
Illustrator:
Jyuu
Ayakura
Author:
Tsunehiko
Watanabe
15
THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE


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THE CORPSE, THE MERCENARY, AND THE QUEEN.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

15

On the Northern Continent, after ignoring repeated warnings from the **church** and continuing to denounce it while promoting his own version of **their teachings,** Priest Yan was finally **captured.**
The **mercenary Yan** moved to save him but was too late, and the priest was burned at the stake. Then, while the one-eyed mercenary was stoking the flames of vengeance, a letter arrived, informing him that **if he retrieved the remnants of the corpse, it could be restored to a pristine state.**
To those of the dragon faith, fire symbolizes punishment from the dragons, so restoring the corpse holds significant meaning within their religion.
Yan trusted the missive, and after arriving at the appointed meeting place, he found **Queen Aura** waiting for him.
She told him, **"If you bring me the corpse, I will restore it."**
The mercenary took her at her word and retrieved the corpse.
As promised, Aura cast the spell to **reverse time** on it, yet what resulted was not a mere restoration of the body, but something completely unexpected.





THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

15

"So we meet them in kind."

Zenjirou's words were filled with a heavy determination she had never heard from him before...



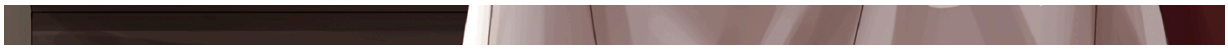
Illustrator:
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"For the love of..."
"I apologize, but I don't seem to recall."
The silver-haired princess didn't react in the slightest. All Aura was accomplishing was distressing the tall warrior—Skaji—behind her.
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The head maid, Amanda, was standing in front of the window with picture-perfect posture as she addressed the assembled younger maids.
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"I am the representative of this town, the current Röc."
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Aura let out a cry of shock at the mercenary's words.
"What?! Impossible!"
"There's... a pulse!"
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Prologue — Those Left Behind

The blazing season had now passed, and it was an afternoon in the active season. Aura was taking her lunch in her bedroom within the inner palace, having received a request for her time over lunch—specifically within the inner palace, at that.

There were only two people who could ask for such a meeting both alone with the queen *and* in the inner palace. Zenjirou was one of them, but he wouldn't need to put in an official request for such a thing. In fact, he wasn't even currently in the country due to his work.

That narrowed down the candidates to only one. Seated opposite Aura at a small table with a smile was Zenjirou's other wife.

"Freya," Aura said.

"Yes? What is it, Your Majesty?" The silver-haired princess's voice was completely relaxed as she answered her red-haired counterpart.

Aura's eyes—brown bordering on red—narrowed. "This discussion is at your request, is it not? What did you wish to speak of?"

The forceful tone of her voice made even Skaji want to shrink into herself. But the princess opposite her didn't even bat an eyelash, simply letting the cool breeze of the air conditioning blow over her.

"What did I... Hmm...I apologize, but I can't seem to recall. Still, we have plenty of time, so I'm sure I'll remember eventually."

Aura glared flatly at her, but Freya still didn't react, not even to straighten from her lounging position. Her request for a meeting hadn't been for any important topic, but rather to be in this air-conditioned room of the main building where such topics were discussed. Although it was the active season now, seasonal distinctions were based on the perspectives of natives of the Southern Continent. For Freya, who was born in the northernmost region of the Northern Continent, the regularly thirty-plus-degree temperatures had left her longing for cooler air.

Aura realized that continuing to glare would do nothing to chastise the silver-haired woman in front of her and would instead only discomfit the tall warrior standing on the sidelines. With a small shrug to herself, she stopped brandishing her glare like a weapon.

"For the love of... Fine. Actions painting a closeness between the two of us will aid our husband."

There was a thread of logic to her words. Frequent meetings like this between them would be demonstrative of a good relationship. And an impression of general positivity to their relationship would be a boon to both Zenjirou and the women present.

Of course, there would likely be people who took less sanguine views of the situation, claiming that Aura was haranguing Freya or that Freya was looking for leverage over the queen. Still, the majority should see it positively. It ought to at least be better than if they *didn't* meet, or if they met very infrequently.

The two of them *did* have a good relationship, in fact. If one considered they were wife and concubine sharing the same man, one could even say that their relationship was exceptionally good.

"Quite right. Therefore, I will do all that I can to demonstrate a good relationship with you like this."

There was a beat as Aura gave Freya an unimpressed look and a reluctant quirk of her lips. "My thanks for your cooperation. Perhaps you would also like to join me for lunch tomorrow? In the main palace, of course."

Freya played the fool, letting her gaze drift away from Aura. "Ah, I'm afraid not. I do believe I have plans tomorrow."

"Oh? What plans would those be?"

"I cannot give any details. However, I will be unable to set foot in the main palace. Oh! But if you change your plans and will be eating here, then I will be able to join you, so please inform me should that happen."

Aura let out a sigh. "You grow more brazen by the day."

Despite that, she didn't offer a rebuke. After all, she knew that Freya understood when such behavior was appropriate. She only acted like this with Aura, and only in private settings. In an official capacity, she was more reserved and sensible. Moreover, when she

was alone with Zenjirou, she showed an admirable amount of restraint.

Freya knew who could be counted upon to indulge her, who would be able to indulge her, *and* who would indulge her but shouldn't. In that respect, Aura was very easy for the princess to deal with. If Freya kept this kind of behavior limited to private settings, Aura would scold her for anything *too* rude but wouldn't do more than simply turn down her cheeky requests, not getting emotionally involved. That meant that she could enjoy conversations like this without any real risk.

This was not the case with Zenjirou, though. He would do all he could to accommodate her and take her pleas as they were spoken. It meant that Freya couldn't really make joking requests or simply ask for something with the knowledge that it would be refused. It was somewhat ironic that she had a familial—at least what she saw as familial—relationship with her sister-wife before her husband, but it was perhaps fortunate considering the broader picture.

Royal and noble relations with a single husband and multiple wives had vastly different levels of harmony within the household. The difference was much more strongly linked with the relationships between the wives than those between the husband and wives. Additionally, in the case of the Capuan royal family, Zenjirou was nothing more than a prince consort, not the core of the family. That role fell to Aura, the queen.

Still, while that might not have been the case from the royal perspective, Zenjirou remained the center of the *household*.

"I wonder what Sir Zenjirou is doing," Freya mused after a moment.

"If things went according to plan, he should be reaching Utgard soon."

Conversation between the two of them always cycled back to Zenjirou, especially since right now, he was setting foot on completely unknown ground. The heady mix of anticipation, concern, and—in Freya's case, at least—envy was uncontainable. She let out a gusty sigh.

"I wanted to go."

"Have you not dropped that yet?" Aura replied in exasperation at the longing words and equally longing emotions behind them.

"I know that saying it won't change anything, but at least let me vent."

"It matters little in the inner palace, but refrain when you are outside," Aura told her before following the order up with a question. "Did you want to go that much?"

She couldn't quite understand the feeling. She had been on many international excursions to make her teleportation powers more useful. The war had also required several long campaigns, both domestic and international. All of it had merely been part of her duty, though. She hadn't felt a shred of pleasure in traveling.

Of course, in a more peaceful era, she would enjoy a honeymoon like Zenjirou had described, but she truly couldn't understand the attraction of stepping out into the unknown on official business.

"I did," Freya replied honestly.

Aura offered her some consolation. "If you absolutely *must* go, there are likely to be chances in the future. Now that he has been once, he can come and go via teleportation. Of course, that does assume we receive permission to do so."

Zenjirou had naturally taken his camera with him to Utgard. He could take pictures that would allow him to teleport there at will. However, Aura was correct that it would require permission from Utgard. It wasn't a matter of law and ethics, but such excursions simply would not be possible without their approval.

Casting magic required intense concentration. Because of that, trying to teleport to somewhere you were aware was forbidden would result in part of your mind focusing on that fact. Someone of Zenjirou's skill and focus would almost certainly be unable to successfully cast the spell, although Aura could manage it.

Freya shook her short silver-blue hair at that. "That wasn't what I meant, Your Majesty. I want to step out into the unknown with my own feet, see it with my own eyes. Teleportation is extremely convenient, but it spoils the charm a little."

"Safety ought to be more important than charm. Are you saying you would not be interested in visiting Utgard via teleportation?"

"I didn't say *that*. If I get the chance, I shall grab it with both hands," she responded with a giggle, puffing up her chest.

"Somehow, every time I speak with you, I feel less like you are another wife of my husband and more like a handful of a daughter." While her tone was exasperated and the phrasing was little better, her expression gave the impression of feeling even closer to the other woman than before.

"Oh? That means I should be useful as a rehearsal for Lady Juana."

"Juana will most *certainly* not be as much of a disaster as you."

Despite the queen's rather pitiful estimation of her, Freya couldn't really refute it. "As it happens, my mother used a combination of both affection and strict discipline to raise me into the fine example of a princess you see before you."

However firmly a parent brought up their children, there was no guarantee they would turn out how they wanted. Aura scowled at Freya as she puffed herself up even more.

"I could have done without hearing that." The reason Aura left it at a simple scowl and a single comment was because she was rather similar to Freya in some ways. She had combat abilities similar to an average knight and had led the army herself, so she was far from a "normal" woman of the royal family.

If she hadn't taken the throne as queen, she likely would have found it even harder than Freya to find a husband. Then again, in Aura's case, part of that was due to her foster parents—the Laras—being rather lenient, so it was hard to say it was merely her nature.

Despite all that, she had been blessed with a loving marriage that was practically unheard of for a royal, in addition to two children. She had fulfilled her duties as the sole survivor of the family, while at the same time relishing the pleasure of the situation. All of that was due to her beloved husband.

"I want to see him again soon," Freya remarked.

The comment perhaps came from all her thoughts about him and the situation, and Aura simply responded with an instinctive nod and agreement.

Chapter 1 — Utgard

Meanwhile, Zenjirou was en route to Utgard with Freya's twin, Yngvi, the crown prince of Uppasala. Zenjirou had first teleported from Capua to Uppasala. That same day had been host to a simple, unofficial welcoming ceremony. He had then spent the night in their palace before they departed via horse-drawn carriage to the northernmost edge of the capital. There, they had switched modes of transportation to the "vehicle" that Utgard had provided.

Said vehicle was effectively a huge sleigh. Two reindeer—or at least that was the closest creature Zenjirou could think of—were pulling it. Of course, they were significantly larger than the heavy horses that had brought them this far, so he wasn't entirely sure whether they could really be called reindeer.

The sleigh itself was not what you would normally picture when hearing the word. Atop it was effectively a huge box, just as big as the enclosed carriage they had arrived in.

It was early fall. Although Uppasala was in the far north of the Northern Continent, there had still been no snowfall near the city itself. That begged the question of how the sleigh was moving, and the answer was that it was gliding through the air itself. The two reindeer ran through the sky rather than on the land, and the sleigh slid along silently behind them.

The interior of the sleigh's coach was just as strange. The walls, floor, and ceiling were neither metallic nor stone, but were made of a bright, gray material that was almost white. The main things inside were two sofas facing each other and a square obelisk between them. The block came to about hip height and had a slanted top that was glowing faintly.

The flat face was home to magic letters. It started off by saying, "Doors closing," and was followed by "Please be seated" and finally "Departing." The doors did indeed close on their own, and shortly

after the two of them had sat down, the sleigh had silently started to move.

A few moments after the movement began, they felt a slight force pushing towards the back of the sleigh, but it wasn't long before it stopped. There were no windows in the floor, ceiling, or four walls, so it was impossible to tell for sure, but it felt like gravity was pulling it straight down. Incidentally, there were magic lights at the front and rear of the interior, so it was plenty bright enough inside.

The panel then changed to say, "You may move about the cabin." Apparently, they were allowed to leave their seats now. He wasn't intending to stand up, but Zenjirou felt the strength fall from his body as he let out a sigh of relief. With his nerves soothed, he finally had the wherewithal to pay attention to his fellow passenger. His younger brother-in-law's eyes were sparkling in excitement.

"What in the world is all this?!" he asked, practically leaping from his seat.

Hurriedly, Zenjirou gave him a warning. "Yngvi, you shouldn't rush around too much. It might say we can move around, but we *are* flying through the air."

There was a long pause. "Huh? Through...the air?"

Although Zenjirou had offered the warning like it was obvious, Yngvi seemed to barely understand what he'd said. It made some sense once Zenjirou considered it. The sleigh had definitely been on the ground, pulled by two reindeer when they boarded. After that, the door had closed and they had started to move. The only light was from the magic, with no windows, so it was impossible to see outside.

The diagonal pull had been enough for Zenjirou to realize they were flying, but that was only because he'd flown on planes on several occasions. Then again, seeing a sleigh pulled by reindeer was enough to make him imagine that it flew to begin with.

Meanwhile, Yngvi had never flown before. That was hardly surprising since Uppasala didn't have any flying horses and the younger prince couldn't use flight magic. All this meant that he was unable to conceive of the sleigh itself gliding through the air,

especially since horizontal flight at a constant velocity meant that there was no inertia.

"We're flying? Really? Um, is it safe?" He wasn't entirely convinced but knew what Zenjirou was claiming now, and he looked uneasily at his feet.

"Well, they invited us and provided the transportation. It shouldn't be particularly dangerous," Zenjirou answered, tilting his head uncertainly. It was the best he could do to reassure the younger man.

"It makes sense when you put it like that. Are you sure, though? I know you aren't the type to make such jokes, but it's still hard to believe."

Zenjirou mulled over the younger man's honest reaction for a while. "Well, there's no proof, so it makes sense you'd have trouble believing it. What to do, then?" He realized there was only one thing that could be a clue within the sleigh. "Is this just a display?" he asked himself, carefully getting up and looking at the glowing panel.

In large characters—Japanese, as far as Zenjirou could see—the panel read "underway." As he looked even closer, he saw smaller words that said "limited controls."

"Oh, that might be it," he muttered, guessing at the significance. He hesitated to touch it, though. After all, controlling a magic tool he'd never seen before while it carried them through the air was unnerving.

"What is it?" Yngvi asked. His face—so similar to Freya's—looked somewhat bemused as he inched over to Zenjirou's side.

"Right. Could you take a look at this?" Zenjirou asked him. "Not the big thing in the middle, but the smaller words in the top left."

Because they were written in magic writing, Yngvi would be able to read them as well.

"Not 'underway' so... Oh, this. 'Limited controls.' Controls?" The word made the prince lift an eyebrow. "We can control this?" he asked, curiosity and desire mixed into his smile.

"Probably. Though they are supposed to be restricted."

Zenjirou was assuming that it was similar to what passengers on planes could do, like raising and lowering the blinds on the windows,

or how someone on the bullet trains could put the backrest down.

Utgard had provided the vehicle, so he thought it unlikely either of them would be able to use the internal controls to change the sleigh's altitude, speed, or especially heading. If they could, there was a risk they might simply abscond with it. That wouldn't be good for anyone involved—Utgard would lose their sleigh and the two passengers would potentially lose their lives by making a mistake while attempting to pilot it.

Zenjirou chose his words carefully so that Yngvi would be able to come to the same understanding as he explained.

"I see," the younger prince answered when Zenjirou had finished. "I'd like to try it, then. What do we do?"

The shock had completely vanished, replaced with boldness. Zenjirou had more or less expected that but was still somewhat surprised.

"You want to try the controls? It should be fine, but there is still the risk."

He was somewhat concerned about Yngvi, less so about himself. He had the magic tool imbued with teleportation, after all. If the worst came to pass, he could activate it and save himself. Logically, though, limited controls shouldn't put them at any real risk, which was the main reason for his lack of concern.

"I want to try."

Due to his reasoning, Zenjirou was able to keep his calm at the eager response. "Then let's do it. If it seems dangerous, we'll stop immediately."

With that, he carefully reached out with his right hand. At the same time, his left found its way to the magic tool hidden at his chest, pressing into it over his clothes. From what he recalled, the king of Uppasala had used his finger to manipulate the green gem to turn it into an invitation.

Zenjirou's theory was proved correct. The moment his index finger brushed "limited controls," the panel shifted.

"Oh!" Yngvi exclaimed in surprise. Still, the panel hadn't changed all that much. The word "underway" had simply gotten smaller and shifted to the top right, while the other text had shifted down into

the center. A moment later, more text appeared beneath it, forming a list.

Light adjustment.

Seating adjustment.

Food and drink.

Amenities.

Wall transparency.

It seemed that Zenjirou's assumptions were correct. All the controls could change were things related to the interior. They should be able to adjust them without concern.

He started off by pressing a finger to the lighting adjustment text. Underneath it appeared two more words: "bright" and "dim." He pressed the former and the lights on the ceiling got brighter. He pressed the latter and they dimmed. Then, he kept his finger on the "bright" text and the lights shone more and more.

With every change in light level, Yngvi let out another excited gasp. Zenjirou moved on to the seating adjustment, and another list appeared beneath it.

Two lengthways.

One lengthways.

Two widthways.

One widthways.

Sleeping.

The "two widthways" was the only one illuminated, so that probably showed its current setting. He was slightly uneasy about what might happen to the two of them when the seats moved, so he left them alone. The next two options were similar. He wasn't particularly thirsty, nor was he desperate to answer the call of nature. The latter of the two particularly would be necessary for a longer flight, but there was no need to investigate immediately.

The last option was the issue. "Wall transparency." Just reading the words made him picture the walls becoming see-through. As things currently stood, it was like being on a plane or train with the blinds down, and this would be the equivalent of raising them.

He was still concerned about what it *could* mean, though. There was a possibility that it meant opening up the wall itself rather than

the “blinds.” It depended on speed and altitude, but opening a window while flying would (presumably) be suicide.

Still, he didn’t hesitate much before pressing the text due to how the other two controls had acted. Neither had made any immediate changes just from pressing the headings. Instead, they had prompted more text to appear underneath. With that in mind, the wall transparency should act the same, or so he assumed. Pressing it, he found that to be the case. Underneath it appeared another sequence of words.

Front.

Rear.

Right.

Left.

Floor.

Ceiling.

The six options were easy to understand; they would determine what became see-through. The question was which to pick.

The ceiling and floor were immediately rejected. All they would be able to see through the roof was the sky, so it wouldn’t give them any extra information. In terms of information, the floor would be the best option, but it was just too scary. Even if his belief that the material would become transparent—like strong glass—was true, it would feel like there was no floor. That wasn’t an option. Zenjirou would never be able to get along with someone who made a bridge out of tempered glass.

After thinking it over, he softly pressed “front.” He didn’t expect what happened next, though. Another two options appeared beneath it in even smaller text: “full” and “partial.” He eventually selected the latter, tapping it with a shaking finger.

Immediately, part of the front wall of the sleigh turned into a glass-like material.

“Wow!!!” Yngvi cried in innocent joy.

Zenjirou couldn’t blame him. The view waiting for them out of the new window was exactly what he had expected. The first thing they could see was the pair of reindeer hauling the sleigh. Looking closely, he could tell that they had something that looked like red

leather on both their heads and legs, which were freely trampling through the air.

There was no doubt about it—the sleigh was flying.



Fortunately, his assumption that the wall would become transparent rather than open up was borne out, so there was no wind invading the cabin. Just in case, he ran his finger over the wall and the transparent section, and was greeted by a cold and hard sensation that didn't change in any way as his finger moved across. It was likely some form of magic that simply removed the color to allow light through.

The transparent section looked—in Zenjirou's estimation, at least—to be around one meter high and one point five meters wide. He considered switching to "full" transparency for a moment, but even understanding what was happening wasn't enough to quell the sense of unease it would cause.

He ended up leaving it set as it was and instead tiptoed over to look through the window. He could see land far out in the distance. The colors were a roughly equal mix of brown and white, with splashes of green. The brown was plain rock, while the white was snow, and the green was probably plants.

"There's already that much snow?" he asked. He had frequently visited the continent, but the majority of his time had been spent in the palace, so he didn't know much about the uninhabited regions. The season was supposed to be early fall, and while Uppasala was far enough north that it felt cold, he hadn't yet seen any deep snow.

Behind him, Yngvi let out a shocked reply. "The first snows have already arrived in the mountains, and some regions have snow year-round, so that itself isn't particularly surprising. The time and angle of the sun, though... Are these the Misted Mountains, Pokafatch?"

"Misted Mountains?" Zenjirou asked.

The range beneath them was covered in uneven snow and certainly didn't seem to have any mist. Were they often misty but currently clear?

Yngvi guessed at what he was thinking and explained excitedly, "They usually live up to their name. The summits are obvious, but the mist normally covers the land straight to the foot of the mountain. People say climbing it is suicide. Utgard is located within the mountain range, so the general assumption is that the mist is artificial in some way."

Being located in the middle of the mountains, with no path, covered in deep fog seemed to be the main reason for it being unreachable without an invitation.

"I see," Zenjirou said. "So the reason we aren't seeing it could be that we've been invited and they temporarily stopped it?"

"It's possible, but..." Some of the excitement had faded from the younger man's voice. Zenjirou noticed and his companion looked at him meaningfully.

"Hm? What is it?"

"You seem shockingly at home with this. It's all alien to me."

"Ah..."

His statement made Zenjirou understand his carelessness. People who grew up in Japan but weren't familiar with touch panels would be in the minority. In this world, however, they would never have seen the like.

"Um, well, the way it's written meant I could understand it, and I mostly guessed with the rest."

It wasn't a secret that he was from another world, per se, but he didn't want to explain the differences in culture, particularly to those from other countries, hence his vague dissembling. Fortunately, Yngvi didn't inquire further.

"I see. You have impressive insight. You were the first to notice we were flying as well."

Zenjirou could only laugh off his brother-in-law's praise. It went without saying, but he had no greater insight than the average person. Realizing that the sleigh was flying, and how to use the controls, were both due to him having had similar experiences in Japan. He'd flown in planes and used touch devices like smartphones, so he'd just adapted to this new experience. Fortunately, his reaction didn't seem to prompt any further suspicion. Of course, the prince's mind was mostly occupied with the fact that they were actually flying.

"This is amazing. We're flying in the sky. If we had even a few of these vehicles, we could use them for scouting. Having more would be revolutionary. The commonwealth has their Husaria, but even a few of these would break their aerial superiority." His icy blue eyes

were alight with ambition as he gazed out of the window.

"Since you didn't know about them before, I doubt Utgard has many either. I don't know how many Husaria the commonwealth has, but unless you can beat them in speed, altitude, or maneuverability, it wouldn't be a contest," Zenjirou commented.

"Oh, you're familiar with aerial tactics?"

"It's just the general theory," Zenjirou answered eventually, avoiding Yngvi's eyes as the younger man grinned. He'd let something slip again. While showing his familiarity with aerial combat was a slip, his excuse had been even worse. It made it clear that Zenjirou came from a world where aerial combat was commonplace.

In this world, there were no examples of *real* aerial combat in recorded history. The only country even capable of it was Złota Wolność. Of course, the commonwealth was neither stupid nor incompetent, so they regularly drilled their Husaria in tactics that would be used against other countries if they someday gained flying horses or similar options.

Additionally, it was all but impossible to hide those aerial displays from other nations, so the concept itself and the knowledge of it following their example had spread across the upper echelons of the Northern Continent. However, there was by no means anything that would be considered a "general theory" of aerial combat. It was common knowledge that Zenjirou had come from a world far removed from this one, but now Yngvi knew they had enough of a history in aerial combat to have formed a general theory about it.

"I see."

Although the prince recognized that Zenjirou didn't want to talk about it anymore and accommodated him, he also internally decided that he was going to get much closer to his brother-in-law.

◇◆◇◆◇◆◇◆

It was several hours later that there was a change. Both Zenjirou and Yngvi, having already returned to their chairs, let out noises of confusion as the view outside the window was suddenly cut off.

Earlier, they had tried out most of the other functions, turning the front, rear, and both sides partially transparent. They had been enjoying the ride while looking out at the scenery and sky, but it had all returned to the ash-gray color of the walls.

Reflexively, Zenjirou turned to look at the panel in the center of the sleigh. In the center of the panel itself were large words that said, "Control disabled," and "Please be seated."

Yngvi's gaze seemed to have been dragged to the panel along with Zenjirou's. "'Control disabled,' 'please be seated'?"

"We're probably near Utgard," Zenjirou explained immediately. "So we can't change things from inside now."

Flights on Earth required you to put your seat belt on and turn off any electronics that you'd been allowed to use for the rest of the flight when it came to takeoff and landing, so it was probably a similar situation. The difference was that they'd been forcibly stopped from looking outside, but even Zenjirou could assume that this was to hide the exact location of Utgard. Yngvi was considerably more cunning, so he'd also have realized that.

"I see. Then let us wait peacefully." His actions and posture—sitting still and upright in his chair—matched his words, but his expression was still filled with irrepressible excitement and joy.

About thirty minutes passed after the controls had been disabled before the panel finally changed to say, "Landing complete." The slight sense of weightlessness had indicated to Zenjirou that they were coming in for a landing, even without being able to see outside.

"Have we stopped?" Yngvi asked, not entirely sure of the situation.

Zenjirou thought his words over before answering carefully. "Maybe? We might have landed but still be traveling on the ground."

With the lack of visibility, it was hard to distinguish between being stationary and moving at a constant speed. The request to be seated had been replaced with "landing complete," but the controls were still showing as disabled. Therefore, all they could do was guess blindly.

"In a sleigh, though?"

Zenjirou considered the comment. “Ah, right. It would be rather difficult to travel on Earth with a sleigh. I can’t feel any shaking, so even if we *are* moving, it might just be low-altitude flight. Something like floating just above the ground,” he suggested, holding his hands around ten centimeters apart to demonstrate. He was picturing the hover cars he had often seen in older sci-fi movies, vehicles that used some unknown mechanism to float and simply traveled in a straight line.

Indeed, the mechanism that the flight thus far had used was definitely unknown to them, so it wouldn’t be unthinkable. Then again, the “landing complete” notice would technically be false.

While he was considering that, the text saying that the controls had been disabled vanished, replaced by the previous array of five options.

“Brother.”

“Right.”

Zenjirou nodded slightly as his brother-in-law stared at him with eyes sparkling just like his second wife’s. He touched the panel to turn all four walls into windows. His eyes were immediately met by blinding white. The walls had become transparent, but white was the only thing they could see.

“Snowfields?” Zenjirou mumbled.

Yngvi responded, squinting against the glare from the reflected light. “It looks closer to ice than snow,” he commented. “They’re ice fields.”

An endless, flat expanse of white lay outside. Whichever of the four windows they looked through, all they could make out was paper-white ice as far as the eye could see.

“Oh, ice. Well, either way, I can see why they prefer sleighs over carriages,” Zenjirou replied.

“So can I.”

A sleigh would be far more efficient over the ice than a carriage. Despite being able to see that, there was still something bothering Zenjirou. “I can’t feel any swaying at all, so I suppose the sleigh really helps. Honestly, it more or less feels the same as when we were flying.”

His casual comment brought Yngvi back to his senses. “No, they really don’t. Normal sleighs bounce around even more than horse-drawn carriages. If you look—and can make it out from all the white—we’re on a maintained road,” he said, pointing out of the front window.

Zenjirou turned to look, straining his eyes. All he could see was that he was surrounded on all sides by white ice. The glare from the sun made it difficult to see, but his eyes gradually grew more used to it so that he could see the road Yngvi was talking about.

Their surroundings looked like a flat, featureless expanse at first. Closer inspection revealed ridges and trenches in the ice, their shadows barely visible. That was the surface of the ice field, and sliding over it would irregularly jolt the occupants of a sleigh. The one they were riding, however, wasn’t shifting at all, because the route it was taking *was* completely smooth. It was a line cut through the ice, unnaturally flat. It certainly qualified as a road.

“Incredible. Do you think they use magic to maintain it?” he asked.

“Probably. It would be *possible* to do it physically, but the effort required would be immense.”

As the two spoke, the view out of the front window finally showed something other than featureless ice. It was a black line, visible on the ice, right on the border between the white ground and blue sky, abruptly breaking the border between them.

“Is that a cliff face?” Zenjirou asked.

“It’s more like a fortification. Given how regular it is, it’s clearly man-made. I imagine Utgard lies behind it.” The excitement in Yngvi’s voice had grown even stronger.

“Its regularity? Yngvi, you can see that from here?”

“I can. My eyes aren’t as good as Freya’s, but they’re still sharp.”

“Huh, that’s incredible. Oh?”

As he spoke, Zenjirou felt that something was slightly wrong. His experiences since arriving in this world had made him learn that it was better to not ignore such feelings. So what was it? It was Yngvi saying that his eyes were good. Was he wrong about how good his eyes were? No. The prince could see that it was a man-made wall

while Zenjirou could only see a dark line, so his eyes were definitely better than Zenjirou's, at least. The true reason for Zenjirou's sense of wrongness was set in stone with Yngvi's next statement.

"It's an extremely high wall, though. The ice makes it hard to judge exactly, but I'm sure it's taller than our palace's."

"Oh, that's it," Zenjirou let slip.

"Uh? What's it?" Yngvi asked.

"Something just felt off, and I figured out why. With how tall it is, it's odd that we'd both notice it at the same time despite our differing eyesight. I don't know if they've used magic or something else, but I think it's hidden until you're within a certain range."

"Oh, I see," he replied, tapping a palm with his fist.

They were currently in a sleigh with 360-degree visibility with nothing but flat ice in every direction. That meant that the wall itself would stick out and be visible from the horizon, in which case it was odd that Yngvi hadn't noticed it first. All Zenjirou could make out was a murky shape above the horizon, but Yngvi had been looking straight ahead the entire time, so he should have seen it earlier. And yet, the two of them had noticed it at essentially the same time, which meant that something must have prevented Yngvi from seeing it until then.

"Incredible..." Yngvi breathed.

"It really is. I dread to think of the kind of spell it would have taken to hide something like that."

Just as Yngvi thought, his praise, which had lacked a subject, had gone over his brother-in-law's head, and he laughed in amusement.

The sleigh slid over the ice, approaching the massive wall. Metallic gray gates were open within it, and the sleigh passed through them. The gates seemed absurdly large to Zenjirou. The castle itself might be gargantuan, but did they need to scale the gates themselves up to match? They were tall enough that a mobile crane could have easily passed through them even with its boom extended.

"The gates move on their own as well," Yngvi commented.

"Wouldn't moving them physically be cruel?"

As far as he was concerned, moving them with brute strength

alone would effectively be torture, but the prince shook his head.

"No. According to the histories from father, Utgard is inhabited by the descendants of giants," he said, hinting at an explanation.

"Ah, so that's why the gates are so large. I suppose it would make sense to move them manually, then. Uh...does that mean the representative we're going to meet is a giant too?"

It felt foolish to ask after this long. Uppasala had given Zenjirou plenty of information on Utgard, including the truth of its ancestry. But saying "they are descended from giants" didn't necessarily mean that it was still *populated* by giants. Descendants of giants and giants themselves were not necessarily the same thing. He had pictured exceptionally tall humans, but considering the scale of those gates, the giants would have been big enough to treat African elephants like lapdogs.

"Who knows? The records are at least a century old, so they are not too credible, but the depictions of their envoys were not exceptionally large."

Zenjirou nodded at his words as the sleigh slid to a stop. "We're here?" he asked.

"I would wager we will be switching over to that," Yngvi said, pointing out of the window. There was a vehicle waiting, pulled by two large reindeer like the sleigh. However, this one was a carriage with four wheels beneath it.

Although outside the gate lay an endless expanse of ice, the same did not hold true for the inside. It made sense when Zenjirou thought about it. Less snow and ice would make life far easier.

While he was considering that, the door opened by itself. The wind that whistled in through the door was obviously going to be colder than Capua's with its position in the Southern Continent, but it was also far colder than even Uppasala in the north.

"Brr, it feels like the middle of winter all right."

"It doesn't feel quite so cold to me," Yngvi commented. "It's definitely colder than Uppasala, though. Let's hurry to the carriage."

"Let's," Zenjirou agreed, easily ducking out. They didn't really have enough with them to call it "luggage."

"Watch your step," Yngvi warned him.

"I will. It's definitely slippery."

The pair walked diagonally from the sleigh and climbed into the carriage pulled by the reindeer.

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As Zenjirou had expected, the carriage was much the same as the sleigh they had traveled in so far. There were, however, two differences that he noticed. The first was that the vehicle itself was on wheels, not skis. The second was that the panel inside showed "Automatic Travel" and nothing else. There was nothing they could control directly. In other words, without the ability to create windows using the panel, they were stuck with the plain gray walls, with no way to see outside.

"It's shaking."

"If anything, I would say it's shaking less than I expected," Yngvi answered. "At least for carriages. The vibration is even, so I believe the path is paved rather regularly." His comment showed the difference in their frame of reference.

"Right. It's less stable than the sleigh, but more stable than a normal horse-drawn carriage."

Zenjirou thought back to riding drake-drawn carriages. The carriage they were currently in didn't really shake in comparison. Compared to the sleigh they'd been riding so far, though, it was much rougher.

It was hardly a surprise. The sleigh had spent most of the journey flying, and after landing it had skated along ice practically polished to the smoothness of a mirror. That made Zenjirou focus more on the differences now.

I wonder what's going on. They look pretty much the same, but they really differ in what they can do.

Overall, the actual coaches seemed all but identical. The interiors were the same, all a uniform light gray, with a panel on a pillar in the floor. It felt very different to ride in, though. The interior controls from the sleigh were also not available in this one. Put simply, it just felt like an inferior version. He wondered why.

The choice to use two models in the same series at the same time was usually because one had advantages in different ways than the other. Often the higher-spec version was more expensive to make, while the inverse was true for the lower-spec one, with the better option being more fragile while the simpler model being more capable of taking damage punishment. Therefore, there must be some benefit to using this less functional vehicle that prevented the better one from completely replacing it.

As Zenjirou was pondering that, the carriage gradually slowed and eventually came to a stop. "Stationary" and "You may alight" were displayed on the panel.

"Brother," Yngvi prompted.

"Right, let's get out," he replied, standing and reaching for the door.

"Welcome, Yamai Zenjirou. Welcome, Yngvi Uppasala. I am the representative of this city, the current Rök. I only speak Ymirian. Ymirian has very little in the way of honorifics and the like, though it does have some. Therefore my words can sometimes appear rude to those who speak other languages, though I intend none of it. To avoid needless strife, I apologize in advance. My deepest regrets and apologies are offered to you both."

Yngvi and Zenjirou had been shown to a building akin to a huge temple, and then to a similarly large room within it. Standing in that room, the man calling himself Rök bowed his head deeply. As he had indicated, his speech hardly sounded like he was addressing royalty that he was meeting for the first time. He came across as rather brusque, excepting the final apology, which was rendered much more formally. It made it feel almost like he was mocking them. But considering Utgard was essentially a city-state, he was all but its monarch.

"I am Zenjirou, spouse of Queen Aura I of the Kingdom of Capua. It is an honor to meet you, Representative Rök," Zenjirou replied, deciding to treat him as superior in status.

"I am Yngvi, second son of King Gustav V of the Kingdom of Uppasala, Representative Rök," Yngvi said, following suit.

"Zenjirou, Yngvi, sit and we will talk." The way he spoke was still blunt enough that it would be entirely possible for negotiations to be called off. Still, he had explained ahead of time, and negotiations with the veiled territory were so important that neither Zenjirou nor Yngvi was foolish enough to fly off the handle over casual speech.

The two of them moved to sit down in the provided seats. As they did, Zenjirou looked around the massive room again. More specifically, the massive room in the massive temple. It wasn't just this chamber that was large, but the building as a whole. In this instance, "huge" didn't only refer to the size of the building and individual rooms—the entrance was massive, the door was just as big, and the handle matched its scale. The chairs and table readied for the meeting were also on the large side. The building and furniture as a whole were on a giant's scale—the temple itself was a giant's temple.

The thing that drew most of Zenjirou's attention was the window. The immense space was covered with glass, far better made than he had seen in the commonwealth. The transparency of it made him think it might even be crystal rather than normal glass. It had been formed into a window fit for a giant. Although he couldn't say for sure without getting closer, he couldn't see a single defect in either its shape or clarity.

Of course, Zenjirou and Yngvi couldn't sit in the giant chairs, so they were provided with normal chairs suited to their stature. The human-scale furniture looked almost like a doll house's next to the giant items surrounding them.

Zenjirou and Yngvi sat next to each other, with the table between them and the representative. Once they had sat down, Zenjirou turned back to the man opposite them. Representative Rök was large for a human. The largest human Zenjirou had personally met was Marshal Pujol, but this man was even larger. He easily cleared two meters in height. However, he was not so tall that you would call him a giant. Even on Earth, there was a not insignificant number of people of similar height, like pro basketball players.

In fact, while the chair he was using was clearly custom-made, it was almost the same as the ones Zenjirou and Yngvi were using

when placed alongside the giant chairs.

Once all three were seated, Representative Rök began the conversation. He was the one who had sent the invitation to Zenjirou and had also provided the venue, so that was to be expected.

"I offer my thanks again, Yamai Zenjirou, for accepting our sudden invitation. We of Utgard wish to negotiate with the Capuan royal family."

Whether his immediately jumping into the main topic was due to Utgard's traditions or his own disposition, Zenjirou found himself taken aback, but he offered a safe answer.

"You do? Although I am royalty, I am not the king and do not represent the royal family as a whole, so there are significant limits on what I can agree to here. With that proviso, I would be glad to hear you out."

There was a lie in his words. He was the prince consort, so his authority was only slightly less than the queen's. However, he knew that he didn't have the ability to use that authority properly, so he put such limitations on himself.

Then again, Zenjirou's ability to use teleportation to visit Aura for a final decision at *any* time meant that even with him acting as a go-between, they would be able to come to an agreement almost as quickly as a diplomat with authority on-site. This made him the most valuable form of communication: a direct line to Aura.

"Very well. Hear me out first. What we wish to commission from the Capuan royal family is transportation between worlds. From what we have heard, your lineal magic makes that possible."

The abrupt familiarity of the topic made Zenjirou forget himself and speak plainly. "What on earth for? I want to know that first," he demanded, all too aware of his heart pounding nervously in his chest.

"To negotiate with Utgarða."

"Utgarða? Is that different from Utgard?"

The representative's answers were all utterly to the point, so Zenjirou had to ask more and more. Fortunately, the ruler showed no displeasure with Zenjirou's attitude and continued answering.

"It is."

The problem was that his follow-up answers were just as brief.

"Exactly how? What is Utgarða?"

"Utgarða is the home of our ancestors. The world where our ancestors—the Jötunn—live. This is Utgard, the city built by those who came from Utgarða."

The explanation matched what Zenjirou had heard from Aura and Bruno of the Twin Kingdoms. He could accept that, just as the people who had emigrated from Hiroshima had created the city Kitahiroshima.

