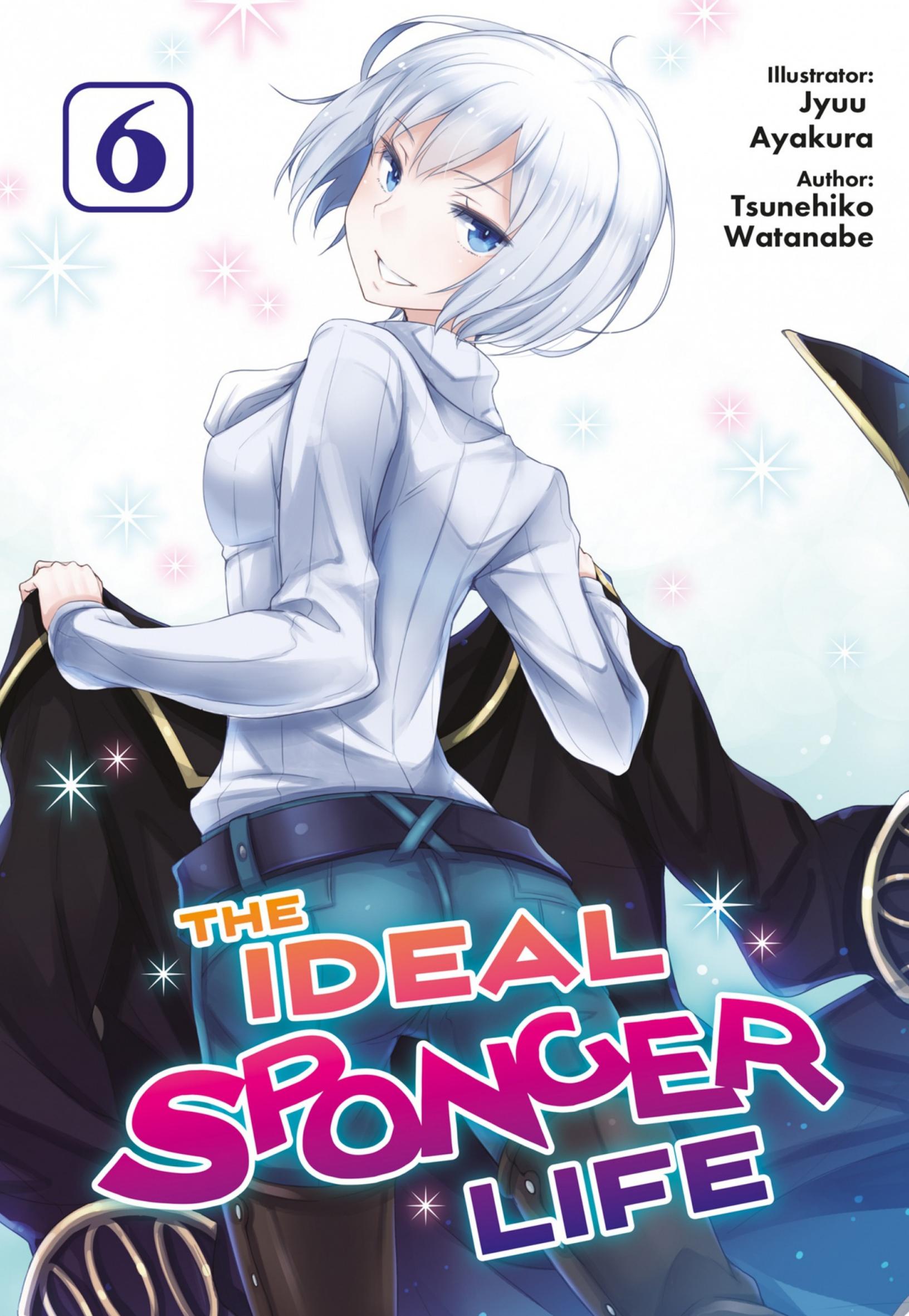


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THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

INTRODUCTION

A SPONGER IN DEMAND

Since being summoned to a new world, **Zenjirou** has remained steadfast in his loyalty to **Queen Aura**.

Now, he is in the enviable position of being **"proposed"** to by **Princess Freya**, who couldn't be more different from his wife.

Freya is **still in her teens, with pale, clear skin and a delicate build that engenders a protective instinct**.

She also proactively lays on the charm towards him.

How will he answer her proposal?
What will become of the happily married couple?

All this and more in the gripping sixth volume!
Just inside these pages!

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE 6



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Prologue — New Year's Celebrations in Capua

The calendar used across the Southern Continent, including Capua, defined its months by the waxing and waning of the moon, adjusting via intercalary months to create a lunisolar calendar.

Such a calendar did not have 365 days in its year—it usually had around 350 days, while years with an intercalary month (once every four years) had more than 380.

The system was bizarre to Zenjirou, used to Earth's solar calendar as he was. After all, depending on the year, there could be a whole month's difference. However, even lunar calendars had the concept of years and had both the end and beginning of the year, which was naturally a customary celebration.

Capuan celebrations had a lot in common with Japan's New Year's Day. Obviously, that didn't mean the temple bells rang on its eve, and there wasn't a custom of eating soba or celebrating the first sunrise, nor was there a first shrine visit of the year.

Taking each detail into account in that way perhaps makes the comparison between them seem rather exaggerated. However, the generalities of a quiet cleanup at the end of the year followed by three days of celebration as the new year began were common features.

The final day of the year was spent quickly and quietly tidying up. Then the first day of the new year was usually spent at home. Things grew lively inside but didn't spill outside the home much.

The second day held the first big event. There was a belief that things bought on the second day of the year were long-lasting, so people flocked to do their shopping. The savvy merchants could not let such an opportunity for earnings pass, so it had become their busiest day, and they did anything they could to drive up business.

As a result, this second day of the year was one where—even in the capital—every merchant could obtain permission to set up stalls in the parks and main streets, leading to those streets being packed with shoppers.

“New tableware! If you need it, this is the one for you! Take a look at the tightness of that grain, and the oil’s right through it! It’s a little pricey, but it’ll last as long as you will!”

“You over there, ma’am! If you’re looking for cloth, then take a look here! Just take this cloth! It’s so sturdy, but it’s soft on the skin too. Make some pants or a shirt out of this and it’ll last for an eternity!”

“Cleavers, knives, pots! If you’re buying iron goods, don’t miss your chance! After all, the spirits of space and time bless our citizens on this day! If you’re not buying today, when *will* you?”

This behavior was a matter of course for ill-mannered stall managers, but even the big stores that usually had their pick of customers had assistants outside, calling potential patrons over.

As the sales talk claimed, Capua’s traditions held that this second day of the year was one where the spirits of space and time—who usually only smiled on the royal family itself—now gave their blessings to the country as a whole. That was what formed the basis of the idea regarding the longevity of goods bought on that day.

Of course, there was no truth to it, but after hundreds of years, it was more of a tradition than a superstition. In recent years, the concept had even developed to claim that because the spirits were connected with the royal family, their home—the capital—would receive the strongest blessings.

It *sounded* plausible, so despite there being no factual basis for the rumors, plenty of people came to do business in the capital. The city profited from the influx, but there was a commensurate burden on the soldiers maintaining order there during this time.

“Hey! No fighting in the streets! Do you really wanna spend the new year in the cells?!”

“You’re blocking the street. Quit haggling for the new year! The spirits won’t have anything to do with you cheapskates!”

“Don’t push, don’t push... I said don’t push! Quit it or we’ll have you!”

Similar cries were roared out by the leather-armor-clad soldiers as sweat ran

down them. The grimacing men were using wooden staves to corral the crowd. Ordinarily, they were equipped with metal-tipped short spears, but today they used the bladeless weapons. Their usual armament was great for *threats*, but their weapons today would be actually *used*.

A small division of soldiers would be unable to keep the throng under control with words alone. There were many occasions where they would need to hold out the wooden staves to push against the mass of people. That was the nicer way of doing things, but there were also circumstances where they had to actually strike someone.

Buyers and sellers alike would work themselves into a fervor, or perhaps two buyers would start an argument over the same item, each claiming they had touched it first. Also, the day was one of celebration, so people were often already drunk once noon had passed.

Warning, threatening, and eventually striking the sources of those arguments were the soldiers' jobs. If they had been equipped with their usual metal-tipped spears, things would by no means end peacefully. If the people standing against them were enemy soldiers or beasts, that would have been fine, but they couldn't bear metal against their own drunken countrymen.

Thus, with it being certain that they would need to strike someone eventually, they used relatively harmless staves as their weapons. Of course, relatively harmless though they might have been, the staves were still weapons. A full-powered strike could easily break bones or even kill, depending on where it hit.

However, the capital was filled with such clamor and arguments that being afraid of such accidents would result in the loss of even a semblance of order.

"Good work, we're your relief."

"Whoa, you two are steaming. Here, have a towel."

The two soldiers looked back in response to the calls from their relief crew.

"Huh, didn't realize it was so late."

"Thank goodness, I'm done in..."

The first man looked to be in his twenties and was well-built. However, they

were all drenched in so much sweat that they seemed to be practically steaming. The first seemed to still have some energy left. His teenaged partner, however, looked like he was practically on the verge of death. The youth didn't quite have all the muscle that would be expected for a soldier, and he tottered like a fawn to swap with his replacement.

"I leave...the rest to you..."

"Sure thing."

"You all right there? Guess that's your last wish? Take a bath 'fore you rest. Best to get the sweat off."

The youth couldn't even muster a response to his comrade's chatter. He just nodded with unfocused eyes and a half-open mouth, taking the offered towel and wiping his neck before weaving off like a ghost along with his partner.

"Ahh..."

"So that'll be us after our shift..."

The two replacements could imagine themselves superimposed over the image of their soulless-looking brother-in-arms as their faces paled.

As the two previous guards walked down a path off from the city center, temporarily relieved from the hardest work they had, the older one checked in with the youth.

"Are you good? Have some water."

"Thanks... Sorry..."

With the population concentrated within the business district, the city as a whole was practically a ghost town once they got away from the merchants. While watching over the mass of people in the business district was part of their job, patrolling almost deserted areas like this one was no less important. Given the current uproar from the merchants, the residential areas were ripe for trouble as the population moved away from them. Depressing as it was, there were always the dregs of society who would see the empty homes as a good opportunity while everyone was focused on their shopping.

"Feeling better?" the older soldier asked.

"I am. Thanks. Man, I thought I was ready for this, but I *really* wasn't."

The youth had finally managed to get himself back to walking straight and was now blaming himself in the face of his colleague's consideration. The other man grinned mockingly at his drooping compatriot.

"No surprise there. You didn't grow up around here, did you? You don't 'get ready' for all that mess. Guess you know that now, though. The capital guard ain't a cushy post."

"I feel it in my bones now..." the younger soldier agreed, using his staff to hold himself up.

The capital guards were less likely to suffer casualties than those in other areas. After all, their duty was to guard the capital, so they wouldn't be on the front line, even in war. They were never given tasks like drake subjugations as the men working in the crownlands were. They were the division most removed from actual *action*.

Yet, considering they would inevitably be placed into this particular scene of carnage, it wasn't a blessing either. With the capital's larger population, it was also more likely that they would be dragged into interpersonal conflicts than other troops. Although they wouldn't need to face external enemies, the sheer number of citizens they were charged with protecting made their job significantly more difficult.

In any case, the two soldiers patrolled the residential area, their staves clacking loudly on the stone paving. The loud sound, and indeed their conversation, was purposeful. It made it obvious that guards were patrolling the area and would hopefully ensure that any potential criminals would contain themselves.

With their reasoning in place, the soldiers continued their discussion.

"At least it's cooler over here. It was as hot as it ever gets back there," the younger man opined, taking advantage of the lack of suffocating body heat from the business district to draw a deep breath without the smell of body odor overcoming him.

"We're in the middle of the active season. I'd die if it was still hot," the older

soldier replied with a shrug.

Unlike Japan, Capua had three seasons that its year was split into: the rainy season, blazing season, and active season. If one were to compare them to the four seasons in Japan, the rainy season would be spring, the blazing season would be summer, and the active season would be both autumn and winter. In other words, half of the year was the active season. The earliest part of that season, which corresponded with autumn, was “a little hot but no detriment to work,” while the latter part, which was equivalent to winter, was cool in the mornings and mild during the day, making it the most comfortable part of the year.

“Well, you’re right, but try saying that when we’re over there,” the younger complained.

“I suppose. It’s like the blaze came calling again back there,” his companion admitted, a sarcastic grin on his face.

Even Capuans, used to the heat from the blazing season, were overwhelmed by the heat from a jostling crowd.

“I guess it *is* the opening sale of the year. Not like we can tell them to hold it in,” the older man continued.

“True. I wouldn’t have minded joining in either, so I can understand where they’re coming from.”

“Oh? You’ve got your eye on something?”

“Ah, well.”

The question was casual, but the young soldier’s cheeks reddened slightly as he let his gaze wander. When the other man realized what he meant, a slightly teasing smile made its way onto his lips once again.

“Oh, I see. A present for a lady friend, right? I’m right, aren’t I?” He elbowed his partner as he spoke.

Realizing there would be no escape, the younger man’s head dropped, his cheeks still red. “Yeah. She’s waiting for me in the village, and I want to get her a ring. Um...a bronze one, if I can,” he admitted.

Bronze was an alloy of copper and tin. Depending on the ratios of those two metals, it could end up brown, gold, or silver in color. It was a cheaper metal than gold or silver, so it was fairly well-liked by commoners for accessories like rings and bangles. Despite that, it was still rather expensive for a young soldier. It wouldn't be something he bought to sound someone out. It would be a gift for a person he was pledging his life to.

Sensing that, the older man continued his questioning. "And would it possibly be one of a pair? You know, like those wedding rings that are in at the moment?"

The custom of wedding rings, which Zenjirou had begun with his gift to Aura, had spread throughout Capua almost unnaturally quickly over the past two years. The royal merchants who were allowed into the inner palace had actively shared word of the tradition. They could hardly call themselves first-class merchants if something so potentially profitable didn't pique their interest.

The custom had recently begun permeating not only the ranks of the nobility but also commoners with a little slack in their budgets. The young soldier must have been one of those who were proactively accepting the new custom.

"It is. I can't get anything amazing with my savings, but I should be able to get two rings if I work hard for them. Besides, they add so much passion to a proposal."

The other nodded decisively at his counterpart's words, even as the younger man's dark skin flushed bright red. "You're not wrong there. Would have been much easier if they'd been around back when I did it."

He must have already been married, and a rueful smile came over his face as he thought back to when he proposed. It probably *would* have felt much better to have a pair of rings in hand when proposing rather than going to one's partner empty-handed. From that perspective, wedding rings were a reliable weapon for the man, and the woman wouldn't dislike being given a gift either. Naturally, the merchants selling such rings were all for it, so everyone won.

"Well, the idea's reached my village already, so if I ask her to accept half a pair of rings, she'll understand what I'm trying to say. 'Please accept this,' is much easier than 'Please marry me.'"

“Make sure she doesn’t mistake it as a regular gift,” the older man cautioned his ardent junior. Even as he did, though, it was obvious that the custom of wedding rings had well and truly taken root in Capua.



If the sales on the second day were akin to a daytime festival, the closing night of the third day was a nighttime festival.

The citizens made the streets as bright as possible, each person carrying light as if to support the sliver of the crescent moon. The business district being packed as it always was for the new year’s sales was a given. However, the residential districts, the craftsmen’s quarters, and even the slums—rarely set foot in by anyone but the residents—were all ablaze with light, driving off the night. If one could look at the city from above, it would look like an overly decked-out Christmas tree, its entirety shining with light.

The brightest area was the royal palace’s courtyard. It was—for this one night each year—open to the general public, and many of the citizens had crowded inside.

Of course, even open to them, it was still the royal palace, so the usual chaos was not allowed, and the crowds there were quite docile under the guard’s supervision.

The lighting used by Capuans was normally created from liquid oil lamps and lanterns, but the people within the courtyard were holding candles instead. Candles were far more expensive than the vegetable oil used in the lamps and lanterns, but the solid nature of them meant they were safer. Therefore, citizens celebrating the Night of Flames were required to buy one at the entrance.

Even though it was a luxury taken only once a year, such an expense was only possible for families with some level of leeway in their budgets, so those gathered were, unsurprisingly, relatively affluent citizens.

The courtyard was filled with both an uncountable crowd and an uncountable number of flames throwing color across it. Zenjirou and his wife, Aura, were looking out on that scene from a balcony on the second floor of the palace.

“Whoa...”

Aura’s lips parted in a smile at her husband’s wonder—the result of his otherworldly upbringing.

“Wonderful, is it not?” she asked proudly. “The very land becomes the starry sky. This is the sight I most look forward to each year.”



There was a multitude of people and a matching multitude of flames. They weren't evenly arranged, so the points of light were irregular. Aura was quite right; there was a certain free beauty to it that brought the stars in the night sky to mind.

"Indeed. Most wonderful," Zenjirou said, his tone that of a retainer in deference to his surroundings. "A right of the royals, I suppose."

Despite his tone, Zenjirou's gaze was glued to the "starry sky" below. His words were neither lip service nor flattery. He had been taken in entirely by the sight below them.

The phrase "right of the royals" was perfect for the situation. There was no law stating that one could not look at the festival from a great height, but such a thing was essentially only possible from this balcony over the courtyard of the royal palace. He could imagine a real risk that having a specially arranged chair next to the queen's as he did, and looking down on these countless flames, could make him feel like the citizens were here to pay their respects to *him*.

Those many flames drove the night away, lighting up the capital. The Night of Flames was making a statement that the days of the year would be just as long, while the nights would be shorter.

However, the "day" and "night" in that statement didn't simply refer to when the sun was in the sky or had set. They were metaphors. The day was a time of fortune, while the night was a time of misfortune. Fighting off the symbol of the darkness meant they would greet the morning in victory and invite fortune in for the coming year.

I must have seen this before. I just can't remember it from last year... Zenjirou thought to himself, what with this being the second new year's festival he had been around for. However, he soon remembered the reason. *Oh, right. I was so stressed out last year, I couldn't even recognize it was so beautiful.*

The Night of Flames was a cornerstone, an event that royalty absolutely had to attend unless something extreme prevented it. But last year, Aura had been pregnant with their first child. Zenjirou had attended the event out of consideration for his pregnant wife, but it was no surprise he hadn't managed to enjoy it.

His outfit was not the now somewhat familiar third formal dress he owned, but the first, and he could count the number of times he'd worn it on a single hand. His head was wrapped tightly in a turban held in place by something more than a mere brooch, and it was both heavy and extravagant, more like a crown.

The outfit was replete with jewels and golden thread, so it caught the light from the nearby candles and sparkled. A beautiful woman like Aura was one thing, but Zenjirou's feelings that dressing a plain man like himself up in jewels and finery was nothing more than a bad joke were likely due to his lingering sense of values as an ordinary man in Japan.

He turned his gaze to his wife next to him, and she seemed to sense it, turning and smiling at him. Aura herself was in the queen's equivalent of the first formal dress. She usually wore outfits derived from the Northern Continent's fashions, but for formal occasions, she would wear the country's native dress, which brought to mind traditional Southeast Asian clothing.

A deep crimson cloth was wrapped elegantly around her, and she wore even more jewelry than Zenjirou, so she sparkled as well. Her beauty and majesty almost made the glittering from the flames seem to come directly from her. She was practically the embodiment of the concept of a queen.

Realizing that her husband's expression had relaxed as he looked at her, her smile deepened in happiness. Her steady effort against her drastically increased weight since Carlos's birth had shown its worth, and she was back to the size she had been before. It was a refreshing feeling to not have the harsh shock of Zenjirou's gaze upon her and instead be able to straighten up proudly in front of him.

While the main reason they were not immediately trying for a second child was the political slowdown that pregnancy caused, Aura couldn't deny that at least a small part of it was due to not wanting to completely expose her wider frame.

My body is back to normal and Carlos is two now. Perhaps it would be best to seriously consider a second child, she thought as she moved her gaze from her husband to the sea of light below.

Carlos Zenkichi was, of course, absent. By Capua's counting system he might already be two, but he hadn't lived a full year yet and wasn't even one year of age by the system used on the Northern Continent. More accurately, he was zero years and six or seven months old. There was a big difference between a baby being considered "one year old" when they were born, with their age increasing each new year rather than on their birthday, and being viewed as "zero years old" upon birth (as was done on Earth), with the age increasing on the anniversary of the birth.

This difference in methods caused the most issues when a child was young. When it was a difference between someone being twenty-seven or twenty-nine, there wasn't a huge disparity. However, when the difference was two years old versus not even one, it could lead to real confusion.

Regardless, it seemed appropriate to start seriously thinking about a second child. Even if they started trying for a child right away, he or she wouldn't be born until at least nine months later. In other words, Carlos and the second child would have an age difference of a year and a half by the Northern system—or depending on how quickly the new baby was born, one or two years by the Capuan system.

The timing made sense for a second child. With the number of holders of lineal magic being a direct correlation to a country's strength, more children was better.

Naturally, however, it could also cause issues in regard to the line of succession.

Noticing that his wife's smile had taken on a slightly salacious tinge, Zenjirou gave her a curious look. They were in the middle of the Night of Flames. A brief chat was one thing, but they couldn't afford to neglect their surroundings and get lost in conversation.

Silence reigned between the queen and her consort after that as they quietly watched the gathered lights until the eastern sky started to grow lighter.

Chapter 1 — The General's Marriage

The current season was the active season, analogous to autumn and winter in Japan. It comprised half the year and, in keeping with its name, was the season that saw the most activity from the people.

The active season was used to make up for the losses in the rainy season, where one day in every three was rainy, and the blazing season, which made standing outside for long periods of time a health hazard. People worked more vigorously during the active season.

Even the bulk of the fighting in the recent war had taken place during the active season. While there had been several surprise attacks at other times of the year, the other two seasons were almost a long-term ceasefire.

The same held true in times of peace. There were obviously people, merchants in particular, who saw others' lack of work as an opportunity, and there were natural disasters or drake attacks that didn't take humanity's preferences into account, so activity didn't simply *stop* in either the blazing or rainy seasons. However, when there was a choice, events were generally planned for the active season.

Chief among these were marriages. Weddings were huge events, not only for the couple being wed but also for their families. Heirs or heiresses, nobles and commoners alike would see their entire families gather to celebrate the pair's new life and meet their new relatives. It was therefore almost inevitable that such gatherings took place in the active season, with its lighter toll on the body during travel. It had been an exception for Aura and Zenjirou's wedding to be held in the blazing season.

This all meant that there were endless weddings during this time of year. Aura herself was not removed from the fact. After all, for high-ranking nobles, there was a domestic law that her permission must be obtained.

Naturally, the majority of these marriages were merely pro forma signatures from Aura on documents prepared by her secretary, but the sheer amount of them meant that it was still a significant amount of work. Further, when it came

to marriages between leading nobles, Aura had to pen her own congratulations to them.

Depending on the circumstances, it might require a gift of money from the royal family as well. Extravagance was forbidden, but it needed to be an amount that wouldn't shame the royal family, so deciding on a sufficient number was quite involved.

All of that could be dealt with in various ways, but there were two circumstances that were the absolute worst. The first was when the noble was of such a rank that the royal family needed to attend the wedding personally. The other was when the wedding involved such influential figures that it could not be allowed without consideration.

Currently in front of Aura was a request that was the absolute worst option—one that fulfilled both conditions. It was a request for a marriage between Pujol Guillén of the Guillén family and the eldest daughter of Margrave Gaziél.

The queen was seated on a sofa, holding the document, while two men sat on the opposite couch. Pujol Guillén and Xavier Gaziél.

Even seated, the general was as tall as a slight woman, while the young margrave-to-be was rather short for a man. The contrasts didn't end with their appearances. While Pujol was composed almost to the point of impudence, Xavier was clearly nervous as he sat next to him, his shoulders held tautly.

Despite finding the young noble's unease somewhat charming, Aura showed no sign of those thoughts on her face as she spoke, keeping her voice and face purposefully expressionless.

"Well met, General Pujol, Lord Xavier. I apologize for the haste, but let us move directly to our main topic for the day. I hold here a request for marriage between you, General Pujol, and Lady Lucinda of the Gaziél family. Is this the consensus of both of your families?"

"It is," Pujol said calmly.

"Indeed, Your Majesty. I, Xavier Gaziél can confirm that in place of my father, the current head of the family," Xavier added, unable to hide the nerves from his voice.

Aura gave a slightly exaggerated nod before continuing.

“Very well. So you will be marrying, Pujol Guillén? I can certainly agree that it would be to the country’s detriment for you to be the head of your family and still unwed.”

“I am grateful for your understanding,” the general said, placing his right fist on his left shoulder and giving a seated bow. His manners were perfect.

However, the impression the huge warrior gave was most certainly one of impudence. It was unavoidable, considering the man’s disposition. Aura did her utmost to ensure that her face remained expressionless and didn’t show her displeasure as she continued her checks.

“Your partner is to be Lucinda from the Gaziel family. Judging from Lord Xavier’s presence, this is related to the recent drake subjugation?”

Pujol broke into a wide smile at her question while Xavier shook with nerves.

“Indeed. I formed a friendship with Lord Xavier during those events. Afterwards, circumstances dictated that he head for the capital alone, so I escorted his forces back to the march,” Pujol explained placidly.

“Yes, the general was exceptionally helpful on that occasion!” Xavier gabbled, almost naively.

The prior year had seen uproar in Capua due to an invasion by swarm raptors around the salt road. The incident had finally been solved in a port town far from said road called Valentia. The developments from that campaign had led to Xavier, initially in charge of his men, needing to strike out alone, so Pujol had taken responsibility for ensuring the army returned home.

Even as a commander to the royal army, he couldn’t just take them to the border and call it a day. He had to go to the lord’s estate (in the case of border regions, since said estate would be closer to a fortress) and officially hand over command of the army to the person responsible for the territory. It was entirely plausible for him to have met the woman in question—Lucinda Gaziel—while doing just that.

Aura looked at both of them evenly as she considered what the preliminary investigations had revealed.

Lucinda Gaziel, the eldest daughter of the Gaziel family. She took the place of her father and eldest brother when they went to war and defended her younger brother and the region. In exchange, she lost the entirety of her chance to marry and is still a spinster. That hits rather close to home.

Women in this world were usually able to marry from about fifteen years old until they were twenty. But due to the way Capua calculated age, it was different from how Zenjirou would see it. To him, it would be akin to calling a thirteen-or fourteen-year-old “of age” and a nineteen-or twenty-year-old as “past their prime.”

However, that precious time in Lucinda’s life had been entirely devoted to protecting her family. The woman was already twenty-six and therefore well past maturity, practically a matron. No matter how hard her family tried, it would be close to impossible for her to find a suitable line to marry into.

“Has this already been discussed with the margrave?” Aura asked just to be certain, but she was half sure she knew what Pujol’s response would be.

“I have. Fortunately, he was entirely in agreement. While it may be somewhat early days, Lord Xavier here has already started to call me brother.”

“B-Brother! Please don’t reveal that in front of Her Majesty!”

Pujol’s answer was exactly what she had expected, while Xavier was in a panic. She let out an internal sigh at the answer. It was easy to imagine how much of a concern Lucinda’s marriage was for her family. After all, having been so focused on protecting their lands, she had lost her chance at marriage. She had also acted as a surrogate parent for Xavier, so he would be worried about her as well.

Then along came General Pujol’s offer. Of course, while Xavier was innocent and young and wouldn’t necessarily realize it, Margrave Gaziel would certainly have noticed the general’s ulterior motives. The Guillén and Gaziel families would be joined in marriage, consolidating the military and financial assets of the Gaziel family under the famous general. The goal was clear, but all nobles had similar ambitions to some extent. Avoiding such things would make marriage impossible.

Besides, Margrave Gaziel was a rural noble, and while he had a strong

foundation of might and wealth, he lacked a direct voice at the center of the country. With that taken into account, friendly relations with the Guillén family, who had strong ties to Capua's seat of power, was by no means a disadvantage.

And that's why I would normally never be able to allow this marriage.

It would lead to an influential local noble family joining a powerful rural noble with lands of their own. It went without saying that this was an immense risk to the royal family. It was entirely possible that such a joining could lead to the birth of a faction that had both more strength and influence than the royals.

That said, it would prove difficult to halt the marriage. Well aware of that, she forced a laugh as she answered.

"Ha ha ha, hasty indeed. However, Lady Lucinda was brought up entirely within her family's march, was she not? Will she be able to adapt to life in the capital?"

"You need not worry. Lady Lucinda will be able to adapt anywhere if she is with me. Truly, the fact that she remains unwed simply shows the lack of discernment my countrymen are capable of."

"Broth—I mean General, it shows all her efforts were worth it for you to say that."

While Xavier was innocently joyous, his phrasing was a confirmation that things had been discussed with the woman in question as well.

The queen kept her smile on her face even as she felt a muscle twitch in her cheek. "Oh? Already falling for her? Well, this just will not do. I cannot have the pillar of my country's military starting to crack. Hm, perhaps I should swallow my tears and give a callous answer."

It was mostly just a joke with a hint of a warning, but the youth in the room was in such a state that he missed the underlying meaning of her words.

"I-In which case, Your Majesty! I, Xavier Gaziel, request permission as my reward for my modest exploits of late!"

A chagrined look flashed over the huge general's face at the boy's rushed request. However, the words couldn't be taken back. Especially when the

monarch they had been spoken to didn't feel like letting the opportunity slide.

Having found the first chance for a counterattack, the queen's smile deepened a little as she spoke. "Oh? Do you realize just what it is you are asking, Lord Xavier?"

"I do!" he affirmed reflexively. However, her meaning wasn't something that could be agreed to so quickly.

Being granted permission to marry in exchange for military gains was not, in itself, a rarity. The issue was that it meant the normal payment for their services would not be given.

During the subjugation, Xavier Gaziel had led his territory's army himself. The pay for those men, along with the provisions for soldiers and dash drakes alike, consumed and broken ammunition and weapons, and even compensation for the few fatalities, would normally be summed up and presented as an estimate to the royal family. That would then be added to the reward they paid.

However, if he were to ask for a marriage to be allowed in exchange for those gains, then none of that money would be paid. The sum wasn't enough to pauper a major family like the Gaziels, but it was a rather painful sum for them to shoulder in its entirety.

The next head of the family would not be allowed to make arbitrary decisions with regard to such a reward. Thus the margrave must have already agreed to it. They must truly be desperate to marry her off.

If Aura were to crush the proposal, she would earn the ire of not only General Pujol but Margrave Gaziel as well. Recognizing that, she knew that she would have to allow it. However, she would have to ensure that permitting it would be as beneficial to the royal family as possible.

Growing serious, she let out a purposeful sigh with a stern expression as she spoke to the two men across from her. "Very well. I am not so heartless that I remain unmoved. In light of Lord Xavier's feelings for his sister, I shall make an exception and allow the marriage between Pujol Guillén and Lucinda Gaziel."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Aura blinked at the youth as he jumped up in joy, but she soon shifted her

gaze to the general.

“Frankly, I am the reason you have remained a bachelor for so long. An exception among exceptions though it may be, I *am* pleased that you are able to finally marry,” she added casually.

The fact that General Pujol, head of the distinguished Guillén family was still single despite being over thirty, was simply that he had been a candidate to become Aura’s husband. Due to that, any marriage involving him had been a potential detriment to her.

Stressing the exceptional nature of it now was her way of making sure that he understood that by doing so, she was offsetting the restrictions the prior circumstances had placed upon him as a candidate, which would nullify any debt. It meant that the Gaziel family would have to shoulder the entire burden of the swarm raptor subjugation while the Guillén family would be owed nothing for their prior restrictions.

It would have been difficult to halt the marriage, so this slight benefit to the royal family was the result of a significant amount of thought on Aura’s part. While the young lord was one thing, Pujol Guillén was not the kind of man to withdraw so easily from a clash.

“I cannot offer enough thanks for your kind consideration. Therefore, I would like to offer you an invitation to our ceremony to be held in the Gaziel march. While I would not ask you to attend personally with your schedule as busy as it is, I can think of nothing that would please me more than to receive your blessing on the day itself.”

One of Aura’s eyebrows rose at his statement.

“Oh...you plan to hold the wedding in the march?”

“Father and sister both said the capital would be fine, but General Pujol insisted. That means my sister will be able to have her big moment at home,” Xavier explained cheerfully, not noticing the queen’s change in demeanor.

The custom in Capua was for the ceremony itself to be held in the hometown of the person marrying into the family. If the wife was marrying into the husband’s family then it would be held in the wife’s home region, and vice

versa. It was meant to symbolize that they would be cutting ties with their home and family to enter another family, and also allowed them to have a final event at their own home.

That said, it was just a general tendency, and exceptions were common, particularly in cases like this one, where one party hailed from the capital. When that happened, it was fairly common for the capital to be chosen.

Logically, it was easier to gather more people in the capital than on the borders of the country, and with the location also allowing guests to sightsee in the capital, the Gaziels wouldn't have been particularly opposed. There was a reason the general had insisted it be held in the march rather than the capital, of course. And Aura could immediately pick out his reasoning.

In my position, I cannot simply offer my congratulations. I have to at least send a representative or even attend personally.

Pujol was a prior candidate for her hand in marriage. If she restricted herself to curt formalities, it could be taken as her still having some form of emotional attachment to him. That could not be allowed. While it was called "adaptability" for a man to have eyes for women other than his wife, it was seen as adultery for a woman to make advances on a man other than her husband and would lead to a scandal without equal.

Aura could understand that. Naturally, so could the general, and that was why he had decided to have the ceremony in the march.

So I shall either have to attend myself or request that my husband attend in my stead.

Both her own attendance and sending her husband to offer their blessings would work just as well to avoid scandal. Essentially, as husband and wife, Aura and Zenjirou would give the appearance of wholeheartedly favoring the general's marriage. After all, a royal would be going out of their way to attend the ceremony all the way in the border march. That fact would be a considerable benefit to the general.

Aura had two choices, but realistically, she would be unable to remove herself from the capital for an extended period of time in that fashion. Therefore, she was left with a single option.

I shall have to prevail upon my husband once more.

Aura felt that she had been doing nothing but breaking her word as of late, but she needed to gain at least some benefit for the royal family with her decision.

“I see. You are a man of strong principles. Of course, our royal family would never miss the marriage of a man such as yourself. One who has served as both the country’s shield and spear. However, my husband and I are immensely busy, and a total of three royals from two countries are currently staying in our lands.”

Francesco and Bona from the Twin Kingdoms were two of those royals, of course, but it had been decided that Freya from Uppasala would also be coming to the capital. Aura had originally wanted to finish things in Valentia in order to keep the intercontinental trade within the royal family, but that hadn’t been possible. After all, one of Freya’s subordinates had taken down the alpha of the swarm raptors in one-on-one combat. Songs of her deeds were already being sung in the capital. With everything being so public, the queen had no choice but to invite their visitors to the capital to thank them.

The plan was for the princess and her retinue to arrive in the next few days. There were rumors that they would be entering the capital with the beast’s skull at the head of their procession, so the area around the castle would probably end up hosting much merrymaking.

“Thus we are unlikely to be entirely free. If the next budgetary meeting were to finish quickly, however, it would be a different matter.”

“I see,” Pujol said. This time, it was his turn to keep his expression from his face in silent thought.

Her statement was a simple thing. She was essentially saying that either she or Zenjirou would attend their wedding if he threw in his lot with her during the budgetary meeting. The agenda of that meeting included where the budget for the recent subjugation would come from.

With the last war being relatively recent, there was by no means a great amount of slack in the country’s treasury. Therefore, unforeseen expenses needed to be mitigated by drawing from different departments, and the heads

of those departments would naturally oppose the shift. If Aura forced the changes through, their displeasure would fall on her, but if Pujol took the stage, it would fall on him instead. Essentially, Pujol would accept their ire rather than the queen.

However, such a stance wasn't entirely bad for him. The general was ambitious by nature and therefore had many enemies. A little anger directed his way wouldn't have much effect. If anything, he could spin it as being willing to take the noble's displeasure if it benefited his country, gaining him even more renown within the military.

