yet she was walking as if she were on land.

"It is a large area, and only Skaji and I use it, so it would be better than the guest cabin on that front. Still, it *is* the captain's quarters, so sailors will enter without warning in an emergency."

While she was almost entirely a figurehead, Freya *was* the ship's captain. If something happened at sea, whether day or night, it came to her. A sailor could rush in while they were in their nightwear, yes, but also while they were changing or washing.

"I shall respectfully decline," Lucretia said with a strained look on her face. She couldn't muster the same resolve as the princess.

"The long voyage will be rather difficult. If at any point it gets to be too much, I can send you back with teleportation, so make the request if that happens," Zenjirou offered.

Emergencies where he could not concentrate aside, he could probably cast the spell while the ship was traveling smoothly. Lucretia's face broke out into happiness for a moment, but she soon shook her head at the temptation.

"Thank you, but I will be fine. I shall see the trip through to its end."

She wanted to be seen as useful to both her homeland and Capua so that she could marry into the latter, and ducking out halfway through would be absurd.

"Then perhaps I could show you to your cabins? There are many things that are different from a room on land, so I should explain them."

Neither Zenjirou nor Lucretia had reason to refuse.

"Very well, please do."

"Indeed, Princess Freya," they replied respectively.

"Follow me, then. There are railings on either the left or right the entire way, so make sure at least one hand is on one of them."

Freya turned with a flare of her coat and set off with sure steps. Zenjirou mumbled to himself as he followed after her with a hand on the railing.

"I'll be spending a hundred days in this room, then. It'll be where I've spent the most time in this world after the inner palace, but I doubt it'll be anywhere near as comfortable."

It was going to be a long hundred days. He refrained from saying that last part aloud as he held on tightly to the railing while following the princess.

Epilogue — The Queen, Prince, and Backroom Deals

While Zenjirou was heading out to sea, Aura had already resumed her normal duties in the capital.

With the newly filled positions of prime minister and marshal in effect, her main duties were checking *their* work, so she had much more leeway with her time than before. She looked over the reports from both of them and—to guard against corruption—pulled several of the sub-documents out and checked those to make sure they agreed with what had been sent to her.

In the midst of those duties, she stretched out in her chair. “Hmm. I believe that will be it for today. Appointing them has truly decreased the workload that falls on me.”

The queen rolled her shoulders in something approaching dissatisfaction. However, her thin-faced aide interjected. “Conversely, one could say that the work which does fall to you is much more important, as neither prime minister nor marshal can make those decisions without your agreement.”

“I know. I am prepared for that. I have no further plans today, do I?” she asked, shifting back and forth in her seat. She was just waiting for Fabio to say no so that she could rush back to the inner palace.

Carlos was still young enough to be called an infant—and so, of course, was Juana, her newly born daughter. It was obvious that she would want to return to the inner palace where they were waiting.

Unfortunately, Fabio’s answer betrayed her expectations. “Originally, you did not. However, Prince Francesco has requested a last-minute audience. Are you willing?”

There was no way she could refuse the request. It was at least to be prioritized over going to fawn over her children.

“Show him in,” she replied after a pause, slumping back.

“Hey, Your Majesty,” was Francesco’s greeting once he arrived. “My apologies

for the sudden request, and my thanks for accepting it.”

He wore the relaxed grin that he always seemed to have. Despite her irritation, Aura replied to him as normal.

“Think nothing of it. Such requests from you are something I have resigned myself to.”

The rather direct and harsh remark was almost a necessary thing when speaking with Francesco. As expected, the man showed no signs of displeasure at that.

“Thank you for your understanding.” He chuckled. “After all, much of our discussions need to be away from Bona’s eyes, so I can hardly plan these meetings ahead of time.”

“I am well aware,” the queen replied with a sigh, acknowledging the validity of his statement. “Which means we have little time. State your business.”

The blond prince pulled out a sheet of drake parchment from his pocket. “Well, before I forget the most important thing, my grandfather requested that I deliver this to you.”

There was a clear layer of mana around the drake parchment. It went without saying that mana-coated parchment was dual burn parchment. Two sheets were linked together, allowing for the exchange of information by burning letters into either of them.

Aura was more than savvy enough to intuit why she was being given only *one* of the pair. “Who holds the other? King Bruno or King Josep?”

“The former. Neither grandfather nor father were expecting His Majesty to board the *Glasir’s Leaf*, so they have responded like this.”

From what Aura had heard, much of the reason Bruno had passed the throne to his son was to free himself up. It was a big ask for either the reigning king or crown prince to independently visit another country.

A former king, having abdicated the throne, however, could just about personally visit Capua. It would seem that he intended to almost immediately visit and speak directly with Aura about future national policy.

"This was under the assumption that His Majesty Zenjirou would be free. My grandfather cannot come all the way to Capua by land with over seventy years under his belt."

Francesco didn't seem particularly worried, merely scratching his head gently as he spoke. All of these plans had been made with the assumption that Zenjirou would be present. In terms of both time and physicality, without Zenjirou to provide transport from the Twin Kingdoms, Bruno could not come to Capua.

Aura nodded in understanding. "I see. Hence the dual burn parchment?"

"Correct. He wants to exchange at least some information with you."

While the foreign king had wanted to speak in person, doing so was impossible now that Zenjirou was heading to the Northern Continent. Therefore, he had provided at least some form of personal contact in the form of dual burn parchment.

"Well, it is better than nothing," Aura replied, taking the document and flicking it sharply.

Despite her harsh phrasing, Francesco had to agree. "I suppose so."

There was a distinct difference in the amount and quality of information that one could attain from letters on dual burn parchment and a face-to-face conversation. Taken to an extreme, Aura only had Francesco's word that Bruno held the other sheet, but it could very well have been in the possession of someone else entirely. There could be no speaking one's mind with such doubts lurking. There was also a strict limit to the amount of information that could be conveyed on a single sheet.

"Ultimately, I believe my grandfather will come here. Of course, that will be after His Majesty returns from the Northern Continent."

"My husband and I are as one. Instead of the previous king coming all this way, surely my husband could speak with him in the Twin Kingdoms?" Aura sniped, well aware of the bad blood between Zenjirou and the prior and current holders of the throne.

Her comment might have garnered a response from one of the two men

involved, but Francesco was completely divorced from the situation.

“Quite right,” he chuckled. “Unfortunately, it seems both my father and grandfather find His Majesty somewhat difficult to deal with.”

“Hmm.”

