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THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE


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The Ideal Sponger Life: Volume 12 [Complete]

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Prologue — Goat Island

“I see land!” a sailor’s voice called out.

The young man was in the crow’s nest on the second mast, and his voice rang across the *Glasir’s Leaf*, breaking through the salty breeze from his elevated position. While it was not a particularly sonorous voice, no one missed it.

The sailors started talking among themselves.

“For real?!”

“I’ll toss you out of there if you’re wrong!”

“Who’s on watch?”

“Boris.”

“Boris... The brat could definitely be mistaken.”

“If he’s got our hopes up for nothing, the goats can have him.”

Whatever they said, though, they were all looking out at the horizon with sparkling eyes.

It was hardly a surprise. Forty days had passed since the ship had left Valentia. Some of that journey had been along the coast of the northern countries of the continent, but it had been thirty days since then. Even veteran sailors would be longing for land—or more accurately, *something* outside of the ship—at that point.

It went without saying that Zenjirou, being much less toughened and with a modern lifestyle, felt it all the more keenly.

“Land? I wonder if we can disembark for a bit,” he mused.

Forty days at sea had acclimatized him significantly to the motion. He left the cabin and walked along the narrow corridor with one hand on the wall to the rope ladder at its end. The cabin they had been assigned was something of a basement compared to the main deck, so getting onto the deck itself meant climbing the ladder.

“Can you manage, Sir Zenjirou?” Natalio asked.

“The ship is still rocking considerably; take care,” the knight’s subordinate added.

The two of them had been relaxing in the same room. While their advice was worded politely, their tones and expressions were both much lighter than when they had first left. Spending over a month in the same room would push people together regardless of rank.

“I know,” Zenjirou replied, waving them off as he climbed.

Natalio and the soldier waited below. Emergencies were one thing, but in most cases, only one person would climb at a time for safety’s sake.

While the rope ladder had been terrifying to begin with, it was now just a matter of course. Zenjirou had learned from experience that a hanging ladder like this was actually safer in rough seas than a fixed staircase.

“The cots are hard to sleep on when the sea’s rough,” he remarked to himself as he climbed. “Maybe I should suggest hammocks to Princess Freya?”

He vaguely remembered hearing that hanging hammocks had been well-regarded for sleeping during the age of sailing on Earth. He at least hoped it would be better than the cots they currently used, which saw him bashing his head against the side every time the ship changed course. Of course, he would be making the trip back via teleportation, so such changes to the ship wouldn’t hold much bearing for him personally.

The knight and soldier came up behind him and followed him out onto the deck. There was already a large crowd gathered there. It felt like everyone who wasn’t currently busy with other duties was out on the bow of the ship.

That was perhaps to be expected. Even a small island was the best news that sailors on a long voyage could receive.

“Ah, Majesty.”

“Here, a space.”

“Thanks.”

He had gotten rather at ease with the sailors for the journey so far. Two of

them made space for him, and Zenjirou breathed a sigh of relief as he got a handhold on the railing around the deck.

While he was more used to living on the ship after so long, he couldn't stride across the deck with no handholds like they could. Now securely in place, he turned to the blonde girl who was holding the banister at his side.

"So, you're up here too, Lucy," he commented.

Lucy—Lucretia Broglie—turned around and smiled at his voice. "I am. I could not simply stay put when I heard there was land."

When she had heard the comment about the precaution of using short names at sea, she had leaped at the chance and asked him to call her by nickname, Lucy. Zenjirou could certainly see her aim, but there was also a logic to her request, so he had given a rueful smile and added the proviso that it would only be while they were on the ship.

Still, it went without saying that it was far easier to call her Lucy rather than Lucretia. Because he had grown so accustomed to it now, he would probably continue to do so. Perhaps one could say he had been taken in all the time.

Enduring the restricted confines of the ship and being saddled with the abundance of free time that traveling as a passenger provided, he felt like he had probably ended up becoming much closer to the girl.

As that thought passed through his mind, he had a sudden realization. While Lucretia usually did her best to be as close to him as possible, she seemed to be almost pulling away at the moment.

"Lucy?" he asked.

"My apologies," she capitulated with reddened cheeks. "The rough seas mean I have been unable to wash properly for a few days."

Zenjirou felt slightly amused by her efforts to stay out of smelling range, and a smile found its way to his lips. "I know what you mean. I haven't managed to shave for at least five days. It's been the whole forty since my hair was cut."

As he spoke, he lifted his left hand—still keeping his right on the railing—and rubbed at the stubble on his chin before running a hand through his scruffy

hair.



Bringing blades up around his face and head to shave or cut his hair while the ship was tossing was not the most sensible of ideas. He normally only had his haircut about once a month, so it wasn't too bad. The facial hair was getting rather irritating after five days, though. He could hardly ask for the Lulled Sea to be used just so he could shave. If there was a storm after he was done, it would be too late for regrets. This was another reason that the news of land was so welcome.

"If we can disembark, I would like to have my hair tidied as well. But who could do so?" Lucretia commented. She fiddled with the hair tied at the side of her head with a slight frown as she spoke.

She had long hair to begin with, so Zenjirou couldn't see anything particularly different. Still, a girl concerned about her appearance would likely find that it bothered her.

"You can ask Ines. She is just as good as a professional."

Ines usually handled cutting Zenjirou's hair. A trustworthy barber was a considerably important thing for a royal. It meant they would have blades around your face and neck, so such selections were rigorous. It was quicker to ask someone with enough skill who was already trusted than to search for someone who worked as a barber and had earned that level of trust.

"Skaji can also cut hair. She always cuts mine."

The two turned towards the voice to see a woman with bluish-silver hair wearing a captain's garb approaching them with sure steps. This was the captain of the ship, Freya. Following behind her was—as ever—Skaji, the female warrior.

Unlike Zenjirou and Lucretia, the captain, for all that she called herself a figurehead, was living up to the title with the ease with which she stood. She'd had rather short hair to begin with, so a decent look at her hair showed the changes. It had originally been on the verge of reaching her nape but now extended below her collar.

"Hey, Captain. Do you have the time to be talking with us?" Zenjirou asked, raising a hand in greeting.

The princess smiled back at him and nodded. “I do. The confirmation has been given and I have already left instructions with the sailors. The vice captain will deal with the rest until landfall.”

“You mean...” Zenjirou asked, leaning forward eagerly, though he still held on to the railing.

“Indeed,” she replied. “The forecastle spotted it as well. It is an island of decent size. The navigation officer says it is possibly an island we stopped at on our journey to Capua as well.”

Sea travel was much less developed than on Earth, and the only driving force the ship had was wind power, so it was exceptionally difficult to determine their precise position. This was particularly true on the wide seas of the Great Southern Sea—named by the Northern Continent—that separated the two continents. They had spent dozens of days with no landmarks, only open water. Sighting the same island on both legs of a journey was less skill than luck.

“We will be anchoring at that island for a while. Vice, deal with the rest!” the captain said.

The bearded man yelled in response, “You lot hear that?! You can sleep on solid land tonight if things go well! If you scrape the hull, it’s coming out of your wages and leave at the next port!”

A ship of the *Glasir’s Leaf*’s size could not easily dock just because there was land. Still, being as close as possible to land was safest, since rowing across these waters could lead to the smaller boats capsizing. The captain, therefore, had to give specific instructions depending on the sailors’ skill and how dangerous the waters were.

Unfortunately, the captain in this case was not the figurehead, Freya, but the *vice* captain, Magnus.

“Aye! Keep the speed like that! We ain’t gonna just stop on the spot! Ralph, Tomas! Call when the sea color changes!”

“Right!”

“Aye, aye!”

The ship slowly and carefully made its way towards the island.

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Eventually, they were safely ashore.

The watchman had spotted the island when Zenjirou's watch showed around ten in the morning, but by the time everyone—barring the unlucky sailor who lost the coin toss and had to keep watch—was ashore, it was getting close to four in the afternoon.

There was still some time before the sunset, but it was already hanging low in the west and lengthening the shadows. The sailors were busily working away to secure a campsite and water before the sun set.

Zenjirou, though, found a tree near the shore and sat down upon it. He felt somewhat guilty resting before the sailors could, but he'd be more of a hindrance than a help, so he was better off like this. On top of having no camping knowledge, he felt dizzy from the long time spent on the ship, so he was somewhat unsteady on his feet.

The trip in the boat had also taken more out of him than he'd expected. The sea spray covering him was one thing, but while the waves had appeared small from the *Glasir's Leaf*, navigating them in the boat showed just how towering they were. They were closer to walls than waves. Walls of water bearing down on you.

He technically knew how to swim but had only ever swum in pools, rivers where it was allowed, or the sea close to the beach. The rough open water was terrifying to him.

The spindrift had chilled him to the bone as well, but he didn't want to admit how much of his shivering next to the fire was due to the leftover fear from the trip.

Once he'd collected himself somewhat, he looked over at the blonde girl to his side.

"Lucy, are you well?"

She didn't have the wherewithal to put on a mask to his question. She just

shook her head with chattering teeth.

“That...was harrowing...”

The trip would have been dangerous in her normal attire, so she was currently wearing clothes that were suitable for activities like horse riding. They had been drenched and she looked pitiful. Her small stature was her undoing, as even her hair was completely sodden.

“It certainly was...” Zenjirou replied. As he spoke, he reached for the kettle on the fire and poured the water from it into a wooden cup, which he offered to Lucretia. “Drink. It will warm you up.”

“Th-Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Even looking like a drowned rat, she managed some politeness. She took the cup and blew on it before sipping the water.

A glance at the sailors showed they were moving much less urgently. They must be likely to make it in time.

Freya had finished issuing instructions and was slowly making her way over. She held up a hand to stop Zenjirou from standing to greet her before starting to jog their way, sending up small sprays of sand.

“Stay as you are. While it varies from person to person, land-sickness is nothing to take lightly.”

Indeed, Zenjirou still felt something similar to vertigo, so he followed her suggestion.

“Thank you, Captain. I assume making camp is going well?”

Freya nodded happily. “It is. Fortunately, this is the same island as the last journey, so we can resupply.”

“Resupply?” he asked.

“Yes. We had some surplus on the outward journey, so we left several goats of both sexes along with scattering seeds for herbs and other plants that grow well when unmanaged.”

The sailors had searched for the mated goats and their kids, finding several of

them.

“I see; I didn’t realize you did such things.”

While Zenjirou was impressed, not knowing any better, a modern ecologist would faint at the thought. An island was a somewhat isolated ecosystem, so introducing external species of flora and fauna to it was practically eco-terrorism. Goats in particular ate almost anything and could weather almost any environment, which meant that they could cause significant damage.

The concepts and culture around these issues were completely irrelevant to the sailors of this world, though. The important thing for them was that their journey was just a little bit safer. They wouldn’t care about wiping out a rare species on an uninhabited island in pursuit of that safety.

“Indeed. They have caught several of the young goats, so some of those on board will be slaughtered and distributed to the sailors. According to the vice captain, not allowing them to regain their energy under these circumstances would crush their spirits.”

“So we’ll be staying for two or three days?” Zenjirou lifted a hand to his chin in thought.

Seemingly not noticing his reaction, Freya continued her explanation. “The real relaxation will be once we hit the Northern Continent ports. Still, filling up with proper food is quite another matter. Having some alcohol would be best, but that is too much to ask for.”

There were some casks in the ship’s hold, but there was still a long journey ahead, so they couldn’t drink them dry now.

“Alcohol... Two or three days... That might be enough...”

“Ah, Your Majesty?” she asked, noticing his preoccupation.

“Captain?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“It feels a little unfair for just me, but would it be acceptable to return home briefly?”

As he spoke, he pulled out his camera, wrapped in several layers of sealed

bags to protect it from the water. If Zenjirou could fix a firm image of his destination in his mind, he could move there in a literal instant.

Someone as skilled as Aura could rely solely on her own memory across a dozen destinations both domestically and internationally. Zenjirou was a beginner, though, and for anywhere other than Capua, he relied on the camera to be able to teleport.

Conversely, with the camera, he could travel to a greater variety of places. He searched for a distinctive rock arrangement and photographed it the next morning, then temporarily returned home.

“I understand them, but the lineal magics of the Southern Continent are truly unsporting.”

While Freya was refreshed from being able to sleep on solid—albeit sandy—ground, that didn’t match her expression as she complained the next morning.

“Such convenient lineal magics are in the minority even on the Southern Continent,” Lucretia disagreed. She had slept in the same tent as Freya due to the disparity in the numbers of each gender. She was also considerably refreshed from finally being able to wash properly.

“They are?” Freya looked down at the shorter girl, somewhat taken aback. She herself was considered short for a woman in Uppasala, so it was a rather novel experience to be able to look down at someone like that, and she felt—meaninglessly—superior because of it.

“They are,” Lucretia explained. “Of course, it eventually depends on when and how they are used, but there are very few nations whose lineal magics can compete in terms of utility, regardless of peace or war, for being able to constantly strengthen their country. The only examples I can think of are enchantment and healing from my own country and the Kingdom of Tucale’s divination.”

While a country’s strength was not wholly tied to how usable its lineal magic was, there was a general trend where more powerful countries had more powerful magic.

Regardless, Zenjirou had gone back to Capua and would be returning the next

day with as many provisions as possible. He had promised alcohol, fresh meat and vegetables, and fruit and desserts. Even now, they were looking forward to it. It was something they were thankful for. Very much so.

But still...

“It certainly does feel somewhat unfair,” the silver-haired woman said, combing sand out of her short hair with her fingers.

Lucretia rather agreed but wouldn’t voice anything against the man she was after, even when he himself was absent. She vaguely laughed the comment off instead.

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The next day, around noon, Zenjirou returned as planned. He had a massive barrel on his back and a medium-sized rucksack on his front, with bags hanging from each elbow. His hands were occupied with his camera. He looked like an elementary schooler who had lost a game of rock-paper-scissors and been forced to carry everyone’s bags.

The barrel on his back must have been the heaviest item because he was on the verge of falling backward until Ines appeared out of nowhere to support him.

“Are you well, Sir Zenjirou?” she asked.

“Thanks, Ines,” he replied before letting out a sigh. With her help, he divested himself of the “souvenirs” all over his body. The dull thud of the barrel seemed to have summoned those working over at the beach. He answered their hopes, thumping the top of the barrel and yelling, “I brought booze!”

There was a unanimous cheer from everyone in earshot. That night was, inevitably, a night of making merry. The sailors had built a massive bonfire during the day, and now they were all seated around it.

The guest of honor was the massive barrel to the side. Said barrel was full of beer, and the sailors were scooping out wooden tankards of it. While Capuan beer was relatively weak, the atmosphere of being back on land for the first time in a while was contributing to their inebriation. The majority of the sailors were already three sheets to the wind.

“Oh, the open seaaas, my belooooved. How far youuuuu stretch, neveeeeeer endiiiing!” one of them sang heartily.

“Then the bastard pissed off the stern! I mean, we were on a ship, running right along a tailwind. He got covered in it!” another of them was recounting.

“This scar? I got it in a fight over my love. She was a barmaid, but what a woman she was. I’ve still got me heart set on her. What was her name again? Ange, I think. Maybe Anne? Actually, Lieselotte? Either way, I’m never gonna forget her.”

“You already have!”

“Shut it! Just her name! I still remember her face and figure, plus the *noises* she made!”

One of them was telling tales of his romantic conquests like they were heroic epics.

The common points among them were that they were all, to one extent or another, drunk, that they were enjoying themselves, and that most of the conversation was vulgar. It was hardly a pleasant place for a lady.

Indeed, Lucretia was unable to deal with those kinds of topics and was looking down by Zenjirou’s side with flaming cheeks. Freya, however, was guffawing away with the sailors while Skaji looked aggrieved at her liege’s actions.

The best choice here was probably to pretend they couldn’t hear it and talk about something else.

“I see you’ve styled your hair,” Zenjirou commented.

Lucretia grasped at the topic like it was a life ring.

“I have. I had Ines cut it. You were right—she is as good as a professional,” she replied, softly touching her now neatened hair.

Zenjirou couldn’t tell the exact differences, but her cheery tone meant that she probably wasn’t just saying that. He smiled at her red-tinged hair from the firelight.

“That is good to hear, though we have just as long a journey still awaiting us. I am unsure how much it will help, but I brought some things back with me,” he

said, offering her a bag.

There were several metal bottles along with some bronze shapes. They shone almost like gold at a glance.

“What are these, Your Majesty?”

“Shampoo... Ah, that is, a cleaning liquid specifically for hair, along with some perfumed oil. The other things are hairpins.”

Washing your hair was somewhat of a luxury on a sea voyage. However, there were several people who could purify water as well as a magic tool for it, so there was a surprisingly large surplus of fresh water.

“These are hairpins?” she asked, picking one up between two fingers.

This world had objects to hold women’s hair in a particular style, but they were like fairly large needles. The hairpins Zenjirou had given her were much more reminiscent of the “hairpin bend.” They were thin pieces of metal folded into two.

Zenjirou had noticed Aura using needle-like pins to hold her hair up and brought the design to the palace smiths. It was not particularly complicated, so the Earth hairpins had been fairly easy to reproduce. Aura had been entirely happy with them. They were easier to use and more versatile than the others, along with offering a better grip.

These were gold in color for Lucretia, but Aura used reddish-brown ones. Having them close to your hair color meant that it was easier to use them without them showing. The hairpins this world already had also acted as accessories and were often decorated, so Aura was rather impressed.

“Thank you. I shall try them later. I see that you are more well-kempt now too?”

He felt somewhat guilty at her comment but didn’t let it show. “I am. I had a haircut and a shave.”

Although Lucretia and the others had been on land, it had been in tents on sandy ground. Meanwhile, Zenjirou had bathed in the palace, had his hair cut, and spent the night in soft bedding. That wasn’t a conversation he wanted to

have.

“The plan is that we’ll be returning to the ship and leaving tomorrow, no?” he asked instead.

“It is. I am honestly rather apprehensive,” she said, sighing and slumping forward.

While the action was somewhat exaggerated, she truly did feel that way. Zenjirou felt quite the same.

“True, thinking of going back to that bed is less than pleasant,” he agreed. He tried to offer a somewhat rueful smile, but it ended up being rather forced, given how depressing the thought was to him. He wished he had brought some cloth and rope to make a hammock, but trying to implement an amateur’s idea without real testing was too dangerous.

“Quite right,” she replied with a sigh.

“Well, we have to get *back* to the ship before that.”

“That makes me feel even worse,” she replied after a pause, her face paling with fear at the memory of their trip to the island. It meant moving low on the water in a rocking boat, looking up at towering cliffs of water. Then, when they got to the ship, she would need to climb the long rope ladder on her own strength.

Of course, with Lucretia’s size, they could probably get a stronger sailor to haul her up. Still, it was a rather unladylike way to travel.

“It is a scary thought. I would feel better if I could at least be in the same boat as you.”

Zenjirou actually found it slightly heartening that would use that teary fear to try and flatter him again. Still, he couldn’t accept it.

“That cannot happen. I have no way of helping anyone who can’t swim, so having *two* people to worry about in the same boat is out of the question.”

Considering their country was landlocked, it was hardly a surprise that neither Lucretia nor her maid, Flora, could swim in the slightest. From a safety perspective, splitting the burden between different boats was for the best.

“That is true,” she admitted.

She had nothing further to say. It *would* be risking her life. That said, the scary trip had led to a party on land again. There was no need to worry over the fear of tomorrow as well.

“Hey, Majesty. Thank you for the meat and drink. Drink up as well!” one of the sailors urged him with ruddy cheeks. He took the tankard and put it to the prince consort’s lips.

“My thanks,” Zenjirou said.

“Nice one, Majesty. You can hold your drink.”

“Right, fetch him another!”

“The meat is done as well.”

“I’ll have some. What about you, Lucretia? The meat, if not the drink.”

“I believe I will,” she replied.

The uninhabited island was filled with the light from the bonfire as well as the general merriment of the party.

Chapter 1 — The Three Yans

It had been forty-three days since they had departed from the uninhabited island. The *Glasir's Leaf* had finally reached its first port of call, the port of Pomorskie. In fact, it had been over ten days since the land of the Northern Continent had first been sighted.

Fortunately, the *Glasir's Leaf* was in a good enough position in terms of both supplies and condition that it didn't need to divert to a nearer port. Freya had said that due to the influence of the church being particularly strong in the southern states, she didn't want to call on any of their ports unless unavoidable.

Zenjirou could only nod along in agreement. Frankly, he wanted to be on solid land as soon as possible after forty days of being shaken around in the wooden cot. Still, he wasn't so arrogant that he assumed his whims held more weight than an expert's opinion.

Regardless, he waited on deck as he watched the sailors go back and forth preparing for landfall. He knew he would be in the way, but he wanted to be on the ground as soon as possible.

Freya was with him. She had finished issuing her rough instructions, had left the specifics to her vice captain, and was now talking with Zenjirou instead.

"The port is a center of international trade, so there should be no issue with us docking here. Resupply should be a simple matter as well. However, the problem comes with Pomorskie being an *ordynacja* of one of the leading families in the country. You and I will have to offer our greetings."

This discussion had already been had several times since they had sighted the continent. Their current conversation was simultaneously something of a final review and just a topic to pass the time until they reached the port.

While he had not been seasick, Zenjirou had not been his usual self while they were out at sea. He wasn't sure he'd managed to get everything memorized, so it was appreciated in that sense as well.

"I understand. Capua has no ties with the Northern Continent, so I would

appreciate you providing an introduction, Princess Freya."

"Indeed. One thing, though—we are still at sea," she said, lifting her chin.

"Pardon me, Captain," he corrected himself with a chagrined smile.

They were blessed with good weather today. The sea and sky alike were blue. The port finally came into view, where the two shades met and mixed on the horizon. Well, at least a white lighthouse-like building and the sea defenses marking the port had come into view.

"The Port of Pomorskie. The country was called Złota Wol..." Zenjirou said, trailing off, as he couldn't remember the name.

"Złota Wolność. The Nobles' Commonwealth of Złota Wolność in full," Freya explained.

The Nobles' Commonwealth of Złota Wolność was the largest country on the west side of the continent. The majority of the populace were followers of the church, just like the other countries on the Northern Continent, but this country held the rare position of recognizing the religious freedom of its people.

For the crew of the *Glasir's Leaf*, who certainly did not follow the church's teachings, it was a perfect port.

The ship was steadily approaching land as the two talked. With how close it was now, even Zenjirou could get a full picture of their destination.

"Incredible. It is several levels above Valentia," he commented.

The port's size, the number of berths, the lighthouses' heights, and the size of the docks for building and repairing ships were all superior to Valentia, the pride of Capua, its biggest port.

"Three-mast ships are already standard within the commonwealth, so their ports have inevitably grown as well. We have seen at least five ships that are four-masted, and are on the same scale as the *Glasir's Leaf*."

"Amazing," he said, without a trace of exaggeration.

The advanced level of their shipbuilding capabilities, the resources to support it, and the size of their naval territory all proved the size and strength of the country. He seemed to remember Freya saying that Uppasala only had *one*

other ship of the same level.

“An international power indeed,” he commented.

“They certainly are.”

The ship arrived with no trouble worth mentioning.

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Being an international hub, the port of Pomorskie had lodgings built to a standard assuming that royalty such as Freya and Zenjirou would be staying. Zenjirou was spending the night in such an establishment.

The only others doing so were Freya, Lucretia, and the guards and attendants for each of them. The rest of the crew had been given their lump sum and sent off into the town. They would likely be spending their time in taverns and brothels to soothe both body and soul.

For his part, Zenjirou had immediately requested use of the bathroom and removed both the accumulated dirt of travel and his facial hair before taking a nap in a big, stationary bed for the first time in forty-three days.

“Sir Zenjirou, it is almost time for dinner,” came Ines’s voice, rousing him.

“Hrm? Ah, already?” he replied before getting changed.

The clothes he was changing into were neither the traditional Capuan garb nor the clothes he had brought from Japan. They were western clothes made by the tailors of Capua, although from Capua’s perspective, they would be clothes styled after the Northern Continent’s. The cut and coloring might stray somewhat from the popular styles as far as someone from the Northern Continent was concerned, but it would still be less eye-catching than either of the other two options.

Room service wasn’t a thing, even in such a luxurious establishment, so he had to head for the dining room on the first floor to eat.

“Oh, should we call on Princess Freya or Lucy?” he asked in sudden realization.

“Her Highness is still at the lord’s estate to explain our entry to the port. She indicated that she would likely stay there tonight. Lady Lucretia is still asleep.”

“I see. The princess certainly has a significant burden.”

However used to traveling she was, going straight from a long voyage to dealing with formalities with the lord of the land was still a significant task. Regardless, Zenjirou was not from a country with ties to the Northern Continent, so he was nothing more than self-proclaimed royalty from the south as far as the locals were concerned. Even if he accompanied her, he would be of no assistance. Quite the contrary, in fact.

“Never mind, then.” He shrugged.

The dining room was—even to Zenjirou, who was used to dining in the palace—impressively lavish. The floor and walls were formed of stone that looked like marble. The tables were covered with pure white cloths, and there were several chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. They were filled with large amounts of candles, and you could fairly easily see at least the people you were sharing a table with. In Capua, so many candles were only ever lit simultaneously for events at the palace.

Perhaps the Northern Continent farm bees? Zenjirou mused as he took his seat.

Freya had told him that Capuan table manners wouldn’t cause an issue. After all, even on the Northern Continent, different countries had slightly different table manners. Therefore, as long as they didn’t diverge *too* far from the host country’s, it was taken as a touch of national character.

While it was a nice thing for Zenjirou, the table was lined with processed meats like sausage and ham. It wasn’t a common type of meal for Capua. They were rather salty compared to his homeland’s norms, but considering how long it had been since he had eaten such meals, he still enjoyed them.

If Zenjirou had to come down on one side of the debate, he was usually one to eat slowly and savor his food. However, neither Freya nor Lucretia were here to talk with him, and the longer he took, the later his guards and maids would have to eat.

He was drinking the herbal tea served as an after-dinner drink as quickly as he could without it looking like he was rushing when an aging man who looked like staff of some sort came over.

“What is it?” Zenjirou asked.

The man gestured smoothly to Zenjirou’s left before speaking. “My apologies for disturbing your relaxation. The guest over there wishes to join you. Would you be willing?”

“Join me?” Zenjirou asked, not hiding his look of doubt. He glanced in the direction indicated and saw what appeared to be a man sitting at another table. Seeming to sense his gaze, the figure raised a hand in greeting.

Who was it? It went without saying that Zenjirou knew absolutely no one on this continent outside of the people he had shared a ship with to get there. However, that didn’t mean he couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to speak with him. The ship’s arrival this morning would have caused an appreciable stir throughout the port town. When Freya had arranged their rooms, she hadn’t hidden her lineage, registering them as “Princess Freya of the Kingdom of Uppasala and guests.”

Additionally, she had constantly treated Zenjirou as someone of higher standing. Anyone who had seen it would likely be at least somewhat interested in him.

Zenjirou considered it for a moment. The main goal of his journey was to gain permission to take Freya as his concubine. However, there was a supplementary objective to gather information on the continent as a whole. In that respect, this was perhaps good fortune for him as well.

He looked back at the employee and asked a question with a self-evident answer. “I presume that only people able to prove their standing are able to stay here?”

“Indeed.”

He was less asking for confirmation and more a reminder. There was implied blame towards the establishment if the man in question caused an issue. The employee understood that, but his answer was immediate.

“Very well. I have existing plans, so will be unable to entertain for overly long,” he told him, surveying the stranger as the figure drew close enough to the table for his features to become visible in the chandelier light.

“My name is Yan. I lead a small mercenary group. I offer my gratitude for your willingness to entertain my disrespectful request.”

He was a man of medium build who appeared to be roughly in his thirties. Then again, due to being of medium build in *Zenjirou’s* estimation, he may have been classed as “slight” by the norms of the continent. He had brown hair and facial hair of the same color. His eyes were blue-gray, but Zenjirou could only see the right one. His left was covered by a dark eyepatch. He must have lost the other.

There was an old-looking scar snaking out from under the eyepatch along his face. Considering he had called himself a mercenary, it was probably a battle scar.

That was the only thing about him that seemed to match the claim, though. The man was scrupulously groomed and fit right in with the high-class atmosphere. His clothes were not particularly extravagant, but they were slightly more refined than most nobles’ casual wear. His hair and facial hair were both neatly trimmed.

With Zenjirou’s acknowledgment, the man took a seat opposite him.

“I will take a liquor,” Yan stated. “Would you as well?”

“Just the one,” Zenjirou replied.

There was a dual meaning to the agreement. He would socialize with the man for the duration of the drink, and once that drink was over, so would the conversation be.

“What did you want to discuss?” Zenjirou asked, purposefully forgoing his introduction and speaking from a superior position. He wouldn’t be able to hide his status regardless, but that didn’t mean he would spread it around either. If the man insisted on finding out his name and providence, then Zenjirou would simply cut the conversation short and return to his room.

The man seemed to intuit that and grinned, not commenting on the lack of

introduction before speaking. “It is nothing particularly important,” he claimed. “I simply prefer to remain on top of information due to my work. You are from the Southern Continent, are you not?”

As he spoke, the man’s eye flicked between Zenjirou and Natalio and Ines behind him. The two standing there had skin dark enough that they would struggle to call themselves from this continent. Zenjirou was in the same boat, although his skin was somewhat paler.

Being a port town, there were many tanned people around, but it was easy to tell tanned and naturally dark skin apart. There were also too many differences in eye color, facial structure, and general build between the people from each continent.

“I am. Still, I would have thought that remaining on top of such information was more the domain of merchants?”

Yan gave an oddly charming smile. “Well, I am hardly on *that* level. Still, not listening for information and keeping abreast of events and moving accordingly can be life and death.” As he answered, the mercenary lifted the drink to his mouth.

“I see. That makes sense. I had thought you were looking for an employer. A shame.”

“Oh? A shame? May I hear why you seem to evaluate me so highly on our first meeting?” Yan asked, raising his visible eyebrow in intrigue.

Zenjirou responded without any real fire. “A mercenary allowed to stay here has proven himself to have much worth already.”

Yan was treated as a guest of the establishment, and the staff had been willing to act as an intermediary for someone a royal was treating as a superior. It was evident that their hosts put quite a lot of trust in him.

The man’s expression shifted to a rueful look. “That is somewhat of an overestimation. I cannot stay here under my own name. I am simply here under another’s employ and using their prestige to stay over.”

“So you are already employed. Should you not be fulfilling your role rather than talking with me here?”

The one-eyed man answered easily. “I am, in fact, hard at work fulfilling my duties.”

