

A detailed manga-style illustration featuring three anime characters. In the foreground, a young woman with long, flowing reddish-brown hair adorned with a large pink flower and a ruffled pink collar looks down. Behind her, a young man with short, light purple hair and blue eyes smiles. To the right, a young man with long, light green hair and green eyes looks towards the viewer. The background is filled with large, stylized purple flowers and soft, glowing light effects.

Written by  
**Haruko Kurimoto**

Illustrated by  
**Vinegar**

# Reflection of Another World

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Reflection of Another World Volume 1

Haruko Kurimoto

Translation by Amber Tamosaitis

Illustration by Vinegar

Title Design by Elisabet Lopez Pons Editing by Tom Speelman

Proofreading by Ji Yu Feng and Fei Hart

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Reflection of Another World

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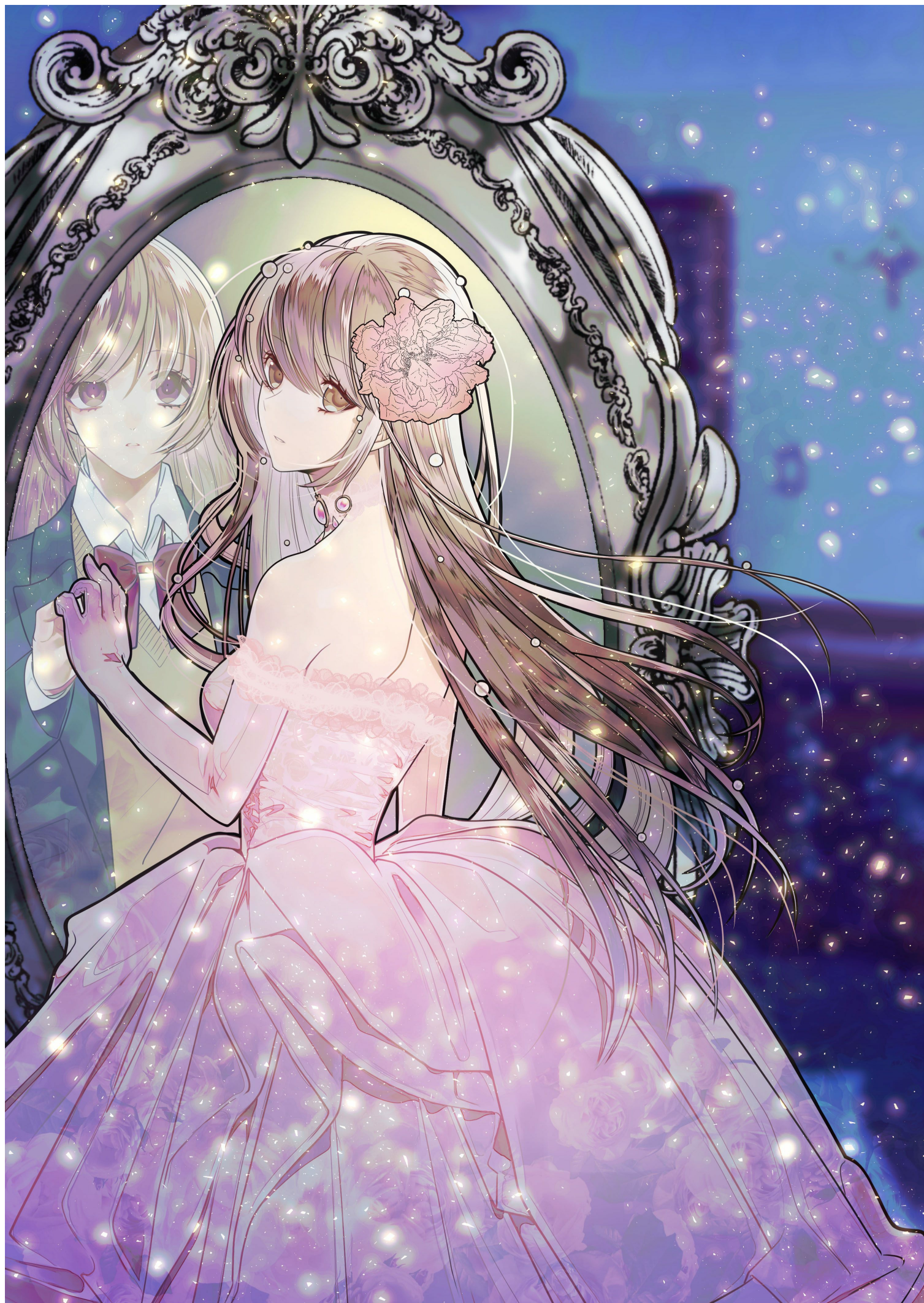
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“—I don’t mean another planet, you know; they’re part of our world and you could get to them if you went far enough—but a really other world—another Nature—another universe—somewhere you would never reach even if you traveled through the space of this universe for ever and ever—a world that could be reached only by Magic—well!”

C.S. Lewis

*The Chronicles of Narnia Vol VI: The Magician’s Nephew*

# Chapter 1: Oracle

**THE** first thing he became aware of was a nauseating sense of unease, coupled with a crippling sense of despair.

The entire area was shrouded in darkness, leaving him unable to see his own body, let alone which direction he was going. The only light in this dark world was a tiny pinprick exactly at eye level.

Goosebumps rose on his flesh at the impossible—no, improbable—sight.

*How...?*

Trembling, he raised his hand. Resisting the urge to turn around, he took a half-step into the darkness. As soon as he did, the tiny prick of light swelled to the size of his pinky, as if drawing nearer, and engulfed him in a blindingly bright light.

His pulse quickened and his heart raced. The darkness was all he could see; he couldn't hear his own ragged breathing, never mind his footsteps. In this world where he'd lost his hearing, he realized that he'd unconsciously covered his face.

In this world with no sense of distance, the light flicked back and forth menacingly, like a snake's tongue.

*I have to put it out...*

Gritting his teeth, he stepped completely into the darkness. As if in response, the distant light slowly grew a little larger. This time, to a size larger than his thumb. He wondered how big it really was.

*I have to put it out. Fast.*

Because it wasn't supposed to exist. Not in a place like this, or maybe simply because he himself didn't need it?

Trying to drag along the dual weight of his malice and impatience, he

continued to walk into the depths of darkness. With each step, his feelings of grief multiplied, and his feet felt heavier, like he was hauling a lead weight. As he got closer, bit by bit, the light became larger.

*I believed that here, of all places, there would be no light...*

There was never any light in his dreams, as he loved the darkness. There was supposed to be nothing here, save for the empty darkness. It was the only place he could breathe freely.

Because for him, the light was something that shouldn't exist.

Each time the flame flickered, his chest tightened. He hadn't even realized it, as, for a moment, he had been able to forget the pain. But it came back again and again.

*Ahh, why is there light here?*

He reached out his hands, imploring the light to disappear. It seemed so close, the way it bathed him in its obnoxious glow. And yet, no matter how far he walked, he could not reach it.

*Ahh, why is this happening? I believed that, here at least, I could rest...*

He kept walking, hoping to douse the light. He walked down that never-ending tunnel of darkness, not stopping his gait until he reached his goal...

\*\*\*

**YURA** Sugano awoke with a shout.

Her head popped up off the cold desk.

“Sugano, if you have no intention of taking my class seriously, then get out!”

Still not fully awake, she emitted a tired groan, before realizing where she was. She leapt up in a panic, as if yanked by a string, and looked around, causing her classroom to erupt in raucous laughter.

It was 2:15 PM. Sixth period. Math class.

Her desk was still covered with all her books for fifth period.

“I-I’m so sorry...”



Still in a sleepy daze, Yura was unable to figure out what else to say, flailing about and scooping the open textbooks toward her.

Naturally, the metal pencil case situated at the corner of her desk was knocked to the floor by the dictionary it was leaning against. It hit the ground with a reverberating clang. This, in turn, elicited even more laughter.

*Ugggggghhhh!*

Fighting back the tears over how pathetic she must look, Yura squatted and frantically scooped up her scattered pens and pencils while her teacher heaved a loud sigh.

She couldn't resist casting a longing glance toward the trees bursting with fresh May leaves lining the streets visible from the second-story window. Despite the calm, cheerful weather, Yura felt a chill and she struggled to keep herself from bursting into tears.

Yura slinked back up into her seat the second she collected her things. Her teacher moved away and started to write on the board. Breathing a sigh of relief at finally putting an end to the commotion, Yura realized her fingers were trembling.

*Ahh, why... Why am I the only one who can't do anything right?*

She could feel her classmates' amused glances. Yura closed her eyes for a moment, trying to calm down.

*It's all right. It's the same as always. It's fine. It's all right. I mean, I should be used to this by now, right?*

She was used to their scornful laughter by now. She'd always been aware of it, just as one was aware of the sounds of nature or car engines when walking down the street. She was used to their words creeping into her ears, no matter how she tried to ignore them. She was used to it.

As the tears began to well up, Yura dabbed quickly at the corners of her eyes and gazed down at her textbook. She pretended to focus on the lecture. The muscles in the back of her neck seemed to stiffen. Her pulse thundered erratically, like she'd just finished running a mile. *Bathump. Bathump.*

*What was that, anyway...?*

That tiny, distant, swaying, solitary light...

In that world completely enveloped in darkness. That heart-wrenching feeling of despair that'd overcome her like a tidal wave.

And then, there was that voice...

That voice that resonated in her head and her heart. A voice she had never heard before. An anguished voice.

Why was she so anxious...? Maybe because it'd been such a scary dream? Or maybe because of what had just happened?

Placing her hands on her temples, she took a deep breath.

For better or worse, she'd almost forgotten the dream in all the chaos.

The hands on the clock hanging over the blackboard read just past 2:30.

There were ten minutes of class left. When her eyes met the teacher's at the lectern, Yura quickly looked away in a panic.

Trying to mentally shift gears, she struggled to grapple with the problem literally right in front of her.

Her mouth was totally dry.

She held her breath, trying to keep down the dry cough. These last few minutes of class were excruciating.

\*\*\*

**YURA** Sugano was a girl who lived a sad life. One where no one else seemed to notice she even existed.

She attended a private school that had only been built four years ago, just a fifteen-minute walk from her house. A combined middle and high school, it was for those students who wanted a good shot at getting into a famous local university. It was not for the faint of heart.

The school was split into a normal and a progressive curriculum. Of the students who'd passed, Yura had, over her three years, gotten the lowest grades in every class outside of Modern Japanese. Her grades were bad, and

her athletic skills were unbelievably poor. She wasn't completely uncoordinated but significantly slower than the others.

The only thing she could perform equally with others in was origami, which every student got into at one time or another. But when she entered high school, her homeroom teacher had told her mother, "She needs to stop being such a child. Always playing with origami..." And she hadn't touched origami since.

She was bad even at life's basics, dimwitted to the core. Ever since coming to that realization, she'd only done the bare minimum, seeking to avoid troubling others at all costs.

It didn't take her long to conclude that avoiding any forms of attention minimized the damage.

She always wore her auburn-tipped long hair the same way to keep it hidden.

She'd never changed her hairstyle or fashion over the years.

She spoke very little and never assertively.

Her classmates could barely remember her name.

The only impression she seemed to leave on them was as the person always in the shadow of her lively best friend, Tomoko.

That was just how things were for Yura. Even if her experiences were painful, there seemed to be nothing she could do to change them. She'd only been scolded harshly about it once by Tomoko, though she couldn't remember what'd brought it on.

"Don't you ever get tired of being a shrinking violet, scared of everything? This moment will never come again, so you should enjoy it," her friend had told her.

Yura had taken it in silence.

After all, she'd thought the same thing about herself many, many times.

But in her heart, Yura knew the truth—that she couldn't be like Tomoko—and that would never change. So, she'd resigned herself to it.

Her dainty body—so tiny for a high schooler—spawned so many inferiority complexes and an enormous amount of self-loathing. Those twin impulses bore their fangs every chance they got. They told her she was a coward. That she hadn't one redeeming quality.

She lived with that pressure, even as it threatened to crush her. She lacked the strength to rise against it but carried a sarcastic sense of humor that served as her one meager defense against her sadness.

She continued dousing the smoldering flames of dissatisfaction that lingered in her heart, and the ashes had long since cooled. She no longer even *had* that flame. The ashes were soaked; there was nothing left to burn.

The only thing Yura could do was hold these ashes close, lest they turn to dust and blow away for good.

*That's right. I'm a coward who lacks the courage to change.*

No one expected anything serious of Yura anymore.

And that was just fine with her.

That was what she wanted, this was how she made it through: *Even if they laugh, eventually they'll forget I'm even here.*

\*\*\*

**STANDING** in front of the antique glass door, the first thing Yura noticed through the glass were the mountains of opened boxes stacked like a barricade on the other side. They hadn't taken down the Closed sign. She could hear the din of packing tape being torn off from inside the little shop.

Holding the bag of pudding she'd brought as a gift, Yura knocked gently on the stained-glass door as she always did.

"Hello, it's Yura. Is Tomo-chan here?" she called in a soft voice.

When she rang the doorbell—a rare variety of metal knocker instead of electric—she heard the sounds of vigorous packing stop, replaced by the sounds of boxes being shoved about. She could see a foot through the glass kick a box aside before the front door was yanked open.

"Welcome back, Yura!"



With a little dirt that looked like it might be soot on the tip of her nose, Tomoko Hatada poked her head out. She had a large box cutter with the blade out in one hand and pieces of packing tape stuck to her clothes. When her eyes met Yura's, they both burst into laughter.

"That was fast. Did something happen?"

Her brows furrowed with concern and Yura frantically shook her head.

"No, nothing happened."

"Really? Well, that's good."

Relieved, the smile returned to Tomoko's face. She swept back her hair, which had been pulled back in two ponytails behind her ears.

Seeing the cheerful Tomoko lifted Yura's spirits a bit as well.

Tomoko's face was glistening with sweat from exerting herself so much inside the cramped, poorly ventilated shop. Her blouse collar stuck to her sweaty neck as she used her sleeve to wipe her face, the cloth becoming black in the process. The sight caused her to burst into laughter.

"It's crazy, huh? My old man brought *all* this back last night," she said, indicating all the boxes scattered throughout the room.

Yura nodded. It looked like they'd been moving.

Tomoko's new father—her mother's new husband—owned this sign-less antique shop.

Only by following a street that stretched through the crowded residential areas and twisted and turned so many times it disoriented anyone walking it, and then climbing a gentle hill, one would come to a narrow, one-way street. Amid a school zone and houses packed so close together, one could barely fit in between even if they hunched their shoulders, stood the door to the shop. The first time Yura saw it, she felt like she'd discovered something magical.

This shop was also what'd first brought Yura and Tomoko together. It was right around the time Yura had entered high school and, as she often loved roaming about in a daze, she ended up lost and discovered this shop by accident.

She could see expensive-looking vases through the curtainless windows. Yura had gasped when she realized, haphazardly placed among them, was a school bag much like her own, even bearing the same school logo.

The bag was leaning against a thin glass vase—one with a price tag reading 200,000 yen—and looked as if it might topple it over at any second. If someone even lightly brushed against it, it'd surely fall. Her experience with poverty winning out over her introvert nature, Yura pushed open the door with the "Closed" sign on it.

The bag's owner, at the time, was Tomoko Asai.

Her father was apparently the owner of a chain of furniture stores spread all over the country. It was a large store, dealing in both domestic and imported furniture. A household name Yura had heard many times before, as Tomoko's father currently worked as the representative for the Kanto showroom.

"This shop is my new papa's hobby," Tomoko said, taking a big gulp from her carton of soy milk before handing it over to Yura who greedily drank.

"Your new...papa...?"

"Yup. Number four."

Yura had almost coughed up her soy milk on Tomoko, whose face was so nonchalant at the sudden reveal. As she patted the sputtering Yura's back, Tomoko insisted she'd been lying. But later, Yura found out it was true. This was her mother's fourth lover.

"And the fourth man I've called Papa."

Tomoko's mother worked as an illustrator for magazine articles and essays. She'd first gotten divorced when Tomoko was still in diapers and had remarried and divorced numerous times, leading her to raise Tomoko on her own. Having inherited her mother's fighting spirit and tenacity, Tomoko was, in Yura's eyes, incredibly brave.

Two months after they'd met, Tomoko had taken her current surname, Hatada. The polar opposite of Yura, Tomoko was lively, with a larger-than-life personality. Her favorite things were soy milk and pudding. Exercise and cooking were her specialties. She was the picture of an honor student and

Yura's irreplaceable, one and only best friend.

That morning, Tomoko had called Yura first thing and left her dumbfounded. She told Yura she'd chipped a front tooth.

"I was fighting with my little brother and ended up flying down the stairs. I chipped my tooth. It's so horrible! I just *can't* come to school today."

Tomoko's tone was so light and airy, she might as well have been talking about the weather. She was slurring her words a bit, and it sounded as if she had something pressed against her cheek.

"With this tooth chipped, I can't get married, let alone go to school."

When Tomoko hung up with a laugh, Yura remained with her hand on the receiver in shock.

But looking at Tomoko now, nothing seemed any different. On closer inspection, her upper lip was slightly swollen. Yura knit her brows together.

"Is your tooth better? Are you okay to be up and about?"

In response, Tomoko opened her mouth wide. She pulled the corner of her mouth back so Yura could see the tooth that'd been treated, then indicated it with her thumb. Yura laughed without meaning to.

"By the way, is that a gift?"







Eagle-eyed Tomoko had apparently noticed the plastic bag and pointed to it, a smile playing on her lips. She must've somehow guessed what was inside and was happy when she opened the bag and confirmed its contents. She set the bag nearby and pointed to a chair.

“Just have a seat and wait. I’ll bring us something to drink.”

By drink, she meant soy milk. Yura had developed a fondness for soy milk in the time she’d been friends with Tomoko.

There were several pieces of antique furniture throughout the six-mat wide shop. There was an old-fashioned nightstand with a lamp and wall-mountable candlesticks on top. Vases and china were positioned in the display case by the window. There was a flower table with intricate designs engraved upon its tabletop and legs.

There was an unassuming but deftly crafted, Satsuma Kiriko cut glass. Stained glass on the wall, an armful of boat lamps—every kind of antique was displayed all over, both on the floor or standing on its own. There was a variety of different goods, and though the shop was messy, it had an enchanting quality to it.

It had become Tomoko and Yura’s hangout spot, and Tomoko’s current father seemed to have very good tastes.

*But does he really get enough business out here?*

That thought had crossed her mind every time she visited. Compared to downtown, bustling with pedestrians and cars, this neighborhood bore only the slightest hint of life. It was in the middle of a residential area, and the road before it was an elementary school zone. On top of that, the road was only wide enough for one car to fit through.

In fact, Yura could count on one hand the number of people she’d seen in the shop in the two years since she started coming that were actual customers. Every now and then, while she and Tomoko were chatting, she would catch someone peering in out of curiosity but not actual customers.

“Is it because you aren’t actively trying to sell the stuff?”

When she had asked Tomoko, she'd responded with a big laugh and said, "I've never really thought about it."

At that time, Tomoko shouted to the owner himself, who just happened to be present, "Are you making money off this, Papa?"

Mr. Hatada reassured Yura with a friendly smile that they really weren't trying, and that in all honesty, he didn't even want to sell any of these objects.

Then he'd recommended a nearby chair to Yura that had a 40,000-yen price tag.

"Isn't it lovely? Touch anything you like. Antiques like this become lovelier the more they are held and cherished. Well...that's the same for women, isn't it?"

Tomoko was always full of energy, but she was a romantic at her core.

Thinking back on that memory made Yura smile.

She gave each of the nearby chairs a good look and pulled up the one that caught her eye the most. As she sat down, the chair emitted a peculiar wooden squeak, having not been sat on for many years.

The inside of the shop was dim. Not only were the windows small to begin with, but there were goods stacked everywhere and only on the brightest of days did the light get through.

Yura sat still with her legs together, in an attempt not to accidentally topple any boxes, and listened carefully. She could hear Tomoko moving about in the back. In the distance, a high-pitched klaxon wailed twice and then fell silent.

All was suddenly quiet. The light piercing the window warmed the peaceful shop. Yura was so comfortable that she might fall asleep if she wasn't careful.

In this welcome stillness in front of Yura, a ray of sunlight shone on a giant mirror hanging on the wall.

Yura gently closed her eyes.

*It's so bright...*

The crimson light reflected off the mirror, showering Yura with the remnants of the setting sun's rays. The mirror was sharing just a bit of the sun's pleasant



warmth. A sudden sound caused Yura to open her eyes.

Footsteps.

Wondering if it was Tomoko coming back, Yura looked around. Nothing. But still, she heard the footsteps in the back of the shop.

*I must be hearing things.*

She closed her eyes once more.

She heard the sound of a heavy door closing, followed by a child's soft footsteps.

*This area does have some affluent homes,* she thought.

It must have been a child from one such home leaving their house and running around outside. At this time of day, perhaps they were off to cram school? She often saw children sporting the firm-sided backpacks elementary schoolers wore rushing to and from the nearby school.

In the beginning, the sound started as a run, then began to slow. They were walking. And...they were crying.

Sobbing.

The child's voice was very clear. Yura thought she could hear it now and then.

Unlike adults, when children cried, there was no guile. All their sadness and their anger shined through.

It was a tense sound, like a bow pulled taut. It echoed as it grew more intense, and the one crying couldn't hold back the hiccuping sobs. Yura opened her eyes once more and looked around for the person.

She looked for a face and saw none.

When her eyes returned to the mirror.

She was taken aback.

*Huh?*

It was an utterly unbelievable sight.

A child was suddenly standing before her. He seemed to be in the wall itself.

Yura blinked. Over and over to be sure. And then finally, she was sure of it—standing before her, inside the mirror with strands of packing tape still on it, was a boy of about seven, his body shaking as he rubbed his eyes.

The child was clad in old-fashioned clothes, with a somewhat stylish stand-up collar.

At first, Yura was sure she'd made some sort of mistake. She turned away in surprise, then looked back again. She hadn't noticed it before, but if she hadn't gone crazy, then the mirror should have been reflecting the one piece of used furniture, the umbrella stand with the little oil painting hanging above it.

But behind the child was a place that looked like a castle of some sort rather than the antique shop.

Trembling, Yura rose from the chair and approached the mirror. The child still hadn't noticed her. He merely stood still in front of the mirror, blowing his nose. He covered his eyes and blinked as several more tears fell. Coughing, he finally looked her way and stopped moving.

“.....”

Yura's eyes widened at the sight of a child with such a guarded expression. The face was unlike a child's, cold and distorted by the tears. It was almost like a beast trying in vain to mimic human emotion.

The child looked up at Yura. She timidly drew closer. Finally, in front of the mirror, her eyes met his. He spoke not a word, merely staring.

The child's eyes were a beautiful color. Perhaps because of the tears, they sparkled like jewels. They were a gentle, clear, and innocuous green. Despite her hesitancy, lulled by those eyes, she spoke in a whisper.

“...Hey, you okay?”

The child gave no reply, merely staring blankly at Yura.

After remaining quiet for a few moments, Yura tried again.

“...Hello? Hey...umm, is that where you've always lived?”

The child sucked in his lip and, after a short time, nodded. Somehow, he could hear Yura.

“...I see.”

Yura had meant to ask if he was living inside the mirror. She could occasionally hear Tomoko rummaging in the kitchen.

“...Are you always there?”

Still silent, the child gave a nod.

“Why are you crying?”

At that moment, the boy dropped his head.

Somehow, Yura got the feeling she understood why. Perhaps the reason he was crying was...

“Aw, don’t cry,” Yura said, trying to smile for him.

Large tears welled up in his eyes. Without much thought, Yura knocked on the mirror.

“See? Just look at this sad face in this lovely mirror.”

The boy finally spoke. He looked up and, in a strained voice, exclaimed, “Mirrors are meant to reflect lovely faces!”

Yura gasped at how loud his voice was.

As soon as he spoke, he dropped his head even lower than before.

While his voice wasn’t really *that* loud, his words were sharp and struck with the force of a whip. Yura shook her head vigorously.

“Th-that’s not true...”

Yura started to say that mirrors reflect all things equally but then stopped herself. She wasn’t sure who, but someone, somewhere, was tormenting this boy with such a fact. She couldn’t say something so brutal.

Unable to find the right words, she touched the mirror and fell silent. The boy stood tall, timidly stretching his tiny hand to meet hers, the mirror between them.

Oddly enough, the mirror carried not only his voice, but his body heat too. There was a slight spot of warmth where her hand touched his amidst the cold

glass.

Yura closed her eyes.

At times like this, Yura could never figure out what to say. She frantically searched for the words that'd rightly convey what she wanted.

At that moment, the warmth of the hand Yura was touching began to spread. She wondered if he was spreading his fingers. But that faint warmth was beginning to grow rapidly. In no time at all, the hand on the other side of the mirror had gotten big enough to close around Yura's hand. It hadn't merely gotten bigger; it had actually grown. It was the size of an adult's hand.

Yura opened her eyes.

On the other side of the mirror, looking down at Yura from a head taller than her, was an unfamiliar young man.

Tear stains remained on his cheeks. His familiar eyes told her without a doubt that this was the child from before.

And then, that pitiful, unsightly countenance disappeared, as if wiped away. It was like he'd cast off that hideous mask, and what remained was a breathtakingly handsome young man.

Yura stood frozen in surprise.

His emerald-green eyes blinked. She thought she could almost hear it. He too looked shocked, and tears began to trickle down his cheeks.







“...Mo...ther...?” he asked Yura hesitantly.

Dumbfounded, Yura opened her mouth to ask him a question.

“Wh—”

*Who are you?*

But just then, Tomoko’s voice yanked Yura back to reality. Her high-pitched, resonant voice echoed throughout the tiny shop.

“Yuraaaaa!!”

As if someone had punched her, Yura was dragged back into the present. She yanked her hand away from the mirror and stumbled over her own feet onto the floor.

“What?! Did you see one?” Tomoko exclaimed, grabbing a can of insecticide from beside the phone and leaping into action.

Yura was trying to wriggle her way up using a chair, clinging to it for support atop the dusty carpet.

“I bet they got in on something brought into the shop. Sometimes they do... and the ones that come in from outside, they’re even *bigger* than the ones we have here... *Ooh*, I can’t stand them!” Tomoko was at Yura’s side in full panic mode.

Yura slumped to the ground.

Finally, the babbling Tomoko realized something was off. Her face became serious and she furrowed her brows.

“...Yura?”

All that Tomoko could see in Yura’s eyes as she clung desperately to that chair, her face pale, was her own puzzled expression.

“I’m so sorry for taking so long! I wasn’t thinking and erased my little brother’s scheduled recording of his favorite anime. He’d flip out if he came home and found out, so I was trying to find the instruction manual so I could restore it. I kinda lost track of time. Sorry!”

As she listened and nodded to Tomoko, Yura staggered to her feet.

A chill ran through her. As if unable to believe what she'd just seen, Yura pressed her eyes closed and slipped into the chair.

\*\*\*

**DARKNESS** enveloped her surroundings.

She could see nothing.

There was no noise.

Not even a hint of wind.

With only the thump of her heart beating, the distant sound of people shouting could suddenly be heard. They didn't sound happy either. They certainly weren't shouts of joy.

There was another ominous sound accompanying the shouting. No, not just one, but several hundred sounds—all blending together.

It was the marching footsteps of thousands of people. The sound of something larger than humans—its heavy stomps shaking her world of darkness with the added sound of screeching metal.

Terrified, Yura crouched down where she stood.

*I don't want to hear this! I don't want to hear these sounds!*

The sounds were like waves ebbing and flowing on a beach; growing closer, then receding far away into obscurity, over and over again. Yura closed her eyes to the darkness and covered her ears.

She had no idea what was going on, nor did she want to know.

*I just have to get away.*

And yet, her legs wouldn't move even one step forward. On the contrary, it was as if her body refused to listen, preventing her from acting on her desire to flee.

Light pierced the darkness through her covered eyes causing Yura to look up.

The blanket of darkness was giving way to a veil of crimson.

She rose in shock, glancing around. She had no idea what was coming.



For the first time she became aware of her surroundings.

This was no mere dream of sounds. It was far worse.

This was a massacre.

A war zone.

Yura stood, among all those distorted shouts, right in the middle of a battlefield.

The veil of crimson she had seen was the light of numerous fires dotting the horrific battlefield.

Trailing like a red-tailed comet, flaming arrows converged as they flew through the air.

Thousands of hands clenched blades drenched in blood, clanging wildly against one another with no sense of rhyme or reason.

*Where am I?*

Suddenly, a man approached Yura, the look on his face like an ogre's wreathed in madness. His mouth was wide open and the crimson blade he carried rose into the air.

He was suddenly hit on the back of the head by something metallic and fell with his face pointing toward the sky above. The next moment, his body was trampled by horse hooves. The muffled sound echoed, and Yura instinctively clasped her hands over her mouth and turned away. Her heel slid in the muck and she fell into a puddle.

But she screamed as she realized that it wasn't water and soil, but blood, turned a strange, dark color.

She screamed as she struggled to escape her nightmare. Managing to make it several steps away, she was able to grab a blade that had been planted in the ground.

*I can't...scream...*

Yura's arm lifted the blade from the sloshy mess. It was so heavy. Her arm felt so very heavy, like it might crumble from the weight. But there was no time for

rest. Somehow, she knew that.

Yura's legs turned all on their own and, slowly, finally, she began to walk.

She kept moving forward, breaking through the tumultuous scene. It was like she'd momentarily been taken over by someone else. Like her consciousness was trapped while another piloted her every action.

*I'm scared. I'm scared. So very scared. I want to scream! Why can't I scream?*

But the one piloting her forcefully silenced such actions. As if voicing such feelings would be a death sentence. They were crushed flat along with Yura herself.

Her arm swung. Supple, like a whip. Each time the retrieved blade fell, it slashed at another arm, pulling her further into the fray.

It was as if the blade itself was bleeding. The blade was bathed in a bright crimson. Yura's arm only clutched the sword tighter. Without leaving a moment for any counterattack, her weapon swung down, again and again, felling one enemy after the next. Each new victim fell in her path.

The blade felt heavy no longer.

As if whoever had possessed Yura's body was in complete control.

No, it was as if they'd completely switched places.

Yura looked at her arm.

Her arm was not the arm she was used to seeing. It was slender but definitely a man's arm. It was strong, as if encased in steel. The hands were wrapped in bandages and drenched in blood.

The sword swung. Again and again. The sound of the sword slicing through flesh along with that sickening sensation.

Even when Yura could no longer hear the sound, she could feel the warm sensation of viscera flung against her face and neck.

*No more. No more!*

*No more, please! Someone, help me! I can't take anymore!*

And then she woke up.

\*\*\*

“**ARE** you possessed or something?” Tomoko asked immediately after Yura opened the door the next morning. Tomoko visited Yura like this daily.

Yura stiffened.

In just the day since they’d last seen one another, Yura had developed large, deep bags under her eyes, noticeable even to a complete stranger.

She’d checked herself in the mirror since waking up. But, from the look on Tomoko’s face, it was clearly worse than she thought.

Obviously, it was from not sleeping at all the night before.

No matter how she tried to shake it off, the persistent dream clung to her more maliciously than any had before.

She was far beyond exhausted, still Yura rubbed her bleary eyes and forced a smile.

“Oh, I’m fine.”

“And what about the band-aid?”

Yura hid the hand she had placed on the gate to the yard.

The second she’d awoken from that awful dream, she’d flailed and cut her hand on a decorative pitcher she had at her bedside.

Seeing the blood at such a horrible moment obviously added to her stress.

Tomoko gazed at her friend with a look of pity. Yura was clearly embarrassed about her clumsiness.

“I’m just really careless...”

“Did you watch something weird before bed?”

Tomoko’s words were innocent, but still, they sent a chill through Yura.

The truth was, she had.

After seeing that weird sight the night before, she had that terrifying dream.

Sometimes she’d have particularly strange dreams, ones she couldn’t help replaying in her head. The incessant parade of thoughts wouldn’t stop, and

she'd end up shivering in her bed all night, bleary-eyed, waiting for morning.

"I'm guessing I was right on the money! You dork."

Seeing Yura's reaction, Tomoko burst into laughter. Her laugh echoed through the crisp morning air. Hearing such a jovial laugh comforted Yura.

"If you get so freaked out by horror movies, just don't watch them. You'll get traumatized and lose sleep," Tomoko said with a laugh, smacking Yura on the back. "See, nothing to fear! Just forget about it."

"....."

Yura gave a small nod, unable to come up with anything else to say.

What Tomoko said made sense, but it was easier said than done.

When Yura closed her eyes, the images from the dream came rushing back.

If she focused her senses, she felt she could even smell the iron.

She'd never in her life had such an intense dream.

The sun's rays warmed the chills running down her spine. She became dizzy, like she'd caught a bad cold. But as she closed the gate, she tried to give the worried Tomoko a little smile.