Aura said nothing of sympathy or reaping what one sowed. It truly *was* difficult to deal with Zenjirou. His values were just too unique, and he had exceedingly few desires. There were limited ways to win his favor back once it was lost.

Truthfully, it was not a problem that she was unfamiliar with herself. Freya’s concubine agreement, his trip to the Northern Continent, and the possibility of another concubine from the Twin Kingdoms were all examples of this. Each of them were things he had been clearly against but that Aura had forced onto him for the sake of the country.

She had not managed to change his mind so that he was happy to do these things. Nor had she offered him some benefit in exchange for the displeasure. He had simply accepted her explanations and was bearing with the situation. Endurance of that kind had its limits for everyone.

Hm, in that respect, you could say that the three of us are in the same boat, she thought.

Bruno and Josep had erred and wanted to fix their relationship with Zenjirou. Aura, on the other hand, had pushed significant struggles his way and knew that she would continue to do so in the future, but she had found no way to earn back his favor. If Bruno and Josep managed to fix things with Zenjirou, it could actually prove to be a useful example for her to follow.

“Well, no matter. While it may be after my husband returns, I will happily welcome the former king should he decide to visit.”

“Thank you. I hope you can inform him of words to that effect,” Francesco said with a glance at the parchment in her hands.

She nodded slightly. “Very well. Was that all?”

The blond prince hurriedly started talking as she moved to end the

conversation. “No, I have a request of my own.”

“Speak it,” she said after a pause, swallowing a sigh. Despite knowing that it would likely be nothing good, she still had to hear him out.

With no way of knowing her thoughts, the prince fulfilled her expectations with a broad grin. “You can produce those jewels at will now, no? Please sell me some.”

“I seem to recall providing you with three already.”

“They all broke,” he answered casually.

Aura couldn’t hide her emotions and her right hand made its way to cover her face.

“I tried making a magical tool for enchantment. The theory seemed sound, but it appears there were some things I missed.”

“A failed enchantment destroys the medium?” Aura asked.

Ordinarily, a failed spell simply had no effect. If Francesco was telling the truth, it would seem that enchanting was a rather unusual type of magic.

However, he shook his head. “Well, strictly speaking, they didn’t *just* break. I broke them. Magic tools that do not function as intended are dangerous and need to be disposed of,” he explained.

“I see. That makes sense,” she replied.

Say, for instance, that a magic tool was meant to light a fire. The maker could have intended for the tool to create a small flame on its upper portion, but when actually used, the flame appeared at random. Technically, it was a successful enchantment and would light fires. However, the danger it posed would mean that it wasn’t actually usable. The Sharou family had strict rules about disposing of such tools.

“That’s why they’re all broken and I need more. I wouldn’t ask for them for free, though. If you provided four, I would use one of them to create a magic tool of your choosing.”

It was almost impressive to her how willing he was to ignore any agreements between their countries and suggest backroom deals instead.

"We have yet to reach an agreement with the Sharou family," Aura reminded him.

"That's why I want to buy them as an individual while I still can."

Aura gave an exaggerated sigh at the clear premeditation in his words. Still, it was not a bad deal for her. Above all else, there was something she wanted to try at least once.

She feigned concern and put on a reluctant look as she gave her answer. "Very well, then. However, this will be the last time. Any further requests need to be with the Sharou family's permission. The items will be delivered to you. As before, separate the good and the bad and note what specifically makes the bad so. Choose four of the good ones for our agreement."

"Understood," he replied cheerily.

"I wish to request a flameburst. Is that possible?"

Francesco seemed somewhat taken aback and the smile dropped from his lips. "Flameburst?" he asked. "Unfortunately, I never learned that spell."

"I know it. I shall assist as I did for the last two items."

"Then it is possible. How do you want it to perform, though? Flameburst may not fall under anyone's lineal magic, but it is an impressive spell in its own right. Even one of those jewels does not make it a simple undertaking."

"A single-use disposable tool is fine."

"Then it should only take a day."

Her goal was halfway fulfilled as soon as she heard that. Repressing the cold shudder, she kept her voice even.

"I see. Then we have an accord."

"Indeed. Thank you, Your Majesty. In that case, I shall excuse myself."

Having accomplished his own goals, he all but skipped away as the queen watched with a dignified expression. But once the door had closed and she had counted slowly to ten, she let it slip from her face as she stared up at the ceiling.

"So it *is* possible. A flameburst in a day."

She felt like she could finally see some of what Zenjirou was worried about. Single-use magic tools were so valuable that outside of extremely worthwhile instances like healing stones, there were almost no examples of them. It normally took years to produce them and they weighed heavily on a country's coffers. With the single use that they represented, only healing stones were generally worth the price. That was why all other tools had been made to be reusable.

As far as combat utility went, there were things like spears that could be wreathed in fire or mantles that produced winds to protect their wearers. These were treated as heirlooms, passed down through the generations.

The mass production of the jewels—of marbles—turned those values on their head. Things could take a day to make and cost what was effectively pocket change for royals and nobles. At that point, the price to performance was favorable even for single-use items.

"Ammunition for ballistae and siege engines can be imbued with flameburst or the like for a dozen, or perhaps even fewer, times the price."

Scenes from the battlefield during the war played out before her eyes. Catapults launched massive boulders and ballistae sent arrows that were bigger than spears flying downrange.

Then, she envisioned a similar type of ammunition enchanted with flameburst or boulder creation.

"It will change the battlefield...and that is putting it lightly." She shuddered. "The jewels alone would not be so much of an issue, though."

Mass production of the marbles was one thing, but there was still a bottleneck in terms of the number of enchanters. Those politically inclined like the new king hardly had the time to create magic tools to begin with. Even those like Francesco, who focused on their craft, had their duties as royalty, limiting their time to create. They had to spend time thinking about their new tools.

Things would be different if Francesco succeeded in creating a magic tool

which itself created magic tools. As long as there was a supply of marbles, they could create magic tools automatically. Even if each tool could only create a single new item per day, that was still over three hundred within a year. If a country without that manufacturing power faced off against one with it...

“There is no chance of victory,” she said with a sigh as she came to a conclusion.

Until now, every time the mass production of magic tools had been mentioned, Aura had envisioned simply *more* of what already existed. However, assuming both mass production and mass consumption, the tools produced would be different.

“While keeping the technique secret for even a year is a necessity, we cannot keep it secret forever.”

