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THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE 3

The Secret to a Happy Marriage

The phrase "**happy marriage**" is not particularly common for light novels, but it's the phrase that comes to mind when you read about our protagonist, Zenjirou. While he's in the **enviable position** of being surrounded by beauties seeking to secure a position as concubine, a prim and proper married woman, **and maids with many different traits...** Zenjirou is stubbornly dedicated to his wife. Despite the environment he's in, that dedication prompts him to start making efforts quite unbefitting of a "**sponger**" as he works in earnest at his magic. Above all else, he praises her when appropriate and will immediately apologize if need be. That honesty might just be the **secret to a happy marriage**, even in another world.

Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue — Beginning of the Second Year

Chapter 1 — Problem on the Salt Road

Chapter 2 — Activity in the Capital

Chapter 3 — The Salt Road

Chapter 4 — Zenjirou’s Daily Life

Chapter 5 — An Afternoon Confrontation, an Evening Lecture, and a Night’s Relaxation

Chapter 6 — Set in Motion

Appendix — The Lord and Maids’ Culture Clash

Color Illustrations

Bonus Textless Images

About J-Novel Club

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Prologue — Beginning of the Second Year

It was nighttime, roughly one month after Queen Aura of the Kingdom of Capua had safely delivered her first child. The streets of the capital were filled with shouts of joy and cheerful flames, driving away the darkness.

Huge bonfires blazed at the crossroads on the main streets and in the parks, and soldiers patrolled the city, accompanied by torchbearers. In the business district, the majority of food establishments were lit by oil lamps, open until much later than usual.

Most places didn't normally operate at night; in addition to their lighting expenditure increasing, there was also a greater risk of fires. Tonight was an exception, though. Tonight they were celebrating the wondrous news that most of the citizens had been waiting for: the birth of the first prince of Capua.

Calls echoed throughout one bar as patrons brought their wooden tankards together.

"To our queen's health!"

"To Prince Carlos's birth!"

"To the future of Capua!"

"Cheers!"

The only illumination in the room was an oil lamp in each corner, but the atmosphere made even the dim light seem like it was shining brightly. This was a commemoration of the prince's birth.

The birth itself had happened one month prior, but not even royalty could guarantee that a child would survive given the lower level of medical development in this world. So it was customary not to celebrate a birth until the following month.

That much-awaited night had finally arrived, and the capital would be bustling until dawn. Of course, while even the drunks were celebrating the good news,

the majority of them were far more excited about the free food and booze on offer. The royal family was covering most of the costs for the night's revelries. They had arranged for firewood and oil for the lamps, and had donated money to the places that would be open. They had also sent soldiers to patrol the streets and prevent fires and fights.

This was by no means a light burden upon the country as it continued to recover from the war, but they could never put a price on such an auspicious occasion. Besides, the extravagant spending would have the secondary effect of temporarily stimulating the capital's economy.

Furthermore, while the royal family was giving out free food and drinks, it was only the cheap fruit liqueurs and soup cooked in bulk. These were enough to fill a person's stomach and get them drunk, but a fair few would grow more generous as they drank, and fork out extra money from their own pockets for better products in spite of themselves. Even discounting the money coming from the royal treasury, each establishment would be making a considerable profit.

"Man, we've had nothing but good news lately. We won the war, the queen got married, and now a year later, we have a prince. It's all too much," exclaimed a muscular man as he sat in one of the chairs, legs splayed. He thumped his empty tankard down onto the table, the knock of wood against wood making a pleasant sound.

"Well, the war lasted for years. This is to make up for all the hell from that," answered the man sitting across from him. He was far more slender than his companion, but upon a closer inspection, one could tell that he was merely lean and had been tempered by years of hard work.

The two of them were probably city laborers. The slighter man scooped up some of his piping-hot soup with a wooden spoon, ferrying it to his mouth. The broth consisted of green bananas, cheap leafy vegetables, and a pitiful serving of drake meat (from dash drakes and the like that had lost their utility due to age). The salt and spices gave it a strong flavor, though, and it was quite tasty if you ate it while it was hot.

Salt, spices, and brown sugar were all relatively cheap in Capua, so even

commoners often had heavily seasoned meals. Slurping up soup that was spiced enough to make you sweat, then rehydrating to replace what you lost by sweating was the way most Capuans overcame the country's overwhelming temperatures.

"Aye, sounds about right. No harm in a bit of good luck after that mess," the bulkier man agreed.

The two of them looked to be in their mid-thirties. A closer examination of each man would have revealed sword and arrow wounds on their arms and chests peeking out from behind their clothes. Taking their ages into account, they had likely served in the war. With that in mind, the conviction in their voices was no surprise.

"About right. Still, if they were going to hand out food and booze anyway, I wish they'd have done it since noon. Half a day wasted. Then again, there's a certain charm to eating at night like this," the smaller man commented as he returned the spoon to his bowl.

"Hah! Forget your 'charm.' I get what you mean, though; kids are a blessing, and you can't choose when you'll receive them."

Such a celebration would normally last for an entire day, but the country was unfortunately in the middle of its hottest season. The sweltering temperatures of over forty degrees affected their day-to-day lives. If people raised their drinks to the kingdom while temperatures were higher than those of their own bodies, many would fall victim to heatstroke and death.

As a rule, people stayed inside and conserved their energy as much as possible during the day. When they absolutely had to go out, a thick, hooded overcoat to protect against the sun was needed. The overcoats were mainly made of heavy cotton (thin, breathable linen was only cooling when the heat was less than body temperature). However much the wind blew, if it was warmer than one's body, it would not provide any relief.

Taking that into account, it was probably only due to how "cool" the night was that the men now reveling in the bar were wearing light sleeveless shirts and pants. Still, that was only when compared to the murderous heat of midday —even the night was quite hot.

The slender man had finished his soup and now flapped the collar of his shirt, but the air wasn't cool enough for such an action to be much help.

"Ugh, I can't take it. I'm gonna chuck some water down; you lot good with that?" he called out loudly enough that the whole bar heard. He twisted in his chair and reached for the wooden ladle that was resting against the wall behind him.

"Woo, go for it!"

"Yeah, it's roastin' in here!"

"No one's arguing!"

His fellow patrons around the bar shouted their assent.

"Here we go, then."

With their enthusiastic support, the man got to his feet and took the ladle in hand before walking over to a nearby tank of water.

It was customary for local establishments to have water tanks—a staple of the service industry. Simply storing the water inside lowered the temperature of the room, and sprinkling it on the floor allowed its evaporation to cool the building a bit. That, of course, led to water collecting in the dips of the flagstones, and it would wet the patrons' shoes and pants, but no one in the bar was particular enough to concern themselves with such trifles. Facing temperatures of over thirty-five degrees even at night, a small amount of water would dry before they knew it anyway.

"Come on! Hurry up, make it rain!" yelled one of the men.

"Make it rain." Or, in other words, douse the men rather than just spreading the water around the room. Wetting the floor was one thing, but spraying the customers themselves was considered rather crude even for Capua. However, this bar was on the outskirts of the city, and the provocation received a round of cheers and applause.

"Yeah! Toss it 'round!"

"I'm gonna melt at this rate!"

"Hold on! At least till the lid's on the food!"

The soup bowls and lightly baked bread were all covered quickly and efficiently. It seemed that “making it rain” was a relatively common practice in this establishment.

Proving the point was the barkeep’s reaction as he watched over the large pot behind the counter. His tanned face simply wrinkled into a reluctant grin, and he didn’t try to stop the other. On the contrary, he offered his permission, telling them, “Mind the lamps would you?”

The slender man chuckled and agreed, thrusting the ladle into the rectangular tank. “You lot ready? Here we go!”

His right arm flashed out in an arc, and water came raining down. The droplets soared through the air, sparkling in the light from the lamps.

“Whoa, cold!”

“Ahhh, I’m alive!”

“C’mon! Don’t be so cheap! More!”

The patrons’ reactions came in a barrage of noise.

“Ah, shut it! Gimme a minute.”

The man upended the ladle over his own head, reveling in the chill before splattering the water around again and again.

“Ahh, that’s great! Long live the queen!”

“Yeah, long live Prince Carlos!”

“Long live Capua!”

The pleasure from the cooling water soon had the patrons yelling out their benedictions again.

“Also, uh...what’s his name again? Whatever; long live the queen’s husband too!”

Aura’s husband, Zenjirou, wasn’t yet well known enough that the alcohol-addled minds of these commoners on the city outskirts could call up his name.

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The night ended and dawn broke. The time of celebration was over, and the scorching sun rose over the horizon, casting its light over a perfectly normal day. This particular time of day, especially during the hottest part of the year, was valuable. The sun lit up the area, but the temperature had yet to rise in earnest.

People rose with the sun, bustling through the streets of the city. It was customary to remain inside when the temperature was at its peak, and to nap through the hottest part of the afternoon to conserve energy. This meant that if they didn't make the most of the mornings and evenings, the people wouldn't have enough time to finish everything they needed to do.

In spite of the hurried movements on the streets as the city came to life, Zenjirou was, as ever, relaxing in the inner palace, completely removed from the tumult despite his home being situated in the heart of the capital. The room was a mix of exotic, classical furniture and mass-produced consumer electronics from Japan.

He sprawled out, surrounded by the mishmash of local and otherworldly items. A single shaft of light shone through a crack in the still-closed shutters, so despite the day beginning in earnest, the room itself was still more "dark" than "dimly lit."

Zenjirou let out a grunt of exertion as he stretched his arms and rolled his neck. He was wearing a white T-shirt and black linen slacks. As he opened the finely detailed shutters, sunlight filled the room, brighter than one would have expected for the early hour, and with it came the overwhelming heat.

"Whoa!"

He gasped at the sudden assault of hot air, turning away from the open window. The bright light stabbed into his eyes, accustomed to the darkness as they were, but worse was the heat, and he was unable to stop himself from commenting.

"Man, forget being uncomfortable; it feels like it's going to kill me."

The seething air made it seem like there wasn't enough oxygen in the room, and even deep breaths felt suffocating. Zenjirou usually had a water tank and fan to cool him down in the living room and neighboring bedroom, but recently,

he'd been diverting his ice to where the little prince slept, so the temperatures were higher than he was used to.

Still, the difference between the dark interior of the room and the blistering heat beyond was like night and day, and it was much more pleasant inside. He scowled at the open window and gathered his equipment so that he could close the shutters as soon as possible, quickly fetching a digital clock, mechanical pencil, and camera from the corner of the room.

"Great. Perfect timing," he said to himself, placing the clock on the windowsill and checking the camera's screen with a nod.

There was a thin nail embedded vertically within the frame. Zenjirou kept his eyes on the slender shadow drawn by it and the clock, waiting patiently.

"Now!"

As soon as the screen displayed "7:00:00," Zenjirou traced along the shadow. Immediately afterwards, he took a picture with the camera. The characteristic delay from the camera was followed by the click of the shutter as the integrated clock read "7:00:09."

This was an exercise that Zenjirou had recently added to his daily routine.

"Hmm, it's changing bit by bit. I don't know how to tell if that's because the day isn't twenty-four hours long, or just that sunrise and sunset happen at different times," he muttered, examining the photo.

Since he had started this project, he'd attempted to record the same shadow at the same time, but the line was moving a little each day. It was his second year in this world, and he had fulfilled his most important duty of providing Aura with an heir. That meant he could now turn his interests towards more mundane curiosities about his new world.

This was one of the things he had decided to look into—how the calendar here worked.

"Well, the clock's still usable after a year, even without adjusting it, so a day is more or less twenty-four hours," he mused.

If not, the clock would have been useless by now. If the length of a day had

differed by even a single minute, three hundred and sixty-five days would have meant a drift of that many minutes, or about six hours total.

A change of six hours would have been obvious, even if he only had vague impressions from the sunrise and sunset, which meant that if there *was* a difference in the length of a day, it was too slight to notice. Still...

“If I measure that shadow exactly a year from now, I could measure the difference in a day without worrying about errors related to the date. The problem is, there’s no guarantee that a year is exactly three hundred and sixty-five days.”

He let out another sigh. The calendar here consisted of six months with twenty-nine days, and six months with thirty days, to make twelve months in all. By that reckoning, a year was three hundred and fifty days. However, that created a clear discrepancy between the calendar months and the solar year, so every few years they added an intercalary month for a year of thirteen months to correct it.

Rough calculations from the calendar let Zenjirou feel fairly confident that a year was three hundred and sixty-five days here as well.

“Man, I could probably give them some useful suggestions if I was sure the lengths of the years and days were the same as Earth’s,” he muttered, closing the shutters.

Of course, he wasn’t intending to alter their established calendar for his own selfish reasons, but an accurate solar calendar would certainly be useful. An intercalary month once over several years meant that there was a disparity of close to thirty days during some years.

Compared to Earth, it was the equivalent of May during one year being the same as April the year before, which made it easy to see how useless it was to define the seasons that way. At the very least, it would have been unsuitable for planning the planting and harvesting periods throughout the year. This meant that Capua currently relied on the experience and intuition of their farmers to know when to plant and harvest.

“It’ll take decades of gathering data before it could beat a veteran’s experience. They don’t even have thermometers here.”

Regardless, he told himself, an accurate calendar and yearly climate data could be of some use in the future. With that thought, he switched on the six lamps, illuminating the room with artificial light.

A knock sounded from across the wide room. A maid would have immediately announced her business, so the lack of any such statement meant there was only one person it could be.

Reflexively, Zenjirou's eyes found their way to the clock.

"Huh? She's usually in meetings now. Well, anyway, come on in," he said, puzzled as he opened the door.

The face greeting him was indeed the one he had expected to see.

"Morning, Zenjirou," the tall woman returned with a smile, flanked by two maids and cradling their baby like a jewel.

“Morning, Aura,” he replied with an equally bright smile as he ushered his wife and son into the room.

“Excuse me,” asked a maid, “is this location suitable?” She had grown familiar with their routine over the past year and had already taken the huge block of ice from the freezer, setting it up in the path of the fan next to where the family was sitting.

The fan sent the chilly breeze straight towards the sofa Zenjirou had settled into. Aura was on the opposite couch, so the breeze didn’t quite reach her, but that was fine. Her arms were currently occupied by a month-old baby, and it wasn’t ideal to have a cold breeze blowing directly onto a newborn’s delicate skin.

“Indeed. Good work. You may leave,” the queen replied, her gaze still on the bundle in her arms.

“Very well. Please excuse us,” the maids answered in unison, bowing before they withdrew.

The door shut with a thud, leaving husband and wife alone with their child. The scene of a mother with a baby in her arms, and her husband watching over them, was a common one that seemed to span cultures, but that was not the case for this family.

“Aren’t you normally in meetings by now? What changed?” he asked Aura once they were alone in the room.

With the heat being particularly savage at this time of year, even the palace took a recess at midday for safety’s sake. To help make up for that lost time, the queen started her morning business at a very early hour.

Zenjirou was correct; ordinarily, Aura wouldn’t have had the time to relax this way. She rocked the baby as she explained.

“You are correct; there was to be a meeting with Margrave Gaziel this morning. But the margrave himself has yet to arrive, so the meeting was postponed,” she answered happily.

“Ah, that’s great. Or is it?”

“It is far from ‘great.’ The issue has not been resolved, merely delayed, so it is a concern, if anything. However, it has given me some precious free time, so it would be a waste not to use it. Don’t you agree, Carlos?”

A strained expression made its way onto her face, but it was soon replaced by a satisfied smile as she watched her child.

“Ahh, ahhh!” the month-old baby burbled cheerfully as he looked up at his mother.

The infant’s features, which Zenjirou had originally felt resembled those of a sickly ape, had transformed as the young prince grew, suckling from his mother or wet nurse. His cheeks and hands had grown chubby where they stuck out from under his clothes, and it made Zenjirou want to poke at the child as an adorable aura overflowed from him.

The prince had glossy curls of olive-brown hair, a pair of dark eyes that roved widely, and skin that fell somewhere between tanned and a paler shade.

Even ignoring parental bias, is there anything at all cuter than this little guy? Zenjirou sincerely wondered. Of course, he failed to recognize that in claiming his own lack of bias, he was essentially being as biased as one could possibly be.

“Carrrrloss?” he cooed. “Lookie here, blehbleh...bah!”

“Ahh?”

The baby, watching his father play around from the opposite sofa, looked at him in bewilderment for a moment before bursting into shrill laughter.

Enjoying his son’s reaction, Zenjirou continued. “Oh, that got a laugh. Is that funny, buddy? Lookie, bleh bleh...bah! Bleeh bleh bleh bah!”

The baby laughed along joyfully, but his mother finally cut in with an unhappy smile.

“Zenjirou, I understand you want to make Carlos laugh, but please stop with this succession of grimaces. As his mother, I understand, but seeing you like this as your wife is rather awkward.”

“Oh... Right.”

He considered saying that there was no point in putting on airs at this stage,

but if he considered her viewpoint, he could see where she was coming from. Although his behavior was meant to make the most amazing thing in both their worlds—Carlos—laugh, the thought of his beloved wife vibrating her lips and sticking her tongue out far enough to lick her chin or nose would have made him want to ask her to stop as well.

Even close relationships needed boundaries.

It was a fact they had to remember. While they were certainly family now, husband and wife alike were, in many ways, still strangers, and to keep their relationship running smoothly, they would need to follow some guidelines.

Reluctantly, he stopped, and the queen gave him a loving smile in return, albeit a different sort of smile than the one she had directed at the boy.

“Besides, should you be calling him Carlos? That is not his only name, and you are the only one who can correctly say the other. Do you not think you should use it?”

Zenjirou was caught off guard by her comment and paused before nodding. “Huh, that’s true.”

She was correct; their son had a second name: a Japanese name that Zenjirou had given him. It was much less known throughout their society than “Carlos” but that was all the more reason for him to make an effort to use it. After all, it was part of their child’s identity as well.

He took a deep breath and spoke in a whisper, letting only a small amount of the air in his chest out. “Zenkichi...”

After much thought, that was the name that he had chosen to give his son. He’d decided to keep things simple and simply use one of the characters in his own name, which had led to suggestions of relatively common names like Yoshihiko and Yoshito. But Capuans like Aura had no concept of ideograms, so explaining that one character could be read as both “zen” and “yoshi” was rather difficult, and Zenkichi was what he had eventually settled on.

The child’s full name was Carlos Zenkichi Capua. Carlos was a relatively common name in Capua. There were even two kings who had boasted the name, and including those who hadn’t inherited the throne, there were over a

dozen royals who went by it as well. For the purposes of distinction, there were some people who used a combination of the boy's two names and called him Prince Carlos Zen. One day there might even be a King Carlos Zen when he ascended to the throne. Then again, there was a strong possibility that due to his first name being more prevalent among the commoners, he would simply be called Carlos III.

While those thoughts ran through Zenjirou's mind, the small prince's smile suddenly turned into a pout as he began to wail.

"Oh! What's wrong? Zenkichi? Carlos? Carlo? What's up?" Zenjirou asked worriedly.

"It is all right, Zenjirou. It means he is hungry," his wife answered unconcernedly as she sat holding the baby.

"Ah, right," he said with a sigh of relief before asking, "Really? You can tell from his crying whether he needs food or changing? That's impressive."

"I can. I learned it from Cassandra," Aura said with a nod. "Although I cannot yet tell in which way he soiled himself like she can."

Cassandra was the name of the wet nurse who handled much of the day-to-day childcare. Such duties were too much for a queen to carry out while running the country. After all, babies were little tyrants who demanded milk at all hours regardless of the hassle it caused, regularly soiled themselves to one degree or another, and threw tantrums if their demands were not met. Raising her child while attempting to carry out her duties for the country would bring Aura down within the week, regardless of her fortitude.

Cassandra, however, had three children of her own and said that caring for Carlos was surprisingly easy. It wasn't that he was special and required less work, but Zenjirou had brought with him items for storing breast milk, along with bottles and the like, which made things much simpler. Milk, if kept cold, would stay drinkable for at least a day. If it was warmed up to body temperature and sipped from a bottle, the wet nurse could avoid being woken up even in the dead of night. If she was tired or absolutely had to sleep, one of the maids could use the bottle in her place.

Fortunately, Carlos seemed to have no problem with suction and would

happily suckle from the wet nurse, Aura, or the bottle at any given time.

“He needs feeding now. As my hands are full with him, could you untie the back of my dress?”

“Mm, sure.”

Zenjirou quickly moved around the sofa to where his wife was sitting. It was out of the fan’s path, so the warm air was unpleasant on his skin, but this wasn’t the time to worry about that. His child needed to be sated as soon as possible, so he stood behind Aura and put a hand on her shoulder. Her long red hair was pulled up out of the way, and she was currently wearing a red sleeveless dress that tied together on each side.

“Aura, tilt your head a bit?”

“Like this?”

She moved her head to the right, exposing her left shoulder. Zenjirou put a hand on the knot and unfastened it. It was usually tied more tightly but was currently in a simple butterfly knot. She had probably assumed that she would be feeding the baby during this time.

Her dress fell gently down one side, exposing one of her large breasts.

“Thank you. Here, Carlos. Milk,” she offered, quickly moving her son’s face to the exposed nipple.

“Bweeeh... Ahh? Bah...”

The baby’s reaction was dramatic. The moment he was close enough, he latched on and began suckling for all he was worth.

“Go ahead, little one,” Aura murmured with a chuckle. “I am truly glad that you are so healthy.” She held her child firmly as he drank, staring down at him adoringly, her breasts still larger than usual from her pregnancy.

“Phew, you must have been hungry,” Zenjirou remarked once he saw that Carlos had calmed down.

He returned to his own seat. The only sounds in the room were those of the baby feeding as his mother held him and his father watched them both. He and Aura had fallen silent, watching the child wordlessly.

“Drink your fill, little one; this is the only time I can feed you today,” the queen said softly. She was a monarch before she was a mother and had precious few opportunities to give him her own milk.

The peaceful moment stretched on until the infant moved his mouth away with a deep sigh.

“Is that enough?” she asked, moving him closer to check, but the prince looked stubbornly away, apparently full.

Zenjirou couldn’t stop a gentle smile from appearing at the sight of his son with milk and dribble running from his lips. However, Aura’s next words froze him in place.

“Is that all you want? I see... You must be full. The rest is for papa, then.”

“No, it’s not! Don’t make such vulgar jokes in front of Zenkichi!” he protested frantically as his wife rocked their son.

Chapter 1 — Problem on the Salt Road

“What? No salt has been delivered?” Aura asked gravely, raising a single eyebrow as she reclined in her throne and listened to the appeals of the morning court.

The room they were in was small, located within the depths of the palace. Even the windows were merely small grids placed far higher than a person was tall, giving the room a gloomy atmosphere. The chamber was one where periodic meetings were held to determine the path of the country. Dominating the center of the small rectangular space was a long, sturdy table with wooden seats all around it.

As queen, Aura was naturally seated at the head of the table with Fabio behind her. He was permitted to enter the room but had no formal right to a seat or even a right to speak. The only people allowed a place and voice at the table were those who held the rank of minister or general.

“I would hear the details, Margrave Gaziel.”

When the queen uttered his name, the margrave nodded in affirmation as he stood from his seat at the lower end of the table. He was a man whose appearance was beginning to show the signs of age. His skin was dark even for a Capuan, and the wrinkles etched into his face showed his years.

Even so, his movements were smooth as he stood. Coupled with his broad shoulders, you could tell that the physical decline that came with age was still being held off by tough training. The old warrior spoke in a deep, carrying voice that matched the impression of his bulky frame in its similarities to a rugby player.

“Two days ago, I received a dwarf wyvern message from my son, who is working to maintain our territory. It seems that despite seven days having passed since the estimated date, the season’s salt has yet to arrive. Our stockpile amounts to approximately three months’ worth. My son, as my representative, is requesting permission to send our forces along the Salt Road

to determine the cause. And, if I may say so, I share his opinion that we should investigate."

The margrave completed his flowing report and seated himself, once more moving with smooth motions that would have suited a far younger man.

Gaziel's territory was remote and bordered by other countries. The area had no coastline or salt deposits and was entirely dependent on imports for the salt that they needed. The Salt Road was a national route established by a prior king in order to make the distribution of vast amounts of salt possible within all the kingdom's territories. It was for that reason that the margrave's statement could not pass unchallenged.

"I disagree," General Pujol replied firmly. "The lack of salt in the border regions is indeed dire, and there should be no doubt that maintaining the safety of the road will involve soldiers. However, those soldiers should be from the royal army, not your own."

After Aura, General Pujol, who was in his early thirties, was the youngest of those gathered in the room. Despite the margrave being old enough to be his father, however, the general had no hesitation when it came to pushing his views. And he was by no means wrong. The Salt Road had been instituted by the state, so maintaining its safety was fundamentally the national army's domain.

Gaziel, however, showed no sign of backing down. "You are quite correct, General. I am in agreement that the road is the kingdom's responsibility. However, taking history into account, the likely cause of the delay is an increase in the raptor population," he countered, revealing the core of his argument. "Should that be the case, it will be necessary to send forces into the forests and plains around the road and cull the lizards that are attacking people. Those locations away from the road are part of my domain."

Falling silent, he met the young general's gaze. Aura watched this rare display of blatant antagonism between the two high-ranking nobles and remained outwardly calm while sighing inside. *This will surely be a nuisance. The local lords always loathe the idea of allowing royal soldiers on their land, and Pujol Guillén's desire to achieve some glamorous feat with the army is likewise*

business as usual.

As she considered the matter, Aura recalled that the margrave had lost two of his sons to the war: his possible successor—his eldest child—and the second son who had made a name for himself on the battlefield. The son he had mentioned a moment ago must have been his third, the only surviving one.

She seemed to remember the boy being a late birth and had heard that he had yet to reach even twenty years of age. With that knowledge, she could make an assumption about why the margrave was insisting that his own forces address the issue.

He likely wants to use the relatively low risk of this to give his son an achievement worthy of succeeding him.

If the margrave was correct in his guess that the delay was being caused by raptors and the damage they did, subduing the creatures' population wouldn't be too difficult. The salt trade was all but nationalized and the merchants always had a large escort with them, although it was more of a facade, lacking any true strength. Even a third son with no real combat experience was unlikely to fail at leading a regional army against wild lizards. The situation could actually be considered a rather fortunate state of affairs for someone looking for a public win.

Of course, this was all predicated on their theories being accurate, but the circumstantial evidence pointed in that direction. Aura considered the pros and cons of leaving it to the margrave's army and likewise the advantages and disadvantages of handing the task to the royal troops. Having performed a minimal cost-benefit calculation in her mind, she spoke sharply to the two men, who were still glaring at each other.

"Very well. Margrave?"

"Yes?" answered the veteran, immediately moving his gaze from Pujol to the queen and bowing politely.

Her eyes resting on the dusting of white atop his head, Aura continued evenly. "We will agree to your suggestion and entrust the resolution of this matter to you. On the occasion of your success, we shall see that you are suitably rewarded."

In other words, she was telling him that he would be paid later, including reimbursement for any expenses, but that if he should fail, the responsibility would lie solely with him. Even so, he had been granted permission to attempt what he was hoping for.

“Indeed! I understand. I shall bring good news back to you,” he replied, his voice filled with ambition as a bold smile deepened the wrinkles on his face.

On the other hand, General Pujol’s desires had been rejected wholesale, and his displeasure was clear. But he was not ignorant of etiquette and would not openly oppose his queen.

Aura folded her arms gently under her full chest, surveying the generals and ministers arrayed before her, beginning with Pujol. Then she addressed the margrave again.

“Heed my words. This only holds if the cause is in line with your expectations and the threat is limited to a reasonable number of raptors. Scout the area, and if you should find some other cause for the delay, you will contact the palace immediately without fail. Is that understood?”

It was a rather strict order. Border regions usually had a large degree of autonomy in military matters due to their distance from the central administration and the necessity of maintaining control. Aura’s instructions amounted to shackling that autonomy, even if only for a short time. Yet the margrave could not object to an order that prevented the fate of the salt supply from resting entirely in the hands of an inexperienced teenager.

“Very well, Your Majesty.”

Aura replied with a nod as he bowed, her arms still folded as she casually added, “Good. Oh, I will also present the award for the act personally. This will require your son to come to the capital, so bear that in mind.”

The margrave struggled to maintain his composure at that, flinching as he furrowed his brows. His reaction was no surprise; he had understood her intentions completely. The “award” would be no physical medal but rather payment for the materials required by his region, special pay for the soldiers, and any relevant expenses. Determining what this vast “reward” would be would take several months as a matter of course, and could even take longer

than half a year. That meant that the margrave's son would be staying in the capital for as long as the better part of a year.

The margraves tended to have a strong sense of independence, but inviting one's son to the capital while he was young could heighten the boy's sense of belonging to the kingdom as a whole, which was likely Aura's goal. Then again, the Capuan royal family was exceedingly powerful, so making inroads with them was by no means a bad proposition. If anything, it was practically indispensable in maintaining their own family's status.

Ultimately, it was a matter of moderation. They needed to remain distant enough to not be swallowed up by the royal family yet close enough not to be shunned. Even with his own biases in favor of his son, Gaziel doubted the youth could pull off such a fine balancing act. But it wasn't enough of an issue for him to spurn the offer and complicate the matter.

Besides, a stronger connection with the royal family on his son's part would be unlikely to make him refuse the reward, and it would be well-appreciated for the still-recovering territory. Gaziel quickly put his thoughts in order and replied, filling the brief silence that had fallen.

"I understand. I am sure there is much my son can learn here as well, and I thank you for the consideration shown."

He bowed again politely, settling on that as his answer.

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While Aura was in her meeting, Zenjirou was alone in the inner palace with the shutters closed as he sat in a corner of the living room. The fan was blowing over the usual hunk of ice, cooling him as he typed away.

"Right, that should do it," he murmured, linking his hands and stretching upwards, working the kinks from his body.

The screen was displaying a spreadsheet program, familiar from his long years of office employment. Off to the left of the keyboard was a loose pile of drake parchments that he had been given by Aura, which recorded the year's revenue. He had been transferring that data over the past few days and had finally finished. He still needed to go over it again at least three more times to

ensure that he hadn't made any mistakes, but he felt that he could afford a break for the time being.

Once he'd cracked his neck and taken a deep breath, Zenjirou glanced over the rows of data again. "Still, it's practically a wall of red..."

He'd done the same thing as last time, making the program highlight cells in red if there was a deficit and in blue if there was a surfeit. The large number of red cells meant that the revenue was often lower than the calculations said it should be.

"Hm, while I'm here, I might as well try to make it easier to understand," he mused, an idea coming to him as he studied the screen.

His solution wasn't particularly complex; he simply added a third column for the value on paper and the calculated values that showed the difference between the two. Then if the value was off by more than ten percent, the program marked the cell with a filled triangle.

He finished quickly. All that remained was to put a formula into the top cell, grab the handle on the bottom right and drag it down, copying it to the entire column.

Zenjirou studied the new figures, frowning and then groaning. "Ugh, there are still so many triangles, even with that. You can't explain away over ten percent as a simple miscalculation or clumsy mistake."

Actually, the tax calculations being *unintentionally* wrong by that much would have indicated a far greater problem with the skills of the workers than if it had been done intentionally. Aura had led a crackdown to a certain extent, but it had been naive to expect that a proper precedent would be set by it, thus decreasing the occurrences of tax evasion.

"Aura's got it tough. Nope, I can't pretend it's got nothing to do with me, can I?" he asked himself.

A year had passed since he had come to this world, and Zenjirou was now often standing in as her representative. He couldn't just laze around and sponge forever. Although it had only been on occasion, he had indeed appeared in public and spoken with others, which saddled him with clear social obligations.

Although Aura had taken back the bulk of her work after the birth, it was difficult for Zenjirou to return to shutting himself away entirely. The biggest factor in that was probably his own disposition. He'd attended school until university, and even during his years of work, he hadn't had any major problems with the job itself. He was without a doubt someone who lacked the tendency to simply shut himself away.

When he'd first decided to come here, he'd been focused on quitting work and living a relaxing, carefree life. He'd been worn down by the hell of constant overtime and had reached the point of mental exhaustion. But those three years of hell aside, he was still in his mid-twenties. The fatigue had been healed by a mere three days of rest, and the mental burden had naturally faded after several months away from work.