The costs and benefits of such actions flashed through the man's mind in an instant before he answered.

"I understand. If those are the circumstances, then I shall do my utmost to aid you," he agreed.



Once Pujol Guillén and Xavier Gaziel had left her office, the queen turned to her thus-far silent confidant and spoke.

"Fabio, things are as you saw. I would hear your unvarnished opinion."

The middle-aged secretary rested his narrow chin in his right hand and thought for a while before answering.

"Very well. In essence, you will send Sir Zenjirou to General Pujol and Lady Lucinda's wedding to give it weight. In exchange, you will gain the general's complete cooperation in the conference to be held."

"Indeed."

A smile made its way onto the secretary's face, visible only in a softening around his eyes as he gave a short nod and continued. "I would say it was a good result. Whatever the case, the general's marriage will be a significant weakness for the royal family, so it was somewhat inevitable. In which case, arranging an annulment of debts between the general and royal family and even passing off the cost of the swarm raptor subjugation can, I believe, be said to be a sufficient benefit for the royal family."

“I see.”

The queen’s shoulders relaxed at his answer. However, the secretary had some harsher words to say, which rather betrayed her expectations.

“Representing you will be somewhat of a burden on Sir Zenjirou, but it should not be a concern. With such a string of logic to the decision, I highly doubt he will refuse. In fact, he will obey any order without even wishing for recompense. Above all, it seems almost impossible for him to betray you. My, my, Your Majesty, you certainly have found an almost irreplaceable loyal piece on your board.”

The queen slammed her hands onto the table in front of her and stood up in response to her retainer’s cynicism but almost immediately managed to recompose herself.

“Does it really appear that I am treating my husband as a piece on the board?” she asked eventually as she returned to her seat with a sigh. Her voice was slightly weak as she made her inquiry.

“To be completely honest, I find it hard to describe in any other way after seeing your recent interactions.”

“I see...”

Aura heaved another deep sigh at her confidant’s statement, then leaned back into her chair and shook her head several times with her eyes tightly closed.

Her rage and exhaustion were because she had been feeling similarly. She had started to naturally assume that for little things, she could simply have Zenjirou act as her representative without issue. The realization that her assumptions had changed so much that the idea of Zenjirou following her without question was something she saw as a given sent a chill through her body.

“What seems to be the problem?” Fabio asked disinterestedly, taking in his liege’s state. “If I may speak without censure, Sir Zenjirou seems to hold no ill will over decisions such as this. Frankly, your guilt seems pointless and ridiculous.”

“You speak as bluntly as ever,” the queen murmured, looking at the secretary

with a mix of pain and anger but not giving any orders to stop. One reason she associated with the man was because he could deliver these painful truths so easily.

However, she couldn't just let the words pass without comment. She took in a deep breath and let it out, making her shoulders rise and fall before she refuted him with a firm expression on her face.

"What you say has logic to it, but it is a sign of excessive reliance on my husband. If I do not maintain my awareness of that, it runs the risk of expanding without end."

"I believe that to be a good intention. However, you and Sir Zenjirou are husband and wife. I would say it is more unnatural for a wife not to rely on her husband at all. Do you perhaps think that you are restraining yourself too much and therefore see it as unnatural to rely on him instead?"

"Hm..." She was at a loss for words in response to that statement. A married relationship of constant restraint would indeed be discomfiting.

As a matter of fact, Aura had been concerned about Zenjirou's lack of desire for things herself. Not burdening other people was a fine way of living, but when those *others* started to include people close to you, it began to feel standoffish.

The secretary kept his slim face expressionless as he gave more advice to the conflicted queen. "With all that said, this may indeed offend Sir Zenjirou, so perhaps I cannot necessarily call your concerns unfounded. If he is to attend the ceremony without you, he shall need to take another partner."

"I-Indeed. He...shall."

Her face twisted as the jab of her confidant's point hit home. In Capua, it was the norm and considered polite for adults to attend weddings in pairs of both a man and woman if possible. An already wed man could bring his wife without issue, and if the wife's circumstances precluded her attendance, he would ask a relative. If an unwed man were to say, "I will be attending a wedding; please be my partner," it would normally be taken as a declaration of love.

Zenjirou was indeed wed, but on top of attending as Aura's representative on

this occasion, she herself would not be able to serve as his partner. Therefore, he would have to choose another woman to bring in her stead. That would in turn lead to any woman he chose leaping forward in the running to become his concubine.

Regardless of anything else, Zenjirou had clearly rejected the idea of taking a concubine, so informing him of that would weigh heavily on Aura.

“We have no choice. It will be a burden, but perhaps we should request that Lady Pasquala attend.”

Pasquala was the wife of the head court mage, Espiridion, and she was close to seventy years of age. Bringing a married, older woman as his partner would obviously not be taken as a sign of taking a concubine.

“Will the other nobles accept that? It is such a good opportunity for them, after all,” Fabio mentioned.

“Acceptance is unlikely. All we can do is evade and push the matter through. If we cannot do so...perhaps he really will need to take a concubine. I could possibly get him to accept it somehow.” She let out a gloomy sigh.

Fabio’s voice took on a tinge of amusement as he looked upon his saddened queen. “Truly, when it comes to Sir Zenjirou, you grow so timid, Your Majesty. It is a rather new sight in our long association.”

“Enough,” she said, her voice growing sharp as she glared at the man.

Even so, Aura was aware of her cautiousness with respect to Zenjirou. He had directed an unblemished, simple affection towards her, and she had an unconscious, visceral desire to avoid blemishing that affection. She shut her eyes once more in her seat, tapping the table with her right index finger as she thought.

“Still,” she said eventually, “there is no alternative to having him act as my representative. Perhaps I should speak bluntly about this to him.”

“I believe so. If the worst comes to pass and Sir Zenjirou is hurt, something to change his feelings should be arriving in the next few days.”

“That is true.”

Aura's face brightened now. The "something" in question was nothing other than the goats he had received from Princess Freya. The goats themselves had been given in "celebration of Prince Carlos's birth," but that wasn't to say there would be no other costs. After all, they would be the first mammalian livestock in Capua.

A region within the palace would be created to house them, grass would be grown to act as their food, and people capable of rearing them would be trained. Each of these actions would require a fair amount of money.

They were comfortable eating most grasses, and they had hardy constitutions, so the rearing would be easy enough, but considering no Capuan had experience with mammals until now, it would not be *simple*. It would be like asking a modern dairy farmer to suddenly care for an iguana. They would need to rely on Freya's subordinates at the start, and there would be a cost for such cooperation. Overall, it would take money and effort. On top of that, none of it was *necessary*, so one could consider it Zenjirou being selfish.

"Greeting Princess Freya's retinue as well as celebrating the triumphant arrival of the woman who slew the alpha in personal combat is something of a pain. It is not impossible, though. Troublesome as it may be, it is for my husband."

Despite her words, Aura's mouth opened in an almost unnaturally wide smile. After all, this was the first time her thus-far unassuming husband had actually requested something for his own sake. Being able to give him it meant that she couldn't avoid the happiness that came with doing so.

Seeing her expression, the secretary said sarcastically, "It is like I am watching an all-too-doting grandmother choose a present for her first grandchild."

"Couldn't you at least have said *mother*?" Aura asked after a moment, her complaint not as hopeful as usual, perhaps due to her awareness of the situation.

"It was somewhat too harsh to call it a mother's love."

"Hrmm..."

The queen had no rebuttal for his curt reply and simply held her tongue.



That night found the royal couple sitting next to each other in the inner palace's living room, glasses in hand.

The four LED lamps set up to almost surround the wooden table with a sofa on each side made the red and blue faceted glasses sparkle in their hands. They contained almost colorless alcohol. It was distilled as they had grown used to, but it was not the fruit of Zenjirou's labors. It had been made by craftsmen imitating the still that Zenjirou had brought to this world.

Constructing a still was not particularly complex. Capuan craftsmen were fairly accomplished at working with copper, so they could reproduce it. The issue was that distillation had an optimum temperature that needed to be maintained, and it seemed the craftsmen had managed to arrive at that result through trial and error. It was still inefficient compared to the still that Zenjirou had, with its heating element having single degree increments, but it was certainly usable.

The product of this new still was what had been poured into their glasses. Zenjirou rolled the trial drink carefully over his tongue to taste it, and after swallowing, he gave a nod.

"I think this is fine. It's just as good as what I made. Well, not like I've got a great palate for it, and considering I'm an amateur, it feels a bit weird to call it 'fine,' perhaps."

Aura smiled as she inclined her glass in the same way. "I think so also. Excellent. We can most likely begin mass production of distilled spirits."

"Hmm, I'm not sure we can. Actual mass production will require us to make bigger stills, and scaling them up might well reveal unforeseen issues."

Zenjirou always seemed to see the worst potentials, but Aura's smile didn't fade.

"We shall deal with that if it occurs. All new projects require trial and error, and we lack the personnel as yet, so we will progress cautiously."

Capua still hadn't entirely recovered from the war, and establishing new industries was rather difficult considering the lack of manpower, even for the

queen.

However, spirits had already been given to nobles during nights at the palace, and they had been well received. Aura believed that establishing mass production meant recouping the initial investment was only a matter of time.

“Regardless, we need not discuss the distillation any further. Instead, Zenjirou...”

“Hm?” he answered. His wife’s smile had vanished and she was looking steadily at him, so he naturally straightened as he looked back at her curiously.

“I wish to speak to you about something that is a little—actually, quite serious and is weighing on me. May I?”

“Got it,” he answered, putting his blue glass of alcohol onto the table before moving to sit opposite his wife.

“I have a report first. Pujol Guillén will be marrying the eldest daughter of the Gaziel family, Lucinda. I would like for you to attend the ceremony in the border march as my representative.”

“I understand.” He nodded in response to the queen’s grave expression as she spoke. “Uh...that’s it?”

The almost exaggerated preface to the statement had put Zenjirou on his guard, but it didn’t sound like anything major to him, so it was something of a letdown.

For her part, Aura let out a slight sigh at his reaction and smiled ruefully. “I see. Galling though it is, Fabio was correct. Will this not cause problems for you?”

“Problems?”

Zenjirou grew even more confused and Aura relaxed, beginning a kind, thorough explanation. “Both when you went to Valentia, and now again in the Gaziel march, I decided your actions before consulting you. Fabio said that I am treating you as a piece on the board, and honestly, I cannot refute him.”

“Ah, I get it,” he said, bringing his hands together in understanding as he watched his wife slump. He remembered the light remonstration he had given

her when she had unilaterally decided he would be going to Valentia. They were separate things, though. “You’re right, there have been a fair few occasions where you’ve informed me after the fact. I know that a lot of circumstances in politics require a swift decision, though, so as long as you give me an explanation I can accept afterwards, I won’t mind much.”

His answer was much as she had expected. Actually, it was what Fabio had told her to expect earlier in the day. *“Sir Zenjirou seems to hold no particular ill will over decisions such as this.”*

And it was true. Zenjirou didn’t even look upset about being compared to a piece by her.

“You truly did not anger. Do you feel no dissatisfaction with being treated as a piece on the board?” Aura asked frankly.

There were, of course, many within Capua who would not disagree with being treated as a piece. For example, her loyal knights took pride in it. However, if their compatriots of equal rank treated them in the same way, there would be uproar. Aura could treat them as such due to the clear relationship hierarchy between a queen and knight. Therefore if her husband saw himself as her subordinate, it would be understandable, but the very fact that they sat across from each other like this was proof that he felt they were equals.

Despite his wife’s candor, the question itself didn’t hit the mark, and the otherworldly man simply looked more quizzical as he answered. “Um, well, I’m not really dissatisfied with how things are, I guess? Obviously, I’ll want to know *why* I’ve got to go to this wedding, and if I can’t agree with the reasoning, I won’t be happy.”

As far as he was concerned, she wasn’t treating him like a piece to maneuver. If anything, he usually regretted how little he could do to help his wife as she did her utmost to carry out her duties as queen.

“Hmm...” Aura murmured, not quite able to agree with his answer.

“Anyway, you’re the queen and I’m the consort, so doesn’t it make sense for you to make those decisions?”

He accepted “instruction from someone of equal rank” as simply a difference

in position. He'd been in the soccer club back in middle school and had followed his junior's instructions to run up the left side, and he'd seen plenty of people on a project follow the project leader's instructions despite them being the same age. Of course, next time, someone else would be the project leader, and the positions would soon be reversed.

His upbringing in modern Japan meant that he saw people as equal generally speaking and also enabled him to understand that for an organization to progress, people needed to both instruct and follow those instructions without it seeming paradoxical.

Aura had been brought up in a world that, barring a few exceptions, had a clear hierarchy and chain of command, so she might have found it difficult to understand.

"I see... As long as you are not unhappy with things, then. However, the situation is far from what I first promised, so I decided it was necessary to speak candidly with you."

"First promised?"

"Indeed, I first said to you that if you provided me an heir, no more would be asked of you."

"Oh, that," he said, clapping in realization. "You don't need to worry about it. I never expected you to keep it anyway."

"Phwah?!"



It was the first time Zenjirou had ever seen her so deeply hurt and he panicked as he tried to explain.

"Uh, n-no, that's not what I mean, not at all. It's not that I didn't trust you, I just thought it sounded too good to be true, and realistically even a prince consort is a royal and couldn't just shut himself away. That's all!"

His desperate explanation seemed to work as her expression eased just a little. Sighing in relief at that look, he continued.

"So I think your idea of speaking candidly's a good one, even if it took me a bit to agree. First off we should forget all reserve, consideration, and assumptions and just say what we want."

"Indeed, let us start from there." Aura leaned forward on the sofa, in complete agreement.

"I wish to hear your hopes first. Zenjirou, what is it that you desire? How do you want to live?"

He was somewhat overwhelmed by her serious questioning and cleared his throat first before slowly starting.

"Right. It might seem a bit incoherent, but none of this has any real order or anything, it's just what I want. First, I want to spend time with you. I want to live with Zenkichi with us all lying together. I like sleeping just with you as well, though, even though we don't just *sleep* then. On the other hand, I don't want any other woman but you. The inner palace is my home, so I don't want anyone but my family to come in. Also, um...right. I miss food from home, and I want to do something about the shampoo before we run out. I want to know how my soccer team in the J league is doing, and I want to play myself, even if it's just a pickup game. I want to listen to my favorite artists' new songs, and I want to get an internet connection."

Then he shifted more to his responsibilities.

"It's hard having nothing to do all day, so I want to be at least somewhat productive. I enjoyed working on distillation, for example. Diplomacy's a heavy responsibility and difficult, so I dislike it. Going to parties and refusing all those concubines is just depressing, so I really don't want to."

Even Zenjirou had grown at least a little resentful. He started off somewhat hesitantly, but his demands and selfish complaints grew more fluid towards the end of his speech. Aura had listened to the meandering diatribe and kept her expression composed, but she still let out an internal sigh.

I was right to do this, it seems he has grown rather unhappy even without noticing it himself.

Zenjirou was patient and understanding. Even if he wanted to do something, if you gave him a logical reason for why he could not, he would understand. He would even understand needing to do things he didn't want to, and then do them willingly.

Even he hadn't recognized the frustration of not doing what he wanted along with the resentment that had built up. It was completely unavoidable. Even if you understood the logic of something, that wouldn't remove your emotions on the matter. Even without him noticing it himself, those negative emotions had accumulated like a stagnant pool and made it easier for him to get angry about little things, making him speak more cynically.

Fortunately, Zenjirou was relatively resilient, so it hadn't come to the surface yet, but he was still fairly unhappy if all of that was put into words.

"Ah, I do know that all that'd be selfish, but that's about the size of it."

His cheeks had reddened as if he were embarrassed for the almost immature rant, but his expression was much more relaxed now.

It was the first time she had heard his frank desires, and parts of them were things she herself had thought. She didn't show any reaction to that and started putting her own desires into words.

"There are two main ways I want you. The first is as your wife. The other is as the country's queen wanting the member of the royal family known as Zenjirou. I have almost no complaints with the former. I too, as an individual, want you as my only spouse, and for us to spend time together with our son. With those wishes, there is nothing that goes against your own. Therefore, I first want you to understand that what I am about to say are my desires as queen."

"Hm, got you."

Despite understanding that he should have felt more tense at the moment, he couldn't help but let his expression slacken. The habitual exchange of "I love you" and similar phrases meant that he understood her feelings at least somewhat. Even if you were sure of your partner's feelings, having it put into words was special, an almost prickling sense of comfort and embarrassment.

Aura's own expression softened at the twitching muscle in his cheek before she immediately regained her sober look.

"The thing above all else that I want from you as a royal is to take a concubine. The domestic nobles will only hold their tongue for so long. The Twin Kingdoms are unlikely to remain silent with our agreement, so I would have you take another from them. Our glass manufacturing may make the mass production of magic tools possible in the future, and that will cause upheaval on the continent. Therefore, I wish to foster an archduke line with no land that carries enchantment magic. Likewise, I wish to continue developing our glass production and consult you about it. I would also greatly welcome any ideas such as your modifications to the water wheels or distillation, which will increase the royal family's assets."

She then moved on to his issues with royal work.

"Of course, I also wish for you to continue representing me. The only adult royals our country has are the two of us. There are a countless array of events that require a royal, and if you attend those which only require one of us to be present, I can be all the more nimble."

"Whoa..."

Her honest desires had made his face cramp up as he cried out in dismay. He had expected it, but their desires clashed almost astonishingly. The only points of common ground were in glassmaking and distilling alcohol. The rest were things that he wished to avoid yet his wife wished him to do.

Her queenly expression still on her face, Aura continued.

"The thing I fear most, though, is a definitive break between the two of us. Therefore, you do not need to worry too much. Nor endure it. I will fundamentally prioritize what I just said over your emotions. But please, air out all of your frustrations with me as we are doing so here in the inner palace. I

want you to refrain from criticizing my actions within the palace. That would be my utter undoing.”

Zenjirou couldn’t hide his surprise.

“I won’t criticize you, obviously, but are men really so prioritized here?”

Aura shook her head with a stiff expression. “No, it would not cause a significant issue at first. However patriarchal our society is, the weight of the crown is enough to overturn that. Besides, during the war, the country lost four kings in succession over several years with my father, older and younger brothers, and uncle. Taking over during that tumultuous time and leading us to victory does, if I do say so myself, give my reign a rather strong foundation. If, as I had first planned, you simply shut yourself away in the inner palace and had children with me, it would not have been a great concern. However, that was not what you did. You showed people that you had the ability, albeit imperfectly, to carry out diplomatic work and that you are an easy person to talk to.”

“Ah, did I overstep?” he asked, his face tightened even though the events had long since passed.

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “You truly did well. This is all my own failure. I had originally intended for you to attend only the bare minimum of functions, but you were more ‘useful’ than I expected, so I found myself depending on you more without realizing.”

The spark for all of that had been her pregnancy. Until then, Zenjirou’s duties had indeed been the bare minimum. Once she fell pregnant, however, it had impacted her body more than expected, and not even she had been able to continue her duties without issue.

There was no one but Zenjirou who could act as her proxy during such a time, and he had proven to have sufficient talents to do so. That was, in some ways, unfortunate.

Zenjirou had supported his wife while she was incapable of working during her recovery after the birth, and Aura had grown used to that and continued to have him do so as a matter of course once she recuperated. The definitive moment came when Valentia was attacked by the swarm raptors. The three

who had distinguished themselves in the subjugation were Xavier Gaziel, Rafaello Márquez, and the Uppasalan woman Victoria Kronqvist, but Zenjirou had been the supreme commander on paper.

In other words, over the past year and a half Zenjirou had shown both domestically and internationally the bare minimum of competence to navigate the royal court along with the courage to stand on the battlefield if the time came. It would be no exaggeration to say that he could create his own faction within the palace if he felt like it.

Hearing that explanation from his wife confused him and he felt he had been almost unfairly evaluated, but he understood the position he was in and nodded with a grave expression.

“I get it. I’d meant to act carefully even in the past, but I’ll pay even more attention to my actions outside the inner palace. There’s a possibility such rumors could spread even without my own wish for them to.”

“Please do.”

Aura breathed a sigh of relief at his ever-present understanding before she had a sudden realization.

Curses, I simply meant to listen to his desires, and yet I pushed things towards my own convenience yet again. If I let my guard down, taking advantage of his forbearance and kindness will become a habit.

Admonishing herself, the queen rallied and spoke to her husband once again. “Well, keep those things in mind. Outside of those matters, though, I want to do all I can to grant your desires. First, your focus on creation such as with distillation is a benefit to me as well, so I would like you to go about that proactively.”

“Sure. I want to finish making magnets first. After that, I’d like to make cheese and butter once the goats arrive. It sounds like those things exist in Uppasala, so it might be better to ask Princess Freya rather than relying on my trial and error.”

“Oh, I haven’t told you, now that I think of it. Princess Freya and her retinue have left Valentia. Your gift of the goats is with them, and they should reach the

capital within a few days.”

“Oh, I’ll look forward to it,” he answered with a smile.

With dairy products like cheese, butter, and cream, he would be able to reach for the kind of confections they had not yet been able to reproduce. Increasing the number of luxuries increased quality of life.

Now that the atmosphere had relaxed with a more pleasant topic, Aura moved on to the next, more difficult one. “Next, then. You said that you dislike diplomacy and being present in high society and would rather avoid it as much as possible, correct?”

“Yeah, if I’m being honest. Still, I think of it as my job since I became royalty, so even if I don’t like it, I feel like I have to,” he answered, glaring up at the ceiling as he leaned back into the seat.

His job, or royal duty.

“So you mean that if you can avoid doing it, you would prefer not to?” she queried.

He paused, thinking over as if examining himself, then shook his head. “No, that’s not it. It’s annoying to do, but not doing my job weighs on me in its own way. If I had no job, that’d be great, but having it and not running away from it is different.”

“Hm? Could you explain a little more in detail? I do not quite understand.”

Zenjirou sank back into thought and explained, getting lost several times himself. “Well, how to put it? I *do* hate diplomacy and societal events. But I have a duty as royalty to carry out my job. If I closed my eyes to those duties and ignored them, I’d feel even worse.”

Essentially, it was like the difference between a school closure for a student and playing hooky. Going to school each day was annoying, and students loved days when the school was closed and they could do as they pleased. However, playing hooky was wrong, so they wouldn’t do so and would prefer going to class instead. It was being somewhat diligent, somewhat hardworking, and yet still finding it all somewhat bothersome. It wasn’t a particularly rare mentality for the average Japanese citizen.

Zenjirou's clumsy but careful explanation let Aura get the gist of what he wanted to say. "I see. It is essentially that turning your back on your duties, even if you hate them, would give you a guilty conscience, and if you were to feel that anyway, carrying out the work you hate would be less mentally taxing."

"Yeah, that's about the size of it. It's all a matter of scale, though, you know? I'm fine now, but it feels like my workload increased a bunch recently. If that continues, it'll get to be too much."

"Hm, I see. My apologies. I shall take care from now on," she said, apologizing honestly at his warning.

"Thanks. You don't need to worry about urgent things like the wedding or the thing with Valentia, though."

"I see," she murmured, pulling together her observations. *In other words, I can continue as I have been with emergencies, allocating work to Zenjirou without concern. Decreasing the amount of diplomatic and societal obligations he has on a day-to-day level would be for the best, though.*

As far as those diplomatic duties went, there were people such as Francesco, Bona, and when she arrived in a few days, Freya, who he would need to interact with. Most diplomats and nobles did not necessarily need to be dealt with by royalty; things simply went more smoothly if they were.

"I understand. I shall endeavor to keep your diplomatic and societal obligations to a reasonable limit."

It was a slight disappointment to not be able to make the most use of the consort piece on the board, but she decided that she needed to make the sacrifice here.

"Also," she continued, "you mentioned several things that you desire. I could not understand the specifics, so I assume you were speaking of your origins, but are they utterly unobtainable here? You need not consider the money or effort that would be required. Simply tell me if they are possible or not."

Once she told him he didn't have to consider the monetary or practical costs, Zenjirou's gaze moved to the ceiling as he thought it over. "Hmm, well,

watching the J League matches is a no-go. Playing soccer here might be possible if we gathered people together and explained the rules, but I don't want it enough to have to deal with even more people. Listening to new songs is probably impossible too, and I honestly can't think of a way to do it. The food from home... We should be able to make more of that when the goats arrive. The main thing that comes to mind with goat's milk is sweets. Also, I've already started working on a shampoo substitute. Since it's a consumable, I knew we'd need to make it here. I've got instructions on my computer for things like soap, shampoo, and conditioner made from mixing seaweed ash and citrus fruits."

"Hm, I am not uninterested in soap and shampoo either. If it is simply a matter of ordering materials, it should not be a burden," she nodded, allowing just a little of herself as a woman to shine through.

As far as the soap and shampoo went, Aura and Zenjirou both used it. After all, they slept in the same bed, so even if Zenjirou kept himself neat and tidy, there would be no point if Aura didn't do the same.

By that metric, Aura was already making significant concessions for her husband. While hot baths had spread a fair way throughout Capua, even royalty would not ordinarily take one each day. They also had perfumed oils to get rid of the smells from their hair and bodies and covered themselves with them as a matter of course. Zenjirou didn't like the smells or sensation of the oils, though, so Aura never used them in the inner palace.

Of course, she was the country's queen, so when she was in the main palace carrying out her duties, she had to follow society's norms, and the perfumes were indispensable. Therefore, she would repeat the cycle of washing off the painstakingly applied oil from her skin and hair whenever she returned to the inner palace, sometimes several times per day.

She had changed in accordance to her husband's preferences, and the act could, in a certain light, be taken as a sign that the patriarchal nature of Capuan women was still present within her.

Whether he knew of his wife's devotion in that way or not, Zenjirou smiled and gave a nod. "Thanks. Honestly, baths are one thing I almost can't do without. Well, considering the current temperature, I could bear just washing

the sweat off, but when the weather turns humid in the rainy season and sweltering in the blazing season, I need a proper bath.” Realizing he was being somewhat selfish with what he was saying, his face grew a bit ashamed as he spoke.

“Indeed. The rainy season aside, I cannot quite understand your desire for a hot bath in the heat of the blazing season, but if they are that important to you then I shall join you.”

She was the queen, the most important person in the country, and she was changing her lifestyle for him. In fact, even keeping the maids out of the living room most of the time was due to his own preferences. Aura had been brought up as royalty and saw their constant presence as a given. Keeping them out of their personal areas in accordance with his wishes and dealing with most of her needs on her own, including simple clothing changes and the like, was stressful for her, and he recognized it.

“Thanks, Aura,” he told her seriously, realizing how devoted to him she was. Since she had taken him—a man from another world—as her husband, Aura had to deal with hardships she ordinarily would not.

I need to make sure I keep that in mind, he thought to himself. If I forget that and just assume I’m the only one making sacrifices, who knows how arrogant I’d become?

“I do not believe I have done anything that requires thanks. Was there anything else?”

He smiled ruefully at his wife’s resilience before continuing. “There was the internet, I guess. You said it wasn’t possible last time, but I think several magic tools should be able to get this world connected, somehow. Summoning depends on the positions of the stars, so if you applied time reversal or acceleration to a small area, could you not get the stars to the correct position and use the spell right then? If you could, I think a small connection between our worlds would be possible.”

What he wanted was to create a connection near a free wireless network and get his computer hooked up to the internet. There would be no need to create an opening as large as a person for that—if wireless signals could travel

through, it could be as small as a pinprick.

However, after hearing his plan, she shook her head regretfully. “No, as I told you before, that is impossible. First, time reversal is a spell that is cast on a specific item, not an area. If you were to do that, the incantation would need to be adjusted, which would in turn change the mana required. It would essentially be creating a new incantation.”

“You can do that? Create a new spell, I mean?”

Aura smiled at his surprise. “Of course. While I am not a specialist like the court mages, I can adjust an existing spell. Lineal magic is a concealed skill of the royal family, so they are the only ones who can develop it.”

Aura had specialized in politics and military matters, so she wasn’t particularly ardent about developing magic. However, she knew that passing on the lineal magic was a duty of the royal family and possessed a minimum of the knowledge and techniques required.

In fact, the spell she had used to first summon him had been altered by her. Originally, it had been limited to summoning a person the caster had formed a clear mental image of, but she had changed it into something that would summon a completely unknown person with the only requirement being that they be a man from another world who had inherited the basics of space-time magic.

Of course, most of it had been developed by the famed king Carlos II, and Aura had only made the fine adjustments.

She continued, “Besides, the summoning itself is an issue. The spell is nothing more than the transferring of a specific person or thing from another world. It sounds like to accomplish your goal, we would need to form an ongoing connection, no? It would be a completely different spell to ‘connect’ rather than ‘summon.’ Modifying a spell takes a year at the best, and I cannot estimate how long it would take to create a new one.”

“Hmm...”

The numerous issues made him crinkle his lips together and remain silent. While he didn’t have much knowledge of magic, he had a vague understanding

of the fact that both modifying time reversal and creating this new spell would be exceptionally difficult. It might even be quicker for Zenjirou, who had more time, relatively speaking, to study magic and focus on it himself rather than Aura taking charge of it. He understood that but still refused to let go of it and questioned her further.

“I knew realistically it’d be impossible to do right away. What about theoretically, though? If we modified time reversal to act on an area and created a connection, would I be able to do what I want? Are those kinds of modifications and spell creation even realistic?”

Aura folded her arms under her full chest, considering his question. “I believe they are. I am not a proud specialist in magic, so I cannot say for sure, but the modification and development should both be possible, as they fall under the scope of space-time. However, what you wish to do is exceedingly difficult. Reversing time in an area so that the conditions are correct while forming a connection between our two worlds will require vast quantities of mana. I would say that without using future compensation, it would be impossible to withstand.”

That made learning future compensation doubly important. It could end up requiring five months of Aura’s magic to simply connect to the internet for five minutes.

“Whoa, it’d take that much? I guess using the magic tool version of future compensation that Prince Francesco made would—”

Aura heartlessly shook her head at the joy on Zenjirou’s face at his apparent breakthrough. “I cannot allow that. That mana has already been allocated. You stated the items you brought have a finite lifespan. The mana is to cast time reversal on them at periodic intervals.”

The items Aura spoke of mainly consisted of their household appliances. The LED lamps, fridge, AC, TV, computer, and so on. Each was guaranteed by the manufacturer for five to ten years. Even the foundation of their electricity, the hydroelectric generator, would work for only fifteen to twenty years. And this wasn’t Japan—the temperature and humidity were higher in this world. Each of the appliances could very well break before the manufacturer indicated.

“Yeah, that’s definitely more important than an internet connection. Keeping the fridge and AC going would be the best,” he agreed with another clap. They had originally been brought as training wheels for him to get used to life in Capua, but if the spell could extend their lives, that would be even better.

The two items he had named—the fridge and AC—were irreplaceable treasures in the sweltering heat of the Southern Continent. Their charm was such that even Aura agreed for a moment, tempted by them, but she soon shook it off and then shook her head.

“Indeed so... Ah, no. I would like to keep those as well, but the most important thing is something else. That computer you use is what I would most like to keep.”

Zenjirou hadn’t expected that and looked at her in puzzlement. “The computer? But you can’t use it, right? How come?”

It went without saying, but his computer only had a Japanese operating system and programs. Aura had not studied either Japanese or English, so it was like a chocolate teapot to her, he would have thought. However, she replied with a supremely confident expression.

“You must use it to confirm the yearly taxes. You doing that makes a world of difference to our annual income.”

So far, Zenjirou had put each year’s taxes into a spreadsheet program to recalculate them. Aura then used those numbers as a weapon to point out tax evasion by regional nobles and increase the amount of tax she could gain. The benefits of having an individual she could trust to do a final check on the taxes alone and with no mistakes could not be overstated. Because of it, the word was quickly spreading that Capua could not be fooled by false summations on documentation.

Naturally, there were methods for tax evasion other than fudging calculations. For example, changing the size of the carriages used, providing false headcounts of one’s citizens, or even underreporting crop yields and reporting nonexistent disasters were possibilities. Therefore, the most obvious forms of evasion that Zenjirou exposed were only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, but the fact that such falsehoods were seen through put significant

pressure on the feudal lords.

Her explanation let him see where she was coming from, but it also brought up another question. "Hmm, I can understand how valuable the computer is, but aren't you concerned about incorporating something that only I can use into the running of the country? Or are you intending to learn how to use it?"

She shook her head. "I might well if I have the time, but it will mainly be my daughter," she answered.

"Your daughter? Excuse me? What do you mean?"

It went without saying that their only child thus far was Prince Carlos Zenkichi, and as the title implied, he was their son.

His wife offered a more thorough explanation upon seeing his confusion. "This is actually a thought I had before. I do not want my generation to be the last to have the use of this computer tool to run final checks on behalf of the royal family. Therefore, why not pass it on? If you and I have children, they will almost certainly inherit space-time magic. If they are female, they can be raised within the inner palace until adulthood. It should not be all that difficult to teach the use of it if one starts from infancy. Of course, it requires you to learn space-time magic, future expense, and time reversal to maintain it as your legacy, but it should be possible to use in perpetuity."

"Mmmm, I get what you want to say, but..."

His face pinched at her words. It would mean raising a daughter of his that was yet to be born to know how to use and maintain all of their appliances. Given the overall benefit to the royal family, he could see her thought process. Zenjirou had been brought up in a normal household in Japan, though, so deciding his daughter's fate that way felt like treating her as a replacement part for those appliances and was something he was against.

Of course, such a perspective could also refer to Carlos Zenkichi, the first prince, becoming the next king, so perhaps he should just accept that was how things were for royalty.

"Eventually, it may be a good idea to establish a branch line of the females and entrust that role to the head of the family for generations to come. Of

course, entrusting a particular power to a branch family may lead to an increased risk of upheaval, and we cannot go too far, so perhaps having them be united as royalty would also be a good option. What do you think?"

She seemed to realize from his expression that he wasn't entirely in agreement with the idea.

"Um, let's see..."

He had a brief moment of wanting to say he would simply leave it up to her, but then he remembered that they had agreed to vocalize everything they wanted here and now. He brought his legs together on the sofa and leaned forward, a slightly nervous expression on his face.

"Will she be able to be happy with her role and life being decided from the moment of her birth?"

The queen could not understand Zenjirou's perspective. "Hm? Being born into the royal family already does just that. Do you not think that whether they can be happy with that life depends on our love as a family as well as the wet nurse, along with their own efforts, above all else?"

This world had a class system, and generally, children would inherit their parent's professions, so by local values, a child's role in life being decided from birth was not a source of misfortune. If anything, the second and third sons would be jealous due to their lack of a guaranteed future.

Zenjirou could understand that logically but emotionally was another matter. There were just too few commonalities between this world, where you had to seek happiness in your predestined profession, and modern Japan, where you chose your own career. The conflict between his logical understanding and emotional lack thereof was too much, and he was unusually irritated as he scratched his head.

"Ah, well, yeah. Still, it feels a bit scary to have everything decided from birth. The appliances are one thing, but she might not be able to learn how to use the spreadsheets."

Such a thing would be unthinkable in Japan, but the circumstances were completely different here. If the child was born a member of the Capuan royal

family, they would learn the local language as their mother tongue, and of course, the written language of the region would be prioritized. It would be rather difficult for such a person to learn from the help files on the PC, which would be entirely in English and Japanese. Moreover, Zenjirou would be teaching them, and he was by no means an expert, so he did not necessarily have the skills to train them well. It was most likely that learning from infancy would enable them to use the software to a minimal degree, but it was not a certainty.

“Wouldn’t it be better to leave written instructions?”

“A good idea. Oral traditions are always distorted as they are passed down. A physical form of the instructions would be extremely heartening.”

Leaving Zenjirou’s knowledge behind would be a significant undertaking, but not actually that difficult. After all, this world had automatic translation in the form of the soul of language. If Aura wrote down what Zenjirou said in the local language, it would be done. Compiling it all would not be easy, but doing a little each evening would make it manageable.

