
Illustrator:
Jyuu
Ayakura
Author:
Tsunehiko
Watanabe
13
THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE


Illustrator:
Jyuu
Ayakura
Author:
Tsunehiko
Watanabe
13
THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

The Ideal Sponger Life: Volume 13 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8


Illustrator:
Jyuu
Ayakura
Author:
Tsunehiko
Watanabe
13
THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

Prologue — Valaskjálf

Uppasala was one of the northern countries of the Northern Continent. Its capital was on the north of Lake Mater.

The lake was an exceptionally big body of water. Saying that it was about twice as large as Lake Biwa—the largest freshwater lake in Japan, covering 250 square miles—would probably demonstrate just how large it was.

It was originally connected to the eastern sea by multiple rivers, but prior kings had ordered them to be both deepened and widened, and in some cases connected to form a wide waterway. The lake itself now served as a massive bay.

In the center of the capital was their royal palace—Valaskjálf—and the current king of the country, Gustav V was listening to a report from one of his subordinates.

“I see, so the *Glasir’s Leaf* has safely arrived in Logfort.”

“It has. The messenger ship from there confirmed it.”

“So that is the state of things.”

The king nodded several times, not hiding his relief at his subordinate’s words.

Logfort was a port town to the east of Lake Mater. If you considered the lake itself to act as a bay, the town was the entrance to the sea.

In recent years, the increase in the size of ocean-going ships had made navigating the waterway more dangerous with their deeper drafts and the tight turns. More and more people who wanted to visit the capital on larger ships had started docking in Logfort and taking smaller ships into the lake proper.

Naturally, the behemoth that was the four-masted *Glasir’s Leaf* came under that category as well.

“Princess Freya and her crew will be switching ships and heading here. They are expected to arrive tomorrow.”

“I see, and this would also include our *guests*.”

The king’s icy-blue eyes narrowed as he spoke the word “guests.”

Gustav had acquired at least some information since the ship had docked in Złota Wolność. While it didn’t compare to Pomorskie, Uppasala’s port in Logfort was a fairly large one as well. Naturally, there were many ships that visited both ports. Information from those ships had reached the king’s ears.

“Guests from the Southern Continent... Goods or spoils would have been much simpler,” he murmured, his expression souring.

There were few specifics, and what information he did have was difficult to tease apart, so it wasn’t *certain*, but it at least appeared that one of the guests was royalty from the Southern Continent. He had heard—though wasn’t sure how founded the information was—that both Marquis Pomorskie and Princess Anna had treated the man as such.

“I suppose you could view inviting guests as establishing successful trade.”

If a member of the Southern Continent’s royalty was indeed aboard the *Glasir’s Leaf* then it would be consistent with Freya cementing friendly relations with that country.

“Freya aside, Skaji and Magnus being there mean that there are likely no major lapses in judgment.”

Skaji referred to Victoria Kronkvist, a female warrior of such skill that she was allowed to use the name of the legendary witch Skaji. Magnus was a veteran captain such that the scent of the sea was said to constantly be on his breath.

Both of them were warriors and had not only the ability to be on a ship, but the courage and insight required.

In truth, Freya was not inferior to them in terms of her insight or negotiation skill. But as a father, he would always look at her with the filter of being her guardian.

“Still, I may have erred in her upbringing...”

While she was at sea, concern had been the dominant feeling. Now that she was back in the country, though, grumbles and regrets about his beloved

daughter filled his heart.

“Are you sure? Princess Freya is a strong-willed soul,” his subordinate replied.

Taken on its own, it would be praise, but in response to concerns about her upbringing, it was a rather harsh remark. It essentially implied that her current demeanor was nothing to do with how she had been raised, but because she had been warped to begin with.

The king offered no real reprimand to his subordinate, just a rueful smile.

“Perhaps I named her wrongly instead. She is a tad wild. She would have been better as a man.”

“If you will pardon me, I have to say that her actions would be equally as remonstrable if she were a male royal.”

“True...” Gustav replied, his face returning to seriousness.

The *Glasir’s Leaf*’s intercontinental voyage was the first attempt for Uppasala as a whole. With no prior attempts, there was a significant risk to life.

Allowing a royal aboard had bigger issues than that royal’s gender. Of course, there was the problem with Uppasala that such views were not prevalent in relation to men, let alone women.

“Of course, the country would certainly be more willing to accept her recklessness from a man.”

“A dilemma indeed. For a warrior, the courage to face the unavoidable risks—even of sea travel—is a virtue, yet avoiding even needless risks is decried as ‘cowardice.’ I wish we could change that in some way.”

Uppasala was a country of warriors. Originally, they were a country of pirates. Due to that, for better or worse, warriors had high standing and acts of valor were encouraged. In itself, that was not a bad thing, but due to the pathological avoidance of anything that could be taken as cowardice, it was also an unadaptable mass of fighters.

Gustav was pained that it was not just limited to the warriors, but that the traditions and nature of Uppasala’s underpinnings were inhibiting the country’s growth.

He slumped back into the chair, resting his body weight against its back as he directed his gaze up to the ceiling before closing his eyes in thought.



“We are at a turning point. Technology and the economy are progressing rapidly. We need to gain at least a grounding in the areas where we struggle to survive the upheaval. Simultaneously, we cannot abandon our strengths.”

Uppasala was a country founded by pirates. They had no real specialism outside of the waves. They could not afford to lose their naval strength. To continue the upscaling of their ships and the increase in their efficiency while maintaining a powerful navy would naturally require a focus on shipbuilding and training sailors, both of which needed a certain economic strength as a foundation.

“We are pushing our way into international trade. We truly are in a rough position.”

“We are?”

“Indeed. Though more accurately we are in a position which could become so. Still, I have been prepared for that for a long while now. We should focus on more immediate issues. Are you certain the commonwealth declared war on the Knights?”

A different subordinate took a step forward at that.

“We have yet to confirm things. However, we have heard multiple corroborating accounts of the knights attempting a sneak attack on Pomorskie, so it seems credible. The country declaring war in response seems an entirely natural response.”

With rumors and hearsay being their only sources of information, teasing out the truth inevitably became more difficult.

There was information from ships that had left before the port was sealed, and information from those that left after the reopening but before the *Glasir’s Leaf*. Then there was the information from ships that left around the same time but arrived at Logfort first.

If each set of information was concrete then things would be easy. Unfortunately, the reality was far from that. After all, the majority of the information was from the crews of merchant ships, which rarely even left the ports they stopped at. The information they had gained in Pomorskie was

already secondhand at best, and each individual would add their own spin and imagination to it. Some people would then say it as if everything they had heard had actually happened, even the parts which were added earlier in the chain.

This complicated the information and created chaos that could not be easily parsed.

The current credible information suggested that at least the Knights had attacked Pomorskie. The country then reacting to that seemed rather likely. It was easy to forget, but Uppasala and the Knights' territory shared a coast. There was a perpetually snowy mountain range that separated the two countries, so crossing the land border was all but impossible, but they were geographically neighboring countries.

"Freya has established international trade. We also have a guest from the Southern Continent. Then there are the knights. We will have to prepare a suitable *welcome* for all of them."

Naturally, the meaning of "welcome" was different for each of them.

Their princess returning would be the subject of an affectionate welcome. The guest she had with her would be the target of a calculating welcome, masked by politeness. Meanwhile, the uninvited guests in the form of the Knights would need a welcome of ammunition prepared for them.

The common point between them was that they would need sufficient preparation to ensure that each would be satisfied.

"I shall make the preparations," his subordinate said.

"I appreciate it," the king replied with a magnanimous nod.

Chapter 1 — Meeting in Person

Capua's prince consort, Zenjirou Bilbo Capua, was currently in the country of Uppasala, in the capital city of the same name.

Naturally, he was also with Freya and various other passengers from the *Glasir's Leaf*. The ship itself, though, was still in Logfort. Therefore calling them passengers of the *Glasir's Leaf* was perhaps somewhat disingenuous.

They had transferred to another ship in Logfort before progressing down the waterway into Lake Mater. They had then headed northwest through the lake and safely reached Uppasala's capital.

It went without saying, but the lake had no waves in comparison to the open sea. However, the new ship they were on was also much smaller. Being a sailing vessel inevitably meant that it changed direction somewhat with the wind, pitching each time it did.

Fortunately, Zenjirou had no problem, but his subordinates who were less comfortable periodically offered the lake fish some particularly acidic nutrition.

Once they had docked in the capital, they switched to a carriage and headed for the palace, Ijomiheim. They had already sent word to the palace, so everything went extremely smoothly.

Zenjirou's group—or perhaps it would be more suitable to call it Freya's—safely arrived at the palace.

"Princess Freya," Zenjirou said. He had stepped from the carriage first and offered her his hand as manners dictated.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she replied, taking it.

"Shall we go?" he asked after a pause.

"Yes, let's," she agreed.

The two of them mustered their motivation and headed for the audience chamber.

Waiting for them was the current king of Uppasala, King Gustav V. This was

Freya's father. Of course, he was not the only one awaiting them. There would be her mother—the Queen Consort—along with her brothers—various princes—and other influential nobles and famed warriors.

A tall female warrior—Skaji—approached Zenjirou as he walked and spoke quietly.

"Your Majesty, this may be impertinent, but please allow me to state this again. The palace is still home to much influence from warriors. Their thoughts, values, and opinions reign within it. Firmness triumphs over meekness, and insistence triumphs over compromise. Bear that in mind. Mutual understanding with them is not out of reach, even after clashing."

"Right. Thank you for the advice," he replied briefly.

Zenjirou had used calm periods of the voyage to learn as much about the customs and values of the country as he could from both Freya and Skaji. He had also been told the names, ages, and general appearances of the most important figures—starting with royalty, of course—but wasn't entirely confident on that front. He had, naturally, made sure to memorize all of the royals, though.

He frankly had myriad feelings of unease, but he couldn't turn back now. He let out a shallow breath, as if to exhale all the timidity from himself before firmly stepping onto the carpet as he kept walking.

The official audience was almost an anticlimax, passing without any incident. Zenjirou didn't have the leading role in the meeting, though. It was meant to pay homage to the heroes of the *Glasir's Leaf* who had successfully arranged an intercontinental trade deal, so Freya took center stage.

After a long period of being ignored while others extolled their people's deeds and courage, Zenjirou and his group were swiftly recognized as "guests from the Southern Continent."

Thereafter, they were shown to a room. The fact that Natalio and the others weren't asked to disarm even here in the royal palace meant he could assume they were being—at least publicly—treated as royalty and the guards that such a royal would have. Or else a noble playing the same role.

“If you have any requests then we are at your disposal,” said the aging man who had guided them here. Once he and the maids had left, the only people in the room were those he knew from the Southern Continent.

They had been wearing formal outfits for the audience but now changed into more comfortable clothes in a predetermined order.

Quickly shucking the third uniform for a more pleasant outfit, Zenjirou used his left hand to massage his right shoulder.

“The atmosphere in there was not as bad as I’d expected,” he said, a little louder than he would if talking to himself.

Ines nodded in response—having assisted him in changing.

“It was. The true test is yet to come, although we cannot yet tell when that true test will be,” she said, warning him against relaxing too soon.

“Right, I know. Still, we’re on our own for now.”

“We can trust in Princess Freya’s skill,” Ines replied.

“Right,” Zenjirou nodded, almost as if trying to convince himself.

Speaking of Freya, she had changed from her captain’s garb into a formal dress a princess would wear and answered her father’s summons. She was currently presenting what she had risked her life for.

She had used her own hair, which she had cut short when taking on the captaincy, to give herself a more princess-like appearance with her hair now reaching down to her mid-back. The very fact that she had done so showed that she was willing to do absolutely everything she could to improve her father’s mood and have her request accepted.

However, having heard everything she had to say, the king’s response was certainly not what she wanted to hear.

“I see,” the man said eventually. “I have a good idea of the situation now. Rather than trading with the northern countries on the Southern Continent, you went to Capua. True, if they are as strong as you say, then us taking the initiative to establish trade will bring us much benefit. An exchange of royal blood or two would certainly be on the table.”

Her father's logical words were all but agreeing with her suggestion. However, the sour expression on his face put paid to the wholehearted positivity in what he was saying.

Freya braced herself and the king continued with exactly what she was expecting.

"There is a matter of honor, though. Foolish though it may sound, honor can at times be more important to a country than simple profit. You are our first princess, Freya. A king would be one thing, but this man is nothing more than the queen's spouse, even if he is a royal. Sending you to be his concubine will see us looked down upon by our peers."

It was a rebuttal that Freya had been expecting. The various countries of the Northern Continent generally saw the Southern Continent as lesser. Zenjirou was the prince consort—not even the king—of one of those countries they saw as lesser, and she would not even be his legal wife, but a concubine.

With all those factors in place, they could not ignore the loss to their prestige, no matter how much benefit it brought them.

Still, with that in mind, Freya straightened and offered a rebuttal of her own. "I understand your concerns. However, I believe it will be a small matter as things stand currently. We will have a valid trade route with the Southern Continent. I believe that ill repute would be acceptable in this case."

"Intercontinental trade is accelerating as ships advance. We indeed cannot afford to miss the boat, so to speak. I do not dispute that a country of Capua's stature, which our peers have yet to get their claws into, is a particularly pleasant prospect. Assuming that is enough to send you to His Majesty as a concubine is too hasty, though."

"The war Capua was part of has greatly curtailed their number of royals. The only two males are His Majesty and the first prince, Prince Carlos. His Highness is not even two years old yet, so with speed being of the essence, he is out of the question. There is no other suitable candidate."

"Now, Freya, do not play the fool. I am well aware that the only candidate they have is His Majesty Zenjirou. It is not necessary for *you* to be his partner. If you were to be queen consort it would be a different matter, but a prince

consort's concubine? It need not be you. A girl from any of the high nobility who is related to us would be enough, would it not?"

Freya made a slight noise as she was lost for words. She had tried to combat his reluctance towards a political marriage with the Southern Continent by stressing the current situation and how it was progressing, but he had shown approval for marriage itself. Just not between Zenjirou and Freya.

What made it worse was that if Aura heard the proposal, she would likely be entirely on board. Freya had just started to see a life of freedom and adventure on ships—even after marriage—as a realistic possibility, and she didn't want to surrender it here.

She thought frantically and came up with a counter-argument. "I-It would not be. While it is still unofficial, I have gained Her Majesty Queen Aura's approval for my proposal. The agreement was for me to become a concubine, not just someone from Uppasala."

"That was also a rash decision..." he said, glaring heavily at her.

Pitting herself against his insight, she told him the conditions she and Aura had established for the marriage. If she was to marry, she would be granted a ducal rank and a duchy to go with it, with the tacit understanding that said duchy would be a coastal area. She would then be able to use the port in that duchy as an exclusive trade port with Uppasala.

There was also a plan for a shipyard capable of building large ships for intercontinental trade. Half of the first eight ships would be granted to Uppasala while the costs for them all would be paid by Capua.

The harshness gradually faded from his face as he heard the conditions, replaced by a look of intrigue.

"Hmm...not bad."

All of the conditions Freya had spoken of were of benefit to Uppasala. There was the hidden facet that Capua didn't have the techniques to build such ships, so the engineers would need to be provided by Uppasala. Inevitably, the advanced technology would pass from Uppasala to Capua. In addition to the skills to build the ships, they would also gain knowledge of how to navigate

them between the continents, and also the better blacksmithing of the Northern Continent. There were therefore still advantages for Capua as well.

Essentially, Capua would provide the money and location, while Uppasala would provide the expertise and personnel. Indeed, such a plan could not be spearheaded by a noble girl with no place in the line of succession. No country would give such a girl a ducal title and territory.

Looking at things neutrally, Capua was offering enough that there would be no position for them if they could not marry someone into the royal family.

“Hmm, what to do?” the king mused, looking up at the ceiling in thought.

While he had to scold his daughter for his recklessness, there was a charm to the suggestion she had brought with her. Uppasala was not a particularly affluent nation. It had historically been a warlike country, a country of pirates. Much of the land was covered in ice, so their agriculture lagged behind, supplemented by rearing goats and reindeer—both animals that could survive on relatively little. They had a thriving fishing industry but not a position that allowed them to take the lead in trade by land *or* sea.

Initially, they would not have even counted as a middling country. They had pulled themselves to such a position with their warrior spirit, ship building, and blacksmithing.

With the way things are developing now, though, that is nothing but the distant past, Gustav thought to himself.

Manufacturing was becoming more efficient and trending towards mass production. Trade was advancing as the size of ships increased. Economic blocs inevitably increased in turn, giving rise to countries on levels never before seen and hegemonic states. Relying solely on their ethnic temperament and individual skill would make it hard to keep up.

After thinking for a while, his conclusion was to defer matters.

“First, I need to know what kind of person His Majesty is.”

“You mean?!”

Gustav quickly rained on Freya’s parade as she stepped forward in joy.

“I will have a private audience with him for that purpose. You will also be present, but you are not to interject. I will use that meeting to evaluate whether he is a suitable person to give you to.”

A meeting to “determine what kind of person someone is” would—with Uppasala’s militaristic nature—be somewhat akin to a stress interview. Freya understood that, but she also understood that there was no avoiding it.

“Of course, other than determining the nature of His Majesty, I will also investigate whether Capua is a trustworthy partner in trade and treaty. We will not confuse the two matters.”

“I understand,” she answered after a moment, offering Zenjirou a silent apology.

Capua’s queen was truly seeking the Northern Continent’s technology, in addition to a trade treaty. Uppasala’s king was certainly prepared to accept that. Adding in the first princess of his nation trying to become a prince consort’s concubine made things more complicated. It could be said that to fulfill Freya’s selfishness, Zenjirou would have to undergo more hardship than he otherwise would.

“I shall inform His Majesty of that,” she added eventually.

I shall have to personally make it up to him in some way, she thought.

“I shall take my leave, then,” she said, rising from her seat.

Gustav glared even more strongly than he had thus far and made a wide motion, stopping her.

“Wait. We are not yet done. Well, we are done with that topic, true. Still, there are several other things I need to ask you. Firstly, with regard to the dispute between the commonwealth and the Knights. I would have you explain *in detail* why there are rumors that we are their allies in this.”

“Of course...”

She nodded slightly and let herself sit back into the chair again.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

The next day, Zenjirou and his entourage were summoned to a room deep within the palace. Freya had told him yesterday what to expect from the meeting between him, the king, and her.

Doing his best to hide his nerves, he sat. There was a long table in the room. Zenjirou was sitting on one of the shorter sides and Gustav was opposite him. To Zenjirou's left on the longer side were Freya and other people from the *Glasir's Leaf*. On the right were other members of the Uppasalan royal family, highly ranked nobles, and named warriors. Zenjirou's subordinates were standing behind him.

The white marble table was fairly large, and its size meant that it seated a good number of people, but Zenjirou was actually grateful for that. Having some distance between him and the king opposite him was more important to him than how many people were in attendance.

Once the initial formalities were out of the way, Gustav spoke. "So, Your Majesty, I have heard you have a request to make?"

With that immediate opening, Zenjirou was up. He swallowed once to make absolutely sure his voice wouldn't crack, then spoke measuredly.

"I do. To cut straight to the point, the Kingdom of Capua is prepared to accept the offer of direct trade that the Kingdom of Uppasala has offered."

The nobles to his right stirred at that, clearly somewhat interested.

Very aware of the sweat that seemed to pool in his palms, Zenjirou immediately focused on parsing the reaction of the king opposite him.

Gustav gave no words of either affirmation or refutation. He had wanted some form of commitment, but if he let the matter hang for any longer, anyone with some insight would be able to infer that as well.

With it being worded as "the offer of direct trade that the Kingdom of Uppasala has offered," it would mean that it was not a trade both sides desired. He needed to satisfy himself with the fact that none of the royals gainsayed him, giving at least an air of agreement.

He continued before anyone else could speak. "To ensure the success of such

a trade deal, and to act as a symbol of our countries' friendship, I wish to take Princess Freya Uppasala as my spouse."

The reactions from the royals were varied. One of them outright yelled that he was mocking them. Another simply gave an ambiguous statement that still showed their disagreement. Yet another called it an "unfunny joke," while not hiding the scorn from their expression.

The reactions were much as he had expected. There was a fundamental trend among those of the Northern Continent towards seeing their southern neighbors as inferior. Additionally, Zenjirou's position as Queen Aura's spouse had been made clear here.Zenjirou was effectively saying, "Give me Princess Freya as a second wife—a concubine."

Their first princess would be a concubine of another nation's prince consort. Even if both countries were on equal footing, there would be a visceral reaction to it.

That made the apparently happy smile of a silver-haired boy, once he had gotten over his surprise, all the stranger. The boy also had icy blue eyes and was wearing blue clothing, marking him as Uppasalan royalty.

Zenjirou had gotten Freya to tell him the names and appearances of the adult royals and general leadership. He was only meeting the majority of them now, so he couldn't tell who was who.

This one boy, though, he could recognize at a glance. He was the second prince of the country, Yngvi, Freya's twin brother.

He was shockingly similar in appearance to Freya, taller than Zenjirou, with features that were relatively mature, so there was no mistaking it. They were so similar looking that you might even mistake one for another at a glance.

The deepening of his smile as Zenjirou met his eyes could not be his imagination. He was the one member of the royal family who had actively supported Freya's attempts to captain the *Glasir's Leaf*, and it seemed like he would support her here as well.

While Zenjirou was considering that, the man at the prince's side stood with a clatter. "Out of the question! Are you mocking us?!"

He seemed to be in his early twenties, with blond hair and clear green eyes. He was a large man. Given his appearance, position, and blue clothing marking him as a royal, Zenjirou could remember his name. This was the first prince of the kingdom, Eric. The lack of any similarity in looks or hair color to Freya or Yngvi was due to them having different mothers.

The prince was clearly mocking him. While he was aware of that, Zenjirou pointedly ignored him, not letting his gaze drift in that direction as he continued speaking to the king.

“What are your thoughts, Your Majesty? Naturally, I understand that this is not such a simple matter as to ask for a decision here and now. I would appreciate your consideration of it, though.”

“How dare you?!” Eric roared at Zenjirou, blatantly ignoring him.

Zenjirou intentionally kept calm, still not looking in that direction. Whether it was intentional or not, Eric was the one breaking etiquette here.

Zenjirou had introduced himself at the audience yesterday, but the only person here who had responded in kind was the king. That meant that Eric was currently not even offering the courtesy of an introduction before interrupting a conversation with a foreign royal.

What was more, while the position of prince consort was a somewhat peculiar one, it was at the very least equal—or even superior, depending on how you looked at it—to the position of first prince. The prince was thereby pushing himself into a conversation with his king and a person of similar stature.

Ignoring him and pretending he couldn’t hear his yells was the mildest response Zenjirou could take here. If he acted as if he *could* hear Eric, then he would first have to scold the man and demand he introduce himself.

From what he had heard before, Prince Eric loved his younger sister without question. He could therefore understand the emotional reaction to him demanding her hand in marriage. Both psychologically and more pragmatically in wanting the negotiations to go well, Zenjirou wanted to avoid censuring the other man, so he kept ignoring him and spoke to Gustav.

“I am aware that this is a significantly difficult matter. Accepting this request would mean Princess Freya leaving her homeland. I would also like to hear others’ opinions on this as well.”

Towards the end of his statement, he let his eyes dart to the side. The king picked up on the signal and heaved a large, pointed sigh.

“I appreciate your consideration, Your Majesty. I am aware that someone has been speaking rather loudly *to themselves* for a while. Any of you with opinions on His Majesty’s suggestion, raise your hand. Once you *officially introduce yourself*, you may express them.”

He glared harshly at his son, who was still standing. Eric was not foolish enough to miss that his father was saying that he wouldn’t accept his words as official remarks unless he followed procedure. Reluctantly, he sat back down.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “I wish to speak.”

“You may.”

Eric stood again, even more intimidation in his green eyes now as he glared at Zenjirou. “We have not met before, Your Majesty. I am the first prince of Uppasala, Eric. Though our mothers are different, Freya is my sister. Therefore, I cannot overlook your statement.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. I have heard much about you. While I may be older than you, I hope one day for you to call me brother-in-law, so I hope we can be on good terms.”

“I object completely. I wish for my sister’s happiness, so I am entirely against her marrying you.”

As his tone got rougher, Zenjirou objected to the statement. “I have no doubt whatsoever that you do wish for her happiness. However, considering your own words, I find myself doubtful that you truly *understand* that happiness.”

There was a moment’s pause.

“That is quite the claim. It sounds like you wish to imply that, after only a year, you understand Freya better than I, her brother who has grown up alongside her.”

“I am glad my meaning is clear,” Zenjirou said plainly, remembering Skaji’s warnings to not be afraid of conflict. He could say without a doubt that Eric *didn’t* understand her happiness. That was due to Freya having rather abnormal values for a noblewoman, so it wasn’t entirely the prince’s fault. Still, one look at her face made it clear that Zenjirou’s request was not “ignoring her wishes.”

Knowing that and still saying it was out of the question was effectively saying that Freya didn’t know what would make her happy and that he would make that decision for her. Having at least some form of feelings for her meant that Zenjirou was opposed to that.

The provocative words prompted a smile from the prince. It lacked any sense of friendliness, however. “Oh? Quite the claim once more. In that case, I shall not refrain and speak plainly as well. I see absolutely no warrior’s soul in you. Your looks, your stance, your words, and actions—each of them shows me nothing but a coward. I cannot believe such a person would be able to protect Freya.”

Not being a warrior, but a coward, would be the greatest insult one could level against an Uppasalan man. Zenjirou, though, privately agreed with him and wasn’t at all offended. Indeed, he let a grin of his own make its way to his lips.

“My apologies, Prince Eric. It would appear we are talking at cross purposes. I am here asking to marry Princess Freya. Your sister appears to be a completely different person, so you need not worry.”

Despite intentionally saying things snidely, the meaning seemed not to have gotten through to the prince. Instead of flying into a rage, he looked awkwardly confused. Explaining your own mockery was roughly as embarrassing as needing to explain your own joke. He had to do so, however, or things wouldn’t go anywhere.

“Pardon me. I had thought we were discussing Princess Freya’s happiness. So when you brought up a man who could protect her, which is entirely unrelated, I was somewhat taken aback. I doubt you would believe something so patently incorrect as Princess Freya—after shaking off her ties to the country to captain a voyage for your kingdom’s first instance of intercontinental trade—desiring

someone to protect her.”

“Why you!”

Understanding what Zenjirou was implying, Eric sent his chair skittering back. If he had been angry earlier, he was practically murderous now. Even Natalio at Zenjirou’s back had readied himself, so that was likely no overstatement.

While internally resigned to being unable to entirely hide his worry, Zenjirou did his best to project confidence as he spoke to the king.

“As you have heard, Your Majesty, Prince Eric’s objections are not relevant to Princess Freya.”

While watching the prince reach for his sword out of the corner of his eye, Zenjirou waited for the king’s response.

Gustav let out another sigh before speaking. “There is logic to your words. Freya is certainly not a normal woman who would feel happy about being protected. Regardless, I am sure you can see how her father and brother would be uneasy about entrusting someone they love to someone who was incapable of doing so, no? However overjoyed one may feel, they must be alive to feel it,” he admonished him.

Gustav had dealt with the situation as a good king should, admitting his son’s mistake in showing such emotion while also strengthening his legitimacy to refute Zenjirou. Moreover, as if to accent said weakness, he moved his neck so that it was obvious he was looking at Zenjirou’s shoulders. Shoulders that were currently shaking from Eric’s threatening presence.

While Zenjirou’s physical weakness was evident simply in his stance, this fear likely showed mental weakness to the king.

“You are quite right. I grew somewhat heated and my words went too far,” Zenjirou replied.

While Skaji had told him to not cede ground, he did so here. It was something of a gamble, considering both men’s personalities, but if Zenjirou didn’t deviate too much from their impression of him, he was sure he could get things moving in the direction he wished.

“Indeed! We cannot turn a woman of the Uppasala family over to a man who has not even taken the Rite of Age! Anything else should come after that!” Eric cried.

Zenjirou looked back to Gustav, asking with his eyes whether he was going to let the comment pass and if Zenjirou could respond to it. The lack of reaction was an agreement on its own.

With Eric showing the reaction he’d expected, and Gustav making no move to censure him, Zenjirou shifted with triumph.

“I see. That sounds intriguing. Being so far north on the Northern Continent, Uppasala has some characteristic customs. However, as someone from the Southern Continent’s Kingdom of Capua, I would appreciate you understanding the difference in our cultures.”

Eric took the lowered tone and legitimate request for understanding as weakness. He laughed scornfully and practically spat. “Impossible. The Rite of Age is an absolute minimum requirement here. Taking a royal woman has me wanting to demand the Rite of the Warrior, even.”

Zenjirou had heard of both of them from Skaji before, what with the high possibility of either event coming up in response to his request for marriage. However, he played dumb.

“Inferring from your words, the former would be proof that you were of age and the latter that you were a warrior. However, with regard to the former, I am considered as such in Capua, and as for the latter, I am not a warrior to begin with.”

He spoke firmly, intentionally speaking faster as if trying to keep himself out of danger, depending on one’s viewpoint.

“Hmph, so you are frightened.”

Zenjirou answered the absolute derision of the prince with silence. Not reacting here was effectively agreeing. Despite understanding that, he purposefully said nothing.

“Hah, I see what you are. The Right of Age is—as the name implies—something children must face to be considered adults. We cannot confer any of

the rights a person of age would have if they cannot even muster the courage to take it. It goes without saying that marriage is one of those rights.

Zenjirou then answered with slight anger, as if angry that his pride had been slighted. “Oh? So you mean to say that there is no cowardly man within this country?”

He raked his gaze over everyone present, addressing his question not just to Eric, but to every man present.

Not one of the men looked away from him. Young or old, the image of a warrior or more slender officials—though the latter were much fewer in number—all of them nodded firmly.

Things were going how he'd hoped. He made sure not to hide his nerves, fear, or even inferiority as he responded.

“I see. That is where our cultures differ. My own lands see warriors as distinguished. However, not every man is a warrior, and even those who aren’t are still respected.”

To the Uppasalans, it sounded like pitiful excuses.

“Then you should marry a woman who can respect such a culture. You should make at least this concession if you wish to marry a woman—particularly a royal—from our lands.”

Eric had stopped hiding any of his derision. While the other men present didn’t speak, they still showed agreement. The only exceptions were Yngvi at his side, and the king. Conversely, you could also say that they were the only two whose thoughts and emotions weren’t following Zenjirou’s guidance.

Those two needed extra attention, he warned himself. Still, with the majority thinking as he wished, he gave his prepared statement. “Concessions in both directions are important, yes. Particularly considering that our two nations have yet to interact at all. Either side pushing entirely unilaterally will lead to failure.”

“While I agree with that view, this is not something I am willing to concede.”

“Any unilateral decisions of that ilk are out of the question. I see. Then I would like to invite you to my country. I am sure that if you are able to

experience our culture and customs, our nations will be able to take a large step towards understanding."

The conversation thus far had closed off any avenues of escape to the suggestion. Anyone important would have worked, but the *first prince* was either extremely fortunate or perhaps too fortunate. However, his lack of this kind of knowledge meant that he couldn't change his plans now.

"How foolish. Unlike Freya, I am not in a position to leave the country for years at a time." While taken aback, he spat his objection afterwards.

Zenjirou knew that this would be the clincher and pressed further. "You need not concern yourself. I can cast teleportation. While it has its limits, I can send things and people to places that I have visited before in an instant. I can use that to send you to Capua. Although I cannot use it countless times in a single day, of course, I would happily use it for you," he said, grinning.

At his claims, the room stirred in a completely different way than earlier. The Uppasalan royal family had no lineal magic, but there were royal families on the continent that did, so his claim wasn't taken as a falsehood.

"Ridiculous. Why would I do such a thing?" the prince said, discarding it out of hand. He wouldn't let the other man force the issue here.

"I see. I thought it was a good suggestion, but I will not force the matter. But crossing the sea like Princess Freya requires an extreme amount of courage. It is hardly surprising that you would show fear under such circumstances. I suppose it was too much to ask. My apologies."

The very clear way in which Zenjirou bowed his head made Eric surpass anger and completely freeze. Zenjirou took the opportunity and continued.

"I suppose under those circumstances, there would be no need for me to undertake the Right of Age. After all, despite the claim of there being no cowardly man in the country, that does not seem to be the case. The problem is solved, then, and I would like to reiterate my desire to wed Princess Freya."

"Take that back!" the prince demanded, sword half-drawn.

Zenjirou gave him a smile tinged with tension and fear. "Surely you realize how impossible that is? All I did was remark upon reality. It is not something

that can be ‘taken back’ by another’s words, only the person in question’s actions. Or if I was to ask you to take back your comments and say that I was a suitable man to marry Princess Freya even without the Rite of Age, would you be willing?”

“Your nonsense is not the same as my speaking the truth,” Eric growled lowly. Zenjirou could feel the man was on the verge of making good on his implied threats.

“It is unquestionable that you rejected my suggestion. While I am sure you would say that it was not out of cowardice, it is not you who gets to make that determination.”