"I have heard that the people of Utgard are descendants of giants—the Jötunn. Is that true?" he asked.

The question prompted the first real change in the representative's expression so far. The man's face was strong, almost carved from granite, and the expression that made its home on his features could be called a smile of almost cynical amusement.

"Our traditions hold that we carry their blood. Those like me who are particularly large are said to carry more of it, and are respected. Part of the reason I am the current Rök is likely due to my size. The Jötunn that our history discusses, though, are too different from humans, and I cannot see how they could mate together."

After listening to his explanation, Zenjirou cast his eyes over the gargantuan pieces of furniture they were sharing a room with, then looked at the similarly large door and nodded in understanding.

"I see. Would they be a size to match the furniture?" he asked.

"So they say."

"They say? Then it is false?"

The man opposite lifted his broad shoulders into a shrug. "It was centuries ago. So many generations have passed since we lived alongside each other. There is no one to corroborate it, so I can't say for sure. The physical evidence is there, though, so I would say it is true."

Some of the furniture in the massive temple would have been remade recently, but much of it came from the city's founding. Of those, some of them, like the sofa, had depressions in the middle of the cushions. The door knob was worn to a shine, so there was no other conclusion to draw but that giants had used it.

"We have weapons sized for giants in our armories as well. The handles are well-worn, so I think it's almost certain they existed. Oh, there is one more thing. It is less hard evidence and more just a clue. I can 'show' you what a Jötunn looked like if you wish?"

He can "show" me something that hasn't existed for centuries? And despite being able to do that, it isn't real proof? Not quite understanding, Zenjirou tilted his head.

His young brother-in-law, however, immediately inferred the meaning. "Are you speaking of illusion magic?"

"Exactly, Yngvi. I can reproduce what the previous Röks have passed down to show you."

Illusion magic was Utgard's lineal magic. The people who had come from Utgarða to Utgard—in other words, the founding generation—would have seen the giants with their own eyes. When they became parents or grandparents, they could use their memories to show their descendants what those beings looked like. Then, those children could use their own illusions to duplicate their ancestors'. That would repeat over and over, according to the representative.

Zenjirou could picture that process, and he couldn't help but ask, "I... Pardon me for asking, but is it an accurate image?"

The bigger man smiled broadly. "Outsiders would naturally have to doubt that. I find it unlikely myself. After all, the Jötunn that I can reproduce are all beautiful or handsome. Yet, according to our history, they worried over their monstrous appearances."

The Jötunn were objects of reverence for the people of Utgard. So the combination of the caster's desires and biases would gradually beautify the illusions. The blatant amusement on his face as he spoke didn't seem to suggest much respect for them, though.

"I see. Then if you would?" Zenjirou asked. His request was driven more by curiosity than an attempt to gather information.

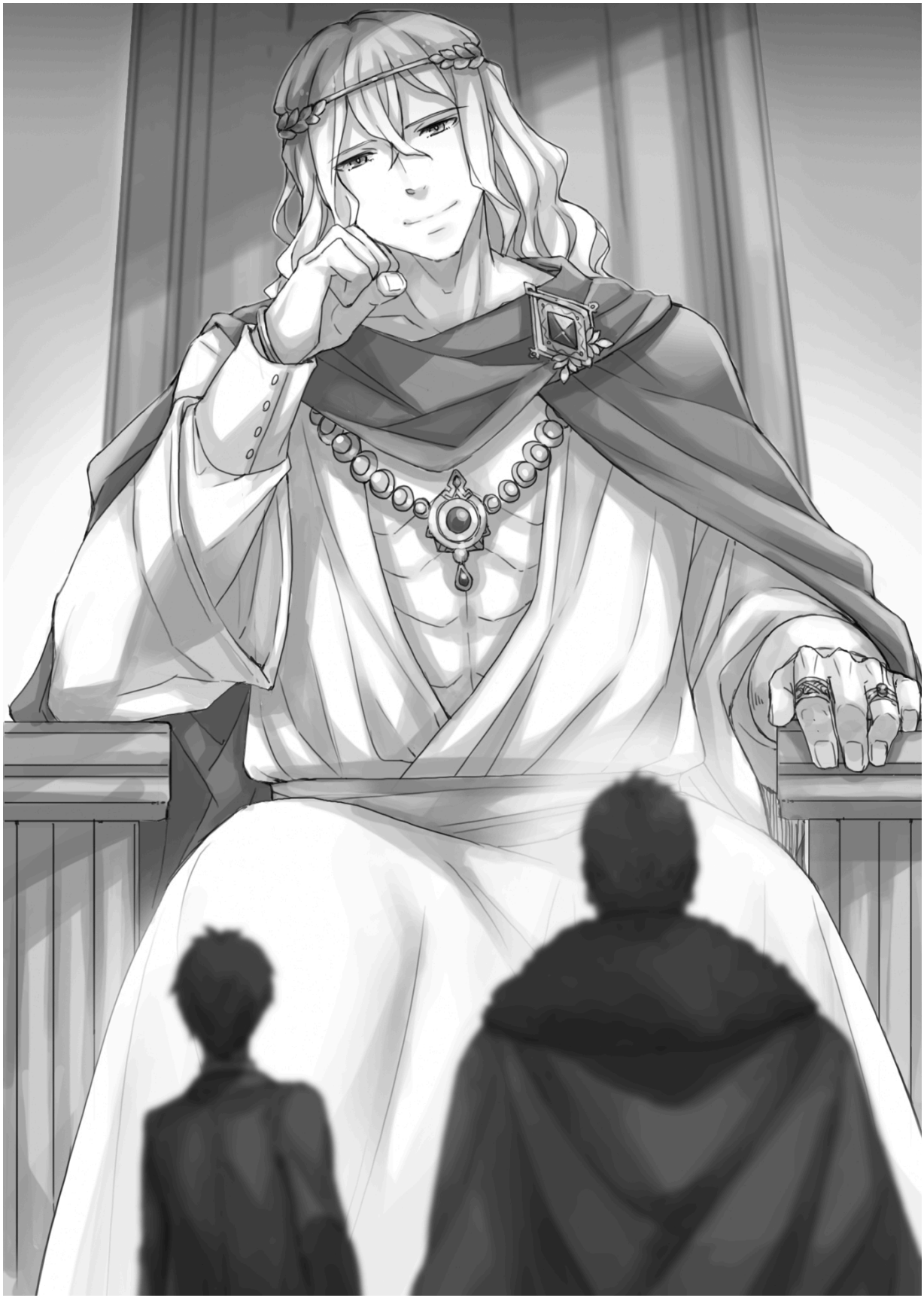
"Very well. If you would look at the Jötunn seat over there," the ruler gestured.

Zenjirou and Yngvi did so. Out of caution, or for whatever reason, the representative covered his mouth so that his lips couldn't be read before speaking so quietly it was impossible to hear. The results

were immediately apparent. Zenjirou gasped.

"Wow!" Yngvi exclaimed.

The figure was certainly a giant. While Zenjirou had no idea how long giants lived, if he were a human, he would have looked to be in his thirties.



The giant's features were so handsome that Zenjirou could easily see where the representative's thought of beautification had come from. A human-sized version would have drawn gazes from men and women alike—Zenjirou was sure of it. The giant's face was not his only impressive feature; the muscle tone visible on his body made him look more like a god from some pantheon than a mere giant.

What Zenjirou was more curious about, however, was the ornamentation on the giant's clothing. Perhaps he had been of a particularly high rank. Shining metal rested around the figure's waist, wrists, and neck. It was likely gold. There was no issue with that, but the sheer amount of it boggled his mind. Manufacturing such things was possible, though the jewels set within the metal were another matter. Even on a giant, the gems looked large. One could upend every treasury in Capua and never find a gem of such size.

The clothes were odd too. How were they made? Cotton, linen, and silk could all be gathered from nature and woven, but doing so with the natural sources Zenjirou knew of would require an absurd amount of work. Given that giants were ten times the size of humans, this meant thread from cotton or silkworms would only be a tenth of its relative thickness. Even if it were possible, it would take entire fields of cotton to create a single set of giant's clothing.

The leather for the belts and shoes was much less of a concern in a world where huge drakes existed. All of this quickly blended with the knowledge that the world they lived in was a different world than his own.

"Rather than the Jötunn being giants, is it possible humans are dwarves?" he muttered to himself.

Yngvi's sharp ears picked up the question. "What do you mean?"

"Um..."

Realizing that he might be hesitating to speak his mind in the current situation, the representative's lips curled upward slightly as he bid Zenjirou to continue. "I would like to know as well. Continue, Zenjirou."

"Well, I was just thinking that the Jötunn might not be giants. They live in another world, right? So perhaps everything in that world is larger, in which case they wouldn't be considered 'giant'

from their perspective. If anything, humans who moved there would be considered dwarves."

He explained his thoughts about the clothing and gems. Food would have been the same. If grains were the same size as those in this world, creating bread large enough to satisfy them would have taken absurd amounts. Considering that the people of that world had managed to prosper enough to create a society with refined clothing, it made a lot more sense that everything was on the same scale. In other words, in a world composed of giants, the giants wouldn't be "giant"—rather, the humans would be dwarves.

Both of his companions seemed extremely interested in this chain of logic.

"I see. I should have known you'd come up with something like that," Yngvi remarked.

"That is an intriguing suggestion. I disagree with some points, but it's logical. Very interesting. I would like to investigate it properly at some point."

Somewhat surprisingly, it was the representative who was most interested. He leaned in closer, his huge muscles seeming to be carved from stone. Part of what he said bothered Zenjirou, though.

"You disagree, but it still seems logical? What do you mean?"

The other man answered, "Our teachings say that their culture was founded on a strong base of magic. One of their spells allowed them to combine several natural stones into one, so creating multiple gems for jewelry like this would be fairly feasible."

"Ah, I see. Magic." Zenjirou felt his face heat in embarrassment. He had been so certain and yet completely forgotten the prerequisite of magic, so his shame was hardly a surprise. "Then all of that was pointless. Please forget about it."

"Not so fast. I said that it was logical despite my objections. I have only just noticed it myself, but those gems are an oddity. Even if the Jötunn had the magic to take scraps and create larger ones, there are too many for it to make sense."

He had not just inherited the one image. There were shorter giants, but even they had at least one gem-studded accessory. Of course, those were smaller stones, and the clothing was of an

inferior make as well.

"Maybe the ore veins in that world are just that much richer than ours?" Zenjirou suggested.

Representative Rök immediately rejected the idea. "Then the gems would not be seen as valuable. They were considered valuable to the Jötunn in the same way gems are to the people of this world. Although the giants were several times larger than us, the gems of their world were still relatively rare compared to ours. Hence me seeing the logic in your suggestion."

If the environment in the two worlds was the same, the relative rarity of the gems would increase according to their size. If conditions were different and more gems were available, they would likely be considered less valuable.

With neither of those being the case and precious stones being approximately as valuable in Utgarða, the representative could see the credibility of Zenjirou's theory that the "giants" were simply the "humans" of that world.

"Of course, part of that is probably wishful thinking," the representative said with a rueful smile.

"Wishful thinking?"

"Indeed. Our goal behind establishing a route to Utgarða is the importation of magicite."

"Magicite?" Zenjirou parroted, the word unfamiliar to him.

"Yes, magicite. You could call it the cornerstone of Utgard. After all, the only things that can bring the full effect of magic writing out are magicite and pure mana."

Both Zenjirou and Yngvi leaned forward at that. "Are we really permitted to hear that?" Zenjirou asked.

Their surprise was understandable, as the representative had just revealed information about magic writing that neither of them—even the nominal ally in Yngvi's case—had known. Although Zenjirou was extremely interested, not confirming that the topic was safe ahead of time would leave him too concerned to truly listen.

Representative Rök offered another shrug before answering. "It is not something that should be spread around. Therefore, I ask that you keep it as private as possible. To be specific, only speak of it to

those of higher standing in your countries."

The two visitors exchanged glances. Zenjirou was prince consort of Capua, and Yngvi was the crown prince of Uppasala. In other words, there was only one person in each of their countries who was ranked higher. In Zenjirou's case, that was his wife Aura. In Yngvi's, it was his father, Gustav. Restricting the information to them would definitely make it top secret. And yet, trusting that to a verbal promise seemed rather laissez-faire. It showed how relatively important the promise would be.

"Very well," Zenjirou answered eventually.

"I shall do so," Yngvi agreed.

Now that he had their agreement, the representative gave a shallow nod before dispassionately revealing one of his state secrets.

"If all you want from the magic writing is the translation, you don't need much. However, manifesting further effects requires very specific materials. Magicite is perfect for it. There was once a huge deposit under the ice fields here, but we are starting to see its end. Magic writing is the foundation of Utgard, so a steady supply is the most important thing for us."

Representative Rök's words were franker than Zenjirou would have expected of him, with the weight of a country on his back. He had to know what was going on. If this magicite was truly the foundation of the state, why was he revealing that weakness to royalty from other nations?

Zenjirou leaned forward, questioning the representative to try and get a clearer picture. "And that is why you wish to open trade with this other world? Is there no option to search further within *this* world?"

"We are doing so at the same time, of course. I intend to talk with Yngvi about exactly that later."

The young prince smiled widely at the conversation turning to him. "So our lands have a deposit of this magicite?" he asked.

"There is a *possibility*. Frankly, merely searching around will likely be a wasted effort. If the chance exists, though, we wish to investigate in all of the other northernmost states."

"And outside of those five? The Northern Continent is a big place."

Yngvi's question prompted a flattening of the representative's face as he shook his head. "Any other countries will be difficult. All probable locations have been designated holy ground by the church."

There was a long pause.

"I see." Yngvi fell into thought for a while before his lips lifted into a crescent.

"Then what about the Southern Continent?" Zenjirou suggested while mentally noting the prince's smile as something to report. "Honestly, that seems far easier than trying to get assistance from another world entirely." Capua was a big country in terms of national power, of course, but it was also a large country, physically. Although they had no real gold mines, they had a fair amount in the way of underground resources like iron and silver, so Zenjirou was rather optimistic they might have some of this magicite. His hopes were immediately dashed, though.

"No. There is none on Randlion—the Southern Continent, that is."

"Why is that?" Zenjirou asked, taken aback at the absolute surety in the other man's voice. Unfortunately, no answer was forthcoming.

"If you do not know, I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you why that must remain secret either. Ask nothing else about this. If you must know, find out for yourself. I will not stop that."

"Very well." The response made Zenjirou even more curious, but he could tell that any questioning about it would be pointless here.

"Either way, Utgarða is our main chance. What do you say, Zenjirou? Will the Kingdom of Capua—no, the Capuan royal family—be willing to assist us?"

His self-correction was apt. The city-state didn't want something from the country itself. The only entity that possessed the means to travel to other worlds was the royal family. Although the distinction between monarch, country, and royal family had been much more ambiguous in the past, they were not one and the same.

"I cannot give you an answer from what I have heard so far. I understand what you are asking for, but the information is too

vague. What time frame would this span? What payment can we expect or would you offer? I would hear all of that first."

Representative Rök's eyes narrowed as Zenjirou moved to begin proper negotiations.

"I cannot give an exact time frame. However, it is not something that cannot wait a century or three. Success in our negotiations with Yngvi would lengthen that time as well."

In other words, it depended on the amount of time they had before their magicite was depleted. It certainly made sense that they could not give an exact number. If magicite was truly indispensable to Utgard, then their stores of it were effectively the country's remaining lifespan. Naturally, they wouldn't reveal that detail to a foreigner.

Either way, Zenjirou could not conceal his relief at the deadline being on the order of centuries. If it had been decades, he would have had to refuse.

There were two spells that Zenjirou knew of within space-time magic that concerned other worlds. The first one was summoning. Naturally, it was one that Aura knew, as it had been used to summon him to this world. The other was the transfer. It was based on the summoning spell and, as the name implied, sent the target to another world. Zenjirou had temporarily returned to Japan after his first summoning, and it had been a revised version of the latter spell that Aura had used to send him back.

The royal family of Capua currently consisted of Zenjirou, Aura, and two babies, which was most certainly not enough to fulfill the representative's wishes. However, over the course of centuries, that became much less of a concern. Generation after generation, they would have more and more people capable of casting space-time magic, and they could research relevant magic as they went.

With that in mind, Zenjirou questioned him further. "Pardon me, but if travel there becomes possible, will you be able to purchase the magicite? Or would the Jötunn be generous enough to just give it away?"

Strictly speaking, this had nothing to do with Zenjirou or the royal family, but he still wanted to know the answer. If the royal family

made contact between the two worlds possible and then Utgard's envoy was soundly rebuffed, it wasn't something they would prefer to be involved in. More pragmatically, it would influence the payment.

The representative seemed perfectly happy with the line of questioning, and his tone didn't change as he answered. "I have no absolute guarantee, but I do not believe it would be an issue. According to our history, they wanted our skills in magic writing. We have been developing those skills over the years and haven't stopped. I believe we will be able to use them for bargaining."

Both Yngvi and Zenjirou were startled by that.

"Pardon, but they wanted *your* skill with magic writing? So it wasn't humans getting close to the Jötunn, but the Jötunn needing humans?" Zenjirou asked.

Yngvi picked up the thread. "You'll be using your skills in magic writing as bargaining material? I heard that the Jötunn were a highly advanced civilization, magically speaking. You said as much as well. Despite that, those skills are still valuable to them?"

Representative Rök replied calmly, "I will answer Zenjirou's question first. You are right. The relationship between humans and the Jötunn was not human-prompted. The Jötunn put it forward. To speak plainly, the humans were under their dominion. If I were to go further, we were more like livestock with a particularly useful skill."

There was a fair amount of self-deprecation in his words, but there was no hint of anger or hatred towards the Jötunn.

"Livestock...under their dominion..."

Zenjirou rolled the phrases around in his mouth while the representative explained.

"Of course, I say livestock, but we were not used for meat like pigs, or for wool and milk like goats. Instead, they wanted us to carve magic writing for them."

His dark gray eyes shifted from Zenjirou to Yngvi at that point.

"The rest of this will answer your question, Yngvi. The Jötunn were indeed extremely advanced magically. They were on the same level as the ancient dragons the church reveres so much. Our skill in magic writing is something they taught us, and is a drop in the

ocean compared to their mastery."

For once, Yngvi was struck completely dumb. There was still a gleam in his blue eyes, though as he waited for the representative to continue.

"However, there are differences between *knowing* how to use magic writing and actually doing so. The writing must be carved precisely in order to use its effects. Another is that the writing's size has no influence on its efficacy."

"Ah, so that's it," Yngvi said.

"Oh, *that's* why they need humans," Zenjirou added, coming to the realization a beat later. "If the effect will take place regardless of the writing's size, so long as it is carved correctly, the humans would be far more suited to the skill than the Jötunn."

"Exactly," the representative said with satisfaction.

If humans and Jötunn were as dexterous as each other relative to their size, then when it came to writing smaller text, the Jötunn would never be able to match the humans. Engraving a Jötunn-sized ring with magic writing would—for a Jötunn—be an exceptionally delicate task, beyond most of their kind. It would be the domain of the best craftsmen they had, at the end of years of training. For a human, though, apart from the clumsiest, anyone would be able to do it with some simple training.

"If our histories are correct, there were many who remained in Utgarða. If those lines live on, they would be our trading rivals. However, I would rate our prospects against them as good."

"Would you tell me the reason for that?" Zenjirou asked.

"It's simple," the other man said dispassionately. "While we were under their rule, we constantly engraved magic writing for them. It would be natural to assume the humans who remained are still in that position. Meanwhile, we have improved our abilities for our own sake."

There was a firm pride and confidence on his face. They had engraved things for themselves, which inevitably meant they had practice in working on items on their own scale. Using those techniques on Jötunn-scale items would allow them to fit far more into the same space.

“I see,” Zenjirou responded eventually. “Utgard has a surfeit of skilled craftsmen.”

The windows of the temple passed through his mind. Although the people of Złota Wolność used glass in their windows, it was warped and murky from a modern perspective. Creating panes of glass and engraving words in tiny text were not one and the same, but both required skill and patience.

“Indeed. We won’t be inferior in skill or number,” said Rök.

There was obvious pride that made up part of that answer, and yet there was definite objectivity in it as well. There was a real possibility that the humans who had remained had also polished their skills beyond those who had traveled to Utgard. The Jötunn might very well see the examples and refuse to trade for something of equal quality. More harshly, it was also possible that the Jötunn had continued to develop their powers and magic writing itself was a thing of the past. Either way, it would be dangerous to stake everything on it.

“Would you tell us of their traditions? There could be things that the Jötunn are likely to want that exist in Capua but not here. I believe there is scope for an agreement there.”

The representative looked shocked by the suggestion. “Are you sure? If our history is correct, they are very advanced and effectively a massive nation-state. You could even consider them divinities beyond this realm.”

Zenjirou’s implication that Capua would trade with Utgarða on Utgard’s behalf was a tacit promise to not directly trade with the former. The reason for the man’s shock was that Utgard wanted the Capuan royal family to establish a route to Utgarða. In other words, when the two related nations were in a position to trade, Capua would be as well. Being in that position but purposefully using Utgard as a go-between for things Utgarða wanted was clearly wasteful. You could even consider it against their better interests.

Of course, despite his relatively low level of statecraft, Zenjirou knew that. Yet he immediately agreed even so. “Of course. However advanced they are—or rather, the more advanced they are—the more risks there are in us directly entering into a relationship with a

nation we know nothing about."

"Hm?" Representative Rök cocked his head at that. There was a logic to it, but it was almost cowardly. Be it domestic or international, all politics carried risks. Zenjirou's comment meant avoiding both the risk and the reward. Of course, that wasn't his true goal.

"Therefore, I would suggest that my country's trade with Utgarða be carried out via Utgard. In return, Utgard would interact with the countries in this world through us."

"Brother?" the prince prompted him, narrowing his eyes and speaking in a low voice.

Although he had somewhat expected the response, it felt heavier than Zenjirou had expected, so he continued with a slightly hurried voice. "Of course, I wouldn't ask that you completely drop all trade and agreements you already have. I mean for us to be your go-between to other, new countries."

This was something that could quite easily see the representative flying out of his seat in a rage. It was quite a rude suggestion. It meant constraining their diplomatic policies to what was convenient for Capua. It also cut off the majority of their options for international diplomacy.

"Hm, what for?" Rök's reaction, however, was another slight incline of his head, with no real sign of displeasure.

With that in mind, Zenjirou couldn't help but feel accomplished at what had taken all of his courage mustered into a single suggestion. The reaction had strongly supported his assumptions.

At present, Utgard had almost no diplomatic ties with other countries. Even within the region, it had been over a hundred years since someone had been summoned from Uppasala. The other three of the five countries were likely in similar positions, and other nations might not even be sure of Utgard's existence. That meant restrictions on negotiations with other countries would merely be maintaining the status quo.

That was why Zenjirou thought his suggestion would be realistic, despite such a thing normally being rude at best, and excessive interference at worst by the standards of another nation.

"Having a link to you is to our benefit. I imagine you are aware, but your kingdom is distinct from not only us on the Southern Continent, but the other nations of the north. Having exclusive leadership over a connection with such a different country will, of course, be hugely beneficial to us."

The representative nodded in understanding at the plain and materialistic reasons Zenjirou gave, but continued his questioning. "I don't dispute the benefit to the royal family. However, if your aim is magic writing, I will tell you that it will not be done before we proceed. Negotiating with an individual would be possible, but we cannot do so with a country."

His words were a roundabout way of saying that they would not be exporting magic writing. There was no contradiction to anything he had said earlier in that. The whole reason Utgard was trying to gain passage to Utgarða was that their reserves of magicite to engrave seemed to be reaching their end. Paying with the very thing they were running out of wouldn't be an option, and Zenjirou had expected as much.

"That is fine, though if it is possible, I would like you to consider magic writing without magicite as its base."

Even the complete translation ability that the writing itself possessed would be valuable, regardless of the special abilities it might be missing. While verbal conversation was possible thanks to the soul of language, there were multiple languages even on the Southern Continent, so a script that anyone could read would be well worth it.

Rök considered it for a few moments but eventually shook his head. "No. There are no exceptions."

That meant there was either some shortage of the materials for the translation ability itself or that they were concerned about the techniques spreading. Whatever the case, it was a complete refusal, so Zenjirou didn't push his luck any further.

"Understood. But the other points are acceptable?" Zenjirou asked, keeping his tone as light as possible.

Representative Rök nodded slightly while pushing for confirmation. "They are. Can I take it that you are accepting our

request?”

“You can. However, we have a limited number of people capable of casting the spells, so I have no idea how to establish a travel route. You mentioned earlier that the deadline for your request would potentially be several centuries or even longer away. Are you willing to accept that?”

Zenjirou was just about capable of three spells: drawing something nearby, creating a barrier, and teleportation. Aura was a much better mage, but she was not a researcher.

There were materials that had been left behind by the previous king, Carlos, and other members of the family, so research on trade routes was possible but unlikely to begin until the next generation when there were more people capable of casting the spells.

All Zenjirou could personally do was digitize the writings left behind on the various pieces of parchment and strips of wood. He was much busier than when he and Aura had first gotten married, but he was still the one with far more free time.

I’ll take the lead and gather the information, then get Aura to look over it and let me know what she thinks. It’d be great to get some insight from Espiridion, but that’ll be up to her to decide.

While Zenjirou was considering all of that, Representative Rök had kept his silence, but eventually nodded firmly. “Fine. I understand it will take time. However, I would rather avoid your family making a show of the attempt to maintain the contract. Once we have agreed on the details, I want to seal the contract officially with magic. Agreed?”

“Seal it with magic? Can magic writing do such a thing?” Zenjirou asked, his surprise clear.

“It is not impossible, but that isn’t what I mean. To make things certain, we will use a contract magic tool.”

Zenjirou wasn’t foolish enough to miss the implication there. “An inheritance from the White Empire.”

“Exactly.”

Although Representative Rök spoke placidly, Zenjirou couldn’t contain his shock, partially at the White Empire’s existence, and partially at the idea that they would go out of their way to use it.

He realized that he had misjudged things. They had gone out of their way to invite him here, so he had known their desire to contact Utgarða was no mere whim or vagary. However, the representative had said that it could theoretically wait "two or three centuries." Because of that, he'd taken it as a casual agreement, to put it plainly. But with them now going out of their way to use one of the relics of the White Empire, it most definitely was no such thing.

Still, the decision did not affect the terms themselves.

"Understood. However, I do not have the authority to agree to that on my own. I suggest we negotiate in writing as per usual until the particulars are settled and form the contract once we have both reached an agreement."

"Very well."

Yngvi was silent, watching the exchange with the gleam of ambition flaring in his eyes. It was still only a verbal agreement, but a contract between Capua and Utgard was a matter of great historical—and political—significance.

Intermission — Private Discussion Between King and Prince

Several days after what could justifiably be called a historic conversation between Zenjirou, Yngvi, and Representative Rök in Utgard, Yngvi was in a room in Uppasala's royal palace, Valaskjálf. He was joined by King Gustav and no one else. It was a top secret meeting between the two.

"That sums it up, father," Yngvi said, now finished relaying the events of the meeting. "Both we and Capua have assigned space in the city, and my brother-in-law obtained permission to use teleportation to and from it. Utgard is now far closer."

The king remained silent, shutting his eyes as he mulled over everything that had happened. Then he shook his head to clear it. "I hardly know what to say. I may have been calling this an era of change and revolution, but this is drastic..." He couldn't contain the soft complaint.

"If you find yourself not keeping up, then you can hand over the throne at any moment. You have a reliable successor right here."

"I intend to do so as soon as I have *made* my successor reliable," Gustav answered curtly as his son pointed at himself with a grin.

Yngvi's face dropped into a very put-on look of disappointment before he shrugged. "Very well, I will continue my efforts. On that note, I will be going to Capua. I can, can I not, father?" Yngvi's trip there as the next king of Uppasala was to fulfill his claim of taking a bride from Capua.

"Very well. Even disregarding a connection with Utgard—or even if we focus solely on that—a link with the Capuan royal family and their space-time magic is indispensable. Remember that your first wife must be from within Uppasala, or at least the royal families of the Northern Continent."

With that rather obvious reminder from his father, the prince considered for a moment and then sought confirmation. "Taking the woman from Capua as my first bride is not an option, then, is it?"

"Of course not. If you did, your reign would be pulling Uppasala away from both the influence of the church *and* the northern five. If the woman was a direct member of the Capuan royal family, you may be able to sway their views, but you cannot wait until Princess Juana is of age."

There were currently only two female royals belonging to Capua. Aura—being both married and the nation's monarch—was naturally out of the question. The only other one was Juana, who was still a baby. That meant that the highest-ranked woman that Yngvi could marry would be a member of the high nobility at best. Taking into account their precautions against lineal magic leaving the nation meant that even they may not be an option.

The Northern Continent tended to look down on the Southern Continent. If Uppasala had a noble from there as their first queen with the second and third being from their own nobility, you could practically guarantee no one else would send *their* nobility there. Indeed, even domestic prospects for a second and third wife could be rather slim in that case.

The young prince ought to have been well aware of that. Despite that knowledge, however, his desire to strengthen his country was such that he had been considering a first wife from Capua. Gustav was by no means enough of a fool to miss the implications.

"Speak. How much value do you see in Capua? Enough to make clear enemies of the church? Enough to risk parting from the rest of the five?"

Yngvi remained silent in the face of the harsh rebuke for a few moments. Eventually, he shook his head, sending his hair—long for a man—swishing from side to side. "No, not *that* much value. Very well, father. Whoever I wed from Capua will be at most my second or third wife. I will search for a woman who will be able to fulfill that role." There was the extra implication that if he could not find such a woman, he would give up. Yngvi then continued, "I leave the choice of my first wife from here to you, father. However, my conditions are

the same as the second wife from Capua."

"Of course," the king agreed.

The conditions being the same did not mean that they would be equal. Instead, it meant that just as his second wife from Capua must be able to abide by her position as his second wife, the first wife must act in a manner befitting his first. In other words, she must not treat his second wife as inferior solely for being from the Southern Continent.

Indeed, as Gustav had said, it was a natural condition. Their first princess, Freya, had married into the Capuan royal family as a concubine, and Yngvi taking a second wife from Capua showed just how Uppasala viewed that nation at a glance. If, despite that, his first wife did not treat the marriage with his second wife as legitimate solely due to her origin, it was quite right to consider it a failure to uphold her position.

"Still," Gustav murmured, his brow creasing, "a first wife willing to accept a second from Capua? That will be no mean feat."

It was hardly a surprise. The disdain for the Southern Continent was practically ingrained. Of course, most royals and nobles would be able to treat a temporary guest well, but a fellow wife would require a much longer and closer relationship. It would be necessary for someone to hide their feelings for decades no matter how they truly felt—a rarity, to be sure—or someone who truly did not have negative feelings about the Southern Continent—even more of a rarity.

"Maybe we should look to Graz as well?"

The Kingdom of Graz was a nation that, despite its position within the church's sphere of influence, proactively pursued marriages with even the animistic countries of the Northern Continent.

"Do not even joke about it. Our country will become a second Ofus," the king rebuked him lowly.

While around twenty percent of Ofus's population followed the dragon faith, Uppasala was almost entirely animistic, so the royal family inviting someone from the church's religion would invite significant backlash from the populace. The next king taking someone from the dragon faith as his first wife and someone from

the Southern Continent as his second would never be accepted.

Yngvi himself knew that. He let out a deep sigh but still agreed. "So it's definitely not an option, then. I really wish it was. They're the only country willing to let their lineal magic spread."

Graz's royal family had lineal magic but made no effort to keep it within their borders. Instead, they proactively sought out international marriages for their royals.

"This is all your greed coming to the fore. You think too highly of yourself. Learn the difference between what you can do and what you can *definitely* do. If the possibility of an unrecoverable error is there, you should only wager on the latter," the king scolded him harshly.

"Right, father." Yngvi ducked his head slightly and reflected. Although he definitely wanted to rally against the reprimand, he also remembered a vast array of incidents where his father's remonstrations had been valid. He therefore restrained himself and accepted what the king had to say before shifting topics. "Then our aim is to get all the benefits we can from Capua. Actually, depending on the circumstances, that could be from Zenjirou directly."

"Indeed, I can see the country's importance. Even just with what Eric and Freya have said, they are most certainly a powerful nation. This incident with Utgard also guarantees that they will have a massive impact on the five nations. Their teleportation is a huge consideration. In that respect, I can see the importance you are placing upon Sir Zenjirou as the only person capable of practically using it. That is not the only thing you are implying, though, is it?"

Yngvi's lips curled up into a crescent at that. "Indeed it is not. I relayed how we flew in the sleigh Utgard provided, but he also spoke of aerial combat. He considered the most important factors to be altitude, speed, and turning circle. He referred to it as common knowledge." Yngvi began to chuckle.

"Common knowledge? Aerial combat?" The king's eyes narrowed.

"That's right. I didn't notice it until much later, but it's also not just theoretical knowledge. He has flown before."

His reaction would have been otherwise inexplicable. The whole interior had initially been a uniform gray, with the panel deactivated.

Despite that, Zenjirou had said with certainty that they were flying.

With the benefit of hindsight, Yngvi could understand the claim. When the sleigh had started moving, the force he'd felt had been diagonal. When you moved horizontally, the force matched it, so with the direction to the floor having changed, the motion itself would be diagonally up. In other words, flight. That was only in hindsight, though.

"The takeoff, landing, and even the flight itself were so smooth. Honestly, until he mentioned it, I hadn't even realized we were moving, let alone flying. He also used the magic writing in the center of the sleigh to dim the lights and make the walls transparent. He was clearly used to manipulating them, or something similar at the very least."

"So he is familiar with flight? Do you believe it possible to attain flight ourselves with his knowledge?"

The prince shook his head in slight surprise at the question. "Hardly. That would be almost too convenient. I also doubt it is something possible with just his knowledge. After all, Capua would have already developed such options if it were."

It made sense after considering it. Yngvi himself had, as a royal, learned how to control a carriage or ship, and even how to perform simple maintenance or repairs on them. However, if you asked him to build one from scratch, he'd have to raise his hands in defeat. Flying vehicles would require just as much specialized skill, if not more, by his reckoning.

"I do not want something so direct from him. It's something much more vague. He has a huge amount of cultural knowledge, skills, and biases that are utterly different from both the Northern Continent's technology and the Southern Continent's magic. The majority of it will not be things we can put to immediate use, but I believe that among it all might be the key to advancing our own skills."

For better or worse, Yngvi was a pragmatic person. However great the unknown knowledge might be, if it wouldn't directly strengthen the nation, he would show no interest. Conversely, if it could help them, he would be voracious and flexible.

Gustav was a wise king and saw it as both a boon and a potential curse. The prince's willingness to utterly spurn tradition and the past for the sake of his country would be a great aid to steering the nation through the unrest facing the Northern Continent. But there was also a concern that focusing too directly on strengthening the nation would lead to him overlooking or outright ignoring other factors.

He thought little of the military zeal of the country's warriors and would demand to hear what benefits the research at the university would provide. For a leader, that showed a lack of development. Things that seemed meaningless at first glance could form the foundation of the future, and the younger man hadn't yet realized that ignoring such options could stifle the country in the much longer term. That was exactly why his current position was all the more remarkable.

"You mentioned that he laid the groundwork for an exclusive trade deal with Utgard. The five nations may be excluded from it, but do you see it as acceptable?"

The sharp question beneath the words of whether they truly had to surrender so much to Zenjirou was heard by the prince.

"Honestly, rather than see it as acceptable, I *had* to accept it. Although I could have likely interjected, it would have damaged our relationship significantly. I made the judgment that it was not so dire that I needed to take the risk."

"Significant damage? Did you not remark that he was far more mild-mannered and tolerant than usual for nobility? I do agree with you on that, though."

Yngvi's blue eyes closed slightly as he nodded. "I did say that, and my opinion has not changed. If anything, joining him on this trip made me utterly certain of that opinion. I believed it possible for interference to pose a problem even so. Enough that it would cause issues with *our* agreements with them."

"You believe he wishes to monopolize trade with Utgard to that extent?"

This time, Yngvi paused to think before shaking his head. "No. This is fundamentally just my opinion, but rather than trying to land

a huge gain, it felt more like he was trying to avoid a huge loss. After all, once he included us as exceptions, it opened up gaps in that exclusivity. With him accepting that and still forming a rough agreement, it makes me wonder if there is perhaps a third country he wishes to block from trade with them."

"Hmm, a third country..." While Gustav had his misgivings about Yngvi, he still recognized him as his successor. Above anything else, he had proved his insight into people, at least in the short term. If with that experience Yngvi was still so insistent, Gustav felt he had to put some stock into it, even if there was no proof to back it up. "Jumping to conclusions is dangerous, but perhaps we ought to investigate."

"That was my intention," Yngvi agreed, a smile on his face thanks to getting his way.

Of course, his main plans were to build friendly relations with Capua and Zenjirou. Therefore, even if his suspicions turned out to be well-founded, he wasn't intending to act against Zenjirou's desire to block a third country from Utgard. Despite that, making a point of doing so intentionally should win him some extra goodwill. Considering Zenjirou's temperament, showing good faith would only serve them well.

Such were the plans percolating in the young prince's head at that moment.

Chapter 2 — Schemes and Maneuvering

While Yngvi was meeting with his king in Uppasala, Zenjirou had teleported back to Capua and was doing much the same with Aura.

They were sitting opposite each other in the living room of the inner palace. This was always how they arrayed themselves when there was a serious conversation to be had. Zenjirou had finished explaining what had happened in Utgard, and Aura's serious look remained on her face as she spoke heavily.

"I see. A flying sleigh, a temple for giants, and magic writing that makes all of that possible. Our cultures are just too different, so I can barely imagine what you are describing, to be completely honest." She then fell into silence as she considered things. "The problem is that you made this agreement with Utgard entirely of your own accord. I would have you explain exactly why."

Her gaze was not that of his wife, but entirely that of his queen. Zenjirou winced but still met her gaze head-on. After all, he'd expected this response. He adjusted how he was sitting and straightened his back. Other than his phrasing, he acted just as he would with any other nation's king.

"Right. There was just one reason for it. I didn't want to let Utgard and the Twin Kingdoms interact directly."

The reason he kept his phrasing the same as usual was that he'd decided that if he acted entirely like he would in the royal palace, it would interfere with a frank conversation between the two of them.

"The Twin Kingdoms... Explain in detail," she pressed him, her expression still severe.