"I'm sorry, I'm really okay."

"...I see. Well then, about that mirror..." Tomoko pounded her fist into her hand and changed the subject.

Yura opened her bag and pulled out some report paper as they walked along.

On the front were some of the one hundred famous waka poems; on the back were several math formulas. Today, they had two quizzes, so she intended to study along the way.

"I looked into it," Tomoko said, "though I still have no idea why you're suddenly so interested." She held up her index finger. "I asked Papa about that mirror. But he doesn't know a thing about it. Not even who made it."

*It figures.* While she was disappointed, Yura was not surprised.

With so many different items coming into the antique shop, it was only



natural that he wouldn't know the origins of each and every one.

Tomoko seemed to have remembered something else.

"Well, we *did* figure out something. To be considered an antique, most items have to have some value to them. But that mirror seems to be special. When I asked why, he said that when he was a young man, that mirror was given to him in a shop similar to ours from Russia or Zimbabwe or somewhere. He didn't have an eye for beauty back then, but apparently, that's how it ended up in the shop."

*Russia and Zimbabwe? They're opposites—north and south.* Yura nodded ambiguously as she reflected on this fact.

Tomoko pulled a face.

"Well, I know that's kinda vague...but it's a fact that mirror is no normal antique."

"How so?" Yura asked excitedly.

Tomoko gave her a glance, probing whether or not she really wanted to know. Yura nodded fervently—satisfied, Tomoko continued.

"That mirror," Tomoko began, holding up her index finger once more. "Well, it might be hard to tell at first glance, but it's double-sided."

"Double-sided...?"

"Yup. Its elliptical shape spins on a vertical axis." As she spoke, she drew an ellipse in the air and pointed out the top and bottom. "The mirror is laid into its frame and the center spins like a revolving door. Since this was a decorative mirror, there apparently used to be something there. But since we're using it as just a mirror, it's just been hung on the wall. We think maybe it was used for some sort of special ritual. That's why it's double-sided."

Yura frowned. Tomoko mimicked her look.

"Wanna check it out? We could stop off for a bit."

Tomoko, intent on never being late and maintaining perfect attendance, always called on Yura super early in the morning. It threw Yura off in the beginning, but after three years of friendship, she was used to it.

Even as the road they walked was a residential school road, bereft of any shops, the silly conversation Tomoko led as they walked to school made it fun for Yura, like a morning walk. Knowing this, Tomoko continued coming by each day.

Even when she called Yura the day before to tell her about her chipped tooth, she was neither angry with her brother for causing it nor was she in shock at the injury. She was more upset about her efforts for perfect attendance and never being late having all gone to waste.

Without a word, they passed the turn they'd normally take and continued on the road to the shop. They quickened their steps to make their downhill journey easier.

"Mirrors are made by using some sort of paint-on glass, right?" Yura asked as they walked.

Tomoko nodded. She produced the key from her pocket before they even reached the shop. "It's not paint, actually, but mercury. Papa enlightened me with his great knowledge on the subject."

The Japanese word for glass, "kagami," Tomoko explained, came from the word "kagemi," meaning "someone always at one's side." It referred to how, in the past, the back was metal, but it was now glass, with both sides treated with mercury.

"That's why, even without the metal part, if a mirror is made of glass, then each glass surface is a mirror in and of itself, y'know?"

The pair stopped in front of the shop. Tomoko dropped her bag at the door then put the key in the keyhole. The old-fashioned door also had a lock that turned audibly.

"So does that mean the two mirrors are back-to-back?" Yura asked, setting her bag down beside Tomoko's.

"You'd think so," Tomoko said as they opened the door and slipped into the shop.

The mirror in question was nearby. It'd been removed from the wall and placed on the floor.

Tomoko grabbed the frame and heaved it into the center of the shop. “Look,” she said, holding the elliptical mirror vertical, then indicating the ellipse’s vertex with one hand, while her free hand pushed the mirror inside.

Just as she said, the mirror spun awkwardly on its axis like a revolving door.

Tomoko moved the mirror so Yura could see it in profile—from the side. She pointed.

“As you can see, this is one.”

Yura pulled a face without meaning to. Tomoko was right. It was just one glass surface, with no seams or anything.

And yet still, there were two surfaces.

“...What is this?”

“Who knows?” Tomoko said indifferently, giving a curt shrug before dragging the mirror back to its original spot. “It really is interesting how it’s made. Wonder how they did it?” she mused, gazing down at it curiously.

Only about half her words reached Yura’s ears.

*It’s a double-sided mirror with no seams?* Yura wondered, staring dumbfounded at the thought of it. She covertly rubbed the goosebumps forming under her sleeves.

Since Tomoko lived in ignorance, she could laugh. After all, she hadn’t seen what Yura saw the day before.

*Double-sided?* Maybe...just maybe, the glass’ interior hadn’t been painted. There was a tiny spot from where the sun had been hitting the mirror in its previous position.

“Papa said he’d sell it to you for a deep discount. 50,000 yen,” Tomoko said, staring at the spot. “Or, you could pay me later, when you’re rich and famous. What’ll it be, young miss?”

Tomoko rubbed her hands together and laughed.

Yura responded by clearing her throat.

Her wallet would hurt just spending 500 yen.

“No, thank you. I don’t think I’ll ever be rich enough to pay you back.”

She hadn’t realized it yesterday, but looking at it like this, the mirror *was* beautiful. She hadn’t thought it was anything but silver, but there seemed to be something metallic shining lightly from within.

It was terribly dirty, so Yura gently wiped it with her finger, displacing some of the filth and letting its true beauty and silvery light shine through.

Going once around the frame, she found some sort of intricate pattern that resembled ivy. There was another pattern that, on a casual glance, wasn’t very noticeable but that Yura caught sight of by sheer coincidence.

*Wha...?*

Though it was a pattern, it wasn’t solid or consistent. One wouldn’t be able to see it without focusing, but it looked like a *trompe l’oeil*. Almost like foreign script or imagery within the design. They were long words, appearing to be cursive English. Thinking it strange, Yura pointed to the mirror.

“Tomo-chan, what language is this?” she asked.

“Where?”

Tomoko leaned closer to the mirror, squinting her eyes and examining the spot Yura was pointing at.

“You’re right. What is this? Russian?” she responded after a moment.

She hadn’t seemed serious, but still, the answer felt obvious.

Yura heaved a sigh.

“Isn’t it something closer to Aramaic or something like that?”

Tomoko’s internal world map seemed to include only America, Russia, Japan, and, for some reason, Zimbabwe. She managed to maintain above-average marks in all subjects, but geography was definitely her worst.

Tomoko burst into laughter, and Yura couldn’t help but join her.

*So, it’s just a mirror, she thought. Just an average, everyday mirror.*

“I can’t believe you *noticed* something like that,” Tomoko said with admiration. “It’s kinda like 3D, right? I can’t really see things like that.”

They left the shop. They could hear the warning bell in the distance that signaled they had ten minutes until the start of school. Yura panicked. They were running out of time.

They quickened their pace and headed on the path to school. Their school was at the bottom of the steepest hill in their residential district. They could see its square roof amidst all the crowded house roofs.

“When Papa was little, it used to scare him. He tried to take it down, but something popped out at him, like horsehair or spikes or something. He was really afraid of it, even from a young age, thinking maybe it really was haunted or something. So he thought he should give it a home. Taiki laughed so hard, he was on the verge of tears. Isn’t that messed up, laughing at a little kid like that?”

“Wow, it almost sounds like a magic mirror.”

“That would be amazing if it were.”

*That child...that boy in the mirror... Yura thought as they walked. He didn’t cause me any harm. Maybe that’s why I wasn’t worried. He just cried, was all. He just looked unsightly. Just stood there with those...beautiful eyes.*

But that was over now.

It was in the past, never to happen again. Just a mysterious occurrence, she tried to reassure herself.

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**AS** soon as she entered the classroom, the pair were stopped by Nozomi Hashimoto and Keiko Fujieda. The two of them were sitting in the seats belonging to students who’d yet to arrive.

Their hair was against school regulation. Their shortened skirts gave everyone a view of their legs. And their ties were undone, a look that never changed throughout the year. Their faces were plastered with ravenous smiles.

Camped out by the door, they quickly met Yura and Tomoko as soon as they entered.

“Morning, Sugano-san.”



The overly loud voice startled Yura. The bag she carried on her right shoulder slid down, as if slinking back on her behalf. Tomoko faced the pair cautiously.

“We have math today. Do us a favor and don’t fall asleep again.”

Yura literally flinched at their words. As she hung her head reflexively, they stared down at her with twisted smirks.

They always acted like this, but Yura’s exhaustion had her wilting immediately at the sight of them.

Nozomi Hashimoto was the vice-captain of the track team. She was as tall as any of the boys, and her body was in much better shape than Yura’s. She had a bad vibe to her and was often late or absent. Because she seemed the type to suddenly fly off the handle, she was exactly the sort of person Yura found hardest to deal with.

“Well, I guess since Hatada-san’s back today, she can wake you up.”

“You know, you *really* should try to make some *actual* friends.”

They both burst into laughter at this exchange.

Yura escaped to her seat, shrinking away from the attention to the best of her ability.

Nozomi Hashimoto and Keiko Fujieda did not get along with Tomoko at all.

The reason was obvious.

If Tomoko could be considered a positive presence, then they were definitely negative.

Among the eight classes in year three, the two of them would always loiter in stairways or off in some corner of the campus with a similar kind of girl from a neighboring class named Miki Osakabe. Their purpose in life seemed to be to pick their own personal targets and harass them for fun. But their smiles always seemed to be hiding some deep-seated hunger.

Yura had seen them smiling and laughing many times, but never once seen them look happy.

From the time they’d entered third year, they had their sights set on Tomoko.

As someone with both good grades and strong athletic skills, they deemed her the most intolerable person in class. They seized any opportunity they could to go after her.

Despite being the target of their cruelty, Tomoko merely brushed it off.

Yura knew it was only a matter of time before the brunt of their anger turned to her since she was always at Tomoko's side. They endlessly mocked her with their words: lazy, lame, childish, loser.

Lately, they'd chosen to try and crush Yura in Tomoko's place and seemed satisfied that they were finally pounding her into submission.

This ridiculous form of psychological torment seemed to have no end.

Yura had gotten so used to it that she no longer cried on her way home from school.

"It's all just so utterly stupid."

Yura wondered how Tomoko could say that so plainly. She wished she could brush the whole thing off like that.

She didn't have to interact with them often, and when she did, it was always in the same places. But what in the world dredged up such hatred for her within them? How had such malice overtaken them?

Perhaps all they knew to do was take out their boredom on someone else. They no longer cared how their actions looked. How others saw them no longer held power over them.

What kind of adults would they become? What kind of happiness could they hope for?

Yura let out a sigh as she listened to their snide remarks and mocking laughter.

\*\*\*

**YURA** continued to have the same dream every night.

It was like someone was shuffling two cards, but no matter which she drew, both led to the dream.

Both the tumultuous battlefield and the all-consuming darkness felt like three-dimensional projections. Little by little, they became more vivid and less dreamlike.

She tried as hard as she could to focus, like she was using a high-powered lens inspecting every little detail.

Even when she was merely napping, the angry voice of her teacher still seemed so far away.

At the worst of times, even during those bursts of light sleep, Yura still felt like she stood on the edge of a dream.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Tomoko asked, concerned. All Yura could do in response was offer a wan smile while blinking her bleary eyes.

It was lunch time, yet Yura left her chopsticks in place, seemingly on the verge of dozing off again. Tomoko was past shock and more fearful at this point.

“You really aren’t sleeping at night, huh? Was the horror movie you watched really that bad?”

Yura had been to Tomoko’s shop numerous times since that day, but hadn’t seen anything else unusual.

The trio of girls got their kicks in teasing the increasingly sluggish Yura too.

Since they had gym on Friday afternoon, Yura and Tomoko hurried to the changing rooms before everyone else after lunch. They got changed first and hurried back to the classroom.

At their school, every class had a public morals representative who locked up the classroom, secured valuables, and keys to the clubrooms in the event a club officer was in the class. The public morals representative was always hated, so naturally, the duty was forced onto Yura.

“Hurry up, Yura,” Tomoko urged once they finished chasing out the stragglers.

There was a simple metal hook next to the blackboard for securing valuables when locking up the classroom.

As they rushed off to gym after securing the room, Yura became dizzy.

“Yura?”

After taking three deep breaths, the dizziness subsided. Her vision flashed green for a second, then things returned to normal.

Tomoko, who had turned back in a panic, was peering into Yura’s eyes, worried.

“Look, why don’t you just rest for today? You’ve been looking pale all day...”

Yura shook her head and forced a smile.

With her lack of athleticism, Yura was just barely passing gym class. She couldn’t afford to sit it out.

It was just lack of sleep, she was sure. Even the pain in the back of her eyes and her constant stomachache had to be because of that.

The bell tolling the end of lunch rang out. The pair exchanged glances and dashed off.

\*\*\*

**THE** longer gym class went on, the worse Yura felt. After they had to run five laps at the start, they then had to pair off for stretches.

Turning pale, Yura managed to keep going, but the second she stood up, she was seized with such intense nausea, she couldn’t move. She held her breath, but it was no use. Unable to hold it much longer, she leapt up and dashed outside. She charged past the teacher, who turned to watch her, and bound for the bathrooms in the back of the gym.

There were rectangular storeroom-like buildings with thin walls along the sides of the gym.

Underneath the galvanized iron that served as the single corrugated sheet-like roof, there was a long building that looked like a row house, split into several different clubrooms, one for each sports team.

Yura darted into the very first concrete room, then leaned over a bucket. Perhaps because she had barely eaten since morning, she was unable to throw anything up and alleviate her nausea. She grew dizzy and stumbled back outside.

Her back was slick with a cold sweat, making the wind outside feel lukewarm. She covered her mouth with her clammy hand and leaned against the wall to steady her chills.

She heard Tomoko calling for her in the distance and looked up.

*I have to hurry. She's looking for me.*

Since classes had already started, this area facing the schoolyard was very quiet. Beyond the green fence at the edge of the grounds, a car in the jam-packed parking lot tried to pull out of its tight parking spot. It would move forward, then back. Forward, then back. It was changing directions trying to pull out without hitting another car.

As Yura watched its blinking brake lights disappear in between the cars, she straightened her back.

She heard Tomoko's voice again. It was closer than before.

"Yura— Hey, where are you?"

*I'm here. I'm sorry.*

When Yura went to say those words, a metallic sound caught her ears, and she held her breath.

The first thing that she noticed was a red plate that'd fallen to the ground.

All of the sports teams had a red plastic plate attached to their clubroom keys. As she had to collect those keys at least once a day, she recognized them right away.

She looked up.

Nozomi Hashimoto and Miki Osakabe stood there in shock.

The pair were still in their uniforms and stood there with fabric bags swaying from their arms.

They also had three other keys with matching red plates in their hands.

Yura's eyes grew wide. She had inadvertently memorized how many keys there were, having to collect them each day.

Regulation tennis. Basketball. Softball. And track, the club Nozomi Hashimoto



was vice-captain of.

“There you are! What are you doing here?!”

Tomoko came over to confirm that it was, in fact, Yura. At that moment, the others exchanged startled glances, then turned away. They ran inside.

Yura turned back to Tomoko.

“T-Tomo-chan...”

“A-Are you okay? You’re pale as a sheet. I told you, you should’ve rested today!”

She rubbed Yura’s back as Yura looked down.

Looking back one last time, Yura saw the other two girls were gone.

“What? Was someone else here?”

As Tomoko looked around suspiciously, Yura grabbed her arm and shut her eyes.

For reasons she couldn’t understand, it seemed like she’d witnessed something awful, and her knees began to tremble.

The bell rang, signaling the end of class. She bit her lip, trying to quiet the beating of her heart.

\*\*\*

**THAT** day after school, Tomoko had cleaning duty, so they both cleaned together. Once a week, they split up, and Yura’s class, Class 3-D, cleaned the western stairwell and the entrance to the gym.

Since they had the front of the gym, they swept from one side to the other. As Yura helped Tomoko clean, they overheard their names being called over the PA system and looked up.

“Yura Sugano and Tomoko Hatada from class 3-D, please see Sako from the math department in the faculty office immediately.”

The disinterested voice repeated the announcement twice more before cutting out.

Tomoko burst into laughter at hearing Sako's voice over the loudspeaker. Sako was their homeroom teacher and head of the math department.

"Come on, at least try to sound friendly."

Not in any sort of hurry, Tomoko set the dustpan before the pile of dirt they'd accumulated.

"Anyway, everything's always 'immediately' with Yakko," Tomoko said, motioning toward the main building.

"Yakko...?"

"He seems like the type who'd get comments on his elementary school report card like 'Completely unsociable' and 'Please try to smile more,' right?"

Yura burst out laughing.

It was so likely, it was scary. As she laughed, she dumped the swept-up trash into the garbage. Still not in any hurry, they put the cleaning supplies back.

But it actually was an urgent matter.

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## **"STEALING?"**

Sako had been waiting for the pair in the faculty office.

Unlike lunchtime, hardly anyone was in the faculty office after school.

Though they didn't feel any concrete sense of crisis, the way their teacher greeted them both with this accusation so suddenly it left them dumbfounded.

"Did something happen?"

Rather than answering them, their teacher glared quietly at the desk. The normally light-skinned Sako was now noticeably pale. Getting a bad feeling, Yura looked down.

"I was informed a short time ago by one of the sports advisors that a theft had occurred. The victims were members of the tennis, basketball, softball, and track teams."

Yura gasped. She instinctively looked at Tomoko, who had furrowed her

brows.

“Fortunately, the damages aren’t that great. Half of the students were impacted, and all the club rooms were hit. Only the track team lost its entire first-term budget.”

Tomoko’s eyes widened. Sako finally lifted his pale face.

“Sugano, you are the public morals representative, right?”

Yura gave a small nod. “But I locked everything up properly...” she somehow managed, trembling.

Tomoko, who had been listening with suspicion, finally spoke up. “She’s right. I was with her when she locked up. We were the last two and we left the room together. The valuables bag was in its proper place...”

He was silent.

Slightly frustrated, Tomoko pressed. “What is going on?”

“During fifth period, Sugano...” he began, “there’s a student who said they saw you standing in front of the clubrooms. They said they saw you run out, your face pale.”

Yura gasped. Tomoko’s eyes widened and she pressed the teacher.

“Y-You can’t possibly suspect *her*?”

He gave no response. Sako seemed to be reading Yura’s face seriously and carefully.

Losing her patience, Tomoko raised her voice.

“No way, she was sick and just went to the bathroom... Who would say something so ridiculous? And what kind of *proof* do they have?”

Yura hung her head. Her breath caught in her throat and she couldn’t speak. She remembered bumping into that trio during fifth period. Their shocked faces, the four keys, the cloth bags, their retreating figures, and the sound of their footsteps.

“I cannot release the names of the students who came forward. But it would be easy for the morals representative to retrieve the clubroom keys from the

valuables bag. Or rather, all the clubs that were hit were clubs our class had the keys to.”

Tomoko, who had been listening quietly, gasped. Her cheeks reddened and she clenched her hand into a fist. Yura thought she saw her eyes go white. Once she steadied her breathing, Tomoko spoke frankly.

“No matter what you say, it wasn’t her. I’d be more suspicious of whoever came forward to ‘testify.’”

Sako looked away. Finally, he mumbled in response, “Can you prove otherwise?”

Yura went ice cold at those words. But Tomoko didn’t hesitate.

She looked up and declared, “I can.”

She then spun around and left. As Yura followed her, she could feel the teacher’s cold gaze upon her back.

\*\*\*

**EVEN** from behind, Yura could hear Tomoko’s painful words.

By the time they grabbed their bags and left school, the sun was setting.

“Why didn’t you speak up even once?” Tomoko shouted forcefully.

Yura had finally calmed down after the day’s harrowing events. Trembling, she managed to tell Tomoko about what she’d seen. As she spoke, Tomoko pounded the wall twice, unable to withhold her anger. The right hand she was massaging had turned red.

“They sure got the jump on us... We can’t just grin and bear it anymore! We need to go to their houses today and let ’em have it!” she exclaimed, clutching the handle of her bag so tight that it seemed it might break.

Yura nodded silently.

It was only natural for Tomoko to be so worked up.

The way they had been accused of something they hadn’t done, been talked about behind their backs, and staying quiet in the face of such allegations, Tomoko’s reactions were neither foolish nor reckless. Her sense of justice was

stronger than the average person's, and she wasn't the sort to allow corruption to go unpunished, so it was clearly eating at her.

"It's all right, we told our teacher what was going on. I'm sure he will understand."

"How can you be so *calm* about all of this?" Tomoko asked in a tone that was half-irritation, half-astonishment.

Yura hung her head.

Until the end of second year, Tomoko had belonged to the tennis team for a time. The advisor for the tennis team, Sakagami, was an open-hearted woman who'd developed a rapport with Tomoko. This was the teacher who presided over fifth period gym class. They had gone to see her after leaving the faculty office to tell her what happened.

"That is a problem..." was the first thing Sakagami said after listening to everything Tomoko had to say. "Well, I didn't believe Sugano was the sort to do something so foolish either."

Those words gave Yura the slightest hint of salvation. Setting her pen down, Ms. Sakagami stretched. As she spoke, her finger trailed down the list of stolen belongings.

"I also saw you take off with your face pale. And I don't think in the short time before you came back that you could have stolen so much from all four clubrooms..."

"They took that much?"

Sakagami responded to the question with a nod while awkwardly tapping the old printer on her desk with a ballpoint pen.

"Each room had been ravaged from one end to the other. It was like they'd checked each member's locker and not only stolen club funds, but any items against school regulation, which each student hid in their respective clubrooms. It seems like they gathered everything they wanted, including those items, regardless of price. What a foolish thing to do."

"....."



“Well, it’ll be all right,” the teacher said. “Sako doesn’t have much room to fool around either. He’s very serious. It was after school and very sudden when they found out about the crime and tried to investigate... I’ll try to explain what you’ve just shared with me, so you two head home for today.”

Things were up in the air, but that’s where they were. It was difficult to tell whether or not anything useful would happen.

“How can we *prove* anything?” Tomoko spat.

Yura didn’t head home but instead headed straight to the antique shop. Tomoko spit into the darkening sky.

“I always *knew* I couldn’t count on Sako, but this is a new low.”

Yura looked down. Tomoko raised her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Tomo-chan.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

Tomoko sulked in irritation. She sounded more upset than Yura had ever heard her.

“...Hey, listen...”

“...*Mmhmm?*”

“Why didn’t you say anything in your defense?” Tomoko looked Yura straight in the eye. The pair had stopped on the darkening hill.

“.....”

“You know there are times that you need to fight, right?”

Yura hung her head. She could tell what Tomoko really wanted to say by the look in her eyes.

What had happened earlier wouldn’t have turned out that way if Yura had come out and said “That’s not what happened.”

She couldn’t even stand up for herself, her friend had to do it for her. It felt like, in her cowardice, she was taking advantage of Tomoko.

“...I’m sorry.”

"I didn't say it because I want you to apologize."

Tomoko took a deep breath then let out a long sigh, as if releasing so much excess tension.

A dusty wind began to blow along the road.

"...You know this kind of thing will probably keep happening, right?"

Yura was silent.

That was probably true. No, it was definitely true. Such ridiculous false accusations were all it took to put her in this horrible situation.

"...Just forget it."

That was all Yura could say.

If she just shook her fist each time it happened and kept fighting, eventually, she'd run out of strength. At least that was what she believed.

Even Tomoko would reach her limits. The light in those eyes that burned so bright today would burn out. That was the one thing she couldn't let happen.

Getting angry every time would solve nothing. If she just let them do what they wanted, eventually, they'd get tired and leave her alone. They couldn't be *that* foolish to keep stealing...right? That's what she believed, at least.

As if reading Yura's thoughts, Tomoko made a face. Her voice got louder.

"So, you're fine just keeping quiet, *letting* people do this to you and just say nothing? You think it's *right* to let them spread false accusations about you? To treat you like an empty-headed fool?!"

"...It's *not* right..."

"If I can't be with you like I was today and something like this happens again, are you gonna stay quiet then too? When you *need* to speak up or do something or fight back, don't just stay quiet because it makes things easier..."

"It's fine. I'm sorry." Yura turned away.

Tomoko really *was* angry.

Maybe all of this frustration had been building up for a long time.

Yura always clammed up when she should speak or explain. It was her own spinelessness, she knew. She knew deep down that she was weak, cowardly, submissive, and indecisive.

“I’m...so sorry...”

“Why do you *always* try to avoid the issue? Why do you *always* apologize when it’s not your fault?”

A long silence fell over them.

Somewhere in the distance, a streetlight flickered on and off.

Under the early evening streetlights, Yura could see Tomoko’s fists were trembling. Her clenched fists were shaking in frustration. Yura couldn’t even look at her, lowering her head instead.

Tomoko opened her mouth.

“...You *coward*.”

Those words struck Yura right in the heart. Something that she should’ve protected more fiercely than anything cracked like an eggshell.

*Weakling. Coward.*

Tomoko should have been glaring at Yura, but instead, her face became hazy and unreadable.

“...”

Yura didn’t have the willpower to speak, let alone to argue.

Her head down, Yura clutched her bag and took off.

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**WHEN** she reached her house, only the entrance and living room lights were on. The door was locked. When she felt the resistance of the locked doorknob, she remembered her mother was working the night shift at her part-time job. Lacking the will to even change clothes, Yura flopped down on her bed and lay there, spacing out for a good while.

She remembered she’d forgotten her laundry and padded reluctantly down the stairs. As she came down, she noticed the light on the answering machine

was blinking on and off. She gulped.

She was getting more and more pathetic. Trembling, she peeked at the call log.

There was only one message, dated six days ago. Losing her energy, she stayed there, spacing out some more.

Pulling herself together, she pressed the playback button. The machine was set so that, when one hit the playback button, the call log was erased simultaneously. The voice pouring out of the machine after the pre-recorded message was Tomoko's usual calm tone. She was saying they should go buy the things she needed for Home Ec after school the day after tomorrow.

“—and, oh yeah, I actually lost the list of things we need. What was it again? Can you tell me tomorrow? But anyway, three thousand yen should cover it, right?”

As she spoke, Yura could hear the smile in her voice.

Tomoko was the same, whether she was alone, or they were together. She chatted excitedly and offered a “Good night” with a laugh before hanging up.

“Well, see ya tomorrow. Good night!”

Yura instinctively reached for the pause button on hearing her voice. She was a second too late and heard the brief sound of the message being erased.

The house was suddenly quiet.

*Tomo-chan...*

Yura covered her face and approached the phone. Pressing her hands to her eyelids, she felt they were hot.

The voice on the phone sprang back to her mind. A voice from an average, sorrowless day. An ordinary day. Yura suddenly realized how irreplaceable such a thing was and lifted her head.

Tomoko's smile suddenly appeared before her eyes.

As if her mood had changed, Yura began searching for her bike key.

She turned over the key holder above the shoe cupboard, and finally finding

it, turned and ran out the door without locking up behind her.

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**THE** door to the shop wasn't locked.

The darkened shop was only dimly illuminated by the faint light spilling out from the kitchen in the back. As Yura timidly stepped across the threshold and announced herself, she thought Tomoko's lack of response at first was due to anger.

Shaking, she peeked in past the door, then gave an apology.

There was no reply.

Peeking around the kitchen as much as she could, she finally realized Tomoko had stepped out. The food Tomoko had made was on the table. Yura remembered that Tomoko would invite her to eat there whenever she was depressed.

"Whenever you're feeling low, eat here with me. You can think things over in peace."

The table, which normally held nothing more than snacks or drinks, held dinner for three tonight.

Yura suspected it was Tomoko's, her father's, and her little brother's.

"If you just sit around thinking, you'll get more and more miserable. But if you move your hands, that won't happen. Sometimes, cooking while you think is better. Setting your worries on the backburner of your mind to simmer can yield delicious results. And some freshly made food."

Yura crouched down as Tomoko's words echoed through her mind. All of a sudden, tears spilled from her eyes, and she had to lower her voice.

*Tomo-chan...*

She was afraid Tomoko had become completely fed up with her.

She'd said herself that it was wrong—had quickly reached that conclusion—but she was ashamed of the way she'd still been able to do nothing but remain silent.

*Weakling. That's right. Apologize. Apologize and use that apology as a shield.*

She never figured out what was truly wrong and right. She just apologized and covered her eyes and ears to reality as she did.

A bittersweet scent accompanied the smell of eggs wafting into her nostrils.

Tomoko's specialty Chinese dish.

They probably wouldn't ever get to eat it together again...

Not as long as Yura failed to change. As long as Yura couldn't stop being a weakling or a coward.

She lifted her head and rose to her feet.

*I thought I'd be able to do what I came here for before I was asked to leave or slunk out on my own: apologize to Tomo-chan, then take the night to think it over.*

She thought of buying the ingredients she needed on the way home and making something she'd learned from Tomoko. Yura was bad at cooking and didn't care for it in the first place, so she might end up focusing on that rather than her own problems.

She pulled her thin wallet from her pocket, looked around the shop, and suddenly spotted the mirror.

It was unchanged from the last time she'd touched it, but it'd been moved a bit further into the shop. Just standing there in a daze was uncomfortable, so Yura approached it and stood before the mirror for the first time in a while.

*That boy...the one who lived inside the mirror.*

She thought that perhaps that day was a turning point.

Yura wondered as she traced the fingerprints left on its surface.

Maybe it all started the day she saw him. It was only after that that those mysterious dreams filled her nights.

With the light pouring from the kitchen, the shop got a little brighter. In that little light, Yura concentrated on the decorative engraving.

Even in the dim light, if she looked hard enough, she could still see those



letters from a script she didn't recognize. Maybe it was because she was looking through tears, but the mirror seemed to glisten.

When she focused, the letters seemed to raise up on their own, one after the next, as if a spell had been cast upon them.

*I can't believe the trompe l'oeil technique existed when this was created.*

A bright, circular line shone within the mirror, and Yura's eyes widened. She turned around to see a car parking at a house across the way. The houses were all crammed in so tight that many didn't have room for a driveway. So they all crammed in along the narrow shoulder, struggling to squeeze into their garage.

The headlights reflecting into the mirror seemed oddly beautiful. It shimmered so brightly, it seemed to shut out the moon. Shimmering and blurred in her tears, it was lovely.

When she thought about what might come next, she wanted to run away. She clamped her eyes shut and rested her head against the mirror.

*I have to prepare myself. She can yell at me, scold me, be fed up with me, but I have to apologize. For my own weakness.*

*So I can fight on my own.*

Suddenly, something shimmered in Yura's vision. As if the morning sun were rising at the edge of her vision.

Yura opened her eyes. Suddenly, the mirror's entire surface shone white. Almost uncannily so. Looking over her shoulder, she saw neither cars nor even people outside. Every car was parked in its spot.

A twinkling began to spread from between her fingers.

It was that script.

Where Yura had touched, the golden ivy became entwined and began to creep up. It ran along the circumference of the mirror, pushing its way through the grooves left from the engraving—slowly.

Like iron filling a delicate mold, the golden ivy crept its way along the mirror's frame as Yura watched in awe. In just a short time, the glowing ivy had gone all around the mirror. The entire surface was glowing, illuminating the tiny shop.

Like the water's surface, light rippled within it.

A draft began to blow and, in that moment, Yura saw something unbelievable.

Playing at the corners of her vision, the bead curtain that separated the shop from the interior froze in the position the wind had blown it.

There *were* people outside. They had just stopped moving.

A driver who'd just gotten out of his car froze in place.

The clock on the wall had stopped moving, as if time itself had frozen.

This all happened instantly.

The moment seemed to last a frighteningly long time.

Only one thing moved when everything else had fallen still, albeit in slow motion.

The wind had begun to swirl.

A mouth like that of a large vacuum twisted open in the mirror. She could see the light rippling, as if blown about by the wind. Her hair began to flutter toward the hole—the inside of the mirror.

She was being sucked in.

The moment she realized what was happening, Yura was pulled toward the sparkling maw before her.

She had no time to resist before she plunged into the light. Her eyes were dazzled and all of her, up to the top of her head, was swallowed by the mirror. She opened her mouth to scream, but before she could, Yura melted into the gold and silvery light.

## Chapter 2: The World of Red Earth

**THE** world was draped in an all-encompassing veil of darkness. Like a draft in an old house, the wind would blow with a faint howl, then fade like fog and begin all over again. It was like a herd of ghosts gliding across the ground.

Her body was stiff and hurt all over. The arm she'd slept on was completely numb. It felt like she'd landed on a rocky surface.

Yura opened her eyes with a groan.

It was no dream.

She really *was* lying on rocky ground. When she tried to move her hands, her fingers touched dirt.

She tried to sit up but couldn't.

Her arms and legs felt like they'd turned to rubber while she slept.