Zenjirou looked over the others again. Lured in by that action, Eric looked at the leaders and warriors of his country. Suddenly, his anger vanished, like he had been doused in ice-cold water.

It was not everyone. Indeed, it was a minority, but there were certainly people looking critically at him. It almost felt like they were accusing him of talking a good game but making an excuse and running when things got dangerous.

The warriors of Uppasala had an almost ingrained tendency to consider running from a trial as cowardice without question. It was a problem that Gustav had been wrestling with and it was now undermining the prince. An even greater problem was that Eric’s own views as a warrior meant he could not just discard their opinions as ridiculous.

As Eric opened his mouth to speak, Zenjirou forestalled him. “There are times when cowardice is preferable to courage. I have always thought so. However, if courage is required here, then so be it. Aware of my cowardice as I am, I will gather what courage I have. In order to ask for Princess Freya’s hand in marriage, I will follow Uppasala’s customs and undertake the Rite of Age.”

Just as he implied, his voice shook with nerves, but it was still firm. The warriors present viewed him with some small measure of interest for the first time.

“But as I said, for both of our nations, I have no intention of agreeing to a one-sided compromise. This is assuming that you accept my suggestion and show

your own courage and come to my own lands."

There was silence as Zenjirou's gaze seemed to bore physically into Eric. Still, the prince released his sword and sat back in his chair, understanding that an outburst of anger would do nothing here.

Before he had fully recovered his cool and managed to speak, the king stepped in. "Your Majesty, I wish to confirm that your taking the Rite of Age is to *ask for her hand*, no? You do not assume that simply undertaking the right will allow your marriage?"

"Indeed so, Your Majesty," Zenjirou agreed, frankly relieved that he had pointed it out. Taking and succeeding in this test would only allow him the right to ask. It would take things from being "out of the question" to a "reasonable idea."

"There you have it, Eric."

With the conversation falling back to him, Eric remembered—albeit too late—that while Freya had forced her way to its captaincy, the construction of the *Glasir's Leaf* and its voyage were at the king's behest.

While Zenjirou was nothing more than royalty from the Southern Continent and someone they hesitated to hand a princess over to, he was also the key to intercontinental trade that Gustav was entrusting his country's future to. At the very least, he was willing to accept the country as an equal and negotiate. With that understanding, Eric also realized that there was nothing he could say here.

"I understand, Your Majesty. I will see Capua with my own eyes," he proclaimed loudly.

The other warriors in the room murmured approvingly at his show of courage.

"Thank you, Prince Eric," Zenjirou responded. "I will send a maid to inform them that a guest of your stature is coming. Then, once I have sent you, I shall undertake the Rite of Age."

While his voice was much quieter than Eric's, it also garnered murmurs of praise for his courage. There was no anger or disdain for his mocking their prince or calling him a coward. That was the first time Zenjirou truly understood the advice Skaji had given him.

So, this is how they are as warriors. Despite the insults and such, when you show courage, they'll congratulate it.

In that case, clashing directly certainly made things quicker than immediately compromising or currying favor by hiding what you really wanted to say. The fact that not giving in also meant putting your life on the line was somewhat of an issue, though.

Even the prince—while not entirely free of distaste for the man—had nodded several times with a harsh expression when Zenjirou had made his declaration. The looks of welcome on the few officials' faces was possibly less to do with courage and more to do with the profit such trade would bring to the country.

The two exceptions were the king and the silver-haired youth sitting at Eric's side—the second prince, Yngvi. Gustav wasn't hiding his rueful smile, and the younger male was clearly holding back joyous laughter. It seemed the two of them had seen through him. His declaration was the exact opposite of courage. It was simply calculating self-preservation.

"Your Majesty," Gustav said, interrupting his regret and making him straighten.

"Yes?"

The king gave a gentle smile. "I cannot prioritize one child over another due to affection, but as king, I must do precisely that for my princes and princesses. In that respect, Eric will one day become king, so I want him safely returned," he said meaningfully.

Zenjirou firmly met his eyes. "Of course, I swear it," he answered, ducking his head slightly to avoid the full strength of the king's gaze.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Once the meeting was over, Eric was summoned by his father. He sat down in front of the king in his office and awaited his comments with dignity.

"While it was somewhat unexpected, you will be putting in great efforts now."

Erice snorted at his father's words before answering. "While I am less than happy about the specifics, the result itself is the best I could ask for. I will see the Southern Continent for myself and then pass judgment."

"I appreciate it."

"Leave it to me."

The king, in one way, trusted the strength in his son's eyes deeply. It was the prototypical warrior's gaze. While seeing the country's strength as its military strength alone was problematic, there was certainty in his eyes. If Eric was seen as strong, then the country would be too. And vice versa if he was seen as weak. He was a bit overzealous sometimes, and had a tendency to allow his emotions to get the best of him and lead him into outbursts. Still, he did not allow that to stop him from listening, and his personality had won him the support of the warriors.

He was still young, but Gustav was sure that Eric would be an even better king once he gained experience. The problem was whether he would have the time to do so. That much was beyond the king's control, so all he could do was pray.

Due to the conversation about cowardice and the lack of such, Eric would be going to Capua. However, Gustav took the optimistic view that there was little danger in it. Capua was on-board enough with the intercontinental trade agreement that they had sent one of their very few royals on a perilous crossing. Capua would be making the arrangements, so as long as Eric didn't do anything excessive, he would be treated as an honored guest.

There was a single point of failure that would spell his end, though. Gustav's expression grew tighter as he put the dilemma into words.

"Still, the issue will be His Majesty's rite happening at the same time. We will have to choose his companions prudently."

The northern countries—including Uppasala—carried out the Rite of Age. It consisted of fewer than ten people heading out into the mountains or out to sea and bringing something down over a certain size.

For the mountains, it would need to be something like a deer, reindeer, wolf, boar, bear, and so on. At sea, it could be a seal, sea lion, walrus, or so on.

The custom had originated due to the slow development of agriculture because of the constant snow blocking off many areas. To support a family, a man needed to be able to serve as either a hunter or fisherman. Of course, not many people earned their livings as hunters and fishermen now, but the custom was still deeply rooted. A blacksmith, someone inheriting a shop from their parents, even someone working as a lecturer at a university—each and every one of them would have taken the right while they were young.

“Indeed, we cannot just throw him in with a group of young men actually taking the rite. He would drag them down with him,” Eric said with a darkly amused laugh.

The king just rested his head in his hand. “I should have known you would not understand.”

The custom was to take the rite with a group of people who were also doing the same—in other words, a group of minors. However, as time progressed, it became acceptable to be accompanied by others who had already passed the rite.

Nowadays, there was no shortage of youths coddled by full hunters, whose families had enough money that actually being able to fight was meaningless. Of course, anyone who wanted to genuinely become a hunter or fisherman—or take the Rite of the Warrior—would never take such a shortcut.

Generally, the closer one was to the top levels of the palace, the more traditionally they took the rite due to the warrior-like nature they practiced. However, the king knew it would be impossible to impose that upon Zenjirou.

“That is not why. His Majesty must complete the rite as quickly as possible. At the very least, even if he fails, he must return unharmed.”

Unable to understand the reasoning behind that, Eric snorted. “I can understand granting foreign nobles concessions to develop relationships with their countries, but is such an extent necessary? If he were to be injured or even die during his rite, then that would be either a lack of skill or fortune.”

“That is not the problem. The issue is that we cannot lose you.”

“What? Me?”

The king gritted his teeth as he explained the situation to his son. “Were you not listening to His Majesty’s declaration? He said, ‘once I have sent you, I shall undertake the Rite of Age.’ In other words, you will be on the Southern Continent while he is undertaking the rite. If the worst should happen, how will you return?”

“Huh?”

Eric finally noticed the exact wording of the statement. Until Zenjirou returned safely, Eric would be completely unable to return from the Southern Continent.

“But in terms of lineal magic, there must be other people who can cast it. Queen Aura at least should be able to.”

“Have you forgotten? His Majesty called it magic that allowed him to send people and things to places that he has visited. I do not know how many people in Capua can cast the spell, but the only one who has ever visited Uppasala—or the Northern Continent as a whole, in fact—is His Majesty.”

Eric’s face went blank as he understood the situation as a whole. An expression—that of anger—had started to return to his face when Gustav waved him down.

“Calm yourself. You are to be the next king; you cannot throw your life away to your emotions.”

“Of course...” Eric replied eventually, face bitter. If he was willing to surrender any chance of return, he could get his revenge on Zenjirou. However, all he would gain was the satisfaction of doing so. When Capua lost Zenjirou, they would have no reason not to take the prince’s life.

The only result would be both countries losing precious royals and neither side gaining from it. Gustav was not so light on his son to let that happen.

“Allowing him to die is out of the question. However, we do not want the rite to take too long either. While he is doing it, you will be staying in Capua.”

The issue there was that the Rite of Age had no time limit. If one could not find suitable prey, it could take days or even months. If Zenjirou did that, it would lead to Eric being stranded in Capua for longer. It was not a situation

they wanted to be in.

“Add to that the war between the knights and the commonwealth. It will be a war on a scale yet to be seen.”

“You are sure?” Eric asked, reacting dramatically to the mention of war. It was close to a reaction of joy. The king found it heartening that he didn’t balk at the possibility, but that was also not the kind of disposition that would be appreciated in the next king.

“I am. While they are across the sea and mountains, they are our neighbors. There is also the matter of Freya’s presence being capitalized on by Princess Anna. I doubt things will reach us, but we need to be ready. That is precisely why I do not want you away from the country for too long.”

“Understood,” Eric replied firmly, almost eagerly. In truth, he would be a dependable commander on the battlefield. So much so that having him away from the country if something occurred would be an issue.

“Therefore, I want His Majesty to complete the rite as quickly as possible. That makes choosing his companions a matter of utmost importance. Eric, who would you recommend?”

Eric fell into thought at the question.

“I can think of many skilled warriors and hunters. Many of them would—if I ordered it—even give their lives to see those orders fulfilled, if I may be so bold. Having them accompany him would mean he would certainly not be injured. However, the finishing blow must be made by the man himself. However skilled the people with him are, I have my doubts that he will be able to do it.”

The curt statement was not uttered out of hostility towards Zenjirou; it was merely Eric’s view of the man’s abilities. A warrior of Eric’s caliber could look at someone’s physique, stance, and gait to determine whether they were an amateur or veteran of combat. Thus, his declaration that Zenjirou was a rank amateur on the level of women and children.

However skilled the people around him might be, the one undergoing the rite would find it difficult to complete if they were a complete amateur. He would be allowed help, but he had to strike the final blow.

Traps were likewise allowed, but he would have to be the one to lay them. If his escorts laid a trap and he used a spear to strike from a distance, that would not fulfill the requirements, even today.

It was still spring. Much of the mountains were covered in snow. He would have to carry his weapons, traps—and if he went for the mountains, his camping gear— on his own. Eric frankly didn't think Zenjirou stood a chance.

"True. Personally, I wish for him to succeed, but we need to prepare for the possibility he does not."

"Father, you approve of giving Freya to that man?"

The king couldn't resist a smile at the almost refreshingly to-the-point question. "I am not against it, at least. If it keeps our honor, it is an entirely reasonable deal. While I do love Freya, she is not irreplaceable as a royal. They are still young, but we have both Gerda and Hilda. The only one we cannot replace is you."

Although there was fatherly affection in his tone, the conversation itself was that of a merciless statesman. The king had three wives, and as many sons and daughters each between them, six children in total. Being born into the royal family made it unavoidable that their marriages would be intertwined with—and judged by—their political return.

"I understand how important this trade is," Eric said. "However, allowing our first princess to be a concubine of the *consort* of the Southern Continent's royalty is far too detrimental to our reputation. Besides, there must be something that would make her happier."

The statement would have caused more issues if Zenjirou had heard it, but Eric was serious. He truly believed that if Freya married someone who would be accepted, she would be happy.

"Well, true." The king agreed as well. The difference was that he knew her happiness was tilted more towards becoming Zenjirou's concubine than a normal marriage.

Even understanding that, though, it was hard for him to respect the decision. It was akin to her wanting to marry a self-proclaimed musician or comedian. No

parent would truly welcome such a union. Even if she wanted it deeply, norms dictated that very few relatives would truly be happy with it.

However, Gustav was a king before he was a father. “Let me tell you now. You should consider the trade deal with Capua to be a certainty. While I do not mind you objecting to their union, I expect you to not allow it to influence that.”

The prince remained silent for a moment before mastering his emotions and saying, “I understand.”

“Still, your statement that it is bad for our reputation is quite correct. We will need to take measures to deal with that. His Majesty taking the Rite of Age is one of those. That alone will not be enough.”

“Prince Consort Zenjirou taking First Princess Freya as a concubine” would on its own make the marriage biased in Capua’s favor. That therefore needed to be ameliorated by Zenjirou’s efforts, which would make things more accepted on the whole.

In that respect, the Rite of Age was an easy option. Normally, if a royal was marrying internationally, they would not require the northern customs to be followed. By accepting this, Zenjirou was able to show that he was willing to physically work for the marriage.

“In that case, we shall have that weakling say he has had enough and take back his words, though he will not be injured at all.”

The king sighed as he answered his combative son. “Do not go too far.”

Once Eric had left the room, Gustav’s next visitor arrived.

“You called, father?”

The guest was Yngvi, the country’s second prince. He was similar enough in looks to Freya that it would make you wonder if someone had simply changed her gender with magic. He was Freya’s twin and shared the same silver hair and icy blue eyes. Much to the king’s concern, there was a lot of his personality that showed similarities to hers as well. On this occasion, though, that similarity was exactly what he wanted.

“I want to hear your judgments. Have you spoken with Freya since her

return?”

The prince shook his head. “Unfortunately not. I spoke briefly with the sailors, but not with her yet.”

That was the truth. The two of them were particularly close royals, but both of them were adults. Even princes and princesses who had grown up together could not meet so easily once they were of age. Things were different now than when they used to swap clothes and trick people.

While that was not what he had hoped for, Gustav continued the conversation. “I see. Do so as soon as you can. If needed, I will arrange it.”

“I understand, father.”

The king was slightly envious of the easy smile on his son’s face. Speaking with Freya was nothing but a good thing for the younger male. While Gustav doubtlessly loved her as his daughter, every time there was a request for a meeting with her, he felt a heavy weight settle in his stomach. However, that made the prince invaluable as an interpreter for her.

“Give me your honest views. What do you think of Freya becoming a concubine?”

“It’s a good thing, isn’t it? A political marriage where three sides gain to such an extent is rather rare to my knowledge,” the prince answered surely.

The three sides in this case would be the Capuan royal family, the Uppasalan royal family, and Freya herself. The one person being ignored was Zenjirou, but Yngvi had no knowledge on that front. National benefit aside, he had no way of knowing how an individual he had not lived and eaten with would feel personally.

“So it is a marriage she would want. Are you sure it is not just a flight of fancy?”Gustav’s question was due to understanding all too well how a spur-of-the-moment decision could lead to a life of regret.

“I cannot say for certain. However, what I can say is that her values have not wavered in the slightest since we were children. Looking at it from the perspective of those values, this seems to be an unexpected blessing. What you and my brother consider a happy marriage would be nothing but a duty for

Freya to fulfill as a royal."

The king felt like he was constantly racking his brains to see her happy, and he let out a sigh at his son's stinging evaluation. "A duty rather than a blessing..." With such a disparity in their views, it made him want to just give up on understanding her, for all that they were related by blood. "Still, there is the problem of our country's honor. What are your thoughts on the harm that allowing our first princess to become a consort's concubine would do?"

Yngvi didn't take any notice of that issue. "I do not think it is a concern. We animistic countries are already looked down on by those the church influences. The exception would be Złota Wolność, I suppose."

While he was correct, it was also true that he was speaking hastily and from a lack of understanding that came with youth.

"Precisely, Yngvi. Precisely. That is why we cannot afford to be viewed as even lowlier. If we lose trade with them, the country will not survive."

Strictly speaking, the country would still survive. Even if they were limited only to trading with other animistic countries in the north, they could maintain their position for a while. But the continent was in the midst of a technological and economic boom. Simply maintaining the status quo while their neighbors made leaps and bounds would lead to a relative reduction in their strength.

However, Yngvi denied his father's words. "That is precisely why, father. We should take this opportunity to get out from under the thumb of the church. Unfettered trade with the Southern Continent makes that a possibility. New large ships and establishing sea routes will potentially also make it possible to reach Capua without an intermediary stop. Additionally, the Capuan royal family can use teleportation. While that alone will not support trade, it will allow rapid and safe passage for people and documents. Moreover, the country already has the port of Valentia, which is capable of supporting ships of that size. Despite that, they are not currently trading directly with the Northern Continent and are still one of the leading countries on their continent. It would be foolish to allow such a country to slip through our fingers."

He had gotten more and more heated as he spoke, eventually rising from his chair as he reached the end of his diatribe.

With all those circumstances combined, Capua was clearly an ideal trading partner. In some ways, it was a harbinger of a potential new age, and the silver-haired prince was perhaps more sensitive to that than anyone.

“So you believe a temporary stain on our honor would be acceptable? I understand what you want to say. However, that is a judgment I cannot make.”

“Then you should hand the throne over to me soon. I think when I turn twenty would be the best?”

His face was similar to Freya’s, as was the smile on it. However, his icy blue eyes were looking towards a completely different future. While Freya sought freedom and the unknown, Yngvi was eyeing the throne.

“You are ten years too early. I fear handing the throne to you. If things go smoothly, I am sure you can become the next king, but it is not certain. If you want the throne, you need to improve yourself.”

“I understand, father,” he replied with an innocent grin.

Once Gustav had seen his second son leave, he heaved a sigh. “Both of my adult sons have promise. It would be ludicrous to ask for more.”

While he understood that, as a father, he could not help his eyes being drawn to their flaws. Eric was caught in a combative mindset and had a narrow outlook on things. Yngvi was too ambitious and would try and speed the country’s progression along excessively.

Gustav himself was still in his forties. He knew he must be at the country’s helm for at least another decade. That meant that establishing trade between Capua and Uppasala would fall to him.

Making his decision, Gustav rang a bell to summon an aide.

“You called?”

“Contact His Majesty. Tell him I wish to talk with just the two of us tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

The king closed his eyes and considered the man called Zenjirou. From a warrior’s perspective, he was easily summed up as pathetic and unreliable.

However, he had successfully trapped Eric and managed to negotiate.

Considering Eric's reaction during their latest conversation, while the prince was angry with Zenjirou, he also felt competitive with him. From a certain perspective, you could say that he recognized Zenjirou as an equal. Gustav considered it a change for the better.

"I want another. I could do with the warriors around Eric taking the blow rather than only him," he murmured as he watched his aide leave.

Chapter 2 — The Rite of Age

Several days later, the day had come to send Eric to Capua. Zenjirou had sent a maid home with a letter to give them warning, so while he had no way of checking, the Capuan palace—and Aura specifically—should be aware of the foreign prince's arrival.

Eric would head to Capua this afternoon. Tomorrow, Zenjirou would set out into the mountains to take the Rite of Age.

The rite meant going out to sea or into the mountains and bringing back prey suitable to prove one's adulthood. Originally. only the minors taking the rite would go, but nowadays, companions were allowed. However, while they could offer advice, they could not offer assistance. If he relied on their aid, it would be seen as a failure. The biggest "prey" Zenjirou had managed so far would be the beetles or frogs he had caught as a child, so it weighed rather heavily on him.

"Your Majesty," Freya asked him with concern as they walked to the room where Eric was awaiting them. "Are you sure you do not wish to take Skaji?"

She had offered the warrior she trusted most—both in terms of personality and ability—to accompany him, but Zenjirou had turned her down, saying he would allow Eric to make the choice. Naturally, Natalio had intended to accompany him as well and was considerably against his decision, but Zenjirou's course had not yet faltered.

Skaji aside, not taking Natalio was an unavoidable decision. The season was still spring, and the mountains Zenjirou were heading into were still completely covered with snow. The temperature dropped considerably during the night as well. While Natalio was overwhelmingly stronger than Zenjirou in terms of fighting ability and stamina, he would quite possibly be nothing more than a burden under those conditions.

Zenjirou had spent his childhood in a place that saw at least decent amounts of snow. He was also a relatively competent skier. At least, in terms of modern high-efficiency skis. He didn't have the courage to try and ski through the mountains with the narrow strips of wood lathered in wax that this world used.

Skaji, an accomplished skier as well, had offered to teach him, and he might even get a taste for this world's skis someday, but that would not happen now.

"I will be fine. While it might be shallow thinking, I have an idea, at least. It would be better in that respect if I had no absolute allies with me."

"Did your discussion with my father influence that?" she asked.

The discussion had taken place the day after the decisions about Eric's trip to Capua and Zenjirou's Rite of Age had been made. It was a conversation without any outsiders, just the two of them, so he had been away from even his guards and maids. It had mostly concerned a minor request from Gustav and an agreement that when that request was fulfilled, he would accept the concubine proposal.

Zenjirou had been unable to hide his shock at the unexpected acceleration of events, but it was more than he could ask for. The problem was that the request was not precisely easy to accomplish. After considering it for an evening, he had come up with a reasonable strategy.

The conversation had been with a king, without *any* attendants, so it went without saying that secrecy was the name of the game here, which meant he couldn't answer her question with either agreement or disagreement. She seemed to have expected the lack of an answer and didn't prompt him for a real response. Instead, he felt her examining his expression in detail.

Then, Skaji spoke from behind them. "Are you certain that is all you wish to take?"

Zenjirou would be leaving tomorrow, so his gear was already prepared. He had no sense for the kind of tools that would be needed to hunt in the snowy mountains, so Skaji—who had prodigious skill in hunting as well—had prepared everything for him. However, Zenjirou had pared down what he was taking even from what she called the absolute minimum. It was therefore hardly a surprise she would be worried. Unfortunately, however, Zenjirou didn't have the stamina to take everything she deemed bare essentials.

"I am. I am sure that if you see it as essential, it is, but I lack the skill to use much of it. I lack the strength to carry it all as well."

“Will you not take at least a bow or spear? Using one that your companions are carrying will be considered a failure.”

Those were the first two things Zenjirou had decided against, and for a simple reason. He didn’t have the ability to use either of them. It could take months of training just to shoot an arrow in a straight line, and learning spearwork was out of the question. He didn’t have the courage to face even a deer with a spear, let alone a bear or boar. Instead, he was taking multiple types of traps.

“They say trapping takes even longer to learn than using a bow or spear,” Skaji said with a sour look. If you couldn’t find an animal’s tracks, deceive its senses, and outwit it, you wouldn’t catch anything. However, there was the advantage that even if you failed to catch anything, you wouldn’t be hurt.

“Right. It is worth the attempt, though. I’ll simply do what I can,” he replied lightly.

“I see.”

If he couldn’t bring down any prey, he wouldn’t pass the rite. With no bow or spear, and seeing traps as “worth the attempt,” it seemed highly unlikely he would manage.

Skaji glanced towards her liege, but Freya simply smiled back. If he didn’t manage to pass, her desires of becoming his concubine would not come to be. She should find how lightly he was treating it to be an issue too, but she was not going to place any further burdens upon him.

Both Capua and Uppasala wanted intercontinental trade. As Gustav had said, some other noble girl would allow things to go much more smoothly, and it could even be possible to reach an agreement without a marriage. Freya was the one who had made things more complicated by adding in her own wants. That was the reason she wouldn’t place any further burden on him. Still, she was not surrendering her dream.

“Skaji, I’d like to get in touch with Yngvi. Arrange it as soon as possible,” she told her companion quietly, so that the warrior was the only one who could hear.

Eric was already waiting when Zenjirou and the others arrived.

“Apologies for the delay,” Zenjirou stated, since Eric had been waiting on them, even if there was plenty of time before the agreed-upon hour.

“It is hardly worth mention, Your Majesty,” he replied, raising a hand and letting it pass. These conversations were the same, whichever continent you were from.

With the greetings finished, Zenjirou inspected the prince’s outfit. If he had to sum it up in a single phrase, it would be “embellished combat gear.” While it was attractive, the armor and sword hanging from Eric’s waist were both clearly made with the assumption they would be used. The armor was colorful and polished to a sheen with a two-part structure of thick steel and lighter leather. The sheath and pommel of the sword were decorated with gems, but the handle itself was wrapped in plain, rough leather to make sure it wouldn’t slip.

While it was a somewhat disquieting sight, it was a fact that a male royal in Uppasala would be ready for combat even if they were in formal wear. Skaji had worn a uniform of some type to the banquets in Capua, but that was a more informal version, much like Zenjirou’s third outfit. Even if that wasn’t the case, telling someone to go into a completely unknown land unarmed would be rather difficult.

The prince was also carrying a cylindrical item wrapped in a gorgeous blue cloth, but nothing else. It looked like a sword to offer as a gift. It was probably just as usable—if not more so—than the sword hanging from his waist. Uppasala’s blacksmithing was unmistakably better than Capua’s, so it was a worthwhile gift.

“I have already sent word, so you will be treated as a guest of honor. You will not find yourself overly inconvenienced,” Zenjirou told him.

He had been about to say that the prince *should* not find himself overly inconvenienced, but stated it more firmly instead. While he was wary of making such a firm statement without any information, he was the one responsible for the situation, so he could not afford to be vague.

“I am sure.” Eric nodded. He seemed to have completely readied himself over the past few days and didn’t appear to be at all perturbed about heading alone

to an unknown country.

“I am ready to send you at any point, so would you like to go immediately?” Zenjirou asked.

“No, wait a moment. I would like to finish things before I leave. These people will be accompanying you on your rite.”

The five men standing behind him stepped forward at his introduction. Their ages varied. One was over forty, one was younger than twenty, and the other three were in their mid-thirties. The commonality between them was their build. Each of them was easily over 180 centimeters and had muscles that were even and well-trained.

“They are all trusted retainers. Each of them are skilled warriors, but even more skilled hunters. With the five of them with you, I can guarantee you will be at no risk of losing life or limb.”

“I am Victor,” the eldest said, putting a fist to his chest as he spoke on their behalf. “While we are limited in what we can do for your rite, we will help you as much as possible within those restrictions.” The greeting he gave wasn’t refined noble etiquette, but a warrior or hunter’s greeting.

“I am Zenjirou. I look forward to it,” Zenjirou replied, remembering his private discussion with the king.

While this Victor was one of Eric’s confidants, he was also Gustav’s and worked to further his goals.

The rest of the men had—at a closer look—expressions of anger or disdain towards him. The youngest in particular was outright glaring. It was hardly a surprise for Eric’s confidants. A few days ago, the verbal argument between Zenjirou and Eric had nearly ended with Eric drawing his sword in earnest. It would be more of an issue if they *didn’t* find themselves ill-disposed to him with their liege in that situation.

Still, even with that bias against him, the warriors of Uppasala would follow their leaders’ orders. Eric had ordered them to do their utmost to protect Zenjirou, so they would obey. If they did not and Zenjirou was hurt, then the faith in both the soldiers and their lord would suffer with the latter having

guaranteed his safety.

That said, Zenjirou was rather hesitant to entrust his life to those who disliked him, especially considering his normal caution—particularly when one considered that fulfilling his agreement with the king would require further irritating them.

It made sense that he was being asked to do something so extreme, considering he was asking for their first princess's hand in marriage while only being a prince consort himself, but that didn't lessen the pressure any. With his stomach feeling like it was on fire, Zenjirou recited the statement he had already prepared.

"Incidentally, I want to confirm something. In order to pass the Rite of Age, I cannot accept any help but advice from you. To do so would result in failure, correct?"

"Precisely," Victor agreed.

Zenjirou continued, "As far as I have heard, there is no limit on the number of attempts one can make. Even after repeated failures, a single success is enough to pass. Can I assume the same holds true for me? If that is the case then I will likely be relying on you multiple times."

With actual hunters by his side, they could hunt until the sunset, then assuming he caught nothing, he could call it a day, return to their camp—with the hunters taking watch, of course—and come back from the mountains with their aid the next morning. Then, once he had recovered, he could try again several days later, repeating the whole process until he succeeded. At the very least, that was not forbidden by the modern rules of the rite.

There were people from wealthier families who were removed from fighting, hunting, and fishing who did precisely that to succeed. The group's faces turned sour at his question, though. He had already predicted that would happen, as slipping through loopholes in the rules wasn't something they were happy with.

After a few moments of thought, the prince spoke up. "Frankly, that is not something we would prefer. At the very least, you should be prepared for negotiations to be much harder compared to completing the rite in a single trip. Additionally, should that happen, I would like to arrange my return after that

first attempt. As I have said, I am not possessed of much free time."

Fortunately, the conditions Eric proposed were all what Zenjirou had expected. Of course, simply accepting them as-is would be dangerous. Part of Zenjirou's guarantee against the displeasure of his companions was that he was the only one who could bring Eric back from the Southern Continent. Put bluntly, he could consider it taking Eric hostage to guarantee his own safety. With his cowardly disposition, there was no way he would have the courage to have Eric's most trusted as his only guarantee of safety as he headed into the mountains.

He forced a smile as he added his own conditions. "Very well, assuming I fail, I shall bring you back to Uppasala. I will simply do my utmost to ensure my marriage to Princess Freya is accepted. However, I must admit to some concern in regard to that."

His expression was tight, not hiding his nerves or fear. Honestly, it was a rather pathetic look he had. However, Eric's memories of being taken in by that expression a few days prior meant that he was, if anything, *more* vigilant rather than letting his guard down.

"And that is?"

Zenjirou responded to the harsh question. "If it will improve my chances even a little, then I would prefer to accomplish the rite with only one attempt. Simply hunting during the day and returning from the mountains each time will take too long. That would be against your wishes as well."

"It would indeed," the prince responded warily. While he didn't know where the conversation was going, he wouldn't take back his statement of only a few moments ago.

"That leads to some unavoidable concerns. If I have to withdraw due to my companions' circumstances rather than my own, would that count as a failure?"

There was a pause. "Hm? What do you mean?"

Even though Eric was listening carefully, he couldn't understand what Zenjirou was trying to imply. That wasn't just the case for him—Victor and the others couldn't understand where the conversation was going either.

“Do you mean if they advise you to return considering your state? In that case, the final decision will still be yours, so you cannot call it ‘their’ circumstances.”

Zenjirou could hear his heart racing as he shook his head. “No, it is simpler than that. I mean, if someone other than me says that they cannot take anymore and want to return. Or, more bluntly, if they could not keep up and left me behind.”

Dead silence filled the room. Eric had gone past anger to simply being aghast. Even without his own admission, it was visible just by looking. Zenjirou was an amateur. As a warrior and a hunter alike. Even as a simple hiker. Eric considered it unlikely that he would manage to succeed in the rite, even if he was blessed with luck.

And yet, Zenjirou was concerned that hand-picked warriors and hunters would not be able to keep up with him. Eric didn’t even get angry, he just sighed and gave a huff of dark amusement as he chided Zenjirou.

“Your Majesty, that is not something you need to worry about. However likely the converse is, it is absolutely impossible they will be unable to keep up with you.”

Zenjirou quite wanted to firmly agree, but doing so wouldn’t help things here. He kept his strained smile on his face as he said something even he thought was ridiculous.

“Still, even the most skilled can slip. Used to the mountains they may be, but they could come down with a fever during the trip. Even the most surefooted can misstep, and I want to know how that would be taken.”

Anyone could tell it was essentially pointless posturing. While it was *possible*, there was no end to such possibilities.

There was obvious displeasure on Eric’s face. The fact that he still remained wary was proof of how vividly he remembered being caught out several days ago. Still, he had to show utmost faith in his men, and it was indeed how he felt.

“Impossible.”

His swift dismissal was exactly what Zenjirou was hoping for.

“I see, then I can assume that there is absolutely no possibility whatsoever that I will be delayed by their circumstances?”

“You can.”

“And ff that should still happen, it will completely overturn everything agreed upon thus far. Are you prepared for that?”

“I am. I trust these people.”

Even as Zenjirou felt awkward about repeatedly making the point, Eric’s affirmations didn’t change.

“Very well. That is all I have to ask.”

“Then our business is finished. I am ready when you are, Your Majesty,” the prince said, facing him again.

“Very well. I shall cast the spell. It can feel akin to seasickness if you are unused to it, but it is not dangerous.”

“Understood. Do it. Victor, I leave the rest to you.”

“Yes, sir,” the warrior replied.

“Let us begin, then. *Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer...*”

With the spell cast, Eric vanished to Capua.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

The next day, with all of his preparations made, Zenjirou traveled by carriage for about an hour and arrived at the foot of the mountains.

They were not particularly high, and the foot of the range was wide and rolling. It was not what someone from Japan would expect from a mountain. They would probably call it a hill at best. It was covered in thick trees, though. It was also still covered in snow—perhaps since those trees shielded it from the sun—making it obvious that despite its height, it was not something that amateurs would climb.

The lower-than-expected hill coupled with the more-treacherous-than-expected path were practically the worst conditions for Zenjirou.

“Victor, are there any steep slopes, or preferably cliffs, within the hunting grounds?” he asked.