“Whatever else ends up happening, there’s no harm in leaving instructions. By the way?”

“Yes? What is it?” Aura asked, looking curiously at her husband as his gaze wandered and he smiled vaguely.

“You mentioned our daughter earlier, but we don’t have one yet, do we?”

All of this was predicated on them having a daughter they did not yet have. Would that perhaps be a sign that the avoidance of “acts that could produce children” was over?

Aura grinned at her husband as the lust rose from his body and gave the long-awaited answer.

“Oh, that? I believe it to be exactly as you wish. Carlos is growing well, and I can leave much of my duties to you as my representative. I am physically well, so I think now would be a perfect time for our second.”

“Oh hoh,” Zenjirou answered in a low tone, taut like a drawn bow as his grin grew beyond anything it had been.

"You have a lewd look in your eyes," Aura told him, although even she had to smile ruefully in the face of such blatant lust as it made her shuffle back.

"Oh hoh hoh..." Zenjirou raised his hands next to his face and started wagging his fingers irregularly.

"A lewd movement of your hands as well," his wife said, shifting to cover her chest with her arms as if sensing danger. However, her thin nightwear and arms could not conceal her voluptuous body. If anything, her putting her arms around herself like that emphasized her cleavage and made the sight even more arousing.

"Heh heh heh heh..." His lewd look and movements continued as he half rose and steadily approached.

"What are you planning like that?" she demanded, pressing herself to the back of the sofa to increase the distance between them.

"Hee hee hee..." Zenjirou didn't hesitate to put his right foot onto the table between them as he made a beeline for his wife.

"Calm down. You are letting your lust run rampant."

"Oh, but didn't you say that we should give form to our desires without holding back?"

"I did not mean it like that! I simply wanted to converse. No one stated that we should start such actions here!"

Despite her words, Aura didn't move to leave the sofa, so he knew she was going to accept his advances. In the first place, the difference in their physical abilities was comparable to a kitten and tiger. If Aura wanted to refuse him, Zenjirou wouldn't be able to push the matter.

He continued his slow approach over the table before looming over her. "Aha ha..."

"Wait, at least let us retire to bed."

"The bedroom is too far."

"No, it is not; it is right there."

“That’s way too far for me right now.”

It was rare for him to refuse her, but the situation was something he had been longing for. It was impossible; there would be no stopping him.

“Honestly, you...” She understood that and gave a rueful smile as she opened her arms in welcome.

“Gah he he he!”

“Come now, at least speak like a human,” she said, not forgetting to lightly smack him on the back of the head as he buried his face in her breasts.

Chapter 2 — Triumph in the Capital

A sudden triumph in the capital was, in spite of the inconvenience that it caused the citizens, a highly welcome event.

Such events completely closed off the main arterial route of goods and people through the city, so it would inevitably be some sort of hindrance. At the same time, it was almost like a festival and therefore well-liked. Savvy merchants set up stalls by the closed main road and people who owned homes on that road would rent out their second floors and roofs for spectators in order to make some money.

It would cause more issues if it continued for days, but the occasional event was a good breather for the people. Therefore, when Freya's group arrived from Valentia for their triumph, it received a positive response overall.

Several drake-drawn carriages made their way up the main road through the capital, escorted by a parade of armed soldiers. The alpha swarm raptor's skull was carried by another carriage at the front of the procession. A significant amount of time had passed since it had been killed, so the skin and meat had started to rot and therefore been removed. The skull itself was still striking enough, however.

“Whoa! It was that big?! Just the head’s as big as my torso!”

“The woman on top was the one that took it down.”

“She’s huge too. I wouldn’t want to be standing next to her.”

“She’s a beauty, though; a real woman.”

The spectators’ gazes were all focused on the skull and the woman atop it. Her name was Victoria Kronkvist, or Skaji.

It was extremely rare for a woman to become a warrior on the Southern Continent. On top of that, she had taken down the raptor alpha at the head of her forces, in single combat, so those facts alone made it a good show.

Skaji also had looks that would draw attention regardless. She was midway through the 180s in height, and her body was clearly trained, even from a

distance. Yet, she still had womanly curves around her chest and rear, and while her eyes were rather sharp, it didn't stop her from being called beautiful.

She was an accomplished warrior from another land, so the attention she received was unsurprising. Her liege, Princess Freya, had told her that her martial accomplishments would make diplomacy easier, so she was consciously standing taller and saluting the crowds with her beloved tusk spear.

Behind her, the Uppasalan soldiers were also drawing gazes.

"Those Northerners sure are tall, though. What do you think, are all of them a whole head above me?"

"Seriously, are they a country of giants or something?"

Their hair colors were blond and light browns, with vivid eyes of blue, green, and gray. They had beards covering their chins to their mouths and even the smallest among them was 180 centimeters tall, while the tallest were imposing pillars of muscle well over 190 centimeters in height.

These strange giants were clad in leather armor and chainmail, marching armed with swords and short spears. The impact was enough to make the spectators want to step back even knowing that it was safe. Some of the younger men in the audience couldn't help but pat at their arms or chests to compare themselves to the foreign military giants.

The extravagantly decorated carriage was in the midst of those men, protected, and didn't garner that much attention in comparison. It was relatively big and drawn by four dash drakes, but it was a much more familiar sight for the citizens than the combination of the massive skull and armed men.

If its occupant—Princess Freya—had exposed her silver hair and ice-blue eyes to the public, then things might have been different, but the carriage's windows were small in order to ensure her safety. She was sitting by the window and offering small waves with a smile to the crowd, but only a small portion of the spectators could see that.

If anything, Freya was paying more attention than the spectators, as it was the first time she was seeing a foreign country's capital.

They are more prosperous than I expected. This main road is paved and has

tracks for carriages as well. The homes are mostly wooden, but they are well-built and primarily two stories. There are even some three-story houses.

The citizens all seem at ease too, and I can't see any underfed or orphaned children. When you take into account how recent the war was, you can certainly consider this a wealthy country.

The sights made Freya think once again that establishing trade between their two countries would be of considerable benefit to Uppasala.

“I would have preferred to continue negotiating with His Majesty Zenjirou...”

Despite her desires slipping out, she spoke quietly enough that the words didn't reach the maid she had been loaned by Capua.

She had only spoken with Zenjirou for a few days, but that had been enough to get an idea of his general personality.

He was sincere and easy to work with to an extent where she could safely say he was the first noble she had seen who was like that. It seemed like he didn't have the authority or rights to make the kinds of decisions that his title of prince consort would indicate. Despite that lack of power, though, Freya would prefer to work with someone sincere and unlikely to betray her. To put it more harshly, she saw him as someone who was easy to manage.

He is the prince consort and one of only two adult royals. Therefore, the problem will be the other, Her Majesty Aura. If my current information is accurate, she will be a formidable opponent, the silver-haired princess thought as she continued waving her pale hand.



While the Uppasalan delegation was parading down the main street, Rafaello—who had arrived in the capital before them—was speaking with his father, Count Manuel Márquez, in the Márquez's capital estate after their period of separation.

“It has been some time, Rafaello. Are you well? You accomplished your difficult role with aplomb,” Manuel started.

“Not at all, father. It was not particularly difficult. I wish to thank you, in fact,

for arranging work that was both suited to me and worth doing."

The conversation seemed somewhat reserved for father and son, but the two Márquezs had an exceptionally good relationship for two adult members of a noble family. The father saw his son as a worthy successor, while the son would take the prudent guidance of his father to heart. Regardless of any slight disagreements between them, most nobles would consider the relationship enviable.

Manuel shifted his gaze to the open window, through which the cheers of the citizenry were intermittently audible.

"It would appear that Princess Freya's party has arrived safely. They must be rather popular if we can hear their cheers from here," he remarked.

"The soldiers of the Northern Continent draw the eye. I also imagine that the raptor skull and Lady Victoria at the procession's head make for a good show. Rumors of its extermination will have reached even here by now," Rafaello answered with a smile. He had spent some of the journey from Valentia to the capital traveling with the delegation.



“A rather transparent way to put it,” the count chuckled reluctantly. He was sure that the source of those rumors was the very son sitting in front of him right now.

The rumors spreading in the capital held that Zenjirou had practically been in charge, standing on the battlefield, with Xavier Gazi leading the main force while Victoria Kronkvist took on the alpha in single combat.

This was the same information the count had been able to acquire from reliable sources in the palace. In other words, the rumors were almost entirely unaltered as they spread. It went without saying that this was exceptionally rare. Rumors normally warped so much in their telling that one couldn’t help but wonder where on earth the final version had come from. For a rumor to remain correct as it spread naturally implied that it was being assisted somehow.

Rafaello most likely saw some kind of benefit to ensuring that the truth of the matter was known. The count would have to ask after it, but first, he would continue with his official business.

“I looked over the documents, but I would hear it directly from you as well. Were the negotiations with Princess Freya a success?”

His successor’s smile vanished at the question, and he nodded with a serious expression.

“Indeed. Sir Zenjirou and Princess Freya held optimistic discussions towards establishing trade between the Kingdom of Capua and the Kingdom of Uppasala. The fine details will likely be finalized within the capital now, but both families have agreed to individual trade.”

“I see,” Manuel smiled.

If the two families had established a monopolistic trade before other nobles could interfere, then the count could say that his expectations had been met. If international trade between the two countries was strictly between the two royal families, then even if Uppasalan trading vessels docked in Valentia, no one but Capua’s royal family would be able to trade directly with them.

If that was where things ended, there would be no reason for the count to

celebrate, but of course, it did not end there. The main things the Uppasalans wished to trade for were national products of Capua like sugar, spices, drake hide, and drake bones. The royal family would be unable to prepare sufficient quantities for export on their own. Therefore, even if the trade was technically monopolistic, all it meant was that the direct negotiation would be between the families. There would still be opportunities for influential nobles to join indirectly.

The count planned to get in on the trade preferentially. His secret discussions with Aura had led to an agreement that in exchange for help with the negotiations, the royal family would not take a cut of the trade with the Márquez family, so financially, it was equivalent to trading directly.

“You have done well. I shall finalize things with Her Majesty later. I suppose that it will proceed as discussions between Her Majesty and Princess Freya, so it will likely take some more time, but that is hardly an issue.”

“I will leave it to you, father,” the son answered, trusting in his father as the latter confidently offered to finish things.

“Indeed.”

For his part, while it didn’t show on his face, Manuel was somewhat dissatisfied. His son had succeeded in following his instructions to achieve the desired result, but he was unhappy that Rafaello had grown too used to the final responsibility and benefits being taken by others.

It was true that his son was accomplished, but he was already past thirty. He needed to move from being an accomplished son to being a head of a great family, even if somewhat less accomplished, or else the count hesitated to leave the family to him. If he continued raising him as a capable, reasonable son, he would end up being too deferential and unsuited to leading the family.

Even as the count considered that he would need to take some drastic measures soon, he knew he could not do so in a situation so entwined with the royal family. Tucking away his worries in a corner of his mind, Manuel focused on the problem in front of him.

“Now, while I let this pass earlier, I shall confirm it now. The rumors spreading through the city are your doing?”

While it was worded as a question, it was closer to a statement, and Rafaello nodded soberly.

"It is. I had my subordinates spread them."

"I would hear your reasoning."

Rafaello had likely been prepared to explain from the beginning, so he answered smoothly. "Very well. Frankly, it was to maintain good relations with Sir Zenjirou. If rumors were allowed to spread naturally, his accomplishments would be exaggerated further. I believe that would be against his desires."

The answer was not exactly what his father had expected, and the count looked at him questioningly before asking for clarification. "Excuse me? Explain? Not that Sir Zenjirou does not wish for his deeds to be exaggerated. I am aware that he is loyal to Her Majesty and that he takes great pains to avoid increasing his influence and destabilizing her power. Why would you make the effort to follow suit, though? Did he ask that of you?"

"He did not; it was my own choice," Rafaello answered bluntly.

A crease appeared between Manuel's brows. "Why, though? What did you see of Sir Zenjirou's disposition?"

Rafaello straightened in his seat and took a deep breath before answering. "That it is terrifying. Sir Zenjirou is a monster." His expression was utterly serious.

"What on earth? Explain." The wily count narrowed his eyes upon hearing his son calling the utterly unaggressive prince consort a monster. If anyone else had said it, he might have laughed it off, but his son was not such a poor judge of character.

Rafaello considered his response, remaining silent in thought before replying, "Well, I can honestly think of no other way to describe a monster than 'monster.' Naturally, that does not refer to his appearance or abilities; it refers to his nature. He is *different*. He is fundamentally excessively kind and logical, and it took me some time to notice that he doesn't show his true feelings in official situations, but treating him as an ordinary person will lead to making mistakes," he declared.

"Hmm...I can accept that his values are somewhat peculiar, but I cannot fathom calling him a monster. Do you mean to say that he is as formidable as General Pujol or Marquis Lara?"

Rafaello leaned forward over the table and continued. "Not at all. General Pujol's nature is 'monstrously strong,' and Marquis Lara's is 'monstrously powerful,' but they are simply matters of strength and size. To describe it physically, it would be akin to calling people superhuman for being human and yet having the strength of a drake, or else being much taller than average. In comparison, Sir Zenjirou is truly a monster. It is like seeing a human and yet everything from the neck up being decoration, with the only weakness being the instep or else having a third arm hidden behind them."

The count was now truly confused as his son likened the man to a true monster or apparition. Manuel could not see any possible way that the harmless consort was so dangerous.

The younger Márquez went on again. "Here, it would be a person that appears at first glance to be ordinary but was far more. You carried a sword and fought when you were younger, right? Think back to that. How likely do you think your victory against a person with average stamina and beginner-level swordsmanship but a specific physical oddity like I just mentioned would be?"

While the scenario was utterly impenetrable to the man, the count saw his son's seriousness and thought about it properly before answering. "Well...it would be somewhat difficult, but if they lacked skill and physical abilities, then I would think it would be doable with relative ease."

"Father, is that not assuming that you are aware of the fact that the monster's head does not matter, that its instep is its only weakness, and that it has a third, hidden arm?" Rafaello asked immediately, his father's answer being exactly what he had expected.

"Hm? Ah, yes, I suppose so," he answered. The count was by no means unintelligent, and he immediately understood what his son wanted to say. "I see, you are quite correct. The reason I would win is that I knew about those weaknesses. If I faced a monster that appeared to be human without knowing it, then the moment I cut off its decorative head and thought I was victorious, it

would kill me with the weapon in its third hand. Under those circumstances, I believe even General Pujol himself could fall, let alone me. Is that what you are afraid of? That no one knows what kind of mental offense he may launch or even what topics must remain unspoken?"

The younger man smiled in relief and nodded twice at his father's understanding. "Exactly. I cannot help but feel that the nobles interacting with him are carelessly fondling an ancient dragon, not knowing what might displease it. Sir Zenjirou is indeed genial. Logical too. However, he is not emotionless. I have come to understand that in the near month I spent working with him."

During that month in Valentia, Rafaello had seen Zenjirou act without restraining his emotions. For example, when he found out that Freya had goats, he had been overjoyed and immediately offered to buy them. While it might have been an emotion of delight, it proved that Zenjirou had emotional responses that could overwhelm his pragmatism. If he likewise had something which would cause rage or hatred to such a degree, he might likewise follow his emotions and demand the death penalty.

However, Rafaello had no idea what might provoke such a response. Rafaello himself was well-mannered, a good listener, and excelled at observation to divine the feelings and values of his negotiation partner. His main strength was in using that information about his partner's desires and feelings which could not be put into words to smoothly carry out a conversation.

Despite that, he'd had no such success with Zenjirou. Of course, everyone had their quirks, so completely divining someone's emotions and values was impossible. However, it went beyond that with Zenjirou. Rafaello couldn't even begin to predict his values. If he knew a person's age, gender, standing, and occupation, he could normally estimate what they would value. For example, a young nobleman who worked in the army would generally be delighted about being evaluated as having good prospects and would often grow angry about being seen as cowardly. There were, of course, exceptions. Usually, though, it was only partially incorrect. Conversely, people who didn't match his estimations at all often turned out to have misrepresented their status or occupation.

By Rafaello's categorization, Zenjirou was young, male, a royal, and unemployed. "Unemployed" might seem harsh, so you could also take his occupation to be "royalty" or even "prince consort." For royalty and nobility, status and occupation often became the same thing.

Regardless, Zenjirou was utterly outside of what Rafaello thought a young male royal should be. Even if he changed the parameters, considering him female, or older, or a commoner, changing his occupation to farmer or military man, none of it fit him. It was perhaps what you would expect from someone from another world—he truly defied categorization.

"I became painfully aware that he is not some puppet of the queen like many nobles like to claim. He has a firm personality and actively plays the role of his own accord. He is less like a puppet and more of an automaton."

Some of the nobles deriding him were planning on removing Aura from the throne and installing Zenjirou instead. They were under the misapprehension that they could control his puppet strings themselves.

The truth had been revealed to Rafaello, though. Zenjirou was no puppet. The proof lay in the fact that even so far from the queen's instructions in Valentia, there was no delay in his decision-making. If he had been a mere puppet, he would have been caught flat-footed without the queen's commands due to the rapidly changing circumstances.

That hadn't happened, though; his actions had remained practically unchanged from when he was representing her within the royal palace. That was the most terrifying part. The man used his unshakable freedom and judgment to constantly do the best for the queen. It was akin to her having a second body that took a minimum of instruction to provide results on its own. If Rafaello's estimation was correct, then Aura's power would soon have an even firmer foundation.

He continued his explanation gravely. "Therefore, I would advise keeping our distance until we can understand Sir Zenjirou better. He would be a dangerous enemy but also perhaps a dangerous ally."

When you didn't understand a person's disposition, attacking them was a risk, yet so too was currying favor. Calling a normal man "bold" would be a

compliment, but it would doubtlessly insult a woman. Telling a noble they were unconcerned with money would be offensive as well, but not a merchant.

“Sir Zenjirou is entirely indifferent if you point out that he has no martial skill, and he doesn’t fail to follow Her Highness’s instructions. Not understanding what will please him and what will do the opposite makes me believe that keeping our distance would be in our best interest.”

Rafaello was offering this advice because he would be returning to their family’s territory once his business was concluded, but it was likely that his father, who worked in the capital, would interact with the man.

“Indeed, I understand your concerns, and you are correct. For the time being, I will conduct my business with the royal family via Her Highness.”

Aura was a formidable opponent, even for the sly old Márquez, but he knew her disposition. He could be outwitted, but he would not walk unaware into the lion’s den. His son breathed a sigh of relief and gave a nod.

“I do believe that would be best. Also, this is my own opinion, but I think that once we understand his character more, we would be well served by considering how to get Sir Zenjirou on our side.”

Manuel’s eyes widened at the rather rare proactive opinion from his son.

“Oh? So you wish to say that his aid would serve our family well? Is he that talented?”

Rafaello looked conflicted for a moment before answering, choosing his words carefully. “I would not say he is particularly talented. Naturally, he is by no means incompetent either. I merely think that if we can gain his allegiance, or even offer our own, our family will prosper. I believe that where the usual relationships between nobles and royals differ could well be points of commonality.”

“Continue,” his father bade him.

“Very well. I had the opportunity to interact with Sir Zenjirou for a relatively long time. He became even less comprehensible in the process, but there were several things that I was able to confirm. The first is that he is by no means as skilled at holding his emotions or expression in check as I first assumed. I am

sure of this due to him immediately moving to buy some of the goats that Princess Freya said she had, prioritizing his emotional response. I assumed he excelled at it due to his lack of meddling as Her Majesty's representative, presuming he was extremely rational about it. However, there is the other possibility that he has not been controlling his emotions like that. In other words, that he has not been compromising himself but simply has no dissatisfaction with playing the part of prince consort."

"And?"

"The final offensive on the swarm raptors was technically led by him, but as he did it, I could feel the slightest reluctance to his actions. Combining these facts, I believe that while he is indeed a member of the royal family, he prefers to stand in the shadows rather than up front. While he is a man, he is loath to stand and proclaim his victories. If it is indeed the case, then I believe we would be able to count on his assistance if we wished to take public credit for something or to increase our military renown."

"I see. I understand what you wish to say, and it is indeed intriguing should it prove true." The count nodded deeply, his expression remaining unchanged by his son's lengthy explanation.

What Rafaello wished to say was simple. Nearly any male noble would want the chance to stand for credit or win militarily. Royals could create such circumstances, but if there was a royal who didn't want those opportunities for himself, there could indeed be a good deal to be made. It was akin to the difference between asking a notorious wino for a superb vintage and asking someone uninterested in the drink. It went without saying which one would be easier to convince.

"Very well. Of course, I cannot determine our family's course based solely on your opinion, but I shall bear it in mind. You have done well."

"Thank you, father. If there is nothing else you wish of me, I would like to return home once the banquet to welcome Princess Freya is over," he said with a smile, feeling his intentions had gotten through to his father. Therefore, he felt comfortable requesting permission to return to their lands. It wasn't ideal for both the current lord and heir apparent to be away. Of course, with a

domain as large as the Márquez's, there were enough people to keep it running for up to half a year without their leaders, but their presence was always preferable.

Therefore, Rafaello's request made perfect sense. However, contrary to his expectations, the count shook his head.

"There is more. Your return will be delayed. This is still confidential, but General Pujol will be married before long."

Rafaello's eyes widened at the information which had barely spread at all within the capital.

"Oh, at last? Who might the bride be?"

"The eldest daughter of the Gazi family, Lucinda."

Even Rafaello was initially lost for words at the answer, and a shocked smile made its way onto his face as he shrugged. "Well... I suppose all I can say is that we could expect no less of the general. He and his ambition know no fear."

"Indeed, he stands to gain much but also to potentially lose much. The royal family will likely remain vigilant in regards to him for at least as long as Her Majesty lives. That said, while it does not involve our family, I wish for you to attend and represent our household. You should decide who you want to accompany you."

"I see. I assume that my stepmother or Mirella are unsuitable?" Rafaello asked just to be sure, since attending a marriage as an unmarried adult man with a woman was essentially a declaration that there was the intention for a relationship between them. Conversely, a man with no one to make such a promise to would ask either an already married relative or a girl who was not yet of marriageable age. Mirella was his cousin. Manuel nodded as if the answer went without saying.

"Indeed. You need to get married. While it is not a competition with the general, it is about time for you to marry as well. I have chosen some candidates myself, and I will consider any that you wish to mention. So?"

Thus, his father unilaterally decided that Rafaello would marry and declared it as if it were obvious. For his part, Rafaello was not dissatisfied with the order;

he accepted it as completely natural. It was yet more proof that he was still just “the good son.”

“Someone for me to marry? Any woman you select would most likely be of no concern, but as far as my own suggestions go, I would prefer someone like stepmother,” Rafaello said, mentioning his stepmother (over five years his junior) as his ideal woman. His own father’s second wife. It was a rather risky joke, but they were close enough that it would indeed pass as such. Also, Octavia was popular enough that there was a real sense of persuasion to what he said.

His father grinned victoriously at that.

“That is impossible; even Capua lacks two women of Octavia’s caliber.”

“Yes, yes, I know. In that case, I have no real requests. As long as there are no major problems with her personality or abilities, the only thing that remains is whether our married life can go well. That would be contingent on the effort she and I were to put in, though.”

“I see. I shall reach out to the first candidate, then. She is the second daughter of Baron Massana, Lady Kisha.”

“Lady Kisha of the Massana family? I seem to recall they are distant relations of ours, and our lands border each other. I don’t believe there is a particularly *large* disparity in status either, but...”

The cause for his startled expression was that although the Massana family was not lowly by any means, it was not highly ranked either. Feudal lord though the baron may have been, his territory was extremely small and even court nobles without peerage or land could hold more influence if they had an important post. That was how weak their position was. That said, as a feudal lord, he still had his own lands and army, and due to that land being connected to the Márquez’s, an alliance would still be of benefit.

However, Rafaello felt that the family was a little lacking in position for the heir apparent of one of the ten strongest families in Capua to take one of them as a wife. It matched the Márquez family’s preference for stability over vicissitudes, and for low-risk low-reward over high-risk high-reward, but the “reward” still felt too low.

Manuel grinned once more at his son before speaking like a magician revealing his trick.

"You can imagine most of the circumstances. If she came from too grand a family, it would be hard to manage as the next head. It would be better for there to be a clear difference in status to forestall any issues. The other thing is that the charm lies not in the Massana family, but in Lady Kisha herself."

"Ah, I *have* heard her name several times before. I seem to remember she is seen as fairly beautiful within society. A different beauty from my stepmother, though."

"Indeed, while she is not as popular as Octavia, she is enough of a woman that there are a fair number of men who prefer her. She is five years younger as well, so I would say the two will only be compared societally for a very short time."

Refined, graceful, and reserved. That described Octavia, the embodiment of the average Capuan man's ideal. Unlike her, however, Kisha Massana was a beautiful woman who boasted a voluptuous body and beguiling expression. She was even allowed to wear the emblematic color of the country, red, to show that she was among the highest skilled dancers. If a modern person from Earth saw her furious dance in the red native clothing, they might even think of *Carmen*.

"That would make her twenty this year, no? It is rather rare for a woman of Lady Kisha's renown to remain unmarried for so long. Is the baron intending to leave things until the last moment to have his pick of families?"

In which case, his tactic had seen great success. After all, they were to receive a proposal from the next head of the Márquez family. However, the count answered his son's question with a completely blank expression and a surprising statement.

"Not at all; there are no issues with Lady Kisha even should she age past twenty. After all, she entered the inner palace as a maid the year before last. A few extra years is nothing compared to such a position."

"I see...so that's the reason," he said, letting out a sigh before tiredly massaging his eyes with his right thumb and index finger. "Father, I was under

the impression that I just suggested we keep our distance from Sir Zenjirou..."

His father gave a disdainful shrug at the rare critical tone. "I intend to do so. However, a family such as ours is important within the country, and Sir Zenjirou is the queen's prince consort. We cannot maintain such a distance indefinitely. Therefore we should proactively probe to find out his values as soon as possible."

That was completely correct. However, the count would not have chosen Rafaello's wife-to-be just for that. He simply hadn't changed his choice despite their earlier conversation.

Rafaello himself had said that once they understood him, Zenjirou would make a good ally, so he couldn't complain.

Manuel continued his explanation. "Octavia's reports from her time at the inner palace say that Sir Zenjirou has a surprisingly amicable relationship with the maids."

"You mean he took one as a mistress?!" Rafaello couldn't contain his surprise at that. However, the answer was even more unexpected.

"Not amiable in that way. He has no woman in that type of relationship, but they are exceedingly close on a day-to-day basis, and the maids seem to find him to be affable. He is rather well-liked by them. Of course, none of this has been stated explicitly; it is simply Octavia's impression upon seeing them interact."

"Not in that sort of relationship and yet he's affable with the maids? He hasn't laid hands on them...but is still well-liked by them? That honestly makes me even more wary. What on earth? I cannot fathom him, in personality *or* values," Rafaello said, raising his hands in somewhat joking surrender. "Is Sir Zenjirou particularly taken with Lady Kisha?"

"Unfortunately not. Her family is simply the only one who suits our circumstances. Viscount Regalado's family would be suited in terms of prestige, but their position is somewhat unique, as you know. Careless interference would be a risk. Besides, his daughter is a bit too young, while Lady Kisha is of a more suitable age."

“I see.”

Rafaello put his hand on his chin and considered his father’s words. A twenty-year-old who had been the talk of society recently and now worked in the inner palace as a maid. Her looks were certainly first-class, and if she was chosen to work in the inner palace, there should be no major problems with her personality. Her current age was still within the norm to marry, if only just, and when you took into account the benefit of her having spent two years in the inner palace, it was no issue at all.

Finally coming to a conclusion, he calmly made his decision. “Very well. I will want to meet her, and I still might refuse if there is something unforeseen, so I would appreciate you not making any firm decisions yet. You can continue things as if we will marry, though.”

“Understood, in which case I can progress things to the point where you can announce your engagement as soon as you wish. I would like you to be able to have her accompany you to General Pujol’s wedding as your fiancée,” Manuel replied, nodding in satisfaction at his son meeting his expectations.



Three days had passed since the parade had ended without incident, and Freya’s party had been formally welcomed into the country through a ceremony at the royal palace.

The royal family had decided to host the banquet that night to welcome them in deference to the exhaustion of their long journey from Valentia. Several sparkling chandeliers along with multiple candlesticks were illuminating the banquet hall, and men and women were gathered in their finery, chatting.

During the active season, the temperatures stayed at a level that could be described as warm rather than hot, and the nights were cool and pleasant. This meant that the guests’ outfits were different from those worn during the hotter parts of the year. There was variation, of course, but the outfits were much more decadent during this season. Much as the concept of ‘autumn fashion’ was a thing in modern Japan, temperatures that allowed one to wear a number of layers without getting too hot made it the season with the greatest degree of fashion freedom.

The most eye-catching individuals among the ladies and gentlemen dressed to the nines were of course the guests of honor, Princess Freya and the warrior Victoria Kronkvist, also known as Skaji.

Freya had emphasized her position as captain of the *Glasir's Leaf* in Valentia, so she often wore men's clothing. However, now she was here as a princess and naturally wore the clothing expected of her. Her light blue dress was something from the distant Kingdom of Uppasala. It was simple in design and decorated with a minimum of lace. However, a closer look showed that there were blue sapphires across it, something only permitted for the Uppasalan royal family. It was more than beautiful enough to draw the eye.

On top of that, the woman herself had short silver-blue hair and icy blue eyes, making her a mysterious beauty. Her skin seemed almost impossibly pale to those from the Southern Continent, and her appearance was ethereally beautiful.

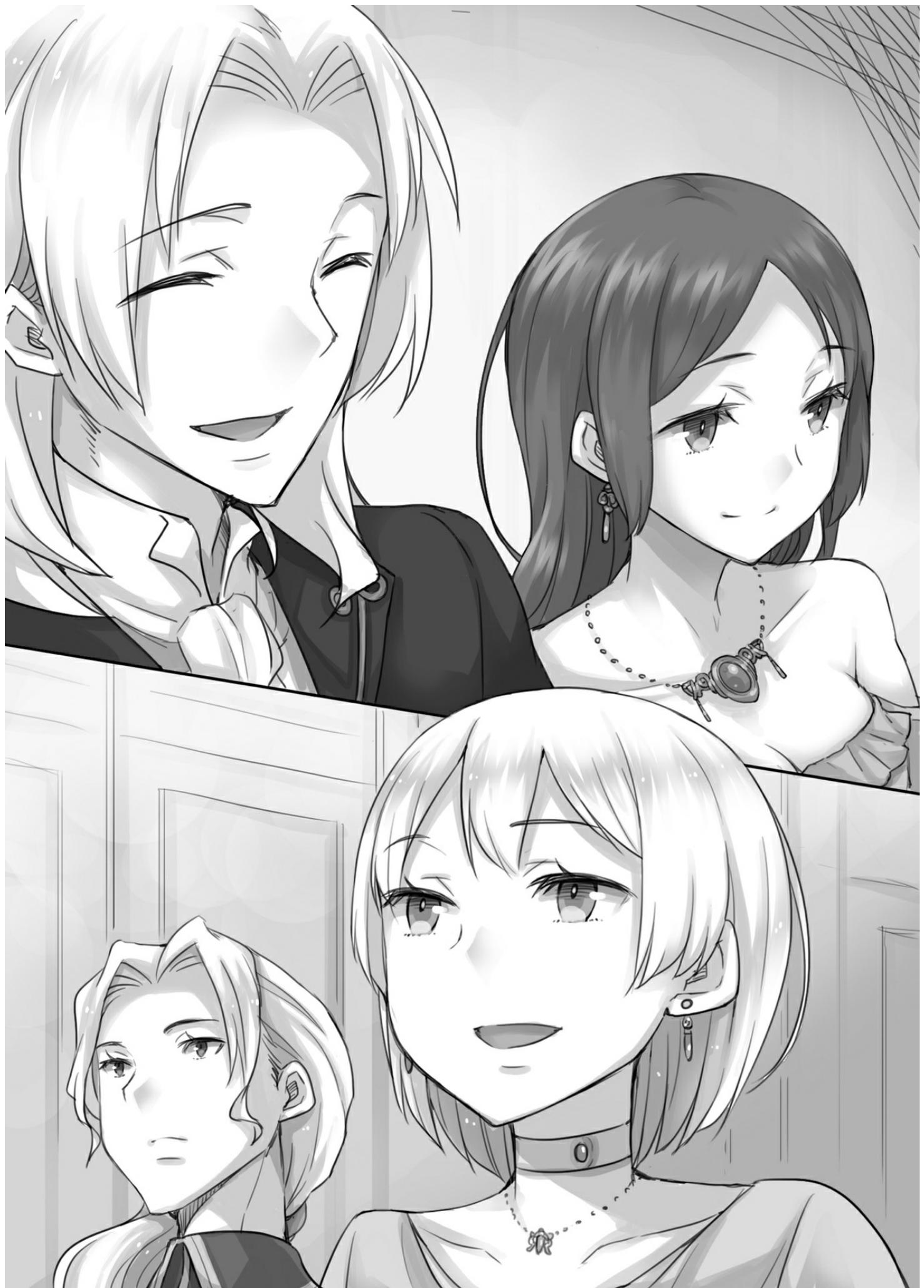
Freya's smile remained on her face even as the guests' gazes converged on her, regardless of gender, and whispered rumors spread throughout the room. She was born royalty, so she was used to the attention.

She walked along the red carpet, several shadows forming around her from the chandeliers as she followed her homeland's etiquette with her gait. She had been told ahead of time that someone of lower status addressing someone of higher status was against Capuan etiquette, so she was moving to an area where she could initiate conversation, surveying her surroundings with a smile. However, before she could do so, someone else approached her.

"Hey, it's good to meet you, Northern Princess. I'd like to exchange greetings; would you be amenable?"

The words were light and calm, coming from a blond-haired, blue-eyed man wearing a deep purple tuxedo-like affair. Behind him was a girl with chestnut-colored hair, wearing a lighter purple dress.

"Of course. May I ask your name?" she replied, despite already having a good idea of who they were.



“Thank you. I am from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, the eldest son of the first prince of the Sharou family, Josep. My name is Francesco.”

“I am also of the Sharou family, and my name is Bona.”

Prince Francesco and Princess Bona. As the two royals from the central power of the Southern Continent introduced themselves, Freya acted as the representative of her homeland and returned the introduction with her soft smile in place.

“Thank you for your courtesy. I am the eldest daughter of King Gustav V, Freya. This is my confidant, Victoria Kronkvist, or Skaji.”

The tall warrior behind her simply bowed deeply and wordlessly as the royals exchanged introductions. Skaji, of course, was not armed. She had removed her leather armor and was wearing a blue militaryesque uniform stitched with silver thread. Her lower half was covered with a feminine skirt, but a closer inspection revealed that it only fell to her knees and actually had deep cuts up the side. Underneath was a pair of half-length pants that were integrated with the skirt.

The outfit allowed her a similar range of movement to standard pants if it came to it. Despite that, it still gave a feminine impression and might well have been standard Uppasalan dress uniform for the country’s female warriors.

“Oh, a reliable escort. Good to meet you,” he said.

Despite that, her wordless response had made it clear that she was there only to guard Freya, so he turned his cheerful smile back to the princess.

“May I call you Princess Freya? It’s the first time I’ve met someone from the Northern Continent, so I am rather excited despite myself. I would appreciate an insight into the continent’s culture if you would be willing.”

Francesco’s disposition meant that despite his somewhat overfamiliar interaction with someone for a first meeting, they weren’t unhappy about it. His disposition might well be an even more powerful ability than being able to manipulate two bloodlines’ lineal magics.

Bona’s clear discomfort and nerves under her forced smile put a slight damper on the mood, but Freya answered the foreign prince with a smile, not

taking offense.

"I would be thrilled if we have the time. While I am somewhat embarrassed to show my ignorance, I had not heard of the fame of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle until I arrived here. I would greatly appreciate such information from you as well."