Zenjirou made a slight noise of confusion before understanding what he meant. “I see,” he said, as his expression closed up.

From most people’s perspective, Zenjirou was a complete unknown here. With Freya, the first princess of the Kingdom of Uppasala, vouching for him, they could be relatively sure of his innocuous nature, but a guard would want to eliminate all uncertainty. Therefore he had approached Zenjirou to feel him out. The fact that he had done so openly and admitted to it meant it was unlikely there was any malice being directed his way.

“I trust it has proven fruitful,” Zenjirou added.

The mercenary’s eye narrowed as he grinned. “Indeed it has. I have nothing to report to my employer.”

“Nothing to report” meant he didn’t see Zenjirou as necessary to keep an eye on. Of course, taking the man at face value was risky, but observing him for a while made it possible to see that in terms of both ability and tendency, he was unlikely to cause harm.

“I am glad to hear it. Would you be willing to share your employer’s name?”

The mercenary nodded after a moment of thought. “I would. We are not particularly hiding things. My employer is called Yan.”

“Yan?” Zenjirou parroted, his voice clearly stressing that the man had said that was *his* name.

The fellow’s grin widened. “We do indeed have the same name. It is a rather common name in my homeland, though, so it is a simple coincidence. Of course, he is far from a mercenary like myself. He is a fine priest.”

A priest. On the Northern Continent, that meant a priest of the church. In the south of the continent, there were countries where priests were superior to the nobility. They had power in name—and in some cases actual power—within those regions.

“Oh? That is impressive.” There was a hint of tension in his voice as his mind

raced.

Freya was from one of the few animistic countries rather than one that followed the church, and Zenjirou was here under her authority from the Southern Continent. A priest from the church was someone to be wary of when you were in that position.

The one-eyed man's expression was somewhat proud as he replied plainly, "Ah, you need not worry. He isn't so hard-headed. If he was, he would hardly have friendly relations with the commonwealth."

The Nobles' Commonwealth of Złota Wolność was one of the few countries on the continent that guaranteed religious freedom within its borders. While around ninety percent of its citizens followed the church's teachings, there were no problems with people believing in the spirits or other faiths.

"I see. He sounds like a sensible man."

"I can vouch for that. I shall take my leave, then." He slowly rose from his chair. His movements must have sent the air in Zenjirou's direction, because the scent surrounding the man drifted towards his nose. It was something he had smelled before. An almost nostalgic smell, even.

"Of course. It was good to speak with you."

"I am immensely happy you would say so."

While Zenjirou absently exchanged farewells with the man and watched him leave, he searched through his memories for the scent. He'd been in university. It was summer at the beach. They were playing around...with fireworks.

The sequence of associations eventually led him to fireworks.

The man smelled of fireworks, Zenjirou thought to himself in sudden realization. As soon as he understood that, he stood from his seat, his face drawn.

"Sir Zenjirou, are you returning to your room?"

He gave a perfunctory nod in response to the question before striding off rather quickly.

"Sir Zenjirou?"

“Ah, my apologies. There is something on my mind,” he said, slowing his pace and relaxing. His thoughts were still whirling.

Fireworks certainly didn’t exist on the Southern Continent, so discussing it with a knight or maid would be no help. The *Glasir’s Leaf* was cutting-edge technology and didn’t have such things either, so he had assumed they did not exist even on the Northern Continent. That might have been a foolish assumption, though.

He would have to talk to Freya when she got back. How common were weapons that used black powder here?

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Freya had yet to return even after breakfast. That was not particularly surprising. She likely had things to discuss. With someone of her status having arrived, they may well have wanted to detain her somewhat.

Zenjirou had found himself unoccupied. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do. His appearance set him apart here, and carelessly wandering would increase the burden on his guards. He also couldn’t use teleportation to go back to Capua. He would have no excuse for Freya if she was finished with the lord before he returned.

Fortunately, though, he had returned to Capua during their stay on the uninhabited island, so he was much refreshed. He should have been thinking more of showing appreciation to his subordinates than about himself.

He had requested by word from a maid that the manager come to his room. The gentleman was a somewhat rotund man and looked just under fifty. His figure and constant smile made him rather easy to talk to.

“Good day. May I ask what you need of me?” the manager spoke. His politeness despite this effectively being their first meeting was either due to Freya’s influence or his general disposition. Regardless, he was still the one most likely to be able to grant Zenjirou’s request.

“I would like money that can be spent in this country. Unfortunately, I only

have money from my homeland. Would it be possible to make an exchange for the local currency?" he asked with a signal to Ines.

"If I may inspect them first?" The manager took the bag of silver coins from Ines and removed one with an air of familiarity as he inspected it.

The money he had brought with him was mainly large silver coins. They were larger and thicker than the coins commonly used in Capua. These were used mainly for trade, or sometimes for agreements between royalty and nobility. They were the most important type of currency, and the silver content hadn't dropped a gram even during the war, while the standard coins got blacker and blacker.

They held an unquestionable value within the country for that reason. Naturally, they couldn't be spent in Tucale or the Twin Kingdoms, but the exchange rate had remained almost constant even during the war.

Fortunately, they were valuable on the Northern Continent as well.

"These are wonderful. I may not be an expert, but even I can tell. They contain more silver than this country's coins and the size and weight alone proves their value," the manager said.

Zenjirou let out a relieved breath at his valuation. "I see. Then would it be possible to exchange them for this country's currency?"

The man's expression darkened at his request. "That would be rather difficult. Our establishment does indeed allow for the exchange of currencies. However, it is a service we provide, so we match the official trade exchange rates to make neither a profit nor a loss. However, there is no official rate for your homeland's currency."

"That would indeed be a problem," Zenjirou said in understanding.

He frowned. If a place that maintained official rates was to allow an exchange for which no rate officially existed, it was entirely possible that it would become the effective rate in the future. The world wasn't simple enough that this alone would cement a rate, but it would definitely become an initial index. That was fine if the rate was fair, but favoring either Capua or the commonwealth would harm the establishment's reputation.

“Then what to do?” Zenjirou pondered.

The manager offered a shrewd suggestion. “Allow me to confirm, sir, but you need this country’s currency, correct?”

“I do.”

“It is not an extreme amount, and you are prepared to let those wonderful coins go?”

“Indeed.”

The manager’s expression was just as friendly as earlier now that he had his confirmation. “Then perhaps I could *personally* buy some of those coins? Silver coins that are only tender in a small part of the Southern Continent will have value as a collector’s item.”

It was a lifeline for Zenjirou. There was nothing incorrect about what had been said. If it was sold to a collector, it wouldn’t lead to issues even if they were sold for a price far from the market value.

Northern ships had called in Valentia before, so there would be at least some of their currency on this continent as well. The large coins were only used by royalty for international trade or deals with other nobles, though. Even if there were some examples on this continent, there would be very few, so it would hold a high value for a period.

“I would appreciate that,” he replied.

“Understood.” The manager offered a perfect bow that belied his bulk.

Before long, Zenjirou had a decent chunk of local currency in hand. He handed over part of it to his guards and maids, giving them free time in turn. While he was staying there, he would manage with the bare minimum himself. It was less than half a day off for each of them, but both groups aided in either his protection or comfort.

He knew from his time as an office worker that time away from work would be valuable to them in refreshing themselves. The men grinned, beaming, when he told them. Of course, half of the reason for their smiles was likely the unexpected windfall of spending money. Either way, the first to take a break

was Margarette.

“I shall take you up on your offer, Sir Zenjirou.”

“Good. We don’t have enough time for you to really take it easy, but relax as much as you can.”

With that exchange, Margarette left the room. She was one of very few people in Capua to have blonde hair, green eyes, and pale skin, which meant that she didn’t stand out here. She headed down to the reception and asked for some clothes to be arranged. Once they had been delivered, she returned to her assigned room and changed out of her maid uniform.

Any lodgings over a certain level would be able to deal with their guests’ wardrobe needs during their stay, hence such clothing being readily available for purchase. The particular outfit was an elegant dress. The cloth and tailoring were both refined, but the color and cut were rather plain.

Personally, she preferred showier and slightly shorter dresses. Standing out wasn’t to her benefit here, though, so the style was convenient, if anything.

The doorman saw her out onto the streets of Pomorskie.

“Thank you,” she said.

It seemed the doormen weren’t there to address the guests, however, as he simply gave a polite bow of his head.

The bright sunlight shone on the white paving stones as the salty breeze filled her nose. Part of it might have been due to its role as a port, but the town was constructed rather similarly to Valentia. Zenjirou had called it several levels above the latter port in every way when they’d arrived, and Margarette agreed.

According to the people she had spoken to at their lodgings, the area around the establishment was safe enough for an unaccompanied woman even at night. With Capua only having been at peace for a few years, there were unfortunately very few places that were so safe.

This meant that when she caught sight of a rather scruffy youth, she was not particularly surprised. He wore shabby-looking pants and a sack for a shirt, which had holes for his arms and head. His feet were clad in wound, threadbare

cloth rather than anything that could really be called shoes. He was dirty and grimy enough that she could imagine the wind turning would carry the stench of his body odor, and his hair was slick with grease.

He was, in short, the very image of a street urchin. He was flitting from shadow to shadow, clearly following her.

A pickpocket? she wondered. *He doesn't move like it.*

She decided to feign ignorance for a while and entered a nearby clothing store. Those in the area were, naturally, high-class shops. It wasn't somewhere a vagrant like the boy could enter, but Margarette's clothing and the way she carried herself let her blend in with the clientele.

"Welcome," a clerk greeted her.

"I do not have the time to request a fitting. Would you be able to show me the various cloths you have?"

Clothing stores—outside of secondhand shops—only ever had a few outfits to serve as display pieces. Instead, they kept a stock of cloth and tailored it to suit each customer. Shops in a port town like this would have many chance customers, so nothing she said would ring particularly false, as many of them would merely buy the cloth.

"Of course. Please wait a moment," the clerk answered before immediately bringing out several bolts of fabric and unfurling them in front of her. "This is the store's bestseller. The base is common flax, but take a closer look at the vivid red. It is a new dye that our dye crafters have developed very recently. It is created from a specific flower, which leads to not only the vivid color but to a long-lasting dye..."

The clerk was—as one would expect—proficient in talking around selling points, and with Margarette's love of shopping, she allowed herself to temporarily forget her duties and enjoy it. She ended up buying a handkerchief for each of the maids of the inner palace as a souvenir, along with both the red flax the clerk had recommended and white silk, enough for an outfit in each before leaving the store.

She had used most of her allowance there, but she was very much satisfied

with her purchases. She had a happy look on her face as she left before spotting the youth darting back across the road.

I spent a lot of time shopping, but he's still waiting? He definitely has business with me, then.

A pickpocket after a mark wouldn't wait for so long before moving on to another. Margarette had only just arrived, though, so she couldn't imagine anyone specifically seeking her out. She had technically been born here but hadn't been on the Northern Continent since she was three years old. It was essentially impossible that anyone would both know her and be able to pick her out in an instant. At least twenty years had passed, so recognizing her would be less a feat of memory and more likely some sort of spell.

Is he after a link to Sir Zenjirou? Perhaps I should draw him out.

Fortunately, the boy looked to be a complete amateur as far as she was concerned. She was confident she could take him down one-on-one, whatever weapons he was concealing.

Margarette made her way to a quieter area to lure him out. Just in case, she stayed close enough to the main streets that she could yell and be heard. If he couldn't be tempted out that easily, she would give up on it.

Fortunately, that didn't seem to be necessary.

"E-Excuse me!"

She hadn't moved too far away from the main street when the call and the soft patter of feet announced a small figure's approach.

"Are you talking to me?" she asked, injecting a note of surprise into her voice. She turned and acted as if she had only just noticed him. As she had expected, the boy was in front of her now.

He looked to be around eight or nine. He wasn't as old as ten, certainly. Of course, many street children had poor nutrition, so his growth might have been somewhat stunted. She couldn't have been too far off the mark, then.

"Did you need something?"

The boy gave her a surprised look before seeming to come to some decision

and addressing her with a tense voice.

“Miss, are you staying at the Ancient Arbor?”



The Ancient Arbor was the name of the place where Zenjirou—and therefore she—was staying.

“I am,” she answered leadingly.

He stepped forward. “I’ve got a request, then. There’s a priest staying there, right? I want to meet him. I need to tell him something! I know a street rat asking you is stupid, but I can’t just leave it!”He was getting more agitated as he spoke. The final sentence was more of a yell than a mere request.

Her training as a spy meant that she had been instructed on how to pick apart someone’s expression, eyeline, and tone—and the changes in all of them—to determine whether they were lying. It was a technique that could fail even with complete amateurs, but he didn’t seem to be lying in her estimation.

She decided to humor him. “A priest?”

The boy grew more panicked at her playing dumb. “Yeah, a priest. He’s staying at the same place; you must have seen him? He’s called Yan.”

Margarette *did* know the name. Priest Yan. That was the name of the person employing the mercenary of the same name who had approached Zenjirou the night prior. The priests of the church on this continent were considered rather elevated citizens, so they shouldn’t have been familiar to some random street urchin.

“You know Priest Yan?” she asked.

The boy nodded several times, explaining. “Yeah, I do. Well, he came to preach in my village while it was still there. He’s different, though! He said to tell him if I ever needed him! That he might not be able to help, but he would at least listen!”

The priest had apparently made quite an impression. It heightened Margarette’s wariness. The mercenary had vouched for the man’s personality as well, to her recollection. She had not really paid it any heed before, but the one-eyed man’s emotional response had seemed too excessive for someone who took money to serve another.

She could have honestly told the boy that she knew nothing and left the

conversation there. She was technically only a maid, so she couldn't bring such a topic to the priest. It was a good chance to acquire information on the Northern Continent, though.

She gave him an apologetic look. "Unfortunately, I am nothing more than an attendant to someone staying there. I cannot personally speak with the priest, but I will convey the message to my lord. If he does not wish to pursue it, that will be the end of it. Even if he does, the priest may not want to hear it and the same will happen. Is that acceptable?"

The boy nodded, almost a reflex. "I don't mind. Thanks, miss!"

Just the possibility of word reaching the priest must have been massive to him. Margarette then nonchalantly asked a question, remembering how their interaction had started.

"You are welcome. I wouldn't go so far as to say 'in exchange,' but when I first replied, you seemed surprised at first. Then you seemed to realize something. Would you tell me what that was about?"

The boy didn't hesitate before answering. "Wow, that was well spotted. I was just surprised. Normally, a pretty woman like you would get nervous if a dirty brat like me speaks to them. They get all frowny. You didn't even step back, though; you just smiled?"

Margarette internally chided herself for not playing the role well enough. The boy's next words caused that self-chiding to grow even stronger.

"It makes sense, though. You're not just some maid, you're a bodyguard, right?"

She couldn't suppress a raised eyebrow. "Why would you think that?" She felt the urge to pin him with a glare but managed to control herself and maintain a gentle smile as she tilted her head at him.

"Well, you just looked off. You don't walk or turn like a normal woman, I guess? It felt like I'd seen it before. I figured it out, then. You don't walk around like a posh lady; you're like a knight or soldier."

"I see..."

She studied the boy more closely again. He still looked like a completely untrained youth. She found it hard to imagine that he had learned how to act well enough to deceive her at his age. Which meant that it was natural talent or self-training that had seen through her deception.

So he's a diamond in the rough. It'd be hard to train him at his age, though. If he were younger I'd take him to Marquis Lara...

There was no need to speak with him further for now, she decided. "I shall take my leave. But can I ask your name?"

The boy scrubbed a hand under his nose before proudly answering, "Oops, I forgot. Ah'm Yan!"

"Yan, you say?"

"Yeah, the same as the priest. Well, it's a super common name in my country, so it's not that special."

The child gave her a wave and then dashed off.

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That night, Zenjirou received a report from the maids and guards who had taken time off that nothing had gone wrong. Of course, they didn't need to report everything that happened on their own time, but this was a far-flung land. He wanted to hear about anything unusual or worthy of mention.

For better or worse, none of them had anything particular to report. Still, he had lent his music player to one of the maids who had gotten some high ground to take photos of the town as a whole.

"That's good," he told her. "I'll tell Her Majesty when we get back. I should be able to offer a reward myself as well. Think if you want anything specific."

"Thank you," the tall maid said happily.

The main event would be Uppasala, so he didn't want to use too much of the battery power beforehand. Therefore, she had only taken a few photos, and he had spent less than a minute looking at them. It would be more than enough for

Aura to see what type of threat the country posed, though.

This port surpassed Valentia in every way. The elevated position of the photos meant that the pictures showed much of the overall construction of the town. Thick walls surrounded it, and the people were generally well-kempt and happy. With a few exceptions, a country's strength was reflected in the physical and mental fulfillment of its populace.

The tall maid had brought back much information, but Margarette was certainly the star that day.

"Sir Zenjirou, allow me to offer my apologies first. I have overstepped slightly. While I was in town..."

Once she had explained the details of her day, Zenjirou sat back in thought.

"I see. That certainly is overstepping a maid's duties. There is too much around this boy to ignore, though, I agree. I shall therefore overlook it, but understand that this is the exception rather than the rule."

"Of course. My thanks for your tolerance."

Although there were only Capuans in the room, it was an official gathering, so he was forced to be uncomfortably stiff with his words. Regardless, he muttered to himself as he considered the information.

"This orphan has to meet the priest no matter what? Instead of a reckless attempt to do so personally, he went through Margarette, so he understands that an orphan wouldn't be listened to. He can't be an idiot, then. He is more intelligent than his age would imply and still feels the *need* to meet the priest."

Margarette offered some more information at that point. "Sir Zenjirou, he implied that his village no longer exists. I spoke with several of the staff and none are aware of a nearby village that has recently been destroyed."

Zenjirou gave a somewhat depressed sigh. "Which means that if he isn't lying, he wasn't brought up around here."

An orphan without money for even basic necessities, let alone passage on a carriage, had made his way across a long distance to meet this priest.

"Whatever the case, he seemed insistent that bad things will happen if the

meeting does not take place.”

As this was coming from a child, there was a strong possibility he was mistaken. Additionally, what might seem awful to a child was often nothing to a country. Above all else, Zenjirou wasn’t even from this *continent*, let alone the country. He would be leaving within ten days. There was little chance that anything awful would affect him in the slightest.

Still, his nature meant that he listened to such complaints and that his mental health would suffer if he ignored them.

“I’ll talk to the mercenary tomorrow,” he decided.

Margarette relaxed in relief at that.

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The next morning, when Zenjirou went for breakfast, he looked for the one-eyed mercenary. More accurately, he asked a member of staff to tell the man that he wanted to speak to him when he arrived.

Fortunately, Zenjirou had managed to get the one-eyed mercenary's attention rather easily. Unfortunately, however, the man's response was not as he had hoped.

"What? You mean to say that Priest Yan has yet to return?"

The mercenary of the same name paused in the middle of drinking his soup—the two of them were taking breakfast at the same table—and nodded.

"Indeed. He received a welcome at the Lord of Pomorskie's estate and said that he would be unlikely to return for a while."

"I see. That is a pity," Zenjirou replied.

"Did you have business with him?"

Unsurprisingly for a man in his profession, there was an unmistakable wariness to his question. Zenjirou considered his options for a moment before responding honestly. Earning distrust by dissembling for the sake of a boy he had not even made acquaintances with would just be foolish.

"Nothing too serious," he assured him. "I was asked to make an introduction for someone wishing to meet him. In fact..."

Once Zenjirou had summarized the events leading up to his question, the other man nodded. His expression had barely changed.

"I see. That is how things are, then."

Zenjirou had been ready for some form of censure from the priest's guard for speaking on the behalf of an orphan, and he stumbled for a second. The other man offered a smile that was something of a mix of pride and exasperation.

"It is rather worrying as a guard, but this is not a particularly rare occurrence for him. He always says, 'If there is nothing I can do, then so be it. However, I can always lend my ears to those seeking salvation.'"

He then gave a slightly exaggerated shrug. It was far from the action of a hired

sword to their employer. It was almost like concern. It made Zenjirou all the more interested in the priest named Yan, but it was convenient for him.

“I see. So he is the model of a priest, listening to the woes of those lower than him. Do you perhaps remember the boy?”

The mercenary considered it before shaking his head. “Unfortunately not. I have not been in his employ for even half a year yet. It is entirely possible they met before.”

The man’s statement pushed Zenjirou’s feelings from mere curiosity to wariness. A mercenary showing such concern towards his employer after such a short period? A youth who had met the priest on a single occasion had traveled all this way to ask for aid, so the man must have had something about him that drew people to him.

“I understand. I would like you to pass on the boy’s words when you next see the priest. Is that acceptable?”

“There will be no problem with that. There is little other answer I can give, in fact. I would like very much to object, considering my role, but I would likely garner a lecture if I prevented such voices from reaching him. I may even lose my job.”

“I see. Thank you, then.”

“Of course.”

The Southern royal and Northern mercenary had an amiable discussion afterwards as they finished their breakfasts.

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Around an hour had passed since Zenjirou had finished his breakfast.

His plan of having Yan the mercenary introduce him to Yan the priest when the latter returned had soon crumbled.

Still, the current situation was not too bad. While the priest had not returned, Freya’s guard, Skaji, had. According to her, the negotiations with the lord had

finished without incident and he wanted to extend an invitation to Zenjirou.

Of course, the invitation was somewhat unofficial in light of accepting his position as royalty from the Southern Continent. The unofficial nature of it was unavoidable. While the lord of Pomorskie was a high-ranking noble in his own right, he was not a representative of the Nobles' Commonwealth of Złota Wolność as a whole. An official invitation would require the country to officially recognize the existence of Capua first.

Only the Sejm in the name of the king could do such a thing. The lord of Pomorskie was a member of the Sejm, but he was just that: *a* member. With that in mind, taking several days to make any invitation, and that invitation being unofficial at best, was practically inevitable.

Zenjirou focused on the warrior woman before him before asking for confirmation of what he already knew.

"Very well. I will gratefully accept the invitation. I heard before, but is a priest by the name of Yan currently staying with the lord?"

The tall woman answered without hesitation. "He is. I was unable to meet him myself, but he is certainly there. The lord is holding something of an informal event to welcome you, Your Majesty. I daresay this Yan will also be present."

Which meant Zenjirou would be able to meet the priest. Unofficial though the setting was, interacting with the man while the lord was acknowledging him as royalty would mean he wouldn't need to prove his status. It was a lifeline for him.

"I understand. Speed is of the essence, then. Is there a limit to how many may accompany me?"

She looked away awkwardly for a moment but quickly rallied. "The lord guaranteed an event worthy of your stature, for all its lack of official recognition. However, on the night itself, you will have to accompany Princess Freya, so Lady Lucretia will need some other escort if she is to attend."

As she spoke, she directed her gaze at Lucretia, who had joined them to hear the explanation. To put things bluntly, Lucretia's "aims" were common

knowledge. Having such an opportunity monopolized by Freya was hardly something she would be pleased about.

While she kept her expression blank, it was more to avoid showing any defeat than the lack of such feelings. Of course, while the Twin Kingdoms had granted her permission to journey to the Northern Continent, she was not an official ambassador. She should not be drawing attention to herself anyway.

“My thanks for your consideration, Lady Skaji. However, I understand the position I am in, so it is ultimately unnecessary.” She smiled.

“I appreciate your understanding and offer my own thanks in place of those of my liege.”

Zenjirou had been gathering his thoughts while that conversation was taking place.

“Then I shall head to the lord’s estate once preparations are complete. Several guards and maids will remain. Those who do will be tasked with Lucy’s care.”

He was already mentally separating the people out for those tasks. He would be accompanied by Ines and the tall, young maid. Natalio and a single soldier would be his guards.

Margarette and the other knight and soldier would be remaining here. Lucretia’s only attendant was Flora. Without leaving them behind, Lucretia—practically the model of a noble girl—would be unable to do much. It would also lighten the burden on Flora.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Lucretia said with honest appreciation as he ordered the remaining maid, knight, and soldier to see to her needs.

Her side-tailed hair swayed with the bow of her head.

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A lord’s estate was a symbol of their lineage, power, authority, and wealth.

The Pomorskie lord’s estate—the man being a leading noble in the biggest

country in the region—was an utterly overwhelming example of that. Unfortunately, with his knowledge and norms being far from such things, all Zenjirou thought of it was that it was a fine mansion.

Given the event's unofficial nature, there was no exaggerated greeting awaiting him. Still, the preparations were well and truly in place as his group was swiftly allowed inside.

There was a familiar face in the waiting room he was brought to.

"Your Majesty, I apologize for the delay."

"Not at all, Princess Freya. My thanks for your assistance."

Freya—clad in a blue dress—was the one to greet him. Naturally, she could hardly wear her captain's garb in such a situation.

"I am glad to hear it. I believe you will have heard from Skaji, but Lord Pomorskie has held this event to greet you unofficially as royalty of an unaffiliated country."

An official greeting would need the king to assemble the Sejm and for the parliament to make a decision. Zenjirou was not keen to be detained for so long.

"I believe this is almost the best solution. You have my appreciation again."

"Thank you. While your treatment will be unofficial, however, the same cannot be said for me."

That was true. Unlike Zenjirou—who was essentially self-proclaimed royalty from a country on the Southern Continent that *this* country had no ties to—Freya was, for better or worse, a princess of a country on the Northern Continent that Złota Wolność had diplomatic ties to, to say nothing of the fact that she had sailed the eye-catching sailing ship the *Glasir's Leaf* into the city's port. A lack of official documentation would be all the more suspicious and cause more issues. Zenjirou could certainly understand that.

"I suppose so, yes," he replied.

"I shall therefore be taking the lead role tonight. You are in the somewhat complicated position of being unable to officially reveal your identity while also

being my partner for the event. I hope I can rely on your cooperation in this."

It certainly was rather bothersome. Of course, he could hardly refuse at this point, but she wanted to confirm things to avoid potential gaffes.

"I do not mind that. With the unofficial nature of this, how would I best interact with the other guests?"

He was to participate in a gathering of nobles without revealing his own standing. Should he truly be acting as if he were in a higher position due to being royalty? Unofficial affair or not, he was still Capuan royalty. Deferring to the foreign nobles could lead to further problems down the line.

When a *post-facto* royal like Zenjirou had such concerns, they were already solved issues for royals by birth like Freya.

"That is precisely why Lord Pomorskie will—while making no mention of your title—greet you as a person of higher standing. There are no guests of higher standing than him. Actually, there are no guests higher than myself, to be more precise."

"I see. Very well, then."

With the host treating him as superior, the other guests—despite not knowing his actual standing—would also have to treat him as such. In other words, Zenjirou could act the same way he always did.

"However, despite the unofficial nature of tonight, your standing still needs to be revealed to the lord. You should therefore speak briefly to him before the main event. Is that acceptable?"

"Ah, of course."

While Freya was the main guest, that didn't change the fact that Zenjirou was there as well. It was only polite for him to greet his host and offer his thanks.

A knock came at the door as they talked.

"Sir Zenjirou?" Ines asked. She was checking in to see how he wanted to deal with it.

Zenjirou gave his usual nod. He was, unsurprisingly, used to such things by now.

“Yes? Who am I addressing?” Ines asked.

“Excuse me,” a voice replied from through the door. “The lord of the estate has come to greet Sir Zenjirou. Would you be willing to allow entry?”

Zenjirou couldn’t hide his surprise. The very topic of their conversation had arrived. Instead of them going to the host to offer their greetings, the converse had happened? With that confusion in mind, he turned to look questioningly at Freya.

“Ah, while this is unofficial, I did mention that Lord Pomorskie is treating you as a foreign royal, did I not?”

It was hardly surprising in that case. Zenjirou was royalty while the lord was just nobility. With the difference in their standing, the lord needed to show initiative in offering his greetings.

While Zenjirou felt this was excessively considerate, it was an unavoidable part of etiquette for royals and nobility. Frankly, he would much rather have been able to set his own schedule to go and offer his greetings. Such luxuries were impossible to ask for at this point, though.

“Very well; show him through,” he ordered, having no choice but to feign calm and proceed.

The man calling himself Lord Pomorskie was a refined, middle-aged gentleman. Around forty years old, perhaps. He was slightly taller than Zenjirou. While his body bore the signs of training, his age had led to his muscles fading to be replaced by a rounder form. Standing as he was allowed his stomach to be visible, so it was safe to say that the extra weight that came with middle age was already settling on him.

The man offered an affable smile in greeting. “My name is Lukasz and I am the current head of the Gdanski family, in charge of Pomorskie. It is an honor to be able to meet you like this.”

“I am Prince Consort Zenjirou of the Kingdom of Capua on the Southern Continent. I am in your care.”

The man’s name was Lukasz with the family name Gdanski, but his official rank was Marquis Pomorskie. On the Southern Continent, a marquis almost

always had the same family name as their lands. It made things slightly more complicated, but he would just have to memorize that fact.

“Is the temperature acceptable? I have heard that the Southern Continent is much warmer and more humid than this,” the man remarked considerately.

“I appreciate your concern. It is fine, though. While there is a slight chill to the air, Her Highness’s advice was helpful in picking out clothing, and the room is pleasantly warm.”

It was the first month of the rainy season in Capua—April by Earth’s calendar. There was a chill in the air as it caressed him outside, but the room was both spacious and warm. The presence of glass windows was probably a large part of that. It blocked off the air from outside while also allowing the sunlight in. On days like today, with clear skies but low temperatures, it was pleasant.

Was Uppasala also capable of working with glass? He had—obviously—kept the fact that marbles were the best medium for magic tools from Freya, so he had never discussed glass with her before. If their marriage was made official, then perhaps he would need to do so.

Zenjiorou was considering that in a corner of his mind as he talked idly with the lord. When the conversation touched on the evening’s event, he made a face as he remembered something.

“That reminds me: I heard that Priest Yan of the church was currently here. Will he also be present tonight?”

The lord was somewhat taken aback. “Priest Yan? Pardon me, Your Majesty, but are you acquaintances?”

If he had truly arrived here only a few days prior on the *Glasir’s Leaf* for the first time, there was no way for that to be the case. The man frowned somewhat with that doubt in mind, but Zenjirou offered an explanation.

“I have not spoken directly to him. However, I have met a mercenary who called himself the priest’s protector. Our discussions have made me rather curious about the man.”

“Ah, I see.” The answer seemed to have reassured the noble as he regained his composure. “Priest Yan is certainly a guest of mine. He will be present

tonight, so I imagine you will be able to talk with him."

"I am glad to hear it. What kind of person would you say he is? His guard's concerns have piqued my interest in him."