There hadn't been any major issues for a while now. He'd come to a whole new world, married a woman who was exactly his type, and even had a baby with her. The life-changing events had come one after another at first, so it felt like time had flown. On top of that, he'd brought a mass of recorded dramas, programs, and soccer games along with him.

He hadn't exaggerated; in the beginning, he'd genuinely been fulfilled by sleeping, eating, watching TV, and playing games. Unfortunately, Zenjirou's core values meant that he couldn't be content with such a life forever.

"I'll need to pick up more work sooner or later. I've got a full schedule with learning magic right now, so I'm fine, but once that finishes up, I'll have more time than I know what to do with," he reflected.

For the most part, his situation was comfortable. He was feeling refreshed, mind and body, but he had very few responsibilities and a narrow scope of things he could do. Basically, he felt out of place. No one around him had offered any rebukes, but he felt a sense of guilt for doing nothing productive with his time. In the end, his values were similar to those of any other Japanese citizen.

He wasn't a workaholic to the extent that his job was his life or that he considered his calling to be working as a cog in the corporate machine. Yet he wasn't lethargic enough to accept room and board without doing anything to

earn it.

“Well, I can’t do anything to stand out, but if I offer my work to the public through Aura, that should be fine. There are a bunch of things I want to try.”

At the moment, Zenjirou was wrestling with refining spirits. Knowing that the only alcohol in this world was extremely weak fruit liqueur and the like, he had brought a domestic still with him. It used a hot plate as a heat source and automatically regulated the temperature, so even an amateur shouldn’t be able to fail.

Of course, being a domestic still, it wouldn’t distill too much at once, and he could only make enough for himself. But Aura was very interested in the idea as well. While Capua had no spirits, there were plenty of people who enjoyed alcohol. There was a certain value to even an amateurish attempt with an overwhelming flavor, solely because of its strength.

The principle behind distillation was simple. Water boiled at about one hundred degrees while ethanol did so at under eighty. So—simplifying the process greatly—one could heat a solution of the two liquids at eighty degrees and preferentially boil off the alcohol. Then the vapors would need to be contained and condensed, which would provide an extremely strong solution—a distilled liquor.

Of course, there was a particularly annoying property of achieving a mix between the two: azeotropes. An azeotrope was a certain combination of the two liquids where they both boiled together despite usually having different boiling points. It meant that a beginner couldn’t just use a thermometer and completely separate the alcohol from the water, but repeated cycles would allow one to make it stronger bit by bit.

Zenjirou’s original goal had been to get it to be burnable, but he had the feeling his priorities had shifted slightly. Alcohol pure enough to use as a fuel was too strong and flavorless, so most people wouldn’t drink it. Still, there was an undeniable utility to concentrated alcohol, so it would definitely prove to be a useful contribution to the country if he could perfect the purification process.

“I’ll need to look into soap after that. Actually, the soap’s probably fine for now; it’s the shampoo and conditioner that we’re tight on. I underestimated

how much a long-haired woman uses," he grumbled, crossing his arms.

Most of the things that he'd brought with him were reusable. He'd known that he would only be able to bring a limited number of consumables, so it was a sensible decision. However, he'd made an exception when it came to bathing products, bringing as much of those as he could... Solid bars of soap to wash his body with, face soap, and shampoo and conditioner for his hair.

The solid soap wasn't an issue; he'd brought plenty of it and made sure to take it out of the bath when he was done so that it didn't dissolve. It would likely be some time before that ran out. The more pressing concern was the limited amount of hair products.

Zenjirou himself kept his hair short, even for a man, and had underestimated just how much his wife would need to wash her waist-length hair by a significant margin.

"At this rate, we'll be out within the year. I *did* download a tutorial on how to make soap and shampoo, but..."

The problems with creating shampoo went without saying, but he'd never made soap either. On top of that, the recipes listed items like "caustic soda" and "additive-free soap," which were items he had no way of obtaining here. He had another recipe that called for ash and oil to make a more primitive kind of soap, but the overall nuance seemed to imply that it was even more difficult to produce than the one requiring caustic soda.

Plus, he couldn't use any of them immediately after their completion. They'd have been made by an amateur with limited knowledge and could therefore be too strong, drying out the skin, or else have some problem that he didn't know about which made them painful or itchy.

Still, while he was not usually one for luxuries, he didn't think that he'd be able to stand regressing where bathing was concerned.

"I'll have to try out the soap by just washing my hands first to see how it goes. I can test the shampoo on animals... Ah, no, I can't. The 'cattle' here are all lizards. They don't have fur."

Zenjirou's tone as he mumbled was one of rare seriousness for him.

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Even after the morning's meeting, Aura still had work remaining. She was accompanied only by Fabio as they arrived at an office inside the palace.

Aura let out a deep sigh, settling into the wicker chair that was practically a second throne. She was of the opinion that she was well used to negotiating with and managing high-ranking nobles, but decisions like this always weighed heavily on her.

"Fabio, draw up the documents," she instructed, straightening in her chair and drawing a sheet of drake parchment from the desk.

"Very well. Please wait a moment," he answered, taking the parchment and striding over to another desk in the corner of the room, his dragon-bone quill moving with practiced motions.

With the secretary's experience, the document was finished in minutes, and he returned to her side with it in hand. "Here you are, Your Majesty. Please review and sign it."

The document laid out the terms for Margrave Gaziel's forces to mobilize, investigate, and hopefully solve the problem going on with the Salt Road. It would give the margrave the legal right to send his own army to the state-owned road and to demand recompense from the kingdom at a later date.

"Very well," she said after reading it through twice and checking for any issues before signing at the bottom with familiar movements with a ballpoint pen.

The paper was already embossed with the Capuan crest (an open door and a sand timer flowing upwards), so the signature alone made it official. Such parchments were guarded heavily, and anyone who took one without the queen's permission found themselves facing the death penalty.

"So, Your Majesty, may I take this to the margrave?" Fabio queried, but Aura immediately shook her head.

"No, it would take too long. The Salt Road is a matter of national importance. I will send the documents directly. Tell Margrave Gaziel to select one of his subordinates to serve as the messenger."

She would use her teleportation magic to send the envoy entrusted with the documents straight to the region in question. The ability to do this was one of Capua's strengths. Any other country would have had to take an alternate route to the blockaded Salt Road, sending the documents by dwarf wyvern or possibly breaking through with a sufficient escort. Naturally, she would never use dwarf wyverns for such matters.

The teleportation magic was a large part of the influence that Capua, despite its size, had over its most remote regions. Similar situations in other countries would have been dealt with arbitrarily by the margrave of the region and several days would have passed before the central government was simply informed of the results.

Much as the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle were ruled with the Sharou family's magic tools and the Gilbelles' healing, Capua was held together as a nation through the existence of their Space-Time Magic. Taking that into account, it was understandable that Aura being the only individual who could cast such magic was a public concern, and it was also why concubines were still being pushed at Zenjirou, seeing as he held that latent power himself.

"Understood. I shall convey that to the margrave. However, I must ask if you are certain," Fabio said, bowing shortly and sealing the document inside a wooden tube once he was sure that the ink was dry. The second half of his words were laden with meaning.

"Of what?" It was a common exchange between the two. Despite the clear exasperation on her face, the queen's tone was not harsh as she urged her secretary to continue.

Unmoved by the look on her face, the middle-aged man spoke plainly. "Of your decision on this matter. You need not allow the margrave such freedoms. The current issues with the Salt Road are more than enough to justify the royal army's mobilization, are they not?"

The question was exactly what she had anticipated. The slender-faced man always acted like this, playing devil's advocate for any decision that Aura faced. He did so both when the decision had already been made and when it made sense to bring his opinions to bear beforehand.

He didn't make these propositions because he agreed with them wholeheartedly. It was simply a way for him to stimulate Aura's mind and guide her to the exploration of new solutions. When they had such discussions before a decision was made, it also served to prepare her for dealing with dissenting opinions during the actual meetings where the matters were finalized.

He was a useful man, without a doubt. That much was true, but...

He is truly irritating, Aura thought. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd told herself that, but she answered him regardless.

"Pujol Guillén already suggested such a solution himself. If he is allowed successes at will, there is a fair chance that he will become a marshal. I cannot welcome such an outcome."

"Yet there are gains to be made if the royal army were to solve a problem during one of their marches. It might even allow us a breakthrough and a permanent garrison in the region, no?"

It would certainly enable a transition from entrusting the regional armies with the defense of their kingdom's borders to having the royal troops take the lead instead. That would be the kind of revolution of their national defense system that Aura had been working towards for quite some time. From that perspective, Fabio was correct. This was a situation that would allow them to send in the army and establish a precedent for doing so, making it seem like a normal response, so the suggestion was not a bad one.

Still, she shook her head without hesitation. "Out of the question. The strengthening of our army and garrisoning the borders must be completed in one fell swoop. Spreading the changes out will only result in exposing ourselves for a greater period of time. Now is not the moment to act."

"If you focus too much on waiting for things to be just right, you may miss your chance. For all we know, this could be the only chance that presents itself during your reign. Are you still certain?"

"I am. We cannot afford to be too eager for the best and then find ourselves in a worse position. Governance is no gamble."

Aura remained adamant. It was a fact that she had been aiming to place the

border defense under the auspices of the royal army in order to enable a quicker response to foreign threats. However, she was well aware that such reforms would invite great risk. If they strengthened their presence without weakening the various lords' holds on the individual regions, it could spark civil war.

That said, weakening the holds before moving in would leave those lords and their lands defenseless against external threats. If forcing such a change caused the remote regions to rebel or invited neighboring countries to nose around, maintaining the status quo was far better.

Besides, Capua was a big country, and while resting on their laurels was dangerous, they weren't in a position to launch an all-or-nothing attempt.

Aura continued, "The best-placed forces to send into the margrave's territory are those stationed here. Sending troops that far will take too much time. With the deadline placed due to their reserves running out, we need a quicker solution."

"Then would it perhaps be best to have the army on standby in the unlikely event that his son should fail?" Fabio prompted.

"Is that necessary? I find it difficult to imagine Guillén will be lax about his preparations for such an event. Should anything go wrong, I assume he would mobilize immediately."

"That makes it all the more important. If the army moves at General Guillén's request, it makes his achievements even more significant. It is important to make a show of the army moving in on your own orders," he warned flatly, prompting the first hesitation from Aura thus far.

She put her chin in her hand and considered. "That certainly is true. Very well. Before the general can make any suggestions of his own, I shall instruct the troops to carry out a long-term maneuver in the border regions. I shall leave the precise composition of his forces up to him."

It went without saying that the location for these exercises would be the closest camp to Gaziel's territory.

"Understood. I shall ensure that there are enough provisions for an

expedition along the Salt Road to encounter no issues even after their maneuvers. It may be better if the margrave is made aware."

This time, Aura shook her head once he had finished his almost prepared response. "Do not bother. There is no need to conceal it from him but no need to actively inform him either. He will likely hear about it sooner or later, and purposely telling him might be construed as placing pressure on him."

"Very well, ma'am."

The secretary seemed to have said all that he felt was necessary. His words this time were perfectly polite and bland as he gave a final bow.

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As a queen, Aura's life was quite hectic. She had meetings of political and military importance, held audiences for domestic and foreign matters in the throne room, and had piles of paperwork waiting in her office.

If she insisted upon absolute perfection at every turn, she would need to start taking an LED lamp to her office and working through the night in order to complete every task. In her position, that was doubtlessly the route that Zenjirou would have taken.

But Aura was efficient and managed the distribution of her efforts well. Given her position, if she worked herself to the bone, she would collapse sooner or later. In the long term, some imperfections were preferable.

It was that distinction that found her taking the afternoon off to spend some time with her beloved husband. The noon sun was beating down, and the sounds of clashing wood echoed across a courtyard in the inner palace.

"Come, now! Your right!"

"Ugh!"

The noise was coming from the wooden poles wielded by both Aura and Zenjirou. Each pole was about a meter and a half in length. Aura, wearing a thin military uniform, wove her faux short spear through the air. Zenjirou, who had donned a T-shirt and sweatpants, managed a clumsy block.

"Left now!"

“Gah!”

“And right again!”

“Agh!”

Naturally, Aura was holding back considerably, but Zenjirou was already gasping for air. With a frantic expression on his face, he somehow managed to use the basic defense techniques that Aura had drilled into him to ward off her attacks.

“Watch your legs!”

“Huh?! Ack!”

He hadn’t focused enough on his footwork, and Aura had swiped his legs out from under him, sending him sprawling. The ground was a soft lawn, so it didn’t truly injure him, but it certainly hurt.

He didn’t have time to cry out in pain.

“Look alive! You make a good target when you cease to move like that. On your feet! Or, if you cannot, at least roll away!” She brought her weapon down near his face repeatedly.

“Shit!” he yelled, rolling to the side as quickly as he could. As he did, water flew off him like a dog shaking himself after a dip in the pool.

Both of them were drenched, and not solely from the sweat they had worked up while exercising. The pair was training on a patch of lawn right next to a marble fountain that sprayed water higher than Zenjirou was tall, and they were sparring directly under it.

That was, of course, intentional. Considering peak temperatures reached over forty degrees, most people would be incapable of vigorous exercise without such accommodations.

“Right, your legs again!”

Zenjirou gave a cry and managed to ward off the blow by thrusting his weapon into the ground, but Aura’s attack didn’t stop there.

“Not enough. Your flank is open.” She let her spear slide up along his own and then under his arm, hoisting him up.

“Whoa!”

He’d only just gotten to his feet and once more found himself on the ground.

There were two reasons the couple had chosen to spend their precious time together training in such oppressive heat. Zenjirou had worried that he wasn't getting enough exercise, and Aura wanted to bid farewell to the weight that she had gained during her pregnancy. The birth was over, but her weight and figure had yet to return to what they had once been, which was only natural.

In modern Japan, Aura might have spent her pregnancy under the strict supervision of a dietician who would have prescribed a diet to provide the necessary nutrition for both her and her child without causing her to grow fat. But nutritional science was not as advanced in this world, and a lack of nutrition would have been risky for the baby.

Therefore, a slight excess of weight was better, and she had faithfully followed Doctor Michel's advice to "eat for two," which had inevitably led to weight gain. It was by no means a bad thing that she had put on a few pounds, but whatever her feelings as a mother might have been, she could not abide being in such shape as a woman.

For better or worse, Aura had at her disposal the mirror that Zenjirou had brought from home, and with it came a merciless view of her body. While her reflection in a pool of water or the small polished metal mirrors was indistinct, the glass pane showed everything in painful detail. Once she had looked into it and seen her softened jawline, she was no longer able to deceive herself.

Zenjirou, fortunately, had shown no hint of dissatisfaction that might put their marriage in jeopardy, but she would not rely on his magnanimity. While the adage that love followed lust wasn't the case for all marriages, there was a certain amount of truth to it.

"Right, we shall end it here. Ready yourself—this one is from above!" she called, purposefully telegraphing her attack as she brought the pole straight down towards his head.

She'd held back enough that she could halt the attack at the last moment, but he still barely managed to react in time. With a grunt, he brought his own weapon to bear. The two pieces of wood collided with an almost metallic sound.

Zenjirou's staff had stopped her blow a hair's breadth from his head. There

was a moment of silence.

“Very well. Shall we leave it there for the day?” she asked, her face easing from its unyielding expression into a smile.

“Agh!” he gasped, collapsing onto the lawn.

“Phew.” Her own breath came quickly as she sat on the edge of the fountain, enjoying the spray on her back and closing her eyes in pleasure. Zenjirou, meanwhile, could only manage ragged breaths as he lay sprawled on the grass.

“Can you drink?” she asked, having recovered far more quickly. She pulled a plastic bottle from the fountain and put it close to his face as he lay there.

“Ugh... Hahh, hahh... Guh, hah...”

He managed, somehow, to right himself and drain the bottle, unable to offer even a word of thanks. The bottle contained a mix of sugar, water, and juice from a citrus fruit. While keeping it in the fountain water didn’t cool it all that much, the lukewarm temperature at least made it easier to drink.

“Phew... I needed that!” he declared earnestly once he had finished the half-liter refreshment. The sudden influx of water caused him to sweat even more. The warm glow from their session along with the light blows from Aura made him want to leap straight into the fountain.

“It would appear you have managed to catch your breath. How was it? I tried to moderate my attacks, but are you hurt anywhere?”

Zenjirou patted his still tired body in response. He had been struck repeatedly during their match, but there was no severe pain anywhere. The tips of the faux spears were wrapped in a soft cloth, but it was still a meter and a half of hardwood. If they were ever unlucky, it could rupture tendons or blood vessels, or even break bones.

“Looks like I’m fine. My left side and my right thigh kinda sting, but that’s it. Look.”

To demonstrate, he stood up and waved his arms around. He was still exhausted and about as steady as a newborn foal, but even the extra effort of moving around didn’t reveal any exceptional pains.

He joined his wife, sitting down on the edge of the fountain. His weary body felt like it might pitch into the water if he wasn't careful, but it wasn't deep enough to drown in, so he would probably be fine.

Actually, there was a definite temptation to do just that; to soak his flushed body in the pool. Aura addressed him as he glanced back at the surface and seriously considered the option.

"So, what did you think of your first spear drills? I would like to hear your opinion."

She moved to sit next to him as they spoke. When they were standing, Zenjirou was about two finger-widths taller than her, but while they were both sitting, their difference in height widened to a whole handspan. Either his legs were particularly short or Aura's were especially long, but he decided that overthinking it would likely not end well and quickly turned his thoughts to the conversation.

"Man, I thought it'd be pretty tough. I was sure from the start that I wouldn't be able to keep up, but it was even worse than I expected. I'm completely wrecked. It reminds me of back when I was in the soccer club in high school or when we were practicing for the youth cup," he admitted, shaking his head exaggeratedly.

The phrases "high school," "soccer club," and "youth cup" were ones for which the Soul of Language had no equivalent, but the first half of his answer allowed Aura to get the gist.

"Well, no amateur can stand against an expert in martial arts unless they have exceptional natural talent. You might have defeated me if you too had trained from a very young age," she said with a chuckle, not overestimating her own strength.

In truth, her skills were much the same as an average knight's. She couldn't compare with men like General Pujol Guillén, who was famed throughout the land for his martial prowess. For a man, Zenjirou wasn't particularly blessed in terms of his constitution or athleticism, but he was by no means inferior. If he had trained as much as Aura had, and from the same age, he would likely have had a similar level of ability by now.

Zenjirou knew that she was being entirely truthful, but he also caught the implication that he wouldn't reach the same level starting at his current age, so the grimace on his face only deepened.

"Aha, thanks. Well, I just want to stay in shape, not stand on the battlefield."

"That is the best choice. Obviously, if you truly wished to do so, I would not stop you. But there is no need to force yourself," she agreed with a laugh.

Of course, if one considered Zenjirou's status as one of Capua's few royals, it was doubtful that there would ever be a situation where his shallow skills would be of any use. Even though he wanted to learn how to wield a sword or spear as a sport, he couldn't imagine himself in an actual battle.

"Yeah, I'm not that serious about it. Besides, I can barely wield this with one hand with my current strength."

As he spoke, he hefted the mock spear in his right hand. He was currently learning the fundamentals, wielding the shaft with both hands, but these weapons were often used with only one hand in combat, with a wooden shield on the other arm. Furthermore, a person had to be able to throw the spear in an emergency before they were considered proficient, so waving it around with both hands was seen as nothing more than an exercise.

"Indeed. I suppose you are not quite strong enough to wield these as a soldier would."

Aura's statement prompted an exaggerated cry of despair from her husband. "Ugh, that sure put me in my place. Still, it's true. I mean, your blows were so heavy, I thought my spear was going to go flying."

His mind must have been truly dulled by fatigue for the word "heavy"—the one word absolutely forbidden around dieting women—to pass his lips. It was the kind of mistake he would usually never make.

"I-I see. Was I truly that *heavy*?" Aura asked, her sophisticated facade cracking.

"Yeah, crazy heavy. It felt like each attack was gonna push me into the ground. They were *that* heavy. I can't believe you're only as strong as an average knight with all that weight behind your blows. Well, I guess I'm just that

weak," he said with an innocent laugh.

"Ah..."

Crazy heavy. Heavy enough to push him into the ground. The words, despite their lack of malice, stabbed her deeply. At this rate, they would have ended up in the first real argument of their marriage.

"I-I see. Actually, to change the subject," she began, speaking far more quickly than she normally would, forcefully switching topics to maintain their currently harmonious relationship, "there was an issue during a meeting this morning. It most likely will not impact you directly, but I believe I should bring it up regardless. I assume that Lady Octavia has discussed the Salt Road during your lessons? Well, an area of the road has seen..."

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That night, the living room—having been the site of Zenjirou's hours of distillation that morning—still had a faint scent of alcohol despite the time that had passed. The afternoon had been spent sparring with Aura, so the windows had been thrown open to allow the smell to dissipate, but it still clung stubbornly to the room. Maybe the fumes had permeated the furniture and carpet at this point.

I should probably do it outside next time... Zenjirou thought as he poured his homemade alcohol into a couple of glasses from a whiskey bottle they'd finished earlier. The glasses had the same designs etched into them, one in red, the other in blue. They were a type of glass called *Satsuma kiriko*—the most valuable tableware that he owned.

The repeated distillations had increased the alcoholic concentration of the drink, and while it still had a faint amber tinge, it was mostly colorless now.

"Want to give it a go?" he asked before his smile turned self-deprecating. "I asked some of the maids who were free to try it earlier, and they didn't seem too taken." He held out the red-cut glass to his wife, who was sitting on the sofa.

In spite of the fact that Zenjirou had made it himself, it would have been unthinkable to allow the prince consort, let alone the queen herself, to sample

something that had not yet been verified to be safe. To that end, he had asked some off-duty maids to taste it and confirm that it had had no ill effects.

As for what they had actually thought of the product... Well, it was just as Zenjirou had said. Unfortunately, Aura was of much the same mind.

“Hmm... How should I put it? The taste is rather flavorless,” she told him after bringing the glass to her lips, frowning slightly.

“Yeah. Figures,” he sighed. He was well aware of that fact, and even as he slumped in disappointment, he couldn’t disagree.

The electric element maintained its temperature automatically, so the distillation itself wasn’t too difficult, but he was still an amateur. Getting the distilled alcohol to produce a flavor and aroma was completely out of his wheelhouse. In the end, he had managed to create a simple high-percentage alcoholic drink with just a hint of amber.

Aura took another mouthful of the liquid and consoled its creator, who was hanging his head in front of her. “Still, it is, as you say, a surprisingly *strong* drink. The strength itself should lead to sufficient sales. The flavor and scent can be dealt with by adding fruit juices or spices when it is to be consumed. Poor quality fruit liqueurs and grain alcohols are often handled in such a way.”

Her words prompted him to clap his hands together. “Oh, right. So we should drink it like vodka. You don’t just drink it straight, you can cut it with soda water or lime.”

He inclined his own glass. Back in Japan, he had only really bought low-malt beer and cheap whiskey, but he had to admit there was some value to what he’d made, even with no flavor or perks other than the strength itself, and it improved his mood.

“Actually,” he muttered, relying on vague memories, “they mature whiskey and brandy in casks for a few years after they distill them. I guess that makes sense, right?”

Aura had finished her drink first, and she returned her empty glass to the table before answering. “I see, so there is still room for improvement? Incidentally, this distillation... Is it possible without the specific equipment you

brought?”

Zenjirou tilted his head curiously at her question, frowned, then answered, “Well, it’s not *impossible*. It’s simple enough when it comes down to it. You essentially need to keep it heated at around seventy to eighty degrees, then condense the vapors and collect them. I think you could probably get it done with a normal wood fire, but it’d take a lot of trial and error.”

“Ah, so heat management is the issue. Roughly how hot is seventy to eighty degrees?”

Zenjirou let his gaze wander to the ceiling as he considered that, still leaning back into the sofa. “Uhh... How do I explain this? Oh, I know. How about a recent example? Fresh water boils at a hundred degrees, and the bath we use is probably just under forty, so roughly halfway between the two. Does that make sense?”

He’d intended it to be a rough explanation, but it looked like she had understood well enough. “I see,” his wife replied, leaning forward from the opposite sofa. “That would make it a fairly high temperature; too hot to judge by touch, at least.”

“Yeah, best not. You’d get scalded.”

The thought had Zenjirou frowning and hunching in on himself. In truth, a momentary contact would probably not burn much, but that didn’t mean checking the temperature by touch on a regular basis was realistic.

“Still, it is possible. The specifics may be different, but those with experience in extracting sugar may be able to judge it correctly,” Aura suggested.

“Right, that’s true,” he nodded. “Even back on Earth, distillation has been around for ages, so if you know the basics, it just depends on the intuition and experience of the people doing it, I think.”

His home world had a long history of distillation, and it was fundamentally simple, so even without electric thermostats, relying on craftsmen’s skills and eyes might mean that it was possible to replicate. Ancient blacksmiths on Earth had been able to determine the best temperature to strike the metal by monitoring the color of the flame. There were probably blacksmiths with that

same type of insight here in Capua right now.

In comparison, moderating the temperature of distilling alcohol by sight or feel probably wouldn't be too difficult, although it would of course require the development of certain tools and the training of dedicated experts. The main question was whether the results would be worth investing in. The kingdom might have been a large one, but it was still recovering from the war, so the treasury was in no state to accommodate frivolities. Manpower, funds, time—they all had spending limits. Just because something could potentially be of national interest down the line didn't mean that it would be easy to get there.

"It is something that I would quite like to test further in the future." Aura had decided to set distillation aside as her husband's hobby for the time being and shifted to a topic of greater importance. "To change the subject, however, I am told that the development of glass manufacturing should begin in the next few days," she announced, puffing out her chest. "The budget is tight, so we only have around a dozen people involved. However, all of them are either former blacksmiths or apprentices with a modicum of training, so they are well-used to handling the fires involved."

Zenjirou was fairly sure of her answer but asked just in case. "So it wasn't possible to get any *current* smiths rather than just former smiths and apprentices?"

Much as he had expected, Aura's answer was a negative, offered with a bitter smile. "I'm afraid not. Blacksmiths are this country's treasure. Those who have retired are one thing, but finding apprentices was considerably more difficult."

She gave him a slight shrug. Current blacksmiths were irreplaceable specialists and were to a certain extent even more valuable than skilled knights and officials. Aura couldn't put such valuable people onto a project that might never bear fruit. Or rather, strictly speaking, she *could* use her influence to do that, but the country's productivity would drop if she did, and it would be Aura, as monarch, who would have to face the consequences of that.

The reassignment of one or two smiths likely wouldn't have had a significant effect, but it could at the very least have worsened the smiths' opinions of the royal family. Craftsmen normally had a lot of pride in what they turned their

hands to, and they also tended to have connections with each other. Aura wanted to avoid inviting their ire as much as possible.

“Regardless, the current numbers are all we can dedicate to glasswork for the moment. Of course, as far as material transport and tool manufacturing is concerned, should they be required for anything other than development and production, we can simply increase our capacity at will.”

She paused for a moment and then continued. “Oh, it would likely be for the best for them to have a dedicated water wheel. The dee-vee-dee showed them grinding firebricks into powder and even finer consistencies, which appeared to require a lot of milling. We are understaffed as it is, so using a water wheel from the beginning would be more efficient.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot you had those,” Zenjirou mused, remembering that from his lessons with Octavia. His own world had had water wheels since before the common era, so it wasn’t strange for them to be in regular use here in Capua.

His comment made Aura frown for a moment before she nodded. “We have many rivers within the country, and they are a great boon to rural regions for milling flour. However, they were originally created by using engineering advancements from the Northern Continent, and our own versions seem to have a much shorter lifespan than theirs. Additionally, they soon become quite noisy and break easily.”

“Doesn’t that just mean the numbers of teeth aren’t co-prime?” Zenjirou asked, vague memories of middle school and his math teacher explaining the subject during a digression from the lesson.

“Hm? Co-prime? What does that mean?” Aura asked, only to be interrupted by a knock at the door and the familiar voice of a maid excusing herself.

“Sure, come on in,” Zenjirou called loudly, their conversation on pause.

With permission having been granted, the door opened to admit three familiar young faces to the room where the two royals were relaxing. The blonde in the middle seemed to be their representative, and she spoke calmly to the couple with a bow of her head.

“Our apologies for disturbing you at such a late hour. It seems the

temperature will remain high tonight, so we came to request some ice for Prince Carlos. May we take some?”

“Oh, right, it’s still a bit risky at the moment. Sure, go for it,” Zenjirou replied easily.

The fridge had five compartments, but there was a limit to how much it could freeze at once. If they took the ice for the baby, he and Aura would be forced to sweat through the night using only the bucket of water in front of the fan, but they could bear it for the sake of their adorable child. Capuans dealt well with the heat by nature, but a baby a mere month old would struggle with it. There was a relatively high incidence of even noble or rich families’ children dying due to heatstroke.

There was no wire to the room that Carlos and his wet nurse shared, so they couldn’t take the electric fan in there, but they had partitioned the room and allowed the cold air to fill the smaller space. A single maid each night was to watch over and feed the prince using the bottled milk as well as change his diaper in order to ease the burden on the wet nurse, but that duty was rather coveted, likely due to how cool the room was kept.

The maids gave a bow and some words of thanks before moving to the fridge.

“If only we could have Carlos sleep in our room,” Aura muttered, watching them, unable to give up on the idea.

Of course, she wasn’t mourning the room with ice but the ability to sleep in the same room as her beloved son. As a father, Zenjirou was in complete agreement, but he placated her with a reluctant smile.

“We can’t do that, and you know it. How often do babies that age wake up crying at night? Either they need to be changed or they want to be fed. If you woke up for all of those incidents, you’d never be able to get your work done during the day.”

Even if they left the actual changing and feeding to the maids, sleeping in the same room would mean constantly being woken up. Such a lack of sleep would have an obvious impact on her duties during the day. As queen, Aura understood that intellectually and had no intention of succumbing to her selfishness.

“I know that is true. I cannot care for my own child in that way. Even a queen cannot reign over all.”

Being unable to hold in her grumbling was proof of her deep love for the little prince. Zenjirou empathized with a slightly bitter expression.

“You’ve still got it good. Pretty soon, I won’t even be able to speak to him.” His feelings swelled as he said that, and he let out a despondent sigh.

“There is no other choice,” Aura replied comfortingly. “You speak a language from your world, not the language spoken in the west of the Southern Continent. It would clearly be a poor influence on Carlos, blank slate that he is.” At some point, they had traded the roles of consoling and complaining.

“I mean, I get it, but still...” he said, sighing again.

Until a child learned its mother tongue, it was better not to speak to them in other languages due to the Soul of Words that existed in this world. The one occasion where the Soul of Words was absolutely no help was when a child learned a word for the first time. At that point, if people speaking two different languages both talked to them, the child could learn a mish-mash of tongues. After all, a baby could not consciously cut off the flow of their mana to stop the Soul of Words from reaching it.

For example, if Zenjirou were to use the word “papa” with the meaning of “father,” and Carlos were to learn and make that association in his mind, then if Aura tried to teach him the word for “father” in her own language, Carlo would still hear the word “papa.” And if the child continued to learn in that way, he would end up as someone who used a bizarre mix of the local language and Japanese. In essence, someone who would come out with strange turns of phrase like, “Let’s dance conmigo together!”

They would have to prevent people who spoke different languages from interacting with him until he had learned one in particular. Zenjirou knew that, but having his contact cut short with his adorable son was painful.

“Plus, Zenkichi’s a boy, so he won’t be able to come in here once he turns five,” he added forlornly.

It was a Capuan custom to treat children under five years of age as “sexless,”

so although he was currently being raised within the inner palace, even the male heir to the throne was no exception and would eventually be subject to the law that banned most males from entering the inner palace. At that point, he would be moved to the royal palace and taught alongside his foster siblings, gradually being educated to be a royal. As long as Zenjirou was shut away within the inner palace, he would inevitably be estranged from his son.

“Maybe I’ll get a room in the royal palace too,” he said thoughtfully.