Hiding production methods indefinitely was, in the long run, close to impossible. She could no longer take Zenjirou’s worries about the Sharou family ruling the world with marbles to be an exaggeration. There was only one way around it.

“There will be no avoiding a concubine from the Sharou family,” she mused.

Her conclusion circled back around to where she had begun and she let out a full-chested sigh.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life 12*.

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Long Separation

Zenjirou was both prince consort of Capua and—more recently—had gained his own title as Duke Bilbo.

Real power aside, he had the highest title after Aura and was the second-most highly ranked noble in the country. However, his lifestyle was relatively plain.

Of course, this was in relation to the general standard of nobility, but the fact remained that he didn't have particularly luxurious tastes. Despite this, while he was unaware of it himself, there were several extreme luxuries he partook in.

One among them was fruit. He enjoyed eating fruits as they were. He didn't dislike them being cooked into tarts or pies, but if he had to pick one over the other, he would fall on the side of the unprocessed fruits.

Because of that knowledge, there were often such fruits on his dining table, even though in Capua, it was a fairly luxurious thing.

It was not too surprising if you thought about it. The phrase “selective breeding” didn't even exist in this world, so fruits that could be eaten without further preparation were extremely rare.

While it was an unconscious vice of his, Zenjirou was currently on a ship bound for the Northern Continent. Even if he later used teleportation to return, he would be absent for at least a hundred days—more than three months.

Despite the presence of a fridge in the inner palace, fruit inside it would not last for that long. If Aura had to pick, she preferred processed fruits. Her recent favorite was fruits pickled in Zenjirou's distilled spirits.

Therefore, Zenjirou's leftovers had been handed over to the maids.

It was the afternoon, and two of the maids were seated at a table in the corner of the kitchen. They ferried the various colored fruits to their mouths.

“Hmm, that's great,” marveled a girl with short, curly hair—Faye—as she used a spoon to take a portion of a mango-like fruit.

“Sir Zenjirou’s fruits all taste different, even compared to the same ones normally,” said the maid with the largest chest in the inner palace—Letti—with an almost dopey smile as she ate a big fruit similar to a cherry.

Two other figures entered as the pair enjoyed the royal treats. One was a shorter girl, while the other was a girl of medium build. They were juniors to Faye and Letti. Their names were Nilda and Mirella.

The smaller girl’s hair was tied in a short ponytail. This was Nilda, and there was no wariness in her smile as she made her way over to the table.

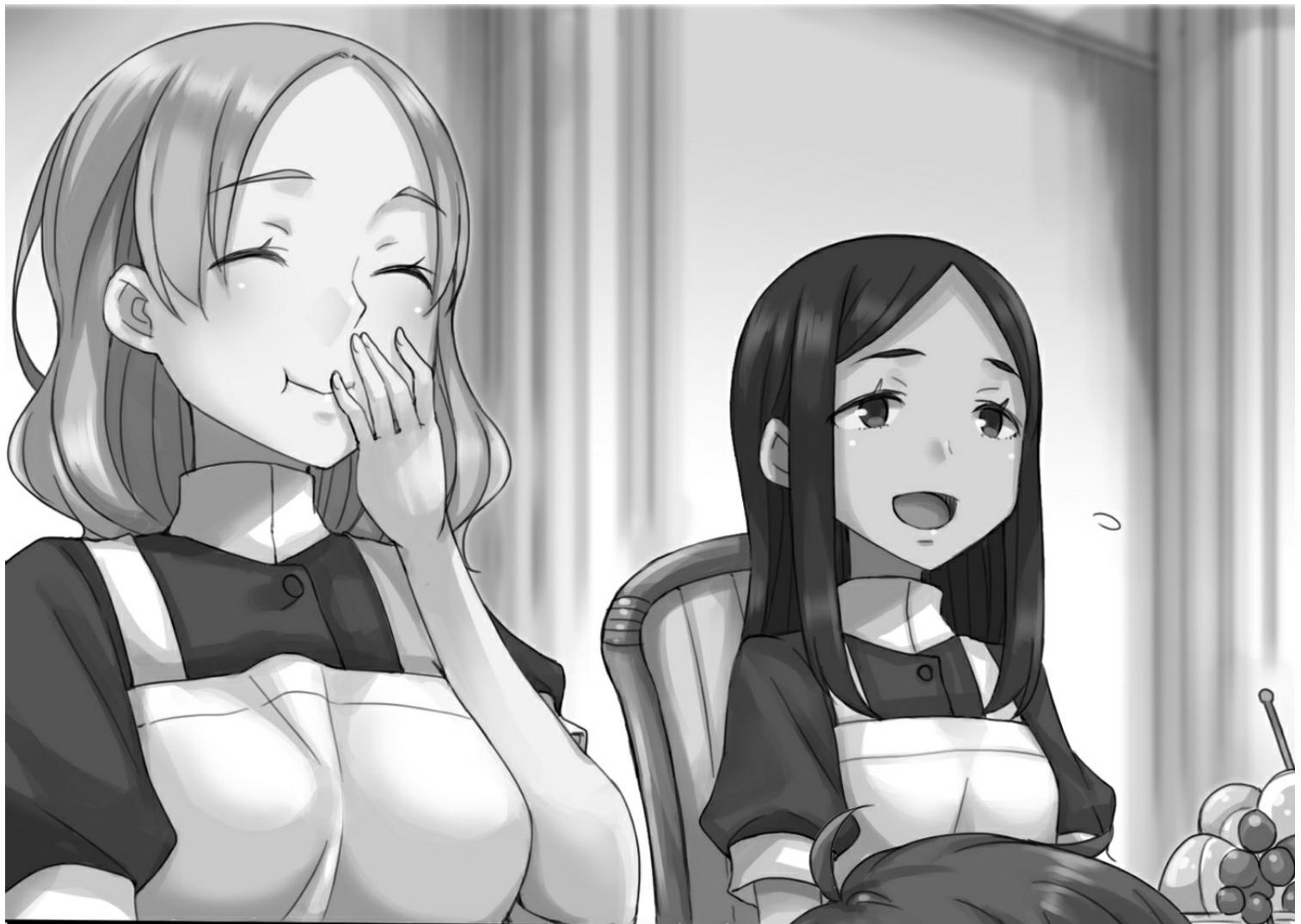
“Faye, Letti, are you on a break?” she asked.

“Could we join you?” the girl with long, glossy black hair—Mirella—followed up. Her uniform couldn’t hide her upbringing.

Neither of the other two had a reason to refuse.

“That’s fine. Pull up a chair.”