Zenjirou nodded and continued his explanation. "Firstly, Utgard has glass. I've seen it with my own eyes, so I'm sure of it. They used it in the temple they guided us to. On top of that, as I

explained, they use this magicite and carve magic writing into it to maintain their culture. It might well be due to that, but the engravings that I saw were all far more precise than both the Northern or Southern Continent's. The panes of glass were much less warped and clouded than what I saw in the commonwealth as well. This next bit is just a hypothesis, but they can probably make marbles that will stand up to actual use. It would be by hand, so our production would still probably beat them, but depending on how many craftsmen they have, we could lose in the initial rush."

Once she'd heard his excuse—or rather, explanation—the queen's face grew even more severe. However, the concerns behind that expression had shifted from Zenjirou to the international situation itself. From her perspective, Zenjirou's decision had been the correct one...assuming, of course, that his assumptions held true.

Currently, Capua and the Twin Kingdoms were in an alliance, prepared for opposition from the Northern Continent that would eventually arrive. In that respect, limiting their access to marbles, which would increase their strength—both national and military—could be considered in bad faith. However, that didn't mean they could allow the Twin Kingdoms and Utgard to negotiate either. The current expectation for magic combat tools was to be carried out with the Twin Kingdoms enchanting them and Capua providing the medium: the marbles.

With the personnel being from the Twin Kingdoms and the material coming from Capua, it was an equal relationship. If the material became available from a third party, it would be hard to maintain that equality. Capua would much rather avoid an alliance where they were forced into an inferior position, although it would be the height of foolishness if both nations were swept aside by the Northern Continent. If that was the alternative, even being in an inferior position to the Twin Kingdoms would be preferable. If insisting on the best possible position ended up putting them in the worst one, they would have to compromise, and they would need exact information to make that decision.

Zenjirou was the person to have seen the most of the Northern Continent and the one who viewed them as the most threatening.

Surely it was a serious concern if even he was saying they needed to stop direct trade between Utgard and the Twin Kingdoms.

The optimistic perspective flashed through Aura's mind, but she soon internally refuted it. Aura had a great deal of faith in Zenjirou's personality, but not as much in his abilities and insight. That said, he'd already made the agreement, and overturning it would not be simple. The details and the official agreement were yet to be confirmed, but it would be hard to deny that it was Zenjirou's plan and agreement given how clearly the path had been laid.

She gathered her thoughts. Then, to ensure the information was shared, she put her thoughts into words. "You said that you saw glass itself on the Northern Continent, but that its existence was not a problem, correct?"

"Right. If they could import it from the continent as a whole, we wouldn't have been a problem at all."

No matter how powerful the Twin Kingdoms were, they were unlikely to be the kind of monster able to continue importing strategic resources from the Northern Continent. As Zenjirou said, if they were, they wouldn't be at risk of invasion to begin with. There were still concerns, though.

"I have that letter of introduction from the Priest Yan. We talked about enticing some of those craftsmen before, right? If the Twin Kingdoms was doing that, it'd maybe be a problem," he suggested.

If they could gain the personnel rather than the materials, they would still likely start a project to mass-produce magic tools domestically. Zenjirou's concern was that Capua's plans to do as much themselves were going better than expected. He could not teleport over yet, so the conversation was currently being held through merchants, but there were craftsmen interested in moving.

Still, after a little thought, Aura refuted his concerns. "That would indeed be a risk, but it is unlikely to be one we need to be overly concerned with. First, unlike you, the Twin Kingdoms has no introduction. Secondly, though this is also the case for our nation, there are no advantages to the craftsmen in moving all the way to the Twin Kingdoms. Leaving one's birth country for another is a huge commitment."

Aura paused here for a second before continuing.

"It feels rather shameless for me to tell you that, though. Thirdly, unlike us, they have no one capable of teleportation. Additionally, they have no ports even if they did manage to get an intercontinental trading vessel. With the situation as it is, it is more of a hindrance than a help to concern ourselves with them luring craftsmen to their country."

A kingdom's resources were limited, but the things it had to contend with were practically unlimited. There had to be a priority listing, and low-probability issues along with low-risk issues had to be practically ignored. Aura's judgment was that Zenjirou's concerns about the Twin Kingdoms gaining the foreign craftsmen was one such matter.

Incidentally, the reason Capua's recruitment was going so well was that there were too many craftsmen for the work available. The Northern Continent was advancing quickly in all sorts of spheres. A new technique didn't necessarily mean that every craftsman was capable of it. New skills would be born, old techniques would become commonplace and eventually see a lack of demand. When that cycle was at its fastest, there would be an excess in the workforce—craftsmen who only had the old skills, which had either no demand or an insufficient demand to live off.

It was the worst luck the individuals themselves could have, but the timing for Capua was a stroke of good fortune. Either way, Zenjirou accepted her explanation and replied.

"Then I guess we won't consider it a problem for now, which means our issue is Utgard, right? Uh...I guess the difficulty in trade is the same there too?" he asked, lacking confidence.

The queen looked conflicted for a moment as her husband began to doubt his actions throughout the conversation. "No, from what you have said so far, your decision was correct in itself. From the Twin Kingdoms's perspective, there are no political impediments with Utgard, so transport would be the only issue. Limiting their access to marbles to go through us was the correct choice. My concern is that you made the decision there and made an—albeit provisional—agreement between our nations."

“Did I exceed my authority?” he asked hesitantly, considering the power he’d been given. It made sense. He was the prince consort and practically the only person capable of moving around with teleportation, so the authority he had was vast. His usual claims about the decision not being one he could make and having to discuss it with Aura were essentially a lie. What he lacked was ability and courage, not power.

Therefore, Aura shook her head with a sour look. “From that perspective, there is no concern at all. This lack of concern is my greatest worry, though.”

“What do you mean?”

Aura’s bearing finally returned to that of his wife rather than his monarch. “The people who know about this negotiation are limited to Representative Rök of Utgard and Prince Yngvi of Uppasala, but others will talk. The biggest thing is that the results of these negotiations will need to be publicized eventually, and insightful people will be able to look at the time line and see that it was something you negotiated directly. That is my greatest fear. If word spreads that you made the decision there and then, there will be much greater diplomatic pressure on you than before.”

If nations found out that Prince Consort Zenjirou could make a decision in the moment, they would aim to encourage it. With the choice between a distant and formidable opponent in Aura and a much more easily dealt-with Zenjirou—who could instantly come and go with teleportation—it was inevitable that many would aim for the latter.

“Ah, that makes sense,” he answered, understanding her concern and realizing his lack of forethought. At the same time, it underscored the depth of his wife’s feelings and affection, so he couldn’t help the smile making its way onto his lips. Somehow managing to retain a dignified expression, he continued. “Got it. I don’t know exactly how I’ll deal with it, but I’ll make sure I’m ready.”

“Good. Diplomacy is a conversation, so if you are aware and ready in advance, things are entirely different.”

That marked the end of their discussion about Zenjirou jumping the gun with his negotiations.

Zenjirou shifted his thinking and then started talking about the specifics of the agreement he'd made.

"So, their terms are a route to Utgarða."

Aura hummed in agreement and then said, "Frankly, I have found no magic promising in the slightest."

With that easy admission, Zenjirou—still sitting on the sofa—slumped slightly. "You too? Guess that's the end of it, then. We'll have to pin our hopes on our descendants. You can use the summoning and sending spells, right?"

Aura agreed easily as he pointed out that she'd both brought him to Capua and temporarily sent him back. "Learning and casting a preexisting spell requires different abilities than unraveling the magic language to create something new. I have some skill in the former, but none at all in the latter. It was mostly my uncle, Carlos, who adapted the transport spell into summoning. All I did was adjust the details."

Those adjustments primarily consisted of changing the amount of mana offered and testing several words in the magic language that all had the same meaning in her native tongue. In other words, something that didn't take a vast amount of knowledge and could be accomplished in great part through trial and error.

"So have you still got his writings on the spell? I can compile them all, right? If so, I want to get them onto my computer."

Zenjirou had added the characters used in the region's native tongue to his word processor, so he could type in the local language as well as in Japanese. Fortunately, his steady efforts meant that he was as skilled at reading the language as a Japanese high school graduate would be with English. Of course, there would be a deluge of words he didn't know when it came to something as specialized as magic research, but he didn't need to understand what the words meant to type them out.

Aura put a hand to her chin as she considered it. "It *would* be useful to consolidate all of that disparate information. There are two problems, though. One is that it is impossible to correctly render the pronunciation with our writing. The other is that to access the consolidated data, one would need to be proficient with the use of

the computer."

Despite there being problems, neither was significant. The first point was true for the written records as well, while the latter was lessened by space-time magic research being limited to the royal family. They could simply teach their descendants how to use the computer at the same time.

"Once it's digitized, it's a lot easier to look through everything than with paper copies. The problem would be saving it all. It's a bit late to be worrying about it, but I should have bought a big external drive. Well, that's years down the line anyway," Zenjirou mused, the pointless complaints drifting from his lips.

The secret time reversal spell of the Capuan royal family would make it possible to keep the weapons of the royal family—the generator, computer, and so on—functioning semipermanently, but the contents of the computer could be an issue. Time reversal was exactly what its name suggested—not repair magic. If they did nothing and then turned back the clock by a year for the computer, it would work just as it had back then, but the data stored within it would also be reverted.

To avoid that, they would need to separately store data they wanted to keep. Zenjirou technically had several SD cards and memory sticks, but the total storage space wasn't all that great. Individual documents and spreadsheets didn't take up much space on their own, but every bit counted. If things went as planned and the research took a century or more, all while being recorded in the computer, they would eventually run out of room. The storage space on the computer itself probably wasn't a major concern, but the external storage limits had to be kept in mind.

"If it is a future concern, you could go and buy another, no? When the stars align again in thirty years, I can send you to and fetch you from that world. I doubt you used all of your currency there, did you?"

Joy flashed across Zenjirou's face for a moment, but then he thought things over and shook his head. "It's an option, but we probably shouldn't rely too heavily on it. Technology, particularly this kind of thing, advances extremely quickly there. In thirty years,

there's no guarantee I'd be able to find any compatible parts."

If ten years seemed like ancient history, then thirty years was practically prehistoric. It was entirely possible that whatever he could find at that point would be wholly incompatible with his current laptop. In fact, Zenjirou himself didn't really think of cloud storage as a data backup method. The world of technology had changed so much in less than a decade.

Aura, however, wouldn't be able to understand such rapid change. Even so, she offered a solution. "Then why not buy a new computer as well?"

"I don't know whether I could manage that with the money I've got left. The way I see it, I *should* easily be able to, but prices will have changed as well. Besides, in thirty years, they'll probably have changed the style of currency, so trying to use old cash to buy a computer could set off all kinds of alarm bells. I don't know what they'd do with an account that's been inactive for thirty years, and buying a computer with cash might not be the easiest thing."

What position would he be in when he went back? They'd probably have declared him either dead or missing. There was always the chance he'd end up drawing the attention of the law, and that would probably make things even more difficult.

"Hm. I admit to not understanding the details, but the number of possible issues mean we should not rely on it."

"Yeah. Still, you're right. Text documents should fit on my SD cards and memory sticks for a while."

"Very well. In that case, Zenjirou, I formally entrust the investigation of a route between Utgard and Utgarða to you."

The official decree from the queen made Zenjirou straighten and respond formally, "Understood, Your Majesty."

"You understand the implications, no? I will be unable to assist you. I lack the time to dedicate myself to it. Additionally, you will be responsible for ensuring it is continued by the next generation."

"Of course."

The current generation of the Capuan royal family consisted solely of Zenjirou and Aura. Therefore, saying that Zenjirou had this responsibility was also saying that he would be the only one

involved. The issue was that he would also have to take charge of passing down the work to the next generation. He would have to get things to a position where they *could* be passed down by the time his successor—one of his and Aura's children—was old enough to take over.

If each generation had to start from scratch, unless one successor was a veritable genius in magic research, it would never get close to completion. Zenjirou had to build the foundation for all of that, so it was a rather hefty role.

"Guess I'll have to get back to studying properly again. I'm pretty sure I'll end up running into a roadblock I can't get past on my own. Who do I ask for advice then? You? Lady Octavia? Espiridion?"

His somewhat rambling concerns prompted Aura to relax slightly before answering. "I will, of course, answer your questions, though it would be limited to the inner palace here. I have little in the way of applicable knowledge or free time, though."

Still, she had much more knowledge than Zenjirou did at the moment. If you limited the topic to space-time magic rather than magic in general, Aura was the leading expert among the living, though the fact that "second place" was also "last" in that leaderboard was a concern.

"Lady Octavia is out of the question. There is too much at risk to let it leak, both in terms of our lineal magic and the agreement with Utgard."

Octavia's personality made her one of the most trusted people in the country, but her loyalty was not solely to the crown. She was the wife of one of the most independent nobles, Count Márquez. Given her position, there was little they could let leak to her.

"Finally, the ol—Espiridion—is someone I will grant limited permission to discuss the matter with. Such conversations will take place within a room of the royal palace, and no one else will be present. The only exception I will allow is Ines. All discussions must be verbal. Anything written could potentially go missing."

"What about audio recordings?"

Aura was already aware of the recorder Zenjirou had brought from Japan and its capabilities. She thought it over for a few

moments before nodding. “Again, in a limited fashion. If you are taking it with you, you must report it to me that morning, as well as its safe return.”

The possibility that Zenjirou would forget it somewhere, resulting in someone unsavory getting hold of it and managing to figure out how to use it through trial and error was rather low. Moreover, the audio itself would be exempt from the effect of the soul of language. As long as the hypothetical thief wasn’t exceptionally skilled in the language of magic, they wouldn’t be able to understand what was being said. For such a small risk, it was worth it.

“Got it. It might be limited, but with his help, maybe it’ll go quicker than we expect.”

“I would like to think so,” Aura said, agreeing with his optimism.

Although they potentially had centuries, they were all but trying to catch a cloud. Significant progress within their own lifetimes would be a godsend.

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A month later, the twins from Uppasala were meeting for the first time in a while.

“Welcome, Prince Yngvi,” Freya said to him. “Allow me to offer you a reception as a representative of Capua.”

“My thanks for your courteous greeting, Lady Freya.”

The room of the inner palace they were in was completely built of stone and let no light in from outside at all. While their words and actions were every inch the formality expected of a meeting between foreign dignitaries, the emotions in their matching blue eyes betrayed them—they had the light of children delightedly playing up their roles.

Indeed, the soldiers of Capua guarding the room, as well as the knight from Uppasala sent ahead of the prince, had slight smiles on their faces at the twins’ antics. Only one person—Skaji, standing behind Freya—let out a sigh of exasperation, likely due to her own diligent nature.

“If I may guide you, then?”

"Please do."

The silver-haired twins left the room, their attendants behind them. An annex of the palace had been readied for Yngvi's use, and once he reached his room, the prince immediately lounged on the sofa.

He wasn't just acting as if he was relaxing, he was really doing so. You wouldn't think it was his first time on the continent, let alone in the country or room. His daring in that respect was just like Freya.

The only other people in the room were their own trusted confidants, so with the only people present being close to them, they reverted to their more familiar attitudes.

"Whew. It's hot here. I thought it was just the fire in the room at first, but it wasn't even any cooler outside."

As he spoke, Yngvi waved a hand to fan his face.

"It's much better now," Freya told him with a degree of pride. "The blazing season—what we would call summer—literally kills people."

She had spent much longer in the crucible than he had. She was enjoying finally having someone she could look superior to after spending most of her time unable to adapt to the continent and worrying those around her.

Yngvi looked up to the ceiling with exaggerated despair.

"Ahh, that's rough. He told me over and over that it was completely different from home."

As the caster of the teleportation spell, Zenjirou went back and forth between the two countries more than anyone. He had repeatedly warned the Uppasalans—or more accurately, Gustav and Yngvi—about how different the two countries were. It mostly boiled down to saying that Capua had done all they could to help the diplomats from Uppasala with the heat and requesting that Uppasala do the same for the diplomats from Capua regarding the cold. He had even shown the drake parchment recording the purchase of the mist-generating magic tools, and there was a letter of appreciation for Capua's consideration from the diplomats. Uppasala had installed fireplaces in all of the rooms of the Capuan embassy and allowed diplomats to use firewood and charcoal as much as they wanted.

Hearing her brother talk about her husband, Freya asked after him. “Is he doing well?”

The very fact that Yngvi had arrived via teleportation meant that Zenjirou had been there to send him. “He is. Contributing a lot as well. He won’t be coming back for a while.”

There was a pause as Freya’s face shifted into a serious look. “Did something happen?”

The original plan was for Zenjirou to return that day. He’d only gone to Uppasala to send Yngvi back in the first place. Now, she was suddenly hearing that he wouldn’t be returning soon.

Yngvi had said Zenjirou was well, and he was clearly well enough to send the prince over. Yngvi didn’t seem to be implying he’d been hurt either, so something else must have happened.

Yngvi’s smile didn’t waver, but the look in his eyes sharpened as he answered. “This morning, we received a report from an undercover agent. The church has captured Priest Yan. When we decided to react as quickly as possible, Zenjirou offered to teleport people from the palace to Logfort.”

The capital of the country was on the northern coast of the huge Lake Mater. Logfort was on its eastern coast, which was originally linked to the sea by a multitude of rivers, although several kings had led excavations to make a large canal that was—only just—navigable by vessels like the *Glasir’s Leaf*.

Therefore, for people to come from abroad to the capital and then return home, they would have to switch boats at Logfort. That was the quickest, shortest route for most. But in spite of the need to switch vessels, the majority of the travel being over water made it relatively quick, since water was practically the fastest travel method by this world’s standards. Still, it went without saying that teleportation was far superior to that.

Freya understood the severity of the situation, so her face was deadly serious as she questioned her brother further. “To Logfort? He couldn’t send them directly abroad? He visited Złota Wolność before.”

Although Freya was part of Capua now, she still wasn’t deeply knowledgeable about their lineal magic. However, she at least knew

that it allowed one to visit anywhere one had been before.

"He said not," Yngvi answered.

The three things necessary for magic were correct pronunciation, the correct amount of mana, and the correct visualization. Zenjirou's magic was still at the level where the slightest distraction could cause the spell to fail. Therefore, knowing that he wasn't officially allowed to teleport somewhere and that it was an illegal act would almost always distract and cause him to fail.

"I see. Still, even just sending them to Logfort will make things go much faster."

"Father asked him to go and summon the commander to speak with him personally."

"Surely that's imposing on him too much? I understand the desire, though." Freya sighed. She had personally experienced just how convenient teleportation was. It was amazingly effective for emergencies like this. Unlike written or relayed orders, being able to directly speak to those concerned meant that orders could be given both as quickly as possible and as precisely as possible.

"Actually, considering the situation, should you even be here? Eric isn't there either."

Now that Yngvi was officially the crown prince, Freya wasn't sure he should have come to the Southern Continent given the situation back in the north. But her brother merely shrugged.

"It's just a matter of priority. Priest Yan's capture is a sign of big change and needs attention, but there will be time before we have to respond. I'd much rather be prioritizing my wedding." His ambition was clear as he spoke.

"The need to rush means there's going to be a lot of backlash," Freya commented.

"I suppose. I hope it shows our seriousness that we are still trying to achieve it, even if we need to rush things."

Yan's capture was an indication that storms of chaos would soon be ravaging the Northern Continent. Fortunately, the separation of Uppasala—both politically and geographically—from the church's influence meant there was a significant possibility it wouldn't trouble them. And yet there was still a chance it could. It was easy to see

how taking a woman from Capua as his second wife—eventually second queen—in the middle of that would stir things up.

Of course, there was the option of saying that the time wasn't right and calling it off, so Yngvi wanted to have the wedding be a *fait accompli* before word of the priest's arrest spread. As he had said, it would show both his and his father's seriousness regarding the marriage.

Freya decided to put off the discussion of the Northern Continent for now. "You should talk to Her Majesty about that, not me. She needs to hear the report about Sir Zenjirou's change of plans as well. Why not ask about the marriage at the same time? Wait, what's with that look?" Freya noticed that Yngvi had gotten a sour expression as she spoke.

"Well, about that. He said that I should talk to Queen Aura about what we'd be offering in compensation for his assistance."

"My condolences," she said with a chuckle. "Her Majesty is a strong opponent, unlike him."

"Gimme a break. Uppasala's a poor country," he despaired theatrically, staring up at the ceiling. The look on his face along with the sound of his voice showed that those words were well and truly how he felt.

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Several days later, Zenjirou returned to Capua, albeit later than originally planned. Soon after his arrival, he found himself speaking with Aura in their living room. The upheaval in their plans had made it unclear when he would get back, so his safe return had led Aura to cancel all of her official duties for the day and head back to the inner palace herself.

While part of that was concern for her beloved spouse, it was also the correct thing to do as the country's queen. Although the events might be unfolding on the distant Northern Continent, she needed specifics as quickly as possible.

As soon as Aura had sat down opposite him, Zenjirou launched into an explanation. "Honestly, the information I can give you isn't

much different from what Yngvi already relayed. There wasn't anything new over the following days."

It was an obvious fact, but outside of a few exceptions, information traveled extremely slowly in this world. Zenjirou had teleported himself to Logfort to fulfill the king's request, but there was no new information there. It made sense; the information was coming from the middle of the continent, so it would struggle to get all the way to the northernmost reaches in just a few days.

"Yet it still seems you have news to report?" Aura prompted him, her eyes sharp.

Zenjirou's face remained stiff as he answered. "I do. It might be too little time for information to come from overseas, but it was plenty of time for conversations to happen within the country. The local leaders have compiled a list of predictions for what will happen next. Priest Yan and the church—in this case, the Church of the Claw, which arrested him—will both refuse to concede, and he will be executed according to their traditions."

His voice shook as he spoke. It had been several years since he had come to this world, but his views on life and death were still the norm for modern Japan. He didn't have the nerve to remain calm when he heard that someone he knew had been arrested and would likely be executed. It was only Aura and him there, so he didn't have to feign strength or endure alone. It would be worse than pointless to do it, it would be detrimental. Aura wouldn't misunderstand the kind of man he was.

"Hm, that is far from pleasant. I understand why the church would not concede, but it makes less sense to me why Priest Yan would not when execution is the consequence. Does that mean the church is forcing the execution by making unreasonable demands?"

The dialogue could have been meant to create a veneer of acceptability, but the demands being something the priest could not meet would make execution the only option. Such events were by no means a rarity in the political world that Aura had spent her life in.

Despite the queen's feeling that this could be one of those instances, Zenjirou shook his head after a moment. "No. Assuming that Uppasala is correct, at least, the church would accept either

outcome. If anything, they might prefer to persuade him."

He then began to explain the circumstances. Yan had publicly called the church's methods wrong, challenging the very basis of their faith. The church had previously condemned him and ordered him to follow the will of the church as a whole, but he had used his positions both within the institution and the university to circumvent that, as criticism of the status quo was allowed through academic research.

His arrest was due to the church finally having had enough and forcing the matter. It was likely a difficult decision even for them. Yan was both a priest and the dean of the dracology department, so many people respected him. Executing him would certainly cause pushback. Therefore, having him publicly admit that he was wrong was their ideal outcome rather than his execution.

Of course, even then, there would still be pushback based on the church forcing him to change his position. But threat or no, compromising would hugely weaken his stance and reduce public anger.

Zenjirou's explanation of all of that seemed to satisfy Aura.

"I see, then this priest is stubborn enough to choose death when the choices are execution or compromising his views."

"That's how the leaders of Uppasala see it."

"What are your thoughts, Zenjirou?" she asked him.

Zenjirou recalled his meetings with the priest and eventually shook his head. "I'm not sure. I saw him as a logical, peaceful person. I couldn't tell you whether he was so firm in his beliefs that he'd pick death over betraying those values, though. I just don't know. I didn't interact with him enough to be sure. Marquis Pomorskie of Złota Wolność said, 'For better or worse, he is simultaneously like a mountain and a storm.'"

He had immediately been able to see why the lord called Yan a mountain. Large, calm, and unmoving described his personality well. The latter part hadn't been something Zenjirou had seen personally, but the lord and priest clearly had some history, and Yan's stubborn defiance of the church so far, coupled with Uppasala's view that he would choose execution over compromising his beliefs, made the

moniker much more likely to fit.

"I see. Still, we are too distant, so all we can do is gather information or perhaps make our move first."

The second half of her statement was mostly Aura talking to herself, and it prompted her to fall into thought. People, goods, and information: all of those things were limited in speed, so it was extremely difficult to act decisively against a distant nation. In that respect, the teleportation that Capua possessed could be considered unfair, although there were limits on the number of times it could be used, the number of people it could act upon, and the destinations it could reach, so it was not an absolute trump card.

That meant that, as Aura had just said, interfering with chaos and conflict in distant countries meant they had to assume their predictions were correct to some degree and strike preemptively. After all, Zenjirou or Aura could go to and from a place and collect information within a few days, but for anyone else, teleportation would be a one-way trip.

Zenjirou knew that she was talking to herself and quietly waited to hear what she had to say. Eventually, she had thought everything over and spoke.

"Now that I think about it, you mentioned a mercenary by the same name. You spoke rather highly of him as a commander and said that he was concerned for the priest. How would he react, do you think?"

It made sense to be more concerned with the free and strong fighter than the already arrested priest. Uppasala had spent more time focusing on the mercenary's actions than the priest's.

"The church kept details like that in mind as well. They carried out the arrest when Commander Yan had finished his contract with Princess Anna of the commonwealth and was on his way to see the priest."

"I see. So they kept damage to a minimum."

The mercenary had been hired by Princess Anna of Złota Wolność and had practically been their commander in chief for the battle of Tannenwald. The battle itself had ended in the commonwealth's victory, and once Yan had dealt with the aftermath, his contract had

ended and the church had picked that moment to strike.

As Zenjirou said, that showed just how seriously the church was taking him. If they had waited until after the mercenary had reunited with the priest, they would not have captured the priest so easily. Conversely, if they had attempted it while Yan was still in the princess's employ, he would have taken his forces and potentially rescued the priest.

Of course, he was fundamentally just a hired commander, so being able to use those forces for his own ends wasn't likely. Still, as things stood, it would have been enough of a possibility to be considered a risk.

While he might have only been a contracted officer, the combination of a victory and having won their trust meant a fair few squads might have followed his orders if he'd declared a change of plan and another site to attack. Of course, he would have to have been willing to throw away all of his credibility and achievements as a mercenary to do so, yet that seemed eminently possible as far as the priest was concerned.

"I wonder how he will act," Aura commented. "From what I've heard, he seems unlikely to give up on carrying out a rescue just because he doesn't have enough men."

"They said that in Uppasala as well. He's apparently covering his tracks, so he's definitely planning something. They know where the majority of his most trusted soldiers are, though, so he's either going it alone or with a bare minimum of aid. They are fairly sure he is still at least somewhat rational."

Yan led his own mercenary group, but the majority of his troop had received rewards for their victory in the recent battle and were currently relaxing and spending that money.

"If he is concealing himself then he is certainly planning *something*. With his most trusted people being left behind, though, it seems he still has the wherewithal not to attempt a direct fight."

Zenjirou nodded at the queen's analysis. "Yeah, he might be strong with a weapon and one of the best commanders on the continent, but he isn't some superhuman who can take on hundreds or thousands of opponents with minimal allies. We think he might

infiltrate the place Priest Yan is being held and try to free him."

"But despite taking that into account, Uppasala believes the execution will occur? Is that because they see Commander Yan's chances as low or nonexistent?"

"That's half of it. The other half is that even if he does get inside, Priest Yan would probably refuse the assistance."

"He is that stubborn?" Aura asked, an eyebrow rising in surprise.

Zenjirou sighed before answering.

"It certainly seems so. Or at least Uppasala thinks so."

Gustav and the other leaders of the country hadn't personally been acquainted with the priest, so their assumptions about him were based on hearsay and what they knew about his public actions. It was dangerous to assume anything, but what they knew made them believe that Yan would not pursue the illegal route and would instead continue appealing his own legitimacy from within prison up until the moment of his execution.

"I am glad that the man is not on the Southern Continent," Aura muttered.

He must have been insufferable from a statesman's perspective. He had the charisma to rally people and the will to lead those people to try to change the world, while also being so righteous that he would not allow threats or backroom deals to make him stray from his course. There was no type of person a ruler would want in their country less.

"Still, it is a shame," she continued. "If he survived, he could buy us quite a lot of time."

There was a long pause.

"Zenjirou?" she prompted, her face growing even more serious.

"Yeah?" he replied, straightening reflexively.

"This Priest Yan has absolutely no mana, correct?"

"That's right. He said so himself, and I certainly couldn't sense any from him. He said that he had some other way of making the soul of language work for him. Aura, what's going on?"

Her question about that oddity gave Zenjirou a fair idea of what she wanted to say. He gulped and gingerly put his assumption into words.

“Are you planning on testing time reversal on Priest Yan? On...his corpse?”

Time reversal was a spell passed down in utter secrecy through the Capuan royal family. It was, as the name implied, a spell that rewound time on the target. However, the suitable targets were limited to targets with no mana. Therefore, it was almost unused apart from repairing treasured swords broken from use, pieces of art burnt to a cinder, or expensive nonmagic tools. It had been tested on creatures with no mana of their own as well—insects, small fish, and similar animals—and had been found to rejuvenate them too.

Priest Yan was in the extremely rare—or unique, as far as anyone knew—position of being a human with no mana.

“Yes, that would be worth testing,” Aura answered.

Zenjirou then responded harshly and seriously to her answer. It was a conscious decision to do so, of course. After all, he was the only one present other than Aura, and she had come up with the idea. There was no one but him who could point out holes in the plan or any dangers. “And worth the risk it carries? He will have been executed by that point. Even getting his corpse will be rather difficult.”

In terms of planning and scheming, Aura was by far his superior. That did not mean that there was no point in questioning her, though. Even veteran craftsmen could make an error that a newly minted one would not. A pro could potentially miss something even an amateur could point out.

That was why it was necessary for strategies and plans to be looked over by someone other than the person who came up with them. Ideally, many people, in fact. However, more people checking over such things also reduced the secrecy of it. Striking the right balance between the spread of information and how the matter was approached was difficult.

Regardless, Zenjirou was the only person capable of speaking about the plan. He didn’t have the option of assuming ignorance and letting things go unquestioned. He had to ask the obvious questions, the seemingly pointless ones, as well as the seemingly absurd ones.

All of those together might expose a blind spot in Aura's thinking.

The queen's own understanding of that fact meant that she answered the obvious criticism with no reproach and in detail. "You are quite right; it is not worth exposing us to danger. So we shall not. Instead, we would contact someone trustworthy in the vicinity. If the mercenary could retrieve the priest's corpse, then I would restore it. If Commander Yan incited his mercenaries to action and is listed as wanted by the church before we contact him, we would scrap the plan."

The risks would be placed on the mercenary as much as possible. Considering his apparent devotion to the priest, it seemed rather likely that he would accept any risks that a potential restoration incurred.

"So if we can minimize the risks, we'll do it, and if not, we'll completely drop it? That sounds good to me, yeah. Still, it seems like letting Commander Yan know about our circumstances will still be a risk in and of itself," Zenjirou mused.

The commander was a veteran mercenary and intelligent individual. Letting someone like him know about the secret spell's existence, and indeed the plan to restore the priest, was quite risky. There was a definite truth to Zenjirou's words.

Of course, Aura had also thought of that. "On that front, I would like to decide after gathering more information on the man. The final step would be meeting him personally, and if I am concerned, I would scrap the plan then too. I would also only inform him of any certainties regarding the spell, to avoid giving him premature hope. If he is unwilling to accept our terms, that will be the end of it."

"What are we certain of?"

Aura lowered her voice before answering his question. "That the reversal only works for targets lacking mana, as I explained before. In other words, the spell functions on corpses, as corpses themselves contain no mana."

"Ah, right, the issue is the resurrection, but the spell itself works on corpses. Is that the same for magic tools too?"

The queen nodded. "Indeed, it restores their form, but only that. Their abilities as magic tools remain gone. We have gotten off topic,

though. Either way, what I shall tell the commander is that if he recovers the priest's body, I can restore its form."

Many people would see it as worthwhile to neaten a corpse and properly bury it. Recovering the body would be difficult, but Zenjirou agreed that the very possibility of restoration made it likely that the mercenary would cooperate.

"Right, that makes sense. If Priest Yan is executed as a heretic, he'll probably be burned at the stake. Commander Yan would almost certainly be willing to risk his life to restore the priest. He's a follower of the dragon faith, after all."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

The queen's question prompted Zenjirou to explain what he'd only just found out himself. "Right, well, people in the church—or I guess those who follow the dragon faith specifically—see a proper burial as the correct way to treat a dead person. Burning someone at the stake is considered a judgment on their soul. It apparently stems from the tradition of true dragons' breath burning a criminal and their soul away to nothing."

The church's traditions for a proper burial were cleaning and purifying the corpse before dressing it in clothes that were treated the same way and placing it in a coffin before burying it in the earth. A damaged or missing body could not be treated like that or the dead person would be lost and suffer. Burning to death was considered one of the most damaging acts to the soul. Naturally, cremation was not a concept they had.

A small smile made its way onto Aura's lips. "Oh, they balk at cremation? That is a rather significant difference. Still, it is good news for us. It certainly does make it much more likely that Commander Yan will accept."

In animistic countries like Capua, cremation was the norm. The four main spirits were of the earth, water, fire, and wind. Therefore cremation, and burials—whether in the earth, at sea, or in the sky—were all seen as the dead returning to be one with the spirits, so there was no real aversion to any of them. Sky burials had sanitary concerns and could also attract carnivorous drakes, so they were allowed in very few countries.

Ignoring the emotional side of things and just considering the physical phenomenon, a corpse that had been burned to death would be smaller and lighter than a buried one. It would be much easier to sneak out with such remains than a whole body in a coffin.

"Yeah, winning him over shouldn't be too difficult. It'll probably be pretty difficult to remove even the charred remains from the church, though. We can't ignore the potential that he might get captured and reveal that we're acting behind the scenes." Zenjirou's inability to ignore risks was a good thing, but the way he almost *only* looked at the risks was also a shortcoming.

"Hm, there is not a way to avoid that. We could potentially entrust communication to a representative with instructions not to reveal us. However, doing so would mean we would be unable to gain his trust. Therefore I see the risk as acceptable. Of course, taking the risk of his capture into account, we must also take measures to render that less likely."

"Like what?"

"Simple. We persuade Commander Yan to wait until things have calmed down. The people of the church are not monsters with infinite amounts of concentration. However dangerous they believe the priest to be, execution renders him a corpse, a thing. Immediately after the execution would be one thing, but a month, several, or even a year later, I highly doubt they will be as guarded."

The suggestion was extremely simple. That in itself made it much more effective. In every profession, there were limited personnel available. It was a given that they would be removed from positions that were seen as unnecessary. Containing the priest while he was alive was one thing, but continuing to guard his corpse even after the execution seemed extremely unlikely.

Still, Zenjirou had a concern with that plan. "The spell uses a lot more mana when you have to reverse more time, right? Will that be an issue?"

He wasn't the most informed about magic, but he did of course remember the top secret information on time reversal. Aura was the one who had given him that information, so she had certainly considered the question herself.

"No. I will use the future compensation magic tool. I do not have as many opportunities for spellcasting as you, so I have stored quite an amount of mana. I should be able to reverse time by over a year for something the size of a human body."

The magic tool she was referring to was something that Francesco had made in collaboration with her. The spell it was based on was one of the Capuan royal family's lineal magics and allowed them to pay for a spell with their future mana.

There were several strong spells within space-time magic, but the amount of mana they required was high. Although royals had far more mana than the norm, there were still limitations. Future compensation was one of the methods to surpass that restriction.

If they paid three days' worth of mana, they could cast something that cost four times the amount of mana they ordinarily had when it was combined with their present mana. In exchange, for the next three days, they would not regain any mana at all.

The spell was powerful but inconvenient, so Aura had commissioned a magic tool from Francesco that greatly improved matters. It particularly excelled in its ability to add to the mana stored within it to a spell. Aura was, for better or worse, bound to the throne, so there were days when she would not use any magic whatsoever. Storing some of her mana on those days within the magic tool meant that she now had a significant stock.

"If I remember right, you can store mana bit by bit, but you have to use it all at once. In which case, it's the same either way, so we can postpone it by a year, right? I guess that works."

Of course, Zenjirou agreed with the logic that the church wouldn't keep a firm watch on a buried or abandoned corpse. Even so, he couldn't agree with the plan.

"Still, it's a real worry if Commander Yan fails. He couldn't negotiate with them, could he? For Priest Yan's corpse at least."

"I thought of that as well. The issue is how likely it is to work and what effects it would have on future events. It would be natural for the commander to wish to retrieve his employer's corpse. Therefore, there would be no issue with attempting negotiations. If they went well, that would be perfect. However, if they failed, the corpse would

inevitably be much more heavily guarded for a while. That would make forcing the matter far more difficult," she answered smoothly.

Succeeding would be the best result, but failure would make the alternative much more difficult. In turn, it made more sense to show no sign of it and simply take it by force after waiting. Zenjirou could understand that.

"Right, that'd be the best result, but it's not all that likely, and it'd make managing to steal it harder too."

"Indeed. Besides, even if Commander Yan failed and was captured, it would be unlikely to cause us harm. After all, he is already known as a follower of the priest, no? That means they would be unlikely to assume someone had prompted it."

Commander Yan had both the means and motive to rescue the priest—or at least retrieve his body. So Aura's statement that they would assume it was of his own accord was rather persuasive.

"That makes sense. Not negotiating and just taking it would be quicker and less risky overall, then."

Despite his agreement, the look on Zenjirou's face was still conflicted. Aura saw that and questioned him.

"What is it? Is something still bothering you?"

He looked away awkwardly for a moment, but eventually decided to speak his mind honestly. "Yeah. Doing it will clearly put Capua against the church. We can't do anything about that risk."

The look on her face in response to that was utter shock.

"Aura?" Zenjirou asked.

She didn't manage to reply immediately. That was how unthinkable what Zenjirou had just said was to her. He was from another world, so his fundamental viewpoint was different. He had only managed to disguise those differences with earnest effort in learning along with logically minding his comments and actions. It had been a while since she had felt the difference so keenly.

She let out a deep sigh, forcibly calming herself before speaking dispassionately to him. "Zenjirou, they were already our enemy from long ago."

"Yeah, I know they were potential enemies, at least."

The queen continued her explanation for her understanding yet

utterly oblivious husband.

"That is not what I mean. They are far more clear enemies than you think. We have gathered information on the church from those who have visited the Northern Continent, including you. Analyzing it, we have looked at their beliefs, the way they go about their business, and how they are likely to act. They will almost certainly clash with the Southern Continent, and with Capua specifically. The reason they do not currently see us as enemies is that we are out of sight. The Northern Continent is currently in the midst of a revolution in shipbuilding and seafaring capabilities, so it is only a matter of time before we are no longer out of sight. It is not a short time either. That is why avoiding angering the church or making enemies of them is completely pointless—at least, if we let it stop us from acting."