Their host offered a somewhat conflicted expression. "He is a hard man to summarize. If I had to, though..." He paused for a moment. "I would say that, for better or worse, he is simultaneously like a mountain and a storm."

Both the words and the look on his face were almost inscrutable.

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The event went ahead that night as planned. The first princess of Uppasala, Freya, was introduced as the guest of honor, along with her escort, Zenjirou. The host treated Freya as royalty while nonchalantly offering her escort an even higher level of treatment. None of the guests would miss what that meant.

With the woman in the blue dress at his side, Zenjirou surveyed the party. *This is incredible. I wouldn't have expected something on this level,* he thought to himself.

The food, both in quality and quantity showed the country's strength. The profusion of fish dishes was no surprise due to the city being a port. The meat was hardly a shock to see on a noble's table either, but the variety and amount of fruits and vegetables were proof of the country's prosperity.

In principle, agriculture was more efficient when it was narrower in scope. The diversity of the fare on display showed that the country was strong enough to ignore those efficiency losses. Furthermore, he could *smell* the spices used. If Freya's information was true, the majority of those spices could not be grown on the Northern Continent. That meant that, to one degree or another, this country had already established trade with the Southern Continent.

The tableware was another point. The majority of it was made of metal, but unless Zenjirou was mistaken, there were pieces incorporating colored glass. There were also such brilliant white pieces of tableware that he could only assume they were porcelain. While they were hardly on the same level as

lacquerware, the patterns and designs were obviously foreign, even to a layperson. The country's alliances seemed more widespread than Zenjirou had thought.

While every other guest was a new person for him, things were a little different for the princess at his side. Although they could be counted on one hand, there were a few acquaintances of hers present.

"Do you recall me, Princess Freya? We met once before when I visited Uppasala," said an aging noble with stark white eyebrows.

Freya turned to him with a purposefully concerned expression and answered honestly. "I do apologize, but I am afraid not. Could I ask for your name once again?"

It was better not to feign awareness in these situations. It was rare, but there were certainly some ill-mannered people who would say they had "met before" when the before in question was when their conversation partner had not even been three years old. Telling someone of that ilk that you had some memories of them would just lead to embarrassment.

"Of course. I am Cezary of the Czapleski family. I hold the position of Viscount Czaple."

"Viscount Czaple, where did we meet before?"

"In the palace of Uppasala, of course. I stayed in your lands five years ago as an ambassador."

"An ambassador from the commonwealth... Ah, did you perhaps wear a cloak with a white valley lily?"

"You recall? I did indeed. The valley lily is the symbol of the Czapleski family."

While there was no *major* connection, finding an acquaintance at this kind of event certainly moved conversation along.

As she spoke animatedly, Freya also introduced Zenjirou. "Viscount, this is Sir Zenjirou. He has been of exceptional assistance to me."

"My name is Zenjirou," the prince consort added, maintaining the progression of such an introduction even without offering his title. He still had to behave

like royalty, so leaving that out made things rather blunt and to the point.

“It is good to meet you, Sir Zenjirou. I am Cezary, Viscount Czaple. I am honored by the opportunity to meet you.”

Zenjirou nodded. “So you were an ambassador? You must have a great deal of the king’s trust, then. Ah, actually, I suppose in this country’s case, the Sejm would appoint ambassadors?”

“Quite so. There are many who are unable to understand the governance of our lands. I see you are quite wise.”

Zenjirou waved off the blatant flattery. “It is merely some incidental knowledge I picked up. I would not claim to understand the intricacies of parliamentary government or elected kings.”

The man let out a noise of interest, looking attentively at Zenjirou. He was currently wearing the third uniform of the Capuan royal family. With his darker skin, he was clearly foreign in both country and culture. However, the viscount offered a quirk of his lips as he inspected the red clothing.

“Then perhaps you would be interested in learning?” he asked after a moment. “It could lead to the development of your homeland, were you to internalize it well.”

“I may be interested in it for the knowledge, but not internalizing it. The number and caliber of the people required to maintain such an organization are too large. Adopting it without care would just cause chaos.”

Forming a parliament required a firm base of a populace with a certain level of education. Zenjirou was certain it would be of no utility whatsoever to Capua as it was now.

“A shame. As a diplomat, I can only welcome the increase in countries sharing our values.”

“Fighting the lack of understanding of their environs is the duty that falls to the pioneers. Surrendering to such difficulties means stagnation, but being too concerned with it is no more help either.”

The viscount chuckled. “A wise saying indeed. I will continue my efforts. What

would you say, Sir Zenjirou? Perhaps your country could adopt it piecemeal."

"I appear to have stepped in a hornet's nest here," Zenjirou replied with a laugh of his own.

He had originally intended to keep the conversation up simply to avoid dampening the mood, but he had actually started to enjoy the discussion. There was a pleasant tempo to the back and forth, and a pleasant mood between them. Before Zenjirou knew it, he had been well and truly drawn in.

The aging man's sharp eyes seemed to notice the chill that went through him. "My, we have certainly become engrossed. I will take my leave, Sir Zenjirou, Princess Freya," the viscount said before swiftly walking away.

He had been taken in. Frankly, it was almost refreshing in how it had happened. He didn't feel like he had let anything major slip, but the man's silver tongue had still gotten him talking about matters he had not intended to discuss. On top of that, the conversation itself had been enjoyable and the other man had left before Zenjirou could regain any real wariness, making it hard to feel too bad about it.

It made sense, coming from a man who had acted as an ambassador for a long period for such a large country. A former businessman-turned-royal was hardly a fitting match for him.

Whatever the case, Zenjirou and Freya now had some free time. They spent it sampling the tables of food and drink arrayed before them. Or rather, they spoke to the servers by each table and had plates prepared for them.

"Your M— Sir Zenjirou, is olive oil an issue for you?" Freya asked, correcting her usual form of address.

The vegetables and meats flavored with olive oil were considered a regional dish even on the Northern Continent—specifically, a dish from the south. It was a type of cuisine Zenjirou had eaten on several occasions before, so it didn't stand out as odd to him. Now that he considered it, though, pork—meat from a mammal—along with the red pepper-like vegetables, and even the olive oil itself, were all foodstuffs that didn't exist on the Southern Continent. Any Capuan other than Zenjirou would likely hesitate before eating them.

“It is not a concern. While I do have preferences, there is very little I find distasteful.”

He had been born and raised in modern Japan, so he had a much more varied diet than average for this world. It made the breadth of the meals he could eat much wider as well, despite his not realizing it.

“I see. Perhaps a drink, then?” she asked.

“Indeed. I would be happy with something not particularly strong or sweet,” he replied before turning to the server. “Can you recommend something?”

“Of course. I would offer this white wine. If you would prefer something lacking alcohol, perhaps lime-flavored carbonated water?”

Zenjirou considered it for a moment before taking the latter of the two. He was no lightweight, but this was a place to avoid risks.

With Zenjirou having sated his hunger and thirst with the foreign food and drink, the host took it as a good opportunity to approach.

“Princess Freya, Sir Zenjirou. I trust you are enjoying yourselves?”

“We are, Marquis.”

“It has been a worthwhile night, Marquis.”

The lord gave a polite smile at their answers. “I am pleased to hear it. Incidentally, there is someone I wish to introduce. Is now a good time?”

They didn’t even need to ask who, as it was likely the man behind him. The fellow wore a plain green set of robes, which were out of place for an event such as this.

His identity was easily discernible, given who the marquis would actively bring over to introduce.

“Of course,” Zenjirou replied. “Who is this?”

With his acceptance, the marquis stepped to the side to put the two men across from each other.

“This is Priest Yan from the church, Sir Zenjirou.”

“My name is Yan, Sir Zenjirou. It is a pleasure to meet you,” the priest said, his

smile deepening.



Chapter 2 — The One Who Pleads and the One Who Listens

Priest Yan was just on the slighter side of average in build and height. His most distinguishing features were probably his somewhat thin eyes. The outer edge of his eyes was somewhat lower, so coupled with their narrowness, he looked like he was constantly smiling.

The regard the other two people by the same name possessed for him had given Zenjirou the impression that this was someone with a stronger presence. Despite that, though, the priest was gentle in appearance and tone alike. He gave off the air of an intellectual.

Zenjirou had a wordless sense of unease as he viewed the man, though. It was like there was something that should have been there but wasn't, something he should have been able to see that, instead, he could not. Internally, he questioned what was causing it. Still, given how much he had wanted to speak with the man, he couldn't let himself get caught up in that sense of unease and neglect the conversation.

"So, you are Priest Yan. I am currently staying at the Ancient Arbor and made the acquaintance of a mercenary leader named Yan. His statements about you have left me rather curious," he said affably.

"I see. Commander Yan spoke with you. He has been a great aid. In fact, I would have liked for him to accompany me here," the man replied. His voice was by no means loud, but it somehow carried superbly.

"I suppose it was his position? Perhaps etiquette as well."

"I doubt there would be issues with etiquette. The commander comes from a noble family. While they may be of low rank, I would say he knows the etiquette for these situations better than myself."

The statement made Zenjirou think back on his and the mercenary's interactions. The way Yan kept himself groomed and the way he ate were perfect examples.

“Ah, I can certainly see why you might say so,” Zenjirou agreed. “May I ask what kind of place you hail from?”

“Of course. I am making no real attempts to hide it. I came from the slums of Carrel,” the priest said. “Ah, Carrel is the name of my homeland’s capital.”

“I can certainly respect the faith and effort it must have taken to rise to the position of a priest as you have.”

“Thank you, Sir Zenjirou.”

There was a pleasant mood to the air as they talked. After a while, Zenjirou brought up a new subject.

“I assume you can tell from my looks, but I have had no prior dealings with the church and come from quite a ways away. For future reference, would you be willing to give a simple explanation?”

Even without explicitly stating his origin and heritage, his dark hair, skin, and eyes, along with the formalwear of Capua, made it clear at a glance that he was not from the Northern Continent. Their potential trade partner—Uppasala—was one of the few countries on the continent that put their faith in the spirits, but the dominant religious establishment on the continent was the church. Having no knowledge of the church could lead to unforeseen problems with trade in the future.

Złota Wolność was a country that predominantly followed the church but legally guaranteed religious freedoms—an even rarer thing. It was perhaps the absolute ideal place to learn. The priest looked somewhat uneasy at Zenjirou’s question, though. After a moment’s thought, he nodded in agreement.

“Well...very well. However, just the basics that most anyone would agree with.”

There was a certain level of implication to that answer. It sounded like some people would give different answers than others. Religions had different denominations, and even those of the same denomination could have differing interpretations. Zenjirou wasn’t particularly surprised by that, but he was somewhat taken aback to hear a priest say as much. He had an image of priests taking the word of their own denomination as the one true explanation.

Whether aware of the surprise Zenjirou was feeling or not, Yan offered a soft question. “What is the extent of your knowledge to begin with, Sir Zenjirou?”

“Practically just that it is a faith venerating ancient and wise dragons.”

He had gotten the absolute basics from Freya and her subordinates, but they were relatively unaware and may have had biases of their own. Zenjirou thought it was best to admit his lack of knowledge rather than try to feign knowing more than he did in front of a priest, of all people.

“I see. That is not strictly speaking incorrect. Furthermore, while those of a more animistic faith call them ancient—or wise and ancient—dragons, we of the church call them true dragons or even simply ‘dragons.’ Those who use the former consider the unintelligent land and sea drakes you can see in the forests and seas ‘sub-dragons.’”

“Ah. Hence the distinction of *true* dragons.”

“Indeed. You could certainly call them ancient dragons, but to those of us of the church, all *dragons* are holy. It would make the discussion easier if you could accept that.”

It was something of no real concern to the followers of the spirits, but a point that the church was particular about. Considering that, the conversation would be smoother if they surrendered that point. Constantly yielding to such beliefs would be detrimental to an equal relationship, but this wasn’t the time to be hardheaded over such matters.

“Very well. Then I shall call them true dragons as well,” Zenjirou agreed. “You spoke of land and sea drakes a moment ago, but I had heard that such creatures were entirely unseen on the Northern Continent?”

The priest gave a slightly proud smile at that. “Indeed. That is true. However, there is a forest in the northeast of this country untouched by human hands. Land drakes breed there. It is said that within its farthest reaches, there is a cave wherein a true dragon sleeps. I am unaware of the veracity of that claim, though.”

The church considered the forest holy land, so none were able to enter it to verify the rumor.

“Oh, there is much you have to hear from the people themselves, I suppose,” Zenjirou observed.

“Quite so. Rumors and reality are often rather at odds.”

“Well, rumors, tradition, and learning can all change as they are passed on, even without the intention to do so.”

“They can. Particularly with information passing from person to person, time plays as large a role as distance.”

Zenjirou let out a noise of musing. The conversation seemed like it was about to stray from the commonly accepted things he could hear from anyone. Indeed, his expectation proved to be correct.

“The church’s teachings are static. They are not wrong, but the teachings themselves are vast, and the capacity a person has to accept such teachings is much more limited. Thus it is an unfortunate truth of the world that despite believing in the same things, people claim different things. There are two major denominations at present. The apostles and the champions. More generally, they are called the fang and claw, respectively.”

Summarizing the priest’s explanations thereafter, the church taught that the true dragons had ruled the world, and humanity had led a life free of suffering under their patronage. Eventually, though, they had left humanity and departed from the world. Before they’d left, there had been a particularly strong and compassionate dragon, The True Dragon of the Five Colors, who had gifted the humans a fang and claw apiece to protect and guide them.

The fang was given humanoid form with limited intelligence—hence, the apostle. The claw became a weapon, bestowed to a chosen one—or champion.

“Those of the apostle’s denomination take the apostle’s word as the highest authority and those of the fang take their chosen champion’s actions as the same.”

“I see. The differences are born from a long history of teachings. From what you said, though, the general acceptance is that the fang and claw alike were left behind by the true dragon, the pinnacle of the church’s faith, no? It seems natural to me that both factions would respect both items.”

Zenjirou's question was completely sensible, and the priest didn't hesitate in the slightest before answering.

"Just so, but unfortunately, the words left behind by the apostle and the actions recorded by the champion have irreconcilable differences. Therefore one must inevitably be prioritized over the other."

Originally, it may have started as vague feelings of preference, but the fang and claw were now completely different denominations of the faith. Buildings belonging to the church had clear signs as to which faction they belonged to, so it was hardly an exaggeration to call them completely different religions, in fact. The problem then became where the priest in front of him fell.

"That was truly intriguing. If you will pardon a somewhat insolent question, which denomination do you belong to?"

If he didn't ask, progressing with the conversation any further would be rather difficult. The plain green robes the man was wearing held no symbols of either a claw or fang. Perhaps despite the churches themselves being labeled, the priests and clergy of each were not?

The man responded with a plain expression of surprise. "Ah, neither. From time to time, I use both sets of tenets. When the apostle's teachings seem most suited to guide a person, I draw on their words. When the champion's valor is needed to grant courage, I speak of their prowess and skill."

"Is that...acceptable?"

The word "heresy" passed through Zenjirou's mind. The priest seemed to surmise as much and lifted his slender shoulders into a shrug.

"I see no issue," he replied, unbothered. "The apostle and champion, along with the clergy, spread the true dragons' teachings and offer salvation, guidance, and succor to the people. Using only one side of things to do so while discounting the other is a waste."

"From your earlier statements, though, the denominations on the Northern Continent are *all* split between the fang and claw, no? Does that not hold true for you as well?"

"It causes no issue. I am officially a priest for the church of the claw, so I

suppose you could classify me as such if you must. However, I am also the dean of dracology at the university of my motherland, and normally consider that to be my main calling."

Dracology was—if translated into the specialisms of Zenjirou's homeland—likely something akin to theology.

"I see. It is somehow little surprise."

Indeed, he felt more assured than shocked by the statement. The tone of the priest's discussion with him had been less preaching beliefs and more explaining the results of research in as objective a fashion as possible.

"And so I would stress that what I say here is simple knowledge. The statements come from what either denomination teaches."

It was somewhat unfortunate that the first member of the church he had met could be considered one of a small minority of heretics. Still, it was much less so than meeting someone who insisted that only their teachings were true.

The man was rather idiosyncratic, despite his mild appearance. Still, he was rational and insightful, acting more to allow his partner in conversation to understand than anything else. In a way, such people were more trustworthy than most others. Zenjirou could—to a certain extent—see how the mercenary and orphan both by the name of Yan held him in such high esteem despite their relatively small amount of contact.

"I thank you for the valuable insights," Zenjirou said. "Incidentally, the mercenary was not the only person I heard of you from. Do you remember anything about an orphan by the name of Yan?"

Now that he knew the bare minimum about what the priest was like as a person, he could move on to the main reason for seeking the man out. An orphan having such faith in the man after only meeting him once had made things seem more suspicious rather than less. But now that he had met the priest, Zenjirou didn't feel the conversation would go in a bad direction.

The priest thought in silence for a while before eventually shaking his head. "No, I cannot say I recall such a person. But I have traveled far and wide and Yan is a rather common name, so it is not enough to narrow down who you mean."

Zenjirou hesitated for a moment after the regretful admission before adding another piece of information. “The boy said that you came to preach at his village once while it still stood. He seemed to be less than ten years old, so it should not have been too long ago.”

The boy’s age meant that the event ought to have happened in the last few years. In other words, he came from somewhere the priest had preached, which no longer existed, and their meeting had been in the last few years. The implication was immediately obvious.

The priest bit his lip and then spoke. “I may know. There was a village by the name of Scheente Las. As far as I know, that is the only village I have visited in recent times that has been ruined. I cannot say the youth’s name for certain, but I remember a boy who admired me there.”

While Zenjirou didn’t know the name of the village, everything else matched and gave considerable credence to the claim. As a final check, he purposefully lowered his voice. “Priest, this may be an odd question, but do you know where the village of Scheente Las was? Specifically, is it close to Pomorskie?”

The purposeful lowering of his tone was more of a hint to the gravity of the situation than the question itself was.

“No,” the priest answered after a pause. “It was rather distant. Scheente Las is in the far north of the commonwealth, near the borders of the Knight’s Realm and the holy ground I mentioned earlier. If you have spoken with him, am I to believe he has made his way here?”

“He has. To meet you.”

“Me?” he asked, surprise plain on his face for a moment before he schooled his expression to a sober calm.

“Indeed. It seems there is something he absolutely *must* tell you. Something that could become a major concern if it is ignored. He has made his way across the country to this town to tell you.”

There wasn’t even an instant of hesitation before Yan answered. “I shall meet him. I will bid Lord Pomorskie farewell. Excuse me.”

Although taken aback by the priest’s sudden move to leave, Zenjirou

managed to call out before he was out of earshot, “Wait, Priest Yan. I would accompany you.”

This was the bare minimum he could do. While he might have been in the North unofficially, he was royalty and had mediated between a priest and an orphan in a foreign country. If the orphan’s concerns were truly on the level the boy believed, Zenjirou had to hear at least the summary. In the extreme, if he only introduced the two, then some other country could come before him with grievances that he had ruined their plans, as well as demands for reparations. He had to know what went on at least as the result of his introduction to be able to deal with such things more easily.

Of course, the best case was that the orphan was exaggerating and there was no real concern. Young though the child was, however, he couldn’t ignore the boy’s claims. It would be bad for his mental health at the very least.

“Very well, I would welcome you,” the priest agreed.

“Princess Freya and I are the guests of honor tonight, so leaving midway through the night will be rather difficult. I trust you can wait a little longer?”

The other man nodded after a few moments of consideration.

“I can. Pardon my taking your time,” he answered.

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The day ended with both Zenjirou and the priest spending the night at the estate.

They had spoken with the lord and informed him they would be leaving early in the morning. There was therefore little of note as the group departed.

The splendid carriage waiting for them carried Zenjirou, Freya, and the priest—along with their companions—back to the Ancient Arbor. As soon as they returned, Zenjirou summoned Margarette and explained their next steps.

“Priest Yan is in agreement. He mentioned meeting the youth directly but considering the possibilities in play, we would like to minimize the chances of eavesdropping. Margarette, bring the boy back here.”

“Understood, sir. It may take a while. Is that acceptable?”

“It is. Act as you see fit.”

“Excuse me, then,” she replied, giving an elegant bow before leaving to carry out his instructions.

Indeed, it was nigh on noon by the time she returned with the orphan. The time was mostly spent making sure the dirty youth would be allowed into the high-class lodging the Ancient Arbor represented. Specifically, they had paid for a place at another inn with bathing facilities and cleaned him from head to toe before clothing him in children’s attire from the Ancient Arbor. Thanks to that, they were not stopped from entering. Of course, the eye-catching way he was peering this way and that at his surroundings made it obvious he was not the young noble such places usually catered to.

The room Zenjirou was using was the best room in the already high-class lodgings. The “Royal Suite,” as it were. It must have been highly discomfiting to the young orphan.

Zenjirou was the most highly ranked person present. He was also the one with the closest sense of values to the youth, so he was rather sympathetic.

“Uh...ah...old-timer, who’re...” the boy managed.

“I am Margarette’s—that is the woman who brought you here—employer,” he answered as gently as he could.

He might still be in his twenties, but Zenjirou was already a father of two, so being called “old-timer” was hardly going to insult him. He kept a smile on his face as he spoke.

“I talked to Margarette and then took your words to Priest Yan. He will be here soon, but I will be present when you speak with him. Is that acceptable?”

“Huh? But...”

The child cut himself off partway through his startled exclamation. It was hardly a surprise considering his position. He saw his information as an absolute matter of life and death, hence coming to speak with the priest he deemed the only one likely to listen. Yet here was an obvious noble—a foreign noble, at that—wanting to hear his information as well. It was natural that he would be uneasy.

Still, his exposure to the world at such a young age had already given him an understanding of how things worked beyond what his years would suggest.

“Right. Okay. If the priest says, though, will you leave?”

A simple orphan had no right of veto. However, even this fancy-looking foreigner would have to listen to a priest of the church.

“Very well. Let us call him in.”

Understanding the boy’s thoughts, Zenjirou accepted the request. Besides, he had already asked the priest for permission to be present, so he was one step ahead. However much potential the youth had, and however relatively average Zenjirou was, the more than ten years between them would not be so easily surpassed.

Before long, the priest arrived. The one-eyed mercenary was accompanying him. He was wearing fine clothes suitable for the high-class establishment, so he looked more important than the priest, who was wearing his plain robes. However, no one here would mistake their positions. The priest may have only offered a reserved smile, but the other man’s respect was clear in his bearing.

“Welcome, Priest Yan. Pardon the suddenness, but I am simply a witness. You should speak with him,” Zenjirou said, bidding the man welcome before patting the youth on the back.

The boy seemed to be spurred on by that action and stumbled forward for a few steps, clearly overcome with emotion.

“P-Priest Yan! I-It’s me. You probably don’t remember, but I’m Yan from Las Village. We met once before—”

The priest replied to the overwhelmed boy without his expression faltering. “I remember. You gave me a handful of raspberries after I finished preaching by the crooked tree.”

The boy’s face morphed into a shocked look before breaking out into a beaming grin. “That’s right! You remember?!”

“I do indeed. You left quite the impression. The details of your presence here are likely less than pleasant, but I am glad to see you safe again.” The older man

put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Right, I'm glad to see you again too."

"Thank you."

"While I am glad of the reunion, the conversation is likely to go on for some time. Perhaps we should continue after sitting?" Zenjirou urged them, prompting the group to change locales.

The best room in the establishment was not just a *single* room of course, it was a suite. There was a bedroom, a living room, a parlor, and a room for attendants.

The parlor was where they moved their discussion, the two Yans sitting opposite each other across a large four-seater table. Zenjirou was sitting off to the side. He was here as a host, not a participant.

Once a maid had served each of them a cup of herbal tea, he bid them start. At that, his contribution was over. Unless things went well and truly off the rails, he would merely be listening to the conversation from then on.

The boy wasn't used to such situations. His excitement and tension meant that he didn't know how to start the conversation and was just frozen in place.

"If you would, then, Yan," the priest said kindly. "You have important news?"

His soft voice seemed to prompt the boy to regroup.

"I-I do. It's awful, the knights are going to attack the country!"

Knights were going to attack. Invade, raid—in other words, an act of war. Zenjirou felt a thrill of nerves run through him. In contrast, the priest let his gaze move to the mercenary, who seemed almost reluctantly amused. The odd, silent mood could not last forever, though.

The priest spoke reluctantly, but clearly. "Yan. It is not a rare occurrence for the knights to attack Złota Wolność."

The "knights" in this instance were not a band of knights belonging to a country. Their official name was The North Dragon Claw Knight Order, and they were also known as the North Knights to distinguish them from other knight orders.

As the “dragon claw” in their official name implied, they had the influence of the corresponding branch of the church. They ruled over an area to the north of the commonwealth and were practically a country unto themselves. Their national religion was the Church of the Claw, and no other faiths were allowed. The Church of the Fang was no exception. Naturally, they were not particularly well disposed towards Złota Wolność, who allowed freedom of religion. Therefore, scuffles on the border were an almost daily occurrence. It was likely to weigh heavily on those who lived near the border as well.

“It...isn’t? Then, was this all...” The boy couldn’t manage to utter the word “pointless,” and he simply slumped back in his chair.

However, the priest replied comfortingly. “No. There *are* men constantly patrolling the border, alert for the knights, but things can happen regardless. You were right to ask.”

Even this consolation from someone he respected as much as the priest wasn’t enough to improve the boy’s mood. “Right...but what was all this effort for? Damn it! I thought I’d finally get to strike back at them!” he exclaimed, pounding his tiny fist on the expensive table.

The teacups rattled, spilling some of the herbal tea. No one present faulted him for the action, though. The youth’s face was a rictus of anger far beyond etiquette.

“Your anger is justified,” the priest said eventually.

The knights had destroyed the boy’s own village, simply because it was too close to the holy ground. His had been the closest settlement to the area. Their country considered it outside the holy land, but the knights felt otherwise. Therefore, they had claimed that repeated notices had been ignored, and they attacked the village.

The knights were—as far as young Yan was concerned—enemies of both his family and home. They had scared him, and he had risked his life for this journey. But it had all been for nothing.

All he had accomplished was gaining a sense of powerlessness and resentment. Even that was proof of how uncommonly mentally resilient he was for his age.

The room was silent, trying to decide how to soothe him. But one single statement from him was enough to destroy the mood.

“Right. It’s okay, then. Even if they attack Pomorskie, the city’ll be ready.”

“What?” the priest asked.

“‘They’ will attack Pomorskie? Who is ‘they?’” the mercenary asked, ignoring etiquette to question the boy directly.

The child didn’t seem to realize his unexpected his statement had been. He was still lethargic, speaking about his memories.

“The knights. They said, ‘The boat is ready and the groundwork in the Sejm complete. If we can take control temporarily, the old fiefs will be able to return.’”

“Kid, I need to hear more,” the merchant said with a severe look. “Where’d you hear that?”

The boy was overwhelmed, looking towards the priest as he spoke. “By the ruins of my village. There was a big broken barrel and I was sheltering from the cold. I heard horses and looked through a crack and saw a bunch of knights in shiny armor. I didn’t hear it all, but they definitely said that.”

The other two Yans looked wordlessly at each other,.

“Priest...” the boy said.

“This could be a severe problem. We have to make preparations.”

The clergy generally didn’t involve themselves in international disputes, but this time, the attackers were the church’s own forces—their knights. It was hardly a position where a priest should intervene, but he was looked down on by both denominations due to his heretical following of both sets of teachings. In that respect, he was somewhat reluctant to see Złota Wolność fall to the claws.

While he didn’t know the specifics, Zenjirou could tell that things weren’t going well, so he broke the silence. “Priest Yan. Does that mean Pomorskie is likely to become a warzone? Can you trust his words to that extent?”

The man hesitated for a moment but realized he couldn’t remain silent. He

nodded once before speaking. “Indeed. You may not be aware, but until nearly a hundred years ago, Pomorskie was ruled as an annex by the knights.”

The complicating factor was that the knights had been allowed to do so by the commonwealth’s predecessor, the Kingdom of Poznań’s king. That had been around two hundred years ago. The knights had ruled the city for over a hundred years, but the populace had rebelled and fought their way to freedom before declaring themselves an independent city.

Around twenty years later, the city had joined the commonwealth and been accepted into the Sejm. It was a touch *too* blatant. A hundred more years passed, but the knights still saw the control of the city as illegitimate and were constantly demanding the return of their old fief. The influence of history meant that some of the szlachta living in the city had connections with the former rulers.

Additionally, despite the religious freedoms, the Church of the Claw was still the dominant faith in the country. In the same way, there was a majority of the Sejm who followed that faith, and some of those people were close to the knights.

Once the priest had explained all of that, he glanced back at the youth. “Therefore, what Yan here is saying is rather realistic. Additionally, and meaning no disrespect, while a noble scion might be aware of such, a rural villager like him is unlikely to have the knowledge that gives such claims weight.”

Being able to tell a story that hung together so well regardless inevitably increased its apparent legitimacy. Zenjirou understood the implication, but just in case—or perhaps out of hope would be more appropriate—questioned further.

“Then what of the possibility that the information is false? More specifically, that the knights are using him.”

“Don’t you dare! You think I’d work for them?!” The boy was unwilling to let that go and was flushed red with anger as he stood up with a clatter.

Natalio and the other guards started moving instantly, but the boy only stood, making no other movements. Zenjirou raised his hand to stop the knight and his men.

“It is fine. Yan...that will get confusing. Young Yan, then. I am making no judgments. I am simply making sure. I have no idea what kind of person you are.”

The boy scowled and grudgingly sat back down. It was an impressive level of restraint and control for a child who would have had no training in diplomacy.

With the orphan calm, the priest continued. “Sir Zenjirou, I believe there is no need for such suspicions. After all, even if he was given false information, he would have had no way to get it to the people who could act on it. While he has asked for my assistance, a boy traveling so far to speak with a priest he has met but once would normally be unthinkable. Additionally, fearing he is some spy is out of the question. After all, I am nothing more than a priest from a neighboring country. My very presence here and now is a coincidence. Spending all that effort to send a boy with such a tenuous link to me would be inefficient.”

His explanation was logical, and the current situation was indeed the result of *several* coincidences. The priest had to remember a boy he had met once. He then had to also be willing to listen, and furthermore abandon his neutrality and act. Logically, it was hard to believe that anyone would purposefully plan for this situation.

Understanding that, Zenjirou turned back to the boy. “I was wrong. I retract my statement.”

He wanted to add a word of apology, but his status prevented him from doing so. Although Zenjirou was mentally regretting the child’s status, the boy in question seemed satisfied with someone as highly ranked as the prince consort admitting fault.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” he said with a grin, puffing his chest out, showing himself to be more than just a terror on the streets.