“Try these. They’re Sir Zenjirou’s fruits. They’re amazing as well.”



The four of them gathered around the table, eating peacefully.

“You did your work this morning with just the two of you?” Mirella asked quietly. “Was it hard?”

Faye proudly puffed out her—slight—chest as she answered. “Not at all. Neither Sir Zenjirou nor Her Majesty were in the inner palace today, so it was easy.”

Zenjirou was aboard the *Glasir’s Leaf* and Aura took her lunch in the main palace. Therefore, the work in the kitchen was currently the much simpler task of preparing food for the other maids.

Dolores was also on the *Glasir’s Leaf*, so the three problem maids were down to just Faye and Letti. The lesser workload meant that it wasn’t much of an issue, though. Nilda and Mirella were in the same boat as far as one of their trio being away was concerned.

“What about you? You don’t have Louisa and you’re not as used to things as we are,” Faye commented, putting on an air of superiority.

Nilda answered, “We’ll ask for your help if we need it, but we are fine for now.”

Louisa—who was usually the third of their group—was currently acting as Aura’s personal maid. Margarette, the woman who usually filled that role, was also on the *Glasir’s Leaf*, so Louisa was filling in for her.

Obviously, Margarette was not Aura’s *only* personal maid. Using one of Zenjirou’s maids to fill the gap seemed slightly odd, but it was nothing the maids would involve themselves in, so they just ignored it for now.

“I am not as good as Nilda or Louisa, so I am rather nervous. I don’t want to cause Nilda any bother.”

Mirella’s shapely eyebrows drew in slightly as she spoke. Indeed, one could not call her performance *good* by any means. Her position as a branch family member who had lost her parents and therefore been brought up effectively as a member of the main family meant that—for better or worse—she had been brought up as a young lady much more likely to have the services of a maid

rather than provide them. It was therefore hardly a shock that she was not skilled at doing the work.

Of course, the inner palace was unique in that it was not uncommon for such women to take posts as maids.

“Honestly, I would prefer more help,” she complained.

There was a distinctly know-it-all look on Faye’s face as she answered. “That would probably be difficult. They employ people with trustworthiness first to keep the inner palace safe, so simply employing more people is not easy. Except for things like laundry, which can be delegated outside.” She was simply repeating what Amanda had previously told her, but it was apparently enough to convince Mirella.

“I see. Cleaning the bedroom and living quarters along with taking care of food would certainly need trustworthiness above anything else.”

If an inner palace maid was against her lord, then she was close enough to cause real harm. It was therefore inevitable that increasing the number of maids was done carefully.

“Still,” Letti said, happily bringing more fruit up to eat, “there are definitely more of us. After all, there are more people we have to serve.”

“That’s true. Prince Carlos and Princess Juana’s care cannot solely be shouldered by the wet nurses.”

When Freya entered the inner palace as a concubine, she could bring several maids of her own, so it was impossible to say for sure, but Capua would also increase the number of maids here to deal with that.

While the four made small talk about the serious matters waiting in their futures, the door thudded open again to reveal another two figures. Both of them were middle-aged. One was somewhat stout, while the other was tall but even more refined.

They were Vanessa, the maid in charge of cooking, and Amanda, head maid of the inner palace.

The four started and went to stand from their chairs, but Vanessa waved

them off. “Stay as you are. You are still on a break.”

“Vanessa is right. We are not here to scold you. We *do* have a message, though, so listen well.”

The four younger maids settled back into their seats. Naturally, the mood was not as light as it had been. Amanda might have effectively told them to be at ease, but only Nilda truly was.

The older women likely felt some level of guilt about ruining their break, because the head maid kept things concise.

“From what we have seen this morning, working in pairs is too much. While Her Majesty being in the royal palace means it is not an issue, you will be shorthanded on days when she returns. Therefore, the four of you will be working two posts as a group of four.”

One group of four working over two posts was more adaptable than two groups of two working a single post each. It was a last resort due to the lack of personnel.

“Her Majesty is currently in the midst of selecting more people,” Amanda added. “There will be more staff shortly, but endure it until then.”

“I feel like I’ve heard that a lot lately,” Faye murmured.

“Did you have something to say, Faye?” Amanda asked with a pointed glare.

Faye put both hands over her mouth and shook her head. “Nothing, Head Maid,” she replied.

“Very good. That is how you will be working.”

“Understood,” the four chorused.



After the unexpected combination of their pairs, the four—Faye, Letti, Nilda, and Mirella—made their way to the prince’s and princess’s sleeping areas.

Carlos Zenkichi had been born around a year and a half ago, while Juana Yoshino was not even a month old. They had separate rooms near each other. When the blazing season arrived, they would be put in the same room to

conserve ice for cooling purposes, but that was not yet the case.

The reason was exceedingly simple. If one cried, the other would soon follow. It would double the workload of the wet nurses and reduce their sleep, so the two children were separated enough that they wouldn't hear each other crying.

The group quietly made their way into one of the rooms. Faye led the way, shifting the door quietly without knocking. She poked her head around the side once it was halfway open.

There was a plump woman sitting next to a child's bed—Carlos's wet nurse, Cassandra. The woman put a finger to her lips and then beckoned them in. With permission granted, the four quietly entered the room.

Aiding the wet nurse was not their role here. They were here to fulfill a special duty entrusted to them by Zenjirou, who would not be able to see his children for over three months. Ever so carefully, to avoid waking Carlos from his nap, Faye approached the bed and removed an object from her apron, holding it in both hands.

It was a handheld game console. However, it was currently set to work as a camera. With practiced movements, she took a picture of the prince sleeping in the small bed. She took one with a snap, then another. Then, just to be sure, a third.

When she was done, she put the console back to sleep and slipped it back into her apron. To avoid even the slightest chance of waking the sleeping prince, she gestured in apology for the disturbance to Cassandra. The other woman replied in kind that it wasn't an issue but that the four should leave.

They gave a group bow and then left as light-footed and slowly as they had arrived. They then carried out the same sequence of events in the room where Juana was sleeping before heading back to the living room and breathing a sigh of relief.

"Phew, mission accomplished. Princess Juana is almost always asleep, but the prince was as well this time. I was twice as tense as normal," Faye said.

"Right. Well done, though, Faye," Letti congratulated her. "You managed to get pictures of both of them without waking either of them up."

Faye gave a proud chuckle. “It’s nothing. After all, I am most familiar with the things Sir Zenjirou brought here.”