As Zenjirou muttered to himself, the maids loaded the tub of ice onto a hand trolley with practiced movements and pushed it along the carpet towards the door. The trolley itself was something that Zenjirou had brought from Japan. He’d gone to a hardware store and picked it up for the purposes of moving the generator, but since the summoning, it had been used more by the maids to lighten their load rather than by Zenjirou himself.

“Excuse us,” the maids said with a bow.

Aura and Zenjirou both replied in turn from their seats.

“Good work.”

“Thanks, guys.”

The slight clunk of the door shutting signaled that the room had returned to being a private place for the royal couple. There was a period of silence as they faced each other, illuminated by the six lamps around the room. It was commonplace for them to spend their time together this way, without forcing conversation.

Eventually, Aura rose from her seat and broke the comfortable silence. “Well then, I should retire. I will have to send off Margrave Gaziel’s messenger tomorrow, so I shall need my sleep or the energy expenditure required by the spell will interfere with my duties afterwards.”

Her gaze was on the clock next to the TV as she spoke. The digital clock of course used Arabic numerals to display the time, but over the past year, Aura had internalized their meanings and could now tell the time using the twenty-four hours, sixty minutes, and sixty seconds it displayed throughout the day.

She had recently instructed the officials in the palace to learn the numerals as

well, but none of them were as accomplished as their queen yet. If anything, the three maids who snuck around the head maid to borrow Zenjirou's console and fight over the high scores in the block-dropping and cart-racing games might actually know how to tell time better.

Regardless, the queen stated her intentions and stood there languidly before questioning her husband. "What of you?"

Zenjirou considered for a moment before giving a slight shake of his head. "Nah, I'll stay up for a bit. I've got my magic to practice, after all. You go ahead."

Previously, when Aura headed to bed, Zenjirou would instantly move to follow, but the circumstances had changed slightly. They'd recently returned to sharing the same bed as husband and wife but at present weren't having sex before they slept. Aura was a woman of valor who had lived through the war, but another pregnancy and delivery so soon after her first would have been tough on her and would doubtlessly have interfered with the affairs of government. Therefore, they were abstaining from procreation for the time being.

When the issue had first been broached and the decision made, Zenjirou had bitterly regretted not bringing any condoms to this world. His half-serious questioning of Aura regarding whether it was possible to summon things from Earth when the stars *weren't* right was evidence of how much of a problem it was for him.

"Very well, I shall see you later."

"Mhmm, I'll be there soon," he answered, standing up after her.

Aura moved smoothly, winding her hands behind his neck and bringing their lips together.

"Mm..."

"Nhmm."

Their embrace and kiss were somewhat more distant than their previous ones, possibly a sign of Aura losing confidence in her body as she dieted.

"Good night, then."

“Yeah, night.”

The embrace ended, and Aura vanished into their room.

“Right,” Zenjirou decided after a pause, shaking his head as if to shrug off the sensation of their bodies together. He quickly moved to his computer to put his words into action. “I should get this magic practice done and head off to bed myself.”

Chapter 2 — Activity in the Capital

Queen Aura was currently holding an informal audience with various dignitaries in the courtyard of the palace. As a general rule, there were long lunch breaks during the hottest period of the year, but every rule had its exceptions.

Considering her schedule and that, aside from today, the next convenient time was quite a ways away, Aura had—albeit reluctantly—surrendered her usual private lunch for diplomatic endeavors. The current heat was far too oppressive to hold such meetings in the palace's dining hall as they normally would, so the lunch was being held next to the fountain instead, its water spraying high into the air.

The area was covered by a roof and supported by four pillars but had no walls, which allowed the wind to blow freely through. The roof warded off the worst of the sun, and the lack of walls meant that the breeze coming from the direction of the fountain was somewhat cool.

In the courtyard, having done as much as possible to mitigate the effects of the heat, Aura dipped a piece of hard bread into a bowl of spiced soup and looked towards the middle-aged noble to her right.

"I do hope I have your understanding, Count Zamahrd? Our military movements are intended to deal with the expanding population of raptors on our roads, and our forces are being deployed domestically. I would appreciate you relaying that to the Kingdom of Navarra."

Navarra was an inland country on Capua's southern border, running along the edge of Gaziel's territory. It might have been a far weaker nation, but they *had* managed to maintain their independence throughout the prior war, and Aura preferred to avoid unnecessary conflict.

"I do indeed understand, Your Majesty. I shall convey your message without fail," Count Nalbia Zamahrd replied with a slight bow.

The count was a middle-aged man with no particularly striking features. He was of medium build with the usual tanned skin that was characteristic of the western regions of Randlion, and his hair and eyes were dark. It was commonly said that the farther south one went on the continent, the darker the skin and hair got, but despite having a north-south border, the people of Navarra and Capua were ethnically much the same.

Of course, they were all there as representatives of their countries and were clad in abbreviated formal dress, so it wasn't difficult to judge which country each person was from by appearance alone. Zamahrd was wearing yellow, the symbolic color of Navarra. He dipped his spoon into his soup, returning her gaze as he spoke.

"Still, with all due respect, I must say that if the issues on the Salt Road are indeed caused by raptors, my own country will be unable to simply ignore it ourselves. Your Majesty, along with your warning, we will wish to alert our northern territories to be on guard. Is that acceptable?"

Aura forcefully affixed a smile to her face at the foreign noble's words and nodded. "Of course, that is more than understandable. Raptors hardly comprehend the significance of national borders. While we cannot aid you directly, there is no reason for us to hinder you."

"My thanks, Your Majesty," the count replied with a deeper bow from his seated position.

It was a rather obvious request, really. The Gaziel territories did indeed border Navarra, but they were buffered by craggy mountains, so unless a great departure from their normal behaviors was going on, there was no risk of the raptors actually crossing into Capua's neighboring kingdom. The count and Aura were both aware of this, so it was clear that he was not truly asking her blessing to warn his country about the raptors but rather about the army itself.

Essentially, he was saying, "Just in case you're lying, let us warn our borders to be on guard for a military invasion."

It was an unsurprising measure considering Navarra's position. Not being on alert while your neighbors were performing military maneuvers next door would be a mistake for any country. Aura had expected such an answer from

the beginning and had replied already having taken the subtext into account, just as the count himself had done. She could well approve of them being wary.

Still, she thought, lifting the spiced soup to her mouth and blotting the sweat on her forehead, *even ignoring such considerations, when you take into account the difference in our countries' strengths, it is far from likely that they would act foolishly. Yet that is no reason to be negligent.*

The Kingdom of Capua was one of the biggest countries on the continent, while Navarra was nothing more than another inland nation. Even if Capua hadn't bothered with the polite warning, it was unlikely that Navarra would react forcefully, but unexpected issues could arise in international politics everywhere. If such conversations might prevent unfortunate clashes, it was an easy call to make.

Of course, this attitude might also have been due to their relative strengths, since if their positions were reversed, the situation would have been that much more difficult. They would never have been able to reach an agreement after the fact. Instead, they would have first needed to consult with their neighboring country, saying that they were moving troops to the borders but explaining that it was not a move directed towards them. "Understanding" would become more a matter of "permission."

Considering that, trifles such as this are barely worth mentioning, she told herself, annoyed about having to give up her normal cool breeze and enjoyable lunch with her husband for this unofficial meeting.

Aura wet her throat with some tepid water from a silver cup and consciously reacted with a satisfied expression, giving an exaggerated nod before turning her gaze in the other direction. In her line of sight was a man wearing foreign attire with stripes of purple and white. He was a diplomat from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, Knight Mareno Militello. At her glance, he pointedly cleared his throat in readiness for his own role and spoke slowly.

"First, I wish to say how splendid it is to see your countries take such steps to avoid misunderstandings. I can only commend both Her Highness's consideration and Count Zamahrd's prudence. I hope that my own country can follow such an example for constructive and worthwhile relations with our

neighbors.”

“You honor us, Sir Mareno,” Zamahrd replied, a slight hint of relief showing through his almost perfect poker face.

It went without saying, but a third party in the form of the knight was only present as a concession to Navarra. If one took their relative strengths into account, such verbal, unofficial agreements could well be ignored in the face of sufficient force from Capua.

Of course, Aura had no inclination to go down that road, but she also had no way of conveying that sentiment to her visitor. The queen of Capua had a reputation for being relatively upfront as far as rulers of such large countries went, but if one were to ask if she had ever acted in a way that was worthy of guilt, she would have had to misdirect. Saying that she had never gone back on her word for the sake of her country would be a lie.

Thus, she had offered a seat to Mareno Militello in order to lend credence to her words. The Twin Kingdoms were just as big, if not bigger, than Capua, and they reigned supreme over the center of the continent. With the nobility of their kingdoms being aware of her words, even the Capuan monarch could not easily change her mind. Her aim must have been clear to both of her guests.

“My thanks for your gracious consideration, Your Majesty,” the count said with another deep bow after a glance at Mareno.

The explanation provided to both dignitaries seemed to have been accepted. That had been the main goal of the luncheon, so Aura’s own aims had been accomplished. But that didn’t mean the event itself was over. In spite of it being a paper-thin veneer that no one would truly believe, she was officially hosting a private lunch.

The nobles had already finished eating and were now chatting idly while drinking fruit juices and light liquors. They had replaced the sweat that they’d lost from the spicy soup, and were now sweating once more. It was a common solution for the heat, and it meant that people had to drink sufficient water during the summer months or else they would become dehydrated. Despite the relative lack of advancements in the medical sphere, the people of this world were well aware of the risks of dehydration from personal experience.

As they continued, the Twin Kingdoms' diplomat casually spoke up with a smile.

"Your Highness. Your country is always so fast when it comes to sending orders, which is quite atypical for such a large nation. Can I assume that you used your magic on this occasion?"

“Hm? Ah, I did. Due to the urgency, I sent the messenger by way of my magic.”

It was nothing worth concealing, so Aura answered honestly. Of course, she readied herself at the same time. The dignitary would have been able to surmise as much without her confirmation, so bringing it up here could only mean that he wanted to use it to lead into another topic.

Whether Mareno was aware of her thoughts or not, he opened his eyes exaggeratedly and answered, “My! I was almost certain. The practical uses for your magic are exceptional even compared to that of other royals. Although, does it not make it all the more inconvenient that you are the only user of such gifts?”

“Well, I suppose it does,” she answered after a long moment. *So that’s where he is going with it*, she realized, having expected as much already. She relaxed slightly as she nodded. This was precisely what she had thought he would bring up.

“So, what would you say to this, Your Highness? Why not create a magic tool with which to use those powers?” he suggested with a sociable smile.

The magic tool that he was suggesting they create was without a doubt one that incorporated teleportation magic. *Of course that is his aim,* she thought, her smile wanting to twist slightly, but she held it back through sheer force of will.

It was a suggestion that had been made several times, even before her reign. Capua had always pushed it aside, though. Teleportation magic was one of the advantages that had catapulted their kingdom to the rank of a leading power in the western part of the continent. Such a tool would present a possibility for someone outside of the royal line to employ teleportation magic, albeit in a restricted fashion. In the past, the Twin Kingdoms had even suggested creating two such items and providing each of their countries with one.

Aura could not accept the suggestion of throwing away her kingdom’s prime advantage. “I do appreciate the offer, but I will have to decline. After all, their creation requires the cooperation of the practitioner and creator for years, does it not? As you said, I am currently the only one who qualifies as a practitioner. I

find it unlikely that you would suggest I leave the throne empty and move to the Twin Kingdoms' capital." She concluded her reply by releasing the somewhat aggressive twist of her lips.

Mareno could read between the lines. Of course the Twin Kingdoms would never think to invite the queen to their capital in that way; they were more likely aiming for Zenjirou. After all, the prince consort was rapidly learning magic. He still lacked perfect control but could now successfully cast a barrier spell three out of five times. Once he gained more control, learning teleportation magic was only a matter of time.

At best, he would be able to practically apply the use of Space-Time Magic within the year, perhaps next year if his progression was slower. Aura was sure that their aim was to extend the invitation to him once he became capable of casting proper teleportation magic.

In that case, I cannot answer too bluntly, she considered, frowning. After all, Zenjirou himself had indicated that he wanted to use that magic once he was capable of doing so in order to bring a healer to their own capital if the worst came to pass during her next birth. That was currently his primary goal. Just thinking back on how much he thought of her was enough to put a smile on her face. So, considering that potential, it would be best to not strongly deny it.

Her thoughts had been whirling in order to rapidly reach that conclusion, but it was made moot on this occasion for the simple reason that Mareno's next words were entirely different from what she had expected.

"Oh, not at all, Your Highness. You need not worry about that. Truthfully, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona showed a great deal of interest in those transparent jewels and diamond rings. With your permission, they would gladly welcome the chance to visit Capua."

The unexpected statement caused Aura to lose control of her expression, laying her surprise bare. It was inevitable, though. Prince Francesco and Princess Bona were royals from the Sharou family. While the healers from the Gilbelle papacy might venture out now and then, the Sharou family's enchanters had not left their own country in at least a hundred years.

Given that, containing her shock to the extent that she managed was rather

impressive; there were other nobles at the table who had sprayed their drinks onto their clothes and the tablecloth. But Aura couldn't even blame them; that was how shocking Mareno's statement was. Paired with the suggestion of making magic tools with her royal line's powers, it could remain a shock for quite some time.

"This is certainly not a decision that has yet been made; however, I would be grateful if you would consider it a topic of casual conversation. I do swear that my words are nothing but the truth," the knight said with a fixed smile as if pleased with the impact he had made.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

That night, Zenjirou and Aura were spending their time after their evening meal and bath alone, sitting on the sofas in the living room. They were not sitting next to each other but across from each other.

Over the last year it had become somewhat of an unwritten rule that they would sit next to each other for casual discussions and across from each other when the topic was a little more serious. The trend meant that when Aura sat across from him, he knew how the conversation was going to go, so tonight he had yet to put his iced whiskey to his lips, instead placing the glass on a coaster atop the table.

It appeared that his assumption had been correct, as Aura spoke with a serious countenance that was at odds with her casual clothing.

"Zenjirou, do you have a moment? I apologize for bringing up such topics at this hour, but it is information that you need to hear. There was a conversation at the luncheon this afternoon where..."

Zenjirou leaned forward in his blue-striped pajamas, listening to his wife under the light of the lamps.

"Uh, I'm not sure I totally understand, but it's *that* rare for the Sharous to leave the country?" he asked once she had finished her explanation.

He understood that their visit would be important but also felt like Aura's surprise was excessive. After all, it had been less than a year since a princess from the same country (Isabella) had visited them. Besides, their marriage had

been so rushed that only locals and diplomats had attended, but he had learned from Octavia that royals from other countries generally attended such events.

Aura smiled slightly at the question and answered with a nod. “Indeed, *royal* visits in general are not so rare, but a visit from *the Sharou family* is. The Twin Kingdoms have two royal families, after all, and most international matters are left to the Gilbelle papacy. They have not maintained the two-family system for centuries on a mere whim; they distribute their roles rather carefully. Of course, there are limits on their respective levels of influence, and I have heard that much of it is a tug-of-war between each family’s interests.”

Zenjirou nodded in understanding. “So, if such an introverted family is going out of their way to come here, they must have an important goal, right?” he asked, assuming that it went without saying.

Aura, as expected, nodded. “Most likely. I presume their main aim is to acquire your marbles. Isabella intimated that they would be interested in buying the remainder of them. It would seem they are of great use to their enchanting work.”

“Right, the marbles.” The glass orbs were something he’d bought an entire bag of for a few hundred yen, but they could completely upset the balance of power in this world. He knew that, but it still hadn’t sunk in. “Well, I’ll let you deal with that kind of thing. Just tell me what you decide and do what you like with them. There’s no chance they’re after my bloodline? They were rather fixated on it before, weren’t they?”

The sudden suggestion had Aura rest her chin in her hand and think before shaking her head. “I would not go so far as to say it is impossible, but it is a fairly remote possibility. Princess Bona is young and unmarried, so they may think she can ensnare you. However, they are unlikely to be so tactless within our own domain. If you are going to worry about *that*, you should do so while in their kingdom. You intend to go there once you have learned teleportation magic, do you not? Even if you have the surplus mana, it is far from a day trip. There will undoubtedly be a grand welcome awaiting you. If the Sharou family have not forsaken their designs on your bloodline or you yourself, that will most certainly be when they act,” she said with a slight leer.

“Oh, right,” he answered with a shudder. “I guess that’s a risk if I go there.”

It was to be expected. While he could, in theory, simply be teleported to the residence of Capua’s ambassador, a round trip to the country without the royal family’s permission would be unforgivable. Aura was right; he would be unable to refuse their “welcome.”

Damn, I might have taken this a bit lightly.

While it was still quite a ways in the future, he could now see how naive he had been and groaned slightly in regret. Regardless, it didn’t alter his goal of learning teleportation magic so that he could easily move between the kingdoms. It was almost certain that Aura would have a second and third child, and he absolutely refused to face the birth of their future children in the same way he had done with their first, Carlos Zenkichi, where he had been forced to sit and hope that his wife’s luck and stamina would prevail.

If it came down to it and he was eventually capable of such a trip, he would immediately be able to fetch help from a healer. He could allow himself some measure of risk for that. Resolving himself once again, he adjusted his position and met Aura’s eyes.

“Got it. When the time comes, I’ll be as careful as possible and will make sure that I don’t get caught up.”

“I see,” she answered shortly, a gentle look in her eyes.

His answer showed that he hadn’t changed his plan in the slightest, and understanding that such a plan was born of love for her, she couldn’t help but smile even as she worried about him.

“Very well. There is some time until that day comes, but I shall rely on you when it arrives,” she replied quietly.

“Anyway, going back to what we were talking about before, when are the prince and princess going to be coming?” Zenjirou asked, stirring the partially melted ice cubes in his drink and bringing the faceted glass to his mouth.

Aura sipped her brandy and leaned back into the sofa thoughtfully before answering. “I wonder. At present, it is nothing more than ‘an unofficial rumor.’ It is unlikely to happen immediately—it is unprecedented, after all. Honestly, I

cannot read their actions."

"Hmm, right. Then we'll just have to be ready. What kind of people are they? Do you know them?"

Aura shook her head. "I do not. As I said, they are not particularly involved with foreign affairs; there is much less information on them than other royal families. I know their lineage and ages, along with broad rumors," she answered, returning the partly-emptied glass to its coaster.

"What kind of rumors?" Zenjirou asked, prompting her to lightly fold her hands over her stomach and continue.

"First, their ages. Prince Francesco is twenty-four, and Princess Bona is sixteen, as I recall. Prince Francesco is of direct lineage, the current king's grandson, son of the first prince, who will most likely be the next king."

Zenjirou's eyes opened wide in surprise upon hearing that the man was closer to the throne than he had expected. "So, he's the king after next?"

Her explanation seemed to imply that. Succession didn't necessarily pass to the eldest son in this world, but there was a strong tendency for it to do so.

Aura, however, shook her head. "No, he is not. At least, he currently has no claim to the throne."

Zenjirou was even more surprised by that. "What?! But he's, like, twenty-four, isn't he? That can't be normal, can it?"

"It is not. Ordinarily, at least. There are those of legitimate bloodlines who are not accepted as true royals due to a lack of lineal magic, but Prince Francesco is one of its top five practitioners," she stated flatly.

Zenjirou couldn't help but feel that something was wrong here. If this prince was the king's grandson, and he was already twenty-four years old and able to use their magic well, why did he have no right to ascend the throne? The only explanation he could think of was that, despite his lineage, age, and skill, there was an issue with his personality that meant he was being pushed out.

"Just hearing about him makes me depressed."

"I quite agree," Aura said with a slight nod as her husband frowned, "although

breaking many years of silence to send him here means that there isn't likely to be an international incident... I hope."

She gave a slight shrug before centering herself and continuing. "The other visitor would be Princess Bona. She is the polar opposite of Prince Francesco. Her parents are not royalty, merely an older noble family who inherited royal blood, and she consequently inherited the lineal magic. I believe she is twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth in line to the throne? As far away as a royal can be, really."

"Oh, so even if she's not actually from the royal family, she's seen as royalty because she can use the family magic," Zenjirou muttered, impressed.

"Indeed. It varies from country to country, but that is how the Twin Kingdoms do things. In truth, such extended royals can barely use their lineal magic and are not directly descended from the reigning family, so it causes no problems for matters of succession. Their only real value is in being additional users of the kingdom's unique magic. It is a rather weak position within the country."

"I get it. I feel kind of bad for saying it, but she's like a cut-price princess in name only, then, huh?"

"Yes, which makes things more complicated. Their aim is as clear as day," Aura replied with a meaningful look, prompting an inarticulate deluge from him.

"Oh...right, I get it. So maybe, they—perhaps—haven't quite given up on me? Possibly?"

"Well, as I said earlier, I doubt they will be overly aggressive in our own palace. They likely wish to make your acquaintance and establish a rapport with you, presumably because there is no real risk in doing so," she admitted with a shrug.

"Ugh... This is gonna get annoying, isn't it?" he muttered, draining the remnants of his drink to swallow a heavy sigh.

Chapter 3 — The Salt Road

The Gaziel border was the southernmost territory within the Kingdom of Capua. The country boasted the most land of any of the countries in the region. Despite that, the temperature near the border wasn't all that different from the capital.

This was not only the case in Capua; the same could be said for much of western Randlion, which meant that while the capital was currently experiencing its hottest period of the year, so too was this territory caught in the height of a murderous heat wave. A single hour spent unprotected in the sun was enough to put infants and the elderly at risk of death, and it was ill-suited for large-scale military maneuvers.

The region, thanks to an understanding between the various governors, was very unlikely to break out into civil war. However, there were most certainly troublesome enemies on the continent; enemies that paid no heed to the whims and vagaries of man.

Lizards... Creatures that became more active as the temperatures of the western lands rose. From the perspective of the areas they inhabited, such creatures were the true ruling class of the Southern Continent, far more so than humans.

Raptors.

Gaziel's army was currently undergoing its second mobilization of the year—during the hottest period of the year, the one least-suited to such endeavors—to reconnect the broken Salt Road after those very lizards had torn it asunder.

Roughly one hundred men now marched steadily north along the road. It was still in the morning hours, and the weather was relatively cool. Even so, the searing sunlight bore down on them, lighting up the area with the vivid greenery from the sides of the road.

This road might have been Capua's pride, *the* Salt Road, but it was undeniably

rough by modern standards. It was barely wide enough for cars to pass each other, and the surface was merely bare dirt. The center of the road was raised, though, and shallow ditches had been dug on either side, which decreased the likelihood of it turning into a river during the rainy season.

Even so, if someone from Earth were to see this unpaved path, and were told that it was a main route through the kingdom, they would struggle to believe it. It was nothing compared to the asphalt of modern roads or the ancient cobbled roads of the Roman Empire. But regardless of the lower level of science and technology, the people of this world had magic with which they could manipulate the landscape itself, so they were arguably in a better position than Ancient Rome. That the road was so simple regardless perhaps went to show just how much stronger the power of nature was there than on Earth. Of course, there was also the possibility that Ancient Rome was simply an exception when it came to the quality and maintenance of their roads.

Regardless, the local soldiers were currently marching along the road in question. The vanguard was composed of cavalrymen atop large green dash drakes. There were five of them, each with their own squire. The other soldiers carried short spears and were following on foot. They wore thick hooded coats over their leather armor to ward off the sun, but it blazed down mercilessly all the same, stealing the hydration from their bodies.

Already, over half of the soldiers had emptied the water skins that hung from their waists. The main exception was the transportation division. They rode in carriages pulled by drakes, which were far slower than dash drakes but much stronger. The carriages contained huge amounts of necessities in the forms of weapons, food, water, firewood, and large cooking tools, and the drakes were carting along several vehicles full of such materials. Considering it needed to support roughly a hundred soldiers for the duration of their campaign, the seemingly excessive supplies made sense.

If anything, someone from Earth in the Middle Ages would have been shocked that a long-term expedition could be supplied with so few carriages and transported by a relatively small number of beasts of burden comparable to their own horses.

There were five cavalrymen, five squires to match, and ten transport corps.

Fifteen troops escorted the caravan, and there were around seventy general infantrymen. It might have looked like there were far fewer cavalrymen compared to a standard formation, but that was due to the expectation that they would be facing raptors in the forests. Compared to their superlative mobility and strength on an open battlefield, the effectiveness of cavalrymen was much reduced in enclosed conditions. Even those five would dismount when the time came to fight, leaving their drakes with the squires.

“Phew...” One of the cavalrymen, a young man with dark hair and eyes sighed softly so as not to be heard.

Xavier Gaziel was his name. He was the third child of the margrave, and the only one of his siblings still alive. Upon closer inspection, he had many similar features to his sire; however, he was built quite differently. The margrave wasn’t particularly tall, but he had maintained his physique as he’d aged. Xavier, on the other hand, looked daintier and less reliable.

It was hard to tell due to his current position on the drake’s back, but he was shorter than Zenjirou, with Zenjirou being one hundred and seventy centimeters, and Gaziel being in the sixties of that bracket, maybe even as small as one-fifty. He was short, slight, and a novice. No one would ever peg him as a reliable commander.

As if aware of that fact, he had made a point of remaining utterly straight-backed to make himself appear slightly bigger. Riding in the vanguard, he thought he could feel the gazes of every one of the soldiers behind him, evaluating his every move.

Of course, that was a simple trick of his mind. While the sun was still low, the soldiers needed to push through the harsh heat and didn’t have the energy to spare for surveying their commander, so it was a pointless concern on his part.

“Sir Xavier,” muttered his squire, a fair-skinned lad walking next to him with a spear in hand. He was looking up at the commander worriedly, but the man in question couldn’t afford the attention to notice.

Xavier’s ability to maintain his posture without the slightest deviation while mounted was impressive. He might have appeared delicate, but that much was proof of his dedication to his training. That said, riding in such a fashion would

undoubtedly see him soon exhausted.

“Sir, it may be somewhat early, but I recommend a break. A little farther ahead there is a clearing suitable for making camp. What do you think about setting up there?” suggested a middle-aged knight from behind him, hiding a troubled smile.

Age-wise, the knight was perhaps in his mid-forties. Xavier jolted at the dark-mustached man’s words and turned to face him.

“Lord Josep,” he replied, familiar with the name of the knight so loyal to his father.

Lord Josep was a seasoned veteran, having fought for his name in the great war. He normally worked closely with the margrave but had returned carrying the necessary permissions to the army as a proxy via Aura’s magic. If the envoy’s role had simply been to deliver the message, there would have been no need for the presence of such a skilled knight. The margrave had likely sent Josep to ease the burden of his son’s first sortie.

Xavier was happy for the consideration, but it also made him feel pathetic. Shaking off his rapidly declining mood, he answered. “As you said, it is too early, is it not, Lord Josep? I seem to remember our original plan called for greater progress in the morning.”

The knight brought his drake up alongside his lord’s son and replied politely, “It did, sir; however, the heat is stronger than anticipated. The men are already showing signs of exhaustion. I feel it may be a risk to continue in this way.”

“I-I see,” Xavier answered, caught off guard by his subordinate’s suggestion.

There was a saying that wisdom came with age. If Xavier had been walking under his own power, he probably would have noticed the soldiers’ exhaustion as a reflection of his own, but out of respect for his position as commander, he was riding on drakeback.

Riding for an extended period of time was tiring in and of itself, but there was no comparison when it came to walking under the searing sun. The young heir had been taught how to lead his men and gave his agreement before twisting in the saddle and calling to those behind him.

“We’re making camp in the clearing up ahead! Only a while left now—keep it up!”

Once the soldiers understood that they would soon be able to rest, their expressions gained a touch of happiness for the first time that day as their heads rose slightly. Their reactions once more drew Xavier’s attention to his own inadequacies as a commander.

Hm, everyone does look rather tired. I should have noticed it before Lord Josep had to mention it...

His personality was perhaps too serious by nature.

The margrave’s third son, Xavier, clenched his fists atop the drake’s back enough to make his slight body shake as he remonstrated himself.

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Noon several days later found the army headed by Xavier Gaziel having progressed a long way north along the Salt Road, once more making camp. The path wove through dense forest, and there were no naturally occurring spaces large enough for a hundred-strong group to rest, but the Salt Road *was* Capua’s greatest highway, after all. Here and there, the trees were cut back in certain areas to create spaces for large groups to set up camp.

The soldiers’ voices rang through the small artificial clearing.

“Hey, the sunshade’s not high enough! Need an earthwall user over here!”

“We’re about to get cooking! Someone come give me a hand with lighting a fire!”

“Water’s all here; someone purify it!”

The most attention-grabbing aspect of their preparations was inarguably the existence of magic. Even for commoners, it was relatively routine to learn a spell useful for day-to-day life, even if they didn't know enough to be called mages. People with specialized magic were prized in these situations.

Conversely, when it came to combat, magic was almost never of use. After all, using a spell required the correct pronunciation, the correct amount of mana, and the correct cognizance. Regardless of pronunciation and mana, holding a certain mental image in the midst of combat was extremely difficult. Only a handful of elite royal mages could cast offensive magic from the rear lines, but casting while wielding a spear was impossible as a general rule. Therefore, the majority of magic usage by soldiers was for non-combat situations like this.

Xavier Gaziel sat in a folding wooden chair in their temporary headquarters: a white cloth pavilion over rectangular walls, created using earth magic. He rolled his neck to remove the stiffness of the hours on drakeback.

"Ughh!" he grunted in a mixture of pain and relief.

The past few days and his ongoing training meant that he had experienced such treks plenty of times, but he still seemed to end up in this state. He'd been all too aware of his subordinates' gazes and had held himself stiffer than needed.

Currently, the only people in the pavilion were Xavier himself and his trusted squire. Without his subordinates' eyes on him, this sense of privacy was irreplaceable. The single sheet of cloth around them could not possibly hold out the harsh light, but the magic-made wall blocked it completely.

Xavier sat in the shade created by the wall as he used the small bucket of water his squire had prepared to pour over his head.

"Phew..." he breathed. Droplets of water ran through his hair and along his neck, flowing inside his clothes.

"Sir Xavier, here," the squire addressed him.

"Ah, thanks, Andres," he replied, reaching from his seat and taking the offered towel, using it to wipe his face. The heat would quickly dry the water, but that didn't change the unpleasantness of staying wet in the meantime.

Once he was done, Andres wordlessly took the used towel and offered a wooden cup of lukewarm water in exchange. Xavier accepted it mostly out of reflex, draining the contents in a single quaff.

It was at that moment that a low, carrying voice came from the other side of the pavilion.

“Sir, it’s Josep. The scouting party has returned with urgent information. May I enter?”

“Huh, Josep? Very well, enter,” he replied, simultaneously signaling to Andres to tidy the area.

Xavier Gaziel remained in his simple folding chair as he listened to the report from the recon leader and Josep in their temporary headquarters.

“What?! You found the salt traders’ corpses?” he cried out in surprise, leaning forward in his chair upon hearing the information.

“Yes, sir. A little farther up the road, we found several overturned carriages, drake corpses, and human bodies! Each bears grievous wounds and was clearly killed by raptors!” the soldier replied in a loud voice, sending the unshaven hair around his mouth fluttering.

The scouting force was made up of several agile infantrymen. If they were to come across a force of raptors strong enough to cut off the Salt Road, there was little chance of them repelling an attack on their own. That was why they had immediately returned after finding the corpses, the man explained.

It had likely been the correct decision. In this case, informing the main force that the corpses were ahead was more important than staying to collect information. Xavier’s hands had unconsciously clenched into fists in his lap as he listened. Finally, the real battle would begin, so it was hardly unfair for his nerves to show, seeing as this was his first campaign.

“I see. Then we cannot waste a moment. We should tell the men to make ready,” he instructed, straightening his slight form in the chair.

“Sir, the men are still preparing lunch,” the veteran admonished his less-experienced comrade as the latter tensed up. “If we disseminate this information now, the younger soldiers will not recover from the journey as

much due to their nerves. Are you certain?”

“Hm?”

Josep’s words as a veteran caused Xavier to promptly abort his attempt to rise from the chair. He sat back and rested his chin in his hands to think. Certainly telling the soldiers that raptors might be nearby and to take care during their respite would cause discomfort and tension. What was more, a significant number of those present were young men. Older soldiers who had experienced war before were a minority.

“Josep,” he asked after a pause, “how likely would you say an attack from the raptors here is?”