This time it was Zenjirou's turn to be lost for words, and he paled. He had thought he understood, thought he was ready. Now he *had* to understand, though. He had inadvertently been ignoring an enemy.

He and Aura both saw the church, and the countries of the Northern Continent that formed their sphere of influence, as potential enemies. There were definitive differences from there, though. Zenjirou had been focusing on not making "potential" enemies into enemies in truth. Doing that would at least buy time before those nations *did* turn into enemies, and it could potentially be prevented entirely.

Meanwhile, as far as Aura was concerned, a potential enemy was already an enemy and the important thing was to get into as superior a position as possible before they acted upon it, so appeasement in general was off the table. To begin with, it was not uncommon for countries to break even written treaties and agreements with each other, so just trying to appease an opponent would do more harm than good in her view.

Neither way of thinking was wholly right or wrong, but Aura's view was the more common one among the leaders of this world. In turn, that meant that it was almost an unshakable truth that Zenjirou's way of thinking would pass to that majority. He was not

dense enough to misunderstand that.

"Okay," he said eventually. "I'll change how I think about it. Though in that case, is reviving Priest Yan more important than I thought? It'd limit what our enemies in the church can do, right?"

"You are not wrong but also not correct. I do indeed want to delay the Northern Continent arriving in force by any amount of time that I can. Resurrecting the priest would be one of those actions. However, there should be at least a decade before things become an issue, so our priority is not interfering with the church, but in strengthening ourselves."

Aura's current priority was developing intercontinental travel in their own right. If they didn't, they wouldn't be able to stand on equal footing with the Northern Continent. If they could not get into a position where they could strike back against an attack, they could not carry out even a political war. Strengthening their nation was important for that. Delaying the church was nothing more than buying time to do so.

"I see, so we need to think of cost-effective strategies," Zenjirou replied, his face softening in understanding.

Between interfering on the Northern Continent and delaying things for years or stagnating due to their focus elsewhere while the other nations grew in strength by leaps and bounds, the latter would be the better situation for Capua.

"Indeed. As far as we are concerned, we stand to gain if it succeeds, and that is all. It will take few resources and risk us little as well."

With the explanation over, the conversation returned to the conclusion they had started with.

"So, what exactly do you mean?"

"We will watch and wait until Priest Yan's execution. If Commander Yan acts before then, we will not interfere. After the execution, we will attempt to get into contact with the commander. If he acts before we manage to do so, we will not interfere. In that case, his actions are unlikely to be those we want—the retrieval of the corpse, that is."

It would be more likely he would be attempting to take revenge

at that point. Contacting the mercenary after he had done something so serious would be too great a risk. In other words, their only opportunity to contact him was after the execution, but before he actually responded to it.

"Can we manage that?" Zenjirou asked skeptically after a long pause. "We'd have to send someone to do it, and the commander is in hiding."

They would need to find a skilled mercenary's hideout in an unfamiliar setting, and on a short time limit. Zenjirou was well aware that would be no mean feat.

"It will likely be difficult, yes," Aura agreed readily. "This plan is essentially making the attempt because it costs us little. It will still take a fair amount of effort, though, considering how the world will go."

It would be a windfall if it went well and a fairly small effect if it did not. The chances were greater that the plan would never see the light of day. The scope of it sent a chill down Zenjirou's back as he looked at the smiling queen.

"That's, just... Wow. You're always making plans like that. You're a real tactician."

Failure would change nothing, while success would be a stroke of fortune. That alone could influence people's lives, and potentially their deaths. It was the correct attitude for a royal or state leader, but it wasn't something Zenjirou felt he could emulate.

Aura shook her head with a rueful smile at the mix of awe and dread on his face. "This is far from enough to call myself a tactician. A true tactician is terrifying. Someone caught up in their plans would be incapable of realizing they were part of any such plan, or even that the tactician existed in the first place."

"There are actually people like that?" Zenjirou couldn't help but ask.

The queen's answer was firm. "There are. Every large country has one or two of them. In other words, so do we, so you need not overly fear it," she responded with a gentle smile to reassure him.

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The next day, a letter was waiting for Aura in her office in the royal palace. The sender was listed as Johan. The crest on the wax seal was an uncountable amount of coral with eyes growing from it. It was the crest of the Kingdom of Tucale, one of the countries in the western region of the Southern Continent.

"It just had to be Johan. If it had at least been Johan XVII..." Aura griped with a strained expression, dropping somewhat roughly into her seat.

Johan was an extremely common name on the continent, but combined with the crest of Tucale, it took on a special meaning. The kingdom had a strange custom: male members of the royal family were all named Johan, while female members were named Julia. Therefore, only those who took the throne were called Johan with a generational suffix. All other royals had other aliases and generally used them even when introducing themselves.

The name "Johan" alone on a missive from the royal family, however, signified that its contents were a consensus between every male royal. This bore far more weight than "Johan XVII," which would have been sent on a single person's whim. Since this one was signed with only Johan and Julia, it meant that it had been sent with the approval of the entire royal family.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Fabio, her middle-aged secretary, commented, his expression completely unmoved despite his words.

"Considering historical events, you can hardly say you have a 'feeling' about a certainty," Aura retorted as she unsealed the letter and cast her eyes over it. Then, she looked wordlessly up at the ceiling.

"What does it say?" Fabio asked.

Aura remained silent, passing it to him. For once, the man's expression shifted, hardening.

"A person's location? 'Commander Yan's current and likely future movements and hideout'? I must say this is rather detailed. I assume this information is particularly valuable to you?"

"Like little else could be," she practically spat.

The information was extremely useful to Aura. The letter

contained exact information on the commander's whereabouts. Unfortunately, she was not familiar with many place names on the Northern Continent, so it was little help on its own. However, asking someone who was would quickly solve that.

"The Tucale family's divination magic?"

"Yes. They are just as irritating as always," Aura agreed, her annoyance plain on her face.

The lineal magic that granted the Tucale family the right to rule was divination. It effectively provided correct answers when the right questions were asked. There were many restrictions, and the requirement to cast a new spell for every question increased the burden, so it was far from omnipotence, but there was no doubt about its utility. Obtaining information you would ordinarily have no way of knowing was a powerful weapon. Facing them meant you had to assume there was some possibility that any secret you might have had was already known to them. The kingdom also knew how to leverage that weapon well, just as they were doing now.

"So, how does this information benefit you, Your Majesty?"

"It elevates an originally idle thought to a plan with a high chance of success."

Aura's iron self-control meant she'd already regained her composure. The information on Yan's location was listed as being from three days prior, but the letter also included likely future destinations as well. With that much information, it would be far from difficult to send someone to make contact.

The problem was that the darker skin that was characteristic of the Capuans would inevitably stand out, so there was no one appropriate for them to send on hand.

"One of Freya's soldiers could be an option," Aura mused, speaking aloud to clarify her thoughts. "No, if we are doing that, hiring someone who is already there may be better. We can ask Uppasala to be our go-between. In fact, they owe us for Zenjirou's help with gathering information. We are in a strong position there. The question is, how much of the particulars do we reveal?"

As she spoke, she tapped her right index finger on the table. Whatever else, she was sure of one thing—she would not be

revealing Tucale's involvement in providing the information.

Although Uppasala would be making contact and Commander Yan would be carrying out the scheme, and Priest Yan would be revived if it came to fruition, Aura saw no reason to go out of her way to inform them where her information had come from. Thus, if the plan *did* succeed, neither Commander Yan nor the church would know that Tucale had been involved, even if their hidden participation was absolutely vital.

"Someone caught up in their plans would be incapable of realizing they were part of any such affair, or even that the tactician existed in the first place," Aura murmured to herself, remembering the words she'd shared with Zenjirou the previous night.

Chapter 3 — Ability and Preference

Several days after Zenjirou returned from Uppasala, there was a major evening event held in the royal palace to welcome a foreign royal.

The chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings were adorned with a multitude of candles, and each table hosted a finely made candlestick that cast a reddish glow around the area. There was a recent addition of more lighting as well—instead of the naturally wavering candlelight, there were globes of fire (magic tools) completely motionless on several tables.

The common lighting in the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle had, of course, been provided by Francesco and Bona. The tools using light magic itself were valuable even within the Twin Kingdoms, so they didn't have any of those present, but even the static flames were far better than natural fire. The event was just a little brighter than usual thanks to those magic tools, and the couple hosting the event stood in the extra light across from the guest of honor.

"I bid you welcome to Capua once again, Prince Yngvi. This banquet is our reception for you, and I would be pleased if you would enjoy yourself," Zenjirou said in greeting.

"It is an honor, Your Majesty," the prince answered formally.

"I likewise hope you enjoy your night, Prince Yngvi," Freya, as Zenjirou's partner, added with her hand on Zenjirou's arm, treating Yngvi like a stranger.

"My thanks, Lady Freya," their guest of honor replied with a smile.

Even after all this time, Zenjirou still marveled at how similar Yngvi's smile was to Freya's. His words and the way he carried himself were the very model of what was expected between foreign royals, but his expression and tone made it obvious how close they were.

As Zenjirou stood next to the two while they spoke, it made him feel a little jealous. Although he wasn't childish enough to truly envy his wife's brother, he couldn't help but feel a tinge of it as he watched someone more in tune with her than he was.

"We have included food and drink more common here in accordance with your fondness for new things, Your Highness. I hope they are to your taste," Zenjirou continued.

"Thank you for the consideration, Your Majesty. Based on the last several days, I believe they should be."

The prince had been in the country for several days, so he had already sampled the local cuisine several times before the banquet. The meat came from drakes rather than goats, and the seasoning with salt was common between both countries. However, Capua barely used any herbs and instead used plenty of spices. Some dishes also contained a large amount of sugar. Even the fruits and vegetables were wildly different from what he was used to. Yngvi had, just as Zenjirou's comments would imply, given no sign of avoiding the alien foods.

"While this is also true of the food, I must admit that I find the clothing here fascinating. I am already familiar with your outfit, Your Majesty, but it is the first time I have seen Lady Freya in its like."

Indeed, Zenjirou was wearing his familiar third uniform. Freya was wearing a matching outfit, a native set of clothes using red as its base. Marrying Zenjirou had made her part of the Capuan royal family, and much of their outfits had red foundations, although the majority of them were dresses. This was the first time she'd worn the traditional Capuan clothing in an official capacity.

"Indeed. I was interested for quite some time, and I finally feel that I wear it well enough to do so in public," Freya replied, the smile on her face just as confident as her words.

Unlike dresses—which were made to fit the body—the traditional Capuan clothing took practice to don. It was a long piece of cloth wrapped around you, folded and layered before being fixed with ties, so wearing it without practice could cause a careless movement to ruin the outfit. In a regular person's day-to-day life, an outfit slipping a little wouldn't be an issue, but it would be a huge gaffe for a royal.

That was why it had taken so long for Freya to debut her traditional outfit.

"It works well. Even you look ladylike in such attire, Lady Freya."

"Oh, and in what way do you mean that?"

"In precisely the way you think, I suppose?"

The light glare on Freya's face along with Yngvi's simple shrug prompted stifled chuckles from the onlookers, showing their friendly teasing.

Zenjirou laughed slightly exaggeratedly. "You are certainly related. Freya wears many new expressions in front of you, Prince Yngvi," he said, tacitly approving the conversation.

They spent a little while longer talking politely, speaking on food, clothing, drakes, and even the weather. Although it wasn't *pointless*, none of it was what Zenjirou really wanted to talk about.

His topics of choice were more about Utgard, the priest and mercenary, how the church was reacting, and how the main countries that followed the religion were acting. None of those were things they could discuss in a place like this.

Above all, the main—albeit unofficial—reason for the banquet tonight was to gather candidates to marry Prince Yngvi, the heir apparent to the throne of Uppasala. Therefore even several of the inner palace maids were participating, along with many of the other noble girls.

In order to achieve their goal, Zenjirou and Freya, hosts or not, could hardly monopolize all of Yngvi's time.

"Enjoy yourself then," Zenjirou concluded.

"Excuse us, Prince Yngvi," Freya added.

With that, the two moved away from the prince, arm in arm. Immediately, people began to step in. Some of them were moving to greet the hosts of the party. There was no real unifying feature to them. Meanwhile, there were those who moved towards the guest of honor. They had a commonality, though, being escorted by a parent or guardian, unmarried and young.

The news had been spread before the event that Yngvi was looking for a second bride. Among the escorts were those responsible for several young women. Of course, there were parents

who had multiple unwed children, but there were also people escorting those from subordinate families.

In any case, it was the status of those being introduced to the prince that was important, regardless of whether they were escorted by a parent, a superior, a guardian, or even a conservator. The events unfolding seemed just like a marriage interview, but with multiple people on one side.



Watching the events take place from a little distance away, Zenjirou muttered quietly enough that only Freya could hear him, "They certainly are nervous." His gaze wasn't on Yngvi, but on the Capuan girls being introduced to him.

"It is little surprise," Freya answered just as quietly, her arm still in his. "This is a huge fork in their lives."

Zenjirou nodded silently. The girls speaking with the prince had all been investigated by Aura, their backgrounds inspected, after which they had been permitted to speak to him directly. They were, in essence, the cream of the crop. Still, the normal age for remaining unwed in this world meant that they were still teenage girls.

Despite being born into noble families and living with the knowledge that their families' circumstances were paramount in their future plans, even if this marriage was something they wanted, there was no chance they would remain calm about marrying into a completely different world—the Northern Continent. There was an extremely high possibility that one of them would become Yngvi's second wife and spend the rest of her life in a foreign country.

"I want to do what I can to help," Zenjirou muttered to himself, this time quietly enough that not even Freya could hear him from her position at his side.

Zenjirou had literally married into a different world all on his own, so in some respects, he understood how they felt more than anyone. The person who could likely understand them almost as well was Freya, who had married into the Southern Continent. Fortunately, they had Zenjirou's teleportation and her position as former royalty of Uppasala. They would likely be able to support the girl who became Yngvi's second wife.

Of course, that assumed that her husband would also act in good faith. After that thought, the two of them turned their attention from the girls and guardians to the accessories the girls were wearing. Rings, bracelets, necklaces, and hairpieces made up the bulk of them. All of them were made of gold as well. The penny dropped for Zenjirou, and he began looking around for a specific person.

He soon found her. Her blonde hair drew the eye when among the group of primarily darker hair and skin tones present. Practically

at the same time as he spotted her, she had looked towards him. Their eyes met and a smile made its way to her lips.

"Freya," Zenijrou prompted.

"Of course, Sir Zenjirou," she replied before they started walking slowly towards her.

"Talajeh," he greeted her once they were close enough. "I hope you are enjoying yourself."

"I am indeed, Your Majesty," the blonde replied as her smile deepened.

Talajeh was from the Elementaccato family, one of the four ducal houses of the Twin Kingdoms. She had lush blonde hair, amber eyes, and lightly tanned skin, perhaps due to a mixing of blood between the native desert nomads and the migrants who had fled the Northern Continent.

She was adorned with plenty of gold—the local specialty of her homeland—using herself as a living mannequin to display her wares. Zenjirou looked meaningfully at the girls around Yngvi.

"It seems you have been a great help. You have my thanks."

"Not at all," Talajeh replied. "I should be thanking you for the good business opportunity. I hope it can continue."

The smile on her face took on a decidedly calculating gleam. If one were to sum Talajeh up in a single word, it would probably be "mercantile."

It was an unusual group for a noble girl from the Southern Continent to fall into. The gold jewelry the gathered girls were wearing had all been sold using her honeyed words. The accessories from the Elementaccato lands were high in purity and also finely crafted. It was hardly unfair business, but Zenjirou wasn't exactly happy to see Capuan silver diverted to the Twin Kingdoms with his own eyes.

That said, it was hard to deny that he himself was one of the greatest assets to her business. After all, every time he teleported to the Twin Kingdoms, he was paid a fee to cast the spell on Talajeh so that she could take the coinage back and replenish her goods. However expensive the gold accessories were, she still only had what she could physically carry, so the currency outflow could be

ignored. If the unidirectional purchases continued, though, they would need to sell something to the Twin Kingdoms to maintain the balance.

At that, Zenjirou recalled one of the most expensive things they could be selling. "That reminds me, have you heard how the barrier magic tool is progressing?"

Talajeh smiled as she nodded. "I have. Princess Bona has assured me that it is going well," she said as she thrust her large chest out.

Capua's space-time magic contained a spell that physically isolated an area, and Talajeh had requested a magic tool that used this spell. Aura and Bona were currently collaborating on it.

All Aura was doing was going to Bona's workshop and casting the spell once a day, so the majority of the work was on the princess's side. Of course, Bona didn't have the time to spend every day creating a magic tool, so she sometimes took time off of it. That meant that it would be some time before it was completed, but apparently things were proceeding apace.

"So, everything is going well?"

"Well, 'everything' would perhaps be something of an overstatement, but things are certainly moving in the right direction." Her expression was completely at ease as she spoke. Of course, being part of a highly placed noble family and working as a merchant meant that a poker face was indispensable. Still, there was no doubt that things *were* going well for her, so the expression was likely sincere.

"I would like to restock soon. Do you plan to visit the Twin Kingdoms?" she asked.

When Zenjirou was in the Twin Kingdoms, and only then, the combination of him and Aura made an instantaneous round trip between the two countries possible. Therefore, his presence in the Twin Kingdoms also gave the Northerners in Capua a chance to temporarily return home.

That said, the fee was significant even to the royal coffers. Talajeh was possibly the only person who expected enough profit from the return trip for the fee to be worth it.

"I am unsure. I will inform you before I go. After all, I wish to buy

two of the Elementaccato specialties myself. Can I ask you to arrange that?”

Zenjirou’s words prompted the brightest smile she’d displayed so far that night. At the same time, Freya’s grip on his arm tightened.

If Zenjirou was asking for two pieces of jewelry, there was little need to say who exactly they would be for.

“Of course, leave it to me. In fact, would you be interested in visiting our estate in the capital? For you, we are willing to display even our reserved products that guests would not usually be shown. Of course, we would also offer a discount. If you were to visit our capital rather than our residence you would find even more valuable items, and we would not even charge you in such a case. We would guarantee your safety throughout the journey with our lives. In fact, I would even pay for your travel.”

Everyone, whether domestic or international, would want to invite Zenjirou—a caster of teleportation—to their homeland, but Talajeh was by far the most enthusiastic. If Zenjirou visited the place even once—or more accurately, if he photographed it—he would be able to use it as a destination directly.

“I will consider visiting the estate. The capital is out of the question, though,” he answered, a reluctant smile on his face at her zeal.

With people as motivated and capable as Talajeh, it was best not to give a reason when refusing an offer. If he did so, she could respond with a direct counterattack, destroying the reason he’d given.

“A shame,” she said.

The look on her face was one of a lion watching a gazelle escaping its grasp.

Although the evening’s festivities were for Yngvi to meet the candidates for his second wife, his socialization time was not only spent with them. After all, only those vetted beforehand by Aura were allowed to directly appeal to him, and that was an extremely limited number. Once conversation with those few had finished, there was still plenty of time left to be used for socializing with other people.

“It is an honor to have the chance to meet you, Prince Yngvi. I am Capua’s marshal, Pujol Guillén, and this is my wife, Lucinda.”

“An honor, Your Highness,” Lucinda added.

The Uppasalan prince responded to the couple’s greetings with a smile. “My brother mentioned you, Marshal. He called you a truly gifted warrior. It is just as much of an honor for me to meet you both.”

The massive man grinned broadly. He was one of Capua’s most prized warriors and the commander in chief of the army. The two had somewhat similar goals in terms of aiming to strengthen both their nations and their own influence, so conversation flowed freely between them.

“I envy the dash drakes, I must say. While their speed is minimally different from a horse’s, their stamina and strength are many times greater. I presume they require commensurately more food and water, but they still outstrip horses easily. If they could adapt to the climate and ecosystem of the Northern Continent, I would love to purchase some.”

“Meanwhile, the speed at which horses grow is exceptional,” the marshal replied. “Three or four years before they are fieldable is impressive. The drakes may be able to serve longer, but that is not necessarily always an advantage. Callous as it sounds, mounts are expendable to an army, after all.”

Comparing adult specimens of both showed much greater physical capabilities on the dash drakes’ side, yet being hatched rather than born meant that they were smaller to begin with and took at least ten years of rearing before they were able to work as mounts. As Pujol said, that wasn’t a benefit as a military resource. It was all too likely that an engagement would lead to a reduction in numbers, and the drakes were far less suited to quickly raising replacements.

“Above all, I must say I envy your nation’s smithing capabilities. Sir Völundr recently agreed to create a spear for me, and I have to admit it is all that is on my mind each night, despite how childish such excitement feels.”

Yngvi blinked in slight surprise. “Did Her Majesty order it?”

"No, it was his own generosity."

"Incredible! There are precious few warriors recognized by him even in our homeland. Frankly, this is the first time I have heard of him making such an offer. You must be a truly exceptional combatant."

Yngvi was now certain that his first impression of the marshal was correct. The smith's estimation of a warrior was solely based on their capabilities on the front line. Absolutely none of it was due to leadership or command ability. For him to personally offer up a weapon of his own making was proof positive that Pujol's skills were far beyond the norm.

"I maintain my skills enough that I will bring no shame upon my position," Pujol replied. He had no reason to be humble in terms of his standing, his actual skills, or his personality, and though he did phrase it somewhat indirectly, he still made his position clear.

"Considering those skills will be protecting the country and that Lady Freya is of the same blood as me, I have to say it is heartening to hear."

"They will be indeed. Still, I cannot monopolize your time for the entire evening, so we will take our leave here."

"Excuse us," said Lucinda.

"Of course, some other time," Yngvi replied.

The three parted, smiles on each of their faces. Once the marshal and his wife had left, the next pair to approach the prince were conspicuous among the guests—a prince with blond hair and a princess with chestnut-brown hair that shimmered with silver.

"Ah, Prince Yngvi, might we take some of your time?" the former, Francesco, called with a grin.

"It is an honor to meet you," Bona added, politely bowing her head as she followed behind.

Yngvi welcomed the two with a broad smile. "No, the honor is mine. I would be glad to be able to take some of your time, Prince Francesco, Princess Bona."

Francesco—or rather, the country he represented—was a somewhat contentious topic as far as Uppasala was concerned. The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle was a country formed from the

remnants of the White Empire—a historical enemy of the church. That country had essentially ambushed Uppasala with a "symbol of friendship" in the form of the Lulled Sea that Freya had received from them. Inevitably, therefore, Uppasala was in a position against the church, on friendly terms with the Twin Kingdoms.

The results were not bad overall. The country was already one of the minority of animistic nations that didn't have a good relationship with the church by any means. There were also definite advantages to a positive relationship, so the nation wasn't against the current situation. Being forced into it by a trick, however, was another matter. They had to settle things in some way or they would be a laughingstock. Put bluntly, they couldn't afford to ignore appearances.

That said, demonstrating their displeasure here and now against the prince and princess wouldn't help Uppasala either. Yngvi understood that, so he was treating the pair as individual members of the royal family rather than representatives of their country.

"I see that the Twin Kingdoms are advanced in not only magic items, but the spells themselves as well. Those static flames are superb, and I would truthfully be interested in purchasing several," he said, earnest in his praise. The reason for his response was the idea that Zenjirou had partially come up with: the magic tool version of this item was, as the name implied, a flame that was completely static. It was fixed within metal netting and could even be used on a rocking ship. This meant that as long as the metal wasn't damaged, the flame wouldn't be able to spread.

Uppasala's main port of Logfort was a nonfreezing harbor, which meant that ships departed even during the winter. The port didn't freeze due to the ocean currents, and the air temperature was usually below that of the water. Even so, ships set sail. Not only large trading ships, but smaller fishing vessels as well. There were fish that could still be caught during the winter months and those that could be caught *only* during those months. It was easy to see just how valuable a flame that could be maintained without fear of spreading would be.

"Those were His Majesty's idea," Francesco said. "Personally, I

feel they were very worthwhile to make. The core is simple, so they can be created in a surprisingly short period."

As far as the magic tool portion of things was concerned, it was just about turning the spell itself into an item. Enclosing it with the metal mesh and attaching the clamp to fix it in place on the ship was merely structural.

Yngvi's eyes gleamed at the "surprisingly short period" part of the other prince's statement. "Oh, is that so? How long, exactly?"

"Not even two months," Francesco replied.

"Indeed, that would be roughly the time frame," Bona agreed.

The excitement on Yngvi's face dropped by half at that. As Francesco had said, two months was an extremely short time to create a magic tool, but it was far from what Yngvi had hoped for. He wanted mass production of the tools. A safe flame on a ship in the winter would make sailing and fishing far more convenient. One or two rare items would be pointless from that perspective, since they would need tens at least, preferably hundreds.

Francesco must have inferred from Yngvi's expression that it was not the answer he was hoping for. "All magic tool creation takes time. If you like, I could modify some of my own? I could only part with two, though," he suggested with a rueful smile.

"I could do likewise," Bona added. "Though only the one." Her hair sparkled as she smiled.

Static flames in the Twin Kingdoms were used for lighting, not heating, so most royals had a certain number of their own. Those like Francesco or Bona, who were particularly skilled in their craft, would often work through the night and absolutely needed light. Simply fixing a clamp to the bottom and enclosing the flame would not take a huge amount of time. Two or three items would not meaningfully change the national situation, but they could be used on the most important vessels during the winter.

"I would be most grateful. Would similar payment to His Majesty be acceptable?"

"That would be fine."

While Francesco might have been an oddity of a royal, he still had enough common sense that he could manage at social events.

"I must say, Your Highness," he said, "I can feel your determination to push Uppasala forward in every word and action you take. I rather respect it."

Francesco's words were not flattery, they were how he truly felt. Everything the silver-haired prince had done and said was fundamentally based on a desire to strengthen his country. That included his interest in the dash drakes, his desire for the static flames, and his initiative in intercontinental trade.

Even the main thrust of the night—searching for a wife—fell into that category. He had interacted with the women using fine manners, but those with decent insight could tell that his attention was more on the positions and statuses of the guardians behind them, which was neither bad nor particularly special. In fact, it was practically expected for a member of royalty.

The prince laughed. "Hearing such praise is rather embarrassing. I am simply doing what I should as a member of the royal family." Indeed, he wasn't being humble; that was how he truly felt.

Meanwhile, Francesco was someone who, if there was an exam for becoming royalty or nobility, would easily fail it, fail the retake, and then somehow make up enough extra credit to pass the course anyway.

"Not at all," Francesco said. "Your actions are not merely 'what you must do.' They show an uncommon amount of zeal and superb initiative. I could never hope to imitate you."

Yngvi's expression stiffened for the briefest of moments as the other prince spread his arms out into a shrug. He replaced it with a smile quickly enough, though. "Indeed, my actions are of my own will rather than mere obligation to the royal family. However, I imagine you must be far too modest to say you could not imitate it."

In contrast to Yngvi's smile, Francesco had a completely open look on his face as he shook his head. "Not at all. I would never manage to muster the motivation."

"Prince Francesco! Your phrasing!"

True or not, Francesco's admission was not something to be publicly stated, so Bona was frantic.

Yngvi stalled for a moment before gathering himself. "Do not

concern yourself with me, Princess Bona. Uppasala is a militaristic nation, so such forthright statements are far from rare. Still, I suppose a problem with your own motivation would be difficult to overcome," he replied tactfully.

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The next day, Yngvi and Freya met in a room of the royal palace. Although they were twins, they were now part of two different nations and two different royal families. Ordinarily, it would have been inadvisable for them to meet alone, but both Zenjirou and Aura had allowed it.

Freya had not yet been married for long, but she had known both Aura and Zenjirou for a fair amount of time and had garnered a reasonable amount of trust. Now that she had married Zenjirou, Aura judged that she would not let information that would harm Capua slip.

Although they were in a distant place far from their home, the twins—whichever one you accepted as older—had been together since literally before birth. The two silver-haired, blue-eyed royals sat opposite each other, talking casually.

"Good work yesterday," Freya said. "You were just as sharp as always in that kind of situation."

Yngvi laughed. "Thank you. I was glad to see that my socialization passed muster here as well," he replied, taking a cup of tea from the table.

"Well, while the specifics may change slightly, we are all human, so the fundamentals stay the same," Freya said.

Having visited many countries on the *Glasir's Leaf*, her words held a fair amount of weight. Of course, the differences in culture meant that there could be sore spots where they would never expect, so they couldn't afford to let their guard down. Still, there was no doubt that Yngvi had carried out his interactions in Capua without issue.

"So, I would like to hear your thoughts first of all. Crown Prince Yngvi of Uppasala, did anyone from our nation catch your eye?" Freya asked, her tone somewhat exaggerated.

Her main goal for coming here today was to ask that, and it was also reasonable to say it was why they had been allowed to meet entirely on their own. It was an easy chat between two close individuals, and that was why she could ask the question. Neither Aura or Zenjirou—queen and prince consort respectively—would have been able to do so. Both of them would have to shift their focus to any of the girls Yngvi named. It was only because of their relationship that Freya could talk with him about it so casually.

Furthermore, having married Zenjirou, both royals were considered just as close to her. Inevitably, Yngvi was well aware that their discussion here could end up as part of another private conversation within the inner palace. If he named someone here, that name would reach Aura's and Zenjirou's ears as "a very credible rumor," but being only a rumor, it would be easy enough to take it back if need be.

Yngvi was brash and hurried, though, so he—despite understanding the consideration Capua was giving him—disregarded that. "Well, Lady Mirella was pleasant. She was strong-willed and rather intelligent. She also knew her own role well. That Count Márquez was perfect, though. My future would definitely be bright if I was calling such an insightful, skilled man my father-in-law. In turn, Uppasala's future would look good as well. Lady Octavia was also delightful. Despite having the wisdom of a noble, her personality and way of thinking are far more pleasant than what I would expect."

His focus on each woman's family and their standing rather than the women was, frankly, very much like the prince. Marriage to him was extremely political. He truly felt that there was no point in it if it did not benefit him, the royal family, and the country as a whole. Of course, he also understood that maintaining that benefit would require treating his wife in good faith.

"My one concern," he continued, "is that Lady Mirella is adopted rather than being the count's child by blood. In terms of relation, I believe she would be his niece? Additionally, Lady Octavia was not his first wife. What would their rights and obligations as her guardians be in that case?"

"As soon as she was adopted, their rights and obligations became just the same as they would be if she were their child by blood, at least by Capua's laws," Freya answered smoothly. She *was* a member of the Capuan nobility now, so she had learned at least a minimum about the laws of the land.

"Then that won't be a problem. The count acts upon knowledge and calculation, while Lady Octavia acts on her emotions and principles," he said, extremely confident about the two individuals he had met last night.

Freya remembered his boasts of how no one had yet betrayed his first impression of them. In truth, that ability of his was a large part of his skill in interpersonal relationships despite his egoistic nature.

"I see. Lady Mirella of the Márquez family is one of the maids in the inner palace, so I am fairly familiar with her and have to say she struck me the same way. Was there anyone else who left an impression? Oh, you needn't limit yourself to the candidates."

Yngvi grinned reluctantly at how blatantly she was using his insight for her own information gathering, but he still answered truthfully. "The first would have to be Marshal Pujol. I honestly think Eric's excitement about having found Thor was no exaggeration." Even their older brother had needed to put some effort in to hold a conversation with the marshal on equal footing. "First, he is strong. Ridiculously so. Honestly, I cannot even tell how strong. Obviously, I don't just mean his individual strength, but his ability to lead as well. His ambition could certainly be an issue, but given how it links to his motivation, it could be a great advantage in crucial moments."

While their focuses veered in different directions, that hunger for improvement was common between both the prince and the marshal, so Yngvi found it rather easy to understand the man. That was roughly how Freya felt as well.

"Right. Considering how things are going, he will be a useful asset to Her Majesty, though I wager she will have her work cut out for her keeping him under control. Anyone else?"

As she pressed, Yngvi's expression changed completely, all emotion dropping from his face. "Prince Francesco of the Twin Kingdoms," he answered after a pause. "He is skilled. I don't know

how skilled as a craftsman, but assuming he lives up to his reputation, I assume just as skilled as he is in politics."

"Yet because of his manner, he doesn't have a place in the line of succession despite being the first prince," Freya noted, confused by her brother's evaluation. As far as she remembered, Francesco acted as his reputation implied. He didn't say or do anything that would cause a major problem for his nation, but he was generally frivolous and thoughtless, so she could see why he wasn't suited to being the next king.

Despite that, Yngvi looked like he'd bitten into a lemon as he shook his head. "It's a lie, definitely. Well, maybe not a *lie*, per se. He seems like he has the ability but refuses to use it due to how much he dislikes it. Yet he still has enough skill that he can keep acting as he wishes, because his strength in *that* area is just as high, if not higher. If I had to describe it, I'd say he's like a flying horse that hates flying but loves galloping, and despite being a flying horse, is far faster than normal horses over land. That's what permits him *not* to fly."

Freya could certainly see where he was coming from. It made sense—being so careless and yet not careless enough to cause irreparable harm was certainly unnatural. Now that she could agree with his estimation of the man, she could also understand his displeasure.

"You hate him that much?" she asked after a moment.

"I loathe him," Yngvi spat.



Freya couldn't help bursting into laughter. "Make sure you don't show any of that," she pointed out.

"Of course I won't. We need a positive relationship with the Twin Kingdoms, the Sharou family, and Prince Francesco himself. I understand that. Frankly, I wouldn't be so honest with anyone but you," he said, lifting his hands in surrender from his seat on the sofa.

The twins had known each other for a long time, and they knew each other well, so they excelled at spotting dissembling from each other's expressions, words, and actions. Yngvi had never thought he'd be able to trick her, so he admitted his true thoughts.

"Well, I can see how you would be unable to like him, considering your values," she sympathized.

As if prompted by that, the prince vented his complaints. "Seriously, what is he playing at? Born in a position to become king and with the ability to do so, but he's rejecting it—and yet he's *still* recognized as royalty. He's just enjoying life. What *is* he playing at?"

Yngvi was one of the members of the Uppasalan royal family with the strongest ambition. Despite that, he had been born as the second prince, *and* to the second queen. Ordinarily, there would have been no chance of him becoming king.

Fortunately—and calling it "fortunate" would make him unpopular with many people, although it was certainly a stroke of luck for him personally—the first prince, Eric, had been pulled away to become the king of Ofus. Therefore, the title of crown prince had quite naturally fallen to him. Things had been much more complicated until then, though.

Another stroke of fortune in that respect was that Yngvi saw the country as *his*, in a good way. He wanted to become its king but couldn't countenance plunging it into chaos. In all likelihood, if Eric *had* become king, Yngvi would have spent the rest of his life scheming to get the position for himself without causing turmoil.

"Everyone has their own perspective," Freya said soothingly.

He pursed his lips, showing his unhappiness in the whole of his face. "I know that. I'm not your twin for nothing, so I'm well aware there are people with rather warped values in the world. Still, *my* values mean I hate him. I absolutely loathe him."

"What is being my twin supposed to mean?" she retorted.

Despite her complaint, she knew she couldn't argue any more than that. After all, her values were indeed rather divorced from the norm for someone of her position.

Either way, as far as Yngvi was concerned, Francesco had been born with the most valuable thing imaginable, and yet had thrown it away in an apparent fit of pique. It was hardly a surprise he disliked the man.

"Will you actually be able to deal with him? Your two nations will have to clash to some degree for each of your benefits, and Capua can mediate there, but if you two have a difference of personal opinion, there's nothing I can do."

"I know," he replied with another sour look.

It was hard to call Freya's position in Capua stable. Intervening in a conflict between her motherland and an allied nation would quite possibly weaken her position further. Covering for Yngvi could end up with her being accused of trying to act on behalf of Uppasala despite joining Capua.

"I know that disliking him won't benefit me at all, and that liking him would have many benefits," he continued. "I won't show my feelings. I swear it."

Yngvi was skilled at hiding his emotions, even for a member of royalty, so as long as he kept that in mind, it shouldn't cause any major issues. However, a royal's partners in negotiation were often either other royals or at least high-ranking nobility. It was far from impossible that someone could spot the animosity Yngvi felt for Francesco.

"Please do, *please*," Freya replied, her words mixed with a sigh. She was all too aware that a person could not force their own emotions, so she would leave it there. Everyone had people they struggled to get along with. At that point, she had a realization. "Oh, but you like Sir Zenjirou, do you not? In terms of royals with differing values from your own, surely he is in the same group as Prince Francesco."

She was right. Given that he was almost at the top of the royal family and yet purposefully limited his own influence, Zenjirou could

certainly be considered similar to Francesco.

"Ah, you could put it that way," Yngvi agreed easily. "He is entirely different, though. To put it bluntly, albeit rather rudely, his abilities as a royal are unusual. I would hardly categorize someone who has the skill yet refuses to use it the same as someone who understands they do *not* and refrains." He shrugged as he spoke.

"He lacks ability?" Freya asked. Although she wasn't happy to hear her husband viewed badly now that she had an emotional connection with him, she also couldn't entirely agree with that assessment. They had only married recently, but they had known each other for over a year, and she had quite a high opinion of him. She at least didn't see an extreme difference in that respect between him and Francesco.

However, Yngvi bluntly disagreed with that perspective. "He does, without a doubt. However, not in *all* respects required of royalty. He lacks in things like ruthless decision-making, prioritizing profit over principles, and calculating when to break his word to avoid harm to his nation. He probably is *capable* of it, but it would weigh on him mentally, potentially severely. That alone makes him someone I appreciate in an allied nation's royalty. He could be an issue if he was part of our family, though. He would also be a very useful individual in an enemy nation's royalty."

Freya fell silent, unable to refute what he'd said. She had certainly had similar thoughts in the past. While she was personally fond of Zenjirou's views, if she was asked if they were suitable for royalty, she would have to answer no.

Still, although logically she couldn't argue, she also wouldn't accept the statement emotionally. Understanding her silence, Yngvi quickly moved the conversation along.

"Conversely, when good faith and credibility are requirements, he is a reliable person to have on hand, so it's all a matter of being the right man for the job. Personally, I am rather fond of him."

"For the love of... If you aren't careful, I will be the least of your problems."

"I know. I won't act in bad faith with him. In the long run, sincerity is best with people who act in kind."

"As long as you understand that, I shan't say any more," Freya said, easing off. "So, was there anyone else of interest?"

The implication was that if there was not, they would be done with the conversation. Yngvi cast his blue eyes up to the ceiling in thought, then eventually shook his head.