If there weren’t, then his plan was flawed from the start. Still, he kept his worries concealed behind a poker face. His guard and guide looked puzzled at the question, but he answered, “There are several places that fall under those conditions, but with our guidance, I assure you that you will not run afoul of any of them.”

Zenjirou breathed a sigh of relief at the middle-aged man’s response before shaking his head. “Quite the opposite, I’d like you to guide me to one. Even a wild animal can die from a fall, so chasing something off the cliffs could work.”

“Ah, I see,” Victor responded, somewhat impressed. “Then I shall do so.”

It was indeed a valid method, it seemed. With the rules of the Rite of Age, Zenjirou could not accept anything other than words of advice from the five men. However, they would also not leave his side, to ensure they could protect him if the need arose.

The mountains were commonly used as hunting grounds for the Rite of Age. Therefore, the animals within them were well aware of the threat that humans posed. Because of that, even wolves and bears would flee at the first sight of humans, let alone deer and reindeer.

Everyone other than Zenjirou would be no threat to the animals, but wild animals would have no concept of their circumstances. Whether they tried to or not, the five of them would aid in driving the animals away. It certainly seemed like a viable method. At the very least, it sounded more likely to be successful than Zenjirou racing after them.

While Victor had indicated some approval, the other four were less than enthused. They saw using the mountains without actually breaking the rules as petty and weak. From the perspective of an Uppasalan warrior, it was an entirely correct viewpoint.

“Still, Your Majesty, are you sure you have enough?” Victor asked, concerned

about how lightly Zenjirou was equipped for a trip that could last for days.

He was currently dressed in clothing that was not his third uniform or any of the things he had brought from Japan. Instead, he was wearing leather pants that Skaji had chosen along with a thick shirt. He had a short leather coat atop it, and his feet were covered by solid leather boots that came midway up his calf. All of his clothes were fairly resistant to water and snow, and good enough to keep any sticks and stones from actually jabbing his skin.

Since Skaji had picked them all out, his outfit was much the same as what Victor and the others were wearing. In other words, they were acceptable clothes for heading into the mountains to hunt during this season.

The problem was the equipment he had on his back. Frankly, there wasn't much of it. His pack wasn't even half the size of the others'. They all had water skins that would hold a liter, while Zenjirou's would hold a quarter of that.

"Yes, this is enough," he replied.

"Your Majesty, the closest cliff that I know of is at least six days' hike at a hunter's pace. Pardon my rudeness, but attempting a round trip with your provisions is reckless."

While this was the first time the distance to the cliff had been brought up, he had been warned several times about the amount of provisions he was bringing. Therefore, his answer remained the same as ever.

"I thank you for your advice, but it is unnecessary."

"If your life is in danger, then we will offer our own provisions, but please be aware that will constitute a failure."

"I know. You should all take care as well; if the converse happens, then Prince Eric's words will be much lighter."

"The converse?" Victor asked in confusion.

Zenjirou kept his voice level. "If I have to offer you provisions, then his introduction of you as 'skilled hunters' would become a falsehood."

The other four men glared viciously at him. You could practically hear the youngest of them gritting his teeth.

“Very well. We will do our utmost to ensure that does not happen.” Victor waved his hand to calm the others.

Four hours later, their anger had vanished like mist.

“Are you okay, Your Majesty? Can I offer you a hand? Ah, that would be a failure, though,” the youngest asked, amusement clear in his voice as he mocked Zenjirou.

“No need,” Zenjirou said, with even that much taking a huge amount of effort.



The snow-covered forest was more dangerous than he had expected. Victor wasn't mocking him, simply choosing the easiest route to take, but it was still extremely difficult.

The terrain was uneven and there was no place he could put his feet down flat. The fallen leaves that were covered with snow—and the mossy roots—were treacherous. Simply keeping himself upright and walking was an extreme task for him. Every step could lead to a fall, and the uneven terrain meant that a fall would hurt. Once he was hurt, it would make further progress even harder. A stubbed toe could wear away at your concentration, and a twisted ankle would slow him down immensely. Hence the careful progress to avoid any such injuries.

It meant they were practically crawling, and the constant tension was wearing on him both physically and mentally. The temperature was in the single digits, and they were progressing through the shade, but Zenjirou was still dripping with sweat and gasping for breath. He had grown up in the countryside, so he used to go bug-hunting, fishing, and generally playing out in nature. However, the hunting grounds were entirely different from the woods he had been allowed to play in alone.

To be blunt, he was moving about as fast as a woman or child would from Uppasala's perspective. The journey so far had let Victor get a handle on Zenjirou's stamina, and he called out quietly from behind.

"Your Majesty, there is a clearing just up ahead. Perhaps we could take a break there?"

"Very well."

It was obviously an unplanned break out of consideration for Zenjirou. Despite being all too aware of that, he didn't have the energy to be stubborn here.

Although the clearing was "just up ahead" according to Victor, it still took Zenjirou an hour to reach it. He was the only one who was blatantly exhausted, but the others still took the chance to rest.

Of course, Zenjirou was undergoing the rite, so he had no assistance from

them as he took his break. Meanwhile, the others had no such restriction and split the work between them, ready in moments. Two gathered firewood while another cleared the ground. Another gathered large logs and vines to make a simple three-legged structure, and the final person did nothing but keep an eye on their surroundings, maintaining Zenjirou's protection.

With their preparations quickly finished, the guards poured their water into a big metal pot, then threw dried meat and vegetables into it, making something akin to an instant soup on the open fire. The salted meat began to smell fragrant as it regained water and tickled his nose.

While the warriors took their warm soup, Zenjirou ate his own meal. He spread out the sea drake skin he had gotten from Skaji on a relatively flat and dry piece of land before dropping his pack and water skin on it. He took some white bread and sausage from his bag, along with some pickled cabbage, and ate them as they were, washing them down with the cold water from the leather-smelling skin. It was a pitiful meal in comparison to his escorts', but there was no choice. He didn't have a pot to cook with, and even gathering the firewood would take up the rest of their break.

He regretted not bringing the static flame he had used on the ship. Still, it was fairly heavy so that it could be fixed in place, so he would probably have regretted bringing it even more.

Either way, letting himself rest after eating and drinking allowed him to recover his mental and physical stamina.

"Victor, how long will it take to reach the cliff at our current pace?"

The man scowled somewhat after finishing his own simple meal, but answered regardless. "At our current pace, it should be about ten days. However, camping will lead to a build-up of exhaustion, so doing so will be impossible. Regardless, you do not have the provisions for a twenty-day roundtrip, do you?" he asked calmly, looking at Zenjirou's small pack.

He was entirely right, but Zenjirou ignored that and asked the same question. "Is that not the case for you? I doubt you have the food and water for twenty days with you. If we return because of your circumstances, that would be falsifying Prince Eric's claims."

While his words were provocative, their current situation made them seem like nothing more than empty bluster. Victor sighed and shook his head.

“No, this is merely advice. You may be misunderstanding, but we alone will manage. As you say, we do not have the food and water for a full twenty days. However, as you can see, there is snow if you merely look. We can find firewood and melt it to secure drinking water. While there is little prey during spring, it is still there, and there are edible plants. If it comes to it, we can eat insects. Alone, we could last for however long we need to.”

Zenjirou forgot his act for a moment and let out an impressed noise at their survival skills surpassing his expectations. Still, he soon schooled his expression and continued. “Just to be certain, do the rest of you agree?” he asked the others. “Do you all agree that I need pay no mind to your circumstances?”

The four immediately nodded in agreement.

“Indeed. The only concern we might have is that moving so slowly is tiring,” the youngest said mockingly. Despite the inherent scorn in his voice, the malicious rage was absent now, with the man having entirely discounted Zenjirou as inferior.

It was perfect for Zenjirou. He would sooner take contempt than active hostility. Either way, he had gotten what he wanted from the five. Once they were done, and he had recovered, he stood up.

“Then let us depart once we are packed up. Victor, I appreciate your direction.”

“Of course,” Victor responded.

The group was soon ready, waiting for him to say as much. They continued for about three hours after their lunch, and the sun was starting to take on a reddish tinge as it dipped westwards.

“I-I’ll leave it here for today,” Zenjirou wheezed, calling an end to the trip.

As Victor had worried, the afternoon had seen them covering less ground than the morning. As far as sunlight was concerned, they could keep going for another hour or so, but Zenjirou’s stamina was a problem.

“If you have no objections, after breakfast tomorrow, we will start from *here*,” Zenjirou said, looking around as he managed to catch his breath.

“I do not mind, but are you well, Your Majesty?”

Even Victor had a somewhat exasperated look on his face. “If you have no objections” sounded like empty posturing at this point.

The men behind him were all looking at Zenjirou like he was simply an extra burden that talked a good game.

“It is a rather early end to the day. Still, it is a wise decision. It takes amateurs a significant amount of time to make camp. You won’t be able to do anything once it gets dark either,” the youngest said mockingly.

“I thank you for your concern. However, you should worry about yourself more than me,” Zenjirou responded, looking around again.

Keeping the sullen hunter in the corner of his eye, he found something which would work as a landmark before dropping his pack and beginning his preparations.

“Your Majesty?” Victor asked in puzzlement.

Zenjirou wasn’t getting ready to make camp, but doing something far stranger. He didn’t respond, just pulled out a camera from his pack and started taking a photo of the characteristic features. There was an oddly warped tree along with a largish rock. There was also the mountain vista just visible through the trees.

Once he had finished taking the photos, he manipulated the camera to show another one. It was an image of a room in the palace—the guest room he had been assigned.

He shouldered his pack again and then took some deep breaths to get his breathing entirely in order. Finally, he was breathing evenly again.

“I shall set out from here in the morning once I have eaten. You are free to do as you wish until then, but ensure you are gathered here before I leave. Until then.”

With assistance from the camera, Zenjirou chanted the incantation for

teleportation.

"*Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer...*"

A moment later, Zenjirou vanished from in front of the warriors.

"Huh?"

"What the?!"

"Uh?"

"What happened?"

"He...vanished?"

Uppasala had advanced technology but lagged behind with magic—with their rulers not even having lineal magic—so their warriors couldn't truly understand what they had just seen. More accurately, they could not understand what it would mean for them going forward.

The young hunter's response was a given, but not even Gustav's warning had let Victor understand the difficulty they were in for.

Meanwhile, having succeeded at the spell, Zenjirou was now inside his guest room.

"Welcome back, Sir Zenrjiou," Ines greeted him.

The incomparably warmer air and familiar voice from Ines let Zenjirou truly feel like he was safe again.

"It's good to be back. Sorry to ask so soon, but I'd like to use the sauna if you can arrange it."

While walking through the forest had made him feel flushed with heat, he was now chilled to the bone. He was simultaneously aware of the heat on his skin and the cold permeating his bones.

"Of course. I have already made the arrangements, so you can use it right away. Will you head straight there?"

"Yeah, please."

He couldn’t hide a strained smile at how well she had anticipated his needs. The original plan had been for him to be out until around four in the afternoon, but it was only around half past three now. The fact that she had made sure the sauna would be ready significantly earlier than planned meant she had foreseen the possibility that he would be returning early.

While she was guiding him there, he spoke to keep the conversation going. “Did anything happen while I was away?”

“Nothing in particular. However, King Gustav, Prince Yngvi, Princess Freya, and Sir Völundr have asked to meet.”

“Völundr?” Zenjirou asked, not knowing the name.

Still, it was rather obvious that all of them would want to meet him as he took a break. Zenjirou wasn’t going to waste that much time, though.

“Got it. I’d like to meet Princess Freya first and ask about the others. I have heard a bit about the king and prince, but I don’t know this Völundr. I’d like to ask about the other two as well, just to be sure. I’m tired tonight, since it was the first day, and I’d rather avoid it for the next two days just in case, but I should be able to meet with one of them each night afterwards.”

“Very well, I shall make the preparations.”

Zenjirou proceeded just as he had planned, using the sauna and eating before going to sleep early in his soft, warm bed.

The next morning, after eating the breakfast Ines brought him, he got ready in the same way as yesterday, using the images from the camera to aid his visualization before casting his spell.

In an instant, Zenjirou went from the guest room to standing among the still snow-covered trees. It seemed that the warriors had followed his instructions. When he appeared, all five of them were in front of him.

“So, you’re all here. Let us head off, then. Victor, if you would.”

None of them seemed to fully understand the situation after just one night. They couldn’t hide their confusion even though Zenjirou made things as plain as possible for them.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Three days later, the hunters—particularly Victor—finally understood the situation they'd been placed in. Zenjirou had done the same each night—in other words, relaxed and eaten in the palace before coming back to the meeting place they had agreed on the day before, to head back out. Then, they would break for lunch before getting started again. Once the sun started to set, he would leave them behind and head back to the palace alone, where he used the sauna and had a warm meal, then slept like a log in his heavenly bed. The next morning he would teleport back.

The warriors couldn't stand it. Zenjirou could just mosey back to the palace, while they were stuck camping. Additionally, he had followed Victor's warning from the first day that they wouldn't keep up the same pace, and his speed had dropped considerably from the second day. At their current pace, it seemed like it would be even longer than ten days to make the first leg of the trip.

There were no issues yet. There was more than enough food and water, and three days were not enough to sap their stamina. With this situation continuing for at least a dozen or so more days, their experience made it clear what kind of future they were in for.

It was also *at least* another dozen or so days. Zenjirou managing the hike that quickly would itself have been rather good fortune. After three days, though, his footing was surer, and as Zenjirou was walking over open ground, Victor hesitantly questioned him.

"Your Majesty, if you will pardon a question? What are your plans if you cannot find any prey when we arrive?"

"To keep trying until I do. I can keep trying for a hundred—or even two hundred—days until I manage it."

As Victor had expected, it was the worst answer he could receive.

"A...hundred?!" the youngest hunter yelped from behind them.

It was neither a joke nor a threat, though, simply the truth. With teleportation

making daily trips possible, a hundred or two hundred days would be no issue for him. Especially once they reached their objective, he wouldn't have to keep traveling as he had so far. It was not a real concern for him. As soon as he felt a little tired, he could head back and return to continue the next day. And it could well take up to a hundred days for an amateur like Zenjirou to bring down some worthy prey.

It would be the other hunters, who had to keep camping, who would feel the burden. They hadn't been lying when they had claimed they could live off the land even when their provisions ran out, but they had not envisioned doing that for a hundred or more days. If they had, they would have bought more gear, or possibly even the equipment to make a temporary lodge out of logs to be in for the long haul.

The current equipment they had made such a long period in the mountains fairly dangerous even for accomplished hunters.

"Your Majesty, perhaps we should all head back and resupply first?" the young hunter suggested.

Zenjirou gave an exaggerated look of surprise.

"I have no issues. I will not see this cut short due to your circumstances. I checked with both you as a group and Prince Eric several times. Perhaps you are losing your nerve? Does that mean I can just assume that all of Prince Eric's claims were false?"

There was a brief silence.

"It does not."

The man was gritting his teeth so firmly that someone standing next to him would have heard them grinding against each other, but he still managed to offer a denial. Seeing the danger, Victor cut in as the one in charge.

"Your Majesty, with the Rite of Age, we can only offer advice, but we will do the most that we can within those confines."

The other men showed their agreement. This wasn't a polite fiction, but an honest declaration. After all, until Zenjirou succeeded, they would be stuck in the forest and their liege would be stranded on the Southern Continent.

“I look forward to it,” Zenjirou replied.

Likability aside, their goals were now completely aligned.

Intermission — Prince Eric’s Visit to Capua

While Zenjirou was struggling with his rite, the first prince of Uppasala was dripping with sweat in a training area.

“Phew!”

Standing in front of him, wearing flexible leather armor and with a rounded-off wooden spear in his hands, was Marshal Pujol. He was even bigger than Eric and was calmly facing the prince, who held the same weapon. His broad smile spoke louder than any words. “Come at me however you like,” it said.

Eric understood the expression and let out a yell as he attacked.

“Hah!”

He thrust with the spear. A quick, short thrust meant that even a blunted spear could kill and injure. Still, as soon as it touched Pujol’s spear, its trajectory warped like magic, being diverted down.

“I think not!”

Eric pulled his spear back in an arc from under Pujol’s. He then swung again, in an arch toward the marshal’s right flank.

That was well within the man’s expectations, though. He simply pulled back his hands and sent the prince’s spear into the air instead.

“Hah! Hahhh! Hahhhhh!”

Eric had thrown away all composure and attacked with abandon. Their bout lasted for a long time, and his expression changed as it continued. It started at irritation, then progressed to anger before eventually warping to joy.

The irritation was simply explained. The prince was confident in his strength and was irritated that his attacks were having no effect. Eventually, that became anger as he realized that Pujol was better than him and simply “playing” with him by merely defending. His anger had finally become joy when

he realized that Pujol was even stronger than he had imagined.

The marshal wasn't playing with him; he was giving him guidance. The proof was that whenever Eric tried to attack with poor timing, his opponent wouldn't let him attack at all, whereas if his attempt was well timed, Pujolwould defend against it. Additionally, whenever the prince put too much strength behind his attack and ruined his balance, the marshal would strike just harshly enough that it wouldn't injure him.

This wasn't a duel, it was instruction. While Eric was part of the royal family, he was also one of the best warriors in the country. There were several people who could beat him in a bout with spears, but not one of them could *teach* him like this while he was going all out. His tendency to show almost unconditional respect to any skilled warrior could at times be a detriment.

"Hah! Hrah! Hmph!"

Even his strongest attacks were being warded off and used as teaching aids. He had forgotten what that felt like and found himself just concentrating solely on his spearwork, his mind blank.

"Let us leave things there," Pujol said. While he was drenched in sweat, he was breathing evenly.

Eric, on the other hand, barely managed an agreement through gasps of breath. The prince was visibly exhausted to anyone who cared to look—so much so that the very fact that he was still on his feet could be attributed to pride more than anything else.

Still, he was not breathing heavily for long. It was part of his training to master his breath quickly.

When he had recovered, the prince smiled broadly at Pujol. "That was magnificent! The skill you have is phenomenal. I am sure that were you born in our lands, you would have been given the name of Thor."

"I thank you for the compliment, Your Highness. Am I to assume that this met your expectations, then?"

The question was due to the fact that the bout had only happened because of a request from Eric. "I wish to have a bout with a warrior of this country in

order to understand it. I could not do so with His Majesty," he had said.

Aura had accepted that and allowed him to fight with Pujol as the representative of their country.

"I can tell you are well trained. There are not even many of our knights who would measure up," Pujol said.

"It is gladdening to hear that from one of your caliber. Still, 'knights?' I had heard there were no horses on the Southern Continent, yet you have knights?"

"Horses are the creatures used in the north as mounts, no?" Pujol responded. "I have heard of them and seen drawings, at least. We use dash drakes on the Southern Continent. They are herbivorous drakes."

"Dash drakes? So you ride drakes?"

It was hardly a surprise that his eyes started to sparkle. Drakes—particularly land drakes—were practically myths on the Northern Continent. As far north as Uppasala was, the closest they got were rumors from hunters about seeing them, but nothing substantiated. They were viewed on the same level as rumors of Japanese wolves or otters in modern Japan—both species being extinct now.

The only location where there were concrete examples of the drakes still living was in the untouched forests of Złota Wolność. Those who followed the church would revere them, but Uppasala was an animistic country. They simply admired them and saw them as fearsome potential prey.

"Would you like to ride one?" the marshal offered.

"I would," the prince answered quickly. So quickly, in fact, that the marshal couldn't help a smile of amusement.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

That night, Pujol was summoned to the royal palace. When he arrived, the others were already there: Aura, the Head Court Mage Espiridion, and Fabio, the royal secretary.

“You are here. Sit,” Aura said.

“Thank you,” Pujol answered, taking a seat with her permission.

Night had fallen, and while the room was lit with many oil lamps, it was still dim. Reflexively, the warrior’s instincts from living through the war had him looking to the shadows to make sure no one was hiding there.

“I do not have much time, so I shall get right to it. What is your opinion of Prince Eric?”

The man smiled widely. “He seemed to enjoy himself. It was only a light bout, but I rather enjoyed it as well.”

“I see,” the queen answered shortly.

The upper echelons of the country had been in disarray in the few days since Eric’s arrival—or more accurately, since the tall maid carrying a letter informing them of his arrival had shown up.

Aura wanted to demand answers, but the person to demand them of was currently on the Northern Continent out of contact, so she had just had to prepare as he asked. For both the concubine agreement and the intercontinental trade, Eric needed to be treated as an honored guest.

They had rushed around ensuring they were ready to receive a foreign royal, and the efforts required had made Aura sour towards her husband for the first time. That said, while it was an exceptionally irregular and unofficial visit, there had been no issues as of yet. Although Eric was against the marriage, he wouldn’t brandish those views about inside their palace. As far as public perception went, he was grateful for the welcome for his sudden visit, and Aura was wholly welcoming to him.

Aura put her chin in her hand at his answer. “Well, it would seem my first impression of him was correct.”

Her first impression of him was—it went without saying—that of a simple warrior. It seemed like she was correct in allowing Pujol to deal with him despite his lack of diplomatic experience.

“Indeed. After our bout, he was able to ride a dash drake, but he was like a

child with his enjoyment. I even heard him wondering whether he could import one."

Even after the breeders had told him how difficult they would be to rear in the cold weather of the Northern Continent, he still hadn't given up. Considering how they were over twice as strong as even war horses, it was no surprise that a fighter like Eric would be partial to them.

"I see."

Internally, Aura was considering things. The maid's letter from Zenjirou—written by Ines—had implied there was quite the uneasy relationship between the prince and her husband. While it was a good thing that their visitor had gotten on so well with the marshal, it was something to be wary of.

"Very well, I shall speak with him privately tomorrow."

The letter and Eric's behavior so far had shown that he was not particularly well-disposed to Capua, so while he had been officially welcomed, Aura had not met privately with him yet. Likewise, there had been no talk of either the trade agreement or the marriage that went with it.

That could not remain the case. If talks did not progress, then what was the point of exposing Zenjirou to the danger of the voyage on the *Glasir's Leaf*?

"If Princess Freya's words are to be believed, then Uppasala is one of the leading countries in smithing and ship construction on the Northern Continent. Pujol, take a look at this and give me your honest thoughts."

As she spoke, Aura offered a sword to him unconcernedly. Someone so close to her having a sword certainly wasn't safe, but now wasn't the time for that. If Pujol wished, he was capable of killing the queen bare-handed.

"Very well."

He took the sword and removed the clasp, slipping it from its sheath. This was the treasure sword Eric had presented as "a token of friendship" between their countries. The sheath was a deep blue and inlaid with glittering stones. The cross guard on the sword was made of gold, and the pommel itself had a large gem embedded in it. It was a magnificent specimen, certainly worthy of being called "treasure."

That was as far as that went, though. The grip was—as could be seen at a glance—covered in rough leather to stop it from slipping. The bared blade was too thick to be a decorative piece. It was long and straight, with both edges sharpened enough that one hesitated to even rest their finger on the blade.

Contrary to its sharpness, though, the blade was excessively thick, so it wouldn't cut as well. In exchange, it was harder to break and its weight made strikes more powerful. Even if the blade was nicked, it would not lose its lethality.

Looking further, the sheath was bigger than the sword would warrant. The clasps on either side of the guard would hold it in place, but it was so loose that the sword would fall from the sheath without them. This was another thing that demonstrated it had been made to be used.

When a sword was used in combat, its blade could be warped and bent, so a sheath that fit it perfectly wouldn't work again until it had been repaired. That made it harder to carry. Therefore sheaths for the battlefield were made bigger than their swords so that even if the blade was no longer straight, it would fit.

This was made in precisely that way. The sword on Eric's waist—while less ornate—was made in much the same way. It would appear that in Uppasala, swords that were both ornate and practical were the norm.

"So, your honest opinions?" Aura asked.

"I want this sword," Pujol said, purposefully missing the point as he gazed at the sword in the light from the flames.

"While I asked for your honest opinion, that was not what I meant," Aura returned with reluctant amusement.

Handing over a sword like this—which had been offered as proof of friendship between two nations—to someone else was out of the question, even if it was to Capua's own marshal. Still, the very fact that Pujol would make such a statement in earnest showed his feelings about the blade.

"It is that impressive?"

"I am honestly in love. I would willingly exchange the spear my uncle gave me for it."

The marshal had no real aesthetic taste for jewelry, so his evaluation of it was strictly as a weapon.

“Hmm. Since they chose it as a gift, it is likely among their best. Still, with that taken into account, it is impressive enough for you to say as much.”

It would seem that Freya may not have been exaggerating about her country’s relative skill with smithing.

“I shall do whatever I can to ensure the trade deal succeeds.” Pujol grinned.

“I look forward to it,” Aura responded, offering him a nod, although she would not make any firm declarations to Pujol, given his position as the head of one of the most influential families in the country.

The best result for Aura would be trade between the two royal families. Of course, they could not be too concerned with “the best” outcome, so involving the other noble families would ne a consideration. Still, there was no need just yet.

“Good work. You may leave.”

“Ma’am!” he replied, rising from the sofa. “Excuse me.”

The longing gaze he directed towards the blade on the table before he left was very telling.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

The next day, Eric Estridsen Uppasala and Aura Capua met in a room of the royal palace. They started with simple greetings and transitioned into Eric thanking her for the accommodations over the past few days. Once Aura had told him of Pujol's praise for the sword he had given him, they moved to the main topic.

"This may be an odd thing to bring up *now*, but your visit here means you must have become acquainted with my husband."

There was no questioning tone to her words; they were solely to act as a preface to their conversation. Eric was not the most skilled actor, so he did not hide his displeasure as he nodded.

"I have. He seems a particularly wise individual. I could not do the same, though, I must admit nor would I want to," he said, exercising all of his self-control to not blatantly bad-mouth the other man.

Aura could tell that carelessly trying to keep up appearances would not be any help with Eric, so she didn't hide the rueful tinge to her expression as she answered.

"He is the man I love most," she replied.

"Pardon me," Eric apologized, realizing he had gone too far with his statement, but he still didn't retract it.

"Well, no matter. Everyone has their own affinities. Fortunately, he and Princess Freya seem to have relatively good compatibility."

With the main topic now opened for discussion, Eric's gaze sharpened. "As her older brother, and wishing for her happiness, it is not something I can wholeheartedly approve of."

"I shall remember your individual feelings. Has King Gustav said anything?" Aura asked, brushing aside his clear disapproval.

First prince he might be, but he was not the king, and he had no say in the final decision. Eric was somewhat put off by her treatment and responded with an answer slightly off the main point.

"My king has high hopes for trade with your nation."

“I see. It is an honor to hear it,” she replied with an easy grin.

Her thoughts were decidedly less placid, though. In response to her tackling the matter of Freya’s marriage, Eric had brought up the trade agreement. While it was a fact that the two topics were inextricably linked, it was still answering the implied question of “What does King Gustav think of the marriage?” with “He is eager for trade.”

Assuming Eric wasn’t a fool who could not read a room, he was all but saying that the king was willing to permit the marriage for the trade agreement.

That did not, however, mean there was no need to convince him. Eric was the first prince and—should things proceed as normal—would be the next king of Uppasala. Pushing past his objections to force a marriage would effectively be setting a time bomb for when the crown passed to him.

“And what are your thoughts on trade between our nations?” Aura asked, going for a topic that would suit him as well.

“I believe it will be a great benefit to both of our lands if it comes to pass. Of course, I am not accomplished in increasing wealth or in its use, so I would delegate that to specialists.”

His tone spoke more of his lack of interest than his words did. If he had to come down on one side or the other, then he was for the deal, but he was not *eager* for it. His actions over the past few days left Aura sure it was not an act, which meant that it would be difficult to garner his approval of the trade deal.

“I see. Then would the same be true of the marriage? Would it be something to delegate to those familiar with such matters?” Aura asked after considering her other options.

“No. While Freya has her problems, she is still my precious younger sister, and I would like to take that responsibility.”

“So it is for her. A worthy goal.”

Her statement was not necessarily *entirely* sarcastic. His expression and tone revealed an obvious—albeit somewhat awkward—affection for her.

“Any brother would wish the best for his sister,” Eric said, straightening in his

seat. He didn't seem to see any sarcasm at all.

"Then that makes me hope for your approval of their match all the more. It will make her happy, and I am certain that our nation can best do that."

Eric nodded with a firm expression. "I certainly have revised my assumptions since I arrived. While I cannot say that I have grasped everything, I have no doubt as to the country's strength."

While Eric was a warrior at heart and had a tendency to view everything through that lens, he was still a highly educated royal. The welcome he had received, the palace itself, and experiencing the dash drakes with Pujol let him see that the country was certainly a large, powerful one.

While the Northern Continent tended to look down on the Southern Continent, that tendency was less prevalent in Uppasala, as they were also animistic. Therefore, having seen their nation for himself, he was willing to treat them as equals. Then again, one could say that assuming the decision was his to make meant that he saw them as inferior to begin with, whether he realized it or not.

Either way, now that he knew what the country was like, he was not against Freya marrying someone from there. His issue was Zenjirou's personality and position. His initial low impression of him as someone he could kill one-handed had been somewhat revised after how he was played, but there was nothing making up for the man's position of prince consort.

Taking the first princess of one country and marrying her off to a prince *consort* of another was by no means an equal partnership. If anything, it was putting Capua decidedly higher. Aura could understand the concern and nodded several times in understanding.

"I recognize your worries in that regard. While I can only offer verbal assurances as of now, I can say that both my husband and I will do our absolute utmost to ensure she is treated well. She will not just be a member of the royal family, but a duchess of her own land."

"I do not doubt your consideration. However, as her brother, I wish for more happiness for my sister as a woman."

“I can understand that, but there is a lack of certainty in such things. What kind of marriage specifically do you wish for her to have?”

“A marriage to a country worthy of the first princess of Uppasala, to a man suitable for her, who will shelter her, which will bring about benefit to both countries,” he answered firmly.

While that answer was itself somewhat ambiguous, it gave Aura a bargaining point.

“A man who will shelter her. I see. While the majority of women would wish for a man on equal footing, would you not say that Princess Freya does not fall under the majority?”

Oddly enough, that was exactly what Zenjirou had pointed out in Uppasala. Eric seemed displeased, frowning and retorting with a question of his own.

“You would call her abnormal? What basis do you have for saying so?”

Aura was slightly taken aback by the question. “Basis or not, it is the simple truth. We had a ceremony for Marshal Pujol recently. My husband attended as my representative, as I could not leave the capital, but Princess Freya volunteered herself as his partner. Is it not clear that a woman requesting to accompany a man to a wedding would not find happiness in that man taking her under his wing?”

There was a long pause, Eric’s expression freezing.

“Pardon?”

The question was not purposeful, but soft and almost unconscious, like it had simply slipped out as his mouth dropped open. That was just how shocking the information was to him.

Freya asking to act as Zenjirou’s partner, in public no less. It was—to him—an unthinkably shameless act. And yet, *Aura* had just told him that Freya had done exactly that.

Unskilled with subterfuge to begin with, Eric asked plainly, “Ah, you mentioned it being in public. Were you present as well, Your Majesty?”

“Of course I was. It was the banquet to welcome her. It would have been

decidedly rude for me to be absent.” She smiled.

Eric wanted nothing more than to hold his head in his hands and yell.

Freyaaaa!

He was going to lecture her until she cried when he got back. As his anger towards her reached its peak, the shame and integrity of his own values prompted guilt and shame that eclipsed that.

She had asked, at a party that was to welcome her, for Zenjirou to take her to a wedding—in front of his wife, Queen Aura. That went past the point of mere eccentricity. In fact, from his perspective, he found it hard to believe that either Aura or Zenjirou had accepted it.

“Was there anyone other than Freya from our country present as well?”

“The only other guest from Uppasala would have been Lady Skaji, although I imagine the others would at least have heard about it.”

“Is that so?” Eric asked, his voice dead as his final hope was dashed.

Skaji had been present, and while the sailors hadn’t witnessed it personally, they all knew of the circumstances. That meant there was no way of hiding that these marriage talks had begun with Freya going off the rails. It would be but days before rumors were spreading through the entirety of Uppasala.

Damn it! There’s no choice now!

It had all been decided from the beginning. That was the only conclusion his values would allow him to reach.

Eric loved his sister. He also had very little understanding of her odd way of thinking and held old-fashioned values of his own. He had wanted her to have a happy marriage based on those values.

Had wanted, past tense. That wish had just been crushed. She had effectively proposed to a foreign royal—and an already married one, at that—in public, asking for him to escort her to a wedding. No one would seriously ask for her hand after such an event. Eric was well aware of that.

In truth, though, he was being overly pessimistic. Given her title as the first princess of a kingdom, there was still a significant probability of someone

wanting her for—what he saw as—a “proper” marriage.

Still, Uppasala owed Capua a lot for this. Freya had broken etiquette to ask for a marriage. Zenjirou accepting it and Aura allowing it made it “a slight disturbance.” If Zenjirou had rejected her then, and Aura had cut it all down as rudeness, things would have ended much worse.

They could have said that what happened in Capua would stay in Capua if they were willing to never set foot on the Southern Continent again, but with the possibility of trade on the horizon, he now had to show visible gratitude to the queen and her husband. It would not have been an exaggeration to call Freya’s life over then and there.