The young commander’s question made the veteran’s eyebrow rise as he answered smoothly. “Well, it is impossible to say for sure, but I believe the risk is reasonably low. We do have roughly a hundred armed men here, and the raptors in the area should be fairly wary of the danger.”

“Hm, I see,” the commander returned, seeming to come to a decision in an instant.

However, almost as if to interrupt that, Josep continued. “That said, the possibility is *low*, not non-existent. Hungry raptors are impossible to predict.”

“Hmm...” Xavier murmured, closing his mouth again at the followup and thinking once more. If he alerted the entire army, their long-awaited break would end up with many unable to properly rest. However, if he did not, they could be taken by surprise, found defenseless by the beasts.

To alert or not to alert. Xavier suppressed the urge to ask the knight what he thought the correct course of action was and contemplated it himself instead. Josep had already provided an objective opinion; it was now up to him, as the commander, to decide what to do with that.

While he considered the situation, numbers danced through a corner of his mind, counting up from one. It was a habit his instructor had given him. In contrast to the duties of a margrave, which required careful consideration, a rough and ready decision from a commander was often better than a well-thought-out one on the battlefield. His instructor’s sour words that a decision

on the battlefield must always be made within a count of ten, and within a count of three when there were signs of enemy action, had stuck with him.

Before long, Xavier let out a breath and gave an order to the subordinates before him as he sat up straight in his chair. “Very well. There is no need to order readiness. Keep the information restricted to the knights and division leaders for now, and allow the others to finish their meals and rest up. We will be heading for the site in the afternoon, and there is a high probability of battle when we arrive. Once the men have finished recuperating, disseminate the information and keep them on alert for the afternoon as we move out. That is all.”

“Very well.”

“Understood, sir!”

The knight and recon leader answered their commander’s decision respectfully.

As Xavier issued his orders, his face tensed up enough to trigger a twitch in his cheek as he did his utmost to keep the unease off his face. The moment the words had left his mouth, doubt had assailed him. Had he made the right call? If they were attacked during their break, it would be an utter failure on his part. But if he made the information public and the new recruits found their later fight more difficult as a result, that would also be a failure.

The knight and leader, apparently ignorant of their inexperienced commander’s concerns, offered bows and quickly left the pavilion.

“Phew,” Xavier sighed again once they had left, “the battle hasn’t even started yet, worthless...”

His loyal squire feigned deafness at his master’s complaints.

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The army headed by Xavier Gaziel came to a halt in the middle of the Salt Road. Roughly an hour of marching had passed since they had recommenced their journey. Spread out before them was a scene that, in a word, could only be described as “carnage.”

Carriages were on their sides, strewn across the road, and the drakes that had hauled them were corpses, still in their leather harnesses. Scattered around were broken bags of salt, and among it all were several human bodies.

This was what had befallen the salt traders. Several days seemed to have passed since they'd been attacked. The bodies were slowly rotting and were giving off a strong smell. An amateur couldn't have determined whether the parts of the bodies missing had been eaten by the raptors or simply fallen away.

The squirming dark patches on the ruddy meat were corpse flies, and the writhing white flecks were eggs they had laid. If you strained to hear, there was a low hum that irritated the ears mixed in with the wind—the sound of countless flies' wings buzzing.

"Agh!"

"Ugh..."

"Keep it together! Waste your energy here and you'll be dead weight during the battle!"

"Sure, go right ahead and waste that food; I'll beat the crap outta ya 'til your eyeballs are on the way out as well!"

Harsh cries from the veterans carried across the area to encourage the nauseated new recruits. Still, new recruits they might have been, but they lived in the borderlands—as close to nature as one could be. Human bodies aside, few of them were seeing a drake corpse for the first time.

The main reason for their nausea was likely the stench of it all. As the flesh liquified, it let out a scent of rot: a putrid, cloying reek, so thick in the air that it seemed to visibly tinge it. It was hardly surprising that those men who were unaccustomed to such smells felt like spewing the contents of their stomachs onto the ground.

Truth be told, if it hadn't been for two particular factors—a sense of responsibility and vanity—keeping his gorge down, Xavier himself would probably have failed in that respect. Unsurprisingly, it was the veteran knight who brought the young commander's attention back to his duties and away from the internal battle atop his mount.

“Your orders, sir?” he rebuked the other quietly but sharply, maneuvering his own mount alongside Xavier’s.

Josep’s bluntness forced the young man to recall the responsibility he’d been burdened with, and it brought him back to himself. He gave his orders after clearing his throat loudly.

“I-Indeed. Survey team, investigate the corpses, analyze, and report. Everyone else, be on your guard!”

“Roger!”

“You listening? First squad, watch the east! Second, west! Third and fourth, you’re watching the transport and our backs!”

“Clear a path; the survey team is coming through.”

The forces began moving at Xavier’s slightly flustered orders. The survey team headed at a decent pace towards the corpses, sending the flies scattering into the air, billowing up like black clouds. The title of their group made them sound like an educated bunch, but it wasn’t anything special; they were essentially skilled hunters.

However, there was no other group of people more knowledgeable about this kind of thing. The teeth marks and feces left over would allow them to determine the type of creature in question, the state of the victims would let them estimate the numbers, and the level of decay would allow them to try to determine how much time had passed.

None of this was theoretical knowledge; it was simply the accumulation of practical knowledge from personal experience, but that didn’t decrease its reliability in the slightest. Before long, the hunters carrying out the survey returned. If they had been on the estate or in the capital, there would have been a certain level of formality expected, but on the front line, some leeway was allowed.

Once they reached Xavier, a middle-aged man with brown stubble spoke as their representative. “We have our report. It would seem that the merchants were attacked by swarm raptors.”

The man’s words sent Xavier’s cheek twitching again. “Swarm raptors.” There

was no one in the region who didn't know the term; that was how common they were to the western part of Randlion.

There were several exceptions, but as a general rule, herbivores, like the pompo drakes they used for hauling, and dash drakes, were quadrupeds. Carnivores like raptors were mainly bipeds. These swarm raptors were no exception.

Generally, the adults were about one or two heads taller than a human. They stood on two thick legs and possessed explosive strength. Their long tails maintained their balance as they hunted with sharp-clawed forelegs and jagged fangs. If you were to compare them to an Earth animal, a kangaroo would probably be closest in terms of silhouette.

Amongst raptors, swarm raptors were a smaller variant, but that by no means meant they were harmless. As the name implied, they worked in packs. They were actually a common cause of the loss of livestock, and they were said to attack villagers who ventured into the forest.

However, Xavier had a working knowledge of their range and habits, so he looked questioningly at the hunters. "Swarm raptors... Are you certain?"

The unshaven man nodded confidently. "We are. The human corpses are difficult to judge from because of the decay, but the drake hides haven't rotted as much. We could identify the tooth and fang marks. This attack was without a doubt made by swarm raptors."

When a specialist like these hunters made such a firm declaration, there was normally little room for doubt. However, Xavier's doubts were still present.

"I see. If you are so certain, it must be so. Still, I don't know. Could swarm raptors really take out the whole convoy? I heard that their escorts were both skilled and numerous."

As he spoke, his gaze found its way to the merchants' corpses. Considering the bodies' states of decay and how much had been eaten, it was impossible to tell who was part of the escort and who was a merchant, but the shattered spears and bows allowed him to surmise that there were indeed combatants present.

Xavier himself had exterminated swarm raptors as part of his training, but the experience meant that he couldn't see how this much combat power could fail to counter the whole swarm.

The hunter shook his head with a grave expression. "Sir, depending on their master, the exact size of a swarm can increase indefinitely. Most can only command a pack of ten, but as they grow with age, they can grow in number to twenty or thirty members. The largest swarms have large and strong masters because they have to feed their subordinates. Those examples are abnormally intelligent and cunning."

"So, the swarm that attacked the merchants..." Xavier trailed off, his face hardening as he understood the situation.

"Yes, it's likely a large swarm with a bigger master. Even the merchants' escorts would have suffered defeat in the face of twenty or thirty of them. As you can see, the trees around the road are extremely dense, so they could well have had no means to fight back against an ambush."

"Twenty or thirty, huh?" Xavier murmured with a frown at the explanation.

The hunter's expression remained tense as he shook his head again. "No, sir. Twenty or thirty is the minimum. I would estimate this swarm to be more than fifty beasts strong."

"Fifty?! Why do you think that?" the young man demanded in surprise at the number, which was far beyond what he had been expecting.

A closer look revealed that even the other hunters wore expressions of surprise, so it must have been the unshaven hunter's personal opinion. He seemed to have been waiting for Xavier's question as he issued his explanation.

"You should be able to see it from here. Look at the drakes pulling the carriages. While it's not the case for all of them, several have had their backs eaten, do you see? The meat there is tough and unappetizing. When prey is plentiful, most raptors wouldn't touch it. There were many people here and eight drakes. Yet even the backs of the drakes were eaten, so..."

"So there were enough swarm raptors that the number of people and the softer regions of the drakes was still not enough to sate them."

“Yes, that’s my thought.”

“And over fifty of them?”

“That much is my own rough estimation. When you consider that the merchants, the coachmen, the people for loading and unloading, the escorts, and even the softer meat from the drakes weren’t enough to satisfy them, I think that such a number is likely.”

A rough estimate it may have been, but the hunter was persuasive, and Xavier chewed at his lower lip as he considered the situation. Fifty swarm raptors. If that guess was correct, the pack would not be an easy mark, even for his hundred-strong army. They would likely not *fail*, but Capua’s young soldiers were valuable after only recently coming through the war. They couldn’t afford many losses.

This whole affair was something that the margrave had pushed to have him assigned to in hopes of giving his son some sense of legitimacy, but depending on how things played out, he could be faced with a dilemma: prioritize his own ends and allow his precious men to die or abandon the goal to protect his soldiers’ lives and call for reinforcements first.

Not an easy choice...

Emotionally, he wanted to prioritize the lives of his men, but he was also well aware that this was no time for sentimental decision-making. In the near future, he would be taking up the mantle of margrave, and his reputation would be directly linked to his ability to protect his territory’s interests.

His reputation or his men’s lives...

Of course, the ideal outcome would have been to gain renown while making sure that his men didn’t die, but with the hunter’s estimation of fifty swarm raptors, it was unlikely that they could complete the extermination with no casualties.

Xavier felt his swirling thoughts go down a dead end. He concentrated on solving the issue in front of him, then he maneuvered his reins skillfully, turned his drake on the spot, and addressed the men assembled behind him loudly.

“Got it. We’ll need to deal with the bodies and carriages first. We can’t keep

marching at this rate.”

With the order given, Josep filled in the details. “You heard the man, didn’t you? Axemen, clear the trees and make a space for a pyre! Anyone who can use desiccate or wind blade, fashion the wood into chips for it. After that, get the corpses into position and ignite it. Don’t forget your masks and gloves when you move the bodies. Don’t even think about touching them with your bare hands; you don’t want to get done in by the carrion. Burn the salt too; it could be contaminated. Take care to ensure the fire can’t spread, and make sure we’ve got men with water manipulation on hand just in case. Everyone else, stay on your guard. Got it? Right, you’ve got it... Is that satisfactory, Sir Xavier?”

“I-It is,” Xavier answered when prompted, despite being a little overwhelmed by the detailed orders. Then he took in a breath before giving the go-ahead in a loud voice. “Commence the operation, men!”

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As the harsh sun fell westward, black smoke hung in the air over the remnants of the traders at the side of the Salt Road.

“Heave-ho!”

The young soldiers were using trees they had chopped down and adjusted to work as rollers for the corpses, hauling them with ropes that were wrapped around the bodies. Everything stank of death, and the soldiers sweated profusely. They leaned forward, almost with their chests to their knees as they gritted their teeth and strained against the ropes, which bit into their shoulders. The sweat rolled along their cheeks and dripped from their chins, turning the dry soil dark with moisture, but the marks left behind evaporated in an instant.

The scorching sun was not the only reason for that. It was due also to their incinerating the bodies and carriage ruins. The impromptu clearing at the roadside was like a forge, and the environment was sweltering. Plumes of smoke rose as red flames made the air ripple.

“Well, it appears we’ll get the road unblocked without a problem,” Xavier said to himself as he wiped his brow with a dry towel.

The corpses had been tossed onto the fire. At first, the sheer stench of it had

made his eyes water, but it didn't bother him as much at this point. The smell had certainly abated by now, but the main reason was that his nose had simply become numb to it.

Regardless of personal discomfort, the functionality of the road had been restored. With one of the goals of his expedition accomplished, Xavier was feeling slightly more mentally relaxed and allowed his gaze to wander from the flames. It was at that point that he noticed something.

"Hmm?" he muttered, seeing that the unshaven hunter who had given the earlier analysis now had a frown creasing his forehead.

The hunter seemed to sense Xavier's gaze on him as he jogged over before the latter could even call out.

"Sir, I have something I want to report," he said. The man's expression made it clear that it would not be pleasant information, which meant that Xavier most certainly needed to hear it due to his position.

"Speak," he bade the hunter without preamble, his face giving the impression that he had swallowed a bitter pill.

The man began speaking quickly, with a slight bow of his head. "Sir, there is something strange about this. I originally thought it was a coincidence, but all three carriages have broken axles and couldn't have moved."

"What of it?" Xavier asked, already aware of that much. His troop had originally intended to use the carriages to transport the corpses, but none of the vehicles had been in any state to do so. He'd merely considered it bad luck, but the hunter clearly had a different opinion.

"They were involved in a large-scale attack, so it isn't impossible that they'd all be damaged beyond use through sheer chance. From what I've seen, though, the raptors used their claws and fangs to intentionally shred everything, even the wheels, apart."

So, it wasn't a mistake on the part of the drivers that had resulted in damage to the wheels—the raptors had purposefully aimed to disable them. There was only one conclusion.

"They specifically removed their ability to flee? Are they that intelligent?"

“They are. I can hardly believe it myself, but it would be safer to assume so. There are other things that lend more credence to that assumption as well.”

“Such as?”

The hunter’s frown deepened as he continued heavily at Xavier’s urging. “Well, they were attacked by swarm raptors, but do you see a single one of the creatures’ corpses here? The traders seem to have been entirely overrun without managing to take down a single enemy.”

“And that should be impossible?”

The hunter considered for a moment before shaking his head. “I wouldn’t go that far. The area is enclosed, and the trees are rather dense. Under such circumstances, if a swarm ambushed them in a pincer attack, it is entirely plausible for their pack to have sustained no casualties. But that outcome relies on *all* of the escort being caught off guard.”

Once the man stopped speaking, he looked doubtful, as if he himself wasn’t entirely convinced. It was indeed an unnatural idea. A convoy trekking along a peaceful path for a good length of time would inevitably drop their guard a bit, but to such an extent being suggested, the men that the merchants had hired would have been effectively worthless. And while that wasn’t *impossible*, it certainly raised doubts, which in turn meant that any other explanation for the situation became significantly more credible.

“I think the lack of raptor bodies is an indication not of the soldiers’ negligence but rather something that was caused by the raptors themselves.”

“Caused by—” Xavier started, about to ask exactly what the hunter meant, but he was interrupted.

“Airborne wyvern, north-northeast!” came a shout from one of the soldiers on watch, his voice sounding out clearly through the area.

Reflexively, Xavier turned to look in the direction indicated, and then he saw it. Against a dazzling blue backdrop, there was a stain on the scorching skies. At first, it only looked like a dark spot, but it grew rapidly in size, its contours and details rapidly growing clearer: a long neck, a long tail, and a large pair of wings that made up perhaps more than eighty percent of its size. It was, without a

doubt, a wyvern. And not a tiny, tame one that humans had domesticated but a full wyvern in all respects.

“Ready yourselves to defend against an aerial attack, everyone! Bowmen, nock your arrows and be ready to fire!” Xavier instructed smoothly, surprising even himself.

The orders were standard practice for an army encountering a wyvern, and the speed of the troop’s response was perfectly acceptable for soldiers on their first campaign.

“A...a wyvern?!”

“Why is it here?”

“Damn, did the smoke draw it in?!”

Even amid the chaos, the soldiers carried out their orders, and each squad formed defensive rings, their spears pointing outward like hedgehogs.

“This way, sir!” Xavier’s squire called, pulling him by the hand once he had leaped from his mount.

“Got it, Andres! You too!” the commander replied as they slipped behind the line of spears carried by his squad. “Phew...” he breathed, taking his short bow from Andres, glaring up at the sky as he murmured to himself. “I never expected a wyvern. What’s it doing in the forest?”

He wasn’t merely complaining. Wyverns normally hunted in the plains, where they had good visibility, and were rarely seen in forests like this. With its huge membranous wings, it was almost incapable of landing in such a cluttered environment. For that reason, Xavier’s troop had been put together without any thought of facing such a beast, focusing on short spears and bows instead. To fight a wyvern, the long versions of both weapons would have been more appropriate.

“Considering its movements,” the hunter said tensely, having taken a knee at Xavier’s side without him noticing, his eyes focused on the approaching creature, “it doesn’t seem to be hunting here. I think it is on its way to a nearby plain.”

“It’s not targeting us?” Xavier asked.

The hunter gave a slight nod, not averting his gaze from the sky as he answered. “Probably not. Of course, we can’t afford to let our guard down. But hunting humans in a forest like this is dangerous even for them.”

There was a general misunderstanding about the matter, but wyverns were usually no great threat to an army. Of course, humans were unable to easily counterattack when their foe was in the air, so a diving wyvern was a difficult opponent to face, but the losses an army would take from such an encounter were extremely limited.

A brief amount of thought made the reason for that clear: wyverns were drakes that flew through the skies, which meant there was a limit to the weight of the prey they could grab with their claws and take off with. That meant that even if a group of people *were* attacked, there would normally only be one or two direct casualties, potentially three at most. When merchants couldn’t afford sufficient protection while crossing the plains, they would often bring one or two cattle drakes as sacrifices.

So, from a somewhat selfish perspective, even if the animal did attack, the army as a whole would take minimal losses. As long as the victims in question weren’t irreplaceable members of the group, like Xavier or Josep, their forces would not suffer excessive harm.

That said, it would be of little comfort to the individual soldiers affected. There was a one-in-a-hundred—maybe two-hundred—chance that any of them might become food. That fear was shared between all of the spearmen and archers, and they kept their sights fixed on the creature as it flew past.

The only sound breaking the painful silence was the mighty beating of the wyvern’s wings as it soared overhead. Several of the archers had their bows aimed from such an angle that it almost seemed like they’d fall over. The area directly above them was a blindspot, and it took real skill to shoot directly upwards.

However, all of their vigilance was, thankfully, in vain. Considering the wyvern’s visual acuity, it was impossible that their group had gone unnoticed, so the hunter must have been correct in his suggestion that the beast itself

didn’t want to risk a fight in the close quarters of the tree-enclosed road. It continued smoothly by.

Once it eventually faded from view, Xavier let out a sigh of relief, and he wasn’t the only one. The unexpected encounter, and then the fact that it had been resolved without issue, caused the entire army to relax slightly.

“Hssss!”

It was at precisely that moment that several large figures descended upon them from the sides of the road. Their thick legs allowed them to leap overhead from the shadows and land directly on top of the unprepared soldiers, crushing them.

“What?!”

“Ahhhhh?!”

“Gah!”

The enemy trampled the soldiers, coming into clear view on the road. They were bipedal, covered entirely in emerald scales. Carnivorous drakes about a head taller than an average human, and of middling size for their kind.

Swarm raptors.

There were three on the right, four on the left, seven in all, and they had knocked down just as many soldiers as thick ropes of drool bubbled around their fangs.

How long had they been lurking there? Had they used the time the men had been focused on the sky to close in through the trees? If so, the master raptor had used the wyvern’s movements to its own ends, despite the other creature being something its pack would ordinarily fear.

“How?!”

Whatever the case, it took Xavier, still a green commander, several seconds to adapt to the abrupt change in their circumstances. The swarm had ambushed them while they were busy watching the wyvern overhead—an unimaginable strategy for lizards who were known to act on instinct. They had succeeded in taking down several soldiers with a single wave.

I can understand the escort being unable to fight back if these beasts can manage an ambush like this, the young commander thought bemusedly in a corner of his otherwise blank mind.

But regardless of the escort's skill, it wouldn't have compared to that of knights, nor would their numbers. A surprise attack, even one that had wiped out the merchants and their guard, would never be able to take out the hundred-strong force that Xavier was leading.

"To arms, men!" he yelled hoarsely, recovering his wits. "Shielders, focus on the trees! Spearmen, attack from behind them! Archers, fire from the rear! Don't let them near the wagons!"

"Understood!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Got it! Transport! Keep up a supply of arrows!"

Having received their orders, the men seemed to finally remember their roles and gradually got back on track. The battle, which had been initiated by the raptors, now shifted bit by bit. Xavier was leading a force built for exactly this purpose. Once they regained their footing, they would not be defeated so easily.

"Shielders, form a wall!"

"Spearmen, hold fast! Focus on corralling them, not attacking!"

"Archers, fire! Target anything going after our downed comrades! Don't worry about friendly fire! If you end up in the trees, we can't help you!"

After composing themselves, the army transitioned to an organized counterattack and pushed the battle into a stalemate. The men holding short spears and wooden great shields were lined up on either side of the clearing. The raptors had quickly retreated into the trees and were poking their long necks out and screeching in a cacophony of shrieks.

The archers in the rear lines loosed their arrows whenever they saw an opening, but the tree branches and dense foliage interfered, and only a few of them reached their targets. A shot occasionally hit one of the beasts through

their defensive line, but the troops were using short bows, so they didn't have a lot of force behind their shots. Medium-sized they might have been, but the animals had thick hides and sturdy bones, so the bows lacked the punch to take them down in a single hit.

"Gyaaah!"

Red blood flowed from the wound that one of the raptors was unlucky enough to take, and it screeched, but it was far from fatally injured.

Xavier glared at the border between the trees and the road and spoke to the knight at his side, still looking at both the raptors and his subordinates.

"Josep, how many did we lose?"

"Only one for sure so far. He was dragged into the trees a little while ago. Other than that, five were wounded in the initial ambush. They aren't capable of fighting, but they aren't at immediate risk either. They are currently sheltering in the carriages," the other reported calmly, his sharp gaze and arrow still pointed towards the trees.

As a veteran, Josep's weapon was a well-used wyvern bow. It was not very different in size from the short bows the archers were using, but it was a work of art, with a strength and range more akin to that of a longbow. If it hit its target at a favorable angle, it wasn't impossible for it to bring one of the raptors down with a single shot. In fact, one of the bodies on the ground was one that Josep himself had killed.

Xavier wanted to ready his own bow but resisted the urge with logic and directed his attention to surveying the area. Launching a direct attack would mean placing all of his focus, at least for the moment, on a single target. For an inexperienced commander like him, that narrowing of his attention could lead to his forces suffering fatal losses.

Xavier could only keep track of the overall situation. *We've lost six fighters, including the fatality and those who are no longer fit to fight. We can continue fighting—our defenses are already up. And after that, it's...a stalemate.*

They couldn't inflict any meaningful damage now that the raptors had retreated into the trees, but their opponents were likewise struggling to do

much harm to them.

“We *are* equipped to venture into the trees if the situation calls for it...” Xavier muttered unconsciously, irritated by the situation.

“I can’t recommend that. We never expected such well-organized resistance. And while I don’t believe we would lose the battle if we fought them in their own territory, we would doubtless lose far more men than we can afford,” the veteran stated, cutting through his mumbled words.

The commander seemed to have realized the folly of his suggestion as well. His only reply was a short agreement as he withdrew the idea. “In that case,” he asked, “what should we do? We can’t break the deadlock like this, and our supplies are limited.”

“We should maintain our position for a while. While there may be an abnormally large number of the beasts, they have their limits. If the stalemate continues, the underlings will rush—”

“Gyahh!”

He had likely been planning to finish the sentence with “ahead,” but one of the raptors had broken from its cover, almost as if waiting for Josep’s words.

“Hah!” the knight exclaimed, not overlooking the opportunity as he quickly loosed an arrow into the creature’s head.

“Guh?!”

The arrow flashed through the air, flying parallel to the ground as it broke through both the skin and bone of the raptor’s face, sticking deeply in along the shaft. The drakes had much smaller brains than humans, relatively speaking, so even a piercing wound to the head wouldn’t necessarily kill them. But it looked like the knight’s luck had held. The raptor collapsed limply to the ground, only halfway out of the shadows.

“Whoa!”

“Nicely done, Sir Josep!”

Finally earning a small victory significantly improved the men’s morale.

“Good job, Josep. They might seem rather cunning, but I guess some of them are careless too.”

Josep flashed a grin as he fluidly fetched another arrow from the quiver on his back and answered his young superior’s mix of praise and curiosity. “They’re just drakes when it comes down to it. However smart their master may be, the rank and file are slaves to their instincts. Their orders may come from a terrifying leader, but they won’t wait forever.”

“I see. So, if the stalemate continues, they’ll break first?”

The frown on Xavier’s face softened slightly at that first bit of good news since the battle had begun. Now that he looked at the scene with a slightly calmer mindset, the raptors were indeed shifting closer to the road than they had been doing earlier.

Just then, another raptor reached the limit of its patience and leaped out at them, teeth bared and drool flying from its wide-open mouth.

“Gyaaah!”

A single raptor was nothing more than a sitting duck for the waiting soldiers, though.

“Now!”

“Take this!”

“And that!”

The archers unleashed a veritable rain of arrows onto their assailant, and as a coup de grace, the closest spearman flung his spear at it.

“Hurk...”

The careless raptor looked like a hedgehog with so many arrows protruding from its body before the spear was buried deep in its flank, killing it.

“Right, keep it up!” Xavier couldn’t help but yell. If the pattern held and the raptors came at them a few at a time this way, they would easily crush them all.

As that optimistic thought passed through his mind, there came a roar from the forest, almost as if to extinguish his hopes.

“Guuuuooohh!!”

It wasn’t just loud; the sound was clearly distinct from a mere wild animal’s roar. It had a concrete purpose and meaning.

“Sir, to the right!” Andres called from his side, prompting Xavier to turn and look.

He saw a figure through the trees and gulped unconsciously. “It’s...huge.”

“It is.”

The trees and the shade they provided prevented a clear look at their foe, but even its silhouette made it apparent that this was no ordinary raptor. Despite presumably being much farther back than the swarm around the roadside, it looked about the same size as the others at a glance, maybe even slightly bigger.

Ordinarily, the swarm’s leader would be about a head taller than the rest, but this was another two heads taller than even that. Swarm raptors were normally categorized as medium-sized carnivores, but their leader was too big for such a classification. Calling it “a smaller large-sized carnivore” would have been more appropriate.

“Grrrrrghaa!!” the beast growled again while they had their attention fixed on it. At the sound of that growl, the raptors at the edge of the road abruptly turned and moved away.

The soldiers relaxed a bit, thinking that they had retreated, and Xavier half-reflexively admonished them. “Don’t let your guard down! Be on the alert, men!”

His call was most certainly the correct one. If anything, instantly noticing the change in his men and cracking the whip without delay was a credit to him, considering how green he was. Fortunately, his vigilance was unneeded. The rustling sounds from the undergrowth grew gradually more distant.

Once the sounds had faded completely, Xavier counted slowly to ten, then questioned Josep and the hunter next to him.

“Have they truly retreated?”

Both men nodded.

“Indeed. All signs of their presence have grown distant,” the knight replied.

“That howl was their retreat signal, and swarm raptors will not readily attack prey they have given up on once,” the hunter added.

With those assurances from a professional combatant and a drake specialist, Xavier finally felt himself calm a bit.

“I see. At ease, men. Once you’ve treated the wounded, I want a damage report,” he ordered, allowing the slightly diminished troop to finally relax.

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The sun had listed far to the west, and the red-tinged rays bathed the army as they dealt with the aftermath. Treating the wounded was particularly difficult.

“Right, I’m going to rinse it. Bear with it.”

“Agh!”

Lacerations were exposed by ripping open the victims’ clothes. They were subsequently washed with large amounts of water, then wrapped in clean cloths. Those with broken bones were held down by several others while the bones were set and splinted with strips of cloth wrapped around a brace. It was the extent of the treatment they could provide in the field like this. However, even that much could be the difference between life and death depending on the circumstances.

Having finally dealt with the wounded, the leader of the transport division came to Xavier to deliver his report.

“Sir, we’ve completed our assessment and treated the wounded. None of them are in imminent danger of losing their lives. The rest will depend on how things progress.”

Xavier replied with a brief acknowledgment, his face clearly showing relief. Whatever else, the lack of fatal wounds was good news. Of course, as the man had said, they couldn’t assume anything. People injured by drake fang or claw often developed a fever later, which could very well spell their demise.

While the commander wanted to check on each of them personally, he remembered the duties that he was required to prioritize and continued their conversation. “What of the carriages? Can they be repaired?”

“Fortunately, yes. We only lost one of the wheels to the raptors’ claws, so we can get it moving with a spare. We’ll need to change it out when we get to town, though,” the other answered, scratching his head.

The transport corps were not just people who ferried supplies; they were specialists with members that could effect makeshift repairs to broken carriages, weapons, and armor. From one perspective, they contributed the most to whatever battle they had just finished. They had kept their drakes under control even while surrounded by the swarm so that their own animals didn’t run amok.

The squires had done similarly well with soothing the dash drakes, but there was no comparison. Dash drakes were trained under the assumption that they would be in combat, as opposed to the cart drakes, which were only trained for menial labor, so the former would naturally deal with the battlefield much better.

Xavier made a mental note to come up with some sort of suitable recompense for their efforts as he questioned the man. “Understood. We’ll depart when the carriage is repaired. I apologize, but get it done quickly. I dread to think what’ll happen if other drakes catch the scent of the blood. Oh, I’d also like the wounded to be placed in the carriages for our return. Is that an issue?”

The man thought silently for a moment before assenting. “That should be

fine. The drakes have a surplus of strength, and while I can't call it a good thing, we've used up a lot of our water, so for better or worse, we're carrying much less now."

"Right. Water will be a problem as well, then. Very well, I'll entrust the repairs and wounded to you. Do what you can."

"Yes, sir!" the man answered loudly before rushing back to the carriages.

Xavier stared after him for a while before returning his gaze to the front. "Josep."

"Yes?"

"Hunting them through the mountains would be reckless, wouldn't it?"

He was more seeking agreement with his own opinion than actually asking the knight, and the veteran nodded.

"It would. We have some idea of our enemy now, so with sufficient preparation we could achieve a degree of success, but not while keeping the losses to an acceptable level."

The forest was the raptors' territory, and entering that territory to exterminate fifty coordinated enemies with just under a hundred men would be difficult. Therefore, despite chewing at his lip unhappily, Xavier made his decision.

"Very well," he said after a pause. "My mission is a failure. We will request aid from the royal army."

"Understood, sir." Josep would have added that it was a wise decision, but he swallowed the comment. The young commander had barely overcome his own chagrin to make a rational decision, so it might have sounded sarcastic to his ears. Even with honest praise, if it was likely to be taken poorly, it was better to say nothing at all.

While the older knight remained silent, Xavier stared fixedly at the road before speaking. "Once the carriage has been repaired, we'll resume our march. Have the men ready to move."

"Yes, sir. Will we be turning back to our own lands?"

The commander shook his head, his expression hard. “The opposite. We will continue on to the royal lands. We can get the wounded treated by a doctor more quickly that way.”

“I see,” the veteran said in admiration, keeping his thoughts from his face.

There was nothing incorrect about what the young man had said. To reach the closest settlement, a U-turn would have been the quickest option, but for the closest doctor, continuing on to the royal territories would be ideal. The border had a relatively large garrison, and all garrisons over a certain size had at least one doctor attached to them. Concern for his wounded was probably making up the majority of Xavier’s thoughts.

But, at the same time, Josep felt the commander had an ulterior motive. *I imagine he will want to join the reinforcements and sortie again,* he thought.

Considering Xavier’s position as the next margrave, depending on the reinforcement commander’s disposition, Xavier himself might be able to stand at its head. He had yet to give up on using the incident to improve his reputation.

To a knight like Josep, the youth’s actions seemed somewhat rash, but it could also have been said to show an intimate understanding of what Xavier’s father and fief wanted from him.