"No, that's about it. There were, of course, other remarkable people, but outside of Count Márquez, Lady Octavia, Marshal Pujol, and Prince Francesco, no one was on the same level. Princess Bona was significant as an enchanter but would be a rank or two less interesting on the whole."

His words were honest, which meant this was the first time his powers of observation, which he had bragged about for so long, had missed the mark. Marshal Pujol's wife, Lucinda, had been at the man's side the entire time, and despite exchanging greetings with her, Yngvi had no real impression of her at all.

Intermission 2 — Mercenary in Hiding

The Noble's Commonwealth of Złota Wolność was currently the largest state in the west of the Northern Continent. That was true both in terms of national strength and physical size.

In such a large, powerful nation, there would obviously be many prosperous cities. Pomorskie, where Zenjirou had stopped on his journey aboard the *Glasir's Leaf*, was the greatest of them when considering only the port cities, but there were several that rivaled it in scope.

Breslaw, in the northwest of the country, was one of those cities. Unlike Pomorskie, it was located inland. It was close to the country's border, though, so it was historically a major center for overland trade. In that city's pleasure district, in a corner that was considered *particularly* seedy and often even called a slum, was Yan's hideout.

"Augh! I... I couldn't... I couldn't save him!"

Despite the sun being high in the sky, all of the shutters of the squalid room were shut tight, and the one-eyed mercenary was weeping on the floor. He was on all fours on the boards—which were there due to the assumption that people would wear dirty shoes into the room—as tears streamed from his single remaining eye.



The cause of the mercenary's despair was a report from one of his most trusted subordinates: Priest Yan had been burned at the stake.

That report had arrived before the mercenary had even been able to infiltrate the lands of the church where it had taken place. While he had been lying low in a city near the border, his idol's time had come.

"Commander! Commander Yan!"

The mercenary standing at his side had tears rolling from both eyes as well, and they were by no means only grieving ones. Yan's most trusted subordinates all knew the priest personally. They knew the kind of person he was and had a degree of respect and affection for the man. His unilateral execution had instilled a mix of sadness, rage, and hatred in all of them. If Yan hadn't stopped them, some of them would probably have stormed across the borders to try to rescue the priest.

Emotionally, the commander himself felt the same way. The difference was that he understood that hasty action would genuinely not improve the situation, and he had the self-control to keep his head in the middle of the emotional turmoil. He had needed to lay down the law with his subordinates.

"Stay calm."

"Listen to me."

"If we throw our lives away for nothing, he will be no happier."

Those had been his main warnings to his men. He was a veteran mercenary and a superlative commander. He was not, however, beyond human enough that he could overcome his humanity. He had been unable to think of how he could take a mere twenty men against the de facto rulers of the continent to rescue a single man, and while he had agonized over plans and strategies, the man in question had been put to death.

When people finally lost something that they were willing to gamble their lives on, they usually fell into one of two categories. Some fell into despair, effectively becoming zombies, while others had their hearts filled with the fires of hatred and swore vengeance. For those such as the commander, where violence was their

occupation, it was rather easy to see which way they would go.

The commander's voice started off inaudible, but increased in volume until he was speaking clearly. "...it. This will *not* go unanswered. Who do they think they are, acting holier-than-thou after he died? After they *killed* him? They won't get away with it."

"Right."

"Commander Yan's right."

"This is wrong!"

The small room contained Yan's most trusted comrades. While there were those who would agree, there were none who would gainsay him. They spurred each other's anger on to higher levels, stoking their fury until it would consume them.

It was at that moment there was a knock at the door. The quiet noise echoed through the room.

The reactions from the men were exactly what you would expect from such long-serving mercenaries. Yan was instantly on his feet giving wordless hand signals. His men immediately moved to their prearranged stations and placed their hands on their weapons.

The air was thick with tension as Yan looked at one of the men who kept all concern out of his voice as he spoke through the door.

"Aye, who is it?"

Yan and his men were hiding in the district by blending into the slums. They had fake names and histories to avoid rousing suspicion and had interacted with the locals. Whoever was at the door could therefore be a local who had come for no real reason. However, after a short few moments, a voice replied.

"Some guy gave me a letter. Said to give it to the Yan here." It was a young voice. Someone had asked a child to run an errand for them. There were children even in the slums, so that wasn't an issue in and of itself. The problem was Yan's name coming from the child's mouth.

The commander was incredibly famous for a mercenary. He also had a particularly distinguishing feature in his single eye. Therefore, since he had taken up residence in the hideout, he hadn't left the building even once, leaving all interactions with the outside to his subordinates. And yet, his location was known. Who in the world

had sent this letter?

Yan moved on silent feet out of the shadows he had hidden in, returning to the middle of the room with a stern expression. Then he spoke in a low voice.

"Come in."

The door slowly opened at his words. It permitted the person to enter. He was, as the voice had led them to believe, a young boy. He wore shoddy clothes that were patched in places, with his face and hair dirtied by grime and grease. He was the very picture of a slum child and couldn't have been older than his early teens.

He twitched as he saw all the powerful men standing around the room. However, he soon shook his head and mustered his courage, standing as straight as he could as he entered. The commander signaled one of his men with a glance, and the fellow shut the door.

The boy's shoulders jolted in another flinch, but there was no other choice. They couldn't allow whatever was discussed here to leave the room.

"I am Yan. What's this letter?"

"H-Here." With a shaking hand, the boy held out some parchment.

"Someone light a candle," Yan ordered as he took it.

"Sure."

In the light of the candle, Yan cast his eye over the paper. His expression immediately shifted.

"Commander?"

"I'll explain later. You all wait for now," he stated, his expression firm. This letter was definitely intended for him.

It started off with words of condolence for the priest's unjust execution and as a slight comfort, offered assistance in restoring the body. It spoke of a special spell that could completely restore a corpse to pristine condition, no matter its current state.

"Fuck, now of all times. That definitely cooled me down," he muttered to himself.

Indeed, his thoughts, which had been churning like lava, had suddenly slipped into ice-cold clarity. He had focused on vengeance because there was nothing else more important to him. He didn't

care what he lost anymore, up to and including his own life. Nothing he could gain now would satisfy him. That attitude allowed him to dedicate everything to revenge. This was particularly true when the target was an organization he could almost certainly not defeat.

But the flames of his vengeance had immediately been extinguished by the letter in his hand. If he could retrieve Priest Yan's corpse, it could be restored. To those of the dragon faith, the corpse being burned was the worst state it could be in. If there was some way it could be restored, then the commander would prioritize that over any fruitless attempt at revenge. The mercenary was logical enough that such an objective could sweep away even the black flames of his vendetta. With logic returned to him, his even sharper intellect and insight could begin to shine.

His eye—a bluish-gray—gleamed as he glared at the parchment. He needed any information he could get. It was high-quality parchment, but not so much that it would stand out. The ink itself also seemed to be good, but the letters written in it were too clean, so nothing about it was useful. It was overall neat and tidy, so there were no clues.

Once he realized that, the mercenary felt something pulling his attention. Instantly, he started to examine his thoughts.

What caught my eye? Did something seem off? It's clean? Too clean? What's wrong with it being clean?

With that, Yan realized the problem lay with who exactly had given him the letter.

"Wh-What?" the urchin asked, jolting as Yan fixed him with a single-eyed glare.

The mercenary didn't give any mind to the scared youth, however, simply continuing to observe him.

"Seriously, what?" the boy demanded, mustering every ounce of courage he had to hold back the tears at the sight of such a scary man glaring at him. But still the commander didn't let up.

"Commander?" one of his men asked. Even they seemed to find the fixed stare excessive.

Eventually, Yan came to a conclusion. He needed to verify it, though. "You."

"Wh-What's with you?!"

While the boy reared back in fear, Yan continued in an even tone.

"Did you look inside? Did anyone but me and the person who sent it read it?"

It was an odd question to ask. A street urchin wouldn't have had the education to read it, and how would he know whether anyone had seen inside it when some stranger had asked him to take it somewhere?

The boy began waving his hands around. "I-I ain't looked! I don't know about no one else; I just got asked to bring it here to some guy called Yan," he explained.

The explanation made Yan certain that his hunch was right. "I see. You swear it?"

"Yeah, I do."

Now that he had the promise, Yan's blue-tinged eye narrowed as he spoke menacingly to the boy. "Right. Then swear it on *your father's honor*."

The reaction was dramatic. The boy's face froze in surprise for a second, but then he eventually let out a sigh and stood up straight. That was the only change—standing up straight—but it had changed him entirely.

"Very well. I swear upon my father János's honor, no one has seen the contents of that letter."

Yan held up a hand to restrain his men as they readied themselves. "Very well. I shall believe you, son of János. László, if I remember correctly."

"That's me. It is an honor that a general of your caliber remembered such a novice after leading the battle of Tannenwald to a victory for the commonwealth." The boy smiled softly at that, putting his right fist over his left breast and bowing. It was a common bow for a mercenary or soldier, but the boy looked like an aristocrat as he did so.

Yan gave a sigh at László behaving the way he was, and scratched his head. "Tch, I'd heard the rumors, but you're just as bad as your father. So, how involved is János in this?"

János was a name that, at least in the mercenary world, was

widely known. He was younger than Yan but had a roughly similar amount of fame. He had led many to victory in battle, and was one of the very few mercenaries whose services influenced any battle where he was employed. He was famed for already being married and taking a young child around with him.

Yan himself had fought on the opposite side from János once, before he was hired by the priest. He of course knew of his son László from rumors, but this was the first time he had laid eyes on the boy.

János was a mercenary who had just as high a reputation for his manners as his military skill. Naturally, that was only in relation to other mercenaries, but he was well-known for fighting for what was right in addition to faithfully fulfilling his contracts.

"It seems we've got a troublesome individual with eyes on us. It's infuriating, but I suppose we were right not to move."

Yan's statement was prompted by a significant misunderstanding he was working under. That assumption was that the mercenary János was paying close attention to him and had pinpointed his hideout. It was by no means a shortcoming on Yan's part that had led to that misunderstanding. There was the saying "it takes one to know one." Indeed, if you were looking for a mercenary's hideout, a skilled mercenary in the same circles would certainly be the one to ask.

In fact, Yan felt like it was something he too would do if he had to find a hidden mercenary in a city. It was practically impossible for him to make the leap that Tucale's divination magic had let the country tip off Aura as to his whereabouts.

"Dad was just hired to get the letter to you, General, I believe he holds you no ill will." He must have heard Yan's comment to himself and his response was a pleased smile. He respected his father, so he was probably pleased to hear someone of Yan's renown evaluate him so highly. You could consider it praising him as a mercenary.

"I see, then tell him this: if you don't want to make enemies, don't pry any further into our movements."

"I shall tell him exactly that. For future reference, though, could you tell me something?"

"What?" Yan returned.

László responded without hesitation. "What exactly marked me out as his child? I don't believe we've ever met, and I am fairly confident in my disguise."

"Oh. That." Yan considered it for a few moments, then answered honestly. "The first thing was the letter. That was one of your mistakes. Can you see what it was? It seems not, so I will tell you. It is too clean."

The fact that László realized his mistake with nothing more was a testament to his intelligence beyond his years.

"Ah, the look on your face tells me that hint was enough. Impressive. That's right; you've disguised yourself as a street brat, and a street brat would have gotten the letter dirty with filth and oils from his hands. Furthermore, they don't have much of a sense of importance for those things, so it being bent and folded would be more natural. You treated it carefully because of your awareness that it was an important letter."

There were a few moments of silence before the boy responded. "I'll learn from that."

"The deciding factor was your answer when I asked whether anyone other than the sender and I had seen the contents. After you said you hadn't looked, you also added that you didn't know about anyone else. Usually, you would answer that you hadn't, or that no one had."

"Huh?" The boy didn't understand that and tilted his head in confusion.

The commander was almost unnaturally kind as he explained. "I suppose your assumption was that with you being a child living in these slums, some person you'd never seen had given you change and told you to bring the letter to me. The sender would never personally come here and directly hand it over, so there would have been at least one other person, or two if there was trust between you and them. That much is correct. If your father was going to use one of the street urchins for such a thing, he would do that, and so would I. However, the brat in question wouldn't *know* that."

"Oh..."

Yan grinned as László realized his mistake, and continued explaining. "That's right. A street rat would assume that whoever handed them the letter was the sender. Whoever was handing it over would also never explain directly that they were acting on someone else's behalf, after all. In that case, you would be the only possible person to see the contents between receiving the letter and handing it over. So from that position, the correct answers were either that you hadn't looked or that no one had looked."

"I see. If I was the street child I disguised myself as, the correct answer would have actually been the incorrect one. That does help," he said gratefully. "If you'll excuse me, then." Now that his question had been answered, László bowed and moved to leave. His bow, the way he spoke, and the way he walked were all bold and made him seem like the young scion of a military family rather than a mercenary's son.

"Aye. Take care," Yan answered, having no more reason to keep the boy.

The squeal of the hinges showed just how bad the door's condition was as László opened it and shut it behind him.

"That was a pretty precise explanation. Should you have given it?" one of his subordinates asked once they were sure the stranger had left.

The mercenary shrugged before answering. "Probably not. It's better than a poor explanation to someone like him, though."

"Not explaining would have been worse?"

László was the son of the mercenary János. You could describe him as a business rival. Purposefully giving him more information didn't make sense to his subordinates, and their line of thought seemed correct. Commander Yan's read on the situation was different, though.

"The fact that he bothered to ask means that he already had doubts. If I didn't tell him the truth, he has enough intelligence to think it through and come to the correct conclusion. His reasoning skills have been trained for it. If it's going to lead to bad habits in thinking, it'd be better to explain in detail to make him pay more heed to what people say. Well, it's pretty much pointless, I'd

imagine."

The boy's father was János, after all, so even if Yan hadn't told him the truth, if László had explained the situation properly, his father would likely have come to the right conclusion.

"Well, forget about the brat. Getting involved with János is irritating, but if he was hired as a mediator, he probably isn't against us, and he keeps his word. More importantly, you lot need to see this."

With that, he passed the letter around to his subordinates. Many mercenaries couldn't read, but Yan's most trusted were all educated enough to be able to read on a basic level at least. All of them grew excited as they did so.

"What the?!"

"They can restore the priest's corpse?"

"Are they telling the truth?"

They were all of the dragon faith, so the hope that the target of so much of their respect could be restored was shared between them.

"Considering the timing, I doubt it is a mere bluff. It will at least be worth hearing them out," Yan answered.

Even as the words left his mouth, his feelings towards the sender were such that he couldn't stay calm. The letter had arrived after he had found out about the priest's death and before he had actively started to attempt his revenge, telling him that they could restore the corpse. It was unlikely that the timing was simple coincidence.

The sender had without a doubt found the mercenary's location before the priest had been executed, having someone on watch—and Yan's assumption was that it was the mercenary János.

"I've no idea who in the world this is, but it's in poor taste," he commented, a murderous tinge to his voice.

They had waited until the priest was already dead and then offered to restore his body. However much the offer matched his desires, he couldn't manage to feel kindly disposed towards them at all.

"I don't know what their aim is in contacting us like this, but I'll see if this letter is true with my own eyes," he said.

There was an extreme amount of resolve in his words as he spoke.

Chapter 4 — The Queen Plots, the Prince Consort Travels

Logfort was a port in the country of Uppasala connected to the capital through canals and Lake Mater. It was a link to the other countries in the north and a rapidly developing port city.

There was a building some way from the center of the town, and there was a person walking through it. It was likely their first time in the building, and it showed in how they stopped periodically to look around. However, they were moving relatively quickly considering it was their first time there and they were traveling in darkness. That led to the conclusion that this person had to move through darkness as part of their regular duties. If they were actually an uninvited guest, it would be terrible. The figure had already reached the rear entrance and slipped in without a sound like a shadow.

"Commander Yan, it is an honor that you have accepted our invitation. I offer you my gratitude."

"Oh, Your Majesty, Zenjirou, if I recall. Frankly, it is rather surprising that you are behind all this."

King Gustav had given permission for Zenjirou to use teleportation in this building on the outskirts of Logfort, and he was currently sitting on a sofa in the room as he greeted the mercenary Yan.

Shockingly, Zenjirou was the only one present. He had teleported directly there from Capua. He was also allowed to teleport to the embassy in the capital, but he was using this building because they hadn't even notified Uppasala.

He shook his head with a rueful smile at that. "I am afraid you are overestimating me. I am here as nothing more than a messenger. The complete picture comes from above me." He shrugged. Although he had managed to feign calm, the mercenary's

unexpected response had sent his heart practically beating out of his chest. He had never expected he'd be mistaken for the ringleader.

Thinking about it logically, though, the misunderstanding was hardly a surprise. If you were unaware of the existence of the game-changing magic of teleportation, a single royal alone in the room the letter had specified would certainly make it seem like that person was behind everything. Therefore, the doubtful snort from the commander was in some ways the correct response.

"Are you still playing the fool even now?"

"I am not. It is simply a matter of procedure. How much do you know of the lineal magics of royal families?"

"Hm? They are just specific types of magic that some royal families have, no?"

The unexpected question had surprised him and prompted an honest answer. Strictly speaking, "some" was incorrect. Even on the Northern Continent, more than half the royal families had lineal magic, so it should have been "most." However, from the perspective of most people living on the Northern Continent, it wasn't exactly wrong. That was simply how much weaker the association between royal families and lineal magic had become there. As a result of their almost reckless abandon with marriages, there were not only members of foreign royal families with lineal magic that was not their own, but even some simple nobility. The Graz family's expansion magic was one of those examples.

This was partly because the advanced technologies of the Northern Continent had lowered the value of minor lineal magic, and there was only magic of that level left among their lineal magics. If there had been any on a similar level to those considered strongest on the Southern Continent—Capua's space-time, Tucale's divination, Burke's celestial, and the Twin Kingdoms's enchanting and healing—history likely wouldn't have gone the same way.

Either way, Yan's view of lineal magic was the norm on the Northern Continent, and it was completely incompatible with that of the South.

"In our royal family of Capua, part of the lineal magic is a spell called teleportation. As the name implies, it can instantly move a

target to a distant location. I am here through that magic to send you to the person who is, as you say, behind this. I would appreciate your acceptance."

"I see, so that is how it works. Very well. However, should you be telling me such a secret?"

Viewed from the outside, teleportation was a trump card the likes of which was seldom seen. Informing someone of it made it far less effective than it being kept secret. However, Zenjirou shrugged lightly.

"It doesn't matter. It is common knowledge on the Southern Continent," he answered truthfully.

In fact, Yan was about to be made aware of something literally top secret, never mind teleportation, and that was more of a concern. Still, taking too long here would worry Aura where she was waiting, so he moved the conversation along.

"You arrived after having seen the letter, so I assume you prepared what we requested?"

The mercenary nodded briefly at the question, removing something from a metal box at his waist. The rabbit in his hand squeaked weakly. In the letter, Aura had requested he bring an animal that could be killed and was no larger than the box, so this fulfilled the conditions.

Although the candlelight was dim, the rabbit was clearly hale and hearty. Therefore, Zenjirou reluctantly gave the instructions he had to.

"It certainly is alive. Well then, please kill it."

There was a pause. "Right here?" Yan's right eyebrow lifted doubtfully at the instruction.

"Yes. Finish it here and take it with you."

The reason for having Yan bring an animal that could be killed here was to prove that time reversal would mend its wounds. Capua could have prepared a corpse, but that would have left room for it to be some kind of trick, hence asking the mercenary to prepare his own animal cadaver. The reason they had not asked him to bring a corpse was to minimize the amount of mana necessary for it. An older corpse, even a small one, might be beyond Aura's reserves

alone.

Part of it was also the matter of transporting it via teleportation. There was a fundamental understanding that a single casting of the spell could only transport one living thing. It seemed to be a strict requirement, but there were many contradictions if you examined things more closely. The general rule was that a single casting would only take one living thing and the inanimate objects on their person. However, Zenjirou's vague memories of school told him that almost every living person had countless face mites and the like. If the general rule was correct, then after he had teleported, there would be a pile of them where he had been standing, but that didn't happen.

Besides, there was also gut flora, which were, strictly speaking, living organisms. If each teleportation wiped out the gut biome, it would be a definite health hazard. He had wondered if it might be related to the lack of mana, but Zenjirou had magic tools on his person—the Windhammer and the teleportation pendant—and was able to use the spell without issue, so that mustn't be it either. He'd wondered what would happen if he cast the spell on something like a snake after it had swallowed another animal whole and alive, but there was no way he'd be able to muster the willpower to cast it on such a dangerous creature, so he hadn't been able to test it out. He'd eventually decided that thinking about it too deeply was pointless and chalked it up to one of the mysteries of magic.

Killing a rabbit was practically an everyday action for a mercenary as a food source, so Yan had no real reason to hesitate. "Very well," he said, before wrenching the captive rabbit's neck around with frighteningly practiced movements. The rabbit died so quickly that it probably hadn't felt any pain. "Will that suffice?"

Seeing the man kill the animal bare-handed had shaken Zenjirou. "It...is. I shall send you now. *Send that which...*"

His first attempt failed, but his second succeeded, and considering Zenjirou's disposition, that was a significant improvement. While the process was completely familiar to Zenjirou, it was the first time the mercenary was experiencing it, and he hadn't even known of its existence beforehand. Therefore, despite

all of Zenjirou's explanations, it still took him a few seconds to understand the situation he was in after the spell had been cast.

It was a failure he would be ashamed of as a veteran mercenary. A few seconds could mean death on the battlefield.

"Welcome, Commander Yan. I am Queen Aura I of Capua, wife of Zenjirou, who sent you here."

The calm, dignified voice of the queen finally let him understand the position he was in. He was currently standing in a dimly lit room. The floor, ceiling, and all four walls were made of stone. If Zenjirou's words were true, this would be a room in the royal palace of Capua on the Southern Continent, but he had no way of verifying that.

Even so, his sharp awareness meant that he understood there had been a change that could not be normally explained. The change in question was the difference in the air. Moments ago he had been in Uppasala, where the atmosphere was cold and dry. The air in this room, though, was hot and humid. The difference was enough that the brazier burning in the middle of the chamber couldn't account for it.

There was also a distinct difference in the scent of the area. In his long history working as a mercenary, Yan had experienced much of the Northern Continent's weather and could intuitively understand that this was not the same place.

There were four other people in the room with him. One was a woman in her twenties who had introduced herself as the country's queen, Aura. There was also a middle-aged woman in a maid uniform behind her, plus two soldiers flanking them with leather armor and short spears. They were wearing leather helms, so he couldn't tell their age, but he could see they were well trained.

The maid was the only one of them he recognized. She had been at Zenjirou's side when they had met in the hotel. There was no doubt as to the connection between them. Internally, he let go of some of his wariness.

All four of them were fairly dark-skinned, and outside of the maid, he had never seen clothing like that worn by any of the other three. All of those small pieces of information came together to let him accept that this was an unknown world to him—the Southern

Continent. For the time being, he decided to proceed under the assumption that what Zenjirou had told him was true, that he'd arrived via teleportation to Capua on the Southern Continent, and that the woman in front of him was its queen.

"Ma'am. I lead a small mercenary group on the Northern Continent and am called Yan. It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty."

He bowed. His words and actions were fundamentally that of a Northern mercenary, so they were different from the norm in Capua, but they were refined enough not to cause offense even with completely new civilizations.

"Indeed. This is an extremely private matter, and neither of us are blessed with time, so I cannot provide much in the way of a welcome. I suppose you would prefer that as well, though. It is an extremely plain provision, but I have prepared seating, so let us sit and talk. I wager you have that much time at least, no?"

"Of course," the single-eyed mercenary agreed. "However, it is rather convenient that there is a fire here. I would like to place this within it, if that would be acceptable?"

He lifted the rabbit as he spoke.

Aura lifted an eyebrow. "I do not mind, but I would ask why."

"I wish to match the situations as closely as possible. Priest Yan was burned to death."

His voice was low as he spoke and sounded like it came from deep within the ground. However, Aura would not flinch from that.

"Very well. Do as you wish," she said curtly.

Now that he had permission, he strode up to the fire and hurled the rabbit's corpse in without hesitation. There was the foul stench of burning fur, followed briefly by the fragrance of cooking meat. With those scents filling the room, Aura and Yan sat in the seats that had been specially added to the room. The two chairs and the table between them were all plain and made of wood, with the absolute minimum of quality to be fit for royal use.

Once the maid had placed cups of tea in front of both of them, the conversation began.

"So then, Commander Yan, considering you have accepted the

invitation to teleport here, can I assume that you are willing to accept our suggestion as outlined in the letter?”

Aura’s opening move was to get some form of commitment from him, and his lips lifted into a smirk.

“I am certainly exceptionally interested, but whether I accept will be determined by our conversation.”

“Of course. Though with that said, there is little I can say here that was not already contained within our missive. Our lineal magic contains a spell that can restore things that have been destroyed. Using that, it would be possible to restore a corpse, however damaged it has been. Of course, the corpse must be nearby, and it is just restoring the body, not performing a miracle such as reanimating it. If you can accept that and bring the corpse to me, I can restore it.”

“There are several things I would like to confirm first, if that would be acceptable, Your Majesty?”

“You may ask whatever questions you wish, and I guarantee that our dealings will not be colored by them. However, I will not necessarily answer everything.”

“Very well,” Yan answered after a pause at her blatant calculation, his gray eye sharpening. “Your missive reached me almost immediately after news of the execution. Were you aware of my location the whole time?”

“That is correct.”

“Does that in turn mean that you could have contacted me before the execution if you wished?”

“That is correct.”

“Would it have been possible to rescue him with your and His Majesty’s aid?”

“I have no answer for you.”

“Had I not seen your missive, I would certainly have attacked. I am confident that there would have been some uproar on the Northern Continent if I had done so—particularly within the church. So is your desire to limit the chaos on the Northern Continent?”

“I have no answer for you.”

“That makes no sense, though. The church’s strongholds are

currently strengthening their naval abilities. That itself would be a threat to the Southern Continent. With His Majesty Zenjirou being your spouse, there is no way you would not realize that. Despite that, you stopped me from causing chaos on the Northern Continent and within the church. That seems to go against your best interests as royalty of the Southern Continent. Or has Capua already contacted the church?"

"I have no answer for you."

Silence fell as Yan examined her expression, trying to read her intentions in her face rather than her words. It was one of the fundamental techniques of negotiation. Leading a mercenary group, he had needed to become skilled in negotiation and bargaining whether he wanted to or not. Negotiating with an employer was generally the leader's job, and if he couldn't see through an employer who merely wanted to chew him up and spit him out, it could lead to the deaths of the whole group, himself included.

Even his keen eye could glean little from Aura's expression, though. She was the monarch of the country that had emerged from the great war victorious, so she was naturally well-versed in such matters. Fortunately, she did not rush the man, simply remaining silent after she had answered each question.

Silence from the monarch of a country of Capua's stature was weighty in itself, but Yan wasn't going to falter at just that now. He remained sitting in his chair, knees apart as he screwed his eye shut and thought things over. He considered what he wanted to accomplish, what he could risk for it, and the potential problems. Additionally, he considered what Aura would want for bringing this to his attention.

He was not possessed of such superlative insight that he could discern a person's abilities and personality after a single meeting. He was someone who felt that to know a person, it was more important to investigate their past actions and words than to meet them. So although he would never say that he knew her well enough, he had at least a minimum idea of both her personality and abilities.

She was the queen of a huge nation, so she would have a decent amount of skill and self-awareness. Therefore, her judgments,

suggestions, and plans would befit her rank. The problem was—as he had said before—this all seemed to contradict that.

It was frightening to take someone's assistance when you had no idea of their goals or what they stood to gain from it. If he had still been ready to rampage, he would have thought nothing of it and leaped at the chance, but now that he had regained his calm, his actions were dictated by his natural reasoning abilities. He was responsible for a mercenary group, even if it was a small one, and he didn't want to throw his or his men's lives away for nothing.

Once he had concluded his deliberations, his decision was to follow through with the course he was on.

"Very well, I shall accept your proposal. However, I wish to see proof first," he said, his single gray eye darting to the brazier. The corpse was little more than a blackened mass now.

Aura's gaze was pulled along with his. "It seems about time, yes. Very well, I shall show you. Place it on the table."

"Understood. I will borrow your tongs, then."

He stood as he spoke. There was always a fire burning in this room, so there was a constant reserve of logs, water to extinguish them in an emergency, tongs to safely handle burning items, and so on. He picked up the tongs off the wall and, with practiced movements likely resulting from how much time he'd spent making camp over the years, used them to retrieve the rabbit's corpse from the fire.

Fortunately, it was still a single piece, but its ears had long since burned away, so it would be hard to tell that it was a rabbit without having known ahead of time. Of course, since he had taken it from the fire, it was still burning. Yan placed it on the stone floor and scooped up some water before dropping it onto the burning corpse. Then, just in case, he used his booted foot to tread on it and carefully turn it over to make sure it was properly extinguished. Only then did he use the tongs to pick it up again.

The burnt, doused, and trodden-on rabbit was practically unrecognizable and barely holding together. He used the tongs to bring it to the table and placed it in front of Aura.

"Does that work?" he asked.

Even with the charred remains in front of her eyes and nose, she didn't flinch.

"It is. I will give you your proof. Do not approach, though; you ought to be able to see well enough from there."

"Very well." The mercenary stayed where he was. She was right in that the remains were completely visible on the table from his position.

The spell she was about to use was time reversal. It was one of the most closely guarded spells of space-time magic and wasn't even publicly acknowledged. Never mind foreigners, there were exceptionally few even within Capua who knew of its existence.

That was precisely why they were within this stone room, where only those most trusted by royalty would be guarding the secret. The fact that she was even casting it in front of a mere mercenary showed just how much of a threat she considered the Northern Continent.

Aura covered her mouth with her left hand to prevent her lips from being read and pointed her right towards the rabbit's remains before incanting the spell.

"*Let time's flow reverse upon this object by one full day. As compensation, I present...*"

The magic's effect was dramatic. The blackened husk of the rabbit on the table was enveloped in light, and a split second later, the glow intensified enough that it was impossible to look directly at it.

"Guh?!"

Even Commander Yan had to screw his single ashen eye shut at the light that had filled the room. Once he opened it again, it was all over.

The rabbit—its fur having been burned away to nothing and even anything that would normally be edible having all but vanished—was now fluffy and looked just as it had before its death.

"May I pick it up?" he asked after a moment.

"I have no objection. Check it until you are satisfied."

With the queen's permission, he moved closer to the table and gingerly lifted the corpse.

Its fur was damp. There was no sign of injury or scorching on it, though. From its looks alone, it was impossible to distinguish it from a live rabbit. Yan was shocked to feel a faint warmth to it as he lifted it. It was no lingering heat from the flames. No, it was the warmth you could feel in a creature's blood when you cut it while alive.

Contrary to appearances, though, the rabbit was certainly dead. As he focused on the sensations from his hand, he could feel the warmth slowly draining away. He pushed open its eyelids, seeing completely vacant eyes behind them.

"I see... It has indeed been restored. Still, a corpse is a corpse."

As he spoke, he subtly checked the rabbit's left ear. Its overall fur was a dark brown, but in the middle of its left ear was an inverted triangle of black fur. Seeing the triangle, he was sure that this was no trickery and the rabbit was indeed the one he had brought with him.

Since he had pulled the rabbit out in Logfort until this very moment, he'd held the rabbit with its ears together, so there was no way anyone would have been able to see the ear. This was his precaution against some kind of con where they presented him with a very similar rabbit's corpse.

He'd believed the chances to be low to begin with. After all, the only stipulation he'd been given was "a small creature of some kind." There was no guarantee that he would have brought a rabbit. A rat, cat, puppy, weasel, or many other animals would have equally fulfilled those conditions. It would be all but impossible for them to have one of each of them ready to switch out if needed. Hiding the pattern on its ear had been a final safeguard.

"So it seems you understand," Aura said, reading that understanding in his expression as well as his words. She smiled as if urging him on to a decision.

The mercenary firmed his resolve and nodded shallowly. "I have. I believe you would be capable of restoring his remains, Your Majesty."

Putting it into words made him all the more aware of the hope raging within him. The tension had vanished from his face to be replaced by a sort of desire. He had been unable to rescue his priest,

and the man had been burned to death, leaving only bones behind. To the dragon faith, dead bodies were a precious, sacred thing. Any harm that was done to a body needed to be repaired to the extent that it could be. Blemishes would be cleaned, and it would be dressed in its clothes from life and placed within a coffin before being buried. Those were the normal funeral rites for the faith. That was a shared characteristic of both the claw and fang denominations, as well as the two countries that had diverged from those faiths.

"Your Majesty, this is my final question."

The queen silently bade him to continue.

"Are your schemes going to disadvantage me?"

That final question was in fact the height of rudeness. Personally, he was expecting her to continue her earlier refusal to answer. If she didn't outright refute that she was scheming, it would practically be an admission in and of itself.

He was a seasoned mercenary, well aware that nobility and royalty plotted and schemed as a matter of course, using those weaker than themselves for their own causes. At the same time, though, he also knew that those who stood at the head of their countries, leading them from above, could also act at a whim, saving a commoner's life.

While it was fundamentally his own value system, he also felt that there were fewer acts more pointless than wasting time, money, and effort to divine an ulterior motive that didn't actually exist. He had therefore asked the question to at least dismiss the possibility that this was an honest gift with nothing hidden behind it.

The queen considered it for a few moments before speaking. "Hmm...not intentionally, at least. This is based on my own assumptions, but if things go the way I see them progressing, I believe the results will not be something you are against."

She kept her expression controlled as she spoke. She knew that the way you said something as well as how you behaved while doing so was just as important as *what* you said. Hence the awareness she kept of both her tone and face here when the most important words were being said. Deceiving your negotiation partner required even

more focus on both, but fortunately, that was not necessary here...whether those efforts bore fruit or not.

"Very well," the mercenary replied eventually. "I shall accept. His corpse will be retrieved and brought to you, so I ask that you fulfill your part when the time comes." He bowed his head deeply as he spoke.

"I swear I shall. There are restrictions, though. I cannot explain in detail due to its link to the spell itself, but there is a time limit: half a year from Priest Yan's death."

In truth, the mana in the magic tool meant that she should be able to wind back a human-sized object by around a year, but there was a need for some margin for error. The words were no great shock to the mercenary.

"Half a year. That should be more than enough," he said, the confidence clear in his voice.

"Will it? The remains will be within the church's heartland, no?"

"It will not be an issue. There are many there who are sympathetic to us, even if not publicly so." His voice had taken on a tinge of pride as he spoke. The priest's achievements and popularity were simply that meaningful to him—even if the target of that admiration had already passed on.

"I see. Then take care with your target. There will be no second chances."

Yan considered her words, imagining retrieving the corpse from the church and having it fixed through the spell she had just shown him. It would still be a corpse, but one restored so thoroughly it could have seemed alive. But what if that corpse was not Priest Yan, but someone entirely different?

He felt a shudder of fear run through his body. There was no small chance of such a thing happening. After all, the remains would be blackened and rendered down to little but bone. Determining exactly what was and was not from one person would be difficult. He wasn't sure he'd manage to maintain his sanity if he wasted his only chance on a mistake.

"I shall ensure there are no mistakes," he said, determination firm in his voice.

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With the agreement in place, Aura sent the mercenary back to Logfort, having been sent there herself by Zenjirou in secret to make that possible.

While Uppasala was part of the Northern Continent, it was almost in the far north, and far from the church's influence. Yan would simply have to make his own way from that point. There should be little issue, since Logfort was a bustling, prosperous port. People would doubtless be coming and going, so no one was likely to stand out too much.

As a mercenary, long-distance travel was one of Yan's specialties. He had also been stopped before beginning to rampage, so the church wouldn't see him as an enemy yet. Of course, they had purposefully waited until he was separated from the priest before striking, so they would at least be wary of him. Still, with the man not having publicly moved against them, they would not be overly cautious.

Therefore, it would likely be no real challenge for him to use his skills to conceal himself and make his way back to the church's strongholds. Still, things *would* need to cool down before he could hide right under their noses. Either way, Capua had nothing more they could contribute at this point.

Several days after the meeting, an expected report reached the royal palace: the *Glasir's Leaf* had arrived in Valentia. Freya had already left the ship, so its current captaincy was held by the previous vice captain, Magnus. That didn't change that it carried important allied guests, though. Therefore, Zenjirou was preparing to head there as a representative of the royal family.

Naturally, with the *Glasir's Leaf* arriving, Freya was also heading for Valentia. Within the country or not, there was no way that both of them would be allowed to go with only a single guard and no assistants. Therefore, it was five days after the ship had docked that Zenjirou arrived.

Immediately after recovering from the characteristic sense of dizziness from teleporting, Zenjirou was greeted by dazzling sunlight.

He had arrived in a room in the governor's building. The strength of the light coupled with the salty scent on the breeze practically shouted his location.

"Welcome back, Sir Zenjirou," the governor, Damian, said. The entire duchy, including the city, were practically under the direct control of the royal family, and the man tasked with its daily running was, of course, well trusted by them.

"My thanks, Lord Damian. I will be in your care for a while. Pardon the hurry, but is there a meeting room ready?"

The man gave a respectful bow at his question. "Of course. Assuming you are ready, I shall guide you there."

The people from the *Glasir's Leaf* were a given, but Freya and her guard—Skaji—had already arrived. Zenjirou was the final arrival.

"Very well. Let us be off shortly." Indeed, after one last check over his third uniform from a maid just in case, Zenjirou left the room.

"It is good to see you, Captain Magnus. I am glad to see your skills have seen you safely cross between the continents yet again," Zenjirou said, greeting the delegation from the ship without standing.

"It has been a while, Your Majesty. An honor to meet you again." While he spoke formally and bowed as etiquette demanded, both the man's words and actions were unrefined enough for even Zenjirou to notice. He was a man of the sea who had learned a bare minimum of manners.

Capua had always had a history of ignoring the particular behaviors of warriors and those who worked with their hands. As long as they showed respect in their own way it didn't matter. Time spent polishing their manners would be better spent polishing their craft.

The two parties were sitting on either side of a long table. Freya was next to Zenjirou, and while he felt somewhat uneasy about having her on *his* side of the table when meeting those of the *Glasir's Leaf*, it was the correct seating arrangement for their current relationship. Freya was not here as the ship's captain, but as his

wife.

Once the greetings were dispensed with, the captain and governor moved on to practical matters, those being the condition of the ship, the necessary trades, how free the sailors were to act in the city, and whose responsibility it would be if they caused trouble.

On the whole, it was much the same as the last time the ship had arrived, but there were still differences. The captain was now Magnus—a single sailor—rather than a member of the royal family, and Valentia now had a repair dock suitable for the ship's size under construction. It was planned as a construction dock for the future.