He considered it all. The mistake she had made, the difficulty of hiding it, and the best future she could be offered...

“I would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude for accepting my sister to both you and His Majesty.” Eric finally broke, not being able to think of anything better than allowing her to marry Zenjirou as she wished.

Chapter 3 — Days of Searching and Private Talks

As the biggest breakthrough in the deadlock happened outside of his knowledge, Zenjirou was falling into a rhythm.

In the morning, he would teleport out to the mountain for his rite and return the same way before sunset. He would use the sauna and eat, then go to bed. Now that he was used to it, he wasn't even tired in the mornings. As he got even more used to it, he had enough time some evenings after eating to speak with those who wished to see him.

As a result, he would be meeting with the people who had sent requests to him tonight. There were several such requests, but the station of the sender meant that there was not a surplus of choice when it came to deciding who to meet with first. He had wanted to meet with Freya, but that was not to be.

Inevitably, the first meeting ended up being with King Gustav V of Uppasala himself.

"My apologies for taking your time of rest, Your Majesty," the king said. "I am grateful we could meet sooner than expected."

Zenjirou was wearing his third uniform and sitting opposite the king. He raised a hand with a smile and replied, "It is nothing. I was certainly exhausted on the first and second days, but I have gradually gotten used to it. I would like to refrain from alcohol, though, so I ask for your mercy there."

"I see. Then I shall drink alone."

"By all means. Ines."

"Of course," Ines replied, stepping up from behind him to pour alcohol into the king's silver cup. Gustav's lips twitched up as he saw the almost transparent drink with powdered gold floating within it.

"Oh, Lord Pomorskie gave you some of his drink? It would seem the rumors of your protection of the city were true."

The alcohol that Zenjirou was serving had been given to him by the lord of Pomorskie before they had left as thanks. The lord had proudly declared it a delicacy of his lands, and it seemed that was true from Gustav's reaction.

Zenjirou decided he would try some once things calmed down and was now looking forward to it all the more as he replied modestly.

"It was not by my power that the city was protected. It was a sequence of coincidences that I happened to be able to assist with. With regard to Pomorskie, I would credit Princess Freya's wisdom rather than my efforts."

"Oh?"

Zenjirou's praise prompted the man's expression to turn sour in spite of his enjoyment of the drink. It was the best thing he could ask for from a son, but for a daughter, the more he heard, the more his head hurt. He and his son had rather similar outlooks.

"Your Majesty, with this liquid courage between us, I would like to ask in truth: do you truly wish for my daughter as your bride?"

The question was shockingly blunt from a royal—someone who was supposed to live and breathe acting a role. Zenjirou was stuck for words for a moment; the question was just that apt. While the king's concerns likely ran in a different vein than his, the fact remained that he did not *actively* want Freya as his bride. He didn't think he could get a lie past a seasoned royal like Gustav, so he spoke the truth.

"I personally respect Princess Freya as a person to a great extent, and marrying her would be an honor beyond compare. I would treat her as such an honor would dictate."

"Hm..."

His respect for her as a person, and how he would treat her if they married were both true. However, whether he loved her or wanted to marry her was completely absent from his answer, and Gustav would have noticed that.

He did not point it out because he did not want to reconsider things. Gustav had heard about what had happened in Capua now, from more than just Freya. He had spoken to Skaji and the vice captain of the *Glasir's Leaf* as well. His talks

with them had cemented how much value there was in this agreement. However, the fact remained that it would be poor for their reputation, so he had to push the negotiations through to their end.

“Very well, then. I suppose you will be calling me father-in-law before long.”

“I will?” Zenjirou asked after a pause.

The king’s statement was tantamount to accepting the marriage. Zenjirou couldn’t hide his surprise, and the king answered in amusement.

“I would accept it. You’ve already fulfilled my conditions.”

The private meeting between the two of them had added the condition that either Zenjirou would have the escorts accompanying him vouch for him, or else break their viewpoint. In other words, to do the same as he had to Eric during the meeting.

The warrior’s perspective had supported Uppasala through the ages until now, but as time passed, it seemed likely to become an impediment. It was a constant concern of Gustav’s. Zenjirou had—by not fitting into that perspective at all—broadened Eric’s horizons just a little.

The escorts with him, other than Victor, were all staunch supporters of the prince. They were strong warriors and would serve as the center of a fighting formation. The king would consider them broadening their horizons even a little to be a major win. Enough of a win to permit Freya’s marriage.

“Considering the situation, their spirits will certainly be broken. I am willing to say you have already fulfilled my conditions, so I need to make a show of good faith.”

“It is an honor,” Zenjirou replied as the king chuckled, clamping down on his habit of offering slight bows from his life in Japan. He might be sitting in front of a king, but he could still not lower his head so easily.

As far as the king was concerned, people like Eric were dependable as the country’s swords but simultaneously headache-inducingly stubborn. There was a dark humor to be found in them being stuck in the cold mountains for days at a time without any real preparation. Conversely, you could also consider it a show of his faith that even in such a situation, they would not be overly injured.

He continued in good humor. “Since we are in private, I would like to speak openly. We need to consider our position as a nation. Allowing our first princess to marry a prince consort from the Southern Continent does not reflect well on us. I would appreciate your cooperation to prevent the continent as a whole from looking down on us.”

“I understand your feelings. The Rite of Age I am currently undertaking is part of that.”

Visibly putting him through the wringer let them say something along the lines of, “If you’re willing to go to *that* much trouble, then our hands are tied.” It somewhat reminded Zenjirou of a story he had heard about marriages during his childhood. It wasn’t entirely wrong.

“Indeed. Normally, if one of our princesses was marrying into another country, we would not require that. As they marry into another nation, they would follow that nation’s customs. To make up for the situation, though, we need to keep as much of that type of tradition as we can. I would request that the marriage itself be done here, as we would do, in our clothing.”

In other words, for them to follow Uppasalan customs right up until they were married. It showed the public in earnest that Zenjirou making as much effort as he could.

“Very well,” he replied, agreeing readily, since this was up to his own discussion. It was a common Capuan custom that the wedding ceremony and the joining of families be held at the bride’s family home. There was no reason for him to refuse.

“Good. Look after her, Your Majesty.”

“I will,” Zenjirou replied, showing as much honesty as he could to the king’s words as her father.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Meanwhile, two very similar-looking royals—each with silver hair and blue eyes—were seated on either side of a table.

“It’s been a while, Freya. I’m glad to see you well.”

“You too, Yngvi.”

They were Princess Freya and Prince Yngvi of Uppasala, the first princess and second prince. Being twins, the two of them were very similar. In terms of the actual order they were born in, Freya was the older of the two, but Yngvi still claimed to be her big brother and wouldn’t refer to her as “older” even in private. That led to both of them claiming to be the older of the two, forming a bizarre equality between them.

Being male and female royals, it took quite the effort to arrange a meeting, but they had grown up together sharing bed and meals alike. He was the member of the royal family she got along best with.

“You took longer than I expected, though,” she told him. “I thought you would show up the day after I returned.”

Yngvi was similar enough in his curiosity—though focused differently—that no one doubted they were twins, and Freya felt like he had taken his time arranging the meeting considering that.

The silver-haired prince pouted at his female reflection. “That’s mostly your fault. You messed up with Princess Anna in the commonwealth, so we had to put the navy on alert in Logfort because of the risk of war. We only finished today. I might even have to board *Naglfar*. I suppose the rest of it would be His Majesty’s fault? This would normally be Eric’s job, but he’s currently on the Southern Continent,” he said unhappily.

Freya wasn’t entirely comfortable with him pointing it out so strongly either. “Sorry,” she apologized quietly, looking away. “Father said the same. So, things will affect us as well.”

“Well,” Yngvi said, comforting his slumped twin, “I don’t think it will amount to much. It’s a matter of speed. If the commonwealth clashes with them in truth, then we can’t just sit and watch regardless. Tuurukku and Berggen are doing the same.”

“What about Utgard and Ofus?”

“Ofus hasn’t made any moves yet. They have the strongest presence from the

church of the five of us, so they can't act carelessly in this situation. Utgard will probably keep their usual neutrality. Whatever happens, they're not going to move until the end of things," Yngvi said, summing up the reactions of the five northern countries, including their own.

While they were the same age, being a male, Yngvi had been placed into military and political roles and thrived.

"It's a shame you got caught up in things, but considering the international situation, we're better off if the commonwealth doesn't get routed by the knights. We'll have to follow Princess Anna's desires regardless. The risks are too high to send reinforcements, but we have to at least deter them."

"Hm? If we'll have to do so anyway, then wasn't that a mistake on her part? The result will be the same either way, but this way there's bad blood between us." Freya asked.

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "It will be to her benefit on the whole. Doing what she did means that domestically she can argue that we are involved because of her actions. We clearly reacted the most quickly, so there looks to be some truth to it as well. Earning favor with her own people is more important than avoiding bad blood with foreign royals. It's the blatant arrogance of bigger countries."

While there was a hint of scorn to his words, his explanation was confident. She couldn't help but look enviously at him.

"You're so lucky. You get to hear about international politics and influence our policies."

"Well, I worked hard to be able to...though not as hard as you."

He was able to take her complaints so gracefully and even agree with her because he *knew* that she had worked harder than him.

Women who went through even more training than a centurion could gain the title of warrior as an exception and be allowed the same occupations as men. When Freya had found that out at a young age, she had put all her efforts towards that. However, she was slight for an Uppasalan woman, so she had only managed to gain the strength of an average warrior.

She still hadn't given up and had spent a lot of effort convincing her father, mother, and wet nurse to allow her to go out on reindeer hunts and seal fishing expeditions, and summoned people from the universities to deepen her knowledge. She was still instructed in the etiquette of a female royal but undertook her other instruction separately.

"You've still done well. Whatever else, you captained the first intercontinental voyage with the *Glasir's Leaf*. Congratulations."

"Thank you. That was due to your help as well, though."

Yngvi had been the only member of the royal family to support her desire for captaincy and to undertake the voyage. In fact, it was unlikely she would have been made ship's captain if it not for his assistance, even if that "assistance" mainly took the form of threatening to collude with Freya and do something even worse if others interfered too much, so there was certainly much that could be said about his methods.

"Still, you're getting married? I can understand you marrying into the Southern Continent, but I'm honestly more surprised about you marrying royalty."

That was what made him the best at understanding her. Considering her intense wanderlust and curiosity as a child, it was practically inevitable for her to choose some far-off land.

"That's rude. I'm not entirely inconsiderate. I had the common sense to know that whoever I married would have to benefit the country."

"A princess with common sense would not have captained an international voyage and arranged a betrothal without her father's permission."

"I didn't say that I had common sense in *every* respect. Just 'the common sense to know that,'" she growled, lifting her teacup to her mouth.

"That's rather limited for being 'common.' Still, I'm glad. You've found a better marriage than I imagined. With how kind His Majesty is and Queen Aura herself wishing for it, you'll probably be treated well."

After she'd swallowed a mouthful of herbal tea, Freya looked curiously at him. "Huh? Where did that come from? I haven't mentioned anything about Her

Majesty yet. Did you hear about it from Skaji? Or maybe His Majesty?" Only those three should know of Aura's disposition as far as she could think of.

"No," Yngvi said confidently. "No one told me; it was just a simple deduction from the information I have. Capua has already finished with the arrangements, and there are only two people who could make that decision: Their Majesties. However, his personality is significantly more respectful and considerate of people than most royals. Someone like him wouldn't disregard his position as a consort to ask for another country's first princess as his concubine. Which means there is only one explanation: Queen Aura was the one to suggest it. Am I wrong?"

Freya looked awkwardly away as Yngvi detailed his logical, well-reasoned explanation, which had led to a false conclusion. They had known each other since birth, so there was no way he would miss it.

"Freya?" he asked hesitantly.

She remained silent, not meeting his eyes and instead letting her gaze roam across the room. Yngvi's look turned into a lidded glare.

"Say, Freya, tell me clearly, who was the first to suggest this marriage? Who proposed it to whom?"

With the question put that clearly, there was no way for her to avoid it. She raised her hand weakly and answered, "I propositioned His Majesty..."



“What are you playing at?!” her brother demanded, his voice more strangled than Freya had ever heard it.

There was a long period of interrogation after that, where Freya simply grinned defiantly as she admitted everything that had happened. Her grin was solely because she had no other recourse to distract from the issue.

For his part, once he had heard the full details, the prince slumped back in his chair and turned his gaze to the dark ceiling.

“You asked to accompany him to a wedding in public, in front of Queen Aura... Has His Majesty simply gone past being ‘a kind person’ and instead lost all negative emotions?”

His comment meant that if the circumstances of the proposal had been clear to begin with, they wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place. If Zenjirou had simply told Uppasala that he was “marrying your shameless woman,” the upper echelons would have found it hard to refuse. And yet, he had hidden the truth of it and allowed the various comments about it being “out of the question,” him needing to “follow their traditions” to marry her, and “him being wholly unsuitable for her.” Even the Rite of Age he was currently undertaking in the forest was part of that.

“His Majesty avoids clashing with people as much as possible. This time, though, we were able to warn him in advance and he could take a much harder stance.”

“*That* was a harder stance?” Yngvi asked, aghast and amazed. Zenjirou would have been pained had he heard it. He had done his best to get Eric to the verge of violence and was still seen as “kind” from an Uppasalan perspective.

“It was. The marriage is considered a done deal in Capua, so I am almost certain he will do his best to ensure I’m comfortable.”

“You need to thank him for that.”

“I know.”

She saw his remaining silent and his kindness as part of him being considerate, but the truth was different. He had simply forgotten etiquette. He

had been raised in Japan, so a woman making the first move wasn't particularly remarkable. While he understood intellectually that this world was far more patriarchal, having an exception to that constantly at his side in the form of Aura made it hard to truly internalize. The only reason he was even *in* this world was because Aura had summoned him to be her groom, so nothing about it felt strange.

Having regained his composure again, Yngvi spoke up. "I have to say, their lineal magic is impressive. That alone would be worth two or three of you," he said with certainty.

It was already common knowledge that Zenjirou was commuting between the forest and palace each day. It was inevitable that people would realize the value of the Capuan lineal magic that made it possible.

"There's no limit to your rudeness, is there? I have to agree, though. But the Southern Continent is far more sensitive to lineal magic leaving their borders than we are, so bringing our children back here will be rather difficult."

Aura had hammered that point *firmly* home in their initial negotiations.

"That makes sense. Still, with teleportation, you could visit fairly easily even after your marriage. So you might even be able to give birth here, no?"

The mental stresses of pregnancy leading to the mothers spending that time in their homeland was fairly common if the countries were neighbors. Still, Freya knew that her brother wasn't suggesting it out of the goodness of his heart, and she offered him a slight glare.

"And if so?"

"Well, it's all just hypothetical. I was just thinking that if your child was born here and my wife just happened to give birth at the same time and they were accidentally swapped, it would be just awful. After all, the two of us are twins, so I'm sure our children will look alike."

"And His Majesty is a completely different race. Twins we may be, but our children are not going to look similar." She sighed at him.

He grinned back. "That's not necessarily true. A child from you and him would look similar to a child between me and a woman from the Southern Continent,

I'd think."

"Yngvi...if you seriously try that, that will make us enemies," she said in a low voice, glaring at him.

He raised his hands. "Aha ha ha, I'm kidding."

"Fine, then."

Of course, having grown up with him since birth, she knew full well that he was not joking in the slightest. However, she also knew that his calling it a joke meant that he was giving up on the shady plan, so she wouldn't pursue it any further.

Gaining the Capuan lineal magic would be the best result for them, but if that would cut off their only link to the royal family in the form of Freya, it wasn't worth considering. Freya understood the strange criteria he had for evaluating things, since he had both deep ambitions and a willingness to let things pass.

"So, how *much* of it was a joke?"

"The mixing up of the children was a joke. We'll take all possible precautions to make sure that doesn't happen, so you can come back without worrying."

"Which means marrying someone from Capua?" she asked leadingly.

"That would depend on the person, of course, but it's something I'm considering. You'd be angry with me if I said it was 'fortunate,' but you are our first princess and marrying a prince consort. That means that I—being the next king of Uppasala—would be able to take someone from the high nobility of Capua as a concubine as well. The Northern Continent won't be happy about having someone from the Southern Continent as a queen, after all."

It was surprising for Freya to hear that he viewed the trade deal with Capua as that important, but he said as much with a serious expression. Still, Freya picked up on something she was well-used to hearing but that she had to find fault with.

"That's a risky thing to say. We might be good friends as far as royalty goes, and with no signs of factions splitting, it can be taken as a joke, but you should really stop taking every opportunity to say that you'll be the next king while

only being the second prince."

Usually, such a warning would get an apology and a change of topic. Freya expected as much, but this time his reaction was different.

"I will be. Father will probably reign for another decade or so, which means Carl might be a contender, but Eric will not be the king of *Uppasala*."

The specificity of his wording and Freya's understanding of the political situation in the North let her come to a conclusion.

"Has it been officially decided?"

"It has. It can't be publicized yet, but it seems like father has received the official demand. Eric will be the king of Ofus. The current king has finally given up on passing it down his line."

"I see..."

Freya let out a breath at the new information and considered things. The Kingdom of Ofus was one of the northern territories of the continent, like Uppasala. The country was also in the midst of a particularly tricky situation. The current king was an old man over sixty, but there was currently no crown prince to succeed him.

There were several factors complicating matters, but the biggest issue was that the prior crown prince had died in an accident over a decade prior. He had been in his twenties and his wife had died as well. His only daughter was still young, and her corpse had never been recovered, but there was no chance of her survival.

Worsening matters was that the king had only fathered two children. The now-dead first prince and an older daughter. The first princess had already married Gustav and was Uppasala's queen. She had already given birth to Eric.

The king had grieved personally over the loss of his child but had not been overly panicked in public. He was still in his forties at the time. He had originally not had more children in order to make succession easier, but he was still healthy enough to father more. Still, doing so would not ease his citizens' fears over having no successor to the throne until the child was grown.

The king had then spoken to Uppasala and brought up the possibility of his grandson—Eric—being given a place in succession. Gustav, with several conditions of his own from their private meeting, had agreed.

Eric Uppasala had then been given both families' names, becoming Eric Estridsen Uppasala. It was a temporary measure until the foreign king had a child with his new concubine. Everyone had seen it that way, but the situation had continued until today.

"While the king is healthy and carrying out his duties well, another child is unlikely at over sixty years old. Even if they were fortunate enough to have one, there would be no guarantee the king would survive until the child was able to succeed him. So Eric is officially second in line, but first in practice."

The current first in line was the presumed-dead first princess. Women would ordinarily be lower in succession than men, and the king leaving his likely deceased daughter first in line suggested conflict within both himself and his country when it came to handing the right of succession to a foreign prince.

"We always knew it was a possibility, but Eric becoming their king rather than ours is surprising. The Estridsen family should still have people."

Freya's unhappy comment was correct. The royal family itself had not been wiped out. The direct line had been cut, but there were still collateral lines. Those lines were the problem, though.

"That won't happen. Passing the throne to a subordinate line would force it down his brother's line. The man himself aside, the majority of his descendants follow the church."

Ofus was a country consisting of a large island right in between a peninsula of the northern countries and the mainland. Its location made it the closest to—and most influenced by—the church within the northern states. Over twenty percent of the populace followed the church's teachings, so there was an inevitable consideration to their existence in their policies.

As part of that, the king's brother had married a woman from inside the church's sphere of influence, but his wife was the issue. Of course, calling the woman herself a problem was unfair. She just happened to be more devout than they had thought, and her children had been influenced by that.

The king and his brother were almost the same age. Passing the throne to his line wouldn't be passing it to his brother, but rather to his brother's children. In other words, it would be the ascension of a baptized king into the northern states. That was something that the king of Ofus—and indeed all of the other nations—wanted to avoid at all costs. So much so that he was willing to take another country's prince as their next king, and Uppasala was willing to allow their first prince to be another country's king.

There was a serious—yet still rather lively—look on Freya's face as she listened to her brother detail the situation.

"I see. Then he really will be the king of Ofus..." she mused before breaking herself off as she considered the prior meeting with Eric present. "Wait, didn't you imply that the notice only just arrived? Does that not mean that when he introduced himself as our first prince, it was already decided?"

"It's still secret, and neither Carl nor I are the crown prince yet. That's why our seats and introductions were the same as ever."

The response was logical, but considering the knowledge Freya had of Capua's state, it seemed clearly designed to mislead Zenjirou.

"Father explicitly stated that Eric would be king one day."

"It's true. He'll be the king of Ofus."

"It's certainly *true*, yes, but is it not also clearly misleading?"

"Well, I am not father, so I couldn't say for sure."

Freya ignored her brother playing dumb and considered the situation. Why had he purposefully left Zenjirou with the impression that Eric would be the next king of Uppasala? The most obvious answer would be to further guarantee his safety. That had certainly been part of it, but it seemed unlikely that it was the entire explanation.

"Was he...using Eric as a windbreak?"

Yngvi's silent smile was an agreement as far as she was concerned. Now that she thought about it, her father was the one who had started exploring intercontinental trade. He had arranged for *Naglfar* and the *Glasir's Leaf*, along

with ensuring they had captains capable of sailing them. He had also expanded Logfort into a port capable of harboring several such ships—both cargo ships and warships. Of course, it had not *all* been with a view to intercontinental trade, but that was definitely the main objective. Considering all the effort he had put in, he would want trade with Capua to succeed no matter what.

For better or worse, Gustav ruled as a king should. However bad it would have been for their reputation, if it had to be *Freya* who became a concubine to secure trade with Capua, he would pay that price.

Conversely, Eric was—again, for better or worse—a deeply emotional person who prized reputation and honor above all. Gustav would have easily been able to predict his son being so strongly against the arrangement. Yet he'd still had him present. He would have been able to keep him absent by saying that he would be the king of Ofus. Yet thinking back, he hadn't restricted Eric's behavior at all—as much as was possible—letting him do as he wished.

A simple view of that would be that allowing him to do so and earn Zenjirou's ire was nothing but a negative. Just stopping Eric from speaking up wouldn't have influenced things, though. It was obvious that the reluctance to hand the first princess to a consort was not limited to Eric. Many others of the leading lights in the palace had the same opinion. Therefore, he had been allowed to act as their representative and speak those thoughts. His subordinates were one thing, but a prince—and one they assumed would be the next king—having those opinions would not be easily removed from negotiations.

Ordinarily clashing in such a way could leave bad blood, but that was not a concern with Eric. After all, he would not be part of Uppasala in the future; he would just be their neighboring country's king. Having Eric oppose the marriage would allow the opposition to vent, and a poor relationship between him and the Capuan royal family would result in the actual issues shifting to Ofus.

"Father..." she sighed, looking up at the ceiling. "And should you be telling me that now?" she then asked Yngvi.

What was his plan if that information reached Zenjirou through her? But the prince merely laughed at the question and gave a ridiculous answer.

"Well, he didn't explicitly say so, but I'm pretty sure he wanted me to keep it

secret from everyone.”

“Yngvi, what?”

“I’m providing cover, though. His Majesty isn’t particularly fond of this kind of scheme, is he?”

“I wouldn’t dispute that, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t understand them,” she said, almost defending him.

Yngvi’s smile deepened. “That’s exactly why. He might understand it, but it will be unpleasant for him. It isn’t a clean decision, but something forced on him. That discomfort will accumulate and could eventually overcome him. He is a good-natured person, though. Explaining our circumstances as best as possible and admitting that it will cause him trouble and *asking* him for his cooperation while emphasizing that we will be working for his benefit as well would be more effective for him.”

“Yngvi...” Freya murmured, feeling a chill go down her back at how well he understood Zenjirou without even speaking to him.

As a child, he had innocently claimed that he had never had his first impression of a person turn out to be wrong. It was rather delayed, but Freya was realizing just how useful that ability was.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Ten days had passed. Zenjirou and the group had finally reached the cliff they had been aiming for.

“So, this is the place?” Zenjirou asked.

“Mind your step, Your Majesty,” Victor warned him.

“Of course,” he answered, looking down the cliff. He had a thick rope tied around a sturdy tree—having been taught the knot by Victor. While he had that lifeline, the chill breeze from below struck him right to his heart.

With no real frame of reference, it seemed almost completely vertical to him. It also seemed to be at least as high as the view he’d had from the high-rise

building he had worked in back in Japan. It had probably been caused by a now dry stream. The fissures looked like someone had taken a massive carving knife to the ground.

“There’d be no saving me if I fell...” he mused with a shaking voice.

“Indeed,” Victor agreed.

A fall from this height wouldn’t necessarily kill someone, but the wounds it would cause would leave one incapable of anything afterwards, so the meaning was much the same. That would also be true for the animals in the forest.

Eventually, his hands sweating in his gloves, Zenjirou pulled himself back in and stepped away from the edge. His hands were numb from both the cold and fear as he undid the knot, and when the burden was off him, he rubbed his gloved hands together and breathed a sigh of relief.

“This is perfect,” he said again, looking over the torn-up ground. It was exceptionally convenient that those fissures formed a softened U shape. It would be easier to drive something into than a completely straight drop.

That said, Zenjirou didn’t have the skills to guide the forest wildlife as he wished. He would need to ask the specialists for their views.

“Victor, I’d like to drive some prey in the area over the cliffs. Teach me how, if you would.”

The man leading his escort put a hand to his stubbled chin and thought things over before replying. “In your case, baiting them would likely be better than chasing them. To chase them, it could take days to guide a target here. You would need to find them first as well. If you cannot find them before they find you, guiding their movements is close to impossible. Meanwhile, if you have bait, all you need do is wait. While they could take the bait and run, you need not worry about preparing more.”

Zenjirou nodded in understanding. It would be difficult for him to drive them as he wished. He had neither the agility nor the stamina to chase animals through unpaved woods. He had been imagining chasing them from behind, with the animal running straight ahead, but now that his naivety had been pointed out, he spoke slightly faster.

“Very well, I shall go with that. It might be worthwhile setting up a trap at the same time. It might not be much use, but it is worth the attempt.”

That was why he had not brought a bow or spear, and had instead packed a complement of traps. However, the expert rejected that as well.

“It would be better not to. If they spot the trap, they are likely to not approach at all.”

“Ah, I see. A dilemma indeed.”

It went without saying, but even wild animals weren’t idiots. They had the intelligence to stay away from traps that they spotted. What should be bait could end up being a warning and prevent them from getting close to the cliff. It would definitely be putting the cart before the horse, especially as Zenjirou would need to set any traps up on his own to pass the rite. He might have an expert at his side guiding him through the process, but assuming he would be able to hide it well enough to fool animals with sharper senses would be too optimistic.

“Understood, then. It is somewhat early, but I will return and prepare some bait. There is a lot to prepare, so I won’t be here tomorrow and we will resume the day after. Is there anything in particular I should bring?”

Victor answered his request for advice immediately.

“You should decide what you are targeting first. While there are commonalities between bears, wolves, boars, deer, and reindeer, their main diets change.”

“I see. What would be the most likely to work?”

“Well, there are advantages and disadvantages to each. Deer and reindeer are safer but will escape more quickly and may manage to get away. Meanwhile, bears and boars, particularly cornered boars, are extremely aggressive, so they likely won’t run. In fact, they will often attack first. Furthermore, I would recommend avoiding wolves. They hunt in packs, and finding a single one alone is rare. If we are attacked by a pack, we will all have to fight and that would contradict the rite.”

A fight between Zenjirou and a pack would mean that even if he managed to

separate and kill one, he wouldn't be able to protect himself from the rest. Having his escort defeat—or even drive off—the rest would be using their aid and end the rite.

"Very well. Thank you for your advice. I will avoid targeting wolves. I have a concern now, though. I have no confidence that a deer or reindeer would not escape, but I am afraid of the bears and boars. Would it not be safest to assume that there would be several failures and target the former?"

Despite the apparent cowardice, the previously mocking warriors now offered serious advice.

"Then you should plant the bait here," one advised, pointing. "If we hide here, they can get around us."

"When you do, get it as close to the cliff edge as possible. If they have their back to the cliff as they eat, there is more risk of discovery."

"You should also pluck some grass and wind it around your shoes, it will disguise your footprints and scent."

The course of events had led to them wanting his success more than anyone. After all, until he succeeded, they couldn't leave the forest. If he had failed earlier, they could have temporarily returned home, but now that he had photographed the area, he could travel this far into the forest in an instant, where it would take even a skilled hunter five days to reach even in a straight line.

Considering he would be making the attempt within a few days even after a failure, they could effectively not return during that intervening period. They had made no preparations for an extended stay, so they now had to pray for his success.

"I shall take my leave for today, then. I will be counting on you from the day after tomorrow," Zenjirou told them before leaving via teleportation slightly earlier than normal.

The five men began making camp, setting up bedding and a firepit with practiced movements.

"We have time tonight, so I want to go hunt for dinner," the youngest said.

Victor offered a warning in his role as supervisor. “I don’t mind, but make sure you do it far away.”

“I know,” he replied with a sullen expression.

Zenjirou would be hunting in this area the day after tomorrow. Hunting in the same space beforehand would make the local animals warier, and they couldn’t risk that. Despite understanding and accepting that, the young man couldn’t help but complain about Zenjirou in his absence.

“We’ve gotta do all this ’cause of that coward. How much of a kick is he getting out of this?”

While he didn’t explicitly name anyone, it was clear he was unhappy with Zenjirou. If Zenjirou himself had heard it, he would probably have apologized ruefully, but that was not something an escort should be saying about their protectee.

“Watch your tongue. Our failings will fall back on His Highness for his wholehearted trust,” Victor said sharply.

Still, the young warrior just got angrier, not even paying lip service to an apology. Seeing the risk, Victor let out an exaggerated sigh.

“It is thanks to His Majesty’s kindness that we are not disgracing ourselves. We ought to be grateful, or have you not realized that?” he asked loudly.

It wasn’t just the young warrior who was pulled up at that. The other three stopped to look at him as well.

“So, none of you have realized,” he sighed before explaining. “There is no need anymore for His Majesty to even complete the rite. He could simply take our failings and use them to accuse His Highness of not fulfilling the agreement.”

The others still didn’t understand. The three of them were just looking at him in confusion, while the youngest had a sneer of anger on his face.

“He simply needs to say one thing,” Victor continued. “‘I think the area we passed through on the third day seems promising. We will start there tomorrow.’”

“What? That’s ridiculous,” the youngest said.

Two of the others looked more confused, while the last turned it over in his head before letting out a gasp. Victor nodded at him.

“Exactly. His Majesty can teleport. There is no need for him to meet up with us each day. He can go to any of the places we passed within the last ten days.”

It was obvious once it had been said. However, the group had only been made aware of the possibility recently, so it was hardly a surprise they hadn’t seen the danger. They thought back to the conversation between their liege and Zenjirou.

“I see. Then I can assume there is absolutely no possibility whatsoever that I will be delayed by their circumstances?” and “If that should still happen, it will completely overturn everything thus far agreed. Are you prepared for that?” were the exact words he had used. Eric had agreed to both queries.

In other words, if Zenjirou said they would set out from where they were on the third day, they would have to make the trip in a single night. That was, of course, impossible. It would then “overturn everything thus far agreed.”

That would accomplish everything Zenjirou needed. It would make Eric a liar, and there would be no future for the ambitious warriors who had caused his trust to be proven false.

Finally understanding the situation they were in, all of the warriors but Victor paled significantly.

“Do you understand how kind he is being now? If you do, then do your best to live up to that. No one will trust a warrior who does not pay his debts.”

“Yes, sir!” the young warrior practically yelped before racing off.

“For the love of... That’s less understanding the kindness and more having the situation light a fire under him. Well, it’s all the same in the end,” Victor mused in exasperation, shrugging slightly.

Intermission 2 — A Temporary Return

When Zenjirou opened his eyes after the teleportation out of the forest, it was to a dark room. There were no windows. Instead, the room was lit with a brazier.

It was a familiar room to him, and the sweltering heat of the furs and leathers covering him was not due to the fire. The room itself—no, the *continent*—was just that hot.

“Welcome back, Sir Zenjirou.”

“We are glad to see your safe return.”

Zenjirou raised his hand in greeting to the surprised guards and spoke.

“This is a brief return. I shall be heading back tomorrow. Given the visit’s unofficial nature, I would appreciate you only informing Her Majesty. I will be heading to the inner palace immediately.”

“Understood.”

This was the royal palace of Capua. While Zenjirou was in the midst of his trial, he had temporarily returned home.

It had been a while since he had been in the inner palace, and it truly felt like a homecoming to him. The first thing he did as he stepped into the living room was relieve himself of his pack, take off his shoes, and then strip.

“Man, that was hot and heavy. It’s always heavy, but that was shockingly hot.”

On his return from the deserted island, he had been wearing his usual clothing and hadn’t truly noticed the change in climate. This time, though, he was wearing furs and leathers suitable for the deep forest and snow. Even the rainy season—which was relatively cool for Capuans—felt stiflingly hot compared to the forests of Uppasala.