*What is this place?*

Before her was a large rock that could serve as a pillow. Yura crawled over to it, grabbed on, and somehow pulled herself up.

As far as her unfocused eyes could see was a bleak, reddish landscape.

Yura's mouth dropped open. Her mind, which had only just started working, immediately grinded to a halt.

The land before her was rocky and not much else. The sun that climbed up over the wasteland burned bright and dyed the area in crimson.

It was a barren world, with no sign of life, and where the air was thin.

"...Where is this?"

A sudden gust blew by and Yura hugged her chest, grabbing her shoulders.

That was when Yura finally realized her body was actually cold. Her limbs hadn't merely fallen asleep; they'd frozen. Her entire body had gone numb in

the cold.

“It’s...cold? Why...?”

The wind mercilessly struck at her back, covered only by a thin blazer. It felt as if the wind would shred the thin protective cloth. But when Yura tried to huddle up to shield against the merciless gusts, a vivid memory cropped up in her mind.

The balmy rays of the May sun. Students heading to school having switched to short sleeves. The breeze that blew against the school’s stainless-steel windowpanes was the sort that felt like it could blow through your very core.

Looking down at herself, she’d just switched over to her long, thin-sleeved uniform. Even so, the air around her was cold enough to be more fitting for October.

*Where am I?*

The air around her was wrapped in the light of a twisted reddish dusk.

Looking upon the tired sun, a vague realization dawned on Yura, and she suddenly realized that it was, in fact, the morning sun. The last traces of night clung to the edges of the sky. It was daybreak.

She felt like she’d seen this sprawling wasteland on some calendar.

She raised an arm and wiped her face on her sleeve leaving a trail of bright red. The dusty wind had coated her face in red clay, as if she’d patted her face with powder.

She pulled her handkerchief from her pocket and thoroughly wiped her face. As she did, she slowly began to calm down.

“How did I end up in a place like this...?” she muttered blankly as she watched the dawning sky. She couldn’t remember at all how she ended up there. All that existed at the edges of her mind was fog.

But she could say for certain that she’d never seen this place in her life.

Not the skies. Not the ground. Not the wind blowing against her.

Yura tried to push back the questions bubbling up in her mind like sparkling

water.

*That's right; this has to be a dream,* she assured herself.

But if that were true, why was she still so horribly cold?

In dreams, she never actually realized she was in one.

Yura thought it over, pulled herself together, and tried to stand up. However, she was consumed by dizziness and fell back down, flat on her face. She felt such horrible pain behind her eyes. And she began to feel nauseous.

On closer inspection of her surroundings, she wasn't in fact sitting on a vast spread of land but a narrow, fixed area. It was almost like a little road that'd been intentionally constructed and maintained.

There were several sets of tracks, like those left by tires, on the ground.

While Yura had been staring about, the area around her brightened. The sky steadily faded into pale blue. The previous ominous light seemed to have faded.

In the distance she could hear a sound approaching. Like the sound of wheels scraping against the ground. She heard something like footsteps accompanying the wheels. The encroaching noise grew steadily louder from behind her.

Yura did not turn and merely fixated on the sky.

This was an extremely strange dream, one she'd never had before.

It was a sight she was sure she'd only see in some foreign country.

*I hope I remember it when I wake up.*

The sound drew closer and more distinct. She was starting to make out the sound of what was likely several large animals.

At that moment, loud neighing rang out from behind her.

Yura spun around in anticipation before instinctively crying out.

Where there had been nothing before, now stood a uniformed regiment of horses and people in black. They all appeared to be carrying spears.

Yura let out a scream and tried to scramble to her feet. However, her legs had grown numb in the cold, and she collapsed on the spot. The ground seemed to

quake as she hit it.

One horseman suddenly broke off from the rest and charged forward. One after another, the others followed.

They began to gallop in a circle around Yura.

The cavalry of horses let out a loud cry and continued to circle her.

The horses neighed, as if in warning, and before Yura knew what was going on, their clamoring hooves had her completely trapped within their circle.

Yura froze in shock. Her voice retreated and wouldn't respond.

*What in the world—what is this?* she wondered, fidgeting.

At that moment, the unidentified group closed in on Yura and turned their spears mercilessly down toward her.

With her mouth open, yet unable to scream, Yura gazed up at the numerous spearheads pointed at her. The ones surrounding her were all soldiers in iron armor. The spears trained on her were sharp enough that their tips alone could probably lop off two or three fingers.

Just seeing those lustrous black spearheads was enough to send Yura to insanity's door. The hands clasped around those spears were thick and sturdy.

They were like well-made, extra-large tin toys.

*What is this?*

After a long moment, when the reality of the situation finally hit Yura, she broke out in a cold sweat.

Even though this was supposedly a dream, she couldn't wake up.

Restlessness welled up inside and her breath caught in her throat.

She felt like a naked, weak rubber doll in the midst of all these armored figures.

"E...eeyagh!"

Unleashing a scream even she considered pitiful, Yura cowered on the ground.



The scream was the last sound her voice made before vanishing once again. She closed her eyes and tried to calm her pounding heart.

*Ohh, this must be a dream! If it's a dream, then let me wake up. Please!*

However, she failed to wake up.

Yura reared her head back and, with every bit of strength she had, pounded it on the ground.

*Wake up. Wake up, Yura. Wake up, you sleepyhead!*

It hurt. And still, she couldn't wake up. That inexplicable pain only worsened her confusion and intensified her fear.

Her panic only worsened in her flimsy attempts to calm herself down.

*This is a dream! It's a dream. A dream, a dream, a dream...!*

Unsure of when those spears would finally skewer her, Yura began to sob.

Seeing her cowering and trying to curl up like a pill bug, the one soldier reaching out for Yura immediately pulled his hand away. She continued to cry.

*S-Someone. Help me. Tomo-chan...*

"Lower your weapons."

Yura stiffened upon hearing that voice. At the same moment, she heard something being pulled back. She didn't have the courage to look up, so instead, she kept her hands over her head and sobbed.

*This dream is so weird... Why can't I wake up?*

As if to pull her from her insistent thoughts, something landed atop Yura's shoulder. She gasped in surprise.

Trembling, she tried to focus. It didn't feel like iron. It was...

*It's a person's bare hand.*

The person who had grabbed Yura's trembling shoulder tried to stand her up.

She felt something gently press against her back. The smooth touch caught her off guard.

"Stand up."

An unexpected voice commanded into her ear. It was an unfamiliar male voice. It was a calm and comforting voice, cool and resonant.

When he saw no reaction, he repeated his order again. Yura huddled herself up tight.

Listening closely, she focused as well as she could on that voice.

*Who is he?*

His voice carried no hint of a threat.

*Maybe I can trust him?*

His voice carried a haughty resonance Yura had never heard before.

When Yura still failed to move, he spoke again.

“Can you not stand?” he asked.

Prompted by his voice, Yura looked up.





The owner of the voice was clad in attractive black clothes Yura had never seen before. His silver hair seemed long enough to reach his waist, though it was tied into a ponytail at his neck. Though he was down on one knee to look Yura in the eye, it was clear he was far taller than she.

His clear, aqua blue eyes gazed into hers. There was a coldness in those eyes, but beyond that, pride burned within.

“.....”

Yura was transfixed.

On instinct, she looked him directly in the eyes. At that moment, his eyes seemed to widen. He gasped and set his jaw.

The soldiers encircling Yura all exhaled at once.

His face suddenly went slack.

“Your Majesty,” said one of the soldiers nearby.

The voice that came from the circle of iron was unmistakably human.

The young man responded to the reserved but insistent voice by waving his hand. He suddenly got to his feet.

“Stand up.”

He extended a hand to Yura.

As she staggered to her feet, he wrapped something clothlike around her. He wiped the dirt from her forehead with his finger. With his arm around her shoulders, he began to walk.

He led her toward the line of horses at the side of the road. For the first time, Yura noticed the ornate carriage waiting beyond that line.

*Huh...?*

She was completely shocked.

There was golden craftwork scattered amid the reddish-brown ground.

As Yura stopped, the carriage moved forward to meet her.

Yura looked at the man before her, flustered, and began to speak. “Uh...

uhm...”

She stepped into the carriage as prompted, freezing when she saw the cloth-covered seats within.

The man seated himself diagonally across from her without a word.

*What in the world is going on...?*

The carriage trembled.

*Wh-Wh-What is this all about?*

But the words she wanted to say wouldn't come out.

The carriage took off, its newest passenger still in the dark.

Unable to hide her confusion, Yura looked all around her. The young man gave no complaints. The inside of the carriage was far more comfortable than its external appearance let on. It wasn't very big, but it was cozy. From the walls to the seats, everything was ornate. It was like being inside a jewelry box.

Sometime after they took off, the young man lowered the old-fashioned window that Yura doubted her hands could manage to open, and rested his chin on his hand as he gazed out the window. He kept his eyes on the world beyond the carriage.

The silent Yura stole a timid glance at the young man.

*He's kinda like a doll, isn't he? His clothes are old-fashioned, and kind of... surreal.*

It turned out they were riding somewhere high up; Yura could tell they were crossing over dangerously steep precipices a few times.

Below them was a forest. A vast forest with a thick fog hanging over it. An entirely different sight from the wasteland she'd arrived in.

Yura suddenly gasped.

*Why am I having a dream like this? What fed into these wild ideas? And I still can't wake up. No, I haven't been able to from the start.*

Every time Yura let her guard down, her mind would fill with doubts. She fought to push her fears down. She kept trying to keep the persistent thoughts



quiet and remain calm, only for them to reemerge.

*Isn't this strange? This feels far too real to be a dream.*

She could find no explanation beyond that. But still, something was off. She'd been uneasy the whole time. And there was no one for her to turn to for help.

*But no matter how realistic it seems, this still has to be a dream...*

Suddenly feeling eyes upon her, Yura looked up and found the young man who'd been gazing out the window was now looking at her. His elbow was still against the window, but he'd tilted his head just enough to gaze over at Yura.

The way he looked at Yura, as if she were somehow fascinating, made her shrink beneath his gaze.

His gaze drifted over her skirt and red clay-stained uniform.

His eyes met Yura's and he seemed to force a smile.

"What art thou called?" he suddenly asked.

It caught Yura off guard and she lifted her head in surprise. Without even meaning to, she met his gaze.

"Th-Thou...?" she timidly asked her relaxed companion.

He didn't seem that much older than Yura. Maybe twenty-two or twenty-three years old. Blinking furiously, she pointed to the tip of her nose, and he gave a pronounced nod.

"....."

It felt strange to be asked her name by this complete stranger in a dream. She remained silent, unable to respond to him, and in this moment of silence she became aware of the fabric in her lap.

She gasped and pulled her hands away.

"I-I'm so sorry..."

His eyes widened.

She removed the luxurious fabric covering her in a panic. The dirt and grime that clung to Yura had rubbed off on it too.

Yura felt the blood draining from her face.

“I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed. Yura pointed at the cloth. “Your cape got dirty.”  
She pulled her fingers back in a panic.

*I’ll wash it and give it back*, Yura tried to say, but the youth burst out laughing, amused.

“Wh-What?”

“Thou won’t tell me thy name then?”

*Oh, was that it then? He was asking my name! I’m glad he didn’t get mad, but isn’t this weird? But getting to know someone in my dreams... Oh, I really don’t get this at all!*

“—Yura.”

“What?”

It was like the words just fell from Yura’s lips. And once they started, they didn’t stop easily.

“I’m Yura! Yura Sugano! Who are you? Where *am* I?”

Her companion looked completely startled. Knitting his brows together, he frowned.

This time, Yura really did tremble in fear.

*Ohh no! Now what? Let me wake up, please—!*

The young man stared intensely at Yura as she shrank back in her seat.

It was like he was staring at her—no, examining her. After some time passed, he seemed to pull himself back together and began to talk in a strangely concerned tone.

“My name is Ashes.”

“...Ashes...?” Yura mumbled, and the man who called himself Ashes looked a little surprised.

But his face quickly became expressionless once more and he broke his gaze. His mannerisms were flawless, but to Yura, they were still rather pompous. She

could tell he was someone important.

“...This is Tolkinia. Specifically, you’re in the White Imperial Capital of the west.”

Yura’s eyes opened wide at the words her traveling companion spoke. She looked up and muttered, “Huh? Tolki—wha?”

“You said you didn’t know where we were?” Ashes once again frowned. He set his hand in his lap. “So then, I wilt ask thee, where didst thou come from? Why werest thou down there?”

Yura fell silent. She didn’t even attempt a response. After some time, she finally responded with a mutter.

“...I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“...Right.”

It seemed true enough, so she could only nod.

Perhaps it was her imagination, but it felt like the air became tense. It felt unbearable. Yura huddled in on herself again.

“...Well then, ‘Yura,’ what dost thou remember up to this point?”

“Remember...?”

She wasn’t sure what “up to this point” even meant, so she’d no answer to give.

Yura shrugged. When she did, her companion looked serious again.

“I’m sorry!” she apologized instinctively, then glanced quickly at Ashes.

She hadn’t made for good conversation. Surely he was on the verge of shouting at her. Or perhaps something worse...

But despite her fears, Ashes merely muttered with a sad expression, “I see...so thou dost remember nothing?”

“.....”

*I guess I’ll go with that, she thought and nodded. Come on, Yura, get it*

*together. It doesn't matter what this person in your dreams thinks. So why do I feel so guilty? This just makes me a big liar!*

She grabbed her head with a moan. Ashes nodded in sympathy.

"In that case, perhaps Yura is not, in fact, thy name?"

"Huh?"

Ashes frowned, struggling to say what he wanted after Yura's outburst.

"I do not know where you heard that—" he began, knitting his brows into a strange shape. "'Yura' means 'fool' in the old language of the Fern outlands."

It seemed he was implying that this poor, amnesiac girl must've been treated like a "yura" by the countryfolk.

Yura shrank back further.

It seemed she was fully committed to this amnesia story. As she looked down, her eyes shifted from side to side.

It was like being forced to swallow a food she hated.

She wanted to say something but couldn't figure out what. So she lowered her head, dejected over the entire situation.

Ashes gave her a pitiful glance.

Yura thought keeping her mouth shut at a time like this was a sign of respect and it seemed that, now at least, she was right on the money.

And anyway, if she suddenly burst out with, "No, that's not it. I'm from a world called Earth, from a country called Japan, and while I'm at it, I think this might be my dream. So please pay me no mind," with a serious face, he'd go from treating her as an amnesiac to treating her like a lunatic.

Perhaps taking her complicated expression as a pained one, Ashes gave her another sympathetic look.

Like a doctor over a patient's sickbed, he tried to force a smile.

"Please don't worry and put thy heart at ease. At any rate, for now, thou should rest."

“O-Okay...”

Yura fell silent after accepting his forced encouragement.

She rested in the corner of the carriage and closed her eyes in the hopes he'd stop asking questions.

*Wake up. Come on, Yura, it's time. Wake up.*

Ashes suddenly looked up, as if having an idea.

“Well...why don't we call thee 'Yuura' from now on? Yuura is the name of a flower that blooms in Adokia.”

“Excuse me?”

“That other name is pitiful. Certainly not suitable for you.”

Yura hung her head after seeing the serious expression as he spoke.

*That's kind of extreme, isn't it?*

As Yura struggled with her words, the shifting scene outside caught her eyes.

All thoughts of her name and so on flew off somewhere. The lonely, rocky dirt road stretched on and on, but slowly changed to a paved stone road.

The carriage did not sway as violently as before and they were moving faster.

There were soldiers in armor and helmets on both sides of the road, brandishing spears. The breeze from the carriage going so fast caused the crimson flags attached to the spears to flutter like flames dancing in the wind.

Yura shoved her head through the small carriage window and looked ahead. All traces of night were gone and the sky was clear and cloudless.

Mighty castle walls stretched out before them, as if to block the carriage's path forward.

Yura gulped.

The light of the morning sun that'd just finished its ascent glinted off the stone walls. It was magnificent, like a giant, sleeping dragon with its long neck protruding from the ground and stretching toward the horizon.

One white flag fluttered from the parapet.

As if in response, flags began to fly one after the other.

The entire wall seemed to groan.

She could see two iron castle doors creak open before them. The heavy groan resonated through the carriage. It was like a massive animal groaning as it awakened.

And then...

Beyond those walls, she could make out a chalk-white castle with several vivid blue spires towering upward to the heavens.

*Where in the world is this place?*

In her mind, she thought she heard a popping sound.

The building loomed ever closer. Yura gazed up at it, awestruck.

*There's no way. How can this be? It's insane.*

Yura couldn't take it.

She shook her head. Or at least, she meant to.

*This castle is so much more than anything in my dreams. There's no way I could think up something like this. Which means...which means it has to be real — "This is..."*

*...not the world I came from.*

Yura clenched her clammy hands as those final few words ran through her mind.

At the same time, the carriage glided in through the gates. Ashes chortled, seemingly amused by Yura's amazement.

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**"HAVE** a bath and take a rest. We'll talk more when thou art finished," Ashes said and departed without looking back even once, leaving a dazed Yura in the center of a sprawling room. The elegantly decorated space with high ceilings seemed to be some sort of guest suite.

Beyond the door were a group of women in simple navy-blue dresses, staring

at Yura in disbelief. At first, they seemed surprised at Ashes' sudden appearance. They only became more stunned upon seeing Yura hiding behind him.

Suddenly, like a switch had been flipped, the woman at the fore of the others seemed to surge into action and entered the room. She threw back the curtains and opened the window.

Without a moment to grasp the situation, Yura was guided to a chair and sat down. All the other women watching her began to move at once.

"I apologize for the wait. Please, this way."

Yura looked over her shoulder at the speaker. There stood a lovely young woman about Yura's age. Her golden hair was neatly tied back. She gave a startlingly perfect curtsy as she looked at Yura.

"We have prepared your change of clothes, Your Ladyship," she said.

This woman stood in such a refined manner, Yura knew she couldn't imitate it. Both her hands were placed in front of her stomach and she stood with her back perfectly straight.

Yura stared at the woman.

"...You don't mean me, do you?" Trembling, Yura pointed to her nose.

"Yes, I do." Maintaining her same regal posture, the woman smiled elegantly in affirmation.

Yura suddenly leapt up. "Y-You've got the wrong person!"

The woman blinked as Yura shouted.

"I'm Yura! Yura!"

Shaking, Yura shouted in denial with the intensity of someone denying a shoplifting charge that'd been levied against them in public.

*It's absurd! What kind of joke is this? I was never even picked to play the mom when playing house during kindergarten, so why would these random people I just met start calling me "Your Ladyship"?*

"I-I'm just Yura Sugano! I'm no lady!"



The women merely stared, unmoving, at Yura in her overdramatic denial. They didn't even blink, seemingly waiting for Yura to take a breath.

Yura finally ran out of breath and closed her mouth. After a polite pause, the woman smiled once more.

"I am terribly sorry. Then we shall refer to you as 'Lady Yuura.'"

"Oh, come *on*!"

*Just drop the "lady" stuff already!*

Yura clasped a hand to her head. The women merely watched her, no malice present in their gazes. *I can't take anymore! What is this? And this castle, since that's what it seems to be? It's so big, I'll never be able to find my way out!*

"We look forward to serving you," the woman before her said, smiling. "From now on, please inform me and your other ladies-in-waiting of anything you might need."

These women, who looked like they should've been scolding her, instead bowed their heads in deference to her. Even then, they all looked so poised, so perfect.

Yura felt herself withering even further.

*Ladies-in-waiting...? Seriously, what is this place?*

Yura had no idea what to do or say. The women merely stared at her in respectful silence. She clasped her hands and turned them over and over out of necessity and, as if to let them know there was no need to make such a fuss over someone like her, she mumbled, "U-Uhh, thank you. Same to you..."

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An armored guard carved its way down the white hallway. The man in the lead fell out of step with the other steel footsteps, as if something had pulled him back.

The others all stopped at the side of the hallway and paid their respects. Unlike the usual stiff, reverent expressions they normally wore, they all looked different today. It was as if, today, that tense atmosphere was the furthest thing imaginable. Like everyone was in the process of preparing for a happy

celebration.

Suddenly, a man who'd been hiding in the shadow of a pillar stepped out from its shadow. He looked for a gap in the patrol passing by and slipped in line with the others. As he made his way to the front row, he called out to the young man in front.

"Your Majesty."

The man he had addressed as such smiled without looking at him. His eyes straight ahead, he matched his pace.

"Falco? How have you been? What are you doing here during your leave?"

The man called Falco smiled. He shuffled the bundle of letters in his arms. "Very well, sir. I spent my free time shut up in a dark room. It would've been better with the love of a beautiful woman."

As he spoke, he spread out his worn, blistered hands. The young man, seeing how tightly Falco held the letters and the injuries that'd caused, lifted only the corners of his mouth into a smile.

"The previous Emperor sends his gratitude. What of the other side?"

"I've no idea," the young man spat. "But it is too soon to worry."

"Hm," the man said with a nod. He rearranged the letters he was holding, seemingly putting them in order. After a short time, he looked up. "And who is that girl?" Falco asked, his face becoming serious once more.

The corners of the young man's lips twitched upward in response.

"I don't know. Take a guess, Falco," he said, then, looking at his silent companion, his face became serious. "She doesn't even seem to know herself."

Falco clearly frowned. Wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes. He shook his head, as if he was struggling to grasp the situation. Then he gave the young man a reproachful look.

"I can't believe it would happen today of all days..."

The young man fell silent.

Watching from the corner of his eye without breaking his pace through the

castle, Falco heaved a sigh and spoke quietly. “Do I have your permission to investigate?”

When he said this, the young man moved his head for the first time. He cast a glance at his waiting companion, then looked straight ahead once more.

“Do as you wish, Falco,” the young man said, his face expressionless.

A large, open door had come into view. Several people were lined up there, seemingly awaiting their arrival. The people inside were dressed in their finery.

There was little time left until they reached the door.

“But still,” Falco muttered with a smile, “to think you would have that encounter today of all days. Perhaps she really is—”

The young man burst out laughing at his words.

“Knock it off. Such jokes don’t suit you.” The young man stopped in front of the door. He lifted both hands with a smile. “So let me ask, where, in this country, does anxiety dwell?”

The man smiled back, rather irreverently.

He nodded and stepped off to the side. He remained there and watched the young man disappear through the door.

“I suppose I’ll need to improve my comedic sensibilities then.”

“Just stop. It’s an impossible task.” The young man laughed heartily as his back disappeared beyond the closing door. “It’s outside the realm of possibility for *you*. You need to work on a genuine, charming smile first and not something so fake.”

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**SEVERAL** hours passed in the blink of an eye.

Yura lay on the bed, facing the ceiling. So much had happened and now she was feeling dizzier than ever.

On the other side of the room, the ladies were bustling about. They sounded like they were rearranging items, making comments like “This stool isn’t a good fit for this room” and “That table is unsightly, remove it.” They didn’t stop

moving the whole time.

*“What in the world is going on?”*

When Yura had let those words slip out during her bath, she was merely greeted with a smile from her ladies-in-waiting.

As they combed Yura’s hair, they said things like, “You’ll get used to it in time.”

Every single sight was so new to Yura, her mouth was constantly agape.

Food that looked more like decorations, the extravagantly massive bathhouse, the immense gardens. And all the people were equally as magnanimous in their kindness to the awestruck Yura.

“P-Please don’t give me a Tamate-box later...” Yura groaned, exposing her distrust. However, the women merely stared blankly back at her.

“What is that?”

“By the way, will you be having tea?”

“How are your clothes?”

“Your shoes are not too tight, are they?”

Yura thought back on what’d transpired so far as she pretended to go to sleep. She’d been turning it all over in her head this whole time. And yet, she was no closer to an answer.

How in the world had she ended up here in the first place? Was it a dream?

But no matter how many times she pinched or hit herself, she couldn’t wake up.

At one point, she’d come to the conclusion that she’d died somewhere and been brought to this world as a result. It made the blood drain from her face just thinking about it, and ultimately, that explanation failed to satisfy her. Unless the mirror had crushed her under it...

*Could something like that even happen?*

Wisps of memory floated through her mind. She gently lowered her head.

She had fought with Tomoko.

*No, the truth was I pushed her good graces too far.*

Then she'd headed home.

Then back to the shop to apologize.

After that, she couldn't remember.

Her memory was shrouded in mist. As if a thick fog had gathered in one particular corner of her mind.

*Maybe I really was hit by a car or something...*

Her mind was blank and she couldn't seem to piece everything together, so ultimately, she shook her head vigorously and chased the thoughts away.

As she sat up, she heard the rustling of her own clothes.

After her bath, she'd been offered a strange garment as her "change of clothes." The design was intricate. Yura clutched the full skirt and heaved a sigh.

*This is pretty much a dress, isn't it?*

"I feel like I'm in a nightmare..." she muttered and the bustling maids all stopped at once. They exchanged worried glances. In a panic, Yura shook her head and added, "Oh no, it's such a lovely and amazing dress, it just feels like a dream..."

She thought Ashes might have been right about one thing he said.

About the amnesia—or her forgetfulness. Perhaps it was true? It all seemed to fit together too perfectly.

On hearing her words, one of the ladies-in-waiting flashed her a smile.

"It is understandable you might feel that way," she said gently.

She was the lady who'd first spoken to Yura. She'd said her name was Leila.

She added, "Are you tired? Would you like to rest until this evening?"

Her friendly tone and her caring gaze put Yura at ease.

"No, thank you," Yura looked at her and shook her head.

That was when Yura finally realized all the ladies in the room were paying very close attention to her.

“O-Oh, well, may I go for a walk?” Yura asked.

*At this rate, I’m only going to cause them more trouble,* Yura thought, but Leila seemed not to notice. She nodded with a smile.

“Very well. This way, if you please.”

She headed toward the door.

In a panic, Yura sputtered, “I would like to go on my own. Just...to clear my head.”

The woman smiled once more. She was utterly perfect.

“I see,” she said, simply withdrawing. “In that case, please enjoy yourself. However, if possible, please return before the sunset bell? We must get you ready for the banquet.”

Having felt a moment of relief, Yura stiffened once more.

“Banquet?”

Ignoring Yura’s gaze, she said, “What color would be most suitable? There must be something fitting...” Then her head popped up. “Do you have a favorite flower? Oh, but it *would* be difficult to choose! Lady Yuura, you are so beautiful, you will shine more prominently than any flower.”

The words going completely over her head, Yura stared blankly. She was here in this unfamiliar place, being complimented.

“Beautiful?”

Leila grinned. Yura blinked.

“Me?”

Leila looked satisfied. Yura stared in confusion.

“...That’s a strange thing to say.”

“Not at all!” Leila exclaimed.

Seeing Yura’s eyes widen, Leila quickly cleared her throat. She regained her

composed smile.

“Please do not worry, we will see to it that you have the most gorgeous evening attire. Please entrust me with this task!” she declared excitedly.

Yura was then rushed out into the hall.

*What was that? What in the world is this place?* Yura wondered.

The formal compliments, the antiquated look of this building, and the clothes. The way they spoke. She had never even heard of “ladies-in-waiting” as a modern-day job outside of renaissance fairs.

Beyond the glassless windows, the sun hung in the sky.

*I guess it's like the sun I'm used to...*

As she gazed outward, a sense of unease encapsulated Yura and she hugged herself in a tight embrace.

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**THE** castle was larger than she could've imagined. No matter how far she walked, there was no end in sight.

No sooner had she started her walk than Yura began to regret it. She couldn't even remember which way she had come from.

“I always thought I understood just how big a castle really was,” Yura moaned.

*This is more like a labyrinth, though. Big enough for an entire town rather than just a castle.*

As she wandered aimlessly, Yura continued to be amazed. No matter where she went, she'd run into something new. Tall vases full of exotic flowers, water fountains that pierced the heavens, gigantic tapestries. Soldiers clad in suits of armor that sparkled like children's toys. Everything caught her eye. And then she stopped.

It took her less than five minutes to get lost.

*Oh well...what does it matter?* Yura thought. She'd wanted to be alone from the start, so she simply wandered on.

At any rate, she had so many things to think about.

She'd searched high and low for a clock but found none. When she tried to turn on the phone in her uniform pocket, she found the battery was completely dead. No matter how many times she pressed the power button, her phone wouldn't power on. Perhaps it was broken?

*I'll have to get it repaired when I get home... How much money did I have left from my allowance?*

Yura had carelessly broken her watch last month, and if she didn't explain it right, she'd be in for a big scolding.

But how would she explain this?

Along the pillared corridor were numerous statues. As Yura glanced casually around the corridor, something suddenly caught her eye, and she exclaimed.

"Amazing...! How did I not notice this sooner?"

Above her, a massive painting covered the ceiling.

The top parts of the tall columns intersected in arches, stretching off ahead as far as the eye could see.

The magnificent fresco painting was so fresh, she could still smell the paint.

A garden sprawled out beyond one of the side passages. Yura gasped.

It was laid out in intricate geometric patterns. Like those found on a carpet.

Her eyes entranced by the flowers in full bloom, Yura smiled gently.

*What a lovely place.*

As if to lead the bewitched Yura on, one beautiful enticement after the next seemed to appear. It was as if all these sights were created solely to allow her to let go of all her worries. As if trying to convince her to put off the harsh reality of it all for a little longer.

Up ahead, she saw the end of the corridor.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the garden off the next corridor and then noticed something else. It was a path.



A narrow side path, seemingly stretching off from the massive corridor.

Yura blinked rapidly. Standing still, she peered down the hall.

As she marveled at it, the sound of water from somewhere caught her ear.

If the corridors she'd walked through up to this point could be considered the arteries of the castle, then this path was more like one of the capillaries in one's finger, absolutely undetectable by the naked eye.

It was like an aerodynamic hole drilled into the walls, a narrow tunnel path, and completely quiet.

*How was this made?*

As she peeked in, she could see something that looked like a water fountain.

Unlike the white floors up to this point, what awaited her here was bare earth.

*This might be the perfect place to do some thinking...*

Without hesitation, Yura stepped forward. There was barely enough room on the path for two people to pass one another. On top of that, the passage was dark. If there was anyone on the other side, they likely wouldn't notice her.

From within the passage, she could hear something that sounded like a small brook.

The sun was shining at the other end, and the second she reached it, Yura was taken aback.

It was a small garden. A snug little space with no one else around. It was square in shape, but with the corners covered with grass and ivy.

There was a round little water fountain on her left, but the basin was tilted.

Yura blinked.

On top of the basin was a beast she had never seen before with its wings spread wide. One leg was raised and its beak-like mouth was open. Water spilled lazily from its mouth and leaked onto the ground.

*...I guess they don't really use this area yet.*

Yura stood there by herself. The ground at her feet was covered in weeds. There were puddles, and the pathway of stones were overturned.

Yura was getting splashed from standing too close to the fountain, so she stepped back and wiped her face.

Clearly, this area hadn't been used in a long time...

Further into the garden were two thick overturned columns, apparently left behind. They were low enough for her to sit on. She headed over to it.

*Perfect, I can do some thinking there...*

She took a half-step into that weed-covered garden, assuming no one else was there. But then she froze.

"Oh..." Yura stiffened.

There, in that derelict garden, was a person.

That person was sitting absentmindedly on a single step. He was slumped over, with a hand on his knee. Even with his back stooped forward, Yura could tell he was far taller than she.

He looked around the same age as Ashes. He wiped his cheek sluggishly, likely having been splashed by the fountain. Occasionally, he blinked his eyes thoughtfully.

Yura instinctively gasped upon seeing his frighteningly handsome face. Then the young man who'd been staring off into space lifted his head.

Yura froze, startled. Their eyes met.

He gazed back at Yura as if seeing something strange.

A sudden wind blew between them. His light golden hair danced on the breeze, and his unfocused eyes were a misty green. He blinked—then his eyes went wide.

It was in reaction to Yura shrinking back at that same moment.

It was as if they had initially seen the other in outline only, then became completely shocked when that blurry image came into full focus.

Perhaps it was astonishment, but he froze, wide-eyed.

“...Um...” Yura gulped timidly, unsure what else to do or say. She started to step forward, but her legs went stiff.

It was like a trigger of some sort that suddenly brought forward the memories Yura had been searching for. They began to bubble over all at once, overloading her mind. Like information populating a computer screen, the images began to flow without stopping.

“Ahhh...”

She lifted her hands and covered her cheeks.

For the moment, she’d even forgotten he was there.

She’d remembered.

It was the mirror. She remembered the old mirror back at Tomoko’s shop.

*That’s right. I went to Tomoko’s place to apologize. And then, that mirror suddenly began to glow, and a strange wind blew from within. The next thing I knew, I was in that place. Passed out in that vast wasteland of red earth.*

Yura looked dully up at the other person.

Seeing the confused look on Yura’s face, the young man stood up straight, as if someone had thrust a metal ruler into his back.

He gazed frightfully at Yura’s face, and she realized, it looked very familiar.

*I remember now!*

It was the face she had seen after she saw the strange child through the mirror. He had suddenly grown—into that handsome face with golden hair. And most importantly, those emerald eyes.