Regardless, his information was eminently concerning, and the priest picked up the thread again.

“This cannot just be left alone. All I can do is talk with Lord Pomorskie, though.”

Since the knights were intending to take control with a series of blitz attacks, it would be safe to assume that they were well-connected with the other nobles in the city. The priest was a foreigner, though, and had no idea who was trustworthy and who was not.

Fortunately, the marquis's family was sent in by the king of Złota Wolność when the latter joined the Commonwealth. They were a branch family and therefore highly unlikely to be involved in such schemes. If the knights had reached that far, resistance would be futile anyway, so in a certain respect, it wasn't worth considering.

"It is somewhat awkward to leave so quickly, but I will return to the estate," The priest announced. "Yan, I would appreciate you joining me."

"Of course!" the boy answered, almost leaping from his chair only for a statement from the mercenary to stop him in his tracks.

"Wait a moment. I want to check something with the boy here."

"My name's not 'boy,' it's Yan," the youth protested.

"Apologies, but both the priest and I are also called Yan, so it will get confusing. When did you hear this information? I doubt you rode here on horseback. You must have walked, no?"

The priest looked more taken aback at the mercenary's words than the orphan.

"Ah, yeah, I did. It was a real pain. I don't know how many days it was. More than...um, three, at least." His answer was decidedly lacking in confidence.

While Złota Wolność offered the highest quality of education on the continent, a young boy brought up in the remote regions was hardly likely to learn how to count.

Instead, the mercenary answered, knowledgeable about this kind of thing. "You lived near the village even after it was destroyed, correct? Which means you were about as far away as the holy forest, roughly. An adult, assuming by some miracle they avoided getting lost, would take twenty days...probably double that on average, so forty. The boy here has a keen eye, so I doubt he's an amateur. Thirty days, at least, giving him all credit."

The priest's expression twisted at the number, which was far higher than he had been expecting.

"Captain, when do you expect they will arrive?" he asked.

"Well...there is not enough information to make a decent estimate. This is more of a guess than anything else, but they usually travel by land. The core group are proud of being mounted knights. They will have focused on capacity rather than speed for their ship. Their horses are huge and need absurd amounts of provisions. Still, once the ship is ready, it should take little time to move. They would go by land to the sea, then by ship. Perhaps thirty days in the worst case."

"Understood. A day's delay could be fatal, then."

The mercenary's estimate didn't leave them much leeway in how long it would take the knights to arrive after the ship was ready. Comparing the two groups, it was practically luck that the boy's warning had arrived first. They might be ten days behind, or three. They could even arrive that very day. In other words, every moment counted.

"Priest," the mercenary said, "if you request an audience now, will it be granted today?"

The older man shook his head. "It will not. A priest I may be, but I am not part of the mainstream. I cannot interrupt his schedule. I could potentially get through by saying he is in danger, but as I mentioned, there are still strong links to the knights amongst the nobility."

The gatekeeper, the secretary who took the message from the gatekeeper, or someone else in the chain could be linked to the knights and stop the information in its tracks, which would just defeat the purpose entirely, so an official audience was the best plan.

If that was his best option, it was the one he would take. But if there was a way to meet with the lord more quickly, he had to try.

"Sir Zenjirou," he began. Zenjirou was already relatively aware of what the man would ask. "While you have already assisted me greatly, I find myself in the position of needing to ask for greater aid. Would you be willing to request an

audience with Lord Pomorskie in your name?”

Unofficially recognized though he may have been, a royal guest like Zenjirou would be able to meet with the man much more quickly. While he could understand the priest’s aim, accepting that request for help would cause issues of its own.

Although he had introduced the two, he had not known what they would discuss and could therefore be considered a neutral party. Now that he was being asked to aid in informing the lord of the attack, he would be wholeheartedly supporting the country against the knights.

With his position in mind, making that decision alone was rather risky. Therefore, he offered a prepared answer instead.

“There is someone more suitable than me. I would like to summon Princess Freya of Uppasala and explain the situation to her. Is that acceptable?”

Naturally, his request was granted. While she was initially taken aback upon hearing about the situation, Freya soon nodded with a serious look.

“This is certainly something I should be involved in rather than you,” she told Zenjirou.

While Capua had no ties—positive or negative—with either nation. Freya’s homeland had no such reason to hesitate. It didn’t require any thought to understand which country the spirit-following nation would put their weight behind—Złota Wolność, which was open to all religions, or the knights who only permitted the Church of the Claw. She was in a position where she could immediately support their hosts without even asking for permission from her king. In fact, her king would not approve if she did nothing despite hearing such information.

“I will request an urgent audience with Lord Pomorskie,” she said, “with the priest and that boy accompanying me.”

“I would appreciate Captain Yan being present as well. He is better suited to discuss things from a military viewpoint than I am.”

“Very well. I shall say as much. Pardon my hurry, but I shall do so now.”

“We would appreciate it.”

“Thank you!” the boy added hurriedly after the priest.

The silver-haired princess offered a smile and word of acknowledgment before letting her gaze shift to Zenjirou. “Sir Zenjirou, I intend to head directly there without sending a messenger to convey the urgency of the matter. What about you?”

He offered a slight shrug. “I will stay here. I can hardly accompany you, after all. I would like to speak to the vice so that we have our footing should the worst happen.”

Freya offered him a small nod. “Very well. You can tell the sailors you have my permission.”

“Thank you, Princess Freya.”

The “vice” in question was, of course, Vice-Captain Magnus of the *Glasir’s Leaf*. For Uppasala, which was on the same continent, this incident was not something they could avoid involvement in. For Capua on the Southern Continent, however, it was essentially none of their concern.

If the worst happened and Pomorskie fell to the flames of war, escaping before he was involved was more important than victory. Therefore Zenjirou wanted the *Glasir’s Leaf* ready to go if needed. They would need to make up for cutting the sailors’ leave short.

With the conversation over, the princess excused herself. Zenjirou turned to the priest with a sudden question.

“Apologies for the bluntness, but could you not have done the same? I had heard that the church was exceptionally well respected on the Northern Continent.”

The question was as blunt and rude as he said, but the priest just offered a rueful smile as he answered.

“That is certainly true. No matter their origin, a person is granted respect with a position in the church. However, I am in a somewhat unique position and am often looked down on. The lord of the town is not one to behave so, however.”

“I assume this is due to not following either set of teachings?” Zenjirou asked. It was the first thing he could think of. The heretical nature of the priest’s perspective made it logical that he might be shunned even considering his position. However, his answer was not quite what Zenjirou expected.

“Well, that is certainly part of it. In my case, though, it is my lack of mana that results in many looking down on me.”

“Utterly foolish. Mana, or the lack thereof, has no bearing on a person,” the mercenary said scornfully.

Finally, Zenjirou understood the odd feeling from when they had first met. There was no mana surrounding the man whatsoever. There were people who could not cast even the smallest spells, so unless one paid close attention, their mana was nigh unnoticeable. Thus, Zenjirou had simply assumed the priest was one of those people.

“You have no mana? At all?”

“Indeed, since my birth.”

It went without saying that those without mana could not use magic. While Zenjirou had not truly thought about it, the soul of language was also a type of magic.

Unable to hide his confusion, he spoke in Japanese to the man. “I am not speaking a language of the Northern Continent, am I?”

“You are not. Indeed, it is not a language of the Southern Continent either. Due to my circumstances, I have learned several languages, but the one you speak has nothing in common with any of them.”

Zenjirou was overwhelmed as the man’s already narrow eyes drifted farther shut. He could only respect the drive that allowed him to learn several languages thanks to his “condition.” However, that did not explain why the two of them were able to communicate.

Seeming to understand that, the priest put his hand on an object hanging inside his robes on his chest. “Far from the norm I may be, but I *am* a priest of the church,” he said with a soft smile.

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About an hour had passed. Freya and Skaji had pushed aside the bewildered butler and half-forced a meeting with the marquis. At first, he had been at a loss, but as the princess explained the orphan's claims, his face grew paler.

"Impossible! But the logic is there, and it is not a story a youth from the borderlands could falsify."

The marquis was not one of the foremost nobles in the country for nothing. He quickly recovered from the shock and immediately set about considering the situation.

"My thanks for such valuable information. Treating it carelessly would be a risk."

"Not at all. The state of Pomorskie is of concern to me as well," Freya replied.

"Hearing such statements makes me believe my country's policies are right," he said.

In fact, if it wasn't for Złota Wolność's public support of religious freedom, Freya and Zenjirou would have let the two countries fight it out and departed immediately. It was little exaggeration to say that the nation's policy was what had saved the town.

"This is the most I can do. Once our preparations are complete, the *Glasir's Leaf* will be leaving. I wish you the best."

Considering Uppasala's position, Złota Wolność holding onto the port was far preferable to the knights controlling it. However, the first princess could not publicly fight against the knights without her kingdom's permission.

"Very well. However, the port may be closed for our defense. If your departure is too late, please be aware that you may not be granted permission to leave."

"Understood. I shall take my leave. If you require further details, I recommend summoning Priest Yan."

"Is the courageous youth who brought this news with him as well?"

"He is."

“I shall summon them soon. My thanks for the information.”

“I wish you the greatest of luck,” the princess said before leaving.

The lord remained on the sofa for a few moments, taking several deep breaths before opening his eyes and calling out, “This is an emergency! Send people to the Ancient Arbor. Bring Priest Yan and his companions here. Do not question their status and guide them here with all consideration. Understood?”

“Of course, sir,” a butler replied briskly.

The lord nodded in satisfaction but soon had more to add. “Send news to the capital. Pomorskie may need to seal its gates and port and hold the line. Should that happen, His Majesty needs to hold an emergency meeting of the Sejm and provide reinforcements.”

“I shall see to it at once,” the other man said before hurrying off to carry out his liege’s orders.

Chapter 3 — The Husaria

Once Freya had given her warning to the town's lord, she returned to the Ancient Arbor. As if trading places, the priest and his companions were requested at the man's estate.

Meanwhile, Zenjirou had summoned the Vice-Captain of the ship and informed him that the *Glasir's Leaf* might be leaving Pomorskie in a hurry. However, even a day later, not all of the sailors had returned.

It was hardly a surprise. They had been given money and time to spend in the globally connected city. It was practically inevitable that the sailors would make themselves more difficult to get a hold of as they stretched their wings.

The city was a rather peaceful one, so there was a tacit understanding between the sailors and their superiors that the former would be able to relax. Now, though, whatever the circumstances explaining it, Freya and Zenjirou—royals from both their own country and another—were stranded on a soon-to-be battlefield due to those issues.

The Vice-Captain had a fearsome visage at the best of times, but his teeth were bared in anger now, making him all the more intense. All of that together meant Zenjirou was far from being in a position to savor his food as they took lunch in his room.

He heard a disturbance from outside over the sounds of the meal. "Something seems to be happening," he commented.

"I certainly heard something," Freya responded.

She and Lucretia were also in Zenjirou's room so that they could start to move as soon as necessary. The suite had been created on the assumption that it would serve royalty and nobility, so it was practically a penthouse. Zenjirou, Freya, Lucretia, and their various maids and guards were all gathered around. Despite that, there was no sense of claustrophobia.

"It cannot have begun, can it?"

Lucretia flinched visibly at Zenjirou's comment. No one present asked what

“it” was. There could only be one answer. There was only one thing they were warily awaiting.

The knights. The group was aiming for a surprise attack on the city to “reclaim their rightful territory.” Their movements were unclear and they could be at the castle walls at any moment. Therefore, neither Zenjirou’s concerns nor Lucretia’s reaction were excessive.

However, Ines shook her head and calmly refuted his worries. “No, Sir Zenjirou. There is none of the fear in the voices that would represent an attack. The majority sound shocked, and the others sound welcoming.”

“Go confirm,” Natalio instructed one of his subordinates while Ines explained.

“Yes, sir!”

The soldier moved swiftly from the room and soon returned. He was unable to hide his shock as he delivered his report. “Sir Zenjirou! Look in the sky. Above the lord’s estate!”

“Natalio?” Zenjirou said.

“Wait a moment.” Natalio checked for danger before Zenjirou approached the window. “You are clear.”

Zenjirou leaned out of the opened pane, looking outside. He was staring in the direction of the sky above the Pomorskie lord’s estate.

Three figures were wheeling through the sky. They were the wrong shape for birds—too large, regardless of anything else. There was a significant distance between their lodgings and the estate. It was rather obvious to Zenjirou’s eyes that they were not birds.

“Are they...winged horses?” he asked, squinting to make them out more clearly. “There seem to be people atop them as well.”

The silver-haired princess reacted dramatically. “What?! Excuse me!”

She slipped in front of Zenjirou with almost indecent haste, her back against his chest as she looked in the same direction. Figurehead or not, she still captained a vessel. Her icy-blue eyes were significantly better than Zenjirou’s, and they quickly saw the truth of what was in front of them.

“It is?! The Husaria!”

Their circling seemed to be their waiting for permission to land. With that permission apparently granted, the three figures—winged horses or similar, with knights astride them—drifted down to the ground.

It was then that the figure on the lead horse threw themselves from horseback. Whether rigorously trained air force paratroopers or high-altitude fire department rescue teams, the height would have been enough to instantly kill anyone from Earth attempting the maneuver.

However, the knight was clearly—while falling faster than the spiraling horses—not in freefall.



“Is that wind magic?” Zenjirou asked, trying to explain what he was seeing with his limited knowledge. Freya was pale, though, even her lips having lost their color.

“No. It is flight magic, the lineal magic of the royal Krakow family of Złota Wolność.”

The moment the words “lineal magic” left her pallid lips, there was no need to ask who it was. Wanting to stay out of the conflict between the country and the knights, they had refused the offered accommodations from the lord and stayed in their own lodgings. If royalty was getting involved, however, they would need to send someone to the estate.

“Princess Freya,” Zenjirou said, “I would like to send someone to better understand the situation.”

“I quite agree,” she replied.

Both of them had severe looks on their faces. The conversation was pointless, though. By the time they had finished the short exchange and decided to send Skaji as their representative, an envoy from the estate had already arrived.

“I beg your pardon, but I have been requested to ask you both to come to the lord’s estate, Sir Zenjirou, Princess Freya,” they said.

The origin of the request was omitted, although it was obvious even if it went unstated. It must have been the knight from the Husaria, who had jumped earlier.

Zenjirou had no reason to refuse.

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Even Zenjirou, with his relative lack of experience in carriages, could tell they were moving faster than usual. There was an unexpected event awaiting them.

He assumed he would be shown to a guest room—as had happened the last time—and for the marquis to arrive and introduce the royal later. However, the very moment the front door opened, Zenjirou’s expectations fell to pieces.

“Welcome. I am Princess Anna Krakow of the Nobles’ Commonwealth of Złota Wolność. I would ask for both of your names.”

The greeting came in a loud—but somehow not harsh on the ears—voice from a woman clad in gleaming armor. She was standing imposingly in the entrance. She looked around twenty and her eyes were about level with Zenjirou's, so she was probably around a hundred and seventy or so centimeters tall. Her hair fell in blue waves around her face, there was a strong look in her eyes, and her features were distinct and defined. Her lips were a bright crimson—perhaps due to some form of cosmetics—and stretched in a wide grin.

Zenjirou was taken aback and couldn't immediately manage a response. If her intention was to purposefully throw him off, it was masterfully done. But intentional or not, it was certainly the blue-haired beauty's decision. If not, Marquis Pomorskie would not have come running from inside with a strained smile.

Seeing someone *less* composed than him actually allowed Zenjirou to relax. After a sidelong glance at the other man, he took a quiet breath and forced himself to look amiable.

"I am the spouse of Queen Aura of the Kingdom of Capua, Zenjirou Capua," he told the royal.

Freya added, "I am the first princess of Uppasala, Freya Uppasala. It is an honor to meet you, Your Highness."

Anna bared her white teeth in a smile at their introductions. "I see, Your Majesty Zenjirou and Princess Freya. Unofficial though it may be, I am glad as a royal of this country to meet those from other lands. Particularly you, Your Majesty, with how far you have come. Ordinarily, I would love nothing more than to truly welcome you and show our country in the best possible light. However, as you know, the city is rather busy at the moment. I would like to request your understanding in a period of inconvenience."

Freya's face tightened at that phrasing, and Zenjirou's quickly did the same."A period of inconvenience" was essentially the same as saying "You cannot leave until this incident has been resolved."

Considering the two of them had been working on the assumption that once they gathered all of the crew, they would be leaving immediately, it was a hard

pill to swallow. It was an understandable action, though. There was nothing they could do.

If Zenjirou and Freya wanted to leave town, the only way they could was by putting the *Glasir's Leaf* to sea. It went without saying that the port followed the instructions of its lord. Given the situation, with information of a possible attack by sea, there was no arguing with the lord's choice. The port was larger than even Valentia, the pride of Capua. Closing and guarding it would take a considerable amount of time. If the visitors were leaving *immediately,* that would be one thing. However, since they were still gathering their men, it was only natural the port would not wait for them.

Zenjirou and Freya exchanged looks, a wordless agreement passing between them. Frankly, they had no other choice.

"I see. Then we will accept your hospitality," Zenjirou said somewhat brusquely, breaking off the politeness to show at least some displeasure even as he agreed.

The woman had called herself as a princess and addressed him as "Majesty," so there would be no problems caused by the situation. On the other hand, the sudden change would still show a worsening of mood.

"Of course. Although, as I am a guest here as well, the hospitality will be from Marquis Pomorskie," the princess replied with a shameless grin.

The guest room they were shown to had—as they had expected—other guests already waiting.

"Oh?"

"I suppose this is heartening."

"Guys?"

The three Yans—priest, mercenary, and orphan—greeted them in turn. The trip had been staying with the marquis since yesterday. The orphan was practically the informer who started everything, and the mercenary was a field commander with plentiful experience on the battlefield. There was no reason for the marquis to send them on their way, and it was a responsibility the priest was willing to take up. They had no intention of coming this far and then leaving

before seeing how things played out.

The suggestion had been made to the youngest of them that he could leave now that they had his information, but he was possibly the one most concerned about the knights. Even the priest's attempts at persuasion fell on deaf ears on this occasion. It was hardly a shock, since the knights had wiped out both his family and village, and were therefore the ones who had *made* him an orphan.

There was also a more pragmatic part to it all. If he left and survived, he would still be an orphan, liable to end up dead in a ditch somewhere. If he could show that he was useful, though, he might find himself with a lifestyle other than picking through trash and pickpocketing.

"Hm? What?" the mercenary asked.

"Nothing."

The mercenary was his aim. He was a commander, and becoming an apprentice of such a man was the best option for the boy. Naturally, he understood how unlikely such a request was. Still, he hoped that showing his skill meant that he could find employment as some form of assistant.

Whatever the case, Zenjirou spoke to the priest about something else. "As you can likely tell, we seem fated to become rather involved with this as well. Have you already met Prince Anna?"

The priest offered a soft shake of his head. "I have not. The estate has been busy, so while I know she has arrived, I have unfortunately been unable to meet her in person."

That, toom was not particularly shocking. Not even an hour has passed between Anna and the other two Husaria arriving. She had likely barely touched down before Zenjirou and Freya had been summoned. It made her seem like a somewhat hasty person. Then again, the city was in a state of emergency. Acting, and doing so quickly, was more important than etiquette and following norms. There was a possibility that it had been a calm calculus such as that.

Either way, seeing the priest before he met the princess was a valuable opportunity.

"As you know, Priest Yan, I am rather uninformed about the Northern

Continent. If there is anything you can tell me about Her Highness, I would greatly appreciate it." The explanation Yan had given during the banquet had been logical and easy to understand.

"Of course. She is royalty from a neighboring country from my perspective, so I am not too well informed. We have relatively little time as well, so will a simple outline be acceptable?"

"It will."

Freya knew a little about her peer, but Uppasala was separated from Złota Wolność both culturally and geographically. The priest would probably be better informed. Therefore, Zenjirou spent the time before Anna arrived learning about the royal family's position in the commonwealth and acquiring a bare minimum of knowledge about the princess in particular.

"I would like to thank you all once again for accepting my invitation," Anna said firmly when she joined them. "I would greatly appreciate your wisdom and assistance."

She was sitting on a sofa across from everyone else, looking over the group evenly. The marquis was at her side, his eyes darting between them all with a concerned look. It went without saying which was the more normal reaction.

In the room with them currently were: a priest from a foreign country, a mercenary who, whatever his origins, had no permanent home, an orphan who, while born in the commonwealth, now had no place to go, a princess from another country, and finally, a royal from a country they had no diplomatic ties with at all. None of them had any duty to stand against any difficulties facing the country of Złota Wolność.

Zenjirou knew how overbearing the princess was being. While she had removed her armor, she was still wearing her leather under-armor. Managing to still give off the air of royalty despite the plain, practical outfit was just proof of her status.

"I doubt I need to explain it now, but Pomorskie is currently facing an unforeseen danger," she stated.

Everyone present already knew, but she began summarizing the situation just

to make sure they were all was on the same page.

“The boy over there started everything by happening to hear the knights talking. They were discussing an attack on our lands. Now, that in itself is an unfortunate reality, but their target being Pomorskie changes things. The border is well-defended, but it is hard to say the same for this city.”

Pomorskie was an international port and a flourishing center of trade. Having both a strongly defended city and one open to all for trade was a difficult balance to strike. Of course, considering the distance between the city and the knights’ territory, this assault in itself was a gamble. They had neither the time nor manpower to constantly defend against such an unlikely avenue of attack.

“Additionally, we have information corroborating the boy’s story. While not making it ironclad, it certainly adds a great deal of support. Is that not right, Marquis?”

The noble at her side paled as the conversation turned to him, but he responded regardless. “Indeed. Late last night, a fast trading ship from the north passed several larger ships. Their testimony states that, considering the ship’s drafts, they were considerably well loaded. They were likely to arrive within three days—assuming they were heading for Pomorskie, of course.” The last sentence was obviously added as an optimistic aside, but it was obvious that not even he thought it likely.

The princess clenched her fist. “The knights prattle on about their ‘old territory,’ but Pomorskie has been ours since the founding of our nation. We need to show just how against their illegitimate claims are!”

Her statement was true. Pomorskie had been the territory of the Poznan Kingdom even before Złota Wolność had been founded. However, about two hundred years ago, the king of that nation had legitimately turned the land over to the knights. Then, about a hundred years later, the people of Złota Wolność had conspired to allow the city to regain its independence and immediately incorporated it into their commonwealth, ignoring any of the consequences.

“It is as clear as day that there is no legitimacy to their claims. However, it is equally true that there are certain elements in our nobility still clinging to an ancient indiscretion.”

The “ancient indiscretion” was the king at the time handing the city over to the knights. A hundred years of controlling the city meant that there were still descendants of the knights among the ruling class even today. It was an open secret that many of the nobiles with the same surnames as the influential knights were still potentially close to their current forces.

Additionally, the Sejm controlling the country as a whole had a majority of those who followed the Church of the Claw, the same faith the knights adhered to. It was ordinarily mere fantasy, but in Pomorskie, there was the possibility of the city falling to a surprise attack and being taken over by the knights, to legitimate control later on. It was the shortest possible path to regaining the city.

“We cannot allow them to take control, even temporarily. They must be stopped at all costs.”

The marquis at her side was the one most in agreement with her. He was both intimately connected with the issue and had much to lose. If the knights’ wish was granted, then he would lose his home and status, at the very least. He could also very well end up losing his life.

“Frankly, a complete surprise attack would put us in a bad position,” he said, mopping his brow.

“Just so,” Anna said, agreeing with exaggerated movements. “Should we safely see our way through this situation, the boy there will be among the biggest contributors. When the knights have been repelled, you will be well rewarded.”

“Ah, uh, right!”

Anna looked away from the orphan and continued with a drawn expression. “We are lacking information here. However, we are also lacking the time to *gain* that information. I would like to hear your unvarnished thoughts on how we can protect this town.” As she spoke, her gaze found the one-eyed mercenary’s.

The man spoke firmly in understanding. “I shall start, then. I will be speaking from a soldier’s perspective, so I beg your pardon for any rudeness. First, as long as the knights are not overconfident fools, it is almost certain they will not sail directly into port.”

Zenjirou was the only one who found that surprising. Everyone else simply took it as fact. It took some courage to ask the question, but not knowing and pretending to understand would make it harder to follow the conversation as it progressed. “Is that so?” he asked shortly.

There was no mockery from the mercenary—at least on the surface—as he explained briefly. “Indeed. Invading via a port is a rather courageous choice. While few in number, there are mages capable of casting during battle here. Have casters who can create massive swells and fire storms may even end the battle before it begins.”

“Ah, I see. Magic.”

Understanding that, he could easily see where the statement came from. There were few mages capable of casting spells while engaging in melee like Skaji, but if they were a greater distance away, many more could employ their powers.

“Marquis Pomorskie is among the leading nobles in the country. The knights would not assume that we had no access to such mages.”

“Which means that they will land some distance away and attack by land.”

“That seems likely.”

It was all Zenjirou could do to keep his expression placid as the princess and mercenary discussed tactics. They were truly in the swing of things now. There was almost no reason for him or Freya to be there. In terms of information control, it could even be considered a bad choice. He honestly could not see the intent in forcibly keeping them there, then summoning them to the estate and involving them in the war council. Perhaps they were relying on aid from the *Glasir’s Leaf*?

Currently, Zenjirou was nothing more than a self-proclaimed royal without even a dozen people, split between knights, soldiers, and maids. In terms of both political and physical power, he was not only useless, but an active risk.

This nation had diplomatic ties with Uppasala and therefore had to show her some consideration, so they would turn to her for help if they were going to ask. Whatever the reasoning, there was nothing he could do but go with the

flow.

His mind made up, Zenjirou continued to watch the discussion quietly.

“Commander, can you predict where they might land?” the princess asked.

“Might I trouble you for a map I can annotate, along with tools to do so?”

“Lord Pomorskie?”

“I cannot object.”

Unfurling a map in front of both a mercenary and foreign royals was hardly the most pleasant of prospects for a feudal lord such as himself. Still, he understood that needs must and instructed a subordinate to fetch a large map.

“It is somewhat rough, but will it still serve?” he asked once it arrived.

“It will. My thanks,” the mercenary stated.

Rough though he called it, the map was better than any Zenjirou had seen in Capua. Naturally, compared to the maps of Earth it was far rougher. The change in his expression did not go unnoticed.

“Another result of our Husaria. I am confident it is in no way inferior to other nations’ maps,” Anna boasted.

It was a rather obvious duty in retrospect. Since they had flying assets, there was no reason to forgo gathering information from the air.

I’m jealous. If we combined flying knights and a camera, we could at least mimic satellite mapping.

The thought brought a realization to Zenjirou’s mind.

“Princess Anna? If we are lacking both time and information, could we not ask the Husaria to scout? I get the impression they could gather a significant amount of information in relatively little time.”

Having the princess herself join the scouting party was out of the question, but there were three such knights who had arrived.

She offered a slight shrug at his suggestion. “We may need to should the worst come to pass, but it is a choice I am disinclined to make.”

Just as Zenjirou was mulling over what “the worst” might represent, the mercenary seemed to have come to a conclusion and drew a large circle on the map.

“Even taking into account that this is a supported surprise attack, I would want at least a thousand cavalry if I were to try to take Pomorskie. Two thousand if it was just infantry. Speed is a matter of life and death for such attacks, and they pride themselves on being ‘knights.’ Therefore, a thousand knights is the most likely distribution. However, horses are *far* bigger and heavier than people. They require massive amounts of provisions as well. While purification magic can supplement a water supply, traveling by ship will slow them. People are one thing, but horses will not be comfortable entering into battle as soon as they make landfall. Conversely, using cavalry for the entirety of their force means that they would have transport even after landfall and therefore would not need to be in the immediate vicinity.”

The man paused to let everything sink in.

“With all of that combined, I believe this region to be the most likely location for them to land.”

The circle looked rather large to Zenjirou, but judging by the impressed looks both of the locals had, it was more precise than such things usually were.

“So you have narrowed it down to that extent? How reliable would you say this estimate was?” Anna asked.

“Who can say? Should it hold that the knights are attacking by sea, I would say that it is approximately a nine in ten chance.”

“Hm...Commander, would you be willing to work under my employ? I would welcome you as a tactician.”

The mercenary’s single eye flicked toward the priest in response to the princess’s question.

“I am honored you think so highly of me, but I am already employed.”

Despite the clear refusal, Anna didn’t falter. “I am aware. Despite that, however tenuous the link is, the priest here is a legitimate priest of the church. Involving yourself in the affairs of the knights while still in his employ could cause issues for him. A temporary change of employ—if only for the sake of argument—would be for the best. Of course, once our contract is fulfilled, I would not be opposed to you returning to him.”

“Hmm...” The mercenary mused it over. The priest was important to him. With the other man already being despised by both the fang and claw factions, the mercenary didn’t want to prompt any further aggression towards him.

It was difficult to decide whether to withdraw here or not. If Złota Wolność was pushed aside by the knights and religious freedoms gave way to a die-hard following of the claw, it would limit the priest’s scope on the Northern Continent. The mercenary knew he should do what he could for the commonwealth’s victory. The princess’s suggestion was worth considering.

“Priest,” he began.

“The decision is yours, Commander. Military matters are far outside of my wheelhouse.”

The words could be taken as either wholehearted trust or a complete washing of his hands on the matter, depending on one’s perspective. The mercenary closed his eye and considered matters for a few moments before coming to a decision.

“Very well. Then I shall temporarily sever the contract between the two of us. Princess Anna, the specifics?”

“Of course. The first clause would be to serve as a military adviser as you have just done. Additionally, I would like to appoint you as a commander for the incursion from the knights. At all other times, I have no issues with you serving as protection for Priest Yan as you have been doing.”

The conditions she gave ended up leaning towards consideration for the man’s own preferences.

“Then I foresee no problems. However...”

“I know. I pledge that you will not be restricted after the completion of this contract, loath as I am to let a man of your talents slip away.”

“It is an honor to hear it. Were it not for Priest Yan here, perhaps I would even swear fealty to you.”

“Oh, so we simply met the wrong way around?”

“No, it is not a matter of the order, but existence. Even assuming we had met

first, I would likely have left with the priest here."

The princess let out a noise of musing.

"Commander, I would appreciate it if you left matters there," priest Yan interjected with an awkward smile as the situation devolved somewhat.