The guards must have sent word because the maids were waiting in the room and gathered his discarded clothing before folding it up neatly.

“Welcome home, Sir Zenjirou,” Amanda said to him.

“Thank you,” he replied.

He had rather missed her unruffled perfect adherence to etiquette—even in the face of a sudden return from him. Clad in only his T-shirt and boxers, he felt the urge to just lie back on the sofa and rest his eyes. Although he was moderating his pace, the dozen or so days of trekking through the forest and nightly meetings with the movers and shakers in Uppasala meant that the mental exhaustion he hadn’t noticed until now had suddenly come surging forth. Still, he couldn’t just sleep now. There was something important he had to see to as soon as possible.

Zenjirou shook his head to shake off his sleepiness and retrieved the camera and music player from his pack, both of which were getting uncomfortably close to being out of power. The camera in particular already showed a low battery light.

That was the biggest reason he needed to return. He had gotten far more accustomed to using the spell while on this journey, but outside of his “base” of the stone room in Capua, he still needed the images from the camera to do it well. Given his daily commute via teleportation in Uppasala, the camera was an almost literal lifeline for him.

“That’s sorted,” he said, breathing a sigh of relief as he saw their charging indicators light up. He didn’t need to worry now and collapsed back onto the sofa.

“Her Majesty has business and will be unable to return for a while. The baths can be ready for you to use first, so would you prefer to use them now?” Amanda asked kindly.

Zenjirou shuddered slightly in remembrance. While his skin was flushed with heat and sweat, he was still chilled to the bone. It was a characteristic symptom of working physically hard for an extended period in the cold. The inner chill wouldn’t fade easily, even when you returned to the warmth. The quickest way to alleviate it was with a bath.

“Yeah, I’ll head in as soon as they’re ready.”

“Understood,” Amanda replied with a bow before leaving the room.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Later, Zenjirou spent some time enjoying a proper bath rather than a sauna. The chill had lifted from his bones and he had cleaned his hair and body of all the sweat and grime using the liquid soap the merchants had continued to improve.

It would still take longer for his wife to be back despite his long bath, so Zenjirou used the time to visit his beloved children, Carlos Zenkichi and Juana Yoshino.

He’d been overly excited and set the both of them off crying. The wet nurses had scolded him for it, but the time he spent with them was fulfilling enough that he thought almost nothing of it.

After enjoying the time with his children, Zenjirou was almost half asleep in the living room. The door suddenly opened slightly more forcefully than usual.

“Zenjirou, you truly *are* back!”

His wife’s voice—having been absent from his life for so long—brought him straight back to wakefulness.

“Yeah, I am,” he replied. “Well, it’ll only be the one night and then I’ll have to head off again in the morning.”

Zenjirou rose from the sofa as he spoke and closed the distance to his wife as she strode quickly towards him. Their embrace wasn’t prompted by either one of them, but both of them moved into it at once. Zenjirou felt the love—equal in magnitude but different in type to when he had held Zenkichi and Yoshino—in the warmth and softness of the embrace. The same love he had felt daily while he was in the inner palace.

“I’m back,” he repeated.

“Welcome home.”

The two of them continued their embrace for a while. A long, deep embrace

to press themselves together as much as possible.

“I knew you were safe from the maid and Prince Eric, but holding you like this truly puts me at ease.”

“Me too; it finally feels like things are back to normal.”

They would have stayed as they were for the rest of the day. However, royalty could not prioritize their emotions over matters of state, even when in private.

The two of them reluctantly parted and took seats on opposite sofas. They spent the next while exchanging the information they had in private. Zenjirou had been on the Northern Continent while Aura had been unable to leave the palace, so he had nine times as much information than her, but Aura had new things to tell him as well.

“I see, so Prince Eric found a kindred spirit in Marshal Pujol. It makes sense now I hear it,” he mused.

He had been nervous about the emotional disconnect between the two of them when he sent Eric to Capua, but he was glad the man had managed to build somewhat positive relationships with the marshal and queen.

“Indeed. He has also approved of Princess Freya’s marriage. You had not mentioned that it was her who started things in public. That would have settled it immediately,” Aura chuckled.

“I honestly hadn’t thought about it. Either way, King Gustav needed to give his permission,” he replied, scratching at his head. In retrospect, it was not a surprising idea. For better or worse, this world was very patriarchal, whichever continent you were on. It was easy to imagine the harm a woman making such a proposal with no preparation could have caused. It was something he should keep in mind.

“Still, to think how accomplished I felt getting a favorable answer from him, and he is not even the next king... I feel rather duped,” Aura commented with a rueful smile.

Eric *had* introduced himself as the country’s first prince rather than their crown prince. The soul of language made it easy to forget, given how easy it made conversing with foreigners, but a difference in culture could lead to the

same words having different nuances. Or sometimes there was not a word that matched between the two languages. It was like “duke” being a title of royalty in Capua, but also being assigned to the heads of the four tribes in the Twin Kingdoms.

Hence Aura’s assumption that the difference in title from Eric’s introduction was a quirk of the translation process. Instead, it was her mistake.

“I must say that our cultures seem fundamentally different if a country is willing to accept a foreign prince as their king. I had heard about some of the differences from Princess Freya, but the sheer breadth of those differences could become a pitfall.”

“That’s true,” Zenjirou agreed. He also offered a warning: “Still, the royal families of the northern countries being animistic is similar to us, so it’s the better solution.”

“You mentioned the Noble’s Commonwealth of Złota Wolność? They technically have a king, do they not?”

“They do. You should assume it’s completely different from the kind of king you’re thinking of. The king and royal family both have practically no overall power. The Sejm are the actual rulers.”

There were also the facts that the king was elected, each of the nobility had a single vote, and the Senat administered the election, and while it was called an “election,” only the person other countries would call the crown prince could stand, so it was more of a vote of confidence. The specifics like that could wait, though.

He was only back for a single night, so Zenjirou had decided that giving all of that information without a proper explanation would do more harm than good.

“That country is on the brink of large-scale war with ‘knights.’ Are these knights a country as well?”

“Yeah, their official name is The North Dragon Claw Knight Order. There’s a religious order on the Northern Continent with a lot of influence just called ‘the church,’ and they’re from its claw faction. It was originally established to ‘maintain public order in the northern reaches of the continent with lesser

teachings.’ The northern countries—including Uppasala—see them as natural enemies because of that. I don’t know the exact technicalities, but they have the land, money, and military force of a country, so it’s probably fine to consider them a country in their own right.”

He had not been able to learn about either the commonwealth or the knights in enough detail to explain the minutiae of either country.

“Very well. We will leave the details until you are back from dealing with the matter at hand. Regardless, the both of them are strong powers or influences on the Northern Continent in their own right. Both are about to clash in open warfare, but do we know when?” she asked with a harsh look on her face.

Zenjirou shook his head in answer to her question. “I don’t know the particulars around that either, but if what Princess Anna said while we were there is true, the Husaria’s scouting spotted the knights moving at the border. That was roughly thirty days ago.”

Her face turned sour at that. “Well...I have to preface this by saying it is entirely based off my own experience, but war could break out at any moment in that situation. Will the fighting truly not reach Uppasala?”

“That’ll be fine. It’s a rough explanation, but the knights are to the north of the commonwealth, and Uppasala is even farther north. There are sheer, snow-covered mountains between their territories, though. So much so that you gain significant accolades even crossing them in the middle of summer.” As he spoke, Zenjirou took a ballpoint and sketched out a map on a sheet of drake parchment on the table to explain it.

“And the ocean will not be an issue?”

“It would be putting everything on the line. The knights haven’t focused on naval expansion, so they don’t have the forces to split like that. Even if they did, the capital is at least a day away from the coast by ship over the Mater Lake. It sounds like it isn’t realistic that the capital would fall under attack.”

“Hmm.”

Thereafter, Aura asked how long it took to reach Logfort from Pomorskie, how long the land route was between Pomorskie and Tannenwald, and other

such things. Once she had a complete picture of the distances involved, she agreed that Uppasala did seem like it would be unscathed.

Relieved, she said, “While it may be unfair for me to say considering that I sent you there, please escape as soon as things seem dangerous. If it comes to it, do not hesitate to use the teleportation magic tool. Understood?”

“Yeah, I will,” he said, smiling to put her at ease. “Once the devices are finished charging, I’ll copy everything onto the computer. You should be able to get a picture of the Northern Continent and particularly the commonwealth’s strength. Personally, I think there’s a decent level of risk there. We don’t have the time for that now, though, so let’s get back to talking about Uppasala.”

Information on the Northern Continent was important, but the concubine agreement and the trade deal that came with it were still the most important things. The queen had no objections and nodded, urging him to continue.

“With Prince Eric no longer leading the opposition, the actual agreements probably won’t be an issue. Even if I have to turn tail and run with the Rite of Age, I should manage. So the next topic I have will be after that, but Prince Yngvi—while he isn’t the crown prince, he will be the next king—has said that he would welcome a concubine from Capua.”

“Oh, that is worth considering,” Aura said, an eyebrow rising.

With Capua taking their first princess as a concubine, it made Yngvi doing the same much more equitable—even if he remained the second prince rather than becoming king.

“Prince Yngvi is Princess Freya’s younger twin, no?”

“Yeah, though he calls himself the older of them. He looks almost identical to her. He’s *fairly* similar in temperament as well. My first impression of him was that he’s an oddity for royalty but not a bad person. Princess Freya has said the same thing, so it should be faily accurate.”

“Then that puts me somewhat at ease. I had heard the Northern Continent had a tendency to look down on the Southern Continent. It would need to be someone with a large amount of integrity to be able to marry into such a culture. Otherwise, even a political marriage would be at risk.”

A political marriage was exactly what the name implied. Both a political act and a marriage. While it would never happen if it wasn't for the politics involved, it could also fall apart depending on the man and woman involved.

"So you're interested?" Zenjirou asked.

"Depending on their conditions and our desires. I am sure Marshal Pujol would happily offer Fatima..."

"Yeah, that's not a good idea, though, is it?"

Aura nodded in agreement. "It would not even be worth considering. Fatima Guillén has the same mother as Pujol Guillén and carries an equal amount of the royal bloodline."

She was not someone they could allow to leave the country. While the possibility was extremely low, it was feasible that a descendant of hers could someday manifest the latent space-time magic in their bloodline.

"In that respect, I suppose Mirella from the Márquez family would be the same?"

"No, she is from a branch family by blood. While she might have some of the Márquez family's blood, their link to the royal family's is tenuous. She would be suitable. Whatever else, though, their actual abilities, disposition, and willingness would be more important than their ostensible policies with this, though. It would be marrying not just across borders, but across into another continent entirely. It cannot be forced."

That wasn't something she was saying out of emotional consideration. It was simply that if the first inroads into friendly relations in the form of the marriage ended in disaster, Aura felt it would be better to not bother in the first place.

"That makes Princess Freya all the more impressive," Zenjirou commented.

"Indeed, she certainly possesses more than the normal level of courage and initiative."

In that respect, perhaps it was overstating things to call her pushing for the concubine arrangement entirely due to her own selfishness. Capua would be a completely alien land to the Uppasalan noblewomen. There was no one more

familiar with it than Freya to marry into the land.

“For the time being, we will consider Prince Yngvi to be the most likely to succeed the throne. We will also take into account his interest in a concubine from our lands. I will ensure that the diplomat we send as your replacement is aware of those matters. Is there anything else you should report now?”

Zenjirou considered things for a moment before slapping a hand on his leg. “Right. An old smith called Völundr sought me out and asked me to bring him here. Princess Freya was present as well and she was overjoyed, while Skaji was shocked. It sounds like Völundr is like Skaji’s name, something that’s bestowed on a particularly skilled smith.”

“Oh? That certainly sounds worth celebrating, though I fear what lurks underneath the situation.” Looking a gift horse in the mouth like this was perhaps the obvious reaction for the ruler of a nation.

“Well, even if he doesn’t have any ulterior motives himself, I imagine the king will want some recompense for parting with him.”

“If he is so valued, then we will need to negotiate. The bigger issue would be his ability to teach rather than his skill as a smith. If they have such a person, I would do much to get them.”

Skill not translating into teaching ability was the same no matter what world you were in. A single master smith would not increase the overall production of iron tools by much, and their own offerings would cease after a decade or so if they were old. The most important thing was that the advanced techniques he had could spread and take root in the kingdom.

“Either way, things are going fairly well overall. Still, it looks like I’ll be coming back after the marriage ceremony, so it’ll probably be later than we planned.”

The queen felt a twinge in her chest as he spoke of the marriage ceremony happening abroad. None of that showed on her face, though. It was for her that he was taking a concubine and had risked his life on both the sea voyage and this current rite. She felt far too ashamed of all of that to show any sign of the discomfort it caused her.

“I will be waiting,” she said instead, offering a composed smile.

Chapter 4 — The Windhammer

“Summon Völundr!” echoed the king’s roar across the room.

“At once.”

None of his confidants or advisors in the room warned him over the yell. If anything, they wanted to join him. No one in the kingdom would laugh at someone losing their cool over the news they had just heard.

That was just how big it was. In a certain sense, it could be even more important than Freya marrying Zenjirou. After all, while her marrying so *far* afield was unexpected, she was practically guaranteed to be marrying abroad at some point.

Meanwhile, Völundr was so skilled a smith as to be considered one of the country’s treasures. Hearing that someone of his stature would be leaving with Freya was a complete shock to the system.

The king and his confidants waited impatiently for a while.

There was a quiet sound and then the door opened.

“You called, King? I am rather busy, so let’s keep this brief.”

The words came from Völundr himself.

He looked in his early sixties. His hair and facial hair were thick for his age. It had once been brown but was now completely white. He probably counted as short considering the Sveas averaged a hundred and eighty centimeters. He had a slight hunch, but even standing straight he would be slightly shorter than Zenjirou at a hundred and seventy-two centimeters.

However, his body had been trained by working as a smith, and his musclebound frame spoke volumes about him still being active.

The man stalked in front of the king and sat down without so much as a “by your leave.” It would be unthinkable for a normal person, but neither the king nor the others in the room particularly reacted. While he was relatively hale and hearty, his long time in the smithy made his back and legs ache.

Uppasala saw the injuries sustained in smithing in the same way as a warrior's wounds on the battlefield. Warriors who were unable to remain standing or move without pain had the right to sit wherever and whenever they liked. Besides, the king was beyond caring about such trifles at the moment and launched right into the main reason for the meeting.

"I have heard you wish to leave for Capua. Is that true?!"

The old man gave a tired snort to his king and answered. "I certainly don't remember saying that," he said with a puzzled look. Before Gustav could breathe a sigh of relief, he continued talking nonchalantly. "I do not *wish* to leave for Capua. I *will* be leaving for Capua. This I have decided."

The king held his head in his hands and let out a sigh. That was precisely the kind of man this smith was. That fact had been brought home to him yet again, and he had half given up but still tried to reason with him.

"That is not something to decide on a whim. Did you think I would readily allow one of your stature to leave for other lands?"

"Oh? I am owed quite a bit and would forgive it with this payment, Your Majesty."

The king made a noise of consideration at the nerve he had struck. The smith had been the head smith since the prior king's reign. His works had been given to successful warriors and used as valuable trade goods with other countries.

Of course, the royal family had technically purchased them, but it was at a rate that was so much lower than the market cost that it was almost impossible to not feel the pricklings of guilt. Then again, the name of Völundr had gained such fame that the extra value was part of it, so it would be another matter entirely to call the deal *unfair*.

"No. While the debt we owe exists, even so, there is no reason for us to lose you."

"Don't be a miser. You're already 'losing' the princess. An old man like me is practically just a bonus."

"Unthinkable. Losing someone of your skills due to only your selfishness is out of the question."

The man gave a sour look at that. “It’s not selfishness. I’m not explaining here, though.” The smith gave a blatantly hostile look at the various others in the room.

Gustav let out yet another sigh. “Fine. You may leave,” he directed to the people around him.

They did not refuse him. They had known the smith for just as long as the king and had no concerns about the two of them being unaccompanied. Conversely, that long association also meant they knew he would say nothing until they left.

“At once, sir,” they said before doing so.

When they had gone, the king spoke up again. “Fine, now talk.”

“’Course. Sorry for worrying you, Your Majesty. I do have a reason, but it sounds rather bad, so I’d rather others not hear it,” the man said, cracking his neck.

The king silently urged him on.

Völundr gave a sad smile before saying completely bluntly, “Tell me honestly, I’m in the way, aren’t I?”

Gustav shifted suddenly at the question.

Certain his meaning had gotten across, he continued unreservedly. “My head’s full of iron. I know nothing about the international situation or the economy. I know what there is to know about smithing, though. A furnace that can use a water wheel to push air inside would send iron production skyward. You’re not thick enough to miss that. It might still be in testing, but you’re already building it, aren’t you?”

Blast furnaces using water wheels were one of the revolutionary advances on the Northern Continent. There would be an order of magnitude in production quantity before and after. It was literal fuel for a revolution.

Völundr cared nothing for that, though. It was not a matter of sentiment but of technique. “We will have piles of iron. That’s a good thing, but I won’t use that trash. You think a sword, axe, and shield all use the same metal? You think too little of us.”

Völundr was a rather old-school smith. His work began with collecting the stones for his furnace and firing his own bricks. He even used to get his own iron ore from the mountains. With age weakening him, he had the furnaces actually built with assistance from apprentices and mostly bought his metal. Still, he would never lump it all together like that. He maintained that there was a difference in metal suited for weapons and armor, for example.

That was the source of his confidence as he made his declaration. “I won’t falter, I can swear that much. As long as I still draw breath, the weapons those furnaces churn out will not measure up to mine. That’s no lie. The warriors will ask me what I think of those weapons, and I’ll tell you what I’ll say: ‘They’re shit.’”

Völundr was impressive even compared to the others who had held the name, and his influence was nothing to sneeze at. Trust in those new weapons from the warriors would plummet. They might be worthless in his eyes, but they would still be more than sufficient for battle, but that wouldn’t get through to them.

“I understand that, but weapons and armor are not the only things we need iron for. If you look around, the number of things the metal is used for is rising in leaps and bounds. We could simply maintain the status quo for weapons and use the new blast furnaces for the other metal items. We need Völundr for that.”

“That won’t fly in this country, you should know that far better than I, in your position.”

Gustav had no retort to offer the blunt dismissal. The man was entirely correct. Uppasala was not a large country. Their economy was on the level of a middling country and their population was on the lower end of that. Naturally, they also had a commensurate number of smiths.

Despite that, they were leading the continent in the adoption of water wheel-driven blast furnaces. Unsurprisingly, this required a reasonable investment of both funds and personnel. Gathering up outsiders and adding them to the project had little purpose, so most of them were smiths.

Inevitably, the number of smiths doing things traditionally dropped, and so

did the number of items produced similarly. With the number of warriors remaining unchanging, only a small portion of them could obtain the traditionally made weapons.

“While I’m at it, in your position, surely you’d want a young, skilled smith heading up the new furnaces? Ah, that’s the look of someone hit right on target. Any of them confident in their skill would bend over backwards for it.”

Uppasala was, for better or worse, a country of warriors. Their values would place warriors on top no matter what. Because of that, those same warriors had always desired smiths to make their weapons. If the weapons made in the new furnaces were considered useless, then traditional smiths would be revered and those using the new techniques would be looked down on.

“I doubt you want that. Those of us stuck in our ways should just pack it in. We don’t have the money, do we?”

The traditional mages were kept by the royal family at the same time as the new furnaces were being developed. Uppasala didn’t have the budget to do both at once. Intercontinental trade, and the technology for it in the form of *Nafalgr* and the *Glasir’s Leaf* had put a heavy burden on their treasury. They had gambled such that they had to put their all behind the trade passing, and failure would see the country suffer greatly. Continuing both the new and old methods of smithing in the midst of that would weigh even more heavily on their coffers.

“And your solution?” the king asked, pained. Simply asking the question was tantamount to agreeing with the smith.

“Nothing all that difficult. Just put all the smiths on the new furnaces and let those that don’t want to out into the streets, even if they happen to have the name Völundr.”

“You swine...” Gustav frowned as the smith grinned. “Doing that will have both the smiths and the warriors pushing back.”

“And that’s on the king. I see those new furnaces as being worth the pushback.”

“That *is* a surprise. I thought you hated them?”

Völundr snorted. “I do. Oh, how I do. Asking me to use them would just be a joke. As much as I loathe it, though, I can see no choice but to admit I would never beat their production. Besides, I can understand wanting quantity rather than quality.”

“Völundr...”

The king had to admit he had underestimated his resolve. The man was a genuine smith, with no interest in anything else. Still, he had felt the changing of an era through the metal and understood his skills were a matter of the past. Or more accurately, that a country that didn’t let those skills fade into the past would be left behind in this new era.

Those thoughts and feelings were all tied up in his first question of the private meeting. The country’s future was dark if they didn’t adopt the new technology. Völundr’s influence was enough that he could stop that transition. Therefore, he was going to leave.

“You are that certain?”

The older man offered up another grin. The king felt a sense of déjà vu looking at his face and figured out where it was coming from after a period of thought. The smile was the same as that on his daughter’s face when she had obtained the captaincy of the *Glasir’s Leaf*.

“If you would go so far, then I will have to permit it. However, answer me one thing truly or I will not allow you to leave the country regardless of anything else.”

“Oh?”

“What is the real reason you want to go to Capua?”

“What? I just told you. Do you think I’m lying?”

The man looked displeased and angry, but the king had known him long enough to see it for the facade it was.

“I said nothing of the like. Your earlier reasons are likely true. If you dislike me calling it the ‘real’ reason then I will rephrase. What is the *biggest* reason you wish to go?”

“Guh...” he grunted, glaring uncomfortably at the king before shifting his gaze away. Eventually, he let out a deep sigh. “There are drakes on the Southern Continent. Not the sentient ones the church fawns over, but drakes are just a normal part of life there. There are even those of such strength that countries cannot lay claim to their territory.”

“And?”

“There are dragons and warriors, so there are dragon slayers. I can forge a dragon slayer with my own hands. I can think of no finer goal for my final objective in life.”

The man’s smile, still on his face, was practically sparkling. The king let out yet another sigh but internally understood and was relieved by the answer. It was just like him, and an awfully forward-facing reason.

“You’d survive anywhere.”

It might have sounded like a careless comment, but it was practically permission to leave the country.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Several days later, the time came—earlier than expected. Zenjirou was in the trees, covered in furs purposefully dirtied with mud and fallen leaves as he looked out. He had scattered a lot of acorns around the cliff’s edge. Standing over them and devouring the pile was a large boar.

“What will you do, Your Majesty?” Victor asked. “Honestly, it is a rather difficult opponent.”

Zenjirou considered the lead warrior’s words. Boars were tough. While they were fundamentally herbivores, as they got bigger, their disposition could get awfully close to that of a bear. If they decided to run, that was one thing, but they charged with a terrifying lack of hesitation if they decided to attack.

A charge with their two tusks was more than enough to kill. In the worst case, their height meant that the tusks could easily tear the femoral artery. Even in modern Japan, someone with such an injury was very likely to die if they were away from population centers. In a world like this, with medical science as far

behind as it was, death through blood loss was a near certainty.

“Perhaps I should have used something other than acorns,” Zenjirou mused quietly. It was too late now, though. While deer and reindeer both ate them, they were also a favorite for boars and bears. Victor had even warned him of the possibility when he had made his choice.

“Perhaps, but perhaps not. I do not think the choice was a mistake. Moss and sprouts would not have been so effective,” Victor said consolingly.

It was true. The plants that were currently growing and that the deer and reindeer ate were much less sought after by boars and bears. However, those would have been far harder to deal with than the acorns. Despite taking care not to touch them directly, they would pick up the scents of humans and iron and alert the prey. Also, unlike acorns, they were actively growing, so an amateur would easily see them wilting as they moved the plants to use as bait, making them even less effective.

Therefore, for an amateur like Zenjirou, acorns were definitely the best choice. The issue was the possibility of luring in the more dangerous prey. That side effect was well and truly showing itself here.

However, Zenjirou reconsidered things. An aggressive boar was certainly dangerous, but the greater possibility of it attacking meant that it was less likely to run than a deer or reindeer might. While there was a risk to him, the warriors would likely deal with it before it could harm him.

That would be a failure and he would have to retrieve Eric, but he now knew from his earlier visit that Eric was no longer against the marriage. He might be feeling overoptimistic, but he hoped that the warriors’ loyalty to Eric would mean that the prince’s approval would see them carrying out their duty regardless of him no longer being a...hostage in Capua.

He let out a breath. “I’m going for it,” he decided, standing.

“Fortune be with you.”

“Take care.”

“If it gets dicey, we’ll step in.”

“Use this to finish it off.”

“I wanna go home.”

The warriors followed suit, standing as well. While they were aiding in cutting it off, they would be unable to protect him otherwise considering how fast a boar could charge. There was no way the boar wouldn’t notice six people all standing up at once, even with some distance between them.

The boar looked away from its acorns and let out an aggressive bellow as it saw them.

“Be careful—it’s about to charge!” Victor warned.

Indeed, the boar pivoted to face them immediately and rushed them. The phrase “headlong rush” flashed through Zenjirou’s mind.

He had already made his decision, and he knew what he needed to do here. He had practiced over and over. Even so, he was terrified enough that he wanted to run away now it came time to perform.

His legs and hands were shaking and his throat was dry. It was hard to even manage to speak a word. Still, he managed to win over the fear and point the flat of his right hand, the one adorned with a bracelet, towards the oncoming animal and speak a single word in the language of magic.

“*Shun.*”



In the next instant, there was a sudden gale of wind between Zenjirou and the boar.

The boar likely weighed at least a hundred and fifty kilos and was already running at over forty kilometers an hour. Still, the Windhammer around his arm had been introduced as “strong enough to push back even a mounted knight.” The boar’s body was naught but paper in the face of it.

It let out a confused bellow as it spun up into the air like a motorcyclist failing at a wheelie and fell with a heavy thud onto its back. It was a few meters behind where it had started to run from. He had pushed its massive frame farther away.

This could work. The magic tool proving its worth in active service relieved him and his legs stopped shaking. Zenjirou jogged forward before the boar could stand. He put his hand up again and activated the tool again.

“*Shun.*”

The boar bellowed again, unable to even rise. This time it went back nearly a dozen meters. It was right at the edge of the cliff.

It squealed pitifully, understanding the danger it was in. Zenjirou moved faster than it could recover, though.

“*Shun.*”

The third attack sent its body sailing over the cliff.

The warriors had been watching from behind. Every one of them was lost for words and pale.

“What the?” There was clear fear in the youngest warrior’s voice.

That was no shock, though. A warrior would easily be able to see what this meant. Zenjirou had created a gale with a single word. Additionally, the gale was strong enough to push back a charging boar by several meters. No human would be able to withstand that. He had just done it three times consecutively, and there was no guarantee that was the limit. What *was* the limit? Ten? Fifty? Maybe even a hundred?

Whatever the case, there was one thing they knew for sure. In a one-on-one

fight from in front, none of them could beat that attack. There was nothing a human could do against a blast of wind strong enough to send a boar into the air. If they couldn't get close, their bodies, their strength, their technique...all of it was meaningless. Additionally, whatever bow they used would be unable to send arrows through that wind.

In other words, taking Zenjirou down would require an ambush that didn't give him time to use the tool. That was how the weak fought the strong.

"Magic can do that?"

"Lady Skaji could never have done that."

"That's royalty from the Southern Continent... South for magic indeed."

The Northern Continent tended to view magic with less reverence than the Southern Continent, but even that was not enough to discount it. A warrior within the inner circle of royalty would have knowledge of magic and how to deal with it—whether they could use it themselves or not.

However, that knowledge would be in terms of the Northern Continent's standards. The warriors didn't know of enchanting, so they mistook the consecutive blasts of wind for Zenjirou's own abilities. While you could say that was overestimating Zenjirou's skills, considering he wore the Windhammer constantly, it was also correct.

Either way, the warriors—particularly the youngest who had been so disdainful initially—were all looking at him with new eyes now.

Zenjirou had successfully sent the boar plunging into the ravine with the help of the Windhammer, but the real challenge was yet to come. The Rite of Age was—as the name implied—something you had to accomplish to be seen as an independent man. Therefore, while it required a show of strength to bring down your prey, you also needed to be able to obtain sustenance from it.

In other words, it was not over when he defeated the boar; it would be over, and he could call himself an adult by their norms, when he took edible meat or sellable materials from it back to civilization.

That meant he would have to go down the same cliff he had sent the boar over. Part of the rite was that he had to move under his own power for the duration. Therefore, the rope he carried needed to be tied to a sturdy tree by his own hands alone.

Of course, Victor and the other warriors had given him detailed instructions and advice. Like “that knot will slip undone easily,” or “if you take the rope from there, the rocks will sever it partway through your descent.” It was all rather bad for his nerves, so his teeth were chattering for a completely different reason than the cold now.

Still, after he had spent dozens of times longer than the warriors did, they finally gave him the green light. He felt like it was over at that point, but it was still yet to finish.

“Very well, we shall send two down to begin with. When they give the signal, you should descend. The three remaining will protect you from above.”

Zenjirou firmed his resolve once Victor explained it. “V-Very well. Thank you.”

Two of the warriors used their own ropes—long since tied—to smoothly rappel down the cliff. It was a dizzying height for Zenjirou, but it seemed like it didn’t unnerve them at all. The two reached the bottom in practically a blink of an eye and spent some time checking the area. Then, they turned back and waved their hands grandly.

It was Zenjirou’s turn next. He knew that, but he didn’t have the courage to immediately start down.

“Your Majesty. I am not rushing you in the slightest, but if you spend too long,

the scent of the boar will draw other carnivores.”

The advice from Victor served as a final push.

“Got it. I’m going.”

He took his own rope in his hands and set out towards the bottom of the cliff. The following minutes were the most Zenjirou had ever felt at risk of dying.

He headed along the hanging rope to the valley floor. Naturally, he would be unable to support his own weight with just his grip for so long, so he had prepared ahead of time. He had talked with Skaji and was using tools that let even an amateur have the time to make their way down a rope. It was a pair and passed over his wrists, then over the rope.

The objects were akin to a solved wire puzzle. They used the principle of leverage to stop their movement, so even those with weak grips could have a strong fix on the rope. Additionally, there were big knots tied roughly every two meters. Even if Zenjirou happened to lose his grip with the tools, they would catch on one of those and stop him from falling all the way down. It made climbing down past the knots more difficult, but the extra ease wasn’t worth his life.

Thanks to those precautions, he managed to safely reach the valley floor. In exchange, his hands were reddened and bruised under his gloves.

“Level ground...is wonderful...to stand on...” he managed.

With no regard for how he looked, Zenjirou collapsed back to sit on a flat rock, gasping for breath. He was drenched in sweat but internally chilled from the nerves and fear.

“Still, looking up like this, there’s just no contest,” he muttered.

He was looking at the remaining three soldiers briskly making their way down their own ropes. Simply comparing the technique to Zenjirou’s would be an insult. They were moving smoothly and surely, making their way down in moments. What had seemed like his life hanging by a thread was nothing to even remark on for them.

Victor arrived last and stepped onto the ground with light feet, swiftly

removing his lifeline and making his way to Zenjirou.

“Your Majesty. As I said above, the boar’s corpse will begin to attract wolves and bears if you take too long. Protecting your prey is part of the rite, so while we can warn you, we cannot assist you.”

Even as he spoke, Victor felt like the warning was rather pointless. Even a pack of wolves or a group of bears could be easily driven off, if not taken down, with repeated blasts of wind as Zenjirou had done earlier.

In contrast to his assumptions, the warning was greatly appreciated by Zenjirou. While the Windhammer would certainly let him ward off wolves or bears, he would still rather not fight over a meal with wild animals.

“Understood, I will go now. Rendering is outside of my skill set, so I would appreciate your advice.”

As he spoke, he mustered up the remnants of his energy to stand.

Fortunately, the boar had already breathed its last. Wild animals could be startlingly hardy, so it was entirely possible for them to survive—or at least not immediately die from—a fall of that height. Zenjirou would have had to finish it off himself if that had been the case. He understood that an animal could be at its most dangerous in its last moments, so from both a physical safety and mental distaste standpoint, he felt rather fortunate that it would not be needed. Now all he had to do was retrieve edible meat or something that could be sold from the boar. It sounded simple but was rather difficult for an amateur.

Victor’s first piece of advice was to give up on the hide. The local boars had thick, hardy skin that could be used for armor and leather in general, but it was difficult to remove without damage unless you had experience.

Either way, returning with the entire animal would be impossible, so all he had to do was bring back enough to pass the rite. With Victor’s advice, Zenjirou had chosen to go for a leg and both tusks.

“To just remove a leg, you can simply use a knife to make two slices in the surrounding skin and peel it back. Right, just like that. A saw is best to get through the gristle. Breaking through the bone itself is difficult, so despite the

difficulty, you should pop the joint out. You should be able to feel it out if you push your hand in. It's the point where it drops drastically. Get the saw blade there."