It was him.

There was no mistake. This was the same person.

Yura charged into the garden. He leapt up, as if frightened by her charging toward him.

“Um...!” she cried.

The young man instantly flinched. He gasped and stepped back.

Yura noticed the sword at his hip and froze in place.

He was tall. Only a little shorter than Ashes.

She could see something that looked like armor over the sturdy fabric top with the high collar he wore. His body was covered with a cape, but she could see his hand beneath and that it was in position to unsheathe his sword at a moment's notice.

Without giving any of this due consideration, Yura took big strides toward him. Each time, he took a half-step back.

Unfazed, Yura continued toward him, grabbing his elbows.

"H-Hey, you! We've met before! Do you remember me?"

Bewildered by Yura's hysterics, his eyes widened further. Beneath his slightly knitted brows, his wide eyes had become almost spherical.

"You know, that day..."

As soon as she started to speak, Yura stopped. She still couldn't find the right words to describe what had happened. She pointed to her nose, then drew closer to his face while reaching for his hand. At that moment, he frowned and turned away.

"You know...that day...in the mirror?"

"I beg your pardon, but your hand..."

Suddenly, his hand slipped through hers. That was what finally brought Yura back to her senses. She was a bit shocked by his reaction, and though she took a step back, she stared at him. She expected he might be angry with her. However...

"H-Hey? Um...what's wrong?" she asked without thinking.

For some reason, he seemed to be desperately avoiding meeting her gaze. His body had seemed ready to strike, but his head was twisted away and lowered.

Perhaps he didn't understand what was going on and was confused.

"I-It's true. We met before," she tried again, softer this time. "You don't remember? In that big mirror, when you were a child? I know my face is

forgettable, but still...”

Yura once again pointed to herself. She leaned over and peered into the young man’s face. At that moment, his face became distorted, as if he were feeling the pain of a hidden wound. Biting his lip, he looked away. But he then gave Yura a sideways glance and took a half-step back.

Seemingly resolved, he looked at Yura.

“...My apologies, but I do not know you,” he asserted softly.

The color drained from Yura’s face at his words. She instinctively took another step back. She’d finally found that ray of hope she wished for, just to have it snuffed out in the same instant.

“Really...?”

*But I know we’ve met once before.*

Back then, it seemed unbelievable, but they’d seen each other through the mirror. Even if it was just a few words they had spoken.

Yura clasped her trembling hands and looked up at him.

She was under the weight of such intolerable darkness, on the verge of breaking. When she finally managed to speak, it was a hoarse, briny voice that even she found pitiful.

“...Hey, really? You don’t remember?”

She struggled to speak, but it only made the tears more likely to fall.

This time, the young man suddenly gasped, as if pricked by a needle. The edges of his cheeks twitched. He lifted his hand awkwardly, like a machine in need of oiling, and groaned.

“I...I hear what you are saying, but...”

“I didn’t believe it myself, but we met through the mirror. It hasn’t even been ten days. We even spoke—you don’t remember?”

*You can do it.*

Her voice was full of emotion as she spoke, but the young man seemed to be getting flustered.

He thrust out both hands to keep himself standing up straight.

Watching him made Yura anxious for another reason. It was as if she were shaking from more than fear.

Would he remember if she reminded him what was said?

She looked up, ready to start explaining again. But in that time, the young man was already striding past Yura.

“If you’ll excuse me!”

His cape billowing behind him, he dashed off in long strides.

His footsteps quickly disappeared, leaving Yura to watch him go.

Her surroundings suddenly fell silent.

The tears on her cheeks grew cold.

Slowly but surely, she began to calm down.

“No way...”

She hoped he finally remembered, but that seemed highly unlikely.

Her hands dangled at her side in disappointment. She was left standing alone in the garden.

She shook her head and spun around.

There was nothing else she could do here.

Perhaps she should have just rested as Leila suggested.

Why hadn’t he even looked her in the eye?

She felt dejected.

Trying to hold closed the wounds she didn’t even know she had, Yura finally left the garden.

## Chapter 3: The Banquet

“**WHERE** have you *been*, Lady Yuura!? I told you to be back by the sundown bell!”

“I-I’m sorry, Leila...”

As Yura stammered through her apology, she noted the lack of sunlight out a nearby window and the concerned ladies-in-waiting holding boxes. Leila huffed in irritation before marching Yura away.

There was something in the room Yura had not seen before. Leila pulled her inside and sat her in the same chair as earlier. Bending over as if she were going to take off Yura’s shoes, Leila’s eyes suddenly spun.

“...What in the world is *this*?”

Following Leila’s gaze, Yura finally noticed it too. The hem of her dainty skirt had become bright red.

*Where did that happen...?*

“I-it’s okay, Leila. It’s not dirty...”

“You don’t call this dirty?” Leila cried out, silencing Yura’s worthless excuses.

She went to undo the hooks in the back. Yura tried to steady her breathing and slump her shoulders at Leila’s harsh movements.

“I had planned to have you bathe again before you changed, but we’re out of time...” Leila mumbled, discouraged.

“...Once a day is enough for me...”

Leila stripped Yura to her undergarments and quickly stretched out her slender arms. The other ladies-in-waiting rushed over and opened the boxes they carried. Leila peered inside.

“Leila, we haven’t much time...”

Yura suddenly realized their clothes were completely different from before. The navy-blue dresses they had been wearing were all replaced with white ones.

“Leila?”

Leila, who was busy combing Yura’s hair, suddenly lifted her head and looked at her. The version of her in the mirror looked much cheerier than she had before.

It had a modest design, but the neat dress was long and perfectly fit her tall form. The collar held a refined air about it.

Yura looked upon Leila and smiled. “It’s so lovely! That really looks good on you, Leila.”

Leila’s hand stopped. She looked a bit surprised but smiled at Yura in the mirror.

“What gracious words...but I am afraid this is not for me.”

Saying that, she plunged both hands into the box. With great effort, she pulled something billowy out. With a wide grin, she held it out for Yura.

“How about something like this?”

Yura was speechless.

That wasn’t “pretty much a dress,” it *was* the genuine article. A luxurious and flowing dress.

The pale pink fabric was gathered into fine pleats. The waist was adorned with roses of the same fabric. It certainly was lovely. Leila held the dress with the delicate lace embroidery up to Yura.

“N-No, I could never wear that!”

“You do not care for it?”

Leila handed it to the ladies who were standing by, and pulled out yet another dress.

This one was golden with blue lilies scattered throughout.

It was then that Yura realized all the boxes they’d been holding were filled



with dresses.

Hastily, Leila had already unfurled another dress and held it out to Yura. Yura spun around, ready to run.

Leila kept covering Yura with dresses.

Beige. Red. Yellow and white.

*Not this one. Not that one, either.* Dresses flew through the air, one after the next. Finally, Leila pushed the original pink dress on Yura and shouted gleefully.

“Just as I thought! This one truly suits you best, Lady Yuura!”

“I-If you say so...”

True hell awaited her then. She was forced into her first too-tight corset in her life. It was pulled so tight, her face began turning blue.

*I-I’m dying! Help me!*

She could barely breathe, let alone speak, as two ladies pulled the massive dress over her head, their flurry of movements dazing her. Her organs were being squished from top to bottom by the tightened material. It was so hard to breathe, she feared she’d die before they finished.

Yura cried out, being handled rougher than a mannequin.

They spun her about, spraying her with perfume from an earthenware sprayer. Meanwhile, another hand combed her hair, while still another put on her shoes and another placed jewels on her...

Just when Yura felt her soul leave her body, Leila finally stopped moving around her and spoke.

“I apologize for having kept you waiting. Your mirror,” Leila said, pushing one toward Yura.

Yura absently stood up while still feeling on the verge of collapse.

Inside the mirror stood a blank-faced vision.

Wearing that first dress and with her hair beautifully done up.

But still, a mannequin.

The clothes didn't suit Yura's incredibly skinny figure at all.

*It doesn't look right at all...*

She had intended to laugh at herself in self-deprecation, but instead, her lips twisted the way they did when she was trying not to cry.

Perhaps it was because of all the competing fragrances, but she began to feel very ill.

To top it off, she hadn't eaten and was beginning to feel dizzy.

"...It suits you well, Lady Yuura," Leila whispered, overcome with emotion.

Yura grabbed her chest and collapsed into the chair.

*I-I can manage if it's just thirty minutes or so...*

"I'm certain His Majesty will be pleased."

Yura weakly looked up.

*Who exactly is "His Majesty" anyway...?*

"...Hey, just what's going on tonight anyway?" Yura asked in a half-hearted voice.

Leila smiled as she poured water into a glass. As soon as Yuura drank it, she broke into a coughing fit.

"It's a coronation banquet, Lady Yuura."

"Coronation...?"

"A banquet to celebrate the crowning of His Majesty, the Emperor of Tolkinia."

Yura shook her head. She hadn't understood a word.

"An escort will arrive in short order to take you to the hall prepared for the celebration."

Leila suddenly stopped talking and smiled.

At that moment, as if on cue, a reserved knock came at the door behind Yura.

Yura turned when she heard the knock and saw two men clad in magnificent

attire outside the door. They appeared to be elder clergymen. They wore robes reminiscent of priests and smiled in an almost unsettlingly polite manner.

“We have come to escort thee to the banquet hall.”

“O-Okay...?”

Yura blinked then followed them into the hallway. They set out, and Yura followed with trepidation.

“...Um, why are we going there, Leila?”

Leila responded to Yura’s anxious questions by keeping her eyes forward and smiling.

“To attend the banquet, Lady Yuura.”

“...But what exactly will we be doing there?”

This time, Leila offered no response.

As if to suggest she should keep her voice down, Leila winked at Yura. This only served to make her more anxious.

*Where are they taking me?*

After traversing the endless halls for some time, they finally arrived at a door. Standing on either side of the doorway were two soldiers, facing down the dark hallway. As Yura looked all around, they stepped up and pushed the massive doors open.

“Please, enter.”

As they opened the doors, light poured from the room—an intensely bright light. Dazed, Yura squinted in the blinding light.

She stepped forward as instructed. Everything around her seemed blurry. She blinked her eyes a few times and looked up. But the second her eyes were able to focus, she froze.

Before her was a luxurious sight.

Every lamp in the long room that could be lit was. A deep crimson carpet was laid out on the floor, so red that it almost seemed to be ablaze.

Leila began to walk across the carpet.

“Wait, Leila!” Yura continued to panic.

As Yura’s eyes drifted to the other end of the carpet, she realized there was another door. A door covered in red cloth. It was excessively ornate and likely worth more than Yura had ever seen in physical wealth.

Yura froze, hearing music and a commotion from the other side of the door. The sound of people bustling about and raucous laughter.

Yura knit her brows.

Applause erupted throughout the room. Then lively music. The sounds all seemed to coalesce into one. She thought she heard someone cheering.

No, it wasn’t just in her head; she *had* heard it.

“L-L-Leila...”

Yura didn’t move. Resigned, Leila took her hand and walked forward.

*W-Wait!*

For some reason, she didn’t want to go. She had a feeling that, if they opened that door, she wouldn’t be able to escape.

“Leila, please!”

Leila opened the door. It gave a loud squeak.

Like the opening of a Jack-in-the-Box, the din exploded from the room.

The shouting and cheering fell upon her like the waves of an ocean. She was overwhelmed by the light that seemed to swell all around her.

Yura gazed down at the scene in awe. Her throat became dry as she took it all in.

Every inch of the massive hall was filled with people. Clusters of innumerable candles hung from the ceiling, casting their light upon the people below.

Overwhelmed, Yura looked all around. There was a semicircle balcony before her. A single staircase descended from it, leading right into the chaos.

The sound of the door opening caused Yura to jump. It was impossible to

actually hold a conversation without it being swallowed by the surrounding bedlam of noise.

“L-Leila!” she shouted.

“Please allow me to welcome you to the ceremonial banquet for the 14th anniversary of the coronation of His Majesty, Ashes Frazee Westguard the 13<sup>th</sup> Emperor of Tolkinia.”

Leila’s words breaking through the din surprised Yura. She stood there, looking at her.

The name Leila mentioned was familiar, though. Yura whipped her head around to meet Leila’s gaze.

“Ashes?”

“His Majesty’s name.”

“Huh?” Yura instinctively replied.

*No way. That’s impossible!*

Yura saw something in Leila’s eyes, like a mother trying to explain something to a child. She gently motioned for Yura to look.

“Over there.”

At that moment, Yura saw it. A massive hanging banner at the center of the room, right across from the balcony.

It dangled from the high ceiling and fluttered gently in the breeze from the open skylight.

A crest adorned its center. It was an eagle with its wings spread, the sun at its back, and its talons at the ready. The banner stretched all the way down to a podium below it.

Throngs of people were gathered before the podium, all shouting and jostling about. And then, Yura spotted someone standing atop the platform.

She drew in her breath. Even at this distance, she could tell who it was.

That silver hair. That handsome face.

Standing in front of the throne that'd been placed there, he was smiling proudly at a noble who had been speaking passionately.

“Seriously...?”

Yura clung to the handrail, putting all her weight on it. For a second, she thought she saw those aqua eyes glance her way.

“...No way.”

With a silver crown upon his head, Ashes greeted the crowd of admirers with a smile. A bird sat perched on the empty throne behind him.

Ashes lifted his drink in response to the cheering throngs.

“Ashes...”

Yura was taken aback.

Leila gently took her arm. She slowly guided her forward.

Her eyes still fixed on Ashes, Yura followed Leila's prompting and made her way toward the stairs.

One step after the next, the stairs seemed to stretch on into eternity. Time also seemed to slow to an excruciating lull. Everything around them seemed to move in slow motion.

It was like a music box with the switch broken. The music became sluggish and the movements dull. Until at last, it stopped and ran out of power for good.

The crowd was dancing to the music. Each time the dresses fluttered across the floor, it was like hundreds of flowers blooming and withering all at once.

The chandeliers flickered, casting afterimages on the ceiling. It was a slow-moving world. Sounds and movements were dragged out, the room filled with as much gaiety as the hall could hold.

But the crowd that absorbed them the second they descended brought Yura back to her senses. Leila supported her with a strength Yura couldn't fathom.

She was not used to wearing heels, and they were making it difficult to stand up straight. She pinched the sides of her dress and glanced around nervously, feeling a lot of eyes on her.







Feeling a tug on her arm, Yura looked up to see Leila peering at her.

“What is it, Leila?”

“We should make our way as well.”

“Make our way?” Yura gasped.

Leila was walking straight ahead. She paid no mind to the throngs of people around them, her eyes locked on a point further into the room. The expression on her face made the blood drain from Yura’s face.

“Leila, you don’t mean—”

*You don’t mean for me to join in, do you?*

When she tried to think about it rationally, that was the most logical conclusion. Yura took a look at herself. It was like the culmination of all their efforts since she’d arrived. The clothes, the preparation, the offer to escort her. It would all go to waste if she left without participating.

Yura was ready to run. But Leila was faster, pulling her.

“It’s this way, Lady Yuura.”

“Uhh, Leila...what are we going further in for?”

“For His Majesty!”

A sudden outburst caused Yura to jump. Several goblets were lifted into the air by thick arms. The group of men, gathered in a semicircle, all raised a toast “to His Majesty!” Their shouts eclipsed all other sounds in the room for those few seconds.

“They’re members of our heavy cavalry. Please do not be afraid,” Leila smiled.

They certainly did fit the part, Yura thought.

“They’re normally fully armored, so seeing them like this certainly does feel unusual.”

The man laughed jovially. As she watched them out of the corner of her eye, Yura let out a sigh.

“Now then, Lady Yuura.”

“Eep...!”

“No, no, I wanna go home!” Yura complained as the ladies shoved her across the hall.

As soon as she began walking, she was swarmed by an oppressive heat. Massive bunches of flowers in ornate displays overwhelmed her nose with their aromas.

Leila walked on, keeping a tight grip on Yura’s hand as she ushered her forward. Yura continued to argue with Leila as they continued onward.

“Leila, I can’t do anything. You brought me all this way, but I’ve no artistic talents. No magic tricks.”

Leila burst into laughter.

“Now that’s silly! Why should anyone expect you to perform, Lady Yuura?”

“Everyone else is dancing! I should warn you, the only dances I know are the Mayim Mayim and Jenga dances. I really don’t know any others, and you’ll regret it if you make me try!”

They attempted to pass by a cluster of men, all chatting happily with drinks in their hands. As they did, one of the men suddenly called out to them. As they looked back, an older man headed toward them. Leila recognized him and exclaimed, “Uncle!”

Breaking away from Yura, she rushed over to the man. They seemed to share a hug. Leila turned back to Yura.

“I mean, Governor...this is Lady Yuura.”

Leila whispered something to him discreetly. When she did, his eyes widened in surprise.

“...My...”

He dipped his head in understanding. Yura, who’d been chatting incessantly until he appeared, became increasingly awkward. She didn’t see herself as someone deserving of a stranger bowing to her. She bowed back, flustered.

“My...how breathtakingly beautiful...” he cooed. Yura knit her brows at his

words. She instinctively pulled a face.

*What is this old man's problem?*

She gazed around their surroundings but didn't see the person she was looking for, as if they'd disappeared into the crowd.

"I had heard the rumors but never expected such beauty..."

"Uncle, where is His Majesty currently?"

The old man who was steeped in admiration was startled by Leila's words.

"He's currently on his throne," he said in one breath, pointing quickly. "But Count Londewim is on his way over, so it may be best to wait."

"Of course."

Leila nodded and grabbed Yura's hand once more. She began to walk back out into the crowd. Occasionally, she would stop and chat with someone she seemed to know, then wander back out once again.

Yura covered her mouth, suddenly seized by heartburn. The scents around her were making her nauseous.

"What is wrong?" Leila peered into Yura's face, concerned.

Yura silently shook her head. She'd been feeling dizzy, as if all the blood had rushed to her head. The scent of alcohol she hadn't even drunk was almost intoxicating. Her cheeks and ears were bright red.

*I need some cold water...*

But all that was being offered was alcohol. Yura held back a burp as the nausea and dizziness only got worse. She was also reaching her limits with the pain of the corset and began searching for an exit.

*I need fresh air. Even just a breath of night air...*

At that moment, Yura thought she spotted something odd and stood still. It was a strange sensation. Among all the faces full of joy and excitement was one of surprise that looked ridiculous and out of place.

It was a face all the same, but clearly out of place among the others.

Yura stared at the face, but couldn't clearly make it out. She strained to see him and tried to focus.

Then she gasped.

Her vision had cleared. She saw a familiar face with a look of agitation. Yura felt her dizziness subside.

It was the young man she'd run into that afternoon in the small garden. His clothes were different, but she recognized those green eyes. And that handsome face that would catch anyone's gaze.

The second he recognized Yura and her expression, he immediately turned away.

"Wait!"

Almost unconsciously, Yura dashed off toward him.

She plowed through the bewildered people in her way, like she was running an obstacle course.

The young man glanced once over his shoulder and, truly recognizing Yura's face, looked even more surprised. He started moving faster. He slipped into the crowd.

"Hey, hey, please, wait...!"

Her voice was loud enough that it should've reached, but he didn't turn around. He merely slipped further into the hustle and bustle, disappearing into the revelers. She soon lost sight of his back.

Yura gave a shout.

"Hey...wait!"

The second she lost sight of him, Yura took an unsteady step forward slipping on someone's foot and toppled over sideways.

*"Kyaa!"*

The people around her were startled and pulled back. The moment she fell, she spotted a look of astonishment plastered on his face. By the time Yura realized what was going on, she was sitting on the ground.

She tried to get up, but couldn't. Somehow, she'd fallen in a strange position. The second she tried to move, a cramping pain shot through her leg. Her shoes had flown off somewhere. She couldn't stand up, no matter how she tried...

"Lady Yuura!"

Leila charged toward Yura, brushing past the throngs of people as she did.

"*Ahh!* What happened?"

But she suddenly stopped right in front of Yura. She made a face like she had candy stuck in her throat.

"Leila?"

Her eyes were on something behind Yura. Her face was clearly shocked, so Yura twisted her head to look behind her. Someone was leaning over her from behind.

"What wert thou chasing?" said a voice from above with a slight laugh.

Startled, Yura stiffened.

"Ashes...?"

The silver-haired young man was looking down at her. A perfectly crafted smile crossed his face as their eyes met.

"Stand up," Ashes said, offering Yura a hand.

He put an arm around her waist, as she couldn't stand on her own, and helped her to her feet.

Accepting his help, Yura finally took a look around. She realized she was beneath the massive hanging banner she'd seen from the balcony before. She could see the semicircle platform nearby.

Yura instinctively gazed at Ashes.

His long hair was pulled back with a hair tie just above the nape of his neck. He wore gold-crafted armlets, adorned with medals that shone dark grey.

His clothes were different than in the afternoon. They were more refined. And atop his head was, unmistakably, a crown.

“You really *are* an emperor, huh...?” Yura muttered reflexively, grabbing at the hem of his cape.

Ashes laughed lightly, his eyes softening. Suddenly, a voice rang out in awe from among the onlookers.

“My...how beautiful!”

Yura looked toward the voice. Sighs then erupted throughout the room, as if a wind had swept in.

“She seems completely out of this world.”

“Such beauty cannot be from our realm...”

A mixture of cries filled with admiration and gasps bubbled up from the crowd, one after the other. Yura gazed around.

*Not again.*

Yura knit her brows, feeling uneasy.

*Who do they keep talking about?*

She turned her head, glancing around.

Was that person that the old man from earlier called “beautiful” somewhere nearby now? She couldn’t find them.

There weren’t even any other women nearby.

Behind her was a blank wall. There were no other people there.

As Yura twisted to look around, she gazed up at Ashes, as if to ask where this person was. She opened her mouth to ask him, but suddenly stopped.

Ashes had calmly placed a hand on her shoulder and she stiffened. He turned her toward the crowd and bent down next to her. Then he whispered into her ear, in a voice so quiet only she could hear.

“Didn’t you hear them? Everyone is complimenting *you*.”

Yura froze, taken aback by his words. Her face stiffened.

“Wh-Why?”

She fidgeted as if to indicate how ridiculous the idea was.

But then Yura finally realized that everyone *was* staring directly at her.

They were looking at her the way one looks at something exceptionally beautiful. The stares of the men were filled with longing, while those of other women were mixed with a pinch of jealousy.

“Such unparalleled beauty, eh?”

Yura lifted her head, as if pulled by a string. The look on Ashes’ face was one of enchantment. Even he seemed to be infatuated with her. Smiling at the tongue-tied Yura, Ashes spoke with longing.

“Those words exist for you.”

At that moment, the short fuse in Yura’s head was set off with a *pop!*

*What did he say?* She fidgeted. Yura gazed up at him in shock.

“Wh-What...?” she sputtered.

Her body went ice cold and she could feel an icy sweat trickle down her back.

*An unparalleled beauty? Me?*

Those gazes and voices left her convinced that they must be teasing her.

Yura shrank back like a cornered rabbit.

*What in the world is going on?*

The gorgeous lights of the banquet seemed to blur into an arc. Ashes stroked Yura’s cheek gently.

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**AS** the banquet continued, Yura’s anxiety only worsened.

Leaning against the impeccably designed throne, Ashes jovially tipped back his cup.

Yura stood back in amazement, ladling alcohol into his cup.

*It’s so strange. No matter how I think about it, it’s strange. No matter how I turn it over in my head, I can’t understand it.*

It was something that shouldn’t have been, but feeling a slight chill, Yura began to look around. Every person whose gaze she met genuinely

complimented her.

Each person praised her, with utter sincerity, despite the fact she wore no makeup.

They said things like “Your looks are peerless in this realm.”

Everyone looked intoxicated as they complimented her looks. But Yura looked down. She couldn’t believe their words to be anything but sarcasm. She remained silent, clasping her decanter.

“Lady Yuura, there is no need for you to do that...” Leila chided her with a hint of nervousness.

However, Yura shook her head and refused to surrender the decanter.

A new chair had been brought and set out, facing Ashes’ throne as soon as he invited Yura to join him on the platform.

That chair was currently vacant. Instinctively, Yura felt she couldn’t sit, declining the offer and instead snatching the decanter one of the maids was holding, proceeding to walk around and serve others.

“Don’t keep offering it to me. I can’t keep up.”

Ashes’ laughter caught Yura off guard.

Yura had been mindlessly serving Ashes, relentlessly offering him more alcohol every time his cup got half-empty.

“...I’m so sorry,” she muttered, and Ashes flashed her a gentle smile. No matter how sardonic his expression, there was always a hint of playfulness.

“Is there nothing here that strikes your fancy?”

Yura suddenly felt something tug her sleeve and came to her senses. Leila was staring at her, worry tinting her features.

She was bending over, knitting her brows together, giving Yura a reproachful look.

“I beg your pardon, but it is unseemly to make such a face before His Majesty...”

Yura looked up in a panic. She covered her face, wondering what kind of



expression she had been making. At that moment, a thought flashed through Yura's mind like a lightbulb going off over her head.

*That's right... Why don't I find out myself?*

Yura nodded to herself without realizing it.

Everyone here was probably just exceedingly good at being polite, right? There was no way they could've really meant it.

She spun around.

"Um, Ashes, is there a mirror nearby?"

"A mirror?"

At first, he met her gaze with a blank stare, then quickly seemed to light up with realization.

"You mean the Twin-Gazing Mirror?"

Any mirror would do, so Yura nodded vigorously. Ashes laughed once more. He then lifted his hand, pointing straight ahead.

"You have such random knowledge. The mirror you're talking about is over there."

Yura looked in the direction he'd pointed. She saw the balcony they'd originally descended from when they first arrived. Above that was a smaller balcony she hadn't noticed before. Gazing up at it, a light suddenly flashed in her eyes. Something was catching the light of the chandeliers and reflecting it back out. Situated on the balcony was something round.

An elliptical mirror. It captured the light from the hall and reflected it back with a startling white light. It was facing out toward the banquet.

Yura suddenly froze.

*It's...*

Her body seemed to shrivel up. Everything around her became distant, even the sounds becoming inaudible.

*It's...*

Yura stared up at it in amazement.

*It's that mirror, isn't it?*

The mirror she'd seen in Tomoko's shop was hanging right there.

It looked good as new, polished reverently...

Yura blinked. It was so far away, and yet, she could see it perfectly.

That double-sided mirror that'd sucked Yura into its silvery light was hanging right there.

*There's no mistake about it.*

The waves of shock finally receded. Yura blinked, then slowly looked at Leila. Leila, in turn, looked a little frightened.

"Hey..."

Yura closed her eyes, taking deep breaths and trying to calm her pounding pulse. Lifting her trembling hand, she slowly pointed to it.

"How can I get up there?"

Leila looked truly troubled at this question.

She was completely baffled and glancing all over, looking for help.

"How?' I'm afraid there isn't a path that leads there directly," Leila replied, struggling with each word.

"That mirror is a Tolkinian national treasure. Every year, only on *this* day of the Festival of Gratitude, it is brought out from the mirror chamber..."

Yura shook her head. Then she gave a little nod.

Leila had a dubious expression on her face and quickly looked away.

*What...do I do? It doesn't seem like there's any way I can get over there.*

She took a breath and somehow calmed down, glancing around at the festivities. The dancing people, the lively music. The crowd of people surrounding the platform showed no signs of dwindling.

*If only I could get to it.*

Yura searched for some alternate route.

*First, I have to convince Leila and then slip off by myself. Then, I need to find a corner of the room... If I can just get to that balcony. But then what?*

Yura looked up. Could she climb that high?

From the time she was a small child, she was so afraid of heights, she couldn't even play on the swings at first.

Not to mention with what she was wearing, there was no way she'd be able to climb up there...

*How can I get to it...? Is there really no way?*

At that moment, she heard an indistinct voice.

The sound of something breaking.

A sharp sound.

"Dammit!" someone shouted, outraged at the mistake.

Hearing the person cry out, Yura turned in that direction.

Suddenly an arm shot out, pushing someone else away. The person staggered back, as if they'd been struck on the head. She had no idea what had happened.

A young woman was turning away, visibly upset. She was pulling up the hem of her long skirt. Shards of glass were scattered at her feet.

Undeterred, a thick arm shot through the air once more. Water splashed someone's lowered head, splattering everywhere.

That was when Yura finally realized what was going on. She started to rush over.

"No, where are you going!?"

Leila's arm held Yura back. Yura was so worked up, however, that she shook Leila off.

"How horrible...what happened!?"

People were crowding around, making it difficult to move. Yura tried to crane her neck to see what was going on.

It was a young man with his eyes downcast. Perhaps because he'd turned his face away and his body was stooped over, he looked so small.

He lifted his eyes to look at the two men holding the empty glasses. The men had fist-sized stains on their chests. Colliding with each other and spilling the contents of their glasses must've started the whole thing.

*Even if that was the case...aren't they going too far?*

Yura tore the fabric off the decanter Leila was holding and turned back to the disturbance.

The young man was staring at the others, expressionlessly. There was no hint of emotion in his eyes. He wiped away the water without a word.

Suddenly Yura gasped.

It was *him*.

She froze.

The young man Yura had chased and failed to catch earlier.

The one she'd happened upon in the garden. But there was no emotion in his eyes now.

Instead, he looked like a wax doll with lifeless eyes. So completely empty that she was sure if he spoke now, his voice would be monotone.

He turned toward her with equally empty movements.

In that instant, Yura regretted not hiding.

In that moment when their eyes met, he looked so pained, it was as if someone stuck a needle in his eye.

As soon as he recognized Yura, he silently spun away. Turned his back to her and walked off.

There were numerous people in his way and they all stepped aside for him. They all watched him go in disgust, as if looking at something truly awful. The music once again sprang to life.

Finally, the banquet slowly returned to its easy pace, as if nothing had happened.

Suddenly, Ashes was standing next to Yura. He had a capricious look on his face, likely drunk.

Yura turned away, watching the young man who still hadn't completely disappeared into the crowds. She hadn't noticed before, but every single person that watched him go turned away from him, putting as much distance as they could between them.

"Hey, th-that man..." Yura whispered, just barely audible and trembling. Ashes bent closer to her, struggling to hear. "That man, the one with the gold hair..."

"Oh, *him*?" Ashes snorted in response. He casually extended a finger, still wrapped around his cup, to where the young man had been.

It seemed like others nearby were laughing as well. Yura looked down, her heart aching. It was a strange feeling, as if an old forgotten wound had begun to throb.

"Does he have some sort of illness...?"

Ashes laughed in response. It was a sneer; his gaze was cold and disgusted. He smiled with pity, as if rejecting the other man down to his very core.

"Saying it's an...affliction of appearances might be more like it."

"Affliction of appearances?"

*Appearances—like his looks?*

Yura frowned.

She turned her head to look at him. He was currently looking to the side. Where she stood was up high, the place she was least likely to lose sight of him. She could still see him very clearly.

"Isn't he *hideous*?" Ashes slid closer and whispered. He continued to smile at her with a cold expression. "He's the ugliest man in our entire nation."

Ashes' words slapped Yura like an ice whip. She shuddered as if she'd been hit with cold water and looked at him.

The young man looked back up at Yura, as if detecting her fear. His face really was like that of a doll's. A fake expression with any emotion shoved deep down

inside.

However, his looks were still as handsome and as breathtakingly beautiful as they were that day they saw each other through the mirror.

It gave Yura goosebumps and she stiffened up. She slowly looked back and forth between them, speechless.

The young man with golden hair and Ashes.

Both of them had such handsome faces that they couldn't help but garner attention.

*Could it be...*

*Could they possibly be...*

The words sprung back to her mind.

*"My, how beautiful..."*

That old man who had sighed enraptured. Those words of delighted admiration. Those envious gazes.

*"I can't believe such beauty is of this world."*

Yura looked up. The young person whose eyes met hers grew red in the cheeks and flashed her a broad grin.

*"An unparalleled beauty."*

*"Those words of praise were meant for you..."*

Yura took a step back.

*For me?*

Flustered, she looked around. All eyes were on her and she felt backed into a corner.

*He's the most hideous man in the country and I'm an unparalleled beauty?!*

Questions she couldn't put into words were running through her head. Her fears formed a dark veil before her and increased at an interminable speed. She was tormented by a strange sense of terror, all amid the backdrop of this glamorous feast. Yura stood there vacantly, wringing her hands.

## Chapter 4: Common Ground

**EVERYTHING** felt distant to Yura.

All around her the ceaseless cacophony of laughter ebbed and flowed like waves, and the elegant music served as a background to her melancholy.

Yura's arms hung limply at her sides, completely slack like a wooden puppet. The aroma of flowers competed with the powerful scent of wine wafting throughout the room. Yet it all seemed so far away.

As did Leila, who stood at Yura's side, anxiously calling to her, and Ashes, staring at her with a dubious look.

A wind seemed to blow in from somewhere, causing Yura's hair to dance on the breeze. It was like a mysterious hand had grabbed her hair, trying to yank her back to reality. The night wind that broke through the excitement was refreshing.