“The wounded are a concern. I want to hurry as much as we can without exacerbating their conditions. Josep, I want to have those unable to walk riding on our dash drakes. Is that a problem?”

Seeing the new commander floundering, the knight was assailed by a desire to support him. “It shouldn’t be. Strictly speaking, military law dictates that infantry should not ride on dash drakes, but we are still deployed, and there is a tacit understanding that flexible decisions on the spot take precedence over military law,” he answered, approving the thought with a slight nod.

The dash drakes that knights like the two of them rode were bigger than even the largest horses and close to twice as strong. Physically, carrying two fully armed people even for a long time would be no problem for them. If their riders refrained from cantering and paid attention to the feeding schedule and rest stops, the drakes could even carry three.

“Understood. Then we will continue along the Salt Road as quickly as we can without worsening the state of the wounded. We’ll rework the watch rotations, water gathering, and camp plans. Given my failure here, I have a duty to report the results as quickly as possible and to request reinforcements,” Xavier declared, glaring out at the road and into the red light of the setting sun in the west.

“Understood, sir,” Josep replied, noting that the young commander sounded like he was putting on a show of courage. His words were few but supportive.

Chapter 4 — Zenjirou's Daily Life

Morning in the royal capital found Zenjirou carrying out his duties unusually early in the day as he was faced with many nobles in the palace and politely assailed.

He was sitting in the prince consort's chair, which was set up next to the throne, and the well-dressed nobles stepped forward in turn, bowing their heads.

"I am the current head of the Pantoja family, Baron Tomas Pantoja, my lord. My wife and my humble self will be remaining in the capital for another year. Our unwavering loyalty will be at your disposal," said the current supplicant.

"Understood, Baron. I am glad to hear of your loyalty, and as Her Majesty's representative, I pledge to ensure that your sentiments reach her," Zenjirou answered with a nod. At his words, the middle-aged man before him gave another deep bow of his head, then withdrew.

In his place, an older man stepped forth. He had been waiting towards the back of the room.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, my lord. My name is Brass, and I am the previous head of the Bobone family, a knight by title. My old bones and I will continue to serve the country here for the year. Should Your Majesties require it, I shall set myself to whichever duties you require."

"Very well, Sir Brass, I will convey your ceaseless loyalty to Her Majesty."

The old man also bowed his head and retreated.

The person replacing him this time was a young knight.

"Lord Zenjirou, I am the eldest son of the head of the Cavallero family, Sir Conrad. My name is Francesco. Once again, I shall be serving the capital for my family..."

The thrust of all of their words was the same, essentially stating that they

would be their family's representatives and serve in the capital, with Zenjirou accepting their offers. It was a conversation of formality.

The royal family had an immense amount of power for a feudalistic state, and there was a tacit understanding that each fiefdom would have one of their previous, current, or next heads permanently stationed within the capital. Originally, the implication had been that such guests of the country were there as hostages of the royal family, but nowadays there were real benefits for both the royals and the feudal lords, so there was no real resentment as the tradition continued.

Since Capuan royalty was exceptionally powerful, having one of the highest authorities within each family having their ear was greatly advantageous for aristocrats. Additionally, having so many nobles in one place led to a massive stimulus for the capital's economy. And with a richer economy came more of the masses gathering in the city. The population grew, and their economic strength grew, giving rise to many rights within the capital.

To gain those rights, or to avoid losing them, the nobles wouldn't leave. The confluence of all these aims and circumstances resulted in each household sending a representative to the royal family every year, and the royal family would grant them permission to stay and serve.

Ordinarily, this would be a duty that Aura would carry out, but as the representatives this year were all the same as the year before, Zenjirou was acting as her proxy while she was busy.

Looks like there's a load of complicated formalities and regulations if the representatives change, but if not, it's basically just a greeting and renewal. So it makes more sense for me to do it rather than bothering Aura with it, he thought, keeping his expression solemn as he accepted the parade of faces.

Currently, Aura was in another room of the palace with a diplomat from the Twin Kingdoms as they sounded each other out. Zenjirou had offered to take her place here in order to lighten her burden a little. Obviously, he wouldn't handle more important matters on his own, which might suggest a change of power on the horizon, and he similarly avoided situations where important decisions might need to be taken. The only duties he would take on were ones

like this, where even a plush toy with a voice recording would have sufficed if it had only had a royal title.

It was hard to say if his contribution was of any worth, but Aura appreciated it, so he needed nothing more. However, the nobles of this world would never understand his thought process, so some of them would take such opportunities to try out various ambitious approaches with him.

The middle-aged noble currently kneeling before him was one of those individuals.

“I am the head of the Durán family, Baron Diego Durán. I will once again be serving my family here. Still, I must say that the heat of the capital is no laughing matter. My own lands are on a plateau, so I have yet to grow used to this. While my home may be a rural backwater compared to the capital, this heat admittedly makes me long for it.”

A slight glint of wariness made its way into Zenjirou’s eyes as the man continued smoothly with his superfluous musings.

“Despite its rurality, I dare say that our land is any other region’s equal with its picturesque scenery and beautiful weather. There would be no greater honor than to receive you as a visitor, my lord, and I wish to convey my whole family’s invitation in that regard.”

Zenjirou’s expression stiffened, and his eyes narrowed slightly. While at first blush it might have seemed like a simple invitation to escape the blistering temperatures, that was far from its only meaning. If one excluded Carlos Zenkichi, there were only two people in the country that could be called royalty at the moment: Aura and Zenjirou. With that being the case, if Zenjirou were to take a sojourn from the heat, Aura would inevitably have to remain in the capital, given that it was the seat of her power. Therefore, the offer amounted to this man presenting the invitation to Zenjirou alone, without including her.

Ah, guess it still seems like I’m not happy with my lot here? he asked himself with slight irritation.

Looking through the chauvinistic lens of Capua, his position certainly would appear unenviable. Most male nobles would have had too much pride to allow their wives to take the spotlight while leaving them in the shadows.

Well, whether they're being benevolent or malevolent, there'll be no end to propositions like this. I can't ignore them, but it's still annoying.

Keeping his sigh unvoiced, Zenjirou plastered a smile onto his face as he answered. "Oh, a most intriguing invitation. I would like to visit at least once with Her Majesty once Zenkichi is of age. I would surely appreciate your guidance then."

Beneath his joking tone, it was fairly clear that he was saying he had no intention of separating himself from Aura at present.

"Aha... That would be quite a while away yet. Still, I will gladly provide advice when the time comes." The subtext had gotten through. The man bowed with a slight air of disappointment.

"It will be an honor," Zenjirou replied, pretending not to notice the change.

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To attempt to recoup at least some of the lost time from the three-hour lunch break they took daily during the hottest season, the palace was at work as long as the sun was up. So, when Zenjirou returned to the inner palace, it was dark enough that his steps faltered as he hesitated over where to step.

Once a maid carrying a metal lantern guided him to the living room, he gave her a short thanks and opened the door on his own.

"Phew..."

Entering the gloomy room, the first thing he did was switch on the lamps. His eyes had acclimatized to the twilight, so the LED bulbs were slightly dazzling.

With the living room now lit by bright white light, he immediately stripped down. His pants were baggy, and on his upper half, he wore an almost Japanese-style coat that crossed over his chest, with a sleeveless jacket on top. They were all made to be breathable, but given how substantial they were, the uniform was still hot.

Having gotten hurriedly out of it all, he was left in his T-shirt and boxers as he headed for the five-compartment fridge before considering for a moment and shaking his head, overcoming the temptation.

“Nope, if I get the ice out now, I won’t have it for tonight,” he told himself.

He’d make do with the fan, at least until Aura returned. Instead, he retrieved a metal pitcher from the fridge and poured the contents into a glass before draining it dry.

“Phew,” he sighed again as his body began to perspire, almost as if the entire drink were being sweated out immediately. “Ahh, should I not wait for Aura and just go have a bath now?” he murmured, his eyes drifting towards the shelf where they kept the bathware as he wrestled with the urge to cool off.

“Oh, yeah...I still haven’t managed anything decent when it comes to making soap.”

The past few days had been spent on starting the process for making soap from lye and oil, but it had yet to bear any real fruit. The products he’d come up with on the first day had consisted of lye mixed into oil, and while the emulsification had improved afterwards, very few of his experiments had come anywhere close to saponification.

He wasn’t sure if the problem was with the oil, the lye, or just his own skills. Without knowing everything, it would doubtless take a great deal of trial and error.

“Maybe it’d be better to start by making caustic soda? Actually, that’d definitely be harder than making soap with only natural ingredients.”

His concerns were endless. Modern methods of soap production generally involved mixing a solution of sodium hydroxide (or caustic soda) with vegetable oils. Using lye was a much older method, so if he had the soda, it would have been far easier.

He *did* have instructions for creating caustic soda on his computer but had, of course, never tested it. As far as he was aware, there were two methods he could employ. One required electrolyzing saltwater, but he couldn’t do that because it needed an ion exchange membrane, which he wouldn’t have been able to get there. So the method now in his mind was the second option: a double substitution between calcium hydroxide and sodium carbonate (where two kinds of compounds react and subsequently change which type of compound they are) to form calcium carbonate and sodium hydroxide,

commonly known as caustic soda. Calcium hydroxide and sodium carbonate were required.

Calcium hydroxide was also known as slaked lime, and it could be made by mixing water and the quicklime one obtained from burning seashells, so that was doable. The other reagent, sodium carbonate, could be obtained by heating sodium bicarbonate, or baking soda, apparently. So if one had shells and natural baking soda, one could theoretically produce caustic soda.

Strangely enough, both of those things were important in glassmaking, so Aura had already started stockpiling them. With the reagents being readily available, it was hardly surprising that Zenjirou felt the itch to try it out. However, it went without saying that converting shells and baking soda into caustic soda would require several processes. A complete amateur like him wouldn't be able to do it easily. Even if he looked at things optimistically, it would probably be best to assume it would take several months.

If, by chance, he did manage to succeed and produce caustic soda, it was a hazardous material that could blind one if even a small amount got into the eye. And that was to say nothing of how it would react with the carbon dioxide in the air, along with taking on any water vapor and becoming a liquid, so it was hard to store and deal with.

A full consideration of the options made Zenjirou decide that rather than trying to get caustic soda, it was better to keep refining his method using lye.

"Right, let's keep it up for a while. It's mostly emulsifying now, so I guess I should make a graph with the proportion of lye on the x-axis, and the oil on the y, and see if I can spot a trend?"

His thoughts churning, he headed over to his computer and switched it on, loading up a spreadsheet program.

"First I've got to get several types of ash to make into lye, and different oils. Maybe some blends too? No, I need to determine an overall trend first. I'm not exactly happy about it, but I'll have to get the maids to help."

In the end, he spent the time until Aura returned at his computer, pulling together his plans.

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The sky continued to darken until night fell. The royal couple were having one of their usual discussions, sitting on their black sofas across from each other.

“Uh, so it’s pretty much set in stone, then? That the Twin Kingdoms’ prince and princess are coming here?” he asked, wearing a white T-shirt and light blue linen pants as he leaned forward to confirm the situation with his wife.

She was wearing a thin red house dress and frowned as she nodded in answer. “Indeed, although it is merely an informal understanding at present. Still, it is near enough set in stone. I had intended to keep things as quiet as possible, but it is likely a wasted effort. Before long, there will be a quake across the west and center of the continent. And, of course, the epicenter will be our palace. I do apologize, but you should prepare yourself.”

Zenjirou didn’t bother hiding his frustration as she spoke unconcernedly of the upcoming troubles that would involve him. “Sure,” he said after a sigh, “but still, why is it so hard to keep it a secret? Is it that we want to but they don’t care?”

Aura crossed her legs again and shook her head. “No. Members of the Sharou family leaving the country is an important matter to the Twin Kingdoms as well. They are unlikely to leak the information deliberately. We, on the other hand, are not so lucky. After all, we will be hosting other royals in the palace for an extended period. We must create a special budget for the preparations, and we’ll need more people around as well. Also, we are executing this as a matter of Capua accepting a request from them, so we will need to request compensation to ensure that the budget and personnel costs do not see us working at a deficit, which in turn means meeting with their representatives. The movement of that amount of people, goods, and money will, no matter how cautious we are, alert the sharp-eyed to the truth.”

“I see,” Zenjirou answered understandingly.

It was certainly true that even if they kept the information itself under wraps, the movement of money and goods was nearly impossible to hide from the nobles. The amounts of both that would be required to house two royals long-term was no small matter, and insightful people would immediately notice the

change.

Seeing her husband still treating it as if it were someone else's problem, despite his frown, caused Aura to almost admonish him. "Once the information starts to circulate, it will likely be you who is hounded for facts. I am sure it will all wear on you a fair amount."

"Ughh..." he groaned, her words prompting a truly sour expression as he imagined the various methods that the nobility would use to sound him out and make sure of the facts. "Hahh..." he eventually sighed.

It would have been a waste to spend the time they got to relax solely on melancholy. Pulling things together, Aura took water and fruit juice from the fridge and poured them into both her own red glass and Zenjirou's blue one as she changed the topic.

"So, you will not be carrying out any duties tomorrow? It has been a while since that was the case. What is your plan for the day?"

He took the glass and answered. "Ah, thanks. Well, I figured I'd carry on with the soap experiments. Some of the stuff I made yesterday looks pretty good, so I was going to get the maids to help check how good they are to use."

Zenjirou had been spending a lot of time making the soap so far, and it had been going relatively well. Of course, it still needed more trial and error before he settled on a method, but there were some samples that had accidentally come rather close to being complete. If he didn't check whether they were pleasant to use, however, he couldn't truly call them finished with any certainty, so he wanted the maids to literally lend a hand.

He was leery of using women's softer skin for experiments, but there was nothing he could do on his own on that front. People weren't all built the same, and even individuals changed over time, so if he didn't get a wide variety of test subjects, he couldn't guarantee the product's safety.

"I see. There is a limit to the bathing products you brought with you."

Since their marriage, Aura had used the Japanese soap, face wash, shampoo, and conditioner that Zenjirou had brought from Earth.

"Yeah, though to be honest, we've got more of the soap than anything else.

We’re shortest on shampoo, but that’s harder to make.”

Using the same soap for the hair as the body would help to get it clean, but it would also damage the hair. He wanted to find some method of getting rid of the dirt other than the perfumed oil that the upper echelons of Capuan society used, but that would come long after he had perfected the soap. He wasn’t sure he would be able to finish it before they ran out of shampoo.

His mistake a moment later likely came about because of his focus being halfway on those thoughts as he went to pick his glass up from the table, as he always did. It slipped and he dropped it.

“Ah?!” he cried out, but it was already too late. The faceted glass fell to the wooden table and shattered with a crash. The shards of blue glass and the melted ice spread across the table, the liquid dripping down onto the carpet.

It had definitely been bad luck; if it had dropped onto the deep-pile carpet or the cushioned sofa, it might not have broken, but he’d dropped it right onto the hard table of all places.

“Ack, I’ve gone and done it now!” he cursed.

It was a heavy blow to him. Back on Earth, he could have just bought a replacement, but the glass was irreplaceable in this world. He still wasn’t accustomed to the taste of metal or wooden cups, so it was very dear to him. Still, it had been his own carelessness that had caused it, so he couldn’t blame anyone but himself.

“Well, too late now, I guess. I’ll get one of the maids to clean it up,” he muttered, reaching for the bell atop the table.

“Hmm... Considering my schedule, it should be fine,” Aura murmured from the opposite sofa before calling out for him to stop. “Wait, Zenjirou, there is no need. This is a good opportunity. You are a proper member of the royal family, so you have a right to know.”

“Aura?” he asked, at a loss, confused about why she was being so grandiose about a single broken glass. He stopped and looked at her questioningly.

Whether she was aware of his confusion or not, she stood up straight and faced the fragments, holding her right hand out over them. “The magic I am

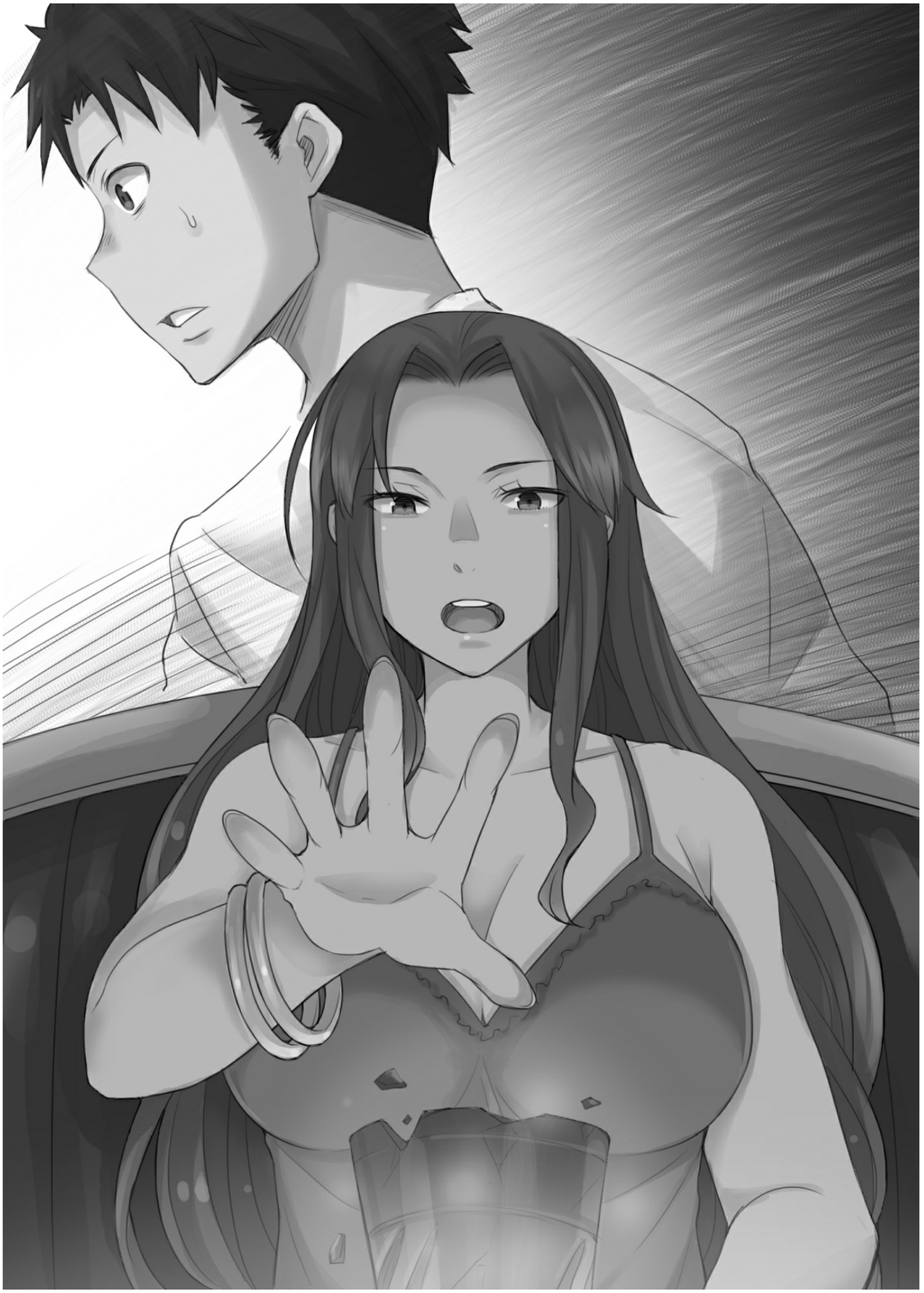
about to show you is a hidden magic of our country. Once you are able to use magic at will, I shall instruct you in it, but you must never allow an outsider to know of it. It must never be used in front of anyone. Naturally, this includes the main influences within our country, like General Pujol and Margrave Gaziel, but it also includes my confidants, Fabio and Espiridion. You must not allow Carlos to learn of it either, until I say that you may. Understood?"

She stood there with her hand splayed over the glass, her eyes steadily boring into Zenjirou's from where she sat on the sofa as she listed her terms.

"Got it," he answered sincerely, able to tell from her tone that this was no time for jokes.

"Very well." The queen gave a slight nod, apparently satisfied, before mana started pouring off her, and she began to chant. *"Let time's flow reverse upon this object by one full day. As compensation, I present one thousand and three hundred offerings of mana to the spirits of time and space."*

The effect was dramatic. The glass shards on the table were suddenly engulfed in a hemisphere of light, and a moment later that light flared and became so bright that he couldn't look at it.



“Ahh?! Huh?!” Zenjirou managed, eventually opening his eyes after closing them reflexively, now faced with the blue glass as it had been before.

As he stared in shock, he spoke a question, almost to himself. “That’s...not some repair spell...is it?” The result appeared to suggest that it was, but her chant had indicated otherwise.

Still standing, Aura nodded. “Indeed, repairing things is rather far removed from our family’s Space-Time Magic, is it not? This is the hidden magic of the Capuan royal family: Time Reversal.”

“Time Reversal...” he murmured, overwhelmed by the phenomenon happening before his eyes. Ever since he had heard that the family’s magic concerned space and time, he’d had idle thoughts about manipulating time itself, but to see it laid bare before him like this left him overcome by such excitement that he couldn’t even speak.

You could also call it passion. He hadn’t been so overcome even when Octavia had first shown him the water creation magic. A passion equal to at least a fifth of what he had felt when he’d buried his face in Aura’s breasts on their first night together was currently ruling his heart.

Aura noticed the light in his eyes and as she sat back down made no move to hide a somewhat wry smile as she continued her explanation. “I apologize for raining on your parade, but this magic truly is not as grand as it first appears.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, tearing his gaze away from the restored glass to look at her.

“First of all, time reversal can only be cast upon things that lack mana of their own. Therefore, it is impossible to use it on living creatures. The only life forms it *is* possible to affect are lowly beings like insects and small fish that have no mana. Of course, magic tools are also outside of its scope, meaning that only things that are neither alive nor magic tools are valid targets, and very few such items are worth it. Few items exist that are worthy of spending such a vast amount of mana on,” she explained before laughing.

Certainly, the local residents’ values would mean they would not be agog over something that could do nothing for living beings or magic tools. Truthfully,

even Aura couldn't recall ever having gained any real benefit from the spell. The most she could think of was when she had accidentally stepped on her father's pipe and had secretly fixed it before the then-king knew.

"Also, the required mana increases dramatically with the size of the target and the length of time. If I were to wind something back by months, even I would need to be prepared to exhaust my mana, and if it were years, I would need to combine it with a spell of future expense and borrow my own mana from the future, or I would be incapable of doing it. The spell is hardly worth the name. However, if its existence became known, it is unlikely the exact restrictions would also be understood. People would see it as a panacea that could even return the dead. That is why its existence is an absolute secret. Do you understand, Zenjirou?"

As Aura espoused the poor utility of the spell, the excitement in Zenjirou's eyes didn't fade in the slightest. The energy in his eyes didn't abate as he asked a question in a slightly shaking voice.

"So, you mean that as long as it's not too big, and it doesn't have mana, you can reverse the time on any physical object by a short period?"

"Y-Yes, I can," she managed, for once overwhelmed by Zenjirou's excitement as she leaned back.

He didn't notice the change and rushed over to a corner of the room with a wide smile on his face. "Then, what about this? How hard would it be for you to wind the time back on this by a few hours?" he asked, pointing at the air conditioner he had brought with him, which had never seen the light of day. He'd quickly given up on using it when he'd arrived, so it was still wrapped in plastic.

Unsure of where he was going with the conversation, Aura looked askance at him but answered regardless. "It is...far bigger than the glass, so I could not do it too lightly. Well, if it was only one day's worth, it would not be impossible. If there was a day where I used no mana, and would not require any the next day, it would be possible that night."

There weren't too many opportunities for Aura to use her mana in the first place, but Space-Time Magic was something that only she could use, and it was

their trump card. She wanted to keep the mana in reserve so that she could always use it if needed.

While her answer presented some restrictions, it was still perfect for Zenjirou. With a wide smile on his face, he clenched both fists and shook them in the air.

“Yes, yes, yes! I can finally get my air conditioner back!”

There was a flood of emotion in his words. The reason he hadn’t tried to set it up before was the fear that if he failed and broke it, he wouldn’t be able to repair it. But with time reversal magic, there was nothing about it that would be truly irreparable. So he could set about installing it in earnest. Even if he failed the first time, if he could try again; there was nothing to fear.

“Hey, Aura, I’ve got a bit of a request...” he said, sidling up to her with a smile of a husband coaxing some urgent spending money from his wife.

Chapter 5 — An Afternoon Confrontation, an Evening Lecture, and a Night's Relaxation

Zenjirou did his best to only attend formal events, but doing so gave rise to unavoidable obligations.

Today he found himself forced into a buffet luncheon in the palace.

"Oh my, so you have created an entirely new alcoholic drink, Sir Zenjirou. That's absolutely wonderful."

Standing in front of him and praising him effusively with her hands clasped in front of her chest was a tall woman worthy of the moniker "supermodel," Fatima Guillén.

"Not at all," Zenjirou answered as unaffectedly as possible without causing offense. "It's a mere hobby; nothing worthy of such praise."

He tried to end the conversation there, but—not surprisingly for the hungry wolf's sister—her forcefulness and strength of character were much the same as her brother's.

"My, how humble. Alcohol is often equated with culture, so a new drink is wonderful. It could well be a significant cultural and economic benefit to our country," she insisted, her cloying praise giving him no respite.

"Ha ha, you shouldn't flatter me so. I dread to think what such honeyed words from a woman of your beauty might do to my ego."

In the end, he could only defend himself with platitudes and a forced smile. *This is a pain,* he thought as he broke into a cold sweat.

Informal events meant that manners and etiquette were not exactly required. While that offered the advantage of his own minor mistakes (often due to the hastiness of his preparations) being overlooked, it also made these overbearing approaches from others more socially acceptable. He felt it had been a mistake to attend and regretted the folly of his decision too late.

He had, in fact, looked over the list of attendees beforehand and had decided there wasn't anyone who would curry favor so aggressively, but the downsides of such a gathering were showing all too clearly now. In the end, Fatima Guillén, a younger sister of one of those ambitious nobles, had decided to attend at the last minute and thus had free rein when it came to her interaction with him.

Still, I'm impressed she can pursue someone she doesn't even like this aggressively. I really can't follow a noble's perspective, Zenjirou thought as he watched the taller woman continue to speak passionately.

Truthfully, of the people he had met in this world, she was far and away the worst at controlling her expressions. That was hardly unreasonable, considering she was only seventeen, but from Zenjirou's perspective, she just couldn't keep a poker face.

That was particularly noticeable from the strong will in her dark almond eyes. However much she praised him, or however charming her smile, the look in those eyes was one of a predator ready to pounce. She was attempting to gain his favor on her brother's orders. She wanted honor for the Guillén family but saw no value in creating a happy household with Zenjirou. At the very least, that was all he could see of her motivations.

However beautiful she was, taking a woman like her as a concubine would be no laughing matter. He felt a little immature thinking that about a girl who was seven years younger, but that was his instinctive reaction.

Fatima seemed to sense his thoughts and hurriedly strengthened her offensive, making him recoil even more. It was a vicious cycle.

"I don't personally have the palate for alcohol, but there have been many in the Guillén family over the generations who have. The current head, my brother, often discusses it in the evenings."

"Oh, many people don't match their appearance, but it would seem the general is an exception. No matter what I hear, the anecdotes always have the luxury of befitting his looks," Zenjirou replied, apparently impressed, after deciding that being too blunt wasn't the right approach.

Fatima's expression brightened. "Quite true. When he was eighteen, he had a drinking competition with our uncle, Lord Emidio. Our uncle was known for

being a heavy drinker, and my brother drank him under the table, even winning our uncle's jeweled spear from their bet. Ever since then, our uncle has refused alcohol completely, and his wife, Lady Deborah, was very grateful."

As ever, the girl couldn't stop herself from lauding her brother's deeds. General Pujol had been one of the other candidates for prince consort, so Zenjirou wasn't particularly well-disposed towards him, and having him praised so highly wasn't all that pleasant.

Oh? If he's that good with alcohol, how about I brew up some eighty-proof and have him chug it in one go?

That and other such spiteful thoughts passed through his mind. Getting a man like Pujol—who practically wore confidence and an air of intimidation much the same way he wore his clothes—blind drunk would have been quite enjoyable.

Ignorant of the pettiness of the thoughts of the man before her, Fatima continued, now with passion as she gushed about her beloved brother. "Also, songs are sung about his successes during the war. If you like, you could invite a minstrel and listen to them. Any of the minstrels associated with the palace should be able to sing them."

All Zenjirou could manage in the face of this beauty extolling her brother's virtues was a sardonic smile. "Lady Fatima, I can see that you respect your brother deeply."

The warm words, much the same as one would direct to a child in one's charge, made her realize that she had completely digressed. Although it was rather late at this point, her cheeks flushed red.

"Ah, m-my apologies. I lost my composure..."

Her embarrassment as she bowed her head in apology was far more charming than her flattering smile had been. Regardless, the lack of such charm during the effusion of praise for her brother still grated.

"There is nothing to apologize for. General Pujol is a leader of leaders in military circles, so such anecdotes are worth hearing, to say nothing of my own interest."

"My thanks, Sir Zenjirou," the tall woman answered his supportive reply,

folding in on herself slightly as she did.

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After somehow making it through the horrendously tiring buffet, Zenjirou returned to the inner palace but, unfortunately, he couldn't yet relax for the day.

"Sir Zenjirou," a maid called through the door, "Lady Octavia has arrived."

"Okay, I'll head right over."

He had magic lessons with Lady Octavia scheduled for that afternoon. The room had, over the course of the year, become their classroom. Soon, the two of them were seated on either side of a table, as usual, quietly going about their lesson.

"Please try using magic, Sir Zenjirou."

"Very well," he answered, slowly taking a deep breath as he remained seated and followed his teacher's instructions.

Now that he could perceive mana, he was able to see the flickering glow being given off by his own. Keeping the glow from his folded hands on top of the desk in the corner of his eye, he fixed a clear mental image of the results of the spell in his mind and then spoke the incantation.

"With my fingertip as the center, demarcate a sphere of space away from the world. As compensation, I present 359 offerings of mana to the spirits of time and space."

He had chanted in the language of magic. The language itself could pack volumes of meaning into a single syllable, so while the chant was only a few words long, what he heard from the Soul of Language became a chant of greater length.

A moment later, the spell was enacted successfully. A translucent dome of light burst into life, centering on Zenjirou—or more precisely, his vertical right index finger.

It was one of the spells of Capua's domain of Space-Time Magic: a dimensional barrier. It was a spell that created a powerful "wall," cutting off

space itself to prevent any interaction between the two sides. However, the spell remained effective for less than thirty seconds, so it was one with no real utility.

“Yes!”

Yet Zenjirou had successfully cast magic, so he couldn’t hold in his shout of joy.

“Wonderful, Sir Zenjirou. You can now use dimensional barriers without any significant problems.”

“I suppose. This spell is the easiest for me from a mana perspective.” He wasn’t entirely used to receiving blunt praise, so he protested reflexively as he happily scratched his cheek.

Spells in this world that required mana close to a person’s natural mana flow were simple. In truth, he was still incapable of one of the indispensable skills for a mage: controlling his mana output. However, in response to his words and shrug, his graceful teacher smiled and spoke in a much more teasing tone than usual.

“Not at all; you have already succeeded at a base level of controlling your mana flow. Have you not noticed? A person’s mana does not remain constant each day. Depending on one’s condition and feelings on any given day, there are slight fluctuations. The mana you used for your barrier today was slightly more than was required.”

Zenjirou was momentarily lost for words, her statement contradicting his expectations. “In that case, why did it work?” he asked.

Octavia, having instructed him on the social mores and graces of this world, was deeply satisfied to see that even in his shock, he had worded his question as a royal should.

“It is as I said,” she explained. “It is only a slight amount, but you controlled it subconsciously and corrected it yourself. Why not try again? This time without moving your attention from the mana leaving your body.”

The short-lived barrier had long since faded.