"So, the repairs will take place at our new dock. The costs will be taken on by Uppasala. Is that acceptable?" Damian asked.

Uppasala's ambassador, Frederick, and Captain Magnus nodded.

"Indeed, we are happy to accept."

"We have no issues."

The ship was a valuable one capable of intercontinental travel, and unlike Magnus—who was a simple captain—the ambassador represented the country as a whole. His discretionary powers allowed him to use a certain amount of the country's treasury.

There was a general framework in place between the two nations that dictated how the ship would be dealt with and who would pay for things, so the conversation ended without issue. What had *not* gone as planned was an unexpected addition to the ship's passengers.

Zenjirou knew that he was the one who should be leading the conversation for this part, so after a deep breath that he kept inaudible to his surroundings, he spoke. "It seems we are in agreement. So I would appreciate an introduction to our guest," he said, directing his gaze to the unfamiliar middle-aged man at the edge of the Uppasalan delegation.

This unexpected guest was the reason that Frederick had needed to come all this way. Everyone else's gazes followed his to focus on the man, who looked to be roughly in his thirties. His hair was somewhere between a dark blond and a light brown and was cut and styled neatly. While it was difficult to maintain personal grooming aboard a ship, the *Glasir's Leaf* had been docked for

several days already. He had likely dealt with it then.

At a glance, he stood at a little less than 180 centimeters, tall for the Southern Continent but perfectly average for the Sveans of Uppasala. There was a certain amount of training visible on his body, but far less than a dedicated warrior. His appearance should have been nothing particularly noteworthy, but it was impossible to dismiss the man himself as such at a glance.

Stares from foreign royalty, former royalty of his own country, and an ambassador of his own lands were focused upon him, and yet he seemed perfectly at ease. There was a light smile on his face as he relaxed in this chair. Even if it was a bluff and an act, the feat was not an easy one.

It was not Magnus that responded to his question, but the ambassador. "Allow me to introduce you. This is Professor Petr Rinne. He is a leading voice in the study of nature in our country."

"I am Rinne, if I may," the professor said, standing. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty." With that, he bowed.

"I have heard of your renown, Professor Rinne. I am glad to make your acquaintance as well. While I am disappointed to tell you this, the words come from none other than King Gustav, so I must."

Despite his king's name leaving Zenjirou's lips, Rinne remained smiling softly.

"He instructs you to return."

In fact, Rinne's response to the order coming directly from his king was to merely tilt his head.

"I have, of course, heard His Majesty's command. However, my discretion allows me to prioritize fieldwork over such orders." His response was not directed to Zenjirou, but the ambassador at his side.

The objection was, in a sense, correct. Those who held the role of professor in Uppasala's university were allowed to prioritize their own fieldwork over royal decrees when they were away for the long term. However, that was nothing more than an exceptional right to avoid the risk of disobeying an order when it was difficult for others to reach them. For example, if they were told to return within a

certain number of days but fell victim to bad weather, or if they were attacked by animals in a region where hunting was forbidden. In those cases, the right was given to prevent unavoidable accidents from restricting their work, so there was an argument to be made for him abusing it now.

Fortunately, though, the king had predicted this reaction as well. Zenjirou gave an exaggerated sigh.

"Incidentally, I also have a message from Smith Völundr. There is an ore he wishes you to search for. He is a smith of Capua, and Capua is of course willing to take responsibility for his commission. We are therefore willing to work so you can accept it. More specifically, we are working with His Majesty so you are able to return here as soon as possible after going back to Uppasala. Naturally, the travel between our two nations will be through teleportation."

The smile on the professor's face was clearly different from the faux smile he'd had so far. "Very well. I, Petr Rinne, will follow that order and return home."

Zenjirou felt like he was about to forget the formal setting he was currently in given how easily he agreed. However, that abruptness matched what he had heard from Gustav and Yngvi about the man. Yngvi had said, "Professor Rinne is, at his heart, a creature of his desires. However, those desires are mainly to fulfill his curiosity, so he can appear both more logical and more sociable than anyone at a glance."

In other words, he was usually the logical and affable professor because behaving like that was convenient for satisfying his desires, or rather his curiosity. However, he could also be unbelievably decisive when it came down to it. Boarding the *Glasir's Leaf* by practically stowing away was one of those occasions. Without knowing about Zenjirou's teleportation, he would have needed to wait over a year to come to the Southern Continent if he'd missed the ship.

It was possible that he would never discover the differences in nature between the two continents if he missed the opportunity. And so, despite knowing the risk of losing his position, he had still done

so.

His reason for the practical sophistry he was using to refuse it was because he felt that returning now could well see him never setting foot on the Southern Continent again. Therefore, Zenjirou giving him the assurance of a commission from Völundr that he could *only* carry out here was a guarantee that he could return, so his behavior had practically shifted with the wind.

"I am glad you understand," Zenjirou said with a hint of tiredness in his voice.

The professor's smile remained soft and unchanging, and the ambassador at his side ducked his head in slight embarrassment.

While convincing the professor to return to Uppasala was important, it was far from Zenjirou's main goal here, which was to see the current state of the ship and discuss the future. Thus, Zenjirou, Freya, Frederick, and Magnus had all come to the ship's mooring place.

"It looks rather different here," Zenjirou remarked as he saw the port itself.

The sights had certainly changed significantly since the last time he had been there. The biggest difference that was visible at a glance was the presence of large cranes. They were made of wood, strengthened with metal at the joints. They were powered by physical labor, but they had a distinct sense of foreignness on the Southern Continent.

Even now they were lifting huge pieces of lumber to be fastened to the immobilized ship. Lifting such huge pieces of wood to such heights with man power alone was close to impossible. In fact, Zenjirou didn't know how they'd repaired and constructed boats *without* such cranes so far. Perhaps the lack of them was one of the main reasons Capua had yet to build any ships large enough to sail between the continents.

Those working in the area had of course noticed the group, but in Capua, those at work were allowed to continue unless he spoke to them directly. Zenjirou was well aware from personal experience that a superior coming to watch you work was not a welcome thing, so he did his best to stay out of the way of anything they were doing.

Then again, he had not come solely to waste time and satisfy his curiosity. He was there in his role as royalty, so he couldn't just stand around.

"Is that crane something the craftsmen from Uppasala built?" he asked.

Freya nodded at his side. "It is. Our—Uppasala's—craftsmen did so. The majority of them are shipwrights, but there is also a bare minimum of prerequisites for the field."

In some respects, that was better than the way labor was divided in the modern world. These days, if you were to ask a car mechanic to build a jack, hydraulic pump, and air pump required for servicing a car from scratch, very few of them would actually be able to do so. However, while the level of technology wasn't as great as the modern world, this world's craftsmen hadn't specialized as much, so a skilled worker could do everything from the beginning.

Being at the pinnacle of smiths, Völundr could, if he wished, create the firebricks needed for a furnace from scratch. While the shipwrights were not on the same level as him, they were all skilled in their craft and together could build anything they needed for the ship's repair.

"The plans were to create a dry dock for larger ships, but can I assume that those plans will be delayed?"

"Indeed. The men and materials originally planned for it are being diverted to repairing the *Glasir's Leaf*, so construction on the dock will inevitably be delayed," the aging Svean craftsman in charge said.

Zenjirou remembered the report he'd read through on the dock. A dry dock was, as the name implied, a dock for a ship that could be drained of water. Using a dry dock allowed the exterior below the waterline to be inspected and repaired.

Without using one, all that could be done to the ship was simple servicing. Of course, Valentia was one of the largest ports in the country and had several dry docks. However, they were for the ships that Capua used and weren't suitable for a ship of the four-masted *Glasir's Leaf*'s size. It would be like trying to fit a horse into a dog's kennel.

"I have ordered some water manipulation magic tools from the Twin Kingdoms. Would they be useful for the dry dock?" Zenjirou asked.

The other man's face hardened at that. "Well, I can say that they would be useful, but I cannot be optimistic about *how* useful. A dry dock for a ship of this size involves a staggering amount of water."

With the lack of powered pumps, dry docks in this world relied on the tide. They docked a ship within a gated waterway, waited for the tide to go out, and then sealed the floodgates.

It went without saying that this required a significant amount of engineering. To use the tide to drain water from a dock meant investigating natural phenomena and creating the dock somewhere conditions were suitable. It was possible to create one only to realize the change in seasons meant that it didn't fully drain or refill and was therefore impossible to use.

Meanwhile, powered pumps made those conditions far looser. All you needed was a passage with enough of a draft for the ships and floodgates. However, it went without saying that those pumps didn't exist on either the Southern Continent or even the more advanced Northern Continent. Zenjirou had hopes that the magic tools for water manipulation would suffice in place of them, but that was unclear at the moment.

As the older man had said, it was unlikely they would be *useless*, but it was entirely possible they wouldn't be enough. They didn't know how much water would be needed for either the dock or what the tools could control. However, even if they were not useful for the dock itself, they would be a godsend for keeping water out from the hull. Since they wouldn't go to waste, Zenjirou had already ordered them.

"This is a major construction. We have already accounted for the time it will take, including delays in the schedule. The quality of the work is more important than its speed. Make sure that it is up to long-term use," he said.

Standing here as a superior, it was frustrating that the work wasn't being finished, but Zenjirou knew that stressing that to the workers would only worsen their morale and not actually help, so he

kept his voice and expression relatively gentle.

"Understood," the older man replied, bowing as the tension left his shoulders.

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Zenjirou and Freya were mainly in Valentia to receive the group from the *Glasir's Leaf* into the country and to send the professor back to Uppasala. They had also checked on the progress of the dock and shipbuilding facilities being built in the city, but after having come all this way, there were other matters they wished to see to while in the area.

After two nights in the estate and sending the professor to his homeland, the next day was spent heading south to Alcott.

Alcott: the word was initially nothing more than a name designating an uninhabited region of territory under the direct control of the crown. When Freya married Zenjirou, though, she had gained the title of the Duchess of Alcott, which was to be a historical turning point. At least, that was the plan.

Princess Freya had married from a country advanced in smithing and shipbuilding, and her countrymen skilled in both trades would be building a major shipyard and port for intercontinental vessels rivaling Valentia. Or again, that was the plan. At present, Valentia was unquestionably the best port in the country. It was their biggest trading port, a site for fishing, and also a naval port that was home to the majority of the country's seafaring military. Capua had a great number of small fishing ports, and a reasonable number of trading ports where small vessels could dock, but only Valentia could properly function as a naval base.

It was far from an ideal situation, particularly in the current climate where large-scale naval warfare seemed an inevitability. It was potentially fatal. Valentia was the only port where the larger intercontinental vessels could dock, so if the Northern Continent's assault toppled it, Capua would be in a distinctly troubling position.

There was a saying about putting all of one's eggs in a single basket, and it applied perfectly to putting all military assets in one

location. A single port capable of repairing larger ships meant that losing it would also mean losing that ability. A single dock suitable for building such ships would put a complete halt to such production if it were captured. A single harbor for large ships led to a single point of retreat in the event of a naval defeat, and in turn a fixed route would make for an easy ambush. It was dangerous in every way possible.

There was therefore good reason to establish a second suitable location in Alcott. Aura was naturally aware of that, but unfortunately there was the greatest possible impediment to such endeavors: budgetary constraints. As a result, Alcott currently stood as a practically vacant lot slowly being cleared and excavated by a small number of people.

"As Duchess Alcott, I bid you welcome to my domain, Sir Zenjirou," Freya said with a grin, standing in front of him as he stepped down from the carriage.

The two of them had traveled from Valentia together, but the princess was not in the carriage with him because she had taken the opportunity to ride on a dash drake instead partway through the journey.

The lessons in the inner palace's gardens were ostensibly for Zenjirou, but—perhaps unsurprisingly—Freya had picked up the skill much more quickly. Frankly, it was a rather predictable outcome for all involved. While it might have been a new experience in terms of the specific mount, both she and Skaji were skilled in horse riding and were therefore on another level from Zenjirou, who only had a standard driving license.

"Thank you, Freya. I take it you preferred the journey on drakeback?" he asked, taking her hand without thinking about it.

Freya responded to her husband's question with a smile. "I did. The carriage is an easier journey, but drakeback is more pleasant."

Her grin was earnest and underscored her words completely. While Zenjirou didn't really understand it intuitively, a female royal or noble—particularly a married woman—eschewing a carriage to don pants and ride personally was practically unprecedented. A closer look would reveal a well-used hand axe hanging at her waist.

Freya was well and truly satisfied with her life, which allowed her the liberty to simply ride on drakeback at her own discretion rather than needing to get special permission.

"You certainly seem to have enjoyed it more. I will have to keep at it."

As he spoke, Zenjirou stretched to work out the stiffness caused by the carriage journey. He was currently at the stage where he could move around fairly freely on the two dash drakes in the gardens, but those specific drakes had been chosen specifically for their placid natures. He would only be able to proudly proclaim confidence like Freya and Skaji once he could do the same for the average dash drake that was used by royalty.

The two of them moved off arm in arm, followed by Skaji, Natalio, and the knights underneath him for their protection. Originally, Zenjirou's protection had been handled by personnel loaned to him by Aura, but now they were all his direct subordinates.

Contrary to Zenjirou's wishes for it to be as small-scale as possible, the Knights of Bilbo were currently growing in number. That was at Aura's word. Blatantly trying to increase their forces would be difficult so soon after the war. Considering the potential issues in the North, though, improving their military force was a requirement. Increasing the number of knights belonging to the newly established order for Zenjirou was the easiest way, as they could be trusted to be at hand and trustworthy for Aura.

The only people less welcoming of the increase in numbers were Zenjirou and Natalio, the leader of the order, so it was difficult to refute. Zenjirou was considering just how large their numbers had grown without his realizing it as he looked over the area.

"So this is Alcott..." he murmured, considering continuing the sentence but stopping short of doing so.

There were several small huts and that was all. It would be difficult to call it a village, let alone a town. He doubted anyone would honestly call it "the Port of Alcott."

Freya must have noticed his conflicted expression. The duchess offered an exaggerated sigh. "Indeed, it is as you say, simply 'Alcott.' Though I will make sure it is one day known as the International

Port of Alcott," she stated.

The agreement was already in place for Capua's resources and Uppasala's skill to make Alcott into a port capable of serving intercontinental ships. There were limits to both monetary and human resources, though. Valentia's improvements were currently the priority, and building the new port was—as was evident from the sight of the area—on hold.

"Ah, yeah, Alcott will be a major strategic location in the future," Zenjirou answered vaguely, his gaze shifting.

Just as Freya was the duchess of Alcott, Aura was the duchess of Valentia. Zenjirou was perhaps the most dangerous person to voice any opinion on which construction should be prioritized. Whichever side he came down on, he would doubtless fall prey to the birds of the royal palace seeking gossip, or the nobles looking for seeds of intrigue.

Because of that, he kept his feelings away from both his face and voice as he moved the conversation onto more administrative matters. "Well, it was originally uninhabited, so I suppose it needs to be made into a suitable workplace for the craftsmen."

"True enough," Freya agreed with a sigh.

While it may have seemed mundane, simply leveling the ground was by no means a waste for developing the region. The ideal next step would be to rush-build a pier so boats could come and go. Even if it was a simple construction, it would allow people and materials to be brought in by sea and improve efficiency by no small amount.

However, even a slight amount of consideration led one to the conclusion that building a pier in a natural bay was not something that just anyone would be capable of. It required dependable, knowledgeable craftsmen to make it a reality. It was easy to imagine how much such simple and harsh conditions would increase labor costs. Forcing skilled laborers to work with very little in the way of facilities would not be cheap.

Conversely, preparing the land and laying foundations was possible with people who had a modicum of strength and health, outside of a small number of supervisors. Such people could be hired in droves for relatively little money. Turning the coast into a port was

so tightly intertwined with the budget they had available.

"If we could hire people capable of casting earth manipulation, things would be a lot more efficient," Zenjirou pointed out.

"If we had the budget for that, we could have started with the pier to begin with," Freya replied with a pout. It went without saying that people capable of using the spell on a decent area would cost even more than the specialists to build the pier.

"True enough," was the only response he could give her.

"While the budget may be under Her Majesty's control, the plan is mine alone. If I could secure funds of my own, the situation would change," she said, almost to herself.

Freya had nearly unprecedented levels of freedom for a woman in this world. Those freedoms also included a certain level of economic activity. The duchess had the right to the money from the royal family—not only to spend it, but to invest the funds and use them as she wished.

"A seed to grow your business," Zenjirou mused, hearing her words.

While not to the same extent as him—since she was at least from this world—Freya was from distant lands and was also the product of a significantly different culture. There were likely things she knew or had experienced that were completely unknown on the Southern Continent—or even if known, not the norm. There might be some piece of knowledge within those experiences that could be used to gain her funds.

"Uppasala is advanced even on the Northern Continent, so if we can cultivate that technology here, it could fund the project," he said to her.

Freya looked up at the sky in thought. "Technology that could earn funds? We have brought people fairly skilled in those things, but the majority were snapped up by the Capuan royal family," she replied.

That was an obvious action for Aura to take. While Freya had married Zenjirou and become part of the royal family, she was unlikely to dedicate her loyalty solely to her new home. Granting her the title of duchess and the uninhabited coastal land to go along

with it, and then allowing the engineers with more advanced techniques to report directly to her on top of it would essentially be allowing the formation of a sovereign state within the country's borders.

Aura's plans would be to take the foreign elements from Freya's people and slowly absorb and digest them, turning them into nourishment for Capua. They could not be allowed to remain alien to the country forever.

Freya understood the logic, but she was not so selfless that she'd just follow the plan without question. There was a decent pause before she spoke up. "Would it be possible to personally hire Uppasalans as part of the Capuan royal family?" she asked.

Zenjirou considered what he knew of the country's laws as he answered. "Hmm, there *shouldn't* be a problem with that. It would need one of us to transport them through teleportation, though, so the decision would depend on Aura's feelings."

Freya faltered briefly at the end of his answer, but she soon rallied. "Perfect. I won't lose this time."

Seeing her decisiveness, Zenjirou wondered if there was some way he could help. Freya's work finishing would, in itself, not be a detriment to either the country or royal family as a whole. The Northern Continent was more advanced than the South outside of magic. That was an irrefutable fact. While shipbuilding and smithing were the first things to come to mind, Capua was already directly importing such skills that directly impacted military matters.

In turn, the areas that Freya could personally import skill in would be different from that. To put it bluntly, they would be things that Aura could overlook.

He considered what he had seen on the Northern Continent that had made the biggest impact on him. The ships, metalworking, glass, candles, lace, clothing, and accessories... As his thoughts reached that point, he cast his eyes to the clothes Freya was wearing. They were horse riding clothes from the Northern Continent, consisting of a white shirt under a brown vest. The white was particularly noticeable in the sunlight.

"I just had a thought. They had a big lace industry in the

commonwealth. Does Uppasala have the same?" he asked.

Freya tilted her head in slight concern, not quite understanding where he was going with his questioning. "Lace? We *do* make some, but not as much as the commonwealth. Besides, while it is a luxury good, getting enough with a minimal number of workers would be difficult, so it would have little return."

Zenjirou shook his head. "We do something similar to making the actual cloth in Capua. The important thing isn't the final product, but the thread used to make it."

"The...thread?" she asked, blinking her blue eyes at him in confusion.

"Yeah, the thread. The Northern Continent's thread is far whiter than what you find here. So if you can let those skills spread, they might be useful."

Freya still wasn't entirely on board. "Pardon me, but I don't see that much of a difference."

It had been several years since she had first come to Capua. She'd had the opportunity to see a lot of Capua's clothing, and she didn't have a particular impression of white cloth there being "less white" than she was used to.

"Are you sure that's not because you're comparing the thread and fabric you see in both of the palaces? The fabric you see in the palace, particularly whatever the royal family uses, would be the cream of the crop, chosen for being as white as possible. The fabric for more general use, though, is far whiter on the Northern Continent. Part of it might be due to a difference in materials, but if there's a difference in the cleaning and bleaching, it might be useful."

"I see..." Freya mused, considering it seriously. "That seems worth looking into. If you're right, then this is an excellent chance."

"Yeah. You'd still need to get Aura's permission in the end, though."

Despite her initial flinch at his final statement, she immediately clenched her fist and spoke up. "Urk. I-I won't lose!"



Chapter 5 — A Planned Miracle

Approximately a month had passed since the clandestine meeting between Aura and Yan.

Yan's opportunity had come much sooner than expected. The mercenary had boasted that even within the church itself, there had been people who followed Priest Yan, and that had proved true. Capua had no idea who exactly had done what to arrive at the current situation. Whatever the case, though, Commander Yan was currently standing in front of Aura with a white wooden box in his arms.

They were within the stone room again, and Zenjirou had once more sent the mercenary over from Logfort. Nothing about the room had changed from the previous meeting. It was stone on all sides, the lighting coming from a brazier at the center. The sights didn't change by the day, nor by the year. Last time there had been a small table and two chairs, but instead there was a simple bed in its place.

"Welcome, Commander Yan," Aura greeted him. "I am pleased to see you have accomplished your goal."

Indeed, she had a smile on her face as she spread her arms in greeting. The one-eyed mercenary, however, maintained his stony expression.

"His Majesty's aid in arriving here was invaluable. If I may, though, my goal is yet to be accomplished. I am here to rely on your gracious aid to do so, however," he said, dropping to one knee on the stone floor.

While his manners were as fine as any could ask for, the fact that he maintained his hold on the white box showed just how precious it and its cargo were to him, and it almost seemed like he was shielding it with his body.

That was unlikely to be far from the truth. While he had an iron core, it was clear that he was at his limit and had no capacity for

joking at present. The war meant that it was not the first time Aura had seen such a person. Therefore, she kept her tone completely unaffected to avoid any provocation as she spoke.

"I shall proceed with the restoration. Remove the corpse from its box and place it on the bed."

The mercenary gave a short affirmation and moved to do so.

He opened the box and carefully, gingerly, removed several blackened-red items, laying each of them on the bed. They were likely human bones. The majority of them had been carbonized and were misshapen. At a glance, it was hard to see them as bones, let alone *human* bones. To be blunt, they looked like lumps of rock stained with dirt.

And yet, the mercenary treated them as if they were babies, carefully arranging them on the bed. It was an act that would take less than a minute without care, and Yan took nearly ten. Frankly, minor damage to the bones would do nothing to influence the outcome, but this was neither the time nor place to say such a thing.

"That is all of them, then. Indicate the bone you have the greatest confidence in being correct. If there is no difference, then I shall choose."

A single item would be the focus of the spell, and it would take in anything that was originally part of the same whole. If the initial target was wrong, it would change what was included. In this instance, if one of the bones Yan had brought belonged to anyone else, the time reversal would produce that person's corpse.

Yan had a face like thunder upon hearing that there was yet more to consider, then carefully checked over all of the bones before indicating a large fragment.

"Start from here."

His voice and finger alike were shaking noticeably. No one here would laugh at him, though. If anything, they were impressed at his courage picking so quickly. In fact, Aura herself had a greater estimation of him because of that, and her wariness of him grew in term.

"Very well. I shall cast the spell. You may watch, but attempting to hear the incantation is out of the question. Move back."

Yan inched back. He wanted to watch from as close as possible, showing his loyalty. While his retreat was almost unbearably slow, Aura simply waited in silence, unmoving, for him to be as far back as she wished.

If he stopped before she told him he could, she would just stop herself. It was not a threat or unfaithful. Instead, it was a natural precaution for using such secret magic. While only those of the bloodline could cast the spell, the incantation was a source of much information.

Pushed back by her unflinching stare, the commander continued his retreat.

"That will do," she said eventually. "I shall begin. *I put you to use*."

Her final sentence was mumbled in the language of magic as she gripped the magic tool in her left hand. It was a simple construction, a marble surrounded by eight equilateral triangles of metal. In truth, though, it was one of the most powerful magic tools in the world.

Future Compensation was a space-time spell and, as the name implied, one that allowed you to pay for spells with your future mana. It let you use both the mana you had today, along with the mana you would have in the coming days. In exchange, though, you would be unable to recover mana for that length of time.

While it had originally acted as an advance on your mana, making it into a magic tool turned it into a spell for you to accumulate mana to pay with. On days where Aura knew without a doubt she would not be using mana the next day, she would use it to store the next day's mana.

As a result, in exchange for being unable to recover mana the next day, that mana would be stored within the magic tool. In addition, it was made so it could be added to over time.

Perhaps fortunately, Aura was bound by the crown and throne, so there were many days she was unable to use magic freely. As a result, she had managed to store vast amounts of mana over the past several years.

With the words spoken, all of that mana was now released for use. She temporarily had access to hundreds of times her capacity.

It was akin to being hooked up to a huge external battery. In her current state, she could cast time reversal on a huge scale.

With her left hand gripping the magic tool, she directed her right palm to the bone Yan had indicated and cast the spell.

"*Let time's flow reverse upon this object by fifty-three full days. As compensation, I present...*"

The tool had enough mana that she could reverse the body's time by more than a year, but the speed at which it had been retrieved limited how much she needed to do.

The magic tool released all of its mana at once, however much was actually used, so it was a waste in some ways. If her plan went as she wished and the priest was actually resurrected, she wanted him to remember the church capturing him. Therefore, she carefully calculated the time from when he had been captured and was still definitely alive and used that number of days.

Just like the rabbit before, the results were dramatic. A ball of light seemed to engulf the entirety of the bed, and then it went off like a camera flash.

Once the light abated, the bones had vanished from the bed. In their palace was a nude man. It was unclear whether his position on his back was just good luck or part of the magic. After all, it wasn't clear what way around any of the bones were supposed to be, so it wouldn't be a surprise if he'd shown up face down with either his lower half or head off the side of the bed.

Aura felt that considering this, it might have been more appropriate to use a wide enough area of the floor rather than a bed, but it mattered little now. She spoke in a calm voice, as though everything had gone to plan.

"The spell was successful. Commander Yan, if you can confirm his identity."

With that, the commander had permission to approach, having looked almost like he was about to pounce forward regardless, his single eye bloodshot.

"Priest!"

His voice was loud and heavy with emotion as he ran towards the bed. Given how he was acting, there was little doubt that this was

indeed the priest.

Spotting the remaining bones at his side, Aura breathed an internal sigh of relief. The bones' lack of inclusion was because they were not originally his. In other words, if the incorrect bone had been chosen, she would have restored someone else entirely.

"Leaving him nude would be disrespectful. Clothe him," she said calmly to the commander.

Only the man's body had been the target of the spell, so him being nude upon its completion was something she had expected. Therefore, she had told Yan to prepare clothes for the corpse to wear. In fact, the bag on his back contained a complete outfit, including shoes and a hat. He didn't have the wherewithal to remember that, though. In fact, Aura wasn't sure whether he had even heard her.

"Priest, priest, priest!" he exclaimed, tears running down his face as he gripped the man's hand.

"Just as with the rabbit, however whole it appears and however warm it seems, it is still a corpse," Aura warned him, maintaining her stance that she had restored only the body despite her hopes to the contrary. None of those hopes showed on her face, though.

It was only natural. If she had allowed him to expect his resurrection and then betrayed those hopes, it would have been more than enough to invite his hatred. While the man's own words and Zenjirou's observations had shown the priest to be without mana, Aura herself had not confirmed that. Insects and small fish without mana would indeed be revived by the spell, but that didn't necessarily mean that the same would hold true for a human.

She had privately been rather sure of it, but without any precedent, it was, truthfully, an assumption that would serve her well. Fortunately, though, that optimism seemed to have been on the mark this time.

"Priest?" the commander said. Being in direct contact with him, it was only natural that he was the first to notice. Given his occupation, he had a significant amount of experience with corpses. He had cut through people and witnessed the moment they transitioned into death. Therefore, he was never going to miss the

dissonance.

"Your Majesty, is this truly a corpse?" As he spoke, he seemed to be grasping for something, repeatedly grabbing the priest's arm and pinching his skin.

Despite her internal celebrations, the queen kept her voice gentle like she was speaking to a child. "It is. It has been restored to its condition while alive. I assume you can feel its warmth? It will soon cool, though. Quickly, clothe it."

"That isn't all. While it is warm, there's resistance when I press on its arm, and the skin returns when I pinch it."

A corpse remained warm immediately after death, but the resistance inherent to living things left soon after. Yan knew that from experience, so despite Aura's words to the contrary, his hope seemed to grow as he put three of his fingers on the inside of the priest's wrist.

"There's...a pulse..."

At that, Aura decided the time had come to display her shock. "What?! Impossible!"

It would be difficult for even someone with a keen eye to see the act through the queen's expression and voice. Commander Yan might normally have been able to manage, but his currently disturbed mental state made it impossible.

"It's true. I can feel it, with my own hand!"

"Move!"

Aura strode forward, playing up her shock and holding her hand about a centimeter over the priest's mouth. A warm breeze played over her palm.

Now certain that her scheme had come to fruition, she wanted to cheer but crushed the urge, allowing words to fall from her lips as if she were not truly thinking about what she was saying.

"Impossible... He is breathing."

Those words seemed to be a signal, and the priest's eyes opened. Brown eyes peered blearily through his barely open eyelids. Despite the evident weakness, there was clearly life in them.

"Kde...jsem?"

The words that passed through his quivering lips were

meaningless to Aura.

Several minutes later, the priest was dressed in the robes the mercenary had brought with him and was now sitting atop the simple bed drinking from a water skin. The mercenary had finished explaining about the other man's capture, his execution, and finally his resurrection at the hands of the queen standing before them. Finally, he regained his calm.

"Děkuju, seminaristo," the priest said, likely offering thanks as he handed the water skin back to the mercenary. While the newly risen man couldn't hide his exhaustion, his expression was a calm smile.

It was the first time Aura had resurrected someone, but everything seemed to have followed her assumptions. The priest was—both physically and mentally—in the same state as he had been fifty-three days ago. Some time had passed since he had been captured, hence the exhaustion, but he was still coherent. It seemed that his captors—at least until fifty-three days ago—had provided a bare minimum of sustenance, so he was healthier than she had expected.

Wordlessly, she sat and examined the foreign priest. He was slightly thinner than you would consider someone of medium build, and was wearing green vestments. His hair and eyes were both brown and, at a glance, there was very little about him that would leave an impression. For those who could see mana, though, he was an utterly alien sight. There was not even a fragment of mana within him. Using that sense of mana made it seem like she was looking at a moving corpse.

Aura had never met anyone similar in her life. There were a reasonable number of people who had *practically* no mana, but it was honestly unsettling to meet someone with *literally* no mana.

The priest's resurrection was what she had expected and hoped for, but she could not allow that to be known. She kept her expression in the narrow band between "utter shock" and "a statesman forcing their shock down to act logically" as she spoke to the two men of the same name.

"I expect the two of you are rather confused. To speak frankly, the same is true of me. We cannot simply remain here, though. If

there are no issues, I would like to speak with you both. Would you be willing?”

The priest was intelligent and driven, and so had become a polyglot to make up for the handicap presented by his lack of mana. Unfortunately, though, the official language of Capua was not one of those he had learned. Therefore, the mercenary offered to interpret.

“Priest,” he said, before repeating what she had said in his mother tongue. Aura, though, could understand exactly what he said due to the soul of language. He had repeated her words exactly with no deviations.

While it would slow things down, it seemed like they would be able to speak and negotiate with each other without any impediment. With her decision made, Aura kept her eyes on the priest but listened mainly to what the mercenary was saying.

“‘That would be fine. I offer my deepest gratitude for saving me through your abilities once I met my fate. It truthfully doesn’t feel real,’ is what he said,” the mercenary interpreted.

Aura nodded at his words. Before she started the discussions with the priest, she turned to the commander and spoke directly to him.

“For the rest of our discussion, you need not specify that you are quoting Priest Yan. Instead, preface any of your own thoughts with a warning that they are your own.”

“Very well,” he agreed. With that, Aura turned to discuss things bluntly with the priest.

“You need not thank me, priest. While the commander here is another matter, I had never expected to do anything which would enable you to personally thank me like this.”

She offered a shrug there. It was a natural position to take. She had used the spell to restore the body, not in order to have the priest offer his gratitude. Any gratitude that she was offered would have come from the mercenary for restoring the corpse.

“I offer you my thanks even so. My life would have ended in nothingness, and its continuation is thanks to your abilities, Your Majesty.”

“Very well, then I shall accept your gratitude. If you wish to demonstrate that gratitude, I would like to request that you make no

indication that this outcome was in any way related to the Kingdom of Capua."

Aura was well aware that this would be nothing more than a verbal agreement. Her plans were to send both Yans back to the Northern Continent, and it was impossible to compel behavior in people so far away with no connection.

Technically, it would be possible to take someone that the priest cared about more than himself and compel obedience that way, but Capua had no leads on such a person. Even if they did, making such moves would be the most foolish thing they could do.

"Of course. I remember none of it. I simply intend to answer any questions with 'all that I am certain of is that I am currently alive,'" the priest said with his calm smile.

Aura looked somewhat doubtfully back at him. "I see. I had assumed you would call it the dragons' guidance or similar."

The mystique around resurrection had remained the same throughout the generations. Aura had assumed that if the priest had yet to break, he would use it as a convenient claim. If his claim was true, then he would also be saying he had no intention of actively using the events.

The priest's smile took on a rueful tinge as he answered. "The dragons' guidance is nothing so direct or biased. It is much wider ranging, impartial, and useless," he said directly.

Of course, the meaning only reached Aura's ears through the mercenary's translation, so the words actually carried more weight when they reached her. The veteran's face was twisted as he spoke, a clear question of whether he should actually say such a thing all but written on his face.

In other words, what the priest was saying was not a normal view within the faith. With some relief, Aura straightened and continued the conversation.

"You surprise me. I had heard that you were a devout follower of the faith in accordance with your rank."

"I do indeed personally follow the dragon faith," he answered. "However, I am also a researcher of dragons and have a position to explain my teachings. Oh, I was excommunicated from the church

before my capture, so my position as priest is self-proclaimed now. I will always preach, though, that the dragon faith is nothing more than an emotional aid and a guideline for life. Breaking the faith's creed will not cause a direct smiting from the heavens, and keeping the faith will not allow one to directly petition the dragons for supernatural aid. The faith is its teachings, and those teachings will lead you to salvation."

"I see. You seem to be a highly intelligent man," Aura said, her almost reddish-brown eyes closing slightly in a smile.

At the same time, she was internally certain of something. No matter what, she had to send him back to the Northern Continent. Even their brief conversation had been enough to make her sure that he was a man with intelligence, logic, adaptability in service of his goal, and a fixation on that goal that would allow him to surrender even his life for it. As a politician, he was the kind of person she wanted nowhere near her country, and that was precisely why she wanted her theoretical enemies to have to deal with him.

The priest had no way of knowing her thoughts as he answered. "My thanks. Regardless, coincidence or not, I cannot countenance not taking this opportunity to redo things. To avoid inconveniencing you, Your Majesty, I would like to ensure that my assumptions of the current situation are accurate," he said, indicating he wished for there to be more information shared between the two of them.

"Hm, I would be willing to hear you out, but what do you mean by it inconveniencing me?"

The priest immediately answered. "To be specific, I wish to establish what happened while I was absent. If we are not in agreement about how to treat that period, it could disadvantage you in the future."

"That would indeed be a problem," Aura agreed. "Without an established timeline, ensuring our responses match will be rather difficult."

She had not reverted him to "the the day before his execution," but instead to the last day the mercenary had confirmed he was alive. This was to add a safety margin to account for the fact that

criminals could die in prison before their official execution date without an immediate announcement of their passing. It was avoiding the possibility of rewinding time on the bones and changing them from "long since charred and blackened bones" to "only just charred and blackened bones." If that had happened, they would have already used the magic tool, so there would have been no second chances.

Of course, although they hadn't revealed it to Yan, her hopes were always for a resurrection, so she had added even more of a safety margin to avoid him being alive yet beyond help from his experiences while incarcerated. As a result, the priest had come back to life as she had planned, but there was a decent amount of time that he had no memory of. If they wanted to hide that his resurrection was a result of reversing time, they needed an established story to cover that period.

"First let us ascertain how things currently are. As far as you are aware, your memories are from fifty-three days ago? You have no memories after that, but prior memories remain clear, correct?"

The priest nodded shallowly. "Indeed, while I believe Commander Yan's word, it honestly doesn't feel real. Truthfully, I cannot believe the year's end has already passed."

The reason the priest hadn't felt how much time had passed was that being imprisoned underground made it hard to accurately count the days. Maintaining an accurate sense of time when confined in a space without sunlight was difficult. While he had been provided with food and water once a day and could keep track of the days by counting how many times that happened, there was no way of recording it. Memory alone was unreliable. Human memory was far less accurate than people thought it was. Even so, the priest was still certain that it hadn't been over two months since he was incarcerated.

"Is that just a problem of intuition? Does your body feel the same? Does anything seem amiss physically? Do you feel either weaker or stronger than you believe you should?" the queen asked.

"Pardon me for a moment," he replied, then stood and rolled his neck, stretching and moving around several times.

Once he was done, he sat back down on the bed.

"No. For better or worse, I feel as I should. See this injury on my right hand... It was something I did accidentally soon after my imprisonment, but it has healed significantly, no? And yet it still remains. The cell was pitch-black so this is the first time I have personally seen it, but it feels as I remember it," he said, lifting his hand to show its back.

While the priest's face remained composed, his translator's twisted in pain, his single gray eye narrowing. The mark on the older man's right hand was, to be more specific, an injury at the base of his middle finger. Anyone who looked at it could see how it had happened at a glance. It was the kind of injury you got from punching something hard. He had probably punched at the walls of the cell—the holy man who was currently sitting with a placid smile. How emotional must he have been?

At the very least, it was not something she should touch on directly, Aura decided. She ignored its origin and spoke simply on its current state. "Intriguing. Even recovering wounds have returned to the state they were. While I am deeply interested in the results of my spell, let us set them aside. In other words, you lack the memory of the last fifty-three days and wish for an agreement on what to tell people who are aware of what happened during that time, correct?"

"Exactly," he answered, lips lifting into a soft smile. While many of the priest's expressions could be summed up as "smiles," there was a shocking range in the emotions they demonstrated.

He had been rewound to his state of fifty-three days prior, but the church had announced his execution forty-six days ago. In other words, there were seven days he had no memory of. Although he may have been confined below ground, it was all but impossible that he had made absolutely no contact with others over those seven days. At the very least, he'd have interacted with someone as he was being taken for execution. There would have been some form of conversation between them, and if the priest didn't remember it, the church could declare the reincarnated man a fraud.