The princess also seemed to realize that pursuing the matter further would just sour relations. "No matter. Let us speak of more practical affairs. It is Lord Pomorskie's view that the army cannot leave the city and still continue protecting it. That means that if we were to attack proactively, it would be with mercenaries he hires and any such soldiers who happen to be in the town. We should be able to manage around eleven to twelve hundred. I will temporarily employ them and place them under your command. The majority will be infantry and they will be a level or two less trained than the knights. I ask for your frank opinion, Commander. Under those conditions, are we able to launch a preemptive strike?"

If the one-eyed mercenary's assumptions were correct, they would be facing a thousand cavalrymen. The defenders had a slight numerical advantage but would be mainly focused around mercenary infantry rather than cavalry. They would not be a unified force, and their training would be relatively inferior.

It went without saying just how much she was asking. Still, after some thought, the man answered in the affirmative, albeit with some provisos.

"Indeed. Assuming our goal is not the extermination of their force but ensuring they abandon their invasion. Victory will be decided by their allies, though. We have no guarantee that they won't have some famed commander beyond our knowledge. We can't tell whether they're hiding someone like that Janos brat."

The man's tone grew harsher as he spoke, perhaps remembering prior battles. He was practically seething by the end of the statement.

"I see. Then I shall have you begin immediately. If you can secure their morale and conduct with deferred payment, then you may promise whatever you like. I shall deal with the payment after the fact."

"Very well. There is little time to waste, so I will excuse myself here. Lord

Pomorskie, I would like you to gather your employed forces."

"Of course. I shall do so immediately. I will also excuse myself, Your Highness."

The two men hurriedly left.

"That is all from me, then," the priest added. "Yan, we have little time, but I can teach you to read as you wished."

"Thank you, Priest," the boy said as the two of them exited as well.

The princesses and Zenjirou were the only ones now in the room. Simply being carried along by the flow of the situation, Zenjirou was struck by an indescribable discomfort. Perhaps that was due to being unable to contribute to the situation in any way, even though it could impact his own safety in the worst case.

He considered the possibility, but that didn't seem quite right. It felt more like there was a disparity between the information available and the situation. If he let it go unremarked, he would be at a disadvantage. It was similar to when he had worked in business and his negotiating partner hadn't *lied* but had certainly given a different impression from the truth.

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?" the princess asked, red lips curving into a grin.

"No, nothing," he replied, growing all the warier. "You may have already realized it, but I am something of a coward, wholly unsuited to combat. I suppose I am slightly concerned about the situation."

The admission of his deficit in that area allowed him to hide his other concerns. Her blue eyes widened in surprise for a moment before she returned to her prior expression.

"I see. Personally, I view being able to say as much with such honesty to be rather courageous. Unfortunately, it is far more common for people to be unwilling to admit their cowardice. Rest assured, if not taken by surprise, Pomorskie is well-defended. The moment their surprise attack—albeit still an attack with a thousand cavalrymen—became known to us, its failure was assured. I personally guarantee your safety."

The explanation that followed was all too easy to accept: the city was surrounded by sturdy walls in addition to its navy, and breaching it would be by no means easy, especially when the composition of the attacking forces was so focused on speed and ambush tactics. They likely had little that was suitable for laying siege to the town. Their goal was collusion from the inside. Unless they were actively invited in, they would have no way to get past the walls.

If the marquis was unable to suppress such internal support after being warned of it, then he was wholly incompetent as the lord of the city in the first place. Her claims that a decisive failure was now impossible with the attack no longer being a surprise were therefore not groundless.

The princess and marquis were still concerned, though, because failure for the knights did not necessarily mean success for the city. Pomorskie was an international port and a hotbed of trade. Even if they managed to repel the invaders, the enemy reaching the city walls was still unconscionable. While the massive ramparts protected the interior and port alike, its position as a trade center meant that there were many—usually wide open—gates to prioritize ease of both ingress and egress.

If the city turtled up and closed the port and gates, it would also be shutting down much of its economy. Above all else, the fact that the walls had been attacked would be a gaping wound. While location, transport links, and facilities were important for commerce centers, the most important thing was safety. This would end that. However easy the city was to reach, if it was not a safe region, merchants would avoid it. Therefore, if it was at all possible to avoid such an attack—even a short-lived one—the city would be best served by doing so.

With that in mind, the lord strengthening their defenses for the worst case scenario while the mercenary took an expeditionary force to preemptively attack made sense. If their plan went well and they defended the city from a distance, it would minimize the damage overall.

War was not like sports; the victory and defeat conditions were not necessarily equivalent on both sides. With each side’s conditions being different, it was possible—albeit rare—for both to lose. Even more rarely, it was possible for both sides to win. Victory and defeat were entirely different for

each faction.

“Ah, I see,” Zenjirou murmured to himself as she repeated the point that victory for one side was not necessarily defeat for the other.

“Oh, is something wrong?” the princess asked with interest.

Despite regretting his slip of the tongue, Zenjirou realized this might be an opportunity. “No, I just realized I had been misunderstanding something.”

“Oh? How intriguing. I would be glad to hear what you mean.”

With her focusing on what he expected, Zenjirou offered as casual a denial as he could. “It was nothing major. Besides, there is no way for me to be sure I am correct now.”

“That just makes me all the more curious. For you to bring it up means it must be related to this incident with the knights, no? In that case, I truly would like to hear your thoughts. After all, we are in the same situation until this is resolved.”

It was a somewhat insensitive comment considering he had been forcibly placed into the situation, but it was a useful phrase for him at present.

“Hm, the same situation. Well, if you insist, I will speak plainly, then. However, there is one thing I must ask you to also answer plainly first. After all...we are in the same situation.”

“Hmph.”

Before Anna could adjust to the sudden change, Zenjirou took the initiative. “I would like for you to tell me your objective. Why did you purposefully fly out to the city?”

She had braced herself but the question still took her aback. There was visible surprise on her face for a moment, although it was soon masked by the confident look she had maintained throughout the meeting.

She made exaggerated motions as she answered. “My goal is, of course, to prevent Pomorskie from falling into the clutches of the knights. I would have thought it obvious?”

Zenjirou refuted her words. “That was my assumption, yes. Lord Pomorskie is currently working towards that, in fact. However, things are different with you.

After all, by your own admission, Pomorskie is already protected."

Her smile merely deepened at his statement as she remained silent. If she wasn't going to say anything, then he would simply have to explicate further.

"You yourself said that if the attack is known, it has no chance of success, which means that when word reached the palace, that was already the case. Why, then, are you here?"

Freya—who had thus far been sitting and listening at his side—made a short noise of surprise. His comments had revealed the inconsistency to her.

"You could certainly say that the bare minimum of success—that is, protecting the city—was already achieved once the attack was brought to light. However, as you can see from our decision to attack, that is not enough to protect the *functions* of the city as a center of trade."

"That is the case for Marquis Pomorskie, yes. However, what of you? Pomorskie might be the largest trading city in the country, but the commonwealth is both powerful and vast. It is not irreplaceable. In that case, from a national perspective, simply protecting the town from falling into the knights' hands is enough. At the very least, it seems unlikely to warrant the risk of royalty arriving with a mere two attendants."

"Therein is the misunderstanding. Pomorskie certainly is not the only option we have for trade, but it is still significant. It is not unthinkable for royalty to personally come and see to its defense. Additionally, royalty in our lands is not as central a position as you think. It is likely somewhat difficult for other nations to understand that, though."

"Reigning but not governing, yes. Even with the reduction in the monarch's powers, I see no mutual exclusivity with protecting the powerful royal family. Still, let us set that aside. In that case, merely sending three Husaria is odd. A state of emergency would—for this country—be declared by the Sejm. With an official declaration, they would send more forces. It makes sense that having a detachment march their way here would be too late, but the Husaria would have no such issue."

He had heard that their winged horses were valuable to the country, but there were far more than single-digit numbers of them. If what he had heard

from the priest was accurate, there were at least a hundred and possibly as many as three to five times that.

“The mounts are precious, and those who can ride them even more so. They can not be sent here and there at a moment’s notice.”

“That is contradictory. The Husaria are fighters. Fighters with extremely high mobility. If they cannot respond immediately in the case of an emergency, they would be little more than decorative. It would be akin to never using your trump card.”

The woman was silent, apparently having run out of excuses.

“I want to know your goal here,” he pressed. “I have no doubt that you are also aiming for a more complete victory against the knights attacking this town. Still, even if that is a result you want to achieve, it is not your true goal, is it? What purpose do the accolades of defending Pomorskie—or, more specifically, beating the knights—serve for you?”

Thinking about it in retrospect, Anna had been rather forceful about gaining the mercenary’s employment from the priest. She was even rehiring any others that the marquis already had.

If she was putting so much effort in, it would make more sense for the marquis to employ Yan and for him to take command from there before carrying out the attack. Despite that, Yan—and the mercenaries who would be serving under him—would all be under Anna’s auspice.

The mercenary taking the fight to the knights was under Anna’s command. If the plan went well, she would be seen as the one to protect Pomorskie from the knights. That itself was what she was aiming for.

The blue-haired princess finally seemed to resign herself. “My, what thorough questioning. I feel like women should be allowed some more leeway, even in a battle of words.”

“Should such generalizations be applied to you? Or do they simply serve your purposes?”

There was a pause. “Is continuing such questioning even necessary if you have seen through me so thoroughly?” she said, an edge to her voice.

Zenjirou didn't let his guard down as he fired back. "Hence me saying it was nothing major. At this point, we are in the same situation, are we not? Incidentally, I get the impression that there may be some connection to us being detained here."

There was a much longer pause this time until the princess let out a resigned sigh. "Magnificent. As you have discerned, Your Majesty, my goal here is to be the next person on the throne."

"During the next Free Election?"

"Indeed," she agreed with a slight nod.

The Free Elections for the position of monarch was a system which—to Zenjirou's knowledge—only existed in Złota Wolność. The Senate proctored a vote of all the nobles in the country, each of whom had a single vote, to choose the next monarch. While it was called an election, the only actual candidate was what other countries would call a crown prince—in other words, the next in line to the throne—so it was merely an approval of the next king. It seemed that the princess was going to cause a large upheaval in that respect.

That meant that Zenjirou could see why the somewhat unnatural step of restricting them had been taken. His title was "Spouse of Queen Aura I of the Kingdom of Capua." He was living proof that there was a foreign country led by a queen with legitimate power. Złota Wolność was proud of building a large, powerful country by promoting freedom and equality. Therefore, officially speaking, any royal—even a woman—had the right to candidacy for the throne.

More practically, though, the weight of long tradition and custom held strong. Her calm self-assessment was that even if she was a candidate, she wouldn't be taken seriously as one, let alone get votes.

"So my first targets are those who constantly bemoan the fact that I am a woman. Pushing past my mother's objections to joining the Husaria was part of that. Fortunately, I am rather accomplished in flight magic, so the qualifications were relatively simple."

It went without saying that being able to fly on your own power, if needed, was extremely convenient for joining the Husaria. While others would need to train so that they didn't fall from their mounts' backs under any circumstance,

the Krakow family trained their magic so that they could cast at a moment's notice instead.

While being able to cast a spell immediately, even while tense, was difficult in its own right, the Krakow family had to learn fall control—the simplest of flight magic—as they became part of the Husaria. Specifically, there was a balcony without balustrading on the top floor of the palace. They were blindfolded and then pushed out without warning. There was a large artificial pool underneath, so falling uncontrolled wouldn't kill them, but casting the spell before they hit the water was the pass mark.

Incidentally, Anna could cast more than just fall control. She could float, move, and even soar. Zenjirou's immediate desire to create a magic tool for it was probably Francesco's influence.

"So you will use these events to make a name for yourself and stand in the next election. Further, my presence will make it known that there are queens with true power in other nations. That combination will at least somewhat improve the country's disposition towards a queen as its monarch here. Was that the reason you wanted me to be present until an official celebration of your victory?"

Anna's eyes went wide before she applauded. "Wonderful. You saw through my actions completely. I am impressed by your keen insight."

While the joking way in which she was acknowledging him was likely to hide it, she could actually have been surprised. The blue-haired princess's smile twitched for a moment as she fixed her eyes firmly on his.

"What say you, Your Majesty? It will take some of your time, but I would gladly see you present at a celebration of our victory."

"Hm. I would be lying were I to claim that I was not curious about how Złota Wolność celebrates a victory. However, I am here for my own reasons."

"Perhaps our country could offer its blessing to your relationship with Princess Freya?"

It was Zenjirou's turn to be surprised now. He had not spoken a word of any relationship between them since his arrival on the continent. Then again, with

some thought, it was hardly surprising that particularly sharp-eyed individuals would have been able to presume as much. They were male and female royals from different families, traveling in the same ship far across the ocean to the woman's homeland. Both of them were also of a suitable age for marriage. Observing how they acted together would be enough to pin down what kind of relationship they had.

Blessings from a country with Złota Wolność's strength would pressure the king of Uppasala, but it would be a third country interfering in diplomacy between the two.

"Perhaps not. Such things would be better suited after results have been borne."

Anna's crimson lips parted in a laugh. "I see. I shall not force the issue, then. That puts me in a bind, though. I truly would appreciate your participation. I wonder how I would thank you for it."

"I have not yet said whether I shall. Besides, does it not strike you as rather indecently hasty to be concerned about a victory party before the victory has taken place?"

"Hardly. There is little I can do now to change events. All I can do is await good news from my commander. Preparing with that in mind simply shows my faith in him." She chuckled, sending blue locks cascading back.

Zenjirou was somewhat taken aback by her claiming there was nothing she could do. "What of the other two Husaria accompanying you? Two are unlikely to turn the tide of battle, but they would be valuable for scouting. After all, we need to know where our enemy is, and there seem to be many ways to put them to use."

"In the worst case, I will have to do that. It is an absolute last resort, though. If the commander requests it, I shall talk with them, but I would much rather not."

She was repeating that this was a last resort for the worst case. The question made its way from Zenjirou's lips—if he had to give a reason, due to sheer curiosity.

“Why is that?”

“It is not complex, Your Majesty. Currently, one of our advantages over the knights is that we know they are planning a surprise attack. However, they do not know that we are aware. The Husaria are indeed among the most useful scouting forces in the world. However, they are also the least useful when needing to do so without being seen themselves.”

“Ah, I see.”

It certainly was a simple explanation. It was all but impossible to escape the sight of the Husaria as they soared through the distant sky. A person or two might manage to do so, but a military formation of a thousand men would be completely incapable.

The same went in the other direction, though. It was hard to imagine that the entire division would overlook them wheeling through the air. This meant that while the Husaria would in all likelihood be able to pinpoint the knights’ position, the knights would also know they had been spotted. In other words, the city was trying to carry out a surprise attack on the knights as they tried to do the same.

“Have you considered you may be overreaching?”

“Am I? On that front, all I can do is leave it to the commander. The only things I can do now are pay my dues in money should we succeed or take responsibility should we fail.”

There was a vicious grin on her face as she spoke.

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Seemingly satisfied with her conversation with Zenjirou, the princess left the room in good spirits.

Zenjirou and Freya had yet to be shown to their own rooms, so they remained in the guest room. This would normally be the height of rudeness, but expecting perfect hospitality under the circumstances would be pointless.

The service staff had—with absolutely no warning—been forced to contend with their princess arriving first thing in the morning. That princess had then summoned a foreign princess and prince consort. On top of that, the mercenary Yan had needed to see the lord's men to deal with the imminent attack before taking them marching on.

The service staff was doubtless in the midst of a hellish period of busyness. With that in mind, it would be rather childish to complain about being kept waiting.

As Zenjirou let out a deep breath—almost a sigh—Freya turned to speak to him in concern.

"Are you tired, Sir Zenjirou?" she asked.

"I am fine. Thank you for your consideration, though," he replied, putting a polite look on his face.

He was rather tired, in truth. Of course, it wasn't a physical tiredness, but a mental one. Anna could give as many logical explanations as she liked for why the city wouldn't fall. Zenjirou wasn't resilient enough to be unbothered when he could be on the periphery of a battlefield. The trip on the *Glasir's Leaf* had risked his life, but there was a distinct difference between nature and a murderous person.

Frankly, he felt ill. He had been aware of it from the beginning, but war and fighting were areas where he would be more of a liability than anything. The current situation was just emphasizing that to him.

"Judging by Princess Anna's comments, we will be free to go after the victory party. Is that inconvenient to you?"

There was honest concern in the silver-haired princess's question, so Zenjirou answered in kind.

"I cannot honestly call it a good situation. The diplomatic permissions Her Majesty gave me were for a friendly relationship with Uppasala and nothing else. Still, the choice for Capua between the knights and Złota Wolność itself is self-evident. Some personal friendliness should be nothing to be concerned about."

The commonwealth allowed religious freedoms, while the knights only permitted following the Church of the Claw. Capua put their faith in the spirits, so there was only one choice as far as diplomacy went.

That said, there were multiple decisions making up such a choice, and the final one rested with Aura, not him. That meant that Zenjirou's only choice was to stress that he could not make diplomatic agreements while he was there.

It certainly should be fine. After all, Anna was using him to make it clear that there was at least one country with a reigning queen. Him solemnly deferring to his wife was actually in service of that.

Freya mulled over what he told her. "So having me be the invited guest while you are just 'royalty from another country that happens to be present' would work for you?"

The difference would be an introduction—unofficial, but still—as royalty of the Southern Continent.

"It would, thank you," he replied.

This was assuming that the one-eyed mercenary would be successful in battle. While Zenjirou lacked Anna's confidence, thinking of failure would serve no practical purpose.

Assuming the military man's predictions were correct, they would not be blockaded by sea. If his assault failed and the knights made their way to the walls, as long as there was no blockade, they could likely arrange for the *Glasir's Leaf* to leave port immediately after confirming the enemy had no naval forces. Princess Anna was unlikely to refuse their escape in that situation.

For Zenjirou, it would almost be better if the assault *did* fail.

"Still, do you think their strategy will work?" he mused aloud, utterly lost in military matters.

"I do not know. Mercenaries do tend to be of inferior training to a proper army, but the most skilled can upend that understanding from what I have heard."

"And Commander Yan is one of those most skilled?"

Freya nodded immediately. “I feel there is little doubt. His name is not known as far as Uppasala, so I cannot say for sure, but Princess Anna seemed to know him. Additionally, entrusting a new person with the men Lord Pomorskie hired means that the other mercenaries are likely to follow his word just from his name.”

“I see, so he is a famous man,” Zenjirou mused, a hand on his chin. He spent a while in thought before speaking again. “Princess Freya?”

“What is it, Sir Zenjirou?”

She understood from his expression that his suggestion would be a major one. She adjusted her position and waited.

“Would it be possible for some of the fighters from the *Glasir’s Leaf* to participate?”

With how far removed Zenjirou was from fighting, it was a rather uncharacteristic request. She was taken aback but managed to rally immediately and answer.

“Indeed. They are my subordinates, so they would not cause issues.”

It was, incidentally, unthinkable for any of Zenjirou’s subordinates to participate. He only barely had enough men to act as protection in the first place, and it would moreover be a political issue. Capuans could not interfere with disputes between other countries.

Conversely, it was already a done deal for Uppasala. Going into battle with their own standard flying might be out of the question, but soldiers taking up mercenary positions for a little extra spending money while on shore leave was —whilst shameless—an excuse that would work. Besides, the knights were already enemies of Uppasala and all other animistic countries on the continent, so participating would make no difference at this point. They did need to keep the number of people moderated, though.

Zenjirou seemed somewhat relieved by her answer, but there was still a clear sense of guilt as he continued. “That is good. Then I would like for you to send one or two people you can trust.”

“Would that be covertly, so the commander is unaware of their origins?”

“No, that does not matter. I would want them to report on what occurs in the battle between the two groups, though.”

“Sir Zenjirou...why in the world would...”

He was asking for people to be sent to the battlefield. It was not a battlefield that needed intervention either. It was impossible not to question him.

Zenjirou kept a grave look on his face as he answered her question in kind.

“Princess Freya, are you familiar with gunpowder?”

Intermission — The One-Eyed Mercenary's Battle

The next day, Yan led his twelve hundred men out of Pomorskie and north along the roads. They continued for the day before making camp and setting up watches as the sun set. Then, they began marching again after their rest.

"Mercenary" was a wide-ranging title, but those under the employ of Pomorskie—one of the leading cities in the country—were more skilled than not. Still, they would not be a match for the knights.

"Which means asking for too much skill could end up getting us burned instead. It would be best to ambush them on a narrow path in the forest, but taking command of an improvised battalion with poor visibility is a recipe for disaster."

Yan had been considering things throughout the march. The majority of his men were infantry, but they had several horses as well. In particular, they had three especially swift horses that would be their trump card if needed. The horses had skilled riders who were entirely forbidden from participating in the battle itself. They had a single role: if Yan's men were unable to succeed, they would return to Pomorskie as quickly as possible to report.

Yan had two predictions about where they would be called upon. The first was if they lost to the knights. Frankly, it seemed all too possible, even to him. He had no desire to throw his life away here, so if they were in a no-win position, he would cede the road to their foe.

The issue was the second possibility—that they wouldn't find the knights. In other words, if his predictions were either wrong or mostly right but fell apart on the specifics, with the two parties managing to miss each other. News needed to get back to Pomorskie as quickly as possible in that case.

"We just don't have enough information...or prep time, for that matter. We're having to assume that we're making the right moves. Will the princess even forgive us for making a mistake?"

The general let out a massive sigh as if trying to expel the melancholy as he complained to himself about the situation.

Eventually, they made their way through the forest and out onto grassy plains, setting up along the road. If the men were as trained as he preferred, they could hide in the forest and ambush the knights as they entered. But given the size of the trees, the men he was leading, and their skill levels, he had his doubts that they would manage to conceal themselves.

Failing the ambush and fighting in the trees was the worst choice for them. While the knights could not use their vaunted speed and charges in the trees, they would have clearly superior skill, equipment, and training on an individual level. Carelessly engaging them could end with even more casualties.

One of the captains had suggested forming up on a nearby hill, but Yan had refused. If they lay in wait off the road, the knights could just ignore them and they'd look like fools. The speed of the knights was a threat. Even Yan's eyesight didn't change the fact that if the knights tried to ignore them and push past, they would need to sprint at full speed to manage to flank them.

Any precision in command would be impossible in that situation. If the knights were feinting and actually turned to face them head-on, the mercenaries would be taken out in a single attack. Thus, even aware of the disadvantage, Yan had his men set up on the plain with the trees at their backs.

"All right, you lot, start digging. You're not setting up camp. We don't have the time, or the supplies, for that matter. Rough up the ground so the horses can't get a foothold. Fetch some decent logs and rope them off for a fence. It probably won't do much, but still."

It wasn't exactly the best defensive formation, but it was better than nothing.

"Hey, Yan, we really facing the knights out in the open like this?"

"It's too risky, ain't it?"

A couple of his acquaintances had headed over and were speaking to him in hushed tones.

"Don't worry about it. This is the best way to carry out our sponsor's orders with the fewest casualties."

“Seriously?”

“We’re trusting you here.”

While they were still somewhat doubtful, Yan’s prior accomplishments meant that they followed him regardless.

“You’d better,” Yan said with a thumbs-up.

“What’s the plan if it fails?”

“Just saying ‘sorry’ ain’t gonna be enough.”

“If that happens, I’ll drown you guys in booze,” he promised them.

“No going back on that, all right?”

“Too late to say anythin’ else now.”

“Well, if you survive and make it back, that is.”

“Nah shit.”

“Can’t drink if we’re dead.”

Yan made sure the jibing and joking was loud enough that the younger mercenaries could hear to help them relax. The conversation continued for a fair while after.

It was just after their defenses were in place that they heard a rumbling from over the horizon.

“They’re coming! Everyone, ready!”

The soldiers all prepared for battle in response to his yell. Eventually, the source of the noise became visible.

It was the knights. They were far enough away that it wasn’t possible to see just how many there were, but there were easily over a thousand. They were marching rather than charging, so the speed at which they were advancing was relatively slow. Still, it was *far* faster than an infantry march.

The horses were huge. They had to carry knights in full armor, so only the biggest were ever selected for use. Atop each massive horse was a knight in gleaming armor, and over a thousand of them approaching at once. The

infantry could set up all the spear walls they liked; it would be hard to resist the force of their advance.

Still, as the knights approached, they came to an unnatural stop.

“What’s going on?”

“They stopped.”

Yan grinned at the questioning mercenaries.

“Hah! They weren’t expecting us to be here.” Despite the fierce smile on his face, he was praying inside.

Go home. Just leave.

The knights’ current reaction was part of the reason he had chosen such a visible place to set up. Seeing the mercenaries lying in wait here would show the knights their surprise had failed. They should also, therefore, know that they had no chance of taking the city. The enemy turning around and leaving was the best result Yan could hope for.

Of course, he princess wants us to fight and win instead, he mused. Still, the princess craving a name for herself ultimately had nothing to do with him.

The most important thing for a mercenary was survival, followed by budget. If they had a numerical advantage, then earning her favor might be on the table, but they were roughly even with their foe. Facing the elite knights on open ground was more of an issue than pay.

Even if they didn’t fight, the claim that Yan had repelled the invaders would still be accurate. Thus, his prayers.

Unfortunately, they were not answered.

“Damn, they’re forming up.”

“Yeah, they’re raring to go. What’s our play, Yan?”

He held back the urge to scowl and curse as his men were doing, keeping a wide grin as he gave his orders.

“I planned for this. Don’t worry. Archers, nock arrows. Pipers, forward.”

While he gave his instructions, he considered the situation. The knights had

spotted them, stopped, and then began moving in an offensive formation. They had not been stationary for long at all. Their commander was no fool. He would already know that their planned ambush was no longer a surprise.

In that case, there was a strong possibility that this offensive front was a feint. The mercenary assumed they would push through his troops if they could, and if not, they would give in and retreat. If his side could hold off the first charge, they could win.

While these thoughts passed through his mind, the knights had readied themselves and were getting ready to rush them.

“Here they come! Clench your arse cheeks!” he ordered in a bellow.

Even that yell was nothing more than a gentle breeze compared to the thousand-strong knights yelling in unison as they charged.

“We ain’t gonna cower! Show them what you’re made of!”

In response to their commander’s rebuke, the mercenaries let loose a roar as well. It was not a unified yell like the knights, more of a desperate raging, yelling, and even screaming. Letting out such yells calmed people and let them relax.

Not yet. Not yet. Hold... Now!

“Loose arrows!” Yan commanded, his eye fixed in a glare on the advancing knights. This was the best time to command the archers. Actually, it was slightly before the best time to loose the arrows, but with the archers’ current level of training in mind, it was more suitable.

“Raaah!”

“Take that!”

“Agh!”

As he’d expected, only around a third of the men had let their arrows fly when he’d actually ordered it. The rest were, as he would say, “Like dribbles of piss down your leg,” coming in fits and starts.

The Crimson Dragon Kingdom’s longbowmen would file an official protest if he had called their assault “a volley.” Still, even the fully armored knights were

not unharmed by the rain of projectiles. Arrows stuck into the metal armor, and the unlucky ones took hits to their horses' backs or necks, falling down.

Of course, they had taken out fewer than ten of the knights all told. The ones who had fallen had gotten out of the way as their training demanded, to prevent getting in the way of the knights behind them. They had to be decently trained to be part of this force, after all.

They moved quickly, and the untrained archers would have no chance for a second round.

"Cavalry, head back and report!"

"Good fortune!"

"The rest is on you!"

"Leave the castle to us!"

The three mounted soldiers headed off before everyone else. The horses they were riding were swift-hooved, provided by the marquis himself. The riders were also the most skilled on horseback and almost completely unarmored. Sending them off now meant that even if the mercenaries failed, the knights wouldn;t be able to catch them.

Sending all three of the messengers off at once was theoretically unsound, but Yan's next move would render them more of a liability, so he had no choice.

He heard them leaving as the knights reached their defensive line, where the ground had been churned with wood and rope fences. It was only a slight difference, but the knights slowed. This would be his only chance.

"Pipers, now!" he commanded his trump card, the pipers.

There were only thirty of them, far fewer than the archers. However, they had all been trained personally by Yan. They would not miss the order.

This time, it was a proper volley. There was an echoing of thirty sharp retorts, accompanied by the billowing white smoke characteristic of burning fresh wood. Several of the leading knights, with no apparent cause, fell down.

The bigger impact, though, was that of the unfamiliar noise on the horses. They reared.

“What the?!”

“Whoa, whoa, boy!”

“Yaahhh?!”

The actual damage to the knights was not terribly different from the archer’s attack, but the explosions had spooked the horses, and keeping them under control was the best they could manage.

The chaos was spurred on by several knights collapsing for no apparent reason. The mercenaries had heard the “pipes” as well, but they had been warned ahead of time and were quicker to recover than the enemy. Above all else, the fact that they were not on horseback made it easier for them to move.

“Now! Charge!” Yan roared.



As if to show them how it was done, he himself plunged through the smoke towards the knights.

“Follow the commander!”

His men followed immediately afterwards, returning their pipes to their waists and taking up their spears. The fact that the other mercenaries only followed after that was proof of just how much of a shock the effect of the pipes was to witness for the first time.

“Yeah...”

“What’s with this smoke? My ears are still ringing.”

Fortunately, the knights were in even more disarray, so the delay didn’t matter.

“Look, they’re strugglin’ even more!”

“Now’s our chance!”

“Tch, we’re gonna be paying for his drinks again, ain’t we?”

The mercenaries recovered and fell upon the knights as the latter clung to their spooked horses, trying to avoid a tumble. For better or worse, common mercenaries were poorly suited in strength, but they became much more formidable when their opponents were weakened.

“Let’s go, then!”

“Take this, you bastards!”

“Leave the horses! They’ll fetch a nice sum!”

At this point, the outcome was already decided.

Chapter 4 — Awaiting Victory

Several days before this event, Zenjirou and Freya were in the room alone—having been left by Anna. Zenjirou had just asked the question he had been holding on to until then.

“Gunpowder? I know of its existence, at least,” Freya answered despite her apparent confusion.

Zenjirou’s face grew more serious. The soul of language had worked, so the concept of gunpowder had to be fairly widespread across the Northern Continent.

“I see. Then I have more questions. The truth is...”

He then explained the first meeting he’d had with the mercenary commander...along with the smell of gunpowder wafting from his body. He spoke of his assumption that there were weapons using it since an accomplished mercenary like Yan smelled of it.

“Do you have any idea of such things?” he asked.

Freya put a hand to her mouth and thought. “Well, I am not entirely familiar with it, but I have heard that there have been many attempts to make it useful on the battlefield over the years. There have been some small successes, but each of them eventually ended poorly and stopped progressing, from what I have heard.”

“In what way?”

“Magic, in the same way as the port would be defended. To use gunpowder in weaponry, one must store it. If you light it using magic from a distance, it ends up damaging the forces using it instead.”