"I would be more than happy. It is no surprise that someone from the Northern Continent would be unaware of the Twin Kingdoms. We're a landlocked country in the center of the continent, after all, so we don't interact with the North."

"I see. My thanks for that information. However, both you and Princess Bona are far closer in appearance to us than those of the Kingdom of Capua, are you not?"

The query was only natural. While there were differences in degree, dark skin was more common on the Southern Continent, and the two foreign royals had skin tones that were much paler. They were similar enough that someone unfamiliar with the four people involved in the conversation would believe that they were from the same place.

Francesco chuckled amiably at her statement as he answered. "Right, I think that's because our ancestors emigrated from the Northern Continent. There's a fair amount of blood from the Southern Continent now, so there are darker-skinned royals and nobles as well, but most are similar in looks to us," he answered.

"Oh, I see," Freya answered, an expression of polite interest on her face as she considered the oddities of what he had just said.

Maintaining a different appearance from the locals of a new area wasn't *that* strange a concept. The word emigration implied that it wasn't just one or two people, and she could easily imagine the royal family avoiding marrying members of the local population to protect their lineal magic. Their tenacity when it came to such matters had most likely also manifested in the preservation of their physical appearance as well.

The problem was that that royal family had ended up in a completely landlocked country. The only way to emigrate from the Northern Continent to

the Southern Continent was, of course, by crossing the sea. While it had happened hundreds of years ago and was therefore impossible to know the details of, the ancestors of the Twin Kingdoms must have arrived by sea before making landfall. And yet, despite that, the country was completely landlocked. Of course, there was the possibility that the borders had expanded and contracted many times over the years; however, when one took into account that the Twin Kingdoms was said to *reign* over the center of the continent, it seemed unlikely.

Most people would not forget that something had been taken from them. If there was some stretch of coastline that had once been a territory of the Twin Kingdoms, there would be people pushing to reclaim it.

Freya thought of another possibility. Innocently, her smile held firmly in place, she questioned him. “So, is the other royal family of the Twin Kingdoms, the Gilbelle Papacy, similar to your own in appearance?”

“They are. Each of our families has their own characteristic look and build, of course, but neither is vastly different from people of the Northern Continent.”

Francesco’s carefree answer only created more questions. *Two royal families with lineal magic both emigrated to the Southern Continent? On top of that, they both took the same path and joined forces to create a single country? That seems highly suspect.*

Royal families with lineal magic were often fiercely independent. Of course, Freya wasn’t aware of every country that had ever existed on the Northern Continent and could not definitively rule it out, but she could not think of a country that would be reasonable for either the Sharou or Gilbelle families to have lived independently.

Enchantment and healing were both extraordinarily useful magics. If a family had possessed those then surely there would be at least some legend of their individual countries, even if they had collapsed.

Of course, national strength is not determined solely by lineal magic, so I would believe a dynasty could die out without leaving its mark on history, and even that the descendants of such a dynasty had not died out but had instead traveled to the Southern Continent. Yet...

Despite the endless questions, it was not a matter to consider then and there, she decided, cutting herself off and shifting to lighter topics.

“The Southern Continent seems replete with drakes,” she said. “I am rather envious. It was my first time riding in a drake-drawn carriage, and I must admit I could not contain my excitement.”

The topic must have been of interest to the prince as well, as he almost leaped to discuss it.

“Right, there are few drakes on the Northern Continent. Even as far as dash drakes are concerned, those of this region and the Twin Kingdoms’ are rather different. Those of this region are often green and thrive in high humidity while those of my homeland are more likely to be sandy colors and thrive in dryness.”

“Oh? So they are indeed considerably dissimilar, despite being on the same continent.”

“Yes, the cultural norms are different between the western and central regions as well. Even the architecture is vastly different, so one town can look utterly unlike another from one region to the next.”

“I see. Intriguing.”

The two of them continued discussing their countries’ cultures for a while.

“Now announcing Her Majesty Queen Aura and Sir Zenjirou!” came a call after some time, proclaiming the queen and prince consort’s arrival.

“Prince Francesco, Princess Bona, I must go and offer my greetings to Their Majesties. Please excuse me,” she said to the Twin Kingdoms royals before moving to leave.

“In which case, we can accompany you. The two of us need to offer our own greetings as well,” Francesco suggested.

“Indeed, Princess Freya. We would appreciate your allowing us to accompany you.”

Freya had no real reason to refuse them. They were all in the same position as far as such greetings were concerned.

“Very well; together then,” she agreed with a smile.

“Your Majesties, I highly appreciate you preparing such an occasion for me. As a representative of the Uppasalan delegation, I, Freya Uppasala offer my deepest thanks,” she said, her tone comfortable and clear as she offered a small bow of her head in addition to a curtsy.

Queen Aura straightened her back and almost seemed to push her voluptuous breasts out in response to the princess’s greeting before offering a generous nod.

“You seem to have recovered from the exhaustion of such a long trip. This banquet is to welcome you. I am more than happy for you to relax and enjoy yourself.”

“Tonight is an informal occasion, Princess Freya. I hope you can take the opportunity to let your hair down and enjoy yourself.”

“Indeed, thank you,” Freya answered the well-wishes from Aura and Zenjirou with a bow clearly different from the norm in the Southern Continent. Despite its unfamiliarity, it was evident to everyone that it was extremely refined.

The past year and a half had made Zenjirou relatively au fait with royal etiquette, but he obviously paled in comparison to Aura, who had been born into the role. For this reason, he generally let her take the lead in these situations and positioned himself off to the side. He would even have preferred to position himself a step farther back, but that would have gone against the role of a man in Capuan society. Queen and prince consort though they were, the man standing behind her would lead to some form of discomfort among others.

“It has been over a month since you came to our lands but very little time since your arrival in the capital. It goes without saying that the cuisine here is significantly different from Valentia. While both will be different from your homeland and therefore not to your tastes, I hope you are able to satisfy yourself tonight,” Aura offered.

“Indeed, I have already partaken, Your Majesty. All of this country’s cuisines are so stimulating.”

“Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to taste any foods from the Northern Continent, so I’m not certain myself, but I assume there is indeed a

significant difference?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. We have no drakes as livestock—our meats are usually goats, cows, and pigs. In Uppasala, we also have reindeer. There are a surprising number of vegetables that are the same, but the seasoning is distinctly different. There are no dishes on the Northern Continent that use such large amounts of spice and sugar."

Aura and Freya used the topic of cuisine as a literal appetizer for their conversation. Discussing food and clothing was relatively unlikely to cause offense and so was often used as a starting point.

With things as they were, Zenjirou decided he should be able to leave the discussion to Aura for a while longer. His gaze shifted suddenly to the side only to be dragged into a conversation by the purple-clad blond with a friendly smile, as if the man had been waiting for his moment.

"It's been a while, Your Majesty. You're already offering a good time," the man—Francesco—offered, hoisting a chalice containing a cocktail based on distilled liquor.

"It has been some time, Your Majesty. We are very grateful that you invited us here today," Bona added, appearing from behind the prince in her role as his minder.

She had her usual appearance as well. Her hair was in its characteristically wavy style, silver dust scattered through the cascading chestnut coloring. She was also wearing a simple, light purple dress. It suited her well and fit the current event too, but if Zenjirou's memories were correct, her hairstyle and outfit were an almost daily thing. The dresses themselves were, of course, different from one day to the next, but they were all simple and light purple. Zenjirou felt like he could almost see her desire to put in the bare minimum of effort for fashion.

Regardless, he had been greeted by the prince and princess of the Twin Kingdoms, so he had to respond.

"Good evening, Prince Francesco, Princess Bona. I hope you both enjoy yourselves," he said, leaving the guest of honor to his wife and turning to the other two. They were of more or less equal standing, and he knew their

temperaments, so they were not particularly stressful to interact with.

Feeling relaxed, he struck up more of a conversation.

“I believe your outfit may be one I have not seen before, Prince Francesco.”

“You have a keen eye, Your Majesty. This is the newest shirt I had the city’s tailors make,” he pointed out proudly, his finger falling not on the purple tuxedo but on the white shirt beneath it.

Spotting the new article from just the small amount of it visible through the tuxedo was indeed something Zenjirou could be called discerning for. Of course, he had noticed it due to seeing the flat, four-holed buttons, not due to any real insight into fashion.

He didn’t know how things were on the Northern Continent, but such buttons were not the norm in the South. He had noticed only due to the items being something that he had brought with him and granted the merchants that entered the inner palace permission to replicate, so a shirt utilizing them would certainly be new.

Buttons, excluding those made of simple wood, were usually almost decorations in and of themselves, and they cost a commensurate amount. Due to that, royals and aristocrats usually had large, extravagant buttons.

“These are interesting. The flatness means that they are no bother even under other clothes, and the four separate holes used to sew them on make them extremely hardy. It’s a rather simple idea once you hear of it, but I’m blown away,” Francesco said.

At that, Bona—who usually remained a step farther back—joined the discussion with interest.

“Are those buttons whittled from drake bone? I see. They are simple, but carving them so finely and creating four holes so close together without breaking them is far from easy. If you do not take the thread into account and polish the edges well, then they will end up catching the thread while it is being sewn on.”

Naturally, though, Bona’s interest was not in the fashion but rather in the techniques used to create it.

That's an odd thought, actually. She likes precious gems but doesn't wear them herself. I suppose her interests are just extremely focused? And Prince Francesco's are way too open.

"Indeed," Zenjirou replied as those thoughts passed through his mind. "The finished article is simple, but they require perhaps even finer technique than goes into normal buttons. However, I daresay the both of you would not find it too difficult?"

"You're right. It might be fun to make some from silver or copper. They would tarnish quite quickly, though, so they'd probably need a lot of care. It's rather easy to get attached when you put the effort in."

"Perhaps I could make some from the coral you provided, Sir Zenjirou? I could carve red coral into a flower and add the holes; it would be both practical and decorative."

Francesco showed interest in anything new, while Bona was only moved by discussions of jewelry. It was nice that the conversation with the two was going well, but when the word coral left Bona's lips, there was a slight sense of guilt behind Zenjirou's forced smile.

Sorry, that technically isn't a souvenir from me. My maid, Ines, picked it...

Zenjirou had hurriedly returned from Valentia after the upheaval and had been unable to buy the souvenirs he had promised. He had sent a dwarf wyvern to Ines, who had remained in Valentia, and the woman had bought the coral and pearl in his place. Francesco and Bona had been overjoyed with the gift, but it had pained Zenjirou.

Regardless, he couldn't discuss that and kept his expression smooth as he continued the conversation. "That sounds good. Why not try some other materials as well? I am just a layman, but do you think similar things would be possible with amber and jade?"

"That sounds amazing! How wonderful. If we were going to use such beautiful stones, though, perhaps the normal, larger buttons would be better. Actually, using such materials for even hidden buttons might be even more fashionable..."

While Bona was usually rather reserved, she would easily grow excited when jewelry was brought up. That was fine, but she could quickly forget herself and go too far.

Zenjirou decided that the risk of that was too great and changed the subject early, somewhat forcefully bringing a new topic up. “I seem to remember you arrived with Princess Freya? Have you already struck up a friendship?” he asked.

“Indeed, we were talking with Princess Freya until the two of you arrived.”

“She was kind enough to speak with us after our greetings.”

Freya had most likely heard their answers and took advantage of a break in her conversation with Aura to smile and join the trio’s.

“Indeed, these two were most friendly. Their tales of the Twin Kingdoms were different from Capua, and both are intriguing to me, having been born in the North.”

“Not at all,” Francesco insisted. “Your tales of the Northern Continent were also deeply interesting. I would like to discuss it with you at a later date, in fact.”

“I would be more than willing, Prince Francesco.”

Whether it was the case for Francesco or not, the word ‘intriguing’ from Freya was not just a matter of friendliness, but no one there pointed that out.

“Thank you, Princess Freya,” the prince answered with an innocent, childish smile. “Oh, that reminds me, I’m glad to speak to you with His Majesty present. Were you aware that he has extremely deep knowledge? The contents of the chalice Lady Skaji is holding were created by him.” The blond prince was almost proud for some reason as he added, “Right, Your Majesty?”

Zenjirou grit his teeth at the uncalled-for statement, but there was no particular secrecy around distillation.

“Ah, well, I did indeed make it, but I wouldn’t say I have deep knowledge,” he protested humbly, trying to move the conversation along.

Freya, however, was sharp and didn’t let that happen. “Oh, is that so? You

made spirits?" she asked with somewhat exaggerated surprise. Skaji was simply shocked and looked at the chalice in her hand with wide eyes.

Aura could see that he needed help and spoke unconcernedly. "Oh, so I assume that distilled spirits are normal on the Northern Continent?" she asked.

"They are," the princess answered easily. "Distillation exists on the Northern Continent. But it is a relatively recent innovation, so it is not exactly common."

It didn't show in her expression at all, but Freya had clearly revised her wariness and estimation of Zenjirou. The people of the Northern Continent boasted better technology than the Southern Continent, so hearing that some of her country's latest advances—even if it was simply a luxury liquor—had been implemented on the Southern Continent would inevitably raise her estimation of whoever had accomplished it.

"I see. Then I would welcome your frank opinions. We only produce small amounts as yet, but I would like to expand it into a national industry," Aura explained, her expression unchanging.

Freya gave a slight, regretful shrug. "I apologize, but I find spirits too strong and rarely drink them. I imagine Skaji would be more knowledgeable than myself."

The warrior started as the conversation suddenly turned to her, but she was the princess's bodyguard and confidant. She was likely used to being asked for her opinion from such high-ranking individuals, and her tone was flat and absent of both nerves or excitement as she answered.

"I suppose so. I can tell that the liquor was simply distilled and added to fruit juice. That is a fine way to drink it, of course, but the spirits that I know from the Northern Continent are sealed in wooden casks for several years, which grants it the color, aroma, and even flavor."

"Oh, maturation?" Zenjirou asked, unintentionally responding to her advice.

The Northern Continent had established techniques similar to those used with whiskey and brandy, allowing the alcohol to mature for a long period.

"You know of it, Zenjirou?" Aura asked, almost let down.

“Not quite, Your Majesty,” Zenjirou hurriedly explained. “I know the method exists but not enough to put it into practice.”

Despite sealing the distillate in a wooden cask, Zenjirou wasn’t aware of the details. What wood was best for such a process? He seemed to remember that whiskey barrels used wood that was charred on the inside, but how strongly and to what extent? Was there anything else to be aware of? Perfecting it would take many trials, and maturation took years. Establishing the technique through trial and error would take a decade at least.

There was no need for him to panic, so he decided to postpone it and explain the rest to Aura once they returned to the inner palace. But as he made that decision, the icy-blue-eyed woman in front of him crinkled her eyes as she smiled.

“Sir Zenjirou, you truly do know a great deal. As Prince Francesco said, I would greatly appreciate a calmer discussion about it.”

“Indeed. We will need to meet to deal with the formalities of the goats, so I would be more than happy to discuss things with you then,” he offered, sidestepping the offensive.

However, Francesco’s next statement was practically circling around to intercept his avoidance. “What? But then I won’t be able to hear. Your Majesty, I don’t mind if it ends up being later, but meet with me as well.”

As informal as the banquet was, Francesco’s behavior was right on the edge of acceptability, and Bona’s face went through its now normal draining of color as she tugged at his sleeve.

“Y-Your Highness,” she pleaded.

Fortunately, the royals who had gathered were all magnanimous, and no one scorned his impolite words and actions. However, etiquette aside, Aura dashed the prince’s hopes.

“Unfortunately, your hope will remain unanswered. Zenjirou will be away for a while, acting as my representative.”

“What? Again?!”

Francesco was the only one to express his dissatisfaction, but both Bona and Freya were similarly shocked. The prince consort had only ever left the capital once when he had gone to Valentia to welcome Freya's delegation. In other words, something of the same, or at least similar, importance would be taking place in a remote region soon.

"Where are you going, Your Highness?" the silver-haired royal asked innocently.

Zenjirou's gaze wandered as he considered what to say. "Ah, well, you see..."

His wife offered him some support, seeing that he wasn't certain whether he should be open about it or not.

"My husband will be heading for the Gaziel march. The matter is currently classified, so I would appreciate keeping it between us, but a wedding of one of our leaders will be taking place there," she said, lowering her voice conspiratorially.

Of course, that "classification" was a lie. While, strictly speaking, General Pujol and Lucinda Gaziel's marriage had not been publicly announced, it was what was commonly called an open secret. Most nobles who entered the palace would be aware of it. It was still unannounced, so it wasn't information to spread around, but there was no law against rumors. And, of course, no punishment either. She wouldn't speak of it openly to the foreign royals when she could be overheard by anyone who listened closely, yet there was a certain amount of excitement to secrecy, even if it was just a formality.

Freya's pale cheeks were tinged ever so slightly red as she leaned forward. "Oh, a marriage? You mentioned the Gaziel march, so is Lord Xavier perhaps getting married?" she asked.

Freya had met Xavier when the swarm raptors had spilled over into Valentia and had gotten on well with him. He was one of her few acquaintances after her short stay in the country.

"No, not Lord Xavier, but his sister, the family's eldest daughter, Lady Lucinda. She will be marrying the current head of the Guillén family, General Pujol," Aura explained.

That was a name even Freya had heard. Even in the single month she had spent at the duke's estate, she had heard of the man both as the initial leader of the swarm raptor subjugation and through rumors that he was the best general in Capua.

The wedding of a general who represented the country was more than enough reason for the prince consort to represent the queen. The calculations flew through her head until she reached a bold conclusion.

"Your Majesty, I am somewhat acquainted with the Gazi family myself. Could I trouble you to allow me to accompany you?"

There were three royal families gathered together when she said that, with five people total, and the other attendees surrounding them were obviously listening in. Freya's bold request ushered in a deafening silence in the banquet hall.

Irritated by the attention on them, Aura kept her voice calm as she remonstrated the Northern princess. "Princess Freya, I imagine you are unaware, but attending a wedding with an unrelated woman is usually done only when a deep relationship exists. I know it was not your intention, but were you perhaps slightly rash in making such a request?"

Regardless of her gentle tone, the queen's displeasure was evident in her warning, but Freya didn't falter. If anything, her smile grew even deeper.

"Oh, is that right? It is much the same as on the Northern Continent. Allow me to reiterate, Sir Zenjirou. I wish to attend the wedding as your partner, and I hope you will consider it," she said loudly enough to be heard across the room.

Then, she took the hem of her skirt in both hands and bowed deeply enough to show the back of her neck.

A shocked gasp came from Skaji. She was the only other person in the room who knew the significance of that gesture. A deep bow and lowering of the head. It was a gesture used by women in Uppasala to initiate courtship.

Chapter 3 — Princess Freya's Intentions

Zenjirou and Aura's actions after a banquet were a practiced routine at this point. They'd divest themselves of their formalwear in the living room once they were back in the inner palace and then head to the baths. Once there, they'd use soap and shampoo to rid themselves of all of the sweat and perfumed oils. Afterwards, they'd soak away their fatigue in the bath and change into their nightclothes before heading back to the living room.

There, they would pour out chilled water and fruit juices from the fridge to slake their thirst from the baths. Once the only item remaining on their itinerary was to sleep, husband and wife would sit across from each other on opposite sofas and carry out a review of the banquet or event together.

"Well," Aura began, sitting back on the black leather sofa. "Tonight's event was unexpected." Her tone was unusually tired.

"Yeah, I'd say. Unexpected's one word for it. To be honest, if I'd had the slightest hint that would happen, you wouldn't have been able to get me to attend, whatever you said."

For his part, Zenjirou's voice was similarly tired, but it was irritation that showed on his face. The unexpected event that both of them were referring to went without saying. The Uppasalan princess, Freya Uppasala, had effectively proposed.

"Given how she proclaimed it so brazenly, we cannot gloss it over."

Aura was rubbing her temples with her right index and middle finger as if to stave off a headache as she sighed.

"Um, if we can't gloss it over, does that mean that I'm pretty much definitely taking her to General Pujol's wedding?" he asked hesitantly as if prodding at a bush he just knew there was a snake in.

"No," Aura answered, shaking her head. "Being unable to gloss things over is as it sounds. Princess Freya has offered herself to you as your partner for the wedding. We cannot change that fact. If we are to refuse it, the refusal of such a public offer would also need to be public."

Generally, nine-tenths of the negotiations between nobles and royals were decided in backroom talks and prior arrangements. Proposals rejected during those prior arrangements were fundamentally treated as having never happened and prevented cracks in the public relationship between the concerned parties. Hurt feelings and displeasure would obviously remain, though.

This time, however, there had been no prior arrangements. The first step had been taken out of nowhere, in public. Therefore, it could not be treated as not having happened.

Her explanation of all that meant that he had a precise understanding of the situation he was in, and his face visibly paled.

“Huh? So, I’m already done for? There isn’t any way I can refuse, is there?”

“If we refuse, we must be willing to annul the intercontinental trade in full. If they had demanded a bride or groom, then we could dismiss it due to the rudeness of there being no initial negotiations, but they *offered* a bride. To say nothing of the fact that you are not king, but prince consort. She is a full royal and the first princess of her country. It would be obvious that I would not forfeit my position as legal wife, so she is therefore aiming for the position of concubine. Refusing such an advantageous proposal is close to impossible, politically. The only possibility would be that international marriages between royals are against tradition.”

“Huh? They are?”

He was surprised for a moment, but he quickly remembered the reasoning. On the Southern Continent, a royal was a user of a country’s lineal magic, so their blood was never allowed to mix beyond their borders. That was a fundamental difference between this world and Japan in the Warring States period or Europe in the Middle Ages.

The bloodlines were kept within the country, so marriages between different royal families were unthinkable. Circumstances had conspired such that Zenjirou held the bloodlines of the Sharou family and Capua family already, so he had completely forgotten about that facet of the Southern Continent’s values.

“So does that mean we can use the domestic nobility’s opposition to it to start things anew?” he asked eagerly, seeing hope and leaning forward on the sofa.

“No,” she answered with a merciless shake of her head. “While there will doubtless *be* opposition from our domestic nobility, it will likely not be in the way you want. It is more probable that it will focus on the fact that if you are taking a foreign princess to marry, you ought to accept a domestic concubine as well. They may even make further requests to accompany you in addition.”

“In addition? You mean I’d be expected to take multiple partners to the wedding?” he asked in shock.

“It does not happen often, but there is nothing preventing it. It is common for high-ranking nobles to have multiple wives, so some take several of them to events simultaneously. As far as ‘partners’ go, however, a single man and woman is the norm.”

That must have meant that such nobles would need to concern themselves with which wife to take to a wedding. While it was obvious that the legal wife would be prioritized, doing so constantly would dissatisfy the concubines. Just making it a fixed rotation could lead to disparities and arguments due to taking one wife to a baron’s wedding, but another to a count’s.

Being fair and taking them all to each event would potentially lead to arguments at the wedding itself. Wedding invitations must have been an ill omen for men with multiple wives.

“Terrifying...” Zenjirou muttered, his honest impression slipping from his lips as he was currently in the midst of being told he would be taking a second wife.

“Ah, no, Zenjirou.” Aura panicked. “The examples I just gave were the worst cases, not the inevitable fate that awaits men with multiple wives. Wives who have perfect relationships with each other essentially do not exist, but that is the case for the vast majority of interpersonal relationships. It has been years since such an event ended in bloodshed.”

The more she spoke, the paler he was becoming, so she punched a fist out and spoke strongly to assuage his fears.

“Hyah, it’ll be fine, leave it to me! If you must take concubines, then I shall accept responsibility and take them in hand. Be they a foreign princess or a domestic noble, I will drive the hierarchy into their bones and train them to avoid causing you bother.”

Zenjirou couldn’t help but laugh at her punch and declaration.

“Whoa, what a reliable wife I have.”

“Indeed, you do.”

Rude though it may sound, it could be a practical countermeasure. Whatever else, Aura and Zenjirou’s marriage was a backwards one, with Zenjirou being a mere prince consort and Aura being the queen. Even if Zenjirou were to take a concubine, Aura would still have a clearly superior position that any other woman would find difficult to overturn. So making that clear from the start and instilling an awareness that they were Queen Aura’s subordinates before they were Prince Consort Zenjirou’s spouse would maintain order in the inner palace.

“To return to the topic, though,” she continued, “it is essentially impossible for you to refuse her as your partner. While that will not necessarily mean a certain flood of concubines, the possibility is similarly high, so prepare yourself.”

Zenjirou cast his gaze skyward at that final warning.

“Got it... Ugh, and here was me meaning to ask Pasquala and avoid it all.”

“If you refuse Princess Freya for Lady Pasquala here, it would be asking for a fight.”

“Yeah...figures.”

Pasquala was the wife of Espiridion, the head mage of the court. She was over seventy years old. Usually, if a married man was invited to a wedding and his spouse was unable to attend, he would ask a female relative in her stead, but Zenjirou had no such relatives to ask. His were all in Japan, in another world entirely, and Aura had no living relations.

Therefore, asking an acquaintance’s wife was the next option, and he had

intended to ask Pasquala to fulfill that role. As far as those conditions went, his tutor Octavia was also eligible, but although she was married, she was still young and beautiful. Inviting her could easily lead to accusations of impropriety, so he had decided against it.

At any rate, someone with a position as high as a foreign princess had made their proposition in plain view, so such alternatives were no longer an option.

“Regardless, we do not know how much they will be asking of us. Depending on that, it may well be refutable even with the cancellation of our trade deal.”

“What happens if their demands are acceptable?”

“Well, in that case, I suppose I would do my utmost to make your life in the inner palace as peaceful as possible,” she answered honestly but was unable to hold his gaze.

“Thanks...” was all he could offer in the face of that, a sigh mixed in with his words.



Meanwhile, Freya was likewise discussing the results of the banquet in a room of the palace. The building was separate from the palace proper and had been lent to the Uppasalan delegation. Dozens of their soldiers were guarding it, and Freya was in the room deepest inside, having changed into her nightwear.

She arranged her legs elegantly as she sat on the sofa. “Tonight was tiring, Skaji. Still, the Southern Continent impresses me, being able to wear this thin clothing and stay warm at this time of year, even without a fire.”

The clothing she was referring to was a plain white, short-sleeved dress. It was the beginning of the second half of the active season, or January, by Earth’s calendar. In her homeland in the northern reaches of the Northern Continent, it was always cold, even if you bundled up and piled the fires high with fuel. It was impossible for her to not feel out of place being able to wear a single layer of short-sleeved clothing and still remain at a comfortable temperature.

Skaji had followed her liege’s example, having changed into nightclothes. She had sat upright on the opposite sofa and answered. “True. I’m grateful for it, though. Wearing furs against the cold means an unavoidable impediment

against foot and spear work. Being able to wear these instead means I can remain completely ready.”

The tall warrior’s outfit was along the lines of a sweatshirt and sweatpants, both in gray. Her carved horn of a spear was also standing against the sofa so that she could be battle ready in an instant.

In spite of the welcome they had been given, they were within another country’s palace. Skaji could not relax her guard entirely in case the situation required her to fight.

“I’ll rely on that, Skaji. Their Majesties both seem to be rational people, so I think it will be a needless fear in the end, but I will be counting on you if it comes to it.”

“You honor me, Ma’am,” the blonde warrior answered soberly, only the slightest softening of her eyes visible as the silver-haired princess smiled at her.

Skaji saw Freya as worthy of her absolute loyalty and also had enough affection for the woman that she would lay down her life to protect her. However, that was exactly why Skaji considered it part of her role to question the princess’s motives when she took such baffling actions and remonstrate with her if she felt her liege was in the wrong.

The warrior controlled her expression as she met Freya’s gaze. “Princess. I believe your words and actions are always founded on constant work for the future. However, I truly cannot fathom your actions at the banquet. If it will not cause difficulties, please tell me your plan.”

Skaji was well aware that she had been the most surprised of anyone when Freya had asked Zenjirou to take her to the wedding as his partner. The first reason was that when she had done so, she had performed the actions an Uppasalan woman would to officially begin courting a man. She was not careless enough to do it as a joke or horseplay, even if they were the only ones who would understand the significance.

The second was that Freya had thus far refused any proposals that her father or brother had brought to her. Considering she had taken the captaincy of the *Glasir’s Leaf* to establish intercontinental trade, it was rather obvious that the princess was somewhat of a tomboy compared to most noble girls. She knew

her duties as a royal well, so she wouldn't act rashly in public and would eventually accept a political marriage, but she had treasured this period where she could act freely more than anything else.

Therefore, Skaji couldn't believe that Freya would make the decision to effectively cut that precious time short of her own accord.

"True, Skaji. If no one else, you at least should know. This is my personal opinion, but I feel that the seas will play an even greater role in the Northern Continent than they have until now. Particularly in the case of Uppasala, protecting our seas will be of the utmost importance."

"I would agree with that," Skaji nodded, setting her blonde ponytail bouncing.

The area of the Northern Continent where Uppasala was located was divided up by harsh mountain ranges. The top halves of those mountains were perpetually covered in snow, so there was practically no possibility of a large-scale invasion from the mainland. At the same time, that meant that there was a restriction on overland trade with other countries. There were three other countries within that northern region, but they were culturally very similar and so not particularly suitable for trade. They were similar enough that war between them would be seen more as civil war than anything else by the southern countries.

Therefore, the only way Uppasala could trade with separate cultural spheres was via ocean routes. And likewise, the only way they could be invaded from those cultural spheres was by ocean.

"That means that to guarantee our country's safety and expand our trade, we need ships. However, we have very few forests in our lands."

It was, in many ways, an unfortunate side effect of their technological progress until now. They had started to mass-produce iron more quickly than any other country, they constructed ships more rapidly than any other country, and they burned far more charcoal than any other country. They had therefore reached the limits of their forests before any other country as well. It wasn't that the country was nothing but bald mountains, but the only trees that could form the basis of their huge ships were now only extant in the mountains of their border regions.

"The exhaustion of our shipbuilding supplies is certainly a large problem for the future, but can that not be ameliorated with money? I thought our plan was to use the income from constant intercontinental trade to buy wood from our neighboring countries."

The princess smiled at her confidant's suggestion as she answered. "That is certainly a reliable method, but I would like to go a step further. Assuming we can establish *constant* international trade, there is something that weighs on me."

"Weighs on you?" Skaji asked in puzzlement.

"Indeed, it relates to Prince Francesco and Princess Bona's homeland, the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. The two families that rule the country, the Sharou royal family and the Gilbelle Papacy, are both migrants from the Northern Continent, it would seem."

"Right, that is what Prince Francesco stated. Considering the pair's appearances, it seems to be no falsehood either," she answered, remembering how different they looked from the others.

Francesco had blond hair, blue eyes, and pale skin, while Bona had chestnut hair and purple eyes. Both of them seemed like nothing more than Northerners. From what they had heard, most of the nobility in their country looked similar, so their claim that their ancestors had come from the Northern Continent seemed perfectly reasonable.

Freya signified her agreement as she continued her own hypothesis. "Indeed. I believe their ancestors hailed from the Northern Continent. The question, however, is when did they emigrate? Skaji, have you heard of rumors of two royal families, both with lineal magic, emigrating to the Southern Continent?"

"Now that you mention it...no, I have not," the warrior answered after a brief period of thought.

Naturally, she was nothing more than a warrior, not particularly well-versed in the history of the Northern Continent. In the first place, calling the Northern Continent "big" was an understatement. The world lacked established systems for communicating and recording history as well, so there wouldn't be anyone who knew of the rise and fall of every country.

Still, two royal families fleeing to the Southern Continent at the same time was a rather major event. Hearing nothing about it was a little unlikely.

Freya nodded and continued. "I have no knowledge of such an event either. While we are unlikely to know the details without asking the scholars of the capital, I would assume they left quite a long time ago," she said.

"I see," Skaji agreed. Information became warped with time. It faded and was eventually forgotten.

"This means that the issue is dealing with the church. Skaji, how much do you know of the White Empire?"

While the warrior was taken aback by the sudden change in questioning, she still answered. "From the tale of the same? I believe it was said to be a superstate that existed in the distant past. It was destroyed in seven days in a war with the ancient dragons, was it not?"

It was a legend that everyone on the Northern Continent would have heard at least once. It was so lacking in credibility that Uppasalan historical researchers decried it as an absurd falsehood with no evidence. However, there were people who believed the ridiculousness or else pretended to do so for the benefit it could offer.

"Yes, that is the White Empire I mean. I am not entirely knowledgeable about the church's teachings, but considering they venerate those ancient dragons, they would doubtless be decidedly against the White Empire if they fought against them."

While those uninvolved might find it amusing that a church would be against something that might not even exist, that kind of legend strengthened belief, so it could not be discounted.

"However, even their teachings state that the White Empire was completely destroyed, don't they?" Skaji asked.

More precisely, they held that the twelve ruling families of the White Empire were obliterated due to their hubris. The church also taught that the other citizens, while guilty of benefiting from the White Empire, had not sinned such that their lives were forfeit; therefore, the dragons had shown mercy and exiled

them to the Southern Continent. That was why the continent was known as a land of exile to the Northerners.

Freya frowned slightly before shaking her head. “No. You know as well as I that the church is not monolithic, correct? There are variations in those teachings, and one of them is that the descendants of the twelve royal families are biding their time on the Southern Continent, preparing for revenge against the ancient dragons.”

“Are you trying to imply that the Sharou and Gilbelle families are descendants of the White Empire?”

Freya had to smile reluctantly at her confidant’s disbelieving expression. “Hardly. I don’t have the slightest belief in something that ridiculous. The White Empire itself is just a legend. But I worry that the church will interfere with our intercontinental trade under that pretense.”

“Ah...I see.”

A similar bitter smile made its way onto Skaji’s face as her liege’s concerns became clear. The church’s influence on the Northern Continent could not be understated, particularly as they had the support of almost all the countries in the south. The church’s displeasure could easily hinder intercontinental trade. After all, Uppasala was isolated, and they would prefer to stop at the southern ports on their own continent to resupply for the crossing. Because of this, while the church was a potential enemy, they could not let it show, so it was a vexing opponent.

“Our partner in trade would be Capua, though, not the Twin Kingdoms. If we don’t ally ourselves with them any closer than this, it shouldn’t have much effect.”

“That is true, but it galls me to overlook them. After all, they have enchantment and healing magic. I have not heard of such strong lineal magics on the Northern Continent.”

“That’s true,” the blonde agreed as the latter sighed.

While they did not yet know the details, they knew of enchantment magic that could be made into physical tools, which in turn would allow anyone to use

that magic. The items would be highly sought after for crossing between the continents—long voyages which ran a significant risk of death. For example, a tool for water purification would mean that even if Freya came down with an illness, there would be no risks to their drinking supply.

Further, there was water manipulation. A long voyage inevitably led to at least some ingress of water into the ship. Usually, the sailors would have to form a bucket relay to remove it, but someone who could cast water manipulation magic could rapidly move the entire mass from the ship.

If the burden of those roles could be placed on tools rather than people, it would vastly improve safety in the event of an emergency. A tool to control the winds would be the best. The sailors of the *Glasir's Leaf* were all skilled enough, but sudden changes to the wind on unknown routes could still empty their sails. If they could change the direction of the wind, accidents would be greatly reduced. The rumored healing stones could also be a last resort if things came to it.

"So you wish to establish relations with the Twin Kingdoms. I can understand that. But what does that have to do with your marriage?"

The conversation circled back around to the original topic. Freya smiled happily at her confidant keeping the thread of the conversation even after so many digressions.

"It provides a route to solve it all with a single stroke. Our wood supplies are drying up, but we cannot abate the expansion of our navy or oceanic trade. As things stand currently, intercontinental trade without going through the southern countries with the support of the church is dangerous. Therefore, why not have Capua establish shipyards and summon shipwrights from Uppasala to build the ships here? In that situation, construction of superheavy ships beyond even the *Glasir's Leaf* that were shelved due to resource constraints becomes possible. If we furnish those ships with magic tools purchased from the Twin Kingdoms, we would be able to travel between Capua and Uppasala without making a stop on the way, a voyage without resupply becomes a possibility, and there is no need to placate the southern countries, or indeed the church. See, does that not solve all of our problems?"