"Then perhaps we could claim you escaped at that point and say that the church used a substitute corpse through a lack of

willingness to admit to it," Aura suggested, assuming that it would be rejected.

Indeed, the man shook his head firmly. "We cannot."

"I thought as much," she admitted with a shrug.

His reaction confirmed her initial information. In his view, the church imprisoning him was not, in itself, wrong. The church was a group of priests, so should sometimes offer guidance to those priests that belonged to it, and if he was given that guidance, he was willing to change.

However, Yan felt that there was nothing wrong or excessive about his words, but conversely felt like the church had deviated from its initial teachings, and he wanted that discussion to happen. If he had escaped from imprisonment, then it would mean that he had changed how he thought about things for his own sake. Uppasala's intelligence had come to the conclusion that even if he had come upon an opportunity to escape, he wouldn't have taken it, and it seemed they were correct.

"Which means there are issues remaining. You did not escape, and yet you also have no memory of what happened towards the end. This is a definite advantage for the church. If they know you have no memory of things said during your imprisonment or at the time of your execution, they could demand you prove your identity by relating those words or else call you a fraud. No?"

"I cannot deny the possibility."

In fact, that was his main concern. The church was in itself as influential as a country on the Northern Continent. Such influence allowed them to make white into black. Even the slightest hint of gray would be treated as fully black. No matter how Yan himself claimed he was the real person, if that influence labeled him a fraud, that would be how he was seen.

Aura scowled internally as the priest thought. Personally, she cared little if he was labeled a fraud. All she needed from him was activity and chaos on the Northern Continent. If, by some remote flight of fancy he insisted he could not immediately return and needed to wait for a chance while regaining energy here, that would be the worst possible outcome. She wanted the dangerous man in

the North no matter what.

While those thoughts were swirling around her head, the mercenary—who had remained silent other than his translations so far—raised his hand slightly. "These are my own words," he started. "Pardon, but I would say it is a simple case of 'he said, she said.' Perhaps we could overcome it with information gathering and predictions?"

"Hm. Explain in more detail," Aura replied.

The commander did so. "Of course. While remembering it makes my blood boil, the information I gathered says that treatment in the dungeon got gradually worse. It is common for people's memories in such situations to become unreliable. In fact, it is strange for such a thing *not* to happen. Furthermore, with no third party, it is possible for the church to lie. Actually, they *will* lie. They will say he repented just before the execution and begged for forgiveness. In which case, I believe all we can do is claim a 'truth' that suits us."

They could question those who believed in the priest within the church about what happened to him, then using that information, he could predict how he would have reacted. Claiming that those events were the truth and that any missing information was simply due to missing memories would work.

"I see. Not a bad suggestion," Aura replied, seeing how it could work, then offered some advice despite internally wanting to send them back to the Northern Continent at once. "There are still concerns, though. Continuing the argument assumes that both parties have equally influential voices. If either is overwhelming, the debate breaks down and one side is taken as fact. Would that be acceptable?"

It seemed unlikely that either man would fall for simply suppressing any of her doubts and claiming it should work. Also, she was not entirely happy with going so far as to use her secret spell and then having the church simply declare the revived man a fraud and refusing to engage with him.

The priest looked bothered, agreeing with the concern, but the translating mercenary spoke with surety. "Again, these are my own words, but I believe such a thing is unlikely to happen."

"Hm. Would you explain?"

"Of course. Priest Yan underestimates his own influence. The church's influence on the Northern Continent is great, and generally its believers believe the church's claims. However, there are people who separately believed in him. They will trust his words. At the very least, those who we meet directly will understand it is truly him."

His words were proud, enough to discomfit even the priest in question. The mercenary continued confidently.

"In his homeland of Bohevia, there is a great number of people who will believe him, including those in the palace and church. Within the capital where the university is, they would be an overwhelming majority."

The queen forced the corners of her lips to remain in place. That was perfect. If he was right, that was practically ideal for Capua. Despite both sides being influenced by the church, Yan's country and a country where those led by the church would all but fall into conflict.

Of course, with how much faith the mercenary had in the priest, taking it at face value would be dangerous. Regardless, it was a perfect situation for the priest to return to the Northern Continent.

"There could be no better result than for you to be able to return home. However, as I said, this was not something I expected. My plan was to teleport the commander with your corpse back to the Northern Continent. If it suits you, I can simply do the same for both of you separately."

The first half of Aura's speech was completely made up, but the latter was the truth. While she had schemed for a potential resurrection of the priest, she was unable to tell the mercenary as much, so she had made no preparations other than to restore the corpse. Therefore, it would be rather unfortunate for them to ask to recover and see how things went here.

There were only a very small number of people within the country who knew Commander Yan was in the room. The pair would be unable to leave the room, and bringing both sustenance as well as anything else required for daily life would be difficult. The greatest inconvenience was that there was no toilet there. The best

result would be for the two of them to leave before they had to answer the call of nature.

Fortunately, the mercenary simply smiled. "That would be fine. Moving clandestinely is my specialty. I would have simply carried the corpse, but now he is alive. If anything, it will be less difficult."

Things would be different if the priest had weakened to the point he was on the verge of death, but although he had lost weight, he could still stand and walk. It would be far easier than carrying a corpse around.

"Very well, then. Assuming you are in agreement, Priest Yan, the commander can explain the teleportation. Your destination will be Logfort in Uppasala. We have a certain degree of contact with their leadership, so even if you are discovered, they should turn a blind eye. It would only be tacit tolerance, though—the best course of action would be to remain undiscovered, so I ask that you move as quickly and secretly as is practical." She had already informed the commander of all of this, but repeated it again for the priest's understanding.

The mercenary repeated the words dutifully to the priest, who nodded and then spoke to Aura directly. "Áno, rozumím jejímu veličenstvu královně."

Of course, Aura didn't understand what he'd said, but his firm expression and the bow he gave suggested it was meant to be an agreement.

The translation from the mercenary was essentially what she had expected.

"Yes, understood, Your Majesty. The rest of what I have to say are my own words. We will do as you ask. I am not going to repay your aid with hardship," he said earnestly.

Given their behavior, Aura decided that there wouldn't be any issues from them. "Very well. This is the final thing I can do for you. I pray for your fortune."

With that, she sent both Yans to the Northern Continent.

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Several days later, once the resurrection had mostly been dealt with, Zenjirou and Aura were in the midst of one of their usual discussions in the inner palace living room. What they would discuss here was completely classified. They had wanted to be even more careful than usual, ensuring that *everyone* was away from them. However, a private meeting excluding even the maids who were allowed to remain at their side for the entire time they were within the inner palace would leak and draw attention. Thus, they had waited until the most trustworthy of the maids were on living room duty. It was a natural precaution to take now that time reversal—Capua's most secret spell—had resurrected a human.

They had started by exchanging information, questioned anything that seemed amiss, spoken of each other's doubts, and continued until both were satisfied. At that point, Aura heaved a sigh, letting her shoulders rise and fall.

"I see. So you did not meet either Commander Yan or the revived priest in Logfort?" she clarified.

"I didn't," Zenjirou answered seriously. "I waited in another room and pretended to be absent."

That night, he had been hiding within the building in Logfort since he had sent the mercenary to Capua, and had still been there when Aura sent both of them back. It would have been preferable for him to see them to gather information, but unfortunately he was nowhere near as confident in his acting abilities as his wife was. He'd decided that it was less of a risk to avoid the possible information leak than to see them directly, even if it did strike him as odd.

Aura couldn't help but agree. "Indeed, there was a reasonable chance they could have spotted our plan if you'd met them then."

They did not want anyone to know that his resurrection had been planned rather than happening by chance. It would potentially see their spell's capabilities misunderstood, and above all else, it would be clear they had some goal in mind for the priest. If the two men knew that Capua was using them to sow discord on the Northern Continent, their goodwill towards the royal family would likely sour.

Zenjirou had decided the Northerners would be able to tell the

whole thing had been planned if he interacted with them, and he was likely correct. He wasn't as skilled as Aura at controlling his expressions, and the period between the resurrection and the meeting would have allowed both men to regain their calm. While one was a priest and the other a mercenary, and they therefore had different positions in society, both were intelligent and logical men—both insightful enough to have doubts caused by Zenjirou's clumsy acting.

"Fortunately, it seems the two of them have left Uppasala without being spotted. At least as far as those working in the building and around the port, no one has mentioned seeing them." While Zenjirou's information gathering abilities weren't exactly high, his conclusion was unlikely to be wrong.

Moving without being noticed was one of the mercenary's specialties, especially considering his extensive experience. The priest was also far lighter on his feet than you would expect from either of his titles. He would be able to avoid dragging the mercenary down, at least. They had likely avoided people seeing them during the night and boarded a suitable ship out of the country.

At that point, Zenjirou moved to get confirmation of what he'd been thinking this whole time. "Hey, Aura?"

"What is it?"

"If things go as we're expecting, are we going to be able to hide time reversal bringing someone back to life?"

Aura considered it for a while before giving a conditional affirmative. "Likely so, yes. Rumors will spread, but that is already the case. If the priest keeps his word, they should remain only that."

In that respect, Aura was taking a rather optimistic view. While part of that was due to what she had seen of the kind of man the priest was and had some faith in his behavior, more of it was due to the lack of benefit to him. A "miraculous resurrection" was much more advantageous to him. If he had been revived due to lineal magic from the Southern Continent, it would be the family that was impressive, and there would be no mystique to it.

"That sounds right. So what about our records? The main things

that come to mind are recording everything and then making sure only the royal family can view those records, or leaving no record at all if we're prioritizing secrecy. I guess it has to be one or the other."

Even Zenjirou knew that a half measure would be the worst choice. Ambiguous information would lead to distortions in expectations and hopes in future generations. "A person without mana can be resurrected through time reversal" could become "a person can be resurrected through time reversal."

Aura had to agree on that front. "Indeed, we have to commit fully to whichever path we decide on. Much of the secret information for royalty is passed down verbally, but that easily grows distorted."

Verbal communications were far more secure than written records, but written records were by far the better choice for passing down exact information. While the resurrection needed to remain secret, the exact circumstances around the possibility were just as important.

"Yeah. Honestly, it seems like it'd be way worse for the vague possibility of resurrection to leak than the truth about how specific the circumstances we need are."

"Quite so. However, the fact is that it must remain as unknown as possible at large," she said, nodding along before having a sudden thought. "I know—we can have you record it."

"Me?" Zenjirou asked, confused. He knew nothing about keeping information hidden, but when Aura continued her explanation, he had to agree it made sense.

"Yes. You can record such information on your computer and leave no physical record. Additionally, if you use your own language rather than the local one, it should be all the harder for it to leak."

"I see, that works," he had to admit.

Information in the computer needed power to be read back. Even if it could be read without it, keeping it in Japanese would make it harder to understand.

Either way, they intended to pass the computer and generator down to their children. The generator was one thing, but using the computer to a reasonable degree required knowledge of Japanese. In other words, their children would need a decent level of

proficiency in reading and writing in the language. Considering that, leaving the information in Japanese was perfect.

"The problem will be losing the information stored within it when we rewind it. There are limits to the amount of external storage I've got, so choosing the specific information we *need* to pass on will be the issue."

"Hm, then perhaps we can allow the level of secrecy to decrease and you can record it on drake parchment, still in Japanese?"

"That'd probably be the best bet. It'd mean we need to not print out the dictionary I'm making, though."

He was using his free time on plans for the request from Utgard. His current step was digitizing all the documents the royal family had on space-time magic. He had also been typing up a list of equivalent words between the two languages before then. It was only the very beginning stages of creating a dictionary. No one other than Zenjirou could do it, and it seemed too vast for him to finish within his lifetime.

The document was certainly not worthy of being called a proper dictionary, created solely by Zenjirou with his own knowledge, but there was still a big difference between having it and not. If he recorded the secret information in Japanese on drake parchment, then he would need to keep the dictionary out of sight as much as possible.

It was something he'd need to do in order to pass the computer and generator on to his descendants, but it wasn't something that needed to be perfect either.

Aura agreed. "Indeed. Japanese is of little use without access to the computer, so keeping the dictionary on the computer maintains the secrecy."

Conversely, it would be a good idea to translate instructions on the appliances and their maintenance, along with how often the battery required rewinding away from Japanese and leave written records. Shutting off the generator meant doing the same to every appliance connected to it, so keeping detailed information on those procedures was vital.

Digressions aside, they had decided how to deal with the

information on resurrection via time reversal.

"So does that pretty much finish everything about Priest Yan?" Zenjirou asked.

"It does," Aura affirmed. "Or more accurately, it marks the point where we can do little but wait and watch."

The priest had been revived and sent back to the Northern Continent. Capua had no further control over either man, so all they could do was wait and see. They were out of Aura's hands now.

"Got it. Is there anything else we need to talk about?"

The required secrecy was far and away the highest with Yan's revival, but it was not the only problem currently facing the country. There were several other matters of greater importance. He'd only just asked the question when he remembered something else he should ask about.

"Oh, what about that glass craftsman I sent after the commander?"

"Ah, he is a guest of the palace. We do not yet know his skill, but the palace will be taking responsibility for the rest of his life. He will not be leaving."

The elderly craftsman had originally managed a small workshop in Bohevia, but he'd been unable to keep pace with technological advances and was starting to struggle to keep food on the table due to the lack of demand. Zenjirou had invited him to Capua through a local intermediary.

The instructions he had been given included coming to Logfort in secret, and there had been a lump sum, but they had not given him any advice for how to get there in secret. While he may have done his best, it was almost inevitable that the leaders of Uppasala would spot him. Truthfully, it was something Capua *wanted* to happen. He was a smoke screen to divert from the two Yans moving around.

Out of work or not, countries could certainly find fault with a foreign land poaching their craftsmen. There was therefore nothing unnatural about Zenjirou teleporting him to Capua behind closed doors.

"I hope he's useful. They might be old techniques, but he should be able to make reasonably transparent glass, so I've got some hope

for him."

The queen nodded in agreement as she spoke. "That would be the ideal outcome. We cannot ask for too much. He was useful for camouflaging the priest's and mercenary's movements. That is enough."

She had very few expectations of the aging man. While advances in technology had put him out of a job, the same wasn't true for all of his peers. Some maintained a living using the connections they'd formed over their years in business; others dismissed the new technologies as a gimmick and still maintained a following with their polished traditional techniques. There were some who had moved away from production to manage workshop unions, while delegating the production to newcomers who had learned the new skills. Some were even joining the young apprentices to learn the new skills as well.

Overall, those who couldn't maintain some form of living were in the minority. From one perspective, they'd picked someone whose personality, skill, business acumen, administration, passion, and luck had all failed to secure him an opportunity. In that way, they certainly couldn't expect too much of him.

"Well, that's true. I guess I'll just take it as a bit of good luck if things go well," Zenjirou told himself, changing his opinion.

"That would be for the best. Speaking of such things, Freya made a suggestion. She wishes to use her own funds to bring people from the Northern Continent. Those specializing in the bleaching and washing of cloth specifically," Aura said with a meaningful smile.

Realizing that it was about what Zenjirou had advised Freya on, he answered truthfully. He'd never intended to hide it in the first place. "Yeah, Freya spoke to me about it, and I gave her what advice I could. As far as I've seen, the average cloth on the Northern Continent is higher quality than ours."

Technically, you could consider his advice to Freya as favoring one of his wives over the other, but a relationship where he could not even do that was too detached for Zenjirou. In the polygamy common in noble families, such relationships were not unusual, but Zenjirou's mental constitution wasn't strong enough to withstand

something like that.

Indeed, Aura herself wasn't condemning him for offering his advice. "It is not an issue," she agreed. "I have given her leave to spend outside of a limited number of industries, and I have no right to stop you from offering her advice. The potential problem would be the likelihood that her success will invite pushback from our countrymen that work in that industry."

If Freya was successful, it would mean a new supplier of cloth and fiber being formed in Capua. Assuming Zenjirou's judgment of the quality was accurate, the thread and cloth would be able to outcompete current products on either quality or price—or potentially both.

That *not* happening would be an issue for Freya, but it coming to fruition would also disadvantage the local workforce. Businesses with higher quality and lower prices still often failed due to lack of fame or trust, but Freya had her title as royalty. In the worst case—or best, depending on your perspective—the current workers could lose their businesses.

Zenjirou may not have had the best head for business, but even he could see that. "That wouldn't be good," he admitted. "Then what if she only sells the techniques rather than directly selling the products?"

"Sell the technique?" Aura asked.

"Yeah. Whatever happens, I'm probably going to be teleporting them over, right? That puts a significant limit on numbers, and they wouldn't be able to produce huge amounts of anything. That would mean they'd need to hire local talent as well. That would put them in direct competition with the current businesses, though."

Competing for patronage was one thing, but the merchants would not let poaching their workforce go unanswered. If they hired children and unskilled apprentices, they would take too long to turn a profit. Freya didn't want to spend a long time making money; she wanted it as quickly as possible.

"So her people would start by replicating things here. They'd use local materials to get bleaching to the same level as on the Northern Continent. There would be a fair number of businesses that wanted

those techniques. They could mass-produce cloth under license, and Freya could take a percentage of their sales. That would end up benefiting both sides, right?"

Zenjirou's idea—centering mostly on minimizing conflict rather than maximizing profit—was potentially the best advice he could offer here.

"A continuing fee to utilize the established technique? That could work well if it is accepted," Aura agreed.

The proviso was there because it wasn't a proposal that would usually work. There was no concept of intellectual property on the Southern Continent, so collecting money for techniques and knowledge was difficult.

Once someone had learned the method, they could quite easily refuse to keep paying, and there was no law to compel them to do so. If anything, the blame would usually fall on the people allowing their trade secrets to fall into their hands.

That wouldn't be an issue in this case, though, because it was being posited by Freya, a member of the country's royal family. The royal family's influence was exceptionally strong for a feudalistic nation. For those living in areas under the royal family's direct control, they could force it to be accepted. Even agreements outside of the norm for the continent would be kept to. That was how much power, influence, and authority the Capuan royal family had.

"Hm, I would allow it in that case. In fact, other dyes rather than simply the bleaching techniques would also be acceptable."

It was an unshakable fact that the Northern Continent was more technologically advanced than the Southern Continent. That meant there was a decent chance that their dyeing techniques were better as well, not just their washing and bleaching methods. Whether they applied to all hues was another matter, but Aura was considering a limited number being used to drum up interest. Zenjirou pondered it before shaking his head.

"No, I think we should stick to the washing and bleaching first. Most dyes are plant-based, right? The plants between the two continents are completely different, so it's unlikely we'd be able to find the right plants here, and finding substitutes would add a lot of

work."

If the original plants could grow in Capua, it would be fine, but the difference in climate made it a likely fruitless endeavor. If it *did* work, it could still take years or even decades to actually pay off. Freya wanted to make Alcott a reality as quickly as possible and needed the money for that.

"I see. That holds. Is that not also the case for the white thread and cloth, though? The reagents used in their manufacturing and bleaching are presumably made from local ingredients, which would surely make them just as difficult to reproduce here, no?"

While Zenjirou partially agreed, he refuted her concerns. "On the whole, probably. It seems far more reproducible than their dyes, though."

There were countless hues of dyes, and even using the same red flower in the same way could produce slightly different shades of red dye depending on the soil in which it was grown.

Conversely, bleaches were all similar on close examination. They removed stains and color. Of course, there was a degree of compatibility with the chemicals and fibers, so there was no guarantee that the same techniques would produce comparable results on the Southern Continent. Regardless, Freya wanted a method for getting money quickly. If it seemed like it would take too long after investigating, she could simply move on to the next option.

"Very well. Then I shall arrange it. I will inform Freya."

"Yeah," Zenjirou replied, managing to swallow the word of thanks that wanted to leave his throat. Thanking Aura for giving Freya consideration in the way she was would not be an impartial position to take.

It was irritating, but this was one of the duties of royalty, and an obligation for men with multiple wives. In Zenjirou's case, both women were accomplished in their own right, so he had to keep this sort of thing to himself.

The thoughts about duty and marriage prompted another topic from Zenjirou.

"Speaking of, how's everything going with Prince Yngvi? They've

only had the one gathering so far."

The gathering Zenjirou was talking about was the event where Yngvi was the guest of honor. While officially it was hosted by the royal family in order to welcome him to the country, it was well known that it was actually for him to find a second wife.

Aura offered a slight shrug to his question.

"It will almost certainly be Mirella. According to Freya, that is the way he wants to go. We will need to carefully sound out her wishes."

"Her wishes" could perhaps be rephrased as "her resolve." It was far from uncommon for a girl's wishes to hold very little weight in marriages between nobles from the same country. This marriage, though, was an extreme exception where she would be marrying into the royal family of a country on the Northern Continent.

It was both an extreme honor, and something that would see them to great fortune if it went well, but it also meant spending the rest of her life in a completely foreign land. It was practically inevitable that there would be difficulties that would be impossible to predict. Fulfilling such a duty would require skill on the girl's side, but also her willingness.

"I pretty much expected it, but Yngvi definitely makes his choices quickly. I agree that finding out how she feels about it is important, but the problem is who does it and how."

By blood, she was Count Márquez's niece, and adopted by him. She was also currently working within the inner palace as a maid. In that respect, it would be easy for either Zenjirou or Aura to ask her directly, but Zenjirou was aware that neither of them were really suited to it. They were both members of the royal family and in favor of the marriage going ahead.

Mirella was sharp enough that she'd understand that. Therefore, while Zenjirou or Aura could tell her to speak truthfully, there was still a good chance she would infer their desires and answer in agreement.

"Indeed, we do not want a commitment, but to know her feelings. For the time being, I will have the head maid spread the information *here* that Prince Yngvi will be having a second bride from Capua, and then have her listen to the maids' gossip. Of

course, we will be asking for Lady Octavia's aid eventually."

Aura's suggestion was nothing particularly special. People generally spoke most freely with those they worked closely with and trusted. They would say things to their peers that they would not tell their superiors. The young palace maids would never be able to pass up such a juicy piece of gossip, and there was little doubt that they'd speak rather thoughtlessly about it. Additionally, they would all know that some of their compatriots had been allowed to return briefly to their families and participate in the welcome for Yngvi. The maids who had not would certainly question those who had.

Did he speak to you? If he proposed, what would you do? Those answers would lead to their actual thoughts.

"This wouldn't just be for Mirella, but I wanted to offer whoever marries him the right to periodically return to Capua," Zenjirou said.

The queen nodded shallowly in agreement. "A good idea. Both the wife and the maids who accompany her," she replied. Her voice gained an apologetic tone. "Though the burden will fall on you."

Teleportation between Capua and Uppasala would almost certainly fall entirely on Zenjirou. While it would doubtless increase his workload, Zenjirou himself didn't see much of a problem with it.

"It'll be the same as with Freya and the maids from the Northern Continent. Spending a few more days there won't be that hard on me."

Zenjirou was teleporting all over the place already, so adding a little more time to his stays on the Northern Continent to send Yngvi's future wife and her retinue back would practically be a rounding error.

The two of them fell into silence, both having told each other what they had to say.

"So we're preparing for war, then...with all of this," Zenjirou said.

"To respond to a war, specifically. Vexing as it is."

Her agreement to his almost meaningless statement was as reluctant and annoyed as her words implied. Schemes to sow discord in enemy nations, strengthening industry and economic strength, using that economic strength to build more ports, and a political marriage to an ally. All of those actions could indeed be

called preparations for a war.

"Is it the war that's vexing, or..."

"Responding," she replied immediately. "If it is to happen regardless, I would much prefer to be the instigator. Being reactive chafes."

While Zenjirou was effectively a commoner from a peaceful land, Aura was the monarch of a powerful nation that had emerged victorious from a war. As a statesman, she was conservative and tended to avoid true warfare. However, that did not mean that doing so was her first priority.

She understood that Zenjirou's views in that area were drastically different from her own, so she began to explain the way she governed and led the country so they could come to an understanding.

"With war, you can either be active or reactive. When you are reactive, you have little choice, so I am talking solely about the active side of things. While this is my personal view, I will say that I believe there are three conditions that need to be met to actively wage war."

"Like the whole 'heavens, land, people' thing?" Hearing the phrase "three conditions" linked to war made him respond with that practically instinctively.

Aura blinked in surprise. "Oh, interesting. The heavens, the land, and the people? That certainly does cut right to the heart of the matter in a rather understandable way."

"Well, it comes from a saying thousands of years ago, and it's still used today." A saying still being in common use thousands of years from its coining was perhaps some of the best proof of its validity.

Aura nodded at his answer. "They are incisive words. However, they are not the three conditions I was talking about. The heavens, land, and people would come second to the three I consider. One of them would be the chance of victory."

Zenjirou considered her words for a moment before nodding. "That makes sense. But does that mean there are two other things you consider as important as the chance for victory?" He was entirely unfamiliar with military matters, so he couldn't think of

anything.

Aura nodded and then answered. “There are. The first—more important than the chances of victory—is the benefit. A war with no benefit is not one I would wage even if victory was assured.”

“Right...”

It was perhaps an obvious statement. There was the issue of whether any benefit would be to the country as a whole, to the royal family, or to the monarch personally. It was a digression from their current topic, though, so Aura didn’t go any further.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Zenjirou continued. “Even if you’re guaranteed victory, waging war for no benefit is just a waste.”

“This is all from the perspective of declaring war, after all. A war that in itself offers a benefit rather than solely through victory is better, but that would be far too convenient. The third thing, which can sometimes be second in importance, is the end of the war.”

“The end?”

This time, Zenjirou had no idea what she meant, so Aura added to her explanation.

“More specifically, perhaps ‘the ability to dictate an end’ would be a better way of phrasing it. Ending a war is extremely difficult. After all, you have an opponent. Even if you personally decide you want to stop, you cannot unless your opponent agrees. Hence the third condition is having measures in place to bring things to an end if it becomes necessary. That is why it and the chances of victory can sometimes switch their importance.”

If victory was all but assured, such measures were less necessary. Conversely, if those measures were practically perfect, the chances for victory didn’t need to be quite so high.

The queen then continued her explanation. “From the Northern Continent’s perspective, the benefits of their acts of aggression are clear. The second condition, their chance of victory, is less clear at present. Personally, we feel that it has not been met, but the truth of the matter is uncertain. Even then, there is the possibility that they see it as being so.”

Zenjirou couldn’t deny that there was a chance the church could assume a low chance of victory was actually a high chance, or even

a guaranteed win.

"The reason behind their willingness, though, is the third condition. They have a practically perfect way to end a war, and they are the only ones in that position."

Zenjirou considered her statement for a moment and immediately came to a conclusion. "Oh, right. They're the only ones with intercontinental ships."

The Northern and Southern Continents were separated by a vast sea, and only countries on the Northern Continent had vessels capable of crossing it. Therefore, if an invasion went poorly for them, they could simply withdraw their ships and unilaterally declare an end to the war. In the absolute worst case, they could abandon both their ships and men and end things that way. To add to that, the actual leaders commanding the invasion would never be on the ships. While it might hurt their coffers, they would never be at any personal risk.

"Indeed. That is why gaining capable ships is indispensable to us." Aura nodded firmly, her reddish-brown eyes narrowing.

For as long as the Northern Continent was the only party capable of crossing the sea between them, no matter how different their combat power was, it would never change that the Northerners would be on the offensive and that the Southern Continent would be on the defensive.

However, if the Southern Continent were able to get ships of their own and succeed in making a round trip to and from the Northern Continent, it would serve to keep the Northern Continent's states in check. If they could manage to plant the seed of a counterattack on the Northern Continent's soil if things went poorly, it would be a worthy accomplishment.

"So if things go well, could we head off the invasion as a whole?" Zenjirou asked, still unable to discard his hopes of finishing things without a war.

The queen shook her head. "No. That is not going to happen. Building the ships, manning them, and establishing intercontinental routes will take years, at least. Meanwhile, preparations for a naval invasion will need around the same amount of time. In other words,

if the invasion takes place on the time scale I am considering, plans for it will have already progressed by the time we have our ships. They are unlikely to abandon such plans after they have been fleshed out to such a degree. We should consider it inescapable at this point."

Her statement was no lie, but nor was it the whole truth. If the Northern Continent's politicians were particularly short on nerve, there was a *chance* that they would call the whole thing off. However, that was extremely low. Aura was of the mind that telling Zenjirou that would only cause problems.

"I suppose so," Zenjirou agreed, following the logic and lack of falsehoods. That meant admitting that it was inevitable that his country would eventually be at war.

He realized he was shaking slightly. Zenjirou wasn't actually as cowardly as he thought of himself. A coward wouldn't board a boat that had a reasonable chance of sinking, nor would they face off against a huge boar as he had, even if they had powerful magic tools protecting them.

When it came to war, though, his estimation of himself was entirely correct. Zenjirou's desire to avoid war, his dislike and fear of it, were unusually strong for someone in this world. It had therefore taken him time to come to grips with it and accept it. Coming to grips with war in the way he had, though, made his resolve weighty and firm.

"So we meet them in kind."

"We do," Aura agreed, despite her surprise at how firm the resolve—the like of which she'd never heard from him—in his words was.

"We win."

"We will."

"So thoroughly we push the next conflict back as far as possible."

"Yes, that is right."

Despite her shock at the words and surety coming from him—things she never would have dreamed of hearing from him—Aura offered her agreement.

Epilogue — The Spark of War

The second prince of Uppasala—though also its crown prince—Yngvi Uppasala had been teleported back to his homeland by his brother-in-law Zenjirou. He had a slight build for a Svean man, and he was practically skipping through the palace. He was even humming as he moved. That's how beneficial he'd found his time in Capua.

He had heard of its stature and power from his older brother Eric and his younger (though officially older) sister Freya, but personally experiencing it had really brought it home. Capua was without a doubt a powerful country. It was also home to different vegetation, livestock, and even clothing than the Northern Continent. Despite all that, their basic values and ways of thinking seemed compatible. Perfect for a trade partner.

The difference in flora and fauna meant that what was commonplace in one country was a potentially valuable rarity in the other. The commonalities in thinking and values meant that coming to agreements was easier.

The world was a big place. There were groups that took what they felt they were owed by force, and there were others that kept their agreements and considered doing so a virtue. There were even tribes that didn't have a concept of individual ownership. In comparison, Capua's values were close enough to Uppasala's that they could consider them to not be a problem.

There was a tacit agreement that Yngvi's second wife would come from that country. The candidate was a fairly intelligent woman who had plenty of training for her station, and above all, Yngvi held her guardian in high esteem. He was an intelligent, balanced figure that ruled a huge territory. He used both his position as a high-ranking noble and his own lands well and distinctly, so he held a strong position in the palace as well. He was an impressive man, that much

was certain.

Yngvi was sure the count would be a reasonable father-in-law. Naturally, "reasonable" was from the perspective of royalty and nobility. He had a route to his second wife from a different, but powerful, country. On top of that, her guardian was highly placed within that country. It was perfect. It was the start of a path to lead Uppasala to even greater heights than he had initially hoped for.

He traveled, light of foot and heart alike, to report to his father. However, the atmosphere within the palace soon changed his gait. "Atmosphere" didn't refer to the literal meaning of the word, of course. It was the distinct change in how people seemed as he passed them that created the vibe in question.

Those who worked so close to the king's personal office were particularly exceptional, so there was no change visible at a glance. Yngvi had been around them since he was young, though, so he could feel the weight of the tiny changes combined. The silent bows of attendants as he passed them were slightly longer than usual. The hardworking, trusted maids' eyes widened slightly when they saw him. Older warriors famed for calm watched him head towards his father with curiosity in their eyes.

While everything seemed normal at a glance, that was a result of the people in question putting in an effort to act as they normally did. There was a difference between actually acting normal and purposefully putting on an act, and Yngvi could sense that difference. Therefore, as he knocked on his father's door, his bouncy steps had vanished, and he was tense as he prepared himself for whatever was awaiting him.

"I have returned, father," he said once he was bade enter. "Everything has gone well for me, so I would like to hear how things are here first."

His words and actions were as polished as would be expected from a prince, but his voice was hurried. The king let out a sigh that was purposefully loud enough that his son could hear it, but made no other comment on how his son had greeted him. Indeed, Yngvi's opinion was correct. The information that most needed to be shared was from the Northern Continent. That was particularly true if—as

Yngvi said—everything had gone well on the Southern Continent.

"Very well. Sit."

"Of course, father."

As he sat opposite his king and father, Yngvi surveyed his expression and let some tension fall from his shoulders. While Gustav had a good enough poker face for a sitting king, the combination of Yngvi's insight and familiarity with his father was better. Therefore, he already knew—there had been some kind of big event on the Northern Continent, and it was known across the entire continent in question. But, for better or worse, it would not affect Uppasala in the short term. Or at least that was how Gustav saw things.

With that certainty, Yngvi let his shoulders relax and his expression smoothed into a relaxed look. That relaxation was quickly blown away, though.

"So, as you wish, I shall inform you of what has happened here. Priest Yan has been spotted."

"What?" Even Yngvi stumbled mentally at that. "Um, father? Just to make sure, there are many people called Yan in the commonwealth and bordering nations, so is the Priest Yan you are talking about *that* Priest Yan?"

If you looked at either denomination of the faith, there would be several priests called "Yan." That was just how common the name was. Generally, though, if someone said Priest Yan, they were talking about the dean of dracology from Bohevia. A priest who had been captured as a heretic and burned at the stake.

"That Priest Yan, without a doubt," his father agreed.

"I've heard rumors that he had been put to death, though."

Yngvi had heard of his capture just before going to the Southern Continent, so he wasn't entirely caught up on the recent happenings in the North. However, every time Zenjirou had sent diplomats or guards between the two countries when the climate became too much for them, there was a slight amount of information exchange. Of course, it went without saying that Zenjirou was the one traveling between the two continents the most frequently.

Now that this latest information was incompatible with what he

had heard, the silver-haired, blue-eyed prince pressed his father for an answer.

"He was. That much is without question. The church announced that. And yet, Priest Yan was seen in the university of Bohevia. The church has proclaimed him a fraud. Well, that much is only natural. Despite that, the university has publicly confirmed he is the same man, and the country as a whole is maintaining their silence."

Yngvi couldn't take in the deluge of information and pressed on his temples with his right hand's thumb and middle finger before holding out his left hand to stop his father.

"Hold on a moment, father. The church announced that he was a fraud, and the university announced the opposite. In that order? There wasn't a breakdown of communication and the university made their announcement without knowing the church's position?" he asked, face twisted.

It was a natural question to ask. There was a huge difference between announcing the priest was the real Yan before the church said otherwise and doing so afterwards. While the former meant there was a chance they simply didn't know the church's position first, the latter was practically open revolt against the church.

And yet, the king shook his head. "There is no doubt. To be specific, the church announced his execution, then approximately two months later, someone calling themselves Priest Yan appeared at the university. Once those rumors became public, the church immediately declared them a fraud. Once the university received the official statement, they put out a contradictory one."

"Wow..."

His voice cracked as he spoke, but there was a hint of a smile on his face.

It was practically explosive information, but considering it carefully, it was also information that could lead to chaos within the church's sphere of influence on the Northern Continent. While Uppasala was on the same continent, it kept its distance from the church, so even if it wasn't exactly *good* news for them, it was certainly easy to consider an internal scuffle in the church no real concern for them either.

When he realized that, Yngvi regained some of his calm.

"It's become a pretty big thing. The university's essentially breaking ties completely. Wait. You said that Bohevia itself was keeping their silence, right? Isn't that a tacit agreement that the priest is the real Priest Yan?"

With the state university coming out against an official pronouncement from the church, the country maintaining its silence rather than censuring the university was indeed tacit approval.

The king nodded at his question. "Essentially, yes. The clergy of Bohevia have long been rather accepting of the man's ideas and were rather divorced from the core of the church. Bohevia itself holds the man in high esteem as well. While the country as a whole isn't defying the church, the general sentiment rests with him."

More accurately, there were many within the leadership of the country that accepted Yan's teachings that were critical of the church. They may have even been in the majority.

"I see. So if the university still maintains the man is telling the truth, and the country isn't contradicting them, there is a decent chance that it really is him."

Yngvi's statement was straight to the point. Yan had been the dean of a university department until very recently, so many there would know him personally and be friendly with him on an individual basis. The university was a state-sponsored endeavor, so there would be leaders of the country who knew him as well. Agreeing that it was him meant that there was a high possibility that it actually was.

"Indeed. If he was a fraud, their leaders would decry him as such," the king agreed.

Yngvi nodded and considered it further. "Hm...so if this Priest Yan is the real one, that means that the one who was executed was a fake. Did the church not realize? No...that doesn't make sense," Yngvi said, refuting his own hypothesis.

However antagonistic the relationship between them, Yan was an official priest, so it was hard to imagine that not one of the people in the church knew his appearance.

"That would mean that the church *knew* the man they captured

wasn't him. That makes their actions seem utterly clumsy, though. Wait, maybe not? The priest they captured was Priest Yan. Despite that, the Priest Yan at the university is also the real one. That itself is possible, and it would mean that the falsehood was his execution. After his capture, he must have escaped somehow, or negotiated for his survival. They'd allow that maybe if he agreed to not take center stage and instead live out the rest of his life as another person. Then the priest could have broken that agreement. That at least all holds together."

The rapid burst of hypotheticals was perhaps the greatest proof of Yngvi's intellect. However, his intelligence could only lead him to conclusions that matched his knowledge. In this case, where the unnatural phenomenon of resurrection was part of it, his thinking was essentially all wasted effort.

Therefore, the king couldn't resist an unconscious smile as he gave his son the next piece of information. "Incidentally, the self-proclaimed Priest Yan had issued a complaint to the church for executing him without just cause."

There was a long pause where Yngvi was dumbstruck. The longest silence of the meeting so far.

"What?"

It was no surprise—what his father had said was just that absurd. Despite his flustered question, Yngvi still hadn't truly understood what his father had said.

"Um, so he's protesting how, despite escaping in the nick of time, the church paraded a fake corpse around?"

Yngvi was practically praying for that to be the case. That at least made sense to him. And yet, his wishes were betrayed.

"No. He admits that he was executed. His claims are that the church executed him without cause and were so self-righteous as they took someone's life. He claims that they are perverting the faith's teachings and demands they rectify it."

"That's the first time...I've heard someone claim they were executed," Yngvi managed, pressing a hand to his head to attempt to stave off a headache.

His father nodded briefly. "Indeed. Normally an executed man

remains silent for eternity."

"Dead men tell no tales" was a general rule that no one expected to be overturned, even in a world of magic. Despite his utter shock, Yngvi churned over the information in his head rapidly and understood how the priest was acting.