Zenjirou had given Faye and Letti a mission to take periodic pictures of both Carlos and Juana while he was away. It was all he could do, considering he wouldn’t be able to see them in person for at least three months.

Juana in particular would change to a shocking degree over that time span, having been born just before his departure. He knew that from his experience with Carlos, and he regretted not being able to watch the same progression with his daughter. Looking over pictures after the fact was the best he could do to help with that.

The girl in question was correct; it was a duty he could only leave to her due to her familiarity with the console. Strictly speaking, Dolores was just as familiar with it, but she was accompanying him on the ship. Dolores had been entrusted with the mobile phone and music player to record what Zenjirou would be unable to of the Northern Continent.

Surprisingly, that order had not come from Zenjirou, but from Aura. It was a difficult task, but Dolores was courageous and had a good head on her shoulders, so Aura felt she could do it.

Either way, Faye brought the console back out as she sat on the sofa, checking the pictures she’d taken. There were three of Carlos and another three of Juana. The other three gathered around her so they could join in on the checks.

“Yup, they’re all good.” Faye nodded in satisfaction. The two newer maids marveled at her side.

“Wow! It’s like a slice of the scene,” Nilda said.

“So this is a magic tool from Sir Zenjirou’s homeland...” Mirella mused. “It is incredible.”

While they were used to the fridge and lights, the console was a new surprise for them. How shocked would they be to hear that it could not only take still images but also videos with sound?

“Looking at them so close together really shows how much Prince Carlos has grown,” Letti remarked softly. “Princess Juana is so small and cute.”

"He has. Though according to Doctor Michel, Prince Carlos was bigger when he was born," Faye told her.

"Oh, really? Because he's a boy, maybe?"

The final step would be to hook the console up to Zenjirou's computer with the USB cable and back the images up. However, not even Faye or Dolores could do that. Actually, they *might* be able to, but his computer held the tax breakdowns of the nobility and the software to calculate them. It could become a weapon for the royal family, so only royalty were allowed to touch it. While the inner palace was as relaxed as possible to accommodate his tastes, there were limits and strict rules in place for some things, particularly enforced by Amanda and Aura.

Mirella had a sudden thought as they enjoyed perusing the photos.

"Sir Zenjirou really does love both Prince Carlos and Princess Juana," she remarked in admiration.

Nilda gave her roommate a blank look. "What? They're his children; of course he does?" she half-asked.

They were related, so of course he loved them. It wasn't something she was saying as a front or something she was telling herself. She truly believed that it was obvious.

Mirella couldn't help a look of longing at the idea. "That is not necessarily the case for royalty and nobility," she said.

The illegitimate child of a margrave had to know that kind of thing. Taking her upbringing into account, though, there were rather few people who would have as little an idea of the pitfalls of noble society.

"Really?" she asked.

Nilda still didn't seem convinced. Mirella couldn't fathom what kind of upbringing her roommate must have had. Mirella's parents had died in the war, so she had been adopted and raised by the main Márquez family.

They had raised her well and with care, but she would have to deny that there was any familial love there.

The exception was the count's second wife. Octavia offered affection to all, though, so she was simply unique in that way. Mirella would someday be obligated to take a husband at the count's discretion to revive the branch family. Her presence here was to aid him in picking out a suitable man. If by some chance Mirella could no longer do so either physically or through some other circumstances, she was entirely sure the count would cut her off.

"It is," she said simply.

"Hmm..."

Nilda was still unconvinced and Mirella seemed uneasy. Faye and Letti both joined the conversation, feeling the same as Mirella.

"It isn't pleasant," Faye said. "Mirella is right, though."

"Right. You seem so defenseless, it makes me worried as well."

Nilda realized she had made her roommate and seniors concerned about her, but that still didn't change the fact that she disagreed. She told them as much.

"Everyone said similar things to me when I came to the capital. The head maid was the kindest, but everyone else said the same. It was all things like, 'Noble society is dangerous, so be careful,' or 'If you're not cautious, you'll find yourself in an irrevocable situation.'"

"And wasn't that enough?" Mirella asked. Her expression showed just how obvious she found such concerns.

Nilda ducked her head and then looked up through her eyebrows at them. "Right. But everyone said it. *Everyone*."

"That's why we're so worried about you being so defenseless."

"Right. But it was *everyone*."

The three looked at her quizzically, noticing something was odd as the smallest of them voiced a question that had been bothering her since her arrival.

"It didn't matter who it was, everyone told me about the scary people in noble society, telling me to watch out for the bad people. *Everyone*. Every noble I have met in Capua. So why? If all of the nobles I met are kind and tell me that,

where are those bad people they are talking about?"

"Huh?"

"Ah ha ha..."

"W-Well..."

Nilda seemed rejuvenated after having finally gotten her thoughts across while the other three were lost for words. The lion told the rabbit that lions eat rabbits, so to be careful. A single lion telling the rabbit would cause the rabbit to remain wary of lions. But if the rabbit met a hundred lions and each of them told it the same? Would the rabbit be scared of lions in general?

Defenseless, innocent, and ignorant. Nilda had each of the three fatal flaws of noble society, and they multiplied each other, somehow making those she spoke with well-disposed to her and creating an odd sort of defense in and of itself.



There was one person whose fate had been unexpectedly yet greatly changed by Zenjirou boarding the *Glasir's Leaf*: Nicolai.

He was a sailor on the ship and also an ardent rearer of goats, having been lent to Capua to care for the goats Zenjirou had been given. He was a farmer's son and therefore familiar with making butter, cheese, and other such products from the milk the goats produced. That was perfect for Zenjirou.

Originally, Nicolai was meant to be aboard the *Glasir's Leaf* when it left to return to the Northern Continent. That was only natural. After all, that was his homeland. While the crew may have been prepared to die traversing between the two continents, none would actively choose not to return should they survive the journey.

While he had yet to finish teaching the Capuans the full breadth of what went into caring for the goats as well as how to make the derived products, the departure of the ship would normally have been his only chance to return home, so he would not have been able to stay in Capua.

However, Zenjirou—a man capable of casting teleportation—was now on the

ship instead. That changed things. If they arrived safely, the journey between their two countries could become instantaneous.

Aura and Zenjirou had offered him free transport home in exchange for further instruction. Even his direct superior had been unwilling to force the matter, but had asked him to accept if he was willing. Being nothing but a lowly sailor, it was practically a done deal.