The warrior was overwhelmed by the full smile on her liege's face for a while and was lost for words. "True. If things go well then it will be as you say, but *will* they go so well?"

Her plan was by no means foolish, but it would still require significant luck to pull off.

"Well, that would be the absolute best case. Voyages without resupply can be ten or even twenty years into the future as far as I am concerned. But I believe that to make it a possibility, we need ports and shipyards on this continent."

"Even if it means becoming a *concubine*," Skaji noted with a grave expression, stressing the word concubine.

Freya was the first princess of Uppasala, born of the union between the current king and the queen consort, a woman of the noblest blood in her country. It sounded bad for her to become a concubine in another land. That would be the case even if her partner were a king, but Zenjirou was only a prince consort. It was a union that would have Uppasala seen as a kingdom one or two ranks below Capua.

The statement didn't shake Freya's resolve, though. "Indeed. I see this as a turning point, a juncture that will decide the next century of our country. Such an opportunity may never again be possible if I do not commit here."

The warrior looked pained. "That may be so, but to sacrifice yourself fo—"

"What? Sacrifice? Where did that come from?"

"Huh?"

Seeing Freya's wide eyes, Skaji realized there was some large disparity in how the two of them were seeing things.

"Do you not dislike the thought of marrying someone and becoming their caged bird?" she asked. "I thought that was why you had avoided all such proposals when we were in our own lands."

"While that's true, I never assumed that I would be able to live out the rest of my days as a spinster. I had always planned to compromise between my own desires for a life of freedom and adventure and my duties to the country."

“So you mean this marriage will be you drawing a veil over your enjoyment and prioritizing your duties as a royal? At your age, I would think you could wait for a few more years before marrying.”

It was there that Freya finally understood what her confidant was getting at. The silver-haired princess burst into laughter before explaining herself.

“Not at all, Skaji. If anything, I wish to marry His Majesty to preserve my enjoyment. Our month in Valentia as well as tonight made me certain. His Majesty is the ideal groom for me. He is far better than any man my father and brother have introduced to me, at least.”

“His Majesty Zenjirou is your ideal groom?” Skaji asked dubiously, not expecting such a statement.

While she had reevaluated him somewhat during the swarm raptor incident, she still didn’t think highly of him. Skaji had a warrior’s temperament, so a man like Zenjirou, unarmed as he was, was beyond consideration.

However, that wasn’t the case for Freya, it seemed. “Indeed. First, His Majesty treated me, as a female captain, with respect. He never treated me as anything other than an equal during our negotiations. You could also feel the pleasant sense of equality between him and Her Majesty Queen Aura during the banquet.”

In one way, Skaji’s interpretation was correct. Freya had intended to live freely and enjoy herself until the very limits of the time she could before becoming the “good wife” of someone for the good of the royal family. However, she had hope after seeing Zenjirou and Aura. There was a female royal who had been able to live freely even after marriage. There was also a male royal who not only allowed it, but actively supported it.

On top of that, the man only had his wife, and becoming his concubine would be a benefit to her motherland. The moment she’d understood that, she had acted almost impulsively to put her thoughts into action. It was too selfish to be called affection. However, that was why she would be faithful to those feelings and do all that she could to ensure her plans came to fruition.

“So that is why I see His Majesty as the combination of idealism and realism, and the best man for me.”

“I-I see,” Skaji managed.

Knowing that despite the blunt, calculating nature of it, this proposal had been given due to her liege’s intense feelings of hope, Skaji was overwhelmed and could only nod jerkily.



Conversation in the palace the next day was almost entirely taken up with Freya’s declaration to Zenjirou. Naturally, there wasn’t anyone who understood the proposal inherent in Freya’s actions but offering to accompany him to the wedding was a sufficient declaration of love in itself.

The fact that the thirty-year-old bachelor, a hero of the land, and a woman five years past marriage age were to be joined was worthy of talk in and of itself, but even that didn’t compare to a foreign princess effectively proposing to their prince consort in public.

In light of that, the fact that the other candidate for Aura’s hand—Rafaello Márquez—was taking a maid of the inner palace—Kisha Massana—to the wedding as his own partner went practically unmentioned.

“Did you hear? About the banquet last night?”

“Of course. Northern women are bold indeed.”

“I was unfortunately not there, but is it true that it was said clearly? Rather than implied, that is?”

“It is. I saw it happen, and Princess Freya was completely clear. She outright asked him to take her as his partner.”

“My, how immodest.”

“Our cultures truly are different.”

“Oh? Do you not think that perhaps it isn’t a matter of culture and that Her Highness just knows no shame?”

“Shh! You’re too loud.”

Such conversations were whispered all across the palace.

The topic was too influential on national politics to just be general gossip, but

her actions had been so sensational that it was more often discussed as an amusing anecdote rather than something deeply political.

“At any rate, this won’t end easily.”

The final speaker’s face was drawn tight, but the light of curiosity could not be hidden from their eyes.

Several days passed with those rumors remaining the talk of the area. The woman at the center of the maelstrom—Freya—was currently meeting with Zenjirou in a room of the palace. The reason for the meeting was to deal with the formalities of gifting the long-promised goats, but with the situation being what it was, a private meeting between the two of them was unthinkable.

Therefore, the meeting had been arranged so that Aura could also attend, which was why it had taken so long.

Sunlight and a cool breeze streamed in through the open windows as Aura and Zenjirou sat side by side on a sofa opposite the foreign princess. A man and woman were standing behind her. The woman was the tall warrior already familiar to them—Skaji. The man was not one they had met before. From his skin tone to his hair color, he was unmistakably from the Northern Continent, but he was much slighter than the other warriors from the *Glasir’s Leaf*. With that said, he was still taller than Zenjirou and fairly well muscled.

“While it is later than planned, I hereby entrust the promised goats to you. They consist of three males and eight females, making eleven in total. All of them are young and healthy and should be capable of breeding soon. The females also lactate significantly. I believe these should be to your liking,” Freya explained briskly, starting their business immediately. Of course, the goats had arrived at the same time as Freya, so this was just a formal transfer of ownership.

“Thank you, Princess Freya. They are the best gift I could ask for. Truly, I offer my thanks.”

Zenjirou’s thanks, given with a smile, were not just diplomatic lip service. He couldn’t wait for the goats’ milk and all the other dairy derivatives that could be made using it.

He wasn't unhappy with the royal cuisine of Capua, but his heart soared at the chance to recreate meals and snacks from his homeland.

Aura spoke straight after, as if she had been waiting for his words. "Allow me to offer my own thanks, Princess Freya. A pasture and stable have been prepared in the gardens of the palace. I imagine you are aware, but no one in my country has dealt with goats before. I imagine our preparations are lacking, so we would like to rely on your knowledge."

"Of course. That is why I brought this man with me. Nicolai, please introduce yourself."

At her words, the young man behind the sofa shuddered. "A-At once. My name is N-Nicolai! Please leave their care to me!"

The youth was clearly nervous, his voice cracking from the tension, but Freya calmly supported him.

"Nicolai is mainly in charge of livestock on the *Glasir's Leaf*. His family manages a large farm back home. He is without question the most knowledgeable in goat husbandry, and I would like to offer you his services for a while, Your Majesty Zenjirou."

Zenjirou nodded at the introduction. The young man was less built than the soldiers of the *Glasir's Leaf* because he wasn't a soldier. The long voyage meant that less than a quarter of the sailors would be solely soldiers.

Of course, they had been chosen to serve on the ship of the first princess, so each of them could probably wield a sword if the need arose, but they had not been chosen for their martial prowess.

"I see. Then I suppose I will be relying on you for a while," Zenjirou said gratefully.

"Yes, sir, I'll do my utmost!" Nicolai exclaimed, standing at attention, his voice painfully loud.

Sailor or not, he was both young and a farmer's son, so the man probably wasn't of particularly high standing. Worried for the young goat carer, Zenjirou moved to make things less crowded for him.

“Princess Freya, my apologies for it being so sudden, but I would like for him to be shown to the gardens and begin teaching the palace attendants how to deal with the goats immediately.”

His wife realized his aim and added her support. “I think that would be for the best. Nicolai, there should be five attendants already caring for them. You can think of them as your subordinates; order and use them as you see fit. However, do not forget to train them so that they can care for the goats in the future.”

“Y-Yes, understood,” Nicolai said, bowing practically to the ground.

While it had been summed up as “to care for” them, there was much to learn. Their bedding, their feeding, things to look out for with breeding, birthing, and rearing kids. There was also milking and dressing the animals. Altogether, it would probably take longer than a month.

“Indeed, Nicolai. As you have heard, you are to head for the gardens and show your abilities. Ensure that the attendants will not make careless mistakes.”

“Leave it to me, Your Highness.”

The man gave another awkward bow once his princess had given him permission before leaving at an appreciable clip.

“My thanks to the both of you for your kindness to my subordinate,” Freya said with a smile and a glance at the man’s retreating back. Apparently, their consideration hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Somewhat embarrassed, Zenjirou forced a smile to hide his shyness. “Not at all. I really *do* want our people to be able to care for the goats as quickly as possible.”

“You can rely on him for that. Despite his nerves, Nicolai truly is gifted with goat husbandry. They are all excellent examples, so I believe they will not fall short of your expectations. Nicolai says they have all three requisites.”

“All three?” Zenjirou echoed.

Freya’s smile remained blooming on her face as she answered.

“Indeed, all three. Good teats, good meat and go—”

“Princess!” the warrior behind her warned, cutting her off just as her words went too far.

As far as the formalities were concerned, this meeting was to finalize handing over the goats. There would therefore be no issue with ending it there, but both parties had something vastly more important to discuss, and ending the meeting would be a waste.

As the bulk of things so far had been dealing with the gift, Zenjirou had been relatively proactive, but now it was the queen at his side who took the reins.

“So, our business is thus concluded,” she said. “We seem to have finished earlier than expected. Princess Freya, if you have no current plans, would you indulge me in some conversation?”

Contrary to the probing wording, the tone and look in her eyes were a blatant declaration that they should move to the main matter. It was impossible for Freya to miss the implication.

“Of course. I am not so foolish as to forfeit the opportunity to speak with you,” she answered, a flawless smile masking her face.

I'm gonna end up with stomach ulcers here... Zenjirou could tell what the conversation was about to shift to and spent a moment trying to think of an excuse to leave but soon got himself back under control. *No, if I run away here, I'll end up regretting it.*

There was very little he could do in his position. While he had grown more or less used to the verbal sparring inherent to conversations between the nobility, it was far outside his comfort zone when relationships between men and women were brought into the picture. That said, he knew well that the topic centered on him, so he told himself that it was his duty to remain where he was and readied himself for what was to come.

Whether she was aware of his readiness or not, the queen boldly threw her chest out and began the conversation.

“It certainly was a shock that night. You truly are the talk of the palace.”

The silver-haired princess's cheeks flushed slightly as the red-headed royal cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"I realize I caused some trouble with that. I simply thought that if I let such an opportunity slip by, I would be unable to enter into a relationship with His Highness and could not hold myself back."

"Oh, well you sound rather taken with my husband. He is utterly irreplaceable to me and my most beloved. However, I am aware that he is not a man who would be particularly well regarded in that sense. What is it that drew you to him?"

The troublesome truth was that while royal marriages were publicly all about status and benefit to the country, feelings between the man and woman were still important. Thus they couldn't bluntly state, "This is all predicated on your status and assets; we care not what kind of person you are."

Aura looked at Freya as she waited for her answer, intrigued. Freya took a deep breath and replied.

"Honestly, it was his personality. Pardon my rudeness, but I believe you would be best able to empathize with that, no?"

"Oh, his personality, you say?"

"Indeed. While it may be an oddity for me to say so myself, I do not have a particularly admirable personality for a royal woman. I believe you can see this in how I am in my current position while still being a woman."

"Hmm," Aura replied, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with her. Despite the fact that Freya had given the evaluation, agreeing with scorn towards a royal would cause discord. However, it was also true enough that she couldn't simply disagree with it.

Freya continued her explanation. "Even back in my own lands, I acted more assertively. I would rather spend my time working for the good of my country rather than remain quietly within the palace. Such actions have caused my father and brother much inconvenience, and I have interfered and spoken on matters a woman ordinarily should not, even gaining success on some occasions. When that happened, the men would almost all react in the same

way. They would knit their brows and call me impudent for a mere woman or else praise me by saying that my being a woman was a waste. Of course, I overstepped boundaries that must be kept, and I know that I am in the wrong for causing such disturbances in the system. However, I cannot help but feel discouraged when no one offers straightforward praise after I have accomplished something.”

“Hm, I see.”

Aura was able to agree emotionally with Freya’s claims. Regardless of events after her coronation, she had felt the lack of freedom during the great war with her position as princess. She could therefore more or less predict what Freya would follow up with.

“His Majesty was different, though. When I negotiated with him as the captain of the *Glasir’s Leaf*, once negotiations were finished, he genuinely complimented me for establishing intercontinental trade. He also allowed me to sit as an equal partner in the negotiations for the development—pardon me. He did not *allow* it, but rather acted as if treating me as an equal in negotiation was the most natural thing. I cannot think of a man other than His Majesty who would do so.”

Her claims were essentially what Aura had expected.

“I see. Certainly, I can empathize with that more than anyone else. His view of women as equals is exceedingly pleasant for someone like myself who refuses to be shut away.”

“And I would like for you to share some of that pleasantness with me.”

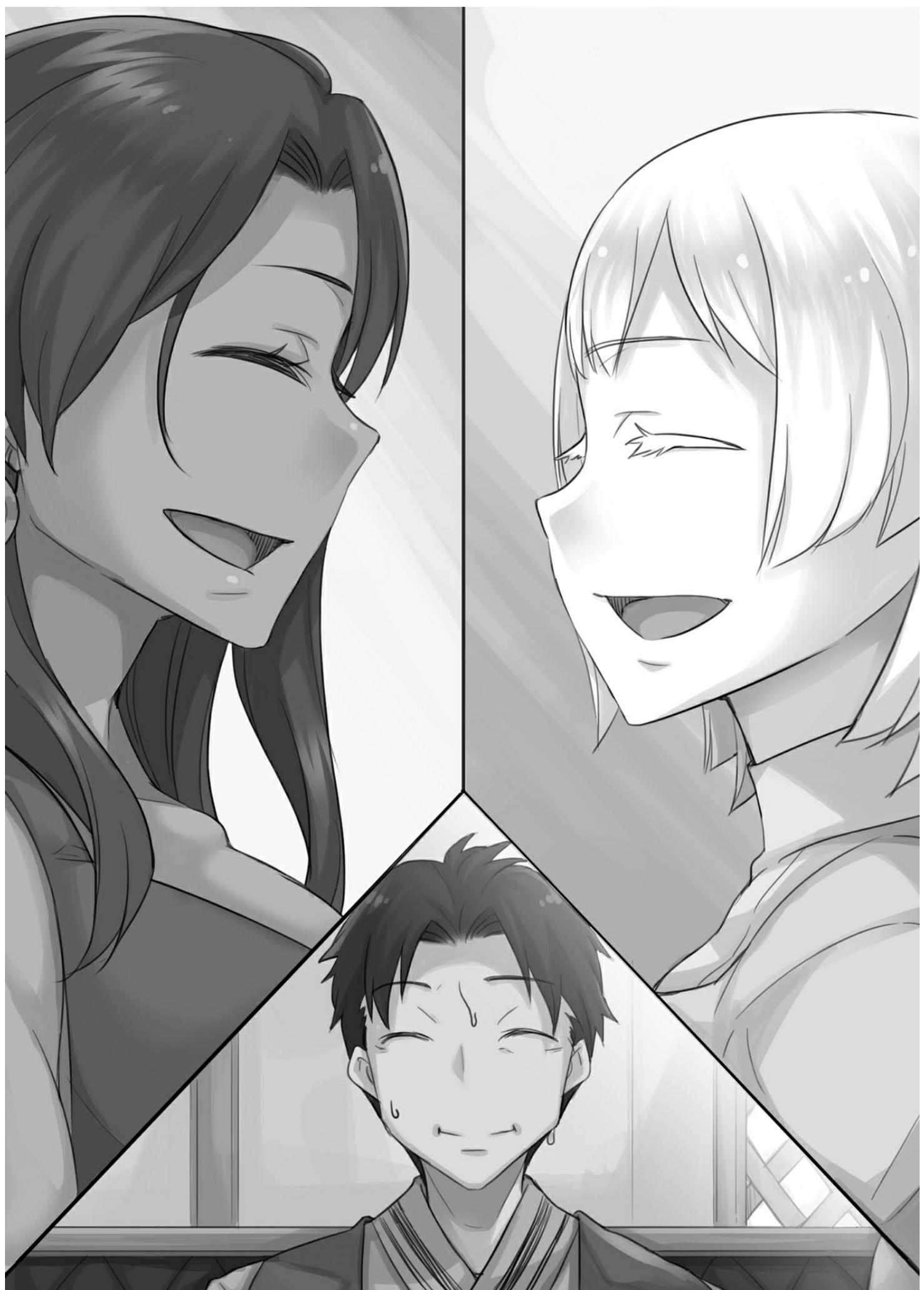
“Well, what to do. Despite my looks, I am a possessive woman. I do not overestimate myself so much as to say that I could allow my beloved to make advances towards another woman.”

“I understand, Your Majesty. I would only ask for the magnanimity befitting a royal. I have no intention of interfering with the two of you. I can simply think of no greater happiness than to be allowed to exist within that life in some small way.”

As words flew between the two royals as fiercely as clashing swords,

Zenjirou's face had completely cramped up as he bemoaned his fate mentally.

I-I'm going to die. Stop it, already; the embarrassment is going to kill me...



Flowery statements praising him gushed forth from the beautiful women's mouths. He knew that it was technically just a front for marriage negotiations, yet he couldn't accept it emotionally. Zenjirou wasn't mentally resilient enough to stand up to the assault of endless praise and declarations of love beyond anything he had ever experienced. Naturally, he didn't doubt his wife's deep feelings for him, but the wording was just all too extreme, and he had no recollection of such feelings coming from Freya.

He'd not known that false praise like this was so effective a weapon. His skin felt like it was crawling, and he felt the urge to writhe around scratching at himself, but he grit his teeth and fought the urge. In truth, Aura was speaking more honestly than expected. And while Freya was exaggerating somewhat, she also wasn't lying, but he would obviously not be able to understand those emotions.

Conversely, neither of them understood that Zenjirou was being tormented by his shame, and the torturous conversation continued.

"However, both parties' emotions are important in such matters. While I hesitate to say it myself, my husband loves me from the depths of his heart."

"An envious position."

"Taking that into account, what of yourself? You are certainly beautiful, so much so that nine out of ten men would choose you over an older, larger woman like myself. Unfortunately, my husband is the last of those ten."

For the first time that day, Freya didn't have an immediate response, and she fell into silence. Indeed, everything about them was different enough that you could reasonably assume that the only thing they had in common was their sex. Aura had long red hair, while Freya had short silver-blue hair. Aura had tanned skin, while Freya's complexion was so pale as to be almost transparent. Aura was in the latter half of her twenties, while Freya was still at the tail end of her teens. Aura was tall and broad-shouldered for a woman, blessed with large hips and chest, while Freya was unusually short for a Northerner, with delicate shoulders and a slight build.

If Aura was indeed Zenjirou's ideal woman, then Freya would be a significant departure from his preferences.

However, Freya wouldn't falter over something like that. She immediately marshaled herself and smiled widely.

"If I may change the topic slightly, the warrior behind me, Victoria Kronqvist, or Skaji, is both my confidant and has my full confidence in my protection. I would like to gain your permission to bring her with me when I enter the inner palace," she suggested, practically throwing the warrior woman in as a bonus.

Skaji was indeed generally similar to Aura. She was a tall Amazonian woman, blessed with curvy hips and a chest. However, she was a full fifteen centimeters taller than Aura, so whether she was the "same" was up for debate.

"Pff?!" Zenjirou spluttered at the unexpected turn, but fortunately, there was someone with an even more attention-drawing reaction.

"P-Princess, *what?!*"

The speaker was the very center of the sudden topic shift, Skaji. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was more flustered than he had ever seen her, so this clearly wasn't prearranged. It must have been something that Freya had thought up on the spot.

Zenjirou was not comfortable with that when he realized what was going on, and out of concern he broke his silence without meaning to.

"Princess Freya, while I understand that you are not being serious when you say that, it is still somewhat excessive to say it in jest. Lady Skaji is an excellent warrior, and while she may be blessed with natural talent, such skill takes extraordinary effort to attain. Suggesting she ignore her wishes to live as a warrior and instead live as a woman is an unfairness that I am sure you understand more than anyone else."

Zenjirou had spoken as a way to stop the escalating backhanded compliments, but while he had wanted to bring all that to an end, his intentions were not passed on to the others in the slightest.

"Agh..." Annoyance made its way onto Aura's face for a moment, as if bemoaning his idiocy, but it was already too late.

Freya's smile bloomed like a flower in answer to his scolding. "Indeed. My apologies; it was too far for a joke. However, your statement confirms it; I am

certain that you are the best man for me,” she said, making her advance.

“Ah...”

That was only natural. Freya had stressed that Zenjirou would be the best spouse for her due to his treating women as his equal. His earlier rebuke and respect of Skaji’s freedom was a clear agreement with Freya’s perspective.

“I see. You truly possess staggering insight,” Aura answered with a strained smile, a slight sense of resignation on her face. “Now, I can understand growing closer to my husband due to that. However, given our positions, we cannot establish a marriage solely based on emotions. I believe you are aware of that also.”

She had moved the conversation to its next stage. Royals sought marriage not to fulfill the feelings of both parties, but for the benefit of both families. The negotiations would start in earnest here.

Understanding that, both princess and queen brought their expressions under control.

“Of course. I am certain that my marriage will bring about the best possible future for both of our countries,” Freya announced.

“Oh, would you be willing to elucidate? As much as it shames me, my own country is unfamiliar with marriages crossing borders.”

Aura’s response wasn’t a falsehood. On the Southern Continent, royalty went hand in hand with lineal magic, so marriages for royalty were fundamentally carried out within their own country’s borders. The cons of lineal magic flowing into another country far outweighed the pros of blood ties and relations with that country. Therefore, her statement held the implication that Freya’s proposal was culturally abnormal, and so the princess would need to demonstrate commensurate benefits if she was to push it through.

The hidden meaning must have been picked up on as Freya straightened on the sofa and took a deep breath, surely filling her sapphire eyes before she began to make her case.

“Very well. First of all, my country is one of the most advanced even on the Northern Continent. While our lands are not vast and we lack the arable

territory to call ourselves a large country, I am confident that our technology is such that we would not fall behind any other. Also, I am the first princess of that country, so should I marry, it will not be solely myself that I bring to the marriage."

"And what else *will* you bring?"

"My culture and the people to support it," she said, beginning a thorough explanation. "I was born and raised in the foreign culture of the Northern Continent. Naturally, should my marriage be allowed, I would not spare any effort in becoming familiar with the culture here as well. However, it would realistically be difficult to live entirely in such a different place. Therefore, I would like to bring people who would be able to reproduce my own culture here to a limited extent."

"Hm, Uppasalan culture, you say? More specifically?"

"Whatever else, I would assume it would involve metalwork and ships. Uppasala is built upon the basis of our smithing, and we grew strong through our presence on the seas. Without these two facets, Uppasala would not exist."

"Oh."

Freya had caught Aura's interest, and the latter's eyes suddenly narrowed.

Strictly speaking, what Freya had just said was a lie... That Uppasala was founded on metalwork and ships. That didn't track with a woman wanting to reproduce her culture in her new home after marriage.

Any woman who missed her homeland's metalworking or couldn't help but feel sad without her country's ships would probably end up as a pirate or the like. In Freya's case it might even be true, but for a normal royal, the culture they brought with them would usually be more in terms of lifestyle, food, and clothing in particular. Chefs, tailors, specialist farmers, both horticultural and animal, would be one thing, but there was ordinarily no need to bring along blacksmiths or shipwrights.

Despite that, her starting point of metal and ships were the main things she had come to understand that Capua would want during her stay in Valentia.

Freya was selling herself here. She could at least start with what the buyers

would need. Aura's face didn't change in response, but she could feel the unexpected earnestness and was unable to hide her internal surprise.

"Ships and metalwork that are considered advanced even on the Northern Continent, you say? Rather tempting indeed. However, would Uppasala be so generous as to hand over such techniques to the country its precious princess is marrying into?"

She was, of course, asking with the knowledge that it would not. Its first princess, smithing, *and* ships? What would they want in return for such a thing?

Freya took a shallow breath this time and straightened. "Indeed. I am the first princess with the blood of the Uppasalan royal family flowing through my veins. If I were to become His Majesty's concubine, it would make Uppasala seem to be placing itself under Capua. That would be an impediment to forming an equal relationship between our countries."

"True, if we were to form such a thing."

Capua felt no particular need for their relationship to be equal. They would of course refuse an inferior position, but if their partner were to lower themselves then they would welcome it.

The silver-haired princess didn't answer the meaningful comment from the queen and simply continued. "Thus, to protect my interests, I would ask for a special position."

"A special position?"

"Yes, a duchy linked to the royal family. One which contains a port."

"Oh, so you would have territory."

Ignoring the increased severity of Aura's gaze, Freya went on. "On that land, I would have a shipyard built. There, ships for both Uppasala and Capua would be made."

"And the shipwrights for these would be from Uppasala?"

"Indeed. The leader of such a product would need to be brought from Capua, but I imagine there would be insufficient manpower, so I assume we would borrow that from the land in question."

“I see,” Aura answered, musing over Freya’s suggestion.

Bringing in Capuan craftsmen was an indication that she was not intending to keep the techniques secret. Freya’s shipwrights would initially need to take the lead, but after some time, Capua would be able to construct these large ships under their own power.

Aura asked for confirmation. “The main materials for ships are wood, but at least some metal is also used. I assume that such parts would also be made here?”

“They would. I think that we would need to bring blacksmiths over in a similar way, but full-scale building would require more than just them, so we would also rely on Capua’s smiths for that.”

In other words, both shipbuilding and ironworking would be actively spread to Capua, and that wasn’t something the queen was against.

“Hmm...” She considered the proposal. Large ships and advanced smithing were both things that Aura wanted dearly. Particularly smithing, as that would also involve firebricks for the high-power furnaces required. With such furnaces, they would be able to make great leaps in glassmaking as well. She could make some concessions for that.

She glanced at her husband. She felt bad for him as he looked on with anxiety, but Aura wouldn’t be suitable to run her country if she let such an opportunity pass.

“And the conditions for the territory?”

“I assume they would be similar to the general requirements for royalty within Capua. We would be subordinate to the kingdom but allowed to self-govern in return for paying taxes.”

“Branch families have significant differences from independent nobles that hold land. The main difference is in the right of succession. A regional lord has the right to appoint his own heir, while a branch family will ultimately have its successor determined by the reigning monarch. In exchange for such rights, where a regional noble would have no claim on the throne even if a princess should marry into their family, a branch family has a place in the line of

succession despite their lower rank.”

“In which case, I would not be opposed to the appointment right remaining with Your Majesty. However, I would like it stipulated that someone with the blood of both royal families would be prioritized. Naturally, I would not require a place in Capuan succession.”

“You would not have a place in Uppasalan succession either.”

“I understand.”

The verbal back and forth continued.

Freya hadn’t combined it to “right of succession” but instead said that she would not require a place in *Capuan* succession. Without Aura’s warning, Freya and Zenjirou’s children could have ended up with the right to the throne in Uppasala, in which case there was the risk that Uppasala might steal away their lineal magic under the pretext of calling for their heir.

Also, while Freya was likely unaware, Zenjirou’s blood held the potential to bequeath both space-time magic and the lineal magic of the Sharou family, enchantment. Aura had to factor in countermeasures against that while keeping the details hidden.

“As you were brought up in a royal family with no lineal magic, you may find it difficult to understand, but the number of people within a country who can wield it is closely correlated with a country’s strength on this continent. However, we currently have only Zenjirou and myself along with our infant child, Carlos. Due to this, there is a great deal of desire within the country for him to take a concubine. Yet, if such concubines are incapable of aiding in the increase of wielders of lineal magic, they would not be accepted. You need to be aware of that.”

While the wording was somewhat roundabout, a small amount of thought allowed Freya to understand, and she offered her own suggestion with a hard face. “The ability can be tested for, can it not? In which case, should we have multiple successor candidates, then those without the ability should be prioritized for the rank, while those who do can be adopted into the royal family? However, if circumstances conspired such that the successors without the ability passed away, those in possession of such magic should be returned.

Would that be acceptable?"

"Indeed, that should be sufficient. Even if they have no lineal magic, they would possess the latent potential to pass it on and would therefore need the permission of the royal family to marry. This is a law that is applied to all high-ranking nobles of the country, though, so I would like that to be simply accepted."

"I understand," Freya answered after a moment.

"Now, in regard to the arming of the region. Royal branch families also have the option of garrisoning the royal army."

"If it is possible, I would like to deal with our own armament. The guarding of the land aside, we will suffer if we cannot also guarantee the safety of the port."

"Oh? So you intend to have your own intercontinental trade route with your homeland?" Aura asked, her eyes sharpening.

"Of course, part of the profits from such trade will also be given to the royal family as a reasonable tax," Freya answered, unruffled.

"No. That I cannot allow. Intercontinental trade will be carried out solely between the Capuan royal family and their Uppasalan counterparts. That will be the general rule."

"Then what of the ships constructed in the shipyard? Will their exchange also be linked to our trade deal?"

"We can offer every other ship until the tenth that is constructed to Uppasala at no charge. If Uppasala wishes for further ships, then they will be moved to Valentia and the royal families will negotiate there for its sale."

That enabled her to keep the intercontinental trade under the control of the Capuan royal family. It weighed heavily on Aura to provide five ships for free, but it was much better than allowing a second inlet for intercontinental trade through Freya's port. The region's future was uncertain, but it would likely become more Uppasalan than Capuan in Freya's lifetime. Allowing separate intercontinental trade in that way would mean that Capua would lose out significantly compared to Uppasala.

With that said, a point-blank refusal and loss of the offered smithing and shipbuilding experience was too much to lose. Therefore, offering what they wanted for a lightening of requirements would be for the best.

“Five large ships for free?” This time, it was Freya’s turn to fall into silent thought.

Uppasala was a technologically advanced country, but in terms of strength was closer to a medium-sized country. To such a kingdom, five ships at no cost was a strong temptation.

Naturally, further in the future, trading through Freya’s port would be much more profitable, but it would take time before those gains were realized, and they didn’t need to go so far to benefit from intercontinental trade. Therefore, Freya was willing to accept the suggestion, but there was still a problem.

Unlike Queen Aura, Freya was ultimately nothing more than a princess, so she didn’t have the full rights of the royal family in the way Aura did. From that perspective, the marriage proposal itself without her father’s and brother’s permission was absurd, but there was a clear distinction from the matters of intercontinental trade.

Freya had taken the *Glasir’s Leaf* to establish an intercontinental trade route, which could be considered as being done under royal decree. Therefore, reaching a full agreement herself was difficult. Having said that, her superiors were in her distant homeland.

“I see. Perhaps if we were to stipulate that trade through the port would require the Capuan royal family’s permission? I would like permission to keep the port ready for trade for such an eventuality.”

Freya tenaciously continued her own negotiations to allow the possibility of direct trade between her duchy-to-be and Uppasala.



“I will excuse myself here, then,” Freya stated. “We have accomplished a significant amount thanks to both Your Majesties. Thank you.”

“Not at all. The same holds true for us. I would like to arrange another such meeting before long.”

“I am glad you were happy with it, Princess Freya,” Zenjirou added with a slightly stiff expression, a vague smile on his face as his fellow royals exchanged farewells with smiles of their own.

Once he heard the door shut behind Freya and her guard, however, slumped over like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Well, it’s an accomplishment for everyone but me,” he said.

Aura remained silent at his unusual sarcasm for a while. They were the only two present, but this was still the royal palace, not the inner palace, so Zenjirou was still treating her as the queen, which made his words feel all the worse.

In truth, whatever Aura said to him from her position, it would only lead to more displeasure. Zenjirou was correct—from her standpoint as queen, the meeting had been truly productive. Blacksmithing, shipbuilding, and a trade agreement with the Northern Continent. With such favorable conditions in place, she could no longer refuse the request. While Freya’s marriage to Zenjirou as a concubine was not yet finalized, it was almost certain that she would be accompanying him to the wedding.

Of course, none of this could be finalized solely by Capua. The decision would ultimately require Freya to return home on the *Glasir’s Leaf* to get the approval of her father, so there would be no decision until at least a year from now.

The current negotiations had only been conducted by Freya, so there was still a strong possibility that there could be future setbacks. However, that didn’t change the fact that if things went well, she would become his concubine.

Zenjirou was against that more than anything else, so he couldn’t help but sigh. He’d been resigned to it, but now it was finally here.

“Zenjirou, I am the queen, and you are royalty. Royals can only be such by prioritizing their country over their personal feelings.”

While her words were harsh, Aura sat at his side and gently reached her hand out for his, where they twined together on his lap. Although it was a casual, natural-looking action, Aura was suppressing a significant amount of fear. Perhaps he would distance himself from her as she sat. Perhaps he would brush her hand aside.

Fortunately, her dark expectations remained unfulfilled. Zenjirou unclasped his hands and softly gripped his wife's. His fingers intertwined with hers as he firmly gripped her hand and craned his neck to smile at her.

"I understand. I may not be the most fitting, but please treat me well."

Despite the stiff formality to his words, they were said softly and with a kind smile. That and the warmth she could feel in her hand finally dispelled her fears.

"Indeed. Our first thought must be for our country, but if it does not run counter to such priorities, there is nothing to censure in a royal seeking their own happiness. I will do all that I can for you."

"That is heartening to hear."

Queen and prince consort remained hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, spending their time comfortably sharing each other's warmth.

Intermission — The Twin Kingdoms's Actions

In the midst of the uproar over the arrival of the Northern Continent's princess, the prince and princess of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle were having a somewhat serious meeting in their loaned corner of the palace.

"Seriously, what a surprise. That Northern princess is so assertive."

"Indeed. Perhaps it is a sign of the difference in culture?"

Even Bona wasn't able to hold in her curiosity, despite not normally being a fan of gossip, but her purple eyes were sparkling as she answered Francesco.



Bona had a slightly different perspective on things than most royals. She was born a low-ranking noble, and even after becoming royalty she had prioritized her training in enchantment and engraving, so she only had a basic level of royal etiquette.

“I cannot imagine the courage required to make such an offer in public as a woman. Will it work out, though? Marriage between royals is the greatest taboo, is it not?”

Her worried comment made her knowledge only being in general terms obvious. Conversely, Francesco might have seemed like a frivolous idiot, and indeed was precisely that much of the time, yet he was brought up as a pure royal and had more knowledge on that front than Bona.

“No, there’s actually a fair few royal families on the Northern Continent that have no lineal magic. In such cases, rather than being taboo, marriages are common. It’s similar to marrying influential nobles within our own countries.”

“Ah, I see. In the same way that regional nobles expand within a country.”

Bona wasn’t unintelligent, so she soon understood.

“Fairly similar, yes. So Princess Freya aiming for a political marriage outside her country is within the realm of sensibility. If anything, I would imagine Their Majesties were more shocked. After all, Capua is a country of its continent.”

“Ah, I see,” Bona answered. “Then does that mean there is a high chance of her not being accepted?” Her concerned face made her seem purely worried about Freya.

“Hmm? I’m not so sure about that. The war means that Capua has dangerously few wielders of their lineal magic. His Majesty is receiving requests for concubines. Princess Freya cannot use any lineal magic herself, but she still has a fair amount of mana. Things might come together easier than you think.”

It would cause issues for the secret agreement between their nations, but Francesco spoke quite indifferently as if it were no concern. Bona, with her position being the lowest in the Sharou family, was unaware of those complicating factors and just nodded in wonder.