But her heart was pounding, breathing proved difficult, and she was dizzy.

"Lady Yuura?"

A wave of confusion welled up within her. Like alcohol inviting a drunken state, it intermingled with fear, and suddenly, Yura was losing consciousness.

Her knees quaked. Her heart stalled. She staggered, her arms going limp, and bumped into the glass someone else was holding, knocking it out of their hand. The glass shattered at her feet. But even that felt far away.

Her mind, which had gone white, now went black, like a game of Othello.

Leila's shriek sounded so far away. Ashes threw his arms out to stop her from completely collapsing.

"Yuura!"

Her eyes spun as she fell. In that last second, before her consciousness fully slipped away, a brilliant light shattered into fireworks amid the darkness

beneath her closed eyelids.







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**YURA** awoke to a muffled scream not unlike the sound of shattering porcelain. She blinked as she tried to sit up. But she found it quite hard. It was like her mind had awoken before her body. Her vision still hadn't caught up yet.

She gazed up at the ceiling, taking deep breaths.

*Where am I?*

A reddish-brown curtain hung from the ceiling, stretching all around the bed. It was not dissimilar to what she imagined being inside a birdcage felt like, even though it was just part of the canopy surrounding her bed.

The bed was so soft, she felt she might sink into it. She was wearing a gown that someone had changed her into. Gentle sunlight from a nearby window danced over the curtains illuminating her cozy bed.

Yura blinked.

*What am I doing here?*

When she closed her eyes, her memories of yesterday quickly bubbled back to the surface. That magnificent hall; the banquet. All she could remember after that was passing out.

*I see. I must've collapsed from being overwhelmed by all the new experiences—and I'm pretty sure the corset and not eating for more than a day didn't help. I guess I can't expect to wake up from this dream just yet.*

She felt around for a gap in the canopy. She could see people on the other side. There was a window to her left and a wood table in front of her, decorated with engravings. A carpet stretched across the floor. Several women were kneeling on the floor, their backs to Yura's bed.

"What if you wake up Lady Yuura?" a lady stooped directly in front of Yura asked.

"I'll handle it. Bring me the cloth. Sisty, you go over there. Watch where you step."

She could hear quiet but energetic voices. Brisk but graceful movements.

Their hair, neatly pulled up, traced an arc in the sun's light.

*So it wasn't all just a dream.*

Yura sat up. "Leila?" she called out.

At that moment, all the ladies-in-waiting turned her way. They looked shocked. Leila, who'd leapt up, walked over and pulled back the curtain, gazing inside.

When her eyes met Yura's, Yura grinned. Leila smiled back in relief.

"I see you're awake, Lady Yuura."

"I...fainted."

Half a moment later, Yura was eased into a chair, water glass in hand.

The light from the midday sun was so bright.

Leila flashed Yura a troubled smile as she placed a shawl over her shoulders. The other ladies-in-waiting were preparing tea. Yura watched their deft movements, impressed by their skill.

"You must've been exhausted," Leila said. "After you collapsed, we sent for the doctor, who said you had passed out from sheer exhaustion and fatigue. You should have seen His Majesty's face—"

The other women began tittering. Leila slightly lowered her head. Yura gave her a wry smile in return.

"Of course, it *would* be too soon for you to be *pregnant*. But we wanted to be sure—"

Yura stared blankly at that remark. Leila put a hand on her cheek thoughtfully.

"Though it wouldn't be THAT *impossible*. Ever since Emperor Ashes ascended to the Tolkinian throne at the age of nine, he has not even taken one concubine..."

Leila paused to breathe. Yura blinked. It was happening again. Even if she knew the words Leila was saying, she couldn't keep up with them.

"Huh..."

Frowning, Yura folded her arms. Unfortunately, she still didn't get it at all. On the contrary, with the indirect way Leila spoke, it was like trying to decipher a code. She couldn't seem to get the point Leila was trying to make.

Yura nodded, looking up at Leila.

"...At any rate, I caused you all trouble, didn't I?" That was the one thing Yura could be sure of. "I'm sorry..." she apologized and bowed her head.

Leila looked panicked. She urged Yura to lift her head.

"Please...don't say such things! We ask only that you take care of yourself! We cannot have you fall apart before the wedding."

"Wedding?"

Yura understood those words.

Leila looked bashful.

"It is truly a shame... If only the sacred festival didn't last for two whole months, we wouldn't have had to postpone it so long."

"Wait, what do you mean, Leila?"

This time, Leila was the one who looked startled. However, she quickly understood, lowering her eyes and shoulders in shame.

"How terribly rude of me. I am referring to His Majesty's wedding ceremony."

"His Majesty...!" Yura exclaimed and clapped her hands, louder than she meant to. It startled Leila and she stepped back. "Wow, that's great! So Ashes is getting married?!"

Yura excitedly clasped her cheeks. Conversations like this, after all, were particularly exciting for a girl her age.

"Congratulations!" she exclaimed. "So, how old *is* Ashes?"

Leila's face broke out into a grin. The others exchanged bashful expressions.

"Why, His Majesty is twenty-three."

"He's so young for an emperor!" Yura said in admiration, then broke into a grin. "I bet his bride must be lovely!"

*Wow, it's so unfair. I wish I could've seen her.*

Yura snapped her fingers. Leila covered her mouth and laughed in amusement.

"Why is it being delayed?"

"During the festival, one cannot make a sacred vow in the church. But any ceremony held afterward is said to be blessed."

"That's so unfair to the couple..."

*If only the wedding could be tomorrow. If it were, I could congratulate them in person.* Yura seemed embarrassed at saying something so crazy, and Leila burst into laughter.

"It is all right. Two moons will pass in no time. I'm sure His Majesty feels the same." She sounded like she was trying to encourage Yura as she then clasped both her hands together. "It's fortuitous you feel this way... there's plenty for us to do. Decorum, manners, behavior, preparations to enter the royal family... we can worry about the ceremony's specifics after that. The summer solstice is already a pivotal day, as it is the Great Sage's birth festival. And now, it'll be the day of the wedding ceremony as well."

"Several guests from other countries will be invited on that auspicious day which starts the calendar year," one of the other women chimed in on Leila's explanation for the first time. "That's what my grandmother told me. She said the previous emperor's ceremony was a splendorous celebration."

"Sisty's grandmother resided in this palace up until her passing last year."

Yura nodded in admiration and the lady called Sisty smiled bashfully.

"It's like a dream!" Leila said, enthralled. She was so spellbound, she seemed to be staring off into the distance before finally murmuring, "We just can't wait for the day when His Majesty, and you, Lady Yuura, declare your love inside the church."

"Ohh..." Yura said, but her mind seemed to have completely stopped working. It felt like she was blowing cold air out of her mouth, and she struggled to keep it back.

*Hang on a second!*

“What do you mean?” Her voice seemed to startle the ladies out of their rapturous states. They all turned her way. “No, I mean, just before,” Yura stammered in a panic, trying to cover for her own surprise, but her words wouldn’t come out right.

Leila gaped.

“Pardon?”

Leila seemed to recoil as she lifted her confused face. She quickly cleared her throat and returned to her normal, composed state.

“My apologies. Well, what exactly are you referring to?”

“You were saying they were going to say their vows. Who and who, Leila? Sorry, but...can you repeat that part...?”

All of the girls went still. They made no attempt to hide their regal smiles, and their faces seemed to break out into giant, enveloping grins. Seeing their faces like that was making Yura uneasy.

“Oh, Lady Yuura!” Leila suddenly smacked Yura on the back, causing her to go stiff. Even though she chided Yura when she was rude, she seemed to act more relaxed when she was being genuine.

The elegant air surrounding her earlier faded away, a playful grin taking its place. She winked.

“How many times *will* you make me repeat it? All right, go ahead and ask!”

“Ask us too, please!”

At that moment, all the ladies chimed in excitedly in unison. Seeing them seemingly lose their composure, Yura felt her body temperature decrease. She had a horrible feeling and couldn’t bring herself to look directly at them.

*I have a sinking feeling I know what’s coming. That there’s been a horrible misunderstanding. I really don’t want to ask her...*

However, she couldn’t avoid it. Clenching her fists tight, Yura called on Leila.

“...Okay, Leila, I’ll ask you...”

“Okay!” Leila answered with the excitement of a first grader just starting school.

*If excitement changes a person’s body temperature, then surely, there’s a ten-degree Celsius difference between the other girls and me.*

It reminded her of a paranormal TV show she had seen at Tomoko’s house. They had a machine to detect human body temperature called a thermal imaging machine.

*I’d be pale blue, like a ghost. They’d be the only one it registered as human.*

“...Who and who are going to be standing there, making vows, Leila...?”

“That is...! Naturally...!”

Later, Yura would think back on how a vicious criminal awaiting a judge’s final sentence would receive kinder treatment than she did at that moment.

After a beat, they all delivered their “final judgment” in unison with a broad grin.

“...You and His Royal Highness, of course!”

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**IT’S** said that in life, one never knows what will happen.

*...No kidding.*

Yura ducked her head as she dashed through the castle. She stayed low like a thief as she passed through the corridors. Occasionally, she’d hide behind the pillars realizing she’d make a terrible spy and check her surroundings repeatedly. She kept looking, ensuring she wouldn’t happen upon Ashes.

*This isn’t funny! No matter how attractive he is, how kind he’s been, I still couldn’t marry someone I just met in an unfamiliar world like this!* Yura bit her lip.

She couldn’t help feeling like she’d been deceived. Nothing made sense.

*Of course it doesn’t! Why would it?*

Yura looked down.



*What is with this world's logic?*

“So, the maiden gives her name and takes the man’s hand. Then, if she agrees to ride in his carriage—that’s...the same as saying ‘yes’ to a marriage proposal? It means...I agreed to marry into the royal family?”

“It’s certainly rare, but it’s not as if there’s no precedent for this sort of thing,” Leila said plainly. “It’s a well-known euphemism.”

Yura leaped up and charged out of the room at Leila’s explanation.

*I’d no idea about any of this!*

Almost on the verge of tears, Yura saw Ashes in her mind, booming with laughter. She couldn’t see him having a, for lack of a better word, ulterior motive. But she had a feeling that if there was one, it’d be hurtful.

She waited for a group of ladies-in-waiting to pass her by, then grabbed the hem of her dress and leapt out from the shadows of the pillar. She hopped between pillars at top speed. Like a stalker or a wannabe criminal.

She gritted her teeth, she just wanted to go home.

*How can I be expected to get married out of the blue, without my consent, in this world that isn’t my own?* Yura fought back the tears.

*How could someone just decide something like that for me?*

Yura twisted her head and panicked when she saw how high the sun was in the sky.

*I haven’t been home in almost two whole days! I’m sure everyone’s freaked out! Mom probably called the police. And I bet Tomoko’s looking everywhere for me!*

*Maybe I could get back through the mirror from last night.*

Her head sticking out from behind the pillar, Yura gazed around. The hallway she’d been walking down was coming to an end. There was a T-shaped intersection up ahead, the path splitting left and right.

“I wonder where that mirror chamber is...”

She remembered what Leila had said at the banquet. That the mirror she saw

the night before was only moved from the mirror chamber to the site of the feast once a year. *That was definitely what she said.*

So, if she went to the mirror chamber, she should be able to find it there.

“...I ‘should’ be able to,” Yura muttered, pulling her head back. A guard passing by turned his head toward the pillar she hid behind, having heard something. Holding her breath and watching, the guard finally shook his head and turned left at the T-shaped intersection.

*Maybe I should have asked him...*

It was too late to think about that now, but this castle really did seem to stretch on forever. There were far too many rooms and towers, and she’d no clue how many corridors connected them all. Trying to find the mirror chamber on her own was going to be harder than she anticipated.

However, there was no way around it. She had to go with the only option at her disposal.

She looked down.

*I shouldn’t linger if I’m just leaving anyway. I guess I can’t expect someone to show me...*

She slipped out from behind the pillar and stood where she had before.

Standing at the end of the hall, she looked down the left and right pathways.

*Now, which way should I go?*

She remembered that the soldier from earlier had gone down the left path, so she decided on the right.

It was a wide corridor with pillars evenly spaced throughout. The sun was more clouded over on this side than the way the soldier had gone. However, there also didn’t seem to be anyone else down here.

“...All right then.” Yura drew in her breath and adjusted her shawl. “Here we go,” she said, and started walking.

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**HER** passage through the endless hallways went on for some time.

A blank wall stretched along the right side, while a low hedge stretched along the left. This scene continued, unchanging, for several minutes.

Occasionally, a familiar massive column would appear along the left side of the dull corridor. On the other side of the pillar was a stone-covered rest area, but there was no one there.

“...Maybe I was wrong,” Yura muttered, walking along.

She gripped her collar tightly and turned around. No one was behind her, after all.

Luckily, there was no sign of anyone else, but the fact that no one else came this way also made her rather uneasy. Trying to leash her anxiety, Yura walked on.

She'd find a large hallway and try to follow it to its end. When she found a door that seemed like the right one, she'd peek inside.

*A place called the mirror chamber should be chock-full of mirrors. Should be, at least.*

She knew this was a pointless way of doing things. Very inefficient. But there was no way she could ask Leila and the others. She didn't want them to see her disappear before their eyes. And that wasn't all...

If she disappeared, the person she'd asked to tell her the way would surely be in trouble. She couldn't help worrying about that. That was the one thing she couldn't allow.

Her heels clicked along the floor with every step she took. Her impatience rising, Yura quickened her pace.

*I have to hurry and get back. I've got a feeling this is only going to get worse. I don't have a minute to waste.*

The cold hallway stretched on and on. She walked and walked, with no end in sight. It seemed the farther she went, the darker it got.

*Maybe I should go back...*

Suddenly, Yura heard voices and froze. She thought at first that it was her imagination, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Ahead, she could see the standard pillar and what looked like a rest area. Three shadows stretched across the corridor, jokingly jostling about.

But before she could rush over to them...

She heard something being struck from the other side. Yura frowned.

A dull metallic sound reverberated throughout the corridor. A cold voice accompanied the sound. Several more ear-piercing sounds echoed in her ears.

Finally, she realized those sounds were intentionally being targeted at someone. It seemed like a horrible prank.

*What in the world is going on?*

She heard coarse laughter. Like a cry. It was a horrible laugh that gave her goosebumps and made her stomach drop.

A narrow rest area was where the scene played out for her.

There were three soldiers clad in armor, standing around a pillar. Two of them held spears with the tips crossed. Crossed like they were securing the pillar.

Between the spears stood a knight.

*What are they doing?*

Just as she was about to speak, the spears were pushed aside. Someone grabbed the knight's shoulder before he could pass. They jerked his body back. The force of it knocked him back into the pillar again.

"...So, what do you want?"

They squared their shoulders at his monotonous, sullen voice as if it were all a joke.

They exchanged glances and snorted with laughter. In lieu of a response, one of the men reached out and grabbed a handful of the knight's hair.

"What do I want?" the guard spat.

"If you want something, say it."

"I don't ever want to see a face as ugly as yours around here ever again."

The knight looked up, as if in resistance, and gave a small smile.

The men looked embarrassed seeing the expression on his face. But instead of letting him go, one of them stepped forward and punched him in the face. He hit the knight so hard, he slammed into the pillar with a thud.

His twisted smile intensified.

*He's the guy from yesterday.*

She froze behind the pillar. Her throat went dry, seeing violence like she never had before.

She thought back to the banquet from the day before.

It was the young man, the one who Ashes said those unbelievable things about. She recognized the sight of the man whose lapels she had grabbed. She recognized his handsome features.

*What do I do?*

She looked around, hoping to call for help. But there was no sign of anyone else in the long corridor. She knew she had to stop it, but her body wouldn't move. It was like her legs were rooted to the ground.

Someone threw another punch, this time at his other cheek. But the knight gave no resistance, merely staring back at the others. Like he was trying to read their minds. They went into a frenzy on the hollow-eyed young man who gave no reaction. They just kept going, striking a blow to his stomach, then another to his jaw.

He neither resisted nor reacted. He didn't raise an eyebrow. He didn't even attempt to wipe the trickle of blood from where he'd been hit in the mouth. He was like a massive doll, being kicked and punched about emotionlessly.

*Why...why isn't he doing anything?*

She held her tongue and made not a sound.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any sign of anyone coming.

*Someone, please come! Anyone! If you don't—he's going to die!*

*"We're going to slice the skin off that filthy face of yours!"*

One of the men became impatient and pulled out his sword. At that moment,

the knight's expression distorted, his real emotion becoming clear. Slowly looking up, he took in the man's metal-wrapped hand, the sword at his hip, and his face covered in a helmet.

Then his lips creased into a light smile.

He lifted a hand and made an inviting gesture. What little strength and scorn he had left, he channeled into his voice.

"...Fine. Do it then."

All of the soldiers stiffened up, speechless. The three men then all began to laugh in unison.

"What's stopping you?"

*What did he just...?*

"Didn't you just say you were gonna cut the skin off my filthy face?"

The knight's voice echoed heavily and clearly this time.

He stared at the perplexed soldiers without even trying to hide his contempt.

*Why would he provoke them? What should I do? Please someone tell me what I should do!*

Suddenly, the knight's voice became a pitch higher. It neither wavered nor gave any hint of apprehension. His words, dripping with hatred, were intended to spur on the bloodthirsty soldiers.

"Do it. Kill me. Or was that just an empty threat?"

At that moment, Yura thought she saw something. In that tense moment, the tension that should have cooled only boiled hotter.

The men who were standing bolt upright lifted their eyes. Even with their face guards on, she could tell. The first man's face was warped with hatred as he pulled out his sword with neither sound nor hesitation.

"We'll..."

*...kill you. You monster.*

He swung his sword without saying the rest aloud. With all his might. At that

moment, the knight appeared to be smiling.

The sword gradually traced an arc.

The moment the blade started down, time stopped, and one minute became several as Yura gazed at the knight's face. He watched the blade's trajectory. His eyes steadily followed its movements. The smile on his mouth had disappeared.

But the second she saw that twinkle of anticipation in his eyes, Yura's synapses began firing once more.

Yura leaped forward almost unconsciously. It was like she was a simple electric toy that'd started up the second she was plugged in. Her voice burst through her dry throat, like someone had at last undone the spell binding her. Before she realized it, Yura was screaming as loud as she could.

"Stop, stop it! What are you doing?"

All of them looked toward her, as if their heads were pulled by some illusionary puppet master's string.

A pink dress fluttered between the knight and the raised sword.

Yura had thrown herself between them. She spread her arms wide and thrust them out.







The men stopped moving, frozen. The one who'd raised his sword forgot to lower it, so he still held it there. One false move and the blade would swing right for her.

That's how dangerous things were now.

"D-Do you have any idea what you're doing...?" she shrieked, her voice cracking.

She felt as if the planet's axis had tilted. She looked up and, seeing a pair of temperate eyes gazing back through the semicircular gap drilled into the helmet, her mind began to feel far away.

"La...dy Yuura..." someone muttered. Yura came to her senses as if someone had splashed her with cold water. Her eyes widened, shocked at having someone call her name out of the blue.

*By Yuura, he means me, right?*

She wondered as the three stared back at her.

"...Who are you? How do you know who I am...?"

The soldier lowered his blade in a panic.

They all fell back, seemingly inspecting Yura's face.

"I'm afraid you've happened upon us at a most shameful moment," the one closest to her finally said.

Yura was taken aback at his words. She didn't want to look at him just then.

Compared to what she had just seen, his calm tone made it seem like he was trying to appease her. Maybe he really was a doll. A mechanical toy wrapped in iron. A switch that was flipped the wrong way could easily be flipped back.

"You aren't injured, are you?" another joined in.

They quickly exchanged glances, as if coming to some sort of understanding. A strange feeling came over Yura and she stared at them.

"Might you have lost your way?"

"This is the northern wall. Only knights and servants use this corridor."

“It is no place for you, m’lady.”

They continued prattling on. Like toys merely acting out their programmed movements. Talking the way a child acting out a performance with their toys would. They were like unskilled performers. Just rattling off a familiar routine.

“Please return to your room. I will show you the way, so please...”

One of them stepped forward and extended a hand, clearly establishing that this was as far as she went. A steel hand. That exquisite hand moved deftly, making a sound as it did.

*Come on now, that hand seemed to beckon. I’m not a bad machine, see how I move? So come on.*

The words “the skin of that filthy face” burbled up inside her. Something about it was familiar. It was like a radio that couldn’t find the right frequency. Every time she tried, these little iron dolls got in the way. That wouldn’t do. She couldn’t worry about them. That’s why she—

Yura turned back to the young man who was supposedly still behind her. At that moment, like a gambler afraid of losing his winnings, something cold grabbed her arm.

“Lady Yuura.”

Suddenly, the spell that bound her was released. Yura immediately shook that arm off.

“Don’t touch me!” she shouted.

The guards fell back with a start.

Something exploded within her, as if the spell keeping her docile had been broken. Her fear evaporated. Her blood began to boil. She remembered what Tomoko had said to her. It came to her mind and exploded throughout. Just like that.

Before she knew it, Yura was making demands. As loud as she possibly could.

“Go away!”

Her breath was ragged with rage. The guard tucked in his chin. He stared back

at Yura in shock. He was surprised, but he didn't move. He stared back at her, his heavy helmet eclipsing the true expression he wore. Who *was* this girl telling him to begone?

“Go! Hurry! Go over there! If you don't—if you don't...”

Yura couldn't seem to figure out what to say. The right words wouldn't come. But when she looked up, he asked, “If we don't, what?” Hearing those words, she shouted back.

“If you don't...I'll call for Ashes!”

Her words sounded so childish. Surely there was no way she could carry out that threat. But at that moment, the men leaped up as if they'd been struck by lightning.

They stumbled back. One threw down his spear and ran off without picking it up. The other two followed his lead, running off at full speed.

The three of them left in a hurry, a clattering sound trailing behind them. When Yura turned back to the knight, she slapped him.

The loud slap echoed throughout the corridor. He stood stock-still. A shocked silence fell over them.

The astonished knight's cheek quickly began to show the mark where she had slapped him. Yura drew closer, as if she were about to grab him by the lapels.

“And you! What do you have to say...!?” Yura shouted at the wide-eyed knight. She was breathing hard and couldn't speak like she wanted to. She pounded his shoulder. “Do you have any idea what you just said...?”

His unfocused eyes slowly gazed back at her. Yura went limp, feeling like she was looking at a child who didn't realize the gravity of a situation. Suddenly, the world before her grew blue and dim. That moment, her mind felt far away, and she staggered backward.

“Lady Yuura!”

She sat down. The second she did, it was like a balloon deflating, the way her skirt inflated, then collapsed around her. It was like she and the skirt withered together.

For a short time, she merely stared into space. When she finally came back around, she realized he'd taken a knee on the ground and caught her. His eyebrows were narrowed, but his eyes were wide.

"L-Lady Yuura?" he called, bewildered. Yura's eyes slowly began to move, and she silently gazed into his face.

"...Are you all right?"

Yura stared at him blankly. Still seeming confused, he looked a bit guilty, waving a hand in front of her face. The hand seemed to move in slow motion before her unfocused eyes. Watching his hand, she slowly began to recover.

He continued waving it patiently. Seeing the red mark on his cheek finally brought Yura to her senses.

"I'm sorry for slapping you," she reached out, offering an instinctual apology. But the second her finger brushed him, he frowned and pulled away. Like water pulled from the shore.

"I-I..."

She trembled. Her face became white once more. Was this the first time she had hit anyone? Her hand wavered in confusion, having lost its intended destination, and Yura clenched her fist to make it stop.

"I'm so sorry. We need to get some ice. Is there somewhere we can find some water?"

She was in a panic. He lowered his eyebrows, vexed, and stared at Yura. He opened his mouth to speak, then idly raised a hand. Yura shrank back. He looked surprised and stared back at her. Trembling, she looked up.

"...What is the matter?"

"Y-You're not going to hit me back?"

He looked completely taken aback. His eyes widened.

"I-I just thought you were...going to hit me..."

"Huh?"

This time, he really was at a loss. His mouth agape, he stared at Yura like she

were truly odd. The way one looks at a rare frog inside a tank...it made Yura feel small.

However, he finally looked away after staring at her for some time, then suddenly his face broke into a grin. Looking down, he began to laugh so hard, his shoulders quaked.

Whether it was he or Ashes, people kept laughing when they met her. She couldn't help shouting indignantly.

"Wh-What's so funny?"

At that moment, he looked up and grinned. It was a very restrained grin. He looked down, then seeming to pull himself together, peered into Yura's eyes.

"No...I mean, thank you, Lady Yuura," he said in such a quiet voice, it could have been a whisper.

Yura stared blankly at him. She hadn't done anything to be thanked for.

On the contrary, she'd done something anyone would be within reason to yell at her for.

Looking up, their eyes met. His eyes were incredibly gentle. A deep, soft green.

"F-For what...?"

Stuttering, she looked down.

She didn't notice. The second she looked away—that short second—a hint of the pain he'd been hiding flashed across his face. When she looked up again, he looked away.

Yura tilted her head.

"Hey, what did you thank me for?"

But he offered no reply. Looking down, the traces of a smile appeared on his face, and he slowly started to his feet.

"Now, please stand up and return to your room..." he said, changing the subject.

Something suddenly dawned on Yura, and she grabbed his arm as he stood,

stopping him.

“Wait! Um...!”

He was shocked. Once Yura had his attention, she spoke.

“I want to go to the mirror chamber!”

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*I had no idea he was so good at carrying people.*

That was the thought that occurred to her when, half a beat later, she'd been whisked off to another part of the castle.

*This is really...an incredible place.*

Everything was designed to catch the eye, and the care taken with each and every item was evident.

There was an imposing statue of a warhorse that practically looked real. More fresco paintings that were so new, the smell of paint still hung in the air. All of the art was clearly only producible by human hands. They were made with great skill and intended not to be disposable but to be kept and passed down through generations.

She had attempted to stand up and stumbled back to the floor. Before she knew what was going on, the knight had scooped her up and was carrying her through the castle.

“What do I do...?”

He gazed down at Yura, who was lost in thought, and inspected her mud-covered skirt. When he spotted that one of her heels had broken, he asked, “Are you in a hurry?”

She could guess what he'd say next.

“Perhaps it would be better for you just to head back.”

Yura had nodded emphatically. She nodded so low, her chin seemed like it would bump her chest. Holding herself back, she added, “I'm in a great hurry.”

He stared back at her blankly. Then, after thinking it over a bit, said, “I beg your pardon then.”

She couldn't tell if he'd accepted that or not, but he lifted her up and walked on.

"I-I'm sorry..." she mumbled, lowering her head. Having someone carry her... felt rather disgraceful. To say nothing of the fact that the mirror chamber was the opposite of the north side where they'd been...

"I'm really very sorry. If I'm too heavy, you can put me down..."

Her ears turned bright red as she apologized, but he merely stared back at her curiously. Yura shrank down further.

"Still, I never would've thought this place was so large..." Yura breathed, transfixed by a garden on her right. The garden had been maintained almost neurotically so, and within the brush bloomed vivid flowers. A corridor stretched out past the garden, and she could see several people there.

"How much farther to the mirror chamber?" she asked.

"We're about halfway there..."

Yura's eyes grew wide. She thought she saw his mouth slacken a bit.

"The castle is so big that each section is furnished with stables for horses in the event of an emergency."

"H-Horses? Really?"

Wow...

He gave a slight laugh, seeing Yura so easily impressed.

Having been raised in the city, Yura had never even been near a horse. Perhaps it was a normal thing to the people here, but Yura was excitedly looking all over in the hopes of spotting one.

"Wow...are there any close by? I know, maybe when I get home, I'll take riding lessons!"

He was startled at her words. He gulped as if something were caught in his throat.

"...*What* do you plan on doing?"

Yura frowned.



“What? I’m going to ride them. I mean, I’ve never ridden a horse before. When I get good enough, I’ll ride them anywhere I like, yes, dashing off at full speed!”

He burst into laughter. Tears playing at the corners of his eyes, he picked up the conversation.

“They say ‘the Goddess of Spring chases away the Silver Wolf of Winter to bring on Spring.’ You riding a horse wouldn’t be that strange, Lady Yuura.”

“What does *that* mean? Are you making fun of me? I know I’m not really in shape...” Yura muttered. He laughed and then looked forward.

It had been like this the whole time. No matter what happened, he always looked away. Even when their eyes met, it was like his attention was quickly called off somewhere else. Yura decided to sate her curiosity.

“Hey, why do you always look away?”

When she did, his head immediately swiveled toward her.

He stopped walking, like he just realized he’d forgotten something. Yura frowned at him in surprise.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

He tried to look at Yura—to peer into her eyes. Yura felt her chest tighten.

“Have I said something wrong? If I did, I’m sorry!” she apologized in a panic, but he just continued to stare at her in silence.

Yura stiffened up. Perhaps it’d only been her imagination, but she felt afraid of what he would say next.

Instead—

“You may laugh if you like.” A bitter grin appeared on his face and he looked down again.

Yura’s mouth dropped open. It was like being apologized to for something you didn’t remember happening.

A seemingly obvious question leaped right into Yura’s mind.

“Laugh at what?”

There was neither snark nor malice. It was an ordinary question.

But still, it seemed to catch him off guard.

The knight's eyes shifted in bewilderment.

It was all so mechanical. Whenever one movement was off, the gears seemed to stop altogether.

He looked at her as if she were something incomprehensible to him. It was like he was suddenly experiencing a malfunction. He just stared at her in silence.

"...What?"

"Hm?"

He seemed to have a hard time finding the right words. Closing his mouth, he swallowed back whatever he was about to say and fell silent.

Yura waited patiently for him to continue.

"I said 'Laugh at what?'"

"Yes?"

They fell silent again. She tugged his arm. When she did, he looked even less likely to respond. After hesitating for some time, he lowered his brows apologetically.

"My...appearance..."

Yura was taken aback. So much so that she couldn't speak. But she remembered something just then and instinctively waved her hand.

"That's it! Yes, that was it. Now that you mention it, there was something else I found strange! *Umm*, I happened to hear something about you being ugly yesterday, but I don't see you that way at all..."

"...Huh?"

This time, it was his turn to frown. He gave her an incredibly dubious look. She prattled on in a panic.

"I-I mean you don't look ugly! Okay, I mean, maybe people's aesthetic tastes

are different here? Maybe that's it. Because I can't believe you could be considered ugly... Not where I come from, at least..."

She was desperately trying to explain. He twisted his lips and sighed as he listened. Giving a slightly fed-up frown, he also looked irritated and maybe a little hurt.

Yura blinked. He seemed a bit sulky.

She burst into laughter at his complicated expression and lifted her hand to his eyes. When she did, his face stiffened.

"You're making a weird face. You've such a gentle look, but then you frown, and it gets scary."

His eyes widened.

"Also, you look like you're about to cry. If you always look like you're gonna cry, you'll end up looking pitiful like me. The mix is really weird."

"...Pitiful..."

"It is," Yura retorted back.

She searched her heart for what she wanted to say. Was there anything? It was so strange, she felt as if something like this had happened before. Somehow, it seemed like so long ago.

"Have you ever heard, 'There's no truly blank expression?'" she asked and he looked at her curiously. "You always have an expression. People who always smile will look like they're smiling, even when their face is neutral. And people who always cry...even if they don't mean to, they'll look like they're crying."

Yura pointed to her own face. Her downturned eyebrows. Her sad eyes.

*Was I really born like this?*

"When I was younger, I was such a crybaby, my mother always fussed at me and told me to get myself together. It's the truth. In older pictures, everyone's smiling...but lately, her eyebrows look angry and her eyes sad." Yura looked down and gave a wry grin. "...So, you have to stop, before someone who means a lot to you has their face changed forever."

Perhaps her greatest sin had been making the people she cared about most sad. There was something in Tomoko's smile that could fix anything...but perhaps Yura's own sad face had its own malevolent power.

She knew that. Yet, she was still such a coward.

She suddenly realized he was looking at her. His eyebrows were still downturned, but when their eyes met, he flashed her a smile that was neither happy nor sad.

"I'll keep that in mind...but honestly...please don't call yourself pitiful...Lady Yuura."

He stopped walking. There was an imposing door straight ahead. It was like the massive door she'd seen the day before, one worthy of belonging to the mirror chamber.

For the first time, she was feeling disappointed. Surely, that was because her time here had been so short.

Yura blinked. It was time to say goodbye.

He helped her onto the floor. Yura turned back and, with nothing else to do, smiled.

## Chapter 5: Tracing the Threads

**YURA** pushed the heavy door open with a cry of joy.

This room was quite different from the vast space she'd seen the day before. The wall was completely covered in mirrors. The mirrors were lined up, facing this way and that, replacing typical wall decorations. There were several white pillars supporting the ceiling.

In the high ceiling was an open, rounded skylight.

It was beautiful, like a painting of another world.

"This is how I can get home..."