With his stay lengthened, the milk, butter, and cream were delivered to the inner palace once again. Those three dairy products made the majority of the recipes Zenjirou had brought from Earth reproducible. While being unused to rearing mammals meant the Capuans were generally not fond of milk itself, the younger generation was rather fond of snacks made using butter and cream.

The four maids were now spending the night tasting the butter cookies that Vanessa—the head chef—had made. The looks of bliss on their faces said it all.

“Delicious,” was Faye’s one-word review.

“Well, Lady Vanessa baked them. That’s why they aren’t burnt despite how thin they are,” Letti said. While Faye was just happy to be eating delicious food, Letti was more impressed by the skill that had gone into them.

“It is a matter of intuition and experience. From your reactions, though, we should be able to spread these around rather than just leaving them for Sir Zenjirou.” Vanessa grinned.

Zenjirou’s impressions of the food were not particularly useful. It went without saying that his tastes were different from the nobility of both another country and a whole other *world* than his own. That meant that many of his recipes wouldn’t be accepted by Capua as a whole, even if they were reproduced.

These butter cookies seemed to be an exception, though. They were made with large amounts of butter and sugar, so they were rather high in calories, but Capua’s large production of sugar meant that they already knew that eating too many sweet things would make you fat. Butter cookies spreading throughout the country would be unlikely to change people’s figures dramatically.

Of course, Nilda seemed wholly unconcerned with her figure and was

munching away on a cookie she was holding in both hands like a squirrel. “This is really tasty,” she breathed.

Mirella looked both surprised and serious when she saw the expression on her roommate’s face, which seemed to brighten the room as a whole. Slowly, she took one for herself. “Well then...”

“Hm? What is it, Mirella?” Vanessa asked her.

The younger woman politely finished what she had in her mouth and then spoke after a beat. “Would you be willing to teach us how to make these cookies as well, Lady Vanessa?” she asked.

“Of course. I can’t make everything myself, so you four will need to learn how,” she said offhandedly.

Mirella questioned her a bit more intensely. “Then is the recipe to stay here? I suppose that is a matter for after we leave.”

“Ah, I see. No, there would be no problem with you taking it. Many of Sir Zenjirou’s recipes use butter or cheese, though, so ingredients will be hard to come by. I suppose there won’t be much point in that case,” Vanessa mused.

Mirella actually seemed happier to hear that, though. “That would be all the better, in fact. Thank you.”

The fact that the recipe used such specific ingredients meant that making it more widely available still ran very little risk of it being “stolen.” Mirella’s thoughts went that Zenjirou was fond of these dairy products, which were practically unattainable on the Southern Continent. He had therefore had a goat hut created in the palace and was having more goats bred. Due to the presence of an expert, that breeding was going well.

If things continued in this vein, the palace would have access to more dairy products. Their preciousness would continue for several years, at which point, Mirella would be leaving the inner palace.

There would be more butter and cream available than Zenjirou could use, but from a national perspective, the ingredients would probably remain immensely valuable. Her adoptive father’s influence and riches would make purchasing them relatively simple. Mirella’s knowledge of recipes extending to this recipe

would change the family into one capable of providing special dishes that were normally only served in the palace.

It would be a good way to show a healthy relationship between the Márquez family and the royal family, and assisting in it would also improve Mirella's standing within the family.

"I will do my best, Lady Vanessa. Please, show me how."

"Got it. I'll be working you hard," the older woman replied. The gleam in the girl's eyes made her chuckle wryly to herself at the relative rarity of these hidden ambitions in the younger woman.



Once their work and mandatory bathing were done, the maids all headed back to their rooms to sleep.

Faye and Letti returned to their three-bed room and changed into their nightclothes before throwing themselves onto their beds. Ordinarily, the only thing to do after the sunset was sleep, but Zenjirou had lent them his game console.

With familiar motions, Faye lay back on her bed and woke the console from sleep mode before playing. The two were silent, and the almost muted game music was the only sound in the room.

Eventually, Faye put the console back to sleep.

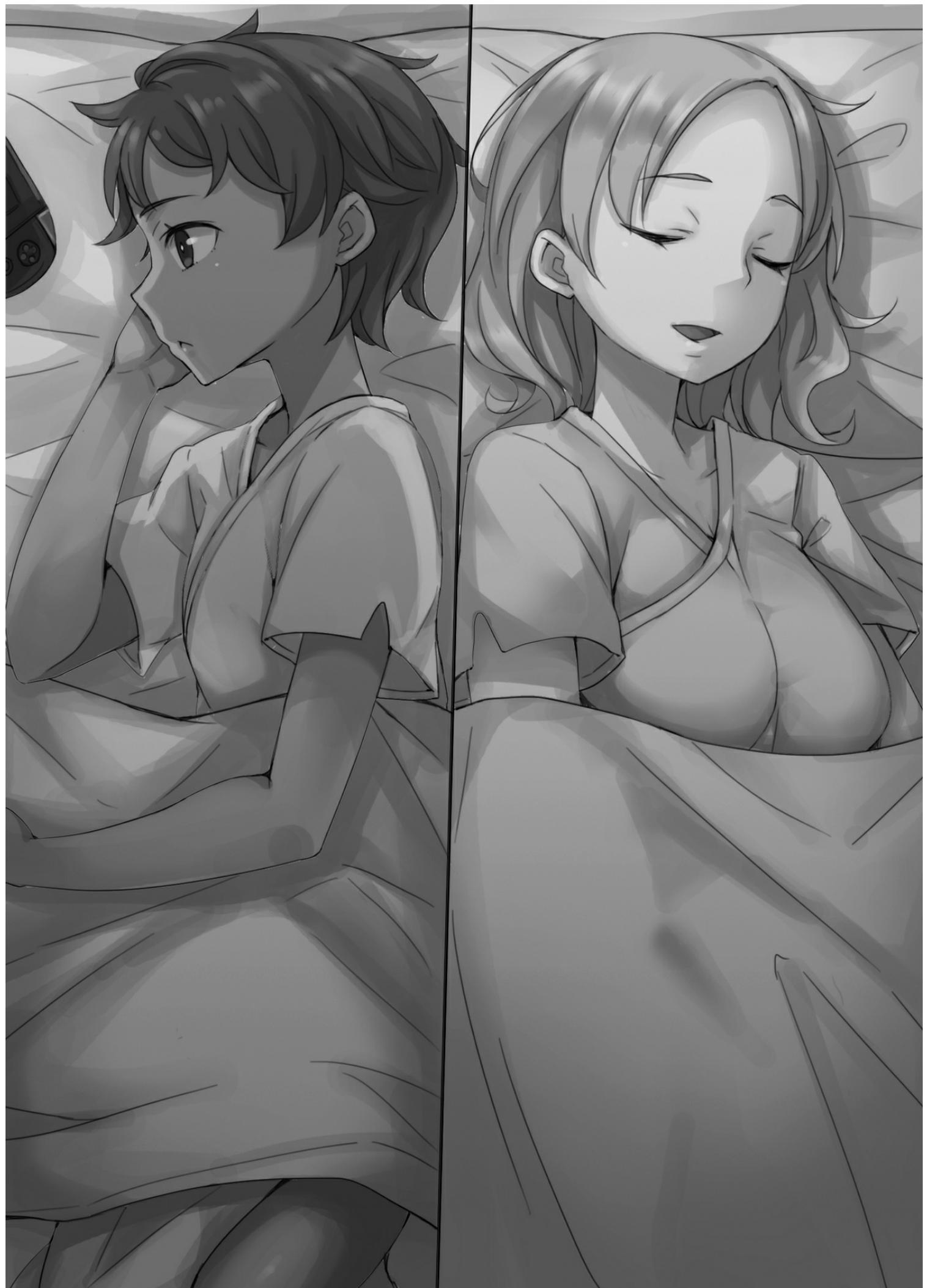
"Are you tired?" Letti asked her.