“So His Majesty will be ‘given’ many concubines in future. That will be hard on him,” she said sympathetically. Their values were close enough that Bona felt a certain kinship with Zenjirou, and she understood him the best of anyone in a certain way.

Marrying multiple women was only the norm for wealthy merchants and high-ranking nobles. Commoners and lower nobles usually had a single husband and wife, and adding a second or third woman into the mix would only be a disruption. Born as a lower noble, Bona had an intuitive sense of that. It was something that Francesco, a royal through and through, would never understand.

“Hm? Her Majesty is fine, as you can see, and Princess Freya is a wonderful woman as well. If anything, he’s in an enviable position. Still, if you’re concerned, why not offer yourself as a candidate?”

Francesco had his usual artless smile without a hint of malice as he cut to the heart of the matter. However, with no way of knowing the plans of the Sharou family’s leaders, Bona’s reaction was awfully blunt.

“Truly, Prince Francesco, you jest about such things far too easily. You cannot. Even though we may be the only two here, you must not voice such inappropriate jokes so carelessly.”

Her expression was scolding as she spoke to the older prince but held no embarrassment or surprise. It was the expression of a woman who had never entertained the idea of becoming the prince consort’s concubine, even in jest. It was not even based on whether she found him attractive or not; she had simply made no assumptions about such a development.

Bona had no doubt that she would be returning to the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle before long, and for his part, Zenjirou was the prince consort of Capua. Regardless of social status, royals on the Southern Continent who held lineal magic of their own would never intermarry. That preexisting problem and the way she would be living her life were too separated, and she didn’t see him as someone she could marry.

Regardless, the blond prince continued his frivolity to spur her on. “But you have seen the pair of rings Their Majesties have, right? You know, the one with

the three linked diamonds. Those are called wedding rings and are from His Majesty's world. It's apparently something that a man gives to his wife there."

"Y-You mean that I'd get such a wonderful ring if I married him?" Bona gulped and her expression morphed into one of deep thought.

"Yup, but he probably can't get anything else from his homeland, so concubines would probably have rings made here."

Hearing the obvious statement from Francesco, Bona looked up in shock with a shudder.

"P-Prince Francesco, stop your trickery, please! I was almost taken in!"

"Come on, don't fall for something like that. It just makes me feel bad."

Francesco scratched awkwardly at his head, averting his gaze from Bona and mumbling quietly to himself, "She turns into an idiot once jewelry gets brought up."



That night, Francesco was doing some kind of work at his desk, alone, which was unusual. On his desk was a magic tool, the same kind of shape as a candlestick that created a ball of fire.

This ball of fire was maintained by mana, and unlike natural flames, it lit the area evenly without flickering, so it was superlative for illumination. Of course, the properties of the fire itself remained constant, and it was usable as a heat source as well as a light source.

Francesco was using the metal-tipped stone in his hand, a peculiar type of pen, heating it in the ball of fire before using the hot metal to write on the parchment spread on his desk.

"I don't want to write anything too provocative, but I can't lie to father either. How to go about this? *'Someone has asked for His Majesty Zenjirou's hand in marriage. It is Princess Freya from the Northern Continent. Our little Princess Bona is friendly with him, but neither of them seem to harbor romantic feelings for the other,' I guess?*"

Francesco burned the letters into the drake parchment as he spoke. These

sheets were known as dual-burn parchment and were a magic tool. Two sheets were linked as one, and burning one sheet would burn the other in an identical way. It had originally been developed as a way to safely light fires in distant locations, but someone had noticed that the characteristics of the burns were identical and thought of burning letters into them, and they became used for long-distance communication.

"Still, I guess him getting a concubine, even if it is a foreign royal, is good news for the Sharou family? With the secret agreement, any children he has with a concubine can study in the Twin Kingdoms. Father and Grandfather might use this breakthrough to push a Sharou princess on him as well, though."

The leading candidate for that play was none other than Bona. She was a particularly easy "piece" for the Sharou family to use. She had just about the standard level of magic to use her lineal magic, and she was born as a lower noble. She was obedient, though, and not bad-looking despite being relatively plain. Disregarding her profession, hobby, and *raison d'être* of jewelry crafting, she had no real attachments. Her birth and upbringing intertwined in a rather complex way, and she had an almost laughably easy personality to manipulate.

Essentially, her origin as a lower noble meant that she had an inherent tendency to obey the royal family, starting with the king himself. Her later ascension meant that she also felt the duty to serve the country as a royal. Therefore she felt the usual sense of duty that a royal did while also following the orders of higher-ranking royals. With her dual upbringing as both a lower noble and royalty, it meant she could interact with any stratum of people without causing them discomfort.

With Bona, whatever kind of man Zenjirou was, she should be able to grow closer to him rather naturally. Even in the worst case, there was almost no possibility he would grow to hate her. Such feelings on the part of the Sharou family were in some ways right on the money and in other ways as far from the mark as possible.

"The two of them are well matched and get on nicely, but perhaps they're a bit too well matched. More than matched, perhaps the word 'similar' is more appropriate."

A smile slipped onto Francesco's face as he thought back to the amiable chats the two had shared so easily. It was perhaps impressive how close they had grown in a mere three months, but that closeness was most certainly not the usual kind between a man and woman.

"It's almost like watching two herbivores getting on and basking in the sun."

If you described romance as involving both carnivores and herbivores, you would need at least one of the former to actively go for romance or nothing would happen. Two herbivores wouldn't prey on each other—that is, court the other. Zenjirou was far from unreceptive to romance, but he was just that: *receptive*.

Compared to the actions Aura had taken when they first met and how Freya had acted a few days ago, Francesco had seen reactions from him but had never seen Zenjirou initiate.

Bona was much the same. Therefore, as both of them waited for an action to give a reaction to, things would constantly remain in their initial state.

"If my eyes don't deceive me, the two of them could spend a century together and still just chat."

Despite his thoughts, Francesco didn't have any desire to record it on the dual-burn parchment. While he wouldn't interfere with his father and grandfather's plans, he wouldn't support them either. After all, he and Bona were developing good relationships, and inviting extra strife was something he'd pass on.

His pen had cooled while he was muttering to himself, so he heated it up again and continued his writing.

"Princess Freya hails from the Kingdom of Uppasala, which is one of the few countries on the Northern Continent where the church holds little sway. Therefore I have made the decision that interacting will not cause any problems. Please grant your permission."

Francesco was removed from politics in his homeland, so he didn't know the details, but the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle's interactions with the Northern Continent were, as a rule, forbidden. Or more accurately, interactions

with those with connections to the church.

Just in case, he decided he should stress her independence. However, while not to the same extent as Bona, Francesco was a craftsman at heart, and he was wildly curious in general, so a connection with an advanced country in the Northern Continent like Uppasala was something he wanted dearly.

“Their advancement is obvious with a glance of their soldiers’ weapons and armor. Still, they are fairly plain, and I don’t recall seeing many jewels. Lady Skaji’s spear is wonderfully decorated, though, so perhaps there would be a source of knowledge on that front. Truly, even though we both hail from the Northern Continent, how different we are.”

His grumblings petered out, not reaching anyone’s ears.

Chapter 4 — Preparations Both Practical and Emotional

Several days had passed since the informal meeting that had been held under the pretext of the goats' acceptance.

"Phew..." Aura sighed. She was sitting at her desk as she always did at this hour, stretching in her chair to shake off her fatigue. "Agh, guh!"

It was before noon, and it was exceedingly rare for her to be so tired while the sun was still so high in the sky.

"It has been a while since I have seen you so exhausted," Fabio said questioningly from her side, underlining just how rare it was.

Aura took good care of her body. Sleep was the cornerstone of health alongside nutrition, so while it wasn't the case during the war, she very rarely lacked sleep in peacetime. Fabio's memory was superb, and he could not think of anything on her schedule over the past few days that would cause such disruption.

"Is there something interfering with your rest?" he asked.

"Hm, well, yes," the queen answered with a rueful smile and half-closed eyes.

"A mental problem?"

"No, a physical one."

"Have you been going to bed later, perhaps?"

"If anything, I have spent more time in bed than usual. The number of hours I have slept, however, has decreased."

"Ah, I see," he answered after a pause. "Well, it is a suitable time for your second."

There was only one reason a couple with a good relationship would be sleeping less despite spending more time in the bedroom. It was good that despite the current upheaval around his relationships, Zenjirou was still on good terms with Aura in that way. As Fabio said, it was an appropriate time for their

second child.

Aura's rest appeared to have driven off her fatigue, and she let out a large sigh before starting to speak. "Regardless, the final decision has been made. Zenjirou will be accompanied to General Pujol's wedding by Princess Freya. I have managed to come to an agreement with our domestic nobles who were aiming for the same role over the past few days. We have perhaps found the silver lining that the most overbearing and difficult person to deal with was unable to get involved this time."

The person in question was none other than the groom of the wedding himself, General Pujol. He would have doubtless pushed his sister Fatima Guillén as a partner for Zenjirou. However, his circumstances were different on this occasion. He had to deal with the preparations for his wedding and could not make such moves himself, and his sister would need to be there as the groom's family either way. Therefore, regardless of his usual tendency to avoid passing up any chance to amass influence and a foundation, he was forced into the position of bystander here.

"Princess Freya will be his partner? Then can I assume she will also be Sir Zenjirou's concubine in the future?"

Aura nodded at the monotone question with lidded eyes. "Indeed. The only certainty is that she will be his partner for the wedding, but you can make further preparations on that assumption. Of course, we are prioritizing intercontinental trade with Uppasala, so depending on those developments, it could easily be overturned."

The benefits to accepting Freya as a concubine were the riches that intercontinental trade with her country would bring along with the advanced smithing and shipbuilding techniques the princess had promised. Simply increasing the number of enchanters could be done with a more appropriate concubine than an awkward-to-deal-with foreign royal.

Uppasala might have been advanced technologically, but it lagged behind magically, so Freya didn't have a particularly large mana pool by Capuan reckoning. A significant number of nobles would be against this unprecedented coupling with a foreign royal. If they couldn't secure the benefit of

intercontinental trade, then Aura was happy to scrap it all.

The narrow-faced secretary understood the circumstances and answered after a period of thought. “Understood. In which case I shall make preparations accordingly. However, the only preparations I can make at present are physical and documents. I must leave the mental preparations to you. Will there be any problems?”

The question about mental preparations was essentially questioning whether Zenjirou would accept the situation. Aura looked up at the ceiling with a strained smile at the difficult question.

“As always, he fully accepts it logically. Even if Princess Freya were to wed him immediately, he would accept it and cause no public problems. The issues would be emotional, and I am doing my best to ameliorate them, although it has led to my lack of sleep over the past few days.”

“I see. That is an indispensable service that only you can provide.”

While the queen spoke fairly directly about her nighttime activities, the secretary maintained an expressionless facade and simply answered in understanding. Although the resumption of such activities was primarily with the purpose of having their second child, it also served the role of calming Zenjirou down.

A large part of the reason Zenjirou had chosen his fate of being summoned to another world was that he had fallen for Aura at first sight. Their life together had deepened such emotions even further, and he had never once been disillusioned. Sex was the main string to her bow when it came to soothing emotionally. However, he had spent over half a year abstaining, so his lust was greater than Aura had expected, and it had ended up being a fair burden.

“He seems to have sufficient stamina in that respect, so concubines will not be an issue. The problem is whether he will see other women in that way.”

Her concern was stated with a furrowed brow and bitter expression, but there was still an irrepressible sense of triumph in her reddish-brown eyes. Zenjirou’s single-mindedness was an issue in terms of a member of the royal family prioritizing benefits to their country. But as a woman, as his wife, she couldn’t help but be happy that he wouldn’t steal glances or feel love for any other

woman.

"I believe you are the only one who can persuade him, so I shall leave it to you, Your Majesty. Regardless, I wholeheartedly approve of you having a second child at this point. Taking a concubine while Prince Carlos is the only legitimate heir is somewhat risky."

With a single heir, an inheritor of lineal magic through a concubine could also become a temporary successor if something were to happen to the original heir. There was no method to mitigate that risk other than to have more legitimate children. If the people involved were king and queen consort rather than queen and prince consort, then as soon as the queen consort had recovered from childbirth, they would be making preparations for a second child.

"I know. However, protecting both the throne and the next generation of royalty simultaneously is more difficult than I thought."

"A concubine exists to take on some of that burden," the secretary replied flatly, not giving an emotional response to her complaint.

"True. From the perspective of national interest, it is absolutely imperative that my husband take a concubine."

The secretary continued his warnings after the queen's nod of agreement. "However, having a child at this point may also cause issues of its own. If you conceive as quickly as last time, the pregnancy should be confirmed within two or three months. The trade agreement may not yet be finalized by then, and the preparations for Princess Freya to become a concubine may also not be in order. That could possibly lead to domestic nobles pushing forward other concubines in order to 'take up the slack.'"

"I can already see my husband growing more and more unhappy," Aura answered bitterly after a moment, all too aware that his concerns were valid.



While his wife was setting about her queenly duties at her desk, Zenjirou was still in the inner palace, wearing his pajamas, playing a video game in the living room.

They had spent the night making love, and he had gone back to bed after seeing his wife off to work. After waking, he had remained in his PJs, playing games. It was a slovenly way to behave, practically the embodiment of self-indulgence.

“Here. We. Go!”

Holding the controller, he imitated a pitching stance and swung his arm down. In response, the character on the screen pitched his baseball. The speed indicator displayed 151 km/h. The strong fastball arced towards the batter standing in the right box, but he lightly swung his bat and heartlessly sent the ball into the left stands. A home run.

“Argh, damn it.”

Zenjirou lost all his motivation after that and lifted his foot from the floor, using his toe to switch the console off while balancing on his other foot. The controller was tossed down onto the carpet. With that done, he plonked down onto the black leather sofa and let out a massive sigh.

“Yeah, this isn’t working. I can’t concentrate.”

Aura had been worried that Zenjirou would be slightly off emotionally now that it had been decided he would be taking Freya as his partner to the wedding. She had therefore arranged to give him a day off, but he, unfortunately, found himself restless.

“Urgh, it’s a bit outside the rules, but maybe I’d be more distracted if I played a multiplayer game with the maids?”

His eyes fell back on the console sitting on the carpet. Despite his mutterings, he would never actually ask such a thing. While he lent out his handheld to some of the maids on occasion, he had never directly involved himself with them. Video games or not, socializing with the maids in that way could be interpreted as him having a special view of them.

Personally, he wanted a good relationship between the maids and himself, but he’d never considered a romantic or sexual one. He neither wanted to accidentally lead them on nor make things awkward by being too wary of it.

“Man, I’ve got the day off and I just don’t know what to do with myself,” he

muttered, finally stripping out of his blue-striped pajamas and changing into a T-shirt and lounge pants.

Since Zenjirou didn't leave the inner palace outside of work, a holiday naturally equated to a day spent at home. Back when he was a student, he'd often killed time by calling some friends over to hang out or wander around town. After starting work, he hadn't had free time to kill anymore, and he wasn't great at entertaining himself indoors.

When he had first arrived in Capua, Zenjirou's eyes had sparkled at the view of the DVDs he'd recorded and the unopened games waiting to be played, but he hadn't been so attached to them of late. He still had several games he'd not finished and countless DVDs he'd not watched, but he just didn't have the passion for them anymore. Even if he tried to enjoy them, the problem lurking in front of him, unfortunately, made him incapable of focusing and doing so.

"I feel bad about Aura making the effort to give me the day off, but it'll be healthier to just tackle it head-on."

Having quickly finished changing, he took some paper from the desk with his computer along with a three-colored pen and sat back down on the sofa.

"Right," he said. "First, General Pujol's wedding will be held in the Gaziel march. I'm going to be attending in Aura's stead, and part of the expectations of polite society are going as a couple. If both members of that couple are unwed then it's usually seen as a declaration of mutual interest. My partner in this case will be Freya."

As he wrote down that he would be attending the wedding with Freya, he let out a deep sigh. Strictly speaking, Zenjirou was *not* unwed; he'd married Aura. Male royals normally had multiple brides, though. On top of that, with him and Aura being the only adult royals in Capua, the country *wanted* him to take a second wife. Therefore, attending the wedding with a young, unwed woman would result in her being seen as a highly likely candidate for concubinage.

The troublesome thing about it was that the person in question, Freya, was more proactive about becoming his concubine than anyone else had been thus far.

"After that, if Capua and Princess Freya's homeland enter into

intercontinental trade, she'll officially become my second wife."

The sigh this time was even deeper than the last.

"I suppose I was told this'd happen from the start, so it was just a matter of time. Still, I wish that time had never come."

Zenjirou stared distantly out across the gardens through the wide-open shutters. He was an exceptionally average, perhaps even conservative person. He didn't have the adventurous spirit needed to celebrate taking another woman while already living happily with his wife and child.

"I'm glad we had that frank discussion. If we didn't, I'd start to wonder if she even loved me."

When they had discussed their dissatisfactions and hopes, Aura had told him that as a woman, she wanted to keep him to herself, which meant that actively setting things up for a concubine was related to her sense of duty as queen, even though it went against her personal feelings. Zenjirou was determined not to forget that.

"Polygamy might be accepted here, but Aura's got to be in the worst position. Assuming she loves me."

Zenjirou had to take a second wife despite already having one who loved him, so he was uneasy and annoyed by it. However, looking at it from Aura's position, her beloved husband was taking another woman for marriage. Jealousy preventing a rational decision would hardly be strange.

"If I were in Aura's position..." Zenjirou began, considering the situation in reverse.

So, if Aura took another man... If she said, "We already have a child between the two of us. Therefore, to spread space-time magic further, it would be better for me to have children with General Pujol and Lord Rafaello. Rest assured, though, I only have feelings for you; this is solely to produce more children."

In that case... Zenjirou's imagination was too vivid for his own good. It would never come to pass in a patriarchal society like Capua, but from the perspective of the longevity of space-time magic, it was far from improbable. Aura could be with another man.

“Just imagining it’s making me crazy,” he muttered in a flat voice.

Were those the feelings Aura was contending with right now? Was she smothering those emotions to fulfill her duties as queen, assigning her husband a concubine? Once more, Zenjirou was aware of his own inadequacy and his wife’s greatness.

Naturally, he had been brought up in a place where a single husband and wife was the norm, while Aura was raised in an environment where polygamy was the norm. Therefore, the mental burden of the situation on the two of them wouldn’t be comparable. Logically thought through, the pressure of taking a concubine would be stronger on the wife than the husband.

“If we can’t avoid it, we’ll just need to get the best result we can...”

Zenjirou managed to refresh himself somewhat and decided to use the rest of his day productively, sending his thoughts in another direction.

“I’m actually kind of glad Princess Freya’s here. The cuisine’s got a wider range now.”

As he spoke, he stood up and moved towards the five-door fridge in the corner. The metal vessel he pulled out contained goat’s milk, fresh from that morning. The goat had been milked according to the instructions offered by the young man—Nicolai—who Freya had lent them.

Once heated to near-boiling and cooled to room temperature, it was put in the fridge each day. The leftover milk was then disposed of the next morning. It was somewhat wasteful, but the only ones with a taste for the drink in Capua were the goat kids and Zenjirou. If it wasn’t disposed of, the fridge would soon be full of nothing but milk.

After pouring it into a glass, Zenjirou took a mouthful of the white liquid and swallowed it with a grimace.

“Yeah, that’s a pretty strong taste.”

As far as “milk” was concerned, he was only familiar with pasteurized milk from cows, so couldn’t avoid noticing the stronger taste from the goat’s milk. It was hard to describe, almost like a mix of animal musk and unrefined scent. As a result, he couldn’t recommend it to anyone else yet. He was pretty sure that

the first sip anyone from the Southern Continent took would also be their last.

“According to Nicolai, it gets better and better with the goats’ environment and food, so I’ll have to wait until then.”

Nicolai had also said that due to their environment having just changed, they needed to prioritize the goats’ health and would therefore need to wait to improve the milk. Fortunately, he wasn’t just capable of rearing goats; he could also make butter, cream, and even cheese from their milk.

When it came to the goats, Nicolai seemed eminently reliable. The pen and pasture set up within the gardens were where he spent most of his nights according to reports, almost like the goats were his lovers, he was so dedicated to them.

Dairy products would widen Zenjirou’s culinary horizons far more than the plain milk itself. Due to the lack of dairy in Capua, there were many snacks he had simply had to give up on reproducing. Over time, he had grown more accomplished with the local written language and had been translating as many of his recipes as possible, wanting to hand them off to Vanessa, the head of cooking in the inner palace.

Her skill was indisputable. Even if the recipe itself wasn’t enough to reproduce the product, she would adjust the ingredients and create something wonderful regardless. She had recently grasped Zenjirou’s preferences and was indispensable to the inner palace.

“Hmm, I feel bad for Nicolai, but I’ll stick to just sampling it for now.”

As he spoke, Zenjirou emptied the glass into the bucket next to the fridge and took out another, filling it with a mix of fruit juice and chilled water. He returned the bucket and two glasses to the shelf next to the fridge, still dirty. It was something he still wasn’t used to, but for a male royal to wash the dishes was preposterous, so he had to leave it for the maids.

“Actually, that reminds me, we’re pretty low on shampoo. I’ve got a prototype ready, so I guess I’ll have to get them to test it out.”

Zenjirou’s feet took him from the fridge to another corner of the room, to a collection of products. The items there were mostly things he had created

through trial and error to make his life better, including an electromagnet he'd made using a coil of wire and rechargeable battery along with a permanent, albeit weak, magnet.

From among them, he picked up a box with metal bottles inside, each around the size of the palm of his hand. The bottles contained shampoo and conditioner that he had made. The base of the shampoo was a watered-down soap he'd created. He'd then used information from the internet and added honey, citrus juices, perfumed oils, and so on, aiming for something that wouldn't damage the hair and scalp but would still wash them.

"If it works well enough, I'll use this and leave most of the shampoo we've got left for Aura."

Zenjirou had short hair, so leaving it a little greasy wasn't too much of an issue. His wife had long, luscious locks of straight red hair that he wouldn't forgive himself for ruining.

"Actually, Aura's hair was gorgeous when I first got here. The other women's hair doesn't look bad either, so if it doesn't work then she can just go back to the traditional methods, I guess," he realized suddenly.

He preferred to keep that as a final resort, though. Capua obviously didn't have the same customs as modern Japan when it came to bathing. They would never bathe each day. People who preferred to remain clean washed their hair once every three days, and the norm was once every seven. Therefore, they used perfumed oils to maintain their hair's sheen and keep the odors under control. Zenjirou preferred to avoid sharing a bed with a woman who did that without washing her hair.

"We already use liquid soap mixed with oils to wash our bodies, so if we can get the shampoo and conditioner working too, all that we'll need is facewash. I could just use watered-down soap, though."

He had never suffered with his skin through washing or sunburns, as it was fairly hardy. Maybe he wouldn't have to worry too much about it.

"Once I've got a method finalized, I wonder if I can leave it to the palace merchants? We did that with the soap just fine, so it *should* be all right, but I'd rather get Aura's permission."

Once he'd finished making the mixed soap and oil, he'd instructed the merchant who came to the palace on the process and simply bought the finished product. Of course, a wily merchant would not be satisfied with supplying such a rare and profitable product to only the inner palace and so had sought Aura's permission to sell it elsewhere.

Bathing was already seen as something of a luxury for nobles, so while it wasn't flying off the proverbial shelves, the appellation of "purveyor of the inner palace" and word of mouth from people using it were enough to lead it to gradually spread amongst the noble women of the country. Adding shampoo and conditioner would maybe even see daily baths becoming the norm for nobles.

"Yeah, that ain't gonna happen," he told himself, shooting his delusions down.

His life in the inner palace had made him forget, but bathing in this world was an expensive luxury in terms of both equipment and labor. In Capua, even the coolest season was more than warm enough that a simple cold rinse was no issue. Therefore, it was only a minority, even among the rich, who spent the money to furnish their bathrooms.

Then again, if it became known that the prince consort preferred his wife and the maids living in the inner palace to bathe daily and keep themselves clean, the practice might well spread explosively throughout noble families with daughters of marriageable age.

"Thinking about it that way, it's honestly pretty impressive that ancient Rome had public baths. You could just compromise on a sauna for warming yourself up. Huh? Saunas?"

The tail end of his musings made him stop.

"Back on Earth, saunas were a pretty Scandinavian thing. Maybe they exist in Princess Freya's country?"

If so, maybe getting a sauna in the inner palace would be a good idea, he considered absentmindedly.

Aura's recent physical "persuasions" must have borne fruit, as he had ended

up accepting Freya's entry into the inner palace as being likely.



That night, husband and wife began their usual evening routine. Having eaten and bathed, they sat opposite each other and began discussing important plans for the future.

"So I'll be going to General Pujol's wedding in a carriage as well?" Zenjirou asked.

"Indeed. The matter with Valentia was urgent, so I used teleportation magic to send you there, but this is a matter of course for the active season, a wedding. It will weigh on you, but I would have you take the slow route in the carriage," the queen explained in answer.

"Got it. Interacting with the people I'm traveling with will probably be harder than the trip itself. I'll have to work something out for that," Zenjirou's gaze as he answered wasn't focused on his wife's face, but on her chest.

Aura's clothing choice after the bath was a red negligee with some sort of mesh on the inside of its neckline. It had probably been meant as a bit of a treat for her husband as their period of abstinence came to an end. She was wearing more provocative clothing of late with him.

He would have been slightly uncertain about where to look if it were anyone else, but he didn't have to hold back with his wife. The bright light of the LED lamps exposed her skin, and he happily ogled her.

"I can put something on over this if you would rather? If you cannot concentrate on the matter at hand..."

"Sorry, I'm fine. Carry on," Zenjirou apologized half-heartedly as his wife scolded him with a reluctant smile. He wanted to keep things as they were.

Of course, Aura also wasn't *really* scolding him, and she continued, "You will be using the royal family's eight-drake-drawn carriage. On board will be you and your partner, Princess Freya. I imagine Lady Skaji will also be joining you as her guard. Finally, Ines will be present as your helper."

"Oh, Ines again?"

"Hm? Is there some issue with her?" Aura asked upon seeing Zenjirou's puzzlement.

"Nah, at least not as far as I'm concerned. She made things way easier in Valentia; it just feels a little harsh to her."

"Hmm, then perhaps someone else? Margarette would... No, that would not work. I would not be entirely comfortable with that. Hard on her though it may be, there is no one better suited than Ines."

"Hrmgh, got it. I'll do my best to behave and keep the workload off her."

If Aura had put it so firmly, it must be important. It was true that not just anyone could care for royals away from the inner palace.

Margarette was a striking young maid with blonde hair— rare for Capua. She was one of the few maids in the inner palace who was not Zenjirou's attendant but Aura's, so the two had not interacted much. For her name to come up from Aura as a substitute for Ines, she must have been very skilled.

"Also, as you feared, many of the nobles from the capital will be attending the wedding. Many will be accompanying the groom, but there will likely be plenty who accompany *you*. I suspect you will need to give your greetings at each rest stop, and I would hope you deal with them appropriately."

Aura informing him of the cruel future awaiting him left Zenjirou looking up at the ceiling. "Ugh, damn it. But you said I'm traveling separately from General Pujol? I figured he'd be aiming to never leave my side. It was a bit of a worry, actually."

The queen's bare shoulders rose in a shrug as she answered. "At a wedding, the groom holds one of the main parts to play. He must maintain that role through the entirety of their travels to greet his new bride. Having a royal such as yourself traveling with them as well would bring into question which of you held the main role, would it not? Therefore it is an unwritten rule that the groom does not travel with someone more highly ranked than himself."

"I see. Seems like an annoying custom to me, but I'm glad of it this time." Zenjirou nodded, his wife doing the same.

"The highest-ranked among the nobles traveling with you is likely to be

Rafaello Márquez. Did you manage to foster good relations with him while in Valentia?”

Zenjirou thought back to the man who had acted as his secretary in Valentia. He was oddly modest for such a high-ranking noble, which left Zenjirou pleasantly disposed towards him.

“Oh, Rafaello? That should be fine,” he answered.

Even if the man had been a prior candidate for Aura’s hand, Zenjirou didn’t feel as antagonistic towards him as he did towards Pujol Guillén. He was definitely skilled and most certainly a person to watch, but he wasn’t as overbearing as the general, so Zenjirou wasn’t quite as wary of him.

“He is one to keep an eye on in his own right,” Aura warned him. “While he is rather unlikely to do something of his own accord, if Count Márquez were to intimate that he should, he is highly likely to follow through and make it a reality. The family has placed itself firmly on our side, so I doubt they would attempt to ensnare us. Still, you must not let your guard down.”

“Sorry, you’re right. I’ll be careful,” Zenjirou apologized earnestly in the face of his wife’s severe warning, ducking his head slightly. “Ah, right. Lord Rafaello was another candidate for your hand, so he’s still single, isn’t he? Who’s his partner for the wedding? Lady Octavia, maybe?” he asked in sudden realization.

Aura decided this was the perfect opportunity and decided to make a recently finalized change in the inner palace clear to him.

“No, his partner will be Kisha.”

That was a name Zenjirou had not expected to hear, and his shock was clear in his widened eyes. “Uh, Kisha as in my maid Kisha? No way, she’s from a big enough family to be the next head of the Márquez family’s wife?”

The year and a half he’d spent there meant that he could immediately picture the maids who aided him just by hearing their names. If his recollections were correct, she was extremely attractive and could well be described as glamorous. She also had a particularly fine figure among the maids and was older compared to the others. Ignoring any biases, she was probably even better looking than Aura. She was the one who immediately came to mind as far as the beauty of

the younger maids was concerned.

“The Massana family she hails from is indeed that of a feudal lord, even if only a baron, so she is quite suitable for the Márquez family. Lord Manuel prefers a stable foundation over a rapid expansion of influence, so taking a fairly tractable family in through marriage fits our evaluation of him. I would, however, imagine that the main reason she was selected as his successor’s bride is, as you are assuming, that Kisha is a maid of the inner palace.”

“Yeah, figures.”

Zenjirou was rather concerned by his wife’s comment. Working in the isolated inner palace and caring for the queen and prince consort meant the maids had access to information that ordinary people could never gain. Of course, speaking carelessly of such things could spell the end of not only themselves, but their very line. They would therefore only be able to reveal slight impressions, but that was plenty valuable at present.

Zenjirou had come from another world entirely, so the palace nobles had essentially no information on him. They would pay vast sums of money just to know what food he liked, his favorite color, or even his favorite season. Conversely, they would do similar for his least-favorite things, as both sets of information could be used to curry favor more effectively.

“So the Márquezes are going to start making their moves eventually?” Zenjirou asked, his tone begging for a break.

However, the queen tilted her head before answering. “No, I would say Count Márquez dislikes risks. I sincerely doubt he will do anything you find unpleasant for some time. I imagine he is currently aiming to gather information.”

“He picked his successor’s wife just to gather some info? Or is she strictly meant to be his partner for the wedding but they won’t actually get married?”

“Hardly. Kisha tendered a sudden resignation from the inner palace for this. Even given how much smaller the Massana family is than the Márquez family, it would mean certain death for the marriage not to go ahead after such an event. He will not countenance such foolishness. He has actually placed a request to announce the marriage as soon as permission is granted.”

"Hmm, that'd mean he chose his son's wife just to get some information about me. That's not entirely believable."

Aura admonished him as he looked askance at her. "I did just say that her family is of sufficient standing—albeit barely—to marry into the Márquez line. With the addition of potential information from the inner palace, choosing her is hardly strange. Kisha is a beautiful woman, well-known and liked in courtly society."

"Ah, yeah, that's right." Zenjirou clapped in apparent agreement.

"Oh, well that makes it sound like you have seen her beauty for yourself." Aura's eyes had narrowed and all intonation had fled from her tone.

Zenjirou had the briefest of moments to think he'd screwed up, but he knew that trying to fob it off carelessly would cause more harm, so he answered honestly. "Well, yeah. Truthfully, I think she's the most beautiful of the maids working here, but that's all."

He couldn't help but make the last half into more of an excuse. Even if praising another woman in front of his wife didn't cause him any concern, it still gave him an odd sense of guilt. However, his reaction this time was born of needless concern.

I see. So he loves me and sees Kisha as the most beautiful of the maids. I can make some assumptions about his preferences with that. I suppose that would make things an uphill battle for Princess Freya? No, he has an awfully positive impression of Princess Bona as well, so she is not necessarily contrary to his preferences.

Aura couldn't reveal her musings to him. She brought her thoughts back on track and moved the conversation on to what she needed to tell him.

"So, Kisha will soon be leaving the inner palace. That is unfortunately not all. It may have been precipitated by the talk of her marriage, but the parents of several of the older maids have asked that their daughters return home soon."

"I can see how they'd be in that position, yeah," Zenjirou agreed.

The maids of the inner palace were, as a rule, all of marriageable age. If the circumstances called for it, they were expected to be available for Zenjirou, so it

was only natural. However, spending the entirety of this period of their lives within the inner palace would be an issue for both the parents and the maids themselves. Therefore, bringing them home before they were too old to be married was one of those kindnesses a parent gave their child.

Understanding that, Zenjirou had no real reason to be against it. “Eh, that’s fine, I guess. I think they’ve got the right, but I don’t want to lose everyone at the same time. Will the maids who are left be able to cope without the extra manpower? I think the burden might end up being too heavy.”

“I have the same concern; therefore, I intend to delay any others leaving before we bring in more maids. Thus, when the additional maids are skilled enough to take over, I will accept the other resignations. I would then establish somewhat of a staff buffer to avoid such a thing happening again.”

“Yeah, that works. That definitely works. We should be ready for anything.”

Zenjirou’s face was unusually serious as he nodded. He was well aware of the risks of working with a bare minimum of personnel. A simple cold could put the others over their limits, to say nothing of the fact that something unforeseen could result in next month’s work arriving this month instead, giving everyone a literal taste of hell.

Aura seemed slightly overwhelmed by his uncharacteristic forcefulness and nodded herself. “I-Indeed. If you are so strongly in agreement, then that is what we shall do. Simply recruiting more people will not be terribly difficult.”

There were *many* girls of a suitable age who wanted to work as a maid in the inner palace. There were even more noble parents who would want their daughters to do so. They would first be filtered for families who were loyal to the royal family, and the rest would be sorted based on their suitability. The previous shortlist had been determined by appearance, and those women were now the ones working around Zenjirou. That appearance selection had been based on those who were the most immediately attractive and the girls closest in looks to Aura, as she hadn’t been aware of Zenjirou’s tastes in women at the time.

Now, though, she knew that such considerations were meaningless. Zenjirou wasn’t someone who would make a move on the maids, so there was no need

to select them based on appearance. Of course, they would carry the name and dignity of the position and would need to be attractive enough for that, but there was no need to prioritize the taller girls with large breasts who looked like Aura.

In truth, that was one of the reasons several of the girls would be resigning after only a year and a half. It was natural, as picking girls who looked older and similar to the queen inevitably meant that they would tend to actually *be* older.

If their looks were less important, the additional girls could be gathered from the younger candidates and therefore stay longer. Nineteen-year-old maids would leave after a year, but fifteen-year-olds would stay for up to five years.

“Losing people from the inner palace is somewhat saddening, though. Oh, I know, would giving the maids who leave something as thanks for their work cause an issue?”

Aura thought over her husband’s idea for a moment. “No, it should not. Normal noble estates do similar things. However, any difference in what you give to different girls could lead to an impression that you were involved with them, so they need to be small gifts, given to all of them equally.”

“I see. A small gift given to all of them. Got it, I’ll think of something,” he nodded.

All the maids had been greatly helpful over the last year and a half. Caring for a man who had no idea of the norms of this world and had completely abnormal preferences in comparison must have been difficult for them. He wanted to show his gratitude in some way.

The conversation had now petered out between them and silence reigned for a while. Such silences between people who didn’t know each other could be unpleasant, but between those who knew each other well, they could be quite relaxing.

The two of them poured water into their glasses to wet their slightly dry throats from the conversation thus far. Eventually, Aura’s red-cut glass was empty, and she returned it to the table before continuing their conversation.