“Ah...”

Magic was the answer yet again. It made sense when you thought about it. It was said that modern high explosives wouldn’t detonate unless the correct procedures were followed. You could throw artillery shells or missiles into fires

or smack them with a hammer and they wouldn't go off.

That wasn't the case with black powder, though. A single spark would detonate it. You could aim a cannon at a fortress that an enemy was holed up in, but cannons in this time period were rather inaccurate. Conversely, magic could be cast fundamentally anywhere within eye-shot. It would never miss a static target.

The tension of a battlefield meant that skilled mages capable of casting from a distance were a small minority. If their opponents set themselves up with gunpowder, though, it was another matter. Cast sparks or an area of flames around them and you could cause a lot of damage with a single spell.

"Is that why you want people with him?"

He nodded somewhat awkwardly. "It is. Though if things are as you say, I suppose there is no need."

Orders hadn't been given yet. Perhaps it would be better to not send people into the danger of battle due to such a minor hunch.

Freya considered it seriously for a moment before disagreeing. "Personally, it seems all the more important to do so. As I said, there have been many attempts to make use of gunpowder on the battlefield. If you smelled it on him, then there is a good chance he is using it. I have heard that the knights have many mages, but this is a surprise attack. They likely have taken no precautions against it."

"So it might follow the commander's plan after all?"

"Conversely, if they have done so, then the commander may be hoisted with his own petard. Whatever the case, the chances for both a great victory and a crushing defeat are greater than I expected. It would be best if we had our own observers."

"Are you sure?"

While he was the one who had suggested it, he was less certain than the princess. Great victories aside, a crushing defeat meant a much greater chance of fatalities. It made him more inclined to forget the whole thing.

Picking up on his nerves, Freya spoke decisively. “Yes. The risk is there, but we should send people in.”

She had a much longer and deeper relationship with the fighters, but her determination to send them in was perhaps evidence of her royal birth. It was yet another instance where Zenjirou’s sudden ascension showed itself.

Regardless, with her being in favor of something he had suggested, there was no way for him to halt it in its tracks now.

“Very well. I shall leave it in your hands, then.”

“Of course,” she replied with a smile.

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While Zenjirou and Freya were deciding to send men into battle, Princess Anna of Złota Wolność was in another room with a severe expression she would never show in public.

“So, Capua is making moves on the Uppasalan royalty,” she mused.

Silence met her comment. Present in the room from the marquis were Anna herself and two other Husaria she had brought from the capital.

“I knew Uppasala wanted trade routes of their own with the Southern Continent, but I had never imagined they would make such a catch. Not even we have made inroads with Capua.”

While those of the Southern Continent were almost completely ignorant of the situation on the Northern Continent, the opposite was surprisingly far from the case. This disparity was because all intercontinental trade took the form of ships coming *from* the Northern Continent.

The most benefits were—due to the physical distance, of course—to the southern states of the Northern Continent, and the northern states of the Southern Continent.

While Złota Wolność was considered to be the midwest of the continent, the bustling trade port of Pomorskie made sure it was also involved in intercontinental trade. Being part of the commonwealth’s royal family meant that Anna had at least heard of the country before.

“Capua is said to be one of the leading countries on their continent, and yet things just do not add up.”

The south had been in the midst of war until very recently, and Capua had held onto their position throughout the ravages of the conflict. Yet Zenjirou did not give off the impression of a royal so familiar with battle.

“The Southern Continent has focused on and developed their magic. Conversely, the general agreement is that their technology, ideology, and institutions are behind our own...”

Her musings could certainly be called condescending in a certain sense, and yet the Southern royal had shown an understanding of the political system of

Złota Wolność, a system that defied the understanding even of some of their local peers.

"I had assumed he was feigning it to make himself seem more knowledgeable, but that does not seem to be the case. He even explicitly said 'reigning without governing.'"

One of the Husaria—who had thus far listened wordlessly—jolted at that comment.

"I seem to remember that phrasing only recently being suggested by the Royal University in the capital?" they asked.

"It has. It is a statement I would hardly expect to hear from our *own* nobility, let alone a completely foreign element. Marquis Pomorskie himself may not even know of it. Yet those words left a Southern royal's mouth. It was frankly rather difficult to control my expression."

"Only recently suggested" referred to the phrase as a whole rather than the actual concept. The latter had existed for a long time. The Sejm governed, dealing with the majority of the country's policies. The Sejm called the king and were a senate that elected the next king.

Describing that king as "reigning but not governing" was just an abbreviated way of summing up the state of affairs. Yet the very nobles it defined were still unfamiliar with it. Hearing the very same phrasing from a distant royal—one who had no connections with this country and only second-hand information to form his assumptions—was no small shock.

"So Capua has much more knowledge of our country than before?" the Husaria asked.

Anna nodded heavily.

"We should assume so, yes. Uppasala is in the north of our continent while Capua is in the midwest of its own. That has led to neither of them participating in intercontinental trade until this point, but Uppasala's new ships have been a boon, allowing them to do so. Still, making the trip completely without resupply is rather difficult. The southern states are under the influence of the church, though. Neither country will want to approach them, both being animistic in

their beliefs.”

“So they have felt us out due to our religious freedoms. We are a supply port for them if need be, after all. I see, that makes sense.”

Anna nodded in satisfaction at her colleague’s summation. It certainly did make sense. For all that, it was not quite correct, though.

“They may consider further trade with us in preparation for damage to their ships.”

“So you think Capua is weighing up their alternatives?” the Husaria asked. There was a clear sense of discomfort in the question. The church’s teachings of the Southern Continent being a land of exile were likely part of the condescension there.

“Do not say that,” Anna replied, waving a hand. “All relations between countries are like that when you dig deep enough. It is all a matter of what is most beneficial. Considering the relationship between the two nations, there is a strong possibility that they will succeed in establishing a trade route. Uppasala certainly has the technology.”

“Is that a threat to us?”

Anna’s smile deepened as she replied. “It will be, yes. At the very least, it is highly possible it will be in the future. At present, we are not negotiating directly with Capua. We simply trade with other countries on the Southern Continent. They are not national-level agreements either. That is why sugar and spices command such ridiculous prices. In comparison, Uppasala sent out their own princess to create trade for the *country*. In terms of plain strength, we are far stronger than Uppasala, but our trade is fragmented through civilian merchants, so we will not be able to compete. Large-scale transport will drive prices down. If the cheap spices and sugar from Capua spread through the Northern Continent via Uppasala, the impact on our sea trade will be no laughing matter.”

“And is that your *excuse*, Your Highness?” asked the other of the pair, finally joining the conversation.

The full set of armor—including a helm—made making any judgments from

the knight's appearance rather difficult. The voice, however, was that of a relatively older man.

"'Excuse' is such an unpleasant word. Please, call it a tool for cajoling the Sejm, Master."

"If you are concerned about how things sound, then 'cajoling' is perhaps not the best word to use either, Your Highness."

The princess allowed herself a shrug at the man's rebuke. "I know. I will not speak like that in front of them. Still, it is a perfect pretext to both strengthen the navy and ensure the royal family has command of it."

By land, there were many countries between Złota Wolność and Uppasala, but the two kingdoms they were surprisingly close via sea. If Uppasala mustered both their naval forces and this trade deal, they could certainly be a threat to the commonwealth.

However, Anna's aim was not to prepare for such a threat. Instead, she wanted to use that pretext to strengthen their own naval forces and have those forces under the royal family's direct command.

"Are you so discontent with the low authority of the royal family?"

"I am not *discontent*, I am *discomforted*. I understand the benefits of our system of governance. The large number of nobles feeling that they have a real say over national politics increases their engagement, and the educational norm of those nobles rises as a result. We gain many outstanding people due to that education as well. Truly, there are many advantages. Regrettably, though, we suffer from a lack of immediacy when it comes to unforeseen situations. Shipbuilding and navigation mean that the seas are now advancing tremendously. You could even say that they are shrinking. For that reason, we need to be able to respond instantly to at least some things, even if just for national naval projects."

She spoke earnestly, yet firmly. The other two present listened until she was done.

"I know that you are concerned with our country's future and you are trying to ensure it progresses in the direction you think correct. Despite that, we have

no way to take even the first steps if you do not become the monarch.”

“I understand,” she replied to her master’s words, resting a cheek on her hand and sighing. Currently, she was simply another member of the royal family. If she could not gain the throne and represent the family as a whole, then advocating for an increase in their rights to the Sejm would be rather difficult. “It is common knowledge that my father and brother are focused on the land. Marquis Pomorskie is likely rather soured by that. He agrees with me that our future lies on the sea. If I can gain a foundation, I believe he will support me.”

The marquis had a faction of his own within the Sejm. His support would represent a significant step forward in her ambitions for the throne.

“Then, once his support has secured you the throne, you will strengthen the navy and take command? Considering the port’s position and that much of our navy is held by Marquis Pomorskie, that seems rather like kicking the man while he is down.”

There was a long pause.

“The royal family will only control the reinforcements and trading vessels. I will not be impinging on the marquis’s current assets.”

“I might hazard that a relative reduction in his influence with the navy would amount to much the same.”

The princess remained silent at her master’s words, merely looking away.

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It had been several days since Yan’s men had left the city, and Pomorskie was enveloped in an uneasy peace. Ships could not enter or leave the port, and the marquis had warships patrolling the sea around the entrance.

The land entrances to the city were much the same. Twice the usual number of soldiers were stationed at each gate, and the time taken to check over everyone as they entered or left had *more* than doubled. The official word was that a wanted criminal could be within the city, but people who paid enough

attention were doubtful.

The transport had been hidden, but locals had seen ballistae and massive bolts brought atop the castle gates, and the guards were visibly wary of the *outside* of their posts.

The biggest hint was that several days prior, a thousand-strong group of mercenaries had left fully equipped. The claim was that they were to search the surroundings of the city, but it was a little beyond belief. Many things could be hidden, but the atmosphere around the town was not one of them. Someone was invading, went the rumors, passed in whispers throughout the town.

The orphan who had been the genesis of all of these rumors was—while the town as a whole wrestled with unease—staying as a guest in the lord's estate. It was an utter luxury for the rural youth, but that also added to his discomfort.

The way he ate, the way he walked through the corridors, the way he opened or closed a door, and particularly how he spoke and carried himself around others—every time he did anything, the serving staff's expressionless faces reminded him of how poorly he fit in.

They *called* him a guest, but their behavior and faces made it clear that he was more of an eyesore. They provided him with soft bedding and fine clothing along with delicious food, yet the way he felt made him long for the days of dirt and hunger on the streets.

As a result, the orphan found himself mostly hanging around the priest—someone who was never cruel to him.

"How long am I here for?" he asked the older man. He leaned back slightly into the sofa, kicking his legs. He didn't know how many times he'd asked the same question.

The priest knew the boy had no place within the estate as a whole, so he kept his voice soft as he answered. "I would imagine at least until the commander returns with news. However, young Yan, where would you go?"

"Well...I don't have anywhere. I'd figure it out, though. I managed so far."

He had initially attempted to go with the mercenaries to prove his worth, but the commander had immediately said he would be a burden and left the boy

behind. Considering how necessary speed was this time, the youth couldn't refute the claim.

Young Yan was wiser and more courageous than one would expect from his age. His physical prowess, however, was exactly what his youth would suggest.

"I see."

The priest had a position as dean at his home university. He had a rather substantial income as far as commoners were concerned. However, he did not have the means to take responsibility for another without consideration.

While benevolence was important as a member of the church, one also could not forget impartiality. While showing some kindness to an orphan would be fine, taking responsibility for the youth's life entirely required a reason. Otherwise, he would be inundated and end up useless.

Therefore, he could essentially only offer advice. "I seem to remember Princess Anna mentioned some form of reward. Have you decided what you want?" While he had expected the boy to grow more animated, the younger Yan instead looked rather worn.

"Nothing, really. I might even just turn it down. I thought maybe I could get some money or a good knife, some kind of weapon I could use as a kid. I don't need it, though. Besides, not like *having* money or something valuable'd help an orphan like me."

There was a surety to the boy's words, and the priest chewed his lip in thought. He was correct. Having money—or other assets—beyond his means would just be a pitfall. A weapon would see disdain possibly turn to fear and could put his life in danger.

That was precisely why the older man offered a suggestion. It was one that would not occur to a young boy raised in a rural village.

"Then perhaps ask for something you could never have taken away?"

"Something I could never have taken away?" the boy parroted. He seemed unconvinced there was any such thing.

While the priest knew it was technically a lie, he still straightened and spoke.

“Indeed. Technique. Knowledge, if you’d rather.”

“Technique and knowledge?”

“That’s right. They are things kept within your body or mind. You need not worry about anyone taking such things from you.”

While techniques could be considered dangerous, and knowledge could be shunned, along with either causing one to lose their life, there were many more examples of them helping. He didn’t tell the boy any of that.

“So, technique and knowledge are like that...”

However clever he was, the boy lacked experience and perspective. The priest explained in a way that was easier to understand.

“For example, you cannot ride a horse. If you were to develop it more than anyone, then Commander Yan could employ you as a courier.”

The boy jolted.

“Knowledge is much the same. You can only count as high as three. If you were able to use numbers properly, perhaps you could have reported more accurately when you heard the knights speaking. The commander could have used that for a more certain strategy.”

“He...could have?”

“Besides, you are an intelligent boy. You summarized their conversation to the relevant points very well. However, I assume they spoke for much longer, no? If you could recite that conversation in its entirety, there might have been even more information to be had.”

“I-I can’t remember that.”

“Of course not. Yet if you had been asked sooner, would you not have remembered more, if not all of it? It would require writing utensils rather than just the knowledge, so this is somewhat unfair to say. If you could write, though, and you did so when it was relevant, you could have brought them more useful information.”

The boy had been listening seriously and the priest let his usual soft smile fall into a serious expression of his own as he awaited the response.

“Priest.”

“Yes?”

“Will either of those things let me be like that one-eyed guy? Or like you?”

“I cannot say. I am completely unfamiliar with warfare, so I only have what I have heard. Still, I have heard that generals of his caliber are rarely found even in the army, let alone as mercenaries. In my own case, I am the dean of my university’s dracology department. Naturally, most mercenaries are not assigned to major operations, and a single university has only as many deans as you could count on the fingers of a hand. That fact alone means that not just anyone could be like either one of us,” he told him honestly.

The boy’s harsh upbringing meant that baseless aspirations would just be falsehoods to him. Therefore, the priest told him the state of things as best he could to give him a more realistic goal.

“What I can say, however, is that with some skill or knowledge truly mastered, you will have a much brighter future than if you had not.”

“A brighter future?”

“You could say it would be a better life. Of course, knowledge alone does not guarantee a good future for you, just as a lack of the same does not mean your downfall.”

“Right.”

The mix of harsh reality and hope was easy for the boy to understand. He had yet to take the final leap, so the priest offered a final push.

“If you decide to ask for this, you would be better served by doing so quickly. You are at the age where the majority of the nobility and rich can read and write simple words, and do most simple math. Those born to knight families can already ride ponies and have a modicum of knowledge with weapons.”

“Then...”

The youth’s expression spoke to not being sure he could catch up. The priest made sure his expression was bright as he carried on.

“It’s okay. You can catch up or even surpass them if you try. I was not an

orphan, but my family was poor. When I was your age, I could not read, write, or do math either. Now, though, I am confident I am better at each of them than the majority of nobles. Of course, it took much effort. You can do just as I did," he said with a smile.

"Okay," the boy decided. "I'll ask the princess for teaching as my reward."

"That is a good idea, I feel." He was happy to see the orphan looking towards his own future with hope and ambition. "Before you do, though, you should decide what instruction you want and what you are aiming for. Dreaming is by no means a bad thing, but first, you should aim for competence in one thing. It will form a foundation for you."

"Hmmm, well, I want to be able to fight."

"'Being able to fight' covers a rather wide range itself. While things would be different for a normal soldier or mercenary, if you want to command a squad like Commander Yan, you will need to exercise your mind just as much as your body."

"Ugh, then I'd start off with being a soldier, I guess."

Their light conversation was interrupted by loud voices that practically shook the walls.

"Priest?!" the boy yelled, paling as he leaped up from the sofa.

Calmly, the older man refuted his assumption. "It is not what you think. This is not an attack. If anything, it sounded like a cheer."

"A cheer? Then..."

The priest met the young boy's grin with a smile of his own.

"Indeed, I would wager the commander is back. With good news as well."

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The return of the mercenary army was accompanied by the best news: the knights had been repelled.

Affairs had been put in place beforehand, so the soldier in charge at the north gate immediately reported the news to the estate. As a result, while there was some delay before the gates were opened, the men were greeted as heroes by Marquis Pomorskie and Princess Anna. They were practically paraded past the citizens on their way to the estate. The men were covered in blood and mud, armed to the teeth, and over a thousand strong. While the citizens stared agape, the familiar sight of their lord along with Anna heading the procession on her winged horse kept the panic to a minimum.

The two highest-ranked people in the city were guiding others who looked like they'd just stepped off the battlefield. *Everyone* was curious in some way. That wasn't at all helped by the disquieting rumors due to the blockade at the port. No one stopped them, so many of the onlookers followed after the soldiers.

The long trail headed by the lord and princess, followed by the mercenaries, and finally tailed by the onlookers eventually arrived at the lord's estate. The courtyard gates in front of the estate were opened and Anna gave a speech as to the particulars. She explained how the cowardly knights had plotted to take Pomorskie by surprise. She told of how a courageous young boy had allowed them to find out ahead of time. She also told the crowd that they could not act officially on just the boy's testimony—here, the marquis offered his apologies for the deceit.

The soldiers had acted on that testimony, though, finding the knights' surprise attack, and then Anna's men had safely repelled them.

"These men are heroes! They repelled the knights and protected Pomorskie!"

The citizens all cheered and applauded at those words, happy smiles on every face as they looked at their heroes.

Zenjirou watched it all happen from inside. "Another wonderful speech," he commented.

"Perhaps we should learn from her example," Freya agreed from his side with a reluctant smile.

There was no disputing just how impressive her speech was. The way her voice carried, her articulation, and the impact of how she spoke were all there.

Zenjirou felt like she'd learned all of the parts of speech-making.

"In one way, I suppose it's a byproduct of the advanced governance Złota Wolność has."

The musing was a mere mutter to himself, but Freya was right next to him and her ears picked it up.

"A byproduct of electing their king? Due to needing to win over their votes through speeches?" she asked.

He was somewhat surprised she had heard him, but he had no real reason to hide things, so he replied honestly to her.

"Well, that might be part of it, but it's a more fundamental thing I was thinking of. You could call it a symptom of a stronger class of intellectuals."

While the system was given the title of an election, so far, each vote had only provided a single candidate. Fundamentally, the position was not that different from a crown prince's in any other country. The nobility simply approved of them and there was no further meaning to it. That made Zenjirou think that speechcraft probably hadn't progressed strictly to win votes in an election.

The problem was with the education levels of the nobility—a full ten percent of the population. Additionally, the amount of interaction the middle classes had with those nobles meant that they, too, had higher levels of education than the norm.

As a result, you had a large number of refined, intelligent citizens—or, put less charitably, citizens who were harder to deceive. Appealing to them meant needing a certain amount of logic and persuasion. That made speechcraft an absolutely indispensable skill for nobility and royals—in Zenjirou's estimation, at least.

Naturally, he had no basis for any of his claims, nor the time to investigate them. It was impossible to tell the truth of the situation. Understanding the details would require a significant amount of knowledge for the requisite assumptions.

While Uppasala was also part of the Northern Continent, it was a simple monarchy. His explanation was rather difficult for Freya to parse. Fortunately,

the topic hadn't been important to begin with, so the conversation stalling was not a major issue.

"So, do you think the rewards will be publicized here?" he asked instead.

The cheering was still audible.

"They will not be. All they currently know is that it was a victory. Who contributed and to what extent will need to be determined before any decisions on rewards are made."

"Ah, that does make sense."

It was somewhat like *kubi-jikken* in the Warring States period, where samurai took their foes' heads back for their commanders to inspect. While monetary payment was part of the job for mercenaries, another part was fame for their future employment prospects. Not paying in accordance with that would spread through the ranks of mercenaries and make future gatherings of this ilk harder, particularly in this case, where their duties were the defense of the nation. The men hadn't been able to enjoy themselves with looting or the like, so if they weren't paid properly, things would degrade.

Eventually, part of the serving staff came out in front of Anna and distributed something to the mercenaries.

"I wonder what that was?" Zenjirou asked.

"Perhaps an advance on their payment? A set reward for anyone who participates in a major victory is fairly common," Freya answered after a moment, once she had an explanation for the situation, which seemed to contradict her previous thoughts.

"I see. That makes sense."

Indeed, Freya's assumption was correct. The objects could have been called a bonus. They were wooden tags. They had Anna's signature and the Krakow crest burned into them, along with the date.

Presenting these items at the city's establishments over the next two days would enable them to have their bills paid by Anna. They only could be used in places like bars, restaurants, inns, and brothels—places that handled ephemeral

goods. If not, particularly cunning mercenaries would use them for weapons, jewels, or similar, and then sell them off later.

It was a necessary measure for Anna. After all, she had arrived on flying horseback with nothing but the clothes she was wearing. Unfortunate though it was, she didn't have the money with her to pay for their services upfront.

Luckily, she was well-placed and well-regarded by the merchants, so they would accept deferred payment. That said, she wanted this to be a *personal* achievement. Any money used for it could not come from the royal coffers, but from her own private assets.

She had been raising money by investing in many promising businesses and craftsmen, and offering charters. She therefore had considerably more money than other female royal her age. Still, paying both the mercenaries' normal rates *and* bonuses was a significant burden.

Of course, Zenjirou had no knowledge of those circumstances. "It seems like they are finished."

"So it appears."

The people in the courtyard began to break away as Anna announced the end of her presentation. The mercenaries immediately began calling out to people —likely bar-and innkeepers familiar with them. While the tags were only valid for the next two days, they were essentially unlimited credit cards until then.

Very few mercenaries were the kind of people to wait until the sun was over the yard arm. Additionally, while the money was unlimited, the drinks, food, and whores were not. There would not necessarily be enough to slate the various thirsts of so many mercenaries. Those with some experience knew as much, so they hurriedly raced off to get the booze and women they wanted.

Their victory achieved, Yan's group was disbanded. In other words, the fighters from the *Glasir's Leaf* were also finished with their work. None of the three had been majorly wounded, and they eventually made their way to Zenjirou and Freya, reporting on the details of the battle to the best of their abilities.

While only they were in the room, the chamber was a guest room from the

marquis, so it felt somewhat wrong to receive what amounted to an intelligence report there. Still, the three had made no attempts to hide their affiliation as they asked to join, and they had still been accepted. It likely didn't matter at this point.

"...and then the bastards turned tail and ran."

"We got your orders, so we kept by the rear with the archers. We didn't fight 'em directly."

"S'none of us got much outta it. It's kinda a shame."

"Good work. Naturally, we cannot have you using the tags from Her Highness, so we will buy them from you. Is that acceptable, Sir Zenjirou?"

She asked him because the entire operation had essentially been at his behest. Therefore, he would be the one paying.

"That will not be a problem. Would the local coins be acceptable? We will not be in the commonwealth for long, but unfortunately, I have none of your currency."

If it came to it, he could have Freya exchange some of the coins, but he asked just to be certain. The three men turned their almost bear-like faces to exchange looks and wicked grins.

"That's nah problem."

"It'd be better, even."

"They spend just as well back home. The girls like it more if we... Ah, apologies."

The last man cut himself off when he noticed his princess sending a withering glare his way, scrunching his large frame up in apology.

A currency's strength was more or less tied to its country's economic strength. It was hardly pleasant to hear one's own countrymen—particularly one ostensibly on state-service—say they preferred another country's, however true it may be.

With the matter of recompense solved, Zenjirou asked for more detail on what he wanted to know.

“Would you say the victory hinged on those weapons that made noise and smoke?”

His tension must have shown through his uncharacteristically grave expression because the three men matched his look and nodded.

“Yeah, definitely.”

“It stank and sounded like Ymir’s fart. Their horses all bolted.”

“Some of the knights fell, but I was pretty surprised myself, so I ain’t sure what happened.”

The sound, smoke, and scent all came together such that all Zenjirou could think of were guns. Freya and the three fighters all seemed unaware of them as well, so how widely had they spread?

“That attack was by Commander Yan’s apprentices, right? Do you remember any of the other mercenaries, or the knights reacting to them? Did any of them seem to recognize what happened?”

The three exchanged looks.

“Well...”

“None, I guess.”

“Yeah, they were all flat on their arses with shock. Well...so were we, in fairness.”

Zenjirou breathed a sigh of relief at no one seeming to understand. That meant it was either a brand new weapon or a minor one that hadn’t spread for whatever reason.

To make sure, he continued his questioning. “Was there nothing mentioned about them on the way back?”

“’Course there was. I mean, we won ’cause of them. We were all asking the commander and his men to sell them or at least tell us where they were sold.”

“I see. Did you get a close look at one?”

One of them answered after considering the question. “No. They were kept in leather bags. I got a glimpse during the fight and I think it looked a bit like a long

black pipe. Sorry, I didn't get a proper look during the fighting, though."

"You need not apologize. If anything, I'm impressed you managed to find out that much on such short notice *and* on the battlefield. Well done."

"Thank ye kindly." The man's smile was more like a snarling bear.

One of the others seemed eager to capitalize and added a comment of his own. "Actually, that reminds me. He called the men with them 'pipers.'"

"Pipers..."

What did he mean by that? Was it likening the noise to the instruments? Maybe because a straight metal tube looked like one? Whatever the case, the fact that there were thirty men used to—and accomplished in—using those "pipes" in battle weighed heavily on him.

"That may prove useful in the future, although I am unsure," he said. "Either way, good work. Here is your payment, including for the tags, so exchange them if you would."

At that, Ines—who had been waiting off to the side—brought three bags of coins out. Zenjirou personally handed them over, and the three men happily took the hefty bags.

"Thank ye kindly," the first said.

"Nice weight to it," added the second.

"Oh, Sir Zenjirou, I love you," the third finished.

They had rather rudely each opened them and looked at the contents before cheering. Zenjirou smiled weakly while Freya slumped in embarrassment. Although allowing poor manners to pass in favor of competence was one thing, a superior would still be put out by their underlings acting in such a way.

Zenjirou would feel sorry for forcing Freya to stay in that situation for much longer, so he gave them leave to go.

"You may leave us now," he told them.

"Right, 'scuse us."

"Thank ye."

“Yah! Let’s go!”

They left with much lighter steps than their bulky frames would suggest. Freya hurriedly called out after them.

“The men with tags will be out downtown. I won’t forbid some drinking and tomfoolery, but do not cause issues with them. Understood?”

“Yes!”

“Got it!”

“Don’t worry, we won’t lose to them!”

The three finally left with energetic—though perhaps disconcerting—yells.

“Oh, for the love of...”

Zenjirou couldn’t help but laugh at her sigh before offering some consolation. “For better or worse, they’re used to this sort of thing. I doubt it will amount to much.”

“Likewise. Still, there is the chance...” She let out a sigh with a sour look before forcing a smile back on her face as she changed tacks. “Your insight here has very much impressed me. You took a minor hint to the extreme.”

“Not at all. It was mostly coincidence and certainly not worth such an estimation.”

He wasn’t being modest; that was just how it was. This time, it had led to rather valuable information, but that was a one-in-a-hundred instance of his overly worrying nature playing out well.

“Even so, it is of great aid to me. It is important to get this information to my homeland as quickly as possible.”

Her comment prompted him to ask her opinion. “Then would you say that these weapons and their use are worth being wary of?”

Freya nodded immediately. “Of course. It goes without saying that a weapon capable of turning back the knights could change the battlefield immensely.”

“I think a large part of its success is that they didn’t know of it and this was the first time it was fielded.”

An unknown weapon was much like an ambush, but in tactics rather than a tactic itself. Assuming it would continue to perform as well would have you soon reaching an impasse.

While she agreed with what he was saying in general, Freya did not feel this was entirely the case. “Horses are delicate creatures to begin with. The sound and stench should remain effective on them for quite a while.”

“Animals can learn and become used to things, though. An untrained horse will bolt just at soldiers yelling, for example. When they are trained, though, they will happily canter across the battlefield. In which case, eventually the gunf—the noise of those new weapons will be something they train against.”

“You think we will see such horses?”

“I do.”

While Zenjirou’s memories were vague, horses had not disappeared from the frontlines even after guns took on leading roles in warfare. There was something weighing even more heavily on his mind, though.

“You mentioned that, so far, magic has stamped out weapons using black powder. Do you think the same will happen with these?”

Freya considered his question seriously for a while before eventually shaking her head. “I am unsure. I believe there is the possibility, but the conditions are different this time. Prior examples were mostly siege equipment, heavy weapons for either assaulting or defending castles. That made it easy for a decent mage to aim and light them, in addition to ensuring that doing so had a significant effect. Thirty of them, each carried by a separate soldier, though, makes the situation very different.”

Put rather inhumanely, it made things cost-ineffective. Even on a national level, there were exceptionally few mages skilled enough to cast on the battlefield. Exposing some of them to danger to destroy a cannon for assaulting a castle might be worth it. Additionally, a single shot could take several minutes for a cannon, so it was rather unlikely the mage would die.

A few dozen soldiers was a different matter, though. A man-portable gun would not necessarily have sufficient gunpowder with it to kill its wielder even if

they did light it. There were too many as well; a single mage would not necessarily be able to disable all of them with a single casting. If one of them managed to escape, the mage was then at much greater risk.

Mages of such value would be guarded, but a gun might manage to slip through the defenses and kill the mage regardless. Was it worth exposing the mage to such danger just to damage a few dozen guns and riflemen? Even Zenjirou's rough estimations of reality on the battlefield made it obvious it was not cost-effective.

That train of thought then led to another realization. "Right, cost-effectiveness. Why no guns yet, even though there have been cannons? Well, maybe there have been, just very few?" he muttered to himself.

"Sir Zenjirou?" Freya asked, not catching what he had said from her position opposite him.

"Your Highness, have there been any recent—say, within the last few decades—major advances in ironwork?"

"Well, that is rather outside of my knowledge, although, I do remember an older warrior saying that ironware had gotten a lot cheaper than it used to be." She had some general knowledge as a royal, but her youth meant she was unfamiliar with its history and progress.

"I see."

Either improvement in furnaces or energy input through waterwheels had led to an increase in production. That, in turn, made guns economical to produce. Those were his assumptions, and they seemed to be borne out.

I'm a complete amateur, though, so this is practically just make-believe.