*Once a year, at the beginning of the new year...a room no one uses save for the summer solstice.*

Ashes' words sprang to mind.

*Once I find the mirror here, I can go home. But that means I have to say goodbye to everyone.*

Yura hesitated on what to say in parting to the young man who'd brought her all the way to this room. What should she say?

"Well, see you."

Yura reached for the young man, who had turned to leave.

"Wait! Um, I'm..." Yura continued. "I'm Yura."

"Yura? That's your name?" he said, his eyes widening, reacting just as Yura thought he would. Then he laughed and lowered his eyes. "I'm...I'm Sei. Sei Wohl Fareeja."

Yura smiled.

"Thank you, Sei."

Sei did not look away this time. His eyes were still downcast as he spoke, but Yura flashed him a cheerful smile.

“Please be careful on your way back.”

Yura instinctively waved. He gave a bow before departing hastily. She couldn’t help feeling disappointed at how quickly he disappeared but turned her sights back to the task before her.

*It’s so beautiful in midday, I can’t imagine what it was like during the night,* Yura thought as she gazed around the room, but it was even more massive than she’d first realized. It was vast and felt terrifyingly wide. Whether that was because of the mirrors facing each other or just the room’s true size, she couldn’t begin to guess.

Either way, walking through such a vast room felt intimidating. After hesitating for only a moment, Yura stepped forward.

*Now, where did they store it? The Twin Hazing Mirror, was that what it was called? If what Leila said was true, then it should be here.*

A carpet was spread across the center of the room. Yura felt a ray of light shining on her as she stepped onto the carpet. It was coming from the skylight.

Gazing up at the ceiling decorations, Yura remembered how she used to love gazing up at the sky. It felt like she was looking up for the first time in a long time.

*Back then, I’d look up as I’d walk forward. I loved looking at the sky.*

She looked around slowly.

*How long has it been?* she wondered as she searched for the mirror in question. *How long since I forgot to look up...? When did I start always keeping my eyes trained on the ground?*

A sharp light shined in Yura’s eyes and she closed them.

Squinting against that light, she finally found what she was looking for.

At the end of the chamber was a raised platform. It was like the one she’d seen last night holding up the throne, but this one had the mirror Yura was looking for on it.

There were a mishmash of sculptures and a decorative stand upon it. The stand was larger than the mirror and looked more like a sacred altar.

The mirror stood atop a golden cloth stretched across the platform. Three goddesses stood there, lifting their arms and holding up the mirror. Behind them were a thicket of sculpted trees, their twisted branches supporting the mirror.

“Amazing...” Yura muttered in awe. This was definitely the mirror she’d seen at Tomoko’s shop. However, seeing it in a place like this, on a stand like that, really underscored the difference between the two worlds.

Even the way it shone was different. Yura blinked. The mirror in Tomoko’s shop wasn’t very polished, but this one was, so much so that the color she’d thought of as silver was more like platinum.

It was as if someone who’d seemed like a measly beggar had actually been revealed as a wandering noble. Even someone with poor aesthetic sensibilities like Yura could tell it really was magnificent.

“Now, what do I do?” Yura muttered, putting a hand on her hip.

She walked closer and looked up at it. It looked as if she could easily walk up the stand and go through the mirror.

The goddess statues supporting the mirror were about as tall as children. The closer she got, the more obvious it was how splendid they were, though nothing was as polished as the mirror’s surface.

*I need to try my best not to dirty it,* she thought.

She stood before the mirror, getting nervous, and drew in a breath. The mirror shimmered, as if it might be about to cast a spell this very moment. The light reflected into all corners of the room, as if the same world awaited on the other side too.

Yura focused, and those decoratively engraved letters seemed to be shimmering white.

She reached out a hand and gently touched the mirror.

It felt cool to the touch. But there was no change.

This time, she touched it with both hands.

Still, there was no change.

*How strange*, she thought, this time touching the mirror's outer frame. She was leaving fingerprints on that polished silver.

Still, there was no change whatsoever. The silvery glow didn't appear in the mirror like before.

"This *is* it, isn't it...?" she said, trying to be sure. She focused on that script. That familiar decoration. But it remained just a mirror, showing no signs of changing.

"No way..."

The realization finally hit her. Speechless, Yura quickly turned away and glanced around, looking for anything that looked similar. However, in this massive room, this was the only elliptical mirror.

Her knees began to tremble. But she gritted her teeth, took a deep breath, and once more approached the mirror, this time hitting it with her fist.

Her movements were awkward with her missing heel, so she moved back a bit to ensure she wouldn't slip on the polished floor. From several steps away, she charged at the mirror. It was like Don Quixote relentlessly charging at the windmills—where she slipped and fell instead.

Afraid if she stayed down that she'd become rooted to the ground, Yura stood back up. She began to feel dizzy, like she might have anemia. She staggered back a bit. She leaned against a nearby wall. For a while, she just spaced out. Finally, when her mind returned to the present...

She suddenly noticed it. Her eyes landed on the mirror behind her. That was the only one. Inside that mirror stood a girl who looked like she was lost.

Wearing a dress with elegant frills and a large, open collar. With dainty arms and legs and a bit of mud on her. The flower in her long hair had slipped sideways, almost comically so.

But...something felt strange. Yura looked in the mirror again.

When she grabbed the hem of her long dress, so did the girl in the mirror. Like



a doll in a glass case, she had beautiful posture. Perhaps it was because of the polished mirror, but her hair seemed shinier than usual. Her skin and face were brilliant.

*No...it doesn't just seem that way. That's how it really is.*

Yura stared transfixed at the person in the mirror. She quickly stepped back, then trembling, came closer once more. Each time she took a step, the girl in the mirror walked toward her.

*Who in the world is she?*

Her hair seemed to have been turned dark brown by the sun. And that hairstyle was familiar...

One step forward.

She definitely didn't look like a doll. Especially not with her charming, very lifelike looks.

One step, then another.

That smooth, ivory skin. Those clear eyes. Those pink lips without a hint of rouge. And those tightly closed slender fingers.

Her pulse quickened. Her forehead was slick with sweat. The girl in the mirror's lips trembled. Within that clear mirror, she stood, with such a beautiful face.

*Who are you?*

Those eyes with that cool, innocent twinkle. If she smiled, surely anyone would be taken in by her reserved but charming aura.

*Is this...*

*...unparalleled beauty?*

Ashes' voice echoed in her mind. Her raised hand began to shake. Kept shaking.

She wasn't just beautiful. This girl was so beautiful, anyone could fall for her.

*An unparalleled beauty. Those words of praise were meant for you.*

As if she'd pulled back too quickly, her legs tangled up in each other and caused her to fall to the floor. The girl in the mirror grew pale. When she raised her arms, her partner mimicked her. The same as when she trembled. When she touched her cheeks. When she grabbed her hair and when she touched her body.

They were all the same. This warped figure was almost like a refracted version of Yura. It was like the pantomime of an experienced artist. The two of them seemed to be mimicking each other through the mirror. However, neither was laughing...

When she realized it, Yura began to cry.

*No, no, this isn't me. This isn't me. This isn't the real me!*

Releasing a voiceless scream, Yura fled the mirror room. Her single broken heel slipped and sent her tumbling painfully to the floor once again.

*Maybe it's just that room, Yura thought as she crawled along. Maybe it's just that mirror. Everything that happened is just so unbelievable, right? So, that must be it; it has to be.*

She tossed her heel aside and threw her body forward as she tried to run. Every movement caused her twisted ankle to hurt even more. She was afraid she'd fall. And yet, Yura charged on.

*No, no, no!*

She ran away, praying in vain over and over.

*It can't be true! How could I bear such a reality?*

She continued to plead. To wish, to beg, to pray.

*Please, please don't let this be true...!*

Her fear was so all-consuming, it was as if she'd fallen into quicksand and no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't get free.

Yura dashed past shocked servants, looking for water. For anything.

Perhaps it was only that room. Or maybe if the mirror didn't work, water would? In water, her reflection wouldn't look so strange. *That's right; that must*

*be it.*

She finally found a small waterway and peered into it. Her prayers had been for naught. Her face was crumpled, and she looked so horribly pitiful. And the Yura that should've been there was not.

Her whole body was covered in goosebumps. She could feel a sob welling up inside. Her voice on the verge of cracking, Yura finally broke down and cried.

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**AT** the same time Yura confronted the reality of her strange new world...

A commotion had broken out in a quiet residential district. Red lights were flashing against the buildings' outer walls.

The month and day were unknown. It was like hell, particularly for those involved. The red lights spun, illuminating the area. Illuminating Tomoko's house and the faces of her neighbors peeking out from behind their curtains.

Crying voices could be heard. They were adults' voices. Mixed in with them were shouting voices. Someone was shouting at the top of their lungs at someone else. A group of trembling girls were talking to the police.

"It's your fault!" cried the voice. "This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't pulled something like that!"

Someone admonished the speaker and held them back. Their hands were bound behind their back.

Inside, a man in a suit was touching his forehead and getting details from an officer. He was vigorously dabbing the sweat on his brow with a handkerchief and his face was pale.

The shouting girl clenched her hands into fists. She gripped a small recorder. Someone had picked up a dropped bike and people were entering and exiting the shop rapidly.

Suddenly, someone's foot stepped on something. It was a thin wallet. A man who looked like a detective bent down and picked it up to look it over.

It was made of synthetic leather and peeling at the corners, with a design that looked like a girl would carry it. Opening the slender blue case, he saw a student

identification card. It had a picture of a girl in a school uniform on it.

The name on it read Yura Sugano.

The owner of the voice recognized it. They stared at it, speechless. At the officer. Then at the wallet in his hands. Both of their faces reflected the same thought at the same time.

The sound of a radio broke through and the officer responded and walked away.

Tomoko looked around the empty shop. Nothing had changed. But no one noticed the mirror that'd been left in the corner.

The interminable night showed no signs of ending.

\*\*\*

**YURA** slipped into her bed with no desire to move.

The dim light cast large shadows across the room.

The image of her in hysterics as soon as she'd returned to her room swam to her mind's eye. It'd taken three people to get her back into the room, her mind anxious over whether or not she would ever make it home. She couldn't fight her curiosity and so had peeked at herself in a mirror, only to thrust it away and burst into tears.

Leila had thrown an arm out and shielded Yura from the shattering mirror. Left to her own devices, Yura sobbed. She then dove into her bed.

Once the footsteps grew further away, Yura poked her head out from under her covers and finally let out the breath she'd been holding.

It was most likely Leila. Probably checking on her. She lingered in front of the room for a time before giving up and leaving.

After that, two people had visited Yura's room. The first was Ashes and the second was Leila.

He'd come after hearing about the commotion. But seeing Yura all huddled up, he silently closed the door.

*"What happened?"*

She heard his voice from out front. It was like he was interrogating someone.

*"I-I'm afraid I do not know..."*

Yura heaved a sigh of relief. Even though this wasn't a bad place, she still found it hard to breathe. She felt as if her lungs were hurting. Like her bad feelings had knotted up inside her chest.

When she cried, her emotions were so...all-consuming, they threatened to swallow her up.

Those emotions flowed out with her tears.

Yura felt like she was completely empty inside. All that remained was exhaustion and a strange sense of unreality.

She stared into the darkness, out of energy, unable to do anything but blink.

The words she'd been unable to voice before finally fell from her lips.

*"Can I even make it home?"*

It was like the pain finally registering in the brain after getting a deep cut. It took a while after she said it for those words to truly sink in.

All the shock she'd absorbed was only now hitting her.

*What do I do? Is it even possible to go home?*

*No matter how it tried to hold me down, to choke the life from me, no matter how confining...that world is still where I belong.*

Yura finally understood.

*I came here without even realizing how important my home was.*

She'd been fixated on the beauty, the novelty, and the feeling of freedom.

*Maybe this was a punishment?*

*Maybe this was my punishment for hiding behind my own cowardice.*

*Because I was always running away from the here-and-now? So, in the end, I was kicked out of my own reality.*

*From where I belonged.*

*From the precious people I should have apologized to. I'm such a fool. Such a coward! So blockheaded. So stupid! Always causing everyone trouble. Just foolishly acting like nothing mattered...*

She found herself wondering what Tomoko was doing.

*She must be worried sick about me. After all that happened between us, I just went missing...*

*My mom's probably looking for me too.*

*What if Tomoko is blaming herself...*

*I'm such a fool.*

Yura drew in a breath.

*I'm so selfish! So wretched!*

Covering her eyes, she kept crying.

Was Leila still out in the hall?

She had no clock, so she'd no idea what time it was. She wondered if anyone could hear her from the hallway.

Taking a breath, she held back her tears.

*No, I don't want to stay here any longer. I want to go home before I get forced into a marriage to someone I don't even know, looking even more like a stranger to myself!*

Yura sat up. She got out of bed and stood by the window. She pushed open both shutters and gazed out at the predawn scenery before her.

Stars dotted the sky as it began to lighten. She saw a massive moon, almost twice the size of the one back home, hovering in the sky. Darkness still lingered at the edges of the sky. The forest she had seen and the wasteland from the other day were still shrouded in a dark haze.

She could see herself in the window glass, just as beautiful as when she'd first seen herself the day before. Then gently looking away, she thought, *Before I lose myself, I have to find a way home. I feel like, at this rate, I really will lose myself. I really won't be myself anymore!*

It felt like the unfamiliar sight in the mirror was awaiting its chance to be her.

*No one here knows the real me.*

*They think this distorted version of me is the real me.*

She closed the window and asked herself one more question.

*But who in this world would get to know the real me?*

*Who could I tell everything about myself to?*

*Who exactly?*

Before the thought had even finished forming in her head, Yura spun around and took off.

\*\*\*

**SEI** vacantly gazed up at the sky in the gloomy garden.

The light of dawn illuminated the statue spitting out water night and day. The sight of the square patch of sky overhead was a familiar one. Soon, the sky would be filled with sunrise and then, the morning would come.

*Somehow, I've managed to see this sight once more,* Sei thought.

When morning came, he'd repeat the same daily life. Then return here at night once more. So that he could be alone.

He touched his hand to the place on his cheek where he'd been punched. It was still numb. The cool night wind felt good against it. As he thought back about it, a wry grin spread across his face.

That dainty arm that'd intervened, putting her life on the line. Her loose fists pounding his shoulders ferociously.

That beauty that persisted despite her fear.

*"What a thing to say...!"*

He'd never seen someone trembling in anger, trying to stop what was happening to him.

No matter where he went how he was treated was always the same.

The same pain and feeling of entrapment followed him everywhere. So, at

night, he came here to lick his wounds. Then he'd trudge away again. He'd repeated this over and over, more times than he could count.

Even so, today, he felt more at peace than usual.

How many years had it been since he smiled at anyone?

*Lady Yura, eh?*

Such a strange name. Where exactly was she from? She had jet-black eyes rarely seen in this kingdom.

He likely wouldn't see her so close anytime soon.

He picked up the sword he'd set on the pillar. Dawn was approaching. It had begun to dye the sky, chasing away the last traces of night.

Finally, he turned and headed for the way out.

\*\*\*

**RELYING** on her vague memories, Yura dashed down the corridor, chilled by the night air. She ran, ran, and ran some more.

She passed by three larger gardens in a hurry. She realized they were lawns and ran off, accidentally trampling several flowers on her way through. She charged through the castle, too dark to see where she was going. Still, she kept running, having no desire to rest.

*He may not be there. Maybe that was just a coincidence. But...*

If he wasn't, she'd wait until he came. She could wait.

She shook as she ran, finally reaching that indistinct little area. With that familiar aerodynamic shape of its entrance. The sight of it gave her exhausted legs one last little burst of strength.

Yura shot out of the passageway and into the garden where the light blinded her.

The silver light of dawn rained down on her. The sun had risen. The broken water fountain and water surface reflected the morning sun's light.

Yura's ragged breathing was the only sound to echo throughout the otherwise silent garden.



Lightheaded after her insane dash through the castle grounds she took a moment to rest by the fountain. Yura blinked her eyes and looked. Her heart was pounding so hard, she was afraid it might leap out of her mouth.

*I guess...he isn't here.*

Surprisingly, she didn't cry.

Maybe she'd done so much crying over the past day, she had cried herself out.

She knelt and leaned forward, putting her hands on her knees.

At that moment—

“Lady Yu...ra...?”

She looked up.

The first thing she saw was the sheath of his sword.

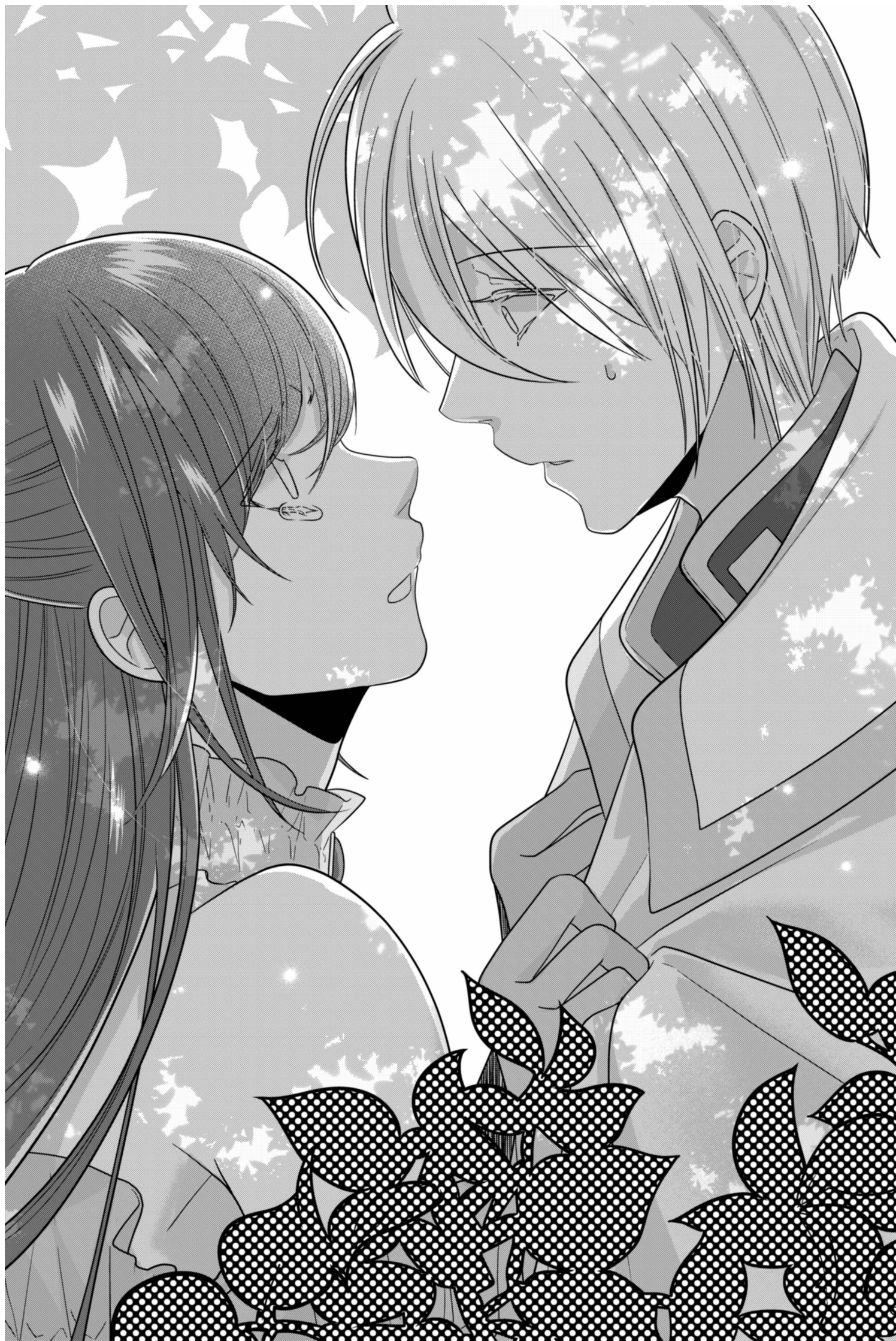
He was scowling magnificently and yet, she couldn't believe he was really here.

“Lady Yura...!”

Yura leapt toward him. She reached out and grabbed his clothes. He staggered back a little, but still, Sei managed to catch Yura. He was taken aback. Yura mindlessly cried out, clinging to the astonished Sei.

“Help me! Please, help me, Sei...!”





She clung to him in desperation, as if she were terrified of some invisible force. He embraced the shaking Yura tightly with both arms.

“L-Lady Yura...?”

Bewildered, he began to rub Yura’s back. His eyes were wide in shock, and he tried to awkwardly comfort her.

“Wh-What happened, Lady Yura? What in the world is wrong?” he asked.

In that moment, more than anything else, she wanted a hand to pull her out of the mud before she sank forever. Just someone to hold her and tell her it was all right, if only for a moment. Even if that someone was just an illusion.

Yura began to sob. Sei continued to comfort her as she wept like a child.

The dawning sun was so warm...

“Will you listen to what I have to say? You may not believe any of it. But it’s the truth. All of it! So please, trust me,” Yura said, pleading as she shook.

However, when she looked up at him, she realized there was something there more eloquent than words.

His eyes were wide, yet they remained focused on Yura.

“I understand,” he nodded. “So...will you tell me, Lady Yura?”

Yura began to cry once more. But something was different this time. Mixed in with all that fear was a hint of relief.

She cried, coughed, and tried to cover her fear as she began to speak. About all the weight she’d been carrying. She explained every little bit of the challenges she had faced since coming to this world.

## Chapter 6: Hesitation

“**LADY** Yuura. What happened? Ahh—”

When Leila saw Sei escorting Yura back to her room several hours later, she shrieked. The color drained from her face when she saw how exhausted Yura was from crying. She practically dragged Yura off Sei’s back with the three other ladies-in-waiting.

“Don’t touch her!” Leila shouted. She knocked away Sei’s hand as he tried to hold Yura up.

“...”

However, Sei silently pulled his hand away. He was used to this kind of treatment.

The raven-haired lady-in-waiting gave an awkward bow. Then the women hurried Yura into the room with them.

As he watched them go, Sei thought, *So that’s...what happened...*

He was surprised after he heard Yura’s explanation. She had visibly withered, as if she’d forced herself to say everything she’d kept bottled up.

With a voice so composed that it surprised him, Sei began to speak. He’d nothing but this little makeshift space to offer her.

“So...how about we do this?”

Each day, by the time the sunset bell rang, they were to meet at the Spring of Rudra—his little garden of solitude.

“I don’t know what I can do for you. But for now, let’s review what we know so far. We may find some clues.”

Those words finally helped Yura take a deep breath and stifle her tears. She nodded so vigorously that he feared her head might fall off, then he wiped her tears with his cape.

*Well, it certainly is a handy piece of fabric.*

He could hear voices inside the room. It was the ladies-in-waiting from earlier talking. Giving in, Sei turned to leave.

*There's nothing more for me to do here. Anything else would be out of character for me.*

Then he stopped. At the same moment, a thought occurred to Sei and he turned back.

*I have no idea what I should do.*

He was at a total loss.

It was like striking at an invisible enemy you knew was there but couldn't see.

In silence, his anxieties began to creep up on him.

*There's no other way to handle it.*

Sei had no choice but to let it go and leave.

\*\*\*

**YURA** once again found herself floating in that dream.

There was neither sound nor time in this place. The only thing Yura saw was her own floating consciousness. The edge of a world. A place of both beginnings and endings.

Yura sprang to life immediately, like a computer that'd been left on in standby mode until someone hit a button. As soon as she awoke, her mind was racing.

Flustered, she traced the threads of her memory.

*This is a bed.*

*The bed in the room I'm staying in.*

She recognized the canopy and the room's layout.

*I see. So I'm back here again.*

*But how?*

She'd been so hysterical, to the point where the tears wouldn't stop. She was

so pitiful, but Sei had offered her a shoulder to lean on.

The sun had long since risen by the time she left the garden.

If it wasn't a dream...

The way that honey-colored hair felt so close. Those narrowed eyes that seemed at a total loss. The way his palm had gently comforted her as she'd sobbed uncontrollably.

Even if it was nothing more than an illusion, she felt the littlest bit of comfort in that moment. Like she had finally been able to shed something she'd carried for so long.

“—Sei!”

She instinctively called out, leaping up from her bed. The second she moved, a dull pain shot through her leg. She gasped at the pain and realized someone was walking toward her in broad strides. The curtain was yanked open.

Yura's eyes grew wide. Leila was standing there with a furious look on her face. At least that was how it looked to Yura.

She shrank back, ready to be scolded, and started to apologize. But Leila lunged at her. She squeezed her.

“Ah...”

Yura was taken aback as Leila held her close.

Yura could tell she was shaking a little.

“Lady Yuura...”

Yura's eyes widened. She couldn't believe it. Leila was crying. The other ladies suddenly surrounded her.

“Lady Yuura...I'm so relieved... Thank goodness you're all right...Lady Yuura...!”

Yura blinked. Everyone else's eyes were red and swollen. Leila trembled and Yura embraced her back.

*I did it again, she thought. This is by far my greatest sin so far. To put these people who cared for me through so much.*

“...Sorry, Leila. I’m so sorry.”

Yura closed her eyes.

*I haven’t changed. I’m so pigheaded and self-centered. I wish I could just get my pathetic life together...*

Her eyelids grew hot. Guilty over her own uselessness, she fought back tears and apologized over and over again.

\*\*\*

**YURA** sipped the briny tasting tea in silence. Each sip helped calm her nerves and improve her overall mood.

*If I had one superpower it would be that no matter what happens, I always cheer up after crying it out.*

Leila had been standing stiff and awkwardly the whole time. Every time the cup drained, she’d stiffen.

Yura heaved a sigh. Leila had refused, despite Yura’s repeated insistence, to sit down.

*We’re so close in age, but I guess, since we’re master and servant, we’re different*

“I’m pleased that it seems Lord Fareeja did not attempt anything,” Leila suddenly muttered, causing Yura to spit the tea out of her mouth. She coughed and quickly pulled the cup away from her lips.

“Th-That’s horrible!”

Leila’s eyes were wide.

“What do you mean, ‘nothing?’ What would he have done?” Yura asked.

Resigned, Leila put down her cup and straightened her posture. Never taking her eyes off Yura.

“You seem so terribly exhausted...”

She exhaled and stood from her seat. “At any rate,” Leila continued, “please abstain from such activities in the future. His Majesty might notice and take issue as well. So...”



“R-Right...”

Yura shrank back.

*So, this was a lecture after all.*

Leila turned her back on her. Then she approached the table and looked back again.

“I have something to return to you.”

Yura looked surprised.

*Something to return to me?* Something was sitting on the table. It turned out to be a wooden box. The corners were reinforced and it had a key attached. Yura blinked.

But when she opened it, she recognized it right away.

It was her school uniform, along with everything else Yura had had on her when she first arrived.

“Oh, these?” Yura smiled.

When she picked up her phone, her watch with its broken hand, and her bike key, her heart throbbed in pain.

They were such ordinary objects yet seeing them made her anxiety skyrocket.

She felt a precious bond and a sense of familiarity. As she gently closed the box, Yura realized why they’d returned her belongings to her in a lock box. These were things that didn’t exist in this world. Things that were clearly alien.

“Aren’t you going to ask me anything about it...?”

She could hear her voice cracking. Leila and the other ladies said nothing and gave no response.

After a silence that lasted an uncomfortably long time, they all exchanged glances and smiled.

“I beg your pardon. But they *are* rather mysterious objects.”

“.....”

“But you still don’t have your memory back, do you, Lady Yuura?”

Yura was silent, merely staring back at Leila. She seemed the same as always. She placed her hands together and gazed at Yura like a pretty cat.

There was nothing in her eyes that gave Yura reason to be afraid.

“And also,” Leila said as she smiled and shrugged her shoulders a bit. “No matter how strange these items are, that doesn’t change the fact that you’re *you*, Lady Yuura...”

Yura’s eyes widened at those words. Leila peered back at her.

Yura smiled. Something warm welled up inside her.

It felt like sunlight shining into a room that’d been closed up tight for a long time.

A broad grin stretched across Yura’s face. It felt like the first time she’d smiled out of actual joy in a long time.

“...Thank you!”

Leila was taken aback. Her face instantly grew bright red. Yura gazed at Leila, who’d now pressed her hands to her cheeks, then at all the other embarrassed ladies.

*I don’t belong here. Even my body has been warped by the mirror. But I can’t worry about that right now. I need to figure out how to make things work for me in the moment.*

Yura grinned. Standing up, she hid the box under her bed. Leila blinked at her. “I’ve something I have to do. Just one thing that can’t wait.”

Fixing her shawl, Yura headed for the door.

“Lady Yuura, where are you going?” Leila followed her, concerned. Yura opened the door, then looked back over her shoulder.

“I’m going to see Ashes,” Yura said.

Leila’s eyes widened.

Everyone there looked taken aback.

“Why?”

“Not that it’s a problem...”

*What if I’m stuck here—*

*I don’t want to think about that. I don’t.*

If she had to be here, this was something she *had* to do. Leila’s eyes boggled.

*I have to take care of this and soon.*

Somewhere, a bell rang.

*I need to talk to him about this whole marriage thing.*

\*\*\*

**THERE** are three great dangers in the world.

The first is recklessness. The second is thoughtlessness. And the third is defenselessness.

At least that’s what she’d heard at some point in her life.

*So, do all three together mean instant death?* Yura thought as she stood before the massive door.

The throne room was in the very center of the castle. The colossal door, more magnificent than any other she’d seen here, towered over her. It stood opposite a dizzyingly large hallway. Yura was beginning to regret her decision.

The door was flanked by dark green stone pillars. Decorated with fancy bare wood, and flowing geometric patterns were inlaid into the stone pillars. Guards in heavy armor stood watch on either side of the door.

The man who’d disappeared a moment ago returned, informing Yura that she’d been granted an audience. As soon as he did, Yura wanted nothing more than to turn and flee as the doors opened without a squeak.

A long red carpet stretched further into the room. A familiar tapestry hung on the wall before her.

The mark of the eagle with the sun at his back.

There were chairs facing each other on opposite sides of the carpet.

*Two, four...* Eleven chairs, and all of them empty at the moment.

Further in, she could see a platform. The carpet ended just before a seat atop the platform and there was someone sitting there, his legs crossed.

“.....”

That someone was reading the document resting on his lap. As Yura approached, he looked up, the corners of his mouth lifting into a smile.

“Ashes?”

He looked surprised as she timidly called his name. His lips relaxed into a smile. He held out one hand, beckoning her over.

“Yuura.”

Yura stopped just before him. The man standing close to the throne also eyed Yura with surprise.

Ashes took her hand and looked at her as if to make sure she was all right as he stood.

“Shall we go somewhere more private?”

\*\*\*

### ***MEANWHILE...***

Sei finished his duties and training session early, then made his way to the castle library.

The bell tolling midday rang throughout the area. Tolkinia’s Great Library Tower was situated in the castle’s northern wing. It boasted a collection of books in the hundreds of thousands, the largest collection not only in the empire, but on the entire continent.

Sei kept his head down, silently walking between the throngs of people. The library was packed with scholars from the town surrounding the castle who’d gained permission from the administration.

Quickly signing in at the entrance and slipping inside, Sei knew right where he was headed. In front of him was a square pillar with a wooden board attached—a catalogue of all the books in the tower. The long desk off to the side bore several candlesticks. Sei chose one that had recently been lit.

He scanned the wooden board zipping across the tiny lines of text until he finally found what he was looking for. He couldn't help the sudden feeling of dread he felt as his eyes drifted over the item again and again. Confirming its location, Sei finally headed in that direction.

*Myths.*

*It's definitely not a category I've set eyes on in my lifetime,* Sei thought.

It just seemed entirely too unreliable.

But this was what he came for.

Ever since she'd divulged her situation to him, this was the only place he could think to come.

A long time ago, his father, his one and only living parent, told him a story. But the only thing that was the same about every story his elderly father told him in that too drafty room was the genre.

The one thing he'd heard over and over without ever tiring of it was the fairy tale: the myth of Tolkinia's creation.

Candle in hand, Sei approached the shelf. He pulled out the book he was looking for. Amid the dusty air, he opened it.

\*\*\*

**THE** emperor's comfortable sitting room was neither gaudy nor extravagant. It wasn't made to show off, but for people to relax in.

*Though I can certainly guess his likes just from looking around in here.*

Ashes certainly had good taste. The whole room was done in mahogany and reflected the dim light. The calm colors of the carpet and style of furniture reminded her of Tomoko's shop.

As Yura took in the room, Ashes had his back to her. He tossed his cape onto his chair and smiled at her.

"Make yourself comfortable."

His words caught Yura off-guard.

At that second, her eyes were caught by something strange lying on the desk.

*I guess I really don't feel that nervous.*

The room was full of rare objects and things she'd never seen before.