“Right...” he said, still not quite believing it as he followed his teacher’s instructions and cast again. *“With my fingertip as the center, demarcate a sphere of space away from the world. As compensation, I present 359 offerings of mana to the spirits of time and space.”*

This time, however, he focused on the mana as it left his body. And while doing so, he saw the light of it floating off his entwined hands lessen slightly, then an instant later, the spherical dome of light appeared.

“I see...so this is me moderating the mana flow?”

“It is, only slightly, but once you have the technique ingrained, you should be able to control it freely. That is the second step of becoming a mage. Once you can sense mana and control its flow, the rest is about learning individual spells. This is the greatest turning point for the moment.”

“I understand. Continue your instruction.”

Octavia bowed respectfully in response to his command. He had only recently been able to speak in the imperative like that.

“Very well. I would be beyond honored if I am able to help you in my own humble way.”

Her behavior was without a single breach of etiquette, and her words were only describable as gracious. Excessive perfection in behavior could make someone come across as cold and distant, but it felt like more of a virtue coming from her. A simple smile engendered a sense of warmth for the young woman.

“So, let us begin training your control. This is the method. Can you see? You increase and decrease the amount of mana like this.” As she spoke, the mana coming from her body dimmed and brightened in accordance with her will. “You make an attempt now, please.”

“R-Right... M-mghhh!”

Zenjirou tried to do the same thing he had done earlier and control his mana flow, but the result wasn’t particularly noteworthy. Not that there was no result at all, but it was at a level where if one looked closely enough, the change was just about visible but could perhaps be dismissed as a trick of the light. It was

absolutely feeble compared to Octavia's display of going from nothing to multiple times her usual amount. However, the young instructor praised her student's struggle regardless.

"Just like that. In much the same way as they call sensing mana 'opening your eyes,' controlling your mana is spoken of as 'learning to move another body,'" she explained. "So unlike with the former, where after attaining the ability, you are done, the true difficulty of mana control begins after actually gaining some ability in it. You are controlling a whole body that you have never moved in your life. If I may say, it is rather like a child learning to walk. A baby must first learn to roll over, then crawl, and then walk with help. It takes a long time to do the same with your 'body' of mana."

There were no shortcuts on this path. Rather, it required an accumulation of steady effort. And much like moving a physical body, part of the learning process was predicated on natural talent. People without that talent, even with training, would not be able to push out more or less than a certain amount of mana and would be unable to make fine adjustments.

"Grgh!"

Therefore, there was a relatively high probability that his training could all come to nothing. Even so, Zenjirou had no intention of foregoing the effort despite his awareness of that possibility.

If I don't learn this, I won't be able to cast teleportation magic, he reminded himself. He shied away from imagining what would happen if he couldn't learn the spell before Aura's next birth; how he would once more be able to do nothing but pray to the heavens.

"Mrgh... grrk..."

This is for Aura! he thought, throwing himself into it with all his strength, oblivious to the soft look in Octavia's eyes as she watched him.

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Zenjirou had spent his half-day relatively busy considering the sweltering heat, what with the afternoon buffet and his evening lesson, so when Aura returned, he was wearing a T-shirt and pants as he lounged on the black sofa

watching a DVD.

“I am back, Zenjirou.”

He reflexively used the remote to pause the TV and sat up to look in the direction of her voice. There, he found his wife in an outfit he had never seen.

“Welcome back. What’s up with the clothes? I’m pretty sure you were wearing your normal dress when you left.”

When he had seen her off this morning, she had been clad in her usual evening dress in a bright red, with the slit across the chest, but now she was wearing a set of the sari-like clothing that Octavia wore. However, unlike Octavia, who tended to prefer her clothes to have a blue-based color scheme, Aura’s attire was red.

Her mood seemed to improve at his reaction, and a smile made its way across her lips. “Hmhmm, did it surprise you? There was a traditional event that required my attendance this afternoon. Normally, our country considers dresses to be sufficient formal wear, but there are several functions that require more traditional attire.”

She spread her arms and threw her chest out, allowing her uncharacteristic outfit to be seen in full by her husband.

Zenjirou wasn't so dense as to miss the implied question of whether it suited her. But lacking a silver tongue, all he could do was honestly give his opinion without succumbing to embarrassment.

"Huh, I haven't seen you in that before, but it looks really good on you. Your dress suits you too, but it's good to see you in something different."

Fortunately, his clumsy praise seemed to have landed well.

"I see. It is more restrictive than a military uniform or a dress, so I usually wear those, but if you feel that way, I will perhaps wear this from time to time."

Even now, her bright smile fascinated him. Zenjirou hadn't realized it, but despite her queenly first impression, Aura had a certain naivete when it came to the intricacies of a relationship. Normally, as soon as she returned, she would shuck her formal wear and change into something more comfortable. Today, for some reason, she kept her red sari on as she sat next to him on the sofa.

Zenjirou's arm snaked naturally around her, and she followed the movement, resting her head on his shoulder with a soft sigh. The night was still hot despite the usual fan and bucket of water, but they enjoyed leaning against each other like this nonetheless.

That said, the power of love had its limits. Either they had finished enjoying the feel of each other or they could no longer stand the heat, and they eventually separated.

"You were watching a dee-vee-dee, no? Do you not wish to continue?" Aura asked, remembering what she had walked in on now that they had parted.

Zenjirou shook his head. "Nah, I was just killing time until you got back. I'll watch the rest on my own tomorrow."

"Hmm, I see."

She understood that he was merely being considerate but decided to accept it. If it was a game or music, they would both have been able to appreciate it, but that wasn't the case for a DVD. After all, the Soul of Language had no effect on recordings. There were very few shows that one could enjoy without understanding the words. Sports like soccer or baseball matches and game

shows were mostly self-explanatory, but without the fondness for the teams of his world, they weren't particularly engaging.

If I'd known about this, I'd have bought some silent films like Chaplin's, Zenjirou thought mournfully.

Either way, Aura changed the topic and moved on to another one of their customs: asking him questions. "So, how was your day? Was there anything novel?"

"Hmm? Well, nothing much at the buffet, I guess? Guillén's sister, Fatima, came in and upset things a bit."

The name of that woman, now that she was pursuing her husband more aggressively, made Aura's expression harden.

"Fatima? Did she get any commitments out of you?"

"It's okay. I managed. Well, partway through the conversation, her obsession with her brother flared up. We were talking about the alcohol I distilled, though; is that a problem?" he asked, with a slightly chagrined expression.

The queen considered it for a moment. "No...that should not be an issue. We had intended to make it available at an event at some point regardless."

"Phew, that's a relief."

Even so, she didn't forget to offer a warning. "However, take care when it comes to mentioning such things. While distillation and soap should not be a problem, I would like to keep glassmaking a royal secret."

If he were to speak of things that could profit the country so openly, the factions against the queen could set Zenjirou up as a puppet. He was well aware of the risks.

"Right, sorry, it was a bit rash," he said meekly. He had been growing complacent, and such lapses in judgment had become more frequent of late.

"Well, it was nothing serious this time; you simply need to take more care in the future. So, did anything else transpire?"

Zenjirou rather gratefully took the blatant chivvying along of the conversation, and he answered, "I made some decent progress with Octavia. I

can cast a dimensional barrier nine times out of ten now, and I can control my mana flow at least a little. See?”

Putting actions to words, the mana flowing from his body strengthened and then weakened slightly.

“Oh! You have progressed significantly in such a short time. Impressive. When I learned from the old man, it took over two years before I could control my mana consciously to some extent,” she said with praise.

However, Zenjirou was aware of the truth and could only smile despite himself as he countered, “But you were seven then, right? I’m already a grown-up, so I’ve got the understanding and willpower that comes with age. ’Course I’d learn quicker.”

If it took him the same amount of time to learn something in his twenties that it had taken a seven-year-old Aura to achieve, he would be a little depressed. He had a firm goal—a goal to be able to cast teleportation magic by the time his wife had her second child. To reach that objective, he would put in all possible effort.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll do my best.”

“Hmm, try not to go too far,” she warned him lightly as his determination renewed itself, feeling fairly worried. *Good grief, if I leave him be, he will exhaust himself with “self-study.” He is always so quick to exert himself.*

That was one of the reasons she asked for an overview each day and sometimes had to tell him to rest.

Honestly, he is far more work than a dullard would be.

Despite her mental criticisms, her gaze as she looked at him was as soft as ever.

Chapter 6 — Set in Motion

Ten days had passed since Xavier's battle on the Salt Road. Aura had been carrying out her duties in the office when a dwarf wyvern arrived from a fortress that lay on the outskirts of the royal territory.

She gave a sigh and spoke. "So, the margrave's son has failed. He brought back the particulars of the impediment, however, so it was far from a complete failure." She rolled her neck where she sat. The sunlight coming in sparkled off her loose hair.

Things had become somewhat troublesome.

"Indeed. According to the report, over fifty raptors make up the swarm marked for extermination, so a mere one hundred men would be somewhat hard-pressed to manage it. I would say that Lord Xavier's decision was by no means incorrect," Fabio replied from behind her.

"I know," she answered bluntly, not turning to face him. She agreed that Xavier's decision had been the appropriate one. Capua had yet to recover from the war. Every hearty young man, even under the command of a feudal lord rather than the direct control of the royal army, was valuable to the kingdom. If they annihilated the swarm but lost half their men, the operation could not be called a success.

From that perspective, the third son had made a rational, intelligent decision that would hardly be expected from such a young commander on his first sortie. At the very least, Aura didn't see this failure as any mark against the man himself. However, given her position, she could not openly praise his decision either.

"So, the extermination falls from the Gaziel family to General Pujol," she commented with a sigh.

A thousand elite soldiers were already marching towards the fortress in question under the general's command, under the pretense of running training

exercises. They may have even reached their destination by now. Either way, the initiative would lay with General Pujol. Unable to leave the capital, Aura could only watch this development silently.

“Well,” she decided, “considering who the man in question is, the situation will be resolved one way or another.”

The general’s ambitious personality aside, she trusted in his abilities as a commander. It was unfortunate for the young local heir’s prospects, but the Salt Road’s restoration was a matter of some urgency. If it took too long, it would be the margrave’s territory that took the brunt of the damage, so while it was contrary to their hopes, they would just have to deal with it. However...

“Certainly, with the general at the helm they are unlikely to fail,” offered the slender-faced secretary emotionlessly. “The problem lies with how much higher he will aim after this success.”

“Well,” Aura returned after a moment, “you might actually consider it good timing. This way, he will not be in the capital when the prince and princess arrive from the Twin Kingdoms.”

Her tone was somewhat forceful, like she was convincing herself rather than her companion.

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There was an anecdote that Zenjirou had once heard on a segment of a music talk show. It had come from a musician’s answer to the question, “Before your debut, what was the hardest work you had to do?”

Without a moment’s delay, the musician had answered, “That’s got to be installing AC units.”

The reason being, the room where the air conditioning was being installed obviously didn’t have it yet. And since the clients *wanted* it, that meant it was hot enough to need it. Once he was done working himself into dripping with sweat, the musician had to head straight to the next workplace, which of course also had no air conditioning.

Moving from AC-less room to AC-less room in the Japanese summer was a practically Sisyphean endeavor. At the time, Zenjirou had laughed that (along

with the musician himself) off as he'd sat there drinking tea in his nice, cool room, snacking on rice crackers.

The reason he was remembering that moment all these years later was simple.

"Damn, the sweat's in my eye! I can't even see the scale!"

"Sir Zenjirou, are you okay?!"

"S-Sir, watch your feet!"

Currently, he was engaged in that very task, with sweat pouring off him in a room of the inner palace, subject to such temperatures that even midsummer in Japan would have seemed refreshing in comparison.

"Right," he muttered eventually, "that's the backing done!" His expression was satisfied, as if he had already finished his job with that one step alone.

"Here's a towel, sir."

"Ah, thanks," he answered the tall maid as he took a chilled towel from her and wiped himself off. "Ugh...I needed that."

He had been up on a ladder in the sweltering room, carrying out work that he was wholly unfamiliar with, so that "need" was by no means an understatement. With the maids' help in setting up the ladder and holding the backing down, he had managed to get the glittering silver backing installed on the three wooden supports with long screws.

"I'll need to thank the carpenters. I caused Aura a bit of a hassle yesterday, so I'll have to make it up to her," he murmured to himself as he looked up at his handiwork.

He had gained special permission to allow the carpenters into the inner palace in order to install the AC supports in their room, which were now well-braced so that even the heavy air conditioner wouldn't topple them.

The wooden supports were set against the white marble of the wall, with diagonal braces between them, so it looked rather unsightly, but that was unavoidable. He'd never have been able to screw it straight into the stone. His homeworld had masonry bits and power tools available, but Zenjirou hadn't

considered those specifics while making his preparations.

Regardless, as he wiped his face and took a breather, he noticed the maids still standing at the ready and spoke to them. “You can all go ahead and use them too. Make sure to drink a lot; you might end up dehydrated or with heat stroke at this rate.”

The maids had been footing the ladder and holding the backing from underneath as Zenjirou worked, so they had been exerting themselves quite a bit as well. If they didn’t cool down at least a little and drink some more water, they could find themselves in seriously poor shape.

“Right, thank you very much.”

“We’ll take you up on that, sir.”

The maids thanked him sincerely, their brows and hair dripping with sweat, before hurriedly heading for the fridge in the neighboring room.

Now alone, Zenjirou spread out the sheets he’d printed from various websites on DIY air conditioning installations and checked them again.

“Right, so with the backing level fixed to the wall, you need to attach the unit to it and make sure there are no problems, then you need to run the piping, electricity, and drainage through the wall...”

As he spoke, his gaze moved to the right of the backing to look at the round hole through the thick stone wall. It had an incline so that the drainage couldn’t backflow.

“Still, craftsmen are amazing in both worlds. It’s exactly the right size and angle,” he marveled.

He had had the hole created by royal masons the day before. It was fascinating to see it made exactly to specification, without any power tools, through a stone wall that was thicker than his upper arm was long. Royal masons used earth magic to soften the stone before they opened it up, and then once again to harden it when they were done, but it didn’t change the fact that it took considerable skill.

Once he’d wiped himself off, he unfolded the towel and then refolded it so

that the cool interior was visible, wiping himself again before psyching himself back up.

“Right! Let’s get the unit in here hooked up. Then I can run the pipes outside and set up the external machine! Ugh...the external machine...”

He’d have to exert himself just as much for that step, but this time under the blazing sun in the courtyard, without the respite of shade.

He sighed, glaring at the sun that streamed in relentlessly through the window.

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While Zenjirou was dripping with sweat in the courtyard, with only parasols carried by the maids for shade, Aura had finished her office work and was visiting the rear courtyard of the royal palace.

She strode rapidly across the weedy ground, surrounded by her personal guard, who were clad in white leather armor and armed with short spears.

Compared to the front courtyard, which could well be considered representative of the palace, or the inner courtyard, where they entertained guests or held outdoor parties, the rear courtyard could only be described as “tasteless.”

In exchange, however, it was bigger than the other two put together. It was a space dedicated to allow the craftsmen assigned to the palace to do their work. The masons cut rocks, carpenters roughly cut trees to size, smiths reforged weapons for the royal knights, and leather workers repaired armor. If one had to put a name to it, it could be called the craftsmen’s quarter.

The royal palace also had large fields, a seemingly excessive number of wells, and pastures for grazing. Looking at the overall composition, it was clear that, if it came down to it, the palace could stand up to a siege and function as a fortress. Fortunately, the castle had never seen an actual fight, even during the recent war.

The craftsmen noticed her and her guards, and stopped to bow.

“Good work; continue, if you would,” Aura told them lightly as she walked

through.

If they were working, they could omit paying their respects even to the monarch, so the rules were surprisingly lenient in that respect. Her mere presence garnered attention as she headed to a wooden cabin that had been constructed just that year. It had been built next to the waterway through the palace and furnished with a water wheel, so it had evidently received somewhat preferential treatment.

Several workers wearing stained clothes were standing at attention in front of the building, awaiting her visit.

“Your Majesty, thank you for going to the trouble to visit,” said an older man with a head of white hair and a beard. His hands, peeking out from the shabby but solid shirt, had hard calluses, speaking to his skill at his craft. Judging from his appearance, though, the muscles underneath that shirt had deteriorated a bit compared to one who was actively working.

On the other hand, the men shifting uneasily behind him were all in their mid-to-late teens. These craftsmen were still slender, and their hands lacked the stark calluses. The first was a retired blacksmith, and the others were apprentices who had yet to come into their own.

They were all craftsmen that Aura had gathered for the glassmaking endeavor. There were currently no expectations for the results they would achieve, so she had been unable to divert workers from their current population of smiths.

Standing in front of them, the queen pulled her shoulders back, thrusting her chest out as she spoke frankly. “I would hear your report. You say there have been results?”

The older smith nodded at her question. “Yes, Your Majesty. We followed your instructions and heated a mixture of white sand, powdered and baked shells, and powdered trona at the highest temperature we could for five days and nights. They then melted together and liquified. This is the product produced by mixing it with an iron rod and removing it from the ashes and allowing it to cool. Please inspect it.”

He took something long and thin in his callused hands and presented it to

Aura.

“Very well,” she replied, gesturing with her chin and prompting one of her guards to take it. After inspecting it for any abnormalities, he passed it along to her.

Aura looked it over herself and then spoke. “Oh...I see.”

It was, frankly, something that looked like green-tinted obsidian. It was smooth and glossy, but it was also nearly pitch-black and the green was hard to see. It was certainly nothing like the “glass” the tableware and bottles that Zenjirou possessed were made of. However, taking it in hand and holding it up to the light made its slightly translucent nature clear. The greatest piece of evidence was that its shadow in her hand was not black but rather green.

“Excellent,” she said, nodding with a smile at the sight. While it was a useless lump at present, it at least demonstrated that the method on the DVD Zenjirou had shown her *could* eventually produce glass. As a proof of concept, it was nothing short of spectacular.

“Well done,” she praised them. “Continue to refine the production process along with increasing the resulting transparency. This is a completely unknown method, so there is no time limit on this nor are there any recriminations for failure. However, you must not halt your efforts. I expect you to continue to strive for success.”

“Y-Yes! Understood, ma’am!” the old smith said with an excessively deep bow, prompting the young apprentices behind him to hurriedly follow suit a beat later.

Her words were the unvarnished truth. Aura hadn’t expected the experiment to produce anything like what she had seen in the DVD Zenjirou had shown her. To be able to produce something that, despite its imperfections, was clearly glass, surpassed her expectations. When Zenjirou had told her that it was harder to melt than iron, she had been prepared for the likelihood of seeing no real progress for some time.

“So, what of the details? It seems you are still using iron forges, but will that be sufficient?”

The smith shook his head with a sour look. “They will not, Your Majesty. I’m loath to admit it, but maintaining the heat like this will probably destroy the forges before long. Taking five days to create this small amount will also impede us.”

“Hmm...then investigating those ‘fire bricks’ may accelerate things. It seems we need more personnel,” she announced, holding her chin in her hand as she thought. “Very well,” she decided after a moment, “I will prepare what I am able to. However, it will by no means be instantaneous, so do what you can with your current resources for the time being. I leave the decision of whether to focus on the glass or firebricks to you. Do your utmost, is that understood?” she asked, fixing him with a sharp look.

“Yes, understood, ma’am,” the old man bowed, accepting her edict.

With that, Aura left the glassmaking hut and walked along the waterway, accompanied by her guards to another area. Eventually, a slightly strange sight met her eyes.

“Hm, so this is the place.”

The sight in question was the water wheel setup. A count would have revealed that there were ten of them in a row. It was completely illogical according to standard practice. Consecutive wheels like this would lead to a lower output, but that was not a concern. These were only about knee-high; they were never intended to produce a great amount of power to begin with.

Aura gathered the skirt of her dress and stopped over to peer at them from above. It was at that moment that a slightly rotund middle-aged man and a solidly built younger man came running over.

“Y-Your Highness! Have you come for an inspection? We would have come to greet you if we had known!”

Aura gave them a slight shrug as she halted their attempts to prostrate themselves, both men still out of breath.

“It is fine; this was not a planned visit. I simply came here on a whim; my apologies for any worry it’s caused.”

“Hahh, it is an honor, ma’am.” They bowed, even though they hadn’t kneeled.

Aura didn’t have a tendency to waste time with needless words, and she cut right to the heart of the matter. “It seems you have had some interesting results yourself. From what I can see, six of the ten wheels have broken.”

“You are correct. Five of them are of standard design, and the last is the new design that you endorsed.”

“As are the remaining four?”

“Indeed so, ma’am.”

“Impressive, to think my husband had such knowledge...” she mused to herself, careful to make sure that no one could hear her.

The experiment to test the water wheels’ endurance had been his idea, enacted by Aura. When she had once idly complained that their water wheels deteriorated faster than those of the Northern Continent, Zenjirou had instantly said, “Doesn’t that just mean the number of teeth aren’t coprime?” These ten miniature wheels had been designed to test exactly that.

The numbers of teeth being coprime meant that the numbers didn’t share any factors other than the number one. As an example, the only shared divisor of the numbers nine and five was one, so they were “coprime,” but the numbers ten and five were divisible by five, so they weren’t. Whether the number of teeth on each gear were coprime or not was extremely important. If they were, the teeth would have even contact with each other. If not, some of the teeth would be in contact with the same set on the other cog more frequently, and others would never be in contact.

And what would the result of that be? Coprime gears would wear down evenly, so the amount of wear for the amount of work would be optimal. If not, some of the teeth would wear excessively while others would barely be worn at all, so some of the teeth would be distorted faster than others.

Those distorted teeth would lead to slop in the gears, which would soon break apart. If one made the gears out of the same material, with the same precision, those that were coprime would have a life expectancy of up to ten times longer than those that weren’t. Nowadays on Earth, modern materials with extreme durability and micron-level precision meant that the difference wasn’t as stark, but the wooden cogs and easily wearable materials in this

world, as well as the lack of precision, made the difference all the more apparent.

“Your suggestion was correct, Your Majesty. The number of teeth you specified lasted longer than the wheels we’d been making until now.”

The craftsman was truly appreciative, not taking umbrage at an outsider to the specialty (even the queen) correcting him. Aura believed the praise should have been directed to her husband rather than herself, so her feelings were conflicted, but she wasn’t careless enough to show that on her face.

“It is nothing so significant. My suggestion was merely a theory. Without your skill, it would have come to nothing. Your listening to my words and producing something in such a short period of time is of true value to the country. I hope that you continue to exert those skills for the royal family, the kingdom, and even me.”

“Ha, hah ahh,” the craftsmen said, bowing deeply at her words.

Aura looked at the man and his companion with a satisfied smile as she continued. “I will want to replace the water wheels throughout the royal territory with this new style. Will that be a problem?”

At her pressing, the middle-aged man, still humbling himself as best he could, answered with an upturned look, searching for assurance. “Of course not, Your Majesty. Simply give the order and we shall begin. However, if...I may ask one thing...”

“What is it? You may ask.” She was fairly sure she knew what his question would be but feigned ignorance.

“Very well. My thanks, and please forgive my rudeness. Do you intend to spread the knowledge of these water wheels to the other lords?”

His question was just what she had expected. *I predicted their concern about that. Well, considering their position, it is hardly surprising.*

These new water wheels lasted overwhelmingly longer than the current items on the market. The existence of the improved versions was wonderful news for the people ordering them—royalty, nobility, and farmers—but they were a curse to a small number of people: the craftsmen themselves.

If the wheels lasted for years longer than before, it would inevitably decrease demand for the engineers. From that perspective, they would effectively be strangling themselves. Their concern was entirely understandable.

However, despite understanding their feelings, Aura maintained her poker face as she answered simply, “Ah, of course. As monarch of this country, I have a duty to share such advancements with its people.”

“I-Is that so...” The expression on the man’s face embodied despair as he replied hoarsely.

Intentionally ignoring his slumped posture, Aura continued with a slightly affected tone. “Indeed it is. As a separate matter, I have been considering altering how the commissions for your profession are handled. Rather than being paid for each water wheel and repair that you carry out, I believe it would be better to entrust the repair and maintenance of a wheel to you and pay the expenses for it all at once at the beginning of the year.”

“Eh? Wait, that means...” The craftsman didn’t immediately understand her intention but soon followed her thinking, and his face changed again, this time from a look of despair to joy.

Her suggestion was essentially a yearly contract. Until now, every time a water wheel broke, the engineers were commissioned to repair it. With this method, the new wheels would break down less, so their earnings would drop, directly disadvantaging them. They would be helpless. To avoid that, Aura would pay for the repair and maintenance for a year all at once. Even if the wheels were working without a problem, they would not have to repay any of the original sum.

Of course, the workers would also have to repair any that *did* break with no additional compensation later on, but as long as they kept up with the bookkeeping, it wasn’t likely to be a real issue.

Of course, I will get an estimate of the average yearly budget on repairs and specify a lower amount within the contract, she thought.

But even if the craftsmen could have read her mind, it wouldn’t have dimmed their mood. Aura herself was reluctant to allow a rapid reform to put the engineers out in the cold. A yearly contract would prevent any “unexpected

expenses” as well, so it would make calculating the money flow within the treasury easier. While their income might drop a little, they would also be able to plan their year more easily.

Well, it is a compromise. Once more my husband has created a little more slack in the royal treasury. Now, what to do with it?

“Thank you, Your Majesty! Thank you so much!”

As the workers prostrated themselves in thanks, the queen was already considering her next move.

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Later that evening, Zenjirou and Aura came across each other in a room in a corner of the inner palace. The chamber had been set aside for their beloved son, Carlos Zenkichi Capua, or Carlo Zen for short.

It was the norm for Aura to head to his room as soon as she finished her work, but it was quite rare for Zenjirou to be there as well. That might make it sound like he had less love for his son than his wife did, but that wasn’t the case. Zenjirou couldn’t speak the mother tongue of the country, so to avoid contaminating the language that Zenkichi would learn as a child, he was forbidden from speaking in front of the prince.

But however careful he was, it was human nature for him to want to speak to his son eventually. With that in mind, Zenjirou held back his tears and refrained from spending too long in the infant’s presence. He remained silent, looking over the room. It was probably around the same size as an eight-tatami-mat room back home, or roughly thirteen square meters. For a room in the inner palace, it was rather small. That said, it had originally been much larger and had been purposefully reduced by way of wooden partitions.

There was, of course, a reason for that. Why would anyone make a large room into a smaller one? The answer became clear the moment one stepped inside: the air was cool. Although the sun had already set, the temperature was still thirty degrees. Yet the room was more than five degrees cooler. This was due to the block of ice set up in the corner and the maid standing there fanning it with all her might.

The artificial wind passed over the ice and set a cool breeze flowing throughout the room. Naturally, having a breeze fall directly upon the little prince would be bad for him, so the space was being indirectly chilled in this creative way. Fanning the ice made the room cooler overall, and the space had been partitioned to make the process just a little bit more effective. The bigger the room, the less a limited amount of ice could cool it.

“Ah, sir, my apologies for the lack of greeting,” the maid said to him, not ceasing her movements.

Zenjirou simply nodded back in thanks. While a number of maids shared the duty, fanning without rest was still hard work.

If the extension cord were longer, I could have brought the whole fan in, he thought in response to seeing her effort, but doing so would actually make the women feel bad. Fanning the ice was one of the more popular jobs for the maids. It may have been tiring work, but everything they did was tiring to some extent. Therefore, being able to enjoy the cool air by standing right next to it almost inevitably raised the popularity of the position. It was certainly heavenly compared to mowing the garden lawns under the blazing sun or maintaining the temperature of the kitchen oven.

While Zenjirou was considering all of that, Aura approached the prince’s bed and looked down on him.

“Bwah?”

Prince Carlo Zen opened his wide eyes just as his mother looked in on him.

“Hm? So, you are awake, Carlos?” Aura pouted slightly, having missed her chance to watch her adorable son sleep.

“Indeed,” said the wet nurse. Her smile was bright, but slightly dark lines ran under her eyes. “He woke a little while ago and seems to be in a good mood.”

The tiny prince had probably spent much of the night bawling, depriving the wet nurse of sleep. Each time Aura saw the evidence of the woman’s efforts, she was all the more certain she would never have been able to fulfill those types of duties as a mother. That meant she had to treasure the time she did get to spend with her child.

“May I hold him?” she asked.

It felt a bit sad to ask someone else for permission to hold her own son, but the prince was more familiar with the wet nurse than his own parents at the moment, so there was no point pretending otherwise.

“Of course, Your Majesty. Go, go, give the prince some motherly warmth.”

Aura made a short noise of affirmation as she slid her hands under Carlo Zen’s head and body, lifting the warmest and softest creature imaginable up into an embrace with careful movements.

“Ahh!” the baby cried happily from his mother’s arms, waving his pudgy hands towards her face.

“Aha ha, what is it, Carlos? What’s with those hands?”

The queen’s usual strong expression had vanished, relaxing into something almost careless as she bent her head to rub her cheeks against his hands and held his soft body near her face.

“Dah, dah, ahh.” The prince used his hand, smaller than two of Aura’s fingers, to rub her cheek.

“Ha, ha ha ha, what’s up, hm? C’mon, that tickles.”

“Ah, ah, dahh.”

Simply watching the interaction between mother and son was enough to bring a smile to one’s face. Having observed in silence until then, Zenjirou finally reached the limit of his patience and stepped forward.

“Zenkichi, it’s papa.”

He spoke the words in the local language of Capua. The year and change since he’d arrived had allowed him to learn a bit. Or at least “learn” in the same way the average middle schooler in their third year had learned English. But he had a few hundred words committed to memory by now.

Among those, “it’s papa” were two of the only words that Aura and Lady Octavia had no concerns about his pronunciation of. Anything else he might say at present would get the meaning across but with a strong accent, so he didn’t have permission to use them in front of Zenkichi yet. As a result, he packed all

of the feelings he had for his son into that one short phrase.

“Zenkichi, it’s papa,” he said, waving his hands at his son with a jovial expression.

“Bah? Gahh, gahh!”

Either Zenjirou’s face had amused the boy, or he liked the movements of his fingers, as their son’s gaze now moved from mother to father.

“Mgh...”

The only one unhappy about that was Aura. She loved her husband, but when it came to their son, Zenjirou was a rival who could draw the little angel’s look and smile from her.

“Come on, Carlos. Look over here. Hmm, you love mama best, do you not?”

“Dahh, dahh.”

The rocking from his mother and her words drew the infant’s attention almost forcefully back to the queen.

“Hmm-hmm,” she hummed, smirking triumphantly at Zenjirou as she regained their son’s interest.

Naturally, this in turn irritated Zenjirou, so he stepped closer and took her up on the challenge.

“Zenkichi, it’s papa.” Sadly, that was all he could say.

“Carlos loves mama best. Papa is number two. Papa’s fine with that, right?”

“Zenkichi, it’s papa,” Zenjirou insisted, shaking his head with a desperate look as Aura grinned cruelly.

“Are you sure? He won’t be able to tell who you are if you don’t say it clearly. Right, Carlos?”

“Zenkichi, it’s papa!”

“Goodness, what a loud voice. You’ll make Carlos jump. Papa’s scary! Scary papa.”

Aura fought to hold in her laughter as Zenjirou grew flustered. She pressed

Carlos to her chest as if to ward off her husband's gaze and turned away. Sitting off to the side, the wet nurse and maid in the corner were also suppressing smiles, their shoulders shaking, but Zenjirou was in no state to notice. He knew that Aura was teasing him and had taken it far too seriously. He stomped up behind her and yelled the loudest he had all day.

"ZENKICHI, IT'S PAPA!"

The combination of his sudden appearance, his frantic expression, and the volume of his voice...

"W... W... Waaaahhhhhh!"

Their lovely son began to cry.

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"Gah ha ha ha!"

"Aura, you're laughing too much," Zenjirou chided her as she sat across from him in the living room, still chortling.

"A-Apologies. But...I cannot. Every time I remember the look on your face when he started crying... I c-can't take it, ah ha ha ha!"

Zenjirou turned sulkily away from his wife as she guffawed with tears in her eyes. There was no point in replying. He had left the most precious thing in his life wailing to Aura and the wet nurse before fleeing the room and brooding in the living room. But as soon as his wife joined him, she'd burst out laughing.