Zenjirou had his mouth half open, making sure to not breathe through his nose at all. He was grunting as he worked, practically wrestling with the boar's bloody corpse. The scent of blood was filling the area and he wanted to avoid throwing up from the stench. According to the warriors, what he was doing still smelled considerably less than normal butchery.

No one but Zenjirou could lay their hands on the boar if it was to count for his rite. There was no way he could get a boar weighing roughly 150 kilos hanging in the air on his own, so he had taken Victor's advice to slit the back of its neck and rotate it onto its back so the smallest amount of blood possible remained in the limbs.

Normally the stench of blood was far stronger and even veteran hunters could find themselves vomiting if they managed to break the animal's guts. They were rather lucky it was spring. In summer, although the country was comparatively cool, the weather still accelerated the decay of corpses. In winter, the corpse would have already started to freeze by now, and a weak amateur like Zenjirou would have found it impossible to get any purchase with a knife.

His bout with the corpse lasted another hour. As far as he was concerned, the boar was a far tougher opponent in death than it had been in life. The knife glistened with blood and fat, but he managed to remove a rear leg and both of the animal's tusks. His nose had already numbed to the scent, so he took a full breath in relief.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty. Those tusks are magnificent. They should certainly be accepted as proof in your Rite of Age."

The others joined in with their own congratulations, none of them hiding their joy. There was definitely the selfish motivation of finally being able to go home now, but unlike when they first set out, they were now willing to praise Zenjirou for his accomplishments. After taking down the boar with magic the likes of which they had never seen, a complete amateur had conquered his fear and

made his way down the cliff under his own power before getting covered in blood and fat to emerge victorious from his rite. It was inevitable that their opinion of him would change.

Even Zenjirou felt the change in atmosphere. There was the relief of finally completing the rite, and he showed his appreciation for the warriors who had protected him thus far.

“While it may have taken quite a while, your presence enabled me to complete the rite. You have my thanks. As part of that, do as you wish with the rest of the boar that I cannot return with.”

“Thank you!”

“We can finally eat meat again!”

The warriors’ joy increased at his generosity. Zenjirou had taken too long to remove the leg and tusks for the rest of it to be good-quality meat, but the warriors set about butchering the remains briskly to get the best meal possible. Slightly overly bloody or not, boar meat would be a feast for the warriors who had been forced to stay in the forest for over a month.

While they were joyously rendering the boar down, Zenjirou was tying his spoils together and lifting them onto his back. Even those three items were rather heavy for him, so much so that the way the leather straps were digging into his back made him feel like he might fail to cast the spell to teleport away. He started divesting himself of everything he would no longer need.

“Victor, I’m leaving my supplies here, so if there is anything that may be of use, you can feel free to take it.”

The only things he absolutely had to return with were the Windhammer and his teleportation tool. Everything else, he could leave there. That included his water skin, the salt, and the bread he had not yet eaten. They were just excess weight to him, but precious supplies for the warriors, given how long it had been since they had left home.

“We shall do so gratefully,” Victor said, thanking him on the group’s behalf. The other four didn’t stop their work, though.

Once he saw them finish, Zenjirou offered them a farewell. “I will be on my

way, then. You were all of great help, and I will be certain to convey my satisfaction with your performance to Prince Eric."

Considering how loyal they were to the prince, it was more of an emotional and practical reward than a monetary one. There was little doubt that if Zenjirou told Eric that, they would be well rewarded by him.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"We could ask for no greater praise."

"That makes all our efforts worth it."

"You have our thanks as well."

"Please do!"

The overjoyed warriors watched him as Zenjirou cast his teleportation spell back to the palace.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

While Zenjirou was gaining proof of his success, the master of the palace was wrestling with stomach and heart pain from a flurry of issues.

The first and biggest issue was also the least influential on Uppasala itself, but the war between the knights and commonwealth had begun and concluded far quicker than expected.

Gustav fixed the messenger with a harsh stare. "So the clash between the two ended in victory for the commonwealth. And you are sure it took place in Tannenwald?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir. There is no mistaking it. The knights numbered roughly twenty-five thousand and the commonwealth eighteen thousand. They clashed in Tannenwald."

There would be no carrier pigeons sent across the waves, so the information had been passed on in written form via couriers on ships. Naturally, that led to a rather significant lag in the flow of information. Gustav read over the report again before summarizing it for himself.

“While we cannot move due to a lack of information on the scale of both the victory and defeat, we seem to have avoided the worst outcome.”

The “worst” went without saying: an all-out victory for the knights. While the permanently snowy mountains may have blocked the border, the northern regions that Uppasala inhabited did border their territory. The animistic minorities such as Uppasala would by no means want the unbending zealots that the knights represented to be even stronger.

He inspected the rather sparse report again before inclining his head. “Still, for staking everything on success, there are fewer men than I would have expected from both sides. The commonwealth was attacked, and I can understand the size of their country making it difficult to gather troops. However, the knights were the aggressors here.”

Perhaps it was the influence of Anna getting Freya on-side? Maybe it would be a good idea to scout their coastline. If they had encampments there that split their forces, Uppasala could gain no small measure of favor with the commonwealth.

After considering all of that silently, the king spoke. “Do we have leeway with our agents? If so, send at least one to the coast of the knights’ territory.”

Two large powers in the western area of the continent had clashed. It was not a matter of victory or defeat, but of how victory was obtained and what could be gained from the result. Depending on that, it could have a great influence on the region. While they could not shirk the responsibility of gathering information to predict how things would progress, the fact remained that there was nothing they could do *but* gather information right now.

“You can leave.”

“Excuse me,” the messenger said before exiting the room.

Once he had left, the king shook his head firmly to dispel his thoughts. His position was not so simple that he could afford to be solely focused on a single issue. There were other things he had to consider too.

Gustav let his gaze fall to the two implements on the table in front of him. One was made up of two stones connected by a long chain, while the other was

a metal cup attached to a vice. These were the magic tools for water purification and static flame.

Additionally, there were testimonies from Freya, Skaji, and even Magnus for the Lulled Sea installed on the *Glasir's Leaf*.

"Magic tools created through enchantment... Yet another unthinkable topic."

Gustav rested his head in his hands. This problem was not one he could consult with anyone on. The legend of the White Empire had been passed down in Uppasala from king to king. With Eric having the right to succession in a neighboring country, he couldn't be told, and neither could Gustav tell Yngvi, who was not officially to be the next king yet.

"The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle? The family names are different, but I feel like the fourth and tenth royal families—the Shulepovs and Demichevs—had the same lineal magics."

The two royal families did not hail from the Southern Continent, but had migrated there from the North. Too much of it fit together, and Gustav couldn't hold in a sigh.

His worries were because he knew the empire had once existed due to the information passed through the king's line. However, that information was not especially detailed. While there was a theory that some members of the empire had escaped to the Southern Continent, the truth of it had not been passed down. That made it rather hard to determine whether the Twin Kingdoms truly was inhabited by descendants of the White Empire. To investigate in more detail would mean contacting Utgard. He wanted that to be a last resort, though.

Once he had worked through all of his thoughts, he finally spoke to himself. "That makes Freya's concerns and judgments rather typical."

She had said that while the empire was a fairy tale, she worried about the church using it as a reason to interfere. Even with that concern, she had found dealing with the Twin Kingdoms to be too alluring to pass up. It was something she could only say because the majority of the world considered the White Empire to be nothing but a myth.

“It truly is alluring, though,” he said, running a finger along the static flame tool. While the majority of the lake, unfortunately, froze during the winter, Logfort and other ports remained free. That meant that while the number of ships dropped, they could have *some* coming and going.

Even when the seas didn’t freeze, Uppasala was still cold in the winter. So much so that not taking precautions could quickly result in death by exposure. A flame—however slight—that could be used on ships for that slight amount of extra safety was by no means a small matter. It also went without saying how big a role water purification would play on longer voyages as well.

“I wonder how the church would react to these. I would prefer to draw conclusions based on their reactions to His Majesty’s, but it would likely be an exercise in futility.”

There were two main reasons behind the near resignation in his voice. One of them was that hiding a magic tool with the abilities of the Lulled Sea would be close to impossible. Concealing it in other countries would be hard. However, getting rid of it would be even more difficult. Doing so would likely earn rebellion from the sailors. While it would not be *impossible* to remove a safety device for the dangerous business of sea travel, it would cause a decent degree of friction.

The second reason was more simple. Trade between Uppasala and Capua was practically a done deal at this point. Capua currently had a prince and princess from the Twin Kingdoms staying within their palace, and there was an unofficial envoy from the country itself on the voyage. They were inextricably connected with the matter.

It would therefore be rather difficult to negotiate a position as allied nations with married families between Uppasala and Capua while also being estranged from the Twin Kingdoms—to say nothing of the fact that from the church’s influential point of view, they were both simply animistic countries. There was a strong possibility they would all be lumped together into the category of “enemy.” Overturning that would require quite a lot of concessions.

“Yngvi may be taking up the throne sooner.”

The second prince had no scruples about clashing against the church’s

influence. Of course, that was not to say he was willing to wage all-out war, just that he would not weaken foreign policy by avoiding friction with them.

If it was impossible to avoid antagonizing them regardless, it could be entirely appropriate to have Yngvi on the throne, considering his unwavering nature. Fortunately, they were on good terms, so he would still be able to offer "advice" even after he gave up the throne.

"The trade with Capua, diplomatic alliances shifting, the transition of smithing to water-wheel powered furnaces. Perhaps finalizing them all with a change of king would minimize the chaos?"

He considered it all. With Yngvi's values, there was little chance he would be against transitioning to newer technology. New trade agreements, new diplomacy, and new technology. Yngvi could lead all of that, and Gustav—having abdicated the throne—could at least somewhat maintain the old diplomatic routes and blacksmithing. Leaving the throne would mean the influence and money he could bring to bear would be less, so he would only be able to save some of it. Still, it was better than losing everything at once.

It was common within a country for there to be people both for and against any change in diplomatic relations or the adoption of technology. With diplomacy in particular, it was common for those against the public policies to be used in secret when predictions fell through. Then, when there was upheaval, the direction of policy could be quickly changed by taking those who had been visible backstage and bringing those who had worked in secret out into the public eye.

"I must say, His Majesty certainly brings about change at an astonishing rate despite being so relaxed himself," the king sighed, a mix of humor and exasperation in his voice.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Zenjirou had returned. In and of itself, this was not an unusual thing. Outside of the day he had spent in Capua to literally recharge his batteries, he had come and gone between the forest and the palace. It was practically routine at this

point.

However, while he usually returned during the evening, this time it was still the morning. He also had a large pair of tusks and a leg from a boar on his back, so things were a completely different matter.

Zenjirou had finally passed the Rite of Age. The news spread through the palace in the blink of an eye.

After he had arranged for his proof to be dealt with, Zenjirou warmed up in the sauna and washed himself up. Contrary to the exultation and sense of accomplishment, there was an all-pervading sense of exhaustion in his bones now that he was finally released from the tension of his goal.

Once he left the sauna and headed back to his room, he changed into loungewear and threw himself onto the sofa.

“I want to sleep for a week.”

Ines’s soft voice responded to his instinctive comment. “Now that you have finished the rite, you will need to head to Capua to retrieve Prince Eric. Perhaps you could rest there for a day or two since you will be there regardless?”

The suggestion was intensely alluring to him as he realized how tired he was.

“Right. I should be able to do that at least.”

Frankly, he was utterly exhausted at the moment. While he may have used the Windhammer, he had still brought down a boar, rappelled down a cliff, and pseudo-butchered the beast. The boar had charged at him clearly ready to kill. If the rope had snapped, that would have been the end of him. The peril made things feel even more tiring. The tension had fortunately taken his mind off it. Now those nerves had been exchanged for accomplishment, though, it was impossible to ignore the fatigue permeating his body. Remaining in that state would easily result in him making a critical mistake in the coming negotiations.

He should definitely relax. Making that decision gave him a little more energy. There was a silver lining as well, as the way he would use that energy had already been decided.

“Sir Zenjirou, Princess Freya has requested an audience.”

“Show her through,” he replied after a pause, using the energy he had only just regained to respond to the expected statement.

“Congratulations on your success, Your Majesty. I offer my thanks as well. You have my deepest gratitude for undergoing such hardships, and for such a long period, for my sake,” Freya said once the meeting had begun.

“I offer my own thanks,” Skaji added. “Truly, thank you.”

Skaji usually put her all into her position as Freya’s bodyguard, but even she had expressed her gratitude here.

“It was something I did for my own marriage, of my own will, so I do not think it would usually warrant thanks. However, I am pleased that both of you would offer it regardless, and will happily accept your thanks,” Zenjirou replied, gesturing Freya towards the sofa as he did.

She sat down and Skaji stood behind her. Once they were both in position, Zenjirou sat down opposite them. They faced each other, and when Freya had calmed, she spoke.

“I have received word from my father. His decree is that henceforth, Prince Consort Zenjirou Bilbo Capua of Capua be allowed to ask for First Princess Freya Uppasala of Uppasala’s hand.”

Originally, undergoing the Rite of Age had been solely to have his request be worthy of consideration, but there was an unofficial agreement for the marriage itself now. That was due to multiple things: the secret agreement between Zenjirou and Gustav to damage his escort’s views as warriors, and it becoming clear that the whole thing had started with a public request from Freya. Furthermore, progress on the Northern Continent was faster than expected, so Gustav wanted to hurry the intercontinental trade agreement along.

With that said, there would soon be an official ceremony held within the palace for their marriage.

“I see,” Zenjirou replied. “It honestly does not yet feel real. I hope we can make things work, Your Highness.” Indeed, his tone was entirely like he was talking about someone else rather than himself.

Freya offered a rolling laugh of amusement. “Likewise, Your Majesty. As you are aware, I am a rather active person and would wager it will take quite some time for that to change, even after marriage. I would be grateful if you could take a long-term view of things.”

The warrior behind her had wide eyes and was about to scold Freya for so openly declaring she would not be some quiet bride. But Zenjirou offered a genuine smile.

“That is one of your charms. I would say there is no need to stifle yourself. As long as your words and actions are not to the detriment of Capua, the Capuan Royal family, orHer Majesty Queen Aura, I shall endorse all of them.”

While Zenjirou had mentioned country, family, and monarch, the last of them was all he really wanted to cover. As long as it didn’t disadvantage his beloved wife, he truly wanted to accommodate Freya as much as possible as she married across the continents. That was how well-disposed and respectful he was of her.

He would respect her actions and deeds, guaranteeing her freedom into their marriage. That was what Freya had wanted more than anything, and what she had half given up on before.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” she said, smiling with slightly watery blue eyes.

Chapter 5 — A Second Marriage

Today in Uppasala, Zenjirou Bilbo Capua—prince consort of Capua—would be wed to the country's first princess.

About a month had passed since he had completed the Rite of Age—an incredibly short time. However, Zenjirou had no concerns on that front. Then again, there was no doubt that he had been the absolute busiest person during the past month.

Zenjirou was one of the only two people in this world who could move under his own power between the Northern and Southern Continents via teleportation. Therefore, he had traveled between the two countries over and over.

Retrieving Eric from Capua was the first of it. Then he had sent a diplomat to Uppasala and brought another back from Uppasala to Capua. Of course, that was far from the last of it. He had been back and forth several more times to enable each diplomat to understand their own countries' positions.

The rapid transitions between the two nations so different in climate had interfered with his body's temperature regulation and made him somewhat ill, even. His fever wouldn't abate even at night, and he found himself unable to sleep despite his exhaustion. Conversely, he was having to focus all of his energy on resisting huge yawns during his daytime work. It was likely some flaw in the switching of his sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Despite that—and his occasional complaints—he had fulfilled his role, fortunately enough. It was a role that could literally only have been accomplished by him. There was no substitute who could take over.

As far as the trade deal was concerned, it had been established to be solely between the Capua and Uppasala families, but the diplomats would decide the specifics at a later date. The same was not true of the marriage to Freya. The acceleration of the agreement had shifted the burden onto the only person capable of traveling between the two countries.

All that meant that while Zenjirou was going to be a full participant in the

ceremony itself, he had been unable to truly understand how the ceremony would progress until the day came. The sole thing he already knew about was his outfit. That had needed to be fitted to him, so he had been required to attend in person. Freya's clothing and fitting had all been carried out in a separate room, so today would be the first time he saw her in her bridal outfit. The bride and groom were seeing each other for the first time in the antechamber today.

"Your Majesty Zenjirou."

"Princess Freya?"

Zenjirou's response to the girl calling his name was an unsure question. There was no one else she could be, and she had sounded exactly like he remembered when she called his name, and her features themselves were the now-familiar sight he was used to. But she was wearing a wedding dress that was mainly white, along with a lace veil patterned after falcon feathers. The belt around her waist had decorations on it made of gold, and the several necklaces around her neck were made of the same.

Falcons and gold were considered charms for marriage in the northern countries of the continent. All of that combined meant that this was definitely his bride, and Freya. However, his lack of confidence was due to her hairstyle.

She seemed to notice his gaze on her hair because she offered a mischievous laugh. "Oh, this? It is a wig. It was made from the hair I had cut when I became captain of the *Glasir's Leaf*."

As she spoke, she spun around, showing the entire ensemble.



Indeed, she did not have the short-cut hair that Zenjirou was used to. If it was loose, the long silver hair would likely have reached the middle of her back. It had been carefully braided up into a bun, though. It was a perfect hairstyle for the big moment of marriage and was clearly the product of much effort.

“It suits you well, Your Highness. Just as well as your usual hairstyle, I would say.”

The praise was honest, but he remembered that her normal hairstyle was the one she had chosen along with her way of life, so he hurriedly added the extra sentence.

Freya giggled at his clumsy praise and pitched her voice somewhat teasingly. “Thank you; you seem stronger than usual in that outfit as well.”

“That is hardly praise,” he retorted with an exaggerated frown.

Freya poked her tongue out slightly before laughing. His outfit as a groom was —succinctly put—highly decorated armor. It was metal at its base, with fur and gold adorning it. This was the traditional wedding garb for Uppasalan royalty and high nobility. There were two swords of differing sizes hanging from his waist. Both were gorgeous ceremonial swords, but as with most blades in Uppasala, they would stand up to actual use as well.

The outfit as a whole was almost normal for a groom in Uppasala. However, the second sword was something he had put quite an effort into having.

As Freya’s teasing implied, the outfit could not be said to suit him in the slightest. So much so that any compliment was more of a lie than anything. The armor and swords hanging on his frame were too heavy, so a duck would probably have beaten him in a footrace. He would have been far more likely to escape something wearing just his T-shirt and jeans than an outfit this heavy. Wearing all this just strengthened the respect he had for the warriors who would be able to wear it while running around the battlefield.

As the conversation progressed, there came a knock at the door.

“Your Majesty, Your Highness. The preparations are in order. Please enter.”

The two of them exchanged looks without even intending to.

“Your hand, Your Majesty?”

“Of course.” Freya softly took his hand in her own.

He escorted his new bride quietly out of the antechamber. The wedding was taking place in a courtyard.

While it was not the case in Capua, it was fairly common in animistic countries for weddings to be held outside. The spirits governed nature, so out in the open air where that nature was present was considered perfect for the holy unions of families.

Of course, “outside” or not, this was the royal palace and the wedding was between two royals. The tables set up atop the lawn were covered in pure white tablecloths, and the chairs for the guests were all polished to a sheen, without a single sign of dirt.

It was early summer, early in the afternoon. The cool breeze made Zenjirou feel a slight chill on his skin due to being used to the intense heat of Capua. He escorted Freya past the applauding guests. He felt himself nearly falling into the same pace he had used when marrying Aura, but consciously sped up so he was in the lead.

During that first wedding, he had been so nervous that he could barely remember how to put one foot in front of the other. In comparison, he was doing far better this time and was able to not only act as Freya’s escort, but cast his gaze over the assembly of people.

While part of it was due to this being the second time, which meant he was more used to it, his nerves had been eased by managing to get through the life-risking voyage to this country and passing the Rite of Age.

Considering that, he focused himself again. Forgetting his cowardice despite his lack of strength and acting more boldly would cause more harm than good.

Eventually, the two of them reached the seating for the bride and groom on the stage at the front. As they stood next to each other, the area fell silent. The arrangements made meant that Zenjirou would be the next one to act.

He glanced at Freya to his side, and she gave him the slightest nod of agreement. Now knowing that his memory wasn’t incorrect, he used his left

hand to hold the sword's sheath tightly and his right to carefully draw the blade. He held it high into the sky, where it gleamed in the sunlight.

He then took a deep breath and proclaimed as loudly as possible, "My name is Zenjirou. I, Zenjirou Bilbo Capua, will be bound in marriage to Freya Uppasala and pledge to bring her joy and love throughout our partnership. In the name of the spirits of wind, earth, water, and fire."

Following that, Freya's left hand rested atop Zenjirou's right as he held the sword aloft. "My name is Freya. I, Freya Uppasala will be bound in marriage to Zenjirou Bilbo Capua as Freya Alcott Capua and pledge to respect and love him throughout our partnership. In the name of the spirits of wind, earth, water, and fire."

Freya Alcott Capua would be her new name. Alcott was the name of an uninhabited coastal region farther south than Valentia. The past month of negotiations had resulted in an agreement that she would be afforded the territory and the title of duchess with which to rule it. There would eventually be a port and shipyard there, but the timescale and budget still had yet to be settled. For the time being, the initial shipbuilding for intercontinental travel would be done in Valentia. When and what scale the port and shipyard in Alcott would be would depend on future negotiations.

With the vows exchanged, the guests began to applaud and stamp their feet to celebrate the union. There was no one priestly looking to preside over the ceremony as a whole. Uppasala had shamans who led ceremonies, but the normal method for a wedding in Uppasala was for the newlyweds to make their vows directly to the spirits. Therefore, if taken to the extreme, their wedding could be said to be complete. However, long tradition added more to any ceremony.

The two sat down in their chairs on the stage, and a man from the bride's family stood. He was a young, impressively built man clad in gleaming armor. This was the first prince of the country, Eric Estridsen Uppasala.

Zenjirou glanced at his new wife in surprise at the change of plans to see the same surprise mirrored in her own blue orbs. Apparently, this was a shock to both of them. Normally, it would have been Gustav who stood here, not Eric.

The small golden hammer that the king would usually have held was in Eric's hand, so it would appear that he was to carry out the role that his father would ordinarily have done.

Freya offered a resigned smile. While Zenjirou knew there was nothing to be done now, he still felt unease at having Eric carry out the role. He had not thought the strife between them had been fully solved.

There would be no resisting it now, though. Zenjirou centered himself and watched Eric make his way up to the stage with the metal hammer in hand. The prince stopped first in front of Freya and softly brought the hammer down towards her dainty shoulders.

"May misfortune vanish from her path," he said as the metal tapped her shoulder.

The golden hammer was a weapon of myth in Uppasalan tradition. It was tiny, sticking out of its wielder's hand, about the same size as his fist. The legends said that despite its size, it was terrifyingly powerful. It was also supposed to have the ability to destroy evil and misfortune. Therefore, there was a custom for a man of the bride's family to strike both bride and groom with it to ward off calamity from their married life.

It went without saying that this particular piece was a replica, although replica or not, it was made of gold and very real in that sense. Of course, it was also extremely heavy.

Eric then stood in front of Zenjirou and swung it down again. The twist of a smile Zenjirou saw on his face was most certainly not a trick of the light. Indeed, the hammer made a completely different noise when it struck him, and there was a dull pain in his collarbone.

"May misfortune vanish from his path."

Despite the pain, it was not enough to cause an injury, so it was a small piece of revenge from the prince.

"Look after Freya, brother-in-law," he said with a fierce grin. Immediately afterwards, his expression took on a hint of chagrin. "It would seem I did indeed eventually call you brother like you initially said. Your insight is a sight to

behold,” he added before lifting his massive shoulders in a shrug.

“The understanding of the Uppasalan royal family is an honor to have. Of course, I am rather proud of the effort I put in to receive it.” Zenjirou straightened and threw his shoulders back as he spoke, speaking of his own achievements himself. He had gotten somewhat more used to this way of doing things and his gaze slipped down to where Eric had just been sitting.

The table he was sitting at was home to various members of the royal family. They included Gustav, Eric, and Yngvi, all of whom Zenjirou had been introduced to. There was also a woman who looked to be in her forties and another about a decade younger, as well as two girls who were not yet of age and another boy. There was also an elderly woman.

In order, they were Second Queen Felicia, Third Queen Matilda, Second Princess Gerda, Third Princess Hilda, Third Prince Carl, and Queen Mother Gunnel. The underage princesses and princes—along with the already retired queen mother—not being part of official functions was only natural. However, the lack of Felicia and Matilda was due to the late first queen.

Felicia and Matilda were influential nobles in Uppasala, but the late queen was a former princess of Ofus. Her only child, Eric, with circumstances being what they were, had held a place in Ofus’s succession rather than just Uppasala’s.

To avoid any implication to Ofus that Eric was being slighted now that he had lost the shield of his birth mother, Gustav had not raised either Felicia or Matilda to be first queen. Therefore, there were significant restrictions on both of them when they were in public.

Of course, there were no problems with unofficial meetings, so Zenjirou had actually met with Freya’s mother repeatedly. Enough so that she had made him promise to address her as his mother-in-law during the marriage. However, this was the first time he was seeing Matilda.

While Zenjirou was looking at the table of royals, Eric had finished his ceremony and was moving back to the table. The next part of the ceremony would be the meal.

Waiters ferried roast boar and goat to the tables one after another. The wind

carried the juicy scent of meat up to Zenjirou, and he felt his mouth begin to water as he stood.

“Your Highness.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

Freya followed suit, standing and allowing him to take her arm to lead her down from the stage.

Cutting the main dish—the meat—was the groom’s duty. That was why the groom had to have a usable sword for a wedding ceremony. Naturally, commoners’ weddings with few attendees were one thing, but for a royal wedding, the groom would never manage to cut portions for everyone. Therefore it was custom for the groom to only cut the royal guests’. All of the rest would just be nicked with the sword before being taken to the others.

The first to receive a portion would usually be the groom’s family. Unfortunately, he had no relatives here. You could perhaps argue the Capuan guests would count, but they were simple diplomats and guards, along with the maids who were sitting to rest up. They were there because it would be an issue to have *no one* to fill the role of family at a royal wedding, but prioritizing them was another matter.

It was therefore Freya’s parents who they headed for first. In other words, the royal seats.

“We shall begin with the serving, then,” he said once they arrived. He drew the smaller sword at his waist, and then passed it to Freya.

The king let out a chuckle—already aware of the plan—while Eric just remained silent and aghast. Yngvi practically cackled, but quietly enough that it wouldn’t be heard.

“He really did it.”

The other guests, who had not known, could not hide their shock as they stirred. The particularly observant had noticed that Zenjirou was carrying two blades, but no one had even dreamed that one was for his wife.

He ignored the murmurings as he drew the other sword for himself.

This was the actual reason for carrying two swords. While it was fundamentally a role for the groom, it was now something they were doing as a couple. Serving meat to guests was a male's right in general. The exception was for female warriors who hunted the meat themselves. By going out of his way to split the role with Freya, he was announcing to the country that their marriage would not be a normal one as Uppasala knew it. Part of it was also the rather pathetic reasoning of not thinking he'd be able to cut the meat for everyone with a sword. He had more or less been considered minimally competent in the past month.

His smile remained in place, but his clumsy movements were enough to earn titters from the other guests as he sliced the meat before moving on to the rest.

While Zenjirou was dealing with the meat on the guest plates, Freya approached the roast boar and sliced some off. It was—even being as polite as possible—the difference between night and day. Freya had suggested that she could purposefully take more time than him during the rehearsal, but Zenjirou had refused. Splitting the role was telling the assembled people that Freya was not a normal princess, and this was not a normal marriage. Using it to prop the groom up was very much undermining that.

That said, they could not be entirely equal, so the meat Zenjirou cut went to the more highly ranked guests. The first plate went to his new father-in-law.

"I had never expected the chance to eat food provided by my son-in-law here," he said.

"It is an honor, father-in-law," Zenjirou replied with a small smile.

It was slightly unclear, but the king was thanking Zenjirou. "Son-in-law" didn't refer specifically to him, but to any man marrying one of his daughters. "Here" referred to Valaskjálf.

Unlike the Southern Continent, Uppasla had many marriages abroad for royalty, so very few of their princesses would be married in their own country. The norm was for the wedding to take place in the country the woman was marrying into, which in turn meant that it would be difficult for Gustav to leave to attend, given his position as king.

Despite that, thanks to Zenjirou, he had been able to attend his daughter's

wedding and he was thanking the man for it.

“The Southern Continent is distant. All I can do is sit on my distant throne and pray for her happiness.”

There was an unspoken request to look after Freya on its way to actually being spoken, so Zenjirou took the initiative before the king could finish.

“I know that you have given us leave to use one of the annexes as an embassy. With a strong position, I can promise to ensure that Princess Freya can temporarily return twice a year.”

He had already used the camera there, so the distance between Capua and Uppasala was nothing to Zenjirou. Sending Freya to the country wouldn’t require him to travel, but retrieving her would. Still, if needed, he could ensure Freya could return to Uppasala once a month.

Realizing the reality of the matter, Gustav pressed his finger and thumb to his brow and sighed. “Capua is so nearby.” Physical distance aside, the king’s words were completely true in terms of travel time.

Zenjirou then followed by with placing meat on Eric’s plate. The prince thanked him and speared the meat with his fork to hold it up.

“I have attended many weddings, but never before have I seen the groom so cack-handed with a sword.”

The meat had taken several attempts, so there were lines of ragged meat along the cut, and spots where juice had oozed out as he crushed the meat’s fibers. Zenjirou was well aware of that even without Eric pointing it out. Therefore, all he could do was offer a rueful smile.

“My apologies for the poor showing,” he said.

“I had the honor of receiving some instruction from Marshal Pujol while I was in Capua. It was truly worthwhile, and if he had been born in our lands, I have little doubt he would now be called Thor. Do you truly have no intention of taking advantage of such a person’s presence in your lands?” His tone was more envious than critical. The prince seemed to have truly taken a liking to the marshall.

“Indeed.” Zenjirou’s answer was almost unbelievably dismissive in the prince’s estimation. “Even if I spent the year getting some smattering of swordplay, that is all it would be. The extra hesitation it could cause would possibly even be more of a detriment.”

Even if he put in the effort to learn how to use a weapon and increase his stamina, his abilities would not amount to much. If he gained some combat ability, he would now have the “fight” option as well as “flight” and be slower to make the decision, which he saw as a disadvantage. After all, Zenjirou was the prince consort of Capua. Expecting him to be skilled enough against anyone who would be coming for his life was too much to ask for.

“That is a waste. I cannot understand it,” Eric said honestly.

All Zenjirou could do was laugh it off. While he was serving the men, Freya had been dealing with Gunnel, Felicia, and Matilda. From her perspective, Gunnel would be her grandmother, while Felicia was her actual mother. They seemed very close, and with the older views they both had, they were currently scolding her for acting like a man and serving guests.

Of course, it was an occasion of celebration, so neither of them could be *too* harsh here, but both were still lecturing her to the extent they could. Even so, Freya didn’t stop using the sword to slice the meat, and her face was still in an open smile. She must have been feeling both overjoyed and accomplished at being able to fulfill a role allowed only to men in the palace she had grown up in, in front of the royals she had spent her life with.

Seeing that, Zenjirou let out a soft breath of relief that his insight had not been wrong. He had constantly been worried that he might be overstepping the mark.

Yngvi laughed as he watched the thoughts shifting under his expression.

“My Apologies,” Zenjirou said as the younger prince looked his way, only noticing now that he had paused. He placed a slice of the boar on Yngvi’s plate as well.

“Thank you. This and mead is what definitely makes a wedding.” The young prince picked up a metal cup of mead as he spoke. Despite his dainty appearance, he was quite the drinker.

Mead made in the traditional way was a must for all auspicious occasions. Not just in Uppasala, but in all the northern countries of the continent. It still had the sweet scent of the honey, but wasn't at all bad tasting. It had a similar taste to beer, but beer meant Japan to Zenjirou. Beer here didn't include hops, so it was less bitter and easier to drink, but not quite enough for him. The mead here was similar to *this* world's beer.

"I must say that you certainly are a diligent individual, Your Highness. You have learned and used our country's manners in such a short space of time. I shall have to learn from your example," the prince said with a meaningful look up at him.

Zenjirou had already heard about the younger prince's desire to take a concubine from Capua to strengthen their ties.

"That is quite the praise. My thanks. If you get such an opportunity, I would be delighted to help."

"Right, I'll look forward to your assistance should the time come."

While Zenjirou didn't know if it would really happen, it seemed evident that the prince, at least, was serious about it. However, the Northern Continent had a tendency to look down on the Southern Continent, so it would depend on to what extent the prince could protect any concubine, and on that concubine having the constitution to live in another country. Until they knew that, it would be impossible to make any promises.

"Of course, if the time comes," Zenjirou repeated, brushing the topic aside.

Afterwards, he put meat on Carl's plate while Freya did the same for Gerda and Hilda. Their role at that table was now complete.