Faye shook her head in the now pitch-black room. "No, I just can't concentrate."

Normally, the length of time that Faye held on to the console would lead to Dolores accusing her of monopolizing it and insisting on having her turn. The push and pull over whose turn it was, along with their occasional friendly agreements, were now part and parcel of playing the games for Faye.

"Are you sleeping yet?" she asked Letti.

"Not yet."



The three roommates had the bad habit of bringing the console out at bedtime, so they were not yet sleepy. Faye rolled over in the darkness and spoke softly, almost to herself.

“I wonder what Dolores is doing now.”

“Sleeping, probably? Oh, but rooms on a ship are really small, so she might not be able to.”

“Maybe. I don’t think she’s that sensitive, though,” Faye replied, rolling over yet again, unable to get comfortable.

Letti heard the noise and smiled softly before speaking in her usual kind voice. “You’re worried, aren’t you?”

“No. Dolores would be fine even if the ship sank. That giant would be able to reach the bottom.”

They had been roommates for a long time now, so Letti could tell the claim was just a front. “I’m worried,” she admitted. “An accident at sea would be bad enough, but I’m worried about her once they arrive as well. The people there are all like Margarette, aren’t they? We’d stand out there, so maybe she’ll be bullied.”

“That won’t be a problem. Sir Zenjirou is there.”

That wasn’t her putting on a front. Faye was from the nobility as well, so she knew how powerful the country was, and she also knew how responsible Zenjirou felt. Being under his protection as a member of the Capuan royal family meant that no one would scorn her—at least in public.

Of course, the difference in culture could make that a moot point and was one of the concerning things about being on a completely different continent. Still, Faye wasn’t aware of the details.

It was Letti’s turn to roll over now. It made her bountiful chest sway, but unfortunately, the room was dark and Faye was the only other person present, so there was no one to enjoy it.

“What kind of place is the Northern Continent I wonder?” she mused.

“Apparently, really cold,” Faye answered.

“Okay.”

The word “cold” didn’t help Faye or Letti to imagine anything about it. Even in the coldest part of the year—the active season—the temperature in Capua didn’t drop below ten degrees at night. It would be just as hard for them to imagine the cold of Uppasala as it was for Freya to have imagined the heat of Capua before she arrived.

“Also, they don’t have drakes like we do.”

“They don’t have drakes?” Letti asked. “So they just have birds and mice and stuff?”

“Well, there are other animals instead. Like those goats Sir Zenjirou bought.”

“Oh, that makes sense. That’s interesting. There are probably lots of food and ingredients like cheese and butter I’ve never even imagined.”

“Maybe Dolores will bring something back as a souvenir.”

“That’d be nice.”

The conversation stalled out, replaced with a long silence. They looked around and groped for something bright and cheery, but the darkness of the room led their thoughts down equally dark paths.

“I’m worried about her,” Letti said.

“Me too,” Faye replied in apparent defeat, almost silently.