Truthfully, seeing Aura pound her fist into the sofa as she laughed wasn't a particularly pleasant sight. Watching her roll around, Zenjirou gave his final warning in a low voice, his face uncharacteristically grim.

"Aura, c'mon, leave it there, all right?"

"Bwa ha ha! V-Very well. I shall...stop... No, I cannot, aha ha ha!"

His final warning had gone unheeded. Well, there was nothing for it now but to use force. He stood silently and slowly approached her before...

"Take that! If you want to laugh that much, I'll give you something to laugh about!" he cried before falling upon her.

“Wai—Zenjirou?!”

“And that, and that, and that!”

Seizing his chance now that he was on top of her, he used both hands to start tickling her around the waist and under her arms.

“Aiiiee?! Wai—Gyah, hee hee hee, n-no!”

“Coochie coochie coo!”

In a contest of pure strength, Aura would always win, but her position was a bad one, and she could only continue to be tickled as she lay there on the sofa.

“Ah ha ha ha, w-wai—Sto—pah ha ha ha!”

“Gotcha, gotcha!”

Zenjirou gradually seemed to be enjoying himself more, and mirroring what had happened in the prince’s room, his grin took on a teasing edge as he assailed her with more and more tickling. Her waist, under her arms, her thighs, her neck, the soles of her feet. He even slipped under her arms to her chest, around her back and down from her waist, taking the opportunity to enjoy himself as well.

“Hee, stah—ap!”

“Tee hee hee, how about that, cutie, how about that?”

“Oh! Your goal has changed since the beginning, has it not?”

The couple’s playfulness continued in ardent harmony up until the maid in charge of the baths arrived and informed them that the water was ready.

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Once they had washed the dirt and sweat of the day away, the couple returned to the living room in their usual casual clothing.

“Good grief, I *did* go too far with teasing you in front of Carlos like that, and I apologize for the laughter afterwards. Still, that is no excuse. Tickling is one thing, but I have my duties, and I told you another child would be difficult, so that was—” Aura began before Zenjirou cut her off.

“That was just a bit of fun.”

“You would strip a woman for ‘a bit of fun’?” she asked after a moment.

“My wife, at least... Yeah, sometimes.”

As they bickered good-naturedly, the two of them did not stop in the living room for once but headed straight to the bedroom.

“Goodness... Let us move on. So, would you show me? You were successful, no? You managed to set up this ‘AC’ you mentioned?”

“More or less. Looks like it’s working for now, at least,” he answered with a slightly doubtful expression as he put his hand on the door.

He had spent most of the day installing the air conditioner. When he’d tested it, a cool breeze had blown out, so he had left it plugged in. Since then, he hadn’t opened the door.

“It’s been on this whole time, so if it’s working all right, then by now it should...” He paused, his hand on the door as he screwed his eyes shut, and with an expression almost of prayer, he took a deep breath and flung it open.

“Yes!”

Just as he had hoped, the room behind the door was unthinkably cool for the hottest time of the year.

“This is most impressive. I was surprised when I first saw the lights and fridge, but this is even more shocking,” Aura marveled as she sat on their king size bed and lifted her hands towards the wind coming from the newly-installed machine, the cool breeze pleasantly caressing her body, flushed as it was from the bath.

“Phew...” As Aura closed her eyes like a cat being stroked under the chin, she suddenly realized that her husband’s face as he sat next to her was somewhat sullen.

“What is wrong? You look unhappy. Is there an issue?”

Zenjirou scratched at his head awkwardly as she looked at him, and answered, “Yeah, well, honestly, it’s not quite right. The room’s a bit big for how powerful the AC is, and it’s not airtight enough, so even with the door shut, there are still warm drafts coming in. It’s nighttime, so it’s pretty cool now, but

in the middle of the day when the sun's shining through the gaps, it won't be as cool as I'd hoped."

He sighed. He had been lucky enough to get it working on his first attempt, but it was a given that the machine wouldn't be as much of a blessing here as it would have been in Japan. The one he'd brought was intended for domestic use in a space no larger than forty square meters, but this room was at least fifty. And on top of that, the buildings in Capua weren't particularly airtight. While the machine could handle nights like this well enough, he didn't think it would stand up to the midday heat of over forty degrees.

"Would that not be too much of a luxury?"

Zenjirou gave his shocked wife a slight smile. "Yeah, maybe, but I have this image of an air-conditioned room being like 'another world.' Besides, the biggest question still hasn't been answered."

"The biggest question?"

He nodded, glaring up at the unit above him. "Whether I actually managed to set it up correctly. It's not making any weird noises or leaking right now, so it seems okay. But from what I've heard, if you don't do it just right, the wear and tear gradually accumulates, and it stops working after a few days."

If that happened, the only choice he'd have would be to use Time Reversal Magic. Several days' worth was definitely more than he could ask Aura for, so he'd have to give up on the idea entirely in that case.

My only hope is to one day learn time reversal and future expense magic so that I can repair it myself.

Future expense was another secret spell of Space-Time Magic. Put simply, one could use it to borrow the mana from 'the you of tomorrow or the day after,' and cast magic beyond one's means. If he used that spell, he would be unable to use magic for a specific amount of time corresponding to the amount of mana borrowed, but since Zenjirou's role was fundamentally a non-combatant one, he would have the freedom to do that.

Of course, once he could use magic, his mana would also likely become a national treasure to be employed for the good of the country, so he might not

be able to wield it too freely. Regardless, even under the best of circumstances, it would be a year before he would be able to cast those spells, so if he were to restore the unit at that time, it would require close to a year's worth of time reversal.

Such a length of time would lead to him needing to pay with several *months* of mana, and even if it was 'his' mana, considering his position as a royal, that was still an excessive amount to use selfishly.

"No sense worrying about it. It's working now, so we should enjoy it," he decided.

"Indeed," Aura nodded. "We should also have a small table brought into the room as well. Taking our breakfast or time off together simply sitting on the bed like this would perhaps be a little too ill-mannered."

"Aura...you're just raring to move out of the living room and into the bedroom, aren't you?" Zenjirou couldn't help but smile upon seeing that his wife was even more into the air conditioner than he had expected.

Having sat down on the bed right in the path of the cold air, the very thought of returning to the heat of the living room had left their minds. With some time left before they would sleep, the couple sat side by side and chatted.

"So, you used up the majority of your day installing this machine?"

"Yeah, and that's no exaggeration. I didn't get anything else done, even though there's a lot I wanted to do, like the soap and distillation," he said with a nod.

Having recently started to take on more of a role in the palace's operations as Aura's proxy, Zenjirou was no longer possessed of quite as much free time, so days where he had no obligations were precious in their own right. Today, however, he'd had things he had wanted to do but had found neither the time nor the energy for anything but this one project. Completing the installation in forty-degree heat had been extremely hard on him.

Of course, the soldiers on the Salt Road could march for days on end, but if Zenjirou were to voice his utterly honest opinion, he saw them as superhuman for being able to do so.

I really will need to get used to the climate here, even if it's gradual... Although the idea kinda loses its impact after just installing an AC.

Despite his thoughts, it was actually *because* he'd installed the AC that he could sit there thinking about it at all. When humans were stuck in unpleasant conditions, their minds were occupied with thoughts of escaping. More enriching internal dialogue could come only after finding relief.

Regardless, Zenjirou felt that this wasn't the time for such a discussion, so he changed the subject by bringing up what he wanted to do going forward, providing his wife with the details.

"I've got the soap and alcohol-making to keep up with when I'm free, but I've been working more in the palace recently too, so I can't do everything I want all the time."

Aura frowned at that before she answered. "If there are things you wish to do, you need not work as much. I have more or less recovered by now."

The suggestion was doubtless born of her feelings for her husband, but that didn't mean he could take advantage of them.

"And then in a few years, you'll be in the same state as last year? No way. I'm not proud of it, but I'm just a normal guy. I'm pretty sure if I stop doing something for half a year, I'll forget what I learned, even if I could manage it all before."

"That *certainly* is nothing to be proud of," Aura replied with a reluctant smile as her husband thrust his chest out with his declaration. She shrugged and continued with a slightly tighter expression. "Very well. Honestly, I underestimated the restrictions my pregnancy would place upon me, and it would indeed be appreciated if you would continue with the same level of work. However, please do not misunderstand me; I do not offer to lighten your workload if there is something you wish to do out of the goodness of my heart. I suggest it because I see the potential good your efforts and creations can offer the country."

Zenjirou scratched at his cheek, feeling conflicted. "Ah, well, I hope you don't put too much stock in them. In the end, I've only got a surface knowledge of things. Honestly, I'd expect to fail eight or nine times out of ten. Although, since

you're saying that, does it mean any of my suggestions had good results?" He had only noticed her wording mid-reply.

Aura grinned and nodded. "Indeed. I visited the craftsmen this afternoon, and they've had far greater success than expected. First, the glass: they created something that works as a proof of concept. I will show you in a day or so. At present, all they have managed is a dark rock that is a polished green, but it verifies that the process itself has potential, at least."

"Whoa, that's great," he marveled. They had created something that was recognizably glass from only the knowledge of the minimum required ingredients and a rough explanation of how the process worked, so the praise was well-deserved.

"There are still many problems, of course. The product is too dark for me to comfortably call it glass, and the methods required to create the correct shapes still need to be developed. And the furnaces we normally use have too great a burden placed upon them during the melting process. If things progress in this manner, the furnaces will reach their limits within ten more uses at most, according to the smiths," the queen summarized, her expression turning displeased.

Zenjirou's expression tightened in turn as he rested his chin in his hand and thought it over. "Hmm, so we'll need those firebricks."

"Vexingly, yes," Aura agreed with a derisive snort.

The DVD he had shown her and the method it demonstrated for making firebricks evidently still annoyed her. The explanation "take old firebricks, grind them up with clay, and fire them in a kiln made with firebricks" was of no use to her whatsoever, so Zenjirou could hardly blame her for being frustrated.

Wanting to avoid her mood souring any further before bed, his voice took on an air of panic as he spoke quickly. "Uh, and the other problems were the color and the process of shaping it, right? I think as far as the shaping goes, using the same method as the TV show and gathering it on a long metal tube before blowing down it would be the most realistic. They generally use something called 'float glass' for windows these days, though," he mused, twisting his face as he dredged up the buried memories.

“Hmm? I watched the glass-blowing with you, but this is the first I have heard of this ‘float glass.’”

Zenjirou’s gaze was drawn to her lightly-clothed form as she leaned forward with interest, but he answered her carefully.

“I don’t know the details, so I can only give a pretty rough explanation, but it’s called the Pilkinton process. You let the molten glass float on top of liquid metal with a lower melting point, and it lets you create glass panes. You don’t need to polish it after, and it gives smooth, flat glass. It might be easier to think of it like...when you melt lard and it floats on water. If you leave it alone, the fat solidifies into sheets, right? It’s just like that.”

“I see. It sounds like a rather large-scale method, but I understand the theory.”

Despite that, she didn’t look too impressed, perhaps due to the very different meanings that glass held for each of them. Unlike Zenjirou, whose first thought was the glass from a window, Aura’s focus was on spherical shapes like the marble, so naturally she was less interested in a method for making panes. And the Pilkinton process was far more difficult than glass-blowing. It required a pool of liquid metal to be maintained at a certain temperature, and the workers around the container would be at risk from the fumes.

The technique worked well on modern Earth with its automated production lines, but the level of technology in this world meant that blown glass, where the craftsman flattened the glass after the fact, might be more effective.

Zenjirou hadn’t thought that deeply about it, but he knew his wife’s heart wasn’t in it.

“The color was the other issue, right? The only thing I can think of is to do the same as the show and try our best to get the metal out of the sand. As for how, I guess grind it more finely, agitate it with water, and just take the top layer of sediment,” he suggested, moving the conversation along.

The explanation in the show had been simple, but glass mainly got its colors from metal particulates that were mixed in with the sand. Therefore, the most obvious way to avoid that was to remove as much metal as possible from it.

To do that, the sand had to be ground well with millstones, creating as fine a powder as possible, and then an environment where it could be easily separated from the metal would be needed, allowing them to pour it into casks full of water, mix it vigorously, then wait until it all settled.

This meant that the comparatively heavy metal particles would sink to form a layer on the bottom, and the top layer would host the lighter sand. At that point, you merely had to scoop up the top layer.

His answer caused her recently dulled sharpness to come back to the fore as she held her chin and replied. “Hmm, you explained it much the same when we watched the image, so I had them do exactly that. Perhaps they did not grind it sufficiently, however, or it was not agitated well enough in the water, so the results were different.”

“Huh, maybe the sand itself is the problem? Apparently, there’s a real distinction between sand that’s suitable and that’s not. If it’s no good from the start then however much effort they put in, there will be a limit to how much better the final product is.”

While it was an extreme case, black sands that were essentially made of iron itself wouldn’t give dramatically better results no matter how much they ground it. Of course, Aura’s suggestions were eminently possible, so there was no guarantee he was correct. Regardless, his opinion seemed credible enough to her.

“I see. You mean the suitability of the sand itself. Perhaps we should gather various types of sand from all regions of the kingdom.”

“That’s a good idea. Also, they showed the workers using magnets to remove the iron content as well. I’ve got a few that go on the fridge, but they’re probably a bit weak to separate out iron with. I have a lot of rechargeable batteries, though, so we could use those as a DC source and make an electromagnet if we had some copper wire.”

Aura looked askance at him as he trawled his memories for the middle-school science lessons, and she questioned him. “Copper wire? What is that? Copper that has been stretched out?”

“Yeah. If you wind copper you’ve stretched out so that it’s like a thread

around and around, and then pass a current through it, the thing you wrap it around gets a magnetic field. I remember making iron into a magnet like that when I was at school, but do you not have copper wire? Iron wire might also work, but it's not as efficient. Copper's the next best conductor after silver, after all."

Aura folded her arms under her large chest at the question and considered. "We do not. No such thing presently exists within Capua, at least. The issue lies with whether the smiths working in the palace could make it. Creating something so thin seems difficult. To then wrap it around something else, it would also need to be rather flexible. It may be more expensive, but perhaps we stand a better chance with silver rather than copper. Such fine work is similar to that required of silversmiths."

Zenjirou appeared surprised for a moment before his expression morphed into one of understanding. "Oh, right. It might matter for larger stuff like power lines, but small-scale testing means silver won't be too expensive. Yeah, that sounds promising, so I should ask for some. I'll get ready and set up a workspace in the shade in the courtyard."

His lack of detailed knowledge meant that he couldn't make an accurate prediction about whether the magnetic field he created would have an impact on its surroundings. It was unlikely that standard alkalines would interfere with appliances like the computer, but making such a judgment as an amateur was risky, so it was better to take precautions. Working outside in this heat would be irritating, but the shade and spray from the water should allow him to deal with it.

"Very well, I shall make the arrangements with the silversmiths and will have sand gathered from various regions as well."

"Great."

That concluded their conversation about glassmaking. Aura now shifted the topic to the water wheel experiment.

"Incidentally, your idea for making the number of teeth on the water wheels 'coprime' is amazing; it worked exactly as you suggested. Those that were made coprime lasted many times longer than those that were not," Aura told him, her

eyes sparkling as her face broke into an irrepressible smile.

“Oh, good, so it went well. It was just hearsay; I was actually pretty nervous about it.”

“The difference was truly dramatic. Currently, we are testing the concept with miniature versions constructed from purposefully soft wood, but considering the results thus far, the craftsmen have given their approval.”

The changes would allow them to save quite a bit on the expenses of maintaining the country’s water wheels. Aura’s smile as she spoke had the full force of a monarch behind it, and it made Zenjirou back away slightly atop the bed.

Ah ha ha, he thought to himself, *my wife’s beautiful and kind but also intense.*

The queen, unaware of her husband’s thoughts, folded her arms under her voluptuous chest as she grew even happier. “This will doubtless lead to an increase in the royal treasury. And unlike the money from prior balance sheets, I can use it as I wish,” she chortled. “It may not be a large amount, but the yearly difference will be huge. Our options are opening up.”

Incidentally, the idea for the coprime water wheels in miniature had come from Zenjirou himself along with the idea of a yearly contract to avoid putting the whole burden on the engineers. Zenjirou didn’t see it as a particularly big contribution, but it had led Aura to increase her already high opinion of him.

However...

“Right, that’s good, that’s great,” Zenjirou replied. “But seeing as it’s so special, we should use it well. Why don’t you think it over properly once you’re less swept up in the excitement of it?” he suggested placatingly as he patted her shoulder.

Her expression abruptly changed as if her earlier joy had been a mere act. “Unfortunately, I will lack the freedom to do that for quite a while. This is the only time I can spare for it right now. I have had a report from the Twin Kingdoms that Prince Francesco and Princess Bona have departed the country. Soon enough, the prince and princess of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle will arrive here. When they do, you and I both will have exceedingly tight limits

on our time," she explained, indicating that if he wanted to work on these things, now was his chance.

Zenjirou let out a sigh. "Huh? It's already gotten that far?"

"It has. Large processions can greatly vary in speed due to the weather and other factors, so we cannot set a precise date. However, the plan is for them to be here in a month. At that point, we shall both need to devote ourselves to dealing with them. You should prepare yourself for a period of little respite," his wife answered before sighing, almost as if Zenjirou's mood were contagious.

Royalty from the Twin Kingdoms was coming to visit, and their own circumstances and preferences would come second in light of that. As Aura had said, there would likely be a period where they were hiding tension and wariness under smiles. And while he might have been prince consort and thus not at the forefront of things, it didn't change the fact that he was one of only two members of the royal family. His schedule would undoubtedly be full, at least for a time.

"Got it. I'll do my best," he promised, slumping and taking a deep breath to drive off the melancholy.

The evening passed much this way, with the two of them sitting on the bed and discussing a range of topics, until the phone interrupted the conversation with an electronic beeping.

"Oh, there's the alarm," Zenjirou said, rolling over the king-size bed to stop the noise.

"Ah, it is already time to retire. The cooler room truly is agreeable; it feels like no time at all has passed," Aura remarked regretfully.

Zenjirou's care to avoid losing track of time immediately showed its worth.

"Yeah, if we kept talking, we'd never stop. Shall we get some sleep?"

He fiddled with the AC's remote, pressing a button, which beeped. Aura looked somewhat unhappily at him as she spoke.

"Mrh, are you not leaving it running?"

"I'm not turning it off," he answered his enamored wife with a slight smile in

spite of himself. “Just putting it into sleep mode. It’s meant to be used at night while you rest, because having it running at full blast would be bad for you.”

“Is that so?”

Her mournful look made him want to take it back and set the machine to full power again. Considering the temperature in the room was over thirty degrees even at night, it would probably keep things at a more reasonable level. However, he’d rather not risk it needlessly from the outset.

“I’ll get the lights. You good?” he asked instead.

“I am.”

With that, Zenjirou climbed out of bed and switched off the orange glow of the lamps. With the lights off and the shutters closed as well, the room fell into pitch-black darkness without even the illumination of starlight.

Still, Zenjirou had already spent over a year in the room and was quite familiar with it. He navigated the darkness without hesitation and felt his way into the bed where his love was waiting, crawling to the middle. Even in the darkness, Aura seemed able to make out the faintest outline of him and stretched out her hand, guiding him to her.

“Zenjirou...” she murmured.

“Nn, thanks,” he answered, joining hands, exchanging a kiss, and lying down by her side, joining them as man and woman.

“Good night, then,” she told him.

“Yeah, night.”

Queen and Prince Consort. When the royals from the Twin Kingdoms arrived, for better or worse, there would be a huge upheaval within the country. Taking that upheaval and smoothing it out would be their duty. Even Aura, a user of Space-Time Magic, had no knowledge of the difficulties that would face them. But that in and of itself was why they should allow themselves to rest peacefully like this while they could, their hearts concerned only with their feelings for each other.

The loving couple’s breaths sounded in their ears as they lay close enough to

each feel the warmth of their partner, sleeping quietly.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life 4.*

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Culture Clash

The maids working in the palace held Zenjirou in high regard. Or if you were to put it more casually, you could say they saw him as easy to deal with.

He didn't find fault with their work nor did he give orders on a whim. He wouldn't even severely rebuke them if certain circumstances were to lead to their work not being finished on time, as long as they had a concrete explanation for it. He always remembered to thank them when they finished their work as well.

None of these things were much on their own, but all together it created a comfortable environment, so it wasn't surprising that they thought so much of him.

Regardless, nothing in the world is perfect, so they did, of course, have some complaints. He rarely allowed them into the living room or bedroom, his strange reservations when it came to wielding authority often caused him not to provide clear orders, and his otherworldly origins meant that his culinary tastes were very different from the average Capuan.

Each of the maids had various complaints along those lines. However, if they were asked what they found *most* vexing, the majority of them would likely be of a single mind: his unusual fondness for bathing.

This morning, several of the maids were working intently to clean the absurdly large baths of the inner palace. With the high temperatures in Capua, such physical labor was generally done during the relatively cool hours of the morning and evening.

The two baths were big enough to pass for small swimming pools and had been drained of water. The young maids stood inside them, barefoot, holding long-handled brushes in both hands and scrubbing at the surfaces hard enough to work up a sweat on their brows.

It was simple hard labor with no hint of fun, so it was hardly surprising that

they would complain.

“Argh, my back is killing me!” cried the petite girl with short hair.

“The sound carries in here,” snapped the taller girl at her side, “so keep your stupid shouts down, Faye. Besides, you’re short so you’ve got it easier than me. I’m practically folded in half here.”

Underscoring those words, the second maid, Dolores, took her right hand from the brush’s handle and tried to punch the feeling into her back. There was some truth to what she said. Cleaning lower spaces did place more of a burden on a person the taller they were. Then again, using the long-handled brushes meant the burden on them was relatively insignificant. Dolores’s nerves were simply raw from the monotonous effort they were putting in, so it was little more than a general outburst.

Faye, however, wasn’t enough of a saint to let the comment pass.

“What are you on about? You’re way louder! After all, your volume’s proportional to your height, you colossus!”

“That can’t be true. If it were, we wouldn’t be able to hear you without straining our ears.”

“I’m not *that* small!”

The fact that they didn’t stop working even while flinging insults at each other was perhaps a point in their favor.

Cleaning the water from the floor meant that their skirts were hiked even higher than usual, making them all but miniskirts at least five centimeters from their knees. Seeing the young women with their legs bare, not even wearing socks, only sandals made of water drake leather, would ordinarily be rather titillating. However, in spite of their appealing outfits, they were standing bow-legged to get purchase in order to properly clean the floor, glaring at the surface like it had killed their parents, so there was nothing in the scene to cause arousal.

“I told you to be quiet, dwarf!”

“*You* be quiet, giant!”

The argument bounced off the large room's stone walls, and as it grew more vigorous, their work grew less so. Eventually, the mismatched pair were simply glaring at each other, not cleaning, and not moving around the room while they were supposed to be working.

There was no chance of their supervisor overlooking such disgraceful behavior. The middle-aged maid in the corner, who had been scrubbing her own section, picked up the bucket of water at her feet without speaking and flung its contents out.

"Huh?!"

"Gah?!"

The cold water suddenly splashing their bare legs caused the two younger women to jump and shriek. Still, considering the water had reached no higher than their skirts, the other woman must have held back.

The middle-aged maid glared at the pair with half-lidded eyes, remonstrating them with a sigh. "You've stopped. Continue your work."

"R-Right, sorry, Ms. Oraja."

"O-Our apologies, Ms. Oraja."

The two of them shook exaggeratedly as if they'd been physically struck by her rebuke, despite Oraja, who was in charge of the baths, not having been particularly harsh.

At first glance, their supervisor had no truly defining features. She was an average middle-aged maid. If one had to pick something to define her by, it would likely be her constantly half-lidded eyes.

The taciturn maid watched her subordinates frantically return to work before she seemed to lose interest and resumed her own. She hadn't remonstrated them quite as harshly as another supervisor, Ines (in charge of cleaning) would have done. Nor did she strike them like the maid in charge of cooking, Vanessa, would have.

Still, even "the three problem maids" wanted to avoid her glare. And there was a single reason for that: Oraja would wordlessly watch them work, with no

expression on her face, and then judge their efforts to be sufficient or not. If she decided that the work was insufficient for a maid of the inner palace, it would be a decision made without emotion. She would simply quietly inform the head maid, Amanda, of their failure.

Oraja's stance was that work was something you learned by observing and doing, while instruction was needed only as an introduction, and her role was to evaluate her subordinates as useful or not. It was the opposite of Vanessa's and Ines's methods, who saw it as their duty to either beat the skills into or coach the younger maids, respectively. Even with their shameful nickname, the young trio always reflexively straightened upon receiving an admonition from Oraja.

Faye and Dolores returned to working properly, so it was a superb method in that respect, although the girls themselves probably found it hard to bear. For a while, silence reigned, with the only sound being the scraping of the brushes over the wet floor.

Dolores was skilled at dissembling, but Oraja forcing silence from Faye's overly energetic self was rather impressive. Still, if Faye had the personality required to devote herself silently to work for a long while, she would never have become one of the problem maids in the first place. She wasn't daft enough to neglect her work further after having been scolded already, but she gradually grew more and more restless before suddenly realizing that she hadn't heard a word from their other roommate, Letti, since entering the room.

While Letti certainly took things at her own pace and was a woman of few words, it was rare for her not to speak at all while they were working.

Making sure to continue her scrubbing, Faye snuck a glance to the side to see Letti's usually dull face and droopy eyes filled with determination as she worked vigorously enough to set her chest, prominent even through her uniform, swinging.

Huh? she thought to herself, not understanding the uncharacteristic behavior from her friend. *Why is she being so diligent?*

As Faye considered the situation, the other girl finished scrubbing her own area and walked over with splashing noises on the wet floor.

"I'm done, so I'll help you now. Where should I start?" she asked, speaking

rather quickly for someone as easygoing as she usually was. This was even stranger; she would normally never be so fastidious.

Faye forgot to answer the question and simply whispered back, “What’s going on, Letti?”

Her unspoken question—when had the other girl become so earnest?—made Letti open her eyes wide and offer a surprising answer. “Did you forget? If we don’t finish up soon, we’ll be last to do our shopping during lunch.”

“Ah?!”

“Huh?!”

The word “shopping” made not only Faye cry out but also Dolores a second later. After a moment of shock, a look of understanding spread across their faces. They had indeed forgotten. This was the day, which came every three months, when the trader would be at the inner palace.

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Less than an hour later...

“Hurry up!”

“Faye, if you run in the corridors, Head Maid Amanda will get angry with you.”

“It’s your fault for forgetting your purse, Letti! Argh, we’re so late!”

“We’d have been done long ago if you hadn’t forgotten and slacked off in the baths.”

“Just hurry! We don’t have time to argue!”

Having gotten through their cleaning of the bathroom as quickly as possible, the three troublemakers sprinted down the halls of the inner palace. Of course, the word “sprinted” only applied to their own perception of their movements; in truth, they were moving at what could be described as “a brisk pace” at most.

Regardless of anything else, they were maids of the inner palace, so they wouldn’t cross any truly catastrophic lines. But it was their habit of straying so close to the line that had gotten them their moniker. So the three of them

moved at the quickest pace their position afforded them and changed into outdoor footwear at the rear entrance, then crossed the courtyard through dazzling sunlight and headed for another building.

The inner palace was rather small when taking the size of the country into account, but it was still far from being made up of a single building. The main area where Zenjirou slept was at the center, with several other buildings inside a garden, all surrounded by a wall. Everything within that wall was part of the inner palace.

The building they were heading for now was on the outermost edge. It was nearly part of the wall itself and separated the isolated space made by the inner palace from the outer world. This meant that unless they had some specific business there, the young maids were not normally allowed to approach it.

As they sped across the courtyard, three other maids appeared from their destination, chatting.

“Oh, Carina...”

“Kate?”

“Crystal!”

The other three noticed their approach and grinned at them with slightly different smiles than they had just been wearing. They lifted their hands, showing off the fabrics and small perfume bottles they had bought.

The three problem maids all looked sour. They had been beaten to the sale. The trader brought many one-of-a-kind items, and the fact that such items sold well was much the same from one world to another. If he had presented a particularly good find, these other three would have already snapped it up. And judging from their victorious smiles, that was a definite possibility.

On top of that, as they passed each other, Carina gave them a surreptitious V-sign with her index and middle fingers. Considering the Capuans’ lack of an alphabet, the gesture hadn’t originally existed there, and it was a sign of Zenjirou’s influence on them.

“Grrh!”

Faye's coworkers' triumphant smiles set her growling and made her want to lay into them, but she knew this wasn't the time. Another group might get ahead of them, and that would be beyond stupid.

"Let's hurry, Dolores, Letti!" she declared instead.

"Ah, wait, Faye! We might be outside, but if the head maids catch us running like this, we'll get in so much trouble!"

"Fayyyye, wait up!"

Dolores and Letti both quickened their paces to catch up with Faye as she squared her small shoulders and rushed off in a huff.

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The group entered the big room to find a well-built man of middle age sitting cross-legged on the carpet, presiding over an array of goods with a shrewd smile.

There were cloths of many colors and metal bottles the size of their thumbs, filled with perfumed oils, along with accessories like rings and necklaces.

"Ah, so wonderful!" Faye cried out joyfully.

As she was about to rush over to peruse the items, she caught sight of a figure by the wall. The person sitting there, glaring so strongly that she could practically *hear* the look, was none other than Amanda, the head maid in charge of all matters in the inner palace. Her figure was, as ever, inhumanly perfect, such that it made one think even the creases in her clothes formed by her position obeyed her will.

Amanda normally spent her time in the main building, giving instructions to each of the department heads and maintaining a comfortable environment for Zenjirou, but the reason for her presence here was that she was also responsible for negotiating with and observing the traders.

The room boasted six soldiers with spears in their hands as well, but while in the room, Amanda had an exceptional right of command over them. The maid was putting her life on the line to maintain order within the inner palace, and there were six armed men ready to follow her instructions.

The fact that the trader's bright business smile didn't falter despite the harsh look and naked weapons was proof that the chubby man was not a supplier to the royal family for nothing, and that he had more courage than average. He remained seated as he smiled at the three new arrivals.

"Oh my, Madams Faye, Dolores, and Letti. A pleasure to see you once again. I believe I have just the items for all of you. Please, take a look," he said, bidding them sit in front of the goods.

Remembering his customers in spite of only seeing them once every three months, and immediately being able to put a name to each face, spoke highly of his capability as a trader.

Almost as if drawn in by his smile, the trio knelt on the carpet. They could feel the wordless pressure warning them not to bring shame upon the maids of the inner palace, along with an implicit threat behind it, so they weren't as expressive as usual, but the rarity of the opportunity here was something they had looked forward to, and it was enough for them to overcome their nervousness.

"Oh, I've never seen this pattern before. It's a little strange but wonderful," Dolores mused.

"An impressive spot, Madam Dolores. This pattern has become rather in vogue within the capital. The supply is much lower than the demand, so that is the only sample I currently have."

"I might get a comb, perhaps? My favorite one lost some of its teeth the other day."

"In that case, I would recommend this one, Madam Letti. It was shaped from the shell of a great ocean turtle. In addition to the item's beauty, each tooth is finely shaped, so I believe it is the best comb you will find."

"Hmm, what should I get? I'd like a cute ring or necklace, but I couldn't wear it at work..."

"Madam Faye, what would you say to this hairband? My own humble opinion is that it would allow you to look fashionable without getting in the way of your work, unlike rings and necklaces."

Their eyes sparkling, they surveyed the items before them as the rotund merchant continued his sales pitches. The fact that he had nonchalantly recommended a comb with few teeth for Letti's curly hair, and a band that was suitable for even Faye's short hair, was doubtless another sign of his abilities.

The crisp words from the trader gradually caused the maids to forget the pressure emanating from Amanda as the three of them leaned forward and put their hands on the carpet, their gazes fixed on the products.

Falling to all fours, looking greedily at the items while counting the coins in their purses, they were far from being models of the refined inner palace maid, but Amanda didn't show any sign of coming down on them for it. Whatever else she might have been, the head maid wasn't as uptight or lacking in compassion as the younger women feared. She was accommodating enough to turn a blind eye to a certain extent in situations like this, which served to relieve the workers' stress.

"Hey, which do you think suits me best?" Dolores asked Faye brightly as she held up various pieces of cloth.