A map of an unfamiliar continent with several lines stretched across it, and there was an odd protractor device laying on it. Books with beautiful bindings lay around the room. There were several pages strewn about with a quill pen among them. It looked to Yura to be the results of someone working fervently.

There was an armillary sphere atop the hearth, as well as a decorative double-edged sword and a sundial. There were also a variety of busts carved from marble and wood.

And then there was a tiny wooden box on top of the table. It was covered with fabric and Yura realized suddenly that there was something inside.

It was a coin. A coin with someone's face etched into it. Someone with an expressionless face and their long hair tied back in a single ponytail. A young man wearing a cape with several pleats.

As Yura stared at it, realization hit her and she looked up.

"This is *you*. Isn't it, Ashes?"

Ashes looked up and shrugged.

"It took you awhile to notice."

"It doesn't look anything like you!" Yura blurted out.

As she compared the coin to the real Ashes, she burst into laughter. Ashes looked hurt.

"That's quite rude. It's the real thing. It's the work of the best craftsman in Tolkinia."

"But it doesn't *look* like you at all!"

Giggling, Yura flopped down into a nearby chair. Glancing at Yura, Ashes looked sad.

"You could never understand my torment," Ashes frowned, shaking his head. "They said they could 'depict my likeness exactly as it is,' but there's no proof of that."

Yura felt bad for him and yet she still laughed.

“Is this it?”

“So far,” Ashes moaned. “I won’t be outdone by some ideal version of myself!”

“Is it *that* bad?” Yura blinked.

Ashes seemed to be reaching back through his memory.

“Yes, all of them have made needless additions.”

“Additions?”

Ashes nodded with a serious look.

“I mean to say they’re exaggerated. There are certain rules at play here. First of all, I was drawn...muscular.”

Yura burst into laughter all over again. Ashes openly frowned.

“To appear strong enough that I could single-handedly slay a charging bull. Also...I was given a more handsome face. They’ve ignored all my changes to the prototype.”

Yura approached him while laughing before she clapped Ashes on the shoulders.

“You don’t need any ‘additions.’”

“I’m honored,” Ashes said and shrugged her off coldly. “When people come for an audience with me, they are thrown off and demand ‘Where is the emperor?’ It’s such an inconvenience.”

Yura threw her head back and laughed louder. Ashes looked fed up as he watched Yura laugh so hard, she cried.

“You have it, don’t you! That picture. Where is it?”

“I will *not* show it to you!” Ashes declared. “...If I tell you not to look for it, you will anyway. Won’t you?”

As Yura continued laughing, Ashes pointed to the wooden box with a “Hmph!”

“What do you think? He’s the greatest engineer in the land, isn’t he?”

Yura nodded eagerly.

Returning the coin to the box and laughing for a bit, Yura suddenly realized he was staring at her.

“What?”

Ashes suddenly became serious, looking at the still-smiling Yura, he flashed her a relieved look. His lips loosened and he spoke in an unexpectedly gentle tone.

“You finally smiled.”

“Huh?”

Yura’s eyes grew wide.

“Y-Yeah...”

Yura gave a loud, exaggerated gulp and nodded. After an uncomfortably long moment passed, she searched frantically for the right words. She finally offered an awkward, “I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Then she bowed.

Ashes’ eyes widened and he peered at her like he was observing the flustered Yura for the first time. When his eyes met hers, they looked dubious. Yura felt even more uncomfortable.

“...Hmph.”

He quickly turned away, looking out the window. It was a poor example, but he wasn’t the sort of person she could normally talk to so candidly.

The sound of a bell ringing reverberated on the wind. It was a very gentle sound. To Yura, unnervingly so.

*Right! I can’t just stay here all day like this. I did come to talk about something.*

“Uh. Umm...”

Yura looked up, surprised at his sudden absence. She panicked and looked



around for him.

“A-Ashes?”

Tucked into the right corner of the room was a little door. It was the same color as the wall. And it was open.

She rushed over and peered inside. Then she gasped.

Inside was a hexagonal room.

Unlike the other room, this room was covered with walnut-colored mahogany. The lower part of the walls had glass in them that, on closer inspection, was one long bookshelf. It was bursting with books, with no room to spare.

There wasn't much that one could call proper furniture in the room, only a couch and a table. Ashes was looking through the bookshelves, his back to her.

“At least say something when you leave...” Yura complained as she approached him.

Several books were lying on the couch. She picked up the top book and flipped through it.

“Uh...”

It was full of a script she didn't recognize.

*Is it some sort of cursive? Not good. I'm horrible at English... What do you do when you can't read?*

Yura looked up after the idea suddenly struck her.

*That's right. Why can I understand the spoken words here but not the written ones? I'm fine for now, but what if, I can't understand at all? What'll I do then? Translation shmanslation! If I lose the ability to speak, I won't be able to communicate with anyone.*

Yura shook her head and smacked her cheeks. She tried to disrupt such futile thoughts. She returned the book to the couch

*I will learn the language! At least well enough to be able to write it. If Sei teaches me a little at a time, then I'll be able to communicate in writing if a time*

*comes where I need to fully know the language.*

Ashes silently continued examining the books.

“Didn’t you have something you wanted to talk about?” he asked.

“Hwhuh?” she sputtered.

She was taken aback at what felt like a surprise attack. Ashes turned back to her with a smug smile.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“.....”

Yura gulped.

*H-How did he know?*

Her mind went blank. Yura was susceptible to being caught off-guard like this.

*I’ve always had a habit of freezing up when this happens!*

Ashes faced Yura again, leaning his back against the wall and folding his arms, as if waiting for her to speak.

Yura’s tongue failed her, her throat dry.

She could feel the words spinning fruitlessly through her mind.

“Um...”

She couldn’t think of anything to say but that. Ashes waited patiently for her to begin speaking. It began to feel like the world’s most serious staring contest. Yura finally looked away.

*I’m such a fool...how could I forget something so important?*

“...I came here to talk about the wedding.”

“What?”

Ashes’ face became stern. Yura recoiled. He waited for her to continue, a dubious look on his face. Yura began to explain nervously.

“I-I heard from the others...”

Ashes didn’t move a muscle as she spoke. Gave not a peep or nod. Yura

avoided the specifics, and after she quickly tried to explain, she shut her eyes tight for fear he'd get angry at her.

Ashes only showed a hint of emotion once Yura stopped talking. He brought the tips of his brows together in disgust and spat out a short phrase. "How ill-mannered!"

Yura shrank back further.

"...I'm very sorry."

Ashes folded his arms in vexation. Feeling awkward, Yura looked away. She glanced around the room, trying to find something else for her eyes to land on.

There was a beautiful decoration on the wall Ashes leaned against. It was inlaid craftwork that resembled a cameo carving. It seemed to be telling a story...

It looked like a scene from a myth.

It was spread across three panels of the six-walled room but seemed to comprise one image. It was like a microcosm of the human world. Some people standing on the earth, others gazing up at the sky, and some staring down from the heavens.

"...It's pretty," Yura mumbled, then quickly closed her mouth.

Ashes left his spot on the wall to gaze up at the decoration with her. When his eyes met Yura's, he gave her a wry smile.

Right in front of them was the depiction of a woman. Several angels were supporting her, their long hair blowing in the wind. She looked like a goddess with a gentle smile...

"Pateus," Ashes said. Yura looked up at him and Ashes indicated the carving. "Numeous of the soil. Raulos, Eanis, and Celus, the children of the Four Great Gods. Alekus the God of Power and his wife Lupitel. Orsenus, the God of Triumph..."

Yura blinked. So, it *was* a myth. These gods, whose names she was hearing for the first time, were all beautiful. It was as if they were all actually breathing inside the image.

It was an intricate masterpiece. As if they moved within the paint, but only for a second to catch the eye.

“Are they *all* gods?”

“No.”

Ashes shook his head with a grin. There was one last person in the painting, a completely naked woman who looked as if she’d fallen from the heavens. She was gazing at a spot on the ground, both arms stretched out before her. But that was where the image ended. Yura tilted her head at that final image.

“Who is she?”

Ashes did not respond. He merely narrowed his eyes. After a pause, he finally whispered.

“She has no name.”

Yura was shocked. But a light flashed in his eyes as he gazed up at the image, a light Yura thought she had seen before.

“She has no name. The goddess Pateus, feeling such pity for the man, broke the head off of a flower. This girl was said to be born from the reflection in the tears that resulted. She is the Mirror Maiden.”

Yura’s eyes grew wide. It’d been a few short words, but something he had said caught her ear.

“The Mirror Maiden?”

*“Let’s meet once a day to discuss what we’ve learned. Perhaps we’ll find some clues.”* She heard Sei’s voice in her head.

Perhaps this might be some sort of hint? Yura began to feel the tiniest bit of hope welling up inside her as she gazed up at Ashes. He seemed interested, a face she hadn’t seen on him before, and he smiled in mild vexation.

“Where should I start?” he settled on the couch with an inquisitive look. Yura waited in silence. He finally smiled, having been worn down by Yura’s persistence, and began to talk.

“She has no name. Her legend is said to be among the oldest myths in all of

Tolkinia.”

“Right...”

During his life, a previous ruler had written down the various creation myths of the land, regardless of whether or not they were true. The wall art depicted one such vignette.

“The mighty grandfather and protector of our land, Excellius, bestowed that nickname upon her. Then everyone else began to call her that. ‘The Maiden of the Mirror.’ In a time before humans walked the land. There were four gods,” Ashes went on. “They would later come to be called the Four Great Gods, and as they watched over the humans who populated the world, they created their own sort of amusement. They would create one individual, to be blessed above all their other creations.”

“...Creations?”

“All things are created by the gods,” Ashes said.

“To borrow a phrase from the Nikeans, all things emerge from the earliest gods...”

“Uh-huh,” Yura nodded vaguely.

*I really don't think I know enough for any of this to make sense. And what's this about “...amusement?”*

Yura withheld her knee-jerk-reaction from her lips. Ashes continued.

“...Finally, the gods chose one man, and bestowed upon him all the benevolence they could. His blessings never faded. His life was guaranteed good fortune and grace. He had the most handsome face. Every sword he picked up guaranteed him victory. Where he walked, glory followed. The ground upon which he rested chased away death and brought healing. Pateus, the goddess of spring, brought blessings unto him, and his heart was sturdy like steel...”

“Wow,” Yura blinked. “So, they were very kind gods.”

“In the beginning,” Ashes said with a light laugh. “The child blessed with grace grew into a handsome youth as was hoped. But those looks earned him the

jealousy of the gods, and he lost the protection they'd offered throughout his life."

"That's horrible!" Yura said with indignation. Ashes smiled softly.

"Taking pity upon the young man as he wept through the night, Pateus created a girl from the reflection mirrored in his tears. That girl was the Mirror Maiden. The maiden reflected truth and exposed deceit. Her eyes revealed the boy's true form, and she gave him her love for the rest of his life. That's the gist of her legend."

Once he finished speaking, Ashes handed Yura the book he was holding. It was the one she'd picked up off the couch earlier. She opened it to the page held by the string bookmark. There was the same illustration as depicted on the wall behind them. Yura stared down at it.

"...That's horrible. No matter what, there are things you can and can't do," Yura mumbled. Her lips tapered into a pout. "They weren't good gods at all. It's horrible! Why do you have that picture on your wall?"

Ashes listened quietly to Yura's discontent. He smiled and took the book back from her.

"You think so?"

"Yes."

Ashes laughed lightly at Yura, who gulped instinctively. She was getting increasingly sullen.

"What?"

He'd been treating her like a child the whole time.

"You're mean, aren't you, Ashes?" Yura started to say but held her words back.

"Yes, he *did* suffer misfortune. But do you know how fortunate it was that he was given a ray of light in the form of someone to free him from his shackles?"

Yura's head popped up.

He was clearly providing a counterargument. His tone was like a teacher who,

unable to guide a student toward the right answer, ended up just giving it to them.

Yura hung her head. She could suddenly feel herself wilting.

“...I’m sorry.”

The words were the same ones she’d repeated time and time again. It was like a bad habit.

Tomoko’s voice suddenly ran through her mind.

*“Why do you always apologize like that? Even when you’re not in the wrong...”*

*But maybe I am wrong here?* Yura gently lifted her eyes.

“Is it about the wedding ceremony?” Ashes asked, trying to change the subject.

*That’s right. That’s what I came to talk to him about. How did we end up on this other topic?*

“Are you finally getting used to it?”

Ashes laughed sardonically.

“People here never seem to tire of such ill-mannered gossip. It’s complete nonsense!”

Yura’s eyes grew wide. Suddenly, she found herself voiceless.

“...Really?”

“Yes.”

Yura thought she felt a weight lifted off her shoulders. A smile broke out on her face in relief.

“Ohh! That’s it! That’s what it was!”

“But—”

Suddenly, he reached out and touched Yura’s cheek.

Yura had become relaxed and innocently looked up. But now, she suddenly froze.

“Uhm...”

Ashes gazed down at her, so close she could touch his hair. She stiffened up as those aqua eyes drew near.

“But you...*you* might be able to do it.”

His eyes narrowed, and he gazed at Yura as if he were seeing through to something. Yura was at a loss for words as he whispered to her.

“You might be able to succeed. To release this puppet from the iron shackles of his fate...”

Yura stared in utter confusion, dumbfounded and without a clue as to Ashes meaning.

\*\*\*

**THE** second he'd finished reading, Sei slammed the book shut. As he did, a cloud of dust assaulted him for his rough handling.

His eyebrow twitched in irritation at the onslaught of dust.

*I knew it*, Sei thought as he stared at the nearby candlestick.

The wax of the burned-out candlestick had taken on a strange shape and was clearly past its working life as a candle.

If he just laughed it off as impossible, that would be it. It was easy to tell himself that other dimensions didn't exist. But if he did that, he'd be batting Yura's hand away, thrusting her further into darkness.

But this story was every bit as crazy as it sounded.

He was like a wind-up doll.

*If you wind the doll up, they'll repeat the same movements for a fixed time. But when they've used up all their momentum, they'll stop moving, and they grow silent.*

*Then the next time you lift the arm and wind it up, it does the same thing all over again. Just going in circles.*

Even as he tried to think, his brain stopped, and with a bitter impatience, he finally hit a dead end. Then he'd start back at the beginning, mulling it all over



again and again.

He finally stood up.

*How does one believe in something they can't see...?*

He picked the book up once more and turned to make his way to the entrance. He remembered the past while he walked. A memory from the distant past. When he was very young. Most of his memories were painful ones...

One memory came to mind. His father hugging him and speaking to him as he sobbed.

Because he'd been born looking the way he did, it was always like that. He was always being chased by people throwing rocks at him. There weren't many who accepted him, save for the father who'd raised him.

*"You don't believe in what you can't see? What a thing to say..."*

His hoarse voice echoed in Sei's mind.

At that time, he'd been deeply hurt. He had no faith left to give. Everyone hated him. Mocked him. Humans were brutal, cruel, and repulsive creatures.

Sei couldn't take it anymore. Shaken, the father had asked his child. He peered right into his eyes.

*"So then, why do you trust me?"*

At that time, Sei couldn't answer. He didn't answer. He just stared at him through misty eyes, searching. For an answer.

*"Well...it's because...you raised me...you took care of me."*

Sei stopped walking. He released a great heaving laugh.

*That's right. And then Dad said...*

*"That's right. So, you can see it then."*

He could. The problem had been that he himself hadn't believed he could.

*"Just as you feel affection for me," he'd said. "It's all in your eyes. In your words, your attitude, everything."*

The truth had been there the whole time.

The book he'd been studying slipped from his fingers startling him back to the present. He tried to think back to when they'd first met. To how those eyes had peered directly into him. Yura's keen eyes were clear and true. There wasn't a hint of deceit.

*"Please believe me."*

The memory flashed through his mind. The way she stood before him, reaching for him, blocking his path. Her cheeks red, she was shouting in desperation...

Were her eyes clouding over? He knew the answer.

Sei chuckled.

*"I can't believe it."*

He knelt and scooped up the book. As he did, an illustration caught his eye. The beautiful book had golden ornamentation that shined. That light shining in his eyes made him think. He was always frowning. But today, he felt surprisingly warm.

It wasn't something easy to believe. But he didn't think it was a lie either. In that case...

\*\*\*

## **MEANWHILE...**

Standing in the hall, Yura tried to calm her nerves. She'd run away, throwing herself through the door.

*A fleeing hare would have been much cuter,* Yura thought as she panted. *That was close...*

She touched her cheek and gritted her teeth.

*I...I can't believe it...* Yura thought, *I can't believe he would do something like that.*

*Ashes is a womanizer... I thought he was a good person...* Yura glared at the ground and groaned.

*I guess I need to be careful around him?* She filed Ashes away as a suspicious person in the corner of her mind. She thought she finally had some answers, but things had only gotten more confusing.

*My problems just continue to increase.*

Looking up, she began to feel the weight of the day collapsing down on her. Exhaustion was quick to overwhelm her tired body. Her thoughts had become completely tangled up. Like individual bits of string, all tangled in one massive knot. And there seemed to be no way to undo it.

Sei's face crept like a shadow into her mind, and she began to feel uneasy.

*Did he really believe me?* Her anxiety was becoming unbearable. Trying to ease the sensation that she'd no one to turn to, Yura shook her head and tried to destroy these horrible doubts.

She'd heard two bells before coming to this place. She blinked. She could only rely on her hearing to tell time in this strange new world. One interval was marked with a bell, about once every three hours. Doing the math from midday, that'd mean six, then nine hours. So then, the next bell would be the evening or sunset bell.

*It'll be all right. As long as I don't get lost.*

\*\*\*

**THE** statues floating in the darkness were horribly creepy, almost ethereal.

As she stood in the garden, Yura took in the day's challenges while trying to steady her breathing.

*Why am I always running when I come here?* Yura wondered.

It was like she was always running from something.

She looked around to see if anyone was there.

Just like in the afternoon, the fountain was dribbling water. The garden was dim. She took a detour, being careful not to slip on the half-dry paving stones, and then, she noticed him.

It was Sei. He was sitting with his back against a pillar.

“Sei!”

When she called his name, he put his hands on his knees and got to his feet. The sight made Yura smile.

He was carrying a book under his arm. Yura clenched both hands. For a moment, the sense of relief was dizzying.

“...You came.”

Instead of a reply, Sei blinked at her and met her gaze. Then, he took several steps forward. He stopped at her side.

Yura looked up, feeling apprehensive at the sight of his face.

“Umm...”

*It doesn't matter what. But I should say something to him.*

“L-Leila and Sisty—they're my ladies-in-waiting—they just gave me a bunch of things. They gave me the clothes I came to this world in. The things I'd been holding—they hid them for me, so no one else would be suspicious. But I can talk to you about it, right? I should've brought them to show you...” Yura faltered as she spoke.

Sei stared at Yura in silence. It was like the way one looked at a child while keeping their real feelings hidden.

“...I guess you really can't believe me...” Yura muttered, looking down. She'd no more words to share.

*Oh, I'm such a fool, Yura thought. He'll probably laugh me out of here now. Or maybe he'll just throw me out.*

“I believe you,” Sei said reassuringly, just as she'd given up.

His words were so sober, Yura looked up. His face was calm but his eyes wide. Sei was looking right at her, without so much as a blink. Yura could hear her voice shaking.

“...You're lying.”

“No.”

He shook his head. Yura realized for the first time that he was looking right at

her.

“Really?” Yura asked.

Hesitantly, she gazed into his eyes. She struggled to think of what else to say.

“Can I really trust that you believe me...?”

On reflection, it was a strange question. But Sei didn’t laugh. He blinked thoughtfully. Then he lifted a hand and brushed Yura’s that clutched the hem of her skirt, trying to get her to let it go.

In a panic, Yura pulled her hand away.

Then...

Suddenly, Sei swept one hand across his chest and bowed his head to Yura. He looked at her and said, “I swear to you.”

Yura’s eyes grew wide.

“I realize you may doubt my words. That you may not trust me...”

Sei stopped abruptly. Yura was smiling.

“I swear to you, my lady...”

It was like a fire had been lit in her heart. Like she’d been suddenly illuminated by the light of the sun.

Yura stood as tall as she could, putting her arms around Sei’s neck. His eyes grew wide and he held in his breath.

“...Thank you!”

The tears suddenly overflowed and Yura sputtered. The tears warmed her cheeks that’d been chilled by the night air. It felt like the tears had been cold to start with. But today they were warm. Very warm.

“L-Lady Yura...”

A bit confused, Sei pulled away from her.

Blinking her tears away, Yura smiled.

She felt a bit embarrassed over how hard she’d cried the night before. She still couldn’t stop shaking.

She still remained clueless and in the dark, but...

*“An unparalleled beauty.”*

Yura lifted her head.

*“The ugliest in the land.”*

*How does Sei see me right now?*

Sei looked bashful as their eyes met. But he quickly looked away. That was all the answer she needed.

She felt sad she couldn't look Sei in the eye when she said “Thank you.”

Yura stood tall and gazed at the sky. The corset pulled tight around her creaked. She was like a cog that'd been still so long, she'd forgotten how to move.

*Someday, I will get back to Japan.* Yura thought, making an oath to herself.

*Until then, I'll just have to deal with my strange looks and this corset...*

*But I will definitely find a way home!*

## Chapter 7: The Night of the Holy Grail Festival

**HER** dream smelled like sunshine. It was a dream wrapped in milky white and, when she finally stirred, it was like the altitude had changed.

She had no sense of equilibrium.

All was silent. All was safe.

There was a warmth there that'd cooled.

Like gazing into a cup filled with hot milk. Yura heaved a sigh. Inhaling that gentle scent, she smiled contentedly.

*Oh, what a lovely smell.*

Pulling in her arms and legs, Yura grasped at the fading traces of her dream.

*It's all right, my alarm clock still hasn't gone off.*

She should've been able to sleep a little longer. But someone was watching her. She could tell, even with her eyes closed.

It was her mother.

*Mom, you dried my futon for me, didn't you?* Yura beamed.

She tried to reach for her.

"Lady Yuura."

Yura's eyes snapped open like someone had splashed her with cold water. It was as if that milky white dream had been blown away by some chemical reaction.

"Good morning, Lady Yuura."

Yura struggled to sit up. Leila was standing right by her bed. She was wearing a white dress like the one she'd worn during Yura's first night there, with an animated smile on her face.

Looking out the window, Yura saw that the sun had only just risen.

“L-Leila...”

With a sudden, uncomfortable feeling, Yura pulled the comforter up over her mouth. Leila was smiling her usual affable smile. Yura inched deeper under the covers.

“Wh-What is it? Why are you wearing that...?”

“It’s for church,” she replied, lifting the comforter. “Now, please get up!”

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“**Ugh...** I’m so *tired*. I can’t keep doing this every morning...”

The early morning air was so cold, it made her shiver. It was even worse inside this drafty castle. Since they were going to church, Yura was dressed in a tidy, silky pink dress and grumbled about it until it was time to head to the chapel. It was late at night when she’d finally fell asleep. Being someone who needed nine hours of sleep a night, Yura was finding this lifestyle hard to deal with.

“It’s cold. Let’s go back, Leila!”

“Oh, you’re such a whiner, Lady Yuura!”

Leila stomped her foot in frustration.

Having fallen silent in shock, Yura held her book dejectedly.

“I still can’t read this language, though, you know?”

“You may just *pretend* to read it.”

“So, are these hymns? Prayers? I won’t be able to sing or say them with everyone else.”

“For now, you may just mouth along with everyone.”

*That feels so wrong...*

Yura lowered her brows. Leila sighed in frustration and turned away indignantly.

“At any rate, no matter what you say, please have patience over the next ten days. This is also for *your* sake, Lady Yuura.”

“What do you mean?”



Leila peered into Yura's bored face.

"Once every two years, we are able to see the elites at this time," she said softly.

"Ohh," Yura replied vaguely. "And so?"

"We can see them on the third day of the Festival of Cleansing. The governor's family and all the senior officials gather. Did you know that you will be counted among them?"

"What's that? Nobody said anything to me about this!"

"They didn't *have* to," Leila eloquently threw Yura's words back at her. "You would likely have heard about it tomorrow."

*This is a violation of my rights*, Yura thought, on the verge of tears.

"That doesn't make any sense. I won't go! It doesn't even have anything to do with me."

"How absurd!" Leila grew angry. She drew close to Yura. Intimidatingly close. "It has *everything* to do with you," she boomed. Her eyes fixed on Yura. "Lady Yuura, you are under the care of His Majesty, are you not? Are you not receiving protection in the name of the emperor?"

"Uh..."

"Besides, if they've prepared a seat for you, then it very much *does* concern you, yes?"

Yura hung her head silently as Leila turned and stepped back, her fake polite smile back in place as if nothing untoward had ever happened.

Sisty gave Yura a comforting look.

"This is so upsetting," Yura mumbled wearily. "I don't know anything about anything. I'm in no position to show up with the elites of this kingdom."

At that moment, Leila and Sisty exchanged glances.

"So, is that why you don't want to go?"

To Yura's surprise, Leila's features softened and it made Yura feel like she wanted to tell her what she was feeling. Maybe she could help.

But then Leila smiled broadly and began to speak again.

“In that case, please rest assured,” she said, looking eerily proud. “We will be sure to make appropriate preparations so that you *will* fit right in.”

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**YURA’S** expectations, based on Leila’s words, were very much exceeded.

After Yura endured the chapel service, fighting back yawns and dealing with an empty stomach, the moment she returned to her room, she was rushed into the adjoining room. There, Leila awaited her.

“We will begin your training today, Lady Yuura, and continue for the next three days.”

*There it is.*

Yura took a step back.

“We will mold you into a worthy, well-mannered person. That being said, it should all be fairly simple.”

“That sounds far from simple!”

Leila brushed off Yura’s complaint.

“What I would like you to learn are the appropriate movements, basic posture, manners during tea and brunch, and three basic points regarding conversation.”

“Uhh...”

“And I have the perfect person to instruct you. Benechka Fandine. Formerly of Astania, she is a well-regarded etiquette instructor.”

“Does she teach everyone?”

Leila shook her head. She narrowed her shoulders with a serious expression. She looked like she had something to say, but it was difficult.

“N-Mo. And because time is short, I’m afraid she won’t be able to teach you *everything*. So...”

“Then who *will* teach me?”

Leila's head popped up and she suddenly looked resolved, giving Yura a start. She had the excited energy of someone trying to make a once-in-a-lifetime confession.

"Please forgive my presumption! But with only three days left, please leave the fundamentals to me!" Leila exclaimed.

Yura stared at her.

*Oh, so that's what she meant. Why is she being so formal?*

"You're going to teach me? That's fine...but will you be okay, Leila?" She hastily added, "Y-Your face looks pale."

At that moment, Leila staggered and clung to a chair. But when she rushed over to help her, Leila grabbed Yura's arm.

"I'm all right," she said softly. "I was just so relieved, everything got a little dark."

"Then you really *aren't* okay!"

"To be honest, even suggesting I should be the one to teach you such things is *extremely* disrespectful..."

Yura pulled a face. "*How* is that disrespectful...?"

*I guess I don't have a choice.* She dropped her shoulders. She couldn't keep worrying Leila like this.

"Okay, I'll do it. Please teach me what you know," she said.

*For as long as I'm here, I'll need to know this stuff anyway.*

"I'd rather have you teach me anyway, Leila. I'm counting on you."

That was how she really felt. With Leila as her teacher, she could do these embarrassing things with ease, even if it meant she'd be exhausted. At least Leila wouldn't run her ragged.

Yura had no idea how naïve that thought would soon seem...

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**"NO,** you mustn't be so stiff in the front! Lower your shoulders!"

Leila's guidance—or rather, her secret training—was unfathomable. If Yura thought Leila was overzealous before, this was on a whole other level. She was tired of being yelled at by Leila, whose face was turning bright red by this point.

“Please keep your basic posture! Keep your feet together! Shift back and forth, placing your center of gravity over your back leg! Gently turn your forward knee—GENTLY! Do it so your back knee is hidden. Now bring both knees together. Yes, yes, that's it! That's perfect!”

“Descend *lightly* into the chair please! All young ladies know there are no real backs to chairs. It's more conducive to wearing a dress, isn't it? If you don't sit that way, they'll be able to see your legs through the dress.”

“Please be sure not to stick your elbows out too far! Your hands should rest along your navel to give your waist a more slender appearance. Try to use your right hand—bring it beneath your left in an oval shape. Why is your mouth always *open* like that?”

Yura became frustrated over the several hours of training. Madame Benechka, having finally arrived, was an incredibly slender woman with large eyes. She wore an emerald green dress and, in contrast to what one might expect, carried a large, plump long-eared hedgehog. Yura ogled when she saw it.

“When holding a saucer, use your middle and ring finger to support it. Yes, yes. That's very good.”

Yura was so distracted by the hedgehog climbing around her skirt that she couldn't concentrate.

“We don't merely hold the cup with our hands. We use our entire arms, pulling back with our elbows to our chests. This is one of the secrets to graceful arm movement. Yes, yes. That's quite good.”

By the time evening rolled around, the women had taught Yura everything, down to how she should blink. Under the auspices of going for a stroll to stretch her muscles, Yura made her way to the garden she always visited.

Sei, who'd arrived before her and perhaps seen the look on her face, stood up, his own expression clouding over.

“Are you tired? You look worn—”

“I can’t *take* any more of this Spartan training, Sei~!”

They sat on the edge of the water fountain. Sei said nothing as Yura told him everything that’d happened. He merely looked down, a wry grin on his face as he occasionally interjected to let her know he was listening.

“I don’t think I can handle this for ‘the next three days...’”

“But I think you’re already benefiting from it.”

Sei flashed Yura a smile, attempting to comfort her amid her stream of complaints. Perhaps because of the training drilled into her over the course of the day, Yura now sat up noticeably straighter. Her arms were also neatly placed along her abdomen, as she’d been instructed. As soon as he brought her attention to it, she rounded her back and kicked her legs out.

“Don’t *say* something like that, you meanie! Until these high society types leave, I won’t be able to do any investigating!”





“But isn’t a good opportunity to do just that...?”

Yura raised an eyebrow in annoyance. Sei tucked his chin in thoughtfully, then began to explain more explicitly.

“Starting with His Lordship the bishop, there are several high-ranking clergymen who will be in attendance, yes? If you’re allowed to join them, then you’ll also be able to speak with them directly...”

“*Speak* with them...?”

“What I mean is, you could ask them about their sacred knowledge, about magic and miracles and the like.”

“...Uh-huh.”

*Magic. Miracles.* Yura’s shoulders drooped.

*I guess at this point, that’s all I have.*

Yura seemed defeated Sei thought, as she heaved a sigh.

“But...”

“Yes?”

“Does magic really exist...?”

“It does,” Sei said, responding so quickly it surprised even him. “The problem now is figuring out how to find that magic...”

Yura was surprised at his light tone. She immediately asked “...How can you be so sure?”

“How...?”

Sei gave her a blank stare and then turned away to gaze up at the sky. As if he were looking for something “You can’t see it from here.”

“What?”

“His Majesty’s eagle. It’s always flying around above the castle.”

Just then, Yura got an idea. She shouted without meaning to and clapped her hands.



“You mean that gigantic bird?”

The image of that bird she’d seen many times appeared in her mind. That nimble bird who’d been perched on the throne. The one depicted in the tapestry.

*So that was Ashes’ pet. But what does that have to do with anything?* Yura wondered with a dubious expression. Sei smiled at her.

“You don’t know? That’s a statue.”

Yura was taken aback.

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A bell passed before she could catch Ashes. No matter where she went, she couldn’t seem to catch up to him and she was unable to enter the rooms he’d gone into.

She heard he’d returned to his room for a nap. When she finally headed for his sitting room, the guard at his door warned her not to bother him. Yura ignored him and called to Ashes through the door.

*“What is all that commotion...?”*

Ashes poked his head out, looking annoyed. Slipping into the room, Yura spoke.

“Um, Ashes, I’m here because I have a favor to ask!”

Ashes folded his arms and looked from Yura to her feet. It was only then that she noticed.

“Oh *no!* Has that been with me this whole time?!”

She grabbed the hem of her skirt. Something beige crept out. It was the hedgehog Benechka, the woman who had been instructing her that afternoon, brought with her. *It must have been hiding in my skirt the whole day!*

“That’s a strange thing to keep. And in such a strange place,” Ashes laughed. “So, what’s this favor?”

Yura immediately snapped into a more proper posture. She clasped her hands in front of her face.

“I want to see the eagle!”

Ashes squared his shoulders, as if he had expected this.

“Where exactly did you hear a rumor like that?” Ashes asked with a laugh, opening a window that led out to the balcony.

The sky was bright this evening. The waning moon slightly warmed the air as it showed through the clouds.

“A r-rumor?”

“Please stay back. He’ll cut your cheek.”

Yura stopped at Ashes’ words. She remained in the room, peering out at the balcony.

“...Whoa!”