This was Zenjirou's first meeting with the children. Carl had soft brown hair that grabbed attention, with a well-balanced face. He didn't seem to even be ten years old, yet, but Zenjireou saw him looking perhaps like one of the higher-year students in an elementary school. The difference in race made him seem older to Zenjirou, but the bigger reason was his height. He was already just as tall as Freya, a hundred and sixty centimeters tall. Then again, his half-brother was over a hundred and ninety centimeters, and his father was in the latter half of the one eighties. Taking into account that he would likely grow to a similar

height, it was no real surprise he was so tall. In fact, Yngvi—who was just slightly taller than Zenjirou—and Freya—who was about average for a Japanese woman—were probably far more unusual.

Either way, with the first table being dealt with, the two headed to the others. The next one they went for was another of the royal tables. It was home to those of a slightly lower rank: the king's cousins and second cousins, along with their children.

Zenjirou remembered many of them from the audiences in the palace. He put a slice of meat on the table, and Freya put another over the top of it, forming a cross.

This was all they would be doing for the rest of the tables. However, it would be far too rude to leave immediately, so the two of them received their blessings from the branch royals at the table. Freya—naturally—seemed to recognize all of them. There were the usual comments about not expecting it to happen so soon, her outfit suiting her, and particularly the blade in her hand suiting her.

It was the first time Zenjirou was meeting most of them. There were no real topics of conversation for them. Therefore, most of them said something along the lines of a generic congratulations or asking him to take care of Freya.

The exception was a middle-aged man who grinned. "Your assistance with my son was appreciated. He has a somewhat wider outlook now."

Zenjirou tilted his head in question slightly, whereupon Freya whispered that this was the father of the youngest of the warriors who had been with him for his rite. Considering he had been the source of most of the mockery, Zenjirou remembered him well.

The father was a middle-aged man who was barely royalty, while his son was just a noble with no place in succession. Zenjirou panicked internally at the knowledge that the young man had been a higher noble than he had expected. He worried for a second that this gratefulness for his "assistance" was more of a snide remark, but the man's expression only implied a genuineness to his words.

"I am honored that I could assist in any small way with his growth," Zenjirou

answered, knowing there was no way he would be able to read into an accomplished noble’s expression. All he could do was take the words in the way they had been said.

After the royal and branch royal table, the tables of visiting nobles were next.

Uppasala's status as one of the minority countries practicing animism meant that they had limited diplomatic ties, but there were still a reasonable number of countries that would send guests to royal weddings.

Ofus, Tuurukku, Berggen, and Utgard were—along with Uppasala—known as the Northern Five. Each of them was part of that same religious minority; they had the same kind of culture, so there were, of course, seats for each of them. The three countries other than Utgard had royals or similarly high-level nobility present. Utgard's place alone remained empty, but that was par for the course.

There were others as well: the Red and White Dragon Kingdoms—which had churches of their own and so were a step removed from "the church." There was also a table for the Kingdom of Graz, a country that maintained diplomatic ties regardless of religious beliefs. Additionally, there was a table for Złota Wolność, which had religious freedom in state policy. Those four countries were somewhat removed from Uppasala, so they had not sent particularly high-ranking nobles.

While Zenjirou and Freya went between those tables to give their greetings, Zenjirou had the surprise of seeing a familiar set of faces. They were among the guests from Złota Wolność.

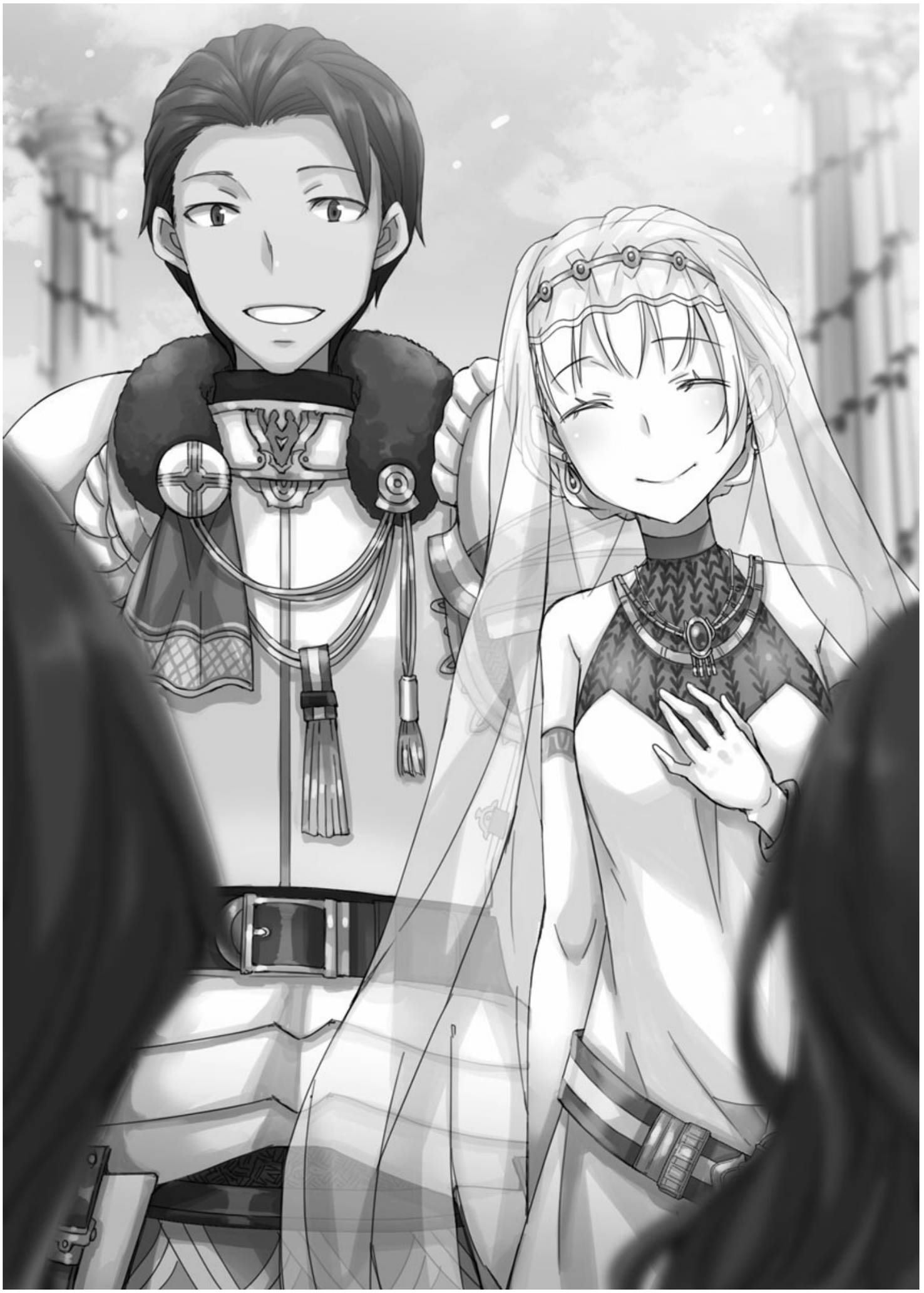
"Your Majesty, Your Highness, congratulations on your wedding."

"Congratulations."

The words came from a young couple—one of the Husaria of Złota Wolność, Eugeniusz Horszowski, and his wife Teresa.

Zenjirou replied, showing his surprise at meeting the two again after Pomorskie. "My, Lord Eugeniusz, Lady Teresa. I never would have expected the commonwealth to send you as emissaries."

"It has been a while, though perhaps not *that* long," Freya commented. "It is good to see you both again."



While the two of them had only met the couple once during the victory party, they had left a good impression, so they easily slipped into conversation.

“I must say, I was surprised by your marriage,” Teresa said. “Though the marriage itself certainly seemed like a matter of time, the time it took was shockingly short.”

“Ah...did we really seem like that?” Freya asked, oddly embarrassed for once and letting her gaze drift away.

With the conversation flowing, Zenjirou offered his own congratulations due to some news that he’d heard recently. “That reminds me, Tannenwald is worth celebrating as well. Allow me to offer my congratulations for the commonwealth’s victory.”

It being overseas meant that they were unaware of the details, but there seemed to be no doubt that the battle between the commonwealth and the knights had ended in victory for the former. In which case, it would be less polite not to mention it.

Indeed, Eugeniusz straightened proudly at his words.

“Of course! Your assistance and Princess Anna’s command saw us safely through their attack. I was able to gain some measure of success personally as well, so I was rather relieved to uphold the honor of the Husaria.”

“Oh? You participated personally? Considering you contributed to your country’s success, I feel the need to do more than just offer a word of congratulations. I would like to host you for a meal at some point; what say you?” Zenjirou was honestly surprised by the man’s claim and quickly suggested a meal. He was not going to let the chance to speak with someone who had just participated in a major conflict on the continent slip through his fingers.

However, the event currently taking place was one of celebrating a marriage —*his* marriage, in fact. He was the guest of honor, so he had a limited amount of time to spend with a single guest.

“Well, I shall be staying within the palace for a while, so I would be happy to take you up on your offer if it is before I leave.”

“Very well. I shall arrange it.”

With the agreement in place, they left the commonwealth’s table.

The next while was spent visiting the other tables. The conversations at each were mostly inoffensive—or, depending on how rude you wished to be, a waste of time. There was food laid out on the empty table for Utgard as well, so the two cut small crosses into the reindeer meat.

The whole thing had become routine by the time they reached Ofus’s table, but that was where things changed. The delegation from Ofus was the largest present. So much so that their representative was a fully-fledged royal with a place in succession.

The man in question was in his thirties, and his attention was more on the table where Eric sat than on the newlyweds, even as the conversation took place. Despite his lack of insight into this kind of thing, it was obvious even to Zenjirou.

The man started out offering his congratulations to them but rather forcefully shifted the topic to Eric. It was nothing to hide, and in fact, seemed something worth sharing, as Freya considering the future relationship between their countries, so she obliged him.

“Indeed, my brother...” she began, discussing things with the man.

“Oh? I see, so Prince Eric said such a thing?”

“He did. You will have to ask him personally for any specific details. Fortunately, he is present here.”

“I shall do so. However, it is still worth discussing such things with others around the person in question.”

Eric was only a short distance away while the conversation was taking place. Although he might have been the grandson of their current king, the royalty of Ofus perhaps held themselves back. They were simultaneously welcoming of his presence and wary. The stance they were taking seemed almost familiar, in fact. The others at the table seemed to hold that simultaneous respect and hostility as well as welcome and wariness—albeit to different extents for each of them.

One of them held himself differently, though. He was an aging noble with gray hair—both on top of his head and on his face. His build was still that of a powerful warrior.His attention was focused not on Eric but in another direction, and he seemed to have been trying to broach a conversation with Zenjirou for a while.

“Is something bothering you?” Zenjirou asked, noticing his behavior.

The man focused himself before speaking. “It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Kevin, a warrior of Ofus. First, allow me to congratulate you on your marriage.”

“Thank you, Sir Kevin.”

Zenjirou’s response and general demeanor made it obvious to the warrior that he was not about to drop the topic, so he continued.

“I beg your pardon for the rather abrupt question, but am I correct in thinking that the people at that table are from your homeland of Capua?” he asked, gesturing.

“They are?” Zenjirou replied, keeping his tone questioning to see where the man was going.

“Well, if you will excuse me for saying so, there is someone rather dissimilar in appearance to yourself with that taken into account. That blonde woman.”

The man’s tone was deadly serious, but the question he asked seemed almost jarringly simple. Zenjirou had tensed up over the course of the conversation but found himself relaxing.

“Ah, she is not actually from Capua. She is from another country on the Southern Continent, the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.”

He followed that up with an explanation of how the country was descended from migrants from the Northern Continent, which in turn had led to their appearance remaining similar to those from the north. The other man slumped at that.

“I see. So the two of them are from this ‘Twin Kingdoms.’”

“Two of them?”

Zenjirou turned to look at that comment and then noticed. There were actually *two* blondes at the Capuan table. One of them was Lucretia Broglie from the Twin Kingdoms, while the other was Zenjirou's maid, Margarette. She was there to fill out the numbers, so she was not wearing her maid uniform but a dress Zenjirou had brought via teleportation, and she blended in with Lucretia and her maid at a glance.

"No, Margarette is not. She is from Capua."

As far as Zenjirou was concerned, he was simply correcting a slight misunderstanding. The other man's reaction was far more dramatic, however.

"Margarette? That is her real name? I-Is that a common name in your homeland? Are there many people with her hair and eye color? Are her parents well? If they are, are they her parents by birth?"

"Sir Kevin?"

The barrage of questions had pulled Zenjirou's wariness back to its highest point and he was almost glaring back at the warrior. Naturally, the others in the area had noticed the interaction.

"Lord Kevin."

"Sir Kevin, this is a celebration."

"Are you truly losing yourself here of all places?"

"You had calmed significantly until now."

It seemed the general chiding from the other people at the table made the man realize how rude he was being, so he calmed himself down.

"Begging your pardon for my rudeness, Your Majesty. I truly apologize."

The warrior practically prostrated himself in apology, actually making himself appear much smaller. Zenjirou was somewhat taken aback, but simply dismissing it all as a misunderstanding would not truly be managing the crisis.

"We are enjoying an event with some drinks. A little rudeness is part of the entertainment. However, this sounds rather intriguing. If you wish to apologize, perhaps you would discuss this with me at a later date?"

The man's eyes gleamed at the suggestion, while his compatriots had somewhat sour looks.

"W-Would that Lady Margarette be present too?"

"She will have work," Zenjirou refuted him curtly as the man seized the opportunity. His main goal was to ensure that no harm would befall her, so he wouldn't have her present.

"Very well. Perhaps we could even meet tomorrow."

"Indeed."

With the agreement in place, Zenjirou took Freya's hand and left the table.

"Kevin, do ensure you keep your manners," he heard as they moved on.

"I will."

There were no major problems after that, and they finished visiting each of the rest of the tables. With the slicing of the meat completed, there was nothing in particular he now had to do.

The guests moved around freely. Some took refills of drinks while others reached out for food. Someone started playing an instrument that they had brought while others sang and danced. Still others began crossing blades.

It was awfully unfortunate, but it was an unwritten rule that the groom must participate in this last custom. Unsurprisingly, as soon as he had fulfilled the bare minimum of his duties as the groom, Zenjirou turned tail and left.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Several days had passed since the wedding had taken place. Those days were just as busy for Zenjirou as the initial runup to the event. He had the meetings he had arranged during the wedding with both Eugeniusz and Kevin. Once he had the information from them, he swiftly returned to Capua via teleportation.

None of the information Kevin had given him was particularly worthwhile. It was utterly useless and without a shred of credibility. However, it was all but impossible to completely refute it. Considering the influence it could hold, they

would need to take precautions. That was how much of a bother it could be.

He also had information from Eugeniusz about the battle of Tannenwald. Zenjirou's opinions on how important maintaining information would be led to Aura now standing in a building on the Northern Continent—the new Capuan Embassy in Uppasala.

"Welcome, Your Majesty," Ines greeted her with a placid expression, followed by the others who had departed from Capua on the *Glasir's Leaf*. The only person missing was Zenjirou.

That was hardly a surprise, though. Zenjirou had just sent her here through teleportation, after all.

"Thank you. I will be returning soon, so refreshments will be unnecessary."

"Of course." The maid nodded slightly.

"So this is the Northern Continent," Aura mused, peering around in interest before shivering. "It certainly is cold."

A native of the area would think they had misheard. They were in the middle of summer, after all. However, "summer" on the Northern Continent took place at the same time as the Blazing Season on the Southern continent. It was therefore almost inevitable that she would feel that the northern summer was cold, having just left the Southern Continent moments ago.

"No one from Uppasala enters this room?" Aura asked meaningfully.

Ines's soft tone didn't change as she agreed. "Indeed. Sir Zenjirou negotiated with King Gustav that no one from outside of Capua would enter the building without permission."

"Good."

Satisfied with the answer, Aura spent a while silently changing her position and intensely surveying the room, as if burning it into her mind. Once she was confident, she spoke again.

"I will be leaving again now. It should go without saying, but this visit is classified."

"We understand."

Aura nodded in satisfaction. “I will be sending my husband back later. He will be in your care then.”

With her piece said, the queen cast the teleportation spell—with considerably greater familiarity than Zenjirou—and vanished into thin air.

Zenjirou had been waiting on a sofa in the inner palace when he looked to the side. His wife had suddenly appeared there, having been completely absent until that point.

“Welcome home, Aura,” he said.

“It is good to be back again.”

He stood from his seat to greet his wife on her return from the Northern Continent. It had been perhaps a dozen or so minutes since he had sent her there. Zenjirou had agreed due to knowing that there wasn’t even a one-in-a-million chance that something would go wrong, but he still let out a sigh of relief when he saw her safely returned.

They sat down on opposite sofas and he asked the first question. “You seem like everything went fine, but you didn’t bump into anyone from Uppasala, did you?”

“I did not. Outside of our people, no one saw me throughout the entire journey,” she replied.

Indeed, as their conversation implied, the visit Aura had made was not something that Uppasala was aware of and was effectively illegal entry into the country. They might have been given an area for an embassy, but they had still entered a foreign royal palace without its king’s permission. It would be quite the piece of leverage if discovered. However, it was worth the risk.

“Now I can send people to the palace as well.”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty big thing if it comes to it.”

Currently, there was an unthinkable amount of both people and things moving between the two countries for Freya’s relocation and the information that went along with it. Zenjirou had taken on the entire burden thus far, but now—at least for one leg of the journey—Aura could help. Fundamentally, they

were sending Capuans to the embassy, so if they insisted on silence, the Uppasalans wouldn't find out.

"It's not something we can really sneak around with, though," Zenjirou added. "We should get permission for a visit for you at some point so you can be more proactive about sending people."

The queen nodded in agreement. "Indeed. We should eventually, yes. The way we are doing things now is effectively illegal. However, it will have to be after the situation has calmed."

Zenijrou knew she was correct. Even an unofficial visit from a monarch to another country would require preparations on the destination's side. Considering how busy things were now, it would just invite further displeasure.

Unlike Aura, Zenjirou could only use teleportation twice a day. Magic tool or not, using up both of them was not something they wanted. During the Rite of Age, there had been no real choice, but most of the time, he would be keeping enough mana for at least one cast whenever he was away from the palace. Therefore, Zenjirou had always stayed at least the night every time he had come back to Capua.

But things would be different now. Zenjirou could teleport himself to Capua, and Aura could send him back. Doing that meant that even if both legs of the trip were in the same day, he would still have his emergency teleport. He could come home and go back within a day without that restriction.

"Well then, I need to head back today, so let's get to the discussion. The marriage is done with now. Freya is officially my concubine. We don't need to have a ceremony here as well, do we?"

"No," Aura answered with a smile. "Congratulations. Also, thank you, Zenjirou. We now have a long-awaited intercontinental trade route of our own. We will not have a ceremony here as well since you had one there. We will have a banquet to announce it or something similar. My attending would be unbelievably crass, so only you and Princess Freya will be there."

"Ugh, that sounds annoying. All right, though, I'll do my best. That's everything to do with the wedding, then. I'll be sending people from tomorrow, will that work?"

She nodded confidently in response.

“It will, the inner palace already has an annex prepared for her use.”

“Princess Freya, Skaji, and any additional maids aside, what else? We have others as a priority as well, the shipwrights and shipyard leaders, as well as the smith Völundr.”

“‘Völundr’ was the same as ‘Skaji,’ no? A name given with meaning?” Aura asked, her eyes gleaming.

“Yeah. It’s the name given to the greatest smith in the country. Well, not quite. There was a longer period without someone holding the name than the opposite, so it means even more than that.”

“So a person who is a national asset. I suppose the old man would be the same.”

“The old man” referred to none other than the head of the imperial mages, Espiridion. In fact, when he was young, Tucale had offered a literal fortune to try and poach him. A mage and a smith were not the same thing, but they were doubtless both the kinds of people you would not carelessly send to another land.

“Why is a person of his ilk coming here?”

“It’s apparently his own desire. He’s of a fair age and has served his country well so far. He says he wants to use what he has left of his time smithing for his own ambitions.”

“His ambitions?”

“He wants to create a dragon-slaying weapon.”

“I see.” She could accept the official reason, but she was not so foolish as to take it as gospel. “There is more to this,” she commented.

“There is?” Zenjirou asked, already having assumed as much himself.

“Yes. I have no proof, but I am certain.”

Zenjirou tried his best to fulfill his role as her husband, putting his efforts into trying to peer through the schemes in place even though it wasn’t a real skill of

his.

“Maybe espionage?” he suggested.

“Does he seem like the kind of person capable of it?”

Zenjirou shook his head. “He looked far from it to me. He seemed more like a real dyed-in-the-wool craftsman.”

“Then likely not. However much talent he has, he has dedicated his life to his craft. It is hard to presume such people also learn subterfuge in that way.”

“Right. Then what do you think it is?”

“I do not know.”

She briefly raised her hands to the side of her head in apparent surrender. Indeed, it was almost impossible to see what lay underneath the king’s decisions with the information they had.

Current smithing techniques were becoming a thing of the past on the Northern Continent, being overtaken by waterwheel-powered blast furnaces. A smith of Völundr’s renown would be an impediment to that switch. It was therefore better to follow his wishes and offer him as a gift to a precious trade partner overseas. Making those leaps from the information they had would make things too easy.

“Well, no matter. We are desperate for smiths, so we should gratefully accept him. The craftsmen are under the palace’s authority for now.”

“Okay. Oh, by the way, Völundr is a picky craftsman, so he makes his furnaces entirely by himself, right down to the stone and bricks.”

“Oh? Which means he may be able to help with glass production. Perhaps he will even be able to give us furnaces that do not break down at the temperatures required.”

“Is that still going the same way? We’ve managed to make the marbles at least, right?”

“We have, but we are still needing to rebuild the furnaces as we burn them out. That limits our numbers.”

Which meant that the next breakthrough would be furnaces that could stand up to high temperatures. Things were gradually progressing. Once the process was in place, they could start negotiating in truth with the Sharou family.

“Once you have had time to recuperate on your return, I will need you to go to the Twin Kingdoms and bring back the former king.”

The former king was Bruno III, the man who had been on the throne when Zenjirou had met him. There was a blatant scowl on his face at the reminder of the man who had tried to drag his young son into politics.

“Very well,” he responded after a moment, his logic preventing a refusal.

With the topic mostly finished, they carried on with the discussion.

“There are also two other pieces of information I think you should know about,” he said. “From two people, even. They are Lord Eugeniusz of Złota Wolność and Sir Kevin of Ofus. The information they gave me was...”

He then launched into an explanation of everything he had heard from each of them. As he spoke, Aura’s face was the most serious it had been through the entire meeting.

She first replied with her impressions of the information from Eugeniusz, the more relatively useful one. “I see, so the commonwealth has won the war for now. The mercenary Yan has gained the most fame from it, followed by Princess Anna, who hired him and has overall command of those men. That princess has announced she will usurp the throne.”

As Zenjirou had been concerned, she hadn’t fully understood the events, so he continued his expression with a worried look.

“It’s not an usurpation; she’s officially announced her candidacy for the next election. The country works on an electoral system, so anyone with a place in succession can put their name forward.”

“Hmm?”

She might have been far wiser than Zenjirou, but the basis of her knowledge was too widely different to truly understand an elected monarch. Zenjirou was returning to Uppasala within the day, so he didn’t have too long to really

explain.

“For now, let’s just say that she has a legitimate right to become the queen of the country and she’s announced that is her goal. The country hasn’t had a reigning queen before, so it’s unprecedented in that respect. Her victory at Tannenwald has drastically increased her popularity, so a lot of people are for it. However, she won’t necessarily be able to push past her brother with ease and that alone, so she might do something else big.”

“And is that last remark your own opinion?”

He nodded slightly. “Yeah.”

“You have met with her several times and spoken as well. Is your prediction based upon that?”

“It is. She seems likely to do that kind of thing. She definitely has the ability to take the initiative.”

“I see...” The queen fell into silent thought.

The biggest, strongest country in that region of the Northern Continent had won a war with its neighbor and times were changing. She had only seen the photos of the port from the maid on the computer, but it was clearly both bigger and more refined than Valentia. Additionally, the information from Freya had been that the country had at least five ships on a similar scale to the *Glasir’s Leaf*.

“Perhaps she will come here?” she mused.

Zenjirou jolted. He had seen the country’s size in person. While Pomorskie was only a small part of the whole, he felt like he understood their power and the threat they could pose.

“Do you mean joining in with the trade? Or...”

He hesitated to say what exactly the alternative was. It wasn’t like he actually believed in what the Japanese called *kotodama*, or ‘the soul of language.’ He knew that just saying something wasn’t enough to make it happen, but it still felt like it might be.

Fortunately, he didn’t actually have to say what he thought for Aura to

understand.

“I am unsure. We should prepare for the worst, though.”

“Right,” he replied, the whole thing still not feeling real.

“So, what of the other person?”

“Ah, right. This one’s pretty ridiculous, but I wanted to check to be sure. Aura, how much do you know about Margarette’s origins?”

“Hm? Why would you bring her up? Were we not talking about the warrior from Ofus?”

“We are, but it involves her. Even if it does sound absurd...”

He then relayed the information from the other man, and the conversation dragged on to an almost painful length.

Epilogue — The Second in the Inner Palace

Another month had passed.

During that time, Zenjirou had sent a single person each day from Uppasala to Capua. He had sent Freya, Skaji, and the maids who would be caring for Freya. He had also sent the specialist craftsmen, starting with Völundr. Sending them all would have been excessive, so the others would be crossing the sea over the next hundred or so days on the *Glasir's Leaf*.

Natalio and Zenjirou's other guards, along with Ines and her subordinates, needed to be sent home as well, as did their guest of honor, Lucretia, and her maid Flora. He had sent one of them back each day. That meant that Zenjirou would have to be the last to return, but he was beginning to feel somewhat lonely.

Additionally, sending his guards and maids away would cause problems with both his safety and lifestyle. Fortunately, Uppasala had given over usage of a building in the palace for Capua to use as an embassy. There were diplomats and soldiers from Capua there, so he was not left defenseless.

It was now the final day, and once he had sent Ines—who had worked tirelessly right until the end—he used the spell on himself, finally drawing to a close his life on the Northern Continent.

"Welcome home, Sir Zenjirou," the familiar guard in the stone room greeted him.

The room had no windows at all. The ever-burning brazier lit the chamber, which was as unchanging as ever. Day or night, rain or shine, there were no changes in this room. That was exactly what made it the best destination for teleportation.

During his trip to the Northern Continent, Zenjirou had sent countless people back and forth, along with himself, so he could almost always cast the spell to teleport there. The second-best destination for him was the room in the Capuan embassy. He was capable of casting the spell to send someone or head there

himself without the aid of his camera. Teleportation was the most useful spell in space-time magic, so it made more sense to focus on expanding one's repertoire of destinations rather than trying to learn countless different spells.

"It is good to be back. Where is Her Majesty?" he asked.

"Waiting in the inner palace."

As he had expected, Aura had refrained from work to wait for him there.

"Thank you," he said before swiftly leaving the room.

"I'm back," were the first words out of his mouth as he entered what was closest to his home now—the living room in the inner palace.

"Welcome home," Aura greeted him with a smile as the door opened.

Ordinarily, kisses and hugs would follow, but they refrained, considering what was to come with the rest of the day. Ines seemed to have gotten straight back to her cleaning duties without even a break.

"Everything's done with for now. I did make sure to arrange a monthly visit for a while just in case, though."

The Northern Continent was in the midst of a blisteringly fast change. It might increase the burden on Zenjirou somewhat, but they wanted to keep gathering information as best they could.

For Gustav, the periodic visits would let him hear about his now distant daughter and keep in close contact with their trade partner, so he'd had no reason to refuse.

"You have carried out your duties well. As the queen of this country, I thank you," Aura said, speaking in a solemn, official tone that he rarely heard in the inner palace.

"Of course," he replied with a serious bow.

Not a moment had passed, though, before her attitude switched from a monarch congratulating her subordinate to a wife overjoyed to see her husband.

"I am glad you are safe."

“Thank you.”

He was home. That was truly how he felt: this was his home. Yet while the inner palace might be his home, that did not mean it was unchanging. He looked over the young maids in the living room and spoke.

“Has the transition gone well here too? I’ve not seen much of a difference in people.”

Aura looked in their direction as well and smiled. “It has. They brought their own staff as well, so we have only assigned six of ours for now. Nilda was requested and was receptive, and the others are new.”

Nilda Gaziel was the second daughter of the margrave. She was a slight girl who had started working in the inner palace relatively recently. Now that she had been mentioned, Zenjirou realized he hadn’t seen her.

Before she had become a maid, she had been relatively close to Freya in the margrave’s estate and in the palace. To Zenjirou at least, they seemed on fairly frank terms. It was rather unsurprising that Freya would want a maid she got along with relatively well.

The other new maids had been recruited while Zenjirou was away. They were completely unrelated to him this time, so they had not needed to be selected for age, marital status, or looks. Instead, they had been chosen solely based on their capabilities and loyalty to the crown. That last factor was particularly important. After all, while working in the inner palace, they would be assigned to a foreign princess in the form of Freya. There was the possibility—remote though it was—that she could win them over.

Once Zenjirou had changed into casual clothing, he sat on the sofa and drank some of the iced water he’d pulled out of the fridge. Aura could tell that he was slightly on edge. It was not that he was against the act required of him in itself; he just felt unwilling to gleefully go about it. His wife, understanding that, made sure the smile on her face had no signs of reluctance as she spoke.

“Zenjirou, I think they are ready as well, do you not?”

Those words were a slight push to her husband. A push towards a room where another woman was waiting for him.

It would seem like a warped relationship to a commoner, but many of the royals and nobles of Capua would have experienced it.

“Aura...” he began before trailing off. He looked at her with an expression that was a mix of surprise and sadness.

“You have been forced into a difficult relationship for the sake of the country. So if nothing else, I wish to tell you this: you have nothing to be concerned about. Princess Freya was the one to want this more than anyone, and I was the one to accept it. You resisted it until its end,” she said, telling him he needn’t be conflicted over the situation.

It was worded differently, but he had lost track of how many times Aura had told him this kind of thing. He understood the logic, but his emotions—based on how he had been brought up and lived until today—didn’t let him accept it. He had come this far without accepting it, and now that he was in this position, he was not allowed to retreat.

He took a deep breath. “Right!” he declared, standing up forcefully. “I’ll be back later!”

“Of course. I will see you then,” Aura replied, standing slowly to see him off.

Zenjirou’s feet took him from the living room out of the main building and into the gardens.

“Urgh, it’s definitely the blazing season,” he grumbled as the sun beat mercilessly down on him. In the blazing season, the sunlight almost felt like a physical attack. He wasn’t walking far, but he was already sweating in his jeans and T-shirt.

He quickly strode over the grass. He passed by a fountain as he walked and was sorely tempted to stop in the cool spray. Still, he carried on. Cooler though it might be next to the fountain, he would still be in the direct sunlight.

He was half-running as he reached the annex. While he had lived solely in the main building so far, the inner palace was originally supposed to be an area where a single man could live with multiple wives. Making women who had married the same man live in the same building was like trying to keep many fish in a small tank. That was why the inner palace was split into multiple

buildings. The one he had just reached was the new home to his now concubine, Freya Alcott Capua.

“Welcome and good day, Your Majesty,” she greeted him with a smile as he entered the room.

“Thank you, Princess Freya,” he answered, looking over the chamber.

It was about the same size as the living room in the main building. The tables and sofas were of similar make as well, the kind used in Capua. However, there was a distinct difference. There were none of the appliances Zenjirou had brought from Japan in here. Instead, the magic tool they had purchased from the Twin Kingdoms kept the temperature under control by giving off mist.

To Zenjirou’s senses, it felt like it was still over thirty degrees. Of course, that was dramatically cooler when compared to the forty-plus degrees outside. Still, considering the air-conditioned bedroom in the main building, he was rather concerned about how she would cope after having been brought up on the Northern Continent.

“Are you comfortable? If you find yourself lacking anything, then I will make arrangements, so speak your mind freely. I must say that anything which can only be found in Uppasala will take at least a month, so please bear with us.”

Freya chuckled softly. “Thank you. There is one thing I would ask. Her Majesty has delivered a large amount of ice out of generosity each evening, and I would like that to continue.”

“Very well,” Zenjirou answered.

It seemed that even without his intervention, Aura had already taken precautions against the heat for their new arrival. The mist-generating tool and ice combined were enough to lower the bedroom’s temperature enough so that she could sleep. He was somewhat relieved. It wasn’t solely for her benefit, as he would be sleeping here tonight.

Freya gave a sigh that went past just being impressed. “Arrangements from Uppasala within a month, though? The sense of distance has been completely destroyed,” she said with a rueful smile.

Indeed, it was a distance that would usually take an exceptionally large ship

and over a hundred days of true peril, so being able to retrieve something from that distance every month was absurd. She had initially been prepared to have no further contact with her homeland ever again, so the anticlimax from that tragic sacrifice was almost embarrassing for her. Still, it did not change that Zenjirou's offer was exceedingly welcome.