"Uhh, I think that one with the blue lines is pretty."

"Hmm? It's a better fabric, but I don't think it would fit Dolores right. I think this tawny one would suit you better."

No matter the world, something that never changes is the sense of satisfaction and enjoyment one gets from fulfilling one's desire to buy things on a limited budget. In fact, if someone had an unlimited budget and could just take whatever they liked, shopping likely wouldn't be as much fun.

Eventually, the trio used up their budgets and bought what they wanted. Then the topic changed.

"Thank you all very much. Now, please take a look at this," the trader said, his smile not fading at all as he lined up small silver bottles in front of them.

"What are these?"

"Perfumed oils?"

"Whoa, so pretty. The only silver one I have is an heirloom from my mother."

The three of them spoke in turn, their eyes growing wide. In general, perfumed oils were stored in bottles made from wood, copper, or silver, with the quality increasing respectively.

Wooden-bottled oils were practically disposable and for commoners, so being low-level nobles, the girls didn't own many. Yet the silver ones were certainly high-class items.

Seeing their excitement, the skilled trader's smile deepened. "Please, feel free to examine them. I prepared the contents, and I am rather proud of them. Each has a different scent." As he spoke, he pushed the palm of his hand out invitingly.

"Oh, but..."

"Our budget."

"Yeah, it's almost all gone..."

Amanda spoke to the saddened maids from her position by the wall, where she had remained silent up until then. "You need not worry about the cost. These are a kind gift from Sir Zenjirou. Choose one to your liking."

The trio's reaction was truly dramatic.

"What? No way!"

"Sir Zenjirou said that?"

"Really?"

Their earlier depression promptly turned on its head as they once more moved forward, practically devouring the silver bottles with their eyes. Each bottle was about the same size—that of their thumb—but there were a variety of designs carved into them. One had something akin to a spider's web, another had twining vine leaves, and yet another had a bas relief of a water dragon arching its neck.

"To explain simply, from the right we have: rosefang, warm chamomile, peppermint, red lily, spikenard, fragrant horndrake, eyeless snake, jeweled water drake, and muskrat."

"No way?! Fragrant horndrake?"

“I’ll have the jeweled water drake!”

“Ah, I like peppermint, though maybe the muskrat...”

The three maids’ interests focused on the faunal scents. This was just what the trader had expected. Floral oils were generally easier to cultivate and harvest the plants for, but the faunal ones carried the risks of hunting, making them more upmarket.

Some people preferred the floral oils simply for the smells, but with the opportunity to get what would ordinarily be very expensive for free, it was human nature to gravitate towards the most valuable options. If anything, Letti was an exception for being drawn to the oil that best matched her preferences rather than the most costly, high-class ones.

A vein started pulsing in Amanda’s temple at their display of raw greed, but she decided not to say anything...at least not *here*.

The three younger women didn’t notice the sharpness and chill in the head maid’s look as they each picked up their chosen bottle.

“Right, I’ll have the fragrant horndrake!”

“I’ll take the jeweled water drake. It doesn’t feel real...”

“Hm, I’ve decided. I’ll go with the peppermint after all.”

Seeing their fidgeting and excitement as they smiled widely, Amanda was compassionate enough that she felt it would be improper to lecture them on manners and courtesy at the moment. Besides, scolding them in front of outsiders—as long as they hadn’t gone too far—was not something she was keen on doing.

Swallowing her reproach and lecture, the head maid’s face and voice were equally emotionless as she spoke to the maids now that they had finished shopping.

“Those are your choices, then? Use them well, and be sure to thank Sir Zenjirou. However, half of them should be used to mix with the soap when you bathe. You will then need to report to him how they feel to use. Is that understood?”

Soap was the invention that Zenjirou had most recently devoted himself to making. He had managed a viscous liquid, but it still stank of the oil.

Hearing the ulterior motive behind the expensive gifts, each of the three reacted differently.

“What?”

“Oh, so that’s why.”

“Huh? We need to mix it with the soap? What a waste.”

However...

“I said ‘*understood*?’”

The trio seemed to sense the danger incipient in the cold gaze as they corrected themselves.

“R-Right!”

“Understood, Head Maid.”

“I understand, ma’am.”

They straightened up and bowed in unison.

Once the younger maids had left, the room fell silent. The six soldiers against the walls and at the entrance were forbidden from talking inside, so it meant that the only people in the room were, for all intents and purposes, Amanda and the middle-aged trader. If both held their tongues, the silence would continue indefinitely.

However, Amanda didn’t intend to preserve that silence for longer than necessary.

“Allow me to once again offer my thanks,” she began, bowing her head in a picture-perfect gesture.

The merchant’s lips curled into an amiable smile underneath his deep black mustache as he waved a hand. “No, no, not at all. It is an honor beyond compare to be able to offer my wares to those working in the inner palace.”

“I see,” Amanda answered, withdrawing the words, not seeing a need to refute him. Regardless, the thanks she had offered were valid.

The man was a purveyor of goods for the royal family. While he was himself a commoner, he was also a merchant wealthy enough to put lower nobles to shame. With this in mind, his wares were all high-class, and he would ordinarily not have anything the young maids would be able to buy with their own funds. For example, it would be like making an appointment on Earth for a manager of a high-class jeweler like Harry Winston, Cartier, or Bulgari to come to a private home just to purchase a single piece from them for less than ten thousand yen. It would not be worth the effort.

Even so, the man's smile was no mere falsification. "You truly need not let it concern you. Her Majesty herself buys from me periodically, so my turnover is never in the red, and above all, my dealings with Sir Zenjirou have gained me things even a mountain of gold could not."

The objects in question were cultural items from Earth. Flat buttons sewn on with four holes in the surface, for instance. Capua only had buttons that protruded from the clothing as a form of decoration, so these flat buttons had the potential to cause a small cultural revolution.

With flat buttons in use, they could even develop new styles with buttons hidden on the insides of clothes, which would be particularly valuable to laborers as their size and style meant they wouldn't be in the way. The merchant had plans to design military dress using these types of buttons and to sell them to the royal army before long.

Other things Zenjirou had done included showing him screws, screw caps on plastic bottles, and the pump on a shampoo bottle. All of these required significant engineering to reproduce, but once mass production became viable, they were utterly groundbreaking developments. If even one of them panned out as expected, he'd recoup his investment in the blink of an eye.

"If this allows me to remain in Sir Zenjirou's good graces, there could be no greater joy, truly," he said, keeping his ambitions to himself as he respectfully bowed his head along with his modest words.

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Back in the inner palace, a source of resentment amongst the maids was once again Zenjirou's love of baths. This resentment didn't just stem from the daily

effort of cleaning them each day. A large part of it was that he had come from another world and was recommending, albeit inadvertently, his own bathing habits to the maids in this world, and the recommendation was practically an order.

Capua was blessed with large water reserves, so washing the body was a practice already well-rooted in their culture. However, the climate was also obscenely hot, so even noblewomen were less likely to *bathe* rather than simply *rinse*. Therefore, Zenjirou's "recommendation" naturally saw some resistance from the women of this world.

Still, a year had passed, and the trio's views had started to change.

"Phew, we're finally done for the day."

"Aw, looks like no one's here."

"Of course not. Look how late it is."

It was very late at night at this point, and their voices echoed through the changing room. At this hour, their master and Aura had both bathed already, as had the rest of the young maids. Their late finish was, of course, to be expected, as they were on bath duty at the moment. Much like a cook's lunch came after their patrons were all fed, those entrusted with the baths bathed after everyone else.

"Right, let's get this finished," Faye declared.

"Wash yourself properly and not just to get it over with. Sir Zenjirou is surprisingly fastidious about cleanliness," Dolores scolded her in turn.

"That's right, Faye, we finally get to have a bath. We should savor it."

The pitch-black room was no impediment to them as they had the general layout of the space memorized, so the three of them chatted away as they swiftly disrobed, setting aside the soot-stained clothing from the heating apparatus.

"Uhh... I'm sure it was around here," Dolores commented after undressing, feeling around for the LED lantern and finally pushing the switch. "Ah, got it!"

The room was suddenly filled with a bright light.

“Agh.”

“Oh, right, Sir Zenjirou said we could use the light as well.”

Their eyes scorched by the brightness after having grown used to the dark, Letti sounded much happier with the realization as she blinked the spots from her eyes. As she’d said, permission to use the light was a recent thing—until then, they’d had to bathe by the light of an oil lamp.

Zenjirou had originally tried to use as little light as possible to prolong the life of the batteries, but after asking the maids to test the body soap, he’d needed to reverse his judgment. Using soap meant that the floor became far more slippery, and accidents in the bath could be surprisingly dangerous. When comparing the batteries’ lifespans and the safety of the maids, the former became much less important.

“I’ll take the light, then,” Dolores chirped, holding a towel to cover the front of her body in one hand and lifting the lamp in the other.

“Ah, you’ve forgotten your perfume,” Faye warned.

“Jeez, you can just bring it with you. I’ve got my hands full here.”

“Fine, sure thing,” Faye answered, holding a towel against her body with one hand and the two tiny containers in the other.

“Ah, wait up,” Letti protested, trailing behind them as Dolores led them into the bathroom with the lamp raised.

The baths were directly behind the door of the changing room. Huge plumes of steam rose from the water, and the temperature was even warmer than outside despite it still being the hottest season of the year.

It was little wonder that Faye let out a noise of displeasure and screwed up her face. “Damn it,” she said, “it’s not just hot, I can barely breathe. Let’s hurry this up and get out of here.”

Having said her piece, she strode quickly to one of the baths.

“Hey, don’t just head for the cold bath. You need to wash off with warm water first,” Dolores scolded in the direction of Faye’s bare backside. She placed the light on a stand by the wall and used her now-free hand to pick up a bucket

as she walked towards the other bath.

“That’s right, Faye,” added Letti, “Take a proper bath. Washing in the hot water feels great.”

Out of all the maids, Letti was probably the one who most enjoyed the warm baths each day. She had been fond of them even before they’d been recommended by royalty, so she was one of the few who had adapted without issue.

“She’s right,” Dolores agreed. “I get why you don’t like it in this weather, but hot water gets your hair and body much cleaner. Give it up already and get over here.”

Dolores, in contrast, didn’t care for the process, but she understood the utility.

“All right, already. Fine, let’s get the worst part over with! Actually, if we don’t hurry it up, we’ll bump into our supervisors!”

At the other extreme was Faye, who utterly loathed bathing. She had always been one to simply rinse herself off, more like a bird bathing than anything else, so it was hardly a surprise that she disliked bath time.

“That’s true, I definitely don’t want to get caught in the bath by them,” Dolores answered with a shrug of her slender shoulders.

The head maids under Amanda all took late baths due to the amount of work they had. So if the trio finished up quickly, they wouldn’t have to deal with the uncomfortable situation of bathing at the same time as their superiors.

Faye took a wooden bowl and plunged it into a similarly wooden bucket that held the liquid soap, scooping out some of the contents.

“Ugh, this really reeks,” she complained.

“And that’s why Sir Zenjirou bought us expensive oils to get rid of the smell. Come on, try it out.”

“Eh he he, I’ll smell of peppermint. It’ll be great.”

Each of the three used their own bowls to gather some soap and then immediately opened the lids of the tiny bottles of perfumed oil. If anyone

particularly sensitive to smells had been around when they opened the three different scents right next to each other, that person surely would have disapproved. However, the young maids' noses were not that attuned. If anything, the mix of scents drowned out the oily stench of the homemade soap, so their expressions eased somewhat.

They inhaled deeply over the open containers, enjoying the fragrances.

"So, this is what fragrant horndrake smells like. Yup, it really gives off that classy air."

"I've got jeweled water drake. *Jeweled water drake*. Apparently, fishermen who get their hands on some when it washes up can buy a new house *and* a new boat. I wonder how much you'd get for this bottle."

"I've got my peppermint. Hmm, it's a nice smell. I really do like it the best."

"Hey, Dolores," Faye interjected, "how's that jeweled water drake smell? Let me have a sniff."

"Ah, I want a try too. I'm after Faye," Letti added.

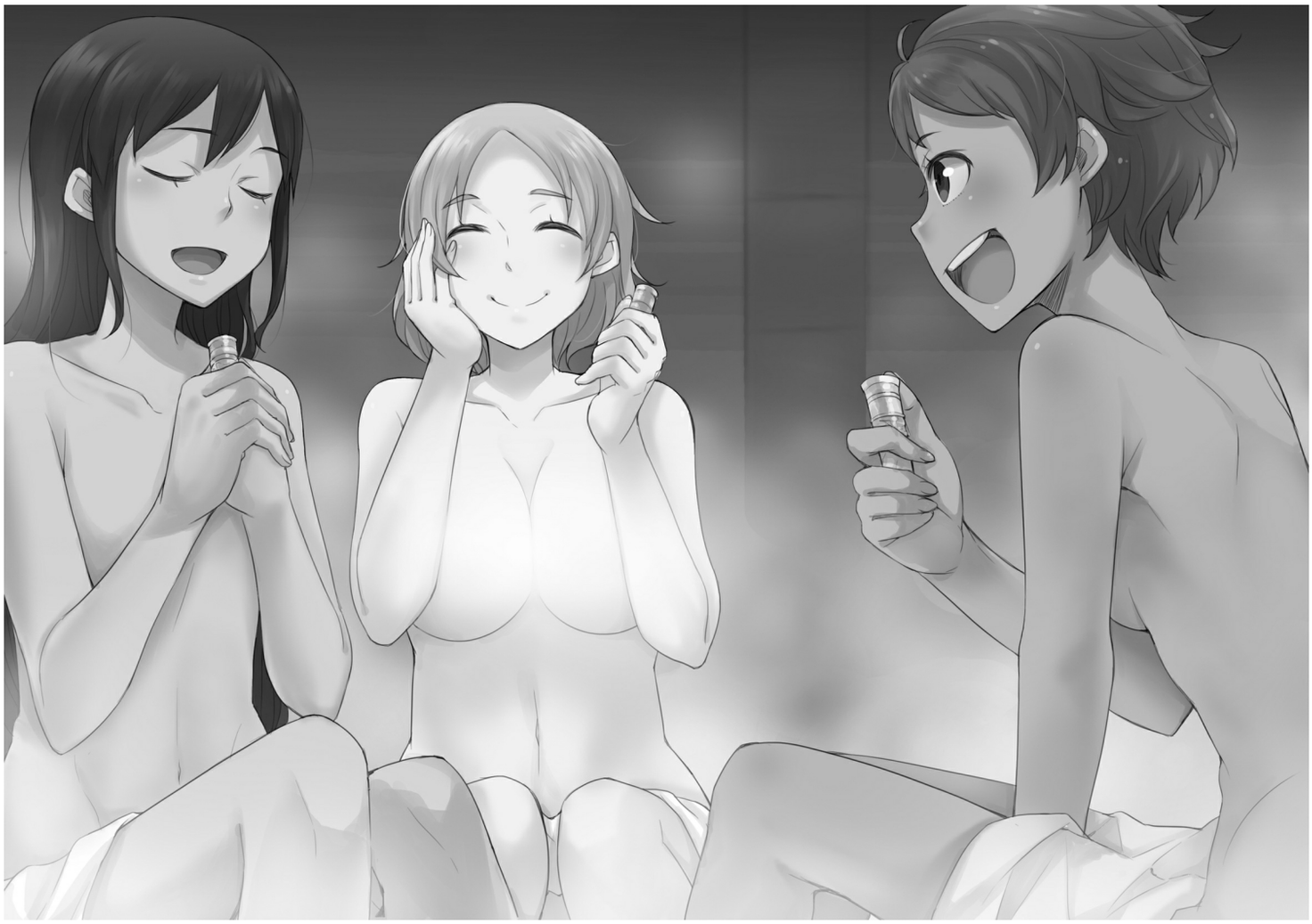
"Sure, as long as you both lend me yours."

The three of them passed around the different perfumes. At the moment, it seemed like there was no great difference between maids in this world and high school girls back on Earth. The scene was essentially the same as the "give me a bite" scene one might see in food plazas and the like.

The exchange continued for a few moments, each of them enjoying the various scents. They soon forgot that they were sitting naked on chairs in the bathroom, just enjoying their chat about which options they liked and didn't.

The young women had only small towels covering their laps and were moving their hands expansively, so Faye's modest chest, Dolores's own completely flat one, and Letti's—which was vast enough that it looked like she'd taken some of her friends' shares as well—were completely unobstructed.

They sat around savoring the scents for quite some time, none of them keeping track of how long they had been there.



“Ah? How long are we going to keep this up?” Dolores—always the most rational of the three—suddenly pointed out. “We’re supposed to be testing them on the soap.”

“Ugh, that’s right...”

“We’re really supposed to mix this with the soap? It’s such a waste.”

Part of the reason they had allowed their prattling to go on for so long may well have been the unconscious thought that they’d be throwing the oils away.

“I agree with you, but that’s how it is. Come on.”

“Urgh, fine.”

“We should start with just a drop, right?”

As the three grumbled, they tilted the bottles over the bowls of soap. Droplets fell in with a *splish* and vanished into the mass.

“Nothing. I can barely smell it.”

They mixed in another drop.

“Hmm? Maybe a bit more?”

Carefully, drop by painstaking drop, they mixed in their precious oils...

“Hey, it doesn’t reek anymore.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Aw, look how much we used up all at once.”

By the time the perfumes started to win out over the oily stench, about a tenth of each bottle had been depleted. While the loss left their hearts saddened, the sacrifice had by no means been for nothing.

“Smells good.” Dolores smiled in satisfaction after washing off the soap with the bucket and sniffing her arm.

“It better. We used so much oil that if it didn’t help, I’d probably cry.” Faye, for her part, still had some lingering regrets about the loss, and her smile was much fainter.

“Yup, the soap is really great, though. Look, my finger just glides over my skin.

It doesn't smell if you add the perfume, so I'd honestly use it every day like this."

While it was true that Letti had liked bathing to begin with, the perfumed soap had certainly brightened her mood as she smiled happily, brushing a finger across her skin.

"You shouldn't worry about it too much, Faye," Dolores reminded her. "Sir Zenjirou gave them to us, so it's not like we had to pay for them ourselves."

"We didn't, but it's still a waste having to use it like this when we finally got some really high-class stuff we couldn't buy on our own."

Even with the regrets they were voicing, the three all rinsed off and headed for the bath, where they sank into a pool of water that seemed big enough to swim in.

Faye preferred the colder water and was immediately sending glances towards the bath next to them, but she decided to spend some more time with the others first. Leaning her head back on the edge of the bath to look up at the sky, she splashed her arms and legs around, stretching out in a slightly inconsiderate way.

Suddenly, she had a thought and voiced a question. "Oh, yeah, what did Carina end up getting? She was so smug about it with her victory sign, so it was probably pretty good. Do either of you know?"

"I only heard secondhand, but apparently it's musk," Dolores answered easily, serving up the gossip from where she sat with her hair bound up out of the way of the water.

"What?! No way, musk?!"

"The one from the Northern Continent?"

Faye and Letti asked their questions in unison, both shocked. Musk was a fragrance obtained from an animal called a musk deer. It was common knowledge that faunal scents were higher-class than floral as a rule, but when it came to musk, the animal itself wasn't the issue.

The Southern Continent was primarily the domain of large reptiles, with

practically no large mammals. Inevitably, that meant there were no musk deer on the continent. Therefore, *all* of the musk fragrance came from inter-continental trade. Since one in ten such ships were said to sink on the way, everything that took the trade route was unavoidably expensive. Even in comparison to Faye's and Dolores's fragrances, musk was a step above in terms of status. Simply wearing it at a high society function could well become a point of conversation.

"Damn, that little minx! I'll have to get some off her later!"

The excitement of the news seemed to have warmed her up even further as Faye threw her fist in the air and hauled herself up.

"Hey, don't just stand up like that! You sprayed me with water. You already getting out or something?" Dolores asked, wiping the spray off her face with a scowl.

"Hardly. It's too warm. I'm getting into the cold water," Faye answered. "If I just left now, I'd probably die from the blood rushing to my head."

She immediately put actions to words, moving to the other bath. Now that Faye had mentioned it, Dolores noticed she had grown rather warm herself and that she'd not have the best night's sleep if she just left the warm water immediately. She decided it would be a good idea to follow her friend's example and then turned to Letti.

"What about you?" she asked their remaining roommate.

"Yeah, it'd be nice to cool off...but I just feel like I'm forgetting something."

"Forgetting something? What?"

"If I knew what, I wouldn't have forgotten, would I?"

Letti tilted her head with a vaguely troubled expression, each movement sending her breasts swaying in the water. Regardless, her misgivings couldn't resist the siren call of the cool water, and she headed to the other bath with Dolores.

"Ahhh, I love that chill!" Faye cheered.

"Phew, that's true. By the way, Faye, Letti thinks she's forgotten something.

Any idea what it could be?”

“Nope.”

“Hey, at least give it a little thought first! And why are you paddling around in the bath again? If the head maid saw you, she’d—”

That was as far as Dolores got before her expression froze.

“The head maid?”

“Ah ha ha... Dolores, I, uh, I remembered...”

“What a coincidence, I just realized as well.”

Dolores’s face twisted as Letti laughed drily, both of their gazes moving in the same direction... Towards the door to the changing room.

“What’s wrong with you two?” asked Faye, the only one of the three not to understand the situation, still paddling away.

The faint sounds from behind the door weren’t their imagination, and considering the younger maids had all bathed already, there was only one conclusion. At this rate, Faye’s future as a maid would be in jeopardy, so Dolores—not so callous towards her roommate as to ignore the risk—gave her a warning mixed with a sigh.

“Faye, this isn’t me being mean. Stop your swimming. It’s too late to escape now.”

“What? Escape?” Faye asked, her feet coming to rest on the bottom of the bath just as the door opened, letting several people inside.

“Oh my,” said Amanda, leading the group. “I thought there was someone here because of the clothes. That would be you?”

“Honestly, you three. I don’t intend to put restrictions on your free time, but you have an early morning tomorrow, so you should be more responsible,” Ines added.

“There’s no real harm, Ines. Some naked bonding with our young colleagues will do us good. Why not get them to wash our backs? It’s been a while.”

Amanda was leading the group, with Ines (in charge of cleaning) and Vanessa

(the head of cooking) following with their own comments. Farther back were Emily and Oraja (in charge of the gardens and baths, respectively), both of whom remained silent.

The heads of every department were gathered in front of them.

“R-Right, we ended up spending a while on the soap...” Faye managed, finally grasping the situation.

“Pardon me,” Dolores said carefully, maintaining a polite expression.

“Ah ha ha... E-Excuse me, ma’ams...” Letti added, trying to somehow get out of the circumstances they had found themselves in.

The three caught a glimmer of hope as they all rose from the water and bowed. It was not meant to be, however, as the seniors did not silently watch them leave.

“Wait right there,” Amanda instructed. “As we are all here, we will verify that you can wash yourselves fully. You may be called upon by Sir Zenjirou at any time, after all.”

“Indeed, particularly you, Faye,” Ines added. “You do have a tendency to find caring for your hair and body to be too much of a hassle.”

“Well, that’s how it is,” Vanessa finished. “There’s no harm in learning how to take care of yourself while you’re young, so recognize that and get back over here.”

Having received orders from all their superiors, no refusal was possible.

“Right...”

“Understood, ma’ams.”

“Thank you for your care.”

The three problem maids answered them in turn with sighs, resigning themselves to their fates and heeding the summons.

The time they had spent enjoying themselves together now held an air of tension as it became a formal instruction on proper bathing by their superiors.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE 3

Carlos Zenkichi Capua:

The official name of the first prince of Capua.

Author: Tsunehiko Watanabe

Illustrator: Jyuu Ayakura

Swarm raptors.

The enemy trampled the soldiers as they came into view on the road. They were bipedal, covered entirely in emerald scales—carnivorous drakes about a head taller than an average human, and of middling size for their kind.

The tall woman worthy of the moniker "supermodel," Fatima Guillén, plied Zenjirou with praise, all on her brother's orders.
"Absolutely wonderful..."
THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE 3

Octavia instructed him in magic. A simple smile engendered a sense of warmth for the young woman.
"So, let us begin training your control."
THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE 3

"Is that all you want? I see... You must be full.
The rest is for papa, then."
The child suckled for all he was worth as his mother held him, his father watching from a short distance away. The peaceful period continued until the baby moved his mouth away from Aura's breast.
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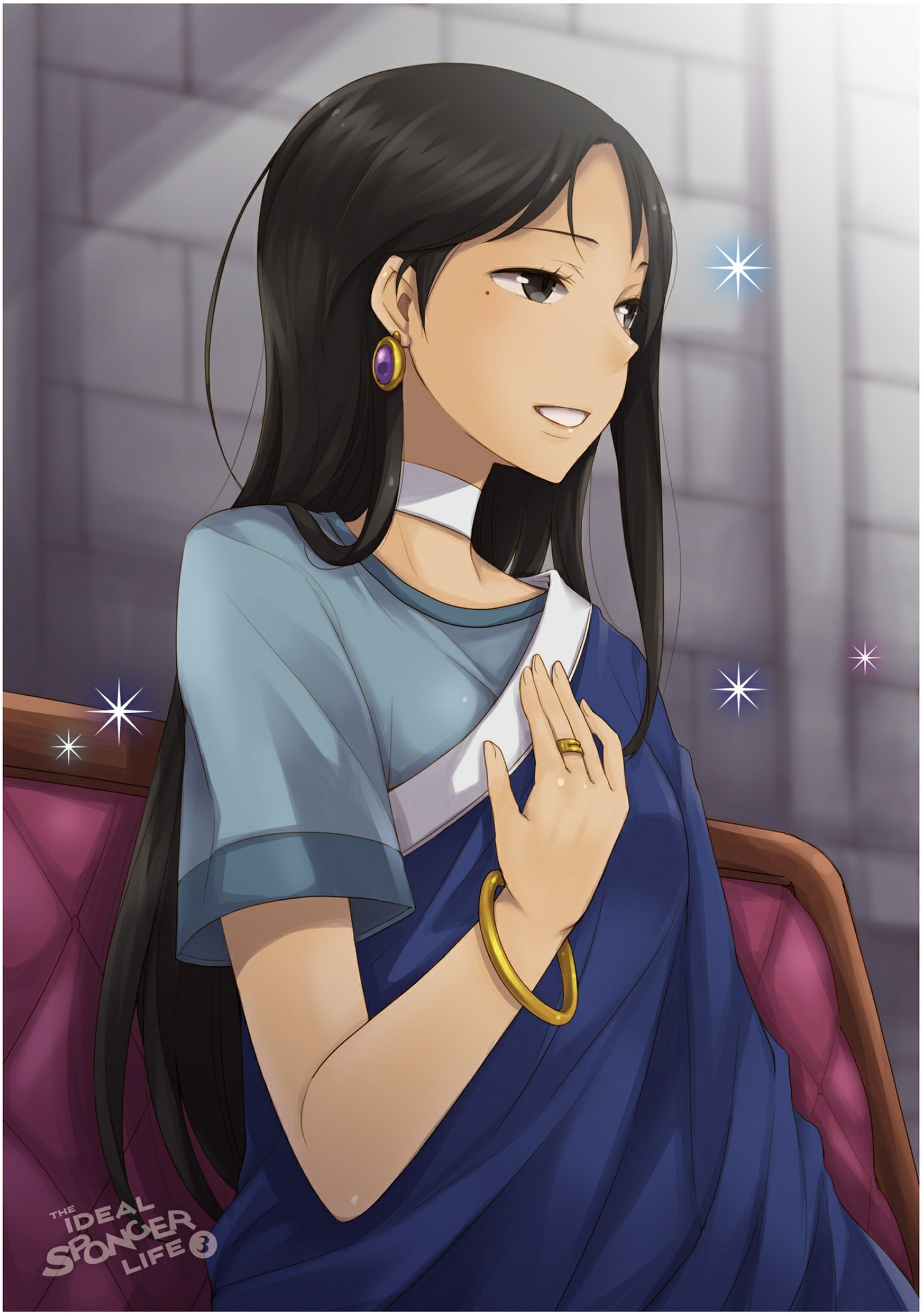
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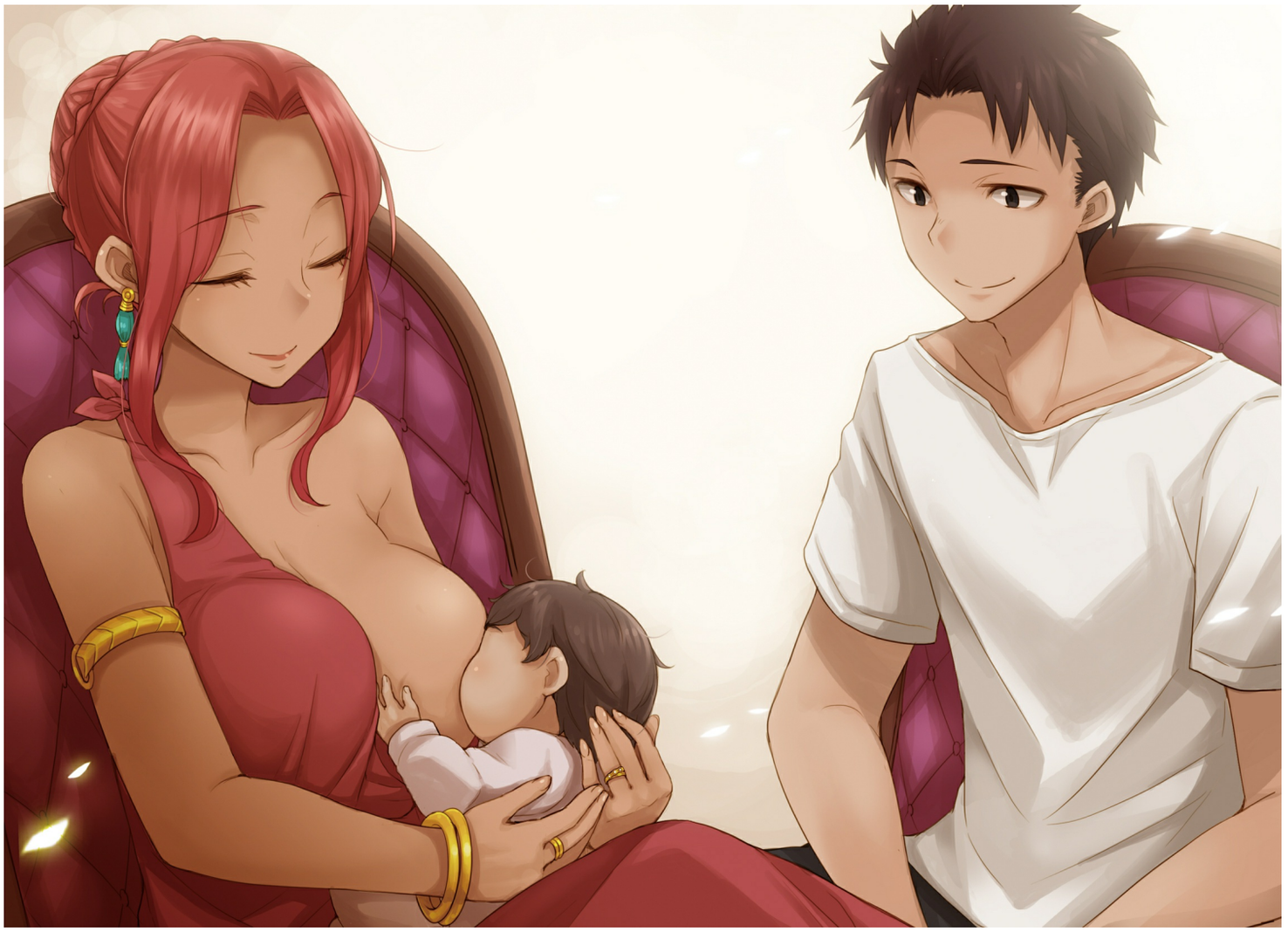

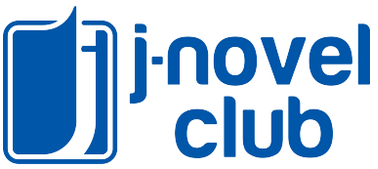

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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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