“This is a slightly different matter, but I should let you know. The souvenirs

you brought from Valentia... Their sand and shells were used in our glass manufacturing and had an extreme effect. The glass we've produced has been almost black until now, but this was far more transparent. The viscosity has also improved, and it is far easier to blow. Our glass production has progressed dramatically."

Aura's eyes were alight, and Zenjirou felt himself drawn in as his own smile deepened. "That's great news. The sand must be the biggest issue. We'll need to try using sand from more places, maybe."

"I intend to. We will be using their impressions to find the best-suited sand we can. The glassmaking budget is currently limited, so it will not be particularly large-scale as yet. What of the other possibility? I believe you mentioned something called a magnet to remove the iron components that cause the color from the sand?"

Zenjirou looked somewhat conflicted as she questioned him further. He scratched his head as he gave his answer. "Yeah, I managed to make an electromagnet with the coil I had Prince Francesco make. It only uses a few rechargeable double-As, but it's fairly strong. Using it to make permanent magnets is difficult, though. It's true that exposing iron to the magnetic field from it makes that iron magnetic, but the magnets you make that way are really weak. I don't think they'll be suitable to remove the iron, but I remember hearing that iron with lots of stuff alloyed into it holds a magnetic field better. I'm trying out a fair bit, but nothing's usable yet." He explained his progress almost apologetically, his gaze naturally being drawn to the corner of the room where his planned electromagnet and weak magnets were.

"So they are not yet usable?"

"Yeah, things don't look good, to be honest. If we want to test it out, it'd probably be better to take the actual electromagnet out and use it there. They report directly to you, so I don't think it would be too difficult to keep it secret."

"Hm, that is an option as well," Aura mused, folding her arms over her full chest.

"The permanent magnets do have the absolute minimum magnetic field. Putting the magnetized needles through oil on paper and floating them in water

makes them all point in pretty much the same direction. I guess compasses would be possible in this world as well.”

“Compasses? What are they?” Aura asked, puzzled by the untranslated word.

“Well, if you leave a magnet alone, its north pole will always point north. The world itself is a big magnet. Wait...actually, is this world even a spherical planet? Whatever, that doesn’t matter for now. If you take a long, thin piece of metal with a magnetic field and float it on water and leave it for a while, it naturally turns to point in a set direction. It’s a tool that lets you know your orientation, and it’s called a compass.”

“Oh, now that would be useful. You could maintain your bearings even in unfamiliar forests.”

The admiration in her voice was doubtlessly due to the painful experience of losing track of her location in such circumstances during the war. As a rule, the army kept people who could navigate by the stars and sun in each division, but there were many occasions where the sky was invisible due to thick vegetation. Conversely, its lack of use on ships was likely due to the relative immaturity of their naval development.

“The issue,” she mused, “is that you need to make it float on water and wait. If it could be made more portable, then I would mass-produce it and equip the army with it.”

“Right, the water method is just the simplest; practical compasses are more portable. How can I explain it? You put the magnet like a teeter-totter or a set of scales. Either way, you hold the needle right in its center and let it spin freely. It’s easy to make, so I’ll draw up a plan that you can give the craftsmen. The actual shape should be easy.”

A compass was a massive advance, but Aura was still thinking about glass manufacturing so she wasn’t too interested.

“I shall leave that to you. Do as you wish. Back on topic, you mean to say that our only option with the electromagnet is to lend it directly to the craftsmen?”

“Yeah, I think that’s the best way right now. You can remove the gathered metal by just switching it off. Honestly, though, I think we’d be better off not

relying on this sort of thing and just finding better sand for glass.”

“Indeed. I hope we can find the best within the crownlands. If not, we may need to contact regional nobles, although I know one place where we can find vast quantities of sand without even looking.”

Her joking tone meant that he was pretty sure it wouldn’t be a solution, but still he asked just in case. “Where?”

“The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. Half of their country is desert. I do not know what kind of sand it is, but they certainly are not lacking,” she told him, laughing.

Pretty much as he had expected... It was no solution.

“Well, that might be a problem in the future. In the long term, no matter how carefully we guard the process, it will be revealed eventually. I don’t know how good desert sand is for glass, though.” He shrugged.

Zenjirou’s concerns were not too far off the mark. Desert sand was the result of decades of weathering. That weathering left behind only the most resilient parts of the sand, quartz, otherwise known as the main ingredient of glass. Mature deserts could be over ninety percent quartz. In fact, there were companies on Earth that imported such sand from mature deserts to use for cheap glass.

“My mention of the Twin Kingdoms was, of course, a joke. First, we should try to improve our process using the sand from Valentia and gather more from that area. Fortunately, Valentia and the Balearis Islands resort are crownlands. I hope we will be able to find better sand in that area.”

“Yeah, good luck. I’ll work on making the electromagnet usable.”

The queen gave him a nod. “I shall leave that to you. Now, this is a slightly different topic, but you are still practicing your magic in the evenings, correct? I believe you said you first successfully used your second incantation a month ago. How have things progressed since?”

It was a sudden question but a topic he wanted to discuss as well, so he answered cheerfully. “Oh, I thought I mentioned that. I’ve managed to get it to a seventy percent success rate.”

His wife responded to his proud answer with genuine surprise. “That is rather impressive. You are progressing quickly indeed. Would you be willing to show me?”

Zenjirou cheered at his wife’s question and immediately got ready to do so. “Whoo, let’s go! *Transfer that which lies within my eye line into my hand. As compensation, I present eighty-one offerings of mana to the spirits of space-time...*”

Silence.

Despite his confident incantation, it unfortunately had no effect. The incantation itself had been properly translated via the soul of language so he had at least pronounced it properly. The issue, therefore, lay within either his visualization or his control of his mana.

Of course, he knew that he didn’t have a hundred percent success rate, so all he did was smile ruefully and try once again.

“Oh, guess that was a nonstarter. One more time. *Transfer that which lies within my eye line into my hand. As compensation, I present eighty-one offerings of mana to the spirits of space-time...*”

Once more, nothing.

“H-Huh? Well, that’s kinda unfortunate. One more time. *Transfer that which lies within my eye line into my hand. As compensation, I present eighty-one offerings of mana to the spirits of space-time...*”

After three consecutive failures, a hint of dismay started to show in his voice. “Honestly, I’ve been doing pretty well recently. I wonder what’s going on.”

Aura softly held his hand as he raised it for a frantic fourth attempt and smiled calmly. “Do not worry, Zenjirou. This is normal. Even the visualization of memorized spells can be hindered by the slightest tension. This is only the second thing you can cast, and the first used while adjusting your mana flow. Succeeding in a mere three or four attempts is a rarity.”

Her statement wasn’t just meant to console him; it was the cold hard truth. He usually practiced while sitting alone at his computer, so however successful

he was there, someone else watching him would inevitably lower his success rate. That was how sensitive magic was.

Of course, magic wasn't the only thing that grew much less successful with mental stressors. Even back in Japan, the Rubik's Cube champion could usually solve all six faces within five seconds, but when he had to demonstrate it on TV, he spent over a minute without being able to do so.

Her explanation made him feel much better, and he smiled back at her while scratching his head, embarrassed. "Ah, right. I'm not all that mentally resilient, so give me a bit until I can manage it."

"I will give you as long as you need. I mind little."

Zenjirou attempted the "attract" spell several times as she watched him. Finally, on his eleventh attempt...

"One more time. *Transfer that which lies within my eye line into my hand. As compensation, I present eighty-one offerings of mana to the spirits of space-time!* Got it!"

The moment he finished the incantation, the wooden coaster on the table disappeared and reappeared in his hand.



“Attract” was a type of exceedingly limited teleportation magic. It was only applicable to items that could be held in one hand, and it required a direct line of sight. It therefore had very limited applications, but it was one of the spells of space-time magic that required the least mana, so it was used for training purposes.

“Magnificent. The magic was successful.” Aura ignored the repeated failures and applauded, praising her husband’s success.

“Ah, thank you, thank you,” he answered, somewhat embarrassed as he raised his right hand, holding the coaster and bowed slightly.

Aura’s expression drew tight as she spoke to him again. “So, allow me to get right to the point. Would you leave your mastery of attract as it is and begin practicing teleportation as your third spell?”

Zenjirou couldn’t contain his surprise at the unexpected suggestion. “What? I can’t even really say that I can use this one. Why would I leave it?”

“Well, it is not the best way of learning, but it would allow you to learn the more frequently used types of magic first. Since you can at least somewhat use the spell, you can envision the effect of a spell while controlling your mana flow. The only three requirements for a successful casting are the correct pronunciation, the correct visualization, and the correct control of your mana. If a beginner is in the same position as you, where they can maintain the visualization while controlling their mana output, they may learn any kind of magic with the same requirements. Therefore, while it will be a great effort, you already have the foundation to use teleportation.”

“I’ll be able to use teleportation?” Zenjirou asked dazedly, the statement sounding utterly surreal to him. So far, the only spells he had succeeded at were the barrier and attraction spells. Both of them fell under the category of space-time magic and were therefore unusable for the majority of people.

Unfortunately, being able to use them didn’t mean they were useful. Both were spells that researchers of the Capuan family had developed to probe into the possibilities of space-time magic, and they held practically no utility.

Teleportation, in comparison, was practically the poster child of space-time

magic. About eighty percent of the reason for space-time magic being considered so useful even among the multiple lineal magics on the continent was due to that spell. It could only send a person at a time along with what they were carrying, but it enabled instantaneous travel regardless of distance. Thinking of being able to use it himself, Zenjirou's heart was racing almost like a child.

"Sure, got it. I'll learn it. Why bring it up so suddenly, though?"

Despite his excitement, he was still confused about why Aura would change the normal learning schedule and have him learn teleportation first.

A crease appeared between Aura's eyebrows as she replied with a slight amount of annoyance. "Because of a problem that may well soon occur. You and I are...with each other every night, no?"

While she didn't explicitly say what they were doing, the reddening of her cheeks at the phrase "every night" left only one conclusion.

"Right, we are. Tonight too, yeah?" His own cheeks reddened as well, but he tried to play off his embarrassment.

"Y-You need not say it! Well, back on topic. If we continue as we are, it is only a matter of time before we have our second child. It will be a slight inconvenience, though. While this is only a personal estimate, however quickly we move, Princess Freya will become your concubine after a year at minimum. The success of intercontinental trade is indispensable, and we cannot accept her without that. Therefore, she will need to return to Uppasala at least once and gain permission to marry into our family from her own king along with securing official recognition of the trade treaty."

Aura paused for a moment before continuing.

"However, the *Glasir's Leaf* took 120 days to make its way to Capua from Uppasala. A more certain route in the future will decrease that somewhat, but we should assume a one-way trip will take at least a hundred days. Therefore a round trip will be two hundred days. Adding the necessary negotiations into that, assuming it will be accomplished within a year is overly optimistic."

"I see. And?" So far, all Zenjirou understood was that Aura was concerned,

but not why.

“Do you recall the commotion while Carlos was growing inside me? I assume the nobles went on the offensive to get you a concubine. That will happen once again for our second child. If Princess Freya was already within the inner palace at that point, we could use the fact that you already *have* a concubine as an argument, but as I explained, she will likely be nothing more than a candidate at that point.”

Zenjirou understood what she was getting at then, and his face suddenly paled. “B-But we managed to get around it last time, right? So we can jus—”

“Last time, we used the emotional excuse that you had no interest in anyone else. However, that will no longer hold water. After all, Princess Freya is already a candidate for such a position.”

“Ugh, that’s right,” he realized, truly at his wit’s end. “She’s already more than I want, and having to take another? Before her as well? I can’t do that.”

“That is precisely why,” Aura began consolingly, “I wish for you to learn teleportation. You boldly proclaimed that you would learn the spell before I had our second child and get yourself into a position where you could summon a healer from the Twin Kingdoms, did you not?”

“Ah, right, I did,” he admitted, somewhat awkwardly settling himself into his seat again.

Despite his high-handed claims of learning teleportation before she had her second child in order to get help, he hadn’t even started to learn the spell. On top of that, he had also started to try for another child with her, so he knew it seemed like he was just all talk.

However, whether she was aware of his internal distress or not, Aura’s expression didn’t change as she continued. “If you can learn how to use teleportation, you will have a legitimate reason to travel to the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. That will in turn allow you to avoid calls from domestic nobles to take a concubine. After all, taking a concubine or not is, at least officially, something done by the person themselves. If you are not here, I can simply say that we cannot proceed without you, which will be accepted even given my position as queen.”

The matter with Freya was, officially speaking, Zenjirou accepting her as his partner to the wedding. However, his expression didn't brighten. If anything, it grew even cloudier.

"That'd get me away from domestic nobles chasing me with concubines, yes. But wouldn't the nobles in the Twin Kingdoms—hell, the Sharous in particular—try to push a concubine on me? I might end up with not just two, but three."

"But if you comport yourself properly, you can restrict it to just Princess Freya. If it comes up in the Twin Kingdoms, all you need to tell them is, 'Traditionally, I would take a domestic noble as a concubine, yet I already have a foreign royal as a potential concubine. If I were to involve yet another country's royalty then the local nobles would refuse to be silenced.'"

"Whoa, what duplicity." Even Zenjirou could only look shocked at his wife's cunning.

Her statement was truthfully absurd. Zenjirou's absence would prevent the local nobles from offering him concubines, while the Twin Kingdoms would be refused, using the local nobles as an excuse.

"Wouldn't that leave me stuck if the locals and the Sharous worked together? I'd have nowhere to run and a second and third would be pushed on me."

Aura could tell from Zenjirou's half-lidded gaze that he wasn't really feeling it, and she tilted her head, somewhat at a loss. "That is true, but what would you suggest? Calling it off? If my pregnancy occurs before Princess Freya weds you, then things will be as I stated."

"Well, it's a bit of a shame, but maybe we should put a stop to trying for our second for a while?"

"That may not work. We've already been doing so for more than ten days, so it may be too late. It is also a fact that a second child before you take a concubine would make the royal family more stable, so I would rather continue as we are."

"Hmm, I get it," Zenjirou murmured, reclining on the sofa and thinking. His brain wasn't working particularly well to begin with, but all this information being stuffed in at once meant that he couldn't sort through it.

As he tried to consider the best result, all he could think of were things that wouldn't work. He'd need to have a priority, get the most important things done, and if the lesser things were not possible, he would just give up on them.

With that in mind, he considered the problem anew. *What's the most important thing to me? Well, that goes without saying; it's Aura. We'll definitely be having another kid too. In which case, I need to learn teleportation magic and go to the Twin Kingdoms.*

At that point, he had to make his first concession. With the second child's delivery in mind, he would have to visit the Twin Kingdoms, which in turn meant the issue of concubines there would be unavoidable.

With that precondition, Aura's suggestion was not so bad. If he was going to go anyway, he might as well learn teleportation quickly and avoid the local concubines.

"All right, I'll learn teleportation as quickly as possible and head for the Twin Kingdoms when you're pregnant. I'm fine with that as far as it goes."

"Oh, I see," Aura smiled happily, earning a tired smile from Zenjirou in response.

"Yeah, when I think about keeping you healthy, I know I'll need to be able to move between the two countries quickly anyway, that much is unavoidable. And if it's going to cause problems, then those are unavoidable too. If it means I can call a healer if you need one, then I can ignore a lot of the other stuff."

"I see. Thank you."

Aura's chest warmed at his ardent declaration. He was saying he would undertake nearly any hardship if it kept her and their children healthy. It was a blessing beyond any she could ask as a woman, even if the hardship in question was the risk of more women being pushed onto him as concubines.

Their chat seemed to have strengthened his resolve, and Zenjirou looked at his beloved wife calmly before he spoke again. "Yeah, if I try to think things through too far in advance, I'll end up paralyzed, so I'll just keep it simple for now. I'll learn teleportation. I'll go to the Twin Kingdoms. But I won't have any more concubines. If it's a political issue that makes it absolutely necessary like

with Princess Freya, that's one thing, but I won't take any more if I can avoid it."

His wording made it sound like he'd already accepted that Freya would be his concubine, but Aura knew it would only sadden her gentle husband if she pointed it out, so such a comment would serve no purpose.

"Very well. I will be counting on you. Thank you, Zenjirou," was therefore all she said, thanking him with a smile for his devotion.

Epilogue — Heading for the Gaziel March

Several days passed after that, and now that the preparations had been made, Zenjirou was to leave the capital. His destination was the capital of the Gaziel march, a city sharing its name. He was to be Aura's representative and attend the wedding held there between the current head of the Guillén family, Pujol Guillén, and the eldest daughter of the Gaziel family, Lucinda Gaziel.

“I am counting on you, Zenjirou. Take my place, as I am unable to leave the capital and convey my blessings to the bride and groom,” Aura told him from her throne.

“Leave it to me, my queen. I shall dedicate my full albeit meager abilities towards acting as your representative,” Zenjirou answered from where he stood below the dais holding her throne.

Several nobles were watching, so the formalities needed to be observed. Their real farewells had been exchanged that morning in the inner palace. They had held each other tightly, kissed, and prayed for each other's safety. They'd also spent the morning cuddling their beloved son Carlos Zenkichi together. This was nothing more than a ceremonial farewell.

“Sir Zenjirou, your carriage awaits!” a secretary called loudly.

As he heard the statement, Zenjirou turned his back on the throne and left the room, maintaining his pace carefully to follow the expected etiquette. Awaiting him in the garden as he exited the palace still surrounded by his guards was a carriage, eight huge drakes to pull it, and the first Uppasalan princess, who was waiting politely.

“We shall be traveling together, Your Majesty,” she said in greeting. “I look forward to sharing our journey together.”

Zenjirou didn't have a chance to gape at his first sight of the huge drakes as the princess bowed, sending her short silver hair swishing forward.

“Indeed, Princess Freya. Likewise,” he answered, shifting his gaze immediately from those drakes to the princess.

He hadn't quite expected the outfit she was wearing. She had generally worn light blue dresses within the palace but was currently clad in thick pants and a long-sleeved shirt with a sleeveless leather jacket over it.

The outfit had several large pockets and was clearly prioritizing function over form. The clincher was the leather weapon holster hanging from a wide belt of the same material. He seemed to remember the type of ax it held was called an adze.

Freya had a soft scarf wrapped around her neck, and the brooch with the blue sapphire was her sole concession to feminine fashion. Was she planning on hiking her way there rather than riding in the carriage? If she'd had a big rucksack on her back, that would have been the only assumption he could make.

While Zenjirou had a decorative bronze sword of his own hanging from his waist, he was wearing the traditional wear of Capua, so it made Freya's clothing stand out all the more. She seemed to notice his gaze on her clothes.

"Ah, I heard we would be traveling a long distance over land, so I wore clothes with a greater range of movement. If it is an issue, I can change immediately," she suggested, studying his reaction with upturned eyes.

However, judging from the blonde warrior behind her, who looked like she had just bitten into a lemon, there was a strong possibility that the clothing choice was simply her hobby.

At any rate, Zenjirou didn't have a reason to object. "There is no need. The outfit suits you well."

"Thank you. I thought you might say so, Your Majesty," she answered with a happy smile and another bow.

They then climbed aboard the carriage that was waiting for them. While it was a massive construction pulled by eight drakes, it was limited in width in order to use the Capuan roads. Thus, the interior had a high ceiling and plenty of space in front of and behind it, but the seating area itself wasn't particularly wide. There were five men and women sitting inside.

The first seat, facing the front and in the center was obviously Zenjirou's, as

the head of the party. Next to him was his partner for the wedding, Freya. The remaining people were in seats facing the first two.

Opposite Freya was her confidante and bodyguard, the warrior Victoria Kronqvist, or Skaji. Opposite Zenjirou was his knight, Natalio Maldonado. Seated a little farther away was Ines, the maid dispatched from the inner palace to care for Zenjirou.

The road to the Gaziel march was not perfectly safe, so their guards, Skaji and Natalio, had their weapons—short spears and swords—on them even in the carriage. Allowing people who were sharing a carriage with the prince consort to be armed would ordinarily never be allowed, but Skaji was the confidante of Zenjirou's likely future concubine. With her also being the only person present to ensure Freya's safety, she was of course allowed her armaments.

The carriage slowly set off. The royal coachman's skill was evident, as the departure was extremely smooth. Suspension was nonexistent at Capua's level of technical development, so even the grandest carriages had little relation to the passengers' comfort, but fortunately, the roads from the palace were all paved with stone. The seat cushions were also of superb quality, so he had no issues with the ride at present. If he were to have any issues, they would likely come once they switched to the plain dirt of the salt road.

As he considered that, the carriage passed the palace gates and moved into the downtown region. Zenjirou let out a slightly unbecoming, though quiet, cheer at the sights through the open windows. It was the second time he had seen them, the first being during the parade for his own wedding.

It was hardly surprising, though, that at the time he had been focused solely on not screwing up and keeping a smile on his face as he waved. Therefore, it was the first time he'd truly *looked* at the sights.

It's actually a bigger city than I thought. Even bigger than Valentia.

It was rather late, but he directed an inquisitive gaze at the paved road and the buildings lining it. The central road had been closed for their passage, but unlike at the triumph, the carriage didn't do anything but progress at a steady pace.

However, the lavishly decorated carriage drawn by the eight drakes was more

than enough to draw the citizens' interest. Spectators were watching with rapt attention from either side of the road, looking deeply interested as they pointed and chattered. The small children in the crowd were doing their best to run along the footpath after the carriage.

Yup, that sort of thing doesn't change wherever you are, he thought, his expression softening at the charming sight.

"Your Majesty, has something caught your interest?" Freya asked from her seat where she had thus far remained silent. She was likely just searching for a topic to break the ice.

Zenjirou didn't intend to spend the multi-day trip in awkward silence, so he just smiled slightly stiffly and answered honestly. "Ah, excuse me. It was nothing of particular interest; I just rarely see the streets of the capital so I was somewhat fascinated."

Freya exclaimed in surprise, "Is this the first time you have seen it?"

"It is. Well, I suppose it is not technically the *first*, but essentially yes."

"I do not quite know what to say," she replied.

Zenjirou hadn't seen the streets of his own city despite living in the palace. If anything, it made *him* seem like the princess who was shut away in the inner palace.

He didn't want her to have the impression that Aura had forced it upon him, so he added to his explanation with a smile. "I have had the opportunity on a few occasions, but I tend to stay at home. Princess Freya, have you spent much of your time outside?"

It was a somewhat obvious change of subject, but she couldn't pass up a topic he brought up, she decided.

"Indeed," she answered with a smile. "Embarrassingly enough, I always tended towards more boyish pursuits in my youth. I spent much of my time in the water, horse riding, hunting, and sailing. My mother and father were often rather put out by it."

"I see. Then, although this may be a rather long journey, I doubt you will need

to worry.”

“Definitely. I’ve spent time on longboats heading upriver... I’ve even led hunts.”

“Oh, that is heartening to hear.”

“Although I often caught foxes and rabbits, I have never hunted drakes. If we have the opportunity on our journey, I would quite like to make the attempt.”

She didn’t seem to be joking, considering the look in her eyes as she patted the ax at her hip.

“Ha ha ha, I would be happy to join you. I would most likely just be a hindrance, though, and unable to aid with the hunt itself, so I would ask Sir Natalio to go in my stead.”

While the knight was somewhat shocked by the topic shifting to him, he immediately rallied and placed his right fist on his left shoulder. “Yes, my liege. I will make use of the wyvern bow you granted me.”

As the conversation continued, the carriage left the capital and eventually reached the salt road. The sight out of the window transitioned from wood and stone houses to large fields.

“Sir Zenjirou, the quality of the roads will worsen significantly now. Please take care, and if you feel unwell, we can stop the carriage anywhere, so do not hesitate to speak up,” Ines told him.

“Understood, Ines,” he answered with a smile.

Right, the road until the Gaziel march doesn’t pass through settlements. It feels like a proper journey.

The greenery outside the open windows let Zenjirou feel how far he was from civilization. Of course, there were still several hundred soldiers protecting him, and the nobles also traveling with him had their own guards. As long as nothing extreme happened, there was little risk to their journey.

Well then, I’ll take a pass on any issues and just hope we get there safely.

He understood that and felt more like he was on a field trip as he enjoyed the rolling scenery out the window.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life Volume 7.*

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Turnover

About a week had passed since the lord of the inner palace, Zenjirou, had left for the Gaziel march when two of his maids were summoned to the head maid's office.

If the maids had been the three problem maids, otherwise known as Faye, Dolores, and Letti, they would have been trembling and trying to figure out what had been discovered and how to best apologize.

However, these two maids had no guilty conscience and simply knocked calmly on the office door.

“Ma’am, it’s Conchita. I have arrived.”

“Sabrina also reporting.”

“Enter.”

The two maids in question said “Excuse us” as they opened the door and entered the room.

The head maid’s role included summoning maids in this fashion and giving them specific training or instruction. Therefore, while her office was small, it had a parlor attached to it. The two maids—Conchita and Sabrina—had taken up positions in that parlor as they spoke with Amanda.

Amanda was sitting on a simple wooden chair across from the two. She held their gazes evenly before shifting straight to the main topic.

“You both share a room with Kisha, so I imagine you expected this. I have called you here today for much the same reason. Your families have both petitioned for your return. As your lord, Sir Zenjirou has accepted the requests, and you will therefore soon be leaving the inner palace and returning to your families.”

As Amanda had expected, the two maids didn’t show any surprise at her explanation, merely nodding in acceptance with even expressions. They had assumed as much upon being summoned.

Conchita and Sabrina were roommates and teammates with Kisha. They’d

heard from her about half a month prior that she would be marrying and was therefore resigning. They had obviously been surprised at first but had soon accepted it. The three of them were the same age, each of them having turned twenty at the beginning of the year. In Capuan society, it was considered the final year where one was of a reasonable age to marry and was commonly called the Year of Truth.

Kisha was an exception, being a maid in the inner palace, and she therefore had a few years' leeway, but it was still a good time to start thinking about those decisions. Conchita and Sabrina were the same age, so this went for them as well.

While their families might not be able to catch the interest of a man like the next head of the Márquez family, they would still be moving to cement their daughters' engagements. Conchita and Sabrina, therefore, knew that such a request was far from unexpected. Their time here was simply over.

"I understand," Conchita said with a dip of her head, sending her luscious black locks swaying.

"Thank you for your instruction until now, ma'am," Sabrina added, her own pretty red hair swishing as she followed suit.

Amanda couldn't stop her expression from softening just a little at their responses. They worked well and had answered similarly. They had made an extremely reliable team with Kisha, though the latter had already departed. They were not lacking as maids in any way, mentally mature and courageous, with little in the way of bashfulness.

As far as courage went, the problem maids were well above the others, but comparing the two trios was rather impolite. It would be like entering a polar bear into a competition to see who dealt with the cold the best.

At any rate, these three had struck a balance between personality and competence, enabling Amanda to take a relatively hands-off approach. However, she subverted their expectations, as the pair had assumed they would be leaving very soon.

"You will both be leaving the inner palace and returning to your families. That much is certain, but it will not be immediately. This is due to the current lack of

personnel in the inner palace. Calling it fortunate may be rather rude to the both of you, but you will not be marrying as quickly as Kisha is. Therefore, we will be prioritizing the acquisition of additional maids. Once they are trained to a sufficient standard where they will not be a hindrance, you will both be allowed to resign. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I understand."

The two of them answered the head maid's request placidly. Amanda nodded in satisfaction while letting out an internal sigh.

Why is it that the most manageable girls are leaving first and I am left with the problem maids? This is the inner palace; normally we would have nothing but the best here.

Her position meant that she could not voice her complaints, though. Maintaining her strict expression, Amanda gave a short nod with "Very well," leaving her lips before beginning a more detailed explanation to the two who would be leaving.

"A few days from now we will have three new maids. You will each be grouped with one of them and another current maid for training purposes."

In other words, the groups would be trios consisting of a maid who was leaving, a new maid, and a current maid. The only two who would be leaving this time were Conchita and Sabrina, so the third maid would simply make a group with two who were staying.

Things had been planned this way due to the risk of isolating the new maids once the pair had left if Conchita and Sabrina were the only two giving them instruction. The inner palace was already cut off from society, so isolating the new maids even further was something to avoid.

"Fortunately," Amanda continued, "Sir Zenjirou is currently away from the capital so there is a lighter workload here. We can use the opportunity to instruct the new hires."

The fundamental issue with replacing people was that unless those replacements were already up to snuff, it would lead to a temporary reduction

in the overall workforce. New hires were generally *not* up to snuff, and the veterans training them would also suffer from decreased efficiency. Therefore, times like this where the overall workload was lighter were the best for increasing the number of people you had to call on.

“We will be keeping it to only three new maids initially to avoid an excessive burden. Once things look good with them, we will bring the next three in. We will therefore have at least six new maids, but we will plan for between ten and twelve, if possible, so you need to act in accordance with that. Am I understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

The problem maids would undoubtedly have shown their displeasure in either their expressions or behaviors, but Conchita and Sabrina both comported themselves far better, and their faces didn’t falter.

Despite that, when they were with Vanessa—the maid in charge of the kitchen who had a friendly disposition—they allowed themselves to be more open, so they likely excelled in adapting to whatever environment they were in.

“Very well. Sir Zenjirou wished to grant you a token of appreciation for the work you have done thus far. Ordinarily, he would have preferred to hand it to you in person as he did with Kisha, but you may leave before he returns, depending on the circumstances. Therefore, I will be an intermediary, but if he returns before you leave then you must thank him yourselves. Understood?”

With that warning, Amanda placed long polished boxes made of wood in front of each of the women.

“Open it and inspect it,” she told them.

The two maids exchanged glances and picked up the boxes in front of them, lifting the lids.

“It’s...” Conchita began before trailing off.

“A silver chain? No, a bracelet?”

As Sabrina had said, it was a bracelet made of silver. It was relatively simple,

and despite clearly being of fine make, was not worth a fortune. However, a close look at the chains revealed glistening transparent grains shining within. They were Zenjirou's beads.

The simple, colored glass would have made a simple silver chain much more valuable to a modern person, and they were nothing short of incredible by the aesthetic senses of this world. However, they had not been utilized for either their artistic or monetary value. It made such items extremely difficult to produce as a forgery in this world.

The two maids gingerly lifted the silver bracelets from the red cloth that padded the boxes' interiors. As they did, Amanda spoke to them.

"They are now yours. Sir Zenjirou said that if you do not want or need them, you are to return them."

"What?!"

"I could never!"

Ignoring the looks on their faces, Amanda continued. "However, you must return them personally to him. He will not accept any other method, and explicitly said that they would need to be returned by you no matter what the reason was."

The two of them settled into confused contemplation at Amanda's words. They were noble girls and neither of them were unintelligent, so it didn't take either of the pair long to recognize the bracelets' true value.

Conchita and Sabrina could henceforth use the pretext of returning the bracelet to gain a personal audience with Zenjirou on a single occasion. Kisha had likely been given the same thing as well, having left the inner palace before them. This was no mere accessory. It was a one-time ticket to meet the prince consort in the future.

Amanda could tell from their expressions that they had understood the gift's true meaning properly and her tone turned cautionary. "I imagine you are aware of this, but Sir Zenjirou is less than fond of unfairness. Therefore, he will not treat your families, either biological or married, with any special favor due to your prior post. However, conversely, if they were to be involved in some

issue and were clearly treated unjustly, he would likely help.”

The implication of her words was clear. Noble society was, frankly, a place where the rule of the jungle reigned supreme. Of course, the royal family technically kept the domestic nobles under control but it was hard to say they had eyes and ears everywhere in practice. It was therefore the norm that disputes between noble families were dealt with out of view of the royal family. It went without saying that in those cases, the final result was not the family that was *correct*, but the family that was *stronger*.

In such an environment, these bracelets held great significance. They were only usable once, so it would be difficult to do so, but the ability to skip all the formalities and take their grievances straight to the nucleus of the country was a strong deterrent.

“Thank you.”

“I will treasure it dearly.”

Conchita and Sabrina were both clearly overwhelmed as they tightly gripped the bracelets.

“I will repay as much of this kindness as I can with my time in the inner palace. That does make me wonder, though, ma’am. If Conchita and I will be aiding another of the maids to train the new maids, has it been decided what groups we will be in?” Sabrina’s eyes were covered in a thin film of tears at the gravity of the gift, and her voice was upbeat as the thought occurred to her. She was also very interested in the answer and waited with bated breath.

Despite their gazes feeling heavy, Amanda didn’t look away and weathered them, clearing her throat before giving a reply. “It has. Conchita, you will be with Faye. Sabrina, you will be helping Dolores.”

“Faye?”

“Dolores?”

It hardly needed mentioning, but those were the names of two of the three problem maids.

Hearing those names, Conchita’s and Sabrina’s expressions both slipped

significantly.



Several days passed, and the early morning found the maids in a normal meeting within a room of the inner palace. Then, they noticed the three unfamiliar younger maids standing around Amanda.

The inner palace maids were well disciplined, so no one started up any whispers, but their curious gazes couldn't stay off the new arrivals. With the entirety of their seniors' attention on them, the new girls stiffened at Amanda's side and began to shift uncomfortably.

Amanda gave them each a soft brush on their backs to calm them down before speaking in her usual strict tone to the gathered staff.

"There are several among your number who will be leaving the inner palace within the next year. One has already left, in fact, so you have likely heard the rumors. Due to this, we have assigned more maids to the inner palace. Girls, introduce yourselves."

As she spoke, Amanda clapped the noticeably slight girl on the shoulder. The girl in question nearly jumped out of her skin before beginning her introduction in a shaking voice.

"M-My name is Manora Sal—I mean, call me Manora! I might not be good enough yet, but it's nice to meet you."



Nerves made the girl—Manora—nearly use her family name as she introduced herself, but she managed it in the end.

Maids—and not just in the inner palace—were service staff as a rule, so they didn't use their family names. If they did, it would likely cause all kinds of issues. For example, if a maid came from a higher-ranking family than Amanda, it was quite easy to imagine it causing issues in the balance between the superior-subordinate relationship and the burden of their family names.

Of course, practically speaking, noble society was small enough that it didn't matter whether you *gave* your name. Most people would know what family you hailed from, so it was mostly a facade.

Therefore, the head maid and most senior maids were chosen from families above a certain rank to avoid such troubles. Even among the divisional leaders in the inner palace, Ines was about the only exception.

Once Manora had finished her introduction, Amanda immediately clapped the girl to her left on the back. She was of average height and build.

"I will also be working with you from today. My name is Milagros. I am looking forward to your guidance and support."

As nervous as the first girl had sounded, this girl was equally as composed, and her introduction was far calmer. Of course, her eyes were almost slits, so it was difficult to read her expression. She might, internally at least, have been just as nervous as Manora.

With the first two maids having introduced themselves, the final maid, who was out of Amanda's reach, began.

"My name's Monica. It is an honor to support Sir Zenjirou alongside all of you. I am very glad to meet you all."

A moment passed as Amanda surveyed all of the younger maids before speaking again.

"Ultimately, the three of them will work as a team like you all do. However, they will be mixed in with you for the time being in order to learn the basics as quickly as possible. Those of you who are in groups with them will be their

examples, so bear that in mind as you guide them, am I understood?"

It was a great surprise to everyone but Conchita and Sabrina, who had already heard the news, but none of them had any right to refuse.

"Yes, ma'am," they all chorused.

The head maid's stern expression didn't falter as she announced the groups. "Now, Manora will be working with Sabrina and Faye. Milagros, you will be with Conchita and Dolores. Monica will be working with Carina and Crystal. Letti, Kate, it will be hard on you, but you will be working alone in the kitchen. You will all be training our new faces while fulfilling the roles you are given. Understood?"

It was the first reshuffle the maids had been subject to since joining the inner palace. Other than the two who had already known what was coming, none of them could hide their bewilderment.

Regardless, the only maid who had any say in assignments was the head maid, Amanda.

"We understand," was the only answer the girls could give.



The new maid Milagros, along with Conchita (who would be leaving), and Dolores (who had already been assigned to cleaning) were heading towards the living room as the latter two struck up a conversation with the former.