"Could I ask you to make deliveries rather than just collecting things? Both the maids and I would like to inform our families of the current situation, I wager. Also, if we obtain something special, we would like to send it to our families as a souvenir," she added.

"Understood. I shall also bring back any replies if there are any."

"Thank you."

The maids at her back broke out into slight smiles at the conversation. Unlike Freya, who had come to the Southern Continent of her own accord, the maids had been ordered here by their superiors. Zenjirou wanted to accommodate them as best as he could, but the difference in both culture and climate were extreme. He was all but certain there would be some of them who grew intensely homesick.

Even so, making all of her maids Capuans would not be fair to Freya. However earnestly they tried, being surrounded only by people with dramatically different views would be a source of stress. The idea was for the maids to operate on a rotation each year.

"Skaji, if you have anything you require, you should also feel free to ask," he added, turning the conversation to the warrior, who was in her usual position behind the princess.

Skaji showed no shock at the sudden address and instead answered with the same serious look she always seemed to have. "Thank you. I shall take you up on your offer. I wish to discuss arms, so I would like to consult with Völundr in the palace."

"Arms? Do you not already have your weaponry and such?" he responded.

She nodded firmly. "I do. However, pardon my rudeness, but they are not entirely suitable for here. The armor we would wear is far too hot to use in

Capua, and thus I would like to discuss it with Völundr."

According to Skaji, the normal armor in Uppasala was thick metal not over the whole body, but on the arms, chest, shins, and insteps. In combat, they also learned to use that thick metal to take blows rather than dodge them. Naturally, someone of Skaji's skill was able to take on most opponents without resorting to that, avoiding each strike without even a scratch. However, if they were greater in either number or skill, not being able to use the defenses she had learned was a big detriment. She therefore wanted to be able to use the same techniques in the heat of the Southern Continent.

Zenjirou was taken by her proclamation. "Very well, I shall make the arrangements. Of course, it would be difficult to allow Lord Völundr here, so you will likely have to meet him in the palace proper. You should discuss that with Princess Freya."

"Thank you, sir," she replied.

"Skaji, you need not worry about my protection while I am in the inner palace. Think nothing of going to your meetings."

Skaji had a somewhat reluctant look as she acknowledged her liege's words. She likely didn't trust the inner palace's protection enough to entrust Freya's safety to it, but would not say as much in front of its lord, Zenjirou.

Silence fell between them now that the business was concluded. If he had been with Aura, it would have been a comfortable shared silence, but it was still somewhat discomfiting with Freya. Was this another thing that would be simply solved in time?

While Zenjirou considered that, Freya let out a sigh.

"Skaji, everyone, please wait in the next room for a while. I wish to speak to His Majesty."

She looked at Zenjirou for confirmation. He nodded and the other women walked out of the room, leaving the two of them alone. Silence fell once again.

Zenjirou had known Freya for a fairly long time, but it was still rare that they were utterly alone apart from each other. Usually, at least Skaji was present. Why would she go out of her way to send the warrior away as well?

Freya stood in the silence and rather pointedly moved to sit next to Zenjirou. She fixed her icy blue eyes on his as he tensed up and spoke.

“Your Majesty?”

“Yes, what is it?” he replied reflexively.

Freya then carried on, her tone meaningful. “That way of speaking. I spoke with Her Majesty at length before you returned and she informed me of it, but that is not how you would usually speak, is it?”

“Uh, well, no.”

In the back of his mind, he remembered his first night after marrying Aura. The situation and conversation were both similar, so he could imagine where the discussion was going. His assumptions were soon borne out.

“You and I are now husband and wife. It saddens me to hear you putting on a facade.”

“Um, well...” his awkward look wasn’t getting him out of the conversation, so he capitulated. “It is a little difficult. I only spoke so formally with Her Majesty for a brief while, so it was simple to fix. However, I have spoken with you like this for more than a year now.”

He could still understand that maintaining that formality after marriage was more unnatural, and continued.

“Would you be willing to take a longer-term view—ah, I mean do you mind waiting a bit? I’ll do my best, but I don’t think I will be able to change immediately.”

He purposefully didn’t moderate his speech.

A smile made its way onto Freya’s lips. “Very well. Let us get used to it bit by bit.”

“Of cour— I mean, yeah. Um, what about you? Is that how you normally talk?”

Freya considered things for a moment. “Well... I speak this way with father, mother, brother, and Skaji, so I suppose so. You *could* say that I speak more casually with Yngvi, but I think that is less ‘my normal way of speaking’ and

more how I spoke as a child.”

Spending quite literally one’s entire life with someone, even while still in the womb, would lead to a somewhat unique relationship.

“That’s fine, then. Aura told me this as well, but the inner palace is meant to be somewhere we can relax, so don’t force yourself into anything.”

“Thank you,” she laughed after a brief pause.

As Freya had said, she had indeed spoken with Aura multiple times while Zenjirou was absent. In one of the meetings, Aura had very clearly set her expectations out.

“While you may be marrying into my land, your also hail from your own. I, therefore, understand you will wish to guide matters to benefit your homeland. I will turn a blind eye to your personal sailing and laying the groundwork for your adventures. It is, of course, your right as a concubine to attempt to compete with me for my husband’s affection and also to attempt to surpass me in that regard. However, this inner palace is, first and foremost, a place for him to relax and be at ease. He detests people fighting around me. Therefore, you and your maids should be aware that if your conflict or competitiveness becomes aggressive and causes him heartache, that will be a large enough detriment that we would be prepared to consider ending our trade deal.”

Essentially, she was saying that while subterfuge and the like were fine, if it became known to Zenjirou and caused him mental pain, it could lead to divorce.

Of course, she would not mention any of that to him. She did as Aura had said, keeping her competitive nature and aspirations inside as she smiled.

“Speaking of how we talk, there is one thing that we absolutely must change,” Zenjirou said. “It is not just you either. You, Skaji, and your maids need to stop referring to me as ‘majesty.’ In this country, it is a title only afforded to those who have ruled.”

In Capua, even a queen consort would be referred to as “highness.” However, Zenjirou was in the tricky position of being the first ever husband of a reigning queen. Calling him “majesty” would be akin to treating him as king. Conversely, calling him “highness” would be putting him in an inferior position to Aura—a

woman—despite him being a man. There had therefore been people even in Capua who had called him “majesty,” but Zenjirou was now addressed—both formally and informally—as Sir Zenjirou most of the time. Many foreigners still called him using “majesty,” but Freya was now part of Capua, so she had to stop doing so.

“I see. Very well. I shall inform the others later. In which case, as I am no longer a princess of Uppasala but a concubine in Capua, you should stop calling me ‘princess’ or ‘highness,’” she smiled.

Zenjirou had been half expecting her statement from how the conversation had gone. “Right. Got it, Freya.”

He felt that hesitating would just cause problems further down the line, so he spoke slightly quicker than normal, getting the whole sentence out in a single breath.

“Of course, Sir Zenjirou,” she answered happily.

“Uh, you’re adding the ‘sir?’”

“I was not raised in a way I could address a superior male with simply their name, so I ask your forgiveness there,” she explained with a rueful look.

“Ah, okay.” He could understand that insisting on it would just be a burden for her. “I look forward to our partnership then, Freya.”

“Likewise, Sir Zenjirou.”

The silver-haired woman took his hand firmly as he stretched it out hesitantly before letting herself almost fall atop him and resting her head on his chest.

Silently, Zenjirou gently put his empty hand around her waist.



To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life 14*.

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Staff Reassignment

Zenjirou and Freya were married on the Northern Continent.

The maids of the inner palace were overjoyed at the news. Zenjirou was a good lord to them, and none of them would fail to celebrate such an auspicious event for him. However, that joy was only momentary. It was soon replaced with welling sorrow.

The reason was simple: their marriage meant that Freya was now officially part of the inner palace. It was roughly a month before she would arrive.

Of course, there had been preparations taking place before now, but there were things that could not be seen to until an official date was in place. Those things included the extra food, the final bedding checks, and orders for clothes. There was also the final cleaning of the annex that Freya would have. The inner palace as a whole was the site of a storm whipping through it to clean everything.

"I brought the bedding!"

"The bedroom is done, so come in."

"Are the rooms for the maids on duty here ready?"

"We don't know the exact numbers yet, so there are ten ready just in case."

"For certain there will be Lady Victoria. She is Princess Freya's confidante and bodyguard. She needs a room close to Her Highness. As close as isn't rude."

"Lady Victoria will be allowed her weapons even in the inner palace, so make sure there is somewhere to store them."

Under Amanda—and the other senior maids' instruction—the young maids rushed around working. Amanda let out a slight sigh as she watched the situation unfold with the younger women working in the blazing heat.

"While this is doable for now, it cannot continue into the long term," she

commented.

“Do you have an idea?”

The middle-aged woman frowned slightly as someone had replied to her musing to herself.

“Vanessa, can you afford to be here?”

The other woman—a well-built lady of middle age—smiled broadly.

“It will be fine. Her Majesty isn’t here for lunch. Feeding us is easy enough.”

The lack of manpower meant that Vanessa would be working on her own in the kitchen today. While she only had to provide food for the maids since neither of the masters of the palace was present, it was still quite the undertaking when alone.

“So, do you have any ideas to change things? I agree that we cannot continue like this.”

As the cook stood next to Amanda, her expression morphed into a deadly serious look. A concubine meant the amount of things the inner palace used would increase, which also meant that the number of people needed to maintain it would too.

Of course, Aura was no fool and had been hiring new maids for a while. There were limits to the increase in manpower, though. After all, this was the inner palace. It was where the royal family lived, where they were at their most relaxed and vulnerable. That meant that the personnel selection had to be extremely rigorous. You couldn’t simply instantly hire more because there weren’t enough.

“I will propose taking on maidservants for the cleaning, gardening, and bathroom positions.”

“What? Are you sure?” Vanessa asked in shock. Even she was shaken by the suggestion.

A maidservant was a woman who worked for the palace as a laborer. The equivalent position for a man was called a manservant. The inner palace already made use of both maid and manservants.

The most obvious example would be in the washing. The maids gathered the dirty laundry in the morning and then the maidservants would take it to wash it. Then the maids would take the laundry that had been washed the previous day back to the inner palace.

They also cleaned the vegetables and such and brought them into the inner palace. The manservants would do things like chop the firewood to be used in the baths.

However, Amanda's suggestion was fundamentally different. To wash—either laundry or food—or to cut firewood did not require them to enter the inner palace. However, tending to the rooms, baths, and garden would be impossible without doing so. Using maidservants for those jobs would mean them being within the inner palace.

"We will be extremely selective about who we pick. Additionally, anyone assigned to the inner palace will need to live within the royal palace until they are released from their duties. They will also only be allowed to enter at specific times to carry out those duties."

Amanda's plan seemed to be rather fleshed out since she smoothly outlined the precautions they would take. Unlike the maids—who were mostly nobles—maidservants were all commoners. However, there was a great degree of variance in what constituted a "commoner." Sometimes the first sons and daughters of lower nobility fell to being commoners, but others had been commoners for generations. The former would be selected in this case.

One of the problems with allowing the untrusted into the inner palace was the spread of information. To prevent some of that spread, any of the maidservants who took on the role would be required to stay within the royal palace for at least a year until they were no longer needed. Additionally, they would only be in the inner palace for a limited time to carry out their jobs and would there only gain the bare minimum of information. Of course, these inconveniences meant that their wages would be quite a bit more than a normal maidservant's, but it was far cheaper than increasing the number of full maids by the same amount.

Vanessa folded her bulky arms at the head maid's words to think before

eventually replying. “Hmm, then I suppose that should be fine?” she half asked. “Just make sure they stay away from the kitchen.”

The kitchen that Vanessa presided over was where the food and drink the queen and prince consort would consume was prepared. In one way it was the location that should be protected the most stringently, and Vanessa strove to uphold that.

“Of course,” Amanda answered with a serious nod.

The rumors about maidservants spread like wildfire through the inner palace, and the younger maids knew within the day. That night, once they were in their room and finished with work, the three problem maids—Faye, Dolores, and Letti—chattered about it under the glow of the oil lamp.

“Did you hear? Did you?” Faye exclaimed in a much louder voice than the hour warranted. “The cleaning and gardening groups are getting maidservants. Ah, we get some subordinates too now!”

The tall, long-haired woman opposite her sighed exasperatedly. “Keep it down, you idiot. Why are you even excited? It’s only temporary.”

The chill of Dolores’s voice did nothing to cool Faye’s enthusiasm.

“How could you even say that? We get subordinates! The first impression’s going to be the most important. I wonder what we should say. We’ll need to instruct them properly.”

She had acted similarly when they had gotten new maids as juniors, so it seemed that Faye just got excited when there were people she could see as being in a lower position than her. Perhaps part of it was due to her slight stature and childish features making people treat her as younger than she was. She perhaps just enjoyed being responsible for others.

“Still, it’s going to change what we do by a lot, isn’t it?” Letti asked easily. “I’m worried whether we’ll manage to do it properly.” Despite the relaxed tone of voice, her expression was rather solemn.

She was correct. Currently, many of the duties the maids undertook were manual labor that would usually not be the domain of nobility. It was simply the case because of the limited personnel in the inner palace. Adding the—albeit

limited—maidservants would enable the distribution of work to return to what it should be. In other words, they would deal with the physical things while the maids would be supervisors.

Dolores spoke up in surprise at her comment. “Huh? You’re not good with that stuff? I figured you’d be way more used to it than I was, with your family’s position.”

Between the three of them, Faye’s family was placed highest, with Letti’s following, and Dolores’s coming in last. Even Dolores was used to using subordinates for that kind of work in her own home. It seemed odd to her that Letti would be less so despite being from a higher-ranked family.

Letti’s usually lidded eyes closed slightly further in conflict at that. “Hmm, well that happens at home, but I’m not good at it personally.”

It wasn’t a matter of her upbringing, it would seem, but of her general disposition. She mainly felt that employing someone to do work and supervising them were different things.

“Really? I’d have thought that just telling someone else what to do would be easier than doing it yourself,” Dolores commented, still not wholly onboard.

If you were to speak well of her position, you could call it aristocratic. Conversely, you could also call it impudent.

“Right, we’re in the position where we give instruction,” Faye cheered. “That’s all we need to do.”

Dolores lowered her tone menacingly in response. “Strictly speaking, that’s not *all* we need to do. Just look at *our* superiors. If it comes to it, they work right alongside us. They’re also our supervisors. If the maidservants make a mistake, their supervisors will also be responsible.” Then she added, more quietly, “I don’t want to see you mess up and be let go.”

Faye smiled happily, but—for better or worse—the room was dark and Dolores didn’t notice.

“Either way, the inner palace is finally going to be home to someone other than Sir Zenjirou and Queen Aura,” Dolores murmured emotionally.

Faye nodded with a soft noise of agreement.

“It doesn’t feel real,” Letti added.

Strictly speaking, Carlos Zenkichi and Juana Yoshino also lived in the inner palace, but they didn’t feel like “people” in the same way. Zenjirou, Aura, and the maids. That made up the inner palace. It had only been a few years, but they had been rather comfortable. Freya was an external influence coming into their space.

Well, she was an official concubine, so she wasn’t an *outsider*, per se. The maids had simply found the inner palace comfortable enough that it felt like it. That was why everyone was concerned. Freya’s arrival would change the inner palace. After all, they had no real issues with how things were now, so any change was likely going to be a change for the worse.

The three problem maids were, naturally, the most relaxed out of all of them. Amanda had already told them they would be with Zenjirou. Saying that he liked their easy attitudes would be the nicer way to put it, but you could also take it as Amanda’s comments about not wanting another princess to assume that *they* were the standard of inner palace maids.

“Who’s going to be in the annex?” Dolores wondered.

“Well, they’re taking new maids on, so maybe mostly them?” Letti suggested.

“That might be for the best. It would be pretty tough for people used to the main building to get sent off to the annex.”

Since none of them would fall afoul of that, they were all too happy to discuss it like it had nothing to do with them. That was perhaps the main reason they’d remained relaxed.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Several days later, the announcement came out. The majority of new hires were—as Letti had guessed—from the new staff. There was one exception, though. One of the pre-existing maids was being reassigned: Nilda.

The longer lunch break during the blazing season was guaranteed no matter how busy they were. Working in the direct sun at that time of year was literally lethal, so it was perhaps to be expected. It was fundamentally to allow one to relax and recharge for work after dinner, but the young maids didn't take it so seriously. Even after the meal was finished, most of them stayed in their dining room to gossip. Amanda understood the importance of being able to unwind like that and kept her silence as long as it didn't interfere with their work.

That afternoon, the problem maids were sharing a table with Nilda as they talked. The other two maids she usually worked with—Louisa and Mirella—were present too.

Dolores was the first to comment after they heard the details directly from Nilda. "So Her Majesty asked you about it a few days ago, right? You accepted it rather than being *told*?"

Even as she spoke, Dolores honestly felt like it was a difficult question to answer. A question directly from the queen was—whatever the technicalities involved—essentially an order. Because of that understanding, most influential people would usually sound someone out through rumors first. There wasn't time on this occasion, so she had been directly asked.

Fortunately, the small girl known as Nilda wasn't aware of those usual customs but hadn't intended to refuse to begin with. She gave an innocent, open smile.

"Right. Apparently, Princess Freya asked for me personally. It was an honor, so I accepted it," she said cheerily, as if she really was happy about it.

"That reminds me, you worked for her before, right?" Faye said, clapping her hands together in remembrance.

Nilda's expression didn't falter. "I did. When my big sis...ah, I mean, when my older sister was getting married, she attended as Sir Zenjirou's partner and I got to know her."

They had met again in the royal palace as well. They were fairly close in age and had eventually gotten quite close. When Freya had heard she was working as a maid here, it was perhaps to be expected that she would ask for her to be assigned to her.

Capua was providing six maids for the annex. The five other than Nilda were new hires. Three among them were already married and of a similar age to Amanda and the other seniors. Still, with their positions both personal and familial, Nilda was practically the representative of the maids assigned to Freya. Nilda, however, was the only one not to have realized that fact as of now.

“Well, if you decided then that’s fine, but are you sure? You won’t be able to come in the living room and bedroom here, then,” Letti said.

The living room was home to the fridge and fan, while the bedroom had the air conditioner. While working for Zenjirou, the maids benefited from them as well. Indeed, the iced fruit juice they were drinking right now was part of that. None of them wanted to lose the luxuries of the electrical appliances. That was shared to a greater or lesser extent among all of them.

Nilda’s adorable smile didn’t falter as she gave a surprising answer. “That’s a bit of a shame. Still, I can borrow the game console and bring it back for charging, so I might be able to take breaks in there.”

“You’re planning on taking that?” asked Dolores in shock. The other maids shared her expression.

Nilda nodded in agreement regardless of her senior and coworkers’ expressions. “I am. Sir Zenjirou gave me permission. Still, he said that others play with it, so I had to keep to the schedule. Oh! All of you play with it as well, right?”

While Zenjirou was flitting back and forth between the two countries, it seemed that Nilda had managed to get a moment of his time to ask directly about it. Faye, Dolores, and Letti exchanged glances at that and said no more. They remembered they were in no real position to comment. After all, they were habitual offenders when it came to taking the console to play with and had pulled her down that path.

Faye spoke quickly, trying to prevent the conversation from heading somewhere bad for them. “That means your team is getting split up, though. Louisa, Mirella, are both of you okay with that?”

The two roommates spoke in turn.

“There will be no problem. My duties remain unchanged,” Louisa said in her usual crisp tone.

“I might move there as well, but I’m remaining here for the time being,” Mirella said softly.

There were some implications to that statement. She had received word from her adoptive father, Count Márquez. Apparently, Freya’s twin brother had expressed interest in a Capuan concubine. It was all entirely unofficial at this point, but Aura seemed to be accepting of it.

Mirella was the count’s niece and his daughter by adoption, so she fulfilled the conditions of being a young unwed noble of high standing. If she was aiming for such a position, then being a maid for his sister would be a good choice for the future.

However, it was all hypothetical at this point, and doing so would lead to the rest of her life being abroad. Neither she nor her father would be bringing it up immediately.

If I go, then practically the only way back will be Sir Zenjirou. Which means I need to get closer to him.

The maid wanted to get closer to her master, and the three women in front of her were the perfect examples of how to do it. The problem was that Mirella was the model of a noble girl, so learning from the three problem maids would be like a dolphin trying to imitate a pig.

“The annex is really close, so I look forward to still working with you.” Nilda grinned, completely unaware of her colleague’s calculations.

“Likewise, Nilda,” the other replied, doing her best to match the smile of the girl everyone seemed to like.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

About ten days had passed since then, and the first of those related to Freya had arrived. She was a warrior taller than any woman they’d ever seen before.

“My name is Victoria Kronkvist. I have also been given the name Skaji and would like you to call me by that name,” the tall warrior—Skaji—said in greeting. She was wearing a blue military uniform and had a sword hanging from her waist. There was an off-white spear in her right hand.

The maids were half intrigued and half afraid of the position of “female warrior,” something that didn’t exist in Capua.

Interest and fear aside, the maids here would not show any of that openly. However, Skaji had sharp eyes and they could not fool her.

“Lady Skaji is also Lady Freya’s protection, so she is allowed her weapons within the inner palace,” Amanda explained. “Keep your manners in mind, everyone.”

No one in such a position had been in the inner palace before, so the young maids were unsure how to treat her. They were not coworkers, but she was also not a superior of theirs. Of course, she was not their liege either, so how were they supposed to act with her?

Skaji seemed to notice the general mood and smiled as softly as she could. “I—and Lady Freya when she arrives—are foreigners here. We intend to learn and follow the customs of this country, but I am certain there will be places we fall short. If any of you notice such a thing, I would appreciate you pointing it out. We will do our best to make the change.”

The bow she offered was—as if to underscore the point—the same one that a knight of Capua would use. Her expression and tone did more than her words to relax the maids.

Amanda was not going to let the chance pass and spoke up. “Lady Skaji, I am sure you are aware, but I will introduce you regardless. This is Nilda, she will be one of Lady Freya’s maids.”

“It is good to see you again, Lady Skaji,” Nilda replied, nerves clear in her dark eyes.

“It has been a while, Nilda. You were a great help,” she said calmly.

Amanda then introduced the other three. “Nilda is also relatively new, so I have some unease about having her introduce you to the inner palace.

Therefore, these three will be accompanying you. Introduce yourselves."

"I'm Faye."

"Dolores. Thank you again for your help on the *Glasir's Leaf*."

"Letti."

"It is good to meet you both. Dolores worked extremely hard on the trip. I look forward to working with you all," Skaji replied politely.

Skaji, Nilda, and the three problem maids were walking through the gardens shortly thereafter. The combination of Skaji's soft demeanor, Nilda's friendliness, and the general brazenness of the other three had them speaking freely in moments.

"I've never met someone taller than Dolores before," Faye commented.

"That's rude," Dolores scolded her.

Skaji laughed openly. "I do not mind. Being large is a compliment for a warrior. The people of our country are generally taller than those of Capua, but even I have never seen another woman taller than me," she said, straightening proudly.

"They are?" Letti asked. "Then are people as tall as Dolores common?"

Skaji inspected Dolores for a moment before shaking her head. "No, she would be counted as tall even there. The general height of a woman in Uppasala would be around Her Majesty's height."

Faye let out an impressed noise.

"The people in the palace were around that tall," Dolores commented.

"That's tall," Letti remarked.

Aura was around a hundred and seventy centimeters. She was tall by the standards of Capua. Dolores—being a hundred and eighty—was an exception. Skaji, incidentally, was over a hundred and eighty-five. Unlike Dolores's slender frame, her muscled frame made her feel even taller.

It was around that point that they reached the annex.

“This will be Lady Freya’s room,” Nilda commented. “As you can see, the mist magic tool is set up in here, so please take care with anything that cannot withstand a higher humidity.”

The room they were in was essentially equivalent to the living room in the main building. It was set up for Freya to spend her day-to-day life there. The furniture was, of course, Capuan in make. If it absolutely had to be from Uppasala, then they would have to get Zenjirou to teleport it back. A chair would be one thing, but a sofa or bed would need the carpet to come along. Otherwise, the craftsmen on the *Glasir’s Leaf* would have to make it here.

Skaji inspected the room with an intense look before nodding briefly. “It is fine. I have no problems at present and you have my thanks for your efforts.”

Nilda smiled in relief.

“Still,” Skaji continued. “I must say these magic tools are wonderful. This room is like a whole other world.”

While she hadn’t shown it on her face, she had been struck dumb by the heat of the blazing season. Although her tone was placid, you could feel the truth of her words.

“There is another similar tool in the next room.”

“I would like to see that as well.”

“Of course. This way.”

Nilda had prepared properly ahead of time. There was no hesitation in her responses. However, her short stature and young voice made it sound like a child trying her best to be helpful, so it inevitably ended up being adorable.

The bedroom and living room were separated by a single door, like in the main building. As Nilda had explained, there was another mist generator set up there. The room was cooler due to it, but more humid as well. The sheets, and indeed the other bedding, would need to be replaced daily. Of course, without them, the bed’s occupant sweating through the night would probably lead to the same result.

“Hmm. So Lady Freya’s room and my own are not connected, are they?”

“No,” Nilda replied shortly to the guard’s question.

Skaji would prefer otherwise, but that would not happen in the inner palace. Freya’s bedroom was not only hers. Annex or not, this was part of the inner palace, so Zenjirou was favored over Freya. Skaji understood that, of course, so she said nothing more of it. Instead, her expression turned awkward as she spoke.

“So, Nilda, I apologize for asking, but are there only two of these cooling tools?”

“There are, yes.”

The warrior’s expression became conflicted at that. “I see. Would it be possible to acquire another two, or preferably three?”

Only the Sharou family of the Twin Kingdoms could make magic tools, so they were exceedingly valuable. They commanded such a value that merely being able to pay was not necessarily enough to obtain one.

Nilda said as much, apologetically. Skaji had a reason to not give up so easily, though.

“I see. If it is impossible, then that will be the end of it, but if money is the only concern, then I would like to arrange it even if it is a significant sum. There will be three maids from our country accompanying Lady Freya. While I may be able to cope, they will not be able to deal with the heat of this country in the blazing season.”

If anything, Freya would be more resilient considering her adventures on the *Glasir’s Leaf*. Dolores had been to Uppasala, so she was able to understand all too well.

“Right, our heat would essentially be torture to someone that grew up there.”

Dolores had known nothing but Capua’s temperatures, so she had called the spring in Uppasala “cold” and even the summer days and nights had felt chilly to her. The three maids being sent with Freya would, naturally, be nobility and probably have at least courtesy titles in their homeland. They would never be able to live normally if they were suddenly thrust into temperatures over forty degrees in the day and over thirty-five even at night.

“Uh, what do I do?” Nilda asked, turning to the three seniors behind her as she realized it was more than she could deal with.

Dolores replied to her. “We’ll put in a request right away. With it being a magic tool, the request will need to go through either Queen Aura or Sir Zenjirou rather than Head Maid Amanda. I’ll explain to them, but if you get a chance, Lady Skaji, I think it would be worthwhile for you to explain personally as well.”

“Very well. Thank you,” Skaji replied firmly.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

Once another ten days had passed, there were far more people in the inner palace. There were the five new maids from Capua who would be working in the annex. While they might be “new,” three of them were veterans like Amanda, and the other two had acted as maids at high-nobles’ estates in the past.

They would not skimp on staff for a foreign princess. Said princess was bringing maids from her homeland as well, so there was the risk of the foreign maids running the annex if they were not careful. Due to that, the veterans were skilled enough to take Amanda’s place if need be.

Additionally, the three maids from Uppasala had also arrived. One of them was also a veteran. She was probably the leader of the maids from Uppasala. She was Svean, so she had cream-colored hair, gray eyes, and pale skin. While they shouldn’t look alike in any way, her unusual height and bearing made her oddly similar to Amanda. She was imposing enough that the worries of the annex falling under foreign control seemed completely founded.

“My name is Ragnhild,” she said. “I look forward to working with you.”

The maids all shuddered when she spoke, as if Amanda was addressing them. Amusingly enough, the maids from Uppasala seemed to feel the same. When they had met Amanda, they had jolted when she addressed them. In that way, it seemed rather likely the younger maids from both nations would get along well.

That night, after returning to their room, the three problem maids discussed their new colleagues from the north.

“Lady Skaji was right,” Faye commented in the dark, swinging her legs in the air. “They’re all tall. They didn’t select them specially like they did when we were hired, did they?”

The maids had initially been chosen for their similarities to Aura, with the expectation that Zenjirou might make a move on them. In other words, they had chosen women who were tall, well-endowed, or both.

Indeed, among the three of them, Dolores was tall and Letti was well-endowed. Faye was an exception with her slight stature in both respects.

Dolores shook her head in answer. “I doubt it. The younger two aside, Lady Ragnhild is tall as well. They wouldn’t expect something like that of her.”

“You added ‘lady’ there, Dolores. She’s a normal maid, so she’s actually on the same level as us,” Letti pointed out.

Dolores jumped slightly. “I’ll make sure to just use her name while we’re working,” she said awkwardly.

Faye poked fun at her. “What are you playing at,” she laughed. “Are you an idiot? Why would you call Lady Ragnhild ‘lady?’”

“What, like you just did?” Dolores asked, glaring.

Faye hurriedly covered her mouth.

“Ack! W-Well...I can’t help it.”

“Then don’t make fun of me.”

“Sorry.”

While they were called “the problem maids” in the inner palace, all three of them were nobles of good upbringing. They all instinctively paid strict-looking nobles like Ragnhild proper respect in their speech.

“Nilda said that even Lady Ragnhild was flagging after work in the morning. The other two looked awful.” Although Letti had been the first to point it out, even she used the honorific.

“Lady Skaji was right, the blazing season is a real struggle for people from the Northern Continent.”

“I’m glad the magic tools were done in time.”

“Yeah, they’re going to spend most of their breaks in their room for now.”

The request from Skaji was taken seriously enough that the extras were finished in record time. Three of them, in fact. They were placed in Skaji’s room, Ragnhild’s room, and the maids’ room. That was in addition to the two in Freya’s room and the living room.

Of course, the Twin Kingdoms would not have been able to provide them so quickly. The three extras had been made by Francesco. They had been made so quickly due to the limited number of marbles. It was fortunate indeed for the new maids.

“That’s so nice, though,” Faye mused enviously. “They get their room cooled as well, so they have a cool space even now, not just in the day.”

It was hardly a surprise she would be jealous. The nights in the blazing season were sweltering almost without exception. Even now it was no exception. While she and the other two were from Capua by birth and therefore used to it, that didn’t mean they enjoyed it.

Thinking of the new maids—and *only* the new maids—getting to sleep in the cool would obviously make them jealous.

“Well, it’s not like there’s much choice,” Letti added. “It’s life-and-death for them.”

“I know that,” she protested. While Faye understood that, she still wasn’t happy about it.

“Well, we have to welcome them properly. You’ve heard the rumors as well, right? The prince in Uppasala wants to take a concubine from us as well. I don’t know who’s going to go, but they’ll be taking as many maids as Lady Freya brought but this time from us. We need to be considerate of Lady Ragnhild and the other two, so that whoever goes from us is treated right as well,” Dolores said, the only one of them who had experienced the Northern Continent.

Uppasala had a season called “winter,” and even a tub of water inside would be frozen by morning. It was honestly unimaginable for a Capuan. Without a lot of help from the Uppasalans, she didn’t think a Capuan would survive the winter in Uppasala.

“A prince from the north, hmm? I wonder who it’ll be?” Faye wondered.

“It sounds nice, but it’s scary too,” Letti said. “I’m not brave enough.”

“Brave or not, you’re not even planning on leaving the inner palace, are you?” Dolores retorted. “Lady Vanessa is training you up as her replacement.”

Letti giggled. Even the unconfirmed rumors—no, especially unconfirmed rumors—made discussing romance and marriage all the more exciting. Faye, Dolores, and Letti gossiped in the dim light of the oil lamp.

“I wouldn’t want to get married and spend the rest of my life there, but I’m interested in the Northern Continent,” Faye said. “That lace was really cute.”

As she spoke, she reached out for the hairpiece by her pillow. Dolores had given her the lace item as a souvenir and it was her favorite accessory at the moment.

“Right? That maple syrup was delicious as well. It wasn’t as sweet as sugar, but it had a sort of smooth taste. It could be fun to make into snacks,” Letti smiled, remembering the syrup Dolores had bought her.

“Oh, well you might get the chance,” Dolores suggested. “Capua already has an embassy in Uppasala, so we can teleport there. It would have to be when Sir Zenjirou is staying there like now, but Lady Ines said we’d send some maids from the inner palace if that happened.”

“Really?!” Faye exclaimed.

“Really, Dolores?!” added Letti.

Dolores sighed at how loud they were despite the late hour before replying.

“Really. Well, there’s no guarantee you’ll be chosen, though, so you might be getting your hopes up for nothing.”

Dolores didn’t breathe a word of the fact that she’d recommended the two of them to Ines to be mean.