"A dead man—someone who was supposed to have been executed—admitting that, and yet living and protesting their execution sounds, frankly, ridiculous at first. So much so that my mind was completely blank for a moment. Thinking it over, though, it's a fine move. The church publicly announced his execution, so he has to admit he was killed. The church, naturally, decries him as a fraud. Despite that, those that know him personally also know he is the real Priest Yan. Because of that, he's seen as having been resurrected after his execution. It's almost the worst possible outcome for the church." Yngvi stifled his laughter.

His father nodded at his words. "Additionally, it is the Church of the Claw, so if his return from death becomes known, Priest Yan would be treated as a modern champion. The church, even the very highest priests, cannot pay him *no* heed in that position."

The church was split into two main denominations. Generally, they were called the claw and the fang. The rulers and guardians of the world, the true dragons, had left, each bestowing a fang and claw to the people they left behind.

The fang became a humanoid with limited knowledge—an apostle. The claw became a weapon, and those chosen by it were champions. Those of the fang revered the apostle above all, while those of the claw saw their champions as standing above all.

"They put their fairy-tale champion in their scripture, and it's treated as historical fact. It is also impossible to deny the resurrection of a dead man. If anything, it's a sign he was recognized by the dragons."

Yngvi's voice was still thick with suppressed laughter. Countries and religious institutions often claimed as fact things which were utterly impossible with proper thought. Things like a king reigning for two hundred years, a general attaining victory on two ends of the continent simultaneously, or a princess who attracted suitors in

droves despite always being hidden behind a veil.

The *Epic of the Champion* was considered scripture within the church, and it included obvious absurdities. And yet, the church treated it as fact. A person being resurrected was one of the miracles included. Often, it was a champion who had willingly met their fate and met one of the true dragons hiding in the afterlife, who had spoken to them, telling them they still had a duty to fulfill before sending them back to the land of the living. In fact, there were no records of someone *other* than a champion being resurrected.

In other words, if they acknowledged Priest Yan as having been resurrected, it would be possibly granting him the same fame as their historic champions. "Champion" was a term that was supposed to denote those recognized by the five weapons the dragons left behind, but it was said that several—or possibly all—of the weapons had gone missing. It would therefore be entirely possible for there to be a champion outside of the church's hands. In Yan's case, he was a recognized member of the church before his execution, so it would be somewhat different.

"The church is certainly in an extremely difficult position. They claimed they executed him, so they cannot now revoke that and say he actually escaped. Thus, all they can do is call him a fraud," Gustav said smoothly, summing up the information he'd shared so far.

Yngvi then picked up the thread. "But Priest Yan is too well-known for them to force that to be accepted. He was a priest who always worked from the bottom up, so there are a large number of people on the streets—and not just in Bohevia—that know his face. He also has his position as dean of dracology, so within the country and university particularly, *many* people know him, and it will come out. Priest Yan is no impostor; he is the real man."

"Inevitably, the falsehood behind the Church of the Claw's announcement of his execution will also become clear. That alone would be enough of a blow to the church, and yet the priest went further. Of all things, he 'admitted' to being executed and claimed it as unjust."

Yngvi raised his hands in submission. "I can only congratulate him. The majority of the church's believers are illiterate commoners. They will believe their eyes first and foremost, followed by what those they trust claim. The people of Bohevia will see him with their own eyes and trust in his existence. At the same time, they will have believed the Church of the Claw when they announced his execution. Therefore, they will reasonably believe both things simultaneously, and we arrive at the situation where he has been executed, but then resurrected."

"Many of them take the scriptures as fact and would be willing to accept that happening."

As was implicit in their conversation, those with a higher level of education than commoners would consider it an open secret that such records were either false or exaggerated. The resurrection of the champions was taken to be the greatest among them. Those with a little insight would understand that the records were almost all questionable at best. There were champions who changed enough through the event that things seemed off—those who studied the theology of it suggested that it might be conflating the histories of two separate champions.

Some reappeared after years, with their cause of death being unclear—again, the theologians suggested it was a temporary withdrawal from being in the public eye, not dying at all. Others fulfilled their final duty and then vanished—theologians suggested that their final duty was carried out by someone else and that the champion had never been resurrected.

Those individuals would be unable to accept that Yan really had been executed, and really had returned from the dead.

"That reminds me, what of the other man who shares his name? The one-eyed mercenary?" Yngvi asked, remembering another individual who would be important in this sequence of events.

"He has been sighted, claiming to be Priest Yan's bodyguard. It is another reason the priest is being accepted as real."

"If I recall, the mercenary vanished entirely when Priest Yan was captured, did he not? The most logical sequence of events would be him rescuing the priest in the nick of time and fooling the church

with a fake corpse."

It was not uncommon for death-row inmates to die before their actual execution. It was not a good look for the captors, so they often claimed that such inmates had been executed. The problem with that explanation was the difficulty of freeing the priest and substituting a body. However, there were those who believed the priest even within the church. If they had a conspirator, it was not impossible.

Thus, Yngvi's explanation was the most likely and realistic so far. It sounded far more likely than the priest actually being killed, then someone spiriting his bones away to the Southern Continent to have him revived through time reversal. In fact, Yngvi's hypothesis was much the same as Gustav's.

"It is likely along those lines, yes. The truth is less important, though—more so is how both parties move following this situation." After telling his successor that, Gustav let out an irritated sigh. However it had happened, Yan was alive while the church was claiming they had killed him. The details of how it had come about were of little importance.

Yngvi spoke as he considered it. "From the rumors of Priest Yan's disposition and the way he so boldly defies the church, I doubt he will simply fall silent. Meanwhile, the Church of the Claw will never withdraw their claim that they executed him. If Bohevia remains on his side, it could well end in armed conflict, no?"

Gustav evaluated Yngvi's statement before answering. "It will definitely go as far as a skirmish at least. They have already taken a stinging defeat recently, though, so it is perhaps equally likely it ends there or grows into an inferno."

The Knight Order of the Northern Dragon Claw—or "the knights," in common usage—were the Church of the Claw's strongest fighting force, and they had recently taken a painful defeat in Tannenwald. Therefore, if the church could maintain their calm as they made their decision, they wouldn't send their armies into Bohevia and make enemies of them in an attempt to eliminate Yan.

However, politicians and leaders did not necessarily make all of their decisions through logic and reason. Particularly in a case like

this, where someone who they claimed to have executed as a heretic was alive and censuring them for it, their honor was in tatters. There was a chance that they could call for the man's death, no matter what it took. If the Church of the Claw decided to protect their reputation and influence, it could even be the correct course of action. The problem was whether they had the strength to do it.

While he was somewhat on board with his father's theories, Yngvi disagreed with the final part.

"They could definitely follow through if they kept calm. After all, the church has a lot of influence. If in public they just decry him as a fraud, but also act behind the scenes to put pressure on Bohevia and its surrounding countries and make backroom deals, they could eliminate Priest Yan with a minimum of harm. It would definitely take years to do, though. Even so, I do not see it as an equal chance of either decision. More of a case of seventy percent to thirty, or eighty to twenty. With total war being the eighty, of course."

"Hm. Why?"

The silver-haired prince shrugged at the question. "Isn't it obvious? That's how unlikely it seems that the leaders can tolerate the wound to their pride and honor. They might espouse calm rationality when it doesn't involve them, but they prioritize their emotions when it does," he said, keeping his tone even with some effort.

When Yngvi had become crown prince, there were documents he was now allowed to look at, and he had done so. As a result, he'd come to the conclusion that those high in the church were unable to accept their own shortcomings. Therefore even with the risks it involved, they would likely pursue Yan, as far as Yngvi was concerned.

Admitting that Yan was alive would mean also admitting their claim of his execution was false. Announcing the execution of a heretic would have been done in the name of the high priest and other high level members of the church. In other words, there would be no room for interpretation that it was they who were at fault. Additionally, they had declared him a heretic, so they would be entirely unwilling to negotiate in secret with him.

Once his son explained all of that, Gustav had to admit that his son's view was more convincing than his own. "I see. That certainly seems to hold water. Sly old foxes they may be, but they are still easily pulled by their emotions, you say?"

His long reign had seen him clash with the church through words if not swords, so he could see the truth in his son's statement. The reason he saw the quiet and loud options as equally possible despite that experience was because he had personally seen how formidable they were as politicians. You could consider it as overestimating them because of the long background he had with them. Of course, there was also the chance that Yngvi was mistaken, being young and knowing no fear.

Gustav put a hand to his chin and thought things over before speaking slowly. "Lighting a massive fire would mean we would need to beware of being burned, but preparing for a natural blaze is another matter."

"In that case, father, let us send a mercenary to Priest Yan! We introduced Zenjirou to János, didn't we? Their contract is settled now, so we can introduce him directly to the priest, can we not? If we add some of our own men, we can get much more precise information."

Gustav let out another exaggerated sigh as his son leaned forward eagerly. "Fool. We cannot so blatantly back one side."

Gustav found his head pounding as Yngvi aimed for a decrease in the church's influence with an astounding degree of brazenness. He knew his son had keen insight and a capable mind, but the lack of fear Yngvi had made him worry about entrusting the country to him.

"Perhaps it would be good for you to feel some pain before it would be fatal," he mused.

"Don't you think that's rather rude, father?" Yngvi protested with a dejected expression.

Gustav, however, did not withdraw his statement.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life, Volume 16*.

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Skill Guidance

The normal cause of significant change within an inner palace was the arrival of a new concubine. While Capua's inner palace was far removed from the "general" inner palace in many ways, the same held true there as well.

Upon the addition of Freya as a concubine, there was a major change within the inner palace. Until that point, only the main building had been used, but now an annex was in use and inhabited by not only Freya, but the maids she had brought with her from the Northern Continent.

Fortunately, Freya was an extremely incisive person and had strictly selected the maids she would bring, keeping the number to a minimum. Therefore, the usual negatives associated with change within an inner palace had been all but absent. The changes themselves, though, could be considered even greater than was normal upon the addition of a new concubine and group of maids.

After all, Freya was a person to whom it was difficult to apply the word "normal," and her husband, Zenjirou, was someone who gave her almost unprecedented freedom to express herself.

Freya's confidante, Skaji, was allowed her weapons even within the inner palace. Freya had also learned how to ride a dash drake within the gardens and, once considered capable, mainly traveled on drake rather than by carriage. Of course, she could hardly do so wearing a dress, so she wore hunter's clothing which had pants to cover her legs.

Inevitably, the maids then had to care for not just the dresses they were used to, but leather hunter's clothing. Tending to the gardens was no longer just removing weeds and pest control, but re-covering areas of lawn the dash drakes had trampled, and the

maids were saddled with work that would usually be left to those running military parade grounds.

For better or worse, there was another change taking place in the inner palace today: the installation of glass panes in the windows. The head maid, Amanda, was standing right in front of those windows, addressing the young maids assembled before her.

"This is a glass pane ordered from the Northern Continent. At present, they are only here in the living room and in Lady Freya's living room in the annex, but we plan to install more depending on their reception. There are some points to keep in mind while maintaining it, but fortunately we have people familiar with the process here, so they will provide some guidance."

As she spoke, Amanda swept her gaze over the three maids from the Northern Continent.

"There is a knack for cleaning glass panes properly, but I am sure you will all be familiar with it soon," their representative, Ragnhild, said. Her role was managing the maids that Freya had brought with her, and the young maids had—with a single glance—called her a palette swap of Amanda. In the months that followed, that impression had been utterly cemented.

The younger two from the Northern Continent saw Amanda the same way, only in reverse, so apparently it was a widespread sentiment. While their hair, eyes, and skin were all different colors, the two women were similar enough that there were periodic rumors that they were actually related by blood. The strict expressions and way they carried themselves while instructing the younger maids, coupled with how precisely they wore their clothes, were all exactly the same between the two of them.

"Therefore," Amanda continued, "those on duty for cleaning within the main building will be accompanied by Ragnhild, Elvira, or Rebecca so you can learn. I take it you all understand."

The assembled maids all chorused their agreement. In addition, their thoughts were in unison as well. "Please be Elvira, please be Elvira..." was running through all of their minds.

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Today the three on cleaning duty were Faye, Dolores, and Letti. They were joined by Elvira to make four. Either because their prayers were the strongest or due to sheer coincidence, the three problem maids were being taught how to deal with the glass by Elvira.

"So, allow me to explain," the maid, her brown hair bouncing as she spoke. She was one of the three maids Freya had first brought from the Northern Continent, who had since been supplemented by more of the girls who were on standby.

Ragnhild was Freya's aunt on her mother's side and was here as supervisor for both the maids and Freya. Rebecca—another of the younger maids—was one of the people who had trained with Freya when she was taking her trials as a warrior and was a trusted friend of hers. In contrast, Elvira had strictly been selected for her skills and personality.

She was roughly the same age as Rebecca, but her abilities were closer to Ragnhild's. She was intelligent, gifted in her work, and well-liked. She was perfect to integrate into a group and exercised her abilities well. The Capuan maids all had a definite degree of trust in her.

"As you can see, the window panes are somewhat complex. There are the round, transparent parts, which are made of glass, dark lead surrounding them, and the wooden frame. All of them require different treatment, so make sure you pay attention."

As she spoke, she demonstrated, dipping a cloth into a cleaning liquid and then wiping the glass. As implied by her saying "round transparent part," the clear parts of the window were made of circular glass.

Each individual piece of glass was around ten centimeters in diameter. They were held in a lead frame and lined up horizontally and vertically to make the window.

These were known as rondel windows, and it was an old style. Relying on the example Elvira had provided, Faye, Letti, and Dolores set about cleaning the glass.

"Hmm, it's slippery, but it's also surprisingly bumpy. Getting it properly polished is pretty difficult," the maid with particularly short hair—Faye—commented.

Indeed, the individual rondels were far from flat. They were made through a process called the crown technique, which was, put simply, something that began in the same way as making a glass phial through blowing. The blank was then cut off and attached to a pole, which was spun at high speed. The centrifugal force drew the glass out into a crown—a flattish sheet.

The rotation meant that the glass sheet was inevitably circular, and the fact that it was spread out through centrifugal force put an upper limit on its size. Not even a skilled glassblower could get it as flat as modern glass sheets, and the leftover from cutting it loose from the pole would always remain. While the undulating glass rounds had a certain "vibe" to them, the fact remained that cleaning them was difficult.

"Where they are might be a problem," commented the tallest of the maids—Dolores. "It might be fine for everyone apart from the exceptions like Faye, but some of the maidservants are as short as her."

Dolores was right. The upper part of the windows were well within reach for her and her hundred and eighty centimeters of height, but someone like Faye—who was around thirty centimeters shorter—would find it rather difficult.

Fortunately, the maids working in the main building were all taller than her, but there were indeed some of the maidservants who were just as short.

It wasn't far enough up that she couldn't reach the top of the windows if she stretched, so it was at least possible. It was rather risky for something which required so much attention, though.

Even a one-in-a-hundred chance of failure would happen eventually if the task was done daily.

Elvira considered the comment for a while, tilting her head. "It is somewhat dangerous with Faye's height. Considering how valuable they are, though, I imagine the maidservants won't be cleaning them for a while. Lady Nilda is the only other maid of a similar height, but she isn't involved with the cleaning, so it likely won't be an issue. Faye has you in her group, so that won't be a problem either, will it?"

Faye nodded along with Elvira's explanation before darting her small hand into the air and turning to the roommate at her side.

"Dolores, the top's all yours!"

The tall maid didn't bother hiding the reluctant smile as she replied, "Sure, sure. In exchange, you get the bottoms and floor."

Dolores was just as cunning as always, taking on the upper portions of the window in exchange for diverting more of the work to Faye.

"That's right," their third member—distinguished by her wavy, light-brown hair and conspicuously well-endowed chest, Letti—mused in her normal easygoing tone. "Nilda isn't in this position anymore."

Nilda, one of the minority of a similar height to Faye, was now the first maid of the annex Freya lived in. On the whole, being first maid of the annex was effectively like being the head maid there. She wouldn't be personally cleaning windows in that position—though Amanda had often been seen with cloth in hand while they were short on numbers. Now, though, she was in much more of a supervisory and directing role.

Despite the addition of another thing to clean in the windows, the addition of Elvira—and her high level of skill—meant that the work was actually done quicker than when it was just the three of them.

With their work done for the time being, the three problem maids and Elvira could spend their time relaxing with tea and snacks in the dining room provided for them.

Currently, they were the only four within the room. At this time of the year, even the temperature in Capua wasn't high enough to make hot tea a problem. Letti had baked something akin to cookies to serve with the tea, and had quickly brewed drinks for everyone.

Normally, making the tea and snacks for the maids' breaks was done on a rotation, but the role was almost exclusively Letti's when it came to the problem maids. Of course, it hadn't been forced onto her, it was by her own choice. She'd always liked cooking, but with the comments about aiming for Vanessa's role, she'd set about doing so with a real sense of purpose. In turn, work that required more stamina tended to go to Faye and Dolores.

Once everyone had their drinks and the small plate of snacks was in front of them, Dolores was the first to speak.

"Thanks for your help today, Elvira. You were really easy to understand," she said, thanking her for the instruction in their new role.

The young maid from the North accepted the thanks with a smile. "You're welcome," she replied before shrugging. "Though I'm sure Lady Ragnhild would have told you everything in less time and more precisely."

Just as Dolores's thanks came from the heart, Elvira's response wasn't her being modest, but was instead a simple truth.

Understanding that, though, the three problem maids shuddered and shook their heads.

"I'd really rather not!"

"I'll say it again, thank you. I'm glad you were the one teaching us."

"Not Lady Ragnhild."

It was an unsurprising reaction. While Ragnhild would certainly beat Elvira in terms of her ability to instruct, there was an even greater difference in how strict said instruction was. It would be one thing if Elvira was a poor teacher, but with Elvira being a skilled teacher—just not as skilled as Ragnhild—there was no reason to actively choose the latter.

Elvira couldn't help a rueful smile at their reactions. "Lady Ragnhild is nothing more than another maid working in the inner palace now; her instruction wouldn't be *that* overwhelming," she said, covering for her coworker who was old enough to be her mother.

However, Dolores shook her long black hair. "That makes her even scarier. She never drops acting like we're equals, or her manners, or even her tone, but still gives really precise instructions."

It felt even more overwhelming than with Amanda, who actually spoke from a superior's position. Ragnhild would always cushion her statements with things like "pardon me for mentioning, but..." and "I would normally refrain from mentioning it in my position, but..." or "This is merely a suggestion, but..." and the only real response any

of them could give was an apologetic agreement.

While officially they may have been on equal footing, the differences in age, accomplishments, and ability made for an inevitable hierarchy. Even now, while the three problem maids and Elvira alike were equals with Ragnhild, they still added "Lady" to her name, and that was the norm. Addressing her without an honorific simply felt too abnormal.

"If anything," Dolores said, her eyes distant, "I feel sorry for Nilda. She's officially Lady Ragnhild's superior."

While treating someone who would normally be your superior as an equal was difficult, being the first maid of the annex meant that Nilda was officially ranked higher than Ragnhild. Elvira giggled as Dolores considered the heartache that must cause before casually dismissing her concerns.

"Oh? I doubt you need to worry. Lady Nilda is doing exceedingly well. While she still has much to learn about her position and how to carry it out, she is doing shockingly well with Lady Ragnhild."

"That's a surprise," Dolores said, doubt evident on her face.

"Yeah, I can't really believe she's acting as Lady Ragnhild's boss," Faye agreed.

While Letti didn't say anything, her expression made her agreement clear. Elvira moved her teacup back from her face towards the table with an elegant motion as she answered them.

"That isn't quite what I meant. Lady Nilda is acting the same way as she always has. Always accepting Lady Ragnhild's advice without issue and playing her role as first maid."

"Ah, that's what you mean," Dolores said. Being the sharpest out of all three of them, she was the first to understand what Elvira meant.

If you were to describe Nilda in a word, it would be "naive." She almost seemed incapable of believing anyone in the world would have ill will towards her, and was almost frightfully open when you looked at her. However, that made her get on very well with people that engaged earnestly with her.

Ragnhild was an extremely exacting instructor, but none of that harshness was out of unkindness. That meant that Nilda would get

along very well with her, as she'd accept the words that were said.

Unfortunately, Nilda was not a particularly fast learner, so even with accepting and responding to the things Ragnhild pointed out, there were many occasions when her actions did not follow suit. Still, with how gifted Ragnhild was as an instructor, she could tell the difference between people who were just giving lip service but not actually putting in effort and those who were truly trying to put the advice into practice but didn't have the skill to follow through.

Thus, while Ragnhild may have found herself exasperated as Nilda repeated the same mistakes several times, she had no animosity towards the younger girl.

"That definitely makes me think it might be Lady Ragnhild that's in the worse position," Letti said in her characteristic lilting voice.

Elvira smiled and simply said, "Definitely."

The three problem maids burst into laughter.



The four of them carried on their chat as the tea flowed.

"I have to say, though," Elvira commented, thinking back to the rest of the living room, "the three of you are more familiar with cleaning glass than I thought. I suppose there are a lot of similar items in the room."

"Now that you mention it, there are," Dolores agreed. "There's the TV, the computer, and the mirror. The glass panes are obviously made out of the same thing as well."

She was right, a large number of the things Zenjirou had brought from his own world used glass in one form or another, so the inner palace maids were already used to cleaning it to an extent. However, it would be dangerous to completely conflate the things Zenjirou had brought from Earth with the rondel windows they had imported from the Northern Continent.

"The smooth feeling is definitely the same, but the windows are all bumpy and feel even more fragile," Faye mused.

She was more or less completely correct. The glass items Zenjirou had brought were different from the glass items of this world in both manufacture and strength.

Unlike modern glass, which had all impurities removed to an absurd degree and was all but completely transparent, the windows here would both color and obstruct the light passing through them if it was too thick, so they had chosen to make them as thin as possible to improve the transparency. While the material used for both might have been fragile, thinning it out as they had made it even weaker still.

Elvira nodded at Faye's comments. "Today was the first time I've touched them, so comparing them to the windows is difficult, but it certainly feels like I need to pay more attention to the glass. I gave the warnings while I was teaching you, didn't I?"

The three problem maids nodded as one.

"That means we should probably assume they'll break at some point," Faye commented.

"We'll need to report that right to Sir Zenjirou," Dolores agreed.

"Broken glass seems like it would be dangerous. Is there anything we'd need to be aware of cleaning it up, or anything special we'd

need to do, Elvira?" Letti finished.

Elvira found herself briefly dumbfounded by the way the three set about discussing what to do if it broke without a hint of timidity or fear.

"You three really have a lot of faith in Sir Zenjirou, don't you?"

Elvira's comment was put the best way she could make it. Frankly, the way the three were talking could be considered mocking their lord. Fragile or not, making plans for how to deal with breaking something in their workplace could certainly be taken as an outright declaration that they'd do so eventually.

Faye, Dolores, and Letti didn't seem to understand why Elvira had a strained look on her face, though, and just looked blankly back at her.

"Of course we do. Why do you mention it, though?" Faye asked, wondering what from their conversation had prompted the comment.

Elvira managed to somehow maintain a smile as she answered. "While someone may eventually make a mistake and break the windows, the way you can so calmly discuss what to do if it happens rather than how to *stop* it happening is because of your faith in him, right?"

Faye and Letti finally realized what she meant and exchanged looks.

"Now that you mention it..."

"You'd normally get at least yelled at if you broke part of the estate, even if it was an accident."

If the staff damaged the furniture and fixings in the estate they worked, it would usually be cause for at least a scolding. Depending on their lord, it could also require compensation and even affect their future prospects.

Zenjirou's way of thinking that scolding someone for a genuine accident was pointless and would just ruin morale—though a purposeful breakage would be another matter—was rather bizarre for this world. In fact, the only maids who had accepted his explanation at face value were these three problem maids and Nilda. The others would all have to fight down their fear if they broke

something in the course of their duties, readying themselves pointlessly.

"It might not be normal elsewhere, but Sir Zenjirou's values are a priority here," Dolores said with a smooth expression. "We're just doing our best to follow them."

Unlike Faye and Letti, Dolores was purposefully interpreting Zenjirou's words for her own ends. Her saying that they'd need to inform Zenjirou directly was part of that stubborn intention.

Normally such reports would go to either Ines—who was in charge of the cleaning—or Amanda. Going directly to Zenjirou was part of Dolores's cunning. She knew that Zenjirou was the one with both the greatest say and softest disposition.

"What happens if someone *does* break one of the windows soon? It'll take a while to order a replacement from the Northern Continent, won't it?" Faye asked casually.

Letti cocked her head as she answered. "Huh? But we have a glass worker from the Northern Continent here, don't we? Can't we just get him to make it?"

The inner palace in Capua was somewhat unusual for inner palaces in that it was not only Zenjirou who could come and go as he pleased, but also Aura and Freya. The maids could come and go relatively frequently as well, so they were not cut off from information solely because they were in the inner palace, and it wasn't uncommon for those who paid attention to hear rumors about events in the palace—or the country as a whole.

Letti's comment prompted a somewhat concerned response from Dolores. "Wait? Is that going to cause problems? I'd have thought poaching craftsmen would."

In the Southern Continent, glassworking was considered cutting edge and top secret. Dolores's concerns were hardly unfounded.

Elvira was the most familiar with the situation on the Northern Continent, though, so she didn't really panic and just asked for clarification.

"Say, Letti? Do you know what country they came from?"

"Uhh, I'm pretty sure it was...the Kingdom of Bohevia?"

"How old is he?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but he's pretty old."

Now that Elvira had finished finding out the circumstances, there was a distinct note of confidence in her voice. "Legally, then, there probably won't be an issue. Bohevia's glassworkers are either under direct employment by the state or part of the glass guild. The former wouldn't be in a position to accept a foreign nation's invitation, so we can assume he is from the latter group. Considering his age, there is a decent chance that he has already left the guild. I cannot say for certain, but that would mean that there was no legal issue."

"Does their guild have an age limit, then?" Faye asked.

Elvira shook her head. "No, the guild regulations don't have anything to do with age. However, when craftsmen in Bohevia reach a certain age, if they are considered to have a certain level of skill and knowledge, the country gives them the title of Domini. They are treated in the same way as state-employed craftsmen, so they wouldn't be allowed to go to a foreign country. An older craftsman who *was* allowed must not have been given the title. Those who haven't managed to gain the title after a certain length of time are—to put it rather harshly—given up on by the guild."

For such craftsmen, leaving the guild was not overly difficult. Those with the title were not allowed to leave in the same way as state-employed glassworkers to prevent their knowledge and skill from passing between nations.

In other words, someone old enough that *didn't* have the title therefore didn't have enough skill to worry about another nation gaining.

"That's from the Northern Continent's norms, though. The Southern Continent isn't as advanced in glasswork, so I'm sure he'll be valuable here," Elvira said, doing her best to couch her words.

Dolores didn't hide her amusement at Elvira's consideration. "You can put it more bluntly. We're more behind in everything. Apart from magic, at least."

"We are, aren't we?"

"Looking at Rebecca's and Elvira's things, I got that impression."

Faye and Letti joined the conversation with interest. Those from the Northern Continent, not just Freya, had been able to bring some

of their personal effects. In the case of Freya, Skaji, or Ragnhild—who were royalty, from a relatively highly ranked family and a well-regarded warrior, and Freya's aunt, respectively—it could be taken as just a difference in status, but Rebecca and Elvira were from lower-ranked families and still had much nicer things than would be the norm on the Southern Continent.

The best example would be something almost every maid had—their sewing equipment. Needles, scissors, and thread. Even at a glance, there were clear differences between the two continents. The most obvious difference was in the scissors. The metal they were made of was a higher quality, and they were very precisely made. Buying a pair of a similar quality in Capua would take a sum that even nobility would think twice about.

The thread was also different. Specifically, the number of colors was different. In Faye's sewing kit, for example, she had white—actually closer to a very light yellow—and black—which also wasn't black, strictly speaking. Rebecca and Elvira, though, had red, blue, green, yellow, and other colors besides. They even had the luxury of sewing repairs in thread close to the garment's original color so the repair didn't stand out; that's how cheap dyed thread was sold. Of course, they would be out of reach for the general public in the Northern Continent, but even the lower nobles would be able to afford it.

In terms of pure strength and economic power, Capua outstripped Uppasala by far, but Uppasala was far ahead of Capua in mass-producing such things.

"You're really informed about the rest of your continent, though," Dolores said. "Are maids usually taught that much in Uppasala?"

Elvira carefully modulated her voice so she wouldn't sound too proud of herself as she answered. "Knowing that much isn't particularly common. I attended a lot of lectures at the capital's university, mainly focusing on law and logic, so I have a little more knowledge than average."

"A university?" Faye asked.

"What's a university?" Letti echoed.

"Umm, it's an organization that gathers knowledge and history

and conducts research. Every country on the Northern Continent has one, I think?" Dolores answered, using what she'd picked up on her travels.

"Dolores's explanation is fairly accurate. If I was going to add to it, I'd say that they also exist to provide education and cultivate intellect. For state- and church-sponsored universities, they also train the people needed to run those institutions."

"Wow."

"That's amazing."

"The Northern Continent's really impressive. You said you went to one... So women can attend?"

The three of them marveled over the existence of such an organization. Dolores's question prompted a regretful look from Elvira.

"No, women can't enroll in the university in Uppasala. Attending lectures like I did is the closest we can come."

There were universities in countries like Złota Wolność and Emilia where women could attend, but even those usually had one female student a year at most. At present, the world of academia was even more dominated by men than the military. With that in mind, Elvira making the effort to go to a university made her a superlative maid, but definitely not a normal one. Still, she definitely had some similarities to a general maid. For example, she enjoyed romantic gossip.

"Oh, Elvira, did you hear about Mirella changing posts? She's moving from the main building with Queen Aura to the annex with Lady Freya. She was one of the maids who went to the welcome event for Prince Yngvi, right? It's what I think it is, isn't it?" Dolores said suddenly.

Elvira was rather interested in the topic herself. "I think so too. Mirella will be his partner, at least tentatively. Fortunately she's one of us, so Her Majesty can reassign her to get her used to how things are in Uppasala and the laws before she actually gets married."

There might have been slightly too much politics in there for pure romantic gossip, but such things were usually what made their way to noble girls. In fact, such politics were often used to liven things

up as obstacles to overcome, or "paths of destiny."

"Which means that Mirella's basically getting a crown princess's training there. Ah, that sounds difficult," Faye commented.

Faye knew that the more highly ranked you became, the more bothersome your duties became and the harder it was to protect yourself, so she couldn't help but sympathize. It probably wasn't necessary for Mirella, though. Mirella was someone who would see marrying a person more highly ranked than herself as a victory.

Dolores knew that and directed a lidded, exasperated look at Faye. "Mirella isn't like you. She's probably over the moon about it."

"That sounds like her," Letti agreed with an amused laugh.

"Well, it's probably still tough," Dolores admitted. "I was only there for a little while as a guest, so all the new sights were fun, but there were so many differences in life over there that I think it'll be a struggle."

Spending a short time in a different culture was very different than moving into it permanently. Despite showing that concern, though, Dolores wasn't overly worried. She knew that Mirella was strong to her core and had been raised as the model noblewoman. She wouldn't shy away from adapting to her new environment. As long as she could somewhat get along with her spouse, Mirella would be fine, at least in Dolores's opinion.

Letti seemed to have come to the same conclusion, but there was a hint of concern in her voice as she picked up the conversation. "Mirella will probably be okay, but I wonder what kind of person Prince Yngvi is."

Although Dolores had met him on the Northern Continent and Faye had participated in the welcome party, it was hard to say that either of them really *knew* him. Inevitably, all three of them turned to Elvira. She didn't flinch even slightly at the intensity of their looks, just offering them a reassuring smile as she answered smoothly.

"I believe he is very well matched with Mirella. He speaks and makes decisions very rationally and also likes to take the initiative in his personal life as well."

Whether it was her original disposition or a result of her education, Mirella tended to want the man in a relationship to take

the lead. With Yngvi's preference to do exactly that, it certainly did sound like they were well matched.

"Lady Freya is naturally more familiar with him," she continued. "With her personally telling Mirella about him, I'm sure she will be able to adapt. Lady Ragnhild is part of the annex as well, so if Mirella can win her favor, I'm sure she will write to Lady Felicia."

Ragnhild was the older sister of Felicia, the second queen, who was also Freya and Yngvi's mother. Additionally, she wasn't here solely due to the blood relation, but as a minder, so Uppasala clearly put a lot of trust in Ragnhild. A missive from her that praised Mirella would have a good influence on not just Felicia, but on King Gustav as well.

"Shall we tell her, then? That she should work hard in the annex to get Lady Ragnhild's approval, I mean," Letti suggested.

It was well meaning, but Elvira immediately shook her head. "You shouldn't. It will definitely have the opposite effect."

"Huh?"

Dolores then suggested something very close to the truth. "Oh, is Lady Ragnhild someone who doesn't recognize efforts when they're just for a reward?"

Such a point of view wasn't rare. People made judgments based on a person's normal conduct, and if a person only put the effort in when there was some reward to be had, those judgments were not good. It was a logical way of thinking.

Elvira offered a small nod. "That's half correct. She wouldn't completely discount it, but acting like that for a visible reward would be less worthy. In other words, if we were to let Mirella know there was the chance for a letter like that, it could make her efforts *need* to be that much higher. Don't worry, Letti. Mirella's usual efforts will be enough to pass muster with Lady Ragnhild."

There was no "should" or "I think" in her statement. It was just a confident "will." Her casual judgment was just like her easy smile; it gave an odd amount of persuasiveness to her words.

"Right. I hope she's happy," Letti said.

"Me too," Faye agreed.

"That would be the best. If she is, then both countries will benefit

from it," Dolores added.

The conversation broke off, but it was a comfortable silence between the four of them. It was broken by the door to the room opening.

Another group must have finished their work for the day. Several maids came in, chattering away. Among the gaggle of darker-skinned and dark-haired maids, one with pale skin and long, straight blonde hair—Rebecca—stood out the most. She noticed them and strode over.

"Elvira, good work today," she said. "Faye, Dolores, Letti, did you learn how to treat the glass already?"

As she spoke, she took an empty seat and flopped down into it. She always acted so familiar and cheery with them. Unlike Elvira's immense skill, Rebecca's disposition was much closer to the problem maids' despite also coming from Uppasala. Because of that, despite how little time they'd spent together, Rebecca had gotten to the point where she was happy to almost mock them like this.

"It's not that hard."

"That's right, Elvira's a really good teacher."

"Well, it might've been another story if you were the one teaching."

Rebecca obviously laughed at their answers, but so did Elvira.

"You're right. It'd probably take more than a day for me to teach *you three*. I can't match Elvira's teaching." The faux modesty she used to mock the three of them prompted the problem maids to fire back their responses.

"Just in teaching?"

"Is there anything you *can* beat her in?"

Indeed, in all areas of being a maid, Elvira was better than Rebecca. Despite Faye and Dolores needling her, she purposefully didn't make a sign, simply flexing her right arm.

"A fight, of course!" she said confidently.

"Rebecca..."

"That's not a thing, Rebecca."

"I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to be proud of that."

While the three problem maids looked on in exasperation, Elvira

laughed in amusement.

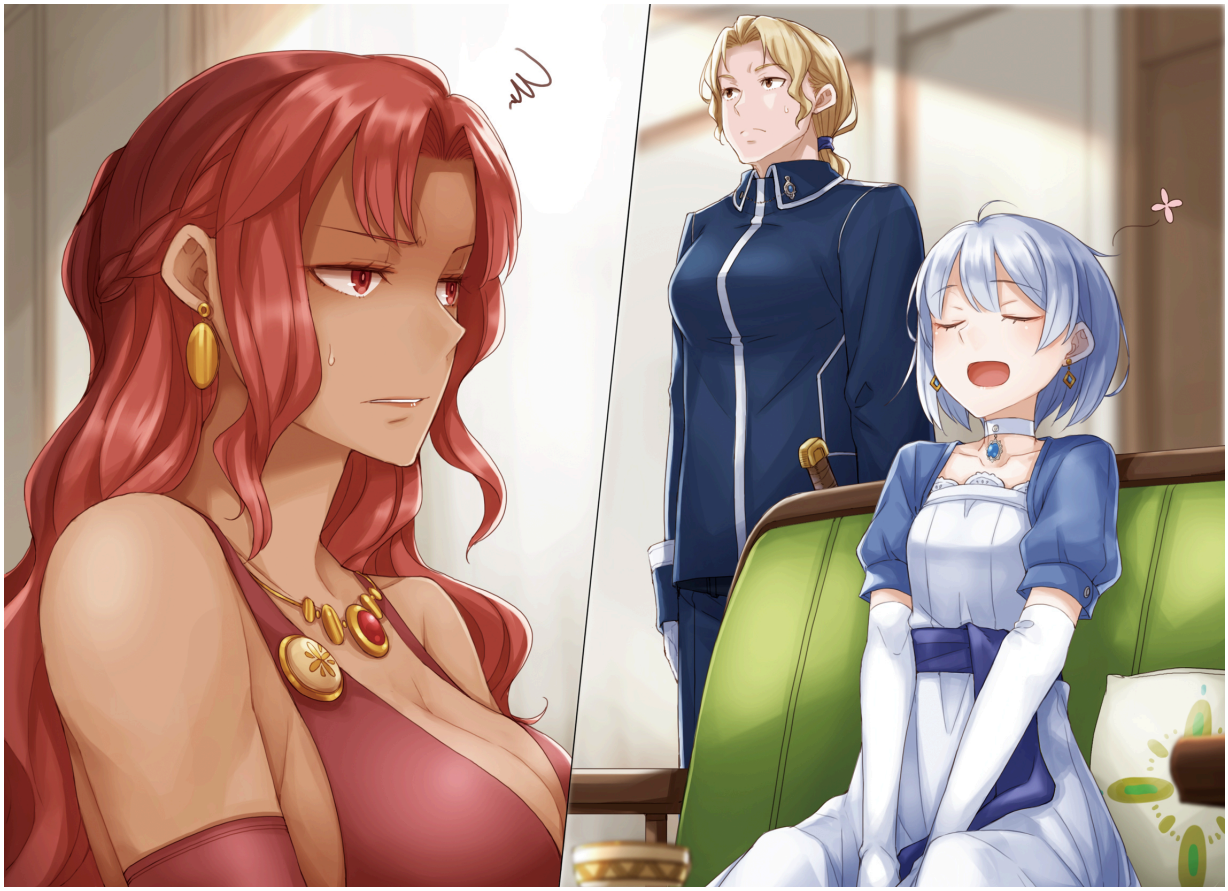












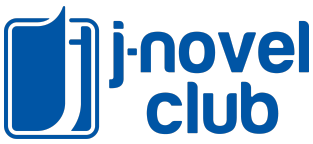












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Illustrations by Jyuu Ayakura

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