When she started to speak, she realized something was swooping in from the sky. It kept coming, with no sign of slowing down. The second she noticed the shape of a rhombus, it appeared. As if in the blink of an eye.

The wind began to swirl.

It was just like coming outside right after a typhoon. Like a sudden wind began to blow. Without a moment to cover her face, Yura closed her eyes, her hair blowing in the wind. The wind was so strong, her hair and skirt fluttered behind her. Ashes’ cape also fluttered with a mighty noise.

The first thing she saw were the wings dancing in the air. With hints of ashen grey mixed in, like someone shattered the glass of the sky, it let out a sound that shook Yura to her core.

She couldn’t believe her eyes.

The thing perched on the railing was really a sculpture.

It was a massive sea eagle, a chalk white sculpture, carved in intricate detail. It looked like he was deliberately made that way, like some sort of prank by a master sculptor.

His neck turned and his talons curled, his wings gliding in front of his sharp beak. Yura’s eyes were wide.

“You’re sure in a mood.”

Ashes reached out a hand and ran his fingers along the stone’s neck. Narrowing its eyes, the creature stared menacingly at Yura.





“Ah...”

Yura stared back at it in fear and disbelief. She undid her clasped hands, lifting them as she asked, “M-may I touch it?”

“You’ll lose a finger.”

Yura shrank back. Ashes laughed as she retreated further back into the room.

“It will only allow members of the royal family to touch it. My mother never was able to in her whole life.”

“.....”

“Are you satisfied?”

Yura nodded, still shaking. She shivered, either from the night air or the wind. She grabbed her arms, completely shaken.

She had so many questions to ask him, but in the end, she didn’t have the chance before she needed to go back to her room so he could return to his duties.

She pulled the cape Ashes had lent her tight around her, thinking as she walked through the dimly lit hall.

*...It was real.*

The guard tasked with seeing her to her room carried a candle that reflected off his armor. She trudged along behind him, carrying the hedgehog, her mind hard at work.

*“The clergy will be there, yes? The fact that you’ll be there means you can ask them directly...”* she recalled Sei saying.

She had no choice but to find out more.

*The problem is, how...?*

*“They’ll arrive on the third day of the cleansing festival. Did you know that you have a seat there as well?”*

*I guess that’s how!*

Yura clenched both hands.

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“**WHAT** in the *world* has gotten into you? You certainly are working hard today,” Leila chuckled as she served lunch.

Sisty smiled as well, water in hand. Yura stopped shoveling food into her mouth and smiled.

“Lady Benechka had so much praise for you. At this rate, you’ll be able to move onto table manners tomorrow,” she said, peering into Yura’s face. Yura gulped, her eyes forward.

“Yes. If I must learn them, I will.”

“So, what’s *really* going on?” Leila exclaimed with excitement. Yura was in something of a good mood. At the very least, she didn’t mind the two of them fussing over her.

On the table were foods so splendid, it seemed hard to think of them as mere lunch. They were all so magnificent, Yura couldn’t even think of laying a hand on them. Even so, eating had become easier. On the first day, her hands had frozen just using the knife and fork.

Yura would eat quickly to try and get used to this world’s food. If she went bite by bite, she might taste something unfamiliar and stop eating. It’d been the same back home. If she’d encountered something she didn’t like, she wouldn’t want to eat it.

“This is delicious!”

“That is nice to hear!”

Despite the fact that Yura was rather mannerless in her way of eating, Leila still paid it no mind and grinned at her. She was looking out for Yura, who seemed to be having trouble acclimating to her new life there.

There wasn’t anything too exotic at the table. It was all easy for her to eat. Yura was happy for such thoughtfulness.

After finishing lunch and tiring of turning things over and over in her head, Yura decided to visit the mirror chamber once more. Blessed with weather the same as that day, time seemed to stand still inside that room. The mirror in

question shone as brilliantly as ever.

If Yura's guess was correct, this mirror could connect to the one in Tomoko's shop. *Or at least, it should be able to.*

First, she tried calling Tomoko's name, but got no response.

She cautiously touched the mirror, but there was no change.

It remained a terribly ordinary mirror, as Yura expected. But still, she was disappointed.

*There's just so much I don't know about it...* Yura thought, looking over the mirror.

It was platinum, and while extravagant, that was the most remarkable thing about the metal. She also didn't understand how the double-sided mirror was constructed. Even focusing just on that aspect, there was still so much she didn't know.

"...I wish I at least knew who made it..." Yura muttered, then a thought struck her.

She fell silent, not even realizing what she had said at first.

*The mirror's history.*

Just as one knows when the hot liquid they drank is making its way through their stomach, Yura could feel the wheels in her brain begin to turn.

*That's it.*

Yura spun around and took off.

*Where else would Sei be at this time?* She shoved the door open and leapt through.

*That's it! Why didn't I realize it before?*

The history of the mirror, who made it, and exactly how it was made.

They might hold the clues she was looking for!

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"**I'M** sorry, I'll do whatever you ask. So please don't be mad, Sei," Yura



apologized in earnest as they stood facing one another in the tiny garden.

Called out of training so suddenly, Sei's clothes were a bit disheveled. He wasn't wearing his cape and came only with his sword.

"...I'm not angry," Sei said, smiling.

"I-If you're angry, then just come out and say so!" she insisted.

Pulling his collar closed tightly with the string at his chest, Sei heaved a sigh. His rough movements made Yura shrink back.

"You mustn't go somewhere like that again. You never know what might happen to you."

"...I'm sorry."

"So, what's going on?" Sei asked, putting his cape back on. It was around the ninth hour. But in Yura's world, the time would have been more like three o'clock in the afternoon.

She was sitting on the fountain, as she always did, and started explaining the situation. Sei remained standing. Once she finished, she took a breath, and Sei broke in.

"So, you want to know the mirror's history?"

"...Yeah."

"That should be easy to answer if you look in a Tolkinian history book..." he said, sitting down next to her. Adjusting his sheath, he spoke thoughtfully. "...However, I can tell you some stories right now."

"Really?"

"About Excellius' Sacred Treasures of Protection. They're said to be made of earth."

"Earth?"

Sei nodded. He turned toward Yura and knit his brows a little.

"I don't remember the particulars, but the legend goes like this: 'Long ago, when the mighty king Excellius first established this kingdom, there were several sacred implements he created from the earth at his feet. Each

implement he made was inspired by a myth he loved, and they were all known as the Sacred Treasures of Protection.’ They’re now considered our national treasures.”

“National treasures...”

“I can’t even begin to fathom how they were made, though...” Sei said. “Long ago, Tolkinia was once known as ‘the land through which ancient magic flows.’ That’s what is written. It’s not really seen that way anymore. The implements made of earth are considered sacred. The only one that shows any trace of its ancient magic is His Majesty’s eagle. That’s what they say. You’ve likely already guessed this, but that eagle is one such implement.”

After saying all that, Sei was starting to look impatient.

“S-So...”

“The power that makes it move. That alone means we can’t deny the existence of magic.”

Yura was staring at the ground. His words turned the gears in her mind. “So, you said the problem was how to find it, right?”

“Y-Yeah?”

“...So, it does exist,” Yura muttered. Without realizing it, she clenched her fist. “It really *does* exist...” Yura repeated, vacantly. Suddenly feeling a little lonely, she closed her eyes.

*I might be able to go home...*

She felt anxious over how unreliable those words seemed, and yet, relief from the slight ray of hope they offered. The two extremes balanced awkwardly inside her heart, as if on a scale that swayed back and forth.

Sei stared at Yura in silence. He wasn’t sure, but he thought she looked a little sad. When his eyes met hers, he asked something in almost a whisper.

“...Do you not feel comfortable here?”

Yura came to her senses, like someone had splashed her with cold water. Sei instinctually recoiled.

“Th-That’s not it! I love everyone I’ve met here!” Yura proclaimed. But her voice became hoarse. She couldn’t speak. She faltered and hung her head.

“But...” Unable to continue, Yura looked down.

She felt like a cowardly cameraman who couldn’t focus on his subject. It was embarrassing, the way she couldn’t focus and look him in the eye.

*I really am a coward.*

Sei stared silently at Yura. Whatever was going on inside her head was a battle she needed to win on her own.

Sei lifted a hand and began stroking her hair. When Yura looked up, he looked away, apologetically.

“...No...” Yura held her breath, the tears welling up inside. She finally had to choke them back. “...I’m sorry,” she apologized in a briny voice as she began to cry.

It was a weary cry; the tears silently flowed from her eyes.

Sei’s hand continued to caress her hair. He wasn’t trying to make her stop crying, but to help her through it. It was a warm feeling, like the sun’s rays.

Yura kept her eyes downcast, focusing on the touch of his hand.

*I just want to stay like this a little longer.*

Feeling comforted by Sei’s gentle hand, Yura closed her eyes.

\*\*\*

“**SAY**, Leila, of the people coming tomorrow, who would be the easiest to talk to?” Yura asked the next morning, trying to casually broach the subject. Leila was thoroughly combing Yura’s hair.

“...To talk to?”

When it came to doing her hair, Leila was the most conscientious. As Yura expected, the lady-in-waiting didn’t think too hard before responding.

“The closest in age to you would likely be the deacon from Nikea...”

“Closest in age?”

“He’s the youngest at seventeen.”

Yura nodded. *So, a year younger than me then.*

“Who else?”

“Let’s see...there’s the deacon of the Eltania region. He’s a very amicable sort. He *is* the oldest, though...”

That was it. Yura snapped her fingers in the bathtub.

“So, what’s he like? Do you have a picture or something?”

“*Pick-chure?*”

Confused at this, Leila stopped brushing. Yura panicked.

“Er, a painting? Yes, a painting or something!”

Leila made a strange face. One clouded with suspicion.

“You’ve been asking some *odd* questions...”

“H-Have I?”

Leila, however, did not seem interested in pursuing it further. She poured some liquid onto the comb from a porcelain vial and spread it around with her finger.

“There *should* be a portrait...right, Sisty?”

“We probably *do* have one portrait of the clergy.”

Yura turned her head, trying to look behind her. Leila held her head in place.

“Hey, Leila—”

“I know...” Leila said lightly. “But, why don’t we wait until *after* you eat?”

It was like she’d seen right through her. Yura began to giggle. The other two exchanged wry grins.

“We’ll show you to the portrait room.”

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**THE** portrait room was a little further into the audience room she had visited the day before. It was set off from an even larger gallery, placed at the palace’s

edge.

It was through an archway with no door, with guards standing watch. The square room that stretched before her continued for three lengths. At the innermost point, there was a large door with two more guards, clad in heavy armor, standing before it.

“Hey, Sisty, what is that room...?”

“The Royal Office. Since there is no door here, please keep your voice down,” Sisty whispered so softly that only Yura could hear. Yura gulped.

“So, uh, is he in there...?”

There were various portraits covering the walls in every direction. There was one that seemed to take up the entire wall, almost as tall as Yura herself. Amid a group of people in what looked like a church were two women who seemed to be serving them. They looked like they could be twins, with the same facial features and silver hair.

“Bishop Evayne...who was a priest at the time, is over there.”

“But, he looks way too young...”

Yura squinted at the painting. Sure enough, there was a man, not exactly old, holding up the ceremonial staff. On closer inspection, it seemed to have been painted some time ago.

“He won’t be able to help me much...”

“Why are you saying that all of a sudden?”

Yura gave them the reason she had been thinking up. “I thought, since I’m going anyway, I might as well try to talk with them. But I was afraid of messing up in front of someone quick to anger, so I was looking for someone who seemed like they might be a bit kinder...”

“Oh, Lady Yura!” the two women exclaimed in unison, giving her a playful tap on the shoulder.

*The two of them are so alike with how nonchalant they are.*

“Lord Evayne has magnificent silver hair. Indeed, he looks a tad like the late

emperor.”

“Though he has no beard.”

“What was the late emperor like?” Yura asked.

Leila gently pointed toward the opposite wall.

“Why, that’s him there.”

An old man with resplendent silver hair was depicted there. Wearing purple garments adorned with silver, he had a remarkable beard that stretched beneath his nose and down his chin. His massive body sat atop the throne, a crown perched on his head.

His face prompted another thought in Yura’s mind.

“Are there pictures of Ashes here too?”

The pair looked flustered at her question. They exchanged glances, seemingly struggling to find the right words.

“There are. But His Majesty has refused to sit for any portraits in recent years.”

“How come?”

The two of them looked even more flustered than before. Then it hit Yura.

“Haha, you mean because of the buff portrait of Ashes? Where’s that?”

“Please do not say something so strange! *That* is not in the castle!”

“Then where is it...?”

“In a chapel near the castle, though I don’t know if it’s still there,” Sisty quickly replied.

Yura fought to hold back her laughter.

“But they say His Majesty had it covered in plaster!”

Leila pointed to a different portrait, trying to distract Yura.

It was Ashes as a young boy. Along with the famously handsome late emperor, his sisters, and their husbands...

At the furthest corner of the room, there was an odd, long portrait hanging. It depicted a row of seated people engaged in a lively discussion. Yura stood beneath it.

“Hey, Leila, what’s this?”

The painting was placed inside an ornate frame. There were eleven chairs in the painting. The painting had a lighter touch than the others and even had a signature peeking out from the bottom.

“It’s the members of the administration.”

There was a young man sitting in the chair farthest to the left. The rest were all middle-aged or old men, with various expressions. Some serious, some gentle, some troubled.

“Lady Leila’s uncle is in this portrait as well,” Sisty whispered to Yura.

*Wonder which one?* Yura stared at the painting but couldn’t tell just from looking.

“...Which one?”

At that moment, there was a sudden sound behind them. As the door opened and closed, a group of voices leaked out.

Yura turned around in surprise. Leila did an about face and stepped off to the side. Footsteps began to echo through the hall.

A group of people surged into the room.

“...Leila,” said the old man who was standing at the fore. The young man who’d been accompanying him froze.

“U-Uncle...I mean, Governor Lucius.”

*Speak of the devil,* Yura thought.

Leila fell back behind Yura and bowed.

“L-Lady Yuura,” Sisty’s soft but panicked voice brought Yura to her senses. Turning in a panic, she gave an awkward bow. The young man in front’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What are you doing here, Yuura?”

Suddenly hearing a voice tinged with laughter, Yura looked up. A soldier stepped aside as Ashes stepped forward.

“Have you come looking for *that* portrait?”

Yura pouted and started to say, “That’s not it!” But, sensing this was not the time, she held her tongue. She merely stared back defiantly, puffing her cheeks.

“Well now...”

A voice echoed from someone standing among the group.

The man was standing diagonally behind Ashes and jerked his chin, seemingly indicating Leila and Sisty one after the other.

“Lord Lucius, might *this* be the legendary beauty?”

The old man stared at Yura, vexed. Leila became rigid as Yura reluctantly stepped forward.

“I... I’m Yuura,” she said and curtsied as she’d been taught to do. Ashes’ eyes widened, and in her mind, Yura was pulling down her eyelid and sticking her tongue out at him.

*What? Why does it feel like you’re mocking me, Ashes?*

“My, how beautiful!”

Yura jumped at the sudden exclamation. She quickly drew back her hands from the sides of her skirt and returned them to resting in front of her waist as she’d been taught. Seeing this, the man flashed a big grin.

He was a skinny middle-aged man with hair down to his shoulders. Perhaps it was because of his grey clothing, but his face looked so pale and almost ill. When his eyes met Yura’s, they narrowed, as if he were taking her in.

“Beautiful...yes, truly beautiful. *Certainly* worthy of His Majesty’s favor,” he said, gazing at Yura more as if he were inspecting her rather than admiring her.

Yura could feel herself recoil.

“...Lord Isgard, I believe that’s going too far,” Leila’s uncle—the man called Lucius—gently admonished him. Without a word, the man merely glanced their way.



“Let’s go, Falco,” Ashes said and walked straight ahead. “See you later, Yuura.”

Leila waited before rushing out into the hall with Yura right behind her.

“Leila, who *was* that other man...?”

“Marquis Ermetel,” Leila said after she was positive all the men were out of earshot. Her voice was almost reproachful, and her mood seemed to have soured. Her face was tight, like a tense wire.

*“Beautiful...yes, truly beautiful.”*

They were polite but reproachful words. At least that’s how they’d sounded to Yura.

And then there were his eyes. Narrow like a snake’s, where only the pupil seemed to move. Those words definitely didn’t come from a place of affection. It was something far more wicked.

As she walked, an anger she’d never felt before welled up inside her.

*“Certainly worthy of His Majesty’s favor.”*

*What’s with that man...?*

\*\*\*

***EVERYBODY’S*** voice has its own unique color, Yura thought, as she sat in a chair.

Perhaps it was just an idle thought, but it seemed true. Anytime people were talking, it seemed to liven up the place, just like when flowers bloomed.

That night, there was a particular excitement in Yura’s room. It might’ve also been because of the light offered by the chandelier through the dark night, but the ladies who were consumed with work throughout the day were bustling about, fussing over her new dress. They brought with them several flowers to match its color, worked on finding matching gloves, and generally made a huge commotion.

Yura’s mood still hadn’t improved in the half-day since everything happened. She tried to bar those thoughts from her mind, but every time she imagined

that face that shouldn't have seemed malicious, she naturally went rigid. Hearing the splendor in their voices, she realized she was the downer in the room.

"...Are you not feeling well?" Leila asked with concern as she set a flower into a vase. Yura shook her head frantically, her fingers tracing the design inlaid on the table.

"No. Leila, you're not going to join them?" Yura asked, glancing at the other ladies gathered together. Atop a table pulled to the corner of the room, Sisty had set out several pairs of shoes. She was taking great care in comparing pairs of high-heels or mules to a skirt pulled halfway out of a box. Leila chuckled and shrugged.

"There are already plenty of people over there."

"I see..."

"So, will you be going to bed soon?"

Yura shook her head. There was too much excitement for her to sleep.

"I'm going to stay up a little longer. I like watching everyone."

Leila was silent, save for the snip of her shears. She then brought the new flower arrangement over to Yura. Wrapped in a pure white doily, she handed it to Yura with the most attractive side facing her.

"Is it because of what happened this afternoon?" Leila asked pointedly.

Yura stared back at Leila instinctively. Perhaps the look on her face told Leila she'd hit the nail on the head, as Leila laughed at her reaction. However, she seemed to realize it was not the right time to laugh. She quickly resumed her serious expression and lowered her eyes with a sigh.

"I was afraid you were concerned about that..."

She looked around, then leaned closer to Yura.

"I know this is rude of me, but...Lady Yuura, please be wary of Marquis Ermetel's daughter. She hides fangs beneath the guise of a raven butterfly."

Yura stared blankly back at her. Leila looked worried.

“...He has a daughter?”

Leila nodded silently.

“When you meet her tomorrow, which you likely will, please...”

Yura blinked several times at her.

*If Leila called her a butterfly, then she must be lovely...*

Yura nodded. Seeing that, Leila seemed a little more at ease.

“Oh, that’s right,” Leila said, clapping her hands. “I asked that you be seated next to Lord Evayne tomorrow.”

Yura’s eyes widened. Leila winked mischievously and put her index finger to her lips.

“My uncle!”

Like a withering flower perking back up, Yura’s soured mood began to brighten.

Yura was smiling without realizing it.

“Thank you, Leila!”

Leila smiled bashfully and gave a little bow.

“Now, it’s time to clean up,” she called to the other ladies. Watching Leila reminded Yura suddenly of Tomoko directing her teammates.

*“Come on, don’t be so slow!”*

She could still hear Tomoko in her mind, a ball in one hand. She was looking at Yura.

*“Sorry, just hang on a little longer,”* she would say.

“Lady Yuura?”

Leila had turned back around and was staring at her. Startled, Yura came back to the present and smiled back.

“Wh-What is it?”

At just that moment, Yura heard the one-hour warning bell and rose from her

chair. The maids watched her in shock. Yura turned back to them and offered a bow in the elegant fashion Leila had shown her.

“I’m going for a walk.”

\*\*\*

**EARLY** the next morning, Castle Westgard was enveloped in a rare sort of chaos.

Carriages bearing members of the clergy were coming and going through the castle gate. Visitors from the town below and the surrounding area had scarcely been inside. Horses and ornate carriages bustled about the white marble paved road.

First thing in the morning, Yura was changed into her clothes for the day. It was a neat, blue dress so pale that it was almost white, with a full, ruffled skirt. Since it exposed her shoulders, she wore gloves that came up to her elbows and firm mules. At least, she thought, she might be able to avoid falling for the most part.

“It seems we won’t be in for good weather...” Leila said, gazing out the window after getting Yura dressed.

Yura didn’t know how, but Leila and the others would always look up at the sky and be able to accurately guess the weather. Yura tilted her head, gazing up at the bright and sunny, albeit cloud-filled, sky.

Instead of the usual accessories in her standard hairdo, several fresh flowers were used, making Yura feel like a vase. Soft, white flowers dotted her hair, interspersed with five little pale blue ones. Sisty told her that the clergy liked azaleas.

She encountered Sei on her way down the cloister to the room where the ceremony would be held. He was dressed differently from usual, sporting a navy-blue coat and dress clothes with brass buttons. He gave Yura a bow when he spotted her.

“Ah...”

They kept walking. As she passed, she looked back. Sei passed a guard at the

corner and turned without a word. Once he disappeared, Yura sulked just a little.

*Oh, Sei, you're so unsociable...*

The ceremony was to be carried out in a room in the castle's left wing. The closer they got, the slower Yura seemed to move. Seeing Yura losing her nerve, Leila flashed her a wry grin out of the corner of her eye.

"There is no reason to be nervous, Lady Yuura."

"H-Hard not to be..."

Yura was regretting agreeing to it so easily, even if it was a little late for it.

Her memories from the day before kept coming up, painful as they were. By the time they reached the door, Yura had completely frozen up. The ladies-in-waiting collectively heaved a sigh.

"This is truly troublesome."

Yura gulped. She could hear voices just inside the door before her. She dreaded being sat down and jostled about. If she could, she would remain where she was.

"W-Wait, Leila..."

"But Lord Evayne is already here."

Urged on by words she couldn't argue with, Yura stood tearfully before the door. Guards clad in heavy armor were waiting to open it for her. Yura stood up straight and turned back to the two women.

"I-I don't look strange, do I? Just give me a minute, I need to check my clothes again."

"There's nothing strange about you."

It wasn't a great comparison, but to Yura, Leila and the others were like pirates. Making her walk the plank over the ocean, prodding her along the whole time. All while sharks loomed below.

"Wh-What if Ashes laughs at me?"

Yura said it, feeling like Ashes wouldn't let things slide if he knew the truth

about her. It felt like she was about to be thrown to the sharks.

But the pair took it differently. They exchanged glances, suddenly seeming moved.

“No one will laugh!”

They each took one of Yura’s hands, trying to urge her on.

*Guess I just kicked the hornet’s nest,* Yura thought.

“In you go!” Leila and Sisty brushed aside the guards and opened the door.

It was like visiting another martial arts dojo and having to defeat their best members in a fight.

With a bang, Yura was tossed into the hall before she could make a sound.

\*\*\*

**SEI** watched over everything from a distance.

He couldn’t help being curious. So, once they parted, he reconsidered. Fortunately, there were a large group of people going the same way he was, so he fell in with them to avoid detection.

As he feared, Yura was walking like a prisoner escorted by her jailers. She likely didn’t realize it herself but being dressed in finery as she was had attracted the attention of many. All the people walking by sighed in admiration when they saw Yura, though they seemed to take her desperate movements as playful and chuckled.

Sei wanted to put a flustered hand to his head.

Only invited guests were allowed into the hall. No matter how worried he was, he was still just a knight, so he wouldn’t be able to see inside. The only knights there were those granted permission to serve as bodyguards.

*Maybe I’m overthinking it,* Sei thought, lingering by a pillar.

The door to the room Yura had been pulled into was shut tight. He thought he heard a strange commotion from within and shook his head vigorously.

How did she plan to bring up the subject anyway?

Yura had told him, when they saw each other the day before in the garden, that she decided to ask Bishop Evayne, who was known for his tolerance. “Leila got me a seat next to him,” she said.

*But how does she plan to ask him?* Sei had a general idea, especially after remembering their conversation from two days ago.

He was the one who put the idea in her head to ask high-ranking clergy in the first place. But he hadn’t asked exactly how she would go about it. There was no way she’d just come out and ask...would she?

“I wonder how it’s going...”

He shook his head and started to walk away. But several steps later, he froze. Maybe he *was* overthinking it.

But something was still bothering him, so he turned toward the door.

Yura was susceptible to peer pressure. So, if someone asked her a difficult question, would she be able to get herself out of it? She might second guess herself on whether she should even avoid the question.

What if because of that, people began having strange doubts and questions about her? Bishop Evayne wouldn’t be the only one listening to the words of the girl who catches every eye in the room. And then, there was the actual content. He hated how the clergy seemed to overreact to everything. They could become confused and there was a one in a million chance they might develop the wrong suspicions about her.

“Come on! I really *am* overreacting now...” he muttered, turning back.

He passed the door and turned down a small aisle he spotted. Between the buildings was a narrow path, one that ran right along the hall where today’s ceremonies were to be conducted. He came out by the back door of the hall.

All the soldiers tasked with serving as bodyguards were using that door to enter and exit the hall.

*But what will I do once I’m in?*

As the thought crossed his mind, he noticed a solitary guard in armor, lingering in the small garden past the exit of the side path. He was holding his

steel helmet in his arms, and he was wearing the half-circle cloth those tasked with standing guard for the day had been given. It was a little cramped, but the armor made not a creak as he moved around.

“.....”

*A sucker born every minute*, Sei thought. He knew he shouldn't, and he *did* feel bad. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Well, he actually didn't *have* to be so desperate, but Sei was already swiftly sliding his sword from its sheath. There was a narrow path on the other side of the garden that'd be just perfect. The guard was looking that way.

“Sorry.”

The guard tried to turn around upon hearing Sei's voice. But with a light punch just behind the guard's neck, he quickly fainted and toppled to the ground. Sei had a good arm. With that much force, the guard would definitely be out until nighttime. As Sei returned another guard happened by.

“Wh-What's happened here?”

It seemed he was waiting on the other guard. Sei twisted around and quickly gave orders.

“He's suddenly taken ill! Help me move him. How much time do we have until the ceremony starts?”

“B-By my estimate, probably not more than one bell left...”

“You're one of the bodyguards, right? Can you call for a substitute?”

The guard was clearly flustered. Sei lifted the fallen guard and nodded at the other guard as they carried his partner.

“Then teach me his positions. I'll cover for him.”

The guard looked grateful. Sei looked down, offering a silent apology to the snoring man. The helmet he'd dropped seemed to be glaring at Sei.

It was the sole witness.

Hearing the bell ringing from above, Sei quickly walked off.

\*\*\*



**YURA** stood at the entrance, her mouth agape.

It was much different than she'd imagined. The mood was quiet and there were hardly any decorations, making it look so unremarkable. Yura had imagined something closer to the banquet from the other day, but this was a vast, simple space.

There were a row of windows near the ceiling, all of them open. The ornamentations throughout the white room were lovely in and of themselves, and the engravings on the walls and pillars, as well as the mosaic floor, were all covered in ceramic glaze. Perhaps due to the color scheme, it seemed to be a very sterile space.

Running along the length of the room were two long tables with white tablecloths over them. Spaced at regular intervals along the back wall were guards in heavy armor. Yura blinked.

"Lady Yura, please close your mouth..." Leila whispered from behind.

There were so many people and yet, almost everyone was speaking in the same low whisper. People stood rigidly about, here and there, chatting lightly in barely audible voices. Yura lowered her voice as well.

"Is it *always* this quiet?"

"Yes, but this year, the table is set up different than usual."

In the center of the room were several massive candles that didn't seem easy to reach. They were as tall as an adult and easy for any child to climb.

*I bet those will be difficult to light,* Yura thought, a giggle escaping her lips.

"How do they light those?"

"They are sacred flames. The clergy have special long candles they use..."

*If things move along with no delays, we'll be done by noon,* Yura thought.

By her perception of time, that'd be about three hours. How many questions would she be permitted in that time?

*I've tried to plan ahead, so it should be fine.*

"I wonder where Lord Evayne is..."

“There is no need to be hasty.”

As Yura looked around, she spotted faces she recognized here and there. The first face she recognized from yesterday in the portrait room was the young governor. There was Madame Benechka, with her hair in an impressive style, and a lady-in-waiting carrying her hedgehog. The man next to her was likely her husband. When the pair of them spotted Yura, they smiled.

There were several men who looked like they might be knights, walking around in fine clothes. She searched for Sei but didn't see him. Apparently, only certain people were allowed to participate in this ceremony.

“If we're celebrating, it seems better to have everyone here like before...”

“This is no simple ceremony...” Leila whispered with a bitter smile. “The ceremony today is best described as a performance to promote friendship. After all, what follows are talks that only occur once every two years.”

“Talks?”

“Within the church, even though the archbishops have the right to elect the Pope, the bishops don't have the same right when it comes to selecting archbishops. Tolkinia is responsible for the appointment of archbishops and subsequently the Pope himself. Specifically, His Majesty. *That* is why he is discerning in who may attend, whether they be from the administration or otherwise...”

*I don't really get it, Yura thought, nodding vaguely. To be honest, I don't get it at all! I have no idea how this whole hierarchy thing works. I'll have to ask Sei later.*

“I see...”

“You don't understand at all, do you...?” Leila's smile dimmed. Yura frantically shook her head.

“I-I do understand...”

Next to the massive candlesticks stood a boy about Yura's age. He was clad in indigo-violet robes, and just as Leila said, he was carrying a long staff with a candle on the tip. Yura tried standing on her tiptoes.

A small crowd formed around the candlesticks. It was very lively and all the people and their finery blended together.

“Lord Evayne is here,” Leila said.

“Where?” Yura asked excitedly. Then her eyes met the boy’s, who dropped the staff in shock. It was just at that moment that the crowd decided to move.

“Oh, come on—!”

Yura desperately tried to head toward him. Leila panicked and yanked her back. Generally, trying to walk through a crowd dragging a full skirt behind you was a Herculean task. Her body took up far more space than usual and she had to find a way to go around. Yura glanced around, trying to find an alternative route. No matter where she looked, there were people, people, people everywhere.

A little ahead of her, there was a small space, big enough for two people to get through side-by-side. That was perfectly fit for a detour. She slipped her hand through—

But at that moment, a black shadow played at the edge of her vision. Before she realized it, she had a head-on collision.

A guard barely missed catching the stumbling Yura’s back as she toppled to the ground. The other person was sitting on the ground, their head down.

“I’m sorry,” Yura was saying, as she tried to reach out. However, the other person knocked her hand away with full force. Even with her gloves on, she could feel the anger in that strike. She gasped and froze up.

“Move aside!” Ashes pushed the crowd out of his way. He helped the girl on the ground up and then looked at both of them.

“You aren’t hurt?” he asked.

“...No.”

The girl with her head down looked up.

“Your Majesty.”

At that moment, Yura noticed something curious. This girl was a very lovely

girl, indeed. Her ebony hair was pulled back at the nape of her neck. She wore a dark green dress and her long-nailed fingers were clasped together. She was staring at Yura.

“You aren’t hurt, are you?”

Yura faltered, then shook her head. She started to ask, “Are you?” But oddly enough, once again, her voice would not sound.

It was like standing before a beautiful flower, while also trying to block out the poisonous gas it was spewing.





Ashes turned and walked away. Following his lead, the crowd began to move again. The ebony-haired girl watched Ashes go before turning back to Yura. Her lips pulled into a smile, and with bewitching movements, she bowed to Yura.

“I’m Ermetel Ravelia.”

“...Ermetel?”

Yura thought she’d heard that name before. That instant, Leila gave the top of her glove a tight tug.

“The bell has rung,” she said hastily.

Yura came back to her senses. In a panic, she stepped back and curtsied.

“I-I beg your pardon...”

Yura allowed the girl, who was still staring at her, to walk past before hurrying off on her own. She fought to get through the crowd, guided by Leila to her seat. The eyes staring at her from behind were cold and harsh, so she looked back just once.

*Ermetel?*

The girl from before had her back to Yura.

Yesterday’s conversation came rushing back and Yura vigorously shook her head. It was a little cold, and she hugged her elbows. Sisty rubbed Yura’s back. Feeling the warmth of the hand on her back, Yura suddenly began to long terribly for the touch of a different comforting hand.

—*Sei.*

The din began to calm. The ceremony was beginning.

No matter where she looked, all she saw were unfamiliar faces. When she looked outside, the sky had darkened and become grey. Rainclouds had rolled in.

“It looks like we’re in for some rain...”

Yura heard a voice she thought she recognized and turned around. But there was no one there. She was just being jostled about in the waves of people. Yura took a deep breath and tried to calm her swelling emotions.

“Lady Yuura, please hurry.”

Leila turned back and prodded Yura along.

It was starting. The third bell rang out, indicating not an ending, but signaling the start of the next part of her journey that would hopefully lead her home.

To be continued...







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