"So, we should introduce ourselves before we get there. I'm Dolores. You're fine with me just calling you Milagros, right?"

Dolores was 180 centimeters tall if you rounded up. Milagros was an average height, so to meet the older girl's gaze, she would inevitably have to look up.

"That is fine, yes. As I said earlier, I am glad to meet you."

Milagros was looking up and to the right, so her gaze went to meet Dolores's, but the extreme narrowness of her eyes meant that it didn't feel like it at all.

"I should give my name as well. I'm Conchita. I'll be swapping out with you, essentially, so I doubt we'll know each other long, but it's nice to meet you," Conchita greeted her with a smile.

Conchita wasn't as tall as Dolores, but she was still of a fair height. With that said, though, she was only around 170 centimeters, so it wasn't quite as difficult for Milagros to meet her eyes.

"The pleasure's all mine. Oh, if you are going to be leaving, are you marrying?" As her age would suggest, Milagros seemed to have a fondness for tales of marriage and romance.

Smiling at the girl, Conchita answered. "I am. The official marriage will be some time in the future but my father is in something of a hurry. I assume he found a good partner. You will be in the same position at some point, so you might be well served by preparing yourself."

Milagros didn't seem to understand her warning in the slightest and a crease deepened between her narrow eyes as she tilted her head.

"Prepare myself, you say?"

"Yes, prepare yourself. Working as a maid here confers significant benefits in status. For better or worse, families beyond your imagining will request your hand in marriage. There are no royals who live outside of the inner palace now, so people with even the slightest connection here are in high demand," Conchita explained with a delicate shrug.

Her family was low nobility and held no land or titles. Therefore, she would usually marry a lower noble. If she were to marry into a family with even the smallest amount of territory then it would be called gold digging. That was how lowly her family was within the nobility.

Even so, successors to feudal lords and other titled lords had made offers. Among them was even the famed Guillén family. Conchita's father had been faced with a dilemma and knew it wasn't something he could easily deal with. He had hurriedly asked an old knight friend of his to claim that when they had drunkenly promised their children to each other, they had made it official, thereby solidifying his daughter's marriage.

Influential nobles and therefore relatives sounded good, but when the difference in standing was too large it was possible that the entire lesser family would be incorporated into the larger one.

"You needn't worry about that for quite some time, though. You should prioritize learning the work here," Conchita said, pasting a smile on her face.

"Right, I will do my best," Milagros smiled back, her eyebrows arching.

As they were talking, the three reached the living room. Dolores stepped forward as their representative and put her hand to the door, glancing back at Milagros and giving a piece of advice.

"There are many things inside that you will have never seen before. We will explain how to handle them, but you should make sure not to touch them until then."

"I understand," she nodded.

Once Dolores had seen her nod, she slowly pushed the door open.

"What on..."

When Milagros entered the room, her narrow eyes opened as wide as they could as she took in the bizarre sight. The room was full of Zenjirou's personal effects and was therefore mysterious to anyone the first time they saw it.

Several LED lamps surrounded the sofas facing each other. There was a five-door fridge in the corner emitting a low hum. Enshrined on a hip-high pedestal was a big LCD TV. There was a computer dominating the desk in another corner along with an all-in-one printer at its side.

For the people of this world, each and every one of those things was utterly alien. The lamps were similar at a glance to candle stands, so it was possible that someone would come to the conclusion they were for lighting. Without knowing that the fridge could chill things, you might be able to imagine it could store things. The TV, computer, and printer, though, would all be beyond understanding. At best, they might assume the TV and computer were poorly reflective mirrors.

"Lots of things you've never seen before, right? They can't be cleaned with water in general and there are other things to be aware of, so I'll do them for today. You should just learn by example for now," Dolores told her.

"I understand," Milagros answered obediently.

“In which case,” Conchita added in a soft, supportive tone, “perhaps you can clean the other things. Can you clean normally?”

“I can. Leave that to me. I was to serve in another place if I wasn’t accepted here, so I believe I know the bare minimum to act as a maid,” the newcomer said, her expression more confident than her words would imply.

Her comment let them infer that she was from a family of low nobility. While mid-tier nobles would serve the royal family, they would not act as service staff for other nobility. Of course, there were instances like the Guillén family sending the head’s younger sister to learn etiquette at another family’s estate, so it was not an absolute rule.

“Excuse me, then,” Milagros said, taking her cleaning utensils in hand and setting about cleaning the room.

Even avoiding the appliances, she could dust shelves, wipe the upholstery and sweep the floor without issue. Her confident tone was not betrayed by the skill with which she went about her task. She was awfully fastidious, possibly due to this being her first day on the job. As far as getting the room clean was concerned, it was perfect. However, Dolores soon pointed out the flaw in the new maid’s dedicated cleaning.

“Milagros, that’s too slow. Sir Zenjirou isn’t here now, so we can clean more slowly, but it’s normally a race against time.”

Milagros paused in her wiping of the sofa and answered in confusion. “M-My apologies, but this is as fast as I can go.”

Her apology had hints of being more of an excuse, and Dolores nonchalantly gave her some rather lacking advice.

“Then you need to prioritize the visible dirt and stains and clean them. The main thing is that we finish in time, not that we do a perfect job.”

“Hold on, Dolores. Don’t teach her to slack off from the start,” Conchita scolded her, but there was still a rueful smile on her face. It wasn’t something that should be immediately taught to the new hires, but Dolores wasn’t wrong. The expression didn’t leave her face as she turned to explain that to the new hire. “Dolores isn’t entirely wrong, though. It is fairly common for Sir Zenjirou to

spend his entire day outside bathing and eating in the living room. Therefore, we need to clean the living room as quickly as possible.”

“Will we not be reprimanded for an imperfect job, though?” Milagros asked, slight fear on her face. It would have been entirely applicable in society as a whole, but things were completely different with Zenjirou as their lord.

“Sir Zenjirou isn’t exactly one to reprimand you. I doubt you’ll understand without meeting him, but he dislikes people being on edge more than anything else. Being around people when they’re tense due to that also makes him uncomfortable, so you should relax a little more.”

Conchita’s advice was all true, but was unfathomable to someone who knew nothing of Zenjirou’s personality. Therefore Milagros extracted what she *could* understand from it and murmured it to herself.

“Um, so we have little time to clean the living room and therefore need to finish it quickly. Sir Zenjirou dislikes nervous people, though, so I need to avoid showing that tension... I’m sorry, I might not be suitable as a maid here.”

The woman hunched over in disappointment. Listening to that combination definitely seemed to be utterly ridiculous. It sounded like they would have to complete their work in very little time but not show the mental stress that doing so would place upon them.

Dolores seemed to find her pale face amusing as she laughed off the newcomer’s worries. “That’s not it at all,” she corrected her. “You don’t need to *hide* your nerves from him, you just don’t need to be nervous. If you honestly admit to the things you can’t do and apologize, Sir Zenjirou will forgive everything, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Honestly,” Conchita added softly, pressing a hand to her head to stave off the headache, “you could do with having a little more concern.”

Perhaps the person she’d been put here to train wasn’t the new hire but the problem maid? The thought passed her mind in a moment, but Dolores’s group was the most well-liked among the maids by Zenjirou, so it was rather hard to scold them.

That said, she couldn’t allow the problem maids to corrupt the brand new

ones.

“You should listen to about half of what Dolores said. Aiming for perfection isn’t a bad thing, but she is right that if you cannot achieve it, Sir Zenjirou will not blame you, and you can relax a little. However, if you relax *too* much, Miss Amanda or Ines will lecture you, so take care.”

“R-Right, I understand?”

The rising inflection at the end of her sentence implied that Milagros didn’t quite understand it fully. In truth, the majority of the duties for the maids who were assigned to clean were not actually cleaning tasks. The majority of the cleaning was finished while their lord was away, and they were to wait in the next room once he returned just in case he had need of their services.

However, even if he was in the inner palace, Zenjirou very rarely called on the maids. He needed very little effort to serve, and their other master, Aura, was very busy and therefore rarely within the inner palace.

On top of that, Zenjirou was currently on a trip to the Gaziel march. Therefore, now that Dolores, Conchita, and Milagros had finished the cleaning, they could enjoy a refined afternoon tea during their time in the ready room.

“Conchita, I brought tea and a cherry tart from the kitchen,” Dolores said as she entered.

“Wonderful, let us begin.”

The problem maid was one thing, but even the older maid who held much of Amanda’s trust was relaxing as if it were a matter of course, pouring tea into a wooden cup from the copper teapot and using a silver knife to portion out the bittersweet-smelling tart.

Cutting the circular tart into thirds was difficult so she cut it into six and placed two pieces on each of the three wooden plates.

“We should eat it while it’s warm. You too, Milagros. You haven’t tried it before so it might be somewhat off-putting, but it’s actually very tasty,” Conchita explained with a smile, putting a plate with the tart in front of Milagros before offering her a cup of tea.

“Ah, right.”

Her confusion was clear at a glance, regardless of how hard her narrow eyes made reading her expression, but it wasn’t because of the cherry tart being something she’d never tried before.

“Did Ms. Vanessa cook this?” Conchita asked.

“No, she helped but most of it was Letti. Her Majesty won’t be returning until tonight.”

The other two didn’t hesitate to dig into their tarts as they chatted. Milagros didn’t understand the situation, though, so she felt exceedingly uneasy.

“U-Umm, should we be drinking tea like this rather than working?” she asked, still holding the fork stiffly in her hand.

“What?”

“Well, we’re relaxing without working, so I imagine that wouldn’t be solved with a simple reprimand, would it?”

Once Milagros reworded her question, Conchita finally understood what she wanted to ask. It was then that she realized she had grown just as used to their way of life here as Dolores had.

The sun was still high in the sky and yet the maids were sitting around a table eating snacks. Considering it, she could understand how thoughtless it looked. She smiled to try and put her new colleague at ease.

“Don’t worry; our job itself is to stay within this room. As long as we are, we can do whatever we wish.”

Their role once they finished cleaning was to fulfill whatever orders their masters had for them. Therefore, they waited in this room next to the living room until they were summoned. The fact that Zenjirou and Aura were both out of the inner palace made no difference.

Unlike Zenjirou, who was away from the city, Aura was working in the palace. If plans changed, she could return to the inner palace. Therefore, the maids had to remain in the ready room. In exchange, they could do whatever they liked as long as they were there. They could even fetch things from the kitchen and

have a tea party like Dolores had done today or indulge in hobbies like sewing or knitting.

That didn't change the fact that they were required to wait within a small room, so impatient people like Faye hated it while more laid-back personalities like Dolores enjoyed the cleaning duties more than any other.

The explanations from the other two didn't solve Milagros's confusion, but she did seem to understand. "I see, so because we do not know when we may be called upon, we wait here."

As she spoke, she finally moved her hand towards the plate. She imitated the others and used her fork to break a piece of the unfamiliar cherry tart from the rest and bring it to her mouth.

Cherries in this world were much smaller than those sold on Earth and had much bigger stones along with being far more bitter. Following the cherry tart recipe to the letter made something decidedly unpleasant, but Vanessa knew how to deal with her ingredients and had modified it into something delicious.

The crispy tart was topped with a blanket of crimson cherries. There was a slight bitterness that remained through the sweet seasoning, and the moderating savoriness of the pastry all blended together in the mouth. The cherries looked whole but had actually been cut on the bottom and had the stones removed so there was no need to remove them as they ate.

"I-It's delicious... Am I really allowed to eat this?"

A single bite was enough to allow Milagros to gauge the time and effort required, as well as the ingredients. Using that to judge the monetary cost gave a not-insignificant sum, so she couldn't help but voice her doubts.

At the same time, her fork was already moving back towards the tart, so she most definitely liked the flavor.

Dolores, for some reason, puffed up in pride at the question. "It's fine; when both Sir Zenjirou and Her Majesty are away from the inner palace, the younger maids practice their cooking in the kitchen. They aren't as good as what Ms. Vanessa makes, so we can't serve them to Sir Zenjirou, but it would be a waste to just throw them away. That's why we can eat them. It's a privilege of working

here,” Dolores explained with a laugh.

For her part, the younger girl just gave a confused noise. The younger maids had to cook to improve their skills. Such food couldn’t be served to their masters, though, so the maids disposed of it themselves. Brewing tea was another of the maids’ jobs, so brewing it for themselves was also a necessary duty to improve their skills.

She could understand the logic, but spending her time partaking of such luxurious snacks and tea that was of very high quality based on its aroma alone made her feel somewhat foolish for being so worried about bringing shame upon her family.

When the new maids had been selected, Amanda had told them they would simply be worked to the bone within the inner palace and to discard all arrogance, but such good treatment seemed far from that threat.

Despite what Ms. Vanessa said, perhaps we really are here as potential mistresses?

She knew that more highly ranked girls with greater mana reserves and better looks than her had been rejected, so she had originally accepted that, but this treatment gave her doubts. Her surprise was only increased once they finished the tart when Conchita made a suggestion.

“Incidentally, you look like you could sleep. If you feel like it, you should lie down on the sofa and rest.”

“Lie down? As in taking a nap? But we’re in the active season.”

During the hottest part of the year, an afternoon nap was a matter of course in Capua, so the suggestion itself wasn’t such a shock, but it was rare to hear it recommended at this time of year.

The other two seemed to have expected the response and exchanged looks and smiles.

“We’re both used to it, so we’ll be fine, but you might struggle for a while,” Conchita explained. “The maids on cleaning duty need to wait here until both Sir Zenjirou and Her Majesty retire for the night.”

“Right, we do.”

She didn’t seem to have understood the implication and just tilted her head at her senior.

“Well, this will be a lesson itself. Don’t worry, we’ll get you back to your room if you fall asleep.”

The combination of the lamps and Zenjirou’s familiarity with only heading home once midnight had passed meant that the queen had a much later bedtime than was the norm in Capua.

“What do you mean?” Milagros asked, but she would have to wait until night to understand.



Meanwhile, the three caring for the gardens were washing off the sweat they had worked up in the baths.

At night they would borrow the lamp from Zenjirou and it would be the only light they had to rely on, but the sun was still in the sky now.

The multiple high windows in the room were wide open, and the light streaming in illuminated the entire stone-floored bathroom.

“Whoo! That’s great!” Faye cheered childishly as she poured a bucket of cold water over her head.

The temperature itself wasn’t so high at this time of year, but spending hours under the sun weeding the grass would inevitably warm you up.

“Gah, cold?!” the slight maid at her side cried out as the water caught her.

“Ah, sorry, Manora. Did I splash you?” Faye apologized and asked.

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” the smaller girl said faintly in answer to her senior’s unconcerned apology.

“All right, I’ll help you wash in apology. Come on, sit down here.” Faye was as energetic as ever, patting the chair in front of her.

“Huh? N-No, you...you don’t need to, I’m...”

“Don’t worry about it!” Faye exclaimed, pulling her smaller compatriot as the

latter tried to use a small towel to cover herself.

“N-No, really, it’s fine...” Manora said. “Um, th-thank you...”

The conversation ended up with Manora sitting in front of Faye. The forceful senior maid was combined with a timid junior, so the latter would never manage to push her own preferences through. Of course, Faye wasn’t being malicious in the slightest; she just wanted to show off for her first subordinate.

Manora in particular stimulated that desire because she was even shorter than Faye, who had been by far the shortest in the inner palace until then. The new girl was around two finger-widths shorter, so Faye found her easy to treat this way.

If Zenjirou had seen the development, he’d have said, “We had someone like that back in the soccer club. He tried to be reliable for them and overdid it.” The newly minted second year had needed to be reigned in by *his* senior, a newly minted third year.

“Faye, you can’t do that. Look at her face. It’s good that you want to teach someone new to the inner palace how bathing works here, but you need to calm down a little.”

The chiding voice, laced with soft amusement, came from Sabrina. They had joined the palace at the same time, but Sabrina was two or three years older than Faye, so the latter couldn’t speak up to her.

“Hmph...” she pouted.

“Come on, you can teach her how things work here,” Sabrina said soothingly. “She won’t know how to use the soap, so you need to teach her.”

Faye was purehearted to begin with, so the comment from Sabrina had Faye’s smile soon filling her face once again.

“Right. Okay, listen up, Manora. The maids working in the inner palace all use soap to wash themselves. Days like today, where we bathe twice, we can go without soap for one bath, but we may as well teach you now.” As she spoke, Faye pulled over a small container of soap and scooped up a handful.

“Umm, what is that?” the smaller maid asked, timidly stretching to watch as

Faye rubbed the white liquid into a towel. She was timid and wary, but she was even more curious. She was like a wild animal whose interest had been piqued.

“This is something called soap that Sir Zenjirou made for us to wash ourselves with. Go on, use some too.”

“Ah, right. I understand. like this?” she asked, letting out a gasp as she scooped some up in imitation before letting out a cry at the refreshing scent. “It smells so nice. Is it some kind of perfumed oil?”

“It’s not. It’s soap. It has some in it, though. Peppermint in this one.”

Once he’d had a rough method to create the soap, Zenjirou had revealed it to the merchant who served the inner palace and left mass production to him. Now, they just stocked up on the finished product. As would be expected of a purveyor of goods to royalty, the merchant had improved the recipe into something beyond what Zenjirou had made in quality. People wouldn’t pay for samples that still smelled of oil. The liquid soap they’d made gave less of a lather than the soap Zenjirou had brought with him, but it was good enough to use.

“Yup, rub it into the towel so it foams up, and then use it like this to wash your body.”

“Okay, like this?”

“Soap hurts a lot if it goes in your eyes, so take care. If it happens, make sure you rinse them immediately,” Sabrina added.

“I will.”

Whether they’d ever used soap or not, noble girls would have had baths before.

Following that, Manora washed herself without much issue and rinsed the suds off using hot water before shaking herself off like a puppy. Eventually, both she and Sabrina had finished washing and were soaking in the bath, but Faye was still in the washing area using the contents of a small silver bottle to wash her hair.

“Oh, what’s that, Faye?” Sabrina asked as she relaxed, letting the water take

the weight of her large chest.

Faye puffed out her own smaller chest proudly as she answered. "These are soaps for the hair that Sir Zenjirou gave me. They're called shampoo and conditioner. You're not allowed to use them, Manora. Actually, no one but me is. They're still being tested so we don't know what would happen."

Despite her pride, the statement was nothing to be so proud of, as she was being used as a guinea pig.

"Is that all right?" Sabrina asked with slight concern.

"Hmm, Sir Zenjirou told me to stop right away if my head starts to hurt or my hair goes brittle. I'll get a gold coin if that happens as an apology, though. Even if nothing happens, I'll get a silver coin—one of the post-war ones, obviously."

They didn't know what kind of side effects handmade shampoo and conditioner might have. Ordinarily, Zenjirou would have tested it himself, but he couldn't expose himself to danger as royalty so he was unable to. Therefore, in much the same way as the soap, he had to ask the maids to test it.

The experiment this time was being carried out by Faye because she had the shortest hair. That meant that even if it wasn't kind to her hair, at worst they could just cut it off and it would grow back within a year or two. The other maids had hair that reached their waists, so it would affect Faye for the least amount of time, which eased Zenjirou's guilt.

"Oh, this looks good. It's kinda nice and my hair feels super clean."

Faye scrubbed the handmade shampoo through her hair as her junior and older companions watched from the bath.

"Right, I think that once I'm done I need to rinse it all out and then cover my hair with the conditioner..."

The duty warranted an extra bonus from Zenjirou, so Faye was treating it seriously and making sure she had memorized his instructions correctly as she tested it.

"Then rinse again with hot water. Right, that should do it."

After splashing the hot water through her hair several times and fully rinsing

the conditioner out, she used a towel to rub through her curly hair.

“Okay, I guess a hot soak isn’t so bad at this time of year,” she decided, stepping into the bath with Manora and Sabrina and letting out a sigh of satisfaction. She usually preferred a cooling rinse, but at this time of year, she didn’t mind soaking in the hot water.

“Good work, Faye. So, how were the shampoo and conditioner?” Sabrina asked with a soft smile.

Faye grabbed at her hair and felt it. “Hmm, I think it’s pretty good? It’s made my head feel really refreshed, and my hair hasn’t gone thin or overly dry like Sir Zenjirou was worried about. Although I guess I won’t know for sure until it’s dried off.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. Will he have the merchant make this eventually as well, I wonder? I might be able to splurge for some for special occasions.”

Even if the merchant in question mass-produced it, liquid soap was still a high-class item. If things went similarly for the shampoo and conditioner, the masses wouldn’t be able to get hold of it for some time. Even for nobles. Sabrina was from a relatively well-off lower noble family, and she wouldn’t be able to easily get hold of it after she left the inner palace.

Their conversation made the smallest of the trio realize just how unusual the situation she was in actually was, and she timidly broached the topic.

“Um...should we really be doing this? It won’t get us scolded later, will it?”

Unexpectedly, it was the exact same question Milagros had asked in the ready room. That was how strange life in the inner palace was to outsiders. However, the other two exchanged smiles and tried to put her worries to rest.

“It’s okay. You heard Ms. Emilia as well. She’s in charge of the gardens and she told us to wash ourselves off in the baths,” Dolores replied soothingly.

“I understand how confusing it is being new here, but if anything, we’re obliged to bathe like this. Sir Zenjirou’s preferences mean that everyone who works in the inner palace needs to keep themselves as clean as possible.”

What Sabrina had said was true, but it naturally wasn’t something Zenjirou

had verbalized and demanded. Amanda had seen his reactions and unhappiness when he was around people with dirtied clothes, sweaty people, or even people wearing excessive perfumed oils, and had therefore instructed them to wear clean clothes and bathe more frequently.

However, her explanation wasn't in-depth enough, and it made Manora, at least, think something was different.

"If bathing is our duty and it's for Sir Zenjirou's preferences, then surely that means it happens? Madam Amanda said that it did not, but apparently, it does. Has it already happened to the two of you? W-Will I be, um, s-summoned?"

Her voice was filled with surprise, unease, and just the slightest touch of excitement. Sabrina looked blankly at her for a moment before she realized the misunderstanding that had taken place. Hearing simply that bathing was part of their duties in accordance with Zenjirou's preferences made him sound lustful and wanting to be able to have his fill whenever he wished.

"You're misunderstanding, Manora," Sabrina told her. "Ms. Amanda is right. You don't need to worry about being called to his chambers. At the very least, none of us have had that happen."

"A-Are you sure? Maybe he just swears whoever he calls to secrecy?"

Her concerns were a natural reaction. A maid receiving her patron's "favor" could often lead to friction between her and the others, so it was common to keep the truth of the matter secret. However, Sabrina's smile remained on her face as she shook her head.

"That's impossible. All of us share rooms with two others. He couldn't call someone without it being revealed."

"Besides," Faye interrupted with a cackle as she waved her hand, "Sir Zenjirou sleeps with Her Majesty every night. He wouldn't have the time for anyone else."

"What? But Her Majesty has already had her first child, right? Wouldn't she have been pregnant for quite a while?"

"They were still together even then. He had another bed moved into their room so they could sleep in the same room at least, even if not in the same

bed."

"That's wonderful!" Manora exclaimed, her eyes sparkling as she brought her hands together above the water. As with most girls of her age, she had a weakness for conversations about romance.

Faye continued, "Besides, if he was going to, Sabrina would have been the first. Seeing as he hasn't, he wouldn't have summoned anyone else to his bed."

"Everyone says that," Sabrina commented with a troubled smile, "but I think that's looking at it too simply. However much he loves Her Majesty, that wouldn't have anything to do with him directing such feelings towards me."

"Huh? Oh! I wondered who you reminded me of!" Manora exclaimed, looking at Sabrina as she lounged with the water up to her shoulders, understanding what Faye was implying.

Sabrina had long red hair, was around 170 centimeters tall, and had plenty of chest and hips on her frame. She looked the closest to Aura from among the maids. Of course, Aura was a trained warrior, so she had a much leaner frame, and Sabrina had more sloped shoulders and an almost soft face in comparison, so calling her the queen's doppelgänger would be a little excessive.

Besides, Sabrina was correct, Zenjirou didn't just have feelings for Aura based on her appearance, and he treated Sabrina the same as any of the other maids.

"Well I can't say the assumptions people made on that front didn't also shape my own," the red-headed maid said, sticking her small tongue out before turning to look at the blue sky visible through the windows so that her expression couldn't be read.





That night, the three problem maids met up in their room after spending their first day ever on separate teams.

“You both look tired!” Dolores exclaimed.

“Ahh, it was more tiring than I expected working with one of the new girls. She nodded off in the ready room, so it was a lot of work.”

“You both look tired,” Letti said. “I didn’t have one of the new girls, but that meant it was just Kate and me, so it was pretty tough for us too.”

The three of them sat down on their beds and exchanged tired greetings and appreciations for each other’s efforts during the day. They had suddenly been placed in a situation where they were working with someone they had only met that day along with someone they usually didn’t interact much with, and that had increased the burden on them rather significantly.

“The new girl with us is pretty diligent, though, so she’ll probably need less oversight fairly soon,” Dolores commented in support of the new maid in her group.

Faye leaped on the comment almost antagonistically. “My, what pompous praise. Our Manora is a great girl too. She’s tiny and timid. She’s constantly shaking. It’s so cute.”

“Isn’t that a bad thing?” Dolores asked. “You can’t put someone like that so close to Sir Zenjirou.”

“It’ll be fine. I’m sure she’s just uneasy because she’s in a new environment. Give her a few days and she’ll be all right.”

“Probably, yes,” Dolores agreed easily.

The new girls still hadn’t met their lord, and he literally held their lives in his hands, so they were scared of him. Once they understood the kind of person he was, they’d relax. This trio knew that from experience.

“Still, Conchita and Sabrina are following Kisha in getting married. It feels like we’re losing people like crazy,” Faye commented, her voice slightly solemn for once.

As she replied, Dolores's voice was exaggeratedly calm. "Of course, they turned twenty this year. This would normally be their last chance to get married, and it's the perfect time for a maid here as well."

"Well, yeah, it just made me realize time's still passing," Faye answered in her pajamas, falling back onto the bed.

"How optimistic you are, Faye. This is when time starts to feel even faster. You must have heard the rumors about what Sir Zenjirou is doing right now. And with who, for that matter."

At Dolores's comment, Letti sat up from her bed and joined the conversation. "He is with Princess Freya, right? As his partner for the wedding."

"So will she become his concubine? If she does, she'll be living here, right?"

The first concubine might soon be joining the inner palace. For better or worse, that would inevitably cause a significant change. A more fundamental change than the simple substitution of manpower that was currently happening.

"Nothing is decided yet," Dolores added, her face, lit by the oil lamp in the corner of the room, growing serious. "We don't know what will actually happen, but if things go well, yes."

If the maids were allowed to give their personal preferences, none of them wanted a concubine in the inner palace.

The inner palace was currently at peace. Their two masters were almost unfairly affectionate with each other, and they both had calm personalities, making them unlikely to rage at the maids. This was the absolute perfect workplace for a maid, and allowing an outsider into it was not something any of them wanted.

"Still, it can take years for marriages between royals and high-ranking nobles to be finalized, so it's not going to be a problem anytime soon," Dolores added, trying to convince herself just as much as the others.

Faye stuck her legs out from the bed and kicked them around, still lying down as she whined softly. "Argh, I just want it to stay like this for another three years. Then it won't be our problem."

“True, by that time we may well be returning for our own marriages. I understand what you want to say, but don’t do it outside,” Dolores answered her smaller roommate as the latter complained based only on the effects it would have for her, before crossing her own long legs with a reluctant smile.

“I knooowww, I’d only say it here.”

“Seeing you act like that makes it difficult to imagine you marrying in three years.”

“Yup, I can’t imagine it either,” Faye agreed easily rather than getting angry with her roommate’s cynicism.

Truly, seeing the way she was lollygagging made it hard to think of her as being old enough to be married, or that in three years she’d technically be “too old.”

They had joined the inner palace two years ago, but Faye hadn’t shown any real sign of growth. That said, marriage was unavoidable for a noble’s daughter.

“I think Letti would be more in demand than me,” Faye commented from her bed, sitting up to send a sidelong glance at the girl in question. She was the average height for a Capuan woman with soft, pale hair and a gentle-looking face. Her chest would also steal the gaze of 120% of the men she met for the first time (it would steal the gaze of every man at least once, while one in five would look again). She definitely seemed like she’d be more popular with men, and it was easy to imagine her snuggled up with someone.

However, her expression shifted into something more conflicted. “Hm, I might not get married, though,” she commented, voicing something shocking.

“What? Why?!”

“Did something happen with your family?!”

Letti waved her arms around to get the other two to quiet down as they forgot the late hour.

“N-No, nothing like that. It’s my choice. If my father gives me permission, I was thinking of just remaining in the inner palace.”

“You mean you want to be a concubine?” Faye asked.

“That’ll be a difficult road. Maids struggle enough with the difference in status normally, that’s even worse when you’re up against Her Majesty.”

“No, again, not like that. Ms. Vanessa mentioned today that I could replace her after three years of training, and I thought that sounded good.”

Once they listened to Letti’s frantic explanation, the other two lost much of their enthusiasm.

“Oh, that’s all.”

“Don’t scare me like that.”

“Sorry, I should have worded it better,” she apologized with a grin.

Finally understanding what she meant, Dolores regained her calm and furrowed her brow in thought. “That will be fairly difficult too, though. If you don’t leave the inner palace and take Ms. Vanessa’s place then that’ll mean you’re single for the rest of your life, right? I don’t think you should decide that so hastily.”

“Yeah, Even Miss Amanda and the other heads apart from Miss Ines are married. Maybe you should do the same and come back when you’re the same age as them? I don’t think Sir Zenjirou would have a problem with welcoming you back,” Faye added, also far more serious than usual as she advised her roommate.

Dolores and Faye were both correct; it wasn’t so simple for a noble girl to choose not to marry. It was a common view in the country that women had no value outside of marriage, and Letti herself had been brought up in that environment. She might regret her decision when she was too late to take it back.

Letti seemed somewhat impressed by their passionate advice and her own gaze fell to the floor. “Yeah, maybe. I was just so happy to have my cooking praised. I’ll think it over properly.”

Dolores let out a sigh of relief before replying. “That’s good. Either way, you’ve got at least another three years, so you’ve got plenty of time to change your mind.”

Even if after spending three years refining her cooking skills she decided to get married instead, it would be by no means wasted time. Therefore, she should just keep her life as it was for the moment, training herself in cooking.

Three years. The time the girls spent in the inner palace was almost like a postponement. They were cut off from the clamor of society and could spend the time peacefully and comfortably.

Faye muttered her own worries to try and lift the somewhat solemn mood that had settled over the group. “Still, if we do get married, we’ll have that family’s lifestyle waiting for us. I’m a bit worried about whether I’ll be able to deal with it. They won’t have midday baths, afternoon tea, or ice in the intense heat.”

“That...goes without saying, yes. However long we took to clean the bedroom, it wouldn’t have AC.”

There was a silent pause.

“I...I think I will just keep up my cooking and spend the rest of my life here,” Letti commented.

The three problem maids had adapted more than anyone else to serving Zenjirou.

Imagining a future without the blessings of modern civilization, the three of them started (albeit rather late, all things considered) harboring deep concerns about their futures.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

6

**“Good day,
Princess Freya.”**

She had only worn blue dresses while at the palace but was currently clad in thick pants and a long-sleeved shirt with a vest over it.

Illustrator:
**Jyuu
Ayakura**

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She took the hem of her skirt in both hands and bowed deeply enough to show the back of her neck. A shocked gasp came from the warrior, Skaji, behind her. Only she knew the significance of the gesture.

“Sir Zenjirou,
I wish to
attend the
wedding
as your
partner.”

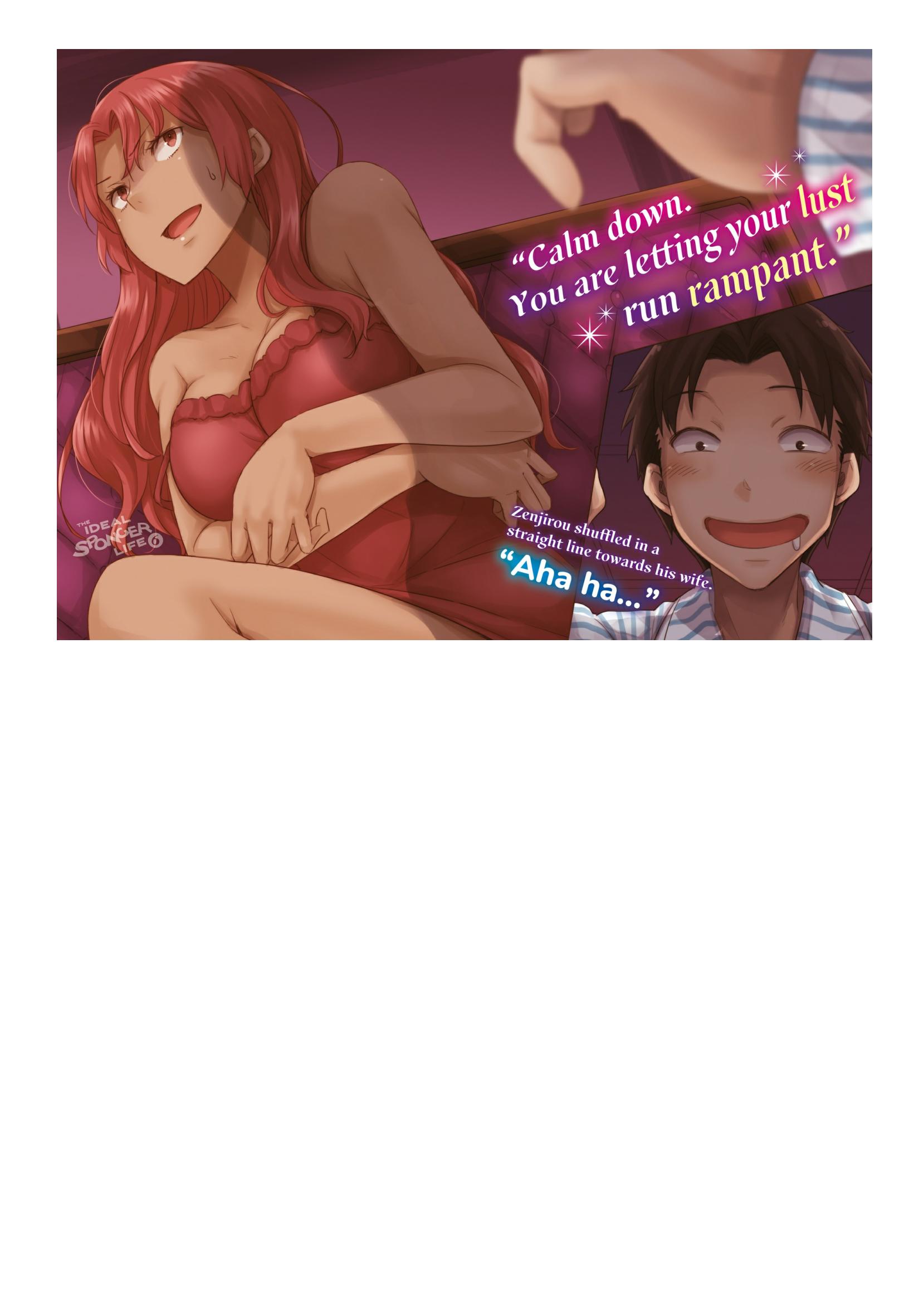


The alpha swarm raptor's skull was carried by another carriage at the front of the procession. The blonde woman standing atop it, Skaji, drew the vast majority of the crowd's attention.

Several drake-drawn carriages made their way up the main road through the capital, escorted by a parade of armed soldiers.

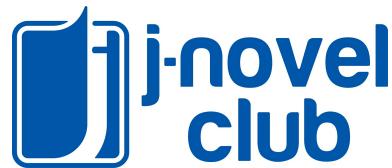
“She’s huge.”
“She’s a beauty, though; a real woman.”





“Calm down.
You are letting your lust
run rampant.”

Zenjirou shuffled in a
straight line towards his wife.
“Aha ha...”



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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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