Still, he couldn't ignore the possibility. At the very least, he had to tell Aura when he got back to Capua.

Mages won't be enough against mass-produced guns. What's the alternative, then? If there was a safer way to light the guns aflame, that'd work.

A figure flashed through Zenjirou's mind, Fiqriya Animeeum of one of the four ducal families of Sharou-Gilbelle. She had shown him a spell that was called

Jinnia Summoning. What the spell actually did was create a golem that followed the caster's instructions. It was made of one of the four major elements.

In other words, fire, water, air, or earth. In and of itself, the spell was short-lived and of little utility, but the Twin Kingdoms had their trump card of enchanting.

Capua had marbles, a medium that drastically decreased the amount of time it took to create a magic tool. Therefore, if the two countries worked together, they could mass produce magic tools to a degree far beyond what was currently possible.

If mass-produced water golems were set against soldiers with mass produced guns, would *that* be more cost-effective?

It was at that point that Zenjirou realized he was letting his thoughts get away from him and brought his attention back to the present.

"Sir Zenjirou? Is something the matter?"

"No, nothing. I was simply thinking that the Northern Continent is advanced both technologically and socially."

"Złota Wolność is the leading country even on the Northern Continent. Of course, I would say that my own homeland is in no way inferior in terms of blacksmithing."

"That is heartening to hear."

The countries on the Northern Continent were building up their strength and expanding. That expansion was not necessarily going to be across the land either. It made all too much sense for it to be via sea as well.

Zenjirou had already developed enough as royalty to see the threat that the tendency potentially represented.

Chapter 5 — Victory Party

In the end, the travelers were unable to shake off Anna and attended the victory party. It was being held at night five days after the one-eyed mercenary brought back news of his victory. The venue was—naturally—the marquis's estate. Sponsored by royalty and held to celebrate a great victory, it was far greater in scale than the welcome for Freya that Zenjirou had participated in previously.

While they had only five days' notice, there were many nobles from a considerable distance away who had come to celebrate. That was likely a combination of the city's prominent place as a port and the Husaria's ability to spread information almost unfairly fast.

The princess herself had not left the estate, what with the preparations for the party, but the other two Husaria had ridden out to invite influential nobles from the surrounding areas.

The main people they focused on were those with territory on the coast. Those with access to the sea could use boats to travel far faster than by land.

While the estate was large enough to represent a seat of power, it was not enough to accommodate so many external nobles. Guests outside of the most important would be staying in the various establishments throughout the city.

Due to that, the travelers along with the Yans had vacated the Ancient Arbor and would be staying at the estate. Zenjirou had offered to set sail if preparing a room was too much, but there had been no reply.

What that meant in practice was that Lucretia had now been brought from the Ancient Arbor to the estate.

"Apologies for the inconvenience, Lucy," he said to her.

"Not at all," she replied with a full smile. "I have been most at ease thanks to your maids and guards assisting me." Her shifting sidetail reminded him of a dog wagging its tail.

Apparently, Lucretia had exchanged some gold coins from the Twin Kingdoms

with the manager and used the money to go shopping.

Lucretia, her maid Flora, and Margarette—who Zenjirou had lent to Lucretia—were all hard to distinguish from the locals by sight. Due to that, they had been able to enjoy their shopping without any real incident.

“It was a rather new experience to go to the shop myself rather than summon a merchant. I overstayed somewhat.”

That comment was proof of her high position as nobility.

Still, Zenjirou was rather relieved she had not been overly put upon by the situation. It made things much easier for the party that night.

“I see. I am glad to hear it. Incidentally, I imagine you have heard about the party tonight, but I will need to escort Princess Freya.”

There was a touch of excusing himself in his somewhat faster tone, but Lucretia offered an understanding look. It was not a feigned expression either. She seemed to realize that Zenjirou felt somewhat guilty about leaving her alone both this time and last.

“I know. I will wait here, so I hope you enjoy yourself.” That was why she spoke understandingly, to spur on those feelings. However, she didn’t expect his reply.

“Marquis Pomorskie has made an offer on that front. If his uncle is acceptable, he can offer an escort for you. He also indicated that while you would have to enter and leave together, you would be able to do as you pleased for the rest of the evening. What do you say?”

It was obvious that the marquis’s uncle—with the marquis himself being in his forties—would be in the latter half of his fifties. He was a gentleman starting to be classed as elderly. He was, of course, already married. He also had children, and even grandchildren. He was the perfect choice to escort Lucretia without causing any misunderstandings.

Indeed, it was far from rare for a girl to convince her grandfather to be her escort to these parties, although such girls were usually somewhat younger.

It was also possible that the marquis had judged Lucretia’s age to be younger

from her stature and looks. Either way, it was still a chance for her.

“I will be there!” she replied immediately.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

It was the night of the party. Złota Wolność had won against their “old enemies,” and while the party was rather small for one being held by royalty, it was rather impressive for such a rapid turnaround.

Due to the party being to celebrate the victory, the mercenaries’ employer—Anna—and their commander—Yan—were both present. The mercenary being a former noble was rather convenient in this instance. He could dress as such without issue along with maintaining decorum as he interacted with others.

As for Anna, it would be unthinkable for her to wear her uniform, so she was clad in a crimson dress. It seemed that Złota Wolność had red as the emblematic color for their royals as well.

Capua having the same royal color meant that Zenjirou was also wearing a red outfit. However, his was not clothing from the Northern Continent. Instead, he was wearing the third uniform derived from the traditional clothing of Capua. There was no way he would be mistaken as part of the commonwealth’s royal family.

He surveyed the venue as those thoughts passed through his mind and noticed a surprising number of people wearing red. On the Southern Continent, an event hosted by the royal family would have seen only the royal family wearing those colors. Was it so different here? It seemed *highly* unlikely that the dozen or more people he could currently see wearing red were involved with the royal family.

Seeming to notice his roving gaze, Freya—her arm linked with his and wearing a pale blue dress—spoke to him.

“Sir Zenjrou? Is something the matter?”

“No. It is just that on the Southern Continent, there is an unwritten rule that only the royal family can wear their color at this kind of event. I was just

wondering if that was different here.”

“Ah, that is true, now that I think about it.” AS Freya wasn’t terribly familiar with the customs of Złota Wolność, she could say nothing for certain.

“So that isn’t the case for the entirety of the continent?” “Indeed. In Uppasala, normal nobles do not wear the blue of our royal family. Of course, those *recognized* by the country are a different matter, and when those from our lands attend parties abroad, they specifically *do* wear blue to represent our home.”

“I see. That is more or less the same as on the Southern Continent.”

Did that mean it was just Złota Wolność that was different in this way? They were a country that allowed religious freedom, so in some ways, it would make sense if they allowed more freedom in fashion as well.

They had not exactly kept their voices low, so nearby people had been able to hear them. A young couple wearing red outfits smiled in their direction. Noticing the signal, Zenjirou escorted Freya over to them.

“I am Zenjirou, spouse of Queen Aura I of Capua. This is Princess Freya of Uppasala.”

“I am the first princess of Uppasala, Freya Uppasala.”

While last time, he had only used his name, this time, he followed Anna’s desires and purposefully introduced himself as the queen’s spouse. His position here was unofficial, but Anna was recognizing him as royalty. The situation was even more complicated than before.

The young man introduced himself in turn. “I am the current head of the Horszowski family of Złota Wolność, Eugeniusz. It is an honor to meet you both. This is my wife.”

“My name is Teresa, Your Majesty, Your Highness.”

The man seemed around the same age as Zenjirou, while the woman was four or five years younger. It was hard to tell for sure, but they certainly fit the category of a “young couple.”

Although Zenjirou had technically been the one to start the conversation, it

had been due to a smile of invitation from the man. He immediately followed the line of questioning that made sense.

“There are many here wearing the same color as the royal family. Is there a reason for that?” he asked the couple, who were doing exactly that.

The two had seemed not to want to hide it, and were in fact eager to talk about it.“That is due to us being nobles since the founding of our country. Such families are specially permitted to wear this color during public events. We are known as the *Karminowa Szlachta*,” the man said proudly, straightening.

His wife then interjected with a grin, “But hat is the *only* extra right we get.”

It seemed to practically be a set conversation as the man laughed cheerily at the shot from his wife. Now that Zenjirou looked, not all of the people wearing red were in the finest of clothing. Quite a few had simply gone for the plainest outfits that would be permitted at the venue. The lack of other rights was likely the truth.

“She is quite right. The Horszowski family is a poor family for the nobility, with no lands of our own. If I had not managed to join the Husaria, I would not even be able to buy my wife a new dress each year.”

Zenjirou was taken aback by the husband’s statement. “Oh, Lord Eugeniusz, you are part of the Husaria? Were you one of those accompanying Her Highness the other day?”

The man laughed and shook his head. “No, I was not. I simply flew here once I heard of this party.”

“Your wife as well?” Zenjirou asked in surprise.

“Indeed. The two of us enjoyed the trip through the night sky on a single winged horse.”

“Ah, is that safe?” Freya asked hesitantly.

“I am long used to it now,” Teresa said with a reluctant smile.

So, it wasn’t the first time they had done something like that.

“That is...rather brave,” Freya said, unable to see their actions any other way. While someone like the princess, who could use flight magic, was one thing,

Teresa riding behind her husband as he controlled the horse would take a lot of courage.

Teresa chuckled. “Thank you, but it is not all bad. Being able to ride as a couple has more benefits than you might think.

She then began to explain some of them. They were, at least technically, the heads of a noble family. There were many formalities that needed both husband and wife in attendance. Being able to fly in on short notice to such events was rather convenient. Such a position—even if it came with costs—was well worth securing.

“I see. Then I assume you have a good deal of valuable experience, Lord Eugeniusz.”

“I would be willing to discuss it with you if you were interested,” the man offered.

“I would greatly appreciate it.”

“Then perhaps I should talk about the ascension of a new duke in the Duchy of Tirana? We needed to send someone in urgently, and that was the first time...”

Zenjirou spent a while listening to the young couple’s history. They were more like flying diplomats than knights.

“The conversation was well worthwhile, Lord Eugeniusz. I thank you,” Zenjirou said.

“It was an honor, Your Majesty.”

“I would gladly welcome you if you ever visit Uppasala,” Freya said to the man’s wife.

“I look forward to it if I ever have the opportunity, Your Highness.”

Zenjirou and Freya finished their conversation and parted ways. As Zenjirou let his eyes roam around the room, he spotted one of the very few familiar faces. The girl had her characteristic hairstyle—tied at the side—and was wearing a green dress over her slight frame. Lucretia.

She was accompanied by an aging man and speaking animatedly with a

middle-aged couple. She seemed to be integrating well into the event. The other couple seemed well disposed to her too. It made sense for a born-and-raised noble. She was clearly standing several levels higher than Zenjirou.

Her conversation seemed to have come to an end as the couple parted from her with smiles. Zenjirou took the opportunity to approach. His initial greeting went to her escort.

“Marquis Dolny, your assistance today is appreciated.”

“Why, Your Majesty, it has been a pleasure. Escorting a young beauty like this takes me back to my youth in body and soul.”

“Well, you have been a most agreeable escort,” the blonde said with a smile, her arm wrapped around his.

Zenjirou then directed his gaze her way. “Hey, Lucy. Enjoying yourself?”

“I am, Your Majesty.”

Her smile seemed to be the embodiment of the word “innocence.” If one were to point out a problem, it would be the accompanying clenching of her hands together in front of her chest, demonstrating the effort she was putting in. Such efforts were actually rather effective in social settings like this, though. In some ways, you could call her as diligent as the knights and soldiers who trained their art day in and out.

“I have rather enjoyed seeing this country’s culture. What about you, Lucy?”

“I quite agree. The kingdom is incredible. The food, clothing, and accessories —both personal and those that decorate the rooms—are amazing. Both the familiar ones and the things new to me. And look at this: the marquis has given it to me.”

As she spoke, Lucretia happily showed him a circle on the end of a stick. It was roughly palm-sized. The rear of it was a silver setting with golden flowers embedded into it as decoration. As he looked into the front of it, he saw his familiar reflection looking back at him.

“A mirror... A *glass* mirror?! Marquis, this is such a valuable gift.”

The man’s eyes narrowed briefly at his surprise before his face smoothed out

into a kindly look. “It is nothing so major. While our continent has only very recently managed to make them, our country has a contract with the manufacturer. We can buy them before they hit the open market.”

“It is that precious?” Lucretia asked. “Then allow me to offer my thanks yet again.” Her big blue eyes had gotten even bigger as she spoke happily. It was likely the first time she had seen such a thing. Until now, she had probably thought it was the same kind of thing as metal mirrors. The only people who could tell the difference at a glance would be those who already knew of their existence.

“Allow me to offer my thanks as well, Marquis Dolny.”

Lucretia was even happier with Zenjirou’s thanks than the marquis was. He felt she was close enough that he would offer thanks for gifts given to her.

“Not at all. While I have grandsons, I have yet to be blessed with a granddaughter. It is a rather valuable experience for me as well.” His expression was the perfect fit for the kindly old grandfather.

“I see. I must admit that the luxuries of this country impress me. There is such a wide variety of food and drink, to say nothing of the art pieces.”

The other man puffed his chest out slightly as he answered.

“It is a source of our pride and represents us. That is the source of our wealth. I doubt there are any other countries with as many ties as our own. That has resulted in our benefits, though there are naturally some annoyances as well.”

The commonwealth publicly recognized freedom of religion, so they were able to negotiate with animistic countries, those that followed either the Church of the Fang or Church of the Claw, as well as those with other religions like the Red and White Dragon Kingdoms. The same went for countries on the Southern Continent as well.

The distance and commonwealth’s tendency to focus on land transport meant that it was a step behind the countries further south where intercontinental trade was concerned. Conversely, though, its position in the middle of the continent meant it could still get a slice of the pie.

“I suppose so. There are always those willing to take advantage of tolerance.

The fact that tolerance has survived while the nation is prosperous is proof that it has not been done excessively. I have a lot of respect for the politicians and educators of this country."

"I could ask for no higher praise," the man said happily. "It seems somewhat disingenuous to say at a victory party, but we always intend to be open to a dialogue. Of course, there are occasions when one has to leave the table before anything else."

"Regarding everyone as worth talking to in that way is a difficult thing to ask. That is what makes it so valuable."

"My thanks. Well, I suppose I should specify that such dialogue would be for those outside of the White Empire."

His tone was that of someone cracking a joke. Still, it was an interesting thing for Zenjirou, so he answered in kind.

"Oh, so you won't sit down with the White Empire?"

"You know of them?"

"I would not say I *know*, but I have heard of them. They were a superstate that used to rule the continent, apparently, though I have also heard that their existence is disputed."

The man offered a slight shrug. "There are indeed no documents or ruins that prove their existence. Well, strictly speaking, many documents have been found but have all been determined to be false."

"Then it truly is just a fairy tale? My impression of the country so far makes me doubt you would show such hostility towards something barely thought to exist."

Dolny gave a half-smile and nodded. "You are quite right. However, this relates to the tales of our predecessor's founding—the Kingdom of Poznan. Enough people believe the tale that ignoring it is impossible."

He then gave a brief summation of the founding of the nation that had come before them. The kingdom had originally been under the rule of the White Empire, and their rule had been with an iron fist. The citizens had rebelled over

and over, and the center of their rebellion had been the Krakow family with their flight magic.

However, as you might expect from the fact that it had happened multiple times, they had all been crushed. The kingdom had eventually been formed when the White Empire tried to rule even the true dragons and incited their anger, being destroyed.

The abbreviated tale didn't sit quite right with Zenjirou. Repeated, *failed* rebellions that ended in further subjugation each time, only being freed by the supernatural true dragons defeating their oppressors. Would a country pass down tales that made them seem so pathetic? If they *did*, surely it would be more along the lines of, "Our ancestors were just and honest, and were therefore oppressed by the wicked White Empire. The true dragons had mercy upon us and wiped out the vicious empire, saving us." They would surely stress their own righteousness and the empire's wickedness.

The myth having such oddities in it served to make it seem rather credible, though. But if that was true, the Poznans—along with the White Empire, of course—would have existed in the Divine Age, before the true dragons left humanity and the church was formed. That much, at least, felt impossible.

"Literature aside, the lack of any ruins is quite bizarre."

The marquis agreed with the objection and then explained. "You are quite right. However, there are reasons that such things have never been found."

"Oh?"

"The White Empire was a completely magic-based culture that did not rely on physical things at all."

"A...magic-based culture that did not rely on physical things? That is rather hard to imagine. You mean to say they made no use of tools, constructed no homes, and just lived in the nude?"

The man shook his dignified gray-haired head in response. "No, they used magic for all of those things. The Twelve Royal Families all had lineal magic. The explanation goes that the force magic of the first family—the Nikitin family—along with the creation magic of the second family—the Makarov family—were

even used for conveyances from their homes.”

Zenjirou imagined buildings and vehicles made by magic. The best he could come up with were the standard sci-fi cities, but using magic as their power source. That still left a question, though.

“Hm? I am not particularly knowledgeable about magic, but are the results not usually very short-lived?”

You could create a ball of water, but it would only *remain* a ball for a very brief moment before falling to the ground. Earth walls would remain semi-permanently, so he could understand the buildings at first. Then he thought about it and realized that it contradicted the lack of ruins after the empire’s collapse.

When he asked the question, the marquis chuckled before answering. “The other families played a part. The Orlofsky family’s contract magic and the Shulepov family’s enchantment magic made up for that—they were the third and fourth families, respectively. The combination of their spells allowed them to vastly increase the duration of each. Of course, however long spells are extended, magic is still magic. The true dragon’s strength unraveled the mana and it all returned to nothing. Anything that was left would naturally fall apart with no one to supply mana to it.”

“Contract and...enchantment?” Zenjirou couldn’t help but be hung up on the latter. Was it the *same* enchantment magic?

“Indeed. Well, there are no records, so there is no foundation for those assumptions. Still, it at least seems logical as an explanation for a civilization vanishing without a trace, no?” His tone seemed to imply that he, too, was not entirely convinced. He did not seem to be looking down on the story itself, but was instead reluctant to take any such explanation with no evidence.

Zenjirou’s mind was spinning with enchantment magic, though. The fourth family of the White Empire, the Shulepovs, had enchantment as their lineal magic. The Sharou family of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle had the same.

If a family with lineal magic was wiped out, then eventually the spirits would bless a new family with the same magic, so it was entirely possible that the

Shulepov and Sharou families were completely unrelated. However, a royal family on the Southern Continent with the same features as those on the Northern Continent meant that it would be somewhat hasty to assume no connection.

Naturally, Zenjirou found his gaze drifting to the noble girl from the country in question. Someone who, by blood, was part of the Sharou family.

He kept the action as natural as possible to keep the marquis and anyone else around from making any assumptions. Lucretia was standing there, an empty cup in her hands and her usual smile on her face. However, her face was utterly pale.



Zenjirou could tell because of how familiar he was with her, but she was keeping her composure well enough that no one else would notice. He felt like looking her way might have been a mistake. The other two members of the conversation had followed suit.

Foreseeing things going badly, he quickly stepped towards her. Smelling alcohol from her drink, he spoke before anyone else could point it out.

“You look a little pale, Lucy. The drink you have is probably slightly strong for you. Has the alcohol disagreed with you?”

She responded, “Is it? I hadn’t realized, though now that you mention it, my stomach feels slightly uncomfortable,” she replied, putting a hand to her chest.

“Ah, maybe it hasn’t settled well with you. It can sometimes happen when you have a wider variety of food and drink. Lady Lucretia, perhaps you should rest over on the side for now,” the marquis suggested, fulfilling his role as escort with some concern as he held a hand out to her.

Lucretia had reflexively grabbed Zenjirou’s sleeve, though. “Ah...I, um...”

Her escort was the marquis, and Zenjirou was Freya’s partner. Taking the latter’s hand without Freya’s permission was somewhat immodest, but Lucretia’s younger appearance helped.

“Oh, well, I suppose His Majesty would be preferable here.”

Everyone knew that Lucretia was from the Southern Continent and had come with Zenjirou on the *Glasir’s Leaf.* It was only natural for her to fall back on someone from the same place rather than a partner she had only met for the first time that day. Besides, said partner was only strictly meant to escort her during the very beginning and end of the party, and the rest of the time, she was free to do as she pleased.

Zenjirou turned to Freya to ask for permission. “Your Highness, I apologize, but would you mind me heading to the side for a while?”

“Of course not. Lucy is a good friend of mine, after all.”

Spending more than three months on the same ship meant that the two had gotten closer whether they had wanted to or not. After all, they were the only

two women of a similar age on the ship.

“Thank you. Lucy, there is a place to sit over that way. Can you walk?” he asked.

“I can. My apologies, Marquis.”

“Do not worry about it. Relax and rest.”

They left the gentleman and silver-haired princess as Zenjirou led her by the hand to some chairs along the wall. Fortunately, the party had only just begun, so there were few people there. Once he made sure of that, he murmured into her ear, keeping his expression under control.

“I would like to hear the details later,” he said to her.

Lucretia’s expression didn’t change either as she replied, “Gladly, once we are back on the Southern Continent.”

He swallowed back his surprise before he spoke. “Very well. Until then.”

Her answer would come not when they left the country, but rather when they had left the *continent*. That itself was an answer. There was at least some connection between the Twin Kingdoms and the White Empire. It was information that was clearly going to cause issues in the future.

While it was somewhat indiscreet, Zenjirou couldn’t help his excitement. This was an ancient superstate that was considered a mere myth on the Southern Continent. While he knew it would cause him issues, he couldn’t deny that he was looking forward to finding out about it.

“If I may sit?”

“Of course.”

He took a seat on the chair next to hers. “You can relax until you have calmed down,” he said.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She had already recovered a significant amount of color in her cheeks as she replied.

As Zenjirou and Lucretia sat next to each other by the walls, there was a stirring towards the front of the hall.

“What is it?”

“What’s going on?”

The two of them couldn’t see since the crowds were in the way. Still, a voice carried over to them before they could stand.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased that so many of you have made your way to this celebration of our victory!”

It was a young woman’s voice, strong and carrying. Zenjirou knew who it was without even seeing her: Princess Anna. After all, she was the one holding the event.

He didn’t know what she was going to say, but he knew there was a reason for her timing. The night had begun and almost all of the latecomers had already arrived. Furthermore, the people who would leave early had not yet departed, so this was the time of night when the most people would be present.

He was somewhat interested in why had specifically picked this time, but considering he was here as another royal, he didn’t think he should join the crowds around her. Fortunately, he could hear what she was saying from where he was, so he remained seated against the wall as he listened to her speech.

“As I said to begin with, this banquet is to commemorate our saving Pomorskie from the foul grasp of the knights. Please, a round of applause for Commander Yan, the representative of the heroes who saved our city!”

The circle of people followed her request, all applauding at once. While he couldn’t see from his position, the commander must have also been in the midst of the crowd.

Anna’s speech continued. “Thanks to Commander Yan’s efforts, Pomorskie experienced no problems. It is a joyous occasion. However, does that mean the threat of the knights is gone? It goes without saying that the answer to that question is no! It is not! The knights even now maintain their strength as they

seek our lands. I have succeeded in divining the next signs of their invasion!”

The people around her cried out in surprise. Zenjirou might not have been among them, but he certainly shared in their surprise. This attack was not their only plan—they were planning on further invasions? And Anna had managed to find signs of those plans.

He couldn’t help but look to his side. Lucretia’s eyes were equally wide in shock.

“And yet, it was hardly due to anyone’s skill or talent. The knights are simply not even attempting to hide it. They are massing troops on our northern border. Currently, they are ten thousand strong but will eventually be at least twenty, possibly even thirty thousand.”

Even more shocked exclamations rang out this time. It wasn’t something Zenjirou fully understood, but military movements in such numbers were exceptionally rare, even on the Northern Continent.

It seemed the knights were aiming to decide things once and for all rather than carry on with the skirmishes that had characterized their conflict with Złota Wolność thus far. The surprise attack on Pomorskie was more than likely intended as a foothold for their main invasion.

“The danger of the situation goes unsaid. I believe there is not a single noble who will sit and bury their head in the sand in the face of this crisis. Naturally, that is equally true of me. I will pass command of my men to Yan here and send them to the battlefield. I ask for all of your aid! And it will not be just our own country. I say we should pool our strength with those neighbors we can—those who stand against to the knights. Tannenwald is likely to be the site of our conflict!”

Tannenwald was not a place Zenjirou was familiar with, but it was open territory on the border between the knights’ lands and Złota Wolność. There were a limited number of places where armies of such a scale could clash. As your opponent’s forces grew in size, you could inevitably predict where you would face off.

“Still, will the commander be under her employ at that point?” Zenjirou mused. “I thought the contract was only for this battle and then he’d be

returning to the priest.”

“Was that specifically agreed, Your Majesty?” Lucretia asked from his side. “Was their contract explicitly for the defense against this one attack by the knights?”

While she was young, she was a born-and-raised noble. She was far more used to the tricks of wording and implications that royalty and nobility thrived on than Zenjirou.

He thought back and eventually shook his head. “No, it wasn’t. I think it was to lead the forces against this invasion from the knights.” As he spoke, he realized what she was doing.

“This means she is keeping to their agreement. She is explicitly including the forthcoming war as part of this invasion, not just the sneak attack, I should say.”

“I suppose that is what you should expect from royalty,” he replied, sighing without really thinking about it.

Silence reigned over the throng of people for a while.

“To Tannenwald,” a young noble finally murmured, breaking the silence with a fist to his chest.

That was the spark that was needed.

“Tannenwald...”

“To Tannenwald.”

“Now, to Tannenwald!”

One after another, the nobles spoke the battlefield’s name. It was quiet and scattered at first but eventually grew louder and more unified. Soon, everyone was practically chanting it as a refrain. Some of the men even had their fists raised gallantly towards the sky.



It was perhaps inevitable, but Zenjirou and Lucretia's position against the wall excluded them from the cheering, both physically and psychologically.

"That's some zeal," Zenjirou commented.

"I suppose it is Her Majesty's influence in effect," Lucretia replied.

It was rather discomfiting to witness their fervor from the outside. Then, Zenjirou heard footsteps approaching and remembered the other person who was divorced from the situation.

"Princess Freya," he said, calling the silver-haired princess's name.

Her feelings had spread onto her face. They weren't all of a kind, so he struggled to read her expression, but he could at least see the mix of anger and irritation, along with a reluctant smile.

"Is something the matter, Princess Freya?" Lucretia asked hesitantly.

The princess shook her head, the self-deprecating smile still on her face. "No, I am just reflecting on my carelessness, too late though it may be."

"Your carelessness?" Zenjirou asked, looking at her, puzzled.

She let out a long, resigned sigh. "The *Glasir's Leaf* will be departing soon. Princess Anna will be there with a grand farewell," she said, her voice lacking any real intonation.

"Hmm?" He could tell from her tone that this was not a good thing. However, he had no idea why it was bad.

"I have made a blunder that will inevitably draw scolding from my father once I return. Did you hear her speech? She said, 'We should pool our strength with those neighbors we can—those who stand against the knights.'"

Zenjirou gave a small gasp of surprise. It went without saying that Uppasala—an animistic country—would be one of those neighbors.

"I beg your pardon, but you are only a princess. Surely even should she win you over, it does not mean the kingdom itself would become her ally?"

The self-recrimination strengthened on Freya's face as she shook her head. "It is not a matter of how things will be taken at home. The issue is how the knights

will take both my attendance at this party and the grand farewell as I leave."

"Ah, I see," Zenjirou replied, now understanding Anna's plan fully.

Złota Wolność was asking for assistance from various countries for their war with the knights. A princess of Uppasala—an animistic country—was present where that announcement was made. Several days later, said princess would be given a grand farewell by the royal family of Złota Wolność as she returned to her homeland.

At that point, the knights would be unable to ignore her kingdom. Whether Uppasala would actually be participating in the war was unimportant. The possibility alone would make the knights wary, and they would have to prepare at least some of their forces for such an attack.

It was a significant military success for the princess. The assembly had gone from listening to a speech to being a rally, before eventually calming as their role was fulfilled.

Anna strode away from the loosening formation, blue hair glinting in the light. A middle-aged man with a single eye covered with an eyepatch watched her—Yan. Judging by the chagrined look on his face, being given command of the next battle had been just as much of a shock to him.

"Good evening, Your Majesty. I hope you are enjoying the festivities?" Anna said.

"I am, though not as much as yourself, I wager," Zenjirou replied, instinctively returning some rather direct cynicism.

No one present had gained as much as the princess had. She doubtlessly *was* enjoying the festivities. After all, this victory party had enabled her to use Zenjirou's position as a foreign prince consort to strengthen the possibility of her ascending to the throne, allowed her to draw out her contract with Yan to the next grand battle, and restrained the knights with an implicit threat of another country by using Freya. She must have been all but walking on sunshine.

"Indeed. While it was unavoidable in this instance, I understand the inconvenience that keeping you here must have caused. Additionally, you have

greatly aided me during this victory party. It would impugn my honor to leave my thanks as words alone. Your Majesty, is there anything I can do to repay you?”

Despite her words, Zenjirou would much rather have had no involvement with the princess than have her offer him something in thanks. A forceful, intelligent, ambitious person was the worst kind of person to negotiate with.

That said, his experience in the world of business meant that he understood that as long as circumstances were beneficial for such people, they would not take exception to even a modest response—in which case, making a request without reserve was the way to get the most out of the situation.

“There is perhaps one thing. You see, Lucy here received a wonderful gift from Marquis Dolny. Lucy?”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” she replied, accepting his request to show the mirror.

Anna gave an exaggerated look of surprise as she inspected the finely detailed mirror. “Oh? My, my. Impressive, Lord Dolny.” It would seem that even to the royal family, a glass mirror was a highly valuable item.

Seeing her reaction, Zenjirou continued. “I would like nothing more than to give another to my wife waiting at home. Would you be willing to offer an introduction to the craftsman who created this—or their guild, perhaps?”

Anna frowned, seeming conflicted. “Hm, I would not mind. Unfortunately, it was not produced by our own country’s craftsmen, but by one of our neighbors’. I can write a letter of introduction, but even contacting and visiting them personally will take a significant amount of time,” she warned him.

“I see. A shame. I will have to wait until another opportunity to place a custom order.”

“Indeed. Then perhaps a letter of introduction and a glass mirror that the royal family possesses?”

“I would appreciate that,” he replied with a nod.

It went without saying that Zenjirou did not really want the mirror itself.

Rather, he wanted glass that was transparent enough to be used for those mirrors. If he could either scout some of their craftsmen or acquire the methods they used, Capua's marble production would leap forward.