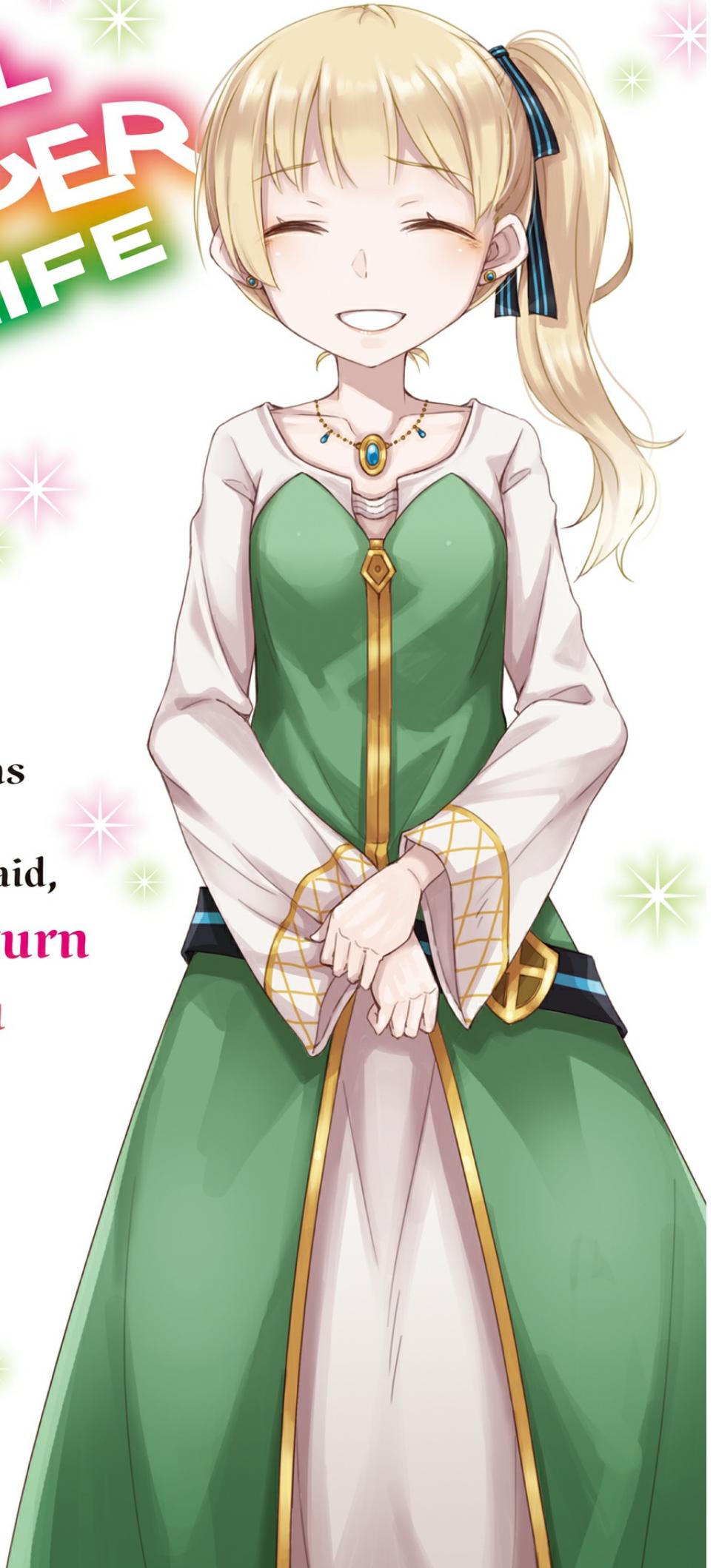
THE IDEAL SONGER LIFE

11

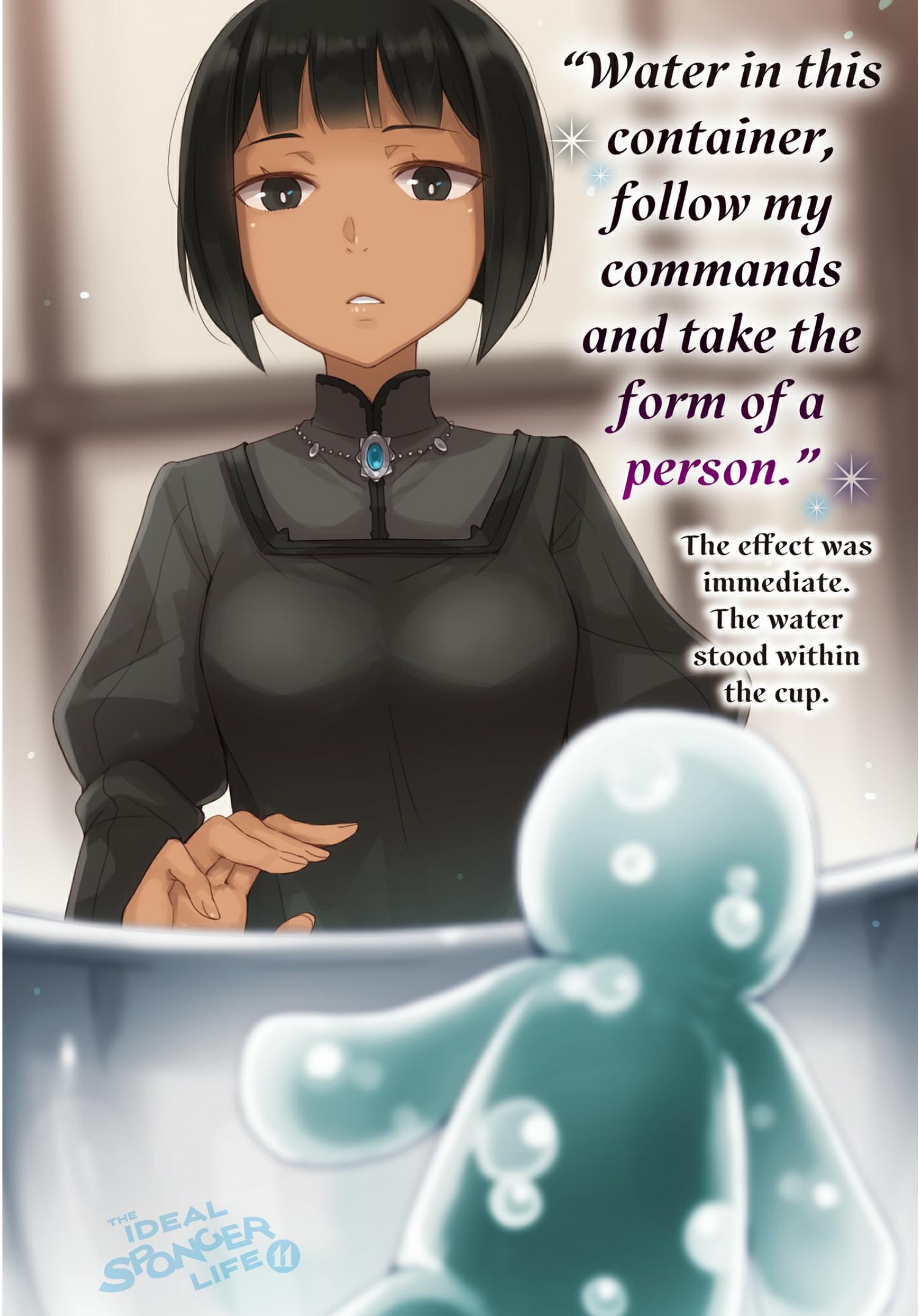
Lucretia's smile was one of childish innocence as she said, "I want to return to the Sharou family."

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Ayakura**

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**Tsunehiko
Watanabe**







*“Water in this
container,
follow my
commands
and take the
form of a
person.”*

The effect was
immediate.
The water
stood within
the cup.

THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE 11



With practiced movements, Faye took a picture of the prince sleeping in the small bed.

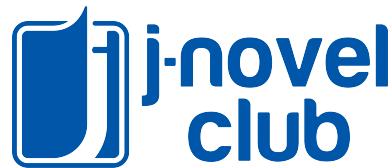


“I will do my
utmost to live
up to your
expectations,
Your
Majesty.”

THE IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE!!

Zenjirou
kept his
head bowed
toward the
red carpet as
he knelt,
listening to
Queen Aura
now that she
had stood.

“Zenjirou
Capua.
I appoint
you Duke
Bilbo.”



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The Ideal Sponger Life: Volume 11

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Illustrations by Jyuu Ayakura

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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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Originally published in Japan by Shufunotomo Infos Co., Ltd.

Through Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2023