Before the journey, he had been hesitant to upset the delicate balance of power and culture on the Southern Continent. However, seeing the technology gap firsthand made him feel like that wasn't where his concerns should lie.

"I would welcome a good relationship with you into the future," Anna commented.

"I quite agree."

What constituted a "good relationship" was probably different for each of them. Still, they exchanged smiles of agreement even understanding that difference.

Epilogue — Departure

Two days later, the *Glasir's Leaf* left port to—as Freya had predicted—a grand farewell from Anna.

The sailors were already at their stations. It was only Zenjirou and Freya, along with their guards, Skaji and Natalio, who would be climbing the gangway now.

Marquis Pomorskie was standing across from them. Joining him were the fatefully connected Yans—in other words, the priest, mercenary, and orphan.

Having arranged this farewell, Anna was wearing her Husaria uniform and was astride her winged horse, circling the sky with her two fellow riders. Each of them had a length of cloth—red, white, or yellow—streaming behind them, so they were even more attention-grabbing. Looking up at them was like seeing a circle rotating through the air, split into each color a third of the way along its perimeter. The ships in port—and indeed the entirety of the town—could see that three-colored circle. The various trading vessels would talk about it at the neighboring countries' ports, spreading the news of the Husaria making a production of an Uppasalan vessel's departure.

After a while, the knight atop the red-carrying horse leaped from the sky. She was skydiving without a lifeline or parachute. The Krakow family had no need for such trifles, though. She had likely cast the spell before she jumped.

The knight fell unnaturally slowly through the air, landing in front of Zenjirou with a soft noise. She then took off the silver helmet covering her head, letting voluminous blue locks fall free. Her hair was far less ordered than a royal woman would usually show in front of others—having been bundled up in her helmet—yet the disarray was strangely fitting for the lightly armored knight.

She showed no care for her current appearance, standing boldly in front of them with a wide smile on her red lips. "Your Majesty, Your Highness. Though I hate to see you leave, I understand you have plans. You were of great help during your stay," she said, spreading her arms out. The act would normally seem somewhat amusing, but she had the charm to make it work.

“I will gratefully accept your thanks,” Zenjirou said. All too aware of how she had used and outwitted them, he was in no mood for his usual modesty.

For her part, while Freya offered a smile, she remained completely silent. While for the general populace, things might be different, nobles lived and breathed in the subtleties of speech, so they would easily be able to tell there were few pleasant feelings between the three of them.

“I truly thank the both of you,” the marquis said, taking over from Anna. “You are the saviors of our town, and I dread to think what may have happened if you had not been here.” The man’s bow was so low that he was practically on his knees. While it may have sounded somewhat exaggerated, he was speaking nothing but the truth.

Looking back, there had been no delay in the knight’s attack. Margarette might have not listened to the orphan. Zenjirou might have declined to arrange a meeting after her report. Freya could have decided not to use her status to force a meeting with the marquis.

The results went without saying—it had only been three days between the marquis hearing the orphan’s report and the knights actually making landfall. If any one of those things had failed to happen, there was no doubt the knights would have arrived without any warning of the impending attack.

In that situation—assuming the nobles sympathetic to the knights had opened the gates from the inside—the city itself could well have fallen. It was not an exaggeration to say that the town owed them.

Part of their thanks was the prized alcohol from the marquis that now sat in the ship’s hold. It was a spirit mixed with several herbs and gold dust. The drink was not easy to get hold of, even for royals on the Northern Continent. Remembering the man’s proud smile as he had called it a masterpiece of the town made Zenjirou look forward to cracking open the seal.

The man’s earnest thanks earned real smiles from both Zenjirou and Freya as well.

“This beautiful town was not exposed to the ravages of battle, and if my actions were part of that result, then I am proud to say as much.”

“This port is an important destination for Uppasala, so I could not be happier to contribute to its peace.”

Being in public meant that they both worded things in somewhat roundabout fashions, but both of them were glad that the town had been defended.

Then, the green-robed man took a step forward from where he had been waiting. “Your Majesty, it has been most fortunate that we were able to make each other’s acquaintance as we have. I wish to offer my own thanks for your aid and would like for you to accept this.” As he spoke, the priest pulled out a sealed letter and held it out to him.

“And this is?” Zenjirou asked briefly.

The priest smiled gently. “A letter of introduction to a glass mirror crafter in my homeland. Princess Anna has already given you something similar, so it may be unnecessary, but the sentiment remains,” he replied, puffing his chest out slightly.

A crafter of mirrors was also inevitably a crafter of glass. The church was one of the biggest customers at such establishments, placing many orders for things like stained glass.

While the majority of the church looked down on Yan as something of a heretic, he was still the dean of dracology at a university. The department had a place of worship of its own, and they used stained glass there as well. Being a valued client from the same country, his letter might even be more valuable than the onefrom Anna.

“I will gratefully accept,” Zenjirou said, taking the envelope from him.

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While the farewell was more grand than initially expected, the *Glasir’s Leaf* safely left port. Its four sails bulged with the wind as it sailed out across the ocean.

Unlike their intercontinental trip, where no one knew what would happen, these were well-worn routes for those of the Northern Continent.

Of course, nature could not be taken lightly, but the route was meant to take four days on average—three if they had particularly favorable winds.

Regardless, there was a significant amount of tension among the crew as they worked swiftly. Zenjirou was rather impressed as he watched, thinking them model sailors. But the truth was that Magnus had been enraged by those missing during the emergency recall, and the crew as a whole had been held responsible.

Their one mercy was that, depending on their performance for this voyage, they could gain a lesser punishment. Upon hearing that, the sailors had thrown themselves into their work with feeling.

Zenjirou had cracked a smile upon hearing this from the bear-faced vice-captain, but soon returned to a more serious expression. He was nervous enough that he didn't have the spare mental capacity to be sympathetic to the fearful sailors.

When the *Glasir's Leaf* had left Valentia, the terror of the voyage itself had overcome all of that. Now, though, the ship would be arriving in Uppasala within the next three to four days. There would be more travel before they reached the capital itself, but even so, it was not a long journey. With their destination being so close, he couldn't ignore it any longer.

Uppasala was—naturally—home to its king. The current ruler was King Gustav Uppasala V. That title wasn't Zenjirou's concern, though. His concern was his position as Freya's father. The event any man feared—asking a woman's father for his daughter's hand—was swiftly approaching.

He let out a breath. Just thinking about it was depressing him. He was also a prince consort, and he already *had* a wife: Aura. Being in that position, he was asking the king for his first princess as a concubine. He couldn't see either a king or a father being happy about that.

Frankly, he would have loved nothing more than for the man to take it as mockery and command him to leave. Then he could say, "Of course. Right, excuse me," and just go back home. However, from Capua's perspective, he could not do such a thing.

While he was engrossed in thought, Freya had appeared at his side. She was

wearing her captain's garb again. It felt like it had been a while since he had seen her wear it, but the long voyage made it seem like the right outfit for her.

"Are you uneasy, Your Majesty?" she asked bluntly.

He couldn't resist a rueful smile at the realization that his thoughts had shown on his face. "I am. Frankly, I will need rather a lot of courage to ask King Gustav for your hand while in the position I am."

"I was the one who suggested it," she pointed out.

"Even so."

If the woman offering and the man accepting were enough to make things go well, it wouldn't even be an issue. But the country's honor came into it, as did the king's feelings.

That made Zenjirou think that part of those feelings would be the king's affection for Freya. Such feelings might even lead to an understanding between the two members of the family. After all, he was allowing her much more masculine behavior than was proper for a female royal.

"To what extent does His Majesty understand your values?" he asked.

If there was an understanding there, there was a high possibility her father would show that same understanding about her becoming his concubine. Freya loved her freedom and adventure more than anything, so she would not be truly happy marrying a normal royal. That was precisely why she had pushed herself so strongly—almost overbearingly—at Zenjirou. He had shown an understanding of that, and a willingness to allow it.

His faint hopes, however, were emotionlessly dashed. "Not in the slightest," Freya answered. "He simply allows me my 'incomprehensible selfishness' out of affection for his daughter."

"I see," Zenjirou said, sighing openly at the answer. It was almost the worst possible answer he could have received.

"My father is a statesman, though," she added brightly, trying to cheer him up. "He will not hesitate to invest in the country's future. Marriages between royals are part of those investments."

“So that will be our starting point, then.”

An intercontinental trade route would be very beneficial. Zenjirou had personally seen how quickly the Northern Continent was developing. Any normal politician would feel the fear of being left behind by that rapid advance and the idea of their nation falling.

More than anything else, developing a country needed a budget. There was a strong possibility that a statesman with those fears would be far more likely to accept things for that purpose over honor or faithfulness.

“Well, I will manage. Somehow, I will manage,” he said, almost forcefully motivating himself.

“I look forward to it,” Freya replied, her face softening in relief.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life 13.*

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Reconnaissance Duty

Dolores was a maid who worked in the inner palace of Capua. She was well aware that she was a rather lucky woman.

Her family was one of knights, with no place in the peerage themselves. Still, the family had a history, so she had managed to become a maid of the inner palace. Such an environment could be either heaven or hell depending on its master.

Her master, Zenjirou, was so kind that it would be awful to ask for anything more. The head maid and some of the others actually found his lack of orders a detriment, but it meant that she could rest in turn.

When she was told that she would be accompanying Zenjirou on the *Glasir's Leaf*, she honestly thought her luck might have finally run out. Indeed, life on the sea was tough enough that she was homesick after a single day. She was stuck in a small area, living with both her superior Ines, and Lucretia Boglie—someone of *far* higher standing. She had a limited amount of water, and the only food was pre-prepared and could not be heated. On top of everything else was the inescapable swaying.

When the seas were rough, it was hard to even sit in place, let alone stand, so she was stuck being tossed around in the hard wooden cot. When the seas had calmed fully again and she heard the various sailors calling it "a stiff breeze," or saying they were lucky they hadn't had any storms, or even that it was good the seas had been so calm, she seriously considered asking Zenjirou to send her home.

Still, she had spent roughly ninety days on board and made it through. The *Glasir's Leaf* had arrived at the incredible port of Pomorskie in the country of Złota Wolność. Then, after staying the night at the high-class Ancient Arbor, Zenjirou had given her—along with the other maids and soldiers—a rather large amount of money as thanks for their efforts.

Dolores was young, so she recovered quickly. While they were meant for serving staff, she had spent the night in the luxurious accommodations and eaten some new food. The next day, she was full of energy.

I really am lucky, she thought as she left for her allotted free time. Contrary to the heavy coin purse she was carrying, her steps were light as she almost skipped through the foreign port town.

“I do not mind deferring to your preference of destination, Lady Dolores,” the young soldier accompanying her as protection told her. “We were allowed to walk freely at night, albeit for a relatively short time.”

“I shall accept your kind offer, then,” she replied, roaming the town with the man following behind.

While she had contented herself with her position as a maid, her family had a fair amount of history behind it, even if they had no title. Brought up in that family, she was used to having assistants and guards of her own following her.

According to the manager of the Ancient Arbor, the town was safe enough that even a foreign woman would be able to walk around during the daytime without an issue. Zenjirou was a worrier, though, and had not allowed any of the maids but Margarette to travel alone. With her role as a spy, Margarette was more capable of hiding than the knights. Her blonde hair, green eyes, and pale skin meant that if she wore local clothes, she would be safer alone than accompanied by a darker-skinned knight or soldier.

“Now that I think about it,” the soldier said suddenly, “should you not have changed clothes as well?”

“It is fine,” she said easily. “We will stand out regardless, so these outfits are probably safer.”

Her maid outfit was clearly of fine make, even at a glance. Wearing that outfit made it obvious that she worked for a fairly wealthy—or even noble—employer. People would shy away from tangling with someone with such backing. Of course, that didn’t mean ransoms and the like were not a risk, so it was not an absolute guarantee.

“True. Though I must say, we seem to be standing out less than I had

thought.”

“Indeed, thankfully,” she replied, looking around.

The “international” status of the port was not bandied around for nothing. The majority of the people walking the streets were pale-skinned citizens of the Northern Continent, but their hair color, eye color, and especially hairstyles and accessories were truly varied. Still, it was also surprisingly easy to see other people with similar darker skin tones like Dolores, or lighter tones somewhere in the middle. With things as they were, if the two of them kept to themselves, they likely wouldn’t draw excessive attention.

Of course, Dolores was tall for a woman and had a good figure along with attractive features. The attention she drew was more than the average foreigner would.

“Let’s go, then,” she said before transitioning into a more joking tone. “Accompanying a woman shopping may be somewhat difficult, but I hope you can bear with me.”

“It will be fine. I *have* accompanied my sister shopping on many occasions,” he laughed in response.

Just wandering the main street in Pomorskie was rather enjoyable. However, there were many shops, so wandering around would use up the small allowance of free time she had and she might not find anything. Dolores was therefore prepared. She’d asked at reception and obtained a simple hand-drawn map with the best stores marked on it.

The parchment was not made of drake skin, but sheep skin instead. It felt and looked slightly different, but it was not a concern to her.

Fortunately, all of the shops the employee had told her about were large stores on the main street. Assuming she followed the map, even her lack of local knowledge wouldn’t get her lost.

“Oh, here it is,” she said.

The door she had arrived at was mostly white and clearly catered to women, given the charming design that was painted onto it.

“Welcome,” a female employee greeted her with a calm smile. Her lack of reaction to the soldier keeping watch behind Dolores went to show her training.

“I am somewhat of a sightseer,” Dolores started. “The Ancient Arbor recommended your store. I have not made any real decisions about what to buy, but could you show me your products?”

The Ancient Arbor was a high-class establishment that anyone selling wares in Pomorskie would know about. The woman’s smile deepend as she heard the name.

“If you will pardon the question, are you asking for work?”

“No, for myself.”

“Understood. Please wait a moment.”

The woman headed farther into the store and then returned. Asking whether it was business or personal purchases would naturally impact the budget Dolores had.

Anyone with some insight could tell that her outfit was that of a maid serving a noble. If she was buying something for her employer, she would be able to spend a significantly different amount than when spending for herself. The employee asking beforehand meant that the store would be able to properly address either scenario.

When the woman finally returned, she was carrying a rectangular tray with several types of cloth atop it.

“This is the lace that our store deals in. What do you think?”

The fabric she showed them was beautiful. It was a narrow weave that brought bandages or ribbons to mind. Half of the samples were white, but there were also those in red, yellow, green, blue, and black. Each of them had splendid patterns in the woven thread.

“Pretty...”

Dolores’s reaction was no real surprise. Lace was exceptionally rare on the Southern Continent, so it was hard to come by. It was a hit with women to begin with, but the novelty certainly added to it. She was completely entranced

by the “woven jewels.”

“Longer, thin strips like this are mainly used on the hems, collars, and cuffs of dresses as decoration. Shorter lengths can also be used as hair accessories.”

“I can see just how gorgeous that would look,” Dolores agreed, smiling as she imagined one of her dresses edged in lace.

“This is how they look when finished,” the clerk said, showing her a dress on a hanger. It was a display sample, so the store had naturally gone all out in addition to the lace. It wasn’t on the level of a wedding dress, but it would certainly fit the leading lady at an event.

“Wonderful...” Dolores murmured.

Her voice had grown even more bewitched, but she could easily foresee the dress itself costing more than what she had on hand.

“How is it attached, though?” she asked after a moment.

“There is no particular trick to it,” the clerk replied. “There is a specific method, though. The common thing is to use the same thread as the lace itself to attach it. We also sell these to those unfamiliar with the material.”

The young saleswoman pulled out several scraps of cloth with the lace sewn onto them. They were examples of how to do exactly that.

“We also sell the thread, of course. Additionally, we sell the hooks used to make lace, so you could buy the whole set and try making your own?”

Dolores stared fixedly at the lace. “Would I be able to?” she asked.

“The type that we sell here would be hard to make if you are not a specialist, but anyone can make the simpler patterns.”

As she spoke, the employee pulled out another short length of lace. It was extremely simple and it was obvious that it was not something the store itself would sell. It was instead an example of the simplest lace weave. However, Dolores was not confident she could replicate even the simplest pattern just from seeing it.

“If you have the time,” the woman began, apparently sensing her feelings, “we can teach you the simple pattern?”

She showed Dolores two balls of white lace thread and two of the hooks for making it.

“Ah...” Dolores couldn’t help but look at the soldier waiting behind her.

Her guard understood the meaning behind the look and smiled back. “Do as you wish, Lady Dolores. You need not worry about me.”

She felt a bit sorry for the soldier being at a loose end while she was learning, but decided to accept his kindness.

“Could you?” she asked the woman.

“Very well. Please, take a seat,” the employee replied, guiding her to a chair and round table in the corner of the shop.

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In the end, Dolores bought some lace to give to each of the maids, a set of hooks with different diameters to make the lace, several balls of thread to use with them, and samples of the attached lace and simplest patterns. The clerk had taught her the three simplest patterns, and Dolores felt it was a huge success.

After leaving the lace store, she visited a shop selling decorative candles and herbal teas. Both of them were well worth the visit to her. Candles on the Southern Continent were mainly made using beeswax. Some places used sumac wax that had spread from the eastern regions, but on the Northern Continent, they also had drakewax.

The employee had mentioned that other animals were rendered and used for wax as well, but they didn’t sell any such candles. The scent from them was strong, so they were cheaper, and they were usually homemade in the more rural areas. Either way, she bought several drakewax candles that were not available on the Southern Continent.

However, the Southern Continent was usually considered the home of drake-related things. When she asked why they were found here but not on the Southern Continent, she had been told that the drakes that could be used for

them were aquatic drakes rather than land drakes. Even among those, there were only a few species that could be used. The Valentian soldier had said he had never seen any of them when she asked for a basic description, so it was likely that they lived in the northern waters, but not the southern.

It made sense, if she thought about it. While the seas might be linked, the temperature of the waters around the Northern Continent would differ drastically from those around the Southern Continent. It was inevitable that the drakes present in each region would therefore be different.

Having lit one candle as a test in the store, Dolores found she much preferred the scent to that of the beeswax candles she was used to. It burned more brightly as well and apparently softened much less in response to the outside temperature.

She had immediately jumped to the conclusion that this was the reason they were so valuable, but the merchant had offered a rueful smile and told her that it was simply because they came from drakes. The teachings that most of the continent followed held that drakes were holy creatures. It meant that processing even the unintelligent sea drakes required the church's permission. That added to the cost, with some of the margin directed to the church, making it a much more mercenary reason for the price.

When she visited the place selling herbal tea, she bought a tea set made of white porcelain—a material she'd never seen before—along with a small bottle of maple syrup. While she had tasted the teas themselves, they hadn't been to her liking, and the tea set itself had been rather expensive, so she didn't buy any. Incidentally, they had some equally expensive sugar that could be added to the teas, but it went without saying that she felt absolutely no inclination to buy that. There was nothing rare about sugar to a Capuan. The liquid with a somewhat reserved sweetness that the maple syrup represented was much more interesting.

Now, weighed down with souvenirs in contrast to her lightened coin purse, she walked along the paved streets of Pomorskie.

"Are you okay, Lady Dolores?" the soldier asked worriedly. "I can carry something if you like?"

She would not take him up on the offer. “No, I’m fine. I *would* like to stop briefly at the Ancient Arbor to drop these off, though.”

The soldier was not an assistant; he was her guard. However safe Pomorskie was, Dolores knew just how foolish weighing down her protection with luggage would be.

“Very well. There is no need to rush, so let us take it easy as we return.”

“Thank you.”

Making sure that she wouldn’t drop any of her purchases, she slowly walked back to the Ancient Arbor. Having returned and safely stored her purchases away, they stopped at the cafeteria on the first floor for lunch.

“What is this?” the soldier asked with a perplexed look.

“A ‘pierogi,’ apparently,” Dolores told him.

Someone from Japan might call it a big gyoza. It was certainly very similar in shape. When the soldier cut it open, it revealed minced meat, cheese, and salted cabbage. It was a commoner’s dish and would usually never feature on the menu of such a high-class establishment. However, it was a popular regional dish, so it had been specially added.

The man gave a faint noise as he hesitantly moved the forkful of food up into his mouth. A frown found its home on his brow as well.

“Oh? Do you not like it?” Dolores asked. She had a much more at-ease look on her face. Indeed, she was eating it readily with all appearances of enjoyment.

“I suppose not. I cannot deal with this yellow melted thing inside it.”

That was when she noticed the cheese. That made sense; those on the Southern Continent only really farmed drakes, so they had no familiarity with cheese products. The only exception was the inner palace, which had the goats Freya had given them as a gift.

Indeed, not all of the maids had accepted the new type of food either. The only one of the older maids who ate it without issue was Vanessa.

Seeing the man’s struggles, Dolores raised a hand to summon a waiter. “Take this dish and bring another back—something without dairy products, please.”

“Of course. Please wait a moment.”

“My apologies,” the soldier said in embarrassment, his cheeks red. Being picky while being such a big man was probably something he was rather ashamed of.

“It seems rather normal here,” she commented, looking around at the other seats. She could see several of them asking the waiters to avoid specific dishes, or for them to be made without certain ingredients.

It was probably characteristic of the very cosmopolitan nature of the town. The wide range of ingredients led to a wide range of dishes that could be made. The varied people that visited would inevitably encounter dishes they did not enjoy.

In exchange for the potential of a new favorite the variety offered, those who thought they were not picky with their food could find themselves becoming so.

“I see,” the young soldier replied, clearly relieved by her support.

“Excuse me. Your replacement,” the waiter informed him.

The new meal was a stew of sausage and salted cabbage. The man’s face broke out into a smile as he speared a sausage with his fork and bit into it.

“That seems fine for you,” Dolores commented.

Sausages were not a food found in Capua either. However, unlike dairy products, it seemed much more to the man’s taste.

“Indeed, it is very tasty. I have heard that they keep well, and I am almost tempted to buy some to take home. I noticed you bought a lot. Are they souvenirs for the other maids in the inner palace?”

“They are. Some of it is for me, of course, but the majority are souvenirs for others. Have you not bought anything for your coworkers?”

The man considered for a moment.

“I have not. It is almost a shame, but perhaps I can buy some of these sausages and share them.”

The sausages had apparently been a real hit, and Dolores couldn’t help but

laugh at the almost childish comment.

“Ah, well, I mean...” The man shied away as she laughed.

Being in the inner palace made it easy to forget, but to commoners, Dolores would be seen as a noblewoman. One beautiful enough to truly draw the eye as well. Sharing a table and having her laugh in enjoyment was unsurprisingly enough to fluster the man.

The unplanned meal was a rather pleasant event for the young soldier.

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Dolores still had some time left after they finished eating. She therefore asked the soldier to accompany her and they went out into the town again, this time to a completely different region.

“Is there somewhere we can see the entirety of the port from?” she asked him.

The soldier said that he had an idea and then asked one of the locals before guiding her through the streets.

“You seem rather confident. May I ask why?” she inquired.

The soldier straightened slightly in pride at her side. “I was born in Valentia. Manmade ports have elevated areas for citizens to evacuate to in the case of a flood,” he explained.

“I see,” she replied, impressed.

The man held his head high. The existence of such places mainly hinged on the person in charge’s discretion, so it was not unusual to see ports without any such facilities, but there was no one here who would reveal that.

The high ground was to the east of the town.

“Is this sufficient, Lady Dolores?” he asked.

“This should be fine,” she replied.

A set of wide stone steps opened up into a large open square. The majority of

the space was taken up by lawns, but there were wooden benches as well. There were also lanterns that would be lit in case of emergencies, which hung next to the benches. It was unremarkable, though, looking more like a park and place for the citizens to relax than an evacuation site.

There was an elderly couple sitting on one of the benches, and a group of children ran around on the grass as they laughed. The town's wealth showed even in their clothing.

Dolores felt a smile on her face at the peaceful sight but soon remembered why she was there. She was now able to see the entirety of the port.

"It truly is a huge, impressive port. Would you say it is more so than Valentia's?"

"I would have to admit it is, however sad it is to state." Indeed, there was a grimace on the man's face.

"Ah, is it annoying to see?" she asked in surprise.

"It is," he agreed. "I was born and raised in Valentia. I thought it was the best port in the world."

Despite the man's dismay, Valentia was not all that special. Even on the Southern Continent, there were those that rivaled it. However, nothing *surpassed* it. So the people living there boasted about their town being the best.

Pomorskie was unquestionably bigger, though. It was profitable and safe as well. In every way, it was better than Valentia. It made sense that someone from the latter town would find it hard to swallow.

She was rather charmed as she watched him clench his fist, but she knew she didn't have much time left.

"I am going to do some work," she said. "I do not think it will look suspicious, but please keep a casual attention on our surroundings just in case," she whispered, moving close enough that their shoulders were almost touching.

The man almost jumped out of his skin, but then nodded. After all, she was not too much shorter than the soldier, so whispering by his side meant that her

hot breath tickled his ear.

“U-Understood. Leave it to me.”

“Make sure it looks casual,” she pressed as he almost saluted. She couldn’t resist a slight laugh as she did.

Natalio had hand-picked him for this duty, so his abilities were assured. The man took a nonchalant look around.

“No one is paying us any attention,” he said.

Dolores then took out a thin music player from the pocket of her apron dress and opened up the camera with familiar motions. She took a photo overlooking the port as a whole, then one of the shipyards. Afterwards, she walked in the other direction and took one of the entirety of the town. Then the walls around the town, one centering on the gate into the town, and one on the feudal lord’s estate. Making sure no one was focusing on her, she then took a photo of the relaxing elderly couple, and one of the children playing on the grass.

She didn’t use the zoom, focusing on getting an overall picture. After a very brief time of shooting photos, she turned the device off and returned it to her pocket.

The main thrust of her duties to record the Northern Continent would not be here, but in Freya’s homeland. There was plenty of storage space on the device, but battery life was another matter. This would be the limit for now.

“Thank you. I am finished,” she said with a grin.

The soldier looked respectfully at her. “You are incredible, Lady Dolores.”

“Pardon?” she asked, surprised by the sudden compliment.

The man smiled at her and continued. “Sir Zenjirou trusts you with his magic tools and their use. You seem familiar enough with it that his trust appears well-founded. The burden of travel between the continents must be no small matter for a woman. Yet here you are after only a single day, carrying out your duties. I have a lot of respect for that.”

“Thank you...” she responded, unable to hide her shyness at the honest compliment.

In all honesty, her “familiarity” with the equipment was more about playing with a new toy at random, and in taking the photos, she had the ulterior motive of hoping that Zenjirou might give her some more spending money if she was proactive. Such earnest praise for this made her feel somewhat awkward and almost guilty.

“We are running out of time,” she said quickly instead, changing the subject. “We should head back.”

“Indeed. Very well, then,” he replied immediately.

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As things turned out, Dolores’s hopes were right on the mark. Zenjirou was exceptionally happy when he checked the photos and promised a reward from him personally in addition to the payment from Aura. He truly was an understanding master.

They were staying in the Ancient Arbor’s royal suite. It was a room prepared with the expectation nobility would be using it. Naturally, it had an adjoining room for maids and the like.

Ines and Dolores were currently in that room. In the inner palace, Ines was in charge of cleaning and was her superior. At the same time, though, she was also someone Dolores had shared a small space with for a long time on the *Glasir’s Leaf*, along with Margarette, Lucretia, and Lucretia’s maid, Flora.

Thinking of the other women in that way led to a sense of affinity. Frankly, though, Ines was the one Dolores felt the least close to out of any of them. Even Lucretia—a highly placed noble—had been unable to keep up her appearances and shown a much less composed side of herself in their shared quarters. Ines, however, had never lost her calm serenity.

It was almost certainly not the case, but it made Dolores feel like Ines had not suffered during the trip at all.

“Good work, Dolores. I will be telling Amanda about your efforts.”

“Thank you, Lady Ines. When you do, please make sure you stress how much

use I have been to Sir Zenjirou."

Ines offered a wry smile at her shameless request as she brewed some herbal tea that the Ancient Arbor had provided.

"I imagine you girls would remain assigned to Sir Zenjirou even if I did not," she replied.

Even so, Dolores couldn't let her guard down. If Freya became a concubine, the inner palace would not just be running the main building, but an annex as well. There were rumors that Lucretia from the Twin Kingdoms might also become a concubine of Zenjirou's. If that happened, the maids working in the inner palace would be split into three sections.

It was no exaggeration that working in the inner palace with the electricity, and Zenjirou's kind—almost doting—demeanor, was heaven. Sharing a ship with Freya and Lucretia meant that Dolores could be fairly certain of their general personalities, and neither of them would be as lax with the maids as Zenjirou was.

Dolores wanted to take full advantage of the slice of heaven she had, savoring it until she left the inner palace entirely.

"I have toured the town myself, albeit briefly," Ines said as if just recalling it. "It truly is a wealthy town. While it will depend on further negotiations, I can see us trading here as well as with Uppasala."

It was unusual for Ines, but there was a hint of her own desires in her statement this time. As she spoke, she placed the one herbal tea in front of Dolores.

Having no need to restrain herself, Dolores thanked her before immediately adding honey and a slice of citrus fruit. She then took a sip. The scent and flavor were both much stronger than usual. Dolores preferred her normal tea.

"You think so?" she asked.

"Indeed. I cannot be certain, but if Sir Zenjirou himself comes here, we of the inner palace may also need to."

"Then I'd like to nominate Faye and Letti," Dolores said immediately, without

even thinking about it.

“I would not be against it, but are you sure?” Ines asked, blinking.

Misunderstanding her, Dolores had an almost wicked smile as she agreed. “Of course, I want them to be able to enjoy the town as well. Of course, they’d also need to spend dozens of days on the ship as we have.”

She was unhappy about being the only one to suffer the trip. Ines was silent for a moment, conflicted. Then, after taking a sip of her own herbal tea—which had no extra additions like Dolores’s did—she answered.

“Well, Dolores, you appear to be misunderstanding. If Sir Zenjirou visits Pomorskie again, he will not be traveling by ship. If negotiations go well, Capua will establish an embassy and he will teleport straight there. Even if that isn’t the case, he can teleport to Uppasala and then travel by ship to Pomorskie. The *Glasir’s Leaf* can make the trip in three to four days.”

“Oh...” Dolores replied dully. The stress of the journey had made her forget entirely about her lord’s lineal magic.

“If you insist, I will happily recommend Faye and Letti,” Ines continued with a chuckle.

“Lady Ines!” Dolores protested.



Ines simply sipped politely at her tea.

Dolores was aware of how lucky she was. While she had been subjected to the rigors of intercontinental seafaring, there were commensurate rewards waiting for her here.

Unfortunately, she was forced to realize that there would be people who